

Serving *Mein Führer*

ELEANOR AYER

The following biography tells about Alfons Heck's experience in the Hitler Youth organization. The author, Eleanor Ayer, uses indented, smaller print to indicate Heck's exact words.

On the cool, windy afternoon of April 20, 1938, Adolf Hitler's forty-ninth birthday, I was sworn into *Jungvolk*, the junior branch of the Hitler Youth. When I raised three fingers of my right hand to the sky in the oath to *der Führer*, my left hand gripping the flag of my unit, my spine tingled.

"I promise in the Hitler Youth to do my duty at all times in love and faithfulness to help the *Führer*—so help me God."

The last line carried a message that turned out to be true for many of us: "Our Banner Means More to us Than Death."

This bond of death, pledged by Alfons and millions of other young Germans, was rooted in a deep love for the Fatherland. *Deutschland über Alles* (Germany Over All) the national anthem proclaimed. Now, with the dear Fatherland supposedly threatened by the evil Jews and gypsies, millions of German teens rallied to its rescue. The Hitler Youth brought them together as one strong force, ready to fight for their *Führer*.

Perhaps because he himself had dropped out at an early age, Adolf Hitler did not consider school the most important part of a child's education. Far more important was the *Jungvolk* (Young Folk), which children could join when they turned ten. Starting at age six, they could become *Pimpfs*, apprentices in the *Jungvolk*. Careful records were kept of

their performance. Leaders wrote reports about the children's progress in athletics, camping, behavior, and—most important—their understanding of Nazi beliefs. If their records were good, they would be admitted to the *Jungvolk*. But before they could join, they must first pass a *Mutprobe*, or test of courage.

The members of my *Schar*, a unit of about forty to fifty boys, were required to dive head first off the three-meter board—about ten feet high—into the town's swimming pool. There were some stinging belly flops, but the pain was worth it. When we passed the test, the fifteen-year-old leader of our company handed us the coveted dagger with the inscription "Blood and Honor" on its blade, meaning that we were fully accepted members of the *Jungvolk*.

Children didn't need their parents' permission to join the Hitler Youth. In fact, an adult who tried to keep a child from joining could be sent to prison. Nazi leaders didn't encourage parents to have their children join. Instead they spoke directly to the children, building in them a burning desire to be part of this great new movement. "You are a superior race of people," Hitler Youth leaders preached to their young recruits. "It is natural that you should rule the world." All this praise and promise of a glorious future inspired millions of children to join.

Parents who didn't agree with Hitler Youth leaders' ideas found themselves powerless to change their children's minds. Alfons's father was one who didn't agree. On a rare visit to the family farm, Jakob saw his son in uniform for the first time.

Wildly he shook his fist at me. "You have all the makings of an arrogant Nazi," he shouted. "They're going to bury you in that monkey suit, *Du verdammter Idiot*." But I looked coldly through him and walked away. I was beyond his crazy ranting and raving.

Girls as well as boys were attracted by the power, glory, and importance that the Hitler Youth promised. While boys served in the *Jungvolk*, girls became *Jungmadel* (Young Maidens). Their uniforms were white blouses with ties and full blue skirts, often highlighted by the not-too-ladylike heavy marching shoes. Boys' uniforms looked much like those of the SA, the Storm Troopers. Around the upper left arm of their brown shirts they wore an armband bearing the black Nazi swastika inside a white diamond, on a field of red and white. Pants were black, bermuda short length, and were worn with white knee socks.

Girls' training was much the same as boys' and included long hours of marching and hiking. But there was one important difference. From the beginning, girls were taught that their most important duty to the Fatherland was to become mothers of healthy Aryan German babies. It was best if they could marry and then become mothers. But often motherhood was stressed so strongly that girls became pregnant before marriage—as part of their "duty" to the Fatherland.

Within the Hitler Youth, there were several divisions, just as there were in the *Wehrmacht* or regular army. Alfons belonged to the *Fanfarenzug*, the drum and fanfare platoon.

During parades, the *Fanfarenzug* always preceded any large units of the Hitler Youth in order to set the marching rhythm. Hundreds of boys were arranged in formation ahead of the flawlessly goose-stepping soldiers who followed. The *Wehrmacht* tried to keep cordial relations with the Hitler Youth because we were its pool of future manpower. There was never a single rally without us. We were the icing on the cake.

Such fanfare at public gatherings delighted the German people, and Hitler's men were masters at it. When the Nazis staged an event, it was always a spectacular show. For Alfons Heck, the summer of 1938 ended in the grandest show of all, "before which everything else in my short life paled. . . . It would bind me to Adolf Hitler until the bitter end."

