

CHAPTER 7

No Place for Political Neutrality

FOR SEVERAL DAYS I visited a German farmer near a little crossroads town in southern Germany. His 250 acre farm sits fairly close to the border between the eastern and western zones. He and his family were against the Hitler regime. Most of the family wound up in Nazi concentration camps.

An agricultural leader in his section of Germany, this farmer has worked closely with the new German government and the American occupational advisers. He has done much to help get German agriculture back on its feet.

But he told me that should the Russian army start moving tonight, he and his family must also start moving tonight. He has been entirely too prominent and too friendly with the American advisers.

"We lived through such dark days once, not knowing from one day to the next what would happen. My family and I don't want to live through it again," he said.

I think he is to be highly admired. The future of democracy in Germany depends upon such

courage among Germans in all occupations and in all classes — courage to do what is right when you know your actions place you high on a list of undesirables of an enemy parading only a few miles from you.

Farmer committees in each village in Germany, elected by the farmers themselves, now help lay out agriculture extension programs for their own committees. A far cry from the old days when extension was directives handed down from the head office right out to the farmer. Committee systems are part of the present plan to help build democracy on German farms. It is not always easy. Frequently committees are inert. Farmers sometimes fail to take an interest, many even skip important meetings.

For you see, many German farmers do not want to become too active or sympathetic toward any government activities. Without a public spirit tradition, many a German farmer prefers to be completely neutral toward any government program — perhaps justly so. He has learned through long years of experience that in Germany the neutrals have survived. In the lifetime of many a German he has seen those who collaborated with the Kaiser's government disposed of, those sympathetic to the between-wars republic sent to Nazi concentration camps, and the Nazis themselves in turn stripped of their power.

An extreme example is that of a German farmer near the Russian zone. When there are official

papers to be signed, he always asks, "What will happen when the Russians take over and find this paper? I don't think I'll sign it." It will take time to tear down this neutrality, greater time perhaps to build democratic traditions — a task not easily done in the present East-West cold war.

I heard of a German lady who lives in Berlin. She lives in the British zone. She works in the Russian zone. But her sympathies lie with the western powers. Several times the Russian officials have demanded that she move over into the Russian zone. She has always come back with the reply that if the officials would find her an apartment in the Russian zone of Berlin, she will move. She banks on the severe housing shortage to prevent them from finding her an apartment. Actually she is frightened to death that they will find one.

Then why doesn't she work in the western zone, you ask? Her reasoning is something like this. "Suppose the Allies eventually win out in Berlin. They won't hold it against me that I work for the Russians. But suppose the Russians win in the struggle for Berlin. The records will show that I work for them. And it might be very dangerous to have worked for the British or Americans if the Russians take over."

I think down through the years this political neutrality among the citizens of Germany laid the groundwork for the rise of Hitler to power.

Fortunately, we in America do not have an army of a foreign country massed at our back door. We

do not live in daily terror of personal retaliation against ourselves and our families.

Now I realize that this may all seem a little far-fetched in a country where folks like to argue politics as well as we Americans do. I might add that I found the same enjoyment for political arguments in most of free Europe — whether it was in a street cafe, over miniature cups of Turkish coffee, in Greece, in the parks of Paris, or around the firesides of Denmark.

But I would like to point out a growing tendency on the part of all of us inside and outside of agriculture to "let government do it."

Let government make the decisions. Don't bother us with the problems. It seems that government generally is always more than willing to take over.

If farm programs, government or non-government, are to have any success, they must have the full-hearted support of farm people, and in a democratic country, the full support of all the people. What I think is equally important, they must be operated by farmers themselves.

Today, with government entering into our daily lives more and more, it is becoming increasingly important for farm people to take an active interest and an active part in government decisions. We cannot afford to shrug our shoulders and say, "Leave it up to the boys down in Washington." Farmers cannot afford to be politically neutral.