

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Nazi Germany Project

Germany, 1930's to 1940's

O. H. 456

HANS MUELLER

Interviewed

by

Steven R. Ard

on

June 4, 1981

## HANS MUELLER

Hans Mueller was born in Stuttgart, Germany, on the seventh of May in 1928. The second child born into his family, Mueller recalls that his family had financial difficulties during his childhood. Later, his father who had been trained in agriculture and wanted to farm found work as a soil inspector. His occupation caused the family to move often. In 1942, his father joined the army and was sent to Russia. Two years later at the age of sixteen, Mueller became an air force helper. Although he was not officially in the force, he and the other boys were trained to use anti-aircraft guns.

After World War II ended, Mueller returned to school and earned a degree in engineering. In 1952, he married Regina Reuthe. Today they have two grown children, Utz and Henrike. His job with the Lotema Corporation brought him and Mrs. Mueller to the United States four years ago. They lived in England prior to this time period.

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INTERVIEWEE: HANS MUELLER

INTERVIEWER: Steven Ard

SUBJECT: Nazism, Germany, childhood organizations

DATE: June 4, 1981

A: This is an interview with Hans Mueller for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Nazi Germany, by Steven R. Ard, at 8360 W. Calla Road, Canfield, Ohio, on June 4, 1981, at approximately 6:05 p.m.

Hans, would you like to tell me when and where you were born?

M: Yes. May 7, 1928, in Stuttgart. [Germany]

A: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What did your dad do for instance?

M: He studied agriculture. Originally his father was supposed to buy him some farm land and he was interested in farming but then after the inflation, the money was gone, so he was a soil inspector or soil researcher, and worked on construction projects.

In the first years of my childhood, my parents were just doing anything to make a living. This was pretty bad times for us. I assume in the early 1930's. And so they had vacation homes and for this kind of thing they were living in the country, and had summer guests and were renting out rooms and so on. They just made a living until he brought them to this job of soil research.

A: And your mother?

M: She attended a college to be a nurse originally. But then they married pretty early and she was having a family. There were three children, really only two--the third one came

pretty late. The first was born in 1927. I'm born in 1928 and the third one came in 1940. So most of the time we were just a family of two. When we had this vacation home, there she [mother] was pretty active, but later on she was just a housewife. Things seemed to be pretty normal at that time.

A: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

M: I started in a one class school. This schoolhouse here at the corner of Calla and Lisbon reminds me when I was growing up in such rural areas--a little village and all the eight classes which there were, were in just one school-room. You had a few benches here and a few benches there and you started this way in school. My parents moved pretty often. When my father started in this business of soil examination, that meant he had to move with construction sites. So we were in different places every three or four years. I went to high school and I hadn't finished high school when the war was over.

My father got into the war to be a soldier. I think it was somewhere in 1942. In 1942, I was fourteen then and mother was left alone with the three kids, when father was fighting in Russia. She was not staying where we had lived because of his job, so she went back to the place in the Black Forest where we had this vacation home and we knew the people. That's the place where I went to high school, at the middle of the war. From there I was then taken to this Air Force Aids, what they called Luftwaffen-Helfer. They took these boys of fifteen or sixteen years. I think I was very proud. There was a medical health examination and if I would have been one of the guys they wouldn't have taken, I don't think I would have liked it. You wanted to be a man and you felt you had to. You felt you had to help defend your country and so you went to this antiaircraft camp; it was just one year. My father went in 1942. I only went to the antiaircraft camp in 1944, when I was sixteen. I was at this camp from 1944 to the end of the war in 1945. I never finished my high school and I never took it up again.

When the war was over, I was working one year on the farm just because that was the easiest way to get enough food and we were living in that village in the Black Forest anyway--so I could stay home and work at the neighbors. After that I had to start all over again. I started as an apprentice. As I hadn't finished school, I couldn't go to college. There was no money around anyway at the time so in 1946, I started an apprenticeship as a toolmaker until 1949, and then things went a little bit better. There was this German mark currency reevaluation in 1949. So you started to have money again in 1949. With financial help of my grandmother, who lived with my aunt on a pension, I went to an engineering college from

1949 to 1951. When I had finished with a bachelor's degree, things were improving already. The German economy started to go just great; they needed the young engineers, and paid them very well. One was happy that after six years on the job, one could afford a car. So from that point on things just went the normal way compared to the way they would go for a young engineer here, the only difference would be that you would have to start on the lower level. You had to start on a lower level, but you could finally achieve a similar goal as a young engineer.

