

BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

Early Years

In an apartment above Georg Kellner's pastry shop in Vaihingen-an-der-Enz in southern Germany, Georg's wife, Wilhelmine, gave birth to their son. It was February 1, 1885. The father, born out of wedlock twenty-two years earlier in Arnstadt, Thuringia, conferred an overdue legitimacy upon his family line by naming his son August Friedrich, after his mother's lover, August Friedrich Schonert, the man who had sired him. In the next three years, Wilhelmine – from the large Vaigle family in nearby Bissingen – bore two more children, but neither survived infancy.¹

When their son was four, the Kellners moved to Mainz, "City of Gutenberg," where Georg was employed as a master baker. Young Friedrich was educated in a breathtaking era of human ingenuity that brought radios, telephones, electric lighting, phonographs, movies, automobiles, and airplanes into everyday lives. He was an outgoing child, bright in his studies, particularly math, and talented in music and art. Sensible to his parents' wishes, he agreed to a career that would make him the first white-collar worker in the family. He attended public elementary school and vocational high school, and when he turned eighteen in 1903, Friedrich began a three-year unpaid apprenticeship as an office clerk in the Mainz courthouse. His immediate goal was to become a justice inspector (*Justizinspektor*), a supervisor of law records and court accounting, including registrar duties. His greater hope was someday to become an administrative manager of a courthouse.

An added benefit for employees in the bureaucracy of Wilhelm II's German Empire was a more flexible military requirement: one year of active duty, with occasional training over the next six years. Friedrich began his full year in October 1907 when he was twenty-two. Lucky to have missed the Reich's participation in China's Boxer Rebellion and the brutal skirmishes in Wilhelm's colonial territories in southwest Africa, the young man safely marched and drilled with his regiment, practiced shooting, and hit the bull's-eye often enough to earn a marksman's lanyard for his jacket.

At a Carnival-Fastnacht party in 1910, Friedrich was introduced to the woman he would marry, a petite young lady he had seen for the first time a few days earlier skating on a pond. Energetic and independent, Karolina Paulina “Pauline” Preuss was three years younger than her admirer. Her father, Karl Preuss, was a tinsmith; her mother, Johanna née Martin, was a robust woman who raised seven children amid the grueling chores of the German housewife.² Pauline graduated from vocational high school and was employed as an office clerk at Schöfferhof Brewery. After a year of courtship, Pauline and her office mates drew Friedrich with them to Frankfurt for the first International Women’s Day, where he wisely cheered in support of women’s suffrage. On the train back to Mainz they became engaged. They were married on January 18, 1913, one day before Pauline’s twenty-fifth birthday and two weeks before Friedrich would turn twenty-eight. He still was intent on becoming a justice inspector, and she would keep working at Schöfferhof for two more years before starting a family.

War and Politics

On August 4, 1914, called from his desk at the courthouse to be with his army reserve unit, Sergeant Friedrich Kellner mustered with Prince Carl Infantry Regiment, No. 118, to march into a war that would embroil much of the world. Helpless to intervene in the unfolding events, a stoic Pauline comforted her in-laws and her parents. Her brothers Franz and Ludwig had also been drafted.

There was some solace in the hope this would be “the war to end all wars,” but Friedrich was not beguiled by the slogans or the municipal bands and cheering crowds gathered to see them off. He had reason not to be. A page in his military passbook, with the handwritten heading “Battles Participated In,” soon would have the names of towns where deadly engagements had played out. His marksman’s lanyard had become a hangman’s noose; his shooting skills put him at the front of every fight.

His first action was at Neufchâteau on August 22. By mid-September he had survived eight battles, including the series of fights known as the First Battle of the Marne, where the French and British put an end to the German advance on Paris. He experienced the humiliation of retreat, but instead of maneuvering homeward, the Prince Carl Infantry Regiment headed into northwest France.³

For two months Friedrich lived in muddy sand-bagged trenches in the area west of Reims, dreading the futile daytime charges and the eerie

nighttime crawls through barbed wire to toss hand grenades into enemy dens while earth and air shook with the thunder of artillery. He questioned the High Command's inept strategy and the Kaiser's ruinous quest for glory – and even the concept of monarchical rule. He saw no sense in a German soldier shedding blood in France because a Serbian killed an Austrian in Bosnia. He would readily take a stand at the Reich's borders, protecting home and country with his life. But the men protecting their country in this instance were those he was firing upon and killing. Try as he might, he could not square his actions with the simple tenet, "Treat others the same way you want them to treat you."

