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## **A Conversation with Albert Speer**

In the summer of 1942 a picture was taken of Albert Speer walking in stride with his Führer through the pine-studded military headquarters at Vinnitsa in the Ukraine. In the picture Speer is wearing a simple uniform, unadorned except for the swastika armband. His knee boots have been so highly polished they reflect the sunlight. The summer campaign against Russia had been going well, and Speer, as the recently appointed Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, had flown far into occupied territory to report personally to Hitler on the state of the German war industrial effort. The report had been highly favorable. Production figures had begun to rise, and they would continue to increase at an astounding rate. In the picture, Hitler is obviously pleased, but his look of ebullience contrasts sharply with the tension and anxiety on the face of his minister. Speer's arms are folded stiffly across his chest and his body is bent slightly forward to catch each of the Führer's words. This posture expresses the Minister's attentiveness, but it also betrays a mood of deep preoccupation. The look on his face is curiously ambivalent. Though steely, it conveys profound weariness and distraction. The picture hints that perhaps even then Speer suspected that Hitler's fervent hopes for colonizing the Ukraine were deluded dreams.

As I drove to Speer's home in Heidelberg almost thirty-five years later, that picture kept returning to my mind. I wondered at the changes time and history had wrought on this man I was about to meet. The drive to Speer's home was a trip into the past. The journey led through the alt Stadt of Heidelberg, up to and behind the castle, into the posh residential area in the Neckar hills. The road twisted and turned sharply as it passed spacious homes dating from the turn of the century. A kilometre beyond the castle, a small unobtrusive bronze plaque gave notice that the muddy driveway which led between two concrete pilasters was the way to Speer's home. The driveway climbed steeply for about

thirty yards and ended at what appeared to be the side door of a low white rambling villa. A little metal plate above the doorbell read "A. Speer."

Frau Speer, and not a servant, opened the door. She invited me into an oblong foyer, one side of which was a crowded coat rack. The house was very quiet, and Frau Speer spoke softly, almost in a whisper. As I was hanging up my overcoat and mumbling a German greeting, Albert Speer bounded through the heavy curtains at the end of the foyer and stood before me. I was surprised by the energy and grace of his movements. "Let's get started," he invited briskly in a voice that shattered the silence of the house. He led the way into a room that ran the length of the house. A wooden table, oval in shape, stood in the area beyond the draperies. Farther on, a few steps led down to the room's lower level which was panelled in wood. The only light in this immense room came from a picture window that was in an alcove to the left. Through the windows I could see a grassy slope that ended in a forest. The trees were tall and blocked a view of the Neckar River below. It was a cold, damp, overcast midwinter day. Yet, bright red flowers grew just outside the window.

Speer sat down by the window in a comfortably upholstered easy chair. The other furniture was old and worn. Although dimly illuminated, the alcove had a mellow, warm atmosphere. The comfortable, unpretentious furniture and the rich wood panelling reminded me of a hunting lodge.

Once seated, I was able to compare the man before me with the one I had seen in the picture. Age and suffering had deepened the lines of the face and whitened the hair, oddly leaving, however, the eyebrows dark and bushy. The face was calmer, more self-assured than in the picture; the traces of worry and tension were gone. The body was no longer stiff, rigid in a pose of attention. His present relaxed bearing was curiously more dignified. It was obvious from his face that, after many years, resignation had brought peace of mind, and peace had carried with it the unexpected boon of youthfulness. Our interview would not be, as I had imagined, a re-experiencing of the past, but very much a confrontation with the present. There was no indication that the man before me had been tried and convicted for crimes against humanity, no hint in the still handsome face that this was the man who had claimed to be the real friend of the worst criminal in history. Instead, like Oedipus at Colonus to whom he had once compared himself, Speer exhibited the uncanny poise of a man who had undergone a ruthless examination of conscience and had come to terms with the secrets he had found there.

I had come to talk with Albert Speer, not so much about history and the part he played in it, but rather about how and why he had written his books. I had been impressed by the moral warning that pervaded *Inside the Third Reich* and the *Spandau Diaries*. As an artist and a technician, Speer had always displayed a sensitivity and a creativity that had been conspicuously lacking among the other Nazis. Unlike the others, he was never perverse, and it was this decency that made poignant the moral dilemmas and tragedies in his books.

