

THE PHOENIX

<http://thePhoenix.com/Boston/news/55446-child-of-hitler/>

← Murdoch mishogoss

Flashbacks

See all in Flashbacks →

A child of Hitler

Growing up in the Third Reich (a memoir)

By ALFONS HECK | January 30, 2008

This article originally appeared in the February 1, 1983 issue of the Boston Phoenix.

In Hitler's Germany, my Germany, childhood ended at the age of 10, with admission to the Jungvolk, the junior branch of the Hitler Youth. Thereafter, we children became the political soldiers of the Third Reich.

In reality, though, the basic training of almost every child began at six, upon entrance to elementary school. For me, that year was 1933, three months after Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. It was 50a years ago this week that Hitler came to power, and I have only a child's hazy recollection of the early years of his rule. But I vividly remember the wild enthusiasm of the people when German troops marched through my home town on March 7, 1936, in the process of taking back the Rhineland from the hated French.

I was born in Wittlich, a small wine-producing town just 20 miles east of the French border in the Moselle valley of the Rhineland. Under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the Rhineland had not only been demilitarized, but placed under French occupation for 15 years. When France's vastly superior army allowed fewer than 3000 German troops to re-enter the region without threatening to mobilize, the French handed Hitler the first of his bloodless conquests. There would be more appeasement — over the Sudetenland, Austria, Czechoslovakia — enough to convince Hitler he had become invincible, and that he could attack Poland with impunity. It was a delusion that may have cost as many as 50 million lives; certainly it changed the world.

None of this, of course, was apparent to the people of Wittlich in 1936. On that March evening, perched on the shoulders of my uncle, I watched a torchlight parade of brown-shirted storm troopers and Hitler Youth formations through a bunting-draped marketplace packed with what seemed to be the whole population. Clusters of people seemed to hang from the windows and balconies, and a continuous storm of "Heil Hitler" drowned out the music of the military band. Standing in an open Mercedes in front of the medieval city hall was the Führer himself, acknowledging the salute with an outstretched arm. It was the first time I had seen him, and I'll never forget the rapture he evoked. On that evening, he surely symbolized the promise of a new Germany, a Reich that had once again found it's rightful place in the sun.

• • •

Unlike our elders, we, the children of the '30s, knew nothing of the freedom and turmoil of the Weimar Republic. From our first day in school, we received an almost daily dose of nationalist instruction. It was repeated endlessly that Adolf Hitler had restored German's dignity and pride and freed us from the shackles of Versailles, the harsh peace treaty that plunged our country into more than a decade of bloody political turmoil. Even in working democracies, children do not question the veracity of what they are taught; we, who had never heard the bracing tones of dissent, never doubted that we were fortunate to live in a country of such glowing hopes.

And unless one was Jewish, a Gypsy, or a political opponent of Nazism, the Germany of the '30s had indeed become a land of

hope. It's no exaggeration to say that if Hitler had died in 1938, he would have been celebrated as one of the greatest statesmen in German history, despite the persecution of the Jews (violent anti-Semitism had become an ugly feature of public German life by then, but very few would have predicted it would end in genocide).

On April 20, 1938, Hitler's 49th birthday, I joined the Jungvolk. Like many of my peers, I could hardly wait to give my oath of eternal loyalty to the Führer and receive the dagger with "Blut und Ehre" ("Blood and honor") engraved on it. Even more thrilling, I was chosen as one of two 10-year-olds who would represent our district Jungvolk at the Nuremberg Party Congress that September. It was a particularly bright moment to be a young German. We had taken Austria "home" that year, as well as the Sudetenland, the largely German-speaking border region of Czechoslovakia. In my own home town, business was humming: we were in the third line of defense of the "Westwall," and hundreds of townspeople were employed in the construction of bunkers. My grandparents had no trouble selling all the wine their farm produced. That summer, a Panzer battalion had been moved into a complex of new barracks, bringing more prosperity to local businesses. The Panzer officer who inspected our Hitler Youth formation on the day the new facilities opened was a Colonel Erwin Rommel; just five years later he would be a field marshal, at the height of his fame as the "desert fox." Although our songs celebrated the joy of dying for Germany, death was the last thing on our minds at the Party Congress.

I have never forgotten the words Hitler addressed to us in his harsh, mesmerizing voice. "You, my youth," he shouted, "are destined to become the leaders of a glorious future world under the supremacy of our new National Socialist order." To many of my peers, this promise became a sentence of death. But in that storm of 100,000 voices, screaming in an almost primeval frenzy of assent, I reaffirmed the oath of fealty I would not break as long as Hitler lived.

That evening, in the huge tent city we shared with thousands of storm troopers, we were visited by the Reich leader of the Hitler Youth, 31-year-old Baldur von Schirach, a minor aristocrat whose mother was an American (years later, at a Hitler Youth leaders' conference, I heard him mention with obvious pride that one of his ancestors had signed the Declaration of Independence). After he had inspected our formations, lined up between endless rows of white tents, we crowded around him near a huge log fire to sing songs. That suited Schirach's naïve, mystical quality perfectly. It was he who had written the words to the Hitler Youth anthem, and he who used to equate Hitler with God (by saying, for example, that "He who serves the Führer serves Germany, and he who serves Germany serves God").

