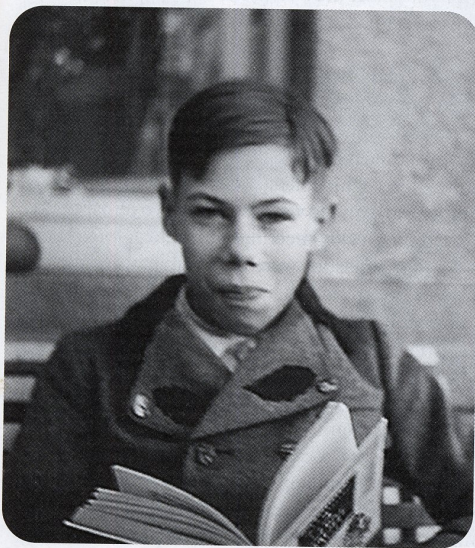




What was it like to grow up in Nazi Germany in a family quietly opposed to National Socialism? **Giles Milton** describes one boy's experience.

# INNOCENT IN A GUILTY WORLD



**Above: Robert Wagner, Reich commissar for the state of Baden, inspects a rally at Pforzheim in southern Germany, November 1934.**

**Left: Wolfram Aichele around the time the Nazi Party came to power.**

**T**he Reichstag elections of March 1933 occurred in an atmosphere of feverish excitement. Everyone in Germany felt that dramatic change was on the way, yet no one could be quite sure how this change would manifest itself. Some were hoping that Adolf Hitler would finally get the popular mandate he desired. Many more were praying that his share of the vote would collapse. The fact is often overlooked that when the election took place – amid unprecedented violence and intimidation – the Nazi Party scored only 44 per cent of the vote. Almost six out of every ten of those Germans who voted did not do so for Hitler.



Among the dissenters was the family of my father-in-law, Wolfram Aichele. Now 87, Wolfram was a nine-year-old boy at the time and remembers his family's cleaning lady urging his artist father, Erwin, to vote for the Communists. 'Vote Ernst Thalmann,' she would say. 'All artists vote for Thalmann.'

But Wolfram's father had no time for extremist parties. He was an old fashioned nationalist who had long wanted Hindenburg to rule Germany. In any case, those who had intended to vote Communist found themselves unexpectedly disenfranchised. The Reichstag fire provided Hitler with the excuse to introduce his infamous Decree for the Protection of People and State. This signalled the arrest of thousands of prominent Communists. It was also the death warrant of the old Weimar Republic.

At the time of the election, Wolfram's family lived in a rambling Italianate villa in Eutingen, a village in southern Germany. It was close to Pforzheim, a provincial town with a deeply conservative population. But aside from their politics there was nothing conservative about the lifestyle of Wolfram's parents. They were an eccentric couple whose unconventional behaviour had already attracted the attention of their neighbours. So, indeed, had their private zoo. As an animal and wildlife artist Wolfram's father needed models for his paintings – wild boar, deer and birds of prey. These were housed

**In September 1933 Hitler visited Pforzheim and the village of Eutingen where the Aicheles lived. The family were criticised by neighbours for not going to cheer him on.**

in enclosures and aviaries in the garden.

In the seclusion of their hilltop home, Wolfram's parents socialised with like-minded friends who shared their love of art, music and literature. Wolfram and his older brother and younger sister were encouraged to chat with the eclectic acquaintances who gathered here. Frau Aichele told her children to form their own opinions of the world. She did not want them to follow the crowd.

Although Hitler failed to win an overall majority in the March 1933 election, it was clear that dramatic change was now inevitable. Wolfram's father was alarmed. His clientele included many wealthy Jews, who collected his work and, like a number of them, he was also a freemason who enjoyed the weekly meetings at his local lodge. Both Jews and freemasons were now being targeted by the Nazis. Wolfram's mother, Marie Charlotte, was also concerned. A freethinker like her husband, she was deeply involved in the Rudolf Steiner education movement and was worried that it, too, would become a target with its emphasis on the liberty of individual thought, a world away from the Nazi ideology of *Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer*.

