



I am liberated by the God of Israel

30.09.2009 | Marquardt, Friedrich Wilhelm

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Others were already soldiers, most of my class mates were in anti aircraft defence around Berlin and in Northern Yugoslavia. All those younger ones of our year were still half at home. During late summer 1944 after the long holidays, we had dug tank-traps in Poland, the Soviet Army still waiting in Warsaw. November we spent in a paramilitary camp, we crawled through the cold and wet beech woods of Bad Freienwalde on the river Oder. We received training with the rifle, machine gun and anti-tank rocket. In the period before Christmas we received our final subject for writing our essay in German literature. Our teacher Mr Jäne had intended it as a protest, which was an eye-opener for us, and stays with me to this day, meaning that it remains unprocessed. The subject was: “How do you propose to lead your life until your hero’s death for the Fatherland?” Thus the six-form ended for me as an education for death. What I wrote in those days I do not know any more: only the subject I have not forgotten to this day.

Early 1945

At the end of January 1945 two of the five of us who had remained behind were conscripted away from the school desk into the Reichsluftfahrtministerium in Berlin. There my classmate Willy Laurent and myself received first class travel documents for all types of trains and a movement order to Upper Silesia. We had to transport an aero-engine from there, via Prague, to Kulmbach in Bavaria. Once we reached Dresden we were, apart from the train personnel, the only Germans who still travelled to Silesia. Train stations, trains, roads were blocked with refugees moving in the opposite direction. Our train took several units of the Vlassow-Army to the front. Squeezed between numbers of Kirgisin people we had to suppress our shivers at their Asiatic presence with which the propaganda aimed against the “Asiatic hordes” from the East had infected us. From Glatz there was no further progress. One could hear the shooting at the front. The commanding officer of the Maria-Theresia-Fortress only laughed at us when we reported to him with our Berlin order. Already when on our way we had heard from the military personnel nothing but mocking and declarations of disgust about the abuse of children. They would have preferred to have thrown us of the train.

Returned with our order not carried out: it was back to our school desk but no longer really any lessons. The old gentlemen of the teaching staff too, now served in the Volkssturm; we:

permanently fire watching; with regards to the air raids on Berlin, my hometown too, was in the flight path. In February I heard for the first time the Berlin Philharmonic, then still in the Berneburger Strasse. On the 18th of March we drove, ourselves now called up for the Labour Service, in a transport from a Berlin goods-train station into the Hinterland of Cuxhaven. The personnel for this Labour Service camp had not yet arrived when we did. The base camp for this unit was on the island of Usedom from where they still had to fight their way west.

Before they arrived I found the same violent and sexually loaded anarchy that I had already encountered in the Polish digging commando. There was no trace of the Hitler Youth motto to which all had sworn: “ Young Folk’s boys are hard, silent and loyal. Young Folk’s boys are comrades. The highest for Young Folk’s boys is honour.” As far as my age group was concerned that had not been internalised.

Of course, we had not been called up as workers but as soldiers. Accordingly, so was our training. My remaining notebook of those days says that the imminent oath has brought on quite a crisis. By no means was it anti-fascist.

Parental Home

My parents were old Nazis, going back to the so-called “fighting time” before ‘33. As the son of a pastor my father was probably protected from the roughest madness. During “Kristallnacht” he even wanted to act in his SS–uniform against the vandalizing window-smashers in our neighbourhood. The next morning over breakfast he said that it had not been necessary, the police had seen to that. On my way to school I saw: everything was destroyed. I cannot find out to this day what it is with my mother: Wandervogel or Nazi thoughts, folk songs or Xenophobia. Today she retreats into her Wilhelminian childhood: when in white dress and floral head dress, she functioned as maid of honour for Wilhelm II during the opening of the Hohenzollern Canal, connecting the rivers Havel and Oder.

Earliest memory, probably from my third year in 1931 from my cot, the drilling of the SA on the Märkisch Sand near our house. With the song, which they kept singing, my ability to remember awoke. The song was called “When the golden even sun was sending its last rays, a regiment of Hitler moved into a little town”: moving into my little town and into my awareness.

One of the balconies of the house in which I was born was to the rear, towards the Eberswalde Stadium. There was an evening in June 1932 when Hitler arrived. My father had to pick him up in his car from the airport in Finowfurt. But on the way there as happened so many times before, the radiator started to boil. Thus he missed out on his honour. On our balcony all hell broke lose. My lively Rhenish Grandma became very jubilant, no one discouraging her. The huge glass decanter with Raspberry juice and my mother’s sandwiches did nothing to help divert the interest of the guests on the balcony. I became afraid and crouched behind the curtain next to the balcony door, an eyewitness behind a net veil.