We talked for two hours, during which time a Putzfrau passed back and forth in front of the window, Now and then Speer would glance outside at the red flowers. We were interrupted once by a cat, and another time by Frau Speer who came in and sat down by her husband. This woman had waited uncomplainingly for him through twenty years, and she would sit by him now, even though she understood very little of our conversation. At one point she asked for the translation of an English word into German. The word was "insane", and Speer translated it as "verrückt".

We spoke in English. Speer was never at a loss for the correct word, but his syntax occasionally betrayed that he was thinking in German. He answered my questions forthrightly and without hesitation. Sometimes he would end his answers abruptly, as if to give notice that he had nothing further to say on that topic.

Although he had been trained as an architect, history had decreed that Speer would build no lasting monuments in stone. In Nuremberg, at the age of forty-one, Albert Speer chose words as his new building materials. Years later I was interested in finding out how he had used words to construct his memorial to the past and to shape his testament for the future.

Interviewer: How would your memoirs have been different, if you had escaped to Greenland right after the war and hidden there writing for several months?

Speer: Well, the memoirs would have been completely different at that time, because I hadn't had the Spandau experiences, the wider horizon that I got in Spandau by reading world literature. For the first time in my life, I was able to read everything which is noble and fine in full quietness and calm. If I had written the memoirs in Greenland, they would have been more the memoirs of a technician. I would have included, of course, my dealings with Hitler, even doubts about him, but the memoirs would not have been as comprehensive and precise as they are now.

Interviewer: Don't you think your vision of Hitler is also different after some perspective? In 1945 do you think you could have described him in the same ways you have since?

Speer: In '45? No. At that time the picture would have been more hateful for several reasons. After the war I was disgusted with Hitler, and I had my own self-interests to think of, too. At that time, I couldn't see both sides of his character which I have since tried to bring out in my memoirs. In Nuremberg prison and afterwards, when many American and British psychologists, psychiatrists, and historians came, they were all given an erroneous picture of Hitler by those who were more than embarrassed about not having contradicted him. The generals and others all said that he was a terrible man. One had only to mention a problem to him and he would be enraged and biting at the carpet. I told them at the time that it would be a dangerous thing, if the image of Hitler were preserved in this way for the future. It would be no warning. In my book, *Inside the Third Reich*, I tried one thing purposely: to re-instate Hitler as a human being.

Interviewer: After your release from Spandau, how did your editors at Propyläen Verlag help you to begin working on revising your memoirs written in prison?

Speer: I had the first experience of this kind shortly after my release, when the magazine *Der Spiegel* conducted a long interview with me. Young people of about thirty-eight to forty years of age asked me questions I had not thought about previously. Their questions went to the roots of how the whole Nazi experience could have happened. I had been swimming more or less on the surface, and this experience gave me the idea of asking my publisher if he would give me somebody on a permanent basis who would ask me questions which would dig under the surface. The person they gave me was Joachim Fest, an excellent man, who later wrote a biography of Hitler.

Interviewer: How important an experience was the process of writing during your imprisonment?

Speer: Well, it is a well-known fact that when somebody is worried or grieved about something which hurts him deeply, and if he has no one to talk to, or even if he has someone to talk to, the writing it down, the formulating of it, diffuses it and makes it lose some of its sting. So writing

was a big help. On the other hand, I have always liked to write about circumstances. I still have letters I wrote to my wife when we were engaged or even before our engagement, about the time I was sixteen or seventeen years old, and we were separated. In these letters I described school life. The techniques I employed in them were similar to those I later used in my memoirs—the use of irony, for example. Also, even then, I liked to narrate spicy things which were a little bit humorous, unusual or peculiar.

Interviewer: Is there anything you would like to change in what you have written?

Speer: No, of course not. What I have already published is just a selection of what I am still thinking about; however, nothing at this point needs changing.

Interviewer: Are you still keeping a diary as you did in Spandau Prison?

Speer: No.

Interviewer: Hans Carossa, a German doctor, wrote a series of memoirs which all together comprise an autobiography of his life. Have you thought about doing something similar and writing about your experience after your release?

Speer: No, I am afraid that if I did decide to write a book about my life since my release, then the events would take on an importance they didn't actually have. Besides, my present life might be spoiled, for then I would be living with the particular purpose of acquiring events which could be written in my book.

Interviewer: Are you working on something now?

Speer: Yes, a technical book about my ministry during the war. Very dull. But I want to clarify certain things about the past.

