

*This is how  
I experienced my time*

\*\*\*\*\*

A glance backwards  
of a representative  
of the war (WW II) generation

By  
Hans Jürgen Dehning  
Born in 1924

Bremen, Germany

This story of Hans' life during and after

World War II

was published in the June 1995,

December 1995 and April 1996

issues of the German Dehning

Family Newsletter.

It was re-typed and condensed

into this small booklet by

Orval Dehning

April 2001.

My father was a conservative, formed by Prussian ideals, but very liberal and open-minded. In 1926 he came to Bremen as an inspector of all primary schools in Bremen. He had a friend, a teacher in a grammar school, who soon became a Nazi and wanted to convince my father that he should join the Nazi party was well. But my father said no. He was a follower of Hindenburg, a field marshal of the first world war, who then was the president of Germany.

In 1933 Hitler became chancellor of the Reich. My father's friend became the inspector of all schools in Bremen. He said to my father, "If you don't become a member of the party, you can't be an inspector of the primary schools any longer."

We were a family with four children, our house was highly mortgaged. So he had to give in and became a member of the party.

My mother had an instinctive dislike for all uniforms. She was shocked to see her husband in the uniform of a man who had to care for the poor. That's why he wore it only once. His work in the Nazi charity organization was his only activity for the Nazis.

Under the Nazi rule, after 1933, all schools had to teach the Nazi doctrine. So they managed to indoctrinate the majority of the young generation. Everybody had to be a member of the "Hitlerjugend", a Nazi organization for young people. The main aims of education were expressed in such slogans as:

"I live to do my duty; tough like leather, quick like greyhounds, hard like steel; what doesn't kill me, makes me stronger; you are nothing, your people is everything; for Führer, People and Fatherland".

The following story illustrates the power of the Hitlerjugend in the state:

For some years the Saturday was without school, it was the day for the Hitlerjugend. We were trained to become tough and obedient. One Saturday we had to march for many hours, then a speech by a "leader" and back again. Dead tired and frustrated, we came home in the evening. It had been sheer waste of time.

My father, the school inspector, wrote a letter to the boss of the Hitlerjugend, complaining about this nonsense. He got a letter from the highest "leader", a pupil in the last class of a grammar school. He wrote that it was none of his business. He should stop interfering, otherwise he would have to take the consequences.

Only very few teachers, if they were in opposition, had the courage of their convictions. I remember one who said we shouldn't believe everything, but have a look behind the things. We thought that unsuitable. There was nobody who gave him away, but these people lived in constant danger.

The church was not very important to us. We learnt a lot about Christianity, but there was no critical relation between Christian values and the reality of Nazism.

We lived in complete isolation in our country. The new radio was an instrument for propaganda. The technique of the new radio was in the beginning. We couldn't hear any radio from abroad.

The press was completely under the control of the Nazi regime. Very few foreigners visited our country. When I once saw a hockey team from India, I was much impressed by the brown colour of their skins.

We could not think of a trip abroad. We were only allowed to take 10 Mark with us.

By his incredible success Hitler became more and more the admired Fuhrer. Within two years the 6 million redundant workers had got a job. Economy was flourishing. The Treaty of Versailles that had been imposed upon Germany in 1919 and that was considered a disgrace was page after page torn to pieces: The Saarland and the Rhineland came back under German authority, and then Austria and the Sudetenland ( a mountainous region of N and NW Czechoslovakia) "came home" to Germany.

Hitler overcame the desperate economical situation and restored the injured self-respect of the German people. Thus the wrongdoings - if at all people got to know them - paled to insignificance. In the wake of Hitler's continuous unbelievable success almost everybody turned to be his follower. And that's what happened with my father.

In April 1942, I was called to duty, 18 years old. I was not enthusiastic, but ready to do what couldn't be altered and to do my duty for the Führer, the People and the Fatherland. It took some time until we realized that a whole generation had been deceived, misused and sacrificed for a criminal delusion.



My elder brother, Karsten, volunteered in 1941 to be a pilot. He was shot down as a fighter pilot in North Africa in 1943 and died.

My younger brother, Hartwig, had to be a soldier in 1943. He became a fighter pilot, too. But because of lack of petrol it was not possible for many fighters to start. In 1945, he was taken prisoner by the Americans. Was it that the American soldiers had not got enough food for the hundred thousands of prisoners or was it kind of revenge? It was a short but dreadful time: hunger, cold, rain in the open air, but then they were sent home.

My brother-in-law, an officer, got severely wounded in Russia. The last two years of the war he was in the West.

During the war we had to fight with the daily necessities and troubles. There was no time for political discussion. With my military unit I had to go to Russia, we moved forward almost to the Caucasus mountains. In 1943 we had to retreat, through the Crimea to the delta of the Danube, through Rumania to Yugoslavia. It was a terrible time. As a soldier of the lowest rank, I suffered very much from the slavish obedience. There was lot of superficial and loud gaiety, some comradeship and even friendship, but first of all life was depressing, humiliating, full of suffering, fear and dread. But what could we do? And didn't we have to bear it for a great aim, as we thought?

