



In all our prattle about guilt we are really saying,
 "I'm more sensitive than Dad"

Older Germans, Younger Krauts

Samuel Hux

You may remember the event. In October, 1977, German commandos rescuing 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," an atmosphere so innocent that one has to remind oneself, sometimes, that some of the most serious matters are really serious. The recently retired schoolmaster was a mild-mannered fascist proud of his collection of Nazi martial recordings, although he had not a word of German. "But those are lies, Communist propaganda! Hitler *loved* the Jews!" he informed a German lady 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 English resident responded, "Booty." That's funny; it's not fair; and there's something inevitable about it. I've never told the story to my German friends, a number of whom watched television with me that evening.

The principal events were already known: commando strike, rescue of hostages, suicides of Baader, Ennslin, Raspe. To a person my friends were proud that the Germans could do what the Israelis had done at Entebbe, and all were aware of the terrible irony of that. But their collective good feeling lasted no longer than the film of commandos returning home to heroes' welcome, strains of the national anthem greeting them. "No!" one German shouted. "Why not?" 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 liberal opinions—an appeal from both "sides," the sides, so it happened, being those too-young and those old-enough-to-have.... You know.

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 for-

eign adventure. Yes, I see your point...and yours. When tempers cooled, just barely, I made apologies and facile explanations to our Spanish hosts, and left to become 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 Germany's 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, but I tell you: West Germany is in grave danger, its 'democracy' is highly imperfect, and I am not at all sure we have any more freedom than they have to the east. At the very least, there the citizen 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 old enough myself 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."

A 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

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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 of who some of his most vociferous admirers in the Thirties and Forties were? 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 that's passed in our democratic assembly has 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's lucky its morality wasn't tested in similar manner. In truth, I haven't learned to cope with all that happened; one need not assume that my silence about much 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 is perfect. Why expect it? The first is rather too forgiving of regimes where people "know where they stand" and rather too expectant of perfection. The second ignores, rather too much, the danger that lies in all emergency legislation, and rides its dignity a bit too much for some tastes. But not, I confess, too much for mine. And this is what has surprised me. The first I prefer to leave a sort of collective voice. The second I cannot help but localize in one "speaker," whom by accident I know fairly well, in spite of a fair difference in age and a world's distance in experience.

"Eugen," as I shall call him, I had seen several times in my youth before I ever met him as an adult. *Wehrmacht* trooper, S.S. *obersturmbannführer*. He is, that is, an actor. I knew him over a year before I confessed to him his face was familiar to me; I knew by then that irony could be an entrée to deeper conversation. "Eugen, 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." Eugen had not been, however, a Nazi. He had spent several months in jail in his twenties as a young socialist. As the war approached he was an actor in provincial theatre. When the war came, he was drafted and he went—without conviction. "I was not heroic." What does he think of the American draft-resisters of the Sixties?—I've 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

think that those who refuse in a state without those organs of protective publicity and a code of fair play have a moral stature I do not know that I have, never having been tested; and, not knowing, I prefer to reserve judgment of those who do not refuse, without that reservation of judgment being really a subtle conviction of the accused until the facts of acquittal are in.

Eugen'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 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 many 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 loves again, or they you.

I am not proposing some counterethics located in the *familiars* or *ego*; I am trying to imagine what it was, *then*, like. I never ask Eugen such questions; I am not a petit inquisitor. Nor am I so stupid as to assume that silence means peace of soul for the silent. For, in spite of one's own survival, some loves were *not* seen again. "They began to disappear before I went. I hoped—God forgive me—that that would pass. When I returned, they were all gone. Dead, I later knew: my Jewish friends."

I hope it does not need to be said that there is no implicit comparison between that silent pain and the pain of the parents, siblings, and landsmen of those friends and the ultimate pain of the friends themselves. But pain is pain, whatever the degree; it has no "decibels" to be counted when one is feeling it. And so with guilt: While the new calculus includes qualities and degrees, one is not by nature a statistician of the spirit, so *any* guilt is felt, by those who can feel, as *guilt*, not as some approximate thing; and the insistence that one must *verbally* disburden himself of silent pains as a way of showing that his soul *is* burdened and to what degree is an impertinence. Not all Germans need to be reminded.

The justification of a hard line in a clear emergency does not automatically symbolize a resurgent crypto-fascism. Eugen does not frighten me. It is his sort, with his kind of experience, that has built perhaps the most thoroughly democratic polity in Europe today—people who have learned and do remember. A greater testament than any continuous, ritual confession. Perhaps it's an overstatement to say that the younger principals of that week in October frighten me; but they do, at least, make me nervous, as

do people with any touch of self-cultivated paranoia.