In November Friedrich was struck by shrapnel from a bursting shell and became one of the 4 million German men wounded in that war; 2 million would be killed. Packed into an overloaded train soaked with the blood of groaning soldiers, the pain in Friedrich's torn leg, and the likelihood it might fester and have to be amputated, brought a temporary halt to his philosophical musings.

Recovery took place in Mainz's St. Rochus Hospital. By spring he was fit for the front lines but instead was assigned to quartermaster headquarters in Frankfurt, where he had a broad picture of warfare and its ruinous costs. Close to Mainz, he could be with Pauline often. On February 29, 1916, as an affirmation of life amid the pestilence of war, their only child was born in their Mainz apartment on Mosel Street, a few blocks from the Rhine River. They named him Karl Friedrich Wilhelm and called him Fritz.

Whether it was the singularity of being a Leap Year's Day child that cast a shadow on this newborn, or the general state of nihilism that gripped the world during the first half of the twentieth century – or a hedonistic gene passed down from his great-grandmother who had brought Georg illegitimately into the world – Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Kellner would seldom know happiness in his adult life and never become inured to the absence of it. Friedrich and Pauline had not the slightest foreboding of the ineffable sorrow tiny Fritz eventually would bring them.

Heroic posters and popular jingles were not enough to maintain enthusiasm for a losing war. The reduced bread rations and growing casualty lists affected almost every family. Pauline's youngest brother, Ludwig, was missing in action, later declared dead. In 1907 Friedrich had posed for a photograph with the men in his reserve squad, each man holding a glass of beer, proud and content. No such élan is seen in the 1917 photograph of Friedrich with the staff at quartermaster headquarters. What Friedrich intuitively had understood in August 1914 about the realities of war was now plainly visible

on the dour faces of his comrades. The old German order was fast approaching its end.

For Friedrich and Pauline the Weimar Constitution was exhilarating, giving her the right to vote and inspiring him to participate in the newly created Republic's self-governance. He joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1920 and became a local organizer to increase party membership.⁴ In April he was promoted to justice inspector, a major step toward his goal of courthouse administrator. And in that year he and Pauline formally withdrew from the Lutheran Evangelical Church "because it and a great many of their ministers behaved un-Christianly" by siding with the military in continuing a lost war instead of surrendering and saving lives.⁵

Friedrich handed out SPD leaflets and addressed crowds at Schiller Square and in the marketplace at St. Martin's Cathedral. Extremists on both ends of the political spectrum harassed speakers like Friedrich and stoked anger about the Versailles Treaty's heavy reparations. The collapse of Germany's currency in early 1923 threatened the government's downfall, but the economy improved as 1924 approached. The nation's renewed optimism confounded the plans of an ambitious politician who tried to take over the Munich government by force. The would-be usurper's putsch failed, but his subsequent courtroom theatrics were closely followed in the press, and Adolf Hitler emerged after a year in prison with popularity, rich patrons, and a manuscript outlining a master Aryan race whose master nation would eject Jews and Slavs and confiscate the lands and resources of its neighbors.

In the summer of 1925 Friedrich's father gave him a recently published book that held a harsh prescription for forging a true German nationality through the ruthless extermination of its enemies – including Germans who would not conform.⁶ Georg encouraged his son to take a stand against its author. At his rallies after that, Friedrich would hold aloft *Mein Kampf* and cry out, "Gutenberg, your printing press has been violated by this evil book!"⁷ His scorn for Adolf Hitler raised the ire of the Nazi Party's paramilitary "stormtroopers," but Friedrich held his ground against them, having contended with worse in Belgium and France.

As Georg's and Wilhelmine's health began to decline, they spent more time with their grandson, Fritz, encouraging him to take his studies seriously. The child possessed a quick mind and excellent memory, but he put forth minimal effort, passing tests with what he recalled of classroom lessons. He considered homework an intrusion on his playtime and required

prompting and scolding to get it done. “There is something in the boy,” Georg said to Friedrich and Pauline, “that makes me think of my mother.”

