

# Growing Up in Rural Baden: Oral History Interview with Waltrudis Becker (1999)

## Abstract

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In this segment from a 1999 interview conducted by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Waltrudis Becker (born 1917) recalled her childhood just outside the southern German town of Villingen, in the 1920s and early 1930s. Becker, a non-Jew, spoke openly about her father's antisemitic views and support for the Nazi Party (NSDAP) long before it ever came to power. She also recounted the stories about the First World War that her parents had shared with her, and she described her education and her own sense of the political mood during the Weimar Republic.

In the 1920s, both Villingen and its sister city to the east, Schwenningen, had reputations as strongholds of Zentrum and, to a lesser extent, SPD support, rather than as fertile soil for far-right activity. In the 1929 elections for the state parliament of Baden, where Villingen was located, for instance, the city cast nearly 41% of its votes for the Catholic Zentrum and just under 21% for the SPD. Baden as a whole, meanwhile, voted disproportionately for the center and center-left parties, and the "Weimar Coalition" maintained an uninterrupted governing majority in its state parliament until 1932. Nevertheless, as Becker's reflections on her father's activity illustrated, far-right organizations did have a presence in Villingen throughout the 1920s. Groups such as the *Schlageter-Bund* and the *Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund* attracted young members that included the future Nazi mayor of the city, Hermann Schneider, who had already immersed himself in that circle as a teenager. By 1930, voters in Villingen had begun to shift—like the rest of Germany—increasingly toward the NSDAP.

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Waltrudis Becker: And I remember that we often stood at Forchheim station. Forchheim near Karlsruhe. When someone came to visit or left. It took us ten minutes to get to the station. And the freight trains passed by there. As children, we counted the wagons. 80 wagons, if I remember correctly. And the stationmaster told us that they all came from the Rhineland and went over to Strasbourg at Kehl. They're all coal trains, about five a day, so I can't vouch for this one, how much. These are reparations from the Treaty of Versailles. At the time, the Treaty of Versailles was seen by everyone as a shameful treaty. Perhaps it will also be seen by today's historiography as a document that carries the seeds of new conflicts. I once wrote this down for a granddaughter. [...]

My father lived from 1877 to 1937. Over the sofa in the living room were pictures of Frederick the Great, Bismarck, and Hindenburg. These were the role models of the bourgeois generation of the time. He followed the political events before 1933, but did not talk about them in the family.

After January 30, 1933, we bought our first radio. I went to high school in Karlsruhe and there was an outbreak of polio in Forchheim, which is the village we belonged to, but we didn't live in the village, our farm was a bit further away. So there was a law, attending school was forbidden because of the risk of infection. I was in the lower sixth, that's today's twelfth grade. And then, over a period of six weeks or however long it lasted, I said to myself, well, now you won't pass your A-levels and I quit school. Repeating a class was a terrible disgrace back then. [...]

During the First World War, my father was not drafted because he was a farmer and, how do you say it,

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was considered indispensable. Yes, he was in Villingen, I was born in 1917, my mother told me that enemy aircraft flew over from France to the Black Forest and bombed or tried to bomb the clock factories. There were watch factories in the Black Forest, and she then had to go into the cellar. And so she had to go down into the cellar with me, with the little baby or child. And they also had a garden, my parents. And a woman was always fetching potatoes from there. And she said later, "You saved my life with your potatoes."

[...]

Before 1933, I had made a friend. We met in the fourth year of elementary school and are still friends today. Her mother was a war widow from the First World War. There were five of them from the first marriage, three of the children still lived at home. There were two sons and they were in the SA and the SS, even before '33. They were teenagers. And they read the Führer, which was a daily newspaper, like the Badische Presse and such, and then I brought it home with me. I still went to school by train and there were two newspaper sellers standing in front of the train station in Karlsruhe. One shouted: "Die Rote Fahne, Der Sozialdemokrat!" We used to imitate him. Those were the two newspapers he sold. And the other one had the Badische Presse and the Führer. And then I bought it from him every day and brought it to my father. And he read it with interest, but we didn't talk much about politics. [...]

I went to the village school in Forchheim for three years and the teacher there said right away when I was enrolled that my parents would have to send me to Karlsruhe for the fourth year if I wanted to go on to secondary school, otherwise I wouldn't catch up. The village school was too primitive, and it was. So there I was, a fourth-year student who had to travel to school by train. School was out at 12 o'clock. A few times we had afternoon school, so I ate there.

Roswitha Breckner: You mentioned earlier that you always bought the "Führer" for your father.

Becker: Yes. From Karlsruhe, that is. Yes.

Breckner: When did you first realize what that paper was?