- A: As you mentioned, when you were about sixteen, they put you in the Luftwaffen-Helfer. Do you mean like into an anti-aircraft battery to shoot down incoming planes?
- M: Yes. They called this Luftwaffen-Helfer. This is helper for the air force. It was never really a part of the military; it was part of the Hitler Youth Organization. But this is so the world would not think that they drafted fifteen or sixteen year old boys. Actually, it was just part of the normal anti-aircraft organization. They put these boys in because they thought this should be a thing that young boys can do. I think that way it was all right if you were sixteen or seventeen, the boys could do it. This anti-aircraft was not mainly used to try to protect the big cities. The British or American Air Force mainly concentrated their efforts on the big cities. The German anti-aircraft mainly concentrated their efforts to protect the industry. Like in Leuna, where they produced their gasoline from coal, which is now mentioned a lot as the first coal gasification plant. Same way, we defended military installations, ammunition factories and railway connections which are vital for our country and so on. They just did not have the amount of anti-aircraft guns to place around the big cities, as if you would try to defend Cleveland, this was just too big. You can fly in from this side and that side. But you can defend a big chemical plant. So that's what they did. But on the other hand, as the American Air Force was not really trying to hit the targets defended by anti-aircraft guns; the life was not that difficult for the anti-aircraft people. They were normally defending something that was not attacked anyway. And trying not to defend something which was attacked every night. So we didn't have too bad a time. I mean there was some action. We were defending a military airport in Donaueschingen which was where the Germans had fighter planes. And another time we were defending a big dam at the Rhine, Kems. At this time, we had an attack. Where this military airport was we never had an attack. There was never a problem this way, but in this time we had low flying, big Y-engine bomber planes attacking and small fighter bombers trying to keep the anti-aircraft down. So the other side finally succeeded. They shoot torpedoes in the Rhine and they finally blew up

the dam. But I think we did shoot down two of the bombers too.

A: Now did you fire the gun? Did you help load the gun, or what exactly did you do?

M: Yes. The whole anti aircraft crew was us young boys, only the sergeants and officers were professionals. We boys were trained to load and aim and fire the gun, the whole job.

A: What can you tell me about the Hitler youth movement? What do you remember from it?

M: You see when one is born in 1928, then in 1933 when Hitler came to power, I was five. I think it was six when you were asked to join the "Jungvolk", kind of like boy scouts. Hitler's movement had two groups: the young boys, "Jungvolk" and the older boys, "Hitlerjugend = H. J." My wife thinks one starts with ten, but I would not know anymore. But I know one was a pretty small boy when they ask you to participate in this organization. This was not really a question of being a party member or not a party member. You didn't sign in to be a member of this Nazi party, they just told you that you had to be in this youth organization, the same way as you had to go to school. I don't know if there was a way that you could have avoided it. But from my parent's point of view, I didn't try to avoid it anyway. And so this was the normal thing to do, as everybody did it. I could not even say whether I was forced to go or whether I was not forced to go. As a very young boy I didn't like too much that during school vacation, you had to go to such a boy scout camp for three weeks and you were sleeping in tents. I was not very good in sports so I did not have too much fun in participating in the sports activities and sports games which filled the days. Then when I went to sleep at night, somebody was always making jokes or doing something silly. One went to sleep very late and then was tired the next morning and then they had some instruction hours maybe the whole morning, because it was raining. They had instruction hours on what Hitler had done, what he had not done, and what he had wanted to do. One had to sit on the ground and it was very boring.

I remember that as not so nice, but otherwise apart from this vacation time, which I would have preferred to stay at home, it was just a question of a Wednesday afternoon and maybe a Saturday afternoon. Once or twice a week we would get together, marching, singing, listening to political instructions, or just doing the usual sports games. No military games or anything like this. I never got really into the second part, this Hitlerjugend for the fourteen to eighteen year old boys. After 1942, I was in this Black Forest village and they were not organized that well. You see, they had this Hitlerjugend Youth Organization too, and

everybody, including me, should have been with them, but we just got together and talked about the girls, or sports, or school. They just were not organized to provide any training or political instructions or serious sports.

