



A Tale of Two Boys



TIM
WICKENDEN
short
histories



A TALE OF TWO BOYS

A SHORT HISTORY

BY

TIM WICKENDEN



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A Famous Photograph



Picture 1 20th March 1945 - Hitlerjugend Helden Parade. Alfred Czech 2nd from front, Willi Hübner 3rd from front

“Everyone made a brief report: ‘Oberkameradschaftsführer Hübner, Bann 803, Lower Silesia area, messenger in the fight for Lauban.’ And he shook hands with everyone. When he stroked my cheek, he said: ‘Well, my boy,’” or something similar. Then he gave a short speech about how proud he is of his young people...”

The words of sixteen-year-old Wilhelm ‘Willi’ Hübner

“I got a new uniform in Breslau and was brought to Berlin. I was taken to the Reich Chancellery, allowed to shower, and had to line up with nineteen other boys. Then Hitler came. He said he was proud of us. He shook my hand, patted my cheek, he said: ‘So, you are the youngest of them all. Weren’t you scared when you rescued those soldiers?’ I replied: ‘No my Führer!’ He said: ‘Keep it up.’ Then it was over...”

The words twelve-year-old Alfred Czech

The photograph taken, on 20th March 1945 of the Hitlerjugend Helden (Hitler Youth Heroes) ceremony is famous, and it was intended to be so. Goebbels’ propaganda ministry had carefully managed the occasion. The boys, who had all shown bravery in the face of the enemy and been awarded the Iron Cross 2nd class¹, were brought to Berlin to be captured by the Deutsche Wochenu (German Newsreel service) to show the world a defiant last stand. The intention was to demonstrate that the depth of potential combatants, and their commitment to the Reich, ran deep. It is the last known recorded public appearance by Hitler, and it is because of this link that it is often mis-dated as taking place on his 56th birthday, 20th April 1945. But what is interesting is not this empty publicity stunt, but the stories of the boys. This account is the tale of the two youngest: Willi Hübner and Alfred Czech.

¹ The Iron cross was a scalable award first you won the Iron Cross 2nd class, before you could be awarded higher levels: it went from 2nd class to 1st class of the Iron Cross, then the Knights cross and finally the Grand Cross.

Willi's story

Willi Hübner was born in Lauban, Silesia in 1928². When he turned eight, he joined the German Young Folk (Deutsche Jungvolk DJV), a junior branch of the Hitler Youth. They sang songs, read heroic histories, and learned to march and drill.

In September of 1939 came the invasion of Poland and the start of war. Lauban was an important railway station and where Willi's father worked as a Locksmith. Willi and his three brothers would spend hours there watching the endless stream of eastward bound trains loaded with guns, tanks, and soldiers. They spent every minute they could either there or in the surrounding farms where soldiers of the Wehrmacht were quartered. Willi recalled enjoying a good feed from the military Goulash Cannons (large pressure cookers). It was an exciting adventure for them. From that time, the armed forces reports were read out in school instead of morning prayer.



Picture 2 Wilhelm 'Willi' Hübner, 9 March 1945 receiving congratulations from Joseph Goebbels after winning the Iron Cross for his part in the battle for Lauban.

When he turned fourteen, he joined the Hitlerjugend and began para-military training. Willi had left school and begun his apprenticeship as a lathe operator with the Reichsbahn (state railway). He remembers that military training was the *'be-all and end-all of our upbringing then.'* They went on military training camps, Hitler Youth ski camps, small-bore shooting - *'sometimes I cursed and cried while exercising for hours!'* Willi loved the comradeship and made many new friends. They were jealous of their mates when they got their draft notice and went off to join the fight. He recalls that being at work was difficult as the lure of the war and the desire to serve was so strong. In the autumn of 1944 Willi and his comrades received their first military assignment. The mighty German army was in retreat, and the boys spent three months digging trenches and tank bunkers. He recalls that girls from the BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädel - League of German Girls)³ were also drafted in to cook their meals and mend their socks.

Shortly before Christmas that year, Willi got his draft papers and reported to a Luftwaffe Flak Unit (Air force anti-aircraft gun battery) in Königsberg, but after just two weeks he was sent home. He looked young for his age and they said he was not old enough. This worried him as he was so keen to help the war effort.

