



*Many bunkers designed to protect civilians during air raids were built so well that they are essentially impossible to remove. This one is a permanent feature of Hamburg's skyline. (R. Minert, 1975)*

# RUHR DISTRICT

*West German Mission*



In 1939, the Ruhr River region of northwest Germany was home to a great concentration of branches and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In that area, rich in mining and industry, more cities had populations of higher than one hundred thousand than anywhere else in Hitler's Germany. In many respects, that area was convenient for missionary work, primarily because the distance from city to city was only a few miles.

Ruhr District <sup>1</sup>	1939
Elders	69
Priests	23
Teachers	24
Deacons	47
Other Adult Males	135
Adult Females	407
Male Children	52
Female Children	39
<i>Total</i>	796

The center of the district was the city of Essen, which had a very strong branch. From there, the distance to the other ten cities in the mission was



Fig. 1. The ten branches of the Ruhr District were closely grouped among the large cities of this industrial region.

never more than thirty-five miles. To the north was Buer (nine miles); to the northeast, Herne (thirteen miles); to the east, Bochum (sixteen miles) and Dortmund (thirty-six miles), to the south, Wuppertal (fourteen miles), to the southwest, Düsseldorf (eighteen miles), Benrath (twenty miles), and Cologne (thirty-three miles), and to the

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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> Jakob Kirchhausen of Essen was the genealogical expert and Gustav Mellin of Herne the president of the elders quorum.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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## BENRATH BRANCH

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> Alfred’s family lived in a suburb of Düsseldorf near Hilden and traveled a few miles to church each Sunday.

<b>Benrath Branch<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>1939</b>
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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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.

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## BOCHUM BRANCH

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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.<sup>1</sup>

Bochum Branch <sup>2</sup>	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.<sup>3</sup>

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



Fig. 1. Christmas 1937 with Saints of the Bochum Branch. (G. Blake)

larger branches help it along. There were only nine people there altogether.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the branch in Bochum was losing strength. The following surnames appear more than once in the branch meeting minutes of the summer of 1939: Hackbarth, Bauer, Kaminski, Bühler, Heiden, Mietze, Kegelmann, Melter, Preuss, Klamma, Leithäuser, and Kossowski.<sup>5</sup>

On November 20, 1939, just a few months after the war began, a meeting was held for the branch and district leaders. According to the minutes

of that meeting, two agents of the Gestapo were present. Nothing noteworthy happened, possibly because branch president Hackbarth was a member of the Nazi Party (Elder Blake recalled seeing him wearing a party membership pin on his suit coat).<sup>6</sup>

The following statement is found in the branch minutes written in November 1939:

Due to the war conditions our sacrament meetings have been held on a very irregular basis. In September and October, only two meetings took place, namely on September 28 and October 5.





*Fig. 2. A group of Saints in Bochum in 1938. District president Friedrich Biehl is standing at left. His brother Walter is third from the right. (G. Blake)*

... Meetings were not held on the other Sundays because the members' work schedules did not permit them to attend. The fall [branch] conference that was scheduled for October 22, 1939 could not take place; the [city government] forbid it because we did not have a suitable bomb shelter.<sup>7</sup>

Two sad reports are found at the conclusion of the Bochum Branch meeting minutes. The first is dated December 10, 1939, and reads as follows:

It was announced that the Bochum Branch was being closed temporarily and the members transferred to the Herne Branch as of today. The speakers today were Brothers Bühler and Ludwig, both of whom reminded the members to remain true to the Church. All branch property was transferred to Herne with the exception of eight chairs, one clock, one mailbox and some firewood, which were sold for a total of 12 RM. The branch funds totaling 4,52 RM went to Herne, except for bus money (1,80) that was necessary due to bad weather. After cleaning costs were deducted, the Herne Branch received 0,60 RM.

The Relief Society funds of 41,65 RM were sent to the mission office in Frankfurt/Main.<sup>8</sup>

The branch president added this statement a month later:

The Bochum Branch and its rooms at Rathausplatz 9 have been closed due to insufficient attendance. Too many of the branch members are not available to serve in callings. There were forty-eight registered members but they are scattered among various neighborhoods and could not attend the meetings. All sincere members hope that the branch can be reestablished after the war. Max Hackbarth, branch president in Bochum, January 1940.<sup>9</sup>

It is not known whether any of the members of the Bochum Branch did indeed attend meetings in Herne or elsewhere. It is likely that at least some were hindered by the problem of transportation or the challenges of wartime life and discontinued their association with the Church.

Located near the middle of the Ruhr region with its critical war industries, the city of Bochum suffered severely during the war. Before the American army entered the city on April 10, 1945, there had been more than one thousand air raid alarms for at least 147 actual attacks, twelve of which were considered “heavy attacks.” At least 4,095 persons were killed, 5,000 more were injured, and “countless residents were left homeless.”<sup>10</sup> Of the city’s living space, 22 percent was totally destroyed and another 74 percent badly damaged. Of the many Bochum men who served in the military, 7,048 died. As late as 1948, there were 8,089 residents reported missing or still prisoners of war. Life in Bochum was clearly fraught with hazards; therefore it is remarkable that no Latter-day Saints in Bochum became casualties of the war.

#### IN MEMORIAM

Only one member of the Bochum Branch is known to have died in World War II:

**Marianna Hildegard Uhlig** b. Chemnitz, Chemnitz, Sachsen, 24 Oct 1902; dau. of Oskar Uhlig and Auguste Hilde Wittig; bp. 1 Aug 1913; conf. 1 Aug 1913; m. 3 Jun 1922, Kurt Walter Müller; 2m. Chemnitz 19 Oct 1928; d. 20 Sep 1939 (FHL microfilm 68784; CHL microfilm 2447 pt. 26 no. 231; FHL microfilm no. 245239 1925 and 1930 censuses; IGI)

#### NOTES

1. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL 10045 11.
2. Presiding Bishopric, “Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955,” CR 4 12, 257.
3. George Blake, interview by the author, Provo, UT, April 1, 2009.
4. Erma Rosenhan, papers, MS 16190, Church History Library.
5. Bochum Branch general minutes, CHL LR 804 11; trans. the author.
6. *Ibid.*, 215.
7. *Ibid.*, 227.
8. *Ibid.*, 229–30.
9. *Ibid.*, 229–30.
10. Monika Wiborni, *Bochum im Bombenkrieg: 4. November 1944* (Bochum, Germany: Wartberg, 2004), 46.

## BUER BRANCH

The smallest branch in the Ruhr District was in the community of Buer, nestled between several large cities in the region. Only ten miles north of Essen, the Latter-day Saints in Buer would have faced no great obstacles in attending district conferences in Essen. Thirty-one residents of this town were recorded as members of the LDS branch.

Buer Branch <sup>1</sup>	1939
Elders	2
Priests	2
Teachers	0
Deacons	1
Other Adult Males	0
Adult Females	11
Male Children	15
Female Children	0
<i>Total</i>	31

The dominant character in the Buer Branch in 1939 was Johann Nowotczin. Little is known about him, but he filled several positions in branch leadership: branch president and clerk, Sunday School president and clerk, YMMIA superintendent and secretary, and *Der Stern* magazine agent. His wife, Johanna, served as the president and secretary of the Primary organization, which had fifteen male children at the time. Their daughter Agnes served in two roles—Sunday School secretary and Primary secretary. The only person in leadership who did not belong to the Nowitczin family was Adolf Kerstan, Brother Nowitczin’s first counselor.<sup>2</sup>

The branch meetings were held in rented rooms at Horsterstrasse in Buer. Nothing is known about the building. Sunday School began at 10:00 a.m. and sacrament meeting at 3:00 p.m. The Primary

met on Tuesdays at 5:00 p.m., and MIA met two hours later.

As of this writing, no eyewitnesses from the Buer Branch can be found, and no records from that branch exist in the Church History Library.

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

NOTES

1. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
2. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHLLR 10045 11.

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## COLOGNE BRANCH

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In 1939, the city of Cologne was the fourth largest in the Reich with 767,222 inhabitants. Situated on the left bank of the Rhine River, it had been founded by the Romans nearly two thousand years earlier and featured the tallest twin-tower cathedral in the world.

Cologne Branch <sup>1</sup>	1939
Elders	9
Priests	3
Teachers	3
Deacons	5
Other Adult Males	29
Adult Females	78
Male Children	3
Female Children	13
<i>Total</i>	143

At the far south extent of the Ruhr District (forty miles southwest of Essen), the Cologne Branch was, by population, large enough to sustain itself; but

for some reason no functioning YWMIA, Relief Society, or Primary organization existed in 1939. (It is especially curious that a branch with so many adult women had no official Relief Society leadership.) The branch president was Gerhard Geller, and his counselors were Hugo Romboy and Albert Bauske. The Sunday School was led by Johannes Sachon and the YMMIA by Hubert Ernst. The only woman listed was Maria Ernst, who represented *Der Stern* magazine.<sup>2</sup>

The meeting rooms were rented in a building at Mozartstrasse 11. The only available description is provided by missionary George Blake of Vineyard, Utah:

They had a large room and two small rooms. There was a picture of Christ at Gethsemane and a picture of the First Vision on the left wall, and a board to post the numbers of the hymns on the right wall. Typical attendance [in December 1938] was more than thirty persons. The Romboys played a major role in the branch because there were so many of them.<sup>3</sup>

When the war began in September 1939, only three meetings were scheduled for the Cologne Branch: Sunday School at 10:00 a.m., sacrament meeting at 7:00 p.m., and Mutual on Tuesdays at 8:00 p.m.

“I remember that my dad [Paul Romboy] was drafted in 1941,” explained Ursula Romboy (born 1939). In addition to her memories of being alone with her mother, Grete, during the war, she recalled the air raids that severely damaged the city in the later years of the war:



*Fig. 1. Paul Romboy as a Wehrmacht soldier around 1942. (U. Romboy Gamble)*

We went into our cellar a lot of times during the heavy bombing in 1943 and 1944. There were bunk beds, and my mother took snacks, and so I never

remember being afraid. I was excited to see the planes fly overhead in our street, and my mother would grab me and rush me down to the cellar. Our house was not damaged, but there were bomb holes in the street, and the top of the house next to us was destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1944, Paul Romboy was struck in the leg by several pieces of shrapnel and eventually arrived at a hospital in Lüneburg. He was pleased to have his wife and his daughter come from Cologne to visit him there—a rare privilege for a German soldier. From Lüneburg, he returned to the Western Front, and his family traveled back to Cologne.



Fig. 2. Paul Romboy in a Lüneburg hospital after shrapnel was removed from his leg in 1944. (U. Romboy Gamble)



Fig. 3. The Romboy brothers of the Cologne Branch. From left: Karl, Paul, Hugo, and Gustav. (U. Romboy Gamble)

In January 1945, life in the smoldering city of Cologne was becoming intolerable. Grete Romboy was evacuated with her daughter to the town of Seeben near Halle in central Germany. Grete's sister-in-law, Gertrude Romboy, was also there with her four sons. In February, Grete gave birth to a son she named Roderick. The two Romboy families survived the invasion of the Red Army and the end of the war at that location.

In the summer of 1945, the time came for Grete Romboy to take her family home to Cologne. Ursula recalled riding in cattle cars for several days, sitting on straw: "When the train stopped [along the way], maybe we could get some milk or something to eat. When we arrived in Cologne, the bridge [over the Rhine] was totally collapsed. We walked from the station to our home in the center of the city, and we found total destruction with bomb craters as big as houses."

Postwar life in a big city had many challenges, but Ursula recalled that her mother was quite resourceful: "She could make something out of nothing. She once took the curtains down and made us clothes. We used everything, and we didn't waste scraps." Sister Romboy needed to be efficient because her husband was a POW and might not be coming home soon.

Paul Romboy was captured by the Americans and incarcerated in France after the war. As a typical POW, he wanted more than anything to go home to his family. From March 1946 to July 1947, he wrote at least eighty letters to his wife in Cologne. Those letters have survived and offer important insights into Paul's physical and mental condition during his time in France. The primary topic was his



Fig. 4. Grete Romboy with her children Ursula (seven) and Roderick (one) in 1946. (U. Romboy Gamble)



concern for the welfare of his family. The secondary message was that his own health was good. The third most popular theme was his desire to return to them. Other topics commonly mentioned were the food in the camps, the work he was required to do, and the frequent transfers to other camps.

Because the French censors were always prepared to delete negative statements from the letters written by German POWs, Paul had to be careful to avoid condemning his captors, but enough statements slipped through to let his wife know that he did not trust the French.

The following are comments taken from the letters written by Paul Romboy in France:<sup>5</sup>

April 12, 1946: I started as a welder, then as a tailor, . . . then three weeks as a laborer, then I did embroidery, [and I] last worked with the U.S. Army film exchange as a laborer.

April 17, 1946: I hope and strongly believe that the good and the bad in life will balance out, although it seems at the moment injustice is taking the upper hand. . . . Most of all through all this disaster of war we are still alive and our home is mostly intact and then during the worst time of the war the real eternal happiness never left us.



Fig. 5. German POWs in Marseilles, France. Paul Romboy is in the front row at left with the white tie. (U. Romboy Gamble)

May 12, 1946: The world is one of destitution and of the devil, one must really pass through devil's gate to gain freedom once more.

July 27, 1946: Every additional day that I spend here makes the reality of captivity more real and

twice as hard. This no shaft of light, sometimes I feel like an alien, no promise of home, no mail, no friends and a religion that no one wants to know of and can't understand.

August 2, 1946: The Lord had me come here and he always hears my prayers. He will bring me peace and let me return home soon.

September 9, 1946: How often have I thought and wondered how the Cologne Branch is doing, what Mutti is doing and if Roderick has already been blessed in Church. But as long as the branch has not been reactivated he can't be blessed. . . . Fast Sunday is past but I can still fast next Sunday.

October 18, 1946: Everything comes in due time, such as the food provisions from America. . . . It is good that Church headquarters has not forgotten the members in Germany.<sup>6</sup>

October 27, 1946: I'm really happy I received the *Family Home Evening Manual* [in English].



Fig. 6. LDS chaplain Howard Badger (left) with German POW Paul Romboy in France in 1946. (U. Romboy Gamble)

November 3, 1946: At times I feel that there is no decency left here. The best thing is to stay away and keep to myself. The day will come when I can talk to my wife, who thinks and speaks my language. Right now all seems very dim, one could just despair.

November 20, 1946: I am a priest and an elder in the Mormon Church and I am desperately needed at home.

December 1, 1946: I can work as a craftsman, a saddler, a locksmith, etc.

December 25, 1946: At 11 p.m. the Catholic priest came from the village and celebrated a Christmas program in a little chapel. I attended it although I was not necessarily spiritually uplifted. But all in all everything was really nice. Then one more thing: the International Red Cross gave all the prisoners a Christmas card and 5 cigarettes.



January 6, 1947: Again I want to stress the fact how the Lord hears and answers my prayers.

February 16, 1947: We are always told not to get too friendly with the French or make any kind of advances toward them.



Fig. 7. Paul Romboy as a German POW in France. (U. Romboy Gamble)

February 28, 1947: For some strange reason they have taken our stoves from us and also additional lights. This has occurred in every room large or small. Then for some reason salt will now be rationed or none at all. They feed us pea soup at noon and night. So now we sit here in the cold and all that wood is stacked outside . . . They seem to get pleasure out of annoying us.

