

John M. Steiner collection  
Interviews with former members of the SS, other Nazi officials, and witnesses to Nazi Germany  
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Interview with Harald von Saucken  
Recorded in 1976

Speaker says that he will discuss his autobiography, with emphasis on his membership in the Waffen SS from 1934 to 1947. He talks about touring Dachau in November 1942. He discusses his years as an American POW and his post-war career managing American businesses in Germany.

Says that he was born on April 23, 1915 in Heidelberg; that his parents divorced in 1921/2 and he spent his youth, either in boarding schools or with his mother. He lived in the Munich area, completed Gymnasium in Mainz in 1934, and then returned to his village, Oberallmanshausen on the Starnberger See. He wanted to continue his studies but had insufficient funds so he decided to join the military. He was deferred due to treaty limitations on the size of the Reichswehr and was very disappointed; however a neighbor told him that there was another avenue – the SS had a branch called the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* (SS-VT -SS Dispositional Troops). He went to visit Himmler, who accepted him, and got a letter ordering him to report in Berlin to the *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* (LSSAH), Adolf Hitler's personal bodyguard, on June 10, 1934. Politically, he felt very positive about the National Socialist party, as was common among 18 year olds. This was a time of need, suicide, unemployment and depression, and Germans were proud of the upswing in the economic picture since 1933. He says he had been a member of the SA since 1932.

He spent the next four months in training and describes it as a very hard time and an unimaginable education. Teachers were former military men and country police, and they were against him because he was destined to become an officer while they were stymied. Himmler's orders stated that he would begin officer training in Bad Toelz a year later and become a lieutenant. For the first three days, he was locked into a cellar without food or water. People stuck him with pins while they were supposed to be at attention, and he was punished for this. Says he lost between 25 and 30 pounds in the first 8 weeks though he was never heavy, and only

got 5 to 5.5 hours of sleep each night. One of his fellow officers-to-be jumped out of a window. Former military officers observed this cruel treatment and complained to Hitler. The ordeal ended abruptly after four months, and many instructors were punished. All the recruits were sent to other companies of the *Leibstandarte*.

Steiner asks why he put up with it and did not return home. He says that he had always assumed that military training would not be a piece of cake and that it had to be hard. He had an iron will to survive and noticed that he was increasingly able to rise to every physical challenge. It also taught him the limits of human tolerance and what was acceptable and what was demeaning. Starting in September, there was a second training course in Jueterbog – of the 6000 applicants only 800 were accepted. Though his comrades complained about how hard it was, he was happy to have completed the first course because this second one was for him positively restful. In the spring, 1935 they were all examined prior to going to Officers Training school. It was forbidden to wear glasses and he had to hide his nearsightedness. The doctor asked him to read a sign and he confidently read “Exit.” The sign, in fact, said “Smoking Prohibited.” The doctor said that despite his vision problem, however, he had proved that he was a decisive, fast thinker, and that he was going to recommend him for the War College.

He went to the Kriegsschule (War College) in Bad Toelz in April 1935 and studied tactics, weapons, map reading, drawing, and geography. He says that there was little discussion of ideology. A year later, he was ranked number one on the final exam and given a choice of his own unit. He picked the *Leibstandarte* from which he had come, and was a member of the 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Company until 1938.

Later in 1938 he was recruited as an inspections officer by the War College in Bad Toelz and stayed there until May, 1939, when he was sent to Juttabock where the SS Artillery Regiment 1 was set up – they needed young officers who had infantry and artillery training. At the beginning of August, the regiment was moved to East Prussia and on September 1 went to war against Poland. His adjutant was wounded and he was promoted to adjutant. At the end of the Polish campaign, they were moved to the border of Holland and they spent the winter training. In May 1940, the western front opened with an attack by their division on the Grebbeberg. During the French campaign, they were in the front lines and went to Biarritz St. Jean de Luz after the ceasefire. In October 1940, they occupied Holland and at the beginning of November, 1940, he was transferred to head up a new SS Artillery Regiment 5 Viking Division in the vicinity of Munich under General Felix Steiner.