He watched as the front came closer and closer. In the distance they could see Breslau burning, *'the sky was a single flicker and there was a constant rumble of thunder.'* In the surrounding villages, the Hitlerjugend set up tank observation posts and Willi took part in both the construction and manning of these facilities. At this time, they were trained in the use of the Panzerfaust (a single use anti-tank weapon). With the Soviet forces at their door, the town's twenty-three thousand inhabitants were evacuated. As the first Soviet shells hit the station Willi's parents and younger brother boarded the last train out. Willi's Hitlerjugend unit was moved back twenty kilometres, but he decided to stay immediately reporting to the local Combat Commander of the Führer Grenadier Division⁴, asking him to accept Willi into his unit as a voluntary Hitler Youth. He was desperate to help and be there to defend his hometown. He explained that due to his extensive

² I am currently researching the exact date of Willi's birth. We do know he was 16 at the time of the award ceremony, so he would have been born sometime between April 1928 and March 1929 - Silesia is now part of Poland

³ The BDM was the Nazi Youth organisation for teen girls. They did not engage in military training but did sports, outdoor activities and learnt to be good prospective mothers. Nazi doctrine saw women as homemakers and child bearers.

⁴ The Führer Grenadier Division was an Elite Wehrmacht mechanised infantry unit - often wrongly cited as an SS unit due to their being chosen to guard Hitler's Eastern HQ, Wolf's Lair.



Picture 3. Hitlerjungend carrying a Panzerfaust, he is also equipped with a Mauser rifle. Note the oversize uniform and helmet, like that worn by Willi Hübner

local knowledge he'd be useful to the commander. The officer registered Willi as a Volkssturm⁵ combatant (literally - folk assault) and assigned him the role of liaison officer tasked with carrying messages to front line units. Willi was thrilled to be given this opportunity, *'that's when I got my first cigarettes and my first schnapps.'*

On his first mission he experienced the reality of combat. Tasked with reporting to an advanced unit east of the town to inform them to relocate, he hitched a lift on a Tiger Tank, sitting behind the turret. Without warning four Russian T-34 Tanks appeared over a hill and fired upon them. While the Tiger Tank engaged the enemy, Willi decamped and took cover in a ditch. He recalls: *'After a brief skirmish two of the T-34s blew up, a third was damaged billowing smoke, while the last turned away. I spent a long while in the ditch. Then I managed to get down to The Valley and make my report.'*

Day and night Willi carried out many such dangerous missions delivering and relaying messages from his commander to outlying units. Having played around the area all his childhood he knew it like the back of his hand and this enabled him to carry messages through no-man's land. He recalled: *"You never knew, is the Russian already here or not? I said to myself: 'It is a pitch-dark night, Ivan doesn't know his way around, but I know my way around, so I have a better chance...'. "* Although his uniform and helmet were too big for him, he felt like a real soldier.

On several occasions, while he was at HQ, his commander called him to the map table to help in briefing officers. Willi was able to tell them about the terrain, what type of bridges there were, what they were made of, and what tracks and access routes were available. His local knowledge proved invaluable. When not relaying messages or helping his commander, Willi occupied himself by carrying arms and ammunition to his comrades. He found a wheelbarrow, which he would load with Panzerfausts and other items, delivering them to the front. He was often under enemy fire and beyond question in real danger. His commander valued him and soon gave him a pet name, 'Bubi' though he only used this moniker when they were chatting informally, at all other times Willi was referred to as Hübner.

⁵ The Volkssturm was set up during the final months of the war and was a people's army largely made up of young boys and older men, particularly those who had fought in the Great War. It was open for ages 16-60. It was not highly effective and resulted in the unnecessary death of countless young and old combatants.

With the battle won, his commander congratulated him saying: *'Hübner, tomorrow you will get a gong!'*

The following day, 9th March, amid the numerous burnt-out Russian tanks and debris of war, the regiment smartly dressed, assembled in the town square where Willi was awarded his Iron Cross. It was a moment of immense pride for him and the award was well received by his adult comrades.

