

THE BROWN PEST--Organizing the Hitler Youth

MONDAY, APRIL 20, 1936. It was Adolf Hitler's birthday, and, all across Germany, special torchlight ceremonies were about to take place. In towns and villages, large halls or great castles were decorated with torches and banners. On this day, boys, ages ten to fourteen, were sworn into the *Jungvolk* (Young People) and girls, ten to fourteen, the *Jungmädel* (Young Maidens).

In Hamburg, Karl Schnibbe, now twelve, could hardly wait for the ceremony to begin. When Nazi leaders came through his neighborhood to register the eligible children, he signed up right away, even though his father did not approve. "It was very exciting," said Karl. The overnight camping trips, campfires, and parades sounded like a great deal of fun."

Karl stood in a large hall crowded with boys and girls as parents and Nazi party members milled about. Karl spotted the blood banner standing in a special place of honor at the front of the room. The Blood Banner was a flag that was supposedly dipped in the blood of Herbert Norkus and other martyrs who had sacrificed their lives for the Nazi Party.

The room quieted as the ceremony began. First, a Nazi Party leader gave a short speech. Then, one by one, each boy and girl stepped forward to take the Hitler Youth oath. Karl recalled how he had gripped the Blood banner with his left hand and raised three fingers of his right hand and recited the oath: "In the presence of this blood banner, which represents our Fuhrer, I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the Savior of our country, Adolph Hitler. I am willing and ready to give up my life for him, so help me God."

When all *Jungvolk* and *Jungmädel* had recited the oath, the trumpets blared a fanfare, and a military band burst out in National Socialist songs. The children were now members of the Hitler Youth.

During the trial period, each boy and girl had to pass a written examination to make sure they had mastered Nazi ideas about race and politics. They also had to prove their racial background. Although membership was voluntary, not every child could join the Hitler Youth. Only healthy boys and girls of proven "Aryan" descent were permitted to join.

"We had to get an *Abnenpass*, a stamped and signed official document that proved our racial heritage," said Henry Metelmann. "We had to write to check with the church registers. What the Nazi authorities were looking for, of course, were Jewish names."

Today scientists agree that "race" is a meaningless concept since human differences are only skin deep, but the Nazis defined the Aryan race as Nordic or Caucasian people with no mixture of Jewish ancestry. The Nazis considered the Aryan race to be the "master race." They claimed that blond hair and blue eyes distinguished the "purest" Aryans. The Hitler Youth were taught that the Aryan race was superior to all other races.

The boys and girls also had to prove that they were healthy and had no hereditary diseases. Some physically disabled children were allowed to join a special section—the Disabled and Infirm Hitler Youth—as long as they passed the racial tests. Blind and deaf children could join provided their disability was not inherited. Mentally handicapped children could not join, no matter how loyal their parents were to the Nazi Party.



Under Nazi supervision, a Hitler Youth signs a statement that he is pure Aryan. Nonmembers were considered outcasts and faced limited school and work opportunities.

Jews were not allowed to join the Hitler Youth, not even a *Mischling* or "half-breed" child who had one non-Jewish parent, no matter how Aryan the child looked. Even Jews who had converted to Christianity or did not otherwise practice the Jewish faith could not join. Many Jewish and half-Jewish children were devastated. "Being an outcast, not being able to participate when my good friends had become leaders, was depressing," said Hermann Rosenau, whose father was Jewish but mother was not.

During the trial period, boys and girls demonstrated their physical fitness: They ran races, threw baseballs, swam, and performed gymnastics stunts. Girls completed a two-hour hike, whereas boys undertook a three-day cross-country hike. Boys also passed a courage test by jumping down one or two stories onto a canvas or into water.

"We were required to dive off the three-meter board about ten feet high] headfirst into the town's swimming pool," said Alfons Heck. "There were some stinging belly flops, but the pain was worth it when our leader handed us the coveted dagger with its inscription BLOOD AND HONOR. From that moment on, we were fully accepted."

Some children were rejected if their parents were not good enough Nazis or if they had "objectionable political attitudes." This meant parents who were not members of the Nazi Party or who had friends who were Jews or practiced the Jehovah's Witness faith. Not wanting to be outcasts, children begged their parents to join the Nazi Party and act like good Nazis.

The Hitler Youth philosophy maintained that youth must be led by youth. Meetings, called "Home Evenings," took place in cellars, barns, empty buildings, and other places far away from adults. The meetings were run by leaders not much older than the other members. "The leader of the group that I belonged to was a boy who was seventeen," said one Hitler Youth. "He was my mentor in every respect.... He exerted more influence over me than any person, parent, teacher, or anyone else of the older generation."

