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'It Was Horrific, And It Will Always Remain So'

Former German President Details World War II Experiences

By Martin Doerry and Klaus Wiegrefe

In a SPIEGEL interview, former German President Richard von Weizsäcker, 89, discusses his time as a soldier during World War II, resistance against Adolf Hitler and the issue of whether his father Ernst, then a senior official in the Foreign Ministry, could have stopped Jews from being deported.

SPIEGEL: Mr. von Weizsäcker, in late August 1939 you were a 19-year-old private at a military training camp in Gross Born near the Polish border. What memories do you have of the start of the war?

Weizsäcker: One night, a few days before the outbreak of hostilities, we were taken from our barracks to railway stations for loading. This was done silently and in an orderly manner, and expressly without waving citizens lining the streets. We were then deployed along the so-called "Polish corridor" as part of the first attack wave on Sept. 1. The next day my brother Heinrich was killed just a few hundred yards from me. I buried him myself. I needn't tell you how that feels.

SPIEGEL: Did this loss of a family member change anything about your attitude to the Nazi regime and its war?

Weizsäcker: No-one who goes to war can imagine what it will do to him. But it's true to say that the war also had a profound effect on my awareness to this very day.

SPIEGEL: How do you mean?

Weizsäcker: Because war destroys human neighborliness, because it should never be used as a political tool, because politics should promote culture. Culture helps people live together. War does the opposite.

SPIEGEL: Did you view the invasion of Poland as a mistake?

Weizsäcker: A mistake? That's not the right expression. I'm sorry, but that's a rather naive question.

SPIEGEL: We didn't live through the war ...

Weizsäcker: Then it's good that you're asking about it. That's far better than simply knowing with hindsight far better what we oldies should have felt and known back then.

SPIEGEL: We really want to know how you perceived the outbreak of war.

Weizsäcker: My mother lost two brothers in the World War I, my father lost one. That wasn't an exception in Germany, but more or less the norm. As a result we were deeply concerned by the thought that war could break out again. It was the basic attitude of any normal, sensitive person.

SPIEGEL: Do you mean to say that the war was not popular in 1939?

Weizsäcker: No, it probably wasn't. Most people were distraught and scared. I remember my mother mentioning a few days before the start of the war that only 20 years had passed since people had last lost brothers, fathers, and other relatives in a world war, and that we could be facing another situation where husbands and children were killed in battle. In many families that was truly their predominant, heartfelt and entirely rational attitude.

SPIEGEL: What was your feeling about Poland?

Weizsäcker: I was one of the countless young Germans of my generation who knew far too little about Polish history and culture, and the situation it found itself in. However, we did notice a clear difference in the various sections of the population in terms of how they received us as soldiers. Once we had crossed the **Danzig Corridor** we arrived in East Prussia, where people were relieved that the corridor was finally being eliminated. By contrast, on the Belgian-Luxembourgian border with (Germany's) Eifel (region), where we were transported immediately after the invasion of Poland, the local Germans were pleased to see us, although they begged us not to trigger another war by going beyond Germany's western borders into Luxembourg, Belgium and France.

SPIEGEL: Did you share the view held by many of your contemporaries that Germany should annex Danzig and the Polish Corridor?

Weizsäcker: I was a very young man. What did I know about Danzig and **East Prussia**? Sure, my married sister lived there, and I visited her once. All I had experienced was personal fate. What I lacked were sound historic knowledge and my own life experiences.

SPIEGEL: In 1939 your father, Ernst von Weizsäcker, was an undersecretary in the German Foreign Ministry and therefore the deputy of Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. How do you view your father's role today?

Weizsäcker: My father's entire career, and that of his confidantes at the Foreign Ministry, was geared towards introducing the kind of reforms that would usher in the European peace that the Treaty of Versailles had failed to bring. Without a doubt this also meant changes in favor of the Germans, who had lost World War I. But the basic premise was that this had to be achieved exclusively by peaceful means. That is why my father remained at the Foreign Ministry even after 1933.

SPIEGEL: We get the impression that your father was one of those conservative civil servants who rejected Hitler's methods but welcomed Germany's re-emergence as a central European superpower.

Weizsäcker: Why this interpretation? Again I am pleased that you are asking me. What do you mean by "re-emergence as a superpower"? As a colonial power with a navy like that of the Kaiser? No. My father wanted a common European understanding about the necessity of establishing peace in Europe. When Hitler subsequently began planning war in earnest, diplomats from Italy, Britain, and Germany worked together in secret to prevent it.

SPIEGEL: You're referring to the 1938 **Munich Agreement**: In an attempt to appease Hitler, the Western powers agreed to his demand for the German annexation of the **Sudetenland** from Czechoslovakia.