The idyllic atmosphere in Eutingen was shattered within hours of the election result. Nazi leaders immediately raised the swastika on public buildings

in nearby P announced antisemite, the state of to a crowd approval w from the w assumed fu purge of all Nazi Party. government than 72 ho announced ment and i deputies w newspaper were establ Jewish sho stores with Jewish goo

The mo Baden – ar on Wolfram Freemason promptly c that all free renounce t joining the membership Wolfram's means to a the Third The Na

in nearby Pforzheim. Shortly afterwards it was announced that Robert Heinrich Wagner, a fanatical antisemite, had been appointed Reich commissar for the state of Baden. Wagner's first public address was to a crowd of 3,000 supporters, who roared their approval when he unfurled an enormous swastika from the windows of his new ministry. He then assumed full police powers and began an instant purge of all officers who were not members of the Nazi Party. He next seized control of the regional government, claiming key ministerial posts. Less than 72 hours after the election results had been announced he was master of both Baden's government and its police force. Socialist and Communist deputies were arrested, Pforzheim's left-leaning newspapers were banned and three penal camps were established. Wagner also ordered a boycott of Jewish shops. Uniformed SA men stood outside the stores with banners reading: 'Those who still buy Jewish goods are good-for-nothings and traitors!'

The momentous political transformation of Baden – and of Germany – had its first direct effect on Wolfram's parents within weeks of the election. Freemasonry was banned and Erwin's lodge was promptly closed. The regime further announced that all freemasons who did not immediately renounce their lodges were forever forbidden from joining the Nazi Party with all the benefits that membership entailed. This was a stricture that Wolfram's father exploited to the full. He used it as a means to avoid joining the party for the entirety of the Third Reich.

The Nazi seizure of power soon had another



One of Wolfram's drawings of typical village life in Swabia made in 1935 when he was aged 11.

Erwin and Marie Charlotte Aichele, with Wolfram's siblings, Reiner and Gunhild, in the dining room of the family home during the war.



direct effect on Wolfram's father. For years, he had made a steady income from his illustrations for a well-known hunting magazine, *Das deutsche Weidwerk*. Now the publication abruptly disappeared from the newsstands, banned by Gestapo leader Hermann Göring because its publisher was Jewish. Even more alarming was the public burning of 'dirty and shame' books in Pforzheim's market square in May 1933. Many of Wolfram's mother's favourite authors, including Thomas Mann and Stefan Zweig, had been condemned. Now their books were burned. 'The difficult times went up with the flames,' wrote the Pforzheim journalist covering the story. 'New life, new writing, new faith will blossom from the ashes.' On several occasions the Gestapo forced their way into Wolfram's family home in order to search for banned books. But Marie Charlotte hid her favourite volumes in a secret cupboard under the dining room floorboards.

Wolfram was a dreamy child who was perpetually lost in his own imaginary world. He wanted to be an artist like his father and spent his weekends making copies of the medieval altarpieces in local churches. But when he reached 12, to his extreme annoyance, he was ordered to join the Hitler Youth – an obligation from which it was almost impossible to escape. 'All German young people,' declared Hitler, 'will be educated in the Hitler Youth.'

What particularly upset Wolfram was the fact that he could no longer spend his Saturdays drawing and painting. He complained to his father who asked a friend, Dr Vögtle, to write a letter excusing Wolfram from attendance on grounds of ill health. The doctor, who hated the Nazis, was more than willing to oblige. For the next 36 months Wolfram managed to avoid going to a single meeting. His case was unusual. For most youngsters, opting out was impossible.

Many of the changes to daily life were subtle but pervasive. Propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels declared that the new government 'no longer intends to leave people to their own devices.' True to his word, Nazi

ideology was brought to the fore in every sphere of personal activity. The regime banned the traditional Swabish greeting, 'Grussgott' (God be with you). Henceforth, everyone was obliged to say 'Heil Hitler'. Wolfram's parents avoided greeting close friends in such a fashion, but it was a different matter when Erwin went to work at the local art school. All state employees were obliged to use the new form of address.

