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A Latter-day Saint in Hitler's SS

The True Story of a Mormon Youth Who Joined and Defected from the Infamous *SchutzStaffel*

Alan F. Keele

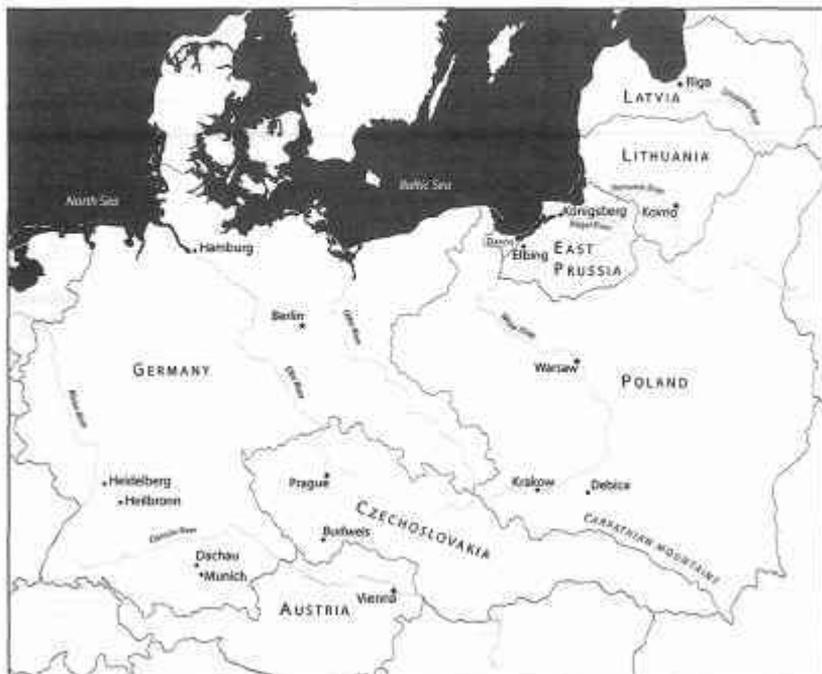
In researching and writing the story of Helmuth Hübener, the Latter-day Saint youth who was executed for distributing anti-Nazi literature in Germany during World War II,¹ I learned of several other Hübener-like people in Nazi Germany.² One such person, whom I shall call Bruno to preserve anonymity, was a young Latter-day Saint man who joined Hitler's infamous elite force, the SS, and then had a change of heart. I had the privilege, a number of years ago now, to interview this gentleman at his home in Germany.

The Early Years

Bruno's story begins with his father, Johann Kusmin S., a native of Riga, Latvia, who supported the czar on the side of the White army in the Russian civil war against the Bolsheviks. He died in a battle in Lithuania in 1923. His pregnant widow, Olga Viktoria Romanovska, fled to Königsberg, now Kaliningrad in Russia, where Bruno was born on November 7, 1923.

1. Blair R. Holmes and Alan F. Keele, eds., comps., and trans., *When Truth Was Treason: German Youth against Hitler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). See also Karl-Heinz Schnibbe, Alan F. Keele, and Douglas F. Tobler, *The Price: The True Story of a Mormon Who Defied Hitler* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984).

2. For a discussion of some of these, see my unpublished paper "Six Authors in Search of a Character: Helmuth Hübener in Post-War German Literature," which can be read online at germslav.byu.edu/faculty/afkeele/authors.htm.



North central Europe during the Hitler years

Olga had had six other sons, all of whom had died young, either from an illness such as typhus or by accident; one was sliding in the snow while hanging onto an automobile, and he got hooked onto the car somehow and was dragged to death. After the death of her husband, Olga found herself *staatenlos* (without citizenship in any state) and could not legally work. She eked out a living as a cleaning lady. One can only imagine her emotional state.

There was a Latter-day Saint sister in the town who was also a part-time fortune teller (*Kartenlegerin*), to whom Olga went to have her fortune told. In what must be one of the strangest conversion stories on record, she learned from this woman about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1936, Olga and her thirteen-year-old son, Bruno, were baptized in the Memel River.