Weizsäcker: My father conspired with the British and Italian ambassadors, and they managed to talk Mussolini into convincing Hitler to accept the agreement. Nowadays the Munich Agreement is seen as a capitulation by Western democracies in the face of a dictatorship. At the time the Western powers considered it the only possible avenue to peace. In any case they were not militarily ready for another war. However, even Hitler always considered the Munich Agreement his worst foreign-policy mistake. Our present view is influenced by the fact that Munich merely delayed the onset of war.

SPIEGEL: How did your father see the Munich Agreement in retrospect?

Weizsäcker: Without a doubt he believed his mission had failed when Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and the war gradually spread.

'It Was Clear Hitler Expected to Win War by Autumn of 1941'

SPIEGEL: You spent most of the World War II on the Eastern Front. In December 1941 you were within a few miles of Moscow, and later your unit was involved in the siege of Leningrad. Many of those who fought in the war are still traumatized by the death and killing they witnessed. Are you?

Weizsäcker: It was horrific, and it will always remain so. In the winter of 1941, I heard Reich Press Spokesman Otto Dietrich say on the radio that the war effort had run into difficulties "because the winter surprised us as we were approaching Moscow in December." That was the first time I saw many of the soldiers in my regiment angrily waving their fists. Was this "surprise" the reason why we were completely inadequately equipped to fight 40 kilometers from Moscow in the heart of winter? It was clear Hitler and the other leaders had expected to win the war by the autumn of 1941.

SPIEGEL: Did you ever witness any war crimes in the Soviet Union?

Weizsäcker: Not personally.

SPIEGEL: The files of your division contain reports from late June 1941 that the bodies of "brutally mutilated" soldiers had been found. Do you remember that?

Weizsäcker: I never saw those files at the time, but I did see mutilated German soldiers. We were petrified of being captured by the Soviets.

SPIEGEL: The papers also contain an evening report from Infantry Regiment 9 dated June 28, which contains the following sentence: "Prisoners were not taken because, having seen how brutally their comrades-in-arms had been mutilated, the soldiers in the regiment no longer felt able to do so."

Weizsäcker: Whichever way you look at it, what you are talking about is monstrous. I have never heard such a report, not even the slightest inkling. Nor did I hear about anyone in our regiment acting in the way this suggests. I therefore deny that this happened in our sector.

SPIEGEL: You seem to be annoyed by the question.

Weizsäcker: Annoyed? No, it distresses me. Is that really so hard to understand? Nobody doubts that the war was waged brutally, and that people were brutal. But the German army took millions of prisoners, and it goes without saying that not all these prisoners were abused or massacred. I'd like to point out that our infantry regiment was a long-established part of the army, and placed great store in personal behavior and discipline -- even in times of war. Of course we take seriously the questions and research of those investigating the issues today. Much of what they have found after decades of research was not known to us at the time. The important thing is to promote historical and moral understanding between generations, and that can and should involve mutual respect.

SPIEGEL: You didn't have any knowledge of the Holocaust prior to 1945?

Weizsäcker: It was only after the end of the war that I heard and tried to comprehend the word and the horrors of the Holocaust. But a friend of mine in the regiment, Axel von dem Bussche, had observed to the rear of our position that the region's Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants had been made to dig a large trench and lay down in it, whereupon they had been shot dead. He came straight back to the regiment, and I'll never forget how he said he had felt like lying down beside them. Axel was a colossus of a man, and highly decorated. He was deeply moved by his experience, and hearing that from him made you want to participate in the resistance to the extent possible.

SPIEGEL: Could Bussche speak openly about his experiences with his fellow soldiers?

Weizsäcke: There was a small, tightly-knit group of friends who spoke about it -- albeit with the almost inevitable impotence of not being able to draw any conclusions from it. What could we have done? After all, we were far from Berlin somewhere in the Soviet Union.

SPIEGEL: What was the main thrust of your conversations?

Weizsäcker: The specific, constantly recurring problem for us in Russia was that we were forever having to pass on orders from above. Time and again it made us wonder who thought these orders up without being able to judge whether or not they could be carried out. So passing orders on and thus colluding with the orders that came from behind the lines was generally the first topic of conversation when we got together and asked ourselves how we could justify all that.

SPIEGEL: So there were several reasons why you chose to join the resistance movement: The experiences of your friend Bussche, your military situation, etc.

Weizsäcker: The entire terrible situation into which our leaders had plunged the entire country.

SPIEGEL: What was your connection to Berlin?

Weizsäcker: An even older friend -- **Count Fritz-Dietlof von der Schulenburg** -- who always spent half his time in Berlin and half with us at the regiment. He collected like-minded people almost to order. In 1943, **Count Claus von Stauffenberg** saw an opportunity to assassinate Hitler. An officer from the front was supposed to be demonstrating new uniforms to Hitler, and Stauffenberg was looking for someone who was willing to blow up Hitler and himself on this occasion. Schulenburg suggested Axel to him, and Axel agreed to it immediately.

