

Called to account for genocide

By William C. Kashatus

When I was a college student in the early 1980s, I visited Dachau, one of Nazi Germany's most notorious concentration camps. Afterward, I couldn't help but ask older residents of the nearby village what they knew.

Some insisted that they believed Dachau was a temporary detention station for Jews rather than a death camp. Others admitted their knowledge but excused their inaction by citing fear of retribution by SS soldiers or the national brainwashing that Adolf Hitler imposed on the German people. Still others clearly struggled with guilt but, annoyed by the inquiry, told me to mind my own business.

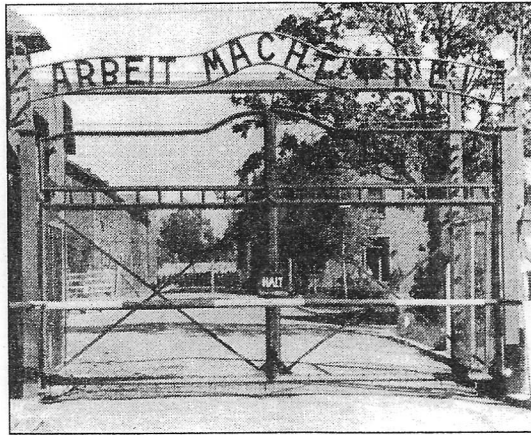
The memory resurfaced when I read about the recent arrest and possible extradition to Germany of Johann Breyer, an 89-year-old Northeast Philadelphia man and former guard at Auschwitz.

Charged with 158 counts of aiding and abetting the murder of European Jews, Breyer is the latest victim of a renewed push by German authorities to hold accountable the surviving SS soldiers who played even ancillary roles in the Holocaust.

But the blame cannot rest fully on SS soldiers like Breyer or even Nazi leaders. The common German citizen was also part of the genocide enforced by those who served Hitler's cause.

Historians differ as to where responsibility lies for the Holocaust, the mass extermination of approximately six million Jews during the Third Reich. It's been easy to place the blame squarely with Hitler, who authorized the "elimination of the Jews" as a means of achieving his master plan of a "pure" or Aryan race.

Significant blame also lies with



The main gate of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. AP

the Nazi leadership, including: Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann, who coordinated the Europe-wide plan of genocide; Heinrich Himmler, the key Nazi official responsible for overseeing implementation of the plan; and the commandants of the main camps.

Then there were the SS — specifically, the SS Totenkopfverbände — whom Hitler designated to carry out the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem," as he called it. These "Death's Head Units," as they were known, served as the guards and staff of the concentration camps in Germany and Austria, the labor camp system in occupied territories, and the extermination camps in Poland.

Breyer has repeatedly insisted that he served as a guard in a labor camp, but German authorities say otherwise. Regardless, since the 2011 conviction in Munich of John Demjanjuk, an Ohio man who served at the Sobibor death camp in Poland, German prosecutors have successfully pursued other former SS members who worked in support roles at the camps under the legal theory that they are as culpable as those who killed directly.

If so, how can all the citizens of the Third Reich escape blame? Aren't they guilty of failing to

stand up to such gross human injustice?

Some may argue that common and reasonable people, when influenced by an authoritarian regime, have no choice but to obey commands resulting in the suffering of others. Since most Germans were not directly associated with the Nazi party, it is believed that they were coerced, perhaps brainwashed, into following orders blindly, succumbed to peer pressure, or were simply unaware of the genocide.

But the argument is difficult to accept considering that authoritarianism, brash nationalism, and virulent anti-Semitism have deep roots in German history. Thus there were those German people who reported Jews in hiding to the SS, some who purchased or pilfered belongings left behind, and still others who contributed to the work of the camps by doing business with them.

If nothing else, historical research reveals that the majority of Germans knew about the concentration camps and that Jews were being indiscriminately killed and persecuted in the death camps.

The task of genocide was so enormous, so complex, so time-consuming, and so economically demanding that it took the greatest efforts of millions of Germans from all spheres of life to keep the Nazi regime that ordered it in power.

This does not excuse Breyer's involvement. Nor does it suggest that a broader, more far-reaching punishment is necessary to vindicate the atrocious crimes of the Third Reich. It's only to register the point that the Holocaust will never be accorded its proper historical significance until it is seen as the act of a single nation where no one escapes accountability for his or her action or inaction.

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