

Eyewitness to History: Children of War

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*For many children, living in Nazi Germany during World War II (1939-1945) was difficult. The Nazi party, ruled by Adolf Hitler, rounded up millions of Jews and others and murdered them. The Nazis also wanted children to spy on their families and report back to the government. Will interviewed his godfather, Hans Ohrt, who described what life was like under Hitler's **brutal**¹ dictatorship.²*

Q: How old were you when World War II started and ended?

A: I was 4 years old at the beginning of the war and 9 at its end. At the beginning of the war, I lived in Berlin in a huge apartment. At the end of the war, I lived with my sister, parents, and grandmother in one room with one bed in a farmhouse by the Swiss border.

Q: What were your feelings regarding the Nazi party?

A: This is a tough one to answer. Imagine that you live in a place like Seattle, where it rains almost every day. You go outside and you come back home every day wet. But your government tells you that the sun shines every day. If you are caught telling anybody that it rains, the government will put you in jail and you are never heard from again.

Q: Did you have any friends who were Jewish or who were Nazis?

A: Yes, I had a friend, Peter, who was Jewish. One day he was gone. I had another friend, Volker, whose father was a Nazi. My parents always made sure that I understood that in his presence I could never forget the sun was always shining even though it was raining. Can you imagine parents teaching their young children that they have to lie in order to survive?

¹**brutal:** cruel and inhuman

²**dictatorship:** rule, control, or leadership by one person with total power

Reading Passage

Q: How old did boys and girls have to be to join the Nazis?

A: You had to be an adult to join the Nazi party. But one did not have to join the party; it was an "honor" to be "invited" to join the party. Once you were invited, it was next to impossible to refuse the invitation. The system was very **complex**.³ If you were a teacher, you belonged to the teacher's organization, for example. The members of these organizations, in turn, had to join the Nazi party.

On their tenth birthday, children automatically became members of the [Nazi] youth organization. The Nazis would teach you all kinds of cool things, [but they would] **indoctrinate**⁴ you and **brainwash**⁵ you to believe in the goals of the party.

Q: Was your sister a Nazi?

A: My sister was 16. She had to join the youth organization. She had a wonderful time and was brainwashed into believing that it was sunny every day. She was also instructed to spy at home and to tell the authorities [what was said], which she did not do.

Q: When did children first start spying?

A: The members of the youth organization had to attend political indoctrination meetings and were told that it was their patriotic duty to report anybody who made negative remarks about the party.

All of this happened 60 years ago. You should learn from all that has happened and make sure similar things don't happen again.

Read the newspapers...and watch out if [the country's leaders] tell you it is sunny every day. Try to discover lies and speak up for what you think is the truth.

³ **complex:** having many parts, details, or functions, often related in a complicated way; the opposite of simple

⁴ **indoctrinate:** to teach the ideas, opinions, or beliefs of only one particular group

⁵ **brainwash:** to try to influence someone's beliefs or habits through force or sly persuading