

## GEORGE N. SHUSTER (1894 - 1977)

### A LOCAL GENIUS

*"I was born in what is still one of the most charming small towns in Wisconsin, even though progress as understood during the early twentieth century destroyed some gracious structures and replaced them with hideous ones."*

It was thus that George Nauman Shuster described the place of his birth; Lancaster, Wisconsin. He was born on August 27, 1894, the first of three children of Antony Shuster and Elizabeth Shuster nee Nauman. He attended St. Clement School from 1898 to 1906 where, per a biographical sketch "he received an excellent education from the School Sisters of Notre Dame." In 1907 due to his mother's illness he was sent to St. Lawrence College School at Mt. Calvary, about 15 miles from Fond Du Lac. This was a Capuchin Catholic secondary school. While there he studied English, history, mathematics, Latin, Greek, German, French, religion, and science.



He had shown himself to be unusually intelligent at a young age and related in his autobiography, *On The Side of Truth* that while attending St. Clement School he read *Harper's* magazines which were handed down to him by the mother of one of his friends. This woman, whose name he did not give was the wife of a retired U. S. Navy Captain. She was a scholar who, he said, was one of the first graduates of Smith College and she inspired him to learn about the bigger world outside.

In time he would work as a reporter, a scholar of Catholic history, an editor, a soldier, an English professor, a specialist on German culture and politics, a college president, a diplomat, and the leader of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). During his lifetime, he wrote almost twenty books and 300 articles on education, world affairs and religion. He received his B.A. in 1915 from Notre Dame University. After service in World War One, he returned to Notre Dame, received his Masters Degree in French Literature and became a professor of English. He became managing editor of *Commonweal*, a magazine for liberal Catholic intellectuals and served in this position from 1925 to 1937. During this time he made a number of trips to Germany, funded by grants, and studied the tumultuous events that culminated in Hitler's rise to dictator. He wrote three books about Germany during these years. In 1940 he completed his doctorate at Columbia University and was named President of Hunter College in New York City.

He recalled his early life in small town Lancaster as not always easy. As a Catholic, he was in the minority in a city dominated by Protestants, and particularly Congregationalists. "*There was a good deal of interreligious bickering in Lancaster*" he wrote, "*though the small Catholic minority normally ran for cover only when some itinerant ex-monk came to town and relit the fires of the Inquisition. It never bothered me much, except that in school we were asked to pray for the poor Protestants who as a consequence of not having the true faith would all doubtless end up in hell.*" He was much influenced by Robert LaFollette Sr. and the Wisconsin Progressive movement after hearing LaFollette speak for two hours from the back of a train, and proudly identified himself with that aspect of his Wisconsin heritage for the rest of his life. Though he was a peaceful and diplomatic man, he would encounter condemnation in his lifetime, being falsely accused of being

both a Nazi sympathizer and a coddler of Communists.

He was opposed to American involvement in World War One, but felt that if his country demanded it, he owed *“a full measure of devotion.”* Owing to the fact that he spoke both German and French, he served in an intelligence unit assigned to intercept German telephone and telegraph messages. He experienced the horror of the battle of Chateau-Thierry in 1918. There were 67,000 American casualties. He recalled *“rivers soaked with blood.”* He said that as a veteran, he did not talk of such things, but admitted *“I was very lucky to emerge from the fighting a very much alive, though worn to a frazzle, sergeant first-class.”* It was in the hell of war that he experienced a spiritual change:

*“When it was all over, I found myself for the first time genuinely religious. Before that, I had lived up to all the rules and tried to believe what I was supposed to as a Catholic. Now I was personally religious, deeply so, but no longer a subservient soul. It seemed to me that I had found God across all the suffering I had seen. Many men I knew had lost every vestige of belief, and one could not blame them. Just what happened to me I cannot easily explain.”*

In the years following the war Shuster became an expert on Germany and its politics. He wrote three books between 1932 and 1935 about Hitler and the changes in Germany. At first, like many others he was unsure about Hitler and his movement. He became in time a fervent opponent of the Nazi and Fascist movements sweeping Europe. He made many trips to Germany, at times risking his safety to interview independent German leaders and individuals opposed to Hitler. In the years before the Second World War Shuster befriended Konrad Adenauer who would become the first post war Chancellor of Germany. Shuster’s trips to pre-war Germany were funded by various foundations. In 1939 the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace funded his visit to Germany. His aim was to meet Adenauer and ask him questions about the inner workings of the German Government. Shuster wanted to determine Hitler’s intentions. Did he want war? He met a friend who hid him for three days, and then drove him, dressed in shabby workmen’s clothing up a mountain road toward Adenauer’s home. He was left beside the road. He snuck into Adenauer’s garden where he hid in some bushes until Adenauer came out. Adenauer recalled Shuster’s visit:

*“Gestapo agents were hounding me, for I was a known enemy of the Nazis – when Dr. Shuster suddenly appeared from behind a bush! He came on a mission from the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace. He wanted my opinions on Hitler and the future of Germany. He left, crawling away from my refuge on his hands and knees to avoid detection. I little thought that the next time I should meet Professor Shuster he would hold a high official position with an American occupying army.”*

