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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can
be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbet-01.php

Children of Jehovah's Witnesses under Two Dictatorships*

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Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to relentless persecution both during the 12 years of National Socialism in Hitler's Third Reich and during the 40 years of communist rule in East Germany. In the Third Reich about 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses of German nationality were incarcerated, over 2500 of them were sent to concentration camps and at least 225 were executed for refusing military service or for undermining military strength. During the life of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) more than 6000 Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in penitentiaries and prisons. Over 60 died in prison or shortly after being released.

Much research has already been done in connection with the study of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses under the Nazi regime in Germany (see Garbe, 1999; Hesse, 2001), but the story is nevertheless still relatively unknown. More research is also needed on communist East Germany. Few publications deal with the mechanism employed by the system to eliminate and subvert this religious group (see Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a). Interestingly, studies reveal that at least 500 Witnesses suffered under both dictatorships; it has so far been clearly established that 325 of them were imprisoned (Slupina, 2003, pp. 247, 257).

Another interesting subject is the study of the fate of children and adolescents. This essay focuses on the fate of the young people among Jehovah's Witnesses during the Nazi era and under the GDR regime from historical and sociological viewpoints. Few studies of this kind have hitherto been published.¹ One reason may be the difficulty of finding relevant archive material. Hardly any documents can be found that contain general guidelines issued by the authorities. Other documents, such as court decisions, are in the possession of persons who were immediately affected. Much of the material in this essay therefore has its origin in eyewitnesses' private collections of papers (many of them now located in the Watchtower History Archive of Jehovah's Witnesses (*Geschichtsarchiv der Zeugen Jehovas*) in Germany (henceforth WTA)). Apart from court decisions, the East German authorities tried to prevent the keeping of written evidence of their proceedings. Acts of repression were usually performed without documentation, or else the real reasons behind any actions taken were not expressed in

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written form. The persons involved were not to be given any foundation for criticism or investigation. (This has meant that today official rehabilitation of victims is often not possible because of lack of written evidence: see Dirksen and Dirksen, 2002, p. 263n.). Only occasionally has it been possible to find evidence in the records of the Ministry of State Security (hereafter referred to in this essay as the Stasi).

Children of Jehovah's Witnesses were affected by these regimes in various ways. The imprisonment of a family member, for example, also had consequences for those relatives who were still free, especially for the children, who in addition to losing the family breadwinner or the care of a mother, often themselves became subjects of hatred and derision. Sometimes the Gestapo put pressure on the prisoners by asking them to sign a declaration renouncing their beliefs in the presence of family members. The 16-year-old Wolfgang Frost was forced to be present together with his mother when the Gestapo subjected his father, Erich Frost, to brutal interrogation in Berlin (FZ Frost). The children of Jehovah's Witnesses had to endure many forms of repression under the Hitler regime as well as during the 40-year existence of the GDR. It is interesting to find similarities but also great differences in the practices of the two regimes, which shared the common feature of aspiring to totalitarian ideological control of the individual and his or her opinions and conduct through socialisation and education. In this essay I shall examine a number of different experiences; but throughout I shall focus on the fate of one family in particular, the Dennert family, which experienced both dictatorships.

Under the Nazi System

Soon after the seizure of power by Adolf Hitler, Witness children were confronted with new National Socialist teaching methods. The National Socialist government aimed at the integration of each child into the so-called national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). On this basis, doctrines such as the superiority of the German race, militarism and the cult of the Führer were taught at school. The German historian Detlef Garbe summarises the procedure: 'Foremost importance was attributed to so-called "community spirit". The main focus was no longer directed toward the "person as an individual". Instead it was the integration of a student into the "national community" that determined the educational mandate' (Garbe, 1999, p. 187). Recurring rituals with a political background formed part of the daily school routine: the Hitler salute, the flag salute, commemorative ceremonies, parades, and membership of organisations such as the newly-formed *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth (HJ)) and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls (BDM)). Such duties brought Witness children into direct conflict with the ideology of the system. As a result of their parents' teachings or their own convictions, Witness children tried to maintain Christian neutrality, viewing these kinds of ritual as idolatry or blasphemy and usually refraining from participation in them. Serious disputes with the school staff were inevitable (King, 1990, p. 190).

In cases of such refusal by Witness children to participate, teachers often abused them verbally and physically. In addition, teachers incited fellow-pupils to acts of cruelty and violence against them. 'The children of Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to an unending barrage of insults and propaganda in school and became sporadic targets of physical violence by classmates and teachers' (Milton, 2001, p. 348). One mother reports:

About four weeks ago my eldest son of 12 years was badly abused by the teacher in school, because he refused to give the Hitler salute or to take part

in activities of the Hitler Youth... I explained to the director that the teacher, not satisfied with what he had done to my boy, then instructed two school comrades to continue the mistreatment, which they did by severely kicking him. (WTA Branch)

Since Witness children were not members of the National Socialist youth organisations they were officially marginalised and became targets of hatred as outsiders. Membership in Nazi organisations was regarded as a privilege by many children. According to Lisa Pine,

The Nazi Regime attempted to control German youth through the creation of the Hitlerjugend (HJ) and its female component, the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM). The National Socialist youth movement was exciting, giving young boys and girls a sense of camaraderie involvement in their national cause and independence from their parents. (Pine, 1999, p. 47)

