

WINNING A GERMAN PRIZE

by Israel Bernbaum

We read frequent news reports which describe Neo-Nazi activity in Germany. We read reports of skinheads roaming the streets of German towns, of swastikas painted on the walls of Bonn, Munich, Berlin, and Leipzig. We read disquieting reports about video-games in which killing Jews in gas chambers is depicted in the games as a form of entertainment. These events are highlighted in the press and brought to the attention of the public. News, however, about a Germany that defends democracy, about a Germany that builds a society based on human rights and justice, deserves also to be highlighted and brought to the attention of the public.

My own personal experiences reveal a positive aspect of modern Germany frequently overlooked by the press.

I am a Jewish Holocaust survivor. My relationship with modern Germany stems from my book for young readers, MY BROTHER'S KEEPER - THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ARTIST. Its German edition MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER was awarded the 1990 top German Prize for Young People's Literature. I was invited as a guest of the German government, and received many honors and much acclaim both as a writer and artist. My book, which deals with the Holocaust, was recommended to the educational system throughout Germany by the authorities for Young People's Literature. I spent three weeks in Germany, as their guest and lecturer on the Holocaust. These three weeks kindled in me a hope for a better future in human relationships, a future in which Germany could play a vital role.

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I had lived in Warsaw. I had witnessed the unspeakable Nazi terror, and I had escaped from the Ghetto before the walls sealed in its Jewish inhabitants. I had survived the war living in the Soviet Union. I arrived in the United States in 1957.

I have produced large paintings on the Holocaust. My paintings, in bright, striking colors, present images in "naive" style. During the last decade they have been seen by thousands of children and their teachers at my exhibitions as well as in slide presentations in classrooms in New York City and in different parts of the country. My paintings on the Holocaust have been accepted by educators as an effective educational tool. My book, MY BROTHER'S KEEPER - THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ARTIST is on the shelves of school and children's libraries throughout the country.

The German publisher, Roman Kovar, himself a Jewish survivor, discovered my book in the International Youth Library in Munich. In his letter of May, 1988, he wrote to me:

"Presently there is in the German media a frequent debate on the theme of the "Silence" (regarding the Holocaust). It has become a topic of frequent discussion. I believe that the best answer to this question would be to publish your book for the German children, since they are asking many questions."

Mr. Roman Kovar published the German title MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER in 1989. It was selected for the 1990 GERMAN PRIZE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE in the category of "nonfiction." The jurors stated in their Report: "We should recommend this book to as many youngsters as possible, since it teaches Remembrance, and Remembrance has a conciliatory power."

I was one among five prize winners of children's and young people's books. The prizes which are distributed in Germany annually were this time presented on November 8, 1990, in the City of Neuss/Rhine, in the presence of high level German dignitaries. There were 300 guests from the educational, literary, and intellectual world of Germany, and the media.

When MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER made its appearance in 1989, it was well received by the German press. Sybil Gräfin Schönfeldt, one of the most prominent book and art critics in Germany,

wrote in her article, "The Bitter And Redeeming Effect of Remembering" in the SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG of April 4, 1990:

"...Let his goal and his hope become our hope: to be my brother's keeper. Without doubt, this book should become the children's text book of the nation."

During my stay in Germany, I was interviewed by the press, TV, and radio. Approximately 20 articles appeared in major German papers and in Vienna. All quoted my statements and excerpted sections from MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER, which informed the German public about its educational values.

I was deeply moved at how warmly my Holocaust lectures were received by hundreds of people at the Central Library in Neuss and by the hundreds of students at the University of Giessen. My talks were received with equal warmth in the American House and in the Jewish Cultural Center in Munich.

-In the German School-

An especially exciting experience for me was being invited by principals and teachers in Munich and Vienna to address the children of their schools. Everywhere I was received with courtesy and kindness. It gave me the opportunity to present with frankness my Holocaust images in the classrooms.

In my introduction, I emphasized that by talking about the Holocaust my intention was to build bridges of brotherhood among people. I stated: "We must agree to learn the truth about past history. You may also ask why should we learn about the Holocaust. My answer is, because the Holocaust was an event of such catastrophic magnitude in human history, if we overlook it, we expose humanity and future generations to a repetition of similar catastrophes.

In talking to these young people I pointed out the major factors which contributed to the Holocaust. In the process I tried to explain the symbolic images in my paintings. For instance, in the canvas entitled "The Jewish Mother in the Ghetto," a head of a mother screams out from the flames and asks: "Civilization where are you? Christian world, with all of your teachings of love, where are you?"

In my remarks I covered the period when the Nazi government prepared a list of eleven million Jews scheduled to be annihilated. To implement this enormous program, it mobilized tens of thousands of SS-soldiers, Gestapo-men, and police. It recruited tens of thousands of non-German police, guards, and auxiliaries, throughout Europe under German occupation. The Nazi authorities had organized an enormous bureaucracy of civilians who were involved in the program related to the destruction of the Jewish people.

I explained to my young German listeners another symbolic image in my painting which presents the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union as passive onlookers of the plight of the Jews. This complete abandonment by and indifference of the non-Jewish world were encouraging signals to Hitler to continue for close to six years undisturbed his program of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem."