Particularly upsetting was the fact that familiar street names were now changed. The principal thoroughfare in Pforzheim was renamed Adolf Hitler Avenue and one of the larger secondary schools in the town was also named after the Führer. There was also an Avenue Hermann Göring and a renamed Goebbels School.

Wolfram's mother had been right to fear for the Rudolf Steiner movement. In late 1935 Reinhard Heydrich, director of Third Reich security, declared that the Steiner movement was 'an enemy to the state' and had 'nothing whatsoever to do with the National Socialist rules on education'. By implication, all former members and associates, including Wolfram's parents, were enemies too. The Pforzheim branch was closed and smashed up by Nazi thugs with the full sanction of the regime.

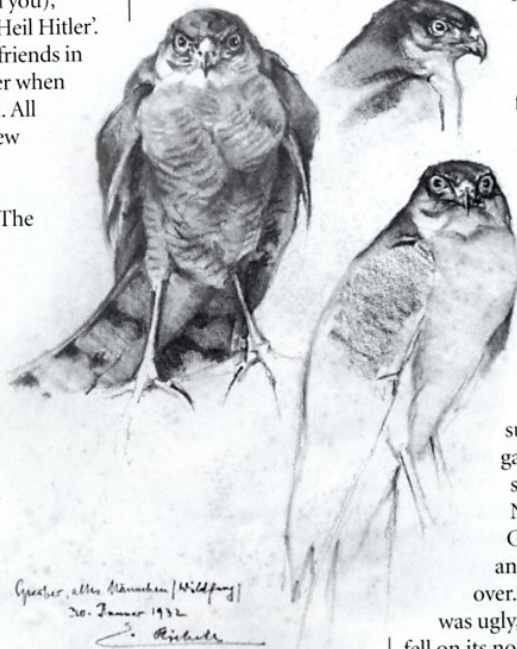
Education was an early target of the Nazis and was soon dominated by ideology. Wolfram remembers a visit from a German émigré newly arrived from southern Russia. Like many ethnic Germans living in

the Soviet Union, he had fled back to Germany in the wake of Stalin's persecution. The Nazis exploited the return of ethnic Germans to the Fatherland, publicising in dramatic fashion the massacres instigated by Stalin. Wolfram and his young school friends were shown images of mutilated corpses, the results of the massacres, and told harrowing stories of cannibalism. The Nazis wanted German youth to grow up with an intrinsic fear of Communism but exhibiting these gruesome photographs to primary school children disgusted Wolfram's mother. The photographs were so vivid that Wolfram had nightmares for weeks afterwards.

Some of Wolfram's friends were subjected to even more dramatic propaganda. The teacher in one Pforzheim school adapted the Bible to conform with Nazi ideology. He told his pupils that God was very tired after making Adam and Eve but still had a lump of clay left over. He tried to make a third figure but it was ugly, so he threw it into the corner where it fell on its nose making it crooked. The children listened to the story wide-eyed, never having heard this particular version of creation. The teacher then told them that the misshapen creature had slowly come to life. God was appalled and said to it: 'Go to hell, you Jew!'

The Nazi state required everyone to be active participants in the new ideology. Even a little backwater like Eutingen could not escape its reaches. A local functionary, August Issel, was determined to impose Nazi ideology on the village. In the summer of 1937 it came to his attention that Wolfram's parents had refused to fly the swastika from their property. They were ordered – on pain of severe punishment – to obey the law. Erwin decided to comply in his own idiosyncratic way. He erected a flagpole, painted it in tar and then hoisted the flag. It was a windy day and by the end of it the swastika had stuck fast to the pole. Such an act was considered subversive: non-participation in the Nazi revolution was now a criminal act and opting out was not an option. It brought the Aicheles increased surveillance and visits from the Gestapo.