In the autumn of 1925, a few months before her forty-second wedding anniversary, Wilhelmine died. As Friedrich mourned his mother, he watched carefully over his ailing father. They had long discussions about young Fritz’s future – and about the unsettled Republic’s also. Georg urged Friedrich to write his own book to challenge the absurdities in *Mein Kampf*. In November 1926 Georg died and was laid to rest beside his wife in the Mainz Hauptfriedhof. A large rough-hewn stone placed at the grave held a simple bronze plaque bearing a single word: “Kellner.”

At the end of that year the second volume of *Mein Kampf* was published with this conclusion: “In this age of racial poisoning, a state that dedicates itself to the care of its best racial elements must someday become lord of the earth.” Sensing the terrible implications in the book and how it would appeal to deeply ingrained German prejudices and militarism, the grieving justice inspector wondered how long he would have to campaign against its dangerous author. “I knew from the beginning Hitler and his politics meant war.”⁸

The Social Democrats kept the National Socialists to less than 3 percent of the vote in 1928, but the loss of jobs and savings during the 1929 global depression perfectly suited the Nazis. The belligerent but charismatic Nazi Party leader railed against capitalism and communism, blamed the Jews for every social ill, and vowed to restore Germany’s greatness, not merely the former empire, but a Greater Germany, which would begin with the annexation of Austria. By 1930 the Nazis had the second largest party in the nation, and fourteen-year-old Fritz, at an age when teenagers naturally rebelled against their parents, was among those caught up in the budding national fascination with Adolf Hitler, whose notion of Aryan supremacy elevated within the Darwinian hierarchy even the scrawniest of German boys and gave them leave to tread upon the “subhumans.” When Fritz came home from school whistling a popular song about SA stormtroopers marching through the land, and he wanted to join the Hitler Youth, it required all of Friedrich’s skills and a rebuke from the normally calm Pauline to persuade him from it. “The youth have been contaminated through and through by the spirit of Hitler,” Friedrich later would write sadly.⁹

Hitler’s visit to Mainz for a large rally had Pauline’s sisters and their husbands preaching about the need for “a strong man” to restore order. Her brother Franz admitted to voting for the National Socialists. “Victims of Nazi propaganda,” Friedrich described his in-laws.¹⁰ But nothing disturbed

him more than those in the courthouse, including attorneys and judges, who were seriously considering Hitler's views. Friedrich angered a chief inspector when he predicted Hitler would start another war. A colleague warned him to be careful because no one knew who was turning toward "Hitlerism" and such people could be dangerous.¹¹

The July 1932 elections gave the Nazis almost 40 percent of the vote and the largest party in the Reichstag. In January 1933, after six months of tense political intrigues, Adolf Hitler was chancellor. From that position he launched a dictatorship that would make his name a synonym for Monster. "Who carries the blame?" cried Friedrich, after having fought for so many years against this outcome. "The people without a brain! To trample democracy with one's feet and give power to a single man over almost eighty million people is so terrible that one can really tremble over the things that will come."¹²

The Errant Son

Under no illusions about what the Mainz Nazis would do to those who had opposed them, Friedrich moved with his family to the small castle town of Laubach, 40 miles north of Frankfurt, where no one was aware of his political activities. The high position available in the Laubach court offered some security against overbearing local Nazi officials. As the courthouse administrative manager, he had one of the two apartments in the building. The chief judge and his family lived on the upper floor.

The Kellners found little difference between the city and the country when it came to Hitler zealots. More than 60 percent of Laubach's votes had gone to the National Socialists, and they ruled the town council.¹³ The professional class kowtowed shamelessly to the new powers and pressured Friedrich and Pauline to join the Nazi Party. Joining was not mandatory, but in a town of only eighteen hundred their refusal was conspicuous and placed them under a cloud of suspicion. Friedrich did not help matters when he expressed disapproval of the Nazis' enactment of oppressive laws: the Enabling Act granting Hitler dictatorial powers, a civil service law restricting Jews, and a law to sterilize people with hereditary diseases.

Their son, unhappy about leaving his friends in Mainz, was unco-operative. When Fritz graduated from high school, he balked at finding a job. It was senseless to start a career, he said, when he soon would be drafted into national work service or the army. He spent his time tinkering with radios, earning money repairing them. To get him away from Nazi influence, his

parents arranged for a relative in New York to sponsor him there. A few months before he was to leave, Fritz went to London to take courses in radio repair and English at Polytechnic University. Back in Germany he worked part-time at the courthouse. When a small amount of money, 2 marks, disappeared from a countertop where it had been left as payment for a fine, the judge blamed Fritz. There was no proof, and Fritz denied taking the money; nevertheless, the judge threatened an investigation, not so much to punish the son as to humiliate the anti-Nazi father.

