

Thanksgiving in Nuremberg (1945)

*John Q. Barrett**

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In 1945, the public trial of twenty-two accused Nazi war criminals and six accused Nazi organizations commenced in Allied-occupied former Germany on Tuesday, November 20. In Courtroom 600 in Nuremberg's Palace of Justice, the International Military Tribunal took the bench. Allied prosecutors took turns reading the lengthy indictment. The process was serious and, as it filled the full day, soporific—reporters and spectators who had obtained courtroom tickets with difficulty began to leave early.

On the next morning, Wednesday, November 21, each defendant stood in turn and entered a plea of not guilty. The president of the Tribunal then called on Justice Robert H. Jackson, the United States Chief of Counsel, to deliver his opening statement. "The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world imposes grave responsibility," Jackson began. "The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored because it cannot survive their being repeated."

Justice Jackson's third sentence summarized the entire Nuremberg undertaking: "That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury, stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captives to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power ever has paid to Reason."

Jackson's speech lasted more than four hours, filling the rest of that second trial day. The packed courtroom, including the defendants, recognized immediately that it was a masterpiece of composition, delivery and vision.

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THANKSGIVING IN NUREMBERG (1945)

The next day, Thursday, November 22, was, in the United States, Thanksgiving Day. In Nuremberg, the Allies did not take the day off to observe the American holiday, but they did meet ceremonially, and quite solemnly, to give thanks. At Jackson's invitation, hundreds of military and civilian Allied personnel gathered in the courtroom that morning.¹ Jackson spoke briefly, explaining the American history and tradition of Thanksgiving to his British, Russian and French colleagues.

Jackson asked two members of the United States staff to speak. One, Captain Edmund A. Walsh, was in civilian life Father Walsh, S.J., vice president of Georgetown University and rector of its School of Foreign Service. The other, U.S. Army Chaplain Henry F. Gerecke, was a Lutheran pastor assigned to minister to prisoners who were Protestants. On that morning, Chaplain Gerecke offered a Thanksgiving prayer. As he spoke, most of those present, including the IMT judges, the senior Soviet prosecutors and the not-particularly-religious Justice Jackson, folded their hands and bowed their heads.²

Following the Thanksgiving service, trial proceedings resumed. The IMT first ruled on pending defense motions. Defendant Julius Streicher was, the Tribunal announced, sane and fit to appear to present a defense, and defendant Martin Bormann would be tried in absentia pursuant to the London Charter of August 8, 1945.

The Tribunal then called on the United States to begin presenting evidence on Count One, which charged defendants with engaging in a common plan and conspiracy to wage aggressive war. Jackson's Executive Trial Counsel, Colonel Robert G. Storey, explained that most of the evidence to come would be German documents captured by the U.S. and British armies. Col. Storey was followed by Associate Trial Counsel Ralph G. Albrecht, who explained the Nazi Party and government structures and offered organizational charts as evidence. Albrecht was succeeded at the podium by Major Frank B. Wallis, Assistant Trial Counsel, who began to offer evidence on the Nazi rise to power in Germany and the pre-1939 planning for aggressive war.

¹ See Frank S. Adams, *Americans Abroad and at Home Mark Thanksgiving Day*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 23, 1945, at 1, 34.

² An aerial photograph of Courtroom 600 on this occasion, showing Pastor Gerecke at the podium and Justice Jackson seated to his left, is reproduced at the end of this file.

Major Wallis's presentation filled all of that Thursday and much of the next day. That Friday evening, he wrote a diary entry about his experience in Courtroom 600:

...Thursday, Thanksgiving day—I was reached. It is difficult to attempt to record any emotions as I stood up in the courtroom—before the prisoners dock—and the 8 judges—before some 350 newspaper men and women, the cameras and more cameras—and started to present the 1st phase of the American case—the common plan and conspiracy—the seizure of control by the Nazis, the consolidation of that control—in short what happened in Germany during the pre war era—the terror, the ruthless purge of the opposition—the destruction of organized labor, the persecution of the churches, the persecution of the Jews, the militarization of the youth and of the country—all in preparation for a gigantic war of aggression aimed at the domination of Europe. As I looked at them [the defendants]—it was with a feeling of scorn and contempt—mixed with a bit of awe—when I remembered how close they came to success in their mad undertaking. Next I was conscious that I was speaking to the world—not only the world of today—but the world of future generations—as this was history that was being made and recorded, history that would be in the school books, history that would be a source of study for years to come by International lawyers and students. However, I did not have much time or opportunity for reflection—I had a job to do—to drive a few nails into the coffins of the bastards with words—and for the next four hours I proceeded to do it to the best of my ability. I don't think that I will ever forget Thanksgiving 1945—and I doubt if I'll ever spend another Thanksgiving—in a strange country, in an International Court Room prosecuting such low level scoundrels—I certainly hope not.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I wish for each of you—American and not, religious and not—a Nuremberg perspective that includes gratitude, peace, justice and human alliance.

