

A Child in The Hitler Youth

Frightening Story of Willing Submission to Nazism

June 05, 1985 | By Linda Matchan, Boston Globe.

“This is not a popularity contest,” Alfons Heck said solemnly while introducing himself to the audience at Dean Junior College in Franklin, Mass. “To my knowledge, I am the highest-ranking Hitler Youth leader living in the United States.”

The lecture hall was silent, though it was filled beyond capacity, mostly with students. He continued, “There was a fatal bond between the Hitler Youth (and Hitler). We were his elite. I would have gladly died for him.”

Today, Heck, 56, is an American citizen living in San Diego who scorns Hitler and

Nazis. A freelance writer on international affairs, he was in the Boston area recently to promote his new book, *A Child of Hitler*, and to discuss the Nazi era with lecture-circuit partner Helen Waterford, 76, a German-born Jewish survivor of Auschwitz.

....

But why would a former Nazi fanatic want to write and speak publicly about his experiences--a man who asserts he would have “remained a dedicated Nazi if we would have won the war,” who by his own description “had not the slightest compassion” for any of the Jews he saw persecuted in his German hometown and indeed “felt more sorry for the loss of my dog than I did for any of my townspeople”? “At first, I was reluctant to come out of my anonymity,” Heck said in an interview, even though after the war he was obsessed with the need to understand and articulate what he had experienced. When he did begin to write about it, he chose to protect his identity by telling his story in the form of a novel.

“But suddenly in 1978 I decided to comment (publicly) on the Nazi era and on what I knew about it,” he said, even though he knew of no other Nazi Youth leaders of his rank who were, or are, willing to talk about their wartime experiences. What changed his mind, he said, were two death threats he received after publishing an article critical of neo-Nazis. “I wanted to show Americans: Don’t think you’re safe. It could happen to you,” Heck said. “I also wanted to show that not everything (in Nazi Germany) was black and white.”

And so in the late `70s he began writing newspaper articles about his association with the Hitler Youth. He was approached by Helen Waterford, also from San Diego, who suggested they team up for joint lectures about their respective experiences in wartime Germany. Today, they speak about “Hitlerism and the Holocaust” on television and radio and at colleges across the United States.

His story is a horrific tale of a child’s indoctrination and submission.

Born in Wittlich, a small wine-producing town near the French border in the Rhineland, Heck was reared by his grandmother; his parents, in severe financial straits, moved with his twin brother to a large city in the industrial



Alfons Heck

heartland of Germany. He was 5 when Hitler came to power. Immediately, the Nazi regime revamped the educational structure of Germany and “we 5- and 6-year-olds received an almost daily dose of nationalistic instruction, which we swallowed as naturally as our morning milk,” Heck wrote in his book.

In school, he was frequently reminded that Adolf Hitler had restored Germany’s dignity and pride and freedom. He received weekly “racial science” instruction teaching how and why Jews were different. A Catholic, he watched Jewish children punished by being forced to sit in a corner that was contemptuously designated “Israel.” At a young age, he said he was fully conditioned to accept the two main tenets of the Nazi creed: that the Germanic-Nordic race was innately superior, and that total submission to the welfare of the state--personified by Hitler --was his first duty. In 1938, a year before it become compulsory for German children to join the Hitler Youth, the official German youth movement, Heck, 10, signed up voluntarily for its junior branch known as Jungvolk. “I couldn’t wait to join,” he told the audience at Dean Junior College. And he wasn’t disappointed. “Almost from the first day on, I became enthralled by the Nazi ideology,” he said. “This is not an apology. It is a fact.”

He said the Jungvolk was magnetic and thrilling, with its precision marching and singing, its political indoctrination, its tests of courage and its pomp and mysticism that were “very close in feeling to religious rituals,” as Heck wrote in his book. “Of all the Nazi organizations, the Hitler Youth was by far the most naively fanatical.”

....

Heck said it took some time before he could forsake Hitler and accept the reality of the German experience in the Third Reich. At first, he conceded nothing more than military defeat; when he saw the first evidence of mass killings, he “assumed they were fakes.”

It was ultimately the evidence revealed at the Nuremberg trials and “several years of painful re-education” that made it possible for him to condemn, though reluctantly, Nazi ideology and activities. He was to feel guilt, betrayal, shame over his zealousness, and a great deal of resentment toward his elders, especially his educators. He left Germany in 1951 and moved to Canada where he married, and then moved to the United States. He has worked at an eclectic series of jobs, from railroad construction to restaurant management to driving for Greyhound Bus Lines. He retired from Greyhound in 1972 after a massive heart attack.

But shedding the Nazi era has not been as easy as he had hoped. He said he left Germany because “I did not want to carry the burden of Germany any longer. But I found out 25 years later that you cannot leave the past behind.”

....

It is a complicated, lingering legacy he carries with him, while he travels around the country reliving Nazi years and describing his fall from Superman to bus driver, from “master race to practically slave.” “I’ve come full circle,” he said. He wonders whether his early indoctrination--the constant reminder at an impressionable age that he was a superior being--still makes him feel superior and is what has helped make his fall so bearable. “None of us who reached high rank in the Hitler Youth will ever totally shake the legacy of the Fuhrer,” Heck concluded in his book. “Despite our monstrous sacrifice and the appalling misuse of our idealism, there will always be the memory of unsurpassed power, the intoxication of fanfares and flags proclaiming our new age.”