

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II, Nazi Germany Project

Germany 1930 - 1940

O. H. 225

REGINA MULLER

Interviewed

by

Steven R. Ard

on

June 4, 1981

REGINA MULLER

Regina Muller was born in Stuttgart, Germany, on November 17, 1929. When she was six, her family moved to Berlin and then to Prague two years later. Her mother and she remained in Prague through World War II until the Russians arrived, then they fled. For most of the war, her father Richard Ruethe operated a marble quarry in Greece.

Mrs. Muller feels that growing up in a totalitarian state meant different things to the people. For some it meant power; others were lethargical and did not care what type of government they had; and there were those who realized the danger of Nazism. She describes her black market activities after the war as her only way to survive. The market collapsed later when the currency was revalued.

Her marriage to Hans Mueller in 1952 produced two children. Utz and Henricke, who are now in their twenties. Her husband's engineering job for the Lotema Corporation brought them to the United States four years ago. Prior to this period, they were in England where they first learned much of the English language. Recently, in June of 1980, Regina received a B.A. from Youngstown State University. She is presently working on her M.A. in psychology at Akron University.

Steven R. Ard

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INTERVIEWEE: REGINA MULLER

INTERVIEWER: Steven R. Ard

SUBJECT: Nazi Germany, Totalitarian State, Hitler

DATE: June 4, 1981

A: This is an interview with Regina Muller for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, Germany in the 1930's and 1940's, by Steven R. Ard, at 8360 Calla Road in Canfield on June 4, 1981, at approximately 4:45 p.m.

Regina, would you like to start by telling me when and where you were born?

M: Well, I was born in Stuttgart, that was in South Germany, November 1929.

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

M: I can't remember much about Stuttgart, but then we moved to Berlin and I remember that. I was six years old. We were there for two years and then we moved to Prague, and there I stayed until the end of the war. In Prague, I went to a German elementary school and to a German high school.

A: What did your father do?

M: He was in Greece. He had a marble quarry there. He was not with us the whole time of the war. It was just my mother and me.

A: What did your mother do? Was she a housewife?

M: She was a housewife and she was earning some money with sewing.

A: Then most of your life was spent back in Prague?

M: Yes, until I was fifteen. That was the end of the war. Then the Russians came, but before the Russians moved in we left.

My mother wanted to get to the Swiss border. She thought the Swiss border would be the safest place because there would be no fights or battles. They would recognize that this was neutral. So that is what we did, we went to the Swiss border. She was right, there were no battles. It was a safe place to be in.

A: Can you tell me what it is like growing up in the state controlled by the Nazi's?

M: In thinking it over, the point is: Not everybody experienced the totalitarian system. For some people it doesn't make any difference. In war time it was different. Before the war started, not everybody suffered under the totalitarian system. Some people liked it or didn't care. I think some people even liked it because they had little positions. They could boss the other people around. They could display power which they never really earned. In the democratic society, either you have money or you earn it by being good in your profession. In a totalitarian system you are put into positions. This suddenly got people into power and they liked it. Not everybody was suffering. Of course, the Jewish people, and those people who were openly opposed, like the communists, were persecuted. The Gypsies, they were very much persecuted. Those people suffered a lot.

Then there was the group of people who didn't like the system but had no way to go, because in a totalitarian system you can't get any information. If you belonged to a resistance movement, an underground movement, you could get information and coverage. You were, in a way, protected because people would call you and give you information. If you were a single person, just by yourself, and you decided you didn't like the system, you were very much lost because you couldn't talk to anyone. You couldn't trust anyone.

The point is, the period was very short. The Nazi regime was only twelve years and I think four years of that was war time. It was eight years. That is like two presidencies in your country. It's relatively a very short period of time. The only time that I can remember is when the war started and a little bit

before the war started. People got very uptight. I think generally people were aware that the war couldn't be won, that it was impossible to win this war. It was actually doomed from the beginning and people who were really thinking rationally knew this. Although they had tremendous success in the beginning people knew it wouldn't last.

A: Let's talk about the Hitler Youth Movement. Can you describe it to me?