Each month, the Hitler Youth headquarters sent letters to the leaders, spelling out how to run the meetings. At the meetings, the children sang songs, played games, learned slogans, listened to readings, and read propaganda leaflets—all intended to teach them how to be good Nazis.

The children also listened to special Hitler Youth radio broadcasts on official Nazi radio sets, called the People's Radio. These inexpensive radios could only be tuned to radio stations approved by the Nazi Party. Eventually, the law would forbid Germans from listening to foreign news or other "impure" or "un-German" broadcasts.

The Nazis knew what appealed to kids—uniforms, flags, bands, badges, weapons, and stories about heroes—and they offered plenty. They organized the Hitler Youth as an army, complete with regiments. A boy could rise from the simple rank of *Pimpf* (boy) to lead a squad, platoon, company, battalion, or even a regiment. A girl could rise from *Model* (maiden) to become a BDM leader.

But the Hitler Youth did not tolerate originality or individuality. Through military drills and marches, the Hitler Youth learned to think and act as one. Most important, they learned to obey their leader, no matter what. The Nazis called this philosophy the "leadership principle," and it required absolute obedience to superiors.

"We accepted it as a natural law," said Alfons Heck. "It was the only way to avoid chaos. The chain of command started at the very bottom and ended with Hitler."

On one occasion, the leader of Alfons's unit became angry at the boys' unenthusiastic singing. As punishment, he ordered all 160 boys to march into an ice-cold river. "We cursed him bitterly under our breath," said Alfons, "but not one of us refused. That would have been the unthinkable crime of disobeying a direct order."

Hitler Youth boys received training that prepared them for military life, whereas girls were trained to become good wives and mothers. But physical fitness was stressed for each group: Girls and boys hiked, camped out, and participated in competitive field exercises. The activities toughened up kids, building their endurance and determination.

The Home Evening meetings bored Melita Maschmann, but she enjoyed the weekend activities. "I remember with more pleasure the weekend outings, with hikes, sports, campfires, and youth hosteling," she said.

Melita especially liked the sports, when the girls' groups competed against neighboring girls' leagues, playing games such as "capture the flag." She noted that the girls fought over the flag as fiercely as the boys did. "If there was any rivalry between the girls, the game often degenerated into a first-class brawl," said Melita,

Every athletic event became an exercise in patriotism. "We did it all for Germany," said Sasha Schwarz. "We ran for Germany. We did the long jump and the high jump for Germany."

The boys' groups divided into platoons for war games, and they hunted down the "enemy." When the games erupted into fistfights, it became survival of the fittest: Stronger boys often pummeled weaker boys, throwing them to the ground. Ripped shirts, scrapes, bruises, and bloody noses abounded. "Like most ten-year-olds, I craved action, and the Hitler Youth had that in abundance," said Alfons Heck.

Karl Schnibbe agreed. "On weekends, we went on overnight hikes, slept in tents, fought mock battles, and marched to the beat of the parade-corps drums," he said. "We shot air rifles. We had campfires and large bonfires and sang patriotic songs. As we got older, we learned to read maps."

At fourteen, the boys advanced to the *Hitlerjugend* where they stayed until age eighteen. There, the military training continued, "We met together, marched and played together," said Henry Metelmann. "We were instructed about military formations and how soldiers move in the countryside unseen. We learned how to shoot, throw hand grenades, and how to storm trenches.' The boys earned prestigious Hitler Youth merit badges for outstanding performance.

