

My twelve years under Hitler, the Nazis and in World War II

By Dietrich Apel

When Hitler came to power in 1933, I was 4 years old, but I have no recollection of the Nazis coming to power. I was born in Berlin in 1929, my parents were shortly thereafter divorced and my mother, sister and I moved to Suhl in 1934 where we lived in the house of my grandparents. I entered grammar school a year later. Most people still greeted each other with the salutation's *good morning, good day, good evening* and *good night* and shook hands with those they knew well. Men and especially boys took their hats or caps off when shaking hands and also took them off when they entered a building, a room or a church. This was considered good manners and a common courtesy. I remember seeing ever more men in SA Party uniforms with the swastika armbands, and I wondered why they greeted each other and all others with "Heil Hitler" and the right arm raised. I honestly can't remember whether I also did it.

The first time I really became aware of what the Nazis stood for was the morning of November 10, 1938, after what was called the "*Kristall Nacht*", also called the night of broken glass, when I saw the remains of the burned-out Jewish Synagogue on the way to school and heard about the broken store windows. I felt the tension of my mother and my grandparents, but kids at the time were not encouraged to ask many questions. Life went on as before, but a year later a drastic change of my life began.

I knew that my parents were divorced, but I never asked them why. A few times I visited my other grandmother's house in *Ilmenau*, a town not far from Suhl and spent a few days there with my father. Only many years later did I find out what really happened. I remember visiting my grandmother, the mother of my father and that I could see the railroad tracks from the picture window of her house (in Ilmenau). I was fascinated how the freight cars were re-arranged by seeing them roll downhill and being re-directed at the switches. This and using trains as the only way to get around are good memories that stay with me to this day.

One memory that I also kept for all these years is not a good one. My grandmother had hidden away some chocolate that was very rare and had given it to me. When my father saw it, he took it away and told me that it was not good for me. I have never forgotten this, and chocolate is to this day a real addiction. During



Dietrich in his Hitler Youth uniform

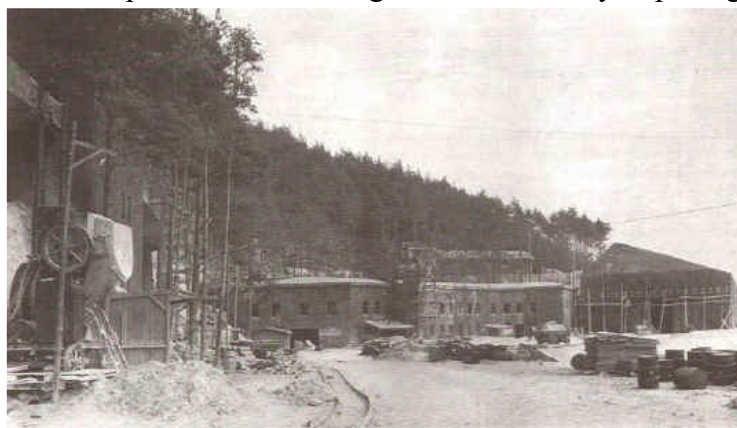
the war chocolate could nowhere be found, and the first time I tasted it again was the day after American troops had arrived in Suhl. I tried my school English on a black American soldier. At first, he seemed to be angry, holding his Colt 45 automatic pistol in his hands. I told him about my uncle in America and some other things about me, and before I left, he handed me a candy bar and told me to come back for more the next day. But he was with the fighting troops and had moved on.

In 1939 when I was 10 years old my father signed me up in a boarding school in *Niesky* that belonged to the “*Brüder Gemeine*”, here called the Moravian Church, that was also active in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The school had a very good reputation, and I will report more about my years there in another chapter. I have good and some bad memories of my almost three years there. One of the bad memories was, that we all had to be in the “*Hitler Jugend*” (the Hitler Youth) and sit in long sessions of Nazi indoctrination with reports about the great successes of the German Army and Air Force in Poland and the sinking of many ships by German submarines.

But our days were filled with classes, homework, and other activities, and we were in no way prepared for what lay ahead. In the third year my father decided without any explanation to take me out of the boarding school. I thought that I had not done well enough in school to continue, but I never asked. Only many years later when I visited *Niesky* after the re-unification of Germany did I find a book about the school that stated in detail that the Nazis wanted to take over the school, but that the *Brüder Gemeine* decided to close it rather than have this happen. It is too bad that I was not informed of this by my father at the time. It seemed to me that I had failed.