Does the world really burden the younger Germans with the sins of the fathers? The swift, common, mental calculation when one meets a German, the uncertain reservation, "He is *old enough*, at any rate, to have....," implies in another case its opposite certainty, "He's clearly *too young* to have...." Perhaps the younger German senses the swift acquittal but resents the momentary trial. That can't be very pleasant, but neither is the history which sires it. And on the other hand it seems to me the world is exceptionally sympathetic to the younger German—excepting the superficial or the mystic who feels there is this something or other, you see, coursing through the blood of a Hun; and excepting the person whose own experience is so painful, whose memories are so tortured, that his capacity for specific sympathy is constricted, and—this to me is essential, nonnegotiable—cannot, should not, be expected to be otherwise: "Your elders murdered mine and would have me. Do not expect miracles from me yet. You may be innocent, but so was my father. He is dead and you are alive. I cannot handle it."

But the world is, by and large, sympathetic, for it knows that the generational complications and misunderstandings that obtain to some degree everywhere obtain in a different way among Germans. It is quite one thing for an American to think that his parents surely must have been decent enough and spirited when young...so how can they be so staid and shortsighted now? But quite another thing for a German to think that his father, or mother, uncle, or older brother seems so self-centered now, while when young he/she served, to whatever small degree, a state which set about systematically exterminating ten million or more noncombatants. Their lot being such a taxing one, so generating of sympathy, what fault then have I to find with them?

Precisely that in their singular way of experiencing dissatisfaction and in their manner of expressing it, they tend to embody in a peculiar way what they condemn: a certain stock stage quality that Westerners have long envisioned when they used the word *German* in a critical sense. Rigidity. And a mental habit that I call *Schmerphilosophie*—*Schmer* not *Schmerz*, fat not pain.

German democracy is imperfect: It is, therefore, corrupt. Rights can be, and sometimes are, violated: There are, therefore, no rights. A society is terrorized to reveal its underlying totalitarianism; it is provoked to force: It is, therefore, totalitarian. If you really feel guilt, you will not contain it, you *will* confess, you *vill*! —Need it be said that older Germans may remember such rigidity of mind, such principled perfection and longing for purity, very well indeed?

There are recognizable truths in caricature, or it would not work. You may agree, disagree, or think me mad, if I write, "The Quotidian is unchanging in its Essence, but modified experientially by instant communication of the upheavals of the Time-Spirit," but in any case you know that I'm writing—in English—German. There is an often-noted tendency in German thought to concretize ideas, fatten them up, so that one seems to be talking of something as substantial as a stone. *History!* *Zeitgeist!* *The Idea!* Processes are turned into measur-

able things almost tangible. (No wonder Marx had so little trouble converting an idealism into a materialism by "standing it on its feet." It already had feet.) Democracy is itself a process, unstable and uncertain, not an achieved *thing*. Therefore, those involved in the process stumble, regain balance, stumble again, hope that balance rather than stumbling is the norm but can't be sure. Citizens of nations with long experience of democracy know this somewhere inside. But "You are amateurs," I say to my German friends; "you've not been at it long enough. You think every stumble is a regression to fascism. Given your history, I suppose that's unavoidable. Still...."

Feelings as well as political processes are made into entities. Guilt is assumed to be a thing one may *own*, and own up to: Here, look at it. But no; guilt is a manner of living, another kind of process (or a *prozess*, I'm tempted to say, a trial). The signs are a mood, a dark night of the soul, in which one prefers silence because no words are adequate, and an external life, political and social, which is authentic evidence of the person having changed, *learned*.

The younger Germans, those I know, are having something both ways—possessing and eating their strudel. On the one hand they are tired, they say, of being held accountable by the world—when they *aren't*. On the other they are tired of voluntarily shouldering the guilt that is by act their fathers'—which they don't have to do and in fact *can't*. Not unless guilt, instead of being a manner of living by the accountable, is a Thing existing in the world to be shouldered by Someone. If one assumes it the latter, then I imagine the younger German saying, "The Destiny of my Generation is to shoulder the *Schuld* of the Past, commanded thus by the *Zeitgeist*"—or something like that.

It is not merely that I am more than a little bored by such attitudes; it's that I think the real *Schuld* is being trivialized, and the events of 1933-45 that caused it are being diminished thereby to the mere occasion of that oldest of psychological games: I'm more sensitive than Dad is.

A week after the events of which I've written, I drove from this village to a neighboring harbor town. On the way I gave a lift to two hitchhikers, German tourists, man and wife. When we arrived at the port, there occurred one of those moments which, although unexpected, one feels somehow had to happen, as if life were plotted by an ironist. "*Was ist meine Schuld?*" I thought the man asked. What's my guilt? I could only stare, and redden in embarrassment. I had made the mental calculation when he entered the car, you see, and he was clearly old enough.... Finally, he opened his wallet and gestured toward it. No—I told him—I was coming this way anyway. My school-boy German has mostly vanished, and I had forgotten that *Schuld* means "debt" as well as "guilt," and that *schulden* means "to be indebted." "*Was schulde ich ihnen?*" he must have said. What do I owe you? So I suffered a couple of hours of the desperate feeling of having been here already without wanting to be before I got home and turned to my German dictionary. [VVV]