The battle for Lauban was the last major German counter offensive of the war and an important victory. Due to the vital Railway station, they needed to secure it. A major tank battle that ran between the 1st and 8th of March, it successfully held up the Russian 3rd Tank Army, causing Stalin to phone its commander, Marshall Konev, asking what the holdup was. For the remainder of the war, the front line around Lauban did not change much. Due to the perceived value of this victory, Joseph Goebbels visited Lauban on 9th March, and young Willi, now a hero and with his Iron Cross, was presented to the Reichsminister Propaganda - the moment caught by the ever-present cameras. Willi recalls: *'It was one of the most touching moments in my life. The whole company had lined up and I had to walk down the front with the medal attached. Old soldiers had tears in their eyes, I don't know why...'* Reich Minister Goebbels arrived. The company lined up in the market square, *'like a field march, everything nice and clean...'* recalls Willi: *'I was standing there a Pimpf⁶ at sixteen and with my Iron Cross. He saw it straight away and came over to congratulate me.'* Willi's expression and body language say it all.



Picture 4 Wilhelm 'Willi' Hübner receives his Iron Cross 2nd class for outstanding service and courage during the battle of Lauban.



Picture 5 Goebbels visiting Lauban on 9th March congratulates Willi on his service

A short while later came the invitation from the Hitler Youth Leader Reichsjugendführer Arthur Axmann. Twenty boys were transported to Berlin. They were issued with new uniforms and stayed at The Youth Leader's guest house. Willi recalls: *'That was such a time, I have never experienced anything like it since. I had never seen such great things to eat, even table wine! We felt like Princes. We visited Berlin by bus, going to castles, and we all thought that this was going to be a turning point.'*

⁶ Pimpf is a High German word used in the past to describe pre-pubescent boys. It means scamp or scoundrel, literally 'little-fart'. The Magazine for the Jungvolk was called 'Der Pimpf'.

On the morning of 20th March, the boys were given a shower, a hearty breakfast, then taken to the Reich Chancellery for the Hitlerjugend Helden ceremony (Hitler Youth Heroes). They had done the best to polish up their uniforms and present themselves well. Willi recalled: *'We only knew him from his voice or from the newsreel, but his person, the close proximity to him, fascinated us so much that we didn't even think he's just a person like everyone else. It was only later that I realised that his face was rather sunken, and that he was trembling a little when he gave his short speech. I didn't even notice a photographer and film crew were there because I was so focused on him. That was a great feeling, undeniably! The greatest event in my life...'*

After the ceremony, the boys were invited to join Hitler for a meal in the Reich Bunker during which enthusiastically they recounted their war stories. One of the boys was Armin Dieter Lehmann born 23 May 1928 (he was not present that day - but in the next parade 20/4/45 which happened behind closed doors on Hitler's birthday but was not recorded or at least no newsreel or photographic record has been found). He had won his Iron Cross for bringing wounded men out of the line of fire and in so doing was gravely wounded. As he was not fit to return to fight he was offered a position as a courier in Hitler's Reich Bunker. He witnessed the fall of the Third Reich and was there when Hitler committed suicide on 30 April. After Hitler's suicide he joined the desperate and bloody breakout from the Bunker and heading west away from the Russians successfully surrendered to the Americans two months later. He spent his adult life working in travel and tourism and as a peace activist. Later he went on to write an account of this time in the Bunker.⁷

The meal over, the boys were taken back to Arthur Axmann's guest house and were allowed to make a gift request. Willi asked for a Leica Camera but as none were available he was given a fountain pen with a gold nib.

Willi was sent back to Lauban to resume his duties but did not see any further action. He was reunited with his family save one brother, who was missing. When war ended they were expelled from Poland. While his parents moved to Landshut in Bavaria where they found acceptance, Willi and his elder brother walked to the Borna Lignite mining district near Leipzig. As he was still a minor, Willi was placed with a guardian and completed his apprenticeship as a lathe operator. Soon after, he signed up for two years in the East German People's Police (Volkspolizei VoPos). However, the service, barracks and communist ideology did not sit well with him and he began to rebel, leading to his dismissal. He was unable to find suitable employment so in 1949 he moved to Bavaria to begin again. It was not easy: the locals did not want to take in displaced Germans from the east. For a while he drifted, working as a farmer and a caretaker before rejoining his parents and landing a job at a service station, pumping petrol. Eventually he became an engine fitter and settled down. He got married (his wife worked in a hospital) and they lived a contented life.

