

Excerpts from the Memoirs
of
Werner Mork

“Aus Meiner Sicht (From My View)”
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More writings of Warner Mork can be found on the website of the German Historical Museum:
http://www.dhm.de/lemo/forum/kollektives_gedaechtnis/weltkrieg2.html

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The Crisis Begins

The construction of these new luxury liners was a sign of the resurgence of German shipbuilding. These huge projects hinted at the possibility that the Nation might finally be able to recover some of the losses due to the war and reparations. It also was a chance to win back Germany's lost reputation internationally and allow the German shipbuilders to assume a new global role. The massive construction in the coastal areas allowed the workers to glimpse prosperity and the laborers were greatly encouraged. That disaster would befall them immediately after these two ships [*The Bremen and the Europa*] were built was unthinkable. No one saw it coming.

Especially not on the day of this great event when the finished steamship "Bremen" at the A G Weser Shipyard would sail downstream with the help of tugboats toward Bremerhaven. That would be its home port and there is where the final touches would be applied to the ship's interior.

Following that, her maiden voyage would take place. She was now the largest passenger ship belonging to the Bremen steamship line "Norddeutscher Lloyd." The company wanted to recapture its leadership role in transatlantic shipping. The new ship was bigger and more comfortable than the smaller "Columbus" that was currently in service. With the new ship, the Bremen, it might be possible to win back the Blue Ribbon for a German ship once again. Among the German shipbuilders and shipyards there was no doubt that the Bremen could do it. In doing so it would bring the badly damaged national pride back with new honors.

In those days the transatlantic route to New York and back was extremely important, particularly passenger transport. Passenger transportation between Europe and America was handled exclusively by the huge European steamship lines. There were no passenger airlines, no huge airbuses like we have today. Among nations and their big shipping lines there was intense competition and rivalry for passenger traffic, especially the coveted wealthy passengers. The competition was not only in providing luxury accommodations that rivaled or surpassed the best hotels in the world. There was also a battle among the shipping lines to have the fastest times for the Atlantic transit. The international award for this was the coveted "Blue Ribbon." In fact the award did not really exist, but the term was used by the shipping lines to project the aura of being the best in the world. That is what Norddeutsche Lloyd wanted to achieve with its new ship. Everyone in North Germany eagerly awaited the launch of the Bremen and feverishly anticipated winning the Blue Ribbon.

For all shipbuilders it was a point of honor to keep their fingers crossed for the Bremen. However, for the shipbuilders of A G Weser, the metal workers, riveters, carpenters, welders and the other industrious dock workers it was a very personal honor and distinction to have built this ship. The mass of metal that sat now in the launch scaffolding was 'their' ship, the one they built with their whole hearts. They identified fully with it as 'their' dock and 'their' ship. Regardless of the political views and party memberships that separated them, in this one respect they were all equal.

They were also convinced that they would continue to build more ships and that their lives would be improved by it. They trusted their Union, the powerful Metal Workers Union, and were ready to go out on strike to protect their rights or to take to the streets to demonstrate. The wives on the other hand were always hoping that strikes could be avoided. The Union's financial support fund was not thought to be adequate. The women always feared the strikes, even though they realized that it was the only way to get the owners to agree to the better wages that would elevate their standard of living or at least make it bearable.

It was a great day for all the people of the Lower Weser River when the proud Bremen would be launched and towed to the outfitting dock for the finishing touches. Powerful tugs did the hard work on the river. The banks of the river were packed with people who marveled at this symbol of national pride. The crowd rejoiced from the bottom of their hearts at the manifest skills of the German engineers and shipbuilders.

On the banks of Weser River in Vegesack the beaches and the boardwalks were overflowing with people of all classes and positions. Men, women and children jostled one another in an effort to take part in this unique once in a lifetime spectacle. Schools were let out early on this great day. The shops and businesses in Vegesack and much of the surrounding areas closed. Everyone who had legs headed to the shores of the Weser River and everyone waited with anticipation for the arrival of the ship. When the ship finally came into view the crowd was seized by a strong emotion. That emotion affected everyone, be they young or old, rich or poor, man, woman or child. Men removed their hats in respect. Loud 'Hurra's' were heard and not a few people had tears in their eyes. People began, spontaneously, to sing the national hymn, "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles." It was sung with a noticeable fervor even by those who belonged to the 'Evil Leftists.' It was 'their' ship that was moving up the river, though not under its own power which it couldn't do on the river. A ship this large had never been seen on the river and this ship was a German ship! And here she was in spite of our enemies who since 1919 had robbed us of our ships with that damned Treaty of Versailles. With this ship Germany had showed them that we weren't defeated and that it really was appropriate once again to sing the national hymn, "Deutschland über alles in der Welt." When the ship passed by the Vulkan steel works all work stopped. The workers there were proud as though they had built the whole ship themselves.



Steamship Bremen being towed from AG Weser Shipyard to Bremerhaven

The leftist dockworkers in Bremen, as in Vegesack, were full of pride in this ship which was built for the use and pleasure of the people that the 'reds' battled against. The rich and moreover the super-rich would be the passengers on this ship. They would give no thought to those who had worked so hard to build such a ship for the Capitalists. There were also the steerage passengers, the less fortunate, who were of interest to the shipping companies as 'filler' but the real purpose and value of the venture would come from catering to the world's wealthy who could afford the enormous luxury without problem.

During the journey of the Bremen up river and the attendant celebration, there was no talk of class struggle. This ship was not the target of any naysayers, there was only unbounded jubilation and strong emotions from everyone. Even the 'red' dockworkers at the Vulkan were filled with pride at this example of what German shipbuilders could accomplish. For them the singing of the German national hymn was an expression of that pride, Deutschland über alles in der Welt. It did not bother any of the shipbuilders that this German ship would sail the oceans flying the black-white-red flag. The only blemish would be the black-red-golden jack flying on the rear corner of the ship, the old empire colors. The 'reds' revolution had not been able to do any better than that. But it did not lead to a new uprising, not then and not now.