Later I saw Hitler quite often. At the Olympic Games in 1936, on the occasion of his 50th birthday in 1939, first on the east-west axis in Charlottenburg, later once more during the parade at the Brandenburg Gate. The Eberswalder train station was the station for the reception of Göring’s guests in the Schorfheide. More than once we had to form a guard of honour there and cheer when Hitler or the Count Ciano or whoever else appeared to visit Göring.

When in spring of this year (i.e.1984, the translator) I flew over the Saarland with the river Saar beneath me to talk with the pastors about “Barmen”, my memory brought back the night of the homecoming of the Saar in 1935. For that occasion we had pomp and ceremony in our garrison square, too. And again a song: “ German is the Saar, German forever, and German is the bank of our river and eternally German my homeland” – the tautologies of the German. All of the

Saarbrücken pastors whom I told about this were too young to know this song. My memory stemmed from such a long time ago.

'Kristallnacht'

The fact that 'Kristallnacht' turned into an important date for me I of course, only know today. In the morning before school began I saw the Synagogue which I never noticed before, as it lay burned out. The charcoaled Hebrew texts became a pointer for me. The Latin teacher of the Sexta, I was then nine years old, always started lecturing in the hallway outside the classroom from the open Latin book- enunciating or with a question or voicing a particular word, he would enter the classroom where we had to stand to greet him; this way he avoided the obligatory Hitler greeting. On 10th November 1938 he read 'very clearly' from a thick book something strange: 'Bereshit bara elohim ha-shamajim weat ha-aretz', the whole first chapter of the Bible, asking "Do you know what this is?" Of course, nobody knew. He said "Bible", nothing else. Only five years ago I met the Jew, a pupil of our Gymnasium, whom this teacher kept hidden in his house until the end of the war. The house next to the house where I was born.

The man who confirmed me was naturally a German Christian, a nice mild man. In contrast to the two BK (Bekennende Kirche) Pastors – no enthusiasts, my parents said. As much as I'm wracking my brains since I would really like to know it: I cannot remember anything about the man who Confirmed me. – Shortly after the beginning of my Confirmation classes a female doctor gave me a book with a dedication; "For you, having been swimming against the tide" All I had done was state, in the presence of the 'Jungbannführer', a fanatical Nazi junior teacher, that I had taken part in the Confirmation classes; although others also took part. That was in 1941/42.

Our certificate that we were Aryan was not to be completely achieved. The famous Jewish great – grandmother really existed. Marianne Salomon, rumour had it. The General Von der Decken had made her, before he married the Princess of Hessen Kassel, pregnant. She was a housemaid in Pymont, the child was my maternal great grandfather; he was placed in the Hanoverian Soldiers Orphanage where he grew up. My mother is a born Decken, without a 'Von der'; the loss of the title she owes to the Jewess. When my father found out all this he must have felt quite sick. Still inside the census archive in Pymont, where he uncovered all that, he burned everything which bore witness to Marianne Salomon.

It didn't help much. The gap in the family tree remained and endangered my future, which was confronted with the following dilemma: according to the 'Reichserbhofgesetz' (the law regulating inheritance of farms and farmland, the transl.), I, as the firstborn of that generation was obliged to become a farmer and take over the farm of my paternal uncle in Hinterpommern who had no children. My father had already once taken me to this unspeakably squalid little farm, where I had encountered my Uncle Paul as the first unswerving anti-fascist. He had mocked my father for his political views and he also did that openly in the presence of neighbours in his village. – Without proof of my bloodline however, I would never have been allowed to become a freehold farmer. That was the 'danger' hanging over my future. Lettow – Vorbeck helped, the hero of the German South – West. He had connections to the SS Race Office. That's where the skulls of my sister and myself were measured; nothing abnormal was discovered. This was certified. But the mood: a Sword of Damocles was hanging over us, never quite left us and a sister of my mother, a young teacher at the time, had to go into the 'German East' to render the gap in the bloodline innocent.

What else did I know?

A Berlin brother-in-law of my father was a pretty high Nazi animal, a school inspector in Tegel and a head of Party education in Berlin. He died in 1945 together with Heinrich George in Russian imprisonment. When he came to visit us we had to walk through woods and across fields for he knew a lot that couldn't be told within four walls. Thus I learned as a child rather continuously not

only about the increasingly worsening mood of the Berlin population, which worried the Party, but also about movements of resistance and quite a lot about the 20th. July. The longer the war lasted, a cousin of my mother, who was an actress in Berlin, appeared at our place with friends for we had real coffee. She was anti-Nazi and knew a lot about Concentration Camps but was considered in the family as somewhat 'over the top'. A Wander Vogel comrade of my mother was known to be settling in 'Palestine'. The word 'Palestine' I link with something red-blonde, for thus the Wander Vogel comrade was described; red-blonde was not pure race. – On the way to the Labour Service in the goods wagon, a comrade knew everything. He was a young Elbskipper and talked of the gassing of Jews. He himself said he had seen smoking chimneys.

