Peter Becker, Part 2 Edited

Interviewer: Let me ask you something about when you were going to church. As far as sermons from the pulpit or what your minister -- what did he say about the Third Reich? Did you get any indoctrination from that?

Becker: I don’t remember because, at the age of six and seven, you don’t remember sermons. They’re all terribly boring, and you wish you were somewhere else! So I don’t think that they said anything in particular. If they did, it was in keeping with what we were learning about the Third Reich: that it was great, that it was good, that Hitler was our god. Hitler’s picture was in every room in the building and every classroom and every dormitory room, and so these were our heroes.

For example, being a school of this type right near Berlin, we were used for exhibit purposes. Whenever the regime had an important visitor, a prime minister or someone else or someone from somewhere else, we were generally paraded out. We were shown off as part of the new Germany. And so we had the benefit of seeing Goebbels and Himmler and Goering and Mussolini and Count Ciano, Mussolini’s secretary of state. We later on -- who else? The Japanese ambassador. All the important people who happened to be in Berlin and who were somehow associated or had dealings with the Third Reich, we generally saw, and they came to our school. And we were all very impressed by that and thought, My god, how great we are; how good we are!

Interviewer: In terms of going into Berlin or even into the town or whatever, were you allowed to go in?

Becker: No, no.

Interviewer: So you never saw like the signs in the shops, like “No Jews allowed.”

Becker: No, no.

Interviewer: You never saw anything like that.

Becker: No, because, as I said, we only were let out, so to speak, once or twice a week, generally on Wednesday afternoons and on Saturdays. We marched into the countryside and then played games or went swimming or something. But we did not see any shops or any signs or anything else.

Interviewer: What about on holidays, in the summer?

Becker: On holidays when we went home, I went to Wittstock, which was a small town, and, again, I was totally unaware of what was going on. My time was spent playing with other boys and girls who happened to be living in the neighborhood. We went swimming. We went around and played at home. And no political indoctrination, nor were we aware of anything that was going on in that sense, in the political sense.

We saw the formations of the SR, the storm troopers who had their meetings and who were marching down the street. On the 9th of November, generally, which happened to be the night of the Kristallnacht, but which also, for the Nazi Party, was the date on which Horst Wessel had been killed and then so on -- so that was celebrated. Consequently, there were festivities with the party formations and flags and banners and the singing of the German national anthem and the “Horst Wessel,” the Nazi Party song. But all of that sort of -- you know, we were too young.

Interviewer: But you stayed in this atmosphere until you were?

Becker: Until I was 13, and then I left the school and came home and became a civilian, so to speak, and became a normal child in a normal public school in Germany, in Potsdam, until 1945.

Interviewer: Now, why did you leave the --

Becker: I became ill, and my illness precluded me from staying in. And I was very happy about this. I didn’t like the environment. In fact, what ailed me was I had become a bed wetter, and some of the boys had this malaise. I was one of them. And, in fact, it started shortly after I became enrolled in the school. The same thing happened to several other boys, including my brothers, who also were enrolled in subsequent intervals. And I guess that was our way of rebelling psychologically against it, and finally, it became so bad that the school decided that I was no longer fit material for the future elite.

Interviewer: When you matriculated into a normal school in Potsdam, what was that like? What was the curriculum, and what was the party line?

Becker: The curriculum was, again, not different from what we had had already experienced in the school itself, in the Nazi school. It was a normal curriculum, with emphasis, of course, in certain areas: in biology, history, geography. These were clearly affected by Nazi ideology and by Nazi doctrine because we were then being told about racial purity, and that is where the Jews once again come in, and this is, I think, the only time that, in school, I officially heard something, but in a kind of what you might call objective, academic context, not filled with hate or “these are bad people,” but simply “these are different people.” And racial purity and Mendelian laws and how these affected -- and the importance of genes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what they told you? What was racial purity?

Becker: Aryan purity.

Interviewer: What did that constitute? How did you get to be an Aryan?

Becker: You were Germanic in origin. You were not -- they were -- and Germany, essentially, we were told, was the only pure Aryan country. All the others -- the British were also Aryans, but they had become somewhat contaminated by their own view of the world. The French were contaminated by their colonial peoples; in part, blacks who were part of the colonial people. And besides, they were all degenerate anyway and did not believe in any of the virtues of order and discipline, but were essentially lazy and exploitative. The Italians, we learned, were essentially lazy, and they were our allies, and Mussolini was doing his best to shape the Italian into something like the Germans.

