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Steven Hill

From My Bedroom Window in Berlin:
In which direction does the Arrow of History point?

In memoriam: William “Jack” Hill, 1927–2024

I confess to a compulsive fascination with Berlin. This alt-city is such a lavish doner kebab of culture and history, a crossroads of ideas and migration, a currywurst of youthful energy and cloying tradition...and a living charnel house of tragedy and resurrection. When I was a fellow at the American Academy in the Wannsee area of Berlin, from my bedroom window I could spy across the placid lake the elegant villa with the sinister name – the Wannsee Konferenzhaus, where the Nazi’s Final Solution was planned. Also visible was the villa of the widow of the famous painter Max Liebermann who, at the stroke-addled age of 85, was given the bitter choice of...Theresienstadt or overdose. She chose the latter. The American Academy villa in which I was residing, which had been owned by the German-Jewish banker Hans Arnhold, had served as an important salon for Weimar Berlin artists, musicians and intellectuals, and members of Weimar cultural life. Arnhold and his family fled in 1933, and Walther Funk, the Nazi minister of economics, turned the palatial villa into his personal residence. What role did my personal quarters play, I sometimes wondered, in Herr Funk’s domestic tranquility amidst his personal brand of banal evil? If only these walls could talk.

The Wannsee itself is now a picturesque haven for co-existing tribes of waterfowl of all colors, stripes and denominations. But in post-war 1945, the Wannsee was transformed by the alchemy of politics into a liquid border, a rip in the German ideological fabric between East and West, between communism and democracy, and between freedom and walled-in utopianism. It was a watery segment of the “No Man’s Land,” the deadly strip between hostile warring machines, stitched together near Potsdam by the Glienicke Bridge of spies. My father, a young American GI, guarded the dark, mourning mansions that hugged the Wannsee waterfront, sometimes falling asleep on guard duty, which resulted in his commanding officer threatening him with a firing squad. He later told me he thought he heard the low moan of ghosts inside the haunted villas, especially on long winter nights when it was bitter cold and he could hear the creaking ice

sheaves on the river. As he marched like a marionette, hup two three four, he entertained himself by counting the icy puff breaths streaming from his nostrils.

I am proud that young Jack turned his back while some of the post-war, still-interned Jews slipped away to chase the promise of their faraway Promised Land, and that he gave his GI chocolate bars to the starving Berlin kinder. But I am ashamed that, when one boy stole his precious chocolate, my father chased the youngster down and drew his revolver, pointing it between the eyes of the petrified youth; seeing the begging fear there, and the Conqueror's arrogance and deadly lawlessness gripped in his own hand, he threw away the pearl-handled beauty for which he had swapped a lifetime of cigarettes and well-placed favors, but which now scalded his humanity.

Yet who am I to sit in judgement? Recently during a phone call with my now 95-year-old father, he began reminiscing about his former days in Berlin as a young soldier. I was shocked as he suddenly began speaking German – almost whole sentences and coherent phrases. No one in my family had ever heard him speak German before; I did not even know he had that capacity. His crinkled, demented brain could barely recall what he had for breakfast that morning or how to drive to his doctor appointments, yet his passable German was now bubbling up from some buried memory source that was seeded 75 years before. “Fräulein Schöne!” and “Wirst du mit mir ausgehen?” (“Hey beautiful! Will you go out with me?”) He told me that he wanted to marry his German girlfriend, but his mother did not approve. Love between two people does not always speak the same language, especially during wartime and its aftermath, and so the soldier-mama's boy eventually sailed home, wife-less. Our family's history was altered before it even began. Who knew?

All of this was visible from the time portal of my bedroom window overlooking the Wannsee -- but only if you knew where to look and what to look for, especially as memory fades. Memory can be the most treacherous of friends, conspiring in our own oblivion.

Gazing across the lake, espying the grandeur that once was, revolted by the thought that the Final Solution was planned *right over there* by men of such brilliant but evil efficiency and ambition, I was gripped by a melancholy evoked by a realization of the episodic horror of this human experience. Victorious legions once marched through the ornately-carved Brandenburg Tor of triumph and empire, their conquered victims in tow, entire towns in chains, women, men, children, livestock...no, wait...that was a different empire, and a different triumphal Arch, that of the Roman emperor Constantine, sometimes it's hard to tell the ghosts of one empire from the other...another empire which also eventually fell, the sites of conquest abandoned, weeds growing up between the cracks, the marble from its magnificence eventually pilfered by the Catholic popes to adorn St. Peter's basilica as the crown of yet another, this one a religious empire. Civilization recycles its own, that's one of the operative principles of this human trajectory. Karl Marx called it the dialectic and gave it a direction, but sometimes it feels more like entropy and tooth decay. Things fall apart, and then pick themselves up again. The stories that Roman marble could tell, if we could listen...if our memories would let us remember.