April 20, 1947: All prisoners over the age of 45 years have now left the prison camp for home. Now the rest of us are awaiting our turn, but when?

May 11, 1947: I will not forget to thank my God for all that has been given to me and that I always have something additional to eat.<sup>7</sup>

It was 1948 before Paul Romboy returned home to his family and took up his church and business activities in Cologne again.

The fate of the Latter-day Saints in wartime Cologne was reported in letters written by branch members after the war. Walter E. Scoville, an American missionary who served in the branch before the war, worked hard to establish contacts with members after the war. The following are extracts from letters he received:

Gerda Romboy (Cologne, February 4, 1947):

We have been through terrible times. We lost our home four times and my husband (Brother Hugo Romboy) came back from a POW camp very ill. His brothers, Karl-Paul and Gustav, have not yet returned. My son Helmut was officially

listed as missing in action two years ago. . . . Our branch meeting rooms were totally destroyed. . . . You would not recognize our beautiful city of Cologne if you came back. . . . Most of the members survived the war, only Helma Webank was killed in an air raid.<sup>8</sup>

Auguste Bauske (Cologne, early 1947 through British censor):

Brothers Gustaf Prießler and Sachon were killed in battle. Brothers Hubert Ernst, Karl Romboy and Paul Romboy are still POWs. My husband [Albert Bauske] did not have to serve and survived the war well. . . . Köln [Cologne] is 80% destroyed and no longer a beautiful city. The rooms at Bremerstrasse 24 were totally destroyed in an air raid.<sup>9</sup>

G. [Maria] Geller (Engelskirchen, Rheinland on March 4, 1947):

What we went through in the war years was the most terrible experience of our earthly lives, but we felt God's hand protecting us. He saved us from death and suffering. We lost everything but thank heavens our boys Hans and Bub are home, as is Richmund's husband. And Mäusgen's husband will come home soon from his POW camp. Hans suffered much during the war but he is still alive and we are so happy. Brother Geller is still the leader of the branch. He had to go through a lot of hard experiences and the members were so grateful that one man was at home to lead us. . . . Brothers Gustav Prießler and Hans Sachon were killed in battle. . . . We accepted the will of the Lord and said with Job, "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away."<sup>10</sup>

Elisabeth Schmidting (May 29, 1947):

[My daughter and I] were evacuated to Thuringia in terrible cold; we starved and froze. We had two suitcases with our valuables and the Russians stole it all. "Seek ye first for the kingdom of heaven" "Sammelt himmlische Schätze" (lay up treasures in heaven) is what we had learned. When I came back [to Cologne] on December 20, 1945 to [the suburb of] Bruesk, Klausenberg 76, I was without my daughter. I had lost her. My apartment was occupied and my furniture was rented out. I was deathly ill and the godless people living there didn't even take me in for one night. They had stolen lots of our stuff. I had to spend two weeks sleeping out in the open in the most bitter

cold. Nobody would take me in. Nurses found me in the streets and put me in a hospital. Then I was in a sanitorium for seven months and was bedridden for 17 months with a lung disease. Now I am among the mentally ill.<sup>11</sup>

Most members of the branch fared better than Sister Schmidting, but many lost relatives and homes. Many spent part of the war away from home. The branch dwindled in the last war years. As the survivors returned, there was reason to hope that the branch and the grand city of Cologne would revive and prosper.

#### IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Cologne Branch did not survive World War II:

**Peter Bell** b. Köln, Rheinprovinz, 1 Sep 1911; son of Simon Bell and Anna Marie Klaukert; bp. 20 Jul 1921; conf. 20 Jul 1921; d. stroke 14 Mar 1944 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 13; FHL microfilm 25721, 1930 census; IGI)

**Michael Borkowski** b. Burdungen, Ostpreußen, 13 Nov 1878; son of Christoph Borkowski and Katharine Nasienski; bp. 30 Nov 1923; conf. 30 Nov 1923; ord. deacon 14 Sept 1924; ord. teacher 12 Apr 1932; ord. priest 3 Oct 1937; m. 6 Sep 1901, Marie Kerstan; d. heart attack Gelsenkirchen, Bür, Westfalen, 20 Nov 1944 (CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 39; FHL microfilm 25726, 1925 and 1930 censuses; IGI; PRF)

**Karoline Wilhelmine Hassel** b. Niederhausen, Sieg, Westerwald, Rheinprovinz, 23 May 1875; dau. of Johann Heinrich Hassel and Karoline Wilhelmine Schmidt; bp. 5 Jul 1905; conf. 5 Jul 1905; m. Hamm, Sieg, Westerwald, Rheinprovinz, 22 May 1895, Gustav Hugo Theodor Romboy; 8 children; d. Klosterseele, Hoya, Hannover, 16 Jun 1945 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 7; FHL microfilm 271406, 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Günther Hermann Keller** b. Köln, Rheinland, 27 Sep 1923; son of Hermann Keller and Henriette Nadrowski; bp. 1 Jul 1932; m.; d. MIA Russia 1 Aug 1944 (FHL microfilm 271377, 1925 and 1935 censuses; IGI; www.volksbund.de)

**Paul Klein** b. Elberfeld, Rheinprovinz, 28 Jan 1895; son of Robert August Klein and Lydia Böhmer or Döhmer; bp. 23 Aug 1907; conf. 23 Aug 1907; m. Grete Frosholt; d. amentia 26 Apr 1945 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 670; FHL microfilm 271380, 1930 and 1935 censuses)

**Josef Karl Körtgen** b. Köln, Rheinland, 24 Apr 1921; son of Franz Körtgen and Christine Weissbarth; bp. 8 Jun 1929; conf. 9 Jun 1929; private; k. in battle in forest southwest of Teremez, near Chlewischtschi, Russia, 30 May 1942 (FHL microfilm no. 68786, no.74; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37; district list 1947, 330–31; district list 1943–47, 430–31; FHL microfilm 271381; 1925 and 1935 censuses; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Sophie Charlotte Katharina Lichtenberg** b. Herrensöhr, Saarbrücken, Saarland, 4 Dec 1858; dau of Georg Friedrich Lichtenberg and Christiana Luise Henrietta Rosenthal; bp. 27 Sep 1901; conf. 27 Sep 1901; m. August Schmidt or Schmid; 1 child; m. — Schäfer; d. Monbachtal, Neuhausen, Württemberg, 26 Jan 1945 (CHL CR 275 8 2441, no. 282; FHL microfilm 245258; 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI, AF, PRF)

**Elisabeth Mank** b. Hellersdorf, Köln, Rheinprovinz, 9 Aug 1870; dau. of Simon Mank and Katharina Wimel; bp. 17 Jun 1924; conf. 17 Jun 1924; m. Josef Prager; d. heart attack Apr 1943 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 102)

**Josef Prager Sr.** b. Koblenz, Rheinprovinz, 6 May 1870; son of Franz Josef Prager and Anna Lobenthal; bp. 17 Jun 1924; conf. 17 Jun 1924; d. war causes Köln 1943 (FHL microfilm no. 68786, no. 101; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37; all mission list, 1943–46, 186–87; district list, 202–3; FHL microfilm 271395; 1920 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Gustav Adolf Prießler** b. Köln, Rheinprovinz, 12 Jul 1906; son of Gustav Prießler and Emma Auguste Speiser; bp. 19 Sep 1923; conf. 29 Sep 1923; ord. deacon 28 May 1924; ord. teacher 3 Dec 1928; ord. priest 12 Jan 1930; ord. elder 1 Nov 1931; noncommissioned officer; k. in battle west of Baranowicz (Baranowitschi), Belarus 6 Jul 1944 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 98; www.volksbund.de; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, 430–31; IGI)

**Gustav Hugo Theodor Romboy** b. Mühlheim an der Ruhr, Rheinprovinz, 21 Dec 1868; son of Bernhard Josef Romboy and Sophie Frentzen; bp. 28 Dec 1905; conf. 28 Dec 1905; ord. deacon 3 Dec 1928; ord. teacher 7 Sep 1930; ord. priest 1 Nov 1931; ord. elder 3 Oct 1937; m. Hamm, Sieg, Westerwald, Rheinprovinz, 22 May 1895, Karoline Wilhelmine Hassel; 8 children; d. hemorrhage Köln, Rheinland, 22 Jul 1944 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 104; FHL microfilm 271406, 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Helmut Hugo Romboy** b. Köln, Rheinland, 14 Aug 1927; son of Hugo Emil Romboy and Gertrud Widdenhoefer; bp. 10 Jun 1936; private; k. in battle between 18 and 22 Jan 1945; bur. Heinsberg, Germany (CHL CR 375 8 2460, 728–29; FHL microfilm 271406, 1930 and 1935 censuses; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Hans Heinrich Sachon** b. Holthausen, Herne, Westfalen, 2 May 1920; son of Johannes Heinrich



Fig. 8. Helmut Hugo Romboy.  
(U. Romboy Gamble)

Sachon and Klara Emilie Hinz; bp. 1 Jun 1929; conf. 1 Jun 1929; ord. deacon 6 Jun 1933; private first class; k. in battle Italy 6 Dec 1943; bur. Cassino, Italy (CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 496; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 496; FHL microfilm no. 245256, 1935 census; IGI; www.volksbund.de)

**Johannes Karl Schummer** b. Leipzig, Sachsen, 17 Oct 1918; bp. 15 Jul 1927; d. 1942.

**Karl Hans Schumer** b. Leipzig, Sachsen, 10 Apr 1882; son of Johann Heinrich Schumer and Augusta H. A. or Christiane Lohse; bp. 19 Apr 1909 or 10 Apr 1911; conf. 19 Apr 1909; ord. elder 2 Apr 1933; m. Leipzig, Sachsen, 23 Oct 1915, Helene Martha Vogel; three children; d. pneumonia Köln, Rheinland, 27 Sep 1939 (FHL microfilm 68803, no. 838; FHL microfilm 245260, 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Helma Maria Erna Webank** b. Köln, Rheinland, 4 Oct 1930; dau. of Hermann Josef Webank and Berta Emillie Erna Stüber; k. air raid 27 Sep 1944 (FHL microfilm 245295, 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Margarete Weibel** b. Köln, Rheinland, 23 Feb 1920; dau. of Magdalene Schminnes; bp. 8 Jun 1929; conf. 9 Jun 1929; k. air raid Köln 29 Jun 1943 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 133; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37; 1948 list, 1524–25; IGI)

## NOTES

1. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
2. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL LR 10045 11.
3. George Blake, interview by the author, Provo, UT, April 1, 2009.
4. Ursula Romboy Gamble, interview by Marion Wolfert, Salt Lake City, March 16, 2006.
5. Paul Romboy letters to Grete Romboy, private collection, used with permission of Ursula Romboy Gamble.
6. Elder Ezra Taft Benson toured war-ravaged Europe in 1945 and 1946 and arranged for relief supplies to be shipped from Salt Lake City to starving Saints in numerous locations in Germany and other countries.
7. Additional money was earned by prisoners for overtime projects; articles produced were often sold to guards or local French

citizens by prisoners who were allowed to leave the camps during the day.

8. Walter E. Scoville, papers, CHL MS 18613.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

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## DORTMUND BRANCH

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One of the largest cities in the Ruhr region of northwest Germany, Dortmund had 546,000 inhabitants in 1939. Eighteen miles east of Essen, Dortmund was an important industrial and transportation hub and therefore critical to Germany's war effort.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints existed in Dortmund in the form of one branch with eighty-two members. Eighteen of those members held the priesthood, forty members were women over twelve, and eight were children when World War II approached in the late summer of 1939. The branch president at the time was W. Georg Gould, a missionary from the United States. His counselors were local members Franz Willkomm and Felix Kiltz. Other branch leaders were August Kiltz (Sunday School), August Bernhardt (YMMIA), Melitta Matuszewski (YWMIA), Antonin Kiltz (Relief Society), and Ernst Proll (genealogy).<sup>1</sup>

Dortmund Branch <sup>2</sup>	1939
Elders	6
Priests	1
Teachers	3
Deacons	8
Other Adult Males	16
Adult Females	40
Male Children	4
Female Children	4
<i>Total</i>	82

At the time, the Dortmund Branch met in rented rooms on the second floor of a building at Auf dem Berge 27. Erich Bernhardt (born 1920) had this recollection of the setting:

Those were the first meeting rooms that we really liked. They were really nice rooms. It was a commercial building that was used for piano recitals [during the day]. About one hundred people could comfortably sit there and listen to the concerts. There were also a few smaller rooms on the sides. We used those to hold our Sunday School and MIA meetings. The large room could be divided into two smaller areas. The branch had about one hundred members on record, but forty to fifty were regularly in attendance in Sunday School or sacrament meetings.<sup>3</sup>

The meeting schedule was as follows: Sunday School at 10:00 a.m. and sacrament meeting at 7:00 p.m. MIA met on Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m. and the Relief Society met on Wednesdays at the same time. A genealogy class took place on the third Sunday of the month at 5:30 p.m.



Fig. 1. Herbert Kiltz in Russia wrote this letter to his family in Germany in February 1944. He was reported missing in action four months later. (R. Asisi-Bonini)

A dedicated branch clerk (who never mentioned himself by name) compiled a detailed history for the years 1939 to 1946. He made this comment on August 26, 1939: “A decisive event in the history of our branch occurred on August 26 when the

missionaries were called away. W. George Gould left as our branch president along with John Wells due to the fact that war was anticipated. This was a painful loss to us to no longer have missionaries in our midst. The missionaries transferred their authority to Brother August Kiltz.”<sup>4</sup>

Young Paul Todebusch (born 1928) recalled the departure of the missionaries: “Before they left, they said good-bye to us. I remember that one of them was sitting on his suitcase, totally devastated that they had to leave.”<sup>5</sup>

The following is found in the branch history and provides evidence that a number of branch members were willing and able to make the short trip to Essen:

November 26, 1939: A branch conference was held and twenty-five persons attended.

December 15, 1939: Thirty-four branch members attended the district conference in Essen.

“I volunteered for the military because I really wanted to work for the aircraft maintenance department,” explained Erich Bernhardt. “I got in, and that was such a big blessing for me. I was in the Deutsche Luftwaffe, and trained to be an aircraft mechanic.” Little did Erich know that an even greater blessing came in the form of a miscommunication. He was sent to Norway in the place of another man but was kept there for five years because he had the required skills. In Norway, he had an opportunity rare for German LDS soldiers:

When I arrived in Norway in 1940, I sent a letter to my father asking him to provide me with the mission office address in Oslo because I wanted to make contact with the Church there. He sent me the address and I made contact with the mission office. They received me very nicely and I felt at home there. They treated me like a returned missionary although we, as the [German] soldiers, were occupying the country. We were not liked much by the Norwegians. But the membership made me a brother in the Church. And for the Saints there, that was the only vital thing to talk about. I kept contact with the Church in Oslo, Trondheim, Stavanger, and Narvik. It



was a great blessing to be able to be a part of the Church, even in Norway.

Paul Todebusch was first a member of the Jungvolk and then of the Hitler Youth. He recalled his feelings about the experience:

I didn't like to go and had a strong opinion against it. I didn't like what they taught us and what they did in general. Once, we had to meet and stand in rows as the Jungvolk and the Hitler Youth together. We stood parallel to each other. All of sudden, everybody was fighting and somebody was stabbed to death. That incident truly made a difference in how I thought about the war.