And all of these peoples in Europe were Aryans and of greater or lesser racial purity. And strangely enough, we were not told, in any great detail, about the Scandinavians who, of course, as far as racial purity was concerned or Germanic origin was concerned, were the purest of them all. Somehow we were led to believe that we were really -- once again, the Germans were the top people. The Germans had made all the important innovations in modern civilization, and it was German order and German discipline and German industry which was foremost.

But to get back to the biological aspect, again here, the Jews were depicted in the biology books as an inferior race, as a race which exploited others, which was a blood-sucking race. It did not produce anything. It was not creative. It, at best, was able to reproduce what other people -- better people, the Aryan people -- had discovered and had invented. The Jews were only there to exploit these things. And once again, the images that I mentioned earlier of Jews looking like big bags, fat people with crooked noses and greedy eyes, with dollar signs in their eyes or British pound signs, and that’s how they were, indeed, depicted.

And this goes back to something else that I forgot to mention. These publications that we saw, we saw them only very rarely. They generally were publications which were not given to us officially, but which one or the other of the boys had brought to school from vacation. And there were two publications. One was called “Der Stürmer,” and the other one was the “Das Schwarze Korps,” “The Black Corps.” That was sort of the house organ of the SS. That was fairly tame. It was “Der Stürmer” which was Gauleiter Streicher’s house publication -- Streicher was a Gauleiter in Nuremberg. And “Der Stürmer,” or I guess -- what’s the English translation -- “The Stormer,” “The Active Person.” “Der Stürmer” was full of anti-Semitic stuff, and that is where we got most of those pictures.

So when we were in regular school -- when I was in regular school again after having left the institution, in biology we learned about racial purity, and the Jews were used as one example of what not to do. In other words, Jews were unacceptable. Jews were bad. They came from an inferior race. In geography, we were primarily told about how Germany had suffered and how this area had been taken away and how Germany had lost the colonies while England, for example, was amassing its empire. And the poor Germans had been deprived of all of this, of the pleasures of empire, and it was all only the machinations of the French and the British which had kept the Germans down. And in what area -- what did I say? In history, of course. History was depicted purely from the narrow German point of view. Again, injustices, a downtrodden people resurrected by Hitler for greatness.

Interviewer: At the age of 14, when you were having your teachers or whatever telling you that you were the greatest and you were the best and you were Aryan, did you feel that? Did you have a lot of pride, and you accepted all that?

Becker: Yes. When I left the school, I became a member of the regular Hitler Youth outside, and I discovered very quickly that there were different branches of the Hitler Youth. There was the ordinary branch, people who generally marched around a great deal. That didn’t appeal to me at all. There was the navy Hitler Youth, and there was the cavalry Hitler Youth, and there was the motor Hitler Youth. In other words, different branches, and you went into the areas which interested you most, or if you had a car, for example, or your family had a car, then you became a member of the motor Hitler Youth. If you liked flying, you became a member of the air Hitler Youth.

I was, at that time, enamored by the sea, and I was thinking of a naval career later on maybe, of becoming a naval officer, and so I joined the navy Hitler Youth at first. And then after a while, in the neighborhood I became friends with another boy who was a member of the cavalry Hitler Youth, and so I was converted from the navy to the cavalry, and we spent most of our time with horses, which we groomed and cleaned and rode and learned how to ride and how to drive a coach with two horses and four horses. It was all very exciting.

And these activities with our horses were interspersed with indoctrination evenings, when not only the cavalry Hitler Youth in Potsdam, but all the Hitler Youth groups came together and listened to speakers, generally extoling the virtues of the party and of Hitler, talking about the victories that Germany was winning, even though we were, by that time, retreating, but still, you know, we were doing well. It was kind of bolstering morale on the lower level and designed for boys and girls.

And so at that time, again, I was aware that things were not going as well. Food was becoming scarcer. But the Germans really did not starve until the end of the war. Their starvation period began only afterwards. And so we were fairly well taken care of. Potsdam was outside of Berlin. It was not bombed. In 1943, for example, I went into Berlin for the first time to listen to -- to attend an opera, and it was very fortunate that I did because two weeks later the opera house was bombed as well, and that was the end of that.

