

>> Interviewer: Please tell me your name.

>> Becker: My name is Peter Becker.

>> Interviewer: Where were you born?

>> Becker: I was born in *München*, or Munich, Germany, in 1929.

>> Interviewer: And tell me about your family: your father's occupation, your siblings, your background.

>> Becker: Okay. My place of birth was purely an accident. My mother happened to be in Munich at the time. We actually lived in northern Germany in a little town called Wittstock, which is about 150 miles north of Berlin, where my father was employed in the local insane asylum as a clerk. My mother had no profession, except to be a housewife and mother of, ultimately, four children, of whom I was the oldest. My three brothers were all younger, came in intervals of two years, more or less, and the youngest one died in 19 -- I'm sorry. The youngest one was born in 1935 about two months before my father died. My mother was then there with four children. The oldest one, me, had just reached the age of five. And so the question arose for her, what to do with four children as a widow and with very few visible means of support, and that is how I ended up in the school in which I ultimately was enrolled.

>> Interviewer: Okay, tell me about your education.

>> Becker: The school into which I was enrolled at the age of six, and where my brothers also joined me at the proper intervals, was one of Hitler's special schools which he had set up for the training of his future leadership elite, I imagine.

There were two types of schools. There were the Adolf Hitler schools, which were pure party schools, and these were essentially on the high school level, equivalent to high school level schools, which were to produce the future leaders of the party. And the requirements were essentially that one be a good party member, or at least be a loyal party member, and believe in the mission and the aims and the objectives and the goals of Hitler's Third Reich.

But then there was another set of schools. These were called National Political Education Institutions, a terrible name, but they were also on the high school level and, in one case, on the elementary school level. And these schools were designed not merely to produce future party leaders, but to produce leaders in general; that is, in medicine, in the military, in business. Whatever the pupils wanted to become or wanted to be later on, if they wanted to go into business or study or go to graduate school, go to college and to graduate school, all that was perfectly all right, as long as they were members of this school.

And so I was involved in the National Political Education Institution which was located at Potsdam. And because it was at Potsdam, it also was one of the only school which started at the age of six. The school went back to the time of Frederick William I of Prussia, who instituted or established the school as an orphanage for the orphans of the soldiers who might be killed in his wars. He actually fought very little, and so there was very little use for this orphanage, but it existed and on a small scale. That began to change with his son Frederick II, Frederick the Great, who fought a great many wars and, therefore, produced a great many orphans. And so the school was in business, and it was known as the Potsdam Military Orphan Home until the end of the First World War, by which time the military, having become somewhat unpopular as a result of a lost war, the name of the school was changed to just plain Potsdam

Orphan Home, which it remained until Hitler came to power, at which time it was at first a National Political Education Institution -- *Napola*, we called it -- and later on, in honor of the long tradition that it had with respect to the Prussian history and so on, it was renamed the Great Military Potsdam Orphan Home. But the mission, or the framework in which it worked, was the same as all of the other National Political Education Institutions.

>> Interviewer: In that they were educating you to either be a party leader or to go into the military or another career track?

>> Becker: Yes, I could go into the party later on if I wanted to, but that was not a requirement. Anything was acceptable.

>> Interviewer: What was the criteria for getting into this school?

>> Becker: Two things. You were tested both physically and mentally. You had to meet minimum admission standards. You had to be reasonably intelligent, and you had also to be of reasonable physical good condition: healthy, no blemishes, no impairments, and so on. And you also had to be, of course, an Aryan. That is similar to the requirements that were established for the SS later on; that is, you had to be an Aryan -- that is, no Jewish blood -- down to the generation of your great-grandparents.

>> Interviewer: Was this school in Potsdam a boarding school, or did your mother --

>> Becker: No, it was a boarding school. In other words, it was a full-year school. We only went home during vacations: Easter, Christmas, and the long summer vacation, which in Germany lasts all of six weeks.

>> Interviewer: So you did start there at the age of six.

>> Becker: Yes.

>> Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about the curriculum there?

>> Becker: The curriculum was essentially that of a normal German elementary school until the age of ten. Then at the age of ten, you switched to high school. It was then the normal curriculum for a high school. That is, you took English and mathematics and biology and chemistry and physics and Latin and -- what did I forget -- geography and music. In other words, about 12 different subjects, which you took at various frequencies during the week. German and math and English were three subjects which we had every day. Others were only taught three times a week, sometimes only twice a week, and sometimes only once a week. Sports, for example, was a one-time-per-week affair where, for two hours, we engaged in sport.