Certainly there were dramatic religious overtones to Hitler's appearance at the Party Congress. Elevated on the gigantic granite platform at our head, floodlit and isolated, he looked like the high priest in some gigantic cathedral. This picture of the Party Congress — of the majesty and power of Hitler and his Germany — is familiar to anyone who has seen *Triumph of the Will*. But what I also remember is the emotional celebration of national unity, and the very personal sense of commitment that we young people felt.

The Hitler Youth's ability to stimulate and organize the young was not unprecedented. More than four million adolescents belonged to various youth groups at the time when Hitler came to power: the churches organized them, as did other political parties. (One of the largest and most active groups, in fact, was the Communist Youth Auxiliary, many of whose members fought the Hitler Youth in pitched street battles before 1933.) Within six months of Hitler's ascension to power, though, the Nazi Party was the only legal one, and the Hitler Youth began to absorb or subsume other organizations. In December of 1936, a statute declared that "the entire German youth within Reich territory is organized in the Hitler Youth."

The Hitler Youth, both in the junior Jungvolk and in the Hitler Jugend, was organized along the lines of the Wehrmacht, in squads, platoons, companies, and so forth. The activities of the prewar Jungvolk resembled those of the Boy Scouts, though with much more emphasis on discipline and indoctrination. We had two rallies a week, usually on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, and often a parade on Sunday. I belonged to the Fanfarenzug, the bugle corps, for most of my four years in the Jungvolk: we preceded our units in the parades, and had more elaborate uniforms and not as much drill.

After the parades we would be shown movies or newsreels, nearly all of them drenched in Nazi ideology. Team sports were always emphasized, and there seemed to be some sports festival every month. In the summer, we often went on camping trips, but even these were interspersed with marching drills and war games. During the winter, the most common trips were those to ski camps.

Much of the fun ended as soon as the war began. The Jungvolk was then called upon to deliver call-up notices and monthly ration cards, to help collect material for the war effort, and (much later) to work in search operations after air raids. In 1940, the older

Hitler Youth members switched to paramilitary training — precision drills, small-arms handling, sharpshooting, navigation. And from 1939 on, every boy and girl above the age of 15 had to do compulsory land service each summer, helping with the harvest.

My days in the Hitler Youth were happy ones, by and large: I was young, and I was becoming a fanatic. My grandparents, who raised me, were apolitical people whose farm was better off under the Nazis. My father had been a Social Democrat who never applied for Nazi Party membership; it's possible that he might have challenged my growing allegiance to Hitler, but he and my mother had moved away from the farm to run a family business, and I did not see my parents often in those years. Once during the war years, when he visited and saw me preening in my uniform, he told me I looked like a little clown. Certainly he never had my blind faith in the Führer. For my part, I thought his point of view was simplistic, out of touch with the truth about the Reich: after all, he had never been to high school, and I considered myself better-educated than he. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944, in the hysteria after the attempted assassination of Hitler, but was released after one night in custody. He lived to tell me what a fool I had been.

Could I have learned from him earlier? I don't know. The Nazis worked hard at binding us children to Germany and to Hitler, and they might have won me away from even the most determined parental opposition. Certainly the regime never wavered from its primary domestic goal of reshaping the young, and thus the future. "I don't need you all that badly," Hitler once shouted to a rally of farm workers. "I already own your children."

For once, he wasn't exaggerating,

• • •

But Hitler did not draw his support solely from us children of the Reich, and it still baffles me that our elders and our educators gave him equal assent. The explanation lies partly, of course, in his undeniable success in restoring full employment and economic order to a devastated nation, where six million were unemployed in a population of 66 million. "You've got to hand it to Hitler," said my grandmother, who equated idleness with villainy. "He puts everybody to work, even the damned Gypsies."

That was in 1938, and by then the number of unemployed had sunk to a miniscule 200,000 out of a workforce of 25 million. It was an impressive achievement, even if it depended on conscription and a vastly expanded army, on massive rearmament and public-works programs (such as the construction of the autobahns), and finally on the introduction of compulsory labor service for all young Germans. The only other national leader who could be compared to Hitler in so thoroughly remaking a whole society in the '30s was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Like Roosevelt, Hitler captured the souls of many of his countrymen by giving them economic security at a time of economic chaos. In Germany, though, the worldwide depression of the '30s was the second such calamity in a decade. In December of 1923, you could have exchanged 4.2 billion marks for a single dollar. A man needed a wheelbarrow full of currency to pay his rent, provided the landlord would accept the stuff at all. My grandfather had to pay the mortgage on his land with wine and meat — and he was one of the lucky ones: he could still feed his family, and he didn't lose his farm. Millions of Germans bartered away everything they had. Inflation and unemployment not only devastated their traditional victims in the working class, but wiped out much of Germany's middle-class as well.