The tumultuous jubilation of this great day was still ringing in everyone's ears when, totally out of the blue, the first mass lay-offs were announced for workers and management. These were the people who had seen the launch as the beginning of a renewal of national pride.

All of a sudden there was no more talk of full order books, but rather of the beginning of a slowdown at all shipyards in the coastal area. That was the end of full employment. Almost overnight the mass layoffs began, first at AG Weser, at a level never seen before. Thousands of workers and administrative employees were set out on the street without any advanced notice. Suddenly, they had no income, just unemployment insurance for a short while, then they became welfare recipients on the dole.

All together nine thousand men were suddenly without work or income. Many more people were affected by the layoffs, the families, wives, mothers and children. This also meant that the middle class would suffer too, the retailers would be hurt by the loss of buying power of the worker's families whose sole provider was now jobless. The shopkeepers and tradesmen were impacted. They provided goods and services to the workers in the lower classes. They were totally dependent upon the workers and employees in the neighborhoods around the AG Weser yards.

The shock of the mass layoffs was frightening above all because the men were so unprepared for it. At first it was seen as something that would only affect the AG Weser yard. That was bad enough, but not likely to affect the other shipyards. All too soon it became apparent that the trouble would not be limited to AG Weser. With an increasing tempo the other shipyards were hit and finally the Bremer Vulkan shipyard. The disaster picked up speed and on payday more and more workers opened their pay envelope to find that it contained their last paycheck, a dismissal notice and they were kicked out.

These men who just a short time before were full of pride and jubilation to be a part of the Bremer Vulkan were now forced to leave their shipyard. Now they stood outside the gates of their shipyard, discarded, unneeded. 'Their' shipyard no longer had any work for them. Nothing for these men who had identified themselves so closely with 'their' shipyard where they built 'their' ships. Now they had to go to the unemployment office in Lobbendorf to get a small stipend. Also in Vegesack and the surrounding areas were more and more families struck by the hardships of unemployment. Here also did the shopkeepers and tradesmen see their income drop off to nothing. The drop in commerce was so great that it began to destroy people and livelihoods. The sad misery of suicide began to rise among men who could no longer live and who no longer wanted to live. Their very existence had been disrupted. They no longer had any hope for a better life, a life that had lost all meaning.

There began a time of dread and ever growing misery, a time of fear. Those times must appear unimaginable for the people today because today there is the social net that protects us from such bottomless financial loss. Today unemployment can not cause the sort of mass poverty we saw then and hopefully will never see again.

Now the proud dockyard workers stood with their hands in their pockets instead of using them for their skilled craft. In time their lack of employment grew into anger against the owners, in this case the management of the dockyard. Blame was laid at their feet. The agitators in the town squares and in front of the employment office held more and more rallies fueled by hatred and anger against the owners and capitalists. To their minds these exploiters had simply cast out the good, skilled workmen. That was only partially true, the fact was that this economic dip was spreading throughout the world. Orders were down at all of the shipyards. However, their own distress was in the foreground of their thoughts and they gave little thought to worldwide events. There was no solidarity, it wasn't even possible. International assistance was out of the question.

I must also mention that many of the industrialists viewed this misery as a 'good' thing. They were looking ahead to the time when things would get better but the workers would not be able to press them for better conditions and wages because they would be grateful just to have jobs again. The demand for higher wages and improved working conditions would be muted for a long time to come. For employers this economic slowdown would be a counterbalance to the babying that the workers had been increasingly demanding since 1918. Employers were now of the opinion that it might be possible to suppress worker demands and get rid of those upstart unions. The employers were looking forward to the day when, finally, they could once again have willing and cheap labor.

On the other hand the shipyard owners recognized that the experienced and skilled master workmen and specialists would be required when business picked up again to enable the yard to regain the necessary high level of quality expected from a German shipyard. Some of the responsible individuals in management did not treat their skilled workers with hostility, they wanted to keep them on their good side and have them help reestablish the quality levels when the downturn was over. However, the majority of yard owners were of the opinion that the uppity workers needed to have their wings clipped. Above all, the vast majority of owners were against the worker themes of shorter work days and guaranteed leave days. As far as leave was concerned the employers asked themselves why the workers needed days off. The workers wouldn't know what to do with a day off. This could only lead to a weakening of the work ethic, especially if the leave time consisted of paid days off.

No one wanted anything to do with such newfangled methods. They needed to be nipped in the bud. Since 1919 they have had to grant more and more benefits to the workers. This had kept the owners from becoming really rich, so now it was time to show the workers once again who was boss.

What was for the workers and employees a great hardship, the majority of bosses saw as a welcomed modification in the labor market. The bosses felt that the downturn was an event they could weather and then enjoy even more profits when business picked up again.

On the part of the workers and employees the hope for better times was almost nonexistent as they witnessed more and more people lose their jobs. The entire economy of the Republic was hit by these hardships. In all areas and every day there were more unemployed and more hopelessness.

Around this time there began a previously unknown radicalization of the masses in respect to politics. It began with the growth of the SA, the paramilitary arm of the NSDAP [*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or Nazi Party*]. In the SA you could find former 'Leftists' who now saw the NSDAP as their only hope. It wasn't made up only of the unemployed. There were also upstanding family men, former soldiers from the First World War who found the military structure of the SA familiar and comfortable. They felt that this sort of structure was needed to counter the confusing lack of direction in the Republic. These men of the SA were not wild and uncouth hoodlums that were only

out for riot and mayhem. They were not criminals or vagabonds, not mentally deficient, desperadoes or broken men. They were normal men who grew the SA into a million man organization.

That was one direction, the other was the “Red Combat Veterans Group” of the KPD [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands: The Communist Party of Germany*]. It too saw a marked increase in membership as well as the Communist Party itself. In this time of great hardship, many men saw the party more and more as their only hope. They could see no way out of the hard times given the state of society as it stood now. More and more they became convinced that the only way out was to destroy the status quo through violent revolution.

