Living with Nazi terror— is he friend or is he foe?

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Old Max is a German driver who lives in Munich, and the summer I was there, he drove me around everywhere. Through him, I got an idea of how the average German might feel about Nazism and the Holocaust, two subjects many of them would just as soon avoid.

I was in Munich as part of a production crew that was shooting "21 Hours at Munich," a film about the massacre of the Israeli athletes by PLO terrorists at the 1972 Olympic Games.

The Germans didn't really like our project, because it was a reminder to them of how badly the incident had turned out under their direction.

And although the offense against the Israeli athletes had been committed by PLO terrorists, it had put the Jewish question in front of German noses again. A few Germans on the set would talk about that question a little, but only Max, who was close to 60 years old, remembered firsthand what Munich was like during World War II.

One day, during a particularly long ride outside of Munich, Max and I were alone and he began to talk frankly about his life.

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Germans' fear, shame blocked out atrocities

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I began to ask about Hitler's first campaigns in Munich, and what he and other German citizens thought was going on. Particularly, I wanted to know what he thought was going on behind the walls of Dachau, where I was going in the next few days.

Max said he remembered Hitler marching through the streets in Munich, how he turned schools and halls of art into ugly military arsenals, how the city was slowly transformed from its joyful, colorful Bavarian character into a gray place of militaristic fear.

'Beautiful swan'

"But we went along with it, because it was like the world was telling us all the time 'You are an ugly duckling, you are an ugly duckling,' and Hitler comes along and tells us, 'No, you're not, you are a beautiful swan.' We believed it."

Max said the citizens of Munich thought the concentration camp at Dachau was a place where political dissidents — including Jews — worked for the public benefit and for their own rehabilitation. He said that the newspapers were "full of stories about enemies to the Reich," and that everyone knew someone who had been hauled off to the camp.

"Some people came out, but they didn't dare discuss it," said Max. "In fact, everyone was scared. If two of us got together, we might say something about the Brown Shirts, but if one more person came into the conversation, we all closed our mouths. No one knew anymore who was an enemy and who was a friend."

Black cloud

Dachau, a former powder factory operating in what was once an artist's colony, was like a black cloud that hung over every citizen of Munich, Max said.

"There was a little jingle that went around," he said. "It went like this, 'Lieber Herr Gott, mach mich stumm, Das ich nicht nach Dachau komm,' which means, 'Dear God, make me dumb, That I might not to Dachau come.' "

In other words, Max said, everyone blocked out what was going on — out of fear — and later, when the Allies liberated the camp, they blocked it out because of shame.

"It's like we have to live with this all our lives, and we don't want to live with it all our lives," Max said.

Max said this sentiment has made some Germans continue to resent Jews, almost as a way of psychological compensation ("like children who reject the person who has gotten them into trouble, even if they're the ones who were wrong.")

In today's Germany, he said, the people of the cities tend to be "less reacting in the gut" and more intelligent and accepting of the facts of the atrocities that occurred under Nazi rule.

In country towns, however, there are still Nazi sympathizers and a more widespread denial of Holocaust horrors.

"They are in the woods, like K u Klux Klan people," he said.

I asked Max if he had been to Dachau.

No, he said, he already knew what was there.

When I went to Dachau, I went by myself, traveling the dozen or so miles from Munich to the concentration camp by bicycle. I wanted to be alone, because I knew I wasn't going to feel like talking much.

The bicycling was pleasant, most of it through a pastoral countryside, and then the concentration camp sprung up out of nowhere.

Its high walls border the highway, and next door, there is a small cafe. The cafe seemed out of place, but I found myself going there, ordering coffee and sitting awhile before I went next door.

Visitors enter the Dachau concentration camp through a hall of exhibits, the only part that has been modernized.

There is almost complete quiet in this hall as people walk past life-size black-and-white photographs of Holocaust victims in striped pajamas, pressed together against barbed wire in the Dachau camp. The scenes in every photograph depicted the ghastliness that took place in Dachau, but I thought, even pictures cannot adequately reflect what went on here.

In a small theater in the hall, an old black-and-white film that runs repeatedly is no recreation. It is a film that Nazis attempted to destroy as the Allies approached.

Like many people who go to Dachau, I found it impossible to watch more than 10 minutes of the film, and I thought, I can't watch 10 minutes of what people in reality endured for days, weeks, months — even years.

The door leading out of the hall into the outdoor compound is crowned with a black Hebrew sign that says: "Never Again."

Outside, visitors can walk anywhere at their own pace, undisturbed. In a place like Dachau, it is impossible to talk. I was glad not to hear any voices, because in Dachau, nothing anyone says is appropriate.

Around the camp there is barbed wire everywhere, and as I walked toward the crematoria at the far end, I tried to imagine what it was like to be led off to that end of the camp.

Suddenly, I felt a strange vertigo, a loss of balance. The air inside the walls of Dachau, even with blue sky overhead, is heavy.

In this state, I arrived at the ovens, those arched doors set in brick where an estimated 50,000 Jews perished for no other reason than that they were Jews.

Near the ovens are memorials that have been erected by major world faiths — Catholic, Protestant and Jew — and the flowers that are left there are the only signs in the camp of renewed hope for the world. Dachau itself is a grim memorial that will stand forever as a reminder of an evil so dark that the blot it left on the planet can never be erased — nor should it be if mankind is to learn from what happened there.