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A Nazi Childhood: Hitler's Germany, 1939-1945

Linda Shay

Perception is a difficult process to dissect and understand. In an instant, the human mind will draw a conclusion of an experience by filtering that experience through a developed worldview and an interpretation of the sensory environment.¹ This process, which takes place at the speed of thought, facilitates a seamless construction of experience and belief that in turn creates reality. Critical to this point is the fact that this constructed reality is unique to the individual, the moment in time, and the surrounding circumstances. What people understand to be true is in fact true for them and unfortunately includes the many flawed perceptions they maintain. Unlike seeing or touching a physical object, perception is invisible, often goes undetected, and can be profoundly difficult to discern.² While it resides within illogical behavior, perception also maintains residence in rational acts, making each moment of human interpretation both exceptional and problematic. People face this dilemma when trying to understand what life was like in Germany under the Third Reich. In a word, it was different for everyone. Change was profound on all levels as people amended assumptions about what was reasonable and increasingly discarded discretion about what was intolerable.³ Children lived in a different world from soldiers, who lived in a different world from civilian adults, who lived in a different world from the Jews. For each of these groups and for every other, life in Germany under the Third Reich was unique. This analysis will focus on the children, that generation whose formative years their *Führer* so deeply influenced and the war he brought to their backyards.

There can be little dispute that World War II was and continues to be a significant part of history. Dramatic in its scope, profound in its impact, it is a moment in history endlessly evaluated, researched, questioned, and analyzed. The resulting literature base is unfathomable and yet comprehension of this event eludes historians. The journalistic query of “who, what, why, when, where, and how” will not produce a single answer but rather an endless litany of theories. History and memory are not synonymous and while neither holds exclusive rights to accuracy; they remain inextricably connected, residing in and around each other simultaneously. The historiography of German life during World War II silently

repeats this mantra.

They were the future of the German Reich, the chosen ones. Swaddled in the belief they would one day rule the world, they were the children of Nazi Germany. When interviewed years later, Katrin Thiele would remember her early childhood with astonishing clarity. She recalled the twelve years her father served within the Nazi Regime as filled with happy memories surrounded by people who loved her.⁴ After the war, she could not fathom that the horrifying stories of Nazi brutality had any relation to her life or the Nazis she knew that taught her the ideals she so believed in. Strangely enough, her perception is not uncommon, as Nicholas Stargardt illustrates in his book, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis*. The book contains dozens of such accounts: children who found their lives literally formed by Nazi ideology and as such had difficulty adjusting to post-war life. Their parents could recall a time before Hitler but their children, the Hitler youth, could not. While this type of literature speaks to a very specific memory, it does provide an invaluable insight into experiences most people cannot comprehend. Stargardt reminds readers that for the children of this generation most deeply marked by the Third Reich; the Nazi values and slogans were literally engrained amongst lessons of cleanliness, respect, and responsibility.⁵ Indoctrinated to believe in the value of service and self-sacrifice, many of these children grew into serving adults, unable to shed that Nazi characteristic. Though this kind of behavior is difficult to understand, the actual recounting by the children, who grew up during the Nazi Regime, can help clarify it. This is not work interpreted by a historian after the fact but rather an adult's recollection of childhood, and as such, fraught with potential inaccuracies; in the end that is its true benefit. Stargardt's work reminds historians this is simply human experience and while their recounting may have flaws, its existence is now part of the historic story. His approach redefines the understanding of victimhood and forces readers to see the subject, which is specifically Nazi Germany during the war, from a different perspective. Its value is in offering that option.

Witnesses to War and literature of its type illustrate how these children did not possess a moral system that would allow them to compare life under Hitler with life after his fall. Rather than abandon their own identity, they simply avoided argument with the past. *My Father's Keeper: Children of Nazi Leaders* reveals a wholly different side. These children, for the most part, did not consciously attempt to avoid their past but rather simply moved beyond it and on with their lives. The

author's father, a journalist himself, interviewed the children of very prominent Nazi officials: Frank, von Schirach, Baldur, Hess, Bormann, Göring, and Himmler.⁶ The work was lost for decades until discovered by his son who expanded on it by re-interviewing many of the same children. Contrasting their lives in 1959 when first interviewed with their lives in 2000, the book tries to uncover the challenges of being a child of an infamous Nazi perpetrator.

