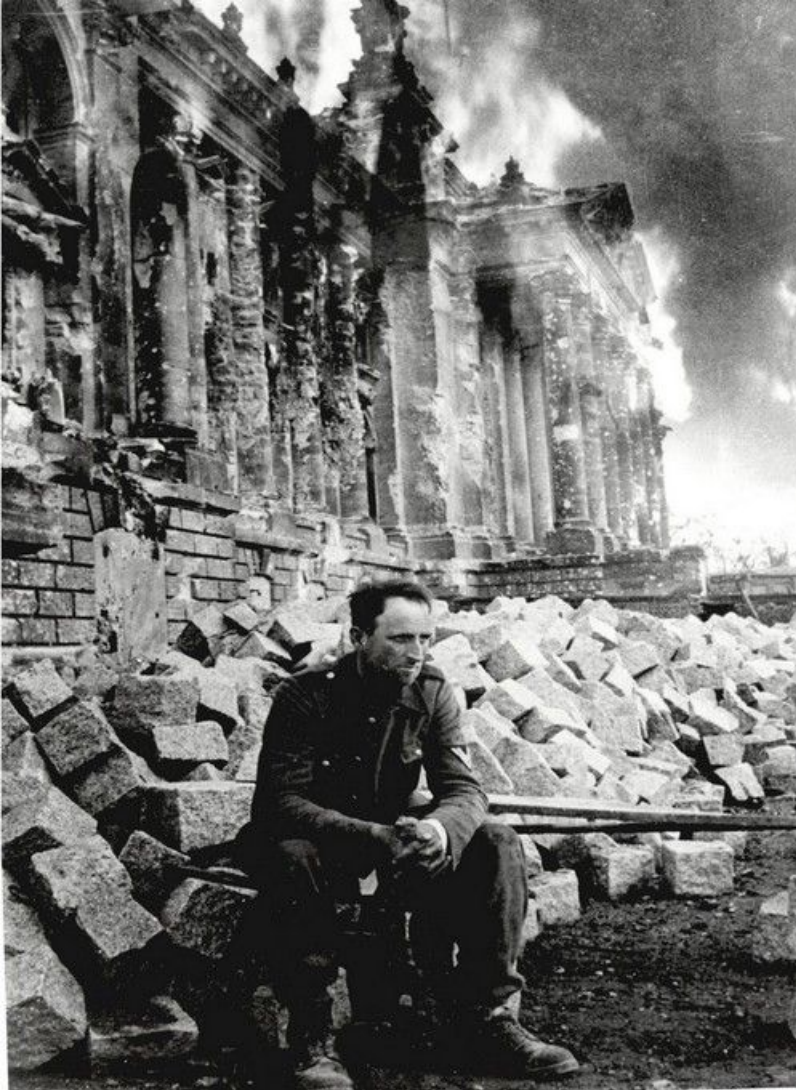


Our German Problem (Or Mine) – A Memory

By [Samuel Hux](#) (July 2017)



Defeated German soldier, burning Reichstag.



One of my dearest friends was a German actor and *Wehrmacht* veteran who died in 2008 at 96 years. An immeasurable absence in my life.

But, I get ahead of myself.

In October 1977, German commandos rescued hijacked hostages in Mogadishu. I watched the televised reports of the venture in somewhat idyllic circumstances: in the local tavern of a small Spanish village whose name means, in the regional dialect, “a forgotten nook away from the world,” with an atmosphere so innocent that one had to remind oneself, sometimes, that some of the most serious matters are really serious.

A recently retired schoolmaster was a mild-mannered fascist proud of his collection of Nazi martial recordings, although he knew not a word of German. “But those are lies, Communist propaganda!” he informed a German resident who tried to instruct him in history. This same lady used to wear a Star of David, prominently displayed, as a symbolic gesture. “Why?” Someone asked about her, since she’s not Jewish. To which an Australian resident responded, “Booty.” That’s funny, it’s not fair; and there’s something inevitable about it. I never told the story to my German friends, a number of whom watched television with me that evening.