This began a time of extremes defined by the NSDAP at one pole and the KPD at the other. Both parties represented a growing circle of members and sympathizers. The Social Democrats could barely maintain their position as the strongest party. They kept losing members to the two parties at the extremes of the political scene.

It was hardship and misery that made these parties huge and powerful. The NSDAP benefited especially because it stressed national self-expression and it gave hope to the small middle-class which was also beginning to feel the effects of the economic downturn. The possible members of the NSDAP included a greater spectrum of society than the KPD which focused on the workers. The call for a world revolution by the proletariat under the leadership of the Soviet Union was a condition that was not acceptable to the majority of the population. For them the KPD was not a German party, it was an extension of the USSR.

The worries of the steadily growing number of unemployed were above all financial in nature. The dole, and then the following so-called Welfare Support was not enough to feed their families and provide them with basic necessities. The wives and mothers took on the task of trying to add a few more Marks to the family income. They hired themselves out to better situated households as washer women, pressers or cleaning women. They tried doing piece work at home as seamstresses just to add a little something to their income. They were the ones who had to take on more loads and burdens to keep the family going, and they worked for starvation wages at any work they could get, when they could get it.

Our Life

I know whereof I speak and whereof I write. I experienced the want and misery of the 1930's in my very flesh and bones. My experiences do not allow me to look back on those times like many others do and use them to paint a false picture of the era. I can not speak to the later demonization of those times. I can only speak from my own experience of the conditions of the time and the political scene as it existed around me at that time. They were such that they opened an unobstructed path for the Nazi Party directly to the Third Reich. Even though there were many people against them, they could do nothing to stop the party's progress.

Let's get back to my new surroundings in Kirchhofstraße during the time before we were directly confronted by hardship. A time in my childhood when I could still be happy and cheerful even though from time to time problems would pop up to give us some trouble.

My childhood world was limited to my parent's house, school and the areas around Fähr-Lobbenforf. However, that area stretched out to Blumenthal and Hammersbeck. My beloved Vegesack was not

forgotten either. Very often I would strike out for the Weser River and the harbor. I still had new memories to make there. All of this was possible in spite of schooling which took up a great deal of my time. I was only able to get away on those days when there weren't classes in the afternoon. In most cases that would be at least twice a week.

We were installed in our new home, made good contacts with our new neighbors and really felt good about our new surroundings. My father had been promoted from foreman to Deputy Master. There was an excellent chance that when Master Prochnow left his position, my father would become the Master Metalworker for the Bremer Vulkan. All of the conditions were in place for us to look forward to a positive future. So we thought.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-06402
Foto: o. Ang. | August 1928

Launch of the Steamship Bremen - August 1928

My father had been vested with a considerable position of trust. He was responsible for the smooth glide of the new ships down the slipway to the water. This was always a big event and everyone on the dock would be nervous about it because you never knew what might go wrong. A successful run down the slipway during the launch required all of the strong wooden stays to be knocked away with powerful hammer blows simultaneously. The hull of the ship would ride down to the water on wooden rails lubricated generously with soft soap, the best slippery substance at the time for ship launches. Once in motion the ship would slide slowly to meet the water for the first time and unite itself with the watery element where it would spend the rest of its days. The slide would have to begin immediately after the baptism, the smashing of a bottle of champagne on the bow. At that time the name of the ship

would be pronounced for everyone to hear. Cheers would go up from all of the attendees which always included the entire staff of the shipyard. A full-throated and full-hearted rendition of the national hymn would be sung. In order for all of this pageantry to go off without a hitch, you needed quiet, level-headed, reliable men.

One of those men was Wilhelm Mork and he was very proud of his skill and the trust that the management of the shipyard had in him to give him this responsibility. Every launch that he was given to manage was a day when "his" ship would meet the water. The fact that all of this would take place under the eyes of the highest dignitaries made his patriotic heart beat fast and hard. Every launch day for him was a sort of holy day, or at least a major patriotic event. That was not the case only for him, but for everyone who worked the other shipyards also. They were invited to attend too. In the collective world of the shipyards every launch was a major event and everyone was tense waiting to see the new ship slide surely and safely onto the river. In launching ships of this length there could be problems with the opposite bank of the river if the setup for the launch had problems. The ship had to be positioned 'just-so' in the right location by the pier. If everything went off correctly as planned then all of the other ships in the harbors around the launch would sound their horns to greet the new ship and the sirens from all of the shipyards would scream their welcome. Everyone would express their joy and delight at yet another flawless launch of a Vulkan ship.

Above all each successful launch was due to the careful work of the dock engineers who had to devote a considerable amount of time and effort to the project. Once the ship slid into the water tugs had to nudge it into the proper slot by the docks. This required a great deal of planning and calculation. The tugs would attach strong ropes to the ocean liner and move her with calm and precision. It all had to be done with heads and hands, there were no computers then. Men had to do it all, and because good men were on the job, it worked each time.

My father, the stubborn Westphalian, had fully integrated himself into a world that was totally unknown to him in 1918. It was a world where he had to struggle to find a way to live, and he succeeded with the indispensable help of my mother. My parents had both become North Germans even though in their hearts they still longed for the old hometown. They had come to terms with their circumstances even though they were quite different than the dreams they had originally hoped and wished for.

Working at the Vulkan made my father happy. He enjoyed the docks and the thought never entered his mind to leave them. After work he would busy himself in our little section of the communal garden. He took care so that my mother would be able to harvest all of the vegetables and 'treats' that she wanted. But I, too, had my little section of the garden that I took care of and made sure that it stayed in my hands. My little beets belonged to me alone and I cared for them and cherished them to the best of my ability and I did it willingly. Sometimes though I was dependent upon my mother. I could be a pain at times and it bordered on laziness. I would hear it from my mother all right, but she still made sure that 'my' little patch looked good and stayed mine.

