

Eningen, Germany

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I grew up in a small village called Eningen-unter-Achalm, in the southern German state of Wuerttemberg. The Second World War began and Hitler's armies set out to conquer the world. My parents were very religious people. I never heard them talk politics but I knew that they were not happy with the things that were going on. Most of the friends and neighbors of my age, and those I had gone to school with, joined the Hitler Youth, but my parents did not want me to be part of it.

On completion of grade school, when I was just fourteen years old, I decided that I wanted to be a tool and die maker. It was recognized as a very respectable profession and I was told that according to my grades and aptitudes I would be suitable for it. I was advised to apply for an apprenticeship with a company called Wafios, short for Wagner, Ficker and Schmied. The company was located in Reutlingen, about three miles from where we lived.

I applied and was invited to take an aptitude test as well as a test in arithmetic, science and a few other subjects. About a week later I was told that I had passed all the tests and that I should report to the company to fill out the necessary forms before being accepted. One of the questions on the form was '*Are you a member of the Hitler Youth?*' This I had to answer with a no.

A few days later I received a note from the company telling me that unless I joined the Hitler Youth movement I could not be accepted for an apprenticeship. I was very upset and begged my father to let me join for the sake of my career. He promised to think it over.

I learned from my friends that young people were needed to join the music band in another of Hitler's movements, for a younger age group, called 'Jung Volk' which was similar to the Boy Scouts. My father agreed that I could join them and thus I became a member of the band playing the fanfare, which was acceptable to Wafios. After a very intensive training, which included attending college for two full days every week, I successfully completed my apprenticeship after three and a half years.

In 1942 Germany occupied France and many of the boys I had gone to school with were in the German army. My brother Walter was a pilot and training to be a fighter pilot. I was also supposed to be called up to join one of Hitler's armies, but was detained by my company because I was a specialist and therefore someone who was needed to support Hitler's war machine. Being at home, when nearly all my friends were in the military, made me increasingly uncomfortable. I felt as though the mothers, whose boys were in the war, looked at me as if to say, "How come you are still at home?" I did not feel right going to work every day while my school friends were out there defending their country.

I knew that sooner or later I was going to be called up to the military anyway, so I decided to volunteer for the air force. I wanted to be a flyer like my brother and I liked the smart uniform. However I first had to convince my father, who would have to sign my application papers and give his consent. After several days of discussing the matter he finally agreed. I had to pass a very rigorous physical test as well as a day-long test in a classroom, answering questions about history, sociology, metallurgy, science and arithmetic. It reminded me very much of the exams I had to take at the end of my apprenticeship. I passed all the tests and felt very pleased with myself. I imagined coming home on leave wearing a smart air force uniform.

When I was just 18 years old I served my basic training in France. However, it was nothing like I had pictured it to be. Physically, I was in very good condition, which helped me to get through the rigorous training better than many of my fellow volunteers. I had never experienced anything so tough. Three of the boys who served in my unit took their own lives by shooting themselves because they could not stand the stress. The immense heat in the south of France did not

help. We were made to run for hours, wearing gas masks, during the hottest time of the day. Over and over again we were shouted at by the trainers, “What, you want to fly and you don’t even know how to walk?” Many times I wished I were back at Wafios.

After my basic training, much to my disappointment, I was sent to school to be a radio operator, instead of becoming a pilot. I also learned how to land a plane in case of an emergency. By the time I completed my training the war had taken a turn for the worse.