We read again from the branch history:

February 2, 1941: Bernhard Willkomm and Melitta Matuszewski were married.

August 31, 1941: Annaliese Frölke was baptized during a district conference.

March 1942: The first great event of the year 1942 was the centennial celebration of the Relief Society on March 22. A fine program was presented in Essen and several members of our branch participated. It was a very spiritual event.

April 19, 1942: Elsa Dreger was baptized in Essen by Elder Gustav Dreger.

August 30, 1942. Nineteen persons attended a genealogical conference.

In the fall of 1942, Herbert Bergmann (born 1936) started school. Regarding the training of school children in the Third Reich years, he recalled the following: "We sang the national anthem every morning. We had to hold up our arms [in the Hitler salute] during the entire song, which was quite a challenge."<sup>6</sup>

Herbert also recalled activities relating to the frequent air raids over Dortmund:

After every air raid, we would go out and collect all the shrapnel. We took a little box and even compared them in school to see who found the best pieces. In the beginning of the war, it was also more like a game still. We would see the planes

and the Christbäume [flares] and would think it was fun. When we realized that the anti-aircraft was gone, war became more of a reality. It was a total nightmare. You sit in your basement, and you hear the bombs coming down with that shrill noise, and you know how close they are. Some sounded like they were right above us. Others were farther away. That is what we learned to distinguish. There were moments when I thought I would not survive. We were all crowded in the basement together—all six families of the house together. I remember one lady who went totally nuts. She started screaming, and they had to hold her down and put something over her mouth. She was never normal again.



*Fig. 2. Herbert Bergmann with the traditional cone full of treats on his first day of school. (H. Bergmann)*

Erich Bernhardt played a crucial role in the life of a young Norwegian Latter-day Saint in 1942, as Erich recalled:

The auditorium of the University of Oslo was burned down by students, some of whom were Nazi sympathizers. The branch president's son was a student at that university but not a supporter of what had been done. Every student of the school was picked up by the police and taken to a concentration camp—so was he. The members of the family approached me and asked if I could help the police understand that the boy had had nothing to do with the incident and that he was not politically involved. I went to the German administration building in Oslo and talked to one of the leading officers. I explained



that the boy's family was religious and in no way harmful or politically active. About two weeks later, that student was called out of a large group of other students and told that he could go home. His name was Per Strand, a son of Einar A. Strand, who was the branch president.

One of the most vivid memories Eugen Bergmann (born 1934) had of wartime Dortmund was a confusing and sad one. He recounted:

My mother and I walked to Church one Sunday morning in Dortmund. The streetcars weren't working anymore, so we had to walk the whole way. We had to cross a square, and we were just about in the middle of it when soldiers came and shot at the windows of the houses and yelled and commanded that everybody should leave the square immediately. I personally saw that day how the soldiers pulled Jewish people out of their homes and how they put the star [of David] on them. It was an awful sight for me. It got worse when I heard the soldiers call the Jews pigs. By that time, I had learned who Jewish people were. We had learned about them in school, and people in our neighborhood talked about them too. Especially some of the older students in my school talked about the Jews. I didn't like that.<sup>7</sup>

Eugen's father was a machinist in a steel factory. In 1942, he was transferred to a factory in Lebenstedt by Salzgitter (about 150 miles east of Dortmund). His wife and their baby followed him to Lebenstedt, but Eugen and his younger brother, Herbert, were sent to towns in the Black Forest in southern Germany. As two of the hundreds of thousands of children sent away from home under the program called *Kinderlandverschickung*, the boys had distinctly different experiences. Eugen told this story:

The families picked us up from the train station. I stayed with the Volz family [in Bad Sulzburg]. They had nine children—two girls and seven boys. The last one was drafted into the war, being seventeen years old, when I arrived. All of the children were gone. They didn't own a farm—just a house with a yard. The father was working at a mill in a different town. I had a really good time there. We didn't feel much of the war happening down there. I had to take care of some

cows and about sixty rabbits. I also chopped wood, but I still had time to make friends with the locals. I went horseback riding. It was a pleasant time. In the beginning, I was very homesick. I missed my mother and my brothers. I was totally cut off from the Church. While I was away from home, I participated in a Lutheran religion class. I was also helping the bell ringer at church. But nobody gave me a hard time because of my religion. The family I lived with were North German Lutherans. I was in that town for about thirteen months.

Herbert Bergmann was not so fortunate when it came to his assignment with a family in the farming community of Grunern:

I lived in the Black Forest for that year, and I had to go to the Catholic Church, which was no fun at all—I hated it. We had Polish workers there; there was only supposed to be one but we had two for some reason. The second guy made great whiskey, and in the mornings I would go into the orchards to pick up all the fruit that was lying on the ground. I would take it to him, and he would make great whiskey from it. Other people from the town would also bring their fruit to him. It was such a small town—everybody knew everybody. One Polish worker did the regular farm-work—the other made whiskey.

Grete Bergmann rescued her son Herbert in early 1944, and Eugen's father picked him up later that year. They all went to their new home in Lebenstedt where the boys could see their father every day for the first time in three years. As Eugen recalled, "We all came together again in a new house. It was a row house with a basement, first floor, and second floor. It was wall to wall with the neighbors. We had indoor plumbing but there was still no refrigerator or ice box. We were in that location when the war ended."

The branch history includes the following report:

In the night of May 4–5, 1943, our branch meeting rooms on the second floor at Auf dem Berge 27 were destroyed in an air raid. All branch property was lost. Therefore we were not able to hold any meetings on May 9 and 16, because we had a lot of adjustments to make. . . .



Fig. 3. Members of the Dortmund Branch. (H. Bergmann)

The Relief Society was also unable to hold any meetings. The Relief Society funds were distributed among needy members with the permission of district president Wilhelm Nitz and district Relief Society president Johanna Neumann. The first meeting after the destruction of our meeting rooms was held on May 23, 1943, in the apartment of Brother Scharf.

Eugen Bergmann recalled seeing the aftermath of the attack and specifically the remains of the church building at Auf dem Berge 27: “The whole front façade had collapsed to the ground. The pump organ was even hanging out over the edge of the destroyed building. We had a prayer meeting after that.”

The same attack that destroyed the branch’s meeting rooms destroyed the home of the Frölke family. According to their son Hans (born 1927), the war did not affect them much until 1943: “We were bombed out twice in two weeks. The first time, we lived in a large apartment building, and we were

on the main floor; the house burned from the top to the bottom, and all the people from upstairs tried to take as many things outside as possible [while the fires burned]. Because we lived on the ground floor, my father broke the window with an ax, and we could carry lots of things out [before the fire burned down to our level].”<sup>8</sup>

The Frölke family then moved into the apartment of Hans’s paternal grandparents in a suburb of Dortmund. On May 23, that apartment was hit and Hans was nearly killed. He explained:

I always slept on the couch in the living room, and I rarely got up when there was an alarm, only when I heard bombs falling—then I got up. That particular night was the same. I waited until I heard [the airplanes] dropping bombs, and then I got up, left the room, and closed the door. I was standing at the front door when I heard a noise in the room that I was sleeping in—the entire room was burning.

That same night, Paul Todebusch's father (who was not a member of the Church) was killed. He was in the official air-raid shelter at a local school. Fortunately, Paul and his mother were away visiting relatives. Soon after the attack, Sister Proll of the branch found Paul's mother and informed her of the tragedy. As Paul later learned, his uncle had identified the body based on the fact that Paul's father always wore brown shoes. Paul's reaction to the loss of his father was predictable:

I was fifteen years old when my father died. We were very close—one heart and soul. Every night when my father came home, he would eat the dinner that my mother had prepared for him, wearing the slippers that we put by the door. He would read the newspaper and smoke his cigarette. He was a happy man. And he wasn't against the church. He allowed my mother to go to church any time she wanted and to pay tithing.

The branch history offers these details about problems caused by the Gestapo:

Brother August Bernhardt went to the Gestapo after our rooms were destroyed and asked for permission to hold home meetings. His request was denied. . . . Later, Brother August Kiltz went to the Gestapo with the same request and was given permission to hold home meetings. Our first meeting was held on September 26, 1943.

Paul Todebusch recalled hearing his uncle describe the visit with the Gestapo:

My uncle [August Kiltz] had been blind since he was eighteen years old. He was invited to the office of the Gestapo with the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the hymnbook and had to explain. All the members were nervous about what might happen. He went there, and they looked at everything he had brought. They then told him that we were not allowed to sing the hymns that used the word "Zion." After that, we did not have any problems with the Gestapo anymore. We do not know who told the Gestapo about us.

More interesting details about the activities of the Dortmund Branch are these from the branch history:

October 10, 1943: August and Anna Grywatz were baptized along with Sister Schneider of Wuppertal; the baptism was performed by Bernhard Willkomm (a priest) in the city bathhouse in Hamm.

During the year 1943, several of our members were bombed out of their homes and had to be evacuated. Eight persons were evacuated. Despite these fateful developments, our members remained loyal to God and to the kingdom.

March 26, 1944: Branch president August Bernhardt was drafted by the Wehrmacht. . . . His successor is August Kiltz.

In February 1944, Herbert Kiltz of the Dortmund Branch wrote a letter to his family, who had been evacuated from Dortmund to southern Germany. He thanked them for sending Christmas packages, of which he had received no fewer than fifteen. In his opinion, he was eating better in Russia ("great meals!") than was his family at home. He was in good health and looking forward to a furlough in March. Whether he ever actually left the combat zone for that furlough is not known. He was reported missing in action in Russia on June 7, 1944, and was declared dead by a court decree after the war.<sup>9</sup>

The hardships of living in an apartment that had been damaged by air raids was something Paul Todebusch could not forget:

Our home was not destroyed during the war, but our balcony was burned, and our windows burst. Our rooms were mostly intact, though. We put blankets and paper over the windows so it would not be so cold during the night. The electricity also didn't work anymore. We fetched water a little farther away from the home. We had to carry it. I think it was more than one hundred meters away. We were allowed to get water twice a day.

In 1944, Hans Frölke and his schoolmates were assigned to operate antiaircraft batteries on the outskirts of Dortmund. By then, his mother and his sisters had been evacuated from the city and were living in Diersheim, near Strasbourg, France. Following the flak assignment, all of the boys but



Fig. 4. Members of the Dortmund Branch during the war. At far right is the blind branch president August Kílz. (H. Bergmann)

Hans were drafted into the Reichsarbeitsdienst. Hans was sent to a premilitary conditioning camp for six weeks, where he had “a most wonderful time and learned a lot.”

Just a little girl, Rita Böhmbeck (born 1940) recalled a terrible experience that happened during an air raid over Dortmund in 1944:

We were trapped for the longest time in the bomb shelter in the Kesselstrasse. There was no food or drink for us. We knocked, but it took them so long to get us out. The door was made out of iron. It was actually a normal basement with a stronger door. It was so dark, and the people knocked on the stones that connected our basement with the neighboring one. The oxygen started to run out. People screamed and prayed and were scared. People in the neighboring house heard the screaming and got out us out through a small hole. I was just four years old. I remember everything. The sight I saw when I left the shelter was horrible. My mother put everything that she thought we

would need in a crisis situation into a box and built wheels and attached those to the box. It was filled with silverware and plates. She also wrapped her accordion in blankets and my doll also. That night, we had to sleep on the street.<sup>10</sup>

The branch history provides this information about the disturbances caused by the war for members of the Dortmund Branch:

October 15, 1944: Due to the confusion caused by the huge air raid over Dortmund on October 6, we could not hold any meetings today. We had to rearrange our affairs totally. We could not hold our fast and testimony meeting on October 1, so we moved it to October 15.

Back at home for Christmas, Hans Frólke was alone with his father. Brother Frólke sent Hans to bring his mother and his sisters home because the American army was approaching the area. It was no longer safe to stay there. From Diersheim, the



group traveled to Erfurt, in central Germany, to stay with friends. Shortly thereafter, they returned to Dortmund, where an order awaited Hans: he was to report immediately for service with the Reichsarbeitsdienst. The date was January 1945.

Hans Frölke seemed to live a charmed life. Following six weeks of service in Schwerte (barely four miles from home), he was instructed to return to Dortmund and report for his next military assignment. While Hans was speaking to the officer who would have made that assignment, an air-raid siren and attack interrupted them, and no decision was made. After the attack, Hans's father told him to take advantage of the confusion and join his mother in Erfurt. From there, he wrote to his father in Dortmund, but that turned out to be a mistake. The postal officials informed the military office in Dortmund of Hans's location, and he received a notice to return immediately. As Hans recalled, "The Americans came to where we were the next day and freed me from having to report for duty." Hans had avoided military duty at a time when young men were dying in great numbers in the hopeless attempt to keep Germany's enemies from her gates.

The branch secretary explained some of the problems encountered by the Saints as the war drew to a close:

Despite the fact that the war's disturbance has reached its zenith, we have tried to hold sacrament meetings. Nevertheless, we had to stop our meeting after the sacrament on March 11 because the alarms sounded and an attack followed. Some of the members were not able to attend the meeting. Constant alarms and attacks on March 18 prevented the members of the Dortmund Branch from attending the district conference, nor could we hold our own meetings on that day. The same was true on March 25, April 1, and April 8. Peace was restored in our city after the arrival of the American troops, and we were able to conduct a sacrament meeting without disturbance on April 15, 1945. On May 6, 1945, the Sunday School started again, having not met since October 15, 1944, due to the increasing dangerous conditions.

At the end of the war, Paul Todebusch was sixteen. He had already done a short stint with the Reichsarbeitsdienst and was actually drafted at the last minute by the Wehrmacht. Fortunately, he did not see any action and was at home in Dortmund when the American conquerors arrived. For some reason, his uncle suggested that Paul surrender to the Americans as a German soldier, even though he had already divested himself of his uniform. Dutifully, young Paul reported to a police officer: "He asked me if I was crazy and told me to go home. I went home and told this to my uncle, who sent me back. The second time, the police kept me, and after a while the Americans took me, put me on a truck, and sent me to a camp. I was a POW for about two months."

As the war neared its conclusion, Herbert Bergmann was nine years old and able to understand some of the military action he witnessed. For example, he noticed that enemy airplanes did not attack the factory where his father worked, but instead tried to destroy the antiaircraft batteries that guarded that factory. "This went on for two days. The enemy sent five planes each time and they were all shot down. They shot down at least twenty-five planes. The factory functioned until the end of the war, and my father was never in danger."

In Lebenstedt, the Bergmann boys watched as the American soldiers entered the town. In the confusion of the takeover, Eugen joined with other boys in collecting goods from destroyed stores in town. He later recalled finding a large box of cinnamon and a pair of boots. At the last minute, several fighter planes made another pass over the neighborhood; their machine guns left several holes in the walls of the Bergmann home. Eugen also remembered how the local mayor had wanted to surrender the town and therefore had raised a white flag above a bunker. A fanatic Hitler Youth boy then shot the mayor for committing treason.

When the war was finally over and Germany defeated, Herbert realized that his dream of joining the Hitler Youth would never be realized. "I wanted



so badly to be in the Hitler Youth. All I had ever known in my young life was Hitler's Germany."