Wolfram awoke on the morning of November 10th, 1938 unaware that anything untoward had occurred during the night. But when he arrived at the carpentry workshop (where he had been working since the age of 14) the owner was in an agitated state. He confided to Wolfram that he had been kept awake all night by the sound of breaking glass. The smashing of windows was only a part of the story of *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass. Brownshirts had vandalised shops, blown up the Pforzheim synagogue and broken into Jewish apartments. Two dozen Pforzheim Jews were arrested on trumped-up charges and sent to Dachau concentration camp. More were



*Greifvogel, aller Mänchen / Wildfang  
20. Januar 1932  
E. Aichele*

**Erwin Aichele's sketches of a falcon. He regularly illustrated a Jewish-owned hunting magazine until it was banned by the Nazis. Below: the artist at work in the gardens of his villa, c.1930.**



beaten s  
what ha  
Of th  
some 7,  
the 800  
Doctor  
friends  
still hac  
their ho  
was a p  
The do  
Erwin.  
Kup  
menac  
they w  
were to  
along  
hours  
realise  
tion o  
the Fi  
poison  
Th  
arrest  
gende  
Aron  
escor  
three  
ment  
show  
The c



**Nazi SA members threatening potential customers outside a Jewish-owned shop in Pforzheim, c.1933.**

beaten senseless. Many in Pforzheim were appalled by what happened that night.

Of the 20,000 Jews who lived in Baden in 1933, some 7,000 had left by 1938. After Kristallnacht 231 of the 800 still living in Pforzheim now decided to go. Doctors, lawyers, physicians, a number of them friends of Wolfram's father, fled Germany while they still had the chance. But a few could not bear to leave their homeland. Among those who decided to stay was a physician, Dr Kuppenheim, and his wife, Lily. The doctor, a fellow freemason, was a good friend of Erwin Aichele.

Kuppenheim and Lily intended to wait for the Nazi menace to burn itself out. But on October 22nd, 1940, they were woken by two policemen at the door. They were told that they were to be deported from Germany along with the rest of Pforzheim's Jews. They had two hours to pack a few belongings. Dr Kuppenheim realised that the future looked bleak. He had no intention of being deported. He laid out all his medals from the First World War, then he and his wife swallowed poison. A few hours later they were dead.

The same day the rest of Pforzheim's Jews were arrested and deported without regard for age or gender. Among those taken was 85-year-old Gustav Aron and Blondine Emsheimer, aged 88. They were escorted to the railway station where they began a three-day journey to Camp Gurs, a bleak internment camp in the Pyrenees. Once again Wagner had shown himself a ruthless exponent of antisemitism. The deportation of Pforzheim's Jewish population

occurred fully 15 months before the Wannsee Conference that determined the extermination of all Jews living under Nazi rule.

Wolfram heard nothing more of the deportees. No one dared asked any questions about them. Even among close friends certain subjects were strictly taboo. There was no news of what happened to them until after the war. By then all but a handful had been killed. The outbreak of war came as an unwelcome surprise to everyone in Pforzheim. But for youngsters like Wolfram there were still a few bright moments. His childhood dream of being an artist was fast becoming a reality.

He was accepted on a wood-sculpting course in Bavaria and proved to be one of the most gifted students of his year. But he knew it would only be a matter of time before he was conscripted into the military. The summons came in February 1942, at a time when Hitler's Russian offensive was becoming a disaster. Wolfram never doubted that he would be sent to the Eastern front. When his mother heard the news she was distraught, though she put a brave face on it. 'In this day and age,' she wrote to her son, 'you have to take things as they come ... You must remember that I shall still be thinking of you, even when you're abroad.'

