

## A Traumatized Young Boy in 1945, Who Stared Into The Abyss

Written by Andy Owen



It's an extremely powerful image.

Emotional.

Haunting.

The horrors of war.

No blood. No gore. No body parts.

Just a young boy, involved in something a young boy should never be involved in.

It was all too much.

He was a kid who had looked into the abyss. An abyss he never imagined could even exist.

He was suffering from combat shock. Terrified. And alone.

Hans-Georg Henke was only sixteen when these pictures were taken.



He was captured by the US 5th Infantry Division on 28th March 1945, when they overran his unit's defensive position in the village of Hüttenberg-Rechtenbach, in Hessen, just north of Frankfurt am Main.

Hans-Georg was one of thousands of Hitler Youth that had been mobilised in late 1944 and early 1945, as a last resort to try and defend a beaten Germany.



He had initially joined the aerial warfare branch of the Luftwaffe, as a flak gunner.

He did so, to try and put food on the table for himself and his two younger brothers. His father had died in 1938 - and when his mother died in 1944, the family was destitute.

He knew he had to somehow find work to support them.

He was only fifteen years old.

For the final weeks of the Nazi regime, he had been integrated into a regular infantry unit, to help the defensive line against the allies in the Frankfurt area.

But, Germany was in tatters. The third Reich was finished.



The American 5th Infantry had crossed the Rhine on 22nd March and quickly established a bridgehead. The next day, they were only 14 miles southwest of Frankfurt.

They were joined by the 6th Armoured - and quickly reached the southern outskirts of the city of Frankfurt and captured the Rhine-Main airbase.

By the 25th March, they had crossed the Wilhelmsbruecke Bridge (which was supposed to have been blown) and entered the northern part of the city.



They encountered fierce resistance as the Waffen SS had a number of units in the vicinity.

And indeed, at one stage, these cold-blooded, ferocious and disciplined fighters mounted a strong counter attack.

But US fighter-bombers were called in and soon the SS were overwhelmed and defeated by the superior US forces with their supporting armour.

Frankfurt was wide open.

The remaining pockets of German resistance, were units hastily patched-up and reinforced by over-age and underage Volkssturm (National Militia) men.

Hans- Georg's unit was one of these - and they were eventually overrun by the Americans, after a harrowing final day of vicious, bloody and close quarters fighting.



To be involved in such an appalling experience and to witness first hand, some of the sickening consequences of a battle like that, must have been absolutely harrowing for everyone, especially the boy.

The battle-hardened US troops, were too much for them.

The Stars & Stripes magazine, reported that Frankfurt was liberated on 30th March.

The war was finally over for the city. The air raids stopped. The bombing was ended. The sirens would not be heard again, nor the anti-aircraft guns.

But the city was in bits. It was all but dead.



The business district was a brick and stone wilderness in which the old residents could hardly find their way around.

No trains were running and no streetcars. Power was out everywhere. There was little or no food - and water was scarce.

Of the 31,000 Jews who had inhabited Frankfurt - one of the oldest Jewish communities in Germany - military government officers only found 140.

These individuals had been employed under the Nazis in cemeteries and cleaning toilets. They were placed in segregated houses, one family to each room.

It was discovered later, that they never received any eggs, meat, milk, white flour, wine, tobacco, or clothing rations for the previous 3 years.

The military government requisitioned houses and a hospital for them.

Following his capture by the Americans, Hans-Georg spent a short time in captivity and was then released to go back to his home in Finsterwalde in the east of the country.

How he got back there and whether he was picked up by the Soviets during the journey, or in fact, interred by them later, or not at all, is impossible to say, as I can find no information on this.

At this time in Germany, there was so much confusion. The allies and the Soviets were enjoying their victory and starting to carve up the country into controlled areas.

The German population were just trying to stay alive.



But, because of the concerns most of them had regarding the Soviets, most people were already moving from East to West Germany. This was before the erection of the Berlin Wall

Hans-Georg did the exact opposite. He stayed East.

This was almost certainly down to the fact that his father was a former Communist sympathiser and had clearly influenced his son during his early years.

Hans-Georg resurfaced in 1946, still living in Finsterwalde. He had joined the KPD - the East German Communist Party. The KPD shortly thereafter merged with the SPD to form the Socialist Unity Party - The SED.

He then moved on to The Deutsche Volkspolizei -the National Police Force.

Eventually he rose to the position of Administrative Director of the Hospital in Finsterwalde.

A few years later, when his iconic picture suddenly appeared in the world's media, he was in great demand for interviews and people wanted to know more about him.

This, potentially, was a real problem for Hans-Georg.

So, he concocted a cover story, completely different from the truth - and he maintained this story throughout the rest of his life.

His version was, that he was based in Stettin with a battery of 88 mm guns. As the Russians advanced, his unit and others, were pushed back towards Rostock.

It was here where the Russians finally overran them, resulting in his capture. The photographs were taken at that time.

Why did he concoct this clearly untrue tale?

His motive appears clear - and relates to his joining the Communist Party and choosing to live in East Germany.

The East German Communists at that time regarded all those who had surrendered to the Americans, as a potential third force.

So, to cover his tracks, Hans-Georg changed the story from being overrun by the Americans to being captured by the Russians.

The photo-journalist who took these amazing photographs, was an American, John Florea - who was working for Life magazine.

He later worked in Hollywood and photographed many stars, including Marilyn Monroe.

He confirmed that they were taken in Hessen after the Americans had overrun the German position there. Later, a number of local residents who viewed the images, also confirmed they were taken in Hessen.

Helmut Hofmann has no doubt that the picture was taken in Rechtenbach in the courtyard of his estate on Frankfurter Strasse.

*"My father first saw the famous picture in 1970 on the cover of a youth magazine that was on my bedside table. Then he said that the crying boy was photographed in our courtyard on March 29th, 1945".*

On that day, according to the descriptions of his father Friedrich, the Americans brought around 30 German prisoners to the Hofreite, which was closed on all sides. Among them was a very young flak soldier.

*"The Americans had taken the gun emplacements of the Germans that day, after some hard fighting. That is why this young soldier was still suffering from shock from the bloody fighting experience.*

*He was still in his Air Force uniform, standing in the middle of our courtyard, shivering, whimpering and crying. Suddenly an American officer came with a camera, knelt in front of the young soldier and snapped him close up".*

I suspect that many people saw through Hans Georg's concocted story, but probably felt that no good would come of challenging it. After all, he had suffered enough trauma in 1945 to last a lifetime.

So, on the surface at least, Hans-Georg's cover story held and he went on to live a full life in Finsterwalde.

He deserved that. I'm delighted he found peace.

Hans-Georg Henke died on 9th Oct 1997, in Finsterwalde, Elbe-Elster Landkreis, Brandenburg, Germany. He was 69 years old.

His two brothers also survived the war.