My father was a good husband and a caring father about whom nothing really bad can be said. Especially in contrast many other fathers who were hardly role models for goodness and loving. It was just that on Sundays right after the mid-day meal he would rush off to the sports center and to his sports club. My mother and I did not like that very much. On these Sundays we felt ourselves alone and abandoned. I missed my father. He was not there for me on even one single Sunday. Not only that, but on many occasions he would have meetings and conferences during the week after work. That would leave me and my mother sitting by ourselves in the kitchen all evening.

Later I came to understand that he was not doing this just because he liked the sports club atmosphere, but rather that he valued the respect and standing accorded to him as a working class guy who had been invited in to this very middle-class club and moreover accepted into the Board of Directors as part of their very middle-class group. This was an honor and distinction that he was very proud of, and rightly so. It was a sort of compensation for him for not being Master Ironworker. He was not yet an independent craftsman working his way up to the middle-class. But out of the mass of workers on the docks he had always managed to make himself known among the bourgeoisie of the middle-class and to be accepted by them as an equal.

His voice in the Board meetings had weight even ahead of the managers, supervisors and salaried employees who made up the Board. The responsibilities and projects entrusted to him in the club were of immense importance to him. For him it was not about a chummy sports club. His association with the direction of the club built up his self-confidence and it showed that he was in no way lower-class, that he did not belong to the unwashed masses.

Later I understood that my father needed this validation to resolve some inner problems of his. It was compensation for the disappointment he endured when his earlier hopes and dreams were dashed. I was able to fully understand his feelings when I later found myself in a similar position. I became chairman of a trade association and found myself, a public school graduate, working with businessmen who all had college degrees. In order for me to succeed in that environment, to be viewed as an equal, took a great deal of effort and courage.

But he spent too much time with the club. It took too much time away from his private life. I was affected by this, but it was much harder on my mother who really disliked being alone like that. The good husband and father was, unfortunately, not the ideal spouse filled with as much love for her as she would have wished and still longed for. My father overlooked all too often the cares and problems of my mother that arose out of his lack of love and physical affection. She suffered from this because she was not a woman without passions. Above all she missed conversation. Conversation with her husband that would go beyond the level of talk around the kitchen table. The result was that she turned more and more toward me. She talked with me about topics that would normally have been far beyond the horizon of a child. It did me no harm. Quite the contrary, I learned a great deal within the limits of my child's mind and that was a great advantage for me.

It was also around this time that my mother's wish for another child grew. She wanted another child and this time she was hoping for a daughter, she had always wanted a daughter rather than a son. Also, she had had her fill of this boy who had given her plenty of sorrow and grief. She was convinced that a daughter would not have done so. Additionally, her son was now a big boy and she wanted something little to take care of. In spite of all of the problems with his affections, her efforts to have a second child were eventually successful. It led to great a great abyss of sorrow.

Although my parents were doing well my mother was still homesick for her parents and siblings in Hamm. As often as possible on holidays my mother would travel home. It cost a good bit of money and our household budget could hardly manage it. But there was a way to get around that, though it was quite illegal. After the war my grandfather in Hamm got a job with the railroad. As a railroad employee he could get a free ticket to travel anywhere the lines ran inside the country. Our good, dear grandfather knew of mother's homesickness. He did what he should not have done, and sent her a free ticket in his name. This was forbidden, but most of the rail employees did it anyway. This kind of ticket was good for one person, but was also valid for a second traveler. In our case I was the second traveler.

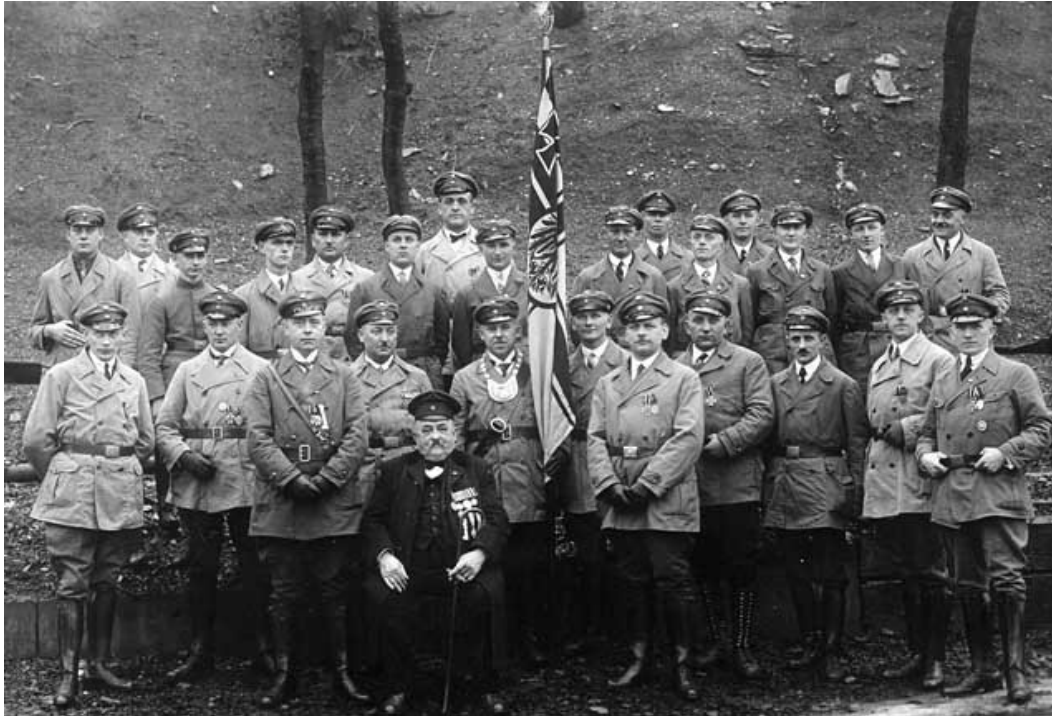
With the ticket we were able to travel 3rd class. If we couldn't do that then we traveled in the baggage car under the most spartan conditions as 4th class, the cheapest way to go. The deal with the tickets had a catch, of course, in that the stationmaster at Vegesack knew quite well that the Mork's were not railroad employees. However, during one of my grandfather's stays in Vegesack, he made a point of visiting his colleague, and coming to an understanding. We had no problems after that, but it did cost my grandfather a couple of his best cigars and a few beers and a schnapps to boot in the railroad station's bar.

