Somebody Else’s Genocide
By Sherman Alexie

After my reading in Atlanta, Georgia, a blond woman asked me, in German-accented English, if my books were translated and published in Germany.

"Ja," I said. I studied German for two years in high school and one semester in college, but I remembered only a few words---abgehetzt, schoner, arschloch---and only one phrase: Ich habe sieben Oktober Geburtstag.

"Do you know how much Germans love Indians?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I gave a poetry reading in Berlin about seven years ago. And about two hundred people showed up. There were a dozen old German guys wearing full eagle feather headdresses. It was crazy."

"Do you ever wonder why Germans love Indians so much?" she asked.

"I have theories," I said. "What do you think?"

"I think it’s because Germans cannot believe what the United States did to Indians. It was genocide."

A white woman, waiting in line behind the German, gasped and slapped her hand to her mouth. A black woman turned on her heel and fled. For one of the few times in my life, I was silenced.

*Wow,* I thought. *Did you, a German, really just pass judgment on somebody else's genocide?*

I waited for the German woman to make the obvious connection. I wanted the woman to make the obvious connection. But she, unsmiling, just stared at me.

"Well," I said. "I think Germans, of all people, should understand exactly what the United States did to Indians."

She was confused for a moment, and then she realized that I was referring to Nazis and the Jewish Holocaust.

"Oh, that," she said. "That was just a little blip."

*A blip!*

Later that night, as I tried to sleep, I remembered my wife and I spent a brief time in Germany. On a cold and foggy day, we waited for the train that would take us to Dachau.
"What time is the train supposed to get here?" I asked my wife.

"2:17," she said.

We waited, stamping our feet against the chill, until the train arrived at precisely seventeen minutes after two.

"Damn," I said. "The train to Dachau should never arrive exactly on time."

As we boarded the train, as it shuttled toward the death camp, I studied the faces of the elderly Germans surrounding us. I wanted to know if they were living in this neighborhood when Dachau was operating. I wanted to know if they saw the ash rising from the ovens. I wanted to know if they heard the screams.

Later, in Dachau, I noticed that many of the surrounding homes were built next to the walls of the camp. A few houses shared a wall with Dachau.

God, I thought, it could happen here again. It can happen anywhere again.

Sherman Alexie is the author of 21 books of poetry and prose, including The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, the 2007 National Book Award Winner for Young Adult Literature, and Face. He lives with his family in Seattle, Washington.