

John M. Steiner collection
Interviews with former members of the SS, other Nazi officials, and witnesses to Nazi Germany
RG-50.593

The following is a draft English-language summary of an interview in German from the John M. Steiner collection. The translation has been not been verified for accuracy, and therefore, may contain errors. Nothing should be quoted or used from this summary without first checking it against the taped interview. Moreover, the description of events in the summary may not match the sequence of the audio files.

Interview with Will Frey, Captain in the Waffen-SS, recipient of the Ritterkreuz (Knight's Cross) medal

Recorded on June 29, 1982

Steiner asks when, how and why Fey joined the Waffen-SS; says that he wants to understand why other men joined, how they proved their worth, their ambitions, and how they were integrated and accepted into the Waffen-SS after serving in the Bundeswehr; asks whether there was a generational conflict between those officers who built up the SS (e.g. Bettrich, Steiner) and those who grew up under the Third Reich (e.g. Otto Kumm); says he has the impression that the older generation were militarily competent but not ideologically Nazis.

Fey talks about the war years, says that he was not a volunteer but was drafted in 1939; stayed in the Bundeswehr until March 1943 when he was wounded and picked up by a Waffen-SS tank unit; says he was very impressed with them – they were very collegial, not as hierarchical as the Bundeswehr; says they invited him to join them and he went to tank training school in April 1944, where he was judged to have leadership potential; recalls that this made him feel as though he won the lottery; says he was stationed in Boulogne when the Allies invaded Normandy, that his commander was seriously wounded and turned over his tank to Fey who says that he “grew into the job.” Says that this is when he began to really feel connected to the Nazi cause – at the beginning of the war, he had not felt welcome and that he was treated with disdain; says that now, he was part of an elite and took pride in having access to the best, most modern weapons.

Fey talks about the end of the war, says he spent the last weeks of the war fighting near Berlin. Says he was lucky that he did not have a blood type tattoo and that in May 1945, he stopped admitting that he was an SS man; said that there was no way you could survive if you were part of the Waffen-SS; says he pretended to be a civilian and returned home; says that a neighbor turned him in to the Americans and that he was arrested in early June 1945

Steiner asks why Fey was proud to be in the SS. Fey says that he valued the camaraderie, the aspirations, the willingness to serve; says it was like night and day compared to service in the Bundeswehr where your family origins and education determined your options; marvels that even

though he had not completed high school, he was sent to tank school; says that in the SS there were no class prejudices, that success was based on achievement.

Steiner asks whether he had any ideological ties to the Nazis. Fey says that he did not when he was in the Bundeswehr. However, these developed once he joined the SS; says that all his officers were Gottgläubig (the Nazi religious category for those Germans who withdrew from Christian churches but were not atheists) and that this appealed to him spiritually because he was too battle-hardened to take religious rituals seriously though he still believed in God; says that he was raised Protestant but that it meant nothing to him. Says that he was not predisposed to Nazism, that his father was a leftist, that he had been forbidden to join the Nazi youth movement. Says that it was only in 1942-1943, on the Russian front, that he began to believe in the Nazi vision; that he saw the ruin of the Communist dream in Russia and did not want Germany to become like that.

Steiner asks Fey about his attitude toward the Nazi racial theories; asks whether he heard about Einsatzgruppen or concentration camps. Fey says that he did not come across Einsatzgruppen, that he vaguely heard about camps, including Buchenwald, but thought that they were merely detention centers, not death camps. Says that he played with Jewish children; that after Kristallnacht and the Jews were taken away, people convinced themselves that they were just being relocated because they didn't fit in; says that he didn't get home often during the war and news about Jewish persecution did not reach them on the front; thinks that people at home probably knew more. Fey says that he met some Jews who returned after the war and that these encounters were friendly, though he did not admit that he had been in the SS, that he represented himself as just another soldier.

[conversation ends abruptly]