Juveniles found it hard to understand why someone did not participate in youth organisations. They would try to convince dissenting schoolmates to join them and would despise those who did not. By the same token, resisting peer pressure demanded much courage in the dissenting schoolmate, and strong convictions to refuse the offer of what seemed to be exciting activities. According to a young Jehovah's Witness, Woldemar Halse, 'Nazi followers boxed my ears because I did not say "Heil Hitler" ... At school they tried to force me to enter the Hitler Youth, where children were taught military discipline and the National Socialist ideology.'²

The fate of the Dennert family illustrates the general situation. Kurt Biereke, born in 1928, was raised as a child of Jehovah's Witnesses. His father died in 1934, and his mother, Elsbeth, remarried in 1935. Her new husband, Willi Dennert, was a gardener and a follower of the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Bible Students. Elsbeth and Willi Dennert had three more children. Kurt remembers that 'on Sunday the family usually sat on the sofa reading the Bible together and afterwards discussed the text' (PC Biereke). At his place of work Willi Dennert did not join colleagues in singing the Horst Wessel Song (the Nazi Party's anthem), as a result of which he lost his job and had to accept labouring work at a brickyard. In the village the family was known for their religious views, and this had consequences for Kurt. Sometimes he was beaten by teachers just for being a Witness child (Interview Biereke). He writes: 'I was often beaten at school because I refused to do things that all the other children did' (PC Biereke). Thus we see how children had to face daily decisions on their own at school about how to act and whether to participate in certain activities or not. It was hard to attend school every day, knowing that there would be difficulties and repeated humiliations to be endured.³

Another Witness child, Simone Arnold, describes a similar situation. She attended a middle school in the Alsace region (today in France). One day she and three schoolmates were in the courtyard when a teacher passed, whom they were supposed to greet with 'Heil Hitler'.

Our four heads together, we were not aware that a teacher had gone by. When she reached the door, she turned around and called us into the hallway, lining us up in front of her. An icy chill ran down my spine, and I stiffened with fright. With an outstretched arm, she shouted, 'Heil Hitler!'

Only the German girl responded. ‘What is this?’ She saluted again. This time, three girls replied. The teacher swiftly reached out and grabbed my hair, pulled me in front of the other three girls, and saluted again. Once more the three girls replied. Fire flashed out from the teacher’s eyes, ‘Obviously you don’t want to salute. WHY?’ ‘I can’t!’ ‘And why not?’ ‘The Heil belongs to Jesus Christ. [Acts 4:12] The New Testament says “there is no other name under the heaven.”’ ‘You’ll hear from us!’ (Arnold Liebster, 2000, p. 180)

As a consequence of Simone’s disobedience, first the headmaster had a serious discussion with her, telling her that she would have to leave school if she continued to refuse to give the Hitler salute. Then a circular was read out to her class. It stated: ‘It has come to our attention that a student is refusing to comply with civic duties. This school is teaching young people to become responsible adult members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Every student must comply. No exceptions will be tolerated. This is an ultimate warning. “Heil Hitler!”’ Simone was forced to deliver this letter personally to all 24 classes of the school, which amounted to running the gauntlet. Finally, because of her refusal to compromise, she had to leave school. Later she was sent to a reform school (Arnold Liebster, 2000, pp. 182–92). As the case of Simone Arnold also shows, nonconformist behaviour often resulted in being expelled from school and being denied further college education (King, 1982, p. 155). The WTA has established the cases of at least 108 Witness children who were denied an apprenticeship or diploma. Only rarely could Witness children find a school that would accept them.

The nonconformist conduct of Witness children soon caught the attention of the central authorities. As early as 8 August 1934 the Gestapo⁴ inquired in a circular ‘whether members of the “International Bible Students” were involved in cases of subversive acts or of jeopardising young people with regard to moral and national policy’ (BA Koblenz Geheimes). One month later, in September 1934, the Prussian minister of science, art and national education (*Wissenschaft, Kunst und Volksbildung*) asked the minister-president of the province of Westphalia for reports concerning such occurrences.

I was repeatedly informed that children of school age whose parents are members of the ‘Jehovah’s Witness’ community refused to render the German greeting under the pretence of having a conscience fully committed to religion. . . . I want to point out that ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’ are to be viewed as members of the banned sect ‘International Bible Students Association’⁵ which have to be dealt with according to the guidelines of the referred decree. Refusal of the German greeting must be regarded as a violation of existing school rules. In case of such offences it is left to the discretion of the *Oberpräsident* (provincial president) and the *Regierungspräsident* (president of the government) in accordance with their duty to employ legal sanctions which go beyond normal school measures.

This letter of information was sent to all institutions under the office of the provincial president and requested that all cases be reported to him (WTA Minister). Further consequences are mentioned in an edict issued by the Reich’s minister for science, education and culture dated 27 March 1935 on the ‘selection of pupils for secondary

schools'. It states that 'Pupils who repeatedly harm the national community and the state by their conduct inside and outside school must be expelled from school' (Garbe, 1999, p. 192).