Becker: I can't remember, but it was probably through my girlfriend's family. Her two brothers. She had an older sister who was a kindergarten teacher and a younger brother. And the two older brothers were druggists. How old would they have been back then? Maybe not yet 20, and of course they were thrilled, and you got to hear about it, or sometimes one of them would come in an SS uniform or SA uniform and they would talk about street brawls, so they themselves never got hurt, I mean they were never wounded or anything. I don't think that the fights were that serious either, but you heard that there were fights, though. So that was ..., when did I meet the family? I would have been 13, 14 years old, that was then the beginning of the '30s. My girlfriend and I were in a gymnastics club. And there were the evenings, always in the evening, then I slept over at her house. And then she came back to my place and stayed over. And then there were the department stores Tietz and Knopf in Karlsruhe. They probably became Hertie, I don't know. And we also shopped there. And then they said, "We won't shop there anymore. We won't buy from them anymore." And then, I don't know how my parents found out about it, but I took gymnastics lessons for a while. They thought that I must do something about my bad posture, so there was this Fräulein Mainzer, who had been a Laban student. And my parents said, "Wouldn't your friend Emma also like to go?" And her family said, "Oh no, we think she's Jewish." So that's the antisemitism. My father was an antisemite, we would say today, because of his upbringing. He was the son of a farmer from Upper Swabia, as I said, and then he went to university. At the time, people tended to be antisemitic, also because of, as I said, the pictures of Hindenburg and Frederick the Great, and Bismarck. And when he said something, we children said, "But father, you also do your cattle business with the Jew." I don't remember his name. And he said, "You have to do cattle business with the Jew, there's no one else." That's the way it is.

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Breckner: And do you remember what else he said about Jews?

Becker: No, he didn't complain about Jews directly. I remember when the movie Ben Hur was shown in Karlsruhe, a black and white movie, but with moving pictures, yes? So we went to see the Hur movie and my mother came too. And when we said that it's a wonderful movie and all that, my father said, "I don't like it." [And we said] "But Jesus appears in it, too." So he said, "Well, he was a Jew, too."

He was Catholic, my father. My mother was Protestant. My father lost his mother when he was three years old and was raised by an old maid. He was the youngest of five children. Upper Swabia is Catholic. He was not a practicing Catholic. He had a Protestant wedding and the Catholic priest from Forchheim visited us once a year and was offered a glass of wine. The sisters would take flowers to decorate the church. Otherwise, everyone was allowed to believe as they pleased. And we children...he said the children should be raised in the faith, the confession, of their mother, because she was the mainly responsible for their upbringing. And at the elementary school in Forchheim, the children only received Protestant religious education from the fourth school year onwards because there were so few of them. There was only one other Protestant boy in my class. So I didn't have any religious education until the fourth school year, then in Karlsruhe and there I was devout. But at home, my parents and siblings and I read the so-called Biblical history. And on Sundays, because the Protestant church was too far away, my mother sat down at the piano and we had a hymn book with the piano music, and we sang a few chorales. That was our church service. And we were confirmed in Karlsruhe and also went to confirmation classes. [...]

And then my father had a friend from Kronberg with whom he was on a first-name basis. He didn't have many first-name friends. The Kronberg friend worked in the ministry in Karlsruhe, was married and had a son and two daughters. They were a little older than my sisters. And when they came over to our place for coffee, this was my upbringing: "Be sure to make a nice curtsy and say, 'Good afternoon, Mrs. Senior Government Councillor' and 'Good afternoon, Mr. Senior Government Councillor'." And as a child, I couldn't even pronounce the words "Oberregierungsrat." And the son, I believe, married a Jewish woman and the daughter, the second daughter, she was a bit slow, she remained unmarried. And that was a typical upbringing back then. They didn't talk to me about it, as a child, I was the child, about problems or anything. It was kept quiet. I did overhear how my mother said that the son of my father's friend had come home and that they had been treated strangely at the border. Because his wife was Jewish or half-Jewish. [...]

We lived half an hour's walk from the village. In Forchheim near Karlsruhe, where I spent my childhood. And when there were elections, we went into the village on a horse-drawn wagon, and as a child I was allowed to ride along, usually on the front seat. And once when an uncle and an aunt of mine were visiting, there were elections. And my uncle said, so, what do we actually vote for? Or what do you vote for? And someone else, maybe my father or someone else, said, well, German Nationalists, as always. That's the social class I grew up in. There was the Center Party and the Social Democrats and the German Nationalist Party. I can't remember any other parties now. Communists, of course. And then came the Nazis. And as I said, apart from my girlfriend's brothers, who were still young, my parents' generation were skeptical about what was going to happen with them. But I remember that they were impressed by the successes. [...]

Source: Oral history interview with Waltrudis Becker, March 13, 1999. Interviewer: Roswitha Breckner. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, courtesy of the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation

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