The principal events were already known: Palestinian hijacking of a Lufthansa flight to force liberation of Red Army Faction leaders held in Germany; commando strike; rescue of hostages; suicides back in Germany of incarcerated terrorists Baader, Ennslin, Raspe. All of my friends were proud that the Germans could do what the Israelis had done at Entebbe the year before, and all were aware of the terrible irony of that. But their collective good feeling lasted no longer than the film of the commandos returning home to a hero’s welcome, strains of the national anthem greeting them. “No!” one German shouted. “Why not?” asked another. Then feet stomping, tables

being pounded, Germans trooping out of the tavern and storming back in.

“Fascist!” “Anarchist!” Then the appeal to me as a non-German, an American of respectable opinions—an appeal from both “sides.” The sides, so it happened, being those too young and those old-enough-to-have . . . you know . . . those too young to have served the Nazi regime in any fashion, and those old enough to have served in *some* fashion or other.

Memories can be so stark that they unsettle me enough to recognize that the then “too young” are now these many years later beyond middle age and the “old enough” are either approaching the end of life or, like my once dear friend, past it. Which fact, however, does not render the episode I am recalling irrelevant with the passage of time, not by one hell of a long shot.

True, I agreed, had the *Star-Spangled Banner* been played in similar circumstances after a similar American mission of risky mercy, one would have thought it only natural. What’s a national anthem for? Yes, I agreed, *Deutschland über Alles* (composed though it was by Haydn) has certain associations, especially after a foreign adventure. Yes, I see your point . . . and yours.

When tempers cooled, just barely, I made apologies and facile explanations to our Spanish hosts, and became the drafted referee of an argument that simmered for days. I intend no narrative of those days; but some summaries, observations, private conclusions, and the confession of an ironic reversal

of my own long-held ready assumptions about Germans' own peculiar generation gap.

A point of view:

"Baader-Meinhof and the Red Army Faction, though wrong, terribly wrong, are yet right in a way. They wish to provoke and reveal a totalitarian reality just under the surface of West German democratic appearance. And they have succeeded. Not the commando strike; that was necessary. But the other measures that have been taken: the denial of access to counsel to the imprisoned terrorists during the crisis, various emergency detention legislation to be exercised 'only' in time of crisis. (Is that realistic? Have we learned nothing?) But more than 'measures' themselves, there is a return to respectability of an attitude, parading as 'law and order,' which will make all sorts of measures possible.

We don't like to use the word *fascist* loosely in 1977, but I tell you: West Germany is in grave danger, its 'democracy' is highly imperfect, and I am not sure we have any more freedom than they do to the East. At the very least, the citizen *there* knows where he stands. You'll not see me climbing the Wall in the other direction; I prefer to take my chances in the West; but I'm not deceived by liberal appearances.

That anthem!—*my God!*—how can we be so stupid and of such short memory?

I'm sick of the French and others telling us that we must never forget, but I think we should never allow *ourselves* to forget. I am not myself old enough to bear any guilt—but I feel it thrust upon me nonetheless. Perhaps because my father—I do not understand him!—is so insistent on not admitting any. It's been over thirty years, he says. But we cannot permit ourselves to forget, to have the rest of the world always reminding us. I am tired of being 'reminded,' because although I wasn't there, I remember."

Another point of view:

"I was there. And I remember.

I'm always amazed at the arrogance and self-satisfaction of a world that thinks we *need* reminding. If there seems a journalistic or scholarly silence on the Third Reich, it starts rumors that we're trying to ignore our history; if there seems a rash of books on Hitler, the world suspects a cult. History being irreversible, what *are* we to do now about it? Is every production of Wagner to be prefaced by a reminder of the composer's views and that some of his most vociferous admirers were Nazis?

Should every publication of Nietzsche bear an explanation, somewhere prominent, on cover or title page, of what *Übermensch* does not mean?

Would it help our image if every law passed in our democratic assembly had a coda attached, something like:

‘This legislation is hereby pronounced in the sincere hope and hopeful certainty that never again will law be mocked as it was during the Third Reich, which, be it noted, we the legislators hereby pledge never to forget?’

And need I, anymore, upon meeting a non-German, find some way of casually mentioning that I served in the *Wehrmacht*, **the** *Wehrmacht*, mind you: I was drafted, don’t you see? I know my guilt: I should have refused to go. But . . . well, it’s beneath my dignity to have to remind the world (that so likes to remind me) that it is lucky its morality was not tested in similar manner.

In truth, I haven’t learned to cope with all that happened; one need not assume that my silence is a painless silence.