M: Well, there were three groups as far as I remember. There was the youth movement everyone had to join. That was the ten to fourteen year olds. Then, in a way, you were promoted to a higher grade. Not everybody could get into this higher grade. Then there was a third grade and only the very good ones could come into it. I was only at the first one, which was very different in parts. One part of the country it was like the Boy Scouts; they didn't do any military drills or anything. They just met and had games and learned a few songs and so on, but there wasn't very much political activity at all. In other places it was very dramatic and it was very political.

Then there was a difference, I think, for boys and girls. I was a girl, so in my group nothing really happened. We met and we had, each year, one sport game in the summer where there was running and competition, and some girls were marching and so on. It wasn't very impressive in a way. That wasn't impressive to me. The only thing was, you had to go; you had no choice. You know, it is like you are doomed to go to a Boy Scout camp or whatever. For me it was the thing to do, but I didn't like it because it was boring; there was nothing really dramatic to do.

A: Did you have friends that were in this?

M: Everybody out of my class was in there. It was compulsory. It was like school; you had to go on Wednesday from three to four. You had to go to this youth movement. And as I said, I was in the younger group. There was not much going on.

A: Can you describe the type of uniform you wore?

M: I think it was black; either a black or a blue skirt and a white blouse.

A: Were there any ceremonies in terms of when certain ranks were achieved that you remember attending?

M: Yes, it was like graduation parties or whatever. Those who were promoted into the next grade, they got kind of a tie and knot like the Boy Scouts. They had to march. There was a political speech in which they said you belonged to the best race in the world. A kid that was twelve years or thirteen years old felt it was kind of dumb talk they did up there, especially when your parents talk at home and say they are dumb. They oppose it, and you say to yourself: Gosh, I have to sit in this and listen to all this dumb stuff. No, this youth movement didn't make an impression on me!

A: Did a lot of people show up for this?

M: Everybody had to.

A: Whether you had a child in the movement or not?

M: No, it was just for kids. There were no parents. They were very strict against the parents, because they knew very well that many parents were either opposed or indifferent to the system.

What they really wanted was to influence the young people. They talked about parents, saying: Parents are old fashioned, and you don't have to listen to your folks.ⁿ They are from the last century. They wouldn't invite parents to those parties because they made it a special youth occasion. You felt: That is my party, the old folks have nothing to do with it. They were clever to do this. Splitting up families was their favorite trick to do.

A: Did they ask you to inform on your parents if they talked against the party?

M: Yes! The system was very well organized. People ask how it could happen, but it was a very trying system. They wouldn't be so direct to ask if you can tell us what your father said this morning. They never would. Very gently, they would say: Your father has a very good opinion doesn't he? They would make you do a statement without wanting to put your father in. They were very clever in doing this! It was well done in a way. The whole system worked because they had a very clear ideology and so there was no--in a democracy you always have an opposition--opposition. There was just one line you had to follow.

A. Had you ever had a chance to meet any of the people or a communist who would be opposed to this?

M. Oh, yes! The communists were the best organized resistance group there was. There were few Catholics and few Protestants who resisted. Most of them didn't. Although they were likely now to tell they did, but they didn't. The communist had an organization before the Nazis came to power and they kept their organization underground. They, in a way, kept as a group, and they protected each other. That was the only group that was working as a resistance group.

A: How effective do you think they were?

M: Not very, they couldn't do anything. You could protect yourself and some information. We were listening to a Swiss radio and all the people did was to really tell each other their latest news. What battle was lost, and what was going on, and what city was bombed, and all that. Nobody really tried to overthrow the system because it was such a well organized system. It was very brutal and very organized.

A: Can you remember some of your school life, like maybe the type of courses you took?

M. Well, there were tremendous differences. Some high schools were very Nazi-oriented and others weren't. Mine was not. There were, in the curriculum, things you had to teach about politics and so on, and this was done with kind of "oh gosh, we have to do this" attitude. They avoided the system by concentrating on other subjects like science, which was very neutral, and math. They did not teach recent history very much, but they taught very much ancient history. I never really got modern history. We were studying the old Greek just to avoid the present. I think many people had a cop out; they concentrated on other things.