According to Christine King, 'In the same year [1935] the principle was established that children were taken from Witness parents to be brought up as National Socialists; in this way many Witness families were to be broken up' (King, 1982, p. 155). From 1936, with hundreds of adult male and female Witnesses entering the concentration camps and prison system, the authorities began to entrust 'protective custody' (*Schutzaufsicht*) over Witness children to the young people's welfare office (*Jugendamt*). This was supposed to check on the way parents were raising their children, by means for example of unannounced visits or house searches, which were justified with reference to paragraph 56 of the Reich's Young People's Welfare Law (*Reichs Jugendwohlfahrtsgesetz*). In cases of imminent endangerment of minors, the child welfare office could take over protective custody (Law, 1922).

Jehovah's Witness parents were deemed unfit to raise their children in accordance with the norms of the system. In a number of cases, non-Witness spouses were put under pressure to divorce their Witness partners (see Dirksen, H.-H., 2003b). Although Nazi officials generally attested that Witness children were well behaved, officials assumed that the youngsters would continue to be reared according to the values and beliefs of their parents. For example, the local court in Bretten ordered 'protective custody' for the two children (Eleonore, born in 1923, and Gerhard, born in 1928) of Else and Oskar Tretter, who were known to be Jehovah's Witnesses.

That the Tretter family leads a good family life has indeed been clearly established by the investigation. The home is tidy and the children are well behaved and well cared for. [...] But the couple... leave it up to their children to make up their own minds concerning political questions and whether to become members of any youth organization. They are allowed to make their own decisions in political and religious matters. This attitude does not meet the requirements for rearing children. German youths are obliged to become pillars of the National Socialist ideology in the future. Therefore, the upbringing of youth has to meet the requirements of this goal. ... It seems necessary to initiate measures to protect the children, so as to guarantee an upbringing in the spirit of National Socialism, and thus counteract the children's spiritual attitude that amounts to neglect.⁶

In cases where the parents did not agree with having their children in 'protective custody' and took legal steps to appeal against the decision, a further measure could be taken to withdraw custody entirely, on the basis of paragraph 1666 of the German Civil Code, on the grounds that the children had been exposed to spiritual and moral neglect (see Andermann, 2003). Court decisions are known from as early as spring 1936. For example:

On 17 February 1936 my children were unexpectedly taken from school and placed in an Evangelical children's home. ... A 15-year-old girl was taken from her mother because she refused to give the Hitler salute in school. She was taken to a convent and not until six weeks later was she allowed to contact her mother. The girl was forced to remain there until she was 21. (WTA Branch)

The local court in Deutsch Eylau decided on 17 October 1936 to withdraw parental custody from the children Irmgard and Günter Strenge. The parents appealed against the decision, but the regional court rejected the appeal on 24 November 1936 (PC Deutsch Eylau/Elbing).

One problem the courts repeatedly faced was that ‘In general, the family situations of the Bible Students corresponded with public expectations of an orderly way of life’ (Garbe, 1999, p. 198). In March 1937 the local court in Hamburg decided to withdraw from a mother the custody of her two children even though it was testified that she was morally impeccable and that she cared well for them (PC Hamburg).

On 13 November 1936 the Ministry for National Education in Saxony requested every education authority in the district to submit a detailed description of the passive resistance of Witness children (Zürcher, 1938, p. 156). The Hitler Youth Law (*Gesetz über die Hitlerjugend*) issued on 1 December 1936 supported efforts to reach conformity in the national community when it obliged minors to become members of the Hitler Youth (Law, 1936). Finally, in a circular dated 21 June 1937, the Gestapo in Berlin gave orders on how to proceed in cases of nonconformity by Witness children:

In order to prevent the dissemination of IBSA [International Bible Students Association] teachings among young people it has become necessary to remove the children of the Bible Students from the influence of their parents. For this purpose, I request that efforts should be made to persuade the appropriate lower courts, in accordance with the Civil Code, § 1666, to withdraw custody from those members of the IBSA who endanger the welfare of their children by prohibiting activities and by their adherence to the teachings of the IBSA.⁷

However, not in all such cases did the courts withdraw parental custody: sometimes they decided on ‘protective custody’ only.

On 27 December 1938 the Reich’s minister for internal affairs issued a decree (also affecting non-Witness families) that demanded generally the removal of children from ‘politically unreliable families’ (Unterbringung, 1939). In a letter of 17 April 1939 to all state police offices the Gestapo quoted the decree and wrote that ‘IBSA members can be identified as “politically unreliable families”’ (B StA Geheimes). The Gestapo circular instructed the police to inform young people’s offices of such families and in close cooperation with those offices to start proceedings for the removal of parental custody. Thus the police were empowered to collaborate in this task (LA N-W Geheime).

The issuing of a considerable number of orders over the years probably indicates that the coordination of cooperation between the various authorities and the police was difficult and that they did not always work in conformity.

Many withdrawals of custody are documented. Research carried out by the WTA has clearly established that more than 605 Witness children, primarily from Germany, but also from Austria, France and Poland, were forcibly removed from the custody of their parents.⁸ Many of them were given to foster parents (Nazi homes) or correctional institutions like reform schools and orphanages.⁹ At times the Gestapo, the police or young people’s welfare officials came to pick up the children at school without giving any advance warning. In many cases, parents were not informed of the whereabouts of their children, and children were seldom permitted to exchange correspondence with their parents (Law, 1922).

