

Changes at School

Ellen Switzer, a student in Nazi Germany, later recalled how a classmate named Ruth responded to attempts at isolating the Jews.

Her most appealing qualities were her total sincerity and her willingness to share whatever she had with a classmate in need. If the school was cold . . . Ruth would always lend you her sweater; she insisted that the cold air made her feel more alive. If you forgot your lunch, Ruth shared hers; she was not very hungry that day. Out of the same generosity that prompted her to share her clothing and her food, she also shared her ideas. Ruth was a dedicated Nazi.

She always had a large number of pamphlets, booklets, newsletters and other materials in her book bag, along with her school supplies. If one wanted to discuss clothes or one's problem with a teacher or a parent with Ruth, she was always willing to do so. But somehow, the discussion tended to turn political. . . . "Here, take this booklet, it will explain what I'm talking about," she would often say, pressing in our hands yet another piece of literature, which often seemed surprisingly relevant to the problem we have been discussing. . . .

Some of us, especially those of us who were called "non-Aryan" (and therefore, thoroughly evil) in Ruth's booklets, often asked her how she could possibly have friends who were Jews or who had a Jewish background, when everything she read and distributed seemed to breathe hate against us and our ancestors. "Of course, they don't mean you," she would explain earnestly. "You are a good German. It's those other Jews, pacifists, socialists and liberals who betrayed Germany that Hitler wants to remove from influence." . . .

When Hitler actually came to power and the word went out that students of Jewish background were to be isolated, that "Aryan" Germans were no longer to associate with "non-Aryans" (i.e., those who were either Jewish or who had one Jewish ancestor, even though they themselves were Christians), Ruth actually came around and apologized to those of us to whom she was no longer able to talk. "The whole thing may be a misunderstanding," she explained, "Maybe it will all be straightened out later. But meanwhile, Hitler must know what he is doing, and I'll follow orders." Not only did she no longer speak to the suddenly ostracized group of classmates, she carefully noted down anybody who did, and reported them.²⁶

C O N N E C T I O N S

How is it possible for a person to be as kind as Ruth and still be a Nazi? What does her story suggest about those who found the Nazis' teachings so attractive? What did Ruth mean when she said "Of course, they don't mean you"? Have you ever said or heard a similar remark when the stereotype of the group doesn't fit an individual within the group?

After the war, in talking to the headmistress of her school about Ruth, Switzer learned that Ruth served as a nurse in a concentration camp where "so-called experiments were carried out on helpless inmates." The headmistress said of Ruth: "She was not really a bad person, she was what I call an ideologue. Once she had come to believe in an idea—no matter how perverted, illogical and evil—she couldn't let go. She's now in prison and she's probably still sure that what she believed was right." Do you agree with that assessment? A guide to teaching *How Democracy Failed* by Ellen Switzer is available from the Facing History Resource Center.

➤ See *Childhood Memories*, available from the Facing History Resource Center, for Carl H.'s description of the power of Nazi racial theories. A summary appears in *Elements of Time*, pages 56-63 and 217-20.