My crisis of oath on the 2nd April 1945 was not anti-fascist. I did not speak the oath but I stood among the sworn and with body and soul I was sworn to Hitler. The 25th April was the baptism of fire. According to my notebook I did not know on the 13th May if – as I wrote – the defeat was meant to be 'wise guidance or a blind and furious fate.' I have now quoted that literally. I noted suicidal intentions for the only time in my life. A sister of my mother did indeed commit suicide together with a very much loved, lute playing godmother of mine out of fear of the approaching Russians. I wrote in my notebook that 2000 years of culture had now collapsed.

I am glad to still have the red notebook. It stops me fooling myself and it allows me to not confuse my present concepts of the then events with the actual experience. My aphoristic hints at my experiences show the fragmented character of my memory and also the considerable contradictions of my experience. That is why in now comprising everything a bit more towards the 'moral of the story' I would like to stay as close as possible with my past experiences and not cover them with today's judgements.

However, I have to note one thing in advance to make what I'm going to finally say now better understood. In those days I was in the middle of puberty, emotionally and mentally as well as physically. My voice had only just begun to break, not without the help of hormone injections; concerned as they were for my male constitution my parents had been persuaded to by a nutty physician. 'Young folks are hard' was not for me. By the way, that was also true of the age group in my class; much less than today's sixteen year olds seem to be. I always have to compare this with the images of armed child soldiers from the Third World. The acceleration has since galloped with us too. I was a child, who had after all enraged the military personnel controlling the train on the winter journey to Silesia.

And still on the trip to being released from prison an older soldier sneered once: "Have you ever had it off with a girl?" A younger elder intervened. "That's enough of that dirty talk, you can see that he hasn't." Although the floating dresses of the women outside the Rathaus in Elberfeld where we were released aroused me very much. – I only mention that for two reasons. My experience with National Socialism had a very strong physical component. I don't know if I can depict that clearly enough. It wasn't just the obligatory uniform.

Young Folk

I even yearned for the Young Folk uniform as a means of belonging, probably also for the dagger, something which can be psychoanalytically well explained today. Wearing the uniform was not the problem. But then to be made uniformed! The Young Folk was mainly physical coercion albeit not through outdoor games but through the uncanny parading around with drums and fanfares through the city every Saturday and most Wednesdays. One turned into a marching block, lined up according to body size, drilled in body measuring, and one particularly felt the meaninglessness of that. One was a body block in motion for propagandist purposes. You have no idea how delighted I am to this day about the bodily freedom of today's demonstrations.

The reaction to a politically diverting parental home was physical sadistic maltreatment. Especially

the case of a proletarian boy whose parents did not allow him to join 'the Service' will never be lost from my consciousness. Without knowing the word back then I remember latent sadism as an essential element in relation to the body and thus masochistic features as well. I know exactly that during the Nazi time I longed quite soon for the freedom of body, soul and spirit. The State's demand for the body for marching, the hours and hours of standing to attention and showing jubilation for the craftsmanship of war deeply imprinted the feeling in me of being-lived. When after the war I heard about a Habeas Corpus I knew what it was about. – I would like to make it very clear that objectively all this most likely was not that bad. But I summarise the form of experience which back then was written into my red booklet. As I said I take into account that I was in the middle of puberty.

School

On the one hand the physical submission had a flipside; on the other hand it logically corresponded to the not only unbroken but reinforced cultural bourgeois inner side of my life. Intentionally, I previously mentioned that in February 1945 I listened for the first time to the Berlin Philharmonic. Already at a much earlier age I had queued during the heaviest air raids night after night outside the National Opera Unter den Linden to get a ticket; I did the same with one or the other of Berlin theatres.

From the Sexta onwards my parents had promised me for my final School Certificate:(a) a Volkswagen, (b) permission to see the Pergamon Altar on the museum island in the River Spree. That seemed to be a value only for those who had completed their education. My Gymnasium, to which I owe myself spiritually to this day although I only stayed until I had to move up to the Upper Sekunda (after the war the final School Certificate was given away to me after a 12 weeks special course for ex-servicemen); of this time at my Gymnasium, which gave me my real spiritual basis, I have a split memory. According to my memory only one female History teacher was a true Nazi; she was afraid of me when I recently traced her through a West Berlin telephone book and gave her a ring. Most were Fatherland conscious.

A Greek teacher was a disciplinarian; one could only endure him through submission. He barked at those who didn't know vocabulary: "You Bolshevik of culture!" As a result of the Great War he was one-eyed. With him we read the poem Polyphemus from the Odyssey, the poem of the one-eyed giant. That was something that possessed its own form of visuality which I cannot forget, the discernible one-eyedness of a teacher's power. The submission meant the honour of having Homer's poem scientifically analysed according to all the rules of a high art and with all the help of the material which he had worked through in his own time as a student at the Berlin University. Philology and terror, one-eyedness, Polyphemus and Wegner - that was his name - and the words "Bolshevik of culture" form a ball of experience on the bottom of my soul.