But that was the first time that I ever saw any rubble, any ruins, and that’s when I realized how much damage had been done to Berlin, and I didn’t know about other German cities because all of that was carefully controlled. You didn’t see any pictures in the papers about the results of air raids. But we had experienced air raids in Potsdam. The planes flew over, and we went into the basement every night and came out again afterwards. But Potsdam itself was not bombed, so we did not know what an air raid really meant.

And so it was not until 1943, when I took my first trip to Berlin, that I saw ruins, and I was shocked of course. But it still meant, to me, convinced that we were good and that we were going to win the war, it meant a temporary setback. All of this would be rebuilt in much greater splendor than it had ever existed before. So it didn’t bother me.

And my own experience with an air raid did not come until 1945 when Potsdam, two weeks before the end of the war, was bombed and was bombed so thoroughly that 80% of the city was destroyed. And it was quite an experience, one which I would not want to repeat. But at the same time, it was something that you endured, and it had nothing to do with Jews in this respect. It simply had something to do with the approaching Allies who -- and I had a map in my room where I, with pins, indicated the progress that the Allies were making and how Russians on one side and the Americans and the British on the other were approaching. And I regarded all that with some equanimity until we realized that we were going to be occupied either by the Americans or by the Russians, and of course we hoped for the Americans. But the Americans stayed where they were on the Elbe River and didn’t come any closer, and so it was the Russians who came.

Interviewer: One of the things I wanted to ask you, when you went into the school in Potsdam, did you want to join the Hitler Youth? Was that -- were all the boys --

Becker: At the age of six, I was not aware of the existence of the Hitler Youth, or of Hitler, for that matter. In other words, I was sent to the school. It was a shock to me that we were going on a trip with my mother, I was going on a journey. I was taken to Potsdam from Wittstock, and I was introduced to various people, who turned out later on to be those sisters, all of which meant nothing until, all of a sudden, my mother said good-bye and left. In that sense, you know, I was then in a school, but I was not aware of the purpose of the school.

Interviewer: No, I’m --

Becker: I’m sorry. Did I misunderstand your question?

Interviewer: I think so, because I wanted to go back to when you went back to regular school at 14.

Becker: Oh, okay.

Interviewer: And so the Hitler groups there, did you join that voluntarily?

Becker: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: I mean, that was something you wanted to participate in?

Becker: Well, voluntarily -- officially, we were all expected to be members of the Hitler Youth by that time. It was compulsory. I never questioned the fact that it was compulsory. It was also something that I wanted to do, so it was not something into which I felt compelled or forced to go because there was a law on the books that said that, if you were in the right age, you had to join the Hitler Youth. I wanted to join the Hitler Youth. It was fun.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your brothers and their experience at the military school in Potsdam. Did they all end up in Potsdam in the same --

Becker: They all ended up in Potsdam in the same school. My second brother came in 1938. The next one came in 19 -- I entered ’36 -- ’38, ’40, and then finally, the last one came in 1941. And we were all members of this school. We did not see one another very often, actually, because we were in different groups. And so being two years older than my next brother meant that he was doing things on this side of the campus, so to speak, and I was doing them somewhere else. So we did not have much contact.

Their experience was similar in the sense that they also became bed wetters and hated it, basically. What we hated about the school and what we disliked was not the indoctrination. What we disliked about it, I think, was being away from home. We were in an environment which consisted of, in my case, of 50 other boys. That was the platoon, so to speak. I was one of 50. I did not get much attention, certainly at least not as much as I wanted to. So it wasn’t that we resented being there because of the nature of the school. We resented being away from home, and my brothers felt the same way.

Then, in 1940, we actually -- and this is another experience. Because of the increasing air raids, parts of the school were evacuated to part of Germany or Austria where air raids were not yet in effect at that time. And so I ended up in a little village south of Vienna in 1940 and stayed there until 1942. By that time, we were brought back to Potsdam. And in this village, we continued our life as it had been before, except that it was less controlled since there was no one building in which the pupils were housed. We were dispersed over the village, and there were four different locations. And that gave us lots of opportunity to do our own thing and to escape the constant supervision and the attention. We fell through the cracks, and we used them. But, again, it was an environment which was strange. It was a Catholic area, clearly. Austria is 99% Catholic. So we saw Catholics in their normal life for the first time. But otherwise, it was the same old schooling, the same kind of teaching that we got, in no way changed. And that was that.

