

From: Sebastian Haffner, “Defying Hitler: a Memoir”

Title:

“Perhaps I should have refused right on the first day that they handed us the armbands? At that time I could have stated: no, I am not willing to do this, and stamped the armband under my feet. But it was madness, and what is even worse, ridiculous. The only meaning this had was that I would have ended up in a concentration camp instead of Paris; that I would have broken the promise I made to my father, to pass the exams. And I would probably have died in vain, because of a Quixotic act without even an audience. Ridiculous. Everyone here is wearing the Swastika armband, and it is clear that there are many who “privately” feel the same way I do. If I were to truly present my position, they would simply shrug their shoulders. Better that I now wear the armband, and so remain at liberty, and later on I can do as I wish. Better that I now learn to shoot properly: perhaps afterwards I will be able to use it for a good purpose...

Nevertheless, a disquieting voice remains in the background.

Despite everything, you are wearing this Swastika on your arm...”

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Robbers and murderers now became policemen, decorated with all the symbols of the regime; they treated their victims as though they were criminals, humiliated them and sentenced them to death in advance. Here is one example that received a lot of attention at the time because of its special scope: the leader of the Workers Association in a Berlin suburb, together with his sons resisted an SA patrol when it broke into his home one night to arrest him.

The man shot two of the SA men in self-defense; that same night an expanded SA unit came to his house, overcame the man and his sons and hanged them in a storage shed in the yard of the house. The next morning the SA unit again showed up in the Kapnick quarter, broke into the homes of all those known to be Social-Democrats and liquidated them on the spot. No one ever knew how many were killed.

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“What was the first noise that we heard? The slamming of a door? Some undetermined scream? An order? We all at once stood up in fear, with a listening expression drawn on our faces. Silence still reigned everywhere, but its nature had changed: no longer the silence of work, but the silence of fear and tension. Outside you could hear the stamping of feet and wild running on the stairs, after that an unclear commotion, shouts, and doors slamming. Several people got up and walked to the door, opened it, peeked outside and came back. There were those who approached the guard and spoke to him, still in whispers – in this hall it was permitted to speak only in a whisper. The noise outside grew stronger. Someone threw the word “SA” into the hushed silence in the room, and someone else answered quietly: “They are throwing the Jews out.” One or two of those present giggled. At that moment this laughter was more frightening than what had really happened there: this laughter at once made it clear that just like everywhere else, there were Nazis in our hall as well.

In the midst of this I was approached by the brown shirts and one of them stood in front of me, asking: “Are you an Aryan?” Before I managed to understand what was happening I had already answered “Yes”. He cast an inquiring glance at my nose and retreated. As for me, my face was suffused with blood. I felt shamed and humiliated – a moment too late. “Yes” I said! True, I was an “Aryan”. God knows, I hadn’t lied, I had just let something much worse happen. What a humiliation. With an absolute lack of responsibility I stated here and now that I was an Aryan – something that was absolutely meaningless to me. How despicable thus to obtain the right to continue sitting here in silence behind my books !...”

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“Military music from morning to night, a male ritual, flag waving... And for the xth time, again Hitler swearing fidelity to something. And also, the ringing of bells. A festive parade of the parliamentary delegates towards the church, a military parade, swords lowered in salute, children waving flags, parades of torches.

The population had to become accustomed to cheering and being awed even without a special reason. It was enough for people who didn't definitely cooperate – hush! – they were murdered day and night with steel whips and stabs by drills. So, we will cheer, and howl with the jackals. Heil, heil! We will even learn to enjoy it.

The weather in March 1933 was marvelous. And wasn't it pleasant to be swallowed up by the mass celebrating in the light of the spring sun, and to listen to uplifting words about our homeland, freedom, revival and God's promise? (It was, in any case, much more pleasant than being shunned by society and being thrown into an SA barracks with a pipe sucking out your intestines).

However, those who had already cooperated preferred to do so not just out of fear – that is cheap and humiliating. They needed to add the proper worldview to the fear.”

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“Without a doubt, you can gain some kind of happiness in such a ‘camp’, the happiness of comradeship. It was happiness to run together every morning on the field, to stand together naked under the hot water in the shower, to share the packages that once this one and once that one received from home, to together bear the responsibility for a prank, to help each other and to support each other in a thousand small ways, to rely on each other unconditionally on daily matters, to have children’s fights and quarrels, to be with each other, to wade in the wide stream that carries you easily and safely – a stream of closeness and trust... Who can deny that there is happiness in all this? Who can deny that there is something in human nature that yearns for this, something that usually is not satisfied in day-to-day life?

... This was the main force of attraction, the Nazi’s major enticement. The Nazis fed the potion of this comradeship to the Germans who so longed for it, until their ability to think was destroyed. They turned them into “comrades” everywhere, and from childhood on addicted them to this intoxicating drug: in the Hitler Jugend, in the SA, in the army, in thousands of camps and organizations like this one.

... Comradeship relieves a person of responsibility for his life before his God and his conscience. His conscience is the “comrades” and he is guaranteed complete absolution - *as long as he continues doing what everyone else does.*”

About the author and the book –

Raimund Pretzel, who afterwards became known as Sebastian Haffner – a journalist and historian – was born in Berlin in 1908, to a middle-class educated family. His father was a high-ranking official in the Prussian legal bureaucracy, and the young Raymond was brought up according to the values embodied by his father, and he prepared himself, although apparently not with too much enthusiasm, for a career in law, like his father. The rise of the Nazis to power in 1933 turned everything upside down. Despite his plans to leave Germany, Haffner managed first of all to serve as a minor judge in the courts system, which at least ostensibly continued to function as it had in the past, and afterwards as a writer in the Olstein newspaper concern in Germany. Like many people in the social group to which he belonged, the young Haffner despised the Nazis and considered them conscienceless rabble. However, in contrast to most of them, he never changed his convictions. In 1938 he left Germany and only returned there in 1954. When he passed away in 1999, he had almost five decades of activity as a publicist in the Federal Republic of Germany (i.e. West Germany) behind him – in the press and on the radio and television. He simultaneously also published a number of books on various historical subjects, the best-known of which is his book about Hitler, "*The Meaning of Hitler*".

As a journalist, Haffner was completely unexpected. He never owed anyone anything, never organizationally belonged to any political camp and was never afraid of negative responses or controversy.

It is possible that the source of Haffner's independence was the fact that he had left Nazi Germany in time. In England he served as a reporter for the London "*Observer*" for over ten years, and during WWII he published essays and books about Nazi Germany that were intended for the British reading public (the most noteworthy of his books was *Germany: Jekyll and Hyde*), and whose purpose was to contribute to the propaganda in that country against Hitler's regime. At that time he began to write under the name Sebastian Haffner, in an attempt not to endanger his family who remained in Germany, and he afterwards kept this name until his death. Haffner preferred to remain in England even after World War II. He received British citizenship and continued working as a journalist. When he finally returned to the Federal Republic, at the period of its rapid economic revival, he was already famous in his field. Nevertheless, after many long years of intensive work, in which he stood out in the public landscape of Germany as a special and rare kind of journalist, his influence diminished, and at his death it seemed that his fame had also disappeared from the world.

However, at the beginning of the year 2000 the book now in front of us was published; an autobiography that deals with the years 1914-1933. "*Defying Hitler: a Memoir*" was written in 1939. The manuscript was found in Haffner's desk drawer when his son was going through his remaining estate. His son, a London mathematician bearing his father's original name of Pretzel, was searching for a manuscript after his father had several times mentioned the manuscript of a novel that he had written. He apparently did not find this novel, but the manuscript that he did find exceeded all his expectations.