

The Hitler Youth: We Too Were Victims

Alfons Heck

A little over thirty-three years ago, when I was just under seventeen, I was a high-ranking, dedicated member of the Hitler Youth and one of Germany's youngest pilots. Although the Hitler Youth was far larger than the Nazi party itself in membership, I don't hold myself responsible for the rise of Hitler, the outbreak of the Second World War, or the persecution of Jews and other so-called "sub-humans." I dearly wish, though, that it had never happened. It must never be whitewashed or forgotten.

It is impossible for any fair-minded German to deny the genocide of the Jews or to explain how it could have happened without sounding like a pious hypocrite or simple-minded apologist. How does one rationalize the slaughter of four to six million people, of whom nearly 600,000 were good German citizens whose only crime it was to have been born Jewish? Many never even thought of themselves as being Jews, just as many Protestants don't think of themselves as Protestants. It's hard enough to grasp the figures. Can one imagine every man, woman, and child in greater Los Angeles and San Diego being murdered and stacked up in piles? To our everlasting shame, it did happen.

When Hitler came to power, I was nearly six years old. Not by the bloodiest thirst for revenge can we, the children of that age, be blamed for what happened. We had never heard the calm voice of truth and reason nor the bracing tone of dissent and opposition. Our souls belonged to the Führer. We too were victims of the Nazi ideology. Yet the horror did happen, and in retribution we Germans paid a terrible price: Innumerable futures were shattered and we lost a third of our territory. Not one single family escaped unscathed. Since the Germans' attempted to conquer the world, more than 50 million people had perished, including 10 million Germans, at least two and a half million of whom were between twelve and seventeen years old. It is important to understand what had gone before.

Before the war, life in the Hitler Youth was pleasant

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and often exciting. From the beginning we were taught total subordination to the welfare and goals of our unit and, by extension, to the state. The state always overrode the authority of our parents, and there was some sort of indoctrination at nearly every meeting. We usually had two rallies a week and frequently a parade on Sundays, which often closed with a propaganda movie. All activities, including camping or skiing trips, were free, but each boy or girl had to supply his or her own uniform and equipment. Most of the rallies were spent marching, singing, camping, and performing all kinds of sports—physical fitness was among the highest virtues. In the senior branch the emphasis shifted to premilitary training, such as precision drilling, map reading, small weapons training, navigation, sailing, motor mechanics, or even, if you belonged to a coveted elite unit like the *Flieger* (Flying) Hitler Youth, the piloting of gliders and high-performance sail planes. (I was sent to my first flight school at fourteen, and, by sixteen, I was a fully qualified glider pilot and selected by the *Luftwaffe* as a cadet.)

All our leaders, by edict of Hitler, were chosen from our ranks, with the exception of the very top ones. For the first time the son of a laborer had (in theory) the same chance to excel as the son of the professional man who could afford to send his boy to grammar school. To become an officer in the *Luftwaffe* it was mandatory that one had gone to grammar school because of the educational requirements, but this wasn't true in the Hitler Youth, where genuine equality existed in many units. It was quite common, especially during the war, to place a boy of sixteen or seventeen in command of a unit or *Gefolgschaft*, which consisted of 160 members and was organized like a military company. As the situation became more desperate for Germany, the draft age became lower and lower, and consequently the leaders of the Hitler Youth younger and younger, until finally boys of under seventeen were in unquestioned command of regiment-like formations consisting of six to eight units. This was made possible by the first dictum that had been drummed into us until it became an almost automatic reflex: "Your highest duty is unquestioning

obedience.” Our motto was engraved on the blades of our daggers: “My honor is loyalty.”

This was the stuff we had heard from our first day in school. As we grew up with it, it became dangerous because the seeds of German superiority were firmly implanted and nourished in us. I still remember the disdain, almost pity, that we felt for the miserable mass of humanity who had not been born in Germany or at least in one of the racially pure Aryan countries such as England and Scandinavia. In our schoolbooks history had been rewritten to the extent that all recent wars were described as holy struggles that had been forced on Germany and challenged its survival.

When I became a member of the *Jungvolk*, which was the junior branch of the Hitler Youth and included all children from ten to fourteen (Aryan only, of course), it was a day for celebration. The blueprint for a young German was eight years of service in the Hitler Youth, four in the junior branch and the last four in the senior. At eighteen, then, one could apply for membership in the National Socialist German Workers party—Nazi, for short. But one still had to work from six months to a year in the National Labor Service, followed by two years in the Armed Forces. Since Hitler’s thousand year reich lasted only twelve years, nobody of my age completed the full cycle, although I did get to spend seven years in the Hitler Youth.

But while all this was going on, what about the Jews? Heinz, the first friend in my life, lived two houses up the street from us. His parents were cattle dealers and mine owned a wine and dairy farm. We started out in kindergarten together. He was Jewish and I Catholic, a detail that meant nothing at all to us. If anything, I envied him because he would never have to face confession. In 1944, at about the time we were sixteen, when I finished my last glider-piloting course, he was gassed in Auschwitz, perhaps cursing the stupendous caprice of fate that had made him a Jew in an era when it was once again open season on Jews. I don’t think he thought of me when the gas seeped out of the “showerheads” but, unlike many others, he must have known he was about to die. As a strong young man he had been separated from his parents and young sister on the day of their arrival in Auschwitz, when they were directly led to the gas chambers because they were too weak to work and considered useless. He apparently survived the camp for nearly three years before starvation sapped him of his strength and he too was condemned to death.

