THE DAY THE WAR STARTED

September 1, 1939 (I had just turned nine the month before) Adolf Hitler announced on the radio, "Seit 5.45 Uhr wird zurückgeschossen." ("As of 5:45 a.m. we are shooting back"). What does this mean—who shot at us first? According to the Nazi propaganda it was the Poles. "A horde of Polish saboteurs had attacked a German radio station." Later, history would reveal that in reality it was some German soldiers dressed in Polish uniforms. Whatever the case, this incident sparked the kindling and lit the beginning of World War II. Finally, Hitler had his war, but of course it was planned long before. Interestingly, most of the German army, and especially the navy, did not feel that they were ready for this war. But Hitler had his way, over the objections and concerns of his own general staff.

Walking to the railroad station in our little town, I encountered no jubilation, no young maidens throwing flowers on marching soldiers, no singing or laughing. No, there was only eerie quietness, people talking in near whispers, the quietness frequently interrupted by droning planes overhead or by noise from columns of military vehicles moving eastward on the nearby highway. We had become accustomed to these noises during the last couple of months. The sounds of war seemed most threatening during the night when we lay in our beds trying to sleep. The signs of the coming

war were visible well in advance for everybody to see. I witnessed the military on maneuvers in the fields of my grandmother's farm. When my father sat with my uncles drinking beer and playing skat (a German trick-taking card game), they discussed in low voices that war was inevitable. Yet when war finally came, it was a shock for most of the ordinary people.

On my way to the station on that fateful day, a vivid and sudden fear gripped me. Though I was young and could not comprehend the enormity of the situation, I felt war was evil, something terrible that was looming and threatening our future lives. I was meeting one of my aunts who was visiting us from nearby Großheringen. Tante Frieda was an ardent believer in the Nazi cause and a great admirer of Adolf Hitler, to whom she always referred to as "unser geliebter Führer," our beloved leader. In fairness I should say she was not alone; she shared this feeling with millions of other Germans at this time.

Frieda's husband Fritz, my mother's older brother, was the stationmaster in Großheringen, an important railroad junction. In this prestigious function he could not avoid becoming a member of the NSDAP, the Nazi Party. He was always a low-key bureaucrat lacking enthusiasm for party politics. But what he lacked his wife made up for. When I saw her at the station she was bubbling with enthusiasm, announcing loudly that "Adolf Hitler, our glorious leader, will lead us to quick victory with our invincible army smashing

the Poles like flies." Soon she got quieter when in a few weeks her husband was suddenly drafted to direct railroad traffic in a desolate place in Poland. On one of his visits back home he proudly showed me a pistol he had received to defend himself against the partisans. Fortunately he never had to use it. He survived and after the war went into quiet retirement with, fortunately for him, a subdued wife.

However, in the beginning it seemed Tante Frieda was right. The German Army smashed through Poland in only a few weeks. The term "Blitzkrieg," (lightning war) was coined. We learned about the war only through sketchy reports in newspapers and magazines. Newsreels in movie theaters preceding the main feature glorified our heroic soldiers, and martial music on the radio signaled a special announcement of another glorious victory. This was the time before television, before we were able to follow a war in real time on our TV screens in the comfort of our living rooms. All the information was filtered. The Ministry of Propaganda under the infamous Dr. Goebbels made sure of that. We heard and saw only what the authorities deemed not harmful and what helped keep up the patriotic spirit. We did not learn about the brave resistance of Polish army units fighting against impossible odds, on horseback against German tanks, or the heroic defense of Warsaw and the uprising in its ghetto.

As a boy the pictures of war keenly impressed me. Watching the newsreels in our little movie theater

I particularly remember the deafening sound of the German "Stukas" (dive bombers) unloading their deadly bombs. Like the other boys I built paper models of them and other planes such as the famous ME 109, the Messerschmitt fighter plane, that was later outclassed by the Spitfire in the Battle of Britain.

My first Christmas during war was in 1939. One of my uncles had given me German toy soldiers with all their weapons. Another gift was a model of Hitler's black Mercedes limousine with the Führer standing in it dressed in his brown uniform, his arm stretched in the Nazi salute. I loved to play with these things but only in the beginning. In later years it was mainly books that fascinated me. My memory of all the war Christmases to follow is of stretching out on the sofa in our kitchen, the only warm room with a coal-fired stove, reading a new book, my sister playing with her dolls, and my mother sitting at the kitchen table writing a letter to my father on whatever front he was serving. In the background we heard Hitler shouting his usual Christmas tirade on the Volksempfänger, a little radio every family owned.