*“I lay hidden in the bushes till Adenauer was alerted”* Shuster recalled. *“We spoke in German. We talked nearly two hours. He warned that Hitler was set on war and that the invasion of Poland was inevitable.”* Shuster left immediately to return home by train via Holland. He was almost arrested by a Gestapo agent who questioned him. He pretended to be a foreigner reading the London Times, and made gestures indicating that he did not understand the agitated agent. Just as the Gestapo agent was ordering the train to be stopped it rolled into Dutch territory, and safety. When asked why he took such a risk, Shuster explained *“He had inside information we vitally needed.”*

In 1939 he was appointed as President of Hunter College in New York City, and he continued in that position until 1960, but he continued serving on other projects, often taking leave from his college services. After he had concluded that Hitler was determined to start a war, Shuster joined a group called **Loyal Americans of German Descent**, and served as its chairman. He gave a broadcast response to isolationist Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota (Nye was born and raised in Wisconsin) who had given a speech urging loyal Americans to oppose President Roosevelt’s foreign policy and assistance to Britain. Nye said that

Roosevelt and British leaders were engaged in a “deliberate attempt to involve this country against its will in the war.” In his reply, Shuster said that war and appeasement were the only alternatives to Roosevelt’s policy; that Roosevelt was getting the nation prepared, and that anyone who had studied Hitler knew that his aim was “*the creation of a new Germany swept clean of Christianity and democracy, and armed for the conquest of the world.*” Despite his frequent statements condemning Nazism, there were those who considered him too sympathetic with Germany.

When the war ended in 1945, The State Department dispatched Shuster and other experts to Austria and Germany to interview captured Nazis. He interviewed many of the high ranking war criminals, including Herman Goering. Walter Winchell, a famous columnist of the day viewed Shuster as soft on the Nazis. He gave over his column to Attorney Louis Nizer who “exposed” Shuster as pro Nazi based on statements he had made in the three books on Germany he had written before the war, and his statement that the U.S.A. was the most militaristic of Western peoples, based on the number of wars it fought that it could have avoided. This was a reflection of his Wisconsin Progressive past, for LaFollette had opposed entry into World War One as totally unnecessary.

In April of 1950 Shuster was appointed as Land Commissioner (Governor) for Bavaria in Occupied Germany. He took leave from his college duties and served for one year trying to reform the German local political and educational systems of Bavaria to teach democratic values. This was not easy, for Bavaria had not cooperated in ousting its Nazi era leaders. His appointment generally brought support for him as the best qualified candidate, but Winchell again launches an attack against him as having “muddled thinking” based again upon his pre-war books. He said Shuster would allow ex Nazis to return to important political, educational, and economic positions. Winchell was wrong.

It was not three years after being accused of being soft on Nazis that he was attacked by Wisconsin’s infamous Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy in March of 1953 as being a communist sympathizer. The basis of McCarthy’s charge was that Shuster as President of Hunter College had not fired a faculty member, Dr. Henrietta Friedman, a professor of the classics and treasurer of the New York College Teachers Union when she was identified as a communist by the FBI in 1949. In those days, when McCarthy accused, most academics ran for cover. Shuster was the first college president to openly condemn McCarthy and his tactics. He stated that he had not fired Friedman in 1949 because civil service rules did not allow it, but he had fired her later when she refused to testify before a state committee, contrary to law. He went farther than that. He said “Senator McCarthy reminds me of the college senior writing a test paper – he can’t distinguish between evidence and surmial, fact and fiction.” He went on to suggest that Academic institutions should investigate McCarthy and his methods. “No doubt” he said “the time has come to ask on ‘what meat this our Caesar has fed’ and to review his activities with the utmost objectivity, calm and chilly resolution, so that an authoritative report can be made to the people.”

In 1960 Shuster retired from the presidency of Hunter and returned to Notre Dame university where he served as assistant to of the president of the University of Notre Dame, Father Theodore Hesburgh. He also served as professor emeritus of English and assumed the directorship of the Center for the Study of Man in Contemporary Society until 1971. He was also a member of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO and served as its Chairman (1953-54). He represented the United



States on the UNESCO Executive Board (1958-63).

He wrote widely on the history of Catholicism in America, rebutting the widely held belief that the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church is incompatible with a democratic society. He pointed out that Catholic Maryland had first dictated religious toleration in 1636, requiring that any person professing to believe in Jesus Christ should not be molested or discriminated against in any way, and that individuals should be judged on their merits only. He pointed out that papal officials had mandated that the priests and high officials of the churches in America should come from within the American nation.

George Shuster died in 1977, working to the last on multiple civic and educational projects. In 1963 he added to his many honors and awards the honor of being named by President Kennedy as one of four Americans, including Vice President Lyndon Johnson, to represent the United States at the funeral of Pope John XXIII in Rome. This was a fitting reward to a man who used his great intellect and his unswerving faith to mark his path in the world. Over the years Dr. Shuster returned to Lancaster many times to visit his mother, but apparently like the biblical prophet, he had no honor in his dwelling place. Perhaps these paragraphs will stir some recollection.