



THE MOMENT BEFORE

Public Testimony Before The Portland City Council by Elinor Langer

Last fall I sat at home by myself and watched the initial hearings on television and was very much affected by what I saw. I particularly remember the high school girl, dressed in black, with a punk hairdo, who said, "We're not bad kids; we're just freaked out," and I thought to myself, there really is a correspondence between how these kids look and how they feel, and I was reminded of a joke current in the early years of the Nazi era: Hitler goes to a barber and complains, "Look at my hair, how flat it is. What can I do to make it stick up a little?" "Stick your head out the window and look what is going on in Germany," the barber replies, "and your hair will stand on end for the rest of your life." As it does with other animals, this stuck out hair should tell us that something frightful is going on.

One of my interests as a writer and reader is the literature of what might be called the moment before. You probably know the genre — "The Last Days of Pompeii" and "The Guns of August" are related to it — portraits of societies about to vanish forever. A recent example is the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld's "Badenheim 1939," in which, as the publisher so well puts it, "the characters on stage are so deeply held by their defensive daily trivia that they manage to misconstrue every signal of their fate," and in which the central subject is the struggle between the characters and their own self-deceptions. Let me read you a paragraph from another such novel, "Prater Violet," by Christopher Isherwood, published in 1945 but set in 1939:

"Like all my friends, I said I believed a European was coming soon. I believed it as one believes that one will die, and yet I didn't believe. For the coming war was as unreal to me as death itself. It was unreal because I couldn't imagine anything beyond it; I refused to imagine anything just as a spectator refuses to imagine what is behind the scenery in a theater. The outbreak of war, like the moment of death, crossed my perspective of the future like a wall; it marked the instant total end of my imagined world. I thought about this wall

from time to time, with acute depression and a flutter of fear at the solar plexus. Then again, I forgot or ignored it. Also, just as when one thinks of one's own death, I secretly whispered to myself, 'Who knows? Maybe we shall get around it somehow. Maybe it will never happen.'"

I believe that the moment we are living in is such a moment — that we are all going around whispering to ourselves, "Who knows? Maybe it will never happen," while knowing that it will — and that is exactly the state of illusion which makes it so difficult to take the simple steps that would acknowledge, and by acknowledging possibly lead to alleviating, our lot. I believe that the inability of the city council so far to confront the issue by bringing forward a simple and sensible ordinance declaring Portland a nuclear free zone is an instance of the common illusion. I do not mean to suggest that others, myself included, are exempt. As someone whose work involves the habit of introspection, I can report that between my longstanding "right opinions" on the subject of nuclear war any my appearance here today — my first such public appearance — my mind presented me with many arguments against testifying, including (a) my preoccupation with other matters; (b) my lack of expertise; (c) the largely symbolic nature of the issue, at least in relation to national defense if not in relation to the city; and (d) the futility of action. I hope I may be forgiven a writer's presumption if I say that I wonder whether the reasoning of members of the city council, which has led to the absence of an actual ordinance today, is not much the same: namely, there are other issues before us; it is not really our jurisdiction; it is too limited in its national impact to take any risks for locally; and, ultimately, we are lost anyway.

The problem with this reasoning is, of course, its circularity. If we act, we may die; but if we don't act, we will surely die — a death that, as Jonathan Schell has so articulately argued, is not mere individual death but extinction. The difference between this "moment before" and all others is that this time there will be no

posterity to cluck over our illusions. It will all be gone.

The tyranny of nuclear weapons is a new form of tyranny. We are hostage to it when social services are cut so that defense can expand. We are hostage to it again when the justification for government policy in Central America is that it will prevent a later confrontation with the Soviet Union that would lead to nuclear war. We are hostages to it because it threatens our ultimate freedom: the freedom to be. It is our place to act, it is all our places to act, because there is no force other than public opinion that is capable of bringing about change. The federal government not only cannot lead, it can barely follow. It is too vast. It is too internally divided. And as the recent MX votes show, it brokers too many issues simultaneously to be effective on any one. Every instance of progress in arms control that has been made since 1945 has been made in response to just such public pressure as declaring Portland a nuclear free zone would represent. We must act on the local level because that is where the hope of the American Republic always has been and always will be. The early colonists did not have to quarter soldiers in their houses — remember the Bill of Rights? — and we do not have to quarter nuclear weapons, or the parts for nuclear weapons, in our cities.

It is very difficult to feel passionate about something and powerless at the same time. To act we must overcome our deepest pessimism about the outcome. But there is no alternative. Otherwise, not only this government but every other government, and not only this form of enterprise but every other form of enterprise, and everything else, will surely perish from earth.

Elinor Langer lives in Portland. She is the author of "Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell."

COLUMBIAN CAFE



CREPES • PASTA • SOUPS • SALADS
ESPRESSO

1114 MARINE DRIVE, ASTORIA



women
o
m
e
n

COTTON • WOOL • SILK

CLOTHING

Open Daily 10-6

436-1571

CANNON BEACH, OR

SHALLON



WINERY

1598 DEANE STREET ASTORIA ORE 97103