Nazi officials often separated siblings from one another with little or no contact permitted. This was the case with the Dennert family. On 12 September 1939 the Gestapo arrested the father, Willi Dennert. He was taken to the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen and later to the camp at Neuengamme (prisoner no. 267). He was not released until May 1945.¹⁰ Shortly after the arrest of the father, a Gestapo officer and an officer of the National Socialist People's Welfare (*NS-Volkswohlfahrt*) took the children away from their mother, Elsbeth Dennert. Gitta, born in 1938, and at the time about 15 months old, writes:

My mother told me that my sister . . . had her first nervous breakdown at the age of three, when she and I were taken away from our parents in 1939. She ran up and down the village street shouting 'I want to stay with my mum!' I was just one year old, and they literally tore me from my mother's arms. . . . Nobody knew where they would take us. My elder brother was picked up at school. They took all of us to the village of Kleinmachnow near Berlin. . . . My mother, Elsbeth, remained at home . . . and as it turned out later, she was pregnant with our youngest brother. (PC Jungmichel)

Despite these circumstances the children were fortunate. Their foster parents were kind people. Kurt remembers:

I had to live with two [older] single sisters. Their fiancés had died in the war. Each wore a Nazi badge in silver and gold. They were never able to get me to call them 'auntie'. They treated me well, though. Nevertheless, I could not completely avoid all involvement in activities . . . of the Hitler Youth. . . . All in all, my involvement was very limited. . . . I was completely on my own when facing decisions. For example, I often set out too early for the building of the Hitler Youth (45 minutes on foot). And since nobody was there when I arrived, I quickly left to return home. If I had been sent back again, everybody would have left by then.

Later, he was assigned to a parade of trumpeters. And again, it was Kurt's cleverness that saved him from further involvement:

I . . . was given a big drum. Shortly thereafter, on 1 May, thousands were gathered with a parade of trumpeters in the lead, and I was forced to participate. And beat the big drum I did! But in doing so, however, I allowed a slight delay before each beat. Today I can imagine how terrible that must have sounded. Someone like me was of no use to them. So they let me go right away.

Kurt missed his parents so much that in the summer of 1943, in sheer desperation, he went to the police headquarters in Berlin and asked 'to be taken where [. . . his] father is' (PC Bierecke).

The example of Kurt and his siblings highlights the situations of potential conflict that Witness children faced when separated from their parents. His experience also shows that, in general, the children did not seek confrontation; on the contrary, they tried to avoid conflicts.

The majority of the children did not live with caring foster parents. Many foster parents, along with the correctional institutions, forced the children to do hard labour.

Simone Arnold relates about her stay at the reform school at Wessenberg, near Konstanz:

I had hardly finished with the months of woodcutting before Fräulein Messinger found a new job for me. I would be head of a new team of four girls, all of us having reached age 14. ... We had to uproot all the stumps and make a field out of the former forest. This meant pulling up the big roots, chopping them off, then prying out the stump with an iron bar. The wintry cold froze our fingers. (Arnold Liebster, 2000, p. 320)

Let us summarise the experiences of Jehovah's Witness children under Nazi rule. Because of their nonconformity, they were frequently marginalised by teachers and students and were deprived of adequate education, and this had a lasting impact on their future job opportunities. Measures taken by the state culminated in withdrawing parental custody. Hundreds were forcibly removed from the care of their parents and were taken to correctional institutions or to foster parents, where the daily routine often included heavy labour, harsh living conditions and abusive treatment. Many of them were scarred for life, both emotionally and physically.

In the German Democratic Republic

Let us resume the story of the Dennert family. After the Second World War father Dennert was released, and the family slowly came together again. Mother Elsbeth Dennert and her little son, Gerd, had been evicted from their home near Stettin (today in Poland) and had settled in Woldegk/Mecklenburg. Finally, in January 1946 the two girls, Christel and Gitta, were located at their foster parents' and were brought home. A short period of family happiness followed. Gitta writes:

After the war we were reunited and enjoyed our family life for about five years. My parents used this time to teach us about God's ways. ... They played, learned, sang, and worked with us. ... We had some beautiful childhood years up until 30 August 1950. On that day, at 5 o'clock in the morning, the police came – this time the East German Police – and again our father was taken away from us. (PC Jungmichel)

On 14 October 1950 Willi Dennert was sentenced by the regional court in Neubrandenburg to eight years in a penitentiary because of his religious convictions. He was charged with being a spy for America, with warmongering, and with possessing propaganda to incite a boycott (so-called boycott propaganda (*Boykotthetze*)). The accused Witnesses were not allowed a defence counsel (PC Schwerin). Even worse, the children were also to lose their mother. Gitta remembers:

Whenever mother went preaching she said to us children: 'If at any time I don't come home, you must go to the police and ask about me.' One day in autumn ... she did not come home. The three of us [...] my sister], Gerd, and myself, went to the police station, and in front of the building we shouted: 'We want our mother back.' They could not calm us down and we refused to go into the station until they promised that our mother would come home with us.