Although he had been a member of the *Jungvolk* for only five months, Alfons was chosen to attend the Nuremberg Party Congress or *Reichsparteitag*, the "high mass" of Nazism. For centuries Nuremberg, in the southern state of Bavaria, had been the showcase city of German history. The Nazis used it as the annual gathering spot for hundreds of thousands of loyal followers. A huge tent city was set up, and for seven days people attended rallies praising Adolf Hitler, the power of the Nazis, and the glory of the new Germany. "Even for a ten-year-old," recalled Alfons, "it was a near feverish, week-long high that lasted into one's dreams."

The Day of the Hitler Youth was Saturday, September 10: Shortly before noon, 80,000 Hitler Youth were lined up in rows as long as the entire stadium. The tension among us tingled into our fingertips. When Hitler finally appeared, we greeted him with a thundering, triple "*Sieg Heil*," (Hail to Victory) and it took all of our discipline to end it there, as we had been instructed.

Hitler, the superb actor that he was, always began his speeches quietly, almost man to man. Then his voice rose, took on power, and his right fist punctuated the air in a series of short, powerful jabs. "You, my youth," he shouted, with his eyes seeming to stare right at me, "are our nation's most precious guarantee for a great future. You are destined to be the leaders of a glorious new order under National Socialism! You, my youth," he screamed hoarsely, "never forget that one day you will rule the world."

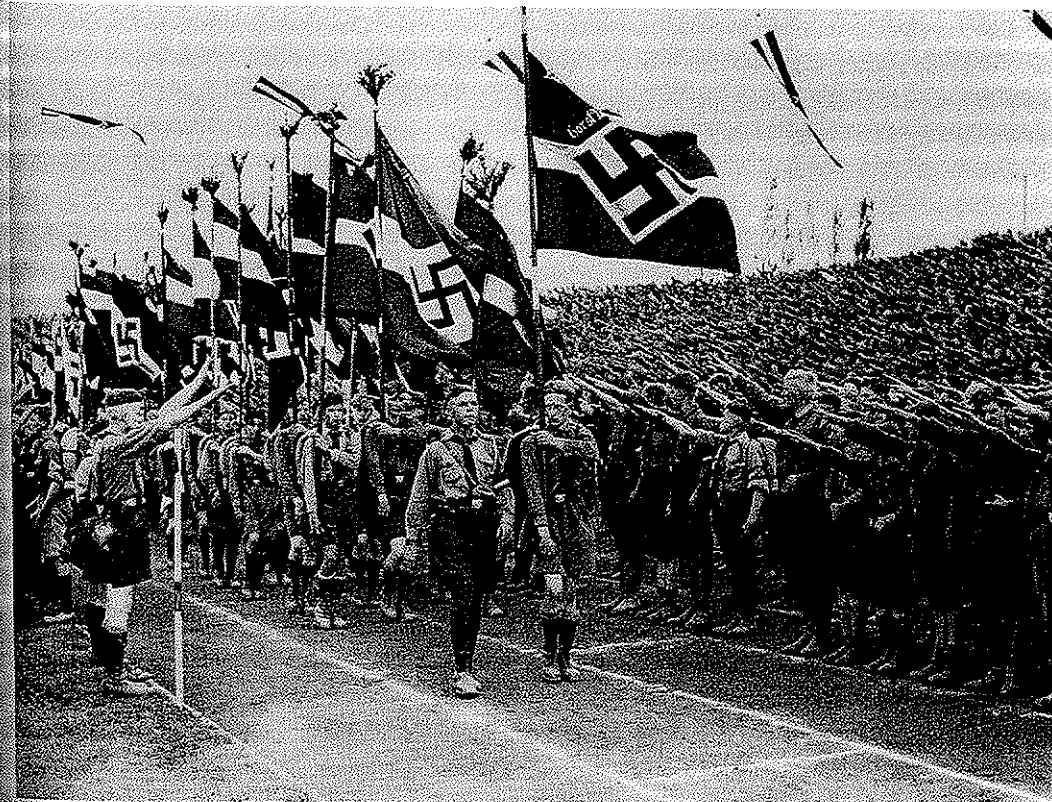
For minutes on end, we shouted at the top of our lungs, with tears streaming down our faces: "Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil!" From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul.

Three days later, during Nazi Party Day ceremonies at Nuremberg, speaking on the theme of Greater Germany, Hitler issued a warning. He was talking about the neighboring country of Czechoslovakia and the Germans who lived in its northern region, the Sudetenland. He spoke of "the oppression," the unfair treatment, that Sudeten Germans were suffering at the hands of the Czech government. "If these tortured creatures cannot gain rights and assistance by themselves," he warned, "they can get both from us."