It was always a big event to travel to Hamm. Father had to stay home but he was well supplied with detailed instructions from my mother. When the hour of parting came, my father stood on the rail station platform obviously pleased to be getting some peace and quiet back. My mother was clearly nervous at least until we got past Bremen, not only because of her husband, but she was also apprehensive about getting on the wrong train to Hamm. When she boarded the train she asked pretty much everyone in the car if she was on the right train. After several kilometers she would calm down only to get excited again as we approached Osnabrück because there her dear brother, Alex, would meet her during the short stop there and they would share a hug. He had a business as a gunsmith and made weapons for hunters and other hunting accessories. She always wrote him in advance in the hope that he could come to the station and greet us. He always made it, but mother was always apprehensive about it and would stick her head out of the window long before we arrived in Osnabrück looking for the first glimpse of Alex.

Train rides were always an extremely interesting event for me. It was not only the poignant partings, but also the the equally poignant arrival ceremonies. Tears flowed in a flood and handkerchiefs were soaked. The most interesting part was the train ride itself, with the noise of the iron wheels on the tracks and the loud whistle of the locomotive when it released steam. The long tunnel outside of Lengerich was very exciting as the train entered it and everything went dark and frightened the unsophisticated farmers and workers.

Equally interesting were the people on board and how they behaved in the station and on the platforms. There was always a lot to see and to experience. It always amused me to watch the mannerisms of people, be they man woman or child. I wondered at the different types of people, the strange ways some of them dressed and the odd ways they spoke. Sometimes I couldn't understand a word they said. Especially, since I came from Bremen and therefore spoke a good High German, or so I thought then, which was a very orderly language as opposed to the many incomprehensible dialects I heard, with the obvious exception of the Low German we used in the North!

As interesting as the train trip was, I found the stay in Hamm even more interesting. It was always a new experience and Hamm became for me a sort of second home. We always stayed with my mother's sister, Aunt Anni. I always felt comfortable with her and welcomed. I also really liked her husband, Uncle Richard, particularly because he worked as the private chauffeur for the director of the Isenbeck Brewery. He drove a huge Mercedes and let me sit in it when he washed it. Then he would make a few circuits of the brewery grounds with me in the car. This was an experience that I could brag about when I got back to school. I was also very impressed on Sundays when he would put on his Stahlhelm uniform and drive his boss to their weekend 'service.' At that time I did not have a critical view of the Stahlhelm, but later my teacher Mr. Lambrecht would change that.



Gathering of Stahlhelm members from Plettenberg, south of Hamm. Note the WWI decorations being worn. Seated gentleman in front is a veteran of the 1870/71 war.

I loved Aunt Anni with all my heart, in part because she was so different from my mother. Anni was always happy and cheerful. Her face always beamed with laughter. She told great stories and could sing. She was a joy to be around. I would go back to Hamm many times as I got older and began making long bicycle trips during the holidays. Hamm was always on my itinerary. Unfortunately, I lost contact with her in the 1950's, because after my divorce I didn't feel morally acceptable. I have always regretted that because, after my mother's death, Aunt Anni became a kind of mother substitute for me. After the war she had a great deal of trouble with her son, Wilhelm, who went his own way, and her husband who remained a POW in Russia for a long time. He was finally released, came home, and died of a heart attack only a year later.

The trips to Hamm also included an obligatory visit to my Grandfather on my father's side, Wilhelm Mork, at his house at 8 Ostenwall. We had to go there in spite of the fact that my infamous Aunt Marie, his sister, was still around. It cost my mother quite an effort to bring herself to enter that house where she had to be in the presence of the bigoted Aunt Marie. [*When Mork's mother married his father, Aunt Marie uttered a curse and predicted nothing but trouble and sorrow for the couple who married outside the Catholic church.*] I still have the image before my eyes of the large living room that faced the street. On every wall in the room and in the foyer hung garish pictures and iconography of the Catholic church. It was one cross next to the other, one Jesus slam up against another, and bunches of Virgin Mary's next to a big bushy bearded God. The overwhelming display was not only unsettling, it scared me.

This was all so foreign to me that it made me very uncomfortable. The atmosphere around Aunt Marie was very oppressive. I was afraid of my grandfather who towered over me like a giant with his long shaggy hair and had a terrifying cyst on his forehead the size of a pigeon's egg. I did like their garden even if I still had to be on my 'best behavior' there. I was never particularly attracted to that house or its two inhabitants. The visits were nothing more than an unpleasant family duty. It was very different when we visited those wonderful folks, my Grandma and Grandpa, in Feidickstraße.

All good things come to an end and eventually we had to take leave of Hamm and our family there. Most often my mother would get homesick well before our planned departure time. She worried about her husband who would be so lonely and longing for his family. This, in spite of the fact that he would be doing quite well spending most of his time at his sports club and visiting with close friends. Nevertheless, my mother would want to go home early and even though I fought against it, it didn't help. I would have to say 'farewell' to dear Grandma, splendid Grandpa, wonderful Aunt Anni and the rest of the family.

We didn't always stay with Aunt Anni. Sometimes we would stay with the grandparents in Feidieckstraße, or with Uncle Josef or Jupp and his family in Kentroperweg. Staying with Jupp was not unalloyed joy since he could be rather unpleasant, especially to his wife and the presence of guests in his house didn't make any difference. He was not a good husband and could be brutal at times. He had probably acquired this demeanor when he was stationed in Kiel in the Navy. His daughter, Margarete, my cousin, was my great infatuation even though she had problems with her eyes and squinted a bit, it didn't bother me. Every time we visited I told her I loved her and wanted to marry her when I grew up. I don't know whatever became of her later. Our paths parted. She got married after the war and moved away. Her brother, Werner Briem, volunteered for the Navy during the war, true to his father's tradition. He was killed in 1945, a navy man converted into an infantry man, defending the Berlin from the Russians. He was in the company of many other soldiers from all branches of the military who ended up as ground troops in that final battle.