On August 14, 1935, Fritz departed Hamburg for New York on the steamship SS President Roosevelt. His name on the passenger list was Fred William Kellner. He was nineteen and ready for a new start. As the ocean liner steamed toward the North Sea, his distraught parents comforted each other. Friedrich thought of his father, who, despite the stigma of his birth, had created a respectable life through hard work. He prayed Georg's grandson would do the same.

It would be eleven years before they would see each other again, terrifying years when the dock upon which Friedrich and Pauline stood, and the shipyards around them, and all of Hamburg and much of Germany would be smashed beneath the weight of powerful bombs. Not even the perceptive justice inspector could imagine the broken world in which they and their son would reunite.

A few weeks after the SS President Roosevelt departed for New York, the masters of Germany announced new racial laws. Jews, no matter how far back they could trace their German ancestry, were arbitrarily stripped of their citizenship and rights.¹⁴ This, to Friedrich, was an unthinkable villainy. "If the Jews, who over the centuries contributed demonstrable achievements in the economic life for the total development of the nation, can be made a people without rights, then that is an act unworthy of a cultured nation."¹⁵

The government's official contempt for Jews encouraged the basest mistreatment of them among the general population, resulting in brutal harassment even in school classrooms. Such actions were made known to the world by the many foreign correspondents in Berlin reporting on the "new Germany." But condemnations were few and feeble. Bolstered by unwitting politicians, celebrities, and industrialists in the democracies that pandered to him, Hitler and his henchmen drew up their plans for mass mayhem.

Friedrich's compassion for Germany's Jews did not stem from friendships or work-related associations. Jews comprised less than 1 percent of the population, so it was not unusual he would have little intimate knowledge

of them. He simply felt no one should be attacked for being different, and he was angry such a simple truth could be obscured so easily by racial propaganda designed to stir up primordial tribal hatreds. His principles would be tested when a Jewish family named Heynemann approached Pauline in the spring of 1935 to seek Friedrich's help. The Heynemanns' son-in-law, Julius Abt, and their daughter, Lucie, were being harassed by the police and local Nazi office. When Friedrich learned a case had been fabricated against Julius to confiscate his property, he helped the harried man get safely from Laubach and passage to America. Lucie Abt was due to give birth in June, so she remained behind. The next year, when her child, John Peter, was nine months old, Friedrich and Pauline helped them get away. They tried to persuade her parents, Salli and Hulda Heynemann, to emigrate while it was still possible for Jews to do so, but the older couple remained behind, certain their neighbors would do them no harm.¹⁶

Sensing another European war was coming, the Kellners were thankful their son would not be in it. Fred's cheerful letters from New York confirmed their judgment in sending him there. He found a job in an import company, became engaged to a young German-American woman and married her in St. Mark's Lutheran Church. In wedding photographs, the young couple looked like motion picture stars: he in a tuxedo, and the bride in a white gown. A year later he sent a photo of himself and his baby daughter.

Only the child was true. He was not working; their daughter-in-law was neither German nor Lutheran; the marriage had been by a justice of the peace, and the wedding photos staged in a photography studio. But considering all that Friedrich and Pauline would have to contend with in the dreadful years ahead, it was a blessing they did not have to know of their son's real activities.

The Diarist

"Every mind is clouded and darkened," wrote Friedrich of his brainwashed countrymen: "Vernebelt, verdunkelt sind alle Hirne!"¹⁷ He felt the same about the minds of foreign leaders who continued to be duped by Joseph Goebbels's lies and cowed by Hitler's threats. He made short trips with Pauline into France – to Strasbourg in 1937 and Forbach in 1938 – to mail letters to Cordell Hull, Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of State, describing the oppressive methods in Germany. He urged Hull to end America's neutrality.¹⁸ On their return from Forbach, Friedrich began a series of essays about the "mood and images" of his surroundings. His first essay, written on

September 26, 1938, described his countrymen's nervousness about Hitler's claim on Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland; they were not ready for another war with England and France. But the leaders of those nations misread the situation and gave in to Hitler's menacing bluster. "An unbelievably pathetic nincompoop," was Friedrich's assessment of the British prime minister.¹⁹

