

Accounting for Atrocities:
Prosecuting War Crimes Fifty Years After Nuremberg

Welcome
Leon Botstein

Ladies and gentlemen, let me welcome you. I'm Leon Botstein. I'm the president of Bard, and I want in the first instance to welcome and congratulate all of you for attending. When we organized this conference we were never sure who and how people would get here on a Monday morning on this subject. I want to thank you all for participating and for coming, and I hope the conference redeems its promise.

The conference owes its existence to Peter Maguire, who's to my left, who is from the class of 1988 and who did his dissertation at Columbia on the Nuremberg Trials, and to Susan Gillespie, who's the director of our international studies program and has long been interested in the question of the aftermath of Nuremberg and issues of justice and international affairs. Peter, who has taught here, had the idea of putting this conference together 50 years after the trials.

I want to thank, in my ceremonial role, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation- sounds like National Public Radio- Philip and Sandra Gordon, and James Ottaway, a trustee of the College- Phil Gordon is an alumnus of the College- and the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany.

When Peter asked me to introduce this, I did not want to overstay my welcome. I do want to say two very brief things about this conference and why it has particular meaning for me. One of my earliest memories was watching my grandfather write a letter to a war crimes trial in Poland which took place in the 1950s. I was born abroad after the war, and my grandfather was in the ghetto in Warsaw- my uncle died in the uprising- and he then went to a camp after the liquidation of the ghetto. He survived in part because a Polish collaborator in the camp saved his life in the following manner:

When they took people out of the barracks, there was always a random

system of actually getting people; the rounding up of people was relatively random. The German staff coming into the barracks collected people and selected people, and the barracks were actually run by the Polish- in this case, the Polish collaborators. My grandfather played chess and was the only person who could beat the Polish guard of that particular area. Therefore the guard had a vested interest in my grandfather surviving. So when the Germans came by selecting people, this Pole struck my grandfather to the ground and said to them, "He's mine." What the hell, there were enough to go around, so they passed him by. This scene apparently was repeated more than once.

This Polish collaborator was brought on trial, and it's one of my earliest memories- I must have been twelve. My grandfather was a lawyer by training, and he wrote a brief on behalf of this man, because another survivor heard that he was brought up on war crimes charges. He was convicted but not sentenced to death, but to extended imprisonment, and largely because of the brief which my grandfather wrote. The struggle which he had in trying to come to terms with his own debt of gratitude for having his life saved and the evident atrocity in which the man was an active participant- the difficulty of these matters is not to be underestimated.

The second thing I want to say- again, I apologize for the personal dimension- is that yesterday in New York we put on a revival of a work by Franz Werfel, Max Reinhardt, and Kurt Weill called *The Eternal Road*, written in the '30s before Kristallnacht. The thing I want to say about it is that- I didn't expect to have this reaction- it's about the plight of the Jewish people in Germany in the 1930s and done before any of these individuals had any idea of the camps or war crimes. Insofar as our sensitivity to these questions and the whole apparatus of discussion is a consequence of Nuremberg, and therefore a consequence of the Second World War- although there's a prior history, no doubt- what was striking about working on this piece was the extent to which what we now take for granted was unimaginable. They had no idea. This piece ends with the Jewish community marching to an exile which they thought was comparable to Babylon- uncomfortable, dispossessed, oppressed- but the idea of slaughter, systematic murder of women and children, non-combatants was totally out of any realm of imagination. And it's no issue of naïveté and no

issue of absence or "they should have known," which I think is nonsense. The amazing part about it is that what is truly unimaginable has become everyday. The extent to which systems of law or international governments attempt to deal with these matters is baffling indeed. And so I consider it a great honor to be president of an institution that spends time, money, and resources worrying about this. And it's an honor to have colleagues like Susan and alumni and colleagues like Peter who get such a thing going. And so without further ado, I turn it over to you. Thank you.