Interviewer: You went back home at 14. Then the rest of your brothers ended up back in the same school with you eventually?

Becker: Yes. They had not been -- two of my other -- the youngest one had died in 1943 of polio, and so there were only the two others left, and they also were evacuated to other parts of Germany, not to Seebenstein, not to the little village south of Vienna where I was. One brother ended up in Graz, which is also in Austria, a little bit more to the Southeast, and the other one ended up in Nuremberg, in a little town outside of Nuremberg. And so their experiences were similar, but different from mine.

Interviewer: When you... I mean, you were 14, and now the war is starting to wind down and the war ended. How old were you when the war ended?

Becker: Let’s see. I was born in September 1929, so by the end of the war in 1945, I was 14 1/2.

Interviewer: So with the war ending and the Russians were --

Becker: Actually, I was 15 1/2.

Interviewer: Fifteen. The Russians were moving in. What happened with your family?

Becker: The Russians were moving in. It took a week for them to occupy Potsdam because there was German resistance, and so there was fighting in the streets. We spent one week down in the basement, where we always had gone for air raids, and waited until all the fighting was over. On one occasion -- we made periodic trips to the house -- it was a four-story apartment house in which we lived. And on one occasion, I was looking out the window -- we were making trips to make sure that everything was all right and that nothing was burning, for example. And on one occasion, a Russian shell exploded, and I became injured and thought, Well, you know, if things turn out right, then I’m going to get the German equivalent of the -- what is it called -- the Purple Heart. But, of course, that was not done.

So anyway, after a week of fighting, the Russians were there for good, and we emerged from our basements again into the daylight and saw the destruction that had been wrought, in addition to the bombing that had occurred earlier. But the street fighting had resulted in destruction of a few more houses. So then there were the Russians, and...

Interviewer: How did they treat you? I mean, what was --

Becker: The Russians treated -- well, aside from the first few days of raping and looting -- and in the house in which I lived, among the female population, I would say that half of them were raped by the Russians, on one occasion or another, until the Russian military command reimposed order on the troops, and then they behaved. But aside from that, we had very little contact with them. They did their thing. They were the occupying troops. They lived their own lives, and we lived ours. They just were there, but we had no direct contact with them, nor did they make life difficult for us.

Until one day when -- the janitor in our house turned out to be a card-carrying Communist, and he went -- and what the Russians did was to have so-called liaison persons in every house, especially apartment houses, to be a liaison between the community that lived in the house and the police precinct. It was, of course, a way of keeping track of people. And the liaison person in our building happened to be the janitor, who also, as I learned, was a card-carrying Communist, had been a Communist all his life, and simply had been very careful about hiding this and had survived under Hitler, but once the Russians came in, his day had come.

And so he went to the police and denounced me as having been a very strong Nazi and having played a great role in Hitler’s Reich. And, indeed, I was a Nazi. I mean, I think it must be clear by now that -- later on, I was asking myself what kind of a Nazi was I, and I think I was 150% Nazi. That’s how strongly I believed in the system and in what Hitler was doing. But I had never played any significant role. As I say, at the age of 14, 15, what can you possibly do?

So I was picked up by the Russians and interrogated, and when they realized that I was really quite harmless, I was released again. And then a few weeks later, I was picked up once more and was again taken to prison and stayed this time -- the first time, it was about two weeks. The second time, it was about a week. And again was interrogated. I was never quite told why I was arrested and taken to prison. And then, again, at the end of the week, I was released, and that’s when we decided to leave, because things were becoming very uncertain.

Interviewer: When the war was over and the Russians were there and, obviously, the Third Reich was no more, how did you feel, I mean, as a 150% Nazi?

Becker: On one hand, I felt very relieved. The war was over, the danger to our lives was over, and we could now start something new. On the other hand, I felt crushed. I felt that Germany, just like after the First World War, had to start all over again, under occupation and so on. And that’s when this relearning, this reeducation process began on my own side, the one that, as I said, lasted about two years. Then when we had moved to Bremen, I also became a member of a Bremen boys’ club, as it was called, an organization that was founded by American soldiers as part of an American government program to get the German youth off the streets and into some kind of activity that was a little bit more channeled, and it was also designed to introduce us to democracy and to make little democrats out of us, which it succeeded very well in doing.