A: Politically speaking, were your parents in favor of Nazism? Did they support Hitler?

M: Yes, at least my father was. Now my father and mother don't necessarily have to have the same ideas. My father was one of the early supporters. I think he was, before 1933, in the party and was really pressing that force. He was actively engaged and thought this was the idea; this was what the Germans needed. So he was a party member before 1933, before the Nazis finally were voted to power. My mother was accepting what he did, but she said she never joined the party. I wonder now why this is, I can't understand it. So she said she voted against it and my father for it.

In my childhood, I never had the idea then that there was anybody in our family against the Nazi party. They were all just for it. It was the natural thing. You should not say anything against the government. Hitler was a great man anyway, because he had improved a lot of things. I think both of them agree that having had the experience of the 1920's, which were not too great for them, they didn't suffer too much, but the time was bad and they had no job then so they had to do this vacation house business. They both were of the opinion that there was certainly a change for the better in Germany after Hitler. They assumed that he was a good man and that he did the right thing. They certainly supported it and I grew up in the idea that that's how it should be and there was no question about it.

The first time when I heard that there were people having different opinions about it was when I was at this anti-aircraft camp and we were together all day and night and had nothing to do. We had the number of people from the same high school, who were very strong Catholics and were against this Hitler move. We then were discussing--there were about fifty, I think, in this movement. Fifty percent were for it and fifty percent were against it. The Catholic people did a lot of reasoning with us, telling us what was wrong. We didn't like what they said, but we got some doubts. But I think that before that, I just didn't quite understand that this government did a lot of things which couldn't get them anywhere. I think I only began to understand that, with the discussions with the other people in 1944 who were of different opinion, before we were leaning pretty well on our own and we just didn't get any other opinion.

A: Did you ever have the chance to see Hitler anywhere?

- M: No, I never saw Hitler. I just thought he was a great man at the time when I was a boy, because everyone said he was a great man. He was kind of like a "Holy Savior" to a high percentage of Germans. They just believed you can say anything against anybody, like maybe a bad guy, but Hitler, he's really great. If you grow up this way, okay. He was a kind of Pope. This is if you would say to Catholic people, "Oh, I think this Pope is kind of . . . many things he has done wrong and so on . . ." You just don't do that if you are really Catholic. And so this was with Hitler and many Germans. You were told that he was a great man, and so I think I kind of believed it.
- A: Did you ever hear on the radio any of these speeches?
- M: Oh yes. You couldn't avoid the speeches and you didn't try to avoid them. If Reagan or Jimmy Carter is on the radio, you listen to him too. So if somebody is the boss of a country and he makes a big speech, and this Hitler really did make big speeches and powersome speeches, then everybody listened. That was the time when radios came out. There certainly was no television, so one did listen. I never heard Hitler live but I heard him a number of times on the radio and I think everybody would agree that he was shouting like mad. But then he was shouting better than when Ted Kennedy tried to shout. He was getting down to the people; he was really convincing most of them. Sure, he had charisma, at that time he got people convinced, yes. At least a high percentage.
- A: Did you ever see any newsreel clippings of him, like at the movies?
- M: When we were at the movies, sure. It was when we were fourteen, fifteen you go to the movies and there was always this (German) Wochenschau, which is the news. They showed, during the war, the winning soldiers and so on. So you saw Hitler as a great general and so on. But this Wochenschau was certainly something very well done at this time. The newsmedia were all in the hands of the government and one can't just say the hands of the party because the party was the government. If you did not have very critical parents, who had seen something else and were of different opinion, or if you didn't go out of your family to get a different opinion, then you just had this one opinion and you didn't know anything else. Then it was very difficult. I mean you might have tried to listen to foreign radio, whether it be from England, Switzerland, and so on, but I never would have tried that. I didn't have the idea. I thought that would have been an offense. You couldn't do something like that, so I never did.

Once in the antiaircraft camp, they were very nice guys. We had known each other from school, but then I never had much



time to talk to them because I lived out there in the village, going in by train and going out by train. So I just saw them during lessons when you can't talk anyway. I was pretty well isolated until I came home. That may have been a reason, otherwise I would wonder now too, why until 1944 when I was sixteen, I thought everything was as fine as it was.

A: Did you ever hear Goebbels speak?

M: Oh, yes.

A: Can you tell me about him?