Interviewer: So many of your daily entries in the *Spandau Diaries* concerned your thoughts and analyses about issues important to a German in the modern world. You talked about the German national character and Germany's affinities with the East. You were concerned about modern architecture and its direction. You have had twenty years

of solitude to think about serious questions which concern mankind. Don't you think you have something to say about life after 1966?

Speer: No. That's not possible now, because I need a quietness and a distance from the issues that I don't have. You see, if Cassanova in the last period of his life had not been very lonely somewhere in Bohemia, he would never have written his memoirs. If he had had the chance in Paris to tell his adventures to interesting people, there would have been no need to write them down. He was compelled to write because he was lonely. In the past this was the same thing with me. But now I don't feel any desire to write about my life. Jokingly, I sometimes say to my editor that after I have survived another twenty years, then there will be another book.

Interviewer: Your German style is very clear and readable, at times even poetic. Are you aware of any conscious influence from German, English or American authors? For example, right after the sentencing in Nuremberg, you read the complete works of Goethe.

Speer: Well, that is quite true. In Spandau, while working on the first draft of my memoirs, I was almost always under the influence of the style of the author I was reading at the time. When I was reading Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*. I was very broad in my descriptions. When I read Hemingway, then I was short and concise. When I look back over my memoirs, I can still imagine who the author was I was reading at the time. After I finished the first draft of *Inside the Third Reich* in Spandau, I purposely read Churchill's memoirs, because I knew they would influence me.

Interviewer: Churchill's memoirs deal with a broader discussion of the war, a far more detailed one. There is, however, more of you, the person, Albert Speer, in your memoirs than is the case with Churchill.

Speer: Well, in the second book, the *Diaries*, perhaps, but in the first book, there is not so much of me. I read Churchill for the style, to see how he described things, and to bring things in the right order for my own work.

Interviewer: You say at one point in *Inside the Third Reich* that you wrote your memoirs for your children.

Speer: Well, you must realize that I had the intention of publishing them. I quickly grasped the improvement in my writing when I started writing for someone. I learned afterwards that many authors do that purposely. They don't write merely to write a book. They write and have somebody in mind to whom they can direct their thoughts.

Interviewer: Did your children read the book with interest?

Speer: I think so. We don't talk about it very much. We live in the present. Maybe they talk about it among themselves, but not very much with me.

Interviewer: What were some of the difficulties you had in writing your memoirs?

Speer: You see, the first book *Inside the Third Reich* was written partly in Spandau, but only partly, because I didn't have the chance to check my memory against the facts, and in some places, my memory was quite bad, so I had to correct many things. I also had to refine my language and to polish it. My writing was just like putting something in the mail and never seeing it again. Everything I wrote had to be sent away immediately, or it would have been destroyed by the prison officials. In revising the *Spandau Dairies*, I had to choose between many thousands of pages. I did some altering, switching around, and changing. I could bring two contrasting scenes together, which were not together in the original diary. The original goes on and on. So much of it is in the same tone and on the same level. In reorganizing it and reworking it, I was attempting to be consciously literary. Therefore, my main task was not so much reworking certain sentences, or changing works to make the sense a little clearer, but in leaving large sections out.

Interviewer: How did you accomplish that?

Speer: That was done in part by my publisher, because I didn't always have the heart to cut. When one is working too long at one thing, one gets blinded. Suddenly, there is no feeling for what is good and what is bad. Even now I think the English translations are better than the originals.

Interviewer: The English translations are excellent, but there is something about the way you think which comes out more authentically in German.

Speer: I loathe both of my books a little, It was the same with my architectural work. When I finished with it, I couldn't see it. I can read the English versions of my work, because they are farther away from me. I might add that I don't watch my television interviews, either.

Interviewer: May we shift the focus of our discussion? There are numerous instances in your memoirs, when you narrate incidents, which considered in retrospect, were offensive to you: Hitler's anti-Semitism, the jokes played by the Nazis particularly on Hanfstaengel, the spot of blood on the floor left by the assassination of Herbert von Bose, the Nazis' overt corruption and ostentatiousness between the years 1933-39. You have remembered all of these things. Didn't they bother you at the time?

Speer: I think subconsciously I was more aware of what was happening in Hitler's circle than I would have admitted at the time. Of course, you know how the memory works. There are thousands of incidents, and the memory just takes what is in some way remarkable.

