VICTIMS OR PERPETRATORS:
How Former Hitler Youths Work Through Their Childhoods Under Nazi Rule

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The Hitler Youth and Bund Deutscher Mädel were veritable propaganda training grounds for future Nazi generations during the Third Reich. By 1939, membership in the Hitler Youth was compulsory for “all adolescents from age 10 to 18...and by early 1939...membership briefly reached a respectable 98.1 percent.” Looking back on their involvement through their memoirs, former Hitler Youths come to see themselves as either innocent of war crimes or guilty in some fashion. A variety of factors influence their conclusions as to innocence or guilt, including gender, education level, and involvement with or knowledge of antisemitic crimes during the war. Nazism’s youth movements are unique because of the way they allowed government officials to control the vast majority of their constituents from inception, and studying Hitler Youth memoirs is important because it helps us to understand the lasting effects of Nazism on an unconventional demographic—Hitler’s supposedly “brainwashed” child soldiers.

Hitler Youth who lean towards innocence

Some former Hitler Youth see themselves as innocent of any wrongdoing and claim that they were just doing their job. Throughout his memoir A Child of Hitler, former Hitler Youth leader Alfons Heck recounted happily his Hitler Youth adventures, finding “quiet ecstasy” flying a sailplane and becoming “determined to volunteer for the Luftwaffe as a professional soldier.” When Heck was promoted to “Oberscharführer, an administrative rank,” he was “damned lucky to get a promotion at all,” and when in 1944 he was promoted all the way to “Gefolgschaftführer employed in the defense of the Westwall.... Money, however, was not of the slightest concern to me. Power was infinitely more

3 Ibid., Pages 3-5.
seductive.” He enjoyed his time in the Hitler Youth and felt ready to commit his entire life to the Führer’s service. He enjoyed the power he obtained, and, by willingly giving his time and energy to the Hitler Youth, Heck bought into the National Socialist regime and thus its antisemitic beliefs.

Rising in the Hitler Youth ranks brought Heck delight, but he claimed he wasn’t privy to the wider Nazi antisemitic policies. While traveling to meet the Führer, Heck and his SS guards encountered “a bedraggled column of prisoners...all looked gaunt and some were barefoot despite the near-freezing temperature.... A few minutes later, we passed a zebra-clad corpse, half submerged in the rainfilled ditch.... I wondered why they hadn’t taken the time to bury him.” Heck expressed these bewildered reactions to his run-ins with the Holocaust a few times throughout the book. He wrote that he was once asked: “Do you know that we are slaughtering tens of thousands of Jews and other subhumans every day back in Poland and Russia?” To this, Heck wrote he was “taken aback,” and later told by a comrade, “Hasn’t it occurred to you yet that that you and I are serving a mass murderer.... Our glorious Führer of course.” Heck responded angrily to Hitler’s apparent defamation, which shows the depth of his entrenchment in the HJ and his belief in HJ values, and implied that he was blindsided by hearing news of antisemitic violence. Heck’s implication here is that he couldn’t be guilty of perpetrating the Holocaust if he wasn’t aware it was happening. In this way Heck declares his innocence.

But Heck does show some degree of self-reflection. “In the years after the war I have often asked myself what difference it might have made, had I known six million Jews had been annihilated. ...It would have made no difference in my loyalty.” He does not apologize, nor try to justify his actions. He merely states fact, showing how dedicated he was to Nazi Germany. He also hints at nostalgia for the

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5 Ibid., Pages 81, 93, 95.
6 Ibid., Page 82.
7 Ibid., Page 110.
9 Ibid., Page 121.
Hitler-free childhood he would have had: “We were in it to the finish, convinced that surrender would lead to life-long slavery.” Alfons Heck believes himself innocent of antisemitic crimes, a point which he stresses in his memoir A Child of Hitler. His memoir’s content is mostly about flying, showing that his primary directive in writing was not to discuss any guilt but to recount his childhood.

Some former Bund Deutscher Mädels view themselves as innocent but for a different reason than Heck. Heck expresses a few glimpses of self-reflection in which he considers what would have been different about his life had there not been a Hitler, but Frau Ellen Frey, a former BDM leader, does nothing of the sort. In an oral history interview conducted by historian Alison Owings, she did not even consider that she might be guilty by association at all. She said about her time in the BDM, “I had a small group...the girls adored me and somehow that was appealing to one as a young girl.... It was just nice.” By asserting that she enjoyed the BDM without acknowledging their antisemitic actions, Frey is guilty by association of acceptance. “But what he gave us young girls back then somehow must still be there, that one cannot condemn it all.” Herc, Frau Frey is not only avoiding any possibility of her own guilt, but she also defends some of the BDM’s aspects, namely the newfound freedom she gained through the BDM. In addition, Frau Frey did not even address the Holocaust besides to say “I say, ja, I still find it awful...,” She regrets “it [the violence] was an error and the man [Hitler] went crazy,” but by still defending her time in the BDM and the liberation she gained, Frau Frey had not even considered the idea that she might be guilty of anything at all. She regretted Hitler’s actions but doesn’t find herself

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12 Ibid., Page 181.
13 Ibid.
guilty. While not a memoir, Frau Frey’s interview does provide meaningful insight into one way former BDM members view themselves.