On 16 August 1954 Elsbeth Dennert was arrested again. This time the district court in Neubrandenburg sentenced her (on 23 November 1954) to eight years in a penitentiary (PC Neubrandenburg). Since Kurt had married and lived in West Berlin, the remaining children were left to themselves again. The eldest girl went back to the foster parents she had lived with during the Nazi period. Gerd was taken to a reform school and Gitta remained on her own (PC Jungmichel).

Although Jehovah's Witnesses were officially recognised in East Germany (WTA Stadtverwaltung; WTA Sovetskaya), the authorities began to be more and more suspicious of their neutrality, their preaching work, and the obvious rapid increase in their membership.¹¹ According to a report to the state president of autumn 1948

The sect of Jehovah's Witnesses organised events in Calbe with 200 participants, in Bitterfeld with 500, in Eisenach with 300, in Brandenburg with 900 and in Wittenberg with 1000 in attendance. According to the report many young people, particularly girls, took part. The danger emanating from this sect is discernable in its refusal of political or trade union activity,... rejecting the petition for a referendum (*Volksbegehren*).¹² (BA Bartel)

Disruption of religious services, interrogations and surveillance followed. In autumn 1949 the Politburo of the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Socialist Unity Party)) passed measures against Witness activities. Point 8 of the agenda envisaged measures directed against young people.

The Secretariat of Young People's Affairs is instructed to work out precise measures together with the Central Council of the FDJ [*Freie Deutsche Jugend*], implementing these guidelines in areas where the influence of the Bible Students on young people is especially strong. The FDJ is to take special care arranging quality cultural meetings in the field. (BA SED)

However, open threats by the authorities could not stop the Witnesses, and in view of the fact that elections in the newly-founded GDR were planned for October 1950, the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned on 31 August that year. Many of them were arrested and sentenced to long-term imprisonment (Dirksen, H.-H., 2003a, pp. 273ff.). A press campaign was also initiated. Witnesses were called for example 'apostles of the atom bomb', 'enemies of peace', 'agents of an imperialistic power', 'wrongdoers against the people', and 'spies for America' (Dirksen, A., 2003). All this was not without impact on children at school.¹³

Although many Witnesses were imprisoned, it proved impossible to stop their missionary work. In the course of time the Stasi¹⁴ realised that other means would be needed in order to liquidate the organisation and its activities. One of the new methods was to aim to subvert Jehovah's Witnesses psychologically. An atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty was to be produced by special operations so as to paralyse believers. They were to be persuaded that their every action was being observed by the Stasi and that fellow-believers were cooperating with the Stasi.¹⁵ Another strategy was to infiltrate the organisation with informants – so-called Unofficial Collaborators (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IM)) – in order to obtain information about all planned Witness activities. Families were also the targets of surveillance of this kind. The Stasi acquired information about every family member: how they were

regarded at their workplace and in the neighbourhood, what connections the family had, how the marriage partnership functioned ('unbalanced, strong'), what was in their bank accounts. The Stasi was also interested in the behaviour of the children at school: whether they were actively involved in service to the community, whether the parents cooperated with the parents' committee at school and so on (BStU Ministry). Living under conditions like these was a challenge for every family member. Rainer Hanisch reports about his experience with a Stasi observer on the day of the Memorial (the annual occasion on which Jehovah's Witnesses commemorate the death of Jesus Christ):¹⁶

I had not yet reached school age, and on that particular day I was playing in front of the house. A 'friendly' man approached me and asked if I knew who had entered the house and who was expected to come. After I had given him the names of some fellow occupants of the house, he got impatient and asked if we were expecting guests. My mother was watching us from the balcony, and she asked the man what he wanted. He quickly disappeared. . . . Stasi informers lived downstairs in our house. Sometimes they told us quite openly that they had to report about our family. . . . So we grew up with the feeling of being watched all the time. (PC Hanisch)

Sometimes even searches were carried out: some Witnesses report about searches at schools in an effort to find forbidden Biblical literature (PC U. H.). Witness children also refused to participate in political activities, of which a whole range took place at school (Handbuch, 1984, p. 1467). Their beliefs thus put Jehovah's Witnesses on a collision course with atheist ideology in everyday life, including at school. Generally, the system tried to influence children as much as possible through the schools and youth organisations, which were already under state control, and also through the parental home.

Although membership of any mass organisation was on a voluntary basis, even first-year primary school children (six or seven years old) were expected to become members of the Young Pioneers (*Junge Pioniere*), and later to join the *Thälmannpioniere*¹⁷ and finally the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend* (FDJ)). The political background of these organisations meant that Witness children could not join them; but membership in a mass organisation was expected as the minimum level of involvement in social activity in the GDR, and the state's goal was membership of 100 per cent. Schools particularly were expected to prepare children accordingly. Ritualised ceremonies such as parades and salutes were introduced as mandatory duties. Teachers would exhort their classes '*Für Frieden und Sozialismus seid bereit!*' ('Be ready for peace and socialism!'), and the children had to answer '*Immer bereit!*' ('Always ready!'). Refusal to participate in this ritual greeting led to marginalisation. During flag salutes Witness children were often compelled to step out in front of all their schoolmates, or conversely were punished by being put in the back row together with the troublemakers.

