

Youth in Nazi Germany

Reading Set 1

Schooling for the National Community

Gregor Ziemer was a teacher and headmaster at the American School in Berlin (a school for the children of American citizens living in Germany) for most of the 1930s. During this time, Ziemer toured German schools and eventually wrote a book called *Education for Death*, which was first published in 1941. In it, Ziemer describes the schools he visited:

A teacher is not spoken of as a teacher (Lehrer) but an Erzieher. The word suggests an iron disciplinarian who does not instruct but commands, and whose orders are backed up with force if necessary. Matters of the spirit are frankly and energetically belittled. Physical education, education for action, is alone worthy of the Nazi teacher's attention. All else can be dismissed as non-essential... The Nazi schools are no place for weaklings. All children must, of course, finish the primary school before they are ten; but after that the schools are proving-grounds for the Party. Those who betray any weakness of body or have not the capacities for absolute obedience and submission must be expelled.

...

The regime draws a sharp distinction between girls, inherently weak, and boys, natural exponents of strength. Boys and girls have nothing in common. Their aims, their purposes in life, are fundamentally different. Boys will become soldiers; girls will become breeders. Co-educational schools are manifestations of decadent democracies and hence are taboo.

[Dr. Bernhard Rust, the Nazi Minister of Education] decrees that in Nazi schools the norm is physical education. After that, German, biology, science, mathematics, and history are for the boys; eugenics and home economics for the girls. Other subjects are permissible if they are taught to promote Nazi ideas. Spiritual education is definitely unimportant.¹

History and science were the subjects most influenced by Nazi ideology. Soon after Hitler took power, a new course in "race science" was added to the curriculum in every German school. But racial instruction was not limited to a single course. It was included in all classes, even arithmetic. One book, titled *Germany's Fall and Rise – Illustrations Taken from Arithmetic Instruction in the Higher Grades of Elementary School*, asks, "The Jews are aliens in Germany – in 1933 there were 66,060,000 inhabitants of the German Reich, of whom 499,682 were Jews. What is the percentage of aliens?"²

¹ Gregor Ziemer, *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), 15–16.

² Ziemer, *Education for Death*, 16.

Indoctrination

Hede von Nagel grew up in Nazi Germany. She wrote of her childhood:

As my parents' second daughter, I was a great disappointment to my father, who wanted to produce sons for the Führer and the nation – and, because he was of the nobility, to carry on the family name.

He was furious that, unlike my fair-haired older sister, who looked so Nordic, I had been cursed with auburn hair and dark brown eyes. Then came a third child, this time a male, but he was a dark-eyed redhead – another let down for my patriotic father. Only when another son was born and proved to be the very model of a tow-headed, blue-eyed Aryan was my father satisfied. "At last," he said, "the child I wanted."

Our parents taught us to raise our arms and say "Heil Hitler" before we said "Mama." This type of indoctrination was universal. Children experienced it in kindergarten, at home – everywhere. We grew up believing that Hitler was a super-god, and Germany an anointed nation... .

At the same time, our parents and teachers trained my sister and me to be the unquestioning helpmates of men; as individuals, we had no right to our own opinion, no right to speak up.¹

¹ Hede von Nagel, "The Nazi Legacy – Fearful Silence for Their Children," Boston Globe, October 23, 1977.

Joining the Hitler Youth

Alfons Heck was an enthusiastic participant in the Nazi Youth organizations. In a memoir written many years after World War II, Heck reflected on what made him want to join:

Far from being forced to enter the ranks of the Jungvolk, I could barely contain my impatience and was, in fact, accepted before I was quite 10. It seemed like an exciting life, free from parental supervision, filled with “duties” that seemed sheer pleasure. Precision marching was something one could endure for hiking, camping, war games in the field, and a constant emphasis on sports... . To a degree, our pre-war activities resembled those of the Boy Scouts, with much more emphasis on discipline and political indoctrination. There were the paraphernalia and the symbols, the pomp and the mysticism, very close in feeling to religious rituals. One of the first significant demands was the so-called ... “test of courage,” which was usually administered after a six-month period of probation. The members of my Schar, a platoon-like unit of about 40–50 boys, were required to dive off the three-meter board – about 10 feet high – head first in the town’s swimming pool. There were some stinging belly flops, but the pain was worth it when our Fahnlieführer, the 15-year-old leader of Fahlein (literally “little flag”), a company-like unit of about 160 boys, handed us the coveted dagger with its inscription Blood and Honor. From that moment on we were fully accepted.¹

¹ Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika* (Phoenix, AZ: Renaissance House, 1985), 9.

