

*Forgive the Germans,
But May They Never Forget*

I write this column as I fly from Berlin to New York. It was my first trip to Berlin since 1946 when I saw it in ruins - razed to the ground with only the shells of buildings visible above. It is difficult to describe how I felt as I returned not only to meet with Holocaust survivors there and the leadership of the Jewish community but also with Axel Springer, the publisher who is not only Israel's great friend but also the man who hosted the event which I was to address.

I want to report on what I said to hundreds of outstanding German officials, none of whom I am sure, was ever a Nazi. As a matter of fact at least one was the son of a Hitler's victim and is presently the minister of finance of West Berlin.

I could not address this distinguished group of German statesmen and clergymen without telling them how a Jew like me feels in the land which spawned and implemented the "Final Solution." I told them that I cannot seek the punishment of anyone but former Nazis responsible for the annihilation of six million Jews. To warrant punishment one must himself have committed a crime. If one sinned only by acts of omission - by failing to resist - one may not be punished. Even Jewish law, which in some instances requires martyrdom, does not prescribe punishment of all Germans. But I did suggest that the German people, collectively and forever, must bear the shame or guilt of what was done by their people. Punishment, no; but a sense of guilt, yes.

What I said impressed many because I explained that in our Jewish tradition we still seek atonement for sins committed by our people thousands of years ago. We punish no one for these sins but we never allow ourselves to forget them. In our ritual for the High Holy Days we refer to atonement for the crime committed by

10 sons of Jacob who sold their brother Joseph into bondage. The special prayers for the penitential season are so structured that we may bring to mind the sin of the Golden Calf and the sin of the *Meraglim* - the scouts who betrayed Moses and caused a generation of the liberated slaves to die in the desert.

All of these sins were committed thousands of years ago. But the Jewish people must not forget them. As a people we bear the taint forever, even if we inflict no punishment on ourselves or others because of it.

By the same token I told my German audience that while I bear none of them any malice, I ask of them no more than I ask of Jews - to bear in mind their collective guilt so that all of us will never let evil triumph again.

One German official took issue with me. He could not accept my notion of collective guilt. He himself feels no guilt - he was born after the Holocaust and his father had been persecuted during Hitler's reign. Why should he sense what I wanted him to sense?

I met with him on the day following my presentation. I simply had to discuss the matter with him. I knew that he was typical of millions of Germans; among them are many who are fine, decent people. If I could reach him perhaps I could reach others - or at least he would.

My argument was a simple one. I asked him whether he was proud of the contribution of the German people to every area of human culture in the last few centuries. He could not deny that he was proud of what the German people had done in science and philosophy, in music and art, even in social legislation. I then asked him whether his pride was due to his own share in that achievement. Of course it was not. But he had the right - and I agreed with him - to be proud of what his people did collectively, those living and those dead.

However, if he deemed the German people collectively a real entity whose past gave him feelings of exaltation, how could he not deem the same people collectively responsible for a shameful chapter in their history - indeed, so shameful that he himself regarded it as the most evil thing to have happened in the annals of man. Call it guilt or shame, Jews feel that a people too must atone - and

not only those who lived when it happened but even those who were born thereafter but deem themselves part of the one collective entity that did the damage.

The least he had to understand was that I was not relating to the German people in a manner that was inconsistent with the manner that Jews relate to themselves and their forbears.

Do we not pray on the High Holy Days for our sins and the sins of our fathers? And do we not ask on the Day of Atonement that God forgive us our sins - as individuals - and the sins of the "House of Israel," which is the Jewish people in their corporate entity separate and apart from the individuals who constitute it?

German lawyers especially must understand this for it is they who gave the world the "realist" theory of corporate existence as distinguished from the "fiction" theory of American jurists.

After our discussion he admitted that my point was well taken but he prefers the concept of collective shame to collective guilt. Since we were not thinking of anyone being punished for collective guilt, it was only a matter of semantics which term we would use. In our High Holy Day ritual we speak both of shame and sin. Perhaps Jews have a greater capacity than others for self-flagellation.

I cannot conclude without adding that for Axel Springer my position was "too mild and considerate." He will not rest until the world in general - and Germany in particular - atones for their collective guilt by securing the State of Israel forever, as minimum retribution for the collective guilt of the Holocaust. May his tribe multiply.