The children of the Dennert family experienced treatment of this kind. Gitta writes that 'During my time at school under the communists we were harassed because we didn't join the "Young Pioneers" organisation.' Some of the teachers repeatedly tried to convince her mother that she must persuade her children to participate in political work at school and to accept the teachings of evolution. However, the Dennert children continued to be nonconformist and as a result were

looked down upon by the teachers and some fellow-pupils. In the school playground they often remained alone although they would have liked to associate with other pupils (Interview Jungmichel).

Another child of Jehovah's Witnesses, Gert Wozni from Halle, recalls:

Because I did not belong to the pioneers and did not participate in political activities, in parades, or in organised groups of people waving during visits by government representatives, I was the only pupil to be given additional homework, or forced to attend extra classes. Since I disregarded the command 'Attention!' (*Stillgestanden!*) at the time of the flag salute, and did not raise my hand, . . . I was treated with disgrace. (PC Wozni)

This kind of treatment – being given extra work, being relegated to the last row during flag salute and so on – may not seem very severe; but its aim was to humiliate particular children in front of their classmates, and children set great store by the approval of their peers and teachers. Measures like these forced children subtly and systematically to the fringes of society.

A further consideration is that membership in a mass organisation was a requirement for obtaining a school diploma. In 1951 the board of directors of the secondary school in Altenberg (Saxony) informed the parents of Gisela Haupt:

It is certainly true... that your daughter Gisela... has never been reprimanded during her four years of attendance. Nonetheless, the entry requirements for A-level examinations demand not only qualifications in subject and character, but in addition one has to prove... one's willingness to collaborate with the [socialist] society. . . Your daughter has not fulfilled these requirements, and the board of examiners has thus rejected her admittance to the A-level examinations. You know quite well... that your daughter did... not join the FDJ, apparently because of her membership of the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses. Thus, she took a clear stand against our school FDJ group, which is supported by every boy and girl in our school except your daughter and one other pupil. The government of the State of Saxony, Ministry for Education of the Peoples, has therefore refused admittance. (Dirksen and Wrobel, 2000, pp. 231, 251, 263)

After the Dennert parents were imprisoned, Gitta was not allowed to commence her training as an office clerk which had already been arranged. Gerd, who missed his parents and siblings in particular, wrote that he was denied a suitable apprenticeship because of the imprisonment of his parents. When he applied for a job in the motorbike factory in Zschopau he was asked where his parents were. His application was again refused. Later he succeeded in finding an apprenticeship at a machine and tractor centre. He was cared for by a worker of the Circuit Council (*Rat des Kreises*) of the youth department (PC Dennert).

Throughout the existence of the GDR the exertion of such pressure was commonplace. Stasi reports from the terminal years of the GDR document the denunciation of pupils who did not join mass organisations and who refused to participate in political activities. The headmaster of the Dr-Theodor-Neubauer school in Sömmerda wrote to the education department of Sömmerda Circuit Council in 1984 about recent occurrences at the school, including nonconformist behaviour by

Witness children. He reported 'intensive politically motivated discussions' with every pupil, and also mentioned disputes with the mother of the Witness children:

Her children are not Pioneers and do not take part in the *Jugendweihe* [a ceremony in which 14-year-olds were given adult social status]. She has a daughter in class 7a and a son in the third year. The district committee of the SED and the district office of the Stasi have been informed. (PC Director)¹⁸

This demonstrates clearly that not even children could escape the watchful eyes of the Stasi (BStU Potsdam).

Schools were to play a leading role in the process of raising children to become 'socialist personalities', as required by the law of 1965 on the unified socialist educational system (Schroeder, 1998, pp. 556ff.). Character traits such as helpfulness, kindness, politeness and diligence were emphasised – qualities which Witness parents tried to instil in their children. In this regard the children met the requirements of teachers, who also repeatedly testified to this fact. However, this could not make up for the children's lack of political involvement (Homan, 1998, p. 154).

Conditions for Witness children deteriorated once pre-military training was introduced into the school curriculum. From the first year at secondary school children were introduced to military concepts through games, meetings with army personnel, drawing military equipment and memorising short military or political poems. From 1971 almost every school subject included more and more military aspects. Finally, in September 1978 military instruction became a compulsory subject in its own right for classes 9 and 10. As a result, from 1979 many Witness children were unable to gain a secondary school qualification, which was necessary for any further training or education; specially-chosen pupils only were accepted to study at the gymnasium (Gesetzblatt, 1982, pp. 93ff.). The experience of U. H. and his six children illustrates the situation. The father was brought up as a Jehovah's Witness, and his children attended the same school as he had done. The teaching staff rose to what they saw as a challenge to try to re-educate the children and to instil in them socialist ideas. U. H. recalls:

Since we neither agreed with the official teachings of the socialist system, nor even pretended to do so as many others did, we were told that, for us, executive or managerial positions were out of reach. This meant remaining at the lowest level of the employment hierarchy all our working life. This has proved to be true in my own case – my whole working life has been restricted to doing menial jobs in a garage. (PC U. H.)