A: Were most of your teachers men or women?

M: Well, I would say more women than men, but I can't remember that well.

A. Let's talk about war years. When the war started, how old were you?

M. About ten.

- A: Can you describe what happened to you during the war?
- M: We didn't suffer in a way that we had a shortage on food, or shortage on clothing, or anything like that. But we knew that it was just a question of time till the whole thing would collapse. This is a very sad experience. You hope, in a way, that it will collapse very soon. That's what many people hoped. That the whole thing would be over very soon. There were so many people dying, in every family you had people, a brother or father or whatever, killed in the war. There was a lot of suffering going on. Even if it didn't happen in your family you knew one. So, that's terrible. That's like a terminal illness. In a way, you know it will end and you hope it is quick, but still all those people have to die.
- A: Which cities were you in during the war?
- M: In Prague.
- A: Did that come under bombardment?
- M: No, at the very end there was some fighting but then we left. We left what we had behind. We had our suitcases, and they were lost. When we arrived on the Swiss border, we had nothing but what we were wearing. Then it took two or three months and then the French soldiers came. Then it was all over.
- A: Why did your mother decide to leave when the Russians were coming?
- M: Well, who wanted to be with the Russians? (Laughter) Now this was very clear that the worst thing that could happen to you was coming under Russian occupation. That was clear. And many, many people just fled. It was just tremendous. Everybody who could possibly go went.
- A: What do you think made it possible for you to go or not to go? Did you have to have passports?
- M: No, we were Germans. There was no question.
- A: How did you leave? By car or train?
- M: People took us out with their car and gave us a lift for a short time. Then we took the train.
- A: The roads of the trains were not being blocked by the war effort? They were still going through pretty

steadily?

M: Yes, yes they were. It was crowded of course. Everybody tried to take his belongings if he was able.

A: Now you say that your father was away in Greece most of this time. Was he sending money back for you to live on?

M: No, we still had some money we could work on.

A: What happened when you got to Switzerland?

M: We didn't go to Switzerland, but to the Swiss border.

A: Okay.

M: But still in Germany!

A: You came back into Germany after?

M: Then the Germans cleared out.

My mother thought there wouldn't be any battles, but obviously there were. Probably she heard some information. The Swiss asked for a twenty mile zone off of the border where there wouldn't be any military or any strangers. Just those people who always lived there. So the Germans took us out and moved us back into the Black Forest.

We actually went into the Black Forest and there we were until the French came. The French, at this particular village, were very nice people. But not in every village. In some villages they had rapes, and really got loose, and burned houses and everything. But in this one I was in, they were very nice people -- French gentlemen, very nice, and nothing went wrong and it was very good.

A: Did you talk to the French soldiers?

M: Yes, but I was a kid. They were very polite. They greeted the people when they went through the village and were very polite. Every morning, there was information given by the man with the bell going through the village. He was announcing every morning that he wanted 120 eggs, 40 chickens, and whatever for the soldiers. The farmers had to bring it. Then they were satisfied. But I remember that this was a very traumatic period because you waited all these years for the war to end and now it had ended and you felt terrible. I don't

know how to say this, but you felt ashamed that it had happened and you were glad it was over. It is like if you have a criminal in your family, or your father is a nut, or whatever. You hope the police will come and get him, but when the police are there and they take him away, you feel terrible that this happened to your father. In this way it was the end of the war and, gosh, those cities looked terrible! There were some cities with nothing left. People just lived in the basement of the houses and on top it was all rubble.

People lost their dignity because they were so hungry, they were going into trash cans. When American soldiers went and threw their cigarettes away they went and picked it up and got the tobacco out. This is terrible!

The people got very inventive. The black market started and people really got into that. Gosh, I worked at a farm and I didn't get paid for it. I just got potatoes, or wheat, or whatever for it. The farmers paid me very well. We had no bike or anything. I carried all these potatoes and wheat and everything to the black market and it was about six miles to the next railroad station. Do you know what that means? (Laughter) I worked there for a year just to go to the black market and get some other stuff.