>> Interviewer: Now, you said you started high school at ten.

>> Becker: Yes.

>> Interviewer: At what point did you become a member -- or were you already a member of the Hitler Youth by virtue of the fact that you were there?

>> Becker: I was a member of the Hitler Youth by virtue of being a member of that school. As you know, the Hitler Youth is really the general name, general term, for the whole age group from the age of 10 to the age of 18, which was actually broken down into two groups. The younger ones were the ones from the age of 10 to 14, and the Hitler Youth itself was actually only from the age of 14 to 18. But because I was in that school, I was

automatically a member of the Hitler Youth in both of its groups.

>> Interviewer: And what kind of activities did you engage in as a Hitler Youth?

>> Becker: Well, I'm not sure that our activities were in any way different as a Hitler Youth. In other words, our curriculum was essentially an academic curriculum. In addition to which, we were, of course, being in a boarding school and being under constant supervision, were really raised in a kind of military or paramilitary lifestyle. Our lives were regulated from morning until night. We all got up at a certain time; that is, fairly early. We then performed calisthenics out in the yard, regardless of the weather, every winter and summer. We then ate breakfast. We then went back to our rooms. We made our beds. We washed. We dressed. We went to school. And all of this was done in unison, so to speak. Then at lunchtime, we marched to lunch. After lunch, we did some homework, or in the earlier grades, we actually had to take a nap and then did our homework. And then the evening meal, and then more activities.

It was in the activities, I think, that my life differed from that of a normal boy who went to public school and went home after school was over and had a normal life at home. Our life was much more structured and it was much more directed so that, whatever Hitler wanted to do with us, we imbibed in a very careful fashion. That is, we were not aware of being indoctrinated. We were not being aware of what was being done to us. It was all a very, very subtle process.

But over the years that I was a member of this school -- and let me go back to some of the activities. One afternoon a week would be devoted to cleaning our clothes and then sewing rips and sewing on buttons and so on. Another afternoon was devoted to cleaning all of our shoes. We had a great number for all various

activities. A third afternoon of the week was devoted to marching out into the countryside, where we played what would be the Hitlerian equivalent of cowboys and Indians. That is, you know, we called it something different, but the objective was to become acquainted with the countryside and how to move in underbrush and in forests and in fields. Even there, even on that play level, it was essentially designed to prepare us for a military life, or at least a life which might involve the military. And once or twice -- or during the summer, we would also go swimming in one of the lakes that was nearby. Potsdam was surrounded by lakes. And in the afternoons or at other time -- and we would also be trained in close order drill so that, once a week, we learned how to march, how to salute, how to make turns, et cetera, et cetera, everything that you needed for a paramilitary organization.

The evenings were, once again, either spent in part in play -- but playtime was very short. It was primarily doing homework, of which we had a great deal. And, also, in addition to that, especially when we were older, but even in the younger years, we were shown movies, movies which would generally have some kind of patriotic or political message, even though we were not aware of that. And when we were older, in the older group, we would get speakers who spoke to us on various issues, and once the war had started, of course that became one of the primary issues: how the war was going, what Germany was going to do, how it was successful in doing this, that, and the other thing.

And so, in that sense, we were indoctrinated, as I said, in very subtle fashion so that, by the time the war ended in 1945 when I was 15, I had become a Nazi without ever really being aware that I was one. That is, I didn't know how I had become one. I knew that I was one because, to me, Hitler was the great man in Germany's life. I had become convinced that Hitler was the savior of Germany. All of that, I could believe because our knowledge of what had gone on in the past was very limited. We

were carefully kept from, I think, knowing certain things or having a broad picture of history. We were not aware of what Germany had done before. Our history, our life really essentially started, as far as we were concerned, with the First world war, with the depressing period of the Weimar Republic, as we were told. Then, after Germany had been beaten down as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, had been disarmed, had been saddled with reparations, et cetera, et cetera, then finally Hitler came along to lift Germany out of this muck and mire and bring it back to greatness, and we felt that we were part of that, and we were very proud of that and thought that Hitler really was the greatest thing that had ever come down the pike.