Although vocational training was required by law (Constitution of the GDR, Article 25, Section 4), Witness children were generally denied the completion of an apprenticeship. Contracts for an apprenticeship included an unconstitutional additional clause concerning military training, with which Jehovah's Witnesses refused to comply. A circular issued by the Department of Vocational Training and Information of the District Council of Karl-Marx-Stadt dated 30 March 1971, entitled *Information über den Abschluss von Lehrverträgen (Information on Contracts of Apprenticeship)*, states:

A new contract form for apprenticeship was introduced for socialist vocational training. ... This indenture defines the rights and duties of the

apprentice. It rules that he has to acquire knowledge and skills in order to defend the socialist fatherland by participating in pre-military training and by partaking of civil defence activities. . . . Certain citizens though – Bible Students [Jehovah's Witnesses] – still refuse to sign [the contract including this rule]. After inquiring with the secretary of state for vocational training, it has been established that . . . negotiations with these citizens shall be carried on until shortly before the start of vocational training. In case of refusal, these youths cannot start an apprenticeship but will be assigned a job. (S StA Chemnitz Rat; BStU Christliche)

Signed such a contract would have obliged young Jehovah's Witnesses to take part in military training against their convictions. Efforts to invalidate or to circumvent the clause were generally unsuccessful. Consequently the completion of an apprenticeship was impossible for almost all young Witnesses, and the pursuit of a career even more so. As the above document clearly indicates, this was indeed the decreed intention of the regime. These young people were forced to do menial jobs as unskilled workers. Some were able to work around the system by attending evening classes and in this way to obtain certain qualifications. No exceptions were made, however, even for very gifted students. One young man with an exceptional grasp of mathematics was not permitted to study because of his 'refusal to perform all duties of a socialist university' (PC Thüringer/Gera). In May 1970 the Ministry of People's Education wrote to his parents about his expulsion from the comprehensive school:

All efforts undertaken by the school, the parents' council, the sponsor brigade (*Patenbrigade*) and the Free German Youth . . . so as to render this pupil worthy of attending the comprehensive school, with an appropriate political-social attitude toward our state, were in vain [. . . the] political and moral maturity [necessary] for continued attendance at the comprehensive school and to commence university studies could not be certified. (PC Letter)

Prior to his expulsion, pupils at the school were to prepare a questionnaire:

On 1 September, the day of world peace, we protested against the war in Vietnam and against the incarceration of Emil Bechtle.¹⁹ There are still pupils among us who do not share our opinion. [Here they named the pupil.] He refused to 1. sign the resolution for freedom of Emil Bechtle, 2. make a statement against the war in Vietnam, 3. become a member of the FDJ, 4. take part in the pre-military service. We ask every pioneer and member of the FDJ to make a statement regarding such behaviour. . . . What attitude do you take in this regard? (PC G. S.)

This example well illustrates the different kinds of pressure that were applied, the cooperation among different institutions, and the consequences of nonconformity for pupils.

In conclusion it can be said that almost all Jehovah's Witnesses living in the GDR had to endure persecution or repression. The government refused to grant them the constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of religion and tried to force every citizen to become involved in socialist activities. The neutrality of Jehovah's Witnesses was not approved of by the GDR system. Despite repression, however, young Witnesses

showed remarkable civil courage when taking a stand for their faith, especially so since it was their personal decision to do so. Generally, they were diligent workers and well-behaved citizens, thanks to the upbringing by their parents, and they were popular with their fellow-pupils and fellow-workers. However, the authorities expected more than these virtues. The measures taken against them ranged from planned discrimination to the refusal of vocational or academic education, and young Witnesses were thus manoeuvred to the margins of society. The government perceived the nonconformity of the Witnesses – although constitutionally guaranteed – as a direct attack on its omnipotent sovereignty, as an offence against the ‘socialist state religion’.

What became of the Dennert family? When the parents were arrested the authorities took over the parental home and confiscated all the furniture. The children were thus left with nothing. Gitta writes that after she was refused an apprenticeship as a dressmaker she had to work as an unskilled worker in a tailor’s shop. She earned just 18 German Marks per month, plus board and lodging. Finally, in April 1957 she was able to collect her father at a police station. Since the father was under constant surveillance by the Stasi, they emigrated to West Germany. About two years later the mother was allowed to follow (PC Jungmichel). Gerd also wanted to leave the country, but about six months prior to his mother’s release he was forced to surrender his identification card to the authorities. Once a month he was asked to register with the police. In the summer of 1961 he unexpectedly got his papers back. He took advantage of the opportunity and fled the country. Gerd was finally reunited with his family just two weeks before the Berlin Wall was built (PC Dennert).

