

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

*William Schoenl*

### **On the Eve**

WE PEERED OUT THE APARTMENT WINDOW AT THE RUNNING BATTLE IN THE STREET BELOW.

"Nazis and Communists brawling again," my brother Peter exclaimed. "The government can't get anything done. Almost 12,000,000 people just voted Nazi and 6,000,000 just voted Communist."

Peter was in his last year at a high school preparing students for university. I was in my first year at Berlin University. Our middle-class family lived in a comfortable apartment nearby.

It was January 1933.

"Granted, each political party is pursuing its self-interest, not the interest of the country as a whole. But you think that only the Nazi Party is pursuing the nation's interest," I retorted.

"Ya, that's what I think," he responded, "and it will get things done about unemployment and the Depression."

On January 30 Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Upon receiving emergency powers he thrust Communists and other political opponents into concentration camps and governed by decree.

"Germany needs to be transformed fundamentally. The Nazi Party will do it, Johann," said Peter. I replied: "It has already restricted freedom of speech. People are becoming afraid to speak openly. Yes, this is change, but not good change."

The black swastika encircled in white on a red background in the Nazi flag symbolized movement. Peter thought Germany was moving forward. I noted that the swastika in the flag moved counterclockwise: Germany was moving in the wrong direction.

Peter became a student at Berlin University in the fall. He joined the Nazi German Student Federation as many students had. Walther Sigg, the head of my department, and a number of other faculty joined the Nazi Party. It had become popular to do so.

During my first two years at the University I was dating Martha Schlesinger, a student who was Jewish. We were in love and intended to marry. In September 1935 Hitler enacted the Nuremberg Laws. The Blood Law prohibited marriage and sexual relations between Germans and Jews, and the Citizenship Law provided that only those of German or related blood were citizens. They effectively ended my relationship with Martha, and I deplored these laws. Peter, on the other hand, saw these laws as strengthening the nation.

As crocuses budded in spring 1936, German troops marched into the Rhineland with no resistance from French forces. Germans were euphoric and admiration for Hitler abounded. When he had announced German rearmament in March 1935, enthusiastic crowds, who looked upon the Versailles Treaty as unfair and believed he was demanding equality for

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Germany, cheered him. German rearmament henceforth continued rapidly.

By September 1938 it had proceeded to the point that Hitler felt strong enough to threaten to go to war with France and Britain to incorporate the Sudetenland—a German speaking section of Czechoslovakia—into the Reich. When Britain and France avoided war by ceding the Sudetenland to Germany at the Munich Conference, crowds cheered again.

Then, on the night of November 9-10, synagogues went up in flames in Germany, many Jewish shops were destroyed, many Jews were arrested, and shards of glass littered the pavements in front of the shops. Even my brother Peter was appalled. But he could not admit that Hitler had approved of this: “Goebbels must have organized it. I believe Hitler did not know.” Like many young Germans through a misguided idealism for Germany’s rebirth, he continued to believe in Hitler.

They did not realize that powerful organizations can be maintained by the slogans and ruthlessness of their leaders and that mass media can amplify the effect of slogans. Nor were they aware that a free society may need a bond of an affective nature, a principle such as caritas—love or care for one’s neighbor—and where caritas stopped, power began.

The following March Hitler took the rest of Czechoslovakia. France and Britain then gave a guarantee to Poland. In August German radio falsely reported that Polish military forces perpetrated attacks along the border. Peter believed it. But it was a ruse to invade Poland.

World War and Holocaust lay ahead.