Interviewer: I am seeking an appropriate moral context to frame my next question. To the existentialists, an action is authentic if it is based on good faith. There are many moral problems in your books, but I got the impression after reading them, that during your entire association with Hitler you were acting in good faith, and that it wasn't until Nuremberg, that you realized you had done anything wrong. Is that true?

Speer: That's right. I think the incident exists somewhere toward the end of *Inside the Third Reich* in which I tried to check my files to see if there was anything that could incriminate me, not with the intention to let it disappear, but with the intention to make it disappear. After this search, I was absolutely convinced that I was all right, that nothing would happen to me. Of course, you have asked a very difficult and leading question. You must realize that in a normal state, I really wouldn't have been responsible, because in a normal state things are working regularly. By that I mean, if a policeman arrests you, you are reasonably certain that he is right and that you have been in the wrong. If a policeman arrests you in an authoritarian system, then you have to check in your conscience if the policeman is right or not. The same thing is true with a government minister. General Keitel, Chief of the High Command of German Armed Forces, and Dr. Ley, Leader of the Ger-



man Labor Front, or Sauckel, Plenipotentiary for the Employment of Labor, should have checked if things were right or not with the labor situation. I mention the incident in *Spandau Diaries* in which the Minister of Agriculture for Great Britain asked (with the same words I used to request labor from Sauckel) to keep the German prisoners of war for the English harvest. Otherwise the job couldn't be done. But Lord Pakenham, who was Undersecretary of State for the War Ministry and was responsible for the war prisoners, stated: "No, it's against regulations." Well, the responsibility was with the War Ministry, not with the Minister who asked for the labor, because in a democracy the man who asked for the labor didn't have to check if the request was correct or not. In a normal state, he could be absolutely certain that someone else was in charge and would handle the repercussions of such responsibility.

Interviewer: Then, unlike other bureaucratic criminals—let us say those who participated in the Watergate cover-up—you were not aware that you were breaking the law?

Speer: I didn't break the law, but I was responsible for it. There is a difference in a totalitarian system. I was not familiar with international law concerning labor. The Nazi government even had a special department for labor, but I never had any association with it, and yet I was responsible for enforced labor. You possibly know C.S. Forester's early book, *The General*? It impressed me very much, because I experienced a similar situation. In this book Forester jumps from the trenches where the soldiers are suffering to the staff division where the officers are drinking their champagne and making the decisions. The generals don't think of the reality of war; they think in maneuvers with maps, needles and numbers, and so they don't imagine what's going on in the trenches. The generals are normal human beings, not hard people, but they are so far away. This problem always exists in modern warfare. If some pilot drops his bombs, he doesn't see the results of the bombs; if he could see children and other people suffocating on the monitor in his plane, he would stop the bombing. I am convinced he wouldn't do it. But he can just push the button, turn away and forget it all. The farther you are away from such events, the easier it is to commit crimes and to forget about them.

Interviewer: In the films I have seen of you at Nuremberg, you stand out. Your expression is so filled with astonishment and shock. When

you finally found out what had been going on in the concentration camps and elsewhere, you were obviously deeply affected. Why didn't you write very much about this process of revelation in your memoirs?

Speer: It was very painful. I wrote a little about it toward the end of *Inside the Third Reich*. Of course, I don't mention it much in the *Diaries*, because the revelation took place before they begin. But you are right. I didn't write much about it.

Interviewer: Why?

Speer: I still don't get along with the whole situation. I still feel concerned about it as a human being, even though as a minister I wasn't concerned with the Jewish persecution. My reaction in Nuremberg was to be concerned and to take the full responsibility, but that was an evasion, too.

Interviewer: How so?

Speer: Because in a situation of helplessness, to take the responsibility is a kind of help.

Interviewer: Do you think you were successful in taking the guilt and responsibility on yourself rather than having them placed at the feet of the German people?

Speer: The trial was won for the German people the moment Justice Jackson declared in his introductory remarks that those in the dock were the guilty ones and not the German people. I am presently reading the *Morgenthau Diary* (somebody sent it to me from the United States) and it was interesting because before the Nuremberg Trial there was a big discussion between Morgenthau and others about the fate of the German people. There was always the question of the German people's collective guilt, and Jackson was opposed to that idea from the beginning. Jackson was a very fair man. He was fair in saying that there must be a trial, and that those responsible must take their chances. After Justice Jackson's introductory statement, I told Gilbert: "Well, the trial is finished for me. It's all right. This is what I wanted."

