

west, Oberhausen (six miles). The population of the Church in the Ruhr District was 796, making it the second largest district in the West German Mission.

Church administrative areas surrounding the Ruhr Districts were the Bielefeld District to the north, the Hannover District to the east, the Frankfurt District to the south, and the Netherlands Mission to the west.

In the summer of 1939, the president of the Ruhr District was Friedrich Ludwig Biehl of the Essen Branch. Raised in a large family steeped in LDS tradition, President Biehl was a veteran of the Swiss-German Mission and, at twenty-six, possibly the youngest German district leader in all of Germany.² When the American missionaries were evacuated from Germany in August 1939, mission president M. Douglas Wood selected President Biehl to lead the entire mission. By October 1939, he had moved to the mission office in Frankfurt and was replaced by Wilhelm Nitz Sr., who served as the district president throughout the war. His name is mentioned frequently as a visitor in branch meetings, as are those of his counselors.

Other district leaders were Carl Schlingmann of Essen (YMMIA), Grete Keller of Düsseldorf (YWMIA), Heinrich Ludwig of Essen (Sunday School), Luise Schwiermann of Essen (Primary), and Johanna Neumann of Essen (Relief Society).³ Jakob Kirchhausen of Essen was the genealogical expert and Gustav Mellin of Herne the president of the elders quorum.⁴

Georg Hübner and Johann Friedrich Biehl served in the last few war years as traveling elders. Their names appear in the minutes of branch meetings during that time. The names Gustav Melling and Heinrich Ludwig also appear frequently, indicating that those men were apparently willing and able to travel to neighboring branch meeting places throughout the war years.

District conferences were very popular events in the Ruhr District. Because of the short traveling distances, it was relatively easy for the Saints to gather. They usually met in Essen but also met

on several occasions in Herne. From the records of various branches, it is evident that those conferences were held at least through the fall of 1944.

Because of the concentration of mining operations and heavy industry in the Ruhr region, the cities there were constantly under attack by Allied air forces. More than one thousand air raids were carried out in the region, and the cities were extensively damaged. More than two-thirds of the Saints in the Ruhr District were bombed out. A great number of families in the branches were split up when the mothers took their infant children to safer localities and when schoolchildren were sent away under the Kinderlandverschickung program. In March and April 1945, the region was surrounded by invading Allied forces and besieged in what was called the *Ruhrkessel* (Ruhr cauldron). That meant additional damage through artillery fire and combat. When the conquest of the enclave was complete, the damage in the cities often exceeded 70 percent. Nevertheless, most of the branches in the district were still holding sacrament meetings, and all still had at least cottage meetings in the intact apartments of members still in the region.

NOTES

1. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
2. For more about the life of Friedrich Biehl, see the West German Mission chapter.
3. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL 10045 11.
4. The geographical extent of the elders quorum is not known. There may have been two elders quorums in Germany overall or in the West German Mission in 1939. No specific references in the mission records can be found regarding this organization.

BENRATH BRANCH

The town of Benrath is located five miles southwest of the city of Düsseldorf. The branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

in that town had only thirty-one registered members when World War II began. Peter Ernst was the branch president and Johann Zimmer his first counselor, but many of the other leadership positions were vacant. Jakob Schumacher was the superintendent of the Sunday School, and Maria Ernst was the president of the Relief Society.¹

The Ernst family lived in the suburb of Reisholz, about one mile north of Benrath. Peter Ernst set up one room for the branch in their single-family home at Rotdornweg 33. According to his youngest daughter, Erna (born 1926), there were about twenty chairs for the branch members and their friends. The average attendance was fifteen persons in the early war years, before members were called away to military service or lost their homes and moved out of Benrath.²

Alfred Koch (born 1937) recalled the names of several member families in the branch: “There were the Ernsts, the Riedels, two Zimmer families, a single sister Jochheim, my family and my grandmother, and a few others.”³ Alfred’s family lived in a suburb of Düsseldorf near Hilden and traveled a few miles to church each Sunday.

Benrath Branch⁴	1939
Elders	4
Priests	0
Teachers	1
Deacons	2
Other Adult Males	3
Adult Females	15
Male Children	4
Female Children	2
<i>Total</i>	31

Sunday School was held at 10:00 a.m. and was followed at 11:15 a.m. by sacrament meeting. The priesthood and Relief Society meetings both took place beginning at 4:00 p.m. on Thursday

afternoons. No other meetings were listed on the branch directory of July 1939. The meetings were not interrupted during the war because Brother Ernst, a veteran of the Great War, was not required to join the Wehrmacht and was always in Benrath.

Although no official Primary organization existed in the Benrath Branch during the war, Alfred recalled that “Sister Ernst [tried] to get a Primary going. Our instruction took place when the adults would go in Sunday School, although I don’t think that it ever was called Primary; but to us it was Primary.”