Himmler's name has become synonymous with evil, with her father considered the architect of the Holocaust. When interviewed in 1959, she made clear she believed she would one day write a book that would rehabilitate her father's image. When re-interviewed in 2000, she remained true to that belief, working in a managerial position at *Stille Hilfe*, a non-profit organization that assists former leading National Socialists. She and several of the other children originally interviewed did not carry the burden their father's victims did, who relived the torture and loss day after day. Instead, when the war ended and society brought to justice many of the perpetrators, these children moved on.⁷ This type of literature is disturbing but is not alone; there are dozens of accounts from Nazi children who neither abandoned their ideology nor apologized for it later in life. The Germany they grew up in was good and their memory of it remains intact. While these children clearly lived a life of privilege, others lived a nightmare. *Between Dignity and Despair; Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* chronicles the horrific experience Jews, specifically women and children, endured under the Nazi Regime.

It was slow and at first, almost indiscernible. While no one could pinpoint an exact date, it was clear that something had begun to change once Hitler came to power as Chancellor. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, Jews would see their world shrink as they retreated to a place somewhere in the shadows. This is a well-researched and documented subject; all know the atrocities that befell the Jews at the hands of Hitler and his Nazi Regime through countless memoirs from survivors, scores of academic research into the political, economic, and social structure of the Nazis, and innumerable probes into the Nazi leaders themselves. Though each of these approaches yields profound insight into a time that produced incalculable anguish, *Between Dignity and Despair* takes a completely different road through this horror.

Marion Kaplan is herself the child of Jewish immigrants from Nazi Germany. Her parents were "lucky" as she put it, meeting in America in 1939. The German-Jewish Diaspora either killed or scattered across the globe her future

extended family, the aunts, uncles, and cousins she would never meet.⁸ While her own story is not unique, her approach to this subject is. Rather than re-tell the horrors of the Holocaust or dissect the minds of the madmen who orchestrated it, she looked at daily life in Nazi Germany from the perspective of the average Jewish person in general, and its women and children in particular. This is not a looking back approach but rather a looking through, over the course of daily life and through the eyes of those who lived it. Kaplan re-creates the shrinking world German Jews experienced during World War II. One of the hallmarks of the book, and there are many, is the detail given to the mundane. Despite the heinous conditions, life must go on; families must buy food, must serve dinner, must wash clothes, and children must go to school in a world where they were no longer welcome.⁹

Theirs was not a world of privilege or ease. Fear and terror were constant as they struggled with the daily challenge of survival. They had unknowingly become the enemy of their own country and its citizens and government would make clear that fact. This type of literature shows the reader a different perspective of his own life. The horrors of the Holocaust are incomprehensible, but surely most people, when reaching for a cold beverage from a well-stocked refrigerator, can better appreciate the difficulties the Jews faced at the Nazi's hands. *Between Dignity and Despair* and literature like it bring the immensity of this event to a personally digestible portion and it is without doubt distasteful.

Historians have well documented the facts of German life during the war. Unemployment had reached nearly six million workers by the time Hitler became Chancellor.¹⁰ By the time when Germany invaded Poland, that number had dropped to a few hundred thousand. Of course, propaganda and records manipulation, which would become the Nazi trademark, helped reduce those numbers. Regardless, with reduced unemployment, lifestyle conditions improved. Morale and national pride also received a much needed boost with the *Kraft durch Freude* (KdF), a program insuring that Germans enjoyed leisure time, a habit still very much a part of German culture today.¹¹ The documentation is rich with examples that illustrate a good life in Germany during the war. Sadly, there is even more illustrating how very difficult it was. These verifiable facts paint a picture of German life during World War II, but it is black and white.

While historians will painstakingly validate sources, in the end, the historic record as a body of work is the interpretation of the historian. If the event occurred

within the historian's lifetime, his or her own collective memory becomes infused into the interpretation as well. While memory is an unreliable source to validate facts, it does speak directly to the belief system of a group or culture determining what is important enough to remember. Of course, few would argue that World War II remains a black moment in human history. The enormous literature base that resulted has tried to reconcile the event from a political, social, and economic perspective and many good historic works have resulted. None however can ever be the single authority on the subject. While historians attempt to eschew drama and emotion from this subject, the schism it creates is often where memory resides. Where German life during the war is concerned, that memory is unique to each person who experienced it. Wise council will direct historians to the verifiable works, the confirmed facts and figures. Good scholarship will encourage them to look further. In the end, historians discover that life in Germany during World War II truly resided somewhere between "dignity and despair."

Notes

1. Thomas F. Shipley and Jeffrey M. Zacks, *Understanding Events: From Perception to Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 392.

2. *Ibid.*, 317.

3. Mark Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 49.

4. Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War; Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 4.

5. *Ibid.*, 5.

6. Norbert Lebert and Stephen Lebert, *My Father's Keeper: Children of Nazi Leaders* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 2001), 39.

7. *Ibid.*, 113.

8. Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair; Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

9. *Ibid.*, 159.

10. John Plowright, *The Causes, Course and Outcomes of World War Two* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 34.

11. *Ibid.*, 72.

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