

Everett Cherrington Hughes

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Innocents Abroad, 1948

Or How to Behave in Occupied Germany

by Everett Cherrington Hughes

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“But you are not an average American.” Thus began the temptations of an American innocent abroad in 1948. Thousands of people from Frankfurt-on-the-Main had made Ascension Day the occasion of their first all-day outing of the season. Several hundreds of them, laden with wildflowers and the booty of a day’s black-marketing for food among the peasants of the Taunus Mountains, were returning in a dilapidated little train. A thunderstorm came up. Soon the human sardines were putting up their umbrellas, for the coach had begun to leak. The tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed woman opposite, whose umbrella was pouring water down my neck, commented on the sad state of Germany, including its railway cars. The accent of my answers prompted her to ask me, “What country are you from?” I replied, “America, of course.” “But, Mein Herr, you are not an average American; that is, racially. I would have said an Englishman or a man from Hamburg.”

Now this had already happened to me several times in the month or so I had been in Germany. So I recognized it as a lure to get me to betray my own people by allowing the implication to stand that I, being passably tall and blond, am somewhat different from and therefore presumably better than the average American. The woman continued, “Now you are quite different from the average American soldier.” “Yes,” I admitted, “I am.” “In fact, most of the soldiers themselves are different from the average. There are so many kinds of us Americans that none of us is average.” (I had lately seen or heard this neat way of putting it.) She gave up this line and went on to say that, of course, Gunther is right about Germany too being racially a very mixed

country. She herself found the people here in Hesse small and dark; not tall, as in her native East Prussia. I took her up on this, adding that I had found the Prussians of Berlin pretty small and dark and that probably the average Dane is a good deal smaller than people imagine. There was a sort of tussle between us. She was trying to use the Nordic ideal as a lever to draw the two of us closer so that we could have a nice talk about how nasty other Americans are. I was admitting nothing, to the point of a slight dishonesty, for I like being tall enough to see parades in most cities of the Western world without impolitely crowding up to the curb, and I am sinfully proud that my daughters are strapping wenches with long, thick, blond braids.

But the conversation went on – for three hours in rain, hail and eventually in darkness – between the ex-schoolteacher from East Prussia who is one of the millions of Germans who have fled from the Russian to the Western Zones of Germany, and me, the American professor in Germany for the first time since 1932. My companion got her criticisms of us Americans all out of her system, and told her own history and troubles to boot. As in most conversations in my several months in Germany, I – the American – did not have to ask questions. The eager German, hungry for association with the outside world, anxious to justify himself, but withal probing for a soft spot to stick a probe into, asked all the questions one could think of, and answered most of them as he went: about Russia, America, war, race, democracy and the future of man. Germans were always – in my experience – hell-bent to talk of the problems of man and the world. Just now, after the long years in which it was dangerous to talk, they are on a talking spree. As a German physician said to me, “Our tongues are like a muscle that has not been used for a long time. At first, you are afraid it will hurt if you move it, so you go easy. Then you find it doesn’t hurt, and you consciously keep moving it around.” And in answering the eager, slightly aggressive talk of Germans trying out their tongues, the American innocent abroad is led into temptation; each of us according to the kind of person he is taken for by the Germans and according to what he would like to be at home; as well as according to what he is or would like to be in this first prolonged American occupation of a European country, a country whose age we covertly admire and whose material achievements impress the American eye even though they lie in ruin.