I then spent some time with my father on the outskirts of Leipzig and now experienced the results of the total war Hitler had declared. Every night British planes bombed Leipzig and American planes during the day. School was constantly interrupted, spent in air raid shelters and during the night in basements. Several times we were sent to Leipzig in *Hitler Youth* uniforms the following mornings to help with the clean-up after the bombings. This was an eye-opening experience that I will not forget.

My father seemed to reach the conclusion that I would be better off in Suhl and let me go “home” for the first time after 3 years. The war had advanced so much that, although I had to register in Suhl, there were no activities of the Hitler Youth. Days and nights were still interrupted and spent in air raid shelters and in the basement at home, but it was still a relatively good time with my mother, sister, grandparents, other relatives and friends.



The construction of the bunkers at Walpersberg Mountain as Dietrich probably saw it, from the book-Deckname Lachs by Müller & Schilling

I will long remember Christmas 1944. My grandfather listened to the news of the BBC in London which had to be kept secret, because those who were caught were sent to a concentration camp. In the evening a beanpole hidden under the sofa held up a long wire stretched through the living room. My grandfather would sit next to the radio with his ear right next to the speaker, so he could hear the news but nobody else could. We knew that American troops had arrived at the Rhine River and that the end of the war was in sight. But for the family, the worst was still to come.

In the first few days of January 1945, I and many other 15-year-old boys were ordered to report for duty in uniform with a shovel and only minimal toiletries at the railroad station. We did not know where we would go, but it turned out that we were taken by train to Kahla, a small town in *Thüringen*. We marched towards a mountain called *Walpersberg* and a camp with barracks where we would sleep on bare floors and get one meal a day. All around us there seemed to be total confusion, and what this was all about became clear the next morning when we were marched to the foot of the mountain and into a maze of tunnels that ended in a big hangar on the opposite side of the mountain. Here stood an airplane that did not have propellers, but a cigar shaped container under each wing. Was this the secret weapon that Hitler had promised to win the war and that some were waiting for? We will never know, but what we do know now is, that this was one of the first fighter planes with jet engines, developed by the Messerschmitt Company with the designation Me 262. That we were allowed to walk right up to this plane to inspect it and touch it was surprising. There was nobody there to explain it to us and we did not see any pilots of the German Air Force.

We walked through many of the tunnels, saw some machinery but no activity to show us for what reason the tunnels were dug. We then saw a lift on the outside of the mountain running on railroad tracks with a platform for taking the planes to the top where a runway was in the making. I believe that we were supposed to help with the grading of this with the shovels we had to bring, but we never actually did. We mostly walked around and had some scary and some sickening experiences. While walking at the foot of the mountain, airplanes came swooping in at very low altitude and we dived into the ditches next to the road. They were American spotter planes that could have killed all of us with their onboard cannons, but they were there to see what was going on. As we found out much later, the Americans were very interested to get to this mountain before the Russian Army did, because they already knew that the first jet fighter planes were assembled at this and other locations, while the jet engines were made by the



One of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighters as they looked when Dietrich was there.

Messerschmitt Company in Bavaria. Most of the airplane components were to be brought in by train and a rail link was under construction. But British bombers destroyed train terminals most every night and American bomber's during the day.

While there we saw one plane being taken to the runway on top of the mountain on the lift and then taking off. What amazed us was that we saw the plane in one direction and heard the roar of the engines coming from another direction. As we found out after the end of the war, the planes needed two additional temporary rockets to make them airborne on a relatively short runway. All this was very interesting to me and seemed to be worth the hardship we faced, which was minor compared to the other experiences that left shocking memories for years to come.

When we roamed the grounds having no particular duty to perform, we saw work gangs of foreign workers and concentration camp inmates supervised and driven by SA men in uniform. The concentration camp inmates were walking skeletons, and this left me with a deep-seated impression and horror. We were not allowed to get close to them.

