



Growing Up German: Impacts from World War II

Hartmut Wegner

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Growing Up German is a powerful memoir about choosing hope and resilience in the face of inconceivable horror.

Hartmut Wegner's poignant and disturbing memoir, *Growing Up German*, is about the lifelong impact of witnessing the madness and brutality of Hitler and his minions.

Wegner's early childhood and youth in wartime Germany came alongside worldwide depression, the burden of paying the WWI reparations demanded by the Treaty of Versailles, and raging inflation, all of which brought the once proud and cultured nation to its knees. Murders were rampant as political gangs roamed the streets, brothers shooting brothers.

The book relates that Hitler took over with the support of the military, manipulating Germany's democratic processes to become the nation's chancellor. It credits Hitler with reviving jobs and putting food on German tables, even as it reveals the costs: freedom of the press and speech were eliminated, and criticism was severely punished. "The persecution of the Jewish people also started immediately," writes Wegner. "Many people were unaware of the extent of the atrocities being committed" at the camps, and thought the prisoners would be released. People lived in constant fear of Nazi brutality. Wegner asks a difficult question: whether all German people can be held accountable for the atrocities. His answer: "Sometimes, I personally think yes."

Wegner's shock and revulsion at being forced to wear the Hitler Youth uniform in high school, march, and listen to Nazi indoctrination is apparent. As the war progresses, he hid in basements during heavy bombing, hearing the screams of the injured and dying, and emerged to neighborhoods reduced to rubble. At the age of eleven, he saw his sixteen-year-old sister be raped by invading Russian soldiers and shares that, as revenge, almost all German women were raped by Russians, and thousands committed suicide.

From Wegner's perspective, Hitler, unable to admit his failure, "wanted the German people to perish, as they had not been strong enough." Descriptions of daily life during Germany's early recovery reveal harsh realities, but these give way to hope with Wegner's immigration to the United States in 1954. He also shares early experiences in his new homeland and expresses pride at becoming a citizen.

To distinguish the narrative from commentary, the text is printed in two different fonts; it's a helpful feature, though the font change itself is sufficient, without the addition of bolded text. Descriptive chapter titles facilitate navigating topics well. The book's errors in spelling, word order, and punctuation are distracting, as are several misused or missing words.

The book relates events in a straightforward manner, influenced by Wegner's German and American education and his business writing experience. That it is more a report than a story makes it compelling; the text carries horrific memories, sans embellishment. Thought-provoking parallels are drawn between the events that led up to WWII and what is happening in the world today. The story comes to a satisfying close, covering later events and Wegner's

achievements that came after those in the main narrative. Its global perspectives are a surprising addition.

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KRISTINE MORRIS (April 7, 2020)

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