They became members of the Tillsit Branch in the Königsberg District,³ a branch of between one and two hundred members presided over at

3. In 1899, Arnold H. Schulthess, president of the German Mission, recorded that "a fine opening has been made in Königsberg, East Prussia." The area grew

the time by President Otto Schulzke, reportedly a professional prison warden but not a Nazi. Bruno was made a deacon. He remembers hearing President Heber J. Grant speak at a conference in Königsberg.⁴ All the district members reportedly traveled to the city and stayed with other members there, often five to a bed. Some children slept at the church on the bellows of the organ.

Bruno remembers the article by the president of the East German Mission in the official Nazi newspaper stating that Mormons and Nazis had some common experiences and values.⁵ But Bruno also recalls that most of

quickly, and Königsberg became its own district in 1901. Gilbert W. Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany: A History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany between 1840 and 1970* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 47. Though the district continued to grow, World War II took a severe toll on Church membership. For example, in 1937 there were 845 members in the Königsberg area. In 1947, the branch closed. Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 129.

4. President Heber J. Grant traveled to Germany in 1937. (For more information on President Grant's European tour, see "A Long-Awaited Visit: President Heber J. Grant in Switzerland and Germany, 1937" by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Mark Alain Bohn, also in this issue.) Meetings were held in Frankfurt. Previously, in a First Presidency Message of 1929, President Grant counseled the European Saints to remain in their homelands despite the turbulent political and economic atmosphere rather than emigrate to the United States. Emigration among German members of the Church declined sharply in the years leading up to World War II. Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 78, 81.

5. Alfred C. Rees was president of the East German Mission from December 31, 1937, to August 16, 1939. Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 88–90, 92. As tensions mounted in Nazi Germany, President Rees wrote an article called "Im Lande der Mormonen" ("In the Land of the Mormons") comparing German and Mormon history and praising selected efforts of the current government. His article was published in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the official Nazi newspaper, on April 14, 1939. The following excerpts are from a translation of his article:

The Mormon people know what persecution and suppression mean. And the German people who have gone through the shadow of the valley since the World War; and who have been forced to rely upon their own strength and determination, and upon their undying belief in their own ability to restore their self-respect and their merited place among the mighty sisterhood of nations, reveal that same progressive character, which does not shun obstacles. For that reason, to a student of Mormonism, recent developments in Germany present a most impressive comparison. . . . The Mormon people, perhaps more than any other people in all the world, pay high tribute to the German government for its bold declaration of war against the use of alcohol and tobacco by the youth of Germany. (Joseph M. Dixon, "Mormons in the Third Reich: 1933–1945," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7 [Spring 1972]: 72.)

the Latter-day Saints in the area were not pro-Nazi; on the contrary, when he later joined the SS, most of them looked at him suspiciously. He and his mother were both philosemites, he said, with many Jewish friends. When he performed his *Landjahr* (an obligatory year working in the countryside) near Elbing, East Prussia, he attended the branch there, an indication that he must have also been somewhat committed to the Church at that time.

Bruno had a strict upbringing and had to work hard to help his mother make ends meet. When he was growing up, he reported, she often had two jobs and had to lock him in the apartment for the day. When he was a bit older, he helped by gathering mushrooms and berries in the forest.

His mother did not speak German well and relied on him as her translator. Possibly for this reason, among imaginable others, she did not want her only remaining family member out of her sight and was over-protective to the extent that she discouraged him from participating in Church youth programs.

The *Jungvolk*

In order to break free of his clinging mother, Bruno reported, he began to get involved with the *Jungvolk*, the Nazi program for young boys.⁶ A friend of his mother, a man whose house she cleaned, sponsored Bruno and purchased his uniforms for him. When Bruno was old enough, he became a member of the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth).⁷ Looking back on

Four months later, missionaries fled Germany, and on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, beginning the Second World War.

6. *Jungvolk* was a branch of *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth), for boys ten to fourteen. Formally organized in 1933, *Jungvolk* saw immediate and exponential growth with the birth of the Third Reich. Gerhard Rempel, *Hitler's Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 9.

7. In 1933, Hitler voiced his conviction about the significance of the youth in the Nazi movement:

I am beginning with the young. We older ones are used up. . . . We are rotten to the marrow. We have no unrestrained instincts left. We are cowardly and sentimental. We are bearing the burden of a humiliating past, and have in our blood the dull recollection of serfdom and servility. But my magnificent youngsters! Are there finer ones anywhere in the world? Look at these young men and boys! What material! With them I can make a new world. (Rempel, *Hitler's Children*, 1-2)

it, he recalls that he should have seen the inherent violence and injustice in the party, for as a *Hitlerjugend* member he had to do pushups with a leader holding a knife upright below his stomach. He also recalls the H.J. clearing out cafés at curfew time and then breaking curfew themselves by lounging in the cafés until late at night.