My father was drafted in early 1940, when he was already thirty-four years old. His first posting was at the barracks of a "Pioner" (engineer) battalion in nearby Weimar. My mother took us children on the train for a visit. It was exciting to ride with many soldiers on the train. In the barracks the comrades

of my father heaved me on a table and hung a rifle over my shoulder. My knees almost buckled under the weight. The army, upon discovering that my father had a motorcycle license, had made him a dispatch rider. He later reminisced to my younger son that this was a particularly happy time, before he went to the front, riding his new and powerful motorcycle through the countryside of Thuringia on "training" rides that were really just joyrides at the expense of the army. Later, of course, it would become a very dangerous business.

It was dark on the way back to the Weimar railroad station. The blackout was in full effect. My mother ran into a lamppost and smashed her glasses. Besides her bloody nose it was a great loss because new glasses were hard to get. The blackout stayed with us for the next six years. We got used to it.

After the quick victory in Poland the war entered a certain lull. There was very little news. Though France and England had declared war on Germany after Hitler marched into Poland, nothing further happened. The invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940 was almost a nonevent.

Hitler had gotten away with his aggressive actions before: the march into the Rhineland, the swallowing of Austria, the occupation of Czechoslovakia. It must have come as a surprise to him that France and England

finally stood by their pact with Poland and declared war on Germany. Hitler did not care about France, he thought it was weak—unfortunately he was right. He cared about England and did not want war with her, but he had no choice.

What started as a single action was the beginning of World War II. I believe that early on the majority of the German people had no idea of the immensity of what would follow. The quick victories in the beginning and the passivity of the allies were lulling us into a certain feeling of superiority and the hope that the war would be over soon.

A big bang broke the lull. On May 10, 1940, German troops crossed the borders of Belgium and Holland, in gross violation of the neutrality of these countries, and following the old Schlieffen Plan, which had not worked as designed in the First World War, and marched on toward France. The war on the Western Front had started, and since the British sent over an expeditionary force, it also marked the beginning of the hot war with Great Britain.

This time the Schlieffen Plan seemed to work. The German army, led by its mechanized units of modern tanks, rolled over France with incredible speed. The numerically superior French army could not stop it and France was quickly defeated in Blitzkrieg Number Two. Victory news bombarded us from the radio, and

soon we saw on newsreels the columns of victorious German troops marching down the Champs Élysées in Paris, and Hitler dancing in front of the infamous railroad car in the forest of Compiègne where Germany had capitulated in 1918, but now France. The victory had one serious flaw, of course. Almost the entire British Expeditionary Force, the "B.E.F.", had been evacuated back to England from Dunkirk in one of the most amazing logistical feats in the history of warfare. Though it left behind most of its equipment, the soldiers saved from captivity in France would form the nucleus of the great and powerful army that would storm ashore in Normandy on D-Day in 1944. Thus, the victory was hollow, something that we could not have realized at the time.

At my grandfather's farm I listened to the victory celebration on the radio. My grandfather (who had fought and was wounded in the First World War) listened quietly, but at the end of the broadcast he turned to me and said, "Boy, that's the beginning of the end." I did not understand what he meant. As a boy I was exhilarated about the might of the glorious German Wehrmacht. But of course my grandfather was right. The victory in France marked the pinnacle of German might in the war. From then on it went downward.

My father visited us on one of his rare R&R breaks in the summer of 1940. He told us about Paris, from

where he brought some perfume for my mother and a little model of the Eiffel Tower for me, which I still treasure. The story of my father during the war will be told later in the chapter, "The Day My Father Came Home."

JUNGVOLK AND HITLER YOUTH

In August of 1940, with the war less than a year old, I turned ten. At this age it was compulsory for every German boy to join the Jungvolk, the "Little Brown Shirts." The Jungvolk was the Nazi youth organization pre-Hitlerjugend, the Hitler Youth, which started at age fourteen.

My father was already in the war at the Western Front. One day my mother took me to a store in our little town where one of my aunts served as a helper. The store sold nothing else but uniforms, a lot of them, not only for soldiers but also for storm troopers, air-raid wardens, nurses in army hospitals and also for the various youth organizations. I was very proud to get my first uniform. Actually, come to think of it, it was also the last one I ever wore.

The basic uniform consisted of a brown shirt, black shorts, and brown knee socks, and complemented by a black scarf held together by a brown leather knot, a black leather belt with an iron buckle showing the eagle and insignia of the Third Reich, and a black shoulder strap. In winter we wore over this a black short wool jacket with two breast pockets like a bomber jacket, long black ski pants and a black cap with a visor in front. The uniform had a swastika on the left arm and a white sign in the shape of lightning and the number of our unit on the other. After a