

The Rise of the Nazis



Berlin, 1933: With a unique blend of nationalism, militarism, and racial theory, Adolf Hitler persuades millions that they are a unique people -- a master race with a special destiny. He promises a more orderly and united society, free of industrial conflict and ripe with opportunity and new jobs. Luise Essig remembers Hitler and her first Nazi Party party -- a Harvest Festival: "We all felt the same, the same happiness and joy. Harvest Festival was a 'thank you' for us farmers having a future again.

Things were looking up. I believe no statesman has ever been as loved as Adolf Hitler was then. It's all come flooding back to me. Those were happy times."

An entire generation was taught to live the ideal German life the Nazi's prescribed. Reinhard Spitzzy remembers: "I personally was in the SS. 'Selected people shall be the future aristocratic spinebone of the German nation.' I felt myself very much flattered by being chosen for this. And then the uniform was very beautiful -- black. Of course we liked the uniform and boots and all that."



The SS had originated as Hitler's bodyguards -- but they would soon spearhead the drive to confirm the German people's supremacy. To build national unity, the Nazi's turned to blame: The Allies of the First World War were responsible for the country's economic distress; weak leadership of the 1920s contributed to Germany's problems. And then there were the Jews. The Nazi's drew on old hatred and old jealousies; says Reinhard Spitzzy: "[The Jews] were much slyer in business . . . excellent in literature, in theaters, in cinema, in science. And of course all that made for a strong and hard-line anti-Semitism."

"It was a process which developed slowly, but surely, and took over all sections of the population who had never thought about it before," recalls Horst Slesina, an officer in the Nazi Propaganda Ministry from 1934 to 1945. "A lot of them talked about it, not necessarily believing it. But gradually their brains became fogged. They started to say, 'The Jews are our misfortune'."



The misfortune, however, was to be a Jew -- or black, homosexual, mentally or physically challenged, a Gypsy, or among any one of the minorities then judged to be subhuman. Records were made on the

basis of physical appearance and ancestry. Partners had to be chosen with great care.

Reinhard Spitzzy: "I was affected by this when I married. . . . We thought that we should, that we could form a new ideal race -- and I chose my wife according to this line."

For those who weren't considered a threat to the German race, life was improving by 1937. Germans were regaining their pride as Hitler's aggressive diplomacy forced respect from European neighbors. At home, propaganda continued to find eager listeners. Friedl Sonnenberg

remembers: "Young people were the most excited by the propaganda, over ninety percent of us were behind everything that went on." And state film and radio would drive the message home, one idea above all others -- "in a word," says Horst Slesina, "the greatness of the German people. Propaganda gave people a big boost in confidence for the first time."

In March 1938, Germany absorbed Austria in direct defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. It was a euphoric moment -- for the Nazis. Norbert Lopper was a nineteen-year-old Viennese Jew: "There had always been anti-Semitism in Vienna, long before 1938. But then it became official and that made it much worse." The Nazis were determined to expand their territory, invading Czechoslovakia in January 1939. With Hitler's invasion of Poland that September came the Second World War. And by 1941, the decision to systematically kill all Jews -- the "Final Solution" -- had been made.

In Ejszyszki, Lithuania in September 1941, the Nazi's led some 3,500 Jews to pits outside the town and ordered them to undress. Zvi Michaeli was sixteen: "When I saw Rabbi Zushe undressed, I thought this was the end. The verses from Psalms that he recited in our ears up until then -- I'd been confident that we wouldn't die. And my father was saying 'You will live, don't be afraid.' He put his left hand on me. I saw my brother David climbing up on his thigh; so tight, he clung so tight. He didn't let go of him until the last minute. And the shots of the machine gun. There was a mixture of voices, of people crying, and children, and the shots -- and the dust -- and everything mingled together.... I felt my father give me a push and then fall on top of me. He covered me. He wanted me to live."



Shootings took place in thousands of towns and villages across the Third Reich. Jürgen Kroger was an interpreter for one of the execution squads: "They said the Jews were an inferior race. One of them said to me, 'It's like having a rosebush and the rosebush has got greenfly on it. You have to get rid of the greenfly.' The Jews weren't human beings for them. It was like killing fleas."

Dora Schwartz was sent to a concentration camp. She describes her arrival at Auschwitz: "When we arrived, we didn't know where we were. We suspected this was a place of death. We saw those chimneys. We saw the smoke from the chimneys. The sight made you shudder. This was going to be our fate."

Hans Münch served as an SS doctor at Auschwitz and remembers the gas chambers: "[The chamber] was almost hermetically sealed. You could hardly hear anything. Then the Zyklon B gas was thrown in from the top and the doctor had to check after about ten minutes to see if it was all over. . . . You looked through the peephole and if everyone was on the floor, then it was alright. Then the doors...were opened and lorries drove up to take them away more easily."

Since 1933, Nazi Germany had sung the rousing songs, been stirred by the Führer's rhetoric, and shared the glow of early military success. Twelve years later, on May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered unconditionally. Only now would the true cost of the Nazi pursuit of a special racial destiny be exposed.