Although he began an apprenticeship as a *Drogist*, which is not quite the same thing as a druggist, Bruno became interested in the *Feuerschutzpolizei*, a voluntary fire department of sorts that was a kind of pre-military training program rather than a full-time occupation.

In 1942, when Bruno was twenty or so, a committee of the *Waffen SS*⁸ (armed protective services) came to the *Feuerschutzpolizei* looking for likely recruits, and they mustered Bruno into the *SchutzStaffel* (protective echelon). He was sent to Debica in Poland, where he served as a guard at a *Truppenübungsplatz* (a troop-training facility). Of his memories there, he said only that the local governor in Poland (the *Provinzleiter*), was a notorious high-living “swine.”

Now comes the ugly part: While Bruno was in Poland, the SS were assigned to details to eliminate Jews. The SS were given *Schnapps* and drugs to make them fearless, Bruno reports, and then they were driven into the countryside to round up Jewish villagers in the *shtetls*.⁹ Bruno was uncomfortable talking to me about this episode in his life. I did not feel like pressing him for details about his participation; nevertheless, I got the

The *Hitlerjugend* was Hitler's youth organization created with this vision in mind in 1926, before the Nazis had even come to power. Peter D. Stachura, *Nazi Youth in the Weimar Republic* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Clio Books, 1975), 23. As Hitler's youth organizations expanded, the *Hitlerjugend* came to refer specifically to the organization for boys ages fourteen to eighteen. Rempel, *Hitler's Children*, 9. The *Hitlerjugend* had close ties to the Nazi adult organizations such as the SA (the Storm Troopers), the SS, and the German army. Rempel observes, “The social, political, and military resiliency of the Third Reich is inconceivable without the H. J. It was the incubator that maintained the political system by replenishing the ranks of the dominant party and preventing the growth of mass opposition.” *Hitler's Children*, 2.

8. The *Waffen-SS*, literally, “the SS-in-arms,” was the combat wing of the SS, a paramilitary group used by Hitler as a secondary, politically motivated army. D. S. V. Fosten and R. J. Marrion, *Waffen-SS: Its Uniforms, Insignia, and Equipment, 1938–1945* (London: Almark, 1972), 5, 8. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and anxious for more power to move forward with his sinister racial agenda, expanded the ranks of the SS greatly as the war progressed. Rempel, *Hitler's Children*, 23. Because the SS could not draft soldiers, it recruited heavily from Hitler youth organizations. Rempel, *Hitler's Children*, 200–201. By the end of 1942, the *Waffen-SS* had nearly 190 thousand men. Fosten and Marion, *Waffen-SS*, 12.

9. The correct Yiddish plural is *shtetlach* (small Jewish villages).

impression that he did not do the horrible things others did. He particularly recalled how shocked he was when an SS man threw a baby into the air and shot it with his carbine. Women were stripped and their body cavities searched, ostensibly for hidden jewels. Bruno said, "Lest anyone argue that there was no persecution of the Jews, let me tell him that I saw it firsthand."

One night after this horrible experience, Bruno and a Hungarian comrade buried their uniforms, dressed in their civilian clothes, and began walking southwest toward the British lines, as they imagined them. In five days they made it as far as the Carpathians, where they were captured by Germans at a small border crossing. Bruno and his companion suspected that a Pole who had befriended them earlier had alerted the Gestapo about them.

Dachau

Bruno was taken back to his unit and tried by the *SS-und Polizeigericht VI* (SS and Police Court VI) in Krakau, Poland. The judge reportedly said to him, "Der Alte Fritz hätte Sie erschossen!" ("Old Emperor Friedrich would have shot you!") When he was sentenced to seven years, Bruno laughed. Apparently this was a nervous tick of his (he had laughed when a bomb had landed near him during the war).