After the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943, I heard someone secretly saying that he doubted the German victory. I contradicted, saying that you mustn't lose confidence after the first great defeat. A comrade of mine told me about the suffering of his parents under the Nazi rule and he said that the whole thing was foul from the very beginning. I had never before heard something like that.

In October 1944, I was taken prisoner in Yugoslavia after two years on the Russian front.

As the partisans were not recognized as soldiers, they were usually not taken prisoners but immediately shot. The partisans did the same with the German soldiers whenever they were taken prisoners. I experienced this cruel practice myself when the partisans caught me in Yugoslavia.

South of Belgrad my military union was dispersed. Some groups of soldiers tried to escape northwards, so did we. It was a rainy day in October and we reached a deserted village. Only one dead man was lying there. When we were leaving the village, we saw a group of people in the distance and we realized that they surrounded us. They called in German that they were friends. But we knew better, they deceived us, but we had no chance, defense would mean certain death. They overpowered us, disarmed us and took away our clothes and shoes. Then we were tied together, always two of us, the whole group together, one pair after another, a miserable group of about 15 soldiers.

The first two of us could free themselves and ran away into a wood and escaped. We had to sit down, then they shot at us. I was hit at my shoulder and torn down by the bullet. After a short time I felt a blow on my head and lost conscience. When I woke, the partisans had disappeared and I saw dead and dying comrades around me. (Much later I could tell the parents of my two comrades, the only ones I knew, how they had died).

A few days later I was taken prisoner again. (The wound in my shoulder fortunately healed later without medical treatment) I was very lucky. Meanwhile Tito's partisans had been recognized as soldiers by the Germans. So the prisoners of either side were no longer shot. I was one of the first who were spared.



In a war the main battle line is a nightmare for the soldiers. Now we experienced a new "battle Line": hunger, cold and lice. Each of them was a terror. And nobody knew whether we would ever come home again. The first year was terrible, then it became more and more bearable.

All my life I will never forget some experiences that had a great influence on my future life:

1. They were simple people who did not ask questions, but who saw how we suffered as prisoners, and who helped us with a slice of bread or a rag for our feet. It was forbidden, but they did it nevertheless secretly.

It is this simple, true and Christian humanity that makes life possible and worth living.

2. As prisoners we learnt about the many crimes committed by Germans. After the German surrender newspaper articles about German concentrations camps were read out to us by an interpreter, while we were sitting in our large stable for horses. When we heard of the abominable crimes, we were deeply shocked and could not believe it.

Immediately afterwards all the German officers (fortunately I was only a common soldier) were ordered to go out. We all wore ragged clothes, but many knew who the officers were and so they obeyed. Later we learnt by some civilians where all of them were shot and buried. (Among the dead officers was a lieutenant, a good friend of mine. Later I could tell his father that he was shot).

One day we were forced to open a mass grave. Below a small layer of earth dead hostages were lying in long rows in several layers one above the other. We had to pull out the heads, arms and legs of the half-decayed bodies, standing in the mud

up to our knees. We were as horrified as the relatives of the murdered and the soldiers standing around the grave, but this did not make the hits on our naked bodies less painful.

More and more we realized how murderous the Nazi terror had been. We had seen terrible things during the war, but how could these atrocities happen?

By these experiences and many discussions, I suffered from a crisis of identity. Everything I had lived for, suffered for was proved a terrible deceit.

And now? What could we live and work for after the war? I was open for new ideas and new ideals.

3. I learnt a lot about socialism, the second corrupting ideology by which so many people have been deceived, ruined and killed.

I wore spectacles and that's why the Serbs thought I was an intellectual. So I was sent to Belgrad to be instructed as an "Antifascist". The circumstances were very primitive, that was to be expected. But the lectures on Marxism and Leninism, given by most intelligent Marxists, were fascinating. I had never heard about these doctrines. But soon we realized the inconsistency between theory and reality, and so we began to doubt whether this was the right way to create a better world.

When I came back to my prisoner-camp, a well trained "Antifascist", my comrades were full of suspicion. It took some time until I was one of them again.

By one experience I changed from a critical open-mindedness to a convinced opposition.



During a meeting of about 50 "Antifascists" from many prisoner-camps in Serbia the following happened:

We were told that in Greece the communist partisans made war against the government to establish a people's Republic in Greece. As prisoners we should work on four Sundays voluntarily to assist the partisans by giving them the money we were to get for this additional work. We had to work very hard on six long days a week, unpaid of course, and now four Sundays, too! That could not be expected from us.. When I wanted to give my opinion, my neighbor pulled down my arm, hissing "Be quiet!".

The chairman pointed out that everybody present was totally convinced of the action, thanked us and closed the meeting.