In our home at 1 Kirchhofstraße began a time when the conversations between my parents became full of concern and worry as the fear of possible unemployment imposed itself on our thoughts. My father was of the opinion that layoffs at his level were unlikely because Master Prochnow had told him that he was just as safe from layoffs as Prochnow himself. The extent to which both men were mistaken will soon be made clear.

Scandals, Affairs and Unrest

The New Spirit is on the March

This was the time when more and more unrest became apparent and my mother's old fears about civil war returned. Unfortunately, it was the case that as the unrest grew so did the street confrontations which often turned bloody. Rangers from the Security police, the SIPO (Sicherheitspolizei) and the SCHUPO (Schutzpolizei) were called in from Bremen to restore order and calm. If the opposing parties did not stop immediately, the police would weigh in with such force that it bordered on brutality. The "Green Minna's" [*Paddy Wagons*] came in great numbers to carry the agitators away to the closest jail, and when they filled up they would take them as far away as Bremen.

It was not only the unrest in the streets that troubled everyone. There seemed to be more and more scandals in business and in political life. It seemed like every day a new scandal would shake the nation, and there always seemed to be some Jews mixed up in the scandal somewhere. For example the scandals involving the Barmat Brothers and later the Sklarek Brothers led to an increased anti-Jewish sentiment among the populace, even in our circles.



A "Green Minna" from 1921

All of these scandals, primarily in Berlin, were like wind in the sails of the Nazi Party. They caused people to be more convinced than ever that the Jews were bad for Germany. They also viewed the capitol, Berlin, as the capitol of commonness and baseness, a bottomless swamp without any morals or dignity, completely corrupt and disintegrating. The Reichstag in Berlin acted like a degenerate gossip parlor, a meaningless parliamentary institution. The delegates were no longer seen as anything special, they were only loyal to their party and had lost touch with the people. So, it was hardly a wonder that the Nazis and the Communists mocked Parliament and made a laughing stock of them. Even the delegates were guilty of the same thing and showed it by their behavior.

Public opinion in the Republic was becoming harsher, and it had been successfully infected with the spirit of Nazism. This new spirit of the land drew in more and more people, most of whom would not have thought of themselves as sympathizers. They began to think that the national swagger and bluster was not a bad thing, it harkened back to the old spirit of German nationalism and militancy that also implied social order. It did not escape many people that these ideals were in stark contrast to the impression that the shenanigans of the Weimar Republic made on them. Little by little they became convinced that perhaps Hitler might be able to bring back jobs and bread on the table if he came to power. These conclusions had a great influence in changing people's minds. This was becoming very evident.

The SA was an organization where unemployed young men could feel welcome. They were given free uniforms and single men could stay for free in the "Brown Houses" like the one in Vegesack in Hafenstraße. They were fed there and moreover they could get the much sought after cigarettes with the SA brand, "Trommler," for the incredibly low price of 10 Pfennig for a pack of five. All party members could take advantage of this bargain and the privilege was highly prized. Smokers were passionate about their vice, but cigarettes were way too expensive if you were unemployed.



Ad for Trommler Cigarettes

The SA always displayed a strictly military demeanor and it was led by ex-combat soldiers who wore their decorations proudly on the breast of their brown shirts. This made a good impression on people. The sight of all of those medals elevated the status of the organization. That the SA got involved in street battles was frowned upon, but the public gave them more slack than the gangs on the political left. It wasn't just the Nazis who started these street fights, all of the political factions were instigators without exception.

The “young men” of the SA, the SS was not yet very noticeable, were met with considerable sympathy because most of the leaders came from the higher ranks of the WW I combat troops. It is true that many ex-combat troops were in the leftest parties also, but they weren't ex-officers. They weren't as impressive since the people still had a weakness for the military officer. When they marched, the SA were immediately recognizable. These “Brown Battalions” followed the strict Prussian military drills. By contrast the leftists were sloppy and disorderly. Many people saw the SA men as the new elite, a

possible successor to the German Wehrmacht whenever Germany would be allowed to have an army again.

It was also thought of as a good sign that many members of the old nobility were associated with the Nazi Party and the SA. Some even came from the old Kaiser's household, and included his sons. It was particularly noteworthy that many of these former nobles willingly subordinated themselves to higher ranking SA leaders who came from the middle class. This was seen by many as a sure sign of a new changes in German society. It harkened back to the spirit of comradeship of the front line soldiers that was forged in the trenches, passed on the the Freikorps and from there to the SA. It also showed respect for the soldiers who did not return from the trenches. An extensive post-war literature developed that glorified this 'heroism' and it came not only from the Nazis, but also from the majority German writers who expressed the same nationalistic sentiment.

In the area around Vegesack and Aumund the local SA-Führer was named Karl Lendroth, a tradesman, who had a plumbing business in the street behind the union offices. The business is there even today. He moved up from SA-Führer to Sturmbannführer and eventually SA-Standortführer at headquarters. Karl Lendroth was no street fighter. He was a businessman, a tradesman, but when the SA needed a street fighter, he would weigh in and give it his all. Others did the same thing in the Red Front Fighters Union, and in the Reichsbanner. This plumber was an upstanding individual whom no one blamed for his love of alcohol, because that was the nature of many tradesmen. It did not besmirch his honor. His demeanor in public after 1933 was not very satisfactory. That was something I witnessed myself in my parent's tavern in Blumenstraße.

When this 'leader' marched through the streets at the head of his troop, he was viewed by the onlookers with mixed emotions. The political opponents were enraged at this twerp, but his men were fully behind him, accepted him as their leader and followed him.