M: I think people laugh at somebody like Goebbels. They didn't take him too seriously. He wasn't very popular. But this was all so long ago that I wouldn't know much about Goebbels anymore. Goering was the much more popular one of the two. Goering was quite popular. Himmler and Goebbels were not very popular. People just looked at them as head of a government office.

A: Why do you think people liked Goering?

M: He was this fat guy who could communicate well with people and was more easygoing than the others, and then he was in charge of the air force, and that made him very popular. As boys, we all at the time were playing these air force games. This was the great thing anyway, to be connected in some way with the fighter bombers or so. This was as a young boy something great. He was not that tense. So that is what made him a little bit more popular. You could make jokes about him and he accepted them. But the others didn't accept it.

A: Did you ever have an opportunity to read any of the literature that the Nazi party put out?

M: I read their papers, yes. In the family there was one of my aunts who was reading one of their weekly papers. I was reading that for some time. I could see that was pretty boring. My parents didn't read it because this was an SS paper. That was pretty bad; everybody could see that this is the kind of thing you don't want to belong to. But as I say, we did have that regularly and I happened to read it because she was collecting these papers, and I was with her and saw them. Otherwise, I don't think that I was reading too much and I think one was not asked to. That is not part of the youth organization, they they told you that you had to read that. Strangely enough, I think, I never read Mein Kampf or similar books, and I was at that time reading a lot. I was actually working a bit in history myself. I was reading about Ceaser, Wallenstein and other people who had been famous in

history, and writing papers on them and trying to get more sources by reading a number of books. But it never occurred to me to really dig into the Nazi system. This was something which was there, and I thought I knew all about it. Then I thought I wouldn't have to investigate it.

A: Did your parents ever get into the youth movement?

M: No, parents had nothing to do with it. I think parents were not allowed. This is not like school. What this youth movement was, was let youth be led by youth. The group leaders were seventeen to twenty as a maximum age-- you could well be a group leader with twelve years also. But the parents were not asked to look in and there were very rarely any festivities or anything going on where parents would have been asked to go and if there were then it would be just as onlookers, as visitors.

A: You mentioned that they did send you to a camp. Where was this camp located?

M: This was in the mountains in Harz , some kind of middle mountains in northern Germany and these were vacation camps. I think they do exactly the same in Eastern Germany now, just have you for a few weeks during school break, in the camp area. You sleep in tents, and do some sports activity. You get some training about what that all means with the party. We looked at it like history lessons or grammar: Just accept it, that the party needed some time too, to let you know what their ideas were and how they looked at things going on in the world.

A: Can you ever remember hearing any stories about Hitler? In a good sense or in terms of some nice thing he may have done as a leader or some activity like that?

M: I mean to a large extent in the time between 1933 and 1939 or 1940, everybody was seeing that things went pretty well over there. They pulled down a lot of slums in the big cities like Berlin or Hamburg and replaced the inhabitants into small houses with garden land at the outskirts of the cities, which they did not have to pay for, just the rent. They called them "Sied Lung", settlement. So those people were able to grow vegetables and live decently.

A lot of things which were commonly understood as if there is really a change for the better. Things are going to be well and I think a high percentage of the population was, until the war started, pretty sure that this was a great government. I think at 1938 or 1939 there was a group of people against this government. Certainly there was a Jewish community and then it was part of the religious people, not so much the

Protestants, more the Catholic side, and I believe the industrialists and the rich people, the people who had the money. And the farm people with whom we were living, certainly there were some against the government, but then some of them were against everything. So you didn't take this too serious. They were against it because they were not as free as they had been before. They were not allowed to make their own booze for instance; they stopped that and they didn't like this. Then the regulations came, but now we are already in the war.

They were not allowed to have their own meat. They were not free to sell whatever they wanted. They had to sell a certain amount to the government and so they started to be unsatisfied in teh government. But I think this was when things got difficult and if things do get difficult, then in any situation, people are not satisfied with the government.

A: Was Stuttgart bombed very heavily? Were you there for that?

M: I was not in Stuttgart during the war. Stuttgart was bombed pretty heavily. About every major German city was bombed pretty heavily. The first of these cities I would say was Munich, on our way to a training camp. You couldn't just start to be an anti-aircraft boy, you first had to go to a camp where you got your training and had to shoot on air bags which were drawn behind planes. So we went to that place in Southern Bavaria, Chiemsee, and we went through Munich in 1944. Munich, already at that time, was very badly damaged. I was never in, fortunately, one of the big cities when they were bombed.