>> Interviewer: When you had speakers or you saw these films, who were the enemies of Germany? Who had kept Germany down? Did they tell you specifically who -- what did they tell you about Jews, or what did they --

>> Becker: Well, the Jews actually were not mentioned very often. That's the surprising thing about this. Our enemies were, essentially, the French and the Russians -- the Bolsheviks, the great Communist enemy -- the English. In other words, it was all an attempt by the other European countries, the powerful countries, to encircle Germany and to keep Germany down, and Hitler had succeeded in...exploding this ring of encirclement and to make Germany free again, to rearm Germany and to make Germany a power again.

The Jews were mentioned only marginally. We were aware that they existed, but there was very little thought -- or very little attention was devoted to the Jews. We received publications which, however, were very effective in the sense that they dealt with, for example, the Jewish influence in England and how the Jews were really the big imperialists in England and also in France, and of course the Communists, or the Bolsheviks, were all Jews, or at least most of them. And so the Jewish element

was woven into the general picture that was drawn for us with respect to the outside world. And the -- we never saw any Jews. We didn't know any Jews, at least not in the school. I knew one or two privately, but that was in my hometown, and that was something else, and I will come back to that later, I guess. But, essentially, in the school, we saw publications in which Jews were depicted as being fat, rapacious, ugly, with large hooked noses; in other words, the kind of shibboleth which very often is prevalent among anti-Semites. And those pictures, I think, stayed with me longer than any verbal impression that could have been given to me.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember as a -- let's say, from the age ten -- or you're into this now, and you're a Nazi or whatever. Did you, by virtue of the fact that you had this information, did you hate Jews just on sight, just as a people, or just you knew they were your enemies?

>> Becker: No. Well, as I said, I didn't know any Jews, except there was one Jewish family that lived across the street from my grandfather's house in Oranienburg. And I did not -- I was not -- they owned a meat-packing plant, and the meat-packing plant was across the street, and they also lived there. And I played with the daughter when I was younger, when I was a child. And, no, I was not aware that they were Jews at all. The fact that I learned that they were Jews, I only learned, in fact, after the end of the war when I learned that they had committed suicide. The family had survived Hitler's Germany, I guess because the father was an important man in the economy, and consequently, they apparently were protected. Anyway, they were not taken to a concentration camp and then only committed suicide as the Russians approached. They were more afraid of the Bolsheviks, of the Russians, than they had been under Hitler.

>> Interviewer: So you're saying he was allowed to keep his business --

>> Becker: Yes.

>> Interviewer: -- and his life went on. In what part of German was --

>> Becker: This was in Oranienburg, which is a suburb in the northern part of Berlin. And nearby, in fact, is a concentration camp, or was a concentration camp, the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. And I became aware of Sachsenhausen during the war when I visited my grandfather, and on one occasion, I saw people out in the streets in the distance who had prison uniforms, wearing prison uniforms, clearing rubble. This was after an air raid. And I remember asking him, "who are these people? Are these prison inmates from the local prison?" He said, "No, they are inmates from the concentration camp." And I think I was about 12 at the time, and I had never heard of concentration camps before. I heard of them later in our schooling, but then they were only referred to with respect to the Boer War and the English in South Africa. Those were the first concentration camps. I was not aware until 1942 that they existed in Germany.

But my grandfather told me that concentration camps were special camps set up for the enemies of Germany, people who were inimical to the regime, people who had committed some political or other crimes, and among them, he said, are also Jews. And I said, "well, why Jews?" And he said, "well, because Jews are the enemies of the German people, and clearly, in time of war, you don't let your enemies run around and do damage to you. You lock them up. You confine them in one place." And that is how I learned about this concentration camp and about the Jews. And I said, "well, what do people do in these concentration camps?" And he said, "well, they're put to work." And one example was, as I said, the clearing of the rubble. And that was the extent

of my knowledge about concentration camps until the end of the war.

There was one other episode that I remember, and that is when, again, I must have been about 11 years old. And because going from Potsdam, from the school, to my grandfather's house in the north of Berlin -- Potsdam is also on the outskirts of Berlin, but in the southwestern area, and so one had to change trains several times on the subway and the local trains. And so rather than make the trip by myself, my grandmother came and picked me up and took me back to Oranienburg for -- I think it was a brief occasion. And we were entering one compartment in the train. German trains, as you know, are different, or European trains are different from American trains. You generally have an aisle on one side of the car, and then you have compartments going off from that.