All this talk of oppression was just an excuse. What Hitler really wanted was to invade Czechoslovakia so he could gain more land, *Lebensraum*, for his people. And the *Führer* was used to getting what he wanted.

Just six months earlier, at dawn on March 12, German army troops had crossed into Austria, the border country of Adolf Hitler's birth. His purpose at that time, he claimed, was "to restore my dear homeland to the German Reich." Most Austrians welcomed the *Führer*. They were delighted with what they called *Anschluss* or "reunification of the Germanic people." Austrians and Germans were now one again, as they had been earlier in history. It was a quiet takeover. Without losing one life, Adolf Hitler added nine million people and vast new lands to the Third Reich.

Now, as he prepared to enter Czechoslovakia, people remembered the Austrian *Anschluss*. Many began to ask themselves just how far the *Führer* planned to go. But Hitler was quick to promise that this would be his last move into other countries. Once he gained back the Sudetenland, he assured them, he would seek no new territory. Common people and world leaders alike believed him. That is why no one made a move to help the Czechs on October 1, 1938, when German troops invaded the Sudetenland.



German crowds salute a parade of Hitler youth.

The Czech people did not welcome Hitler as the Austrians had done. But although Czechoslovakia had an army nearly as strong as the *Wehrmacht*, it could not hold out against the Germans. Within days, Adolf Hitler had accomplished another easy victory, and brought an additional three and one-half million people under his control. With the Sudetenland under his belt, Hitler laughed off his promise of no more invasions. Within six months, he had taken over all of Czechoslovakia.

Hitler Youth members went wild with pride and excitement. These easy victories were certain proof of the strength and superiority of the Fatherland. It was obvious to most teenagers that Hitler was invincible—he could not be beaten. In their minds, *der Führer* was more powerful than God. Alfons Heck was one of those firm followers.

Death was merely an abstract idea to us youngsters. Germany was a country of sun-flecked, unlimited promise. If Hitler had died that year, he would have been celebrated as one of the greatest statesmen of German history, despite his hatred of the Jews. No world leader of the time approached Hitler's ability to draw the praise of his people. I watched women become hysterical and faint when he smiled at them.

Hitler's hatred of Jews didn't dampen his image in most people's minds. Good Aryans paid little attention to their hero's darker side. Few of them objected to the many unfair laws that were now being forced upon the Jews. One of the newest demanded that all German Jews use only Jewish first names. If you were Jewish with a common first name like Karl or Heidi, the Nazis said you must change it to something "obviously Jewish" like Abraham or Sarah so you could be identified more easily.

All across Germany, the fate of the Jews was beginning to look more and more bleak. Headlines like this one screamed off the pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party newspaper:

JEWS, ABANDON ALL HOPE!
OUR NET IS SO FINE THAT THERE IS NOT A HOLE
THROUGH WHICH YOU CAN SLIP.

Alfons's former school friend, Heinz Ermann, was among those whose families heeded the dire warnings. Like thousands of other Jewish families, the Ermanns frantically took steps to slip through the net.

One afternoon, Heinz came to our farm, all dressed up in his best velvet suit, to say good-bye. "My Uncle Herbert is taking me with him for a while," he said sadly. Uncle Herbert was a rabbi in the city of Cologne.

"Maybe that's best, Heinz," said my grandmother. "It'll be nice for you seeing a big city." Heinz's father had decided to send his only son away, since it was impossible for a Jewish child to go unnoticed in a small town. Sooner or later, somebody in Wittlich would call Heinz a dirty Jew—or worse—and his father wanted to spare him that.

My grandmother gave us a piece of cake, normally a Sunday treat, and then we shook hands awkwardly. "*Auf Wiedersehen*, Frau Heck," Heinz said, but he just nodded to me. We both knew that our friendship had ended. Later, when I had to go through interviews for promotions in the Hitler Youth, I always denied having had a Jew for a friend. Before long, Heinz had become just a fleeting memory. ∞

Afterword

In an Emmy-winning film, Alfons Heck reflects on his former loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Confessions of a Hitler Youth was filmed in 1992.

I'm proud that I have found the courage to speak out about my own past. By telling people what really happened, by helping them understand the Nazi era from the point of view of the perpetrator, I hope I can help to prevent such a disaster from ever happening again.

I try to explain how it was possible for people as educated and cultured as the Germans to follow a man like Hitler. How could this happen in Germany? Because we simply did not care enough for other people. We didn't care about anything else except ourselves.

When I speak to young people, the message I hope that they must remember is this: the murder of eleven million people in the Holocaust began very simply with prejudice, minor harassment. If you allow harassment to grow and fester, if you do nothing to stop it, then you become one of the perpetrators. What began in the Hitler years as minor harassment turned, in the end, to genocide.