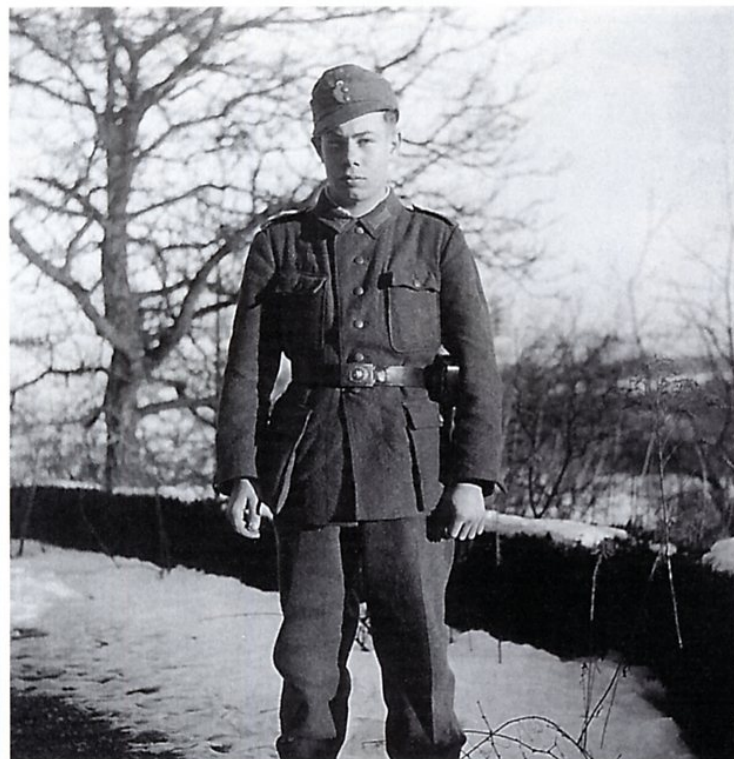
Wolfram and his comrades began a three-day voyage to the Crimea, where a tremendous battle was taking place between the Wehrmacht and the Russians. The young conscripts were loaded onto overcrowded transport trains, 40 men to a wagon.

Each carriage was divided into narrow, coffin-like compartments. Wolfram got his first shock as the train drew to a halt at the bleak frontier town of Brest-Litovsk, just inside Belorussia. Jewish women, all marked with yellow stars sewn onto their coats, were cleaning dirt from the tracks. They were in a pitiful condition – a visible testimony to months of hunger and harsh treatment. Wolfram’s eye was drawn to another group of Jews engaged in a desperate brawl over empty food tins that had been thrown out of the train by the German soldiers. They were wiping the insides of the tins with their fingers in the hope of finding some nourishment.

Wolfram and his comrades made their way from the station into the town. Here they witnessed a further grim example of human misery and cruelty. The newly installed German overlords were treating the enforced labourers, many of them Jews, with ruthless severity. The most brutal guards were the ethnic Germans who had lived in Brest-Litovsk for generations. Wolfram was horrified to see how they behaved towards their Soviet prisoners of war. An old man was throwing shovelfuls of earth up from the trench. Each time he paused to catch his breath the guard smashed him across the head with a spade.

Although Wolfram did not know it at the time these prisoners of war were actually among the more fortunate of the hundreds of thousands captured by the German army. When Minsk was taken in June 1941 300,000 Soviet troops were taken prisoner. After they seized Bryansk and Vyazma the Germans netted a further 650,000 men. Most were starved to death, murdered in cold blood or imprisoned without shelter.

Wolfram on leave in February 1944, the last time his parents were to see him for over two years.



Back in Eutingen the girls of the village were ordered to go from door to door collecting donations for German soldiers on the Russian front. People were expected to donate everything they had. If they did not, it was forcibly confiscated. This policy caused a great deal of ill-will against the regime in the village. The Aicheles’ neighbours whispered: ‘This cannot make you win a war.’ But they were afraid to say such things openly.

Nineteen-year-old Wolfram had not long been in the war-shattered Crimea before he contracted diphtheria, collapsing into a coma soon afterwards. One of the nurses caring for him sent a letter to his parents warning them to prepare themselves for the imminent death of their son. However, weak and semi-conscious, Wolfram clung to life. By mid-November, after many months, it was clear that he had passed the most critical point of his illness. As he recovered he learned that he had escaped the horrors of Stalingrad. All his comrades had been sent to join the battle: only one had survived.

By the time Wolfram was fit to return to the army, the German Reich was facing a new danger. Hitler, aware of Allied plans for the invasion of Normandy, ordered all available manpower to the French coast. Wolfram was now serving as a communications officer with the 77th Infantry Division. It was a dangerous job: the communications teams were often the first to be targeted on the battlefield.

