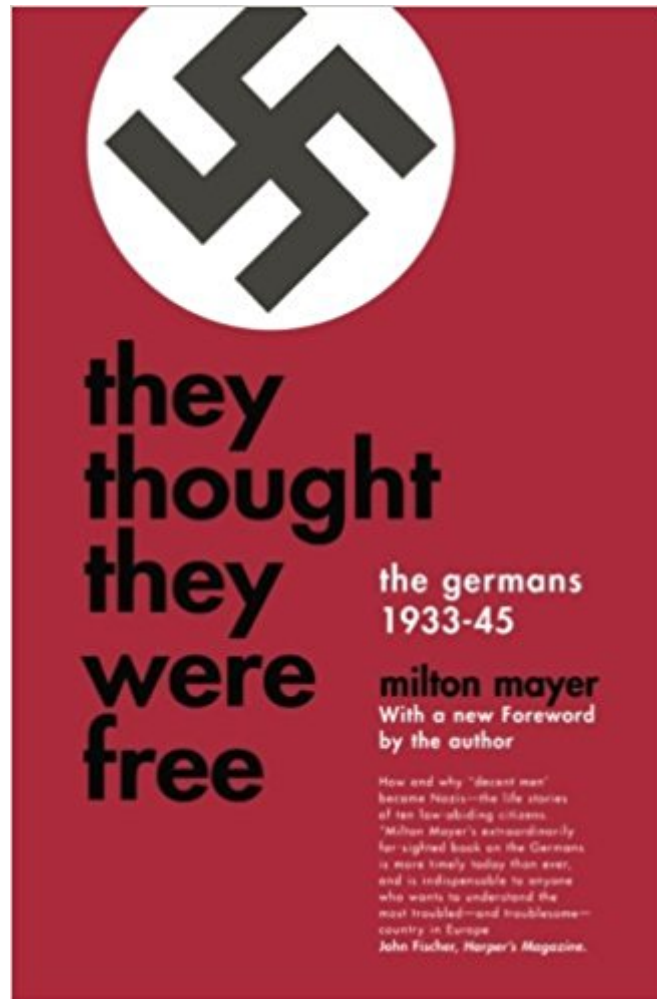


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They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45



Synopsis

First published in 1955, *They Thought They Were Free* is an eloquent and provocative examination of the development of fascism in Germany. Mayer's book is a study of ten Germans and their lives from 1933-45, based on interviews he conducted after the war when he lived in Germany. Mayer had a position as a research professor at the University of Frankfurt and lived in a nearby small Hessian town which he disguised with the name "Kronenberg." These ten men were not men of distinction, Mayer noted, but they had been members of the Nazi Party; Mayer wanted to discover what had made them Nazis. "What happened here was the gradual habituation of the people, little by little, to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information which the people could not understand, or so dangerous that, even if the people could not understand it, it could not be released because of national security. And their sense of identification with Hitler, their trust in him, made it easier to widen this gap and reassured those who would otherwise have worried about it."--from Chapter 13, "But Then It Was Too Late"

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Customer Reviews

It is wonderful to see so many thoughtful and incisive reviews of my father's book. A few details that might interest you: 1) None of the "unimportant Nazis" he interviewed knew he was a Jew, which he was. 2) The book wasn't published in German for years after its original publication (we spent 1951 in the small town which Milton Mayer calls "Kronenberg," where he wrote the book, which was

published shortly afterwards). 3) His German was awful! And, he said, this was a great aid in the interviews he conducted: having to repeat, in simpler words, or more slowly, what they had to say, made the Germans he was interviewing feel relaxed, equal to, superior to the interviewer, and this made them speak more freely. "Sehen Sie, Herr Professor Mayer, SO war die Sache," very patiently. ("You see, THIS is how it was..."). He made one small, but dreadful mistake: There is a very common name in German, to which Milton Mayer added a suffix--because, with the suffix, it was the name of a great family friend (in fact, my boyfriend four years later) and used it fictitiously for one of the interviewees.. However: with the suffix, it's a very RARE German name, and, having given the general location and size of the town together with the rare German name, he really identified the interviewee as-our family friend-- who was quite upset. (He never told my father this, though.) My father was always a superlative interviewer; he said as little as possible, aside from encouraging the interviewee to go on talking. If someone seemed to be avoiding a subject he was really interested in, he would repeat the name of the subject the interviewee had abandoned, and look terribly keen and respectful.

Mayer, a Jew on Sabbatical in post-WW-II Kronenberg, sets his goal as that of better understanding the life-story of the ordinary German under National Socialism. As he tells the story, Nazism was not just a political system or just an ideology it was a worldview peculiarly suited for and congruent with the German Post WW-I temperament and mentality. In the aftermath of the much-hated Versailles Treaty, Nazism arrived on the scene just in time to not just conquer the minds of both little and big Germans but to overwhelm them. Mayer's phrase has described it nicely: German enthusiasm for Nazism was clearly a case of "little men-gone wild." The true value of this book and hence Mayer's most valuable contribution has been to draw a graphic conceptual picture of how the system of Nazism worked as seen at ground level by ten ordinary Germans and from the interior of German society: To a man, they all agreed that it brought them untold economic success, bound them patriotically and politically into a coherent cultural unit, restored the nation's pride and gave all Germans renewed reasons for hope in the future. Given this rosy and very much interior and insulated backdrop, it is no wonder there was no basis for ordinary Germans to see (or even to be able to perceive) Nazi excesses, or to see Nazism itself, as an inherently evil system until it was too late. This was true in part because all Germans already had community permission to hate Jews. The excesses, reserved mostly for Jews, thus seemed normal and in any case were always introduced in carefully orchestrated, slowly escalating, but easily digestible bites. This was done specifically to stay below the radar of the everyday German conscience -- so as to never assault

German sensibilities too abruptly.

In 1935, a Jewish reporter from Chicago went to Germany in the hopes of interviewing Adolph Hitler. That didn't happen, so he traveled around the country. What he saw surprised him: Nazism wasn't "the tyranny of a diabolical few over helpless millions" --- it was a mass movement. In 1951, the Jewish reporter from Chicago returned to Germany. This time Milton Mayer had a different goal: to interview ten Nazis so thoroughly he felt he really knew them. Only then, he believed, might he understand how it came to be that the Germans exterminated millions of their fellow citizens. He found ten Germans. And interviewed them at such length they became his friends. Reading his daughter's memories of her father, I can understand how that happened, "His German was awful!" wrote Julie Mayer Vogner. "And, he said, this was a great aid in the interviews he conducted: having to repeat, in simpler words, or more slowly, what they had to say made the Germans he was interviewing feel relaxed, equal to, superior to the interviewer, and this made them speak more freely." In 1955, Mayer published this book. It was disturbing then. It still is. For one thing, Mayer had only the warmest feelings for the men he interviewed: I liked them. I couldn't help it. Again and again, as I sat or walked with one or another of my ten [Nazi] friends, I was overcome by the same sensation that had got in the way of my newspaper reporting in Chicago years before [in the 1930s]. I liked Al Capone. I liked the way he treated his mother. He treated her better than I treated mine.

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