So we were looking for a compartment with as few people in it as possible, as one is apt to do, and finally found one with only one man sitting in the corner. And as we entered, he got up in order to leave. And my grandmother motioned to him and said, you know, "Stay where you are. You don't have to leave." And then I observed that he wore the Star of David on his clothing. It didn't mean anything to me. And we finished the journey, and ultimately, he got up and left. He apparently had reached his destination. And we went on, and my question was, "Well, why was he getting up? What was he doing?" And she said, "Well, he is a Jew, and Jews are obliged to leave a compartment when an Aryan, when a Gentile enters." And I simply recorded this. It didn't mean anything to me. I didn't feel any outrage at this, and as a child of 11, you take this thing and you absorb it as a piece of information, but it didn't mean anything. None of this really meant anything, in the sense that I thought about it or said, "My God, what are we doing?" No, it never occurred to me.

It was not until the end of the war that I became confronted with what Nazi Germany had been and what it had done. And I remember that shortly after the Russians had marched into Potsdam -- Potsdam was occupied by the Russians, as was Berlin -- everything had broken down: no electricity, no transportation, no gas, no newspapers. And so it was a few days before we could find out what was going on by having at the corners -- the city government or the Russians established reading plaques, wooden boards, to which were pasted newspaper articles or newspapers. And there was no home delivery. There were no newspapers. These were just very brief notices about what was going on in the world and what had happened to Germany.

And I remember seeing a headline that said, "Germans Killed 4 Million Jews." By this time, I was a little bit older than 10 or 11 and 12, and I was outraged. I said, "How is this possible?" And I was convinced, at first, that that kind of accusation was similar to the accusations which had been made against the Germans during the First World War and after the First World War, when Germans also had been accused of various crimes, of chopping off nuns' -- raping nuns in Belgium, or chopping off children's and babies' hands and so on. And most of which, of course, later on was proven to be totally untrue. It was just useful propaganda used by the British and also by the Americans. And I was convinced that what I saw here was simply a replay of that. Germany was being set up to be the guilty person, to -- God knows what I thought we were expected to do, probably pay reparations again in order to atone for our, quote-unquote, sins. And I simply did not believe what I read.

Then, after a while, the figures changed, and then it was not only 4 million people. It was 5 million Jews, and ultimately it was 6 million. I still did not believe it. On one occasion, I went to an almanac -- I said, you know, "We didn't even have that many Jews in Germany" -- and discovered, to my great joy, yes, indeed, we didn't. Germany only had about 600,000 Jews, so

how could we possibly have killed 6 million of them. Until I looked at the areas which Germany had covered, had occupied, during that period from 1939 to 1945 and looked at their Jewish populations in France, in Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria, which of course became part of Germany in 1938, but particularly Poland and Russia. And then I realized that, yes, the numbers were there. The numbers fit. It was possible for the Germans to have done this. I still did not believe it. To me, it was inconceivable that we, as Germans, as people who were brought up decently and with the idea of treating others decently and justly, could have done that. It was just inconceivable and unacceptable.

I think that my mind did not begin to change slowly, and it was a process which was painful and which took place over a period of about two years between 1945 and 1947. The first thing that made me change my mind or accept what had happened was that an exhibit had come to Bremen, where we had moved from Potsdam. We had left Potsdam in late 1945 after I had been put in prison by the Russians twice for having been a member of that Nazi school, and so they thought I was a big Nazi, even though I was able to convince them that, at the age of 14 or 15, there was really not much I could have done in any circumstances. Finally, after the second time when I got out of jail, my mother and my brother and I and my grandmother decided that we would leave Potsdam and would go west, and we did and ended up in Bremen.

well, in Bremen, in -- that must have been 1946 maybe -- there was a traveling exhibit which had been put together, and it consisted of artifacts from the various concentration camps. I don't know how many concentration camps, but artifacts, and I've forgotten most of the items that were there. The ones that I remember were lampshades, lampshades made out of human skin. And slowly and reluctantly, I began to believe and became convinced that what the Germans were accused of was actually true.

>> Interviewer: How old were you?

>> Becker: At that time, I was 16, 17. Then, of course, there was the Nuremberg trial, and I began to listen to it on radio. I had a little headset with a crystal detector. That was the only thing that was available in those years. And so I would listen to it, and I would read the reports about the Nuremberg trial. And of course, again, this was secondhand. But then we saw newsreels of the concentration camps, of what the Germans had done, and not only in Germany, but also at the extermination camps in Poland. I began to learn the difference between the camps in Germany and the camps in Poland.

