

The Germany Where I Grew Up

by C. Peter R. Gossels

My life as a Jewish boy in Berlin during the Nazi regime was far different from that of Helmuth Hubener.

Helmuth was more than five years older than I and belonged to a family devoted the Mormon Church in Hamburg. The Mormons, like the Jewish population of Germany at that time, was a small minority, but they were careful to show their support for Hitler's regime. You will recall that Helmuth, like other German boys, served in the Hitler Youth until he started to listen to radio broadcasts of the BBC and began to write and publish leaflets critical of the war and the Nazi regime, activities that were forbidden and deemed treasonous.

The Jews, on the other hand, were the object of Hitler's passionate hate. No one has ever discovered why. It did not matter whether Jews were rich or poor, young or old, religious or atheist, Hitler wanted them to leave Germany or be killed. And when Hitler invaded Poland, France and Russia, Hitler did his best to see that all Jews, who lived in lands conquered and occupied by his armies, were killed outright or sent to concentration camps, like Auschwitz, Treblinka or Chelmno where they were murdered like animals by the millions. Among those innocent people who were killed were my mother, aunt, grandmother, grandfather and most of the members of my family.

It all started in 1914, one hundred two years ago. Germany was engaged in what came to be known as the First World War against Russia, France and Great Britain and later against the United States. After four years of brutal trench warfare in France and

the loss by Germany of more than seven million casualties (dead, wounded, prisoners and missing in action), the war had reached a stalemate, which, in turn, led to the declaration of an armistice on November 11, 1918. My father, a teenager at the time, drove a potato wagon to the front to help feed the troops. French casualties exceeded six million soldiers, Britain had lost more than three million, Russia more than nine million and the United States, which entered the war in 1917 suffered 322,018 casualties.

Most Germans thought they had fought valiantly and did not deserve to be saddled with the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, territory that is now French, large financial reparations and restrictions on how they might rebuild their armed forces. They had been betrayed, they began to think, by Communists and other international folks like the Jews, many of whom had fought in the German army.

The war had nevertheless devastated the German economy, their Kaiser (Emperor) William II was deposed, inflation was out of control and warfare in some of the cities between Communists and veterans of the German army made everyone insecure and afraid.

In 1933, fifteen years after the Armistice, Adolf Hitler, whose captain during the war had been a Jew, promised to make Germany great again and won about one-third of the vote. He told the German people what they wanted to hear: that they had not lost the war; but had been betrayed by the Communists and the Jews, who had lived in Germany for generations.

And the German political establishment gave him the Chancellorship, though he had won only one-third of the vote. Hitler managed to improve the economy and build

a powerful military machine that impressed a population that felt betrayed by the political leadership that had lost the First World War only fifteen years before.

Hitler made the people proud again, in part because he could blame the Jews and the Communists for Germany's loss of the First World War; but the price he demanded of the German people was absolute devotion to him and his government as the civil rights of the German people were gradually violated and revoked.

He first imprisoned and killed many of the Communist leaders. Then he deprived the Jews of their civil and economic rights. My father, a lawyer and professor at the University of Berlin, lost his job; Jews could no longer attend public schools; if a Jew wanted to enjoy nature at a public park, the only bench available to him or her was painted yellow. By 1938, mobs were attacking Jews and those Jewish businesses that were still open. In September, 1939, the Nazi government began the Second World War against Poland, Russia, France and Great Britain. And in 1941 the Nazi government instituted the policy of murdering Jews wherever they might be found. The Nazis ended up killing approximately six million innocent human beings, among millions of others, who happened to have been born of at least one Jewish parent.

The Second World War, which the United States joined in December 1941, proved to be even more disastrous to Germany than the First World War: Between 6.6 million and 8.8 million Germans died, many German cities were destroyed and Hitler hid in a bunker, where he killed his mistress and committed suicide.

Hitler promised to make Germany great again by blaming others for Germany's misfortune and waging war against them. A lesson that we may all learn from those terrible times is that Germany did indeed become great again after World War II,

because they had come to realize that the Nazi government they had elected, admired and supported had humiliated, enslaved and murdered millions of innocent people and caused immeasurable harm to the German people as well. So they paid reparations to many of the victims who survived, helped Israel, worked hard and created a democratically elected government that respects the civil liberties of all of its people and has earned the respect of its former enemies.

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June 13, 2016

Eighth Grade Class
Lynnfield Middle School
505 Main Street
Lynnfield, MA 01940

Congratulations to the Eighth Grade class of Lynnfield's Middle School!

I read every one of the letters that I received from Ms. Dinardi and Ms. Kane over the weekend and must tell you how impressed I was with your remarkable responses to my talk and my daughter's film, *The Children of Chabannes*.

I hope that you came to understand that my talk was as much about the Holocaust as it was about how we should respond to the horrible massacres that continue to be perpetrated on innocent people by those who are influenced to murder by their racist or religious ideology.

Second: We must appreciate how fortunate we are to live in a country that has tried and continues to try to live up to the principles enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution and its Bill of Rights, namely that the American people are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, even though we often fail to live up to those principles.

Third: Most of you are fortunate to have parents, who support and care for you.

Fourth: You are all fortunate to have teachers, school administrators and members of the Lynnfield School Committee, like Mr. Sjoberg, who work so hard and well to provide you with an excellent education as well as a mature understanding of the real world.

Fifth: We believe that hard work and perseverance should be rewarded, regardless of our race, ethnicity, gender or religious persuasion.

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Sixth: Our nation of immigrants and minorities must respect and learn from each other as we try to do, because we have taught the world that our diverse population has created the most generous, the most prosperous and most powerful nation in the world.

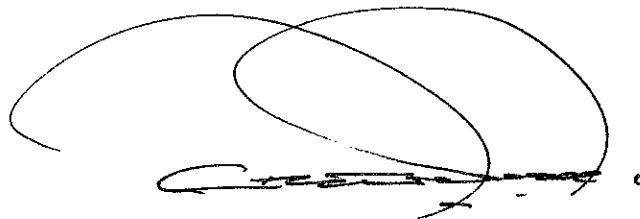
Seventh: With all due respect for history (and I consider myself a historian), we must, as individuals, look to the present and work hard for our future, rather than looking back and trying to fix the past.

Those are some of the principles that I sought to convey in my talk. What seems to be generally missing from your letters, however, is the realization that the man who spoke with you on May 24, 2016, is only one of the millions of innocent people, like his mother, his aunt, his grandmother and his grandfather, who were systematically murdered by the Nazis simply because they were Jewish. No matter how good they were, no matter how brave, no matter how they persevered, no matter how much they focused on the present, rather than the past; they were all murdered, like the victims of today' terrorists.

So the most important lesson that I failed to convey is that there is evil in the world and that we must learn to recognize those bent on evil and do what we can to stop them.

I may have neglected to deliver that lesson, but I want you to know how much of a privilege and pleasure it was to share some of my life story with such a bright and sensitive group of young people as the Eighth Grade of the Lynnfield Middle School. Your questions and letters make me confident that you will succeed in achieving your personal goals and that you will help to keep America a great nation and a model for the world.

With every best wish,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several large, overlapping loops and a horizontal line at the bottom.

CPRG:cac