

Mikael M. Karlsson made the above reference to Pinter in his lecture entitled “Free Speech, Freedom of the Press, and the Tapestry of Lies” delivered at the international conference **Freedom of Expression and Social Responsibility: Theory and Practice**, that was and organised by the Media Studies Programme and Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Akureyri in Iceland on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2014.

What indeed is true and what is false? That very same thought sprung to mind during a brief visit to the capital of Germany, Berlin, earlier this year. The day in question began on a boulevard called *Unter den Linden* where my travel partner, a precocious granddaughter aged sixteen, would begin to display her keen interest in history. She belongs to a generation that will soon take over the reins and partake in directing our globe into a future that will present fresh challenges. Challenges that might seem true one day; false the next.

We made our way to Checkpoint Charlie on *Friedrichstrasse*, where uniformed “guards” provided the merry background for selfies by young tourists who may perhaps be familiar with that piece of history only through school textbooks and/or the cinema. I considered the significance of standing at the former divide between communism and capitalism; truth and falsehood; all depending on your point of view.

Later, at the Jewish Museum at *Lindernstrasse*, we visited the installation by Menashe Kadishman entitled *Shalekhet* (or Fallen Leaves), where guests could walk over faces, masks made of steel. The steely faces expressed a variety of negative emotions and states, including pain, surprise, despair, and death. My fellow traveller walked over them to get a closer look, as you are indeed meant to do, whereas I could not. Through them I saw all too clearly the images from the Holocaust made familiar by TV, newspapers, and books. Indeed, the faces were too closely entwined with my mental image of real faces of women, men, and children crying out in despair and pain, facing the prospect of death. How could I possibly step on them?

Soon thereafter at the museum we were handed pieces of paper, shaped like apples, upon which we were meant to write our wishes for the future. “Never allow the Holocaust to happen again,” I wrote on the back of mine. I didn’t ask my granddaughter what she wrote on

hers. We then navigated the history of the Jewish community in Germany and, just before we left, were greeted by another tree. This one had no leaves. I read one of the written messages there from an earlier guest. It was short: *Je suis Charlie*. In the lobby, my granddaughter bought a little red badge with the words of the great medieval Jewish scholar and philosopher Moses Maimonides: "Hear the truth, whoever speaks it".

We walked back to *Unter der Linden* and headed to the Brandenburger Gate, passing by the French Embassy, where one could see scores of dead tulips and roses, multi-coloured pencils symbolising the freedom of expression, and a multitude written messages. All this created an aura of sorrow over the massacre of the Charlie Hebdo media people in Paris in January 2015. Two policemen were standing there, emphasising the deep sorrow. Most common messages on the sidewalk were "Je suis Charlie", like the one from the naked tree at the museum. But we also saw message such as "Je ne suis pas Charlie" (I am not Charlie) as well as excerpt from Voltaire in English: "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it." The girl took a couple of pictures on her telephone. She then quietly shed a tear. As did I.

This journey in Berlin undertaken by two Icelandic females of different generations ended a few days before approximately 300 survivors of the Holocaust gathered at Auschwitz to remind the world of that it now 70 years since the Russian troops liberated them from the death camps. Their message to the world was to stop the hatred of Jews; hatred they claim is becoming perceptible yet again.

In retrospect, the concept of truth can be hard to accept. Behind the strange decisions made in the past were very probably people who imagined that they were fighting for a seemingly virtuous truth. Their truth. A truth that we can, however, clearly recognise today as both false and evil. Further understanding how groups of people can collectively develop such inherently toxic thoughts must surely one of the keys in stopping hatred, marginalisation, and racism? This also includes examining the role of the media, the purveyors of truth.

My little journey down the Berlin's relatively recent memory lane served as a personal

reminder. We certainly have new tools to spread news more speedily and comprehensively than ever. We also have social media with open interactive access seemingly between everyone. But how are we actually making use of these tools?

The role of the free media is extremely important. Perhaps more important than ever. There are, however, some fundamental questions that need to be further addressed in the near future. For example, what is the role of the press and how should it use its power? Does the press have to cover absolutely everything sensationally or are there aspects of people's lives that should be respected and not ridiculed? Furthermore, what is the fundamental purpose of the press? To tear down or to build up? Or perhaps just to report the truth, whoever speaks it?

Recently, I read a Danish book entitled "Haandbog i Konstruktiv Journalistik", written by Cathrine Gyldensted and Malene Bjerre, about a new more positive and constructive approach to journalism. The authors argue for an increased focus on solutions to problems and how to use the press to improve our societies by good examples. The book raises important questions for journalists to consider regarding their daily routines. It also poses the question: Can journalists act as both guardians of the precious free press, informing us of the world's events, whilst also making the world a little better place by using the pen once in a while to bring out to the people the important good examples from our daily lives? Fortunately, the world is filled with good stories. Unfortunately, however, they often disappear into the massive heaps of news about things going wrong in the world.

The international conference held at the University of Akureyri was one contribution to the discussion about Freedom of Expression and Social Responsibility. I would like to thank all the speakers as well as the participants who actively participated in the discussion about this important issue.

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