The branch history includes minutes for all sacrament meetings from the early 1930s to the postwar era. The minutes were likely kept by Peter Ernst, the branch president, and were done with great consistency during the war years. The following is a typical entry:

June 6, 1942: Sacrament meeting. Brother Peter Ernst conducted. Hymn no. 37. Invocation Sister Erna Jochheim. First talk by Brother Jakob Schumacher. Second talk by Brother Peter Ernst. Closing hymn no. 6. Benediction by Sister Irmgard Schulz. In attendance: 2 elders, 5 members, 5 visitors, 2 friends; total 14 persons.⁵

Erna Ernst was inducted into the Jungvolk at age ten but attended the meetings only for a short while. Regarding the activities, she recalled:

We would meet at the school, outside on the yard, and then they made us march. And sometimes they would make us stand there in rows and our leaders went into the building and we were outside in the cold, and some of us got sick. And so my mother told them I wasn’t coming anymore.

The war was a frightening concept for young Erna: “They started teaching us first aid in school, and they gave us a gas mask. You get scared as a child.” When the bombs began to fall on both military and civilian targets in the area, the Ernst family was very fortunate; the only damage their home suffered occurred when an incendiary bomb buried itself in the outside wall. According to Erna, her

father removed it without difficulty. “He had been in World War I, so he was never afraid.” A high-explosive bomb once landed behind the neighbor’s house, but it was a dud, and experts removed it.

“My dad [Walter Koch] was not pro-Hitler, but he was in favor of the economic [upswing] because he had gone through World War I—when his father was killed—and the hard times and hyperinflation that followed,” recalled Alfred Koch. He continued:

My dad would not join the Nazi Party, and we never had a swastika flag at our home. Right across the street lived a guy who was a member of the Nazi Party—some kind of bureaucrat. He would go to work on a bicycle in his Nazi uniform, a brown uniform with a swastika armband and his brown cap. I can remember him coming over—and it must have been in 1941 or something like that—and was talking to my dad, berating him. He had never talked to my dad before, although he lived right across the street. In 1942, I believe, there was a swastika flag on our house.

In 1942, Walter Koch was drafted by the Wehrmacht. He was gone for the duration of the war and was eventually captured by Red Army soldiers. Marie Koch continued to go to church with her sons and her mother as often as circumstances permitted. From their home near Zuringen, they could often see the red skies over Düsseldorf and other large cities as they burned following air raids. According to Alfred, “It was very scary for us kids. Mother was worried, which we automatically sensed. Huddling in the basement you could hear the bombers flying overhead. The only time any bombs fell close to us they landed in fields nearby.” “Nearby” was close enough to damage the Koch home; the windows burst and several cracks appeared in the walls, but the house remained inhabitable. “After that,” Alfred explained, “we played in the bomb craters in the field.”

There was little opportunity for entertainment for young people during the war, but this did not bother Erna. She had trained as a beautician and was quite busy during the day. For fun she depended on her family: “There were many things we couldn’t do

because of a lack of money. You just got close with your family. We would sing and play games, other than that there wasn’t much to do. I never felt that life was unfair because my parents were always so good to us; they did many things to keep us happy.”

Alfred Koch began school in the fall of 1944. He was the only Latter-day Saint and recalled that it was difficult to stand and announce his religious affiliation as being anything other than the usual Catholic or Lutheran. At school and in the neighborhood, “we were looked at as being a bit different. Everybody in the neighborhood knew that we were *Mormonen*. We had to live our religion despite the fact that nobody was really concerned what we were.”

Toward the end of the war, survival became more of a challenge for the members of the Benrath Branch. The prime concern was physical safety, something that could not be taken for granted even by a teenage girl who rode her bicycle a mile to work and back every day. As Erna Ernst recalled, dive-bombers were a constant threat to civilians:

They would shoot the farmers in the fields, and that was terrible. I can remember I was on my bicycle riding home, and the plane was going around, and I looked up and the plane had a ring [symbol] and so I knew it was British, and so the plane went around. I was riding along a cemetery wall, and he came down and he started shooting, and I jumped off my bicycle and stood against the wall. When he had to turn again is when I ran. At the end of the wall there was a farmer’s house, so I ran to the farmer’s house and ran inside to wait till the plane was gone. I don’t know if they did that for fun, or if they really wanted to [hurt people].

Branch meetings were interrupted in October 1944. The branch history describes conditions at the time:

8 October 1944: Beginning on this date, the war made life terribly difficult for us. Our branch members sought refuge in places far from here and we could no longer hold meetings. Brother Peter Ernst remained in his home with his youngest daughter. There was a tremendous amount of

unrest. Bombs and artillery shells rained down around our homes. We hid in our basements for protection, and we slept there. Those were the conditions when we experienced the invasion of enemy soldiers and collapse of our nation that had celebrated sin and godlessness. Nobody harmed us because the hand of God was over us. All of the brothers and sisters and their children returned to their homes. Five brethren were taken prisoner by the Russians, but all returned.⁶

Another danger for the civilians was disease. With shortages of food and the interruption or destruction of utilities, illnesses were constant and could be fatal. Erna described the government's ongoing attempts to keep people healthy in these words: "We got so many shots, all kinds of shots! They shot us to death during the war!"