Some Hitler Youth found themselves identifying as Hitler’s victims. Historian Alexander Van Plato believes that former Hitler Youth members were robbed of their childhoods and ability to lead normal lives: “No matter how the ex-HJ members entered the post-war period...they found the old values were no longer applicable or acceptable.... compatriots who had been at the front or had already begun or even completed an apprenticeship...they felt themselves isolated...." Some “spoke of their whole world ‘falling apart’. They felt they had been misled and ill used by the Nazis.”¹⁴ Von Plato thus falls into the camp of believing former HJ/BDM members felt as though they were victims, at least of “ill use”—talent and determination wasted¹⁵, which does have some merit. Because not only was their country destroyed by war and opposing armies, but all the political rhetoric the HJ had spent their childhoods absorbing was exposed as evil. This caused shock and turmoil among the ardently dedicated HJ/BDM members. They were forced, in the new postwar world, to reflect on their childhoods and study their place in the Nazi war machine. Historian Michael Kater writes, “By far the majority of young people claim to have been victims, in the sense of having been seduced by the Nazi regime, then used and thrown away, and thus having been cheated out of youth,” and they “had been deceived by a criminal regime whose nature they had been unable to comprehend.”¹⁶ Kater goes too far in saying that the “majority” of HJ claim victimhood, but there is certainly merit in discussing the HJ’s deception. At the Nuremberg Trials Baldur von Schirach, Hitler Youth founder, expressed his opinion about this debate:

¹⁵ Ibid., Pages 217-218.
"The young generation is guiltless."  Though Schirach is not to be trusted, a significant number of former Hitler Youth do believe themselves to be innocent of crime, antisemitic or otherwise.

**Hitler Youth who lean towards guilt**

Some former Hitler Youth and Bund Deutscher Mädel believe that they didn’t perpetrate war crimes and some feel that Hitler stole their childhoods or potential. Some turned blind eyes on their past or chose not to look negatively on Hitler. And some believe the firm opposite: there are many HJ/BDM members who firmly believe in their guilt and complicity in the Holocaust or Hitler’s war crimes, beginning with Ursula Mahlendorf, writing her memoir titled *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood* from 2009 about her time in the Bund Deutscher Mädel.

Mahlendorf begins her memoir by stating “I was too young during the Nazi period to have participated in their crimes,” but also writes that she had to tell her students “about the enthusiasms and the beliefs I held then, the disillusionment, anger, grief, shame, and remorse I experienced after German defeat, and the grief, guilt, and shame that haunts me still.” Immediately she sets the tone for her guilt through complicity and association, not through direct action. She also alluded to her “enthusiasms,” showing that she did enjoy, at least to some extent, her time in the Bund Deutscher Mädel, which is another factor causes her shame, because she enjoyed activities sponsored by a criminal government. Mahlendorf wrote about Hitler: “At age ten, when I heard him and my HJ leaders call us “his Hitler Youth,” I understood that phrase literally. I was his, as I was my mother’s child.” She was completely entrenched in BDM activities during the war.

But Mahlendorf didn’t hold on to fanciful BDM notions in the postwar period. True to her title, Mahlendorf struggled unbelievably with shame almost from the war’s immediate end. “Shame that I

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17 Ibid., Page 261.
19 Ibid., Page 95.
had participated enthusiastically.... Shame, finally, that in my pride at having survived the Nazi regime, I had appropriated the term survivor from the victims of the Holocaust, the potential perpetrator making herself into a victim as well.”

Towards her memoir’s end Mahlendorf describes how she learned about the Holocaust and the Jews’ poor treatment. “I needed no convincing, but I was horrified by the details of the acts of inhumanity in the camps. I despised the many adults I encountered, including my mother, who claimed they had known nothing.... If you feel responsible and keep silent in the face of obvious crimes, it is tempting to erase the memory rather than feel the shame of having failed to protest.”

Here Mahlendorf distanced herself from other former Nazis by implying that she immediately saw the truth about Nazi atrocities and others didn’t. She also condemned her fellow former Nazis for not acknowledging the truth as fast as she did. Mahlendorf places herself as the perpetrator, someone who should bear the guilt of complicity, instead of someone who was lucky to survive a war.