Interviewer: Was that program also to sort of desensitize you from the Nazi way of thinking?

Becker: You mean to, to, to...to make -- to transform little Nazis into little democrats?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Becker: Yes, that was clearly one of the objectives. Except that, in my case, I think the indoctrination, as a little Nazi, was much stronger than in most of the other cases. I noticed this when I left the school and became a civilian in 1943, that, at that time, the involvement of my fellow schoolmates with party matters, even with the Hitler Youth, was much less than…my experience had been. I had sort of imbibed it from morning till night. I had drunk it. I had ate it. I had eaten it. It was part of my life. When I went out of the school, most of my life was concerned with normal things that civilians do, and the party itself was only effective when I went to my Hitler Youth meetings.

Interviewer: Do you think after a two-year process -- I mean, you talk about coming to the realization of what the Nazis had done. Did it only take you two years to work through that?

Becker: It took me two years to accept that Germans had killed Jews, that Germans had committed atrocities. It took me much longer to come to terms with the rest of it, and I don’t think I have come to terms with it yet. You asked me earlier whether I had children, and my answer is no. And one of the reasons that I never wanted children was because I did not want to create children in a world which was capable of doing such -- which was capable of such brutalities as those which I had learned about. I had lived, grown up in an environment in which I missed love, the love of mother and child and so on, and that was another experience which I did not want to see repeated, because clearly my mother did not have -- my parents did not have their children for them to end up in a boarding school. But circumstances had brought this about, and I was smart enough to realize that, if I had children, I could not control their fate. I could not even control my own. Consequently, that’s why I didn’t want to have any children, and the same is true for my two brothers, except that in one case he has children. But the other one doesn’t. So, again, there’s, I think, a similarity in the experience.

In that sense -- and, of course, not only on the personal level with respect to children, but...I think that’s why I became a historian. I wanted to understand what had happened to Germany and what had happened to me, and it has helped me to understand. It has not made me accept things. I still don’t -- in other words, there is a difference between understanding something in the sense of comprehending it intellectually and the other of simply saying, “Well, that’s too bad; that’s the way it was.” To me, to this day, it is painful to think about some of these things and to recall them and to be aware of how frail civilization is, how weak human beings are, and how human beings are capable of doing great things and beautiful things at the same time that they are capable of committing enormous atrocities. It’s part of the human experience, I guess.

But again here, I think that the juxtaposition or the contrast between growing up in a very idealized situation -- because we were filled with Nazi ideology, but from the way we saw it, it was good; it was nothing bad. That it was also bad was something that we only learned later. So growing up in an almost idealized version of life, I think it was very difficult for me to separate that, to divorce that, to divorce myself from that and to become aware of the reality of life, which is, very many times, quite ugly.

Interviewer: You and your family moved to Bremen, and then how did you come to the United States?

Becker: I think as a result of my activity in the Bremen boys’ club and my membership. The leaders of the Bremen boys’ club were American soldiers, ultimately a lieutenant. And when he was recalled to return to the United States, there was a brief time when there was no leadership. And in the meantime, the club had connections with several Americans over here and one family, in particular, living in Rochester, New York, which, as soon as it learned about this club, had written and had said, “We are willing to help; what can you use?” And the American officer in charge wrote back, “We can use anything you can send: food, clothing, money,” not necessarily in that order. And so this family, through membership in various charitable organizations, had collected food and clothing and had sent this over for distribution among the members, as well as families and other needy people.

And when the American officer was rotated home, there was no one who could maintain contact with this family. I happened to speak the best English in the club, and so I was asked to take over the correspondence on behalf of the club. And after corresponding with this family for about two years, slowly personal elements crept into the initially purely business arrangements or correspondence, and ultimately, I asked this family whether it would be willing to sponsor me to come to this country. And they were willing to do that, and so I ended up here.

And I think one of the reasons was that I wanted to get out of Germany. You know, you asked me about my experiences or my reaction, and I think I wanted to get away from Germany. I wanted to get away from a country and a people that was capable of doing what the Germans had done during the war. It was not until later that I realized, I think, that -- I was a very slow learner -- that other people, other populations, other countries are capable of doing precisely the same things, not necessarily to the same people but in their own way, that life can indeed be very ugly, and that the Germans happened to be the ones who did it between 1939 and 1945. But that was one of the reasons why I wanted to get out Germany, to go to a different part of the world.