Let us call the first temptation – to make capital of one’s differences from the average – the Peter temptation. When one has denied his own thrice, the crowing of the gloating cock grates on his inward ear. This temptation turns up in many forms. One is the invitation to be an intellectual. “I am so glad to meet someone from outside Germany; some one, that is, besides the soldiers. If only we could talk together, the intelligent people of the world.” Another time it is the invitation to be a Christian, as against Jews; a white man, as against Negroes; a professor, as against army officers,

occupation authorities and grasping business men; a liberal, as against reactionaries. In the usual human way, the German sizes up one of us for some point of likeness or common interest with himself. Then he throws us the bait. "You and I are white. You will understand how we feel about these Negro soldiers going about with our girls." "You are an Aryan (sic), too. You can see how senseless it is to put Jews here over us Germans." "You are an educated man. How stupid these army officers are." We swallow the hook, for we share with the Germans a weakness for being liked; besides, the proffered role flatters us. We admit that we are not as other Americans, especially other Americans now in Germany. Thus we can form – with our new German friends – a little international mutual admiration society. We professors are especially susceptible to this; for we can start talking with our colleagues of an enemy country about science, philosophy and what a pity it is that professors don't run the world almost as soon as our soldiers start whistling at their girls. But I suspect that people of other trades also yield to their own peculiar versions of this temptation.

In fact, we Americans, of whatever kind, are probably made especially subject to this temptation by our common practice of leading others into it here at home. The Negro American who is liked by his white fellow-workers in industry is often offered fellowship on the condition that he admit that he is an exception in being both a Negro and a good worker, thereby allowing that other Negroes are worthy of the contempt accorded them. A man can be a "white Jew" if he will only openly or tacitly admit that other Jews are "kikes." We Americans do this to one another, not out of ill-will, but to be nice to someone without taking the props from under our own egos. It allows us to admit an individual to our own group while hanging on to the notion his group is inferior. Playing this game both ways at home makes us easy marks for it abroad. It is so easy to appear as we would like to others – to Germans when in Germany – by dissociating ourselves, as exceptional individuals, from some unpleasant image which others have of Americans generally; in short, by just selling our fellow-countrymen down the river.

A Dutchman gave me a clue about how to meet this temptation. He felt it his duty to accept an invitation to teach for a term in a German university in spite of the fact, as he said, that "The Germans destroyed our cities, lived off us for five years and killed thousands of our fellow-citizens who were Jewish and thousands who were not Jewish." He did not say thousands of us Dutchmen and thousands of Jews, but quite unconsciously included all Dutchmen in the national "we-group" injured by the Nazis. This made me watch my tongue, lest I slip in the use of *we* and *they*. Since it is so natural and necessary to say "we whites" and "you negroes," (or the reverse) on many occasions at home, it is easy when abroad and conscious of being American, to slip into saying "We Americans," and "they" – the Jews, negroes, Catholics, or

what have you. It becomes still easier when one's own ego can be helped a little by the implied dissociation of one's self from other Americans. On the other hand, it is a good and warming experience (provided it doesn't make one feel too holy) to develop the habit of saying to people of another country, "Yes, several millions of us Americans are negroes," instead of, "Yes, we have a large negro element in the United States." (*Element* being one of the strongest 'they' words in our language.) Anyone who tries it will learn to distinguish more and more occasions when a little shift of *we* and *they* words will save him from cheap mutual back-slapping at the expense of some of his fellow-citizens.

Let none of this be construed as an argument against listening to criticism of private or public actions of Americans. It is exactly the opposite. Having made it clear that we are not to be trapped into betraying any category of our fellow citizens, we are free to discuss actions and the people who do them on their own merits. Not that this is always easy to do. Even when discussing, let us say, the policy of American occupation authorities, the Peter temptation is there. It is common for "liberal" Americans to say to Germans that, of course, our administration is stupid, ill-informed, and doesn't understand the Germans. "After all, what can one expect from the kind of people who go into the administration?" The point is not the truth of the allegation, but that instead of discussing policies and actions one simply dissociates himself from a class of persons – who have an exceedingly difficult job for which few Americans have any training.

