

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

William Schoenl
Steps

"JEWS OUT," they called as they beat and kicked the man. I recognized one of the thugs. I reported the assault to the police. They did nothing.

Storm Troopers prowled the streets here in Berlin in 1933. But the unemployed had tramped German roads by the hundreds of thousands. The Nazi Party seemed intent on reducing unemployment and dealing with the Depression. Many Germans had voted for it.

I had an appointment with a student in my office at the university on May 11th. At 3:00 pm sharp Peter Heier knocked on the door. "Come in," I answered. He opened the door, bowed as is the custom as I am his professor, and entered. I motioned him to the chair in front of my desk. "I want to talk with you," he told me, "about a matter more important than academics. I participated in the book burnings last night. What do you think of the book burnings?"

The question was dynamite. If I responded that it was right, I would betray my beliefs. If I replied that it was wrong, I would open myself to the charge that I am anti-Nazi. I reversed the question and asked: "What do you think?"

"Books such as those of Sigmund Freud have a corrosive character," he answered. "It is proper that they are burned. I have decided to join the Nazi German Student Federation as many students have."

Since I and other faculty taught that values are completely relative, I should have replied "if it is what you value, all right," but I felt: "don't do it!"

"It is your decision," I said.

On leaving my office and walking to my apartment near the university, I saw two Storm Troopers and heard them say "Heil Hitler" to a well-dressed passerby. He did not return the greeting, and they jostled him. The pressure to conform was increasing. As the Storm Troopers walked toward me I said "Heil Hitler," though I did not mean it. "Oh well, it has just become a conventional greeting," I tried to tell myself.

Two days later, Walther Sigg, the head of my academic department, called me to his office. He was middle-aged with a high forehead and little capacity for empathy. "Some students have complained about your lecture on Freud in modern European history," he informed me. "You praised Freud as a psychological pioneer who put forth the first medical theory of the unconscious and you never mentioned that he is a Jew." As a consequence I decided to avoid controversial material in the future.

"What do you think of the Blood Law and Citizenship Law?" the Heier brothers asked. These laws of September 1935 brought both Peter and Johann to my office. "The Blood Law forbids marriage and sexual relations between Jews and Germans, and the Citizenship Law states that only someone of German or related blood is a citizen," I responded.

"Martha Stein and I are in love and intended to marry, but now we

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cannot—she is Jewish. I deplore these laws!” Johann exclaimed. Peter, on the other hand, contended: “The laws are proper and strengthen the nation.” He had joined the Nazi student association at our university. I personally disapproved of the laws but I offered no opinion because it might endanger my university career.

Nevertheless, Sigg, the head of my academic department, called me into his office three days later. He like some other professors had joined the Nazi Party to advance his career. “Some students complained about your lecture on Marxism,” said he. “You never mentioned that the Fuehrer termed it a Jewish doctrine. At the recent Party Rally in Nuremberg he put ‘Jewish Marxism’ at the head of a list of internal enemies.” I replied that I would no longer lecture on Marxism.

As the crocuses budded in Spring 1936 German troops marched into the Rhineland. Hitler reoccupied it with no resistance from French forces. Germans—including Johann and Peter Heier—were euphoric. Johann had reconciled himself to losing Martha Stein and was seeing another young woman. Admiration for Hitler abounded. Yet freedom of speech—even at the university—was stifled, propaganda replaced freedom of the press, and Germany was rapidly rearming

“Burn, burn,” the mob shouted as buildings went up in flames the night of November 9-10, 1938. Shards of glass littered the pavement in front of shops. I saw police arrest persons who were not part of the mob.

The following morning Peter Heier again came to see me. “What happened last night is appalling,” he said. “Synagogues burnt, Jewish shops destroyed, Jews arrested. It is disgraceful.”

“It is appalling,” I replied.

“Goebbels must have organized it,” he said. “I do not believe Hitler knew.”

I believed that, of course, Hitler knew, but I did not say so because I did not want my comment repeated.

People were disappearing at the Hospital in January 1940. My sister Anna seemed fine. Two days later she was gone.

“What’s happening?” I asked and was told to see Dr. Heinrich Frick, the administrator.

“A program has begun for those with an incurable mental illness,” said he. “Professional psychiatrists assessed them. They were taken by bus to a medical facility.”

“What medical facility?” I queried.

“Grafeneck,” he replied. “No longer will they experience pain. Their lives were terminated.”

“That disrespects human life!” I exclaimed. “It is necessary for social progress,” he replied. “You make it sound good—medical facility, pain no longer, social progress—to justify it,” I responded. “It will have other consequences.”

I looked into this program. Many psychiatrists and other “elites” sup-

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ported it. All patients in psychiatric hospitals were recorded on forms. About 50 assessors evaluated the forms and decided who lives or dies. Besides Grafeneck there were five other institutions to which patients were transported — and killed by gas.

Shocked, I delved further into the program. A decree by Hitler initiated it. Werner Heyde, professor and chair of psychiatry and neurology at Wurzburg University, was its Medical Director. Physically and mentally disabled children were being killed in some hospitals.

Knowledge and techniques learned in the program could be applied elsewhere. Mass extermination was beginning in Germany.