Erich Bernhardt was taken prisoner a few days after the war ended on May 8, 1945, and was kept in Stavanger, Norway, for about three months. As he recalled:

An American unit took us prisoner, and we were very well treated. A British unit occupied the air base that I was working in, and I worked for them during that time. I spoke a little English and was fluent in Norwegian by then, which allowed them to give me different assignments. I was very well liked. They even wanted to keep me from returning back to Germany in August of that year.

Fortunately, he was released that month and returned to Dortmund. A few weeks later, his father came home from a Soviet POW camp; he had been drafted in midwar. The family's apartment had been damaged but was still inhabitable.

Erich Bernhardt assessed his wartime experiences in these words:

I had a very good experience in Norway. I was never in combat and never wounded. I had contact with other [German] LDS soldiers while I was there. They usually attended the meetings in the branches I was visiting so we met there. I was able to translate their testimonies into Norwegian. We talked about our experiences in the war, and they were all as well received in the branches as I was. Being in Norway taught me that the Church is the same everywhere in the world and that even in a war situation the Saints focus on what is most important and don't let themselves become too influenced by politics.

Eugen Bergmann had the following to say about his mother, Grete, who had tried to raise her children without the help of their absent father:

My mother went through a challenging time, with four young children at home, her husband gone, but she always stayed faithful in the gospel. My mother always taught us from the scriptures that we took with us everywhere. She taught us Primary songs. She kept the gospel alive in our home although we couldn't attend church [in Lebenstedt].

The city of Dortmund recorded 6,341 official deaths in air raids, but historians believe that the actual total was substantially higher. Ninety-nine percent of the city center was destroyed. The city was taken by the American army on April 13, 1945.<sup>11</sup>

## IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Dortmund Branch did not survive World War II:

**Gustav Ernst Dietrich** b. Uderwangen, Ostpreußen, 28 Nov 1897; son of Hermann Dietrich and Rosine Neufang; bp. 4 Aug 1929; conf. 4 Aug 1929; m. Louise Wilhelmine Jeckstadt; 2 m. 5 May 1934, Anna Warbruck; d. industrial accident 24 Nov 1943 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 3; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 512; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 512; IGI)

**Margarete Hertel** b. Althaidhof, Haidhof, Oberfranken, Bayern, 7 Jun 1884; dau. of Matheus Hertel and Katharina Hoffmann; bp. 6 Sep 1931; conf. 6 Sep 1931; d. heart attack 9 Apr 1941 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 72; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 598; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 598; FHL microfilm 162782, 1935 census; IGI)

**Herbert Felix Kiltz** b. Elberfeld, Rheinprovinz, 4 Jan 1913; son of Felix Kiltz and Anna Paulina Lemmens; single; 1 child; bp. 17 Jan 1924; MIA Russia 7 Jun 1944; declared dead 31 Dec 1945 or 20 Mar 1954 (Deppe; FHL microfilm 271378, 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Anna Amalie Elisabeth Kreimeyer** b. Höxter, Westfalen, 11 Dec 1897; dau. of Karl Heinrich Kreimeyer and Maria Elisabeth Schimpf; bp. 26 Aug 1925; conf. 26 Aug 1925; m. Dortmund, Westfalen 13 May 1921, Friedrich Julius Franz Todebusch; 2 children; d. heart disease Dortmund 3 Sep 1943; bur. Dortmund 7 Sep 1943 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 46; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 374; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 374; Dortmund Branch history; IGI)

**Joseph Sammler** b. Wongrowitz, Bromberg, Posen, 18 Mar 1891; son of Adelbert Zbierski and Katharine Pazdzierska; bp. 14 Sep 1930; conf. 14 Sep 1930; m. 8 Jul 1921, Elfriede Kroll; d. stroke 20 Mar 1940 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 36; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 560; IGI)

**Friedrich Julius Franz Todebusch** b. Duisburg, Rheinprovinz, 5 Jul 1895; son of Wilhelm Todebusch and Gertrud Heier; d. Dortmund, Westfalen, 24 May 1943.

**Eugen Erwin Trenkle** b. Dorndorf, Donaukreis, Württemberg, 15 Nov 1910; son of Eugen Trenkle and Louise Friedricke Deck; bp. 28 Jul 1920; conf. 28 Jul

1920; m. Anna Wösterfeld; k. in battle Eastern Front 15 Jan 1944 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 51; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, 379; IGI)

**Gerda Christine Wegener** b. Dortmund, Westfalen, 13 Jun 1916; dau. of Gottlieb Otto Wegener and Auguste Ida Schönhoff; bp. 26 May 1929; conf. 26 May 1929; MIA 20 May 1943 (CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 498; FHL microfilm no. 245296, 1930 and 1935 censuses)

**Gustav Wiemer** b. Volmarstein, Westfalen, 17 Apr 1885; son of Gustav Wiemer and Liselotte Dieckermann or Dieckertmann; bp. 30 Jul 1933; conf. 30 Jul 1933; ord. deacon 22 Aug 1937; d. 12 Jun 1944 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 121; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 648; IGI)

**Edmund Heinrich Willkomm** b. Dortmund, Westfalen, Preussen, 10 Jul 1917; son of Franz Willkomm and Wladislawa Maria Tabaczynski; bp. 6 Sep 1931; conf. 6 Sep 1931; ord. deacon 30 Nov 1932; ord. teacher 31 Oct 1933; ord. priest 1 Dec 1935; k. in battle France 23 Mar 1940 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 69; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 596; IGI)

**Johann Willkomm** b. Dortmund, Westfalen, Preussen, 2 Aug 1920; son of Franz Willkomm and Wladislawa Maria Tabaczynski; bp. 6 Sep 1931; conf. 6 Sep 1931; ord. deacon 30 Nov 1932; d. lung disease contracted while in the army Dortmund 20 Dec 1946 (FHL microfilm 68787, no. 71; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 594; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, all-mission list 1943–46, 186–87; IGI)

NOTES

1. West German Mission branch directory 1939, CHL 10045 11.
2. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
3. Erich Bernhardt, telephone interview with Jennifer Heckmann in German, March 31, 2009; unless otherwise noted, summarized in English by Judith Sartowski.
4. Dortmund Branch history, 1939–46, 2, CHL LR 2296 22.
5. Paul Erwin Todebusch, interview by the author in German, Dortmund, Germany, August 7, 2006.
6. Herbert Bergmann, interview by the author, Provo, UT, April 2, 2009.
7. Eugen Bergmann, telephone interview with the author, April 8, 2009.
8. Hans Erwin Froelke, interview by Marion Wolfert, Salt Lake City, February 2006.
9. Herbert Kiltz to his family, February 1944; used with the kind permission of Rita Assisi-Bonini.
10. Rita Böhmbeck Assisi-Bonini, interview by the author in German, Dortmund, Germany, August 7, 2006.
11. Dortmund city archive.

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## DÜSSELDORF BRANCH

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Düsseldorf is one of the principal industrial cities along the Rhine River in northern Germany. With 535,753 inhabitants in 1939, it was also one of the largest cities in the Ruhr River area.<sup>1</sup> The branch of the LDS Church in that city was relatively small, having only sixty members and fourteen priesthood holders as World War II approached.

Missionary Clark Hillam of Brigham City, Utah, was serving as branch president at the time, and the branch directory shows that he had no counselors.<sup>2</sup> Paul Schmidt was the Sunday School superintendent, Manfred Knabe the leader of the YMMIA, Margarete Keller the leader of the YWMIA, and Hedwig Klesper the president of the Relief Society, but no organized Primary existed at the time. Paul Doktor Sr. was the genealogical instructor.

Duesseldorf Branch <sup>3</sup>	1939
Elders	4
Priests	4
Teachers	3
Deacons	3
Other Adult Males	13
Adult Females	28
Male Children	5
Female Children	0
<i>Total</i>	60

The meeting schedule for the Düsseldorf Branch shows Sunday School starting at 10:00 a.m. and sacrament meeting at 7:00 p.m. The only other meetings held in July 1939 were on Wednesdays: MIA at 8:00 p.m. and Relief Society at 9:00 p.m.

Branch meetings were held in rented rooms at Worringerstrasse 112. Kurt Fiedler (born 1926) described the rooms as being on the second floor of

the building at that address. “It was a business building. We set up chairs [each week] in the main meeting room, and there was another smaller room as well. There might have been thirty people in church on a typical Sunday.”<sup>4</sup>

“It was a very small group, but a good branch,” recalled Clark Hillam regarding the Saints in Düsseldorf. He was sad when the telegram came on August 25, 1939, instructing him to leave the country immediately. The telegram also told him to appoint a successor as branch president. He described the situation:



*Fig. 1. Elders Welte (standing left) and Hillam in the home of the Schmidt family. (C. Hillam)*

After we got our evacuation notice, I still had enough time to go to Brother [Paul] Schmidt to tell him that he would be the new branch president. I handed all the records over to him, and he knew that he would be on his own. They were all very sad when they heard that all the missionaries had to be evacuated. They knew that if the missionaries had to leave, that problems were not far away. They believed in the fact that they would be safer if missionaries were around them.<sup>5</sup>

Kurt Fiedler was one of six children in a family who lived in the eastern suburb of Grafenberg, about three miles from downtown Düsseldorf. His mother, Elli, was the secretary of the Relief Society, and his father (though not a member of the Church) “was always active in the branch as either the drama director or the entertainment director. He really loved that,” Kurt recalled.

Just prior to the war, Kurt was a member of the local Hitler Youth group. He remembered the following: “We were trained in survival and camping. I never saw a gun in the Hitler Youth. We did a lot of marching because they mainly taught us discipline. We didn’t have political lessons, but we wore our uniforms for meetings, and that was in itself a political lesson.”

Manfred Knabe (born 1930) provided a fine description of the conditions in wartime Düsseldorf:

We lived under a blackout. All windows had to be totally darkened with black material so that no light could be seen outside. Wardens monitored that very closely and fines were given to people who did not comply. There was an air raid warden in each apartment house. My mother had that duty in our building. She had to see to it that there were buckets of sand and water on each landing in the staircases. And there had to be a broom with a bag over the end to be used to beat out the flames. Every basement was outfitted to serve as an air raid shelter. Thick logs were used to fortify the ceiling joists and bunk beds were installed. A hole was made in each wall to an adjacent building, about one meter in diameter, then the bricks were replaced loosely. If we needed to escape our basement, we could kick the bricks out of the opening and escape.<sup>6</sup>

Preparations for survival during air raids were serious activities, but collecting shrapnel and bomb fragments on the mornings after the raids was a favorite pastime for city children. Manfred recalled that the brass cases from anti-aircraft rounds were especially valuable pieces of his collection.

As the war progressed and Düsseldorf became a frequent target of Allied bombers, Kurt Fiedler was called to perform a most unpleasant duty:

I was assigned to what you would call the home defense. After air raids, we had to dig up the dead or rescue the living who were trapped under rubble—the clean-up after the air raids. It was not very pleasant because, especially when they bombed apartment homes, we had to go down [into the basements]. We were only fifteen and sixteen years old then. We had to remove the bodies of those who were killed. When we found a group of survivors, we felt very successful; that was a good feeling. [But the memory of finding bodies] stays with you for a while.

According to the city historian, Düsseldorf suffered nine heavy air raids and 234 raids resulting in medium damage.<sup>7</sup> During one of those many raids, the branch meeting rooms were bombed out. According to Kurt, meetings thereafter were held

first in schools; when that was no longer possible, the Latter-day Saints met in the apartments of member families. Some of the branch members living in the southern neighborhoods of the city also attended meetings with the branch in Benrath, just a few miles south of Düsseldorf.

In January 1943, Manfred Knabe and his classmates were sent off to eastern Germany as part of the Kinderlandverschickung program. They were housed in a very nice dormitory in the small town of Döntschen and supervised by their teacher and by a Hitler Youth leader. Manfred described the daily life of the thirty-six boys in these words:

We had our classes in the mornings. After lunch, we had quiet time, that is, we had to lie on our beds. Then we did our homework, of course under the watchful eye of our teacher. Then we had our afternoon coffee and our Hitler Youth drills. Then came sports, marching, and war games. We usually had a great time in those activities because our Hitler Youth leader did his job very well. Then several boys were sent off to do small tasks such as fetching milk and mail, peeling potatoes, etc. That kept us in good shape socially. All in all, it was a good experience—except for the homesickness!

Manfred was allowed to go home in November 1943, but he arrived precisely at the conclusion of a terrible air raid. Passing burning buildings on their way home, his mother suggested that he might be better off back at Döntschen. In a subsequent attack, their home burned to the ground, and the family saved only what they could carry. By January 1944, Manfred was back with his schoolmates in eastern Germany, but in a different town. They had been moved to Seiffen, a town famous for its toy manufacturing. Manfred was hosted by the family of a wood carver, and he enjoyed helping the artisan in his shop. Winter sports such as skiing were also a great activity for a big city boy from Germany's flatlands.

Not far from Seiffen was the town of Rechenberg-Bienenmühle, where a small LDS branch held Sunday School. Manfred learned of their meetings and received permission from his teacher to

walk there on several Sundays. As he recalled, "My mother had told me where they met, and I was so happy. I walked to Brother Fischer's house with my hymnal; he was the Sunday School president. They even had a pump organ, but nobody could play it, so I did it as well as I could—usually with two fingers."

The family of branch president Paul Schmidt lived at Lorettostrasse 51 in Düsseldorf. According to his son, Siegfried (born 1939), they walked perhaps twenty minutes to church. Unfortunately, Brother Schmidt's term as the branch leader ended in 1943 when his apartment was destroyed. Although only four at the time, Siegfried recalled clearly the night his home was hit by Allied bombs. With the building above them in flames and the exit from the basement blocked, he and his mother had to leave through a hole in the basement wall into the next building. Emerging onto the street, they saw that their building would not survive the flames. He described what happened next:

All I could see was fire everywhere. Seeing us walking down the street, a woman stopped and asked us if we had lost our home. When we told her that we had, she invited us to come to her house so we would have a safe place to stay. Soon, my father came home [from Leipzig] and stood in front of a house that seemed to be unfamiliar—he could still see our kitchen. My mother had taken a board and written where he could find us in case he came home and hung the board on the front door. My father later told us that he said a prayer the moment he realized that we were alive, giving thanks to his Heavenly Father.<sup>8</sup>

Paul Schmidt was a construction engineer for the Rheinmetall Co., a manufacturer that had been compelled to move its operations into the interior of Germany a few months earlier. When he found an apartment near Leipzig, Brother Schmidt moved his family out of Düsseldorf, hoping to take them a bit farther away from the dangers of the war.

The Schmidt family's new apartment was in Zehmen, a few miles from Leipzig. Siegfried recalled walking more than an hour to the outskirts of town on Sunday mornings, then taking a streetcar to



church. Because it was too far for them to go home between meetings, they stayed at the home of Siegfried's aunt in Leipzig in the afternoons, then returned to the rooms of the Leipzig West Branch for sacrament meeting.

In 1943, Kurt Fiedler was drafted into the national labor force and sent off to help build air fields. He did that for three months. Back at home in November 1943, he knew that a call to the Wehrmacht would arrive soon, so he volunteered in order to choose his branch of

the service. He selected the navy and was sent to the Netherlands, where he was assigned to a submarine unit. Fortunately, he was not sent to sea but rather was trained as a torpedo specialist and sent to an arsenal at a French port city. The closest he came to actual service at sea was an overnight voyage in a submarine that was short of crew members.