Following the success of their belligerent foreign policy, the Nazis increased their internal malice. Persecution of Germany's Jewish citizens in the large cities had taken place for years, with SA brownshirts damaging Jewish businesses and harassing individuals on the streets. Late in the night of November 9, 1938, the stormtroopers launched a co-ordinated pogrom nationwide where even the smallest towns could participate in the frenzy and hatred that had become commonplace in Berlin and Munich. On this "Night of the broken glass" (Kristallnacht), the Laubach schoolteacher, Albert Haas, head of the local SA, led a mob past the courthouse toward the Heynemann house.²⁰ Friedrich demanded that the chief judge, Ludwig Schmitt, order the police to escort the Jewish families of Laubach and the surrounding villages to the courthouse. The judge refused.²¹ Pauline fared no better with the Nazi women's group leader, Frau Desch. Jews were beaten wherever they were found, and the contents of Jewish homes were tossed into the streets to be stolen or smashed. The Torah scrolls and books from the Laubach synagogue were burned in the marketplace. The next day the police took the battered Jewish men into custody – not to protect them but to intimidate them further.

Friedrich wanted to press charges against Haas and another riot leader, Wilhelm Rühl. Judge Schmitt said he needed sworn statements from corroborating witnesses – and no Jew would be allowed to submit an affidavit.²² That proved impossible. When Friedrich offered his own and Pauline's written testimonies, Schmitt angrily responded that Pauline was under investigation herself and would be sent to a concentration camp. "And the same for you," the judge added ominously.

Pauline's refusal to join the women's group, and her sympathetic attitude to Jews – and having sent her son to America – meant one thing to the Nazi mind: the courthouse administrator's wife had a Jew in her family. At the instigation of Frau Desch, Judge Schmitt ordered a secret investigation into Pauline's ancestry and submitted the matter to Regional Court President Hermann Colnot in Giessen. On the day of Kristallnacht, November 9, Colnot approved the investigation and forwarded his recommendations to his superior in Darmstadt, Chief Regional Court President Ludwig Scriba.

Furious at the action against his wife, Friedrich gathered Pauline's family documents to take to Darmstadt. On the cover page of a thick file of his own family papers, he wrote, "To prove the Aryan ancestry of Justice Inspector Kellner in Laubach." The birth and death certificates and baptism papers detailed Pauline and Friedrich's lineage back to the early seventeenth century and were enough to satisfy Court President Scriba. On November 18, Scriba sent a curt memorandum (signed on his behalf by Judge Dr. Meier) to President Colnot and Judge Schmitt that ended the matter. The subject of his memo was "Justice Inspector Kellner in Laubach – Concerning the report from the regional president in Giessen of November 9, 1938." The text had two sentences: "I ask that you return the attached documents to the subject of this report. Doubts about his wife's German bloodlines cannot be validated." When this document later came into Friedrich's possession, he used his fountain pen to insert two additional words in the margin above the text: "Doubts about his and his wife's German bloodlines cannot be validated."

After a full year of writing, Friedrich composed a final essay on August 30, 1939, and signed his name after this concluding paragraph: "As a preacher in the wilderness I felt compelled to write down the thoughts that dominated my mind in this nerve-racking time so that later – should it still be possible – I could convey a picture of the true reality to my descendants." He was emotionally exhausted, under surveillance for speaking out, and lucky not to be in a concentration camp. Their son was across the Atlantic, and they might never get to see their grandchildren. Moreover, Friedrich was fifty-four years old, his injured leg ached from sciatica, and he was developing an asthma condition.

But the "nerve-racking time" was just beginning. Two days after Friedrich signed off on his essays, the German army invaded Poland. Blitzkrieg! The terrible events of war required not sporadic essays but a disciplined kind of reporting. His father had urged him to respond to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. This would be his answer, a wartime diary he named *Mein Widerstand* (*My Opposition*). He wrote the first entry on September 1, 1939, the day the troops marched into Poland, and no matter how dangerous his self-imposed task would become, he continued until his nation's unconditional surrender in May 1945. Like a war reporter on the front lines, he maintained his position in the courthouse, directly engaging the town's Nazi functionaries to gain information for his journal.

For his essays before the war he used loose sheets of blank paper. For his diary he chose accounting notebooks with lined pages bound together with