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Meeting American veterans taught lesson about propaganda's deceitfulness

By Diether Haenicke
November 11, 2009

Around Veteran's Day my thoughts invariably turn back to the time when, at the end of World War II, American troops entered the little German town in which I lived. Those soldiers were the first Americans I ever met.

Around Easter of 1945, the front moved closer. We could hear the roar of advancing artillery fire. Retreating German troops flowed through our town and boys from age 14 on up were drafted. The war had reached us.

From a safe hiding place, a few other boys and I watched the first foreign tanks move slowly along the river, followed by infantry. The soldiers were all black. We knew they must be Americans. We felt anxious.

After the fighting had ceased, we returned to our homes. My mother had saved two dozen eggs and a few glasses of preserved fruit and vegetables for Easter. She was certain that the occupying army would take away what little food we had, and, to foil that plan, she collected her children in the basement and made us eat all the food we had. Undernourished and hungry, we gleefully responded. The next day the first American soldier arrived in our house. He found a very sick woman with three violently ill children who were lying around ashen-faced on their beds and only standing up to vomit. The soldier took one look at us, hastily retreated, and posted a sign on our front door that read: "Warning! Infectious Disease!" We kept it there for weeks.

Later another soldier appeared and, without saying a word, grabbed our radio, called a Volksempfänger, and started to leave with it. It was a cheap radio, at that time common in every German household and had been produced to transmit Hitler's endless speeches, other Nazi propaganda, and heroic music. It was not worth anything, but it was the only means of communication we had.

My mother protested loudly. The soldier stopped and gave her a piece of paper on which he had written “Radio Taken” and then signed.

Twenty years later, I explained to my Detroit students the concept of compound nouns and the word Volksempfänger and told them my childhood story. At the beginning of the next class, I found on my desk a nice little radio with the note “Radio Returned.”

While the adults stayed inside, we boys ventured out and soon met the enemy soldiers. They were the age of our older brothers and our fathers, and they behaved like them. They had stormed the beaches of Normandy and fought their way through France and most of Germany, losing many thousands of their comrades on the way. Now the war was over, and they had survived.

My friends and I watched the American soldiers with great interest. What years of Nazi propaganda had told us about them was wrong. We could see that plain and simple. I never got over the fact that our teachers had lied to us. It taught me at a very early age to judge everything with my own eyes.

The soldiers soon invited us to join them in their games. A man from the Bronx, who probably had a son my age, produced a giant leather glove, positioned me in our backyard, and tried to teach me how to throw and catch a baseball. The results were unsatisfactory, but he never gave up.

We learned the soldiers' names and called out to them when they passed by in their jeeps. They called back, some having trouble with our names. How much easier for us to say Jack, Bob, and Mike than for them to pronounce Siegfried, Dietrich, and Guenther. They gave us food. For the first time ever I tasted chocolate, and I was addicted for life.

The young soldiers of 1945 are now old men and will soon all be gone. I had the privilege to know many of these World War II veterans over the last 40 years. They brought their children to college and let me teach them. I saw them work in factories, banks, hospitals, schools, and businesses. They saved me when I was young, and they made it possible for me to lead a rich and free life. I will always honor them.

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