

BOY WITNESSED YEARS OF DEATH, DESTRUCTION

By [Fred Dickey](#) 12:01 a.m. Feb. 17, 2014

Heinz Kubernus had seen too much, too early. He was only a child of 11, and people had been trying to kill him for more than four years. He had spent much of his life locked in what seemed a tin closet, with a pounding bass drum in his ear.

He would look up wide-eyed at the dark cellar ceiling as dust floated down on him from the concussion of high-explosive bombs. He was terrified of being buried alive. He hugged his mother, but she had the same fear.

In mid-April 1945, the people of Berlin were living in a state of siege. Since August 1940, they had been traumatized by bombings that grew heavier and more frequent each year. Night and day, fire from the sky fell on their neighborhoods under the Allied myth of precision bombing. Up to 50,000 people, perhaps more, were killed in more than 350 raids.

When it started, Heinz says, the first destruction in his neighborhood was the Salvation Army hospital where he was born, followed shortly by his school.

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The bombings dominated Heinz's young life. The wail of the air-raid siren drowned out laughter and turned once-proud citizens into scurrying, burrowing human mice. Only-child Heinz and his 38-year-old mother, Hedwig, would make it to the fortified bunker if they had time, but often had to crowd into the dank cellar of their apartment building. They spent hundreds of hours in fear as the walls shook and the timbers creaked, knowing they were at the mercy of any random bomb that might fall their way.

"In the evening, by 8 o'clock, we were in the basement already and awaiting the raids. We knew if we were hit, the whole building would collapse and we would be buried. When buildings collapsed, people were mostly crushed or suffocated, but when the gas line would get hit, it would explode and (immolate) them.

"There's only children and women, and we're sitting in the dark, or maybe somebody has a candle. We're sitting there like zombies, and then you hear the bombs coming — closer and closer. Bang! Bang! Bang! Everybody starts screaming. When a bomb hit the street in front of our house, we were sitting on benches, and we flew all the way up to the ceiling.

"People are frantic and crying out to their attackers, 'What the heck did we do to you that you want to do this to us?'"

After the all-clear, Heinz the child would go out and, with his bare hands, help dig out the wounded and the dead. "You'd see bodies lying all over. There was a heavy smell of death, smoke and explosives."

Heinz recalls when a 200-pound bomb crashed through all four floors of the building and laid smoking on the basement floor.

"We don't know when it is going to explode. Everybody's screaming. A couple of old guys finally (got their courage up) and picked it up and took it outside."

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Heinz Kubernus is sitting at the kitchen table of his comfortable home in rural Escondido. His face tightens with emotion as he pushes his memory back 69 years to those days of blood and bombs. His thoughts are organized, and his speech carries the trace of an accent reflecting German roots.

He came to North America from Germany 52 years ago as a farm hand and worked his way into a significant engineering job in the missile industry, with attendant prosperity. He and his Berlin-born wife, Renate, have two children. His Americanization was speeded by Army service.

Too much good has happened in his life over the decades to obsess over long-healed wounds. However, though he made peace with the fear, who could forget all the death?

He expresses no animus toward Britons and Americans who for more than four years carpet-bombed his city. Not so, the Russians. Referring to Red Army soldiers who spread terror among helpless Berliners, he says, "I hate those bastards."

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Heinz says he believes the average German knew something was happening to Jews, but without an honest press, they only knew what they saw, or were told by cautious rumor. What was evident to their eyes was bothersome to his mother.

"A furniture store (nearby) was owned by Jews, and the police came and took them away. My mother cried about it: 'Just what the hell are they doing to these people? It's unbelievable.'

"My aunt owed a beauty shop with many Jewish customers. I remember her saying, 'I don't know what's going on here. My Jewish customers ... they took Mrs. Rosenberg away.'"

The accepted answer among those who wanted to believe the best was that Jews were being kept in camps until the war was over. They told themselves and each other that — whether they believed it or not.

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The falling bombs did not begin the tragedy of Berlin but were the consequence of Hitler's aggression of Sept. 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland and lit the fires of World War II.

When the Polish invasion began, Heinz says his mother sobbed and wailed that it would be a disaster for their country. His father tried to reassure by saying it would be a limited war, and things would be all right once the "Polish question" was solved.

After the quick victory, most Germans were ecstatic, but not Heinz's mother, who detested Hitler. As Heinz and his father prepared to go to the Polish campaign victory parade, he remembers, "My mother would not go to that parade to see Hitler ride by in triumph. She said that'd be the last parade she went to."

At the back of the parade crowd, Heinz's father boosted the 5-year-old boy on his shoulders to see Hitler riding by. Bystanders shouted up to Heinz, "What does the fuhrer look like?" The small boy could only say, "He looks like the fuhrer."

The Kubernus family lived in a working-class neighborhood of Berlin. It was an area filled with leftists often sympathetic to communists and cold to the Nazi regime, and especially the fuhrer. Even so, Heinz's father often had to caution his wife against her outspoken opinions.

His father, Willy, a machinist, was drafted as a most reluctant soldier at age 36 in 1942 and sent to the Eastern Front to fight Russians, where he had the good fortune to be wounded instead of killed or captured later. He was sent back to Germany to recuperate, then posted to France, where he served until the end of the war.

Question: Did the people turn against Hitler toward the end?

“Well, it’s hard to say. How you going to turn against him? Yah, sure, they made jokes, but you have to be careful, especially toward the end of the war because that’s when the officials got even worse. You say anything out on the street and they would hang you.

“I was right there when they caught one guy who didn’t have a pass. You had these military police walking around in the last few weeks, and anybody in uniform they asked for his orders, and if he couldn’t show it, they hung him, right there from a lamppost.”

And you saw that?

“Yah, just like that. At the time, I thought that was the right thing because you can’t run away (from the fighting).”

You were in the Hitler Youth?

“Yah. From age 10 you had to be. At first, my mother wouldn’t send me to the meeting, so she got a red card in the mail that said if you don’t (send him), there will be consequences. She had to let me join.”

You were proud to be a member?

“Yah. I was proud. At the time, it was like the Boy Scouts to us kids. Before the Russians came, we little guys were sent to build barricades in the streets using old streetcars and all that kind of stuff. Kids over 14 were told they were expected to fight.”

Despite fatuous claims on government radio, Berliners knew the war was lost. Their hope was that the Americans or British would arrive first from the west to liberate the city. Their fear was that it would be the Russians who would arrive first from the east.

The terror Berliners had for Russians was fueled by Nazi propaganda to spur greater war effort by characterizing Russians as barbarians from the steppes, and warning that the Mongol conquest of 700 years earlier could happen again. The women of Berlin had nightmares.

They had reason to fear. When Heinz’s father returned from the Eastern Front, he spoke of his disgust at what he had seen as the Wehrmacht swept through the villages that dotted the vast plains of Ukraine and Russia.

“He said, ‘If the Russians ever get to Germany, just watch out, because of the stuff we did in Russia. It’s going to be bad.’ ”

On Tuesday: The Russians are coming.

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