I hadn’t seen Heinz since he was eight years old. At that time, he was taken out of our public school, which he “contaminated” by his presence, and was sent to the home of his uncle, a rabbi in a nearby town, until, as his mother told mine, “this madness passes.” He and his family were deported to Poland in 1941 to “atone with the honest labor of their hands for the crimes the Jews had committed against the German people.” That was the official explanation, and I found it perfectly reasonable. I never included Heinz with the “bad” Jews, but after three years in the Hitler Youth I didn’t feel sorry for him either. I believed in a few years he might be allowed to come home again, although not as a “first-class citizen.” His Jewish blood precluded that. But the war was on and everybody had to make sacrifices. He was probably safer in Poland than we, who by then lived under the constant threat of air raids.

With the beginning of the war, much of the play had gone out of our activities. From then on, all boys over fifteen had to help—in addition to their schoolwork or apprenticeships—with the harvest, often alongside prisoners of war, or to work in urban factories that were vital to the war effort. With the onset of air raids, teen-aged units were often used as fire brigades to dig out survivors and sometimes to bury the dead.

In the last desperate months of the war many Hitler Youth youngsters, together with old men and anybody who could still stumble around on two feet, made up the *Volkssturm*, the people’s militia. It was supposed to, in the words of propaganda minister Goebbels, “Defend the sacred soil of Germany foot by foot and turn each house into a fortress.” While most of the older men, whom we derisively called “the old bones” or “the fearless outhouse warriors,” had enough sense to disappear in the general disarray, tens of thousands of thirteen to seventeen year olds died attacking Allied troops and tanks with bazookas, a couple of hand-grenades, or outmoded carbines. The carnage was especially bad on the Russian front and in beleaguered Berlin. No quarter was given and the Russians often threw wounded boys under the treads of their tanks. Surrender usually meant death, and the fighting was ferocious. The slaughter of the Hitler Youth was nothing short of premeditated murder, because it was ordered by direct command of their idol, Adolf Hitler.

During the final days in his bunker under the chancel-

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lery in Berlin, Hitler gave the order to scorch Germany before the arrival of the rapidly advancing Allies. Albert Speer, his minister of armaments, had the courage to protest on the grounds that it would make the existence of the defeated country even more miserable. Hitler turned to him and snarled: "There are no Germans left worthy to survive me." A few hundred yards away children were dying to protect him. Children were killed in battles even after the war had been lost. Hitler had used us cruelly, but to a degree some of it was our own fault, for never before had such power been wielded by mere teenagers. Like any other totalitarian regime, the Nazis had recognized the importance of winning over the young, and, contrary to what many Germans would like to believe, most parents had not objected when their children joined the Hitler Youth.

For the survivors of the Hitler Youth the end of the war was a time of cold despair. In retrospect it seems incredible, but right up to the last weeks some of us believed in the cause of Germany and hoped for a miracle. Then the painful awakening began. Suddenly we were confronted by mountains of emaciated corpses and told we had served a maniacal mass murderer. How had such utter self-deceit been possible? The answer is simple: We had never been allowed to think for ourselves. Eight million German boys and girls joined the Hitler Youth voluntarily, long before membership became compulsory in 1939.

By the end of the war I had gone with Germany from its pinnacle of power to the ruins of the *Götterdämmerung*. Some of the ruins included our farm, which had been bombed flat on Christmas Eve, 1944, when the Americans started their counteroffensive to the Battle of the Bulge. Luckily, my family was in an air-raid shelter, but our seventeen cows and two horses died in the blast and fire, along with my dog, Prinze. A month later a crew of French prisoners of war, cleaning up the rubble, found him still chained to the doghouse, his flesh cooked to the bone. As trivial as it may seem now, that, more

than anything, suddenly highlighted for me the complete idiocy of war.

I have never forgiven Hitler for the betrayal he inflicted on us, whom he had liked to call "the future leaders of a new and glorious world." It took me a long time to accept and admit that atrocious crimes had been committed in the name of Germany, and that I had played a part in them—however infinitesimal—merely because I had so totally believed in Hitler and his aims. Like the survivors of the Holocaust, I desperately wanted to forget, but unlike them, I wanted the world to forget. We, the civilized Germans, just couldn't have allowed that—but we had—and it was one of the reasons why I left Germany. I was not about to pay for the sins of our fathers, who had allowed themselves to be taken in by Hitler, and who had forsaken their children by compliance, greed, terror—or, most often—by plain indifference, which my father, a former socialist, called informed misjudgment.

Today, everytime I see presumably sane people parading around in Nazi uniforms under the swastika I once revered, vowing to curb the blacks, demolish the Jews, chase the Mexicans back across the border, and establish supremacy for the whites and their pure blood, I'm tempted to walk up to them and say, "Do you really know what in the hell you are doing?" And then I think back thirty-three years and recognize how utterly futile it would have been to ask me the same question, even though I was sitting in the middle of obvious destruction. But, of course, then nobody could ask such a question.

While it lasted, I enjoyed my life in the Hitler Youth as a member of the Master Race. Yet, and in spite of the bitter ending, there has never been a more exciting time in my life, and I have often felt that then I reached the full awareness of being alive. Germany's defeat had been a stunning personal disaster. It took me a long time to appreciate that it had, in all reality, set me free.