Peter Becker, Part 1

00:00:18

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 Fredrick II, Fredrick 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.