MARCUS K. BILLSON III

A CONVERSATION WITH ALBERT SPEER

Albert Speer (1905-1981) was born in Mannheim, Germany, and studied architecture at the Technical University of Berlin. In 1934 he became the chief architect of the Nazi Party, and in 1942 he was appointed Minister of Armaments and War Production. He was convicted of crimes against humanity at the Nuremburg trials and spent twenty years in Spandau prison. After his release, he published the memoirs *Inside the Third Reich* (1969) and *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* (1975), in which he denied any knowledge of the Holocaust. The following excerpt is from an interview conducted at his home in Heidelberg in the winter of 1977, which was published in the spring 1978 issue. In his introduction, Billson explained that he was interested in how Speer "used words to construct his memorial to the past and to shape his testament for the future." His essay "Inside Albert Speer: Secrets of Moral Evasion" (1979) also argued that Speer's memoirs "posit him as the riddle of Nazi Germany, proposing that if we understand what happened to him we will know what happened to his country."

Marcus K. Billson III: There are numerous instances in your memoirs, when you narrate incidents, which considered in retrospect, were offensive to you: Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism, the jokes played by the Nazis particularly on Ernst Hanfstaengl, 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 and 1939. You have remembered all of these things. Didn't they bother you at the time?

Albert 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.

Albert Speer in his prison cell during the Nuremberg trials (1945)

Billson: 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. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the Armed Forces High Command, and Dr. Robert Ley, Leader of the German Labour Front, or Fritz Sauckel, General Plenipotentiary for the Employment of Labour, should have checked if things were right or not with the labour situation. I mention the incident in *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*, in which the Minister of Agriculture for Great Britain asked (with the same words I used to request labour 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 labour, because in a democracy the man who asked for the labour 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.

Billson: 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 dif-

ference in a totalitarian system. I was not familiar with international law concerning labour. The Nazi government even had a special department for labour, but I never had any association with it, and yet I was responsible for enforced labour. 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 manoeuvres 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.

Billson: 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.

Billson: 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.

Billson: How so?

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

Billson: 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 Robert H. 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 Henry 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 Gustave Gilbert: "Well, the trial is finished for me. It's all right. This is what I wanted."

Billson: 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.

Billson: 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 labour. And I say that I didn't employ forced labour enough. If more people had been working outside the concentration camps, more would have been alive today.

Billson: 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.

Billson: 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 Harry Truman's memoirs that Henry 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. . . .

Billson: 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. Hermann Göring felt that way, too, and he was right about that. He detested those people, also. He came from a good background. And Joseph 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.

Billson: 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.

Billson: 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.

Billson: 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.

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

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