A: Did they pay you cash at the farm? What did they pay you?

M: Potatoes.

A: Sorry, I mean when you took it to the black market.

M: Oh, to the black market. I got cash; tremendous sums of money. You had food stamps for potatoes, or butter, or whatever. When you paid for ten pounds of potatoes, you would pay one mark, but on the black market you would get 150 or so. With this money you could buy something else, what you wanted. Perhaps a pair of shoes for 3000 marks or so.

A: Where was this farm at?

M: In the Black Forest.

A: This is the same village that took you in?

M: Yes.

A: Do you remember the name of that village?

M· Yes, that was . . .

A· Would people say come with us and you stay with us?
How did you find somebody to stay with?

M· That was regulated. First, the German troops that took us out of the Swiss border went to the Burgomaster and said, "Here are forty people who have no homes. For tonight you make room for forty people." This poor guy had to go through the village and go to this farm and say, "You take five and you take two and so on." You didn't have to say thank you to the people because that was their duty to take you in.

A How long did you stay there?

M: Three years.

A Three years, they had to keep you three years?

M: No! Then we got a little apartment in the village. Well, this was not uncommon, everybody had to take somebody else. So many people needed rooms, everybody understood that if you had a bedroom empty, you had to take somebody in. That was your duty. Nobody questioned it.

A· Going back to the black market activity, did the government regulate that in any way or did they just let it go on?

M· No. It tried to regulate, but that was the only way that the people could keep going. With the food stamps that everybody had, nobody could survive. This was just impossible. So everybody was doing something. If you asked somebody to work for you, he wouldn't have worked for money. He wanted potatoes, a battery, a slinner, or a pair of glasses, or anything! With your money, you could not buy anything.

A: This was about 1945 to 1948 that this was going on?

M· Yes. Then there was currency reform. The old currency was invalidated. As soon as the new currency came along the black market collapsed. In practically three months everything was normal.

A· The money you made through the black market, did it lose it's value?

M· Oh yeah, you had to immediately buy something else. You

couldn't store the money because the next day the prices went up. People were very inventive. The best thing I had was grain. In the wintertimr I went with special thresher. The worst part was when you put the straw in. It was real dirty. We started at four o'clock in the morning and worked until ten o'clock. I got 100 weight of wheat for that. It was tremendous! The best thing that I could do was to exchange it for cooking oil. A friend of ours invented a little machine he made out of a bicycle, where he could make oil out of something like sunflower seeds. I gave him the wheat and he gave me the oil, which had a real high market value and it wasn't so heavy for me to carry. You had to be very inventive.

A: Actually when the black market fell apart, it fell apart because the currency was devalued?

M: Yes.

A: Did you ever have a feeling that part of the food shortage in Germany was the fault of the allies and they were trying to punish the German people?

M: No, I don't think so, I think there wasn't much more food in Britain or France. They didn't have plenty of food either. They had more than we did, of course, but they didn't have plenty. No, and I must say, my experience was excellent. We were in the French occupation zone. It was excellent, no question about that.

A: You mentioned at different times that you did listen to radio broadcasts? When the various battles were announced--let's go back to maybe 1941 when the German army went into Russia--how did people react to that? How did they react to the German army going in and declaring war on Russia?

M: As a nation people always feel great. Most people like it if they belong to a nation that is doing well, and great, and winning. If you belong to a team that is winning most people like this without thinking. I think, first off, that some people thought the Germans are crazy to do this and others were very desperate. They knew from the beginning that it couldn't work out. Some people are very nationalistic. If their country does well they feel good themselves and that was the politics of the Nazis. It appealed to the people because it made them feel good. You were a part of the "big race."

A: In December of 1941 when the Japanese attacked the United States and they got involved, and Hitler declared war on the United States, how did that go over? What did people think about America coming into the war?

M: I think, not too much. That was too far away. They had to fight the Russians that were physically present. At the beginning, the Americans were physically not present.