But I am glad that my nation is trying to act ‘normally,’ is even willing to display an ancient, patriotic anthem—as other nations do. There isn’t an international anthem, as far as I know.”

Neither point of view was perfect. Why expect it?

The first was rather too forgiving of regimes where people “know where they stand” and rather too expectant of perfection. The second ignored, perhaps too much, the danger that lies in all emergency legislation, and rode its dignity a bit too much for some tastes. But not, I confess, too much for mine. And this was what surprised me.

The first I prefer to leave as a sort of collective voice. The second I cannot help but localize in one "speaker," whom by accident I knew quite well, in spite of a fair difference in age and a world's distance in experience.

Jaspar von Oertzen I had seen several times in my youth before I ever met him as an adult; he was an actor, an unforgettable countenance. As a teenager, I saw him playing an SS officer supporting Luther Adler in *The Magic Face* and in a much lesser role with Oskar Werner as a *Wehrmacht* private in *Decision Before Dawn*. Von Oertzen later appeared with James Cagney in *One, Two, Three*. Never a star or matinée idol, but a versatile character actor, Jaspar was little known in the States but familiar enough to German film- and theatre-goers. In the mid-Eighties, we dined with him near Stuttgart when he played the Emperor in Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*, the meal interrupted several times by autograph-seekers.

I knew him over a year in Spain in the Seventies before I confessed to him that his face was familiar to me; I knew by then that irony could be an entrée to deeper conversation. "Jaspar, you are the most perfect Nazi I've ever met." "Thank you, my friend; I take that as a compliment to my artistry. And, of course, I have a degree of experience."

Jaspar, one of whose relatives I learned many years later had died for his involvement in the Stauffenberg conspiracy to kill Hitler, had not been, however, a Nazi. He was briefly arrested in his twenties as a young Social Democrat. In the Thirties, he acted in film and provincial theatre. When war came he was drafted and he went—without conviction. Briefly on

the Russian front, he was saved by his profession: helped make army training films, acted in wartime baubles like *The Adventures of Baron Münchhausen*. In the natural course of things met Goebbels ("He had certain cultural pretensions").

Should he—easy enough for us to say—have avoided serving at all? "I was not heroic." What did he think of American draft-resisters in the Sixties, not of their dubious politics but of their undeniable willingness to put themselves on the line? I never asked that irrelevant question. George Orwell once observed that Gandhi was lucky in having the British as his rulers: He could not only appeal to the organs of protective publicity but assume some gentlemanly sense of "fair play." It's not that I think it simply normal to go when called and think those who refuse are marvelous, admirable exceptions; it's that I have never been similarly tested and prefer to withhold judgment of those who have. Jaspar is not to be looked at askance.

I confess I delight to remember him, which is all I can do now since he died almost a decade ago after having retired from acting to help found the German Green Party (*die Grünen*). My Jewish other half, who has not an adumbration of forgiveness for the late German unpleasantness, loved Jaspar von Oertzen, as he did her, in a most correct fashion. It was nothing less than, and much more than, inspiring to see the two of them together. By which I do not mean some symbolism of reconciliation of Jew and German, no, not some cheap interpretation forcing the private to bear the burden of the public; rather, these two non-symbolic individuals discovered a predictably unlikely but astonishingly real kinship (I'm tempted to say twinship) that surprised and delighted them both. Life is very complicated.

Jaspar's quality of experience is unique: The potential or real guilt by passive association is extraordinary, out of all proportion to the act of accepting military induction. The sheer mathematics, if nothing else, of the Holocaust has created a new calculus of guilt that is hard to grasp. Degrees and qualities of guilt are obviously different; but what are the limits of guilt itself? It is absurd to be indiscriminate. If everyone is guilty, no one is guilty. Camus once said something like that.

There must be a line between active, chosen involvement in a destructive machine and passive going-when-called into something as old as a national army; but where does the line cut, and how wobbly is it? And then there is the always difficult, maybe impossible, question skirted by much ethics: is one's ethical responsibility always to others? The problem touched by Camus when he—Algerian French—refused to sign Sartre's manifesto against the French settlers: I love my mother more than Justice. What I mean: It must be difficult, in a regime where people simply disappear, to take a stance, and thereby never see your loved ones again, or they you.

I am not proposing some counter-ethics located in the *familias* or *ego*