April 21, 2005

Few See Taint in Service by Pope in Hitler Youth

By RICHARDBERNSTEIN and MARK LANDLER

MUNICH, April 20 - The day after Cardinal JosephRatzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, some headlines were already drawingattention to a supposedly dark moment in his past, when the first German popein 482 years was briefly a member of the Hitler Youth.

"White Smoke, Black Past," was the headlineWednesday in Israel's Yediot Aharonot. "From Hitler Youth to theVatican," was the way The Guardian put it. Even before his election aspope on Tuesday, The London Sunday Times carried an article with the headline,"Papal Hopeful Is a Former Hitler Youth."

DoesBenedict XVI harbor a secret past, which includes sympathy for the Nazis? Thatwould seem to be the question implied by those headlines, which were echoed inmany private conversations.

Theanswer to that question, at least according to available evidence, is no.

It is well established, and readily acknowledged bythe pope in his autobiography, that for a time in 1941 and 1942, JosephRatzinger, then a teenager, was in the Nazi Party's main organization forindoctrinating young people.

Enrollment in the Hitler Youth was mandatory for any highschool age student. After that, he served for a time in an antiaircraft unitthat guarded a BMW plant outside Munich - and there are photographs that showthe young Ratzinger in the paramilitary uniform of what were called the flakunits, composed of under-age soldiers assigned to

antiaircraft guns.

But historians and Jewish groups agree that the pope'swartime record, which was very common to young men of his generation, haslittle if any significance today and certainly suggests no sympathy for theNazis, then or now.

It is true that by an accident of history, BenedictXVI is a pope who once wore a Wehrmacht uniform. But as chief adviser to PopeJohn Paul II in matters of doctrine, he was, far more importantly, a centralfigure in one of the late pope's most highly publicized gestures - apologizingfor the role that Catholics played in the Holocaust.

"Everybody was in the Hitler Youth," Olaf Blaschke,a specialist on modern church history from Trier University, said in atelephone interview. "Some very strong Catholics didn't go to the HitlerYouth, that's true. But it was sort of mandatory, difficult to evade. And thosepeople who were in the Hitler Youth and were indoctrinated by those ideologieswere the very people who later on built the Federal Republic of Germany andfought against every type of totalitarianism."

Otherexamples of people who belonged to the Hitler Youth were the novelist GünterGrass and the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, highly respected intellectualpillars of German democracy, Mr. Blaschke said.

In someways, there is a striking similarity between the early years of JosephRatzinger and those of Karol Wojtyla, the Polish boy, five years older, whobecame Pope John Paul II. Each grew up in a small town in Central Europe nearthe mountains; each experienced the Nazi years, and each turned to a deepCatholic faith at least partly in response to what he had experienced.

Throughout his career as priest, bishop and pope, John PaulII spoke about the Jewish friends he had in Wadowice, his hometown in southernPoland, and his memory of their persecutions seems to have

motivated him atleast in large part to produce the 1998 Encyclical "We Remember," inwhich he expressed contrition for the failure of Catholics to offer moreprotection to Jews and for the fact that some took part in their persecution.

Asarchbishop of Munich, Cardinal Ratzinger said very little about the war or theJews, and he does not seem to have uttered ringing public denunciations ofanti-Semitism. But as the right-hand man to John Paul, he was widely assumed tohave played a major role in drafting "We Remember," and he wasclearly involved in other path-breaking gestures the pope made towardreconciliation with Jews, including praying in a synagogue.

"Itcannot be denied," he said last year, in a statement that mirrored themain concept of "We Remember," "that a certain insufficientresistance by Christians to this atrocity is explained by the anti-Judaismpresent in the soul of more than a few Christians."

Traunstein, the market town where Pope Benedict XVI spentmost of his youth, was typical of the conservative Bavarian villages where theNazi Party was able to make early inroads in the 1920's.

But itunderwent a transformation in the 1930's from an enthusiastic embrace of theNazis to a more fraught relationship.

The keychange, according to Gerd Evers, a local historian, was the party'sincreasingly anticlerical oratory, which offended the deeply Catholicpopulation. At one point in the town, some 2,000 villagers signed a petitionprotesting a Nazi order to remove crucifixes from the schoolrooms, and, indeed,the Nazis withdrew the order.

By 1941,when the young Joseph Ratzinger joined the Hitler Youth, the Nazi Party hadbecome an overweening force. The director of St. Michael, a Catholic-runboarding school in Traunstein that Joseph Ratzinger attended, beganautomatically enrolling his students in the

group in 1939, according to Mr.Evers.

The Rev. Thomas Frauenlob, the school's currentdirector, said Cardinal Ratzinger shunned Nazi ideology because it conflictedwith his Christian faith. "He had a strong belief in Christ, which helpedhim distinguish between good and evil," Father Frauenlob said.

TheRatzinger family itself was also strongly anti-Nazi, according to CardinalRatzinger's biographer, John L. Allen Jr., which is the reason Joseph's fatherwas demoted as a policeman, and why he moved his family several times in thewar years. According to some people in Joseph Ratzinger's birthplace, Marktl amInn, his father clashed with local Nazi officials.

"When the Hitler Youth was established, my brother wasforced to become a member," Cardinal Ratzinger said in an interview in1997. "I was still too young, but later, when I entered the seminary, Ialso joined. But as soon as I had left the seminary, I never went to see themagain. And this was difficult, because in order to be entitled to get adiscount on the tuition fee, which I urgently needed, one had to prove that onewas a member of the Hitler Youth."

In 1943, according to Mr. Allen's biography, JosephRatzinger was drafted into an antiaircraft group. He was sent for a short timeto the Austrian-Hungarian border to set tank traps, and deserted after beingshipped back to Bavaria.

After thewar, he entered a seminary near Munich to study for the priesthood, beginninghis career in the church. "Ratzinger's views on truth and freedom wereforged in the crucible of World War II," Mr. Allen writes, drawing a linkto his later theological conservatism.

"Under Hitler, Ratzinger says, he watched theNazis twist and distort the truth. Their lies about Jews, about genetics, weremore than academic exercises. People died by the millions because of them.

"Thechurch's service to society, Ratzinger concluded, is to stand for absolutetruths that function as boundary markers. Move about within these limits, butoutside them lies disaster."

Given hisstanding as a staunch conservative, and his active hostility to liberal trendsin the church, Cardinal Ratzinger earned some unflattering epithets in theGerman press - "Panzer cardinal" being the most common of them.

But, unlike some Germans of the generation a few yearsolder than his, he has nothing in his past to suggest that he has kept someformer Nazi sympathy secret.

Indeed, in choosing to go to a seminary and certainlyin deserting from the army, the future pope, then still only a teenager, wasclearly not acting like a Nazi enthusiast.

"There is no sign that he was in any way attracted toNazism," Siegfried Wiedenhofer, a professor of dogmatics at FrankfurtUniversity and a longtime friend of Pope Benedict XVI. "The opposite isthe case."

ManyJewish figures have praised the new pope, citing in particular his contributionto Catholic-Jewish reconciliation.

"He's never denied the past, never hid it,"said Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League."His whole life is an open book of sensitivity against bigotry andanti-Semitism." The Jerusalem Post, in an editorial Tuesday, explained whyit was not concerned. "As for the Hitler Youth issue, not even Yad Vashemhas considered it worthy of further investigation," it said, referring tothe Holocaust Memorial and research center in Jerusalem. "Why shouldwe?"

This article was reported by Richard Bernstein inMunich and Mark

Landler in Traunstein.