This economic disruption can be traced in part to the Treaty of Versailles. Among its other provisions, the treaty stripped Germany of almost 15 percent of her prewar territory. In the west, the French occupied the Rhineland and took possession for 15 years of the Saar province and its rich coal mines. In the east, Germany lost West Prussia, most of Posen, and the port of Memel. Danzig became a "free city" under the protection of the League of Nations. In addition, Germany lost her African colonies and suffered a reduction in her merchant fleet. And in 1920, the Allied Reparations Commission assessed the staggering sum of 132 billion gold marks as damaged owed, virtually guaranteeing that the German economy would be crippled for years.

The treaty had less-tangible consequences as well. When German troops marched home after the armistice of 1918, they were told by Friedrich Ebert (no right-wing nationalist, but a Social Democrat who became the first president of the Weimar Republic), "You have not been beaten on the field of battle." This was, of course, a lie, as the generals who had sought the armistice knew full well. But the lie became legend, and the legend became the Germans' substitute for a true understanding of their defeat. The harsh reality of the 1919 treaty, then, came as a shock. The nation went into mourning and then on a monumental binge of self-pity. Suddenly the Germans had to adjust not only to the reality of defeat and their culpability, but also to the verdict of the

Versailles treaty that Germany was solely responsible for the War.

For many Germans, there was no adjustment, only rejection. And so over a decade of political unrest the legend became the myth of the “stab in the back,” the shameful betrayal by the “November criminals.” These men, who had little choice but to accept the terms the Allies had dictated, were now the men of the Weimar Republic.

From the beginning, the Weimar government was as weak as it was democratic; it could not guarantee basic political or economic security. Although the Republic succeeded in adopting a democratic, parliamentary constitution (modeled in part on the American one), it was often forced to suspend the very rights it guaranteed in order to put down political violence. Large German cities — Leipzig, Hanover, Hamburg, and especially Munich — were all at various times ruled by Soviet-style Communist councils, which were actively supported by the Soviet Union. As early as January of 1919, the radical-Communist Spartacists were battling government forces in the streets of Berlin, and the hard-pressed government had to turn to the army for help. Gustav Noske, a pillar of the Social Democrats and a member of the cabinet, ordered the formation of the Freikorps, units made up of veterans and drifters and led by former army officers. The first significant political murders of the Weimar Republic were committed by members of the Freikorps, who abducted and murdered two Spartacist leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. It was a vile and senseless act. Both Liebknecht and Luxemburg, for all their radicalism, had already urged their supporters to lay down their arms and to take part in the upcoming elections for the national assembly. These killings set a pattern for countless others, and irrevocably widened the gulf between the Communists and the Social Democrats, the two parties of the workers. Soon they would hate each other more than they would hate their right-wing enemies. Hitler, more skillfully than anyone else, would later turn this bitter rift to his advantage.

In 1920, Hitler's Nazi party consisted of less than 500 card-carrying members and was totally unknown outside of Munich. Almost singlehandedly, he made this forlorn right-wing band (among innumerable others, at the beginning) into a force in German politics. He succeeded because of his unerring sense of propaganda, his organizational ability, and his mesmerizing oratory. In Weimar Germany, these were the talents sufficient to rally millions to his party, though the party's program itself was only a 25-point hodgepodge of extreme nationalism, unbending racism (especially brutal anti-Semitism), and a vague appeal to social equality for all true Germans. It was a simple-minded formula; it drew more from ideas that were already common currency than from any original thinking. But it promised to restore order and greatness to Germany.

Hitler, from his early years as a social misfit, possessed the demagogues's instinct for the gut feelings and resentments of the masses. He knew — unerringly, instinctively — that most Germans would not only accept but embrace the rule of one leader (one König, one Kaiser, one Führer) if he could inspire them with a sense of mission. To do this, he would have to reinforce and confirm their belief that Germany was a nation of destiny, and that the Germans were superior to all other peoples.

But he would not have to introduce them to the idea. The German tradition already contained the romantic, almost mystical notion of the superiority of Das Volk. Germany's greatness had been pronounced not only by political figures like the Kaiser and Bismarck, but also by 19th century philosophical giants like Fichte and Hegel. Hitler borrowed and built on this tradition as surely as he borrowed the awesome visions of Wagner, or the narrow and poisonous resentments of 19th-century anti-Semitism.

His was a long struggle, though, and only a fanatic could have persevered through the 14-year march from the shabby beer halls of Munich to the halls of the Reichstag. For most Germans, after all, the worst had seemed over after 1924, especially when the statesmen of Weimar negotiated reductions in the reparations payments. Then the American crash set off a second downward spiral of the world economy.

The new economic stability brought renewed political turmoil. The Nazi Party had stagnated; now its ranks suddenly swelled with men who had lost all trust in a series of ineffectual governments. Their despair — like the resentment of veterans who had sacrificed their youth to the Kaiser's failure — turned into votes for Hitler, who offered the discipline of the storm troopers and the hope of an end to the chaos. The people were tired of demonstrations, tired of the street battles between right-wingers and Communists (in a single month in 1932, 99 men were killed), tired of police raids against black marketeers and speculators. They yearned for some strong hand to restore authority.

By 1932, the very existence of the Republic was at stake. Governments and chancellors followed one another, each as unable as the last to muster an enduring parliamentary majority. Hitler's party had 196 members in the Reichstag — by far the largest number, though not a majority (the Social Democrats held 129 seats, the Communists 100). Hitler's hour had come.