The SA did not saunter through the streets as a formless group. They always endeavored to make a snappy impression. That is up until the point when the order was given to “Clear the Street!” This was often the prelude to a street battle with another group of marchers. It would give way to a bloody donnybrook where no one side would give in. That just served to escalate the violence. They

graduated up from fistfights, to carrying clubs. Their shoulder straps would be wrapped around the hand with the hook clasp on the outside to make a truly brutal weapon. Brutality became a sad but common feature. There was no going back. More and more force was employed regardless of the consequences. The newspapers tallied the count of the dead. It was not just the SA doing the killing, it was coming from all factions. That everyone should hate everyone was the new reality, and my mother's fears of an all-out civil war were not without grounds.

The appearances of the SA in public always had a very military character, particularly because they would march in straight columns that would nearly fill the street. Add to that the many flags they carried and the old soldier's songs they loudly sang as they marched along. Sometimes they would change the lyrics of the old songs to match the new National Socialist spirit, or they would create new songs with smart rhythms that matched the pounding of their high-topped boots on the pavement. This display alone said to any onlookers, "Clear the streets! The SA is marching!" Many people found their way of acting very compelling, others were filled with fear. The SA was well aware of the effect they were having on people. They wanted to instill fear to provoke and frighten the petty bourgeois and 'good citizens' of the town. This was part and parcel of the "Brown Columns" that filled the young SA men with joy. They were more than ready to spread fear and loathing and did so without any inhibitions.



SA Marching through the Streets

The older leaders of the SA let the 'young hotheads' have their way even if it resulted in people calling them hoodlums. They wanted to have a combat-ready troop that was ready and willing to fight for the Nazi ideology in the truest sense and without reservation and unto death if necessary. However, in other organizations there were young men who were equally ready to defend their particular ideologies with violence. This sort of civil war between groups with differing political views was, unfortunately, common practice in the Weimar Republic, and all sides participated in it. It was the young men who were in the front lines of their organizations. Their motto was "Cudgels out and after them!" They indulged in street fights and beer hall fights. They were not content until blood flowed.

In Vegesack in Gerhard Rohlfs Straße, directly across from Hartmannstift, was where the business office of the Communist Party (KPD) was located and that of the Red Combat Veterans Union. The young Communists would stand around on the street out front just waiting for any Nazis to pass by. First they would insult them verbally, then move on to physically harassing them and it would quickly progress to an out and out riot. This sort of thing was an everyday occurrence that was just part of normal life. Newspapers all over Germany reported the same stories about that day's battles that often resulted in deaths. The Brownshirts and the Reds were deeply involved in the violence, but so were the conservative Stahlhelms and other similar organizations. The Brownshirts were the most active, but one should not talk only about their brutal ways and act as if they were alone in behaving this way as though the other parties were just innocent victims. That the SA was singled out for loathing was due in part to the fact that they were the largest organization, and their numbers were growing daily. The columns marching through the streets got longer and longer. They were the majority in the streets and

the majority had the most power. They could afford to be ruthless in dealing with their enemies.

When thinking back to these awful events one should have the reality of those times before ones eyes. A one-sided view is false, but, unfortunately, that is the popular view nowadays. In the first version of my memoirs I went into considerable depth on this period in history. I am not going to repeat it all here. That material is still available in spite of the many typos. At another time it may be rewritten and expanded. I would have loved to have publicized these writings and had public discussions about them, but the opportunity did not present itself. That is disappointing, but the new generation today seems to have little interest in that history and it has sunk to insignificance. It served as a good exercise in my retirement to jog my memory. I would have liked to have a larger audience in order to give the younger generation something to ponder without me appearing to be an old fogey rattling on about things that happened in a long-forgotten past. It is too bad that that never happened, for whatever reason. If I have enough time left, I will go back and use my previous writings as the basis for a more intensive study of the pre-1933 era. Otherwise it will just have to stand on its own as it is now.

After these somewhat elegiac thoughts, it is time to get back on track recounting the events of my life. I am trying to tell the story just as I lived it and from my own point of view, just the way it was without bending the truth. I endeavor to separate myself from my life today and describe the past in terms of the zeitgeist of those times. I wish to avoid the opportunism that is evident in many of the discussions and writings of many people today. Much of what I have to describe differs from what is 'opportune.' This is in no way to be considered an attempt on my part to glorify an awful time in Nazi history. I am convinced that it is important and right to show history in its true light and not to sweep the truth under the rugs of the historians who only write about the 'evil demons.' This was not the only evil time in German history. I resist the talk about the criminals who used brutal force to push the German people into the Third Reich. I resist the silence regarding the real basis underlying the events as well as attempts to conceal or belittle the fact that the German people as a whole freely and quite willingly entered the Third Reich and stuck with it to the bitter end. This is not an attempt on my part to lay blame. We must simply consider what the basis and the causes were that made the German people more than passive followers.

Fear, Worries and Problems



Adolf Stöcker 1835-1909

Adolf Stöcker

It should not be forgotten that the Nazi ideology had a very long and very German prehistory. The ground where Hitler planted the seeds of this ideology had already been well prepared throughout the German-speaking lands. He only had to grab, hold and use this 'material' with a German public that after 1918 was very receptive to it, either in spite of or because of the Weimar Republic. Both Austria and Germany were fertile ground long before the First World War. The ground had been well worked by members of the intellectual elite in both countries. These were not crackpots as people would like to characterize them today. They were very respected men who brought German nationalism to the foreground, and along with it came antisemitism. Spiritual leaders of both major religions also chimed in, not just the Court Pastor, Stöcker [*Adolf Stöcker 1835-1909. He was a strident and vocal anti-Semite.*] in Berlin who preached to Their Majesties during worship.

I, too, as a child was very much influenced by everything that happened both before and after 1933. It really took hold of me, perhaps more than it did in other children my age. I would have to experience for myself how my hopes, my ideals and my willingness for self-sacrifice would be misused and then brutally destroyed. All of this took place in an atmosphere that did not seem criminal to me just as it didn't for the overwhelming majority in the former Reich. I hate it when false views of the past are put forth as the truth for opportunistic reasons, and the real truth is suppressed or transformed into the past that the writer prefers. I am writing a history that I lived in a period where I grew from a child to a young man. All of it is a reality that I experienced with all of its confusing changes and evolution. It is at least a small reflection of a truth which corresponds to the lived reality.