It wasn't felt so much at the beginning, when the Americans came into the war, because at the beginning there were no bombardments. Only later on it was felt that the Americans were active. Practically the whole world was against the Germans now.

A: Did you ever listen to or hear any of the various Nazi leaders speak or talk on things?

M: Of course!

A: When you heard Hitler, how did you respond to him? What did you think?

M: He was interesting, if I look back now. I never listened to him seriously because my mother could imitate him so well that we always had fun with it. She could do it so well that people came in the room and said, "Oh, Hitler is talking."

He had a tremendous ability. He was very dramatic. He had a dramatic voice and he could talk! On the other hand, he never could talk plain. It was always kind of a grandiose perspective or so. He never could say concrete things, such as we did this or that. It was always something really big that he would come on and talk about. He would keep going and then finally he would claim that we will achieve. In a way it was boring to listen to him because he didn't say much.

A: Did you have a chance to see him?

M: Yes!

A: Where?

M: We were in Berlin in 1936, I think. I remember we had just moved and we stayed in a hotel and my mother said, "Go down and bring me the paper." I went outside and there was this little chaos. Hitler came from a

meeting with Mussolini. That was just opposite the railway station he came by. Suddenly there was this huge convoy of cars coming. I was standing there all by myself and he just greeted me.

He was like a machine. He was always riding in an open car. It was nighttime. I think he really felt great. He really was, in a way, nuts! I think everybody said, "Hitler, Hitler," but I don't think it was his fault. It was the fault of the other people who followed a nut like him. He really was nuts. The intelligent people-- there weren't all dumb people in his government--followed him, that is what I really can't understand. There are many nuts in the world, but why the intelligent people support them is . . .

A: When you saw him there, going by in the motorcade . . .

M: I was only seven.

A: What kind of impression can you remember at all?

M: It was very impressive. It's impressive when the President, whether it is Nixon or whoever, comes in a big motorcade and there are motorcycles, and the street is empty, and you stand there all by yourself and somebody is greeting you. You feel this is very impressive. They were able to produce good shows!

A: What do you mean by a "good show"?

M: Like the Russians do on their Red Square, they have the big marching by, and so on. All they did was very impressive. You saw pictures of the Olympics in 1936, this was a big show. They had the big shows to impress people.

A: Did you ever hear any stories about Adolf Hitler-- things that people would talk about in terms of a story about something he did or some place he went?

M: No, I don't think so. I think Hitler wasn't the most hated person anyway. People didn't hate Hitler so much. They did hate Himmler and the S.S. people.

A: What do you mean by that?

M: I think Hitler was regarded as a nut with gigantic dreams, but people didn't regard him as brutal. People really hated those S.S. people. They were hated people!

A: What have you heard about them?

M: That was the most ugly police system you could image and everybody knew it! I think that is something you avoid whenever you can. People really did everything just not to get into contact with them. It was not known the brutality they did in the concentration camps. We had many friends that were in the resistance, and talked about it and we constantly heard Swiss radio. We knew there were concentration camps but we didn't know they were killing those people by the millions, burning them and so forth. This was not known. We didn't know!

A: By the resistance? Can you identify those more specifically?

M: Just people who talked openly on what they thought and what they felt. They didn't do any actions like sabotage. Not that I knew, anyhow. Perhaps they did, but I didn't know that. You have to remember that I was a kid, so I might not have known everything. They openly talked about it and what they felt and what was going on.

A: How about the Gestapo: What was the attitude towards them?

M: Well, as in Gestapo, that was felt the same way. That was very ugly, very tricky, and you felt helpless. They could tell everything you said. They could make statements about you that weren't true and you were helpless when you were with the Gestapo. All they did was to avoid coming into contact with the Nazis.

A: Did you ever know anybody that got into trouble with the Gestapo?

M: Oh yes! They did tricks to intimidate people. If they knew that these people may be in the resistance they called them in for questioning, even though they didn't know exactly what they were doing. They would call them in for questioning and kept them. They could really scare the hell out of you! Even if they didn't do much to you, they probably took the car away or took the radios away and you couldn't do anything about it. You were happy to be left alone.