Notes

- 1 For the Nazi era, see Beaurean, 2004. Brigitte Hack is working on a dissertation at the University of Mainz entitled *Bibelforscher-Kinder: Jehovahs Zeugen in der NS-Zeit im Spiegel erzählter Kindheits- und Jugenderinnerungen*. For the GDR, see Dirksen and Dirksen, 2002.
- 2 See PC Halse. His parents were imprisoned for their beliefs both under the Nazi regime and under the GDR government. Woldemar Halse had to live with foster parents who were Nazis. He was interrogated and kept under surveillance. On 6 January 1954 the East German regional court of Dresden sentenced him and his parents (Woldemar to 10 years’ imprisonment) for possessing propaganda which was said to be likely to incite a boycott and to be peace-threatening and fascist in nature (BStU Bezirksgericht).
- 3 See for example the experiences of Elizabeth Dopazo in Resource, 1994, pp. 232–35.
- 4 The Gestapo offices were directed from the Gestapo (*Geheimes Staatspolizeiamt*), the Central Gestapo Office in Berlin.
- 5 In 1931 the ‘Bible Students’ worldwide adopted the name ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’. Nevertheless, they were usually registered with the German authorities as the ‘International Bible Students Association’ (*Internationale Bibelforscher Vereinigung*).
- 6 Decision of the local court in Bretten, ref. XI 88/38, dated 27 August 1938. The documents are from the private collection of Eleonore Börner. The ten-year-old son was placed for three years in a home for problem children. The daughter was able to live with a relative. In another case, the decision of the local court in Brieg dated 4 April 1938 says of the children of Jehovah’s Witnesses: ‘The children ... are well-behaved and, according to their teacher, are talented and achieve above average results [at school....] Both children do not belong to any National Socialist youth organisation. They refuse to give the German salute and cannot be persuaded to join in singing nationalist songs. The behaviour of the children clearly reflects the subversive attitude of their parents.’

- 7 StA Augustusburg. On 2 July 1937 the Gestapo in Munich informed the police headquarters in Munich, the police authority in Hof, the local administrative office (*Bezirksamt*), the local administrative office branch (*Bezirksamtsaußenstelle*) in Reichenhall, urban detective superintendents, and various other authorities about the prescribed policy by quoting the circular (StA Amberg Geheime).
- 8 In this way the Gestapo also gained valuable pawns which could be used to put pressure on their 'stubborn' imprisoned parents. If the children could be coerced into renouncing their faith, the Gestapo made haste to deliver the demoralising news to the parents. If the children continued in their same stubborn course, their imprisoned parents sometimes suffered extra punishment as a result.
- 9 Some were also taken into juvenile camps, for example the 17-year-old Erich Meyer, who refused the medical examination for military service and was taken into protective custody and then sent to the juvenile camp in Moringen. Later he was sentenced to death and executed because of his refusal to do military service (LA N-W Gestapo 1; LA N-W Gestapo 2; Guse, 2001, p. 106).
- 10 See PC Wauer. He reports: 'During our incarceration we had to endure much hardship and maltreatment, we suffered from hunger and cold, doing the heaviest work over a long period of time. I remember that Herr Dennert also had to hang on the infamous stake.' (This was one of the severest forms of punishment one could suffer in concentration camp. Standing on a plank, the prisoner had his hands tied behind his back and onto a stake. The plank was then taken away, so that the prisoner fell forwards. Sometimes the guards made the prisoner swing, which made the punishment more painful (AD)) (PC Neustrelitz). Unfortunately the court record has so far not been found. The documents are perhaps in an archive in Poland, or else they may have been destroyed.
- 11 'Whenever the women of Freiberg call for a demonstration of peace there are only 150 to 200 persons present. However, when "Jehovah's Witnesses" invite people to attend one of their assemblies one realises with amazement that 90 per cent of the 800 in the audience are women. These 800 persons listened patiently for two hours' (S HStA Landesregierung). 'They do not participate in the democratic reconstruction and refuse any political cooperation. During the petition for a referendum they not only refused to sign, but actively opposed the referendum. In their house-to-house propaganda and agitation they untiringly visited every household and family' (S HStA Anon.). 'On the basis of reports we have received, we feel sure that the meetings themselves do not contain antidemocratic propaganda. It is nevertheless clear that this sect's negative view of all public issues means that those being persuaded... are not simply elderly women... and will be lost for our tasks' (BStU K5).
- 12 In this case the referendum was for the unification of Germany.
- 13 See PC Jahn. In 1950 his teachers at his primary school near Chemnitz tried to persuade him of the criminal background of his beliefs, particularly by using an article entitled 'Apostel der Atombombe'. As part of the subject Social Studies, pupils were informed about warmongers, spies for America and their accomplices, and some of his peers heaped scorn, contempt and ridicule upon him. The teachers also urged him to influence his parents to vote and to sign the Stockholm petition against atom bombs.
- 14 For a major study of the Stasi see Dennis, 2003.
- 15 An operation of this type was 'Aktion Zerfall': see BStU Zerfall.
- 16 The Stasi knew the date on which this ceremony was to take place, but in order to break up the meeting they needed to find out where the Witnesses planned the gathering and who would be attending it. In the last few years of the GDR the Stasi had 'preventive discussions' with Witnesses who were responsible for organising the ceremony in order to try to persuade them to cooperate with the Stasi (BStU Discussions).
- 17 Ernst Thälmann was a communist leader who was killed by the Nazis and became a hero of the German communists.
- 18 See PC Leiter. In this case in 1985 the Stasi asked for information about the mother's general activities, so as to provide 'disciplining measures' and 'ways to make her feel insecure'.

- 19 Emil Bechtle became a member of the Communist Party in 1924. Under the Nazis he was imprisoned for four months in Berlin. After the war he lived in West Germany and became politically involved in operations against remilitarisation. In 1954 he was sentenced to eight months in prison. He did not serve the penalty at that time, but was arrested again in 1965.

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