

Youth in Nazi Germany

Reading Set 2

Youth on the Margins, Part 1

When Elizabeth Dopazo and her brother were very young, their parents were sent to concentration camps because of their religious beliefs; they were Jehovah's Witnesses whose faith required that they pledge allegiance only to God. Jehovah's Witnesses therefore refused to say "Heil Hitler" as a matter of religious conviction. After their parents were arrested, seven-year-old Elizabeth and her six-year-old brother went to live with their grandparents. Elizabeth later recalled:

We had to quickly change our way of speaking so maybe we wouldn't be so noticeable. In school right away it started, you see. We had to raise our right arm and say "Heil Hitler" and all that sort of thing and then we didn't do it a few times. A few times was all right. You can drop a handkerchief, you can do a little something, but quickly they look and they say, "Ah, you're different and you're new in the school." So you're watched a little more closely. You might get one or two children who'd tell on you but it was rare. The teacher would bring you to the front of the class and say "Why don't you say Heil Hitler?" and you were shaking already because you knew, unlike other children, if you told them the real reason there'd be trouble. For us to say "Heil Hitler" and praise a person would be against our belief. We shouldn't because we had already pledged our allegiance to God and that's it. So we could stand and be respectful to the government, but we were not to participate in adulation for political figures. . . .

Later, around age twelve or thirteen, we joined the Hitler Youth, which we actually didn't want to do, but the Gestapo came to my grandparents' house, just like you've seen in the movies with the long leather coats on and they stood at the front door and they were saying, "Your grandchildren have to join the Hitler Youth and if they don't by Thursday we will take stronger measures." After they'd left we told our grandparents we'll join tomorrow, even if we hate all that stuff. They agreed we'd better do it and we very quickly donned those uniforms. . . .

As time went on, my brother, when he was thirteen or fourteen, sort of was swayed. You know, you have to believe in something. He wanted to be a German officer and said our father had been wrong all along and that we went to the dogs for our father's beliefs. He [our father] died for his ideals and where are we? [My brother] was very angry. I was too, but not as much. I was torn between what would be the good thing to do and what would not. . . .¹

¹ Elizabeth Dopazo, "Reminiscences," unpublished interview, 1981, Facing History and Ourselves.

Comradeship

In 1938, a boy named Hans Wolf wrote a story about his experiences in the Hitler Youth that was published in a school textbook. The story was called "Comradeship." It begins:

It was a hot day and we had far to march. The sun was burning down on the heath, which was bereft of trees. The sand was glistening, I was tired. My feet were hurting in those new walking shoes, every step was hurting and all I could think about was rest, water, and shade. I clenched my teeth to keep walking. I was the youngest, and this was my first outing. In front of me strode Rudolf, the leader. He was tall and strong. His backpack was heavy and pressed down on his shoulders. Rudolf carried the bread for us six boys, the cooking pot, and a pile of books, from which he would read us wonderfully thrilling stories, at night in the hostel. My backpack only contained a shirt, a couple of sneakers, washing utensils, and some cooking gear, apart from a tarpaulin for rainy days and straw beds. And yet I thought I could not lug this backpack any longer. My comrades all were somewhat older and had camping experience. They hardly felt the heat and hardship of the march. Every now and then they would sigh and drink lukewarm coffee from their canteens. More and more, I remained behind, even though I tried to make up for my slack by running. Suddenly Rudolf turned around. He stopped and watched me crawling up to him from a distance, while our comrades continued in the direction of a few trees on the horizon. "Tired?" Rudolf asked me, kindly. Ashamed, I had to say yes. Slowly, we walked side by side. I was limping. But I did not want to let on to Rudolf. When we got to a juniper bush, the leader sat down and said: "For a little rest!" Relieved, I threw myself down. I did not want to talk, for I was shy. Rudolf gave me something to drink. I thanked him and leaned back comfortably, glad to be able to stretch my aching feet, and before I knew it I was sleeping. . . . When we resumed our march, my feet hurt much less and my backpack did not press down on me so. I was very glad about that.¹

¹ Hans Wolf, "Comradeship," trans. Michael H. Kater, in Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13–14.