By the summer of 1944, the Allied forces that landed at Normandy were moving toward the interior of France, and Kurt Fiedler's unit was sent eastward. "We had lost too many submarines by then, and they didn't need us for that duty anymore," he explained. "They sent us in small groups because the French underground were looking for us. One of our small groups was totally wiped out. Eventually, a train picked us up and took us eastward—past Berlin and all the way to Kolberg [near the Baltic Sea]."

Arriving in Kolberg three days behind schedule, the young soldiers were first threatened with court martial due to their tardiness; they managed to convince their officers that constant bombings had delayed their transportation. Kurt and his comrades then received an assignment to work on the assembly of the V-2 rocket bomb. They remained at that factory until early 1945. Bombed out of work at the factory, they were sent to Cuxhaven on the

North Sea coast, where they were assigned to a ship that never came. They simply waited there until the British invaders surrounded the harbor.

When it appeared to the people of Seiffen that the war was lost and the Soviets would be in their town soon, they entered the forest and buried any items bearing swastikas, such as uniforms and books. On May 8, a Soviet officer came to town and ordered the people to remove antitank barriers. After doing that, the boys and their leaders began a long hike toward home, having no desire to wait until the Red Army arrived. After walking more than one hundred and fifty miles westward through the Erzgebirge Hills in about nineteen days, they arrived in the city of Eisenach. Their leaders were able to find four trucks to take them westward toward home. A few days later, Manfred arrived at the home of his parents in a devastated Düsseldorf. His family had lost their home and most of their possessions, but fourteen-year-old Manfred (from whom nothing had been heard for several months) had come home safe and sound.

Siegfried Schmidt recalled experiencing the end of the war as a six-year-old:

A large group of [German] antiaircraft crew members went marching by under American guards. Each prisoner had his hands behind his head. That was the first thing I could recall about peacetime. When the Americans came into our town, they gave me a bar of chocolate and a pat on the back. I knew that they were looking for German soldiers in our houses, but there was nothing wrong with that.

Things worked out for POW Kurt Fiedler everywhere he turned. His British captors did not work their prisoners very hard, and before long Kurt found himself working in the kitchen. "I had all the food I could eat." In August 1945, the camp commandant asked Kurt if he wanted a leave to go home for ten days. "He said that if I could either enroll in school or find a job; he would give me my final release when I returned to the camp." He was even allowed to use British transportation on his



Fig. 2. Celebrating "the spirit of the pioneers" in 1939. (C. Hillam)

way home to Düsseldorf. After a successful ten days, he returned to the camp only long enough to get the release papers. The British even loaded his duffel bag with food and other valuables that he could take home to his family.

During his two years away from home as a soldier and a POW, Kurt Fiedler never saw combat action. He also never saw the inside of an LDS church, met another LDS soldier, or took the sacrament. His only contact with any church came when the POWs were required to attend a service in the local Lutheran church. As he explained, “We had to go to church on Sunday. If we didn’t or couldn’t, they would make us do KP duty or clean toilets. Of course, nobody wanted to do that.”

The Fiedler home in Grafenberg was fortunate to survive the war without a scratch, although Kurt recalled coming home to the sight of buildings down the street that were damaged to some degree. Most of the Latter-day Saints in Düsseldorf were still alive in 1945, but four of Kurt’s non-LDS friends had lost their lives in the service of their country. “It was a bit lonely when I came home,” he explained, “but soon I fell in love with a young lady from the Benrath Branch who eventually became my wife.”

The loss of Kurt’s brother Herbert Eduard, known as Eddy, was especially difficult to understand. At the end of the war, Herbert was only fourteen but was not normal as defined by Nazi health standards. Kurt described his younger brother in these words: “He was an autistic child who had trouble learning. He was a good kid, a great kid. He was smart.” During the war, a doctor required the boy to be sent to an institution. On one occasion, Kurt visited Eddy at a town somewhere in the Rhineland. Toward the end of the war, the family received notice that Eddy had died of pneumonia. They were certain that he had become a victim of the heinous euthanasia program. Kurt recalled the following:

They did experiments with kids [like Eddy]. We learned later on from a nurse who worked there. She contacted my mother, and she said they worked with those kids, and they experimented

with them and killed them. That was in a place called Rupert. I visited him there once; he was in bad shape. I could see that already. It was not Eddy anymore, he was a different person. That was shortly before they announced that he died of pneumonia.

The metropolis of Düsseldorf appeared to be a hopeless landscape in the summer of 1945. More than nine thousand people had perished during the destruction of the city, and it would be years before there would be enough housing for the survivors.<sup>9</sup> Like their neighbors, the Latter-day Saints of the Düsseldorf Branch would return over the next few years from countless locations in Germany, Europe, and elsewhere to begin a new life.

#### IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Düsseldorf Branch did not survive World War II:

**Herbert Eduard Fiedler** b. Düsseldorf Stadt, Rheinland, 18 Jun 1930; son of Alexander Ferdinand Valentin Fiedler and Minna Ella Hecker; d. euthanasia, hospital in Rheinland 1944 or 30 May 1945 (Karl Fiedler; IGI)

**Eduard Oskar Huettenrauch** b. Kunitz, Jena, Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, 16 Oct 1866; son of Eduard Huettenrauch and Auguste Heuslar or Heussler; bp. 3 Sep 1931; conf. 3 Sep 1931; ord. deacon 19 Jun 1932; d. heart disease 11 Jan 1941 (CHL CR 375 8 2430, no. 949; FHL microfilm 162792, 1935 census; IGI)

**Heinrich Laux** b. Straßburg, Elsaß-Lothringen, 21 May 1886; son of Georg Laux and Alwine Weimar; bp. 1 Jul 1932; conf. 1 Jul 1932; d. 4 Jul 1943 (FHL microfilm 68788, no. 53; CHL CR 375 8 2430, no. 973; IGI)

**Hubertine Reiner** b. Baal, Rheinprovinz, 10 Feb 1871; dau. of Otto Reiner and Anna Maria Porten or Perten; bp. 12 Sep 1924; conf. 12 Sep 1924; m. Oct 1898, Wilhelm Heinrich Hermann Schnell; d. heart attack 1 May 1943 (FHL microfilm 68788, no. 43; FHL microfilm 68786, no. 162; FHL microfilm 245258, 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses)

**Lena Eliese Grete Wachsmuth** b. Haspe, Westfalen, 2 Mar 1901; dau. of Friedrich Georg Hubert Wachsmuth and Selma Alma Clauder; bp. 8 Feb 1925; conf. 8 Feb 1925; d. 7 Dec 1938 (FHL microfilm 68788, no. 44; IGI)

**Franz Josef Wolters** b. Dorsten, Westfalen, 10 Nov 1857; son of Josef Johannes Clemens Wolters and Anna

Maria Bernhardine Schulte; bp. 16 Oct 1920; conf. 16 Oct 1920; ord. priest 15 Dec 1935; ord. elder 15 Dec 1935 or 21 May 1939; m. Essen, Rheinprovinz, 21 May 1889, Friederike Francisca Brücker; 7 children; d. old age 23 Jan 1944 (FHL microfilm 68788, no. 73; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 690; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 690; FHL microfilm 245303, 1935 census; IGI)

**Wilhelmine Marie Clara Rosa Zacher** b. Erfurt, Sachsen, 29 Jul 1884; dau. of Wilhelm Zacher and Anna Louise Wilhelmine Amanda Müller; bp. 6 Dec 1901; conf. 6 Dec 1901; m. 26 Apr 1914, August Weber; d. blood poisoning 25 Jul 1944 (FHL microfilm 68788, no. 45; FHL microfilm 68786, no. 114; IGI)

## NOTES

1. Düsseldorf city archive.
2. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHLLR 10045 11.
3. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
4. Kurt Fiedler, interview by the author, Sandy, UT, February 17, 2006.
5. Clark Hillam, interview by the author, Brigham City, UT, August 20, 2006.
6. Manfred Knabe, autobiography (unpublished); private collection.
7. Düsseldorf city archive.
8. Siegfried Helmut Schmidt, telephone interview with Judith Sartowski in German, February 25, 2008; summarized in English by Judith Sartowski.
9. Düsseldorf city archive.

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## ESSEN BRANCH

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Located essentially in the center of the Ruhr industrial district in northwest Germany, the city of Essen was long famous for the gigantic Krupp Stahlwerke. The company had produced military equipment for decades before the start of World War II in September 1939. Essen is located on the north bank of the Ruhr River and had 664,523 inhabitants at the time.<sup>1</sup>

The largest branch in the Ruhr District of the West German Mission, the Essen Branch had 162 registered members. With so many members, the

branch leadership directory dated June 27, 1939, shows all callings occupied.<sup>2</sup> The branch president at the time was Walter Biehl, a member of one of the largest and most faithful families of Latter-day Saints in Germany. Walter's brother, Friedrich, was at that time the president of the Ruhr District and was called in September to lead the entire mission.

Essen Branch <sup>3</sup>	1939
Elders	16
Priests	6
Teachers	8
Deacons	12
Other Adult Males	28
Adult Females	82
Male Children	5
Female Children	5
<i>Total</i>	162

The branch directory was filled out by Walter Biehl and shows his beautiful handwriting, a recreation of the Fraktur style used mostly in printing. The list shows first counselor Aloys Müller and second counselor Jakob Kirchhausen. Other leading men were Heinrich Schmitz (Sunday School), Carl Schlingmann (YMMIA), Paul Müller (*Der Stern* representative), and Walter's father, Friedrich Biehl Sr. (genealogy). Leading women in the branch were Berta Kirchhausen (Relief Society), Luise Schwiermann (Primary), and Ella Schmitz (YWMIA).

When the war began, the branch was holding its meetings in rooms rented since the 1920s in a Hinterhaus behind the building at Krefelderstrasse 27. Karl Müller (born 1922) provided this description:

The building looked like a barrack. We walked up some wooden stairs, and then we entered the meeting room. The classrooms were located on the main floor. We also had a podium. There

must have been about thirty people in attendance each Sunday. We sat on chairs, not on benches. When I was the Sunday School secretary, I had my own table at the front of the room.<sup>4</sup>

fonts in the entire mission. The Essen Branch history gives the following description:

There was even a baptismal font located next to the Relief Society room. For each baptismal ceremony the water had to be heated in large tin containers. Cold water was added by means of a hose. However, there was no way to drain the basin. . . . The sisters scooped the water out after each ceremony, using various containers. In the years prior to the construction of the font, baptisms had been carried out in the Ruhr River or in the Friedrich Bathhouse.<sup>6</sup>

Missionary Erma Rosenhan from Salt Lake City observed a baptism in Essen on Sunday, March 19, 1939, and recorded the event in her diary:

Up at 6 a.m. . . . By 7:15 I was in the Branch to see the baptisms. There were quite a few people there. There was a regular program given. The water was heated by stoves and there were pine needle boughs all around the font to make it look nice. There were 3 children and one adult (man) baptized.<sup>7</sup>

Willi Ochsenhirt (born 1928) was also baptized in that font. In addition, he recalled a picture of Christ's baptism showing the Holy Ghost descending in the form of a dove. That picture hung on the wall behind the podium. There was enough room on the rostrum for a large choir. "I remember once that we had a choir competition with the Herne Branch," Willi explained. "They won because they had a spectacular soloist."<sup>8</sup>

Branch members had several opportunities each week to go to church. Sunday School began at 10:00 a.m. and sacrament meeting at 6:00 p.m. The genealogy class met on the second and fourth Sundays of the month at 8:45 a.m. On Tuesdays, Primary began its meeting at 5:30 p.m., and that was followed by MIA at 7:30 p.m. The Relief Society sisters and the priesthood holders gathered on Wednesdays at 7:30 p.m. in separate rooms.

Sister Rosenhan's comments about the Essen Branch include this comical assessment of the Primary children: "Sunday, August 13, 1939: Had to teach the [Primary] 'B' class again this morning. They were little 'devils' and certainly angered me."

WESTDEUTSCHE MISSION

Erlang. 5-JUL 1939

GEMEINSCHAFT Essen      DISTRIKT Ruhr

DATUM 27 Juni 1939

AMT	NAME	ADRESSE	
		Stadt	Strasse
GEMEINSCHAFTS-Präsident	Walter K. Biehl	Essen	Biehlstr. 15
1. Ratgeber	Aloys Müller	--	Weißstr. 9
2. Ratgeber	Jakob Kirchhauer	--	Karmerstr. 31
Sekretär	Paul Müller	--	Weißstr. 9
SONNTAGSSCHULEiter	Heinrich Schmitz	Schmitz	Maininger Str. 6
Sekretär	Gustav Müller jun.	--	Berliner Str. 112
E.F.F.i.M.-Leiter	Carl Schlingmann	--	Tommeusenweg 10
Sekretär	Erwin Obatenbauer	--	Höckerstr. 7
E.F.F.i.M.-Leiterin	Ella Schmitz	--	Maininger Str. 6
Sekretärin	Irene Heinrich	--	Sommerburgstr. 21
GEMEINSCHAFTSleiter	Friedrich Biehl sen.	--	Biehlstr. 15
Sekretär	Ant Biehl	--	--
PRIMARKLASSENleiterin	Luise Schwiermann	--	Leisenfeld 3
Sekretärin	Grete Biehl	--	Biehlstr. 15
SCHWESTERKLASSEleiterin	Berta Kirchhauer	--	Karmerstr. 31
Sekretärin	Elis Biehl	--	Biehlstr. 15
TEENAGENT	Paul Müller	--	Weißstr. 9
SONSTIGE BEAMTETE			


  
 Unterschrift des Gemeindeführers

Fig. 1. Front page of the branch directory showing Walter Biehl's artistic handwriting. (Church History Library)

Artur Schwiermann (born 1927) recalled that the words "The Glory of God Is Intelligence" were painted on the wall behind the podium. Among those who attended Sunday School were several children whose families did not belong to the Church (which was the case in most branches in Germany). He explained the presence of those children in Primary as well: "Everybody in the neighborhood knew we were members of the Church. The children would say, 'Frau Schwiermann, when can we go to Primary?' There were six or seven whom she took along to Primary."<sup>5</sup>

The Essen Branch enjoyed a most rare feature in their meeting rooms—one of only three baptismal



Other comments reflect the fear of approaching war: “Wednesday, August 23, 1939: Relief Society and choir practice. Because of having to darken [blackout] everything we couldn’t have choir practice last night.”



Fig. 2. The Biehl family in Essen. Branch president Walter Biehl is in the back row, far right. Mission supervisor Friedrich is seated next to his father. (M. Biehl Haurand)



Fig. 3. The Essen Branch meeting rooms were large but modest. Note the photograph of Church President Heber J. Grant. (G. Blake)

One of the saddest events in the life of the Essen Saints was the departure of Sister Rosenhan on August 25, 1939 (her mission companion, Sister Heibel, was a German citizen who remained in Essen). Sister Rosenhan was assisted by president Walter Biehl in transporting her trunk to the railroad station for the trip to Amsterdam. As they went back and forth across the city in response to contradictory instructions from harried railroad officials, they stopped at Walter’s home to say good-bye to

his family. Sister Rosenhan wrote this description of the situation:

Sister Biehl was crying. While [her husband] was helping me get away. He had received his military summons and had to report that very day. Pres. Biehl slumped back in the taxi and said he would not go to work that day. I gave him most of the money I had. . . . I can still see the faces of my companion and Pres. Biehl as the train left. We all cried. . . . Pres. Biehl called [the mission home in] Frankfurt to tell them that I had left.