Or was it Nanking, or Katyn, or Tiananmen, or Srebrenica, or My Lai, Sand Creek, or the Trail of Tears, or Wounded Knee, *lebensraum* shredding the Ghost Shirts of the Plains dancers. Or was it Thomas Jefferson's mud children, half-bred to chained seed, his offspring with house slave Sally Hemings remaining his *property* after birth. Yes, this revered statesman of the

American Enlightenment kept six of his own *seven-eighths* white children in bondage...because they were *one-eighth* black. A pepper pinch of black kept you in bondage in that bitter land of the newly free. Octoroons, the children were called, they even had a name for them because enslaved, nearly white children were so common in that cruel, upside-down place, where slave masters slept with the slave-daughters of previous slave masters and their mistress-slaves, each captive union remixing the bloodline of white male supremacy.

From my Wannsee window, I reflected on the tragedies and crimes that the tribes of humans have inflicted on each other, rotating with saner moments in which we have fostered the laws, institutions and policies to protect ourselves...from ourselves! I experienced a moment of extreme sadness, as I realize how long these struggles have been unfolding and re-folding, and that we have not yet succeeded in our task: to “arrive where we started and know this place for the first time,” as T.S. Eliot once advised. A philosophy that puts humanity at the center of reality must endure the irrational side of the human species, and our violent tendencies and utter imperfections, which have been on display for...well, forever. We are perhaps the most violent, most extinctifying animal ever in the Animal Kingdom, which is no mean accomplishment.

No wonder humans long have appealed to a higher power to protect us...not just from natural calamity, or pandemics, or disease, but from *ourselves*. Yet no god ever arrived, not with sufficient presence anyway, to settle this tragic wandering. Either that, or, as Woody Allen once observed in his serio-absurdist film *Love and Death*, God is a drastic underachiever. No, g(G)od(s) has not saved us, not from ourselves, or the invading hordes, or nature’s whims, or the population churn, or the rise and fall, or the accumulating carbon, or our biological frailness, or the empires of ambition. And now the digital challenge looms, the Invisible Hand suddenly is flashing a robot arm, even as the ticking missiles of climate change and geopolitical crusaders threatens.

And so we come to this stark realization: that despite all our cranial-algorithmic defects and soul-bared flaws, all we have is...ourselves. That is, each other, confronting the sometimes overwhelming nature of this reality. Yes, there is the “procession of death,” our biological destiny, as grippingly portrayed in Gustav Adolph Spangenberg’s painting [*Der Zug des Todes*](#) (“Procession of Death,” 1876), which hangs in Berlin’s Alte Nationalgalerie; at the center of the painting is the Grim Reaper skeleton, leading a procession of the dearly departing who come from all stations of life, the dismal line stretching to the horizon: we see the bishop, the nobleman and knight, and a cripple in rags, and mothers and sisters and brothers and sad-looking children being snatched away too soon. To the side is a young soldier trying to comfort his beloved, since it is his turn to join the relentless line. Dark scavengers circle overhead.

“Remember that you come from dust and to dust you shall return...” No one has yet managed to cheat that final curtain call. And in perhaps the greatest blow, the members of the procession are marching not only away from all that they love, but out of the world’s memory. Life will press forward without them, and eventually no one will survive who remembers them. We are sentenced to exit the ring, and then to be forgotten.

But fear not, because we individual humans are part of a greater wave, called humanity. We have an opportunity to cheat Death in another way – by contributing toward the construction of a Pyramid of wisdom, knowledge, reciprocity and commitment to our greater humanity, that will outlive us all. Pyramids are a symbol of the immortal afterlife, and we reach for it by rallying

what Abe Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature,” and adding our frail mark on this fragile human attempt at political, economic and cultural governance. The Bundestag is re-opened with a glass dome in the Re-United City, walls and curtains all over the world have fallen; democracy and freedom’s flag has been planted in more soils. True, that has been followed now by a time of reversal and backlash, with new walls, whether actual or rhetorical, reasserting this default to ancient tribal bloodline that gurgles in our veins. The Arrow of History struggles to maintain its long trajectory bending toward justice, fairness and equality.