The war years lay heavily on Mahlendorf as she concludes her memoir. She wrote about nightmares, a suicide attempt, failed tries to undergo therapy, and finally about moving into a halfway house to learn to cope. She learned to open up to others through volunteering with children for five years and normalizes her sadness and “emotional bankruptcy.” Her guilty feelings weighed on her much more than they did on Alfons Heck, and she did not recover until she was well into adulthood. But Mahlendorf had something else weighing on her mind: her father, who she’d admired as “the life of every party,” had been not only a card-carrying Nazi but an SS man, and this complicated her guilt. He died in 1935, in the regime’s early years and certainly well before gassings in concentration camps began, but Mahlendorf always worried about his SS actions. Her mother insisted Mahlendorf’s father

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21 Ibid., Page 289.
wasn’t complicit with SS ideals, but the problem bothered Mahlendorf to no end. She learned about Reserve Police murdering Jews: “Battalion members were given the option not to participate; they were not forced to kill. Yet they did, for days on end. ... Might our father have become one of them?”

So Mahlendorf had double the guilt resting upon her shoulders; her own from participating in the Bund Deutscher Mädel and her father’s from before his death. Overcoming her familial guilt takes Mahlendorf a long time in therapy: “Because I had accepted Hitler as a substitute father...mourning for my real father was particularly painful and conflicted. Shame is the one response to my involvement in Hitler’s cause that I still feel as keenly as ever.”

Ursula Mahlendorf believes herself to be both guilty by association and innocent of direct perpetration, even so far removed from the war and Holocaust. Guilt rests heavily on Mahlendorf’s shoulders.

Mahlendorf isn’t the only former Hitler Youth member who finds herself grappling with guilt. Melita Maschmann was a “March violet;” one of many children who joined the HJ in early 1933 in a wave of pro-Hitler fervor. She described seeing Hitler Youth march after the Nazis came to power and later reflects, “Whenever I probe the reasons which drew me to the join the Hitler Youth, I always come up against this one: I wanted to escape from my childish, narrow life and I wanted to attach myself to something that was great and fundamental.”

Maschmann joined the Hitler Youth to belong, as so many contemporaries did, but in her memoir Account Rendered: A Dossier on my Former Self, published in 1964, she had already come a long way in exploring her childhood, complicity, and guilt.

Account Rendered is written as letters to a former close Jewish friend. Early in the text Maschmann writes, “...I still believed it possible to ‘apologize’ for the crimes against the Jewish people

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23 Ibid., Pages 24-26.
26 Ibid., Page 12.
committed by us.”27 Only 19 years after the war, much sooner than the other memoirs in this paper, did Maschmann comprehend guilt specifically towards Jewish people. “The wrong we had done to you and your kin was so terribly immeasurable that a truly sensitive heart could only have found one answer to it—to stop beating.”28 Maschmann found herself complicit in Holocaust crimes and the book’s very format, letters to a Jewish friend whose whereabouts remained unknown after the war, shows the depth of Maschmann’s guilt.29

**FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSION**

Historian Michael Kater writes, “The degree of guilt that any Hitler Youth possessed, whether boys or girls in HJ camps, whether young men or women fighting at the fronts, depended on their age, their hierarchical position in Nazi governance, and, ultimately, on the sum total of activities of a criminal nature they became engaged in.”30 Hitler Youth and Bund Deutscher Mädel tend to fall on one side or the other of the guilt debate when discussing themselves, though Mahlendorf poses an exception. Some view themselves as Hitler’s victims with lost childhoods, lost potential, and zero Holocaust perpetration guilt. Some believe themselves to be guilty and express sorrow and shame at their past actions, and regret specifically towards their antisemitic pasts. But moral judgement isn’t a black or white answer, and the majority of HJ/BDM members wrestle with mourning for what their lives could have been without Hitler, coupled with guilt for their actions, and in some cases guilt for positively remembering their Hitler Youth days.

Studying Hitler Youth memoirs is important because it tells us how much control the Nazis still exert over their former denizens years after the war ended. From my research I’ve seen that in some

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., Page 43.
30 Ibid., Page 262.
cases it takes whole lifetimes to come to terms with the effects of having been a Hitler Youth, but it’s also important to note that there could be extenuating factors at play in these memoirs. The former HJ’s gender, for example, could potentially help determine whether the participate believed themselves guilty. It’s interesting to note that Alfons Heck’s memoir largely contain his memories of flying in the Hitler Youth and only briefly addresses potential guilt and antisemitism, almost as afterthoughts, whereas Melita Maschmann and Ursula Mahlendorf spend their entire memoirs referring to themselves as guilty, though Frau Frey is the anomaly here. Age and education levels may also play a part in perceived guilt or lack thereof. Mahlendorf, by far the most outspoken about her guilt, didn’t write until she was much older and had obtained her PhD. Maschmann published hers in 1964, showing a remarkable amount of self-reflection in such a short time period. Heck’s was published in 1985, and Frey Frey’s interview conducted in the 1980s and published in 1993. These competing factors aside, studying Hitler Youth memoirs helps us draw conclusions about Nazism’s lasting effects and perceived guilt. It’s easy to jump to conclusions—all Hitler Youth were innocent, all were guilty—but at day’s end, that’s not what’s important. What matters is how the HJ members remember and reflect upon themselves and how they tell their story.

Bibliography