Fig. 4. Members of the Essen Branch in 1939. (M. Biehl Haurand)

Friedrich Ludwig Biehl was released as the supervisor of the West German Mission and was succeeded by Christian Heck of Frankfurt on December 31, 1939. Elder Biehl’s personal history is very short from the day he entered the military and reads as follows:

I was drafted into the army on 14 December 1939 so I could no longer function as the mission leader, but I kept the calling [for two more weeks]. I came to the infantry in Bromberg [Posen]. During the month of March I went to Kleve, West Germany. Then I was in the campaign in Holland, Belgium, and France. In April 1941, I was back in Germany. From Marienburg, West Prussia, we marched to the Eastern border and then with the beginning of the Eastern campaign we went to Lithuania, Estonia and Russia. We started combat with the Russians on 23 [22] July 1941. It would be too difficult to write about the afflictions, sufferings and distress that I experienced from these [campaigns].<sup>9</sup>

Walter Konrad Biehl (born 1914) was a copy editor and had married just three months before the war began. In his detailed autobiography, he reported being stationed in many locations on the Western Front: in the Netherlands, in Belgium, in Luxembourg, in France near the Maginot Line, and in several towns in western Germany not far from his own home. He traveled on furloughs to Tilset in East Prussia, the home of his wife, Gertude. He rejoiced in every opportunity to see his daughter, Angelika, who was born on April 10, 1940. Whenever and wherever possible, he attended church meetings.

Margaretha Biehl (born 1927) recalled the pressure put on her by the leaders of the League of German Girls. They instructed her to report on Sundays for activities or assignments. “They would give us a permission form to take to our parents. So I came home and I showed it to my father and he said, ‘Sunday I take my children to church and nothing else. You cannot go.’ And I prayed every day, because I knew that the government could put my father in a concentration camp if he interfered with something like this. And I just didn’t know what to do.”<sup>10</sup>

Margaretha also recalled the propaganda films she and her classmates were required to watch. They all went to the movie theater on Mondays to see films showing how Hitler’s government had made everything better. One of the films showed the people in the Netherlands welcoming the German invaders as liberators. “I can still see that in my mind,” she said.

“We lived right on a plaza across from an entrance to a park in a very visible location,” recalled Johannes Biehl (born 1929), “so my dad was assigned to display a large swastika flag. But he often forgot and wasn’t very conscientious about it. He was visited once by a representative of the Gestapo who told him, ‘Sir, if you forget again to display the flag, you will be in trouble.’ And of course, now we know what he meant by trouble.”<sup>11</sup>

Johannes recalled other aspects of life in Nazi Germany:

The [Hitler Youth and League of German Girls] collected money quite frequently, sometimes on national holidays. They used metal containers and rattled them and begged people going by to donate. I remember that my Dad always responded by saying that he had already given to the church. They even came into the apartment building to collect, but my father never gave them any money.

Regarding political matters in the branch, Johannes recalled:

In our sacrament meetings we had a bit of turmoil. I remember one brother who was a Nazi at heart and prayed once in a while that Germany would be victorious. Eventually, he was not asked to pray anymore. On the other hand, there was a brother who prayed that the church would be victorious—not necessarily that Hitler would get out of the way, but it was clear that he was opposed to Hitler’s government.

Some of the earliest members of the Essen Branch were the family of Friedrich and Emilie Ochsenhirt. They had arrived in the city from Darmstadt, Hesse, during World War I when Friedrich was assigned to work as a blast furnace stoker at Krupp. When Willi was born in 1928, the family was complete with twelve children. It was a serious challenge for Brother Ochsenhirt to provide for his family, and he did many odd jobs on weekends and holidays. When the war began, Friedrich was over seventy years of age, and several of his children were still living at home.<sup>12</sup>

“Three weeks before finishing my apprenticeship as a carpenter, I was drafted into the Reichsarbeitsdienst,” recalled Karl Müller, “I worked on sewage systems and drained fields in Silesia.” Upon his return to Essen, he was drafted by the Wehrmacht and sent to Norway. Following a period of training as a radio man, he was assigned to a very remote outpost near the Arctic Circle. While there for three and a half years, he dealt with isolation and did not know much about what was happening elsewhere in the war. Regarding his circumstances, he recalled: “I did not feel sad or depressed [in isolation]. I tried

to make the best out of the situation. I did not have my scriptures with me while I was up there.” Like so many other German LDS soldiers, he was totally isolated from the Church and the Saints while away from home.

Artur Schwiermann was first a member of the Jungvolk and was then advanced to the Hitler Youth. Under the motto *Jugend führt Jugend* (youth lead youth), he was given charge of a group of younger boys. “We marched, sang and shot. We had air rifles and would go camping, which I always thought was fun.” On occasion, the meetings interfered with Sunday School, but Artur then was all the more determined to attend sacrament meeting that evening.

Many German civilians came into contact with prisoners of war or forced laborers from conquered countries, but fraternization was strictly prohibited. Nevertheless, Artur recalled watching his mother hand apples or potatoes to Russians they passed one day. “Somebody asked my mother if she wasn’t ashamed for giving food to the enemy and I joined in with ‘Yeah, Mom, you shouldn’t do that.’ She looked at me and replied, ‘Remember one thing: They are all children of our Heavenly Father.’ My mother was a saint.”

During the last months of 1942 and the first months of 1943, Walter Biehl received training at what he called a “war school” near Prague, Czechoslovakia. He described it as an unpleasant experience but was pleased to be promoted to



*Fig. 5. Willy Ludwig as a Jungvolk boy in April 1939.*



*Fig. 6. Gertrude, Angelika, and Walter Biehl in September 1942. (A. Biehl Bremer)*

sergeant major. Following another furlough at home with his family, he was transferred to the Eastern Front in April 1943.

To escape the increasing danger in Essen, Johannes Biehl and his classmates were sent away in early 1943. He recalled the setting:

My class was sent to Austria to the Zillertal along with a teacher or two teachers in those days. They taught every subject that students needed to be taught in school, and an adult Hitler Youth Leader was also there. [We were put up in] a small hotel. We had to march in line to our meals, and instead of having a blessing on the food, we would have to stand up and raise our arms and say, “Heil Hitler!” and the same at the beginning of the school class and at other gatherings. It was always “Heil Hitler!”

On March 3, 1943, former mission supervisor Friedrich Biehl was killed in an accidental fire in Russia. The letter written to his father by the company commander dated March 4 provides a description of the event:

In a temporary company barrack a fire suddenly broke out that rapidly spread to two adjacent barracks. A strong wind fanned the fire and in no time the entire structure was in flames. Although his other comrades were able to escape the conflagration, the company later determined that your dear son was not to be found and was probably consumed by the flames. Along with the entire company, I express my deepest sympathies.<sup>13</sup>

Walter Biehl soon wrote to the company commander to inquire about the tragic event. His letter reads in part as follows: “Allow me to ask most respectfully: Was any trace of my brother found after the fire? From your letter, Herr Leutnant, it is not clear whether my brother actually perished in the flames.” The response was equally respectful, but negative: “I can report only that two days after I wrote my letter, the men searched the ruins of the barrack for any possible evidence that would allow the definite conclusion that your brother did indeed perish in the flames. Nothing could be found.”

It would seem that the lack of clarity about Friedrich Biehl's fate was somehow recorded in Wehrmacht records. After the war, the German Commission for the Preservation of War Graves expressed the theory that his remains—as those of an unknown soldier—had been buried at a German war cemetery in Korpowo, Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Friedrich's death was a terrible blow to Walter. He wrote this assessment of his brother in the following months:

Fritz was always a good example for me in everything. I will always have a respectful memory of him. I thank my Creator for the knowledge, that I will see my beloved brother and my other beloved ones after this life on earth. From the time of this death I have felt a deeper duty to the work of the Lord. Fritz left to me many good and noble thoughts, which I will use, so far as it is in my power. I wish the time were soon at hand that I could work again in the Church of Jesus Christ.

The following postscript was written by his father, Friedrich Johannes Biehl: "So far and to this point the writings of my son Walter. 'Man thinks, but the Lord directs.' So it was decided by the Lord to take our dear Walter to him on September 1, 1943." The family received the following letter informing them of Walter's death in combat:

Dear Mrs. Biehl:

As the successor of the killed company leader of your husband, I perform the sad duty of informing you that your husband lost his life on 1.9.43 . . . as the head of his platoon.

. . . He was always an excellent comrade and, in hours of peril, a brave leader.

In heartfelt memory of a hero, who gave in the war his life for his homeland and family, I salute you with a Heil Hitler,

Yours

Rolf Kuhn

Lieutenant and Comp-Leader

Following the death of two sons, Friedrich Biehl was predictably angry, blaming Hitler's government for the family's tragedies. His daughter, Margaretha, recalled how he came home from work for lunch one day and stated that he was going to "tell them."

Understanding that any complaints in public could lead to imprisonment and other penalties, Sister Biehl begged her husband not to make any protests to anybody. According to Margaretha, "I can still see my mother holding on to him and begging him to not say anything. [After that] maybe he just talked about it to people he trusted."

In Austria, young Johannes Biehl found that letters he wrote to his brother Friedrich were returned. Soon after his father informed him of Friedrich's death, another brother, Alfred, came for a visit along with his wife. Johannes was very discouraged, and Alfred reported that to their father. When Walter was killed, Brother Biehl felt that Johannes should not have to go through another such tragedy alone, so he traveled to Austria and told the authorities that he was taking his son home to Essen. Because most schools in Essen had been rendered useless, Johannes was sent to Wommen in Hesse to live with an uncle and to attend school.

The branch meeting rooms at Krefelderstrasse 27 were destroyed early in the war, after which meetings were held first in the Krupp Realschule, and then in the apartments of various families, including the Biehls. That ended when the building in which the Biehls lived was gutted by bombs and flames. None of the family members were harmed; some were in the basement, others in public shelters, and Margaretha was visiting relatives in Wommen, Hesse. When she returned to Essen, she found her family living in her uncle's apartment.

It seemed to Margaretha Biehl that the Allied air forces specifically planned to miss the huge Krupp factories when they dropped their bombs on Essen. According to her recollection, "They didn't hit Krupp until the end of the war, but they hit most of the residential areas of the city." In fact, official reports show that 90 percent of the city's industrial area was destroyed and 60 percent of the entire city. Of the 664,523 residents in 1939, at least 30,746 were killed in the attacks and 1,356 prisoners of war were also victims. A total of 242 attacks were made on the city, of which 30 were considered "severe."<sup>15</sup>



A remarkable incident occurred during an air raid that began during a church meeting on Sunday. Margaretha recalled that the Saints in attendance hurried to the shelter:

We were meeting at the Küppers on that Sunday. And then the sirens went off. And so we all went to an old high school (where we later held meetings) because they had a nice air-raid shelter underneath. There were other people in the shelter, and we [LDS] were in one corner—about twenty of us. And then we all knelt down to pray, and Brother Müller said the prayer. And he said, “And Heavenly Father, watch over these our brethren in the airplanes that they would return home safely.” He called them our brothers. And we had to be careful that the others didn’t hear.

Artur Schwiermann was inducted into the national labor force in 1943 at the age of sixteen. He served on an anti-aircraft crew in Steinfeld and Villach, Austria. “I was only there for a few months, but I saw a lot of action.



*Fig. 8. The Biehl family lived on the second floor of this apartment building until it was bombed and burned out. (M. Biehl Haurand)*

The Americans flew over and it was my job to shoot them down. I was trained on the 88 mm howitzer and learned how to use a radio.” While in the Reichsarbeitsdienst, Artur made the mistake of failing to salute a Gauleiter (regional leader of the Nazi Party).<sup>16</sup> In order to avoid a court-martial, he volunteered to join the Wehrmacht and was in the air force in early 1944.

The Ochsenhirt family also experienced tragedies during the war. The worst took place on October 25, 1944, according to daughter Berta (born 1909):

Our good mother and [our sister] Thekla got killed in an air raid. Myself, I was in Upper Hesse when that happened. . . . I traveled back [to Essen] partly by train, partly walking by foot, and sometimes riding in a farmer’s wagon. After two and a half days, I arrived in Essen because everything was destroyed. . . . People took me

home but I don’t know who. There my father sat alone. He cried like a child. The next day was the funeral on the terrace cemetery. My father had a nervous breakdown.

For the next few months, Berta struggled to care for her distraught father. She eventually moved him into an asylum in Giessen, then to another in Mockstadt, and then back to Essen. During air raids in the last years of the war, she had to seek refuge with him in the same shelter in which his wife and his daughter had died.<sup>17</sup>

Berta’s brother, Willi Ochsenhirt, had been moved with his schoolmates and his teacher to a town in Czechoslovakia in 1942. It was there that he heard about the air raid that had killed so many people in Essen. In 1944, he was surprised to see his mother come to visit him. He was still in that town when she was killed in October. Soon after the air raid, Willi and his friends were told that the attack on Essen had taken the lives of many people, but Willi did not know if any of his family members were among the victims. Nevertheless, when permission was given for some of the boys to go to Bratislava and from there to Germany, he was one of those who left. On the way to Bratislava (approximately twenty miles), he met a man he would call his good Samaritan.

I was walking along in my Hitler Youth uniform trying to get passing German trucks to give me a ride, but nobody would. Then a Slovakian truck came by and a man asked if I needed help. I told him what I needed [a ride to Bratislava], and he took me right to the railroad station there. My own people would not help, but he did, even though the Slovaks hated us and the [Hitler Youth] uniform I was wearing.

Willi traveled to Vienna, where he found his sister. The two then made their way home to Essen and arrived in November to find that their mother and their sister had indeed been killed. According to Willi, his mother was fortunate to be buried in a coffin at a time when most of the dead were simply wrapped up and placed in mass graves. A few

months later, boys of Willi's age were required to report for an army physical. Being very small (still not even five feet tall), he was told by the army physician, "You're too little. Go back home to your mama." Some of Willi's friends were drafted, and some were killed in the final months of the war.



*Fig. 9. Air-raid damage done to the apartment house in which the Schwiermanns lived. (A. H. Schwiermann)*

Shortly before the war ended, Karl Müller's unit was moved from Norway to southern Germany to escape the advancing Soviet army. In Germany, Karl was taken prisoner by the Americans and later handed over to the French. As POWs in France, Germans learned the dangers of working with two kinds of mines—the coal mines whose terrible conditions cost many young men their health, and the land mines that had to be removed from fields and forests where German attackers and defenders had laid them. Because he was not robust, Karl was put on the land mine removal detail. He described the work in these words:

We received training on how to remove the mines safely. I did think about the fact that I could die when I was a prisoner removing those mines. But for some reason, I always had the feeling that nothing would happen to me although I saw people dying because of this every day. My clothing was often ripped apart but my skin was never hurt. One never knew if there was a mine with every step that was taken.

