

Ordinary Nazis and the Persistence of Memory

MY COMPARTMENT was empty as the Johann Strauss pulled out of Frankfurt's main station on a cloudy April morning, starting the day-long journey south to Vienna. When the train stopped at Würzburg, a fairy-tale Baroque town in northern Bavaria, an elderly German man entered my compartment. Short, stocky, fleshy-faced, he wore a green felt hat, tie and zip-up sweater. He took the seat directly across from me, giving me long, predatory looks.

Slowly he began a conversation, and I grew less wary of him. In 1945, he'd done duty with the American army, he recalled, working in the kitchen, learning English. The way he phrased it, it sounded like he'd been a hired cook. A G.I. who befriended him said, "You're a good man, Bernhard," and wanted to take him back to Kansas City. Questioning him further, I learned that Bernhard had been a prisoner of war held by the Americans in Czechoslovakia at the end of the war. As the Russians approached, the camp was moved to Germany. He never went to America, he said, because his mother was very ill, and she told him, "Bernhard, *bleib hier*." Stay here. I felt a chill, sitting alone in the rumbling cell of a train with a man who may have been a Nazi.

The Nazis, Bernhard said, were like the Communists — in every country you had good and bad men. Despite my misgivings, I wanted to believe Bernhard was a good man. Certainly he appeared to be a loyal man — to his mother, to his wife whom he'd been married to for 48 years, to the railways, which he'd worked for all his life before retiring. He was on his way to visit the railway museum in Nuremberg. Since Bernhard's was apparently a deep, old-fashioned sense of commitment, I wonder now, three years after our fleeting encounter, what his loyalty to the Ger-

— Continued on Page G15



Parul Kapur is a freelance journalist and fiction writer based in Frankfurt.

Ordinary Nazis

— Continued from Page G4

man state demanded of him. Perhaps he once murdered innocents for his country, perhaps not. Who is to know?

Who is guilty? Who is innocent? Who is the victim? Who the victimizer? These questions once again circle Germany, though many people choose not to hear them, or feel they are irrelevant, or are tired of hearing them, wanting to free their minds of the past. Ordinary men like Bernhard, the common soldiers who fought under the Third Reich, are the subject of Daniel Goldhagen's provocatively titled book, "Hitler's Willing Executioners," which is a best-seller in Germany. It has stirred a tempest among the intelligentsia and academics. (The book's critics soundly fault Goldhagen's obsessive tone for imputing that Germans were collectively responsible for the genocide and for caricaturing them as grinning anti-Semitic demons, while paying scant attention to the instrumental role Nazi propaganda played in creating mass hatred of the Jews).

The same ordinary soldiers are also the focus of a controversial exhibition documenting atrocities committed by the German army — the Wehrmacht — against civilians, Jews and POWs in the Balkans and former Soviet Union. (This is only shocking if you don't lump all German soldiers together as Nazis, as outsiders tend to do, but understand that Germans drew sharp distinctions between Nazi military organizations like the S.S. and the Gestapo, which they held accountable for the extermination of Jews, and the national army of mostly conscripted men, the Wehrmacht, resulting in the postwar legend of a *sauber*, or clean, army of gentlemen-soldiers.)

Both Goldhagen's treatise and the Wehrmacht exhibition point fingers at *who* played a part in the genocide, both turn the spotlight away from Hitler to the guard or foot soldier who carried out the gruesome killings, and that has got Germans talking again. Yet another door has been opened leading back into a dark past. The issue of *who* has spawned a

shouting match between those who insist it's necessary to examine and acknowledge wartime evils, and those who refuse to look back, saying that highlighting the crimes of a few unjustly implicates all and prevents old wounds from healing.

More sweepingly than Goldhagen's book, the exhibition, "War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941 to 1944," has gripped the German public's imagination. After traveling quietly through 15 cities in Germany and Austria, the itinerant exhibit arrived in Munich last March to find all hell had broken loose in that parochial southern town. A local conservative party boss, currying favor with the right, attacked the show and called for its boycott, instigating a near-violent clash between thousands of neo-Nazi demonstrators and an equal number of anti-fa-

'Perhaps he once murdered innocents for his country. Who is to know?'

cist left-wingers. The furor, in turn, sparked a parliamentary debate in Bonn, with ministers rueing the thought that "this war won't leave us till our deaths." By the time the exhibition stopped in Frankfurt in April, conservative mayor Petra Roth and other Christian Democrat leaders were calling for a boycott of its opening. Meanwhile, the liberal Social Democrats and Greens applauded the exhibition as a courageous exercise in truth-telling.

Outside the Paulskirche, the historic rotunda in which Germany's first parliament met and the exhibition was hung, young reactionaries handed out flyers exhorting "Was Grandpa a Criminal?" answered by a resounding *Nein!* across the bottom. Another conservative politician, Christian Democrat Alfred Dregger, published an essay in the well-respected daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zei-*

tung, defending his honor as a German recruit under the title "The Soldiers Were Hitler's Victims."

Meanwhile several thousand people a day swamped the Frankfurt exhibition, largely adolescents from schools throughout the region. They came flashing belly-button and lip rings, with pop-sicle-orange-and-yellow dreadlocks and platform sneakers and sandals, all looking back, in concern, in hushed fascination, at Germany's past — at photos of boyish soldiers laughing as they pulled an old Jew's beard or shot dead some anonymous dark-haired peasant in the countryside. A cherubic university student said that when she looked at the photographs of Wehrmacht soldiers staging hangings and mass executions in Poland or Ukraine (the pictures were taken by the soldiers themselves, like grisly tourist snapshots), she felt she was looking at a different people. She was not of them, not their flesh and blood.

Another schoolgirl from Aschaffenburg, a Bavarian town not far from where Bernhard had gotten on the train, came to the exhibition to decide for herself whether it told a truth or a lie about ordinary German soldiers. As she sat examining a Wehrmacht soldier's photo album stocked with souvenir images of Minsk in ruins and assorted hanging men, she said her grandfather, a German from Rumania, had fought in the Rumanian army alongside the Germans but felt no animosity for his opponents because he knew "they were poor pigs just like him." Other teenagers I'd talked to confessed they didn't dare broach the topic of the war with their grandparents, uncertain what the reaction might be, so I was surprised that this girl knew as much as she did. In Germany, elders are known for their silence on the war, youths for their enviable distance. (The middle-aged liberals, if anyone, are the ones who profess a sense of responsibility for the Holocaust.)

There was a simple, wrenching explanation for the girl's precocious sense of intimacy with the war. She did not know what her grandfather had seen or done but, she said, he was 80 years old and every night for the last 50 years, he has reported having a dream about the war.