The teacher of German Literature, Jäne, was different, certainly no anti-Nazi but an opponent which one noticed in the way he taught. Against the ban he read 'Tell' and 'Carlos' with us. That is why I see Classical authors not as marble idols but as forbidden and subversive providers of cues. In the final years of the Nazi era, Schiller's 'Don Carlos' and 'William Tell' were forbidden in school. In the very last phase of National Socialism, Humanism and the Classics were means of self-preservation and contradiction, at least in my realm of experience and with the horizon of my age. That is what I mean by the logical flipside of the physical submission; emotional and spiritual escapism.

May 1945

May 1945 and the temptation to commit suicide I overcame with a piece of Goethe which I knew by heart: "The sun shines over bad and good people and to the felon moon and stars are gleaming as to the best." But in reality this Goethe is Jesus, which I only noticed much later. With me the

feeling that 2000 years of culture are collapsing appeared in this connection. I was really amazed when for the first time I heard a concert with classical music broadcast by Radio London. I really thought that something like that existed only in Germany. And when, in October 1945 I requested a visa from the Russian liaison officer in Garmisch to return home, he congratulated me and told me: "You'll see, in Berlin all the theatres are playing again", that was when gradually the twilight of the idols began with me. While writing this I realise: I am probably the first of my family for over hundreds of years who has been abroad. My father never was, my mother only long after 1945 when she was well past seventy. Today I believe that such things, too, belong in the pre-history of fascism.

But I would like to return once more to the cultural bourgeois during the final Nazi months. German Literature teacher Jäne wanted to know how I intended to 'lead' my life. He probably wanted to provoke such a thought, not knowing or knowing only too well, that in those days one was too weak to 'lead' one's life. I was only able to live by giving way to a past-compulsion. As if taking flight I projected possibilities of meaning for my life into the past (that I still know for sure, it still happened in the first months in January and February 1945). The Nazi way of being lived did not immediately create the wish to live as oneself but rather to be a completely different person in a completely different time. During my puberty under National Socialism I could only imagine my identity through the masks of others. I still know that around 1941/42, I would have loved to be the 'Liebe Augustin', dreaming to and fro as an orphan and a music-box maker between Mittenwald and Lindau. It is probably makes sense according to some emotional law that later I became Vikar in Lindau. That was, so to speak, the exact psychological anti-type against the address before the first battle, end of April 1945 when our commander called us the 'last German hope'. The 'Liebe Augustin' against the 'Germanensturm'!

Somewhat unexpectedly it says on the 4th May 1945 in the red notebook: "I am probably now going to take my fate into my own hands". This is a reflection about conversations about running away which we had secretly had. It was another four days until capitulation. Even after 8th May the orientation of oneself towards the present was a very slow process. There was no point while imprisoned anyway, although the imprisonment was relatively harmless. Then I first had a phase of nature mysticism and nature religion before I came to my senses. What I today call the liberation of 1945 is the posthumous judgement of a political awareness, which was gained later and is a highly complex and very confusing experience. This was confusing in so far that it was no experience of self. When I'm self-reflective these days I cannot help thinking: I'm never going to rid myself of the conditions of my puberty. They were of a kind, which did not allow for development. When in 1938 I entered the Gymnasium we were twelve pupils in our class. Three died in combat, three went mad long after 1945 in the fifties; they are still alive but I cannot speak with them any longer. I don't consider this a coincidence, nor that it took ten years for mates of my year to lose their minds. With the rest of my classmates I can politically no longer communicate. They remain, only slightly modified, in the mentality of the past. I notice an inclination towards authoritarian solutions as if they hadn't suffered all this then. In other words: the power of the past forces them today into regression. A formally dear class-mate of mine, now a lawyer in Hamburg, asked me last year on the phone: "Are you the one who allows essays to be produced as group work?" Me: "Yes, of course, I encourage it." Upon which he put the phone down.

My problem today is the difference between my hopefully somewhat liberated head and the, in those days, not fully developed drive structure. It turns out: the National Socialism was for me something holistic, a physical coercion and an emotional/spiritual past-addiction. The subject of the essay of December 1944 occurs everywhere in my consciousness and in my unconscious, like an obsession of which I cannot rid myself: "How do you intend to lead your life until your death for the Fatherland?" Meanwhile this subject evokes in me: (1) For goodness sake not 'Fatherland'; (2) Never again "death for" (3) What can be done so that someone can 'lead' his life? (4) What can I 'intend' to do? – Thus one is stuck with one's school.

I am liberated only by the God of Israel.

Translated from the [German](#) by Anne Moellers