In response to children's questions I explained: The Holocaust was possible because during the Nazi era the German system of government was a dictatorship, a system where a single person, the dictator, Hitler, gave orders, and the people had to obey blindly. He justified the murdering of the Jews by introducing his racial theories of supremacy of the German race and inferiority of other races. According to these theories, the Jewish people were classified as a race "not worth living." I pointed out that the civilized world did nothing to oppose the Nazi racial theories.

A beam of light was my reading of a passage from my book about people who saved Jews: "There were people who saved Jewish lives. Those people, whom I call human angels, were like shining stars in the dark skies of Europe during the Nazi era. They risked their own lives to help save Jewish lives." They were their brother's keeper.

I quoted to the young people from the first page of my book, MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER:

"There is no limit to the questions we can ask about the Holocaust, but to one question we must find an answer:

How can we prevent it from happening again?"

I turned to the final pages of the book. I read: "The answer may be found in ourselves." It means that we must protect democratic freedoms against all forms of dictatorship. We must demand absolute equality for all people and reject any form of racism. We must never remain indifferent to other people's suffering.

To my amazement the response from my young German and Austrian audiences was very favorable. My slide presentations were warmly received and were followed by many questions. This reflected a relaxed atmosphere and interest in the subject under discussion. One of the questions a child asked was, how did I feel making the decision to come to Germany. I confessed that I had been confronted with a dilemma. My friends who survived Auschwitz felt deeply disturbed at my going to Germany. These are people who still live with the scars of Auschwitz on their bodies and in their souls. Personally, however, I realized that I was going to a Germany which has been under democratic rule for forty five years. I was going to a Germany which had awarded my Holocaust book, MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER (MY BROTHER'S KEEPER) the highest German Literary Prize.

I concluded my talks in German classrooms, by declaring: "My heart is filled with hope that thirty years from now when you German children and all the children in the world will have destiny in your hands, you will bring glory to the principles of democracy, tolerance, and brotherhood. So you will make other holocausts impossible."

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I was asked: "How do you feel as a Jew and survivor, as you walk down the streets of German cities?" This same question was asked by almost each German whom I met whether he was from the press, or media. It was a clear indication that these people were aware of what had happened during the Holocaust. I told them about my mixed feelings as a Jewish survivor. As an artist and author of MEINES BRUDERS HÜTER (MY BROTHER'S KEEPER), however, I was aware that I came here with

a certain mission - to convey a universal message. I had always considered that the Holocaust should be of universal concern. The telling of its story to children I regarded as of the greatest importance, because I envision children as the builders of the future. In my "utopian" painting, "We Will Be Our Brother's Keeper" I present my vision of children of all nations holding hands in universal brotherhood. I am grateful for the recognition I received, and for the opportunity given to me to convey personally my message to German children. .

During the receptions honoring the prize winners, conversations revolved around my book and the Holocaust. One of the people seated at the table, a woman in an important position in the German literary world, told me that after reading my book she was overwhelmed by a sense of shame. Another person at the same table confessed that after reading my book she cried like a baby. She cried because of the tragedy my book describes. In replying, I commented that they were ashamed for what had happened during the past generation. To be ashamed for what has happened in the past can stimulate one to act so that injustice will not be repeated. The German soldier, in the well known photograph, aiming his machine gun at the frightened Jewish child with the raised hands, was not ashamed of what he was doing. He was posing for the "heroic" photograph. The German General, Jurgen Stroop, after the Warsaw Ghetto had been destroyed, was not ashamed to utilize this photograph in his "Report" to Himmler. It was a time without shame. It was a time without hope.

The very fact that modern day Germans are showing the courage to come to terms with the past has, in my opinion, great promise for the future. Also auguring well for the future were the optimistic remarks which I heard from people of the press during our interviews and the comments I read in their articles. All of them were young, charming, and very much aware of the Holocaust. None of them hinted at the necessity to forget about it. Only one person asked about the possibility of forgiving. My argument was that, to forgive Aushwitz,

Tremblinka, Majdanek, and all the death camps is permitted only to the victims. How can anybody forgive the murder of millions of people and the eradication of thousands of vibrant communities? How can anybody ask for forgiveness?

It is beyond belief that Germans of the generation which participated in or witnessed the annihilation of the Jews can afford - morally - to forgive themselves. The present younger generation cannot afford to forgive the generation of their parents for its actions. There is hope, however, that the generations will make a joint effort to build a world where it will not be necessary to ask for forgiveness. I must reiterate that the crimes of the Holocaust must never be forgiven. They must never be forgotten so that they will never be repeated...

This hope and my expectations for a modern, democratic Germany were reinforced by observations which deeply impressed me. An example is the International Youth Library in Munich, which, to my knowledge, is unique in the world by virtue of its universal character. It houses hundreds of thousands of volumes of books for children and young people from all nations of the world and in all languages. Another institution of significance is the German Janusz Korczak Society established at the Gissen University. This makes Germany a center from which are spread the principles of democracy and the ideals of universal brotherhood as taught by the great Jewish-Polish humanist, Janusz Korczak.

I cannot fail to mention the locations of the Death Camps, which I visited: Dachau, in Germany and Mauthausen, in Austria. They as many other Nazi Death Camps are preserved as Memorial Museums. In libraries and in schools which I visited, I found many books on the Holocaust with all the devastating documentation. A traveling exhibition of my Holocaust art, organized by the Jewish Cultural Center in Munich, is well received in many Cultural Centers over Germany. All this marks another sign that there is a Germany which is inclined not to let forget the past. It is a promising outlook for the future.