

September 26, 1991

Slate #1349-024

Interviewee: Peter Becker

Interviewer: Jean Brock

Notetaker: Rose Shames

0:00 - Born in 1929 - Peter Becker. Father was clerk in insane asylum. Mother worked in home. Peter oldest of 4 children. Father died in 1935. At age 6, Peter began to attend special Hitler school which was meant to produce future leaders of Party. Mission and goals were those of Third Reich.

National Political Education Institution. Schools to produce leaders for society. In Potsdam school was originally an orphanage (Potsdam Orphan Home). Hitler changed the name. Requirements of the school included physical and mental characteristics; must be Aryan, no Jewish blood. Becker began at age 6, and at age 10 entered the High School. Subjects were typical academic curriculum

Becker also became member of the Hitler Youth because it was part of school program. School was run in military life style - very highly structured. Marching unison behavior directed activity - subtle process of indoctrination. Activities included cleaning clothes, sewing clothes, marching in the countryside, preparation for military life, close order drills. Playtime was short, lots of homework, shown movies of patriotic and military themes, heard reports on war.

Becker became a Nazi. He was convinced that Hitler was savior of Germany. History began with World War I and Hitler brought Germany back to greatness. The enemies were the French, Russians (Bolsheviks), English. The Jews were mentioned marginally. There were publications about Jewish imperialistic influence. Images of Jews woven into this; "fat, rapacious, ugly hooked noses". Pictures more important than words in this impression.

Becker knew one Jewish family in suburbs of Berlin; a successful meat packer who committed suicide after the war.

19:07 - Age 12 first heard of concentration camps; Sachsenhausen. Set up for enemies of Germans. This explanation given by grandfather. Jews are enemies of German people.

19:50 - Age 11 traveling on train with grandmother, saw man with Star of David. Jews were forced to leave compartment when German entered.

21:20 - End of war became aware of meaning. Headline in poster paper "Germans killed 4 million Jews".

23:30 - But convinced that this was propaganda. Then reported number increased to 6 million. He began to investigate, but still didn't believe it - Germans were too decent. Becker's mind changed slowly during 1945-47. Was taken to prison 2 times by Russians because he had been student in the Hitler school. Therefore he moved west to Bremen.

26:05 - In Bremen, saw an exhibit of artifacts of concentration camps, lampshades of human skin. Began to believe. Listened to the Nuremburg trials and saw newsreels of camps.

27:30 - Met American teacher (historian) and had many talks.

29:00 - During 1938, after Kristallnacht passed burned building during march in countryside. Saw broken windows and began to throw stones. Teacher told them to stop because this was a synagogue.

31:12 - No newspapers, radio in school so knowledge of world dependent on what teachers told them. Sheltered, separate life. Mental indoctrination. Church attendance was gradually removed. Students used as exhibits; shown off as "new Germany". Saw Goebbels, Himmler, Mussolini because all important people came to this school.

36:00 - Kept in school except for Wednesday afternoon and Saturday. Didn't see what was happening in city. Saw storm troopers in streets, celebrations, flags, banners, anthems.

38:00 - Left school at age 13 because of illness "bedwetting" which was common problem. Went to normal school in Potsdam. Emphasis on biology, history. "Racial purity" taught. Mendelian laws. Aryan purity. Germans only non-contaminated. Taught that German best.

42:20 - Jewish inferior, bloodsucking, not creative, exploitive. Visual images of fat, ugly and bad. Taught how Germany had suffered.

45:15 - Still a member of Hitler Youth after leaving the boarding school. Navy Hitler Youth changed to Calvary Hitler Youth.

46:55 - Indoctrination evenings to bolster morale of children. Potsdam not bombed but in 1943 went to Berlin to attend an opera and saw result of bombing. Was shocked at the sight.

48:45 - 1945, air raid in Potsdam. 80% of city destroyed. Began to deal with defeat. Russians came into Potsdam.

50:20 - Feelings expressed on going into the school at age 6, and on joining the Hitler Youth. While it was required by law, he wanted to join "it was fun!"

52:00 - Relations with brothers in school; not much contact. All brothers became bedwatters. Hated school because wanted to go home. Needed more attention. 1940-42 was spent near Vienna to get away from bombings. There was less control but generally same teaching. Becker's youngest brother died in 1943 of polio.

Tape two.

0:05 - Description of war's end. Injury, Russians enter, saw destruction in Potsdam.

1:30 - Raping and looting (1/2 of women were raped by Russians in first few days of occupation)

3:03 - Becker denounced by janitor as Nazi (the janitor was Communist). Becker interrogated and in prison twice. Therefore decided to leave. Becker had reputation as strong Nazi. Admitted that he was 150% Nazi.

4:45 - Re-education process. Programs to change little Nazi to little Democrat. But Nazi program was much stronger. Took two years to accept that crimes committed against the Jews. But never got over other issues.

7:00 - Never had children because world was too evil. Had grown up without love. Became historian to try to understand but difficult to come to terms with good and evil.

10:00 - Coming to U.S. Wanted to get out of Germany. Wanted to separate from past.

13:30 - Thoughts on how this happened. Historians view.

21:45 - Eternal vigilance necessary! Strong press, openness, citizens need to be politically active, need to remember that people are imperfect.

24:46 - Role as teacher.

25:30 - Haunted by what he could have done if he had been several years older. What would he have done? Doesn't know!

35:30 - Is their collective guilt in Germany today? No. War is over and part of past.

39:38 - Coming to South Carolina. Drafted into the Army. Went to college on G.I. bill. Graduate studies at Stanford. Took position at USC which had no German department. He started the area of German history at USC. Has been at USC for last 20 years.