Interviewer: When Karl Hanke warned you in the summer of 1944 not to visit a concentration camp in Upper Silesia, you didn't ask him or any

others any follow-up questions. In your first book there is a poignant paragraph after this incident in which you claim you felt responsible for Auschwitz, because you didn't pursue any further inquiries. Now in this *mea culpa* there is implicit the suggestion that there was something you could have done for the Jews. Was there anything you could have done to help them?

Speer: Yes, there would have been something, which I will be writing about in my next book. I could have possibly improved the conditions for working.

Interviewer: But you did that in the situations in which you already knew firsthand that the conditions were poor.

Speer: I did, but I could have done more, if I had known what was happening behind the scenes. Of course, it would have been very difficult, and I don't know if I would have succeeded, but in any case, it would have been worth trying. You see, I believe my guilt lies in just the reverse of my judgment at Nuremberg. The trial claimed my guilt lay in utilizing forced labor. And I say that I didn't employ forced labor enough. If more people had been working outside the concentration camps, more would have been alive today.

Interviewer: I see. Sins of omission. What was your state of mind that July day during Hanke's visit?

Speer: All I was thinking about were production figures, and the next meeting and the meeting after that. It was toward the end of the day, and I was very tired and agitated from all the problems of my Ministry. And then, too, Hanke's visit was just a short one and went by very quickly.

Interviewer: Can you really be a very high member of the government and not know what that government is doing in another area?

Speer: Yes, of course. Another good example is with the development of the U.S. atomic bomb. You can read it in Truman's memoirs that Stimson came and told him that the United States possessed the atomic bomb. Truman was astonished, and he had been the Vice-President of the United States. Truman was a responsible man, and he could not be blamed for his ignorance. It would be a good thing if some historians

followed the question of how it is possible to keep secrets, instead of always dismissing the issue with the fact that the secrets couldn't be kept.

Interviewer: In both your memoirs, you are very concerned about technology and its relationship to modern man. What are some of your current ideas about modern man's fascination with technology?

Speer: Well, I have always maintained that technology is the real threat with which we have to live. I even go so far as to say that the next dictatorship could be the dictatorship of technology over mankind. I see as particularly dangerous the fascination technology has for children. Then take man's flight to the moon. In my opinion, it was absolutely insane to spend all that money.

Interviewer: Don't you think our fascination comes from technology's extending the power of man? Mankind has always been fascinated with power.

Speer: True. It is a temptation that man has to fight. Not that I want to go backwards. Dishwashers are all right—but such exaggerations as the Concorde or the flight to the moon are of no use to mankind.

Interviewer: What do you think we must do?

Speer: We must constantly be on guard. I am quite hopeful, because people have started to be conscious of the danger. I have heard that in China (I have nothing to do with Maoism) certain officials have come to the realization that technological development for the Chinese is not necessarily a good thing or even a success. I don't know that for a fact. I am merely stating what I have heard.

Interviewer: I can see how that would be very possible given the Oriental mentality. To change the subject a little: I get the impression from your memoirs that you felt superior to Hitler and his associates.

Speer: Yes, in some ways, but I was not the only one to feel superior. Goering felt that way, too, and he was right about that. He detested those people, also. He came from a good background. And Goebbels disliked them, too. Those who were a little bit intellectual hated that Munich group. Do you know the meaning of the term *Spießbürger*?

That's what they were. There was often talk about them. Not about Hitler; that was accepted, but about those around him.

Interviewer: What were your feelings when you saw Magda Goebbels for the last time before she was to commit suicide in the bunker? That is a very dramatic scene in your memoirs.

Speer: She looked very sick and worn-out. She was lying on a bed and Goebbels was hovering around her so that we could not have a private word together. At that time I felt regret.

Interviewer: Not horror?

Speer: No, not really, because there was so much horror everywhere in Berlin, at every step. You get used to horror if you are surrounded by it.

Interviewer: And what did you feel when you walked upstairs to see the Chancellery for the last time, and you stood there in the eery silence looking at the ruins of the building you had designed and built?

Speer: Well, of course, it was a sad moment, but not that I was crushed by it. I am not the type to be crushed so easily. I can take a lot of things.

Interviewer: And in the future, what did you think lay ahead for you?

Speer: I had no idea. It was all dark . . . darkness.