And then I met an American teacher, who was attached to one of the American schools, a high school teacher to one of the American dependents' schools, which had been set up by the American government for the American personnel. And we had long discussions about Hitler and about politics and about democracy and so on. And, again, here at first, I was a defender of Hitler and of Germany and felt that Germany had been much maligned and had been aggrieved and injustice had been committed. Until, again, finally -- he happened to be a historian, and our long discussions -- once again, eventually I began to see a different picture. And, as I said, it took me two, three years before I fully accepted what Germans had done.

>> Interviewer: One of the things -- I want to go back a little bit, if we could, and talk about the Hitler Youth activities. It sounds like you were in school most of the time, but there are accounts of Hitler Youth, you know, out perpetrating crimes against Jews or doing hooliganism, that sort of thing. You don't have any knowledge of that, or nobody ever talked about that, or you never saw --

>> Becker: No, there was one time that I noticed something, but it was something that I noticed because, in one of our periodic

forays into the countryside, we -- it was all done in formation and marching, and we were marching down the street. And this must have been -- not must have been -- it was in 1938 in November, and it was shortly after the Kristallnacht, and, again, a term which did not mean anything to me at the time.

But we were passing a burned building. And not only was it burned -- you could see the smoke from the windows where the smoke had left traces -- but the windows had been smashed. And as boys are wont to do -- by this time, we were no longer in formation, but sort of walking along -- we decided that broken windows lent themselves beautifully to being broken a little bit more. So we picked up stones and threw them again into the windows.

And the teacher who was with us supervising us -- and our teachers from in the early time of the school, from six to ten, were females, women, whom we called *Schwester*, or sister or nurse or whatever -- not nurse. Nurse is the wrong word. Sister is a more appropriate expression. And only from the age of ten on did we have males who supervised us all day long, educators. And she said, "No, no, children, don't do this. This is a synagogue, and it's in bad shape, but we do not throw stones at it."

And once again, we said, "Well, what is a synagogue?" And, "It's a Jewish church." And that was it, and then we marched on, and that was the total extent of my acquaintance with what had happened on the 9th of November in 1938 in Germany and clearly in Potsdam as well. But it didn't mean anything, and it was not explained to us in any great extent.

If we knew anything about it, it was what we were told in very general terms. We did not have access to radio, for example, on a regular basis. All of our information came from what we were told. There were no newspapers. We were not given any newspapers

in those days at that age. I guess maybe children don't read newspapers anyway. And so they did not -- so our knowledge of what was going on in the outside world was totally dependent on what we were told. And later on, once the war had started, we listened to the radio broadcasts about the military progress, the news. But, again, it was very controlled, and we were winning, and that was great, and so we all felt very happy, but no great thought given to anything else.

So we, as inmates of this school, were not involved in any of the activities, like hooliganism or the Kristallnacht or anything of that sort. We lived a fairly sheltered, separate life. Our indoctrination was more mental, intellectual than it was in any other way. For example, one part in which we were indoctrinated, or one way in which something was taken away from us, was that most of us came from fairly religious families. That is, it was customary to go to church. And Germany, as you may know, is essentially divided into two religions: the Protestants, who live mostly in the North; and the Roman Catholics, who live mostly in the South and in the Rhineland. Well, having grown up in the North and living in a northern area and coming from a Protestant family, I was a Protestant. And so it never occurred to me, I didn't encounter any Roman Catholics until I went to school.

In the first two years in that school, on Sundays we were permitted to go to church. That is, we were told, "Okay, Roman Catholics on one side, Protestants on the other," and off we marched to different places of worship. The Catholics had to go into town. The Protestants, there was a chapel on the grounds of the institution, and we simply went to the chapel and had our service there. That was on Sunday mornings, and afterwards, we did what we normally did on Sundays, not very much.

And then after about two years, or during those first two years, the frequency of churchgoing became less and less, until finally

it was not done any longer at all, and no one among us had any great desire to go to church in the morning. Who wanted to get up early in order to go to church? So it was something which we just didn't do any longer. There was no religious instruction afterwards. The churches were simply something that were insignificant, and we were not told about them in any great detail, except insofar as they were part of the historical instruction.

>> 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 extolling 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. 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 --

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