

Reading: An excerpt By Milton Mayer, The voice post-holocaust of a German Professor, "No Time to Think"

http://www.thirdreich.net/Thought_They_Were_Free_nn4.html

"You will understand me when I say that my Middle High German was my life. It was all I cared about. I was a scholar, a specialist. Then, suddenly, I was plunged into all the new activity, as the universe was drawn into the new situation; meetings, conferences, interviews, ceremonies, and, above all, papers to be filled out, reports, bibliographies, lists, questionnaires. And on top of that were the demands in the community, the things in which one had to, was "expected to" participate that had not been there or had not been important before. It was all rigmarole, of course, but it consumed all one's energies, coming on top of the work one really wanted to do. You can see how easy it was, then, not to think about fundamental things. One had no time."

"Those," I said, "are the words of my friend the baker. "One had no time to think. There was so much going on." "Your friend the baker was right," said my colleague. "The dictatorship, and the whole process of its coming into being, was above all diverting. It provided an excuse not to think for people who did not want to think anyway. I do not speak of your "little men", your baker and so on; I speak of my colleagues and myself, learned men, mind you. Most of us did not want to think about fundamental things and never had. There was no need to. Nazism gave us some dreadful, fundamental things to think about - we were decent people - and kept us so busy with continuous changes and "crises" and so fascinated, yes, fascinated, by the machinations of the "national enemies", without and within, that we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us. Unconsciously, I suppose, we were grateful. Who wants to think?"

"To live in this process is absolutely not to be able to notice it - please try to believe me - unless one has a much greater degree of political awareness, acuity, than most of us had ever had occasion to develop. Each step was so small, so inconsequential, so well explained or, on occasion, "regretted," that, unless one were detached from the whole process from the beginning, unless one understood what the whole thing was in principle, what all these "little measures" ...must some day lead to, one no more saw it developing from day to day than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head....

"Yes," I said.

"You see," my colleague went on, "one doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me, this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for the one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want to act, or even to talk, alone; you don't want to

"go out of your way to make trouble." Why not? - Well, you are not in the habit of doing it. And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.

In the university community, in your own community, you speak privately to you colleagues, some of whom certainly feel as you do; but what do they say? They say, "It's not so bad" or "You're seeing things" or "You're an alarmist." And you are an alarmist. You are saying that this must lead to this, and you can't prove it. These are the beginnings, yes; but how do you know for sure when you don't know the end, and how do you know, or even surmise, the end? On the one hand, your enemies, the law, the regime, the Party, intimidate you. On the other, your colleagues pooh-pooh you as pessimistic or even neurotic. You are left with your close friends, who are, naturally, people who have always thought as you have.

...It is clearer all the time that, if you are going to do anything, you must make an occasion to do it, and then you are obviously a troublemaker. So you wait, and you wait.

"But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds or thousands will join with you, never comes. That's the difficulty. If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and the smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked - if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in "43" had come immediately after the "German Firm" stickers on the windows of non-Jewish shops in "33". But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.

"And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying "Jew swine," collapses it all at once, and you see that everything, everything, has changed and changed completely under your nose. ...

"Suddenly it all comes down, all at once. You see what you are, what you have done, or, more accurately, what you haven't done (for that was all that was required of most of us: that we do nothing). You remember those early meetings of your department in the university when, if one had stood, others would have stood, perhaps, but no one stood. A small matter, a matter of hiring this man or that, and you hired this one rather than that. You remember everything now, and your heart breaks. Too late. You are compromised beyond repair.