On January 30, 1933, President Paul von Hindenberg lawfully appointed Hitler chancellor of Germany. Within a month, the fire that destroyed the Reichstag gave Hitler the perfect pretext to crack down on his most dangerous opponents, the Communists. Under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, he asked the president to suspend basic civil rights in this “dire” emergency. Hindenberg, who had given previous chancellors similar emergency powers, concurred. It was to all intents and purposes the end of democracy in Germany. Time now began to run out quickly for the opponents of Adolf Hitler.

And then came the turn of the Jews.

• • •

When I came home from school on November 9, 1938, I saw flames shooting through the roof of the synagogue where the 100 or so Jews of my home town worshipped. It was the beginning of Kristallnacht, the night of the broken glass, in which nearly every Jewish place of business or worship in Germany was destroyed or damaged. I watched the destruction in Wittlich with fascination, but with no feeling of compassion. The teaching of “Racial Science,” to which I had been exposed for five years in school and in the Hitler Youth, had done its work. To me, even the Jews of my home town, nearly all of whom I knew by name, had become dangerous polluters of our pure Aryan blood, for all that this substance still seemed nebulous to me. I had largely forgotten my best friend in kindergarten, Heinz, who had been removed from elementary school some three months after we started together. Heinz’s uncle, a rabbi, actually made the decision to remove him, but I have no doubt that the choice was a wise one in the atmosphere of 1933. For myself, I remember only a vague sense of confusion — certainly no outrage, not in one so young. I asked my grandparents to explain, but their replies were equally vague, perhaps even evasive. “You knew he was Jewish,” I recall them saying. “Well, the Jews don’t go to Christian schools.”

And by 1938, much greater crimes against Jews provoked even less protest by me, by my grandparents and townspeople, and by Germans in general. In a very short time, Hitler had accomplished the legal ostracism of the Jews of Germany, and had turned them into Germany’s scapegoats for all past defeats and present difficulties. Again, he was successful in part because his propaganda appealed to existing beliefs: anti-Semitism had been part of German life for centuries. Martin Luther was particularly vicious; the Catholic Church, for its part, had long tolerated and sometimes encouraged the hatred of Jews. Many rural Catholics still used the epithet “Christ killers,” and Hitler found particularly fertile soil for his seeds of hate in the predominantly Catholic provinces, such as Bavaria and my native Rhineland. Bismarck had granted German Jews full civil rights and liberties in 1871, but in many ways their position had eroded ever since. By the ’20s, at least 430 anti-Semitic associations flourished in the Weimar Republic.

This was true even though German Jews were some of the most assimilated — and most assimilationist — in Europe. For more well-to-do Jews especially, nation came before religious identity. And though Jews constituted less than one percent of the German people (about 600,000 out of 66 million), they were among its highest achievers. Jews were prominent in such learned professions as law and medicine, and in trade. Their success engendered a mixture of grudging respect and envy: “Never underestimate a Jew,” my grandmother used to say, but it was no tribute.

When the German people passively accepted the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which made every Jew a noncitizen, they accepted the legal distinction that made possible the brutalities of the late ’30s and the genocide of the ’40s. Most Germans remained indifferent, and many agreed that the Jews had no right to live in Germany. Even to us fanatics in the Hitler Youth, though, the term “Final Solution” did not yet carry the horrifying meaning that later became apparent.

When I first heard the term, in 1940, it came in a context that had long since been familiar: the phrase in full was “the final solution to the Jewish question,” and “the Jewish question” was of course a common term by then. Specifically, we in the Hitler Youth were told that the final settlement of this issue would involve the deportation of those Jews who had not voluntarily emigrated. These recalcitrants would be shipped to conquered Poland to “atone for their crimes with the labor of their hands.” After seven years of education in hate, it seemed a just fate

And so millions of Jews were indeed shipped east, first to work but finally to die. Not for their crimes, but for ours.

• • •

In the spring of 1939, I passed the entrance test for the Gymnasium, or high school. High school education was then the exception, not the rule, but my grandparents wanted me to become a priest. Hitler or no Hitler, the priesthood was still a respected calling in the Rhineland. On numerous occasions I served Mass as an altar boy in Hitler Youth uniform, since our parades and marches frequently took place on Sunday mornings. It wasn't until early in 1944, when I had been accepted as an officer cadet by the Luftwaffe, that a Gestapo captain by the name of Schwertfeger posed an obvious question. The captain had the task of ascertaining that I was racially pure, which meant untainted by Jewish blood for four generations. "Tell me," he said with a thin smile, as he studied my file, "how can you serve the Führer and the Pope with equal loyalty?" I looked at him with some astonishment: it had never occurred to me there could possibly be a clash. Many Nazis were stout Catholics, and the Führer himself had been baptized, though he did not practice. By that time, I had changed my ambitions anyway. I had discovered flying and girls, precisely in that order. All I wanted to become was Luftwaffe fighter ace.