Throughout his adulthood he found it hard to adjust to normal life and his war experiences never left him and still defined him. He said, *'after the war was a difficult time: first you are at the top, and then nothing. I didn't want to know anything more about politics, I've stayed out of it for a long time. I don't believe in comradeship either: at first you are deep in war, in danger, then you get a medal, and everyone says, Hübner we always knew what you were made of. Then, later, you see old friends and approach them, but they don't want to know you anymore...just go away.'* He collected militaria - rifles, medals, etc. - from the time and kept on his wall photographs of his meeting with both Goebbels and Hitler. At the time of writing, I have been unable to discover whether he had any children. He died on 12th April 2010, aged 81.

⁷ Armin Lehmann moved to the USA wrote many books on travel and Tourism, and also wrote two books on his childhood experience in the War: *Hitler's Last Courier: A life in Transition* - Publisher: Xlibris (1 Dec. 2000) and *In Hitler's Bunker* Publisher: The Lyons Press (1 Jan. 2005)

Alfred's Story

Alfred Czech was born on 12th October 1932 into a farming family in the village of Goldenau, Silesia⁸, about two-hundred-and-forty kms east of where Willi Hübner lived. He had a sister and his father, a veteran of the First War, still suffered from his injuries. They were a close family and his mother worked hard. Alfred helped on the farm and like any small boy loved to play in the countryside, which he knew well. Like Willi, he too joined the Jungvolk when he was eight and began the life of Nazi indoctrination that was the lot of all German children. Membership of the youth groups was, in theory voluntary, but if you opted out you were likely to be sent to a concentration camp. For the most part, boys like Alfred enjoyed the outdoor activities and comradeship of these organisations.



Picture 6 Twelve-year-old Hitlerjugend Platoon leader Alfred Czech after the award of his Iron Cross by The Commander of a Silesian Infantry Division - he is the youngest recorded recipient of that award.

When Alfred turned twelve the war was going badly for Germany and the fighting in the East was desperate, brutal, and overwhelming. By the early part of 1945 the Russians were pushing well into Poland and by late January they had begun the Silesian campaign, advancing over two hundred kms in just ten days.

Sometime in February the fighting arrived near Alfred's hometown. Alfred and his war-disabled father were outside working when they spotted a Grenadier struggling back from the front lines where a group of infantry had come under heavy mortar fire and were in grave danger. Alfred's father said the man looked wounded and straight away Alfred hitched two horses to the farm's cart and loading a hand sled set off to see if he could help. It was too risky to take the horses close to the action so Alfred hid them behind cover and taking his hand sled made his way

⁸ Goldenau, now called Zlotniki is a village a few kilometres south west of Opole, Poland.

to the wounded men. Under fire he transported them one-by-one to the cart, recovering eight men on his first trip back to the farm and despite the danger he returned to rescue the remaining four soldiers.

It was an outstanding act of selfless bravery and it was not long before the wounded men, now back with their division, reported the deed and Alfred's life was to change for ever. About that time, he was presented with a watch because he taken part in the discovery and arrest of an enemy spy. Alfred had noticed a corporal taking photographs, but he also spotted that the soldier had his rank insignia, a triangle, incorrectly on his right arm. Alfred reported the man and followed him until he was arrested.

A few days later a senior officer appeared at the Czech family home to inform Alfred that he was to be awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class and taken to Berlin to join in a Hitlerjugend parade at the Reich Chancellery. Alfred was so proud and excited, but his mother, fearing that he would come to harm on the way, was not keen for him to go. However, Alfred's father was convinced he should go, and in the end prevailed.

To begin with, Alfred was taken to Breslau and issued a new uniform after which he was brought to Berlin, joining the other boys at Arthur Axmann's guest house. Alfred was by far the youngest there.

