

# Innocence in an age of Infamy

## **Activity 5: Family, Community, Homeland**

**Grades 7-12**

### **Objectives:**

- Students will read excerpts from Hitler's Last Courier, Armin Lehmann's book about growing up in Germany.
- Students will make generalizations about the effects of family upbringing, community values, and nationalism on growing up in a totalitarian dictatorship and in a free society.

### **Materials:**

- Handout 1: Growing Up German
- **"Innocence in an Age of Infamy"** video: "Armin Lehmann" excerpt

### **Procedure for Classroom Activity:**

1. Begin the lesson by drawing a human stick figure on the chalkboard. Ask the students to think back on their lives and tell you what general experiences and influences have made them into the kind of people they are today. List these on the chalkboard with arrows pointing at the stick figure. (For example, the students may think of such socializing forces as family, school, religion, media, politics, economy, experiences, historical events, etc.)
2. Explain that in this lesson, we will be reading excerpts from Armin Lehmann's autobiography about his life growing up in Nazi Germany to see what kinds of forces influenced his upbringing and ideas.
3. Distribute **Handout 1: Growing Up German**. Ask the students to get into groups of three to take turns reading the excerpts aloud. Then ask the groups to label the kind of influence that each paragraph represents on Armin's life. Discuss how all of these influences worked together in the Third Reich totalitarian dictatorship to control the information and education that Armin received. Such social values as Family, Community, and Homeland, duty to

serve country, extreme patriotism, and Armin's father's strong SS involvement all contributed to Armin's development into a loyal member of the Hitler Youth.

4. Show the "Armin Lehmann" excerpt and ask students to find other examples of forces that influenced his upbringing and belief system.
5. Ask the students to make a list of the kinds of influences that are present in their own personal upbringing and throughout our society today. How are these influences similar to and different from those that Armin experienced growing up in Nazi Germany?

### **Assessment Suggestions:**

1. Ask the students to write comparison paragraphs about the advantages and disadvantages of living in a totalitarian society and in a free democratic society. In which society do they think people would most likely experience the highest level of peace, freedom, equality, and tolerance? Why?

### **Extension Ideas:**

1. Research other totalitarian societies and develop oral reports on how these societies have controlled the lives and thoughts of their inhabitants. Write an article for the school newspaper discussing your conclusions about life under totalitarian rule.

# Handout 1

## Growing Up German: Excerpts from Hitler's Last Courier by Armin Lehmann

“I saw Hitler in person for the first time, and even from a great distance, the effect he had on me was hypnotic, and I shared in the jubilant behavior of all those surrounding me. I still can't describe this emotional wave, the enthusiasm created by those who filled the ... Century Hall where Hitler addressed the crowd. There wasn't room for all who wanted to be admitted. Many had lined up outside.” p. 116

“This was the time when the majority of the population seemed uplifted and thrilled about Hitler's accomplishments. The economy flourished. Unemployment had been eliminated; there seemed to be work for all.” p. 116

“Germany had become a nation of mostly enthusiastic followers. I, not yet a teen-ager, became one of them.” p. 116

“Hitler had himself established firmly as a benevolent dictator with the abilities of a genius, as my father would frequently point out when talking about political events.” p. 116

“I didn't know. I had no suspicions. I knew ... concentration camps existed, but I also remember how my mother had once, when the question came up, explained to me that ... criminals/public offenders/enemies of the state were put into concentration camps that — so she believed and thus I did, too — were correctional facilities similar to labor camps... Those detained, as I remember, were described as reactionary Communists and other terrorists, opponents of the Reich who had to be re-educated.” p. 117

“It was pointed out to us how important it was to develop strong characters, strength of will, and self-control and that although raised by our parents, we belonged to the nation. We were fortunate to have come under the influence of a great teacher and model: Adolf Hitler. It was impressed upon us that Germany had never had such a great leader.” p. 118

“We were taught that as ‘Nordic people,’ we constituted the earth's supreme race, and it was our responsibility to rid ourselves of all bad habits that had been perpetuated by inferior races, and that the Jews and the Communists were out to destroy Germany.

Since at that time, I didn't know any Jews or Communists and as far as I know had never come into contact with any, these were non-personal, ideational enemies. A few months later, the infamous Crystal Night made me realize the nice people in a candy store I frequented occasionally were Jewish. They had become victims and afterward had to wear the Star of David.” p. 118-19

“It was nothing short of a mission to be dedicated to *Fuehrer, Volk and Vaterland* (leader, people and Fatherland), fervently accepted as one of immense purpose and supported by a ... people's community in which people cared for each other in terms of ... all for one — one for all... What was there for a 10- or 11-year-old to question? ... Thus when the Kristallnacht (Crystal Night, known also as “Night of the Broken Glass”) took place, my mind did not react humanely ... I probably had my mind on soccer, or motorcycle rides, or struggles with homework...” p. 124

“My parents, too, were in favor of Hitler expanding the borders of Germany to permit the homecoming of millions of Germans who were separated from the Fatherland when, after World War I, the Versailles Peace Treaty had virtually dismembered our nation.” p. 126

“Many of my vivid memories of 1938 relate to news events documented by the ... Propaganda Ministry, headed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, a genius in his own right and also one with a black soul.

A master of his craft, he transformed news into events affecting the masses, and in retrospect I can only say his censorship was just as effective as his demagogic skills. Nothing entered my mind I could have used for comparisons, and nothing emerged to pull me back from all the elation.” p. 127

“Words such as heroic, fearless, steadfast, unwavering, courageous, valiant, glorious, majestic, noble, distinguished, lustrous were used as abundantly as possible, and increasingly in conjunction with death and dying. Death, even for the very young, was something to be embraced since it would leave behind memories of bravery and glory.” p. 144

“Why would a young boy have questioned Hitler’s purpose and goals at that time? Hitler, not only supreme commander by virtue of his position as Head of State, had also assumed the function of Commander-in-Chief of the German Armed Forces. This enabled him to prove to his people he was not only a great Fuehrer, but also just as great a strategist.

My feelings, opinions, and judgment were based on how my parents, teachers, and friends reacted to the unfolding events and on what I heard on the radio and read in newspapers and magazines.” p. 147

**Excerpts from: Lehmann, Armin D. Hitler’s Last Courier, A Life in Transition. Xlibris Corporation, 2000.**