Disillusionment in the Hitler Youth

Hans Scholl, who later founded the White Rose resistance movement with his sister Sophie and was executed by the Nazis, was at one point a member of the Hitler Youth. His sister Inge Scholl describes how Hans slowly became disillusioned with the group:

Hans had assembled a collection of folk songs, and his young charges loved to listen to him singing, accompanying himself on his guitar ...

But some time later a peculiar change took place in Hans; he was no longer the same ... His songs were forbidden, the leader had told him. And when he had laughed at this, they threatened him with disciplinary action. Why should he not be permitted to sing these beautiful songs? Only because they had been created by other peoples? ... [T]his depressed him, and his usual carefree spirit began to wane...¹

At this particular time he was given a very special assignment.

He was to carry the flag of his troop to the party's national rally at Nuremberg. He was overjoyed. But when he returned we hardly dared trust our eyes. He looked tired, and on his face lay a great disappointment ... gradually we learned that the youth movement which had been held up to him as an ideal image was in reality something totally different from what he had imagined the Hitler Youth to be. Their drill and uniformity had been extended into every sphere of personal life. But he had always believed that every boy should develop his own special talents ...

Ultimately it came to an open break.

One evening, as they stood with their flag in formation for inspection by a higher leader, something unheard-of happened. The visiting leader suddenly ordered the tiny standard-bearer, a frolicsome twelve-year-old lad, to give up the flag. "You don't need a special flag. Just keep the one that has been prescribed for all." Hans was deeply disturbed. Since when? Didn't the troop leader know what this special flag meant to its standard-bearer?

Once more the leader ordered the boy to give up the flag. He stood quiet and motionless. Hans knew what was going on in the little fellow's mind and that he would not obey. When the high leader in a threatening voice ordered the little fellow for the third time, Hans saw the flag waver slightly. He could no longer control himself. He stepped out of line and slapped the visiting leader's face. From then on he was no longer the standard-bearer.¹

¹ Inge Scholl, *Students Against Tyranny: The Resistance of the White Rose*, Munich, 1942–1943, trans. Arthur R. Schultz (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1970),

Youth on the Margins, Part 2

Daily life in school was difficult for a boy named Frank, one of two Jewish students in a school in Breslau in the mid-1930s. He recalled:

People started to pick on me, "a dirty Jew," and all this kind of thing. And we started to fight... . There was my friend, and he was one class above me, he fought in every break... I started to fight, too, because they insulted too much or they started to fight, whatever it was.

We were very isolated, and one order came after another... [One] order says all Jews must greet with the German greeting. The German greeting was "Heil Hitler" and raising your hand. Then the next order came out, and it says the Jews are not allowed to greet people with the "Heil Hitler" signal. Okay, so, in Germany you had to greet every teacher. When you see a teacher on the street, you had to respect them and you had to greet him – you had to bow down...

Now we were in an impossible situation, because when we went up the stairs and we saw one teacher, and we said "Heil Hitler." And he turned around. "Aren't you a Jew? You're not allowed to greet me with 'Heil Hitler.'" But if I didn't greet him at all, then the next teacher would say "Aren't you supposed to greet [me with] 'Heil Hitler?'" And this was always accompanied with a punishment... Not all of them but some of them, the teachers that knew me and would pick on me – they'd punish me, put me in a corner, or humiliate me in one way or another...

You had to raise your hand and salute when the flag passed and Jews weren't allowed to do it... If you don't salute, you immediately were recognized as a Jew, and you really were left to the mercy of the people who saw you, what they would do with you. They could perfectly well kill you on the street and, you know, nobody really said anything because there was no such thing as a court and after all, it was only a Jew... We were at the mercy of people.¹

¹ *Childhood Experiences of German Jews* (New Haven, CT: Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, ca. 1987), VHS