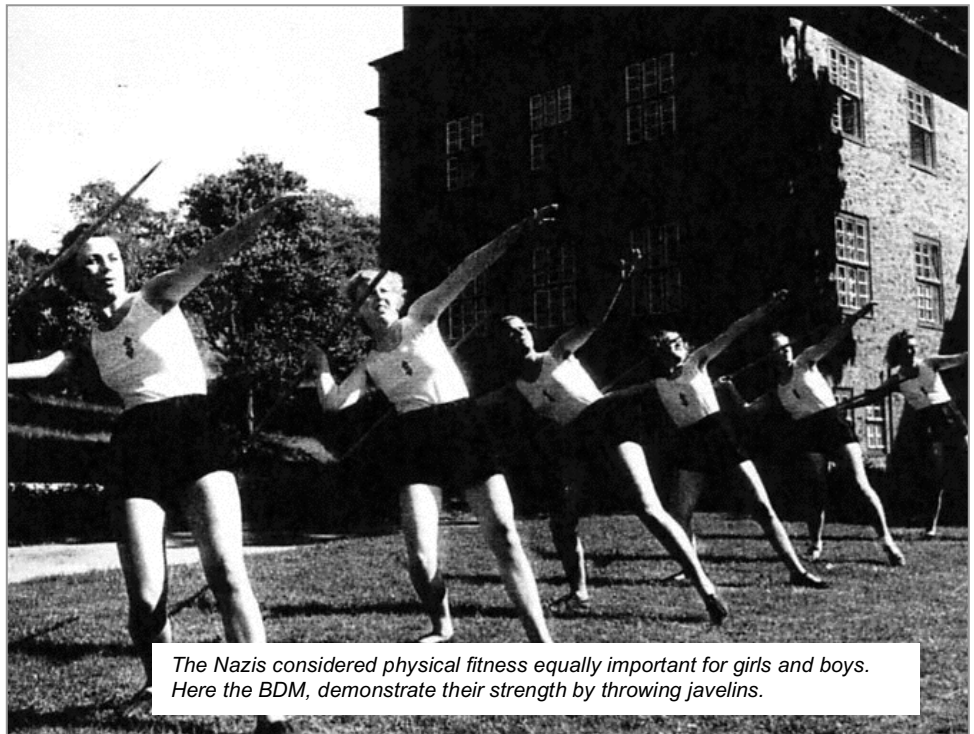
At fourteen, girls advanced to the BDM, where they stayed until age twenty-one. They worked on efficiency badges in sports, Nazi ideology, nursing, household training, social work, and later, air-raid training,

At seventeen, the girls could join the Faith and Beauty group, which promoted physical grace through instruction in dancing, hygiene, and charm. The Faith and Beauty group was intended to make young women strong, beautiful, proud, and self-reliant. One of Hitler's mottos was that the German woman does not smoke, does not drink, and does not paint herself with makeup.

Initially the outside world was impressed with Hitler and the Hitler Youth. They saw that Germany's young people were motivated and disciplined. In 1934, a visiting American reporter commented on German youth: "Children and young men no longer loaf on street corners," noted Kenneth Roberts. "They no longer roam through the towns, hunting for mischief. They are in uniform, marching with the Hitler Youth. They have no time for cigarettes, dancing, flasks, lipsticks, automobiles, or movies."

Many parents liked what they saw in their children; the discipline, physical fitness, diligence, pursuit of excellence, pride in national heritage, and a sense of purpose. But other parents considered the Hitler Youth too militaristic. They didn't want their children drilled in hand-grenade throwing, rifle shooting, and other warlike activities. They recalled the horror of the Great War, as World War I was then called, and they didn't want their children prepared for another such war.

Some parents tried in vain to discourage their children from joining. "Father tried to ram into me that there was no glory nor heroism in war and battle," said Henry Metelmann. "Only madness, desperation, fright, and unbelievable brutality." Despite his father's warnings, Henry found himself drawn to the Hitler Youth. "I was carried away by it all," he said. "It did not take me long before I wore the striking uniform of the Hitler Youth.... I could only promise my father that I would think about what he had told me."



It was the same for the five Scholl brothers and sisters. "We entered into the Hitler Youth with body and soul," said Inge Scholl, the oldest. "And we could not understand why our father did not approve, why he was not happy and proud.... Sometimes he would compare Hitler with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, who, with his flute, led the children to destruction."

For some parents, it was a financial hardship to purchase the required uniform and pay ten pfennig, or pennies, as monthly dues. They objected to the mandatory meetings and activities that interfered with chores around the house on Sundays. Plus, some parents grew angry when the Hitler Youth purposely disrupted Sunday services by playing their trumpets loudly outside the church.

"I thought all of this was marvelous," said Manfred Rommel, who was the son of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, commander in chief of the German armies during World War II. When Manfred told his famous father about the trumpet playing, his father grew angry, saying, "I don't want to hear it!"

The Catholic Church forbade its young people to join the Hitler Youth. It offered similar group activities, but children and teenagers still flocked to the Hitler Youth, finding its marches, rallies, and meetings irresistible. "I frequently served Mass early Sunday, wearing my full uniform—including belt and dagger—beneath my altar boy robes," said Alfons Heck.

On February 27, 1933, one month after Hitler's appointment, a known Communist and arsonist set fire to the Reichstag, the parliamentary building. Claiming a Communist plot, Hitler declared a national emergency. He asked the Reichstag members to suspend civil rights, and they did. They took away the sanctity of home, privacy of mail and telephone conversations, and the freedom of speech, press, and assembly.