A combat veteran by the end of the war, Artur had seen many of his friends killed, mostly in Poland and eastern Germany as the Soviet army moved inexorably into Germany. Along the way he had several opportunities to take the life of an enemy, but he never did so. He described one such situation in these words:

One time, we had orders to take prisoners. Three Russians came, out and I knew that if I turned them in, that they would be shot. I shot at them but missed them on purpose by quite a ways. They got the message and took off. It is possible to have a good heart even though one is a soldier. My dad always told me that if somebody surrendered, you give them all the courtesy you can. Because he could have killed you and he didn't. My father knew that from spending four years in the trenches in World War I.

Artur's unit eventually moved through Czechoslovakia and surrendered to the Americans coming from the west toward Dresden. Unfortunately for Artur, the Americans turned him over to the Soviets (a German soldier's worst nightmare), and he began a term of four and a half years as a POW. "They didn't give us enough to eat, and I went from 185 pounds to 95 pounds in the first six months. I kept going for the next four years. I stole a lot and tried to survive that way—whatever I could get my hands on."

Johannes Biehl experienced the end of the war at his uncle's home in Wommen. Just a few miles from Eisenach, Johannes had been able to visit the Wartburg Castle, where Martin Luther had translated the New Testament into German. In that location, Johannes came into contact with both American and Soviet invaders in April 1945, because the border of the two occupation zones ran between Wommen and Eisenach. He recalled that when the Americans came through Wommen, a black soldier saw his watch: "He said, 'Beautiful!' and then he ripped the watch off my wrist." Fortunately, that incident was the worst thing that happened to Johannes Biehl in Wommen. A few months later, he was home in Essen.

The following text from the branch history reflects the difficulties experienced by Latter-day Saints still in the city of Essen after their meeting rooms at Krefelderstrasse 27 were destroyed:

The members were once again left up to their own devices and had to improvise. The Paul Küpper, Schwiermann and Naujock families allowed the Saints to meet in their homes. The Küpper family provided space in their basement. The Naujocks family had a single family dwelling on Lepsiusweg in the suburb of Frohnhausen and the Schwiermann family had a large apartment. The meetings were thus held alternately at those locations. . . . Eyewitnesses . . . testify that they could truly feel the spirit of the Lord under those humble circumstances, despite all of the problems they had to contend with on a daily basis.<sup>18</sup>

By the time the war ended, Willi Ochsenhirt had left Essen and joined two of his sisters in a small ancestral town north of Frankfurt. It was there that he experienced the arrival of the American army. As he recalled, "I had a knife with a handle made of deer bone. I went up to a soldier and gave it to him (I had learned to speak English in school). They were checking everybody to see if we had weapons, so I just gave it to him." Like most boys his age (sixteen at the time), Willi was always ready for a new adventure. So it was that he and some friends found an American tank abandoned in the mud, and they climbed inside. There they found cigarettes and food "and stuff." Later, they discovered a German *Panzerfaust* (bazooka); having been shown previously how to operate the weapon, they successfully fired it at a tree.

In 1947 and 1948, Karl Müller received a more merciful assignment as a POW in France. No longer did he have to remove land mines, but rather he worked with electronics and repaired watches. Regarding his time away from home, he said the following:

During the seven years I was away from home, I never met another member of the Church or had any contact with the Church. My parents received a letter stating that I was missing in

action and they did not know where I was or if I was still alive for some time. And then my grandmother (who was not a member of the Church but a very good woman) had a dream that I had visited her to tell her that I was in French captivity and that I was doing well. I also gave her the name of the place where I was. She then went and looked for that place and found it on a map. She told my parents where I was and that I was safe.

Returning to Essen in 1948, Karl learned that his parents had been bombed out of their home but had survived and were well, living in a suburb of Essen. He concluded his story with this statement: "My testimony was not shaken because of the war. I did not worry about the idea that God would let things like this happen. I knew that his ways were not our ways."

During his years as a POW in the Soviet Union, Artur Schwiermann endured harrowing conditions but eventually regained much of his weight. Part of the suffering was emotional, caused by the overseers' practice of promising that a prisoner would be sent home soon, only to postpone the move time and time again. Regarding his spiritual condition during those times, he offered the following summary:

I was in the service for seven years and never had the opportunity to attend a meeting, meet a member of the Church, or read the scriptures. I had a testimony of the Church before I went away in the army. I held my own Sunday Schools on Sundays alone and because I remembered some of the songs, I just listened to them in my mind. I promised the Lord that if he would get me out of this hell, I would never miss a church meeting again. While I was gone in the service, I could have answered correctly all of the questions asked in a temple recommend interview.

Several members of the Essen Branch were killed in the air raids that reduced the city to rubble. Several others were among the 18,864 men of the city who died in the service of their country. The few Saints who were still in Essen when the American army arrived on April 11, 1945, were still holding meetings and looking forward to the time when their loved ones would return.

IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Essen Branch did not survive World War II:

**Elisabeth Helene Bernicke** b. Essen, Rheinprovinz, 31 Mar 1904; dau. of Heinrich Bernicke and Auguste Kutz; bp. 6 Oct 1921; conf. 6 Oct 1921; d. rib infection 20 May 1945 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 1; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 16; FHL microfilm 25722; 1930 census; IGI)

**Friedrich Ludwig Biehl** b. Essen, Rheinprovinz, 26 Feb 1913; son of Friedrich Johannes Biehl and Marie Nölker; bp. 14 Dec 1924; conf. 14 Dec 1924; ord. deacon 14 Apr 1929; ord. teacher 25 Jan 1931; ord. priest 13 Dec 1932; ord. elder 4 May 1934; German-Swiss Mission 7 Mar 1934 to 1 Nov 1936; supervisor West German Mission 1 Sep to 31 Dec 1939; private; company clerk; d. in fire Buregi, Ilmensee 3 Mar 1943 (M. Biehl Haurand; FHL microfilm 68789, no. 4; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 20; www.volksbund.de)

**Walter Konrad Biehl** b. Essen, Rheinprovinz, 11 Jul 1914; son of Friedrich Johannes Biehl and Marie Nölker; bp. 14 Dec 1924; conf. 14 Dec 1924; ord. deacon 14 Apr 1929; ord. teacher 17 Apr 1932; ord. priest 3 Oct 1937; ord. elder 13 Jan 1938; West German Mission 12 Jan 1938 to 6 Jan 1939; m. 27 May 1939, Gertrud Lotte Mamat; 1 child; lieutenant; k. in battle Russia 1 Sep 1943 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 5; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 24; M. Biehl Haurand; H. Haurand; IGI)

**Bendix Christian Karl Breitenstein** b. Herbede, Westfalen, 5 Mar 1907; son of Heinrich Gottfried Breitenstein and Elisabeth H. Mintrup; bp. 16 Apr 1921; conf. 16 Apr 1921; m. Feb 1929, Anna Zarembo; police constable; k. in battle Trojana Pass, Balkans, 23 Aug 1944 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 19; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, 202-3; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 43; FHL microfilm 25728, 1925 and 1930 censuses; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Ernst Johann Heinrich Gallep** b. Kettwig, Werden, Rheinprovinz, 24 Jul 1914; son of Heinrich Gallep and Martha Eumann; bp. 9 Jun 1928; conf. 10 Jun 1928; ord. deacon 1 Sep 1929; ord. teacher 13 Dec 1932; ord. priest 27 Feb 1933; ord. elder 4 Jul 1934; missionary 28 Dec 1932; m. 17 Dec 1938, Liesbeth Böttcher or Boettger; k. in battle Mal Skabino, Russia, 25 Jan 1944 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 27; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 431; IGI)

**Elisabeth Marie Luise Heckmann** b. Kirchheimbolanden, Rheinprovinz 14 Sep 1861; dau. of Peter Heckmann and Karoline Hofmann; bp. 20 Mar 1923; conf. 20 Mar 1923; m. 15 Jun 1885, Wilhelm Karl

Fahrbach; d. old age 4 Feb 1943 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 190; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 813; IGI)

**Leo Karbacher** b. Klein Tarpen, Graudenz, Westpreußen or Essen, Rheinprovinz 29 Dec 1899; son of Leo Karpinski and Pauline Stankewitz; bp. 22 Aug 1925; conf. 22 Aug 1925; m. 16 Aug 1924, Therese Anna Horn; k. bomb explosion 25 Oct 1944; bur. Terassenfriedhof, Essen, Rheinprovinz (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 51; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 160; FHL microfilm 271376; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Ernst Lehnert** b. Niklasberg, Böhmen, Austria, 16 Oct 1879; son of Johann Lehnert and Anna Krause; bp. 28 Oct 1928; conf. 28 Oct 1928; ord. deacon 1 Sep 1929; ord. teacher 1 Feb 1931; ord. priest 17 Apr 1932; ord. elder 6 Mar 1937; m. 5 Jun 1910, Auguste Emilie Minna Luthin; d. lung disease 29 Apr 1945 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 65; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 446; FHL microfilm 271386, 1930 and 1935 censuses)

**Hermann Benjamin Mantwill** b. Mulk, Ostpreußen, 6 Jan 1876; son of Karl Ludwig Mantwill and Auguste Dorothea Schmidt; bp. 3 Apr 1920; conf. 3 Apr 1920; ord. deacon 24 Jul 1921; ord. teacher 14 Jun 1925; ord. priest 14 Apr 1929; ord. elder 12 Jul 1936; m. 26 Apr 1905, Johanna Louise Gärtner; 3 children; d. gastric ulcer Essen, Rheinprovinz, 9 Aug 1941 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 73; IGI)

**Karl Gustav Müller Jr.** b. Ellrich, Grafschaft Hohenstein, Sachsen (province), 22 Sep 1888; son of Johann Philipp Karl Müller and Henriette Karoline Dorothea Schoenemann; bp. 22 Aug 1925; conf. 22 Aug 1925; ord. deacon 14 Sep 1926; ord. teacher 14 Apr 1929; ord. priest 1 Feb 1931; ord. elder 6 Mar 1937; m. Ellrich 8 Apr 1912, Friederike Emilie Fuchs or Krone; 2m. 11 Oct 1921, Katharina Elise Somm; 1 child; d. pneumonia Essen, Rheinprovinz, 31 Jan 1945 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 82; IGI)

**Heinz Erwin Emil Naujoks** b. Hamborn, Rheinprovinz, 9 May 1915; son of Emil Naujoks and Berta Marta Eschrich; noncommissioned officer; d. Chemin-des-Dames, France 8 Jun 1940; bur. Ford-de-Malmaison, France (IGI; www.volksbund.de)

**Emilie Ochsenhirt** dau. of Thekla Ochsenhirt (M. Biehl Haurand)

**Friedrich Ochsenhirt** b. Darmstadt, Hessen, 4 Jul 1912; son of Friedrich Ochsenhirt and Emilie Schwarzhaupt; bp. 11 Sep 1920; conf. 11 Sep 1920; m. Hessen 10 Nov 1935, Elise Gottschalk; d. MIA Stalingrad, Russia, 1942; bur. Rossoschka, Wolgograd, Russia (W. Ochsenhirt; www.volksbund.de)

**Thekla Ochsenhirt** b. Ranstadt, Hessen, 15 Dec 1906; dau. of Friedrich Ochsenhirt and Emilie Schwarzhaupt; bp. 23 Aug 1919; conf. 23 Aug 1919; k. air raid



25 Oct 1944 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 100; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 2530)

**Erwin Pfothenhauer** b. Essen, Rheinprovinz, Preussen, 25 Sep 1921; son of Waldemar Wilhelm Pfothenhauer and Christine Kohl; bp. 28 Feb 1931; conf. 1 Mar 1931; ord. deacon 3 Jan 1937; lance corporal; k. air raid Liebau, Latvia, 22 Nov 1944 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 152; Jansen, KGF; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, 186–87; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 575; FHL microfilm 271393; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; IGI; [www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de))

**Werner Hermann Pfothenhauer** b. Essen, Rheinprovinz, 24 Nov 1917; son of Waldemar Wilhelm Pfothenhauer and Christine Kohl; bp. 22 May 1926; conf. 22 May 1926; ord. deacon 7 Aug 1932; m. 20 Apr 1940, Anneliese Brosch; lance corporal; d. in POW camp 99 Spasskij Sawod, Ural, Russia, Jun or Jul or Sep 1941 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 113; Jansen; [www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de); CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, 1949 list, 764–65; FHL microfilm 271393, 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Hermann Rehkopf** b. Niedernjesa, Göttingen, 7 Jun 1898; corporal; k. Dunquerque, France, 25 Feb 1945; bur. Bourdon, France ([www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de))

**Friedrich Schäl** b. Gottesberg, Schlesien, 9 Feb 1889; son of — Schäl and Ernestine Heinzl; bp. 18 Sep 1926; conf. 18 Sep 1926; ord. deacon 31 Oct 1933; ord. teacher 10 Jan 1937; ord. priest 9 Oct 1938; m. 26 Dec 1912, Klara Ida Ludwig; at least 3 children; k. air raid 27 Apr 1944; bur. Essen, Rheinprovinz (FHL microfilm 68803, no. 338; FHL microfilm 245258; 1930 and 1935 censuses; [www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de); IGI)

**Paul Erich Schäl** b. Essen, Rheinprovinz, 20 Nov 1916 or 22 Nov 1916; son of Friedrich Schäl and Klara Ida Ludwig; bp. 10 Jul 1925; conf. 10 Jul 1925; lance corporal; k. in battle Kutowaya, Russia, 30 Jun 1941; bur. Petschenga-Parkkina, Russia (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 136; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 342; FHL microfilm 245258; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; [www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de); IGI)

**Emilie Schwarzhaupt** b. Ranstadt, Oberhessen, Hessen, 20 Oct 1885; dau. of Konrad Schwarzhaupt and Minna Westerweller; bp. 7 May 1910; conf. 7 May 1910; m. Ranstadt 17 Aug 1902, Friedrich Ochsenhirt; k. air raid 25 Oct 1944 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 99; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 252; IGI)

**Auguste Wilhelmine Stadie** b. Groß Jegersdorf, Insterburg, Ostpreußen, 3 May 1873; dau. of Christoph Stadie and Dorothea Braemer; bp. 14 Dec 1924; conf. 14 Dec 1924; m. Norkitten, Ostpreußen, 16 Jan 1895, Ferdinand Wilhelm Schmude; d. old age Roxheim, Hessen, 22 Apr 1943 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 137;

CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 356; FHL microfilm 245258, 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; IGI; AF)

**Augusta Szillat** b. Ossingken, Ostpreußen, 14 Feb 1870; dau. of Daniel or David Szillat and Marie Szebang or Szebauy; bp. 12 Feb 1932; conf. 12 Feb 1932 (div.); d. heart attack 27 Jan 1945 (FHL microfilm 68789, no. 189; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 812; FHL microfilm 245279, 1935 census; IGI)

## NOTES

1. Essen city archive.
2. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL LR 10045 11.
3. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
4. Karl Gustav Müller, interview by the author in German, Breitenbach, Germany, August 18, 2008; unless otherwise noted, summarized in English by Judith Sartowski.
5. Artur Heinz Schwiermann, telephone interview with the author in German, November 30, 2009.
6. Essen branch history, 29. For some reason, the branch history gives the house number as 29, whereas the branch directory and eyewitnesses agree that the number was 27.
7. Erma Rosenhan, papers, CHL MS 16190.
8. Willi Ochsenhirt, interview by the author, Riverton, UT, April 6, 2007.
9. Friedrich Ludwig Biehl, "Life Story" (unpublished autobiography), chapter 7; private collection.
10. Margaretha Biehl Haurand, interview by the author, Bountiful, UT, April 6, 2007.
11. John A. Biehl, telephone interview with the author, August 6, 2009.
12. Berta Ochsenhirt Hommes, "The Ochsenhirt Family History" (unpublished manuscript); private collection.
13. Original in the collection of Margaretha Biehl Howard, Bountiful, UT.
14. See the commission's website at [www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de). The commission is understandably very reluctant to provide any but exact details regarding the whereabouts of missing German soldiers.
15. Essen city archive.
16. He defended himself with the derogatory statement, "I don't see a reason to salute every streetcar conductor" (a dangerous reference to Nazi Party officials as being nonmilitary and thus superfluous).
17. Friedrich Ochsenhirt never recovered from the shock of his wife's death. Eventually, Berta took him to Upper Hesse, near his birthplace, where he died in 1950.
18. Essen Branch history, 31.