Wolfram’s next troubles started on June 17th, 1944, 11 days after the Allied landings. He and his comrades had been sent westwards to confront the American forces on Utah Beach, but they had no maps and soon got hopelessly lost. Without realising they crossed inside the American beachhead and inadvertently placed themselves in a trap. The Americans had tracked their movements, waiting for the best moment to strike. It came soon enough. Wolfram and a splinter group from the regiment marching with him were in a narrow country lane when scores of American fighter-bombers screeched towards them at low altitude. Wolfram flung himself into a ditch. As he did so, exploding shells, grenades and machine-gun fire rattled down.

When Wolfram dared to raise his head he saw that the lane had turned into a scene of carnage. Survival was pot luck. Some of the best-concealed men had been killed instantly. Others, more exposed, managed to escape. The 77th Infantry Division, which had been moving in dozens of little bands across the region, was decimated in less than an hour. It suffered such heavy casualties, along with the loss of almost all its vehicles and artillery, that it was no longer a viable fighting force.

Wolfram’s time as a conscript was almost over. Soon after the attack he was able to surrender to the Americans (to his immense relief) and begin a long spell as a prisoner of war, first in England and then in the US. It was while he was interned in an Oklahoma prison camp that his home town of Pforzheim was to meet a terrible fate. On February 23rd, 1945 the RAF unleashed one of its heaviest incendiary



bom  
min  
man  
In  
Wol  
destr  
reac  
desc  
horr  
rubb  
horr  
child  
dren  
T  
hun  
extr  
in th  
Mar  
not,  
trou  
I  
four  
web  
had  
fran  
Thi  
mar  
mor



bombing raids on the town. In the space of 20 minutes 17,000 people were wiped out – including many family friends.

In their home in Eutingen two miles away Wolfram's parents witnessed the horrors of the destruction and afterwards shielded survivors who reached their hilltop retreat. Their letters to Wolfram described the sense of loss and the futility of war: 'A horrible sight,' wrote his mother. 'Climbing over rubble, walking over corpses. There is no end to the horror. Whole families have died, but there are also children without parents and parents without children. So many have died.'

The most shocking sight – one she witnessed hundreds of times – was that of corpses shrunk by extreme heat to the size of babies. Some of those killed in the bombing had voted for Hitler in the elections in March 1933. Many more, like Wolfram's parents, had not, from the outset viewing the Nazis as political troublemakers who would lead Germany back to war.

In the wake of that infamous election, they found that the Fatherland had been wrapped in a web of darkness. They despised Hitler for what he had done to their country. They had become disenfranchised outcasts in their own land. Under the Third Reich they had precious little room for manoeuvre. They were forced to compromise their morals, their ideals and their beliefs. 'Heil Hitler'

**Pforzheim was destroyed in an RAF bombing raid on the night of February 23rd at a cost of 17,000 lives.**

never tripped lightly off their tongues.

Wolfram's father managed to escape joining the Nazi party for the duration of the Third Reich – a considerable achievement given that he was a state-employed art teacher. Wolfram kept his integrity by dreaming of art. For four years he had lived in his imagination, yearning for the day when he might return to his studies. When he was finally repatriated to Germany in the summer of 1946 he immediately recommenced the sculpting studies that had been interrupted by Hitler's war.

The class was very different from the one he had left. Several students had been killed. Many more were now disabled. But for him the nightmare was over. He could now – at last – begin his life as an artist.

Giles Milton is the author of *Wolfram: The Boy Who Went to War* (Hodder and Stoughton), 2011.

**Further Reading** Christine Bielenberg, *The Past is Myself*, (Chatto and Windus, 1968); Wibke Bruhus, *My Father's Country: The Story of a German Family* (Cornerstone, 2009); Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002); Irmgard Hunt, *On Hitler's Mountain: My Nazi Childhood* (Atlantic, 2006); Victor Klemperer, *Victor; I Shall Bear Witness: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1933-1941* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998); Henry Metelmann, *A Hitler Youth* (Caliban Books, 1997).

For further articles on this subject, visit:  
[www.historytoday.com/nazism](http://www.historytoday.com/nazism)