In this family photograph, taken around 1932, Inge Scholl (back left), about fifteen years old, poses with her four younger siblings: Hans and Elisabeth stand next to Inge, and Sophie and Werner stand in the front.



At the next month's election, the Germans voted more Nazis into office. Hitler then asked the Nazi-controlled Reichstag to pass an enabling law that gave Hitler the sole power to make laws. They agreed. Hitler was now Führer, or Supreme Leader, of Nazi Germany. Hitler still didn't have complete power, but that would come the following year after President Paul von Hindenburg died. In 1934, Hitler became both chancellor and president of Germany.

As Führer, Hitler warned to achieve *Gleichschaltung* or "conformity," in all aspects of German society. He began by eliminating all other youth groups except for the Hitler Youth, saying, "It is important to bring every member of the new generation under the spell of National Socialism in order that they may never be spiritually seduced by any of the old generation." To accomplish this, Hitler turned to twenty-six-year-old Baldur von Schirach, leader of the Hitler Youth. It was Schirach's job to educate Hitler Youth in the spirit of National Socialism.

The Reichstag burns, set on fire by Marinus van der Lubbe, who confessed and was later executed. Immediately afterward, Hitler outlawed the Communist Party and arrested its leaders, executing hundreds and sending

Under Schirach's direction, fifty Hitler Youth members stormed the Berlin headquarters of the Committee of German Youth Association on April 3, 1933. They ransacked the offices and confiscated files on six million young Germans who belonged to rival groups. The files contained personal information, making life dangerous for those young people.

As a result of the raid, more than four hundred other youth groups—mostly political and religious groups—vanished. Many youth groups joined ranks with the Hitler Youth: As a result of such pressure, the Hitler Youth and BDM quickly grew into the largest and most powerful organization for young people ever known. By 1935, it numbered nearly four million members—nearly 50 percent of all German youth, age ten to eighteen. But Hitler wanted more.

On December 1, 1936, Hitler passed a law requiring all healthy young Germans (excluding Jews) "to be educated physically, intellectually, and morally in the spirit of National Socialism." The new law ended any agreement between Hitler and the Catholic Church. Now, parents who prevented their children from joining the Hitler Youth were threatened with heavy prison sentences. Three years later, a tougher second law warned parents who did not comply that their children would be taken from them.

As a result of the two laws, nearly eight million children donned the brown uniforms of the Hitler Youth in 1939. "My father did not like the idea that I should join what he called the Brown Pest," said Henry Metelmann. "But he relented because he thought it unwise not to."

An American reporter remarked on the army of Hitler Youth. "German youth is Hitler Youth," noted Kenneth Roberts. "'Wherever you go in Germany, you see their mustard-colored uniforms and hear their heavy boots pounding on the cobbles, clop, clop, clop, clop.'"

Yet some young people like Kari Schnibbe grew tired of the pressure. "The shouting and ordering no longer appealed to me," said Karl. One year after he joined, Karl began to skip the mandatory meetings, a decision that angered his unit leader. Then one day, he disobeyed a direct order to wear his uniform. As punishment, his leader ordered him to run laps around a drill field.

"My tormentor was no older than I was, so I told him to leave me alone," said Kari. "He yelled at me, and I told him to shut up. He then yelled even louder, and so I punched him in the face."

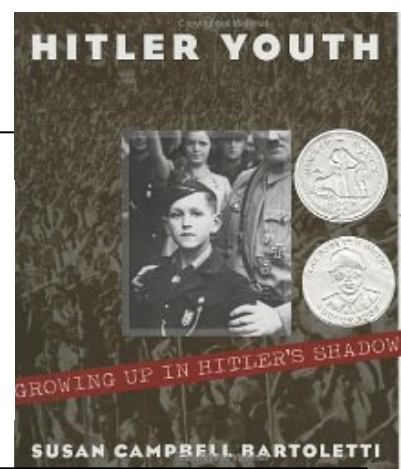
Karl was drummed out of the Hitler Youth for insubordination, and a dismissal letter was placed in his file. But Kari was happy to be free. "Thereafter, whenever they were drilling, I went past, dressed in my civies," he said. "I always stopped and smirked at them."

In 1941, when the Gestapo arrested Karl for a different offense, the dismissal letter from the Hitler Youth was used against him as proof that he was not a loyal German. It was an accusation that could bring jail or even the death penalty.



In this undated photograph Hitler Youth learn to throw stick grenades under the direction of Nazi soldiers.

This reading is excerpted from:



Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow
Susan Campbell Bartoletti