The groundwork for that desire was laid in April of 1942 at the time when German might reached its pinnacle. We had conquered most of Europe, from the English Channel deep into Russia and from the tip of Norway to the shores of Africa. I had not the slightest doubt that eventually we would defeat both Soviet Russia and the United States. Great Britain still existed only because of the American intervention. I had put in my required four years in the Jungvolk, without much distinction. I had risen no higher than to the rank of Jungenschaftsführer, comparable to corporal. All that changed when I was asked to join the elite unit of the senior Hitler Youth, the Flieger, or Flying Hitler Youth. This by itself was quite a step. Only about 55,000 boys of roughly five million served in the Flying Hitler Youth. In my case, it happened mainly because the local unit leader attended my Gymnasium — though any Gymnasium student had a much better chance to become a pilot than, for instance, a butcher's apprentice. To my surprise, just two weeks after I had been sworn in — again on Hitler's birthday — I found myself in glider-flight training in a camp operated under the patronage of the Luftwaffe. From the moment I was catapulted to a height of 40 feet or so in a crude training device, I had found my destiny. I fell under the spell of flying and resolved to volunteer for the Luftwaffe for life. For the next two years, I spent all of my school vacations and one extra month each summer in flight training.

When I returned from my last flight course — on June 3, 1944, three days before the Allied landing in Normandy — the unit leader who had asked me to join the Flying Hitler Youth in 1942 received his call-up to the Luftwaffe. (As a result of our horrendous casualties, most of us were now drafted into the armed forces at 16 instead of remaining in the Hitler Youth until 18.) He proposed my as his successor. The Reich leader of the Hitler Youth assented, and I was promoted to Gefolgschaftsführer, equivalent to the rank of captain. I assumed command of the 180 boys of Gefolgschaft 244.

I didn't expect to remain in the Hitler Youth for much longer than another month. The Luftwaffe needed pilots desperately. More than anything else, I hoped to be sent to fighter-pilot school. But the Allies intervened. A few days after D-Day, I was on a train bound for Luxembourg, I had been ordered to assemble my unit and report to an anti-aircraft battery near the French-Luxembourg border within 48 hours. We were called flak "helpers," but within a month we took over three 88mm guns of the battery ourselves. The soldiers we relieved were sent to the Normandy front to help stem the tide of the Allied invasion. It seems unbelievable now, but then, despite the steady deterioration of our situation since the battle of Stalingrad (which cost us nearly 300,000 men, largely because Hitler wouldn't allow them to retreat in time), I did not perceive the possibility of German defeat. But I was about to meet an officer who tried to tell me the truth.

In the fall of 1944, about a month after the fall of Paris, the German High Command decided to reactivate the fortifications of the Westwall, which the Allies had come to call the Siegfried Line. Regular troops could not be spared, and tens of thousands of Hitler Youth boys were given the task. Suddenly, our small Luxembourg village was flooded with brown shirts. The village sat at a strategic point between the river Moselle and the highlands, where the valley was flat and wide open. In order to close that dangerous gap in front of the bunkers, an enormous anti-tank barrier had to be dug and fortified. Soon I received orders to detach 60 of my boys to the construction site. The senior Hitler youth commander was perhaps a couple of years older than I. One late afternoon, as he was marching his formation single-file back to the village under the cover of the trees along the road, a marauding British Spitfire pilot spied the column and dove to the attack. Two boys were killed and their commander was shot through the thigh. Late that evening, I received orders from Hitler Youth headquarters in Germany to take his place. That put me in charge of an assortment of units that eventually grew to about 2800 boys and perhaps 80 girls who operated our field kitchens.

The man responsible for the architectural execution of the project was a disabled Panzer first lieutenant by the name of Franz Leiwitz. He was an authentic hero who had lost his left arm in Russia. He had dispatched a total of 14 Russian T-34 tanks and wore the Knight's Cross around his neck. When I first saw Leiwitz, he was sitting on his horse, watching the construction. He smiled crookedly at me and said, "So, you are now the leader of this children's crusade?" I was deeply offended by this flippancy,

but within days we became friends. It almost certainly saved his life a few weeks later.

Unexpectedly one morning, I was picked up by an SS lieutenant with orders to drive me to a conference. To my surprise, we ended up in an armored train deep in the forest near the German border. There were perhaps 50 of us assembled in one of the long cars, around a narrow oak table. Some were construction officials of the vast government construction agency, Todt, and there were some high-ranking SS officers and a Wehrmacht general, the military commander of Luxembourg. Most of us, though, were Hitler Youth leaders. Then the door opened, and in walked Albert Speer, the tall, bushy-browed minister of armaments and Hitler's favorite architect.

Speer, an organizational genius, was by then in charge of all war production in the Third Reich and one of the three most powerful men in Germany. After a very brief introduction, he wasted no time in telling us that Germany was in imminent danger of losing the war. We, especially the Hitler Youth leaders, eyed each other in stunned silence. If any of us had told our units what Speer had just coolly told us, we would certainly have been shot. The mere mention of defeat was nothing short of high treason.

Speer concluded his speech with the uplifting remark that victory could still be ours, provided we were able to stop the Allies right here on the Westwall. It's inconceivable that he believed that himself, but he may have been harboring what became my own forlorn hope in the very last days: that the Americans would join ranks with us to defeat Soviet Russia.