On February 7th, while I was away from home, the mailman brought the notification that I had to report for active duty in the German Army on my birthday, the 14th of May in 1945. The mailman was not allowed to leave it because I had to personally sign for it. It was delivered a few weeks after American troops had arrived. Too bad that I did not keep it to remind me of how lucky I was. On February 8th we were sent home from Kahla, wondering why we had been there. But much more devastating news awaited me at home.

My grandmother came from a Jewish family (Franz Jäger was Lutheran) and had to live in fear after the Nazis came to power. For the family and especially for my grandfather there was only one thing to do, to lie low to avoid attracting attention and hope for survival. While Germany experienced hard times after World War I and during the great depression, most companies began to prosper under the Hitler regime. Where my grandfather had a company with 50 employees at the beginning of World War I, he now worked with one master gunsmith, a master stock maker and a master engraver just to survive. Despite of all this, the time I spent in his house became the best years of my life, although Russian occupation lay still ahead.

On the 30th of January 1945 my grandmother was picked up and taken to Erfurt, a railroad junction. The family knew that she would be taken to a concentration



In the year 2000 while on the GGCA tour of German gun makers we visited the Stutenhaus and this picture shows Dietrich telling us his story and about the meaning of the memorial.

camp and gave her a postcard with a friendly message to take along so she could try to mail it along the way. She was able to convince a railroad man to do it for her and the post office stamp of the town from which it was mailed made it clear to the family that she was taken to the concentration camp in Theresianstadt, praised by the Nazis as a retirement community for older Jewish people. But it was in reality only a stopover on the way to the gas chambers in Auschwitz.

On April 4th, 1945 American troops occupied Suhl, but a few days before this it seemed that the war would not be over for me. When we heard artillery fire in the distance, all 15-year-old boys were ordered to immediately come to a school in uniform. I remember few details of what was going on at the school, but one thought came to mind right away: "I must get out of here". When another boy mentioned the same idea, we decided to leave and would tell those who stopped us that we were sent to bring in other boys. Sure enough, we were stopped, and our reason was accepted. When I got home the family decided that I must hide in the basement, which I did.

Devoted Nazi party members, SS members and fanatic followers of Hitler were still killing people who did not want to keep on fighting the war. At the *Stutenhaus*, a well-known mountain lodge near Suhl, two young men had been hiding when an SA patrol found them and executed them on the spot two days before American troops arrived. A memorial of the two is still at the spot where they were first buried. The Suhl gun maker Günther Retz was also 15 years old at the time and was among those who had been ordered to come to the school. He stayed, was marched to a railroad terminal near Suhl and sneaked away when the train they were waiting for did not arrive. He made his way home on mountain trails he was familiar with. He told his story in the book "Suhl, Heimat der Büchsenmacher".

During my last visit to Suhl in 2008 with a travel group, we participated in the re-opening of the gun museum and the *Schützenfest* parade. I was stopped by a man who asked me whether I remembered how we two escaped from the school before the war ended. Unfortunately, I was so occupied with all the arrangements for our travel group that I cannot remember his name. Had it not been for Günther Retz and this man, I would have hesitated to tell this story because it seemed to be a nice story invented by me.

American troops reached the outskirts of Suhl, sent a warning that Suhl would be wiped off the map if the resistance did not stop, and on April 4, 1945, Suhl was occupied by American troops. We still worried about other members of the family, among them my uncle Kurt Jaeger who was released from a American prisoner of war camp (under the sky) and arrived home a couple of weeks later. Erich Jaeger who worked at the MAN Company in Bavaria, known as the producer of Diesel engines, arrived several days later. It took him three days by bicycle because all transportation had come to a complete standstill.

On the 12th of June a jeep with two American soldiers and another person in the back pulled up to the front door of my grandfather's house, and that person was my grandmother. Theresienstadt was liberated by Russian troops in time to prevent further transports to the gas chambers.

Only one member of the Jaeger family still lost his life thereafter. It was Reinhold Jaeger, the youngest brother of my grandfather who was picked up after Russian troops had taken over and died in a Russian concentration camp. He had worked at the Simson Company in Suhl, a company that was taken away from the Jewish owners by the Nazis. He was definitely not a Nazi but had been given the job for plant security which included the supervision of foreign workers who called him “a good man”. Such is life!