A: Is there anything you can think of that might be pertinent to add here?

M: Yes, I would have to say there were occasions when my parents were disappointed about the situation in Germany too. I don't know in which year this crystal night was when the Hitler organization party groups, SA, went into the Jewish shops, destroyed them and when they burned the books on the road and this kind of thing. I haven't seen that either, because at that place where we were nothing like that happened; you had to be in a larger town or in a city. But my father saw it--it was on his way home--and he was very upset and said that he would return his membership of the party. This was impossible what they did here. But this was, I think, the only occasion. He calmed down later. What could he do? There were other people in the party who were against that too. So he just felt that it would be better to stay with them and try to have a better influence on it. This must have been before 1942, maybe in 1939 or 1938.

A: November 1938.

M: November 1938. My father was born in 1900, so in 1942 he was 42 years old and he did not automatically have to go to the military, just because of the times. He never had any military training. But when things started to go wrong, and things at home got pretty bad with regard to regulation and all, he thought -- now we have that war, now we have to. Everybody has to help to get that finished. He voluntarily asked to be drafted. He thought he could not stay home, and try to get not involved. He felt he had some responsibility because he was for the guys in the beginning and now he says, "At least we can try to improve things after the war but first we have to win the war." He voluntarily went to the army in Russia where he soon became a prisoner of war, and later laid over there in a Russian war camp. I think there were not many like this occasion where he was critical, but he may have been more critical later and just didn't tell the world.

A: Is there anything else you would like to add?

M: Maybe I should say that many people here or anywhere in the world would not believe the kind of innocence in many Germans at that time. I later on did some traveling, after the war, and I saw one of the big death camps in Treblinka. There I did really see the bones of a hundred thousand Jews. So you see it and you have to believe what has happened. But then at that place where I was living in Black Forest, we knew of concentration camps only so far that there was a camp in Dachau, which is in Bavaria. We actually were of the opinion that people were put there who did something actually wrong, even if it was maybe not an offense. They may have just slaughtered a pig which they shouldn't have slaughtered and not given it to the government during the war, but sold it on the black market or something like this. We thought these were the kind of people who went there or who had to go there. But that millions of people were brought together to kill them in such camp is really something. Most of the people in Germany, I would say, just didn't know.

Even in the Catholic group, where we then critically discussed this, most of these young boys had no idea. These people had heard of people who just were taken away because they did something against the party. This was discussed. But nobody had any idea that millions of people were brought together and killed someplace in East Germany or Poland. I would say some may have known and certainly some could listen to this at the radio BBC, but most of the people did not dare listen to that radio, so they just wouldn't believe it. Those people who did listen to it wouldn't tell the others. Then they would have known that they listened to that radio, so they didn't pass this news on . . .

We were discussing these things in the Seventieth during an international business seminar. The general opinion of the other Europeans was normally something like this, "That couldn't have happened in our country," such a good country like Switzerland or Sweden and so on. From my experience with other people however, I would say this can happen in any country in the world. This was just too easy to assume that as it happened in one, because of education differences or this or that, it cannot happen in another. This can happen to any place in the world. The only thing one can learn from history is that one has to fight to start. As soon as one group of people gets into position where the rest of the population has no democratic means anymore, to put them out of their ruling position, then things can get very bad. I wouldn't think that there was anything wrong at the time, in the end of the 1920's and the beginning of the 1930's to give Hitler and his party a chance in government, to let them try to improve things. But what was really not understood is that you cannot give all the ruling force to just one group of people especially when they do not believe in democracy. As soon as there is an absolutarian government, like now in the communistic countries, it is very difficult to change back to another form of government, from the movement when one government has all the sources. Well, this is the SS, the Secret Service. As soon as they control everything, every little idea which comes up of intelligent people who try for a change, they just put them away, into a camp as they do with the dissidents in Russia now. That is, why I think it is very important to be critically aware of any movement coming up which wants to take away the right of change, the right of democracy. Extreme nationalism or racism is to be regarded as dangerous also, as it spells superiority to others. The most important part of it is democracy, people's right to decide their government. If you take this away then it's very difficult later to find the remedy to it.

END OF INTERVIEW