

An exhibition: What it truly represents

It moved me very much to learn about a tremendously important exhibition, “Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime,” which recently opened at the German Historical Museum, in Berlin.

As a German woman who was born in Berlin and grew up in Nazi Germany, and whose parents were avid followers of Hitler, I respect the exhibition very much because it shows the desire to look honestly at our past and our regret. I believe every German wants to be proud of how he or she sees the horror that occurred during World War II—the ugliest time in our long history.

I was affected to read a statement in the Oct. 16, 2010, edition of *The New York Times* by a visitor who walked through the exhibit, stating that he was pleased that Germans were no longer saying, “I didn’t know.” And he was troubled “by parallels between then and now. I think, [he says about Hitler], if you had someone like him today, it could be very dangerous. There are a lot of people out there who want jobs, who are not happy with the political leadership, who would vote for someone like him if he came along.”

One of the curators of this exhibit, Hans-Ulrich Thamer, is quoted: “As a person, Hitler was a very ordinary man. He was nothing without the people.”

That statement is crucial. And I feel passionately that what the German people are looking for is what I am grateful to have learned from the education Aesthetic Realism and its founder, Eli Siegel, the great historian and philosopher. What Nazism came from, he explained, is the desire to feel superior, to be able to look down on other people, see them as inferior, to have contempt for them. Contempt—the “disposition in every person to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world”—is ordinary; it takes many everyday forms—for instance, a boy bullying another boy. And contempt

By **JULIE JENSEN** leads to the greatest horrors, including racism, war, and even gas chambers.

When I began my study of Aesthetic Realism and learned about contempt, it was a revelation for me. I saw that the way, like many wives, I was driven to complete my husband’s sentences, to manage him, to feel I was much more sensitive and capable than he was—was contempt, and that it was a major cause of the pain between us. Learning this, I became much kinder, as did my husband, and there was a huge change in our marriage.

I learned that evil begins as soon as we make a separation between what we feel and the feelings of others. Fascism, I learned, is a way of mind and it must be understood as an ethical matter. The only way to understand how Hitler could become so popular, so powerful, is to study contempt wherever it takes place, including very much in ourselves.

Eli Siegel understood how contempt hurts individual lives, and also how it hurts nations. In his monumental essay “What Caused the Wars” he wrote: “It is necessary to see that while the contempt which is in every one of us may make ordinary life more painful than it should be, this contempt is also the main cause of wars....It was contempt which made for that awful mode of retaliation called Nazism....It is the temptation of man to lessen humanity....Unless man has contempt for what is not lovely in himself; unless he has a true joy in defeating what is not lovely in himself, wars will go on.”

In order for this important exhibit to be truly useful to people, and, as one curator said, to avoid the horror of Nazism from happening again, these sentences should be placed on the walls of the German Historical Museum, in Berlin. I cannot think of a better gift to the German people, and the people of the world, than to study the meaning of these words.