The same temptation turns up in discussion of our more flagrant lapses from practice of our avowed democratic ideals at home. After a public lecture on "Race Relations in America" which I gave, by invitation, in a small German university town, a student got up and asked, "What happened to the Indians in North America?" Now the Germans, once they get the idea that they are in a situation where one can talk freely, show a special ability to ask us embarrassing questions like this. On this occasion, the question seemed to be asked with sincerity, and not with the undertone of cynicism one often detected. So I answered that *we* had found the Indians not willing to get out of our way, so *we* had killed a lot of them and shut the others up in concentration camps. I could have said that some misguided, malicious people had done it. Or, if asked about lynching, I could have said – as we do in the Northern states – that *they*, the benighted Southerners do it; or if I had been a white Southerner of the proper social background, I could have said that *they*, a lot of rough people, not of the better families, do it. This would of course, have been yielding to the old Peter temptation.

There are other ways of getting out from under the things one doesn't approve of, or likes to think he doesn't approve of. One is to explain them away; or to say

that it was long ago. Another is to try to make one's self look better by proving the other fellow worse. Thus: Sure, we have lynched a lot of Negroes, but what is that compared to the millions of people you Germans starved, tortured and murdered in the Concentration Camps? Each of these ways out may be quite legitimately used in a proper setting. For, while principles may be absolute, practical good and evil, as well as guilt, are relative. But if we Americans use these devices, and especially the one of pointing out the greater sins of the Germans, we invite them to do likewise about the Nazi atrocities. They will then say that there were extenuating circumstances, that most Germans didn't know about it all, and that it was only the fanatical SS who did those things, anyway. Then the talk is stopped or the subject changed to something more trivial.

My answer about the Indians stunned the chairman and the audience into silence. So I went on to say that I supposed they were waiting for me to disown the people who did the dirty work, but I couldn't do it, as my own ancestors had passed down great stories about their prowess as Indian killers. In fact, our family proudly preserves a legend about how an ancestor killed, by guile, the last Indian in Gallia County, Ohio. The discussion loosened up again, and was finally put to sleep by an old professor who, in the guise of asking me a question, made a long speech about the effect of climate on the English language in America! Indeed, it was my experience that frank answering of embarrassing questions was about the only thing that would break the conspiracy of silence about the Nazi regime. For there is such a conspiracy of silence, not merely between Americans and Germans, but as between Germans and Germans. It is well known that the more hideous the skeleton, the less likely is the family to haul it out of the closet even when there are no strangers in the house. The odd thing is that an American in Germany can, by disingenuous frankness about his own beloved, but less than perfect country, sometimes bring it about that Germans will speak to each other about their own knowledge and feelings concerning the horrors of the Nazi regime. There were occasions when it seemed as if, in the presence of a sympathetic fellow sinner from another country, they were eager to relieve themselves of guilty knowledge, and almost to apologize for their lack of saintly heroism in having been among those who survived the diabolic Nazi inquisition.

This brings us to the most serious temptation of the American in Germany; the temptation to give absolution. For many Germans do, in effect, ask the American to absolve them from their sins. Whatever other Americans may feel about this, I never felt so uneasy as when I sensed this request in the words of a passably sincere German. It came up most acutely in my meetings with those few of my German friends of 1932 who are still in Germany and still alive. Except in the case of a couple of obviously heroic souls, I found that conversation with these old friends covered

a ghostly sparring match. It was as if they were asking for an absolution which I refused to give. In one case I said right at first sight that I had not come to ask or judge what they had done in the Nazi years, that I – as they well knew – had hated the Nazi ideas and doings from the time of my first knowledge of them in 1930, but that I did not consider myself qualified to give absolution to anyone. Yet they and I talked about little else for the next three days. Sometimes it was unsettling and uncomfortable. This was an acute case. But in some measure the temptation to be a priest, to put the healing touch on sinners right and left, is before every American who has contacts with Germans today. As a representative of a conquering people, he can listen to a short confession and a long defence, and then say, in effect, “Arise, brother, maybe I would have done the same in your place.” I have heard it done, and can only hope that I myself have not done it by thought, word or deed. It is an answer whose bit of truth is ruined by cynicism. Or he can make his own confession, or at least a confession for his own part of the world, saying, “Yes, I can see that the Allies unjustly tempted you, but that is no excuse for such excessive murdering.” He thus combines punishment with his absolution. Or he can say, “Yes, I quite see that you are the kind of person who never sympathized, even subconsciously, with the Nazi regime, and that, of course, you could not by yourself do anything to stop its course.” This lets them off too easy. If the German concerned really has some sense of guilt, such an absolution can do little for his soul.

