



"Don't Let Freedom Slip Away!"

By Kitty Werthmann

An Austrian witness of Nazi tyranny and transformation

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"I lived in Austria under Adolf Hitler's regime for seven years. Dictatorship did not happen overnight. It was a gradual process starting with national identification cards, which we had to carry with us at all times.... Gun registration followed, with a lot of talk about gun safety and hunting accidents.... Freedom of speech was the next target.... With a large network of informers, people were afraid to say anything political, even in their own homes."

What I am about to tell you is something you've probably never heard or will ever read in history books.

I believe that I am an eyewitness to history. I cannot tell you that Hitler took Austria by tanks and guns; it would distort history. We elected him by a landslide – 98% of the vote. I've never read that in any American publications. Everyone thinks that Hitler just rolled in with his tanks and took Austria by force. In 1938, Austria was in deep Depression. Nearly one-third of our workforce was unemployed. We had 25% inflation and 25% bank loan interest rates.

Farmers and business people were declaring bankruptcy daily. Young people were going from house to house begging for food. Not that they didn't want to work; there simply weren't any jobs. My mother was a Christian woman and believed in helping people in need. Every day we cooked a big kettle of soup and baked bread to feed those poor, hungry people – about 30 daily.

The Communist Party and the National Socialist Party were fighting each other. Blocks and blocks of cities like Vienna, Linz, and Graz were destroyed. The people became desperate and petitioned the government to let them decide what kind of government they wanted.

We looked to our neighbor on the north, Germany, where Hitler had been in power since 1933. We had been told that they didn't have unemployment or crime, and they had a high standard of living. Nothing was ever said about persecution of any group -- Jewish or otherwise. We were led to believe that everyone was happy. We wanted the same way of life in Austria . We were promised that a vote for Hitler would mean the end of unemployment and help for the family. Hitler also said that businesses would be assisted, and farmers would get their farms back. Ninety-eight percent of the population voted to annex Austria to Germany and have Hitler for our ruler. (see note 1 following article)

We were overjoyed, and for three days we danced in the streets and had candlelight parades. The new government opened up big field kitchens and everyone was fed.

After the election, German officials were appointed, and like a miracle, we suddenly had law and order. Three or four weeks later, everyone was employed. The government made sure that a lot of work was created through the Public Work Service.

Hitler decided we should have equal rights for women. Before this, it was a custom that married Austrian women did not work outside the home. An able-bodied husband would be looked down on if he couldn't support his family. Many women in the teaching profession were elated that they could retain the jobs they previously had been required to give up for marriage.

Hitler Targets Education – Eliminates Religious Instruction for Children:

Our education was nationalized. I attended a very good public school. The population was predominantly Catholic, so we had religion in our schools. The day we elected Hitler (March 13, 1938), I walked into my schoolroom to find the crucifix replaced by Hitler's picture hanging next to a Nazi flag. Our teacher, a very devout woman, stood up and told the class we wouldn't pray or have religion anymore. Instead, we sang "Deutschland, Deutschland, Über Alles," and had physical education.

Sunday became National Youth Day with compulsory attendance. Parents were not pleased about the sudden change in curriculum. They were told that if they did not send us, they would receive a stiff letter of warning the first time. The second time they would be fined the equivalent of \$300, and the third time they would be subject to jail. The first two hours consisted of political indoctrination. The rest of the day we had sports. As time went along, we loved it. Oh, we had so much fun and got our sports equipment free. We would go home and gleefully tell our parents about the wonderful time we had.

My mother was very unhappy. When the next term started, she took me out of public school and put me in a convent. I told her she couldn't do that and she told me that someday when I grew up, I would be grateful. There was a very good curriculum, but hardly any fun – no sports, and no political indoctrination. I hated it at first but felt I could tolerate it. Every once in a while, on holidays, I went home. I would go back to my old friends and ask what was going on and what they were doing. Their loose lifestyle was very alarming to me. They lived without religion. By that time unwed mothers were glorified for having a baby for Hitler. It seemed strange to me that our society changed so suddenly. As time went along, I realized what a great deed my mother did so that I wasn't exposed to that kind of humanistic philosophy.

Equal Rights Hits Home:

In 1939, the war started and a food bank was established. All food was rationed and could only be purchased using food stamps. At the same time, a full-employment law was passed which meant if you didn't work, you didn't get a ration card, and if you didn't have a card, you starved to death. Women who stayed home to raise their families didn't have any marketable skills and often had to take jobs more suited for men.