They were transferred to Silesia in preparation for war with Russia and in June, crossed the border towards Lemberg (Lvov). He was injured in September 1941 at Dnepropetrovsk and after convalescing, was sent to SS War College in Bad Toelz where he taught tactics for a year, then he joined the 48<sup>th</sup> Panzer Corps in Stalingrad where he was supposed to complete his officer training. He was then recalled to Germany and travelled to Berlin where he insisted upon

knowing why. The reason given was that his sister was married to an Italian and he had maintained correspondence with her. He was shocked because he had received permission from Himmler himself to attend her wedding and because the Italians were still allies. He then contracted yellow fever and was hospitalized until November, 1942.

He says that he had heard rumors about the mistreatment of Jews and prisoners in concentration camps and that while the names of Buchenwald, Dachau, and Ravensbruck were familiar, no one really knew what went on there. He asked Himmler about this and Himmler replied calmly that the concentration camps were intended to reeducate asocial and criminal elements who are worthless to the state to become useful citizens who are reintegrated into society as soon as they complete their training. Himmler assured him that the conditions were decent and offered to provide a tour of Dachau.

Three days later, on November 12 they were bused to Dachau, where they were free to explore at will from 9am to 5pm and to speak with any and all inmates. He says that his impressions were not negative. Different types of inmates were designated by patches (Jews, gypsies, criminals) and were organized into work commandos. They had a shoe factory and other enterprises and they all looked well fed. The only thing that depressed him their black and white striped uniforms and shaved heads. The dormitories were spotless, they had clean bedding, and many received packages from abroad. He also says that he did not see any evidence of ovens though they ran around extensively and did not see any special locked areas.

He says he was sent to Belgium where he joined SS First Artillery Regiment. On June 4, 1944 he was severely wounded in Russia and is still 70% handicapped. In February, 1945 they were evacuated and he reached Berlin on his own. He had hoped to report to the SS personnel office to get another assignment on the front. He ran into a former doctor from his command who told him that he was crazy, that the war was lost and to be glad that he had a wound that would keep him out of combat and perhaps let him survive. That evening, during a heavy air raid, he talked with an Admiral who made a weekly political commentary on the radio and asked him why he continued to offer such optimistic predictions. The writer said that he had to pretend that the war would end well for, that the Ministry of Propaganda wrote his texts, that he'd be sent to a camp if he refused, and that someone else would just read the stuff.

He said he went the next day to the command center to ask what he should do next, without asking to return to the front and was informed that he was not allowed to serve, at home or at the front, because he had mistakenly been connected to the July 20, 1944 attempt on Hitler's life.

Eight days later he finally made it back to Chiemsee and to his wife. In May, 1945 he was taken prisoner by the Americans and sent to a camp at Bad Aibling, where he was elected the camp leader. He says that in the beginning, the relations with the American soldiers and the CIC (who were mostly Jews) was very tense, but it gradually improved. He recalls lengthy discussions with

two American Jews, Green and Strauss. Upon his release in 1947, they drove him home and had coffee with him. He was then tried before the local court and after 3-hours of negotiations, was classified as a “*Nazi Mitlaefer*,” (hanger on). Since there was no future for officers, he became a business man. He managed a number of businesses, and from 1961-1968 led an American firm that was developed for the German market. He recalls that many of the employees were Jews and it was very interesting to discuss the events of the Hitler years. He also recalls that when he was introduced in 1960, one of the bosses asked whether he was a fan of Hitler’s in 1933/4 and how long he believed in a German victory. He said that he was a fan as a young man and that he believed almost to the end that Germany would prevail. A year later, the American admitted that he understood how someone could have been pro-Hitler and said he asked him the question because he could not have worked with a dishonest man.

He concludes by saying that the interview is continued on the other side of the tape, but it is unknown whether that recording exists.