As we were about to leave, somebody yelled, "Achtung!" The door opened once more and in walked Adolf Hitler. Suddenly, it became clear why we had been requested to remove our pistols before entering the train. It was about three months after the assassination attempt of July 20th, and Hitler no longer trusted anyone outside his entourage. He wore a field-gray tunic, with the Iron Cross, as usual, his only decoration. He looked pale and seemed to favor his right leg. But as soon as he began to speak, the old fervor returned. I remember his cold stare as he exhorted us to speed up our efforts, and, if necessary, work around the clock. "The Fatherland and I depend on you, my boys," he said almost pleadingly. We, after all, were his purest creation, unencumbered by the ballast of non-Nazi past and infused from childhood with unquestioning obedience. He spoke no longer than five minutes. Long after the war I discovered that this had been his last secret inspection of the Western Front before launching our last all-out attack (which we called the Ardennes Offensive and the Allies the Battle of the Bulge). He had not come all this way just to speak to us, but we thought he had, and he instantly re-established the feeling of camaraderie he always exuded in the presence of the Hitler Youth. Many of us wept when he slowly walked by each of us and held out his hand. It felt strangely hot and soft, as if he had a fever. We were never more ready to die for him.

Perhaps a week later, I happened to come upon an execution of three French Resistance partisans, as I was passing by the village cemetery. They had, as the young SS lieutenant in charge of the SS soldiers who herded them off a truck told me, been caught with German weapons under the floorboard of their Citroen. Two were men, but the owner of the car was a young woman physician who had attempted to drive them into Germany disguised as foreign workers. Although I knew that the possession of weapons by any citizen of an occupied country meant almost certain death, I thought the SS officer was bluffing, perhaps to gain further information; there had been several incidents of sabotage on the rail line leading into France.

Within seconds, however, the three were submachine-gunned by the soldiers, while the officer calmly watched, smoking a cigarette. The woman was only wounded, and the lieutenant turned to me with a curse. "Damn," he said, "I have to do everything myself." With that he pulled his pistol, stepped over the woman, who was lying on her back with her eyes open and softly moaning, and shot her between the eyes. The top of her head came off and I began to gag. He found this quite amusing. "What's the matter?" he inquired sarcastically, "can't you stand the sight of blood?" He then marched off with his men, back to the truck.

I had, in fact, seen much death and destruction by that time, mostly when my unit was used to dig out survivors after air raids on our cities. But the casual brutality of the execution of handcuffed prisoners was overwhelming. Instead of continuing to the construction site, I turned back in to the village to Lieutenant Leiwitz's office. I recited with some agitation what I had seen, but he merely shrugged. "Listen," he said, "why do you get worked up over three partisans who got what they asked for?" He grinned sardonically: "Even the Americans shoot saboteurs, you know."

I stared at him, and he continued softly, "Do you know that we are slaughtering tens of thousands of Jews back in Poland each day?"

"What do you mean?", I said, taken aback. "What for?"

“What for?” he mimicked me, and suddenly he shouted: “Hasn’t it occurred to you yet, Herr Gefolgschaftsführer, that you and I are serving a mass murderer?”

“Who?”, I asked, dumbfounded. “Who? Who?” he repeated sneeringly. “Our glorious Führer, of course, the greatest leader of all time.”

I left then, slamming the door behind me. There was no Gestapo office anywhere near the village, and I, as the senior Hitler Youth leader, could hardly report Leiwitz to myself. I decided to mention his outburst in my next written report, but fortunately he realized the danger he was in. By late afternoon, he came riding out to the construction site. “I think we had better talk,” he said. I never did denounce Lieutenant Leiwitz.

During our next two months in the village, we met nearly every evening. A couple of times we got drunk together on French cognac. We didn’t always talk about Germany, but Leiwitz was the first man of authority who tried to make me see reality. I never believed his claim that Hitler was killing all the Jews, but I could not discount his eyewitness account of the mass execution of thousands of Jews near Kiev. The murder of civilians deeply offended his sense of honor as a German officer. More than that, though, he resented Hitler’s refusal to make peace after Stalingrad and the loss of North Africa. He believed the war was lost. When I pointed out to him that within four miles of our village V-2 “buzz-bombs,” the flying missiles, were launched every day, and would eventually destroy all Allied supply bases as well as England, he laughed bitterly. “You fool, do you really think these gadgets can change the tide of war? Have you looked at the sky lately? It’s filled with thousands of American bombers that are rapidly pulverizing our cities, and where the hell is your intrepid Luftwaffe? The only sensible way out is an armistice, just like 1918.”

Leiwitz risked his life to tell me the truth, and in retrospect I think that he brought an end to my blind zealotry. But he could never turn me against Hitler. Nor could he himself break his oath to the extent of deserting. After the war, I was stunned to learn that he had been executed by the Gestapo just four weeks before the collapse of Germany. His commanding officer, a colonel, had been implicated in the attempt on Hitler’s life. Leiwitz’s name was apparently on a secret list made out by the colonel, in which he described Leiwitz as actively anti-Hitler.