On the day of the parade the boys were told they were to meet Hitler and that they should not stand rigidly to attention or greet the Führer with the Nazi salute. Alfred stood next to Willi Hübner, they were excited and amazed when Hitler arrived. He walked down the line of boys shaking hands and stopping to ask questions. As his turn neared, Alfred's heart beat faster. At last Hitler was standing before him, The Führer stopped and said: *'So, you are the youngest of all. Were you not afraid when you rescued those soldiers?'* Alfred replying: *'Nein mein Führer!'* Hitler smiled, patting Alfred, and pinching his cheek, saying, *'keep it up.'*



Picture 7 Alfred meets the Führer and Reichsjugendführer Arthur Axmann



Picture 8 Alfred tells Hitler that he wasn't scared when he carried out the rescue on the wounded soldiers. Willi Hübner stands proudly beside him.

Later, when they were in the Führerbunker, Hitler asked Alfred whether he wanted to go home, or to the front: *'To the Front, my Führer!'* He replied. Back at Axmann's guest house, Alfred chose an accordion as his gift, which he received straight away.

Without delay, Alfred was given a crash course in the use of the Panzerfaust and other infantry weapons, he recalls: *'some of the weapons were bigger than me!'* Then he was sent to the front: to Freudenthal in the Sudetenland, now the Czech Republic. Alfred recalls: *'Because of the medal, regular soldiers had to salute me, and it made me feel important.'* However, many of the battle fatigued, war hardened soldiers just told him to go home. Years later he admitted that he had been young and stupid, and it was not until later in captivity that he thought about it all.

The Prague offensive was the final major battle of the European conflict with fighting continuing after the German surrender on May 8th. It is not clear exactly when in April or May, but during fierce combat Alfred was shot through the lung: his war was over. Awaiting inevitable capture, the injured boy took advice from an Oberleutnant (First Lieutenant) to throw away his Iron Cross and his uniform so that the enemy would treat him less harshly. Alfred took the advice, though it must have been hard for him to part with his treasured medal and ribbon. He became one of some eight-hundred-and-sixty thousand German prisoners from that battle.

Alfred's ordeal was far from over. He might have expected, as a child, to be sent home, and had he surrendered to the Western Allies he most likely would have been released, but the Czechoslovakians backed by the Soviets, were keen to exact some payback for the Nazis' terrible reign of terror. Everyone remembered the horrific reprisals that had followed the assassination in Prague of Reinhard Heydrich, so German POWs were sent to various camps, some to local concentration camps, including the dreadful Theresienstadt that had until recently housed Nazi enemies.

I have not been able to determine which Prague camp Alfred was sent, but he would not have had it easy. Prisoners were harshly treated and kept in terrible conditions. They had little food, basic sanitation (if any) and often had to sleep on the floor. They were put to work on farms, or cleared rubble, and carried out rebuilding programs. It was a low point in Czech history with many war crimes committed by a vengeful population some of which were later investigated and tried by the Americans.

Two long years later, in 1947, Alfred was freed. Even though he did not know whether his family, or indeed his home, would still be there, the pale, skinny boy had no alternative but to walk home: a journey of almost four hundred kilometres. Despite his condition he made his way back and was happy to be reunited with his mother and sister. They were overjoyed to have their boy back, though shocked at his state. Sadly, Alfred learnt that despite his father's medical condition, in the last weeks of the war he had been called to fight and had died. They had not found his body until some months later: he had been shot through the neck.

Though many ethnic Germans had been expelled by the Poles, Alfred and his family were not. Alfred was soon to learn that his fame had preceded him, and his famous photo was to haunt him. On one occasion local Militia had raided the home (Alfred was not there at the time) and finding the Hitler photograph displayed proudly on the living room wall, they had made Alfred's sister tear it up and eat the pieces.

In the end Alfred was arrested, but after an interrogation was released and no longer bothered. In time he became a miner in the Bolken Colliery near his hometown, but he longed to leave and settle in West Germany. In 1951, age nineteen, he married Gertrud and they started a family. Repeatedly he petitioned the authorities to allow him them to leave but these were rejected. He made thirteen failed applications before a friend suggested he join the Polish Workers Communist Party (PZPR), which seemed to do the trick, and in 1964 they were granted an exit visa and travelled to West Germany, settling in Huckelhoven in the Rhineland. There he worked as a carpenter, but his old lung injury, no doubt exacerbated by his time mining, affected him badly and he was only able to work sporadically.