In the last month of the war, it became almost impossible to find food. Fortunately for the Ernst family, one of their daughters was assigned to work in a soup kitchen. She was allowed to take packages of soup home to her family, but eventually even those ran out. Erna recalled a different source of nourishment that came in handy: "We went along the sides of the roads in the ditches to pick dandelions and stinging nettles, and my mother would cook sauce or make salads out of them." According to her, even though they still had ration cards, there was often nothing left to buy in the grocery stores.

The invading American army approached the Koch home from the east. Alfred recalled that day vividly:

I can remember climbing up a streetcar pole in front of our house, and looking down the road to see if the Americans were there. Sure enough, there was a tank standing in the middle of the road, and it seemed to me that the barrel was a foot across, although the tank was about three hundred to four hundred meters down the road. Then I climbed down and back up to hang out our bed sheet, and then we waited. And I was worried, really worried, because Mother was in town, which was in the opposite direction. What are they going to do when they find my mother? Finally the troops moved in, and my brother and I huddled behind a window. There was some

noise outside, and I looked up, and about a foot or two outside our window an American soldier walked by. He didn't see me, but I ducked right behind the window again. They were checking behind houses to see if there were pockets of resistance. And then my mother came home. All of a sudden, the war was over.

As was common all over western Germany, the invaders gave candy and gum to the children. Alfred recalled that as well:

I can remember once or twice receiving a cigarette, which I took to my mother, which was like gold. You could get anything for a cigarette. And although I knew that we were not supposed to have cigarettes, that was something that Mother could trade in for coal or something else. So to us it was harmless. It was actually kind of a relief. If anything, if I can say that as a child, it was relief to have the war over. But we didn't know where Dad was.

As it turned out, Walter Koch was a POW in Russia and his whereabouts would remain a mystery until July 1946, when a card he had written the previous December was finally delivered to his wife.

In May 1945, the war ended and branch life began anew. The following was written by the clerk on May 6th: "Today was Sunday and we held our first Sunday School and sacrament meeting since October 8, 1944. The conditions of war made it impossible to meet in the interim."⁷ This was followed by a concise report of the proceedings of the sacrament meeting in precisely the same style as they had been reported in during the previous eight years. No other comments were made relating to the war or the conclusion thereof.

Although neither Alfred Koch nor Erna Ernst could recall any branch members leaving the Church because of a loss of faith, they recalled that times were very difficult. Alfred summed up his feelings in these words:

The certain amount of peace and comfort and assurance we had despite the hell that was going on all around us was because of the gospel that we had. . . . The Church was really an anchor

in this turmoil, in this time of deprivation, of uncertainty of life. . . . Because of the faith of our mother and because of our prayers, we knew that things would be okay.

Things were indeed all right in September 1949 when Walter Koch returned from his tenure as a POW in Russia, having been separated from his family for seven years. He returned to a small but vibrant Benrath Branch that had been “held together by Brother Ernst,” according to young Alfred.

No members of the Benrath Branch are known to have died during World War II.

NOTES

1. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL 10045 11.
2. Erna Ernst Fiedler, interview by the author, Sandy, UT, February 17, 2006.
3. Alfred Koch, interview by Sarah Gibby Peris, Preston, ID, November 24, 2006.
4. Presiding Bishopric, “Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955,” 257, CHL CR 4 12.
5. Benrath Branch history, 134, CHL LR 67111 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 153. Because this entry was made by a different scribe and contains information not available at the time, it was likely written a few years after the war.
7. *Ibid.*, 154.

BOCHUM BRANCH

The city of Bochum had nearly 305,469 inhabitants in 1939, but the LDS branch in that city numbered only forty-eight persons. Most were active and acquainted with the members of other branches in the Ruhr District. Essen was just six miles from Bochum, and Herne was just four.

In the late summer of 1939, the Bochum Branch met in rented rooms at Rathausplatz 9 downtown. The only members of the branch listed on the branch directory were President Max Hackbarth and Sunday School superintendent Anton Bühler. The only meetings listed were Sunday School at

10:00 a.m., priesthood meeting at noon, and sacrament meeting at 7:00 p.m.¹

Bochum Branch²	1939
Elders	4
Priests	0
Teachers	2
Deacons	3
Other Adult Males	13
Adult Females	26
Male Children	0
Female Children	0
<i>Total</i>	48

George Blake, a missionary from Vineyard, Utah, was assigned to work in Bochum from late 1937 to May 1938. He described the setting at Rathausplatz 9 in these words:

We had two small rented rooms in the building, which was a business building that fronted on the town square. On the wall next to the entry [outside], there was a small plaque about a foot square with the name of the church on it. The rooms were on the ground floor with a pump organ in them, which was common in those years, and a few chairs, and that’s about all the furniture there was. I don’t remember any decor on the walls. We moved the chairs off to the side for the Christmas Party. Thirty people would have filled the room; normally we had twelve to twenty people [in attendance]. . . . The principle population of the branch was very much blue collar, the working class. . . . The branch was small and not well attended. On our books we maybe had fifty people, but we only had about fifteen at our services, so most of our work as missionaries was trying to activate members.³

Just a few months prior to the war, another Utah missionary, Erma Rosenhan, recorded the following in her diary: “Sunday, April 9, 1939: Visited the Bochum Branch with district president [Friedrich] Biehl. The branch in Bochum is small and the