Now it is important for Americans in Germany to establish good human contacts with Germans. This we cannot do except superficially without the discomfort of exposure to the problem of guilt for the doings of the Nazis. It is no less important that we do not betray our own principles by seeming in any way to condone what is contrary to them, either in Germany or in America. And it is certainly good for humans to forgive one another. But it is quite another thing for us to go about giving absolution from guilt for injuries done to third parties. It won't help the soul of the absolved sinner. It lets the injured millions down. And it makes a moral impostor of the man who plays the role of high priest.

How to get good, honest contacts with people who have one of the severest guilt problems of history to deal with (again and again, Germans blurted out in private conversation, “All of us have a terrible sense of guilt.” I do not say that all Germans either do or ought to have such a sense.) is part of the problem of the American in Germany today. To find a course that does not imply condescension, the arrogation of priestly powers, the cheapening of the whole issue, or the descent into the abyss of cynicism; that is the question. Contact with Germans is, like contact with a mentally sick person, a confrontation with one's self and one's own soundness.

There are other temptations, but I believe they will take care of themselves if one is awake to the two main ones, to betray and to absolve. There is, for instance, the temptation to join in the weeping and wailing about the destruction of Germany, thus reinforcing the “Alas, poor Germany” complex. Another is to enjoy to the full the role of the Rich Uncle that even a poor American can play in Germany, or could play before the currency reform of last summer; or to exploit the power that a representative of a conquering country or one of its satellites can exert in a small way on the street, in a shop or in a train.

During the war our soldiers were given manuals telling them how to behave in the countries of our allies. They were not to say “bug” in England unless they meant “bedbug,” or “pants” unless they meant women’s pants. For those are the meanings of these words in England. To use them in our inclusive American way would be to offend, to be rude unintentionally. The aim of the manuals was to guarantee that we would be liked. The problem in Germany is more difficult and the stakes are bigger. Englishmen weren’t going to stop fighting on the right side even if they didn’t like us personally. In Germany the political future of that country and of Europe is at stake. It would be silly to say that all depends upon the behaviour of Americans in Germany. But something may depend upon it. That something probably does not depend very much on whether we are liked or not. If Germans could be turned into good Democrats because they like their rich uncle, they might – and sometimes they do – threaten to become something else if he isn’t nice to them. On this point the British are, I believe, more toughly realistic than we are. If a person is honest, pretty tough, but sympathetic and permissive he will be liked as much as is good for him and for the Germans too.

I must confess that I fell more than once into every one of the traps against which I am warning others. Sometimes I sensed it on the spot; at other times, I “came to” later, and tried to think out how I might have or should have acted. Nor do I claim that I was completely frank or that I got complete frankness from any or all of those Germans with whom I had close contact. Complete frankness is not only rare, but also frightfully disturbing. And we all know that the phrase “Now I am going to be completely frank,” is more often than not an announcement that the speaker is going to be decidedly not frank.

Furthermore, I am quite sure that I couldn’t write a manual listing all possible wrong things (for that is what a manual aims to do) an American in Germany might be tempted to do. Human ingenuity is such that no such list would be good for long. It isn’t a matter of a certain number of errors to be learned by heart, anyway. It is a problem to be solved – insofar as it can be solved – by an attitude and a principle. The attitude is that of one man trying to enter into honest, and when

Hughes, *Innocents Abroad*, 1948

possible, sympathetic contact with other men. The principle is that of remaining true to our other principles. A moderate approximation to the attitude and a sincere attempt to keep to the principle will get the American in Germany today the reward of many satisfying and fruitful contacts with Germans of fundamental goodwill.

I am tempted – to go back again.