

Three Against Hitler

A compelling true story of three LDS teens' fight for freedom

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Chapter 1 – Growing Up In Germany Between The Wars

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about growing up in Hamburg, Germany, during the reign of the Nazis was how ordinary it seemed at first. Children playing, families at the park on Sundays, or young people going out for a movie were as much a part of our life as they were for people anywhere else in the world. In those days, neighbors talked a lot and our apartment complex was really a self-contained community with a diversity of views and opinions, but tempered by a camaraderie that I remember fondly, even now.

Of course there was the depression, which sometimes left my father unemployed, but Hitler convinced the Germans that their troubles were related to the unfair war reparations that the Allies demanded as their “spoils for winning the Great War.” In fact, the greatest difference between Germany and the other nations of the world (who were struggling through their own economic hard times) is that Germany had someone to blame. In truth, the Allies had come down hard on the German people because of the overwhelming destruction they set in motion in the first truly “world” war. In an attempt to “civilize” Germany, they had forced the creation of the Weimar Republic, supported by a constitution that guaranteed personal liberties and freedom in much the same fashion as had become second nature to the citizens of the great democracies of the Allies. Unfortunately, once the Allied governments reached their conclusions and drafted their treaties, they left Germany on its own to find the way to self-rule and democracy—a project doomed to failure in a country that had been nurtured on the ideals of “duty to State above the individual,” for many centuries.

In the early days, there was robust competition among the dozens of political parties that vied for power. Citizens felt free to fight for their causes and to attempt to have an influence on the government. In time, however, the battle increasingly became the Nazis versus everyone else. One of my earliest memories occurred one night as my parents were standing in front of our terrace apartment building talking with neighbors while we children played nearby. Above our heads was a display from the Communist party, illuminated by a couple of spotlights. The communists stood nearby with materials to pass out to interested citizens. All of a sudden a car carrying a group of Nazis careened around the corner, brakes screeching. They stopped in front of us, jumped out and started beating up the people standing there, including innocent bystanders. Even we children felt the sting of their blows. During this unprovoked attack police stood by, doing nothing.

A month later there was a torchlight parade through our neighborhood. The marchers were from the Social-Democrat and Communist parties, but the Nazis, although uninvited, showed up too. They went atop the building across the street from us and stationed a machine gun on the roof. While the demonstration was in full swing, they started shooting into the marchers, killing and injuring a number of them. The main body of marchers scattered quickly, but a group of them raced up the stairs after the Nazis and a battle ensued. Soon I saw the machine gun and several bodies flying off the roof. With the Nazis thus disposed of, the marchers regrouped and the demonstration continued.

That same week, my parents and I were walking toward the streetcar stop at the Billhorner Roehrendamm when we came upon a car overturned in the middle of the street. Three men were hiding behind it with revolvers drawn, waiting for another car that

was coming their direction. As soon as the car was close enough, the men started firing at it, causing the driver to make some wild maneuvers in an attempt to escape the rain of bullets. We children were so transfixed by this spectacle that we remained standing in the street. My father grabbed us and pushed us into the entrance of an apartment house nearby. It was all over in just a couple of minutes, but talk about excitement! Most people just shook their heads after it was over, and walked away. Others remarked how terrible the times were, while others cursed the Nazis for making it all happen. My father took me aside and said, “Son, don’t ever get mixed up with those people, the Nazis. They are bad people!” My dad was a quiet man who never spent much time in idle chatter. Thus, when he spoke, his message was usually profound. His words made a deep impression on me that day.

January 30, 1933, was a date that will live forever in history! The radio announced that Reichs-President von Hindenburg had just formed a new government, with Adolf Hitler as chancellor. Hitler had persuaded the capitalist pressure groups and tycoons of industry that the only way they could work their way out of the depression was to bring the fiercely nationalistic Nazis into power. He promised to end the “tyranny of the Allied reparations” (which he did by inflating the economy to the point that he could pay off the Allies with worthless Reichsmarks), reestablishing Germany’s “self-defense” capabilities (the factory owners were thrilled). The Capitalists thought they would easily control Hitler for their ends. They failed to realize that his skills as an orator would soon allow him to control the masses through his rhetoric. He was a master at working the masses into a frenzy over the injustices that Germany had suffered and the humiliation they labored under because they were no longer a military power. The

torchlight parades and patriotic rhetoric thrilled the Prussian blood that ran deep in German veins. Young men were so excited that they drilled with shovels instead of rifles, goose-stepping with right arms stretched out in the Hitler salute!

After Hitler was pronounced chancellor, the Nazis really started flexing their muscles. Before this date they did their harassment of Jews and members of other parties under the cover of darkness. But in February and March of 1933, they brought their work into the daylight. I remember those days all too well.

Near our home was a shoe store, owned and run by a Jew. Even before 1933 his store windows had been broken and swastikas had been painted on the walls and door. But, after the “takeover,” the Nazis demolished his store in broad daylight. They broke all the windows, threw the merchandise onto the sidewalk, and dragged the proprietor and his wife and two children into the street. They started beating and cursing them, all the while calling them dirty names and shouting that they weren’t fit to live among the exalted German, Aryan people. The greatest indignity of all is that after the family was lying in the gutter in agony, the Nazis urinated on them. I was only seven years of age when this took place, but I still remember it vividly.

A couple of weeks after this incident, the Nazis had a big demonstration by torchlight down the main street of Rothenburgsort, the Billhorner Roehrendamm. They were marching twelve abreast toward the large open field which was later to become the building site for the Hanseatenhalle, or Hall of the Hanseatic League. Whenever the Nazi flag passed by, bystanders were supposed to salute the flag with the raised arm of the Hitler salute. It looked like everyone in the crowd was enthusiastically supporting the Nazis. What we did not see was that along the sides of the marching column were storm

troopers who passed through the crowd. Whenever they spotted someone who was not properly saluting the flag, they swarmed on him and gave him a beating. I was standing in front of a group of people watching the parade with old Mother Schulz, who lived in our apartment building. When the flag passed by us she asked, “Rudi, do you see the color of that flag?” I replied that it was red. “No,” she said, “it is the color of blood, and it is blood that they will spill!” This ominous statement always came back to my mind whenever I witnessed their atrocities later on. They even had the inscription, “Blood and Honor,” engraved on their dress daggers. They used this distorted concept of honor to shed the blood of millions in the name of their leader, the Fuhrer.

Looking back, perhaps my life in Nazi Germany wasn't so ordinary, after all. But how can one know that the events one sees in everyday life are wrong or unusual without somehow gaining an outside perspective? After all, many of our neighbors were ardent supporters of the Nazis. In time, Hitler succeeded in putting the unemployed back to work and in rebuilding the nation's sense of honor and self-worth. Many influential citizens thought he was Germany's “savior,” who would bring prosperity and help Germany take her “rightful place in the sun” (a quote that Hitler loved to use). In spite of the violence we saw from time to time, many felt that things were at last going right for our country. They were unable to see past the façade and understand the evil. If it hadn't been for my parents and my church, I may not have been able to gain a proper perspective either.