He was first sent to the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany, then was moved to a labor camp in nearby Allach that was making BMW aircraft engines.¹⁰ In 1944 he grasped at an opportunity to volunteer for a kind of suicide mission involving one-man submarines, but when he got to Berlin and party officials looked more closely at his record, he was sent right back to Dachau. From there he was sent to Budweis, Czechoslovakia, on a *Bewährungsaufsatz* (probationary assignment), but he left the train in Vienna to go to the amusement park at the Prater, as he recalls it, and overstayed his leave. When he finally arrived in Prague, he was tried again and given an additional three years of imprisonment in Dachau. In December 1944, he was sent to a labor facility in Neckar-Els bei Moosbach, near

10. Allach was a branch camp of Dachau set up in close proximity to manufacturing sites. Bruno likely worked in the screw factory Präzifix along with up to four hundred other prisoners. Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

Heidelberg. Here he worked assembling Daimler-Benz aircraft engines in filthy underground tunnels that dripped cold water on him as he worked.

Illness and the End of the War

Having survived several bombing raids on the factory, he contracted tuberculosis from the terrible conditions underground. The Red Cross once visited his factory and sent him to a clinic in Rockenau bei Eberbach on the Neckar River, where the end of the war overtook him. Because the United States Army had no proof that Bruno had been a prisoner of the Nazis, they treated him as an SS man, for that is what someone told them he was, even though he did not have the SS blood-type tattoo under his arm.¹¹

At first he was a prisoner of war in the former *Grossdeutschland Kaserne* (Greater Germany Barracks), then in a tent camp in Heilbronn, Germany, and later in Niederroden, Germany. Then, due to his failing health, the Americans put him in one of their own hospitals before freeing him, presumably to die. After he was released on April 22, 1946, he entered a German hospital at Heidelberg-Rohrbach, where his entire right lung was removed. (When I interviewed him in 1985, his chest was still very noticeably sunken in on the right side.) The left lung was infected, but he was given antibiotics to treat it.

Church, Family, and Career

While recovering in the clinic, Bruno saw a newspaper advertising an upcoming conference of the Church in Karlsruhe, Germany. He wrote to the address given in the paper and received visitors from the Church. About eight weeks after his operation, he boarded a train with his new-found Latter-day Saint friends, notably the Eugen Hechter family, for the conference. They propped him up with pillows to ease his pain. He reported to me that from that moment forth he has been a one-hundred-percent-devoted Latter-day Saint. He has served as a patriarch and a

11. The blood type was tattooed on the inside of the left upper arm of SS soldiers. This mark—or any scar that might have suggested an attempt to remove the tattoo—was considered *prima facie* evidence of membership in the SS and often resulted in summary executions. See Karl Schnibbe's account in Holmes and Keele, eds., *When Truth Was Treason*, 380, n. 40.

bishop, as a high councilor several times, and in many other callings; he projected to my eyes a saintly, even beatific spirit. Educationally, he finished his apprenticeship and became a *Drogist*. At twenty-seven he married a woman who was a war widow with two children. They had two sons together. (His two sons were inactive in the Church when I spoke to him; he thought he had been too severe with them when they were young.) When his wife passed away in 1978, he lived for a while with a stepdaughter and her family. He met his second wife at a Latter-day Saint singles gathering in Tiro-lia, Austria. Together they have served a mission in Pirmasens, Germany.

Regrettably, he was unable to locate his mother: though he had heard from her once while he was in Berlin briefly, he does not know what became of her in the confusion of the war, nor could the other Latter-day Saints from the Königsberg area tell him anything more about her fate. When he was asked to teach a class in Church after the war, he realized he knew the gospel better than he thought he did, thanks to reading to his mother aloud from the Book of Mormon and the Bible. Like many who had been in camps, he had a problem with the Word of Wisdom, which he soon overcame. After the war, he received some reparations money, but he had to pay some of it back when it was learned that he had been in the SS. He lived for two and one-half years in the United States, where he worked as a janitor in a Latter-day Saint stake center, but he returned to Germany after fasting and praying about it.

Conclusion

Bruno's story leaves room for much conjecture: Why did he join the SS? His mother was anti-Bolshevik, but he says she was also philosemitic and anti-Nazi. I got the impression he had been, as a very young and impressionable man, simply motivated to get away from a possessive mother and have some excitement, a young man who did not have the perspective to see what Nazism really promised. Yet when he saw Nazism in its true light, he had the courage to flee from it. And when he returned to the narrow path of the gospel, he held onto the rod with the strength of a man who had literally been to hell and back.

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