Soon after this, the draft was implemented. It was compulsory for young people, male and female, to give one year to the labor corps. During the day, the girls worked on the farms, and at

night they returned to their barracks for military training just like the boys. They were trained to be anti-aircraft gunners and participated in the signal corps. After the labor corps, they were not discharged but were used in the front lines. When I go back to Austria to visit my family and friends, most of these women are emotional cripples because they just were not equipped to handle the horrors of combat. Three months before I turned 18, I was severely injured in an air raid attack. I nearly had a leg amputated, so I was spared having to go into the labor corps and into military service.

Hitler Restructured the Family Through Daycare:

When the mothers had to go out into the work force, the government immediately established child care centers. You could take your children ages 4 weeks to school age and leave them there around-the-clock, 7 days a week, under the total care of the government. The state raised a whole generation of children. There were no motherly women to take care of the children, just people highly trained in child psychology. By this time, no one talked about equal rights. We knew we had been had.

Health Care and Small Business Suffer Under Government Controls:

Before Hitler, we had very good medical care. Many American doctors trained at the University of Vienna . After Hitler, health care was socialized, free for everyone. Doctors were salaried by the government. The problem was, since it was free, the people were going to the doctors for everything. When the good doctor arrived at his office at 8 a.m., 40 people were already waiting and, at the same time, the hospitals were full. If you needed elective surgery, you had to wait a year or two for your turn. There was no money for research as it was poured into socialized medicine. Research at the medical schools literally stopped, so the best doctors left Austria and emigrated to other countries.

As for healthcare, our tax rates went up to 80% of our income. Newlyweds immediately received a \$1,000 loan from the government to establish a household. We had big programs for families. All day care and education were free. High schools were taken over by the government and college tuition was subsidized. Everyone was entitled to free handouts, such as food stamps, clothing, and housing.

We had another agency designed to monitor business. My brother-in-law owned a restaurant that had square tables. Government officials told him he had to replace them with round tables because people might bump themselves on the corners. Then they said he had to have additional bathroom facilities. It was just a small dairy business with a snack bar. He couldn't meet all the demands. Soon, he went out of business. If the government owned the large businesses and not many small ones existed, it could be in control.

We had consumer protection. We were told how to shop and what to buy. Free enterprise was essentially abolished. We had a planning agency specially designed for farmers. The agents

would go to the farms, count the live-stock, then tell the farmers what to produce, and how to produce it.

“Mercy Killing” Redefined:

In 1944, I was a student teacher in a small village in the Alps . The villagers were surrounded by mountain passes which, in the winter, were closed off with snow, causing people to be isolated. So people intermarried and offspring were sometimes retarded. When I arrived, I was told there were 15 mentally retarded adults, but they were all useful and did good manual work. I knew one, named Vincent, very well. He was a janitor of the school. One day I looked out the window and saw Vincent and others getting into a van. I asked my superior where they were going. She said to an institution where the State Health Department would teach them a trade, and to read and write. The families were required to sign papers with a little clause that they could not visit for 6 months. They were told visits would interfere with the program and might cause homesickness.

As time passed, letters started to dribble back saying these people died a natural, merciful death. The villagers were not fooled. We suspected what was happening. Those people left in excellent physical health and all died within 6 months. We called this euthanasia.

The Final Steps - Gun Laws:

Next came gun registration. People were getting injured by guns. Hitler said that the real way to catch criminals (we still had a few) was by matching serial numbers on guns. Most citizens were law abiding and dutifully marched to the police station to register their firearms. Not long afterwards, the police said that it was best for everyone to turn in their guns. The authorities already knew who had them, so it was futile not to comply voluntarily.

No more freedom of speech. Anyone who said something against the government was taken away. We knew many people who were arrested, not only Jews, but also priests and ministers who spoke up.

Totalitarianism didn't come quickly, it took 5 years from 1938 until 1943, to realize full dictatorship in Austria . Had it happened overnight, my countrymen would have fought to the last breath. Instead, we had creeping gradualism. Now, our only weapons were broom handles. The whole idea sounds almost unbelievable that the state, little by little eroded our freedom.

