

THE LIFE OF A BOY
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How much did Germany have to unjustly pay for all the destruction that had ever been caused by any country during World War 1? What happened to Germany when it was unable to find that money?

I have asked mother why Germany has had such a terrible past quite a few times, but she says all countries have had to deal with problems at some point during history. And if I asked her whether their problems have been as unfortunate as ours, she never said anything more to that, because apparently she does not know the details and wouldn't want to feed me with the wrong information.

My sister Klara, at the age of sixteen, said that mother is afraid of informers. She did not want to get her family in danger. Our neighbour Rommi had recently been dragged out of his house, only twenty years old, because Hans, the person he thought of as a friend, turned out to be informing on him. We did not know who Hans was, but we hoped to avoid him.

I looked out the only window which faces the kitchen table. The leaves on the branches have dried out, waving in the wild wind. It seemed to be a chilly day in Ehrenfeld once again, cold, cloudy, and grey. Outside, no person was to be seen. Everyone was hiding in their own houses, they did not want to communicate, afraid of coming across an informer, just like mother. I would not have called them cowards though, I did not want to meet an informer either. The largest problem was, you did not know who could be an informer, they wore no uniform, they did not come to ask you whether you are living a life that would satisfy Hitler.

Despite that mother was afraid we might do anything that would paint us in a bad light, me and Klara were both expelled from the Hitler Youth camp for insubordination. Klara had actually been thinking about joining the Navajos group, she already knew two people who were members. I was not quite sure whether joining that group would be reasonable. Despite that I dislike Hitler's strict system, I thought that being part of the group would only put me into danger, and I certainly did not want to risk anyone else's life for knowing me. But sometimes I did feel like the education we are offered is all just a big lie.

How much did Germany have to unjustly pay for all the destruction that had ever been caused by any country during World War 1? What happened to Germany when it was unable to find that money?

Okay:

Germany was unjustly forced to pay –

Klara came in the kitchen.

"Mother, I am going to the bakery, we are out of bread, is that alright?"

Mother was at the oven, cooking dinner, a little hesitant at first.

"Well ... alright, but what will you not do?"

I knew the answer well, and so did Klara.

"I will not do anything to oppose Hitler and his rule."

"Yes, alright, and you only have one hour, it is eight already."

"I will. No worries."

Klara was out the door and onto the road. I looked out the window and saw her running towards the city centre, to the bakery. My sister was actually going out to the bakery a lot more often. She used to stay at home and just cook, but since last month, she has decided she could go to the bakery.

How much did Germany have to pay for all the destruction that had ever been caused by any country during World War 1? What happened to Germany when it was unable to find that money?

Okay, now:

Germany was unjustly forced to pay £6600 million, but it was unable to find that money, meaning that the German people needed to starve. Even J M Keynes, most famous economist at that time, said it was impossible for Germany to pay that huge sum.

"Mother, I finished my homework. Can I eat and then go to bed?"

"Yes, you can, here."

Mother laid a bowl of vegetable soup in front of me, which I ate very happily, and went to bed after that. But I could not sleep very quickly; we lived on a street, on which the Navajos group that Klara knew, would sit and sing songs in the late hours. Mother hated hearing the noise in the middle of the night, but there was nothing she could do. The Navajos would stay there always.

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The next day was Sunday. I had a free day.

"Hey, Otto, I am going to the city centre for a walk, and I will not be back before three. Just wanted to say 'bye.'"

"Oh, what time did you come yesterday?"

"At nine, mother said I had one hour."

"One hour for bread?"

"I took my time, I had nothing else to do at home."

"Okay, can I come with you?"

"Not today, I am meeting a friend."

"Oh, okay, then, see you later."

That day, I had decided to go outside with my friend Peter, also expelled from Hitler Youth. We were the very best of friends. We just went on a walk, there was nothing else for us to

do. There, on our walk, I thought I had seen Klara with her friend Paula, and two other people I had not seen before.

“Peter, look, that’s Klara. Should we see where she is going?”

“You mean you want to follow her?”

“Yes, I want to see who these people are!”

He looked at me for a little moment.

“Otto, are you an informer?”

I pulled a face in disbelief.

“No! Of course not! No, no, no! But I have a bad feeling about Klara. She goes out every day now, and even at eight until nine at night. And she has been quite distant towards us, you know.”

He looked at me, not yet convinced.

“Well okay, I will not follow her. Let us go to the bakery and buy two bread rolls.”

“Okay,” he said, “thank you.”

* * *

That night, we were all awoken by someone ringing the doorbell impatiently. An unexpected visitor had come – unexpected, unwanted, a visitor who is never invited.

It was dark, until mother switched on the light. She went to the door and opened it, when two tall men stormed in, one of them taking a strong grip on her arm, the other one coming towards me and Klara. The one man was pulling mother by the arm. I shouted “Mother! Mother!” while she screamed back my name, “Otto, Otto, Klara!” She tried to pull away from the man but he was too well built, he grabbed her to take her away. The other man took me and Klara just as brutally.

“I do not know what is happening, it must be a misunderstanding, but we will sort it out! Don’t worry! Just don’t worry!”

Outside I saw lights being switched on in the other apartments.

More and more lights. More and more lights.

But no help.

“Mother!” “Mother!” we called.

“Don’t wo –“ And into the car she was forced.

* * *

And now we are all here. Squashed in the narrowest prison cell possible, with thirty other people, in the narrow, warm prison cell, no light, just darkness, and the sounds of other people moving. We were conspired guilty of “opposing Hitler’s rule by joining the opposition,

the Navajos.” And though neither me, nor my dear mother had been part of the group, Klara had joined them since last month.

“Mother?” I say in the darkness.

“Otto, my son ...” she breathes in heavily, “I am so sorry. I am sorry, Otto”, she weeps.

“No! No! Mother! This isn’t your fault! Mother!”

“No, mother! If it is the fault of anyone here, then mine!” Klara said, “If it is the fault of anyone else, then Hitler’s!”

“Otto, Klara, you both should not be here, you both deserve something better! A different age, a different year, a different life! I should have waited for children! I should have waited to make sure they live in a free and better world!”

“Mother, where are you? Take me in your arms!”

“Me too, mother, please forgive me! Take me in your arms!”

“Yes, yes,” Her hands wandered in the air, so did ours to find hers. In the background, there are other voices, other whispers, the sound of other movements, but I just want the hug of my mother. The kiss on my cheek. The fear to disappear, for everyone would be happy that way. I want friends, a family, trust! Is that too much to ask! Is peace and a life too much to ask?

And I want the hug of my mother.