• • •

We could already hear the rumble of distant artillery fire when I received orders to report to the provincial headquarters of the Hitler Youth, back in Germany. I hoped the Luftwaffe had finally insisted on my services. A day before I left the village, Dr. Robert Ley, Reich leader of the German Labor Front, inspected our nearly completed project and pinned the War Service Cross on several chests, including mine. Dr. Ley was visibly under the influence of alcohol at the time: members of his entourage had to help him climb out of the anti-tank ditch. I never quite understood why the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal sentence him to death but handed Albert Speer, who directed four and a half million slave laborers, 20 years in prison. Unlike Speer, Ley did not assume personal guilt for the crimes of the regime, nor did he plead guilty to any charge.

Back in Germany, I found the Luftwaffe would have to wait. I was ordered to assume command “temporarily” of the Hitler Youth district in which my home town was situated. I would never have reached the rank of Bannführer at 16 under ordinary circumstances, but we were desperately short of leaders. My predecessor had been promoted to deputy Reich leader and posted to Berlin. I didn’t know it then, but I was the last district leader before the Gotterdammerung engulfed us.

On December 16, 1944, Hitler loosed the last major offensive on the Western Front. Under cover of the miserable winter weather, the initial thrust by 180 divisions — there was no reserve left — took the Americans by near-total surprise. As soon as the cloud cover lifted, though, the crushing Allied air superiority made itself felt. On Christmas Eve, 1944, a clear, cold Sunday, a formation of B-17 Flying Fortresses leveled much of my home town, like nearly all German towns within 30 miles of the front. My grandmother, my two aunts, and their two small children made it to a bomb shelter and survived. Our farm was totally destroyed, including the 17 head of cattle and three horses. About 180 townspeople died, but I grieved most for my dog Prinz, a German shepherd. I had long since become inured to the loss of human life. That was just another sacrifice so the Fatherland might live.

At last, a few days after New Year’s, I received urgent orders to report to a small air base near Kassel. I found myself in the company of perhaps 60 other men, most of them Luftwaffe officers. We had one skill in common: all of us were top glider and sailplane pilots. To our disgust, we were ordered to practice pinpoint landings in DSF-230 gliders, which were nothing but plywood boxes with wings, capable of transporting 12 to 16 fully armed soldiers. These unwieldy craft were towed to a height of about 1500

feet and then released. I had often flown on thermal updrafts for three to four hours in graceful sailplanes, but DSF-230s just headed for the ground like wounded ducks. Rather euphemistically, they were called assault gliders, since each was equipped with a machine gun pointing through the windshield. Our task was to get our load of men down to the ground as quickly as possible through the enemy fire, even if it meant shearing the wings off between two trees. Our machines were expendable. We, the pilots, didn't stand to fare much better. If we survived the landing alive and well — only a 50 percent possibility — we were supposed to become commandos. The only way back home was through enemy lines.

I suppose I should be grateful to General George Patton and his Third Army. On January 18, the day we were operations-ready, our armies were in disorderly retreat. It had become pointless to use glider-borne assaults, where no solid front existed. To my utter consternation, the Luftwaffe acceded to a request by the Hitler Youth and put me in charge of organizing a Volksturm unit in a small town near the Belgian border.

By Hitler's orders, as of November of 1944, all Hitler Youth members 15 or older, as well as any man up to the age of 65 who could still walk, were summarily drafted. This, then, was the Volksturm the last ditch warriors of Germany. According to our diabolically efficient Minister of Propaganda and Volk Enlightenment Joseph Goebbels, who was second only to Hitler as a spellbinding orator, the "people's storm" had the task of defending each meter of sacred German soil. In reality, most of the Old Bones, as we called the senior members, sensibly disappeared in the general chaos or surrendered without firing a shot. Not so the Hitler Youth. During the last month of the war alone, tens of thousands of boys were killed, especially in the savage fighting against the Russians. Fittingly enough, they were among the very last defenders of Hitler's bunker.

It seems beyond belief now, but like many other leaders of the Hitler Youth, as well as some Wehrmacht officers, I could see the insanity of ordering children as young as 12 to pick up a bazooka and fire it at the first American tank that came into range. We still clung to the illusion that a murderous resistance might persuade the Americans the invasion of Germany would be too costly. A suicidal effort might still gain an honorable armistice, even if victory was now out of reach.

I never saw what happened to the Volksturm unit I led to the trenches of the Siegfried Line. I was recalled to a Luftwaffe radar station near Frankfurt. One of my last duties was helping to set fire to a row of Messerschmitt ME-262s, the first operational jet fighters in the world. There was no fuel left. On March 5, 1945 the base commander inexplicably ordered me to take five days' compassionate furlough, because I had lost my home on Christmas Eve. It seemed odd, especially when I pointed out to him that units of the American Third Army were only 15 miles west of my home town. He merely nodded. "You had better hurry, then." I was dismissed. It didn't dawn on me that he was trying to save my life.

Two days later, I awoke in the basement of my Aunt's house to the thunder of American artillery fire. Toward noon the barrage stopped, and moments later a column of Sherman tanks roared into town. I was trapped. When the infantry began searching each house, I finally admitted to myself that I and the Thousand-Year Reich were finished. I buried my pistol hastily in the garden. Dressed in stained civilian overalls and Luftwaffe boots, I stepped out on the street and into American captivity, half expecting to be shot.