A: How about some of the other men within the Nazi regime like Goebbels. Did you ever hear Goebbels speak?

- M: Oh yes, he was the best. He would have been a great advertisement man. He had lots of fantasy and imagination and he always had to do the speeches when they lost another battle. He had to come to the radio and tell the people that even though they lost a battle, it was a victory for Germany. In a way, he was very much an agitator. He always called it "front shortening." (Laughter)
- A: Back to Hitler for a moment--did you read his book Mein Kampf?
- M: It was not readable. Obviously, he didn't have much education, but it was like somebody who wanted to prove that he was educated, and he used all the complicated words you could imagine. A sentence that could be said in normal words, he used foreign words for it. There might be some historians who read the whole thing but normal people just couldn't get through it.
- A: Did you?
- M: It didn't make much sense.
- A: How about the man named Alfred Rosenberg?
- M: Who was that? (Laughter)
- A: He was one of Hitler's associates, a German. He wrote a book called The Mythos of the Twentieth Century. You never heard of him? Actually Hitler borrowed some of his books to put in Mein Kampf and some of the chapters correspond almost exactly. What did you think of Göring?
- M: He was the target of many jokes and he was actually liked. He was the only one that people, in a way, liked.
- A: Why do you suppose that was?
- M: He was this fat guy and people thought: He can't be too brutal. He liked good eating, good meals, and there was always these jokes about him. There was not much negative that people could tell about him. There were jokes about him; lots of bad jokes, but he was the one that people liked best out of all of them.
- A: Could you remember the nature of these jokes?

M: I'm so bad at jokes. I have to concentrate a little.

A: Either that or we can move on. Do you remember a person by the name of Heydrich?

M: Oh yes, he was one of the ugliest S.S. Yes, he was one of the hated people. I think nearly everybody hated him.

A: For his personality or just . . .

M: What he did.

A: Was what he did known at the time?

M: Well yes! Not all of it, but basically, yes! I think so, in general terms, yes. After the war, I was sixteen and you are very sensitive. That's the name for it: You are very sensitive. But after the war, people were so deprived both mentally or culturally that they were longing for news of the world. They wanted all the literature and the music and everything that they were missing during the Nazi times. When you couldn't read any foreign languages or literature and so on, people were just nuts. People were reading and talking. It was a very exciting time. Although, we were hungry! At the time, I know that people were so mentally active with talking and reading. Talking about what they read and so on. On top of the list was American literature.

America was the big thing. It is sad that this influence didn't last a long time. At the beginning, you could have done everything with Germany. Everything was American, everything! There were these German men and women and everyone was pale and they had these old dresses and everything and here come these GI's, well fed and clean. You say suddenly, "Hey; that's how people should look like; that's healthy." They were happy and they had all this wonderful music, this jazz and the literature. I think everybody was for America.

A: After awhile, people discovered that not everything was so great. It was like a dreamland, America, you know. It was like the big prophecy that you had after that. Oh, it took about from 1945 then to 1960 or 1965, I think until about the time of the shooting of Kennedy; then it started to tip over. Now people in Europe don't think of America so much anymore.

They are more critical and more objective. Let's say that at the beginning people were . . .

A: You mentioned the fact that there was so much reading right away because there was so much literature suppressed. Did you ever have a chance to witness any of the book burning; any confiscation?

M: No. That was at the very beginning of Nazi time. I must have been too young. I don't know. I think most of the things happened in a not so dramatic way. There were these dramatic occasions when there were book burnings and so on. More happened if you had foreign books, you wouldn't talk about them. You would hide them in the basement so nobody would see them and you were not allowed to talk about it. The people couldn't travel and couldn't go on the roads out of the country.

A: When the Volkswagon came out about 1938, 1939 . . .

M: No one had one.

A: Did you ever see one?

M: I can't remember. It doesn't make any impression on me. I don't remember.

A: All right, if there is nothing else then we'll call an end to the interview here.

END OF INTERVIEW