In 2006 the Stern weekly newspaper interviewed Alfred. The journalist, André Groenewoud, asked: *'You and Hitler in a photo - how do you deal with the picture today?'* Alfred replied: *'I had it enlarged to eighty-by-eighty centimetres, and I look at it every day, it hangs in the living room. I haven't found a good frame yet.'* André pressed him: *'No problem with a criminal's picture hanging on your wall?'* Alfred said: *'Why? The picture is part of my life. I have no more contact with the other boys and I'd just like to be left alone. But my ten children and twenty grandchildren do ask sometimes.'*

He went on to tell the reporter that after he retired in 1982, he liked to keep busy and wasn't keen just sitting around watching TV. He liked to hitch up his old carriage to one of his four horses and together with his wife and some of the grandchildren ride out in the country, just as he would have done back in the war.

He said that after he had settled in West Germany some people knew about his fame, so he had brought another Iron Cross from a dealer, which he used to pose for photographs.

Gertrud, his wife of 56 years, died on 18 January 2007 age seventy-four. Alfred followed her on 13 June 2011 age seventy-eight. They are buried together in a small cemetery in Kleingladbach.

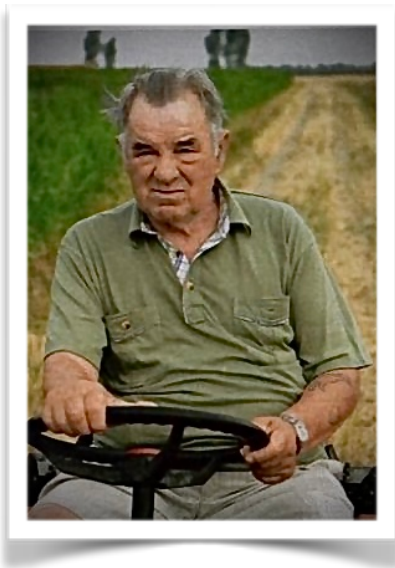
Alfred said that he didn't give much thought about what he did, he just wanted to help. He said that he would have rescued the men had they been Poles or Russians. He did not think there was much wrong in sending boys to fight. He said, *'It was war.'*

Boys to men

Post war both men got on with their lives, but I believe a deep part of them was left behind in that week they spent in Berlin being treated as celebrities and brave heroes. That and their experience of combat, and the childhood indoctrination gave them a common bond, demonstrated by their still having the photo and memorabilia on their living room walls: their pride at being boy warriors and having been a part of such a famous photo opportunity with one of History's most infamous figures and a man whom they had idolised.

A common thread in many German war memoirs is that after the conflict ended no one wanted to know about them, or their deeds: the war had brought shame on the country. They were thrust back into life often having lost everything, carried the trauma of combat and the loss of loved ones. It was a fact that, in particular, seemed to bother Willi.

That part of German history is rightly tarnished with the horrors that the Nazis perpetrated on so many innocent victims, but the stories of ordinary folk like Willi and Alfred reminds us of the many German victims of Hitler's dictatorship. They are the human face of the Nazi regime. In the process both boys lost their childhood, it shadowed their adult lives leaving them profoundly unable to move on from the day they met Hitler.



Picture 9 Alfred Czech riding his tractor near his home, 2006.



Picture 10 Willi Hübner early 1970s - he appeared in several TV productions at the time. The clip of him speaking on the day of the Parade was featured in the British TV series, 'The World at War' - Episode 21.

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Picture 11. Iron Cross 2nd Class (Eisernes Kreuz 2. Klasse - abbreviated as EK II or E.K.II.)- about 4.5 million were issued during WW2. The original Iron Cross had a Swastika in the centre. In 1957 a law was passed allowing the wearing of German medals (except specific Nazi decorations) provided they were of the reissued type which replaced the Swastika with Oak Leaves.

As well as being awarded for a specific act of bravery (as in Alfred Czech's case), the Iron Cross could be awarded for a cumulative service (as in Willi Hübner's award) whereby the combatant's overall service warranted special acknowledgement. It could be won for a certain amount of Tank kills, or planes shot down, etc.

At the onset of war there were about 8.8 million children in the Hitler Youth. After the start of hostilities the average age for Hitler Youth local & district leaders, previously 24 years-old, was reduced to 16 or 17 years-old. Each commanded about 500 boys.



Picture 12. A Post 1957 Iron Cross