But I was neither shot nor sterilized (another Goebbels-inspired fear). Instead, I was put to work as an interpreter, first for the platoon that occupied Wittlich that day, then at an American field hospital. In fact, the only "interrogation" in those days was a rather casual question from the huge lieutenant who put me to work that first day. After giving me a carton of Camels and 13 fresh pork chops (undoubtedly from a German pig, I thought), he inquired, "Say — you aren't one of these Nazis, are you?" When I told him I was on furlough from the Luftwaffe, he cursed briefly, then asked, "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask me," I replied — and he burst out laughing.

• • •

For Germans, the first four months after our defeat were more numbing than painful. We were relieved just to be alive. Unlike most of my countrymen, I had plenty to eat, since I was working in the field hospital.

On the morning of July 6th, 1945, the French troops rode into town, some of them on bicycles. Unlike the Americans, they had come to stay. In the French zone of occupation, the authorities had provided themselves with meticulous records of all Nazi Party members, no matter how insignificant. I was arrested, along with all other Hitler Youth members above the rank of

Gefolgschaftsführer. About 35 people were rounded up in Wittlich, most of them minor Party functionaries (the local Gestapo chief, the town's Party leader, and my predecessor as Hitler Youth had all left for Berlin before the end). We were told we would be executed the next morning at six, in retribution for Nazi crimes against the French. It was the worst night of my life, a night of prayers, tears, and resignation. Then a German-speaking sergeant told me we would merely be held as hostages. "I just hope," he said, "none of your townspeople kills one of us, or you're all dead."

After 12 days, I was literally booted out of the prison by a French officer who ordered me to report to him once a week. Three or four months later, I appeared before a de-Nazification board — three French officials and two Germans who had been opponents of the Hitler regime. One was the local shoemaker, a lifelong Communist who had been sent to Dachau. He was the only board member who advocated a prison sentence for me. The board concluded instead that I had been a fanatic, but not a "definable," or criminal. Their sentence: six months' expulsion from the Gymnasium, restriction to the town limits, one month's labor in the French garrison. (In some sense, the sentence was ludicrous: there was no school yet, and everyone in the town needed permission to travel, provided any mode of transportation could be found.)

The following year, as civic life was beginning to assume some normality, I was not only re-admitted to the Gymnasium, but elected student-body president. The French had made me something of a martyr.

...

My activities in the Hitler Youth were never again held against me. But that is not to say that it was easy for me to come to terms with myself and my country. I developed a lasting aversion to becoming involved in politics, and a deep-seated skepticism about all political and spiritual leaders. It took years to understand the truth that the man whom I adored, and the nation to which I gave my fanatical enthusiasm, twisted that kind of devotion into unspeakable atrocities. I learned in 1945 that my kindergarden friend Heinz had been gassed in Auschwitz. But I also learned, over the next few years, that I had known other victims of Hitler. Of the 26 boys who began the Gymnasium with me, 14 died — all of them believing they were giving their lives to a great cause. None was yet 18.



Along with my postwar classmates, I was greatly helped in overcoming my brainwashing by the priest who was our Latin teacher. Dr. Schneider had been arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 for making anti-Hitler remarks in his class; he was the only educator I knew who had the courage to speak out. He returned from Dachau with a mutilated arm but no bitterness. For three years after the war, he met with us at least once a week to discuss what had happened to our country and to us.

In 1951, I emigrated to Canada. I had come to admire many of the qualities of the Americans I'd worked with in Germany, but it was still difficult for the average German with any Nazi background to enter the US. I lived for 12 years in British Columbia, marrying a Canadian and working at a variety of jobs; then my wife and I applied for permanent visas so we could move to California. It took perhaps five months for my records to be checked and I was asked to appear at the American consulate in Vancouver. But just as when I became a US citizen, six years later, I encountered almost no interest in my political past. Of course, I had never been a member of the Nazi Party, though only because one had to be 18 to join.

In 20 years of living in the US, I have been continually amazed at the ease with which people have accepted me, even when I told them about my past. In fact, I have been most disturbed by people's assumption that I share their prejudices, and I am appalled by the hatred I have witnessed in Americans. Quite a few acquaintances, some of them college-educated, have told me bluntly that "you Nazis" had done "a good job on the Jews." More often than I care to remember, I have heard the sentiment that it was "too bad you Nazi guys didn't have the chance to do the same job on the niggers." And a black colleague told me bitterly one day that I, who had waged war on his country, was far more readily accepted here than he was.

Faced with this sort of sickness, and with the shame so many Germans felt, I wished for years that the whole Nazi era could simply be forgotten. But five years ago, I mentioned in an article in the San Diego Union that I had once been a Hitler Youth leader and had fought for the Nazis, and that to my mind, any American who walked around in a Nazi uniform had to be a nut. I received two death threats — not because I had once supported Hitler, but because I disapproved of the wearing of Nazi regalia.

It was then that I realized that the past does not speak for itself, and that each of us is responsible for giving it a voice. I know now that to be silent can be criminal.

 **Related:** , , , [More](#) 

 **Topics:** [Flashbacks](#) , [Politics](#), [Culture and Lifestyle](#), [Martin Luther](#), [More](#) 