Working Through a BDM Childhood

The title of Ursula R. Mahlendorf’s meticulous, moving memoir of growing up in Lower Silesia (now southwestern Poland), makes the process of working through a personal history as a member of the “Hitler Youth generation” visible. Mahlendorf’s explanation for the title demonstrates one of the memoir’s strengths: its author’s urge to go beyond a mere recounting of her childhood in order to show her readers how she has grappled with these stories, drawing many, increasingly shame-provoking, meanings from them at different moments in her later life.

Mahlendorf writes that when she began the memoir in 2004, “survival” (p. 8) was the focus of the first draft. Indeed, she survived a great deal. Born in 1929 in a family on the edge of poverty (her father’s death left her mother to support three children as a dressmaker), Mahlendorf found opportunity in the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM). At sixteen she experienced the fall of Germany, the Red Army invasion, the occupation of her home town (Strehlen, now Strzelin), a typhoid epidemic, and the expulsion of her family and neighbors (along with millions of Germans living east of Germany’s new postwar borders) and resettlement in West Germany. She titled the first draft of her memoir “Survivor,” but while rewriting, Mahlendorf came to perceive deeper meanings about her “implication in Nazism” that made her initial title a humiliation (p. 8).

In some of her stories this transformation is strikingly clear. One tells the tale of Mahlendorf’s admission to teacher training. Her enthusiastic participation in the BDM won her a spot at one of its teacher seminars in 1944. On a superficial level, this moment offered her a chance to get the higher education that her family’s class status and her mother’s lack of support had thus far denied her. Yet, more fundamentally, she came to see that joining the teacher seminar put her “in the belly of the beast” of Nazism (p. 160). The school was intended to train young women, who qualified for admission through academic standing as well as by proving their descent from “Aryan stock,” to take part in the German colonization of eastern Europe. Like so many other memories, this episode came to be a source of horror for the now left-identified, feminist Mahlendorf: “Yearslater, when I read of BDM girls just a little older than we were then serving in these eastern settlements, participating in driving out the native Polish population and introducing the ethnic German settlers to Germanic values, I shuddered to think what my future might have held” (p. 166). Only after Adolf Hitler’s suicide did Mahlendorf seriously question the Nazi worldview; she seems not to doubt that she would have joined in the violence had she been called upon to do so, and hopes that her book will elucidate “how a perpetrator is made” (p. 8).

In redrafting her title, she realized, however, that she had figured herself in just that...
The memoir's most vivid sections treat the period of her life during and after 1945. Mahlendorf's immediate family initially flees the Red Army, but then navigates chaos, violence, depredation, and epidemic to remain in their apartment until 1946, when they are sent to board a train that deposits them in a refugee camp outside of Bremen. Mahlendorf is initially devastated by the fall of the Nazi regime, and then furious at the leaders who betrayed her and at the adults she comes to blame for allowing the Nazis to dupe her. This fury seems to sustain her, first through the struggle to stay alive in the immediate postwar years, and then in her fight to get an education. An impoverished refugee in West Germany, she undertakes the near-impossible task of qualifying for university admission. Success enables her to leave Germany for an academic career in the United States. Her descriptions of this part of her life have more color than most of the sections on her childhood and BDM days, which are marked by emotional flatness. Yet, the color here is of intense fury. Mahlendorf seems alienated from most of those around her, especially from people her own age, and from her mother. In the memoir's final sections, where it reaches its emotional climax, the cause of this lack of dimension in the earlier sections becomes apparent. Mahlendorf describes her adult realization that she lacked access to her emotions and suffered from depression. After a suicide attempt, she undertook years of therapy. Rather than explain her emotional state as a product of her childhood (which it undoubtedly was), Mahlendorf describes how "working through" her childhood, including by writing this memoir, helped her to understand her depression and process her emotions. This final section, which features Mahlendorf in the act of writing the memoir's final pages, reveals that the emotional flatness of the earlier sections is part of the story. Her honesty here and elsewhere makes The Shame of Survival a rewarding meditation on Nazism and its long aftermath.

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