Since as a child I was always very curious, always wanted to learn more and was very interested in my surroundings, be it at school, the neighborhood or political organizations, I always not only more mature than other kids I also knew more than other kids. My broad knowledge is a major reason why I can write so much about the things that happened around me. There is no invention, nothing that I read about beforehand, just the reality of my life from childhood on. Naturally, many of the events of my very early life are not things I remembered in fine detail, but were fleshed out by reading many books about the past. This has given me much more knowledge about the Nazi era as well from much earlier times.

The increasing brutalization of the relationships among people in their political life as well as in all other aspects of life in the Weimar Republic was based in the anxiety people had regarding their own survival in this time of poverty. The brutalization drove men to unplumbed depths unknown to them up to this point. It was related to their loss of dignity and morals. This happened in all levels of society. It affected us too. My mother would often sit with me at the kitchen table crying and telling her young child of all the dangers and all of the fearful things that could befall us if things went on the way they were going.

An ever growing disquiet gripped everyone. Hardly anyone could imagine a time when things would be different or how they could ever get better. Rumors of the worst kind swirled through the land fanned by members of every political camp. Discontent and fear not only grew on its own, it was stoked by those who used it for their propaganda. There was talk about the arming of the Reichsbanners, as well as the Red Combat Veterans Union. This arming was supposed to consist of more than just light handguns. There was also talk of the secret armories of the SA and the SS. According to the rumors the arms were being provided to the Nazi organizations by the Stahlhelm and the German army in case open warfare broke out. All of this led to a sort of national civil war mania and the possible danger of the country tipping into such conflict became more real. The left wanted arms to protect 'their' Republic and the right wanted arms to destroy it and build a new nation. When a new nation, a new Reich, came into being on January 30, 1933 no one took arms in hand to defend the Weimar Republic and no one took up arms to start a national revolution. The bloody civil war did not happen. The German army stood by unmoved, with their arms at ease. Then in March 1933 they lent their support to the new powers. The people saw much good in the new government, even if a few people were killed, and certain opponents went to jail. At least a civil war had been averted. That was truly a fortunate thing. Peace and calm were assured by the new Reich, or so it seemed.

The fear of civil war in the years before 1933 was especially vivid due to the news people were hearing about events in the Soviet Union. The atrocities of the Bolsheviks resulted in enormous bloodbaths and people could imagine the same thing happening here if the evil communists set the scene not only for a general strike, but also for civil war. That these tendentious news stories originated not only in the Hugenberg Press, but also in the Nazi publications with the intention of spreading fear did not seem to

be noted by the general public. They only saw the Reds before their eyes and the rising danger. Many good Germans also thought of the Socialist Party members as Reds and lumped them in with the Communists.

The looming specter of civil war had a villain and that villain was Communism. The Party in Germany was tainted by what was going on in Russia and it was still an ongoing situation. Even though the news reports coming out of the Soviet Union were slanted when reported by the German press, it was nevertheless a fact that there were a large number of monstrous acts and terrible atrocities still going on, not just those of the October Revolution. Yet the German Communists still talked about the great soviet model and of the sort of Communism practiced there and their desire to import that model to Germany. The majority of Germans thought that unimaginable, but the KDP was still a powerful political party in the Republic. These attitudes among so many people in Germany clearly demonstrates the situation we found ourselves in. The extreme left and the extreme right both counted a very large number of adherents.

Chaos not only in the streets, but chaos also in our minds.

The nation's streets were becoming more and more of a stage for the turbulent appearances of every organization, each had special 'units' that sported snappy uniforms and marched to stirring music through the streets and triggered enthusiastic reactions. The Communist party had an



A Schalmey Horn

unusual offering in the way of march music. They had a Schalmey horn chorus that was very engaging and featured a sound that was quite out of the ordinary. These parades of various groups became part of everyday life. The terror in the streets continued to grow and was really bad around election time. The Reichstag was always forming new governments and calling for new elections. Local governments were having the same problems and they, too, called often for elections. It was a sign of the breakdown of the political system and politicians. More chaos came from the large number of political parties that always wanted to mix in and have their say even when all they had to say was stupid blathering. Eventually, people got fed up with this confusing mishmash of political factions. Once again this was a wind that filled the sails of the Nazi Party which vowed to clean up the mess.

In our neighborhood we experienced up close all of the problems that affected society in general. Not the least of which was the divisions among neighbors. People's ideologies were more and more polarized and this led to tensions in the neighborhood. Earlier it wouldn't have mattered much if your neighbor was a Socialist, a Communist or even a Stahlhelmer. Now, however, it evolved into hatefulness, especially since the first Nazis, the SA, began to appear, which only increased the tensions and problems. In the best case one could try to stay out of the way of these conflicts, but that was rarely possible.

All families were being hit with hardships as a result of the increasing layoffs at the Vulkan Shipyards. The unemployed had to live entirely off of totally insufficient unemployment benefits checks and when that was gone they had to go on the dole. Anger and despair took its toll and the first casualty was the friendly neighborhood spirit.

It was my mother who one day decided that we had to be proactive and find a way to make ends meet.

She would not let her family slide into the abyss of poverty and want. She searched for suitable opportunities for us to keep afloat. She found them, too, because she was stubborn, refused to give up, and because her hardheadedness prevailed.

This was the situation in the Mork family at 1 Kirchhofstraße where I would spend the rest of my childhood. It was here where, on January 30, 1933, we would receive a shock that hit me hard in spite of my young years and caused a dramatic change in me.

Now I will describe our life in these times when I was a street urchin, and I still am one to some extent. I will not follow a strict chronology, but rather recount several experiences, some happy, some unpleasant that brought little joy to my parents.



Unemployment Lines in Hanover