“Heil Hitler!”: Lessons of Daily Life

In 1938, writer Erika Mann published a book called *School for Barbarians: Education Under the Nazis*. Mann had emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1937. Her book criticized the Nazis’ efforts to shape young people’s ideas and feelings. In it, she describes how daily life in Germany was a kind of “school” that educated children in accordance with Nazi ideals:

Every child says “Heil Hitler!” from 50 to 150 times a day . . . The formula is required by law; if you meet a friend on the way to school, you say it; study periods are opened and closed with “Heil Hitler!”; “Heil Hitler!” says the postman, the street-car conductor, the girl who sells you notebooks at the stationery store; and if your parents’ first words when you come home for lunch are not “Heil Hitler!” they have been guilty of a punishable offense and can be denounced. “Heil Hitler!” they shout in the Jungvolk and Hitler Youth. “Heil Hitler!” cry the girls in the League of German Girls. Your evening prayers must close with “Heil Hitler!” if you take your devotions seriously . . .

. . . You leave the house in the morning, “Heil Hitler” on your lips; and on the stairs of your apartment house you meet the Blockwart [block warden]. A person of great importance and some danger, the Blockwart has been installed by the government as a Nazi guardian. He controls the block, reporting on it regularly, checking up on the behavior of its residents . . . All the way down the street, the flags are waving, every window colored with red banners, and the black swastika in the middle of each. You don’t stop to ask why; it’s bound to be some national event . . . Only the Jews are exempted under the strict regulation. Jews are not Germans; they do not belong to the “Nation,” they can have no “national events.” . . .

There are more placards as you continue past hotels, restaurants, indoor swimming pools, to school. They read “No Jews allowed”—“Jews not desired here”—“Not for Jews.” And what do you feel? Agreement? Pleasure? Disgust? Opposition? You don’t feel any of these. You don’t feel anything, you’ve seen these placards for almost five years. This is a habit, it is all perfectly natural, of course Jews aren’t allowed here. Five years in the life of a child of nine—that’s his life, after four years of infancy, his whole personal, conscious existence . . . ¹

¹ Erika Mann, *School for Barbarians: Education Under the Nazis* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1938), 21–24. Reproduced by permission from Dover Publications.

Rejecting Nazism

Some German young people refused to join Nazi youth organisations. One group who refused to join called themselves the Swing-Jugend (“swing kids”) after a style of American jazz music and dancing they loved. Historian Richard Bessel describes the “swing kids”:

The swing youth were not anti-fascist in a political sense—their behavior was indeed emphatically anti-political—both Nazi slogans and traditional nationalism were of profound indifference to them. They sought their counter-identity in what they saw as the “slovenly” culture of . . . England and America. They accepted Jews and “half-Jews” into their groups . . . and gave ovations to visiting bands from Belgium and Holland.¹

A Hitler Youth report on a 1940 swing festival attended by more than 500 teenagers in Hamburg describes the kind of behavior that upset Nazi officials:

The dancers made an appalling sight. None of the couples danced normally; there was only swing of the worst sort. Sometimes two boys danced with one girl; sometimes several formed a circle, linking arms and jumping, slapping hands, even rubbing the backs of their heads together; and then, bent double, with the top half of the body hanging loosely down, long hair flopping into the face, they dragged themselves round practically to their knees. When the band played a rumba, the dancers went into wild ecstasy. They all leaped around and mumbled the chorus in English. The band played wilder and wilder numbers; none of the players was sitting any longer, they all “jitterbugged” on the stage like wild animals. Frequently boys could be observed dancing together, without exception with two cigarettes in the mouth, one in each corner . . .²

¹ Richard Bessel, *Life in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39.

² Bessel, *Life in the Third Reich*, 37.

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.