SPIEGEL: What was your role?

Weizsäcker: Stauffenberg, whom I knew, had sent a telegram to the division and the regiment ordering Major von dem Bussche to return to Berlin or Potsdam immediately. That was difficult because the division didn't want any active battalion commanders being sent back to base in Berlin. I then organized papers and the travel arrangements for Axel with regimental headquarters, and notified Stauffenberg about this. However, the assassination had to be postponed because an Allied air strike destroyed the uniforms. In the meantime, Axel was seriously wounded at the front.

SPIEGEL: Do you consider yourself one of the co-conspirators of the July 20, 1944 plot?

Weizsäcker: I spoke to Schulenburg three weeks before the assassination attempt in Potsdam. He told me the assassination was imminent, and that if the plot was successful we would immediately receive instructions on how to proceed.

SPIEGEL: What would your task have been if the plot had been successful?

Weizsäcker: Schulenburg wanted to bring me and a few friends from the regiment to Berlin straight away. After the abortive attempt on Hitler's life, 13 former or current members of the regiment were executed or took their lives to avoid falling into the Gestapo's hands.

My Father's 'Sentence Was Neither Morally Nor Humanely Just'

SPIEGEL: After the war, you interrupted your law degree to help defend your father at the Nuremberg Trials. The Americans eventually sentenced him to five years in prison. You have always criticized this sentence as unfair.

Weizsäcker: My father was tried before the wrong kind of court. Foreign policy was the only work he really had any influence over and that he really enjoyed. Although the outbreak and expansion of the war frustrated all his efforts, his actions later prompted the so-called Reich Main Security Office -- a part of the SS -- to demand he be charged with high treason by the People's Court. Even the wife of the then foreign minister wrote extensively about this demand in her memoirs. Luckily by the time they got round to it my father was the ambassador to the Vatican in American-occupied Rome and therefore out of the reach of the German bloodhounds.

SPIEGEL: He was also acquitted of the charge of "crimes against peace." The verdict was based on "crimes against humanity." In 1942 Adolf Eichmann asked the German Foreign Ministry to issue a statement on the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz. Ernst von Weizsäcker replied that the ministry had "no objections."

Weizsäcker: My father faced a central moral dilemma: Should he stay in office or not? What would and should he be prepared to accept any mission for? What could he influence personally, and what was beyond his control?

SPIEGEL: And your reply?

Weizsäcker: He remained at the Foreign Ministry in spite of all the deep disappointment it brought him. But after fastidiously reviewing the matter, he found that he was powerless to prevent the central domestic crimes against humanity. That's why he was all the more willing to help in any specific case of persecution he had access to. This is why he remained in office. Hundreds of statements from Jews, from churches, at home, in Britain and in other countries thanked him for the many ways he protected them, as did one of the judges at the Nuremberg Trials, in contrast to his two colleagues.

SPIEGEL: So you say your father was not treated fairly at the trials?

Weizsäcker: During a confidential though recorded meeting before the trial began, the prosecutor asked my father to be a prosecution witness and agree to testify against others. The prosecutor said surely it was worth committing a bit of perjury if it meant he could therefore escape trial. My father vehemently rejected the offer. The sentence was neither historically, morally nor humanly just. The American high commissioner in Germany ordered my father's immediate release from custody, and the first German federal president, Theodor Heuss, and many others spoke out on my father's behalf. In a speech during a parliamentary debate in England, Winston Churchill even said American prosecutors had made a "deadly error" over my father.

SPIEGEL: Have you ever asked him what would have happened if he had voiced his concerns to Eichmann?

Weizsäcker: Of course we put this imaginary scenario to him.

SPIEGEL: It's not an imaginary scenario, but a moral one.

Weizsäcker: The concrete effects were imaginary. Please believe me when I say that we haven't only just discovered what a moral question is.

SPIEGEL: You mean it wouldn't have made any difference if he had refused to approve it?

Weizsäcker: I won't repeat the conversations we had, but of course both he and we were deeply concerned about this issue. What do you think?

SPIEGEL: We're trying to understand what happened back then.

Weizsäcker: I have come to know and tried to portray him as best as is humanly possible.

SPIEGEL: Does that concern you to this day?

Weizsäcker: Of course. There is no such thing as historical, moral, human immunity, whether in youth or old age. I'm sure we agree on that too.

SPIEGEL: Mr. von Weizsäcker, we thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Martin Doerry and Klaus Wiegrefe. Translated from the German by Jan Liebelt.

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