

Beware of Antisemitism in Germany

by Michael Curtis



Paris did not burn during World War II. Whether it is fact or myth General Dietrich von Choltitz, German Military Governor of Paris, is said to have disobeyed Adolf Hitler's orders in August 1944 to destroy the French capital, and instead surrendered to Free French forces on August 25, 1944. Choltitz portrayed himself as the Savior of Paris, but he was no model of righteousness or humanitarianism. He had taken part in the liquidation of Jews in Russia, had pulverized the city of Rotterdam in spring 1940, and destroyed much of Leningrad in the siege of the city.

Yet, though no exemplary of moral uprightness, Choltitz after World War II spoke frankly about the behaviour of Germans during the Nazi regime. He confessed, "We all share the guilt. We went along with everything. I feel ashamed of myself." The story of a woman named Brunhilde Pomsel who died in Munich on January 27, 2017 at the age of 106 reminds us that not all

Germans have been equally ashamed. Paradixically, she died on the very day that since 1996 has become the official day of remembrance of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Pomsel was not a General but a short hand writer, born in Berlin in 1911, who joined the Nazi party and worked for Joseph Goebbels, the infamous Nazi Propaganda Minister, as secretary and typist from 1942 until May 1, 1945 when he killed his family and committed suicide. At the end of the World War II she was captured by Soviet forces and imprisoned for five years. She was described by the director of a film about her life, *A German Life*, as "very intelligent and likable," and someone who did not show any false remorse about the Nazi period.

Pomsel's duties included taking Goebbels's telephone calls, recording his remarks at meetings, and arranging his travel plans, including those to meet Adolf Hitler. She confessed to altering German casualty figures, reducing the number of Germans killed in battle, to present a more agreeable view of the Nazi war, and increasing the number of rapes of German women said to have been committed by Red Army soldiers.

Pomdsel remembered Goebbels as an elegant man who appeared to have his well-groomed hands manicured daily, an excellent actor, and who was "slightly arrogant," to make up for his club foot. She became friendly with Magda, wife of Goebbels, and their children. In her only critical remark, she could never "forgive Goebbels for what he did to the world or for the fact that he murdered his innocent children." She remained silent about her past until 2011.

But, unlike Choltitz, though she was an eavesdropper at the center of power, she showed no remorse or confessed any knowledge of affairs. She explained she did nothing but type in Goebbels office, and "had no idea of what was behind it all." She did not see herself as being guilty, unless "you end up blaming the entire German population." Like most Germans,

she had not resisted the regime. Everyone, she said, was trapped in a vast concentration camp.

The problem of the legacy of Nazism has recently been ignited in three ways in Germany. The first is the republication of a 2000 page annotated version of Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, first written in 1923-4 while he was in Munich prison. Since its publication, after copyright had run out in 2015, the book, with annotations by experts to supply a context, has become a best seller with more than 85,000 copies sold.

Though scholars have participated in the book it is doubtful that *Mein Kampf* is a useful way of presenting historical education. It is more likely to provoke fear than lead to enlightenment.

A second issue concerns the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe by the New York architect Peter Eisenman, located in central Berlin near the Brandenburg Gate and the Tiergarten. The monument, 2711 rectangular pillars in a grid pattern covering over 4 acres, has been visited by millions of people since its inauguration in May 2005. Yet, respectable German writers such as Gunther Grass and Martin Walser were critical of the project. They did not point out the certain vagueness about the memorial since there is no indication of who was murdered, no names, no symbols. Instead, they objected that it was an exploitation of German disgrace for present purposes, and was another illustration of the obsession with the Holocaust.

More ominously, in January 2017, the monument has been described by Bjorn Hocke, a German politician speaking on January 17, 2017 in a beer hall in Dresden, as a "monument of shame in the heart of Berlin." Hocke, a former history teacher, is the regional head of the AfD party in the state of Thuringia. Once a member of a Christian Democratic youth group, Hocke, a father of four, is not part of the lunatic fringe of German society.

However, he is apt to use racist language and Nazi themes. He has commented on the different reproductive capacities of Africans and Europeans. Now he argues that Germany should stop atoning for Nazi crimes. Hocke does not speak for the AfD party and has been rebuked by fellow members including the party leader Frauke Petry, the 41 year old PhD in Chemistry and former businesswoman who has been chair since July 2015, and do not subscribe to his antisemitic point of view.

Yet, Germany is now conscious of Nazi-like views in a political party. The AfD, founded in February 2013, is essentially a nationalist, anti-EU and anti-Muslim party, believing that Islam has no place in Germany. It is also divided on some issues, including antisemitism.

One of the party's prominent figures, Wolfgang Gedeon, a party representative in the state parliament of Baden-Wuerttemberg, believes that the influence of Judaism is everywhere. His belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories is so strong it embraces the view that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are not a forgery. He refers to the Holocaust as "certain misdeeds," and holds that Holocaust denial should be accepted. Other members of the AfD hold the Jews killed by Nazis were not innocent victims, but were guerilla fighters and therefore it was legal to kill them.

These developments suggest caution is necessary in Germany. The increase in immigration is having the same impact in Germany as in other European countries. The AfD has had a rapid growth since its origin in February 2013. In the last federal election in April 2013 the AfD got 4.7% of the vote, just missing the 5% threshold needed to get seats in the Bundestag, the federal parliament. In the European Parliament election in 2014, it got 7.1 per cent of the votes and 7 of the 96 German seats. The party already has some representation in 10 of the 16 German state parliaments. In Hocke's state, Thuringia, AfD got 10 per cent of the vote in the state parliament, and 11 of the 91 seats.

At the moment, it is rising according to polls, largely due to increasing opposition to current German policy, the immigration of 300,000 Muslims in 2016 and one million in 2015. For the United States it is yet another indication that the key issue affecting European countries, as well as the U.S., is Muslim immigration. Attention must be paid immediately.