The lightning bolt of democratic governance passed through a young America in 1776, and galloped its way to other parts of the world over the subsequent centuries. What a mysterious process, this rise and fall of societies and movements, of winners and losers, a rippling wave that has spread invisibly in broad daylight to the corners of the earth. The European Union, so influenced by the imperfectly-lived ideals of America, is the latest chapter in our long migration to roll back the grim, dark, scythe-armed Shadow. Political, economic and cultural governance are the invented mechanisms for grappling with the challenges of our times. We have only to look at the remnants of Nationalist Socialism, or the Confederacy, or Soviet and Chinese communism, and the crumbles of empires littered across the acres of history’s battlefields, of triumph and defeat and buried lives and secrets, to understand the steep price of failure.

Whether you are religious or not, whether you pray to (a) G(g)od(s) or not, or worship at the altar of Trump or Obama, or Monet or Beethoven, Goethe and Vigeland, or Einstein, Newton, Curie, Planck and Darwin, we are on our knees before the demigods who tug on the puppet strings of this human drama. The mystery of our collective history not only must humble us but cause us to continually relaunch our efforts. “Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do,” said the mid-18th century philosophe Voltaire. That history tells us that we have a chance of succeeding in our audacious epic quest.

From my Wannsee window, sometimes I shook my head in wonder over Germany, straddling that fragile divide between what it was and what is has become. It gives me hope, this light of renewal shining from the Deutschland watchtower into the dimness of the grey dawn. We know that Populists, Tribalists, Crusaders, Fascists and Cold Warriors don’t die, they just retreat into the basement until the page turns, waiting for the right moment to reemerge. That small light is always on in the basement, biding time, and then in the course of the relentless dialectical cycle of Them vs Anti-them, smashing together like fusing atoms, the banging on the cellar door resumes, demanding our attention. Tribalism is a fact of our human nature, rooted in our biology, in our instinctual will to survive. “Kin and family first” is the oldest law. We cannot renounce them as if they are the enemy, because they are part of us, part of the whole. We can no more wish to destroy “the other” lest we provoke an equal and opposite reaction. We must rise above “the Sachsenhausen standard,” the tribalism of revenge and domination, and the fakery of all types that does not set us free but in fact imprisons us all, prisoner and guard.

John Donne, early 17th century English poet and cleric in the Church of England, whispers urgently in our ears across the centuries:

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

So our challenge boils down to this: How can the many tribes, however defined, learn to live peacefully, side-by-side? What institutions and practices will facilitate a balance of perspectives, a sharing of the bounty, a respectful separation of powers and checks and balances, an enduring peace with fairness and justice, dignity of work and a grand symphony of representation among the many factions? This is our Hero's Quest. Anything less results in a History of the Winners, and is beneath the dignity that we have accrued as a result of our centuries-long struggles to achieve the very real progress of this current moment.

Now I think of that young soldier, my father, caught with so many others in the crosshairs of history, doing his best in challenging, deadly circumstances to bring honor and dignity to each daily sunrise and its quotidian tests. Even those of us who are not soldiers awake to the bugle of our own potentially heroic reveille, and struggle to answer the call.

Germany has tried to answer that call, evolving into a beacon of sorts, not just for its achievements but *because* of its tragedies and failures. For its struggles that it has overcome. When I hear German spoken on the U-Bahn, or in a restaurant, or at the symphony, I hear echoes of all the war movies and TV shows I absorbed as a child in which the harsh sounds of that strange, guttural language signaled *the enemy*. I was fed a steady diet of World War II movies, as well as the silly prisoner-of-war sitcom, *Hogan's Heroes*, in which the Nazi overseers were either stupid, greedy, sneaky, fat or all four. Now in the present, though I can't understand German, its linguistic exotica sounds like a Beethoven-klezmer-aria to my ears. It's the hopeful language learned by that young soldier, my father, now in his final months as he slips away into the Eternal, and the world slowly forgets him and his generation.

Maybe there is hope yet, I think, for Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Hungary, Uzbekistan, Venezuela – even America, even China. Because Germany embodies the best *and* the worst, which means it is proof that from the smoking ruins something beautiful can arise and take up the torch of enlightenment, and re-point the flaming arrow of history in the proximate right direction, arching across the landscape and illuminating the obstacles blocking the path. We must continue to build upon the past, brick by brick, city by city, station by station, byte by byte, creating new triumphal arches of democracy, prosperity, equality, freedom, fairness and sustainability.

A perpetually inspired Goethe rouses us, saying “Knowing is not enough; we must *apply*. Willing is not enough; we must *do*.” Now is the time for knowing, for application, for will and for doing. The bells toll, in the midst of this 21st century global *stammtisch*, not just for you or me, but for us all.

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