Soon after that my neighbor asked me, if I had not realized what the matter was. Obviously, I wanted to perish in the mines.

The falseness and the hypocrisy of this system has always been the worst for me.

After being a soldier for 2-1/2 years and a prisoner of war for 4-1/2 years in Yugoslavia I came home in January 1949. (In November 1944 my parents were informed that I was reported missing. It was not until 1947 that we were allowed to write a postcard home telling our families that we were alive. In the following years we were allowed to write more and more often until we could inform our families that the government of Yugoslavia planned to send us home in 1949.) The coming home is one of the most precious memories of my life.

In Germany living conditions gradually improved. I could do my training for a job as I planned. First, I became a teacher of primary schools, then I went to university and became a teacher in a grammar school.

During the war and the captivity in Yugoslavia I had made three basic experiences which I never forgot and which became sort of guiding principle for me, especially when teaching at school.

1. The importance of Christian love and charity.
2. Information about the Nazi regime and its atrocities, its inhuman character and the dreadful consequences for the whole world. I wanted to do as much as possible to help prevent that such inhuman ideas would ever be revived.
3. Information about socialist (communist) ideology and political systems to prevent that they might get power in Germany. This implied that I always stood for our democratic society and ideals.

I will go into the third point in more detail:

My anti-communists conviction was often the cause of arguments about politics with left-wing colleagues, politicians and students. Never could I understand that intelligent people could come out strong on the side of Soviet Socialism. I could understand people saying that you must negotiate with the devil if you want to make hell less painful, but that so many people thought the "devils" to be honorable partners and even thought the Soviet System to be better than ours. That's what I could never understand. How was it possible that they did not want to see Stalin's atrocities, the communist show-trials, the dreadful Stasi (State Security Service in the communist Germany) the prisons that were full of "state enemies", the wall in Berlin, the Iron Curtain, the falsehood of this system.



Let me give you a shocking example for the latter:

In 1965, I visited a friend of mine in Dresden. He was an open-minded democrat and so we could openly discuss the political situation with his wife and 16-year old son. But when his 7-year old son entered, my friend suddenly talked about the weather. After the little boy had been put to bed, my friend told me that it was too dangerous to make critical remarks, the little one might tell that at school. One day he would be old enough like the elder son to understand the situation and live in "two worlds", the sincere private one and the false one in public.

I always did everything I could to argue against this ideology and against the so-called "New Left" that greatly increased its influence in the 60ies and 70ies. They talked about the "new human being" in a "society without any rule and power", they condemned our free democratic system and wanted to establish a new socialist society. This was to be done by the "changing of consciousness", they wanted to overcome our system by a "cultural revolution" which should lead to a "revolution of society".

When arguing about these ideas I was often called a man of the "cold war", a "primitive anti-communist", a "fighter for revanchist policy", and when I compared Stalin to Hitler I was accused of offending a great man.

Arguing against dictatorship and ruining ideologies meant at the same time arguing for our democratic system. Despite many faults there is no system that has proved to be better and it is the only system that asks us and gives us the chance to work for improvements.

After the breakdown of Nazism and Communism, I feel great relief. Sure we face big problems in our country and in the world. But I hope and believe that we will find ways for the survival of our planet and secure and improve a community in which everyone can live in peace and liberty

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, it is 50 years ago that the war ended and all the newspapers of the world are full of reports of what happened. After the war we got to know of all the appalling atrocities committed by the perverse Nazi leaders and their helpers.

But it is good to learn that many newspapers try to give an objective analysis of everything that happened.

Thus, we read that "one of the greatest war crimes of World War II was the saturation bombing of the defenseless German city of Dresden".

I think it is a very good development that everybody admits his own crimes against humanity without offsetting one's own guilt against that of the enemy of the past. That is the only way of overcoming negative feelings and making friends.

It was of interest to me that some names given to historical events differ completely.

The last desperate offensive of the German troops in the west started in December 1944. By surprise they managed to bust through Belgium's Ardennes Forest and to form a bulge into Belgium. But after a month-long battle the Germans were driven back. The Americans call it the "Battle of the Bulge", whereas we call it the "Battle of the Ardennes".



Eine Familie, die zusammenhält,  
ist unüberwindlich.

(Björnsen)

A family that sticks together  
is invincible.

In 1923 Dr. Gustav Dehning, Bremen, invited all Dehnings to come to Schneverdingen (near Hamburg) to a family reunion and they founded our „Familienverband“. The Dehnings then had the same ideas that connect us nowadays: we want to learn about our origin to better understand who we are, we want to strengthen the family ties, for the family gives us strength and security. Through the „Familienverband“ with its „Geschichtsblätter“, its family reunions, the genealogical tree and its coat of arms we feel that we belong to a community with the same name, origin and ideals. Whereas the founder and his successor devoted themselves to genealogy and published the results in the „Geschichtsblätter“, we first of all tell about the Dehnings today. We would be very pleased to hear from you. Write us a letter or a postcard, please!