After World War II, Russian troops occupied Austria. Women were raped, preteen to elderly. The press never wrote about this either. When the Soviets left in 1955, they took everything that they could, dismantling whole factories in the process. They sawed down whole orchards of fruit, and what they couldn't destroy, they burned. We called it The Burned Earth. Most of the population barricaded themselves in their houses. Women hid in their cellars for 6 weeks as the troops mobilized. Those who couldn't, paid the price. There is a monument in Vienna today, dedicated to those women who were massacred by the Russians. This is an eye witness account.

It's true....those of us who sailed past the Statue of Liberty came to a country of unbelievable freedom and opportunity. America Truly is the Greatest Country in the World. Don't Let Freedom Slip Away.

After America, There is No Place to Run.

NOTE 1: An Internet search brings several different descriptions of this "election." Here are three:

- [Annexation Austrian-Style](#): "The Nazis moved ahead quickly with their decisive grab for power. An emphasis was placed on propaganda, with banners hung everywhere. In Vienna alone, 200,000 pictures of Hitler went up, augmented by slogans such as 'Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer' -- 'One people, one empire, one leader.' In the subsequent referendum, 99.73 percent of the population voted for 'reunification' with the German Reich.

"There was, of course, the immense pressure exerted by the military, but the result was also reflective of a country willing to join the Nazi movement. The reason for the 'mass elation, even hysteria'... were many: The Austro-Hungarian Empire had collapsed in 1918 and the Republic of German Austria emerged in its place on November 12, 1918. It was a traumatic turn of events. From its very birth, the new state lacked a sense of identity, and a large portion of the population was in favor of annexation to Germany. Making things even worse was the economic crisis and resulting, large-scale unemployment. In February 1933, 600,000 Austrians were without jobs."

- [Annexation of Austria](#): "On 12 Feb 1938, Hitler invited [Austrian Chancellor] Schuschnigg to Berghof for a summit. Schuschnigg politely addressed Hitler as 'Herr Reichskanzler', awaiting a similar greeting from Hitler... What he got in response, however, was a series of insults and threats. Hitler preached of his mission to create a great German Empire; 'I have only to give an order,' he screamed at Schuschnigg.... After hours of persuasion that Western Europe had abandoned Austria, Schuschnigg gave in. He signed a two-page agreement drafted by Joachim von Ribbentrop that lifted the ban on the Nazi Party, released jailed Austrian Nazi Party members, and appointed Nazi Party members ...[to] ministerial positions in the Austrian government.

"Pressure from Berlin did not cease based on that agreement alone, however, and Schuschnigg announced that he would **allow a national referendum to decide the fate of Austria**. Schuschnigg strategically set the voting age to 24 so that the younger citizens, who were much more likely to be persuaded to the Nazi cause, could not sway the vote. Berlin was quick to catch on to Schuschnigg's tactics, and fabricated false news reports of riots in Austria, claiming that Austrians were calling for German military to enter to preserve peace. According to Nazi propaganda, over 80% of the Austrian population wished to become a part of the German Empire; in fact, it was merely propaganda and nothing more."

- [The "ANCHLUSS" - Annexation of Austria by Germany](#): "On 9th March 1938, the **Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg announced a plebiscite** on the independence of Austria. Adolf Hitler took this as an opportunity to take action against the Austrian State. Schuschnigg was pressed to resign. The National Socialist Arthur Seyss-Inquart took over the chancellorship and formed a new government. The Austrian National Socialists took power in Austria. On the morning of 12th March 1938, troops of the German Wehrmacht and the SS crossed the German-Austrian border. On 13th March 1938, Hitler announced in Linz the legislation on the **Anschluss? (Annexation)** of Austria into the German Reich. During the great celebrations in all of Austria, many **potential opponents of the regime were arrested, as well as the Jews who were expropriated and deprived of civil rights**. National Socialist rule was established now in Austria through propaganda, terror and enticements.

"A Plebiscite was set for 10th April on the annexation of Austria to the German Reich, which was only a mockery. Austrian **citizens who were of Jewish descent were excluded** from the election. **People who were of other political opinions were arrested.** Despite this, many **Austrian intellectuals and known personalities from all areas publicly supported Hitler's annexation.** The former Chancellor Karl Renner who had founded the First Republic and the Austrian bishops did their best to convince the many who had remained sceptical. A free democratic election was not possible on 10th April: Election publicity was present in front of and in the election booth, the votes were surveyed and the voting papers were manipulated."