## HERNE BRANCH

The Herne Branch was located in a city that lies between Essen and Dortmund. The 129 members of the branch were distributed throughout a city that numbered nearly one hundred thousand inhabitants when World War II broke out. In general, the Herne Latter-day Saint represented in their socioeconomic status the local society, dominated by blue-collar workers in industry and mining.

The branch met in rented rooms at Schäferstrasse 28. Helga Gärtner (born 1929) described the setting:

The Schäferstrasse was a little outside of the city center and we did not have to meet anywhere else during the war. The rooms were in the Hinterhaus. We entered the building in the back door and were then standing in a small room. From that small room, one could enter the large room in which we held our meetings. The bathroom was located upstairs and could be reached by a small staircase. Everything was kept very simple. We held all of our meetings in that large room since we did not have smaller ones to use. . . . It was all so simple but we were so happy. There were about twenty to thirty people in attendance on a good Sunday. . . . We even celebrated Christmas in those rooms.<sup>1</sup>

A missionary in Herne in 1938, George Blake of Vineyard, Utah, described the branch as “one of the strongest branches I worked with in Germany.” He recalled several members who were educated and strengthened the branch. With the departure of the American missionaries in August 1939, Franz Rybak was asked to lead the branch, which he did for the next nine years. According to the branch history, he was initially assisted by counselors Eugen Kalwies and Hermann Heider.<sup>2</sup> Other leaders of the branch in 1939 were Gustav Mellin (genealogy), Alma Domina (Primary), Fritz Gassner (music), and Augusta Ryback (Relief Society).<sup>3</sup>

Herne Branch <sup>4</sup>	1939
Elders	13
Priests	2
Teachers	1
Deacons	6
Other Adult Males	21
Adult Females	63
Male Children	12
Female Children	11
<i>Total</i>	129



Fig. 1. A baptism in the canal by Herne in 1933. (H. Uhlstein)

According to the branch directory, the first meeting on Sunday was a teacher training class at 8:30 a.m., with Sunday School at 10:00 a.m. and sacrament meeting at 7:00 p.m. Tuesday was a busy

day in the branch, with the Relief Society meeting at 5:00 p.m. and a Bible study class (apparently replacing MIA) at 7:00. The genealogy class met every fourth Tuesday at 7:00 p.m. The Primary met on Thursdays at 4:00 p.m., and an entertainment activity was scheduled for each Friday evening at 7:00 p.m.

Edith Kalwies (born 1931) recalled being baptized in connection with a district conference in Essen:

Whenever there was a district conference there, people would be baptized because they had a baptismal font. All the children who had birthdays were baptized that day. It was December 17, 1939. My father was away in the service so I was baptized by Brother Ryback. We were confirmed by Brother [Christian] Heck, the [mission supervisor].<sup>5</sup>

When the war began, Helga Gärtner was a new member of the Jungvolk. She had these recollections of the organization:

For us it was a wonderful program, similar to the Boy and Girl Scout program of today. Once a week, we would go to home evening. We were taught world history, of course with the emphasis on Hitler's agenda. We were told to read his book, *Mein Kampf*, but I never did. I found it too boring. All I was interested in was the fun that was offered. . . . Once in a while they would take us to classic films. The best were the Shirley Temple films. She was our idol. The whole troupe would go downtown to a real theater as a group with our leader. After one year, we were given uniforms to wear. I loved going there for the fun and the friendships I made.<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of a crucial mining region, the city of Herne was subjected to constant bombardment from the air. Early in the war, Andreas Gärtner was drafted. Soon thereafter, his wife and their two children lost their apartment. Helga recalled that terrible night:

We had fled to the bunkers again one night. When my mother, my grandmother, my brother and I emerged the next morning, we all turned to look at our mother in shock. The sheer terror

of the bombing and the realization that our home had received a direct hit and was gone, had paralyzed the left half of my mother's face. She never regained any sensation to that half of her face to the end of her life.<sup>7</sup>

With her home in ruins, Emma Gärtner allowed her children to be sent away from Herne. Fortunately, both Helga and Reinhard (born 1933) were placed in homes in the small town of Urloffen, near Kehl in Baden. Helga described the experience in these words:

Reinhard and I were able to see each other during the school hours. My brother was so homesick and I was desperately sad for him. He missed our mother so much. We didn't have an easy life either. After school we were required to earn our keep and do chores around the farm. In this little farming community, there was a trade school for nurses and we would serve as models of critically injured patients for them to practice on.<sup>8</sup>

Edith Kalwies and her siblings were likewise sent away from Herne. For nine months, they lived with various families in a small town near Weimar in Thuringia. Back home, it was decided that they should again be evacuated. The second time saw them in a hotel commandeered for their use in a town near Berchtesgaden in Bavaria. While there, an unusual event occurred—Adolf Hitler came to town. She recounted:

One day, somebody came running and said that Hitler was in the village. And they wanted all the youth groups there to put on our [Jungvolk] uniforms they had given us. Black skirt, white blouse, and a black kerchief. We were to assemble ourselves and walk down to the village where Hitler supposedly was visiting. I think he was paying a condolence call to a widow whose husband was a military officer who had been killed. There was a staff car and bodyguards, and there were quite a few of us, and we were half-circled around the house, and they told us to chant for him until he finally came out. He shook hands with a few who were right in the front and then waved his hand and said good-bye and took off in his car. I had actually seen Hitler with my own little eyes!



Fig. 2. *The Herne Branch in 1939. (H. Ulstein)*

Andreas Gärtner was not happy when he learned that his children were separated from their mother. When the term of her Bavarian stay ended, Edith's classmates all headed west for Herne, while little Edith boarded a train east to the home of relatives. Her journey took her hundreds of miles to East Prussia to a town near the city of Tilsit. It must have been a daunting expedition for such a little girl. "I had my little suitcase and a little sign around my neck with my name and my destination. They told the stationmaster to look out for me and call ahead to the stationmaster where I was supposed to go and let him know that a little girl was coming and to look out for me." The destination was the farm of Brother Gärtner's uncle, and Martha Kalwies was welcomed there with her children. On several Sundays, the Kalwieses were able to attend church meetings with the Tilsit Branch. It was a long walk that they sometimes made on Saturday evening in order to be on time the next morning. A single lady in the branch often took them in.

It was about 1942 when the Fritz Gassner family lost their home for the first time. They were living on Schäferstrasse not far from the branch rooms. Daughter Ingrid (born 1932) recalled the sight when she, her mother, and her brother emerged from their basement shelter when the all-clear sounded: "We looked up and the rooms above us were destroyed. We saw a woman who was severely injured by a piece of metal. My mother was able to get us out of there. It was scary."<sup>9</sup> They found another apartment

and were bombed out again. Finally, they returned to the Schäferstrasse and lived in the same building as the church rooms; that building survived the war.

Herbert Uhlstein (born 1934) had about as many exciting experiences as any boy could want—and several that were definitely unwanted. The first may have been the destruction of the apartment building in which his family lived. When a bomb struck the side of the building near the third floor, the inhabitants in the basement shelter could hear the structure begin to collapse. As was required all over Germany, a hole had been opened into the adjacent basement and closed again temporarily. Herbert recalled how it took only seconds to open the hole and move the fourteen persons (including his mother, his baby cousin, and himself) through a series of basements before emerging onto the street. He described what happened next in the commotion:

My mother was trying to hold her hands over my mouth [to keep the dust out] when the building collapsed. Our house and the house next to it were burning. I was carrying my baby cousin, and I ran right into a bomb crater in the street. A bomb had hit there and broken the water pipes, so it was already full of water, and I fell into it. Thank goodness there was a gentleman right behind us; he jumped in and got us out.<sup>10</sup>

The aftermath of the air raids was a shared experience in wartime Germany. Herbert recalled being loaded onto trucks with other youth and taken to areas of the city where the youths were required to help rescue people trapped in basements and to recover bodies of the victims. "I found a man just standing there in a bombed-out building. He looked perfectly alive, and I hollered at him to come and get out of there. He fell over, and his whole back was burned from top to bottom. He was already dead."

Herbert learned how to survive in wartime, but he had a hard time understanding certain political concepts, such as the Nazi treatment of the Jews: "My best friend was Jewish. I played with him and grew up with him. One afternoon we were playing together, and the next day they took him away.



I couldn't understand why he hadn't said good-bye. I asked my mother why and a lot of questions. She tried to explain it to me."



Fig. 3. Left to right: Heinrich Uhlstein, Herbert Uhlstein, Andreas and Sara Gärtner (parents of Sara Uhlstein), and Sara Gärtner Uhlstein. (H. Uhlstein)

Heinrich Uhlstein was already in uniform at the time and therefore could not help his wife and son find another place to live. Fortunately the family of Gustav Mellin (also members of the branch) took them in for the next few weeks. About a year later, the government wanted to send Herbert to Hungary as part of the Kinderlandverschickung program, but Sister Uhlstein resisted. The Uhlsteins may have escaped some of the unpleasant aspects of life in Nazi Germany, but another threatened them in 1944: Herbert turned ten and was to be inducted into the Jungvolk program. His parents were distinctly anti-Hitler and would gladly have kept Herbert away from that influence. He recounted the story:

First we got letters and then I had to do a lot of fibbing. I wasn't going to tell them the truth because my mother would be in trouble. Then two Nazi soldiers came and took me away to be interrogated. They had me in that room for quite a while. I was really scared. I told them that my mother didn't want me to go [to Jungvolk activities] because I was skinny and frail. After that, we took off and went to Erfurt.

Sister Uhlstein took Herbert to the home of relatives near Erfurt in central Germany, where they stayed for about ten months. She had already

received notice that her husband was missing in action, and she must have felt very lonely and discouraged. In any case, they had escaped the Jungvolk leaders and were safe in a relatively peaceful part of Germany.

Helga and Reinhard Gärtner stayed in Urloffen for three years, and though they were visited only once by their mother, they wrote many letters. Back in Herne, Emma Gärtner and her mother had moved into a small cabin on a garden property at the outskirts of town. In 1944, the children were finally allowed to return home and were taken in at the garden property. Helga viewed the devastation of her home town but was pleasantly surprised by one thing:

The Schäferstrasse was still intact and the meeting rooms were not damaged. It was astonishing, but we still met regularly on Sundays and everything seemed to be just the same. The only change we noticed was that the attendance declined during the war years, but that was something we knew would happen. I am not sure if we always had enough priesthood holders during the war [because I was gone] but I know that some elderly brethren and sisters were still there.

Ingrid Gassner joined the throngs of children being evacuated from Herne in 1944. The destination for her class was near Bratislava in Czechoslovakia. Gone for nearly three years in all, she was also housed in locations near Prague and in Passau, Bavaria. Because Fritz Gassner suffered from a kidney ailment, he was not drafted. He and his wife were even able to visit their daughter on one occasion. The government's youth programs were in full swing where Ingrid was, as she explained:

The Jungmädel program taught us cleanliness and exercise and good manners. We knew we had to keep our rooms in order. . . . Our leaders taught us the basic way of life. I wasn't really homesick while I was gone because we had our teacher with us and we knew our classmates. But I was isolated from the Church and never had an opportunity to attend meetings.

Ingrid and her company were moved farther west as the war drew to a close and the Soviet army approached from the east. By the time the end of the war came, they were in territory conquered by the Americans. Somehow, they found rail transportation and made their way safely home.

When the Red Army invaded East Prussia in the fall of 1944, Martha Kalwies realized that she needed to take her children and head west. She made a small backpack for each child and filled it with clothing, shoes, and a favorite toy. As Edith recalled, "The German troops were retreating column by column, and most of the populace was on the road. We heard that the Russians had already broken through." Sister Kalwies was most fortunate to rescue her children from that dangerous situation. By the end of the war, they were back in Herne. Andreas Kalwies was reported missing in action, but it was eventually reported that he was a POW of the Americans. The family had lost their apartment and nearly all of their earthly possessions, but when Brother Kalwies returned several years after the war, they were at least all together and healthy.

Like Sister Kalwies, Sara Uhlstein had no desire to be in the path of the invading Soviet soldiers. She took Herbert one day and began the trek west to Herne, nearly two hundred miles away. They walked with thousands of refugees. When it was clear that they did not know which way to go, Sister Uhlstein took her son into the forest, where they knelt and prayed for guidance. Then she announced that she knew which way to go. They soon crossed over railroad tracks, and she told her son that they were to follow the tracks. "When I saw that the tracks were unused and the weeds two feet high, I told her, 'Mother, no train is coming down this track. It hasn't been used for a very long time!'" Nevertheless, they went where she directed, and eventually a train did come. It was a military transport that had been rerouted due to a damaged main line. The two jumped aboard and rode with the soldiers until enemy planes attacked the train.

Later, they found a ride on some trucks, did a lot of walking, and arrived safely in Herne.

Their return was safe, but being in Herne again was fraught with danger. In the last months of the war, Herbert Uhlstein and his mother spent more and more time standing in line to get food from stores with ever-decreasing supplies. On one such day, Herbert was in one line and his mother in a second when a potentially disastrous incident occurred, as he recalled:

It was right before the end of the war when the enemy was shelling the town with artillery. They hit the house across the street from where my mother was in line. The shrapnel came flying and hit her right on the side of her hip where she carried her canister with a gas mask in it. It hit that steel canister and flattened it. Those canisters were really well built. The blow knocked her down, and she was sore for a long time. She had a big bruise, but nothing was broken.

When the British occupied Herne in 1945, Franz Ryback's apartment was searched and the branch funds were confiscated. Soon after that incident, he appeared in the office of the British commandant in the Herne city hall and informed the officer that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints enjoyed protected status under the Americans and that the confiscation of the branch funds was illegal. The commandant ordered that the funds be returned, and the branch was allowed to develop without restriction.<sup>11</sup>

With the war over, Helga Gärtner and many other Germans had to deal with the fact that Hitler had caused unspeakable things to be done. She recalled being told during the war that the Jews were Germany's ruin and were simply being deported from Germany; she and other German youth believed those claims. When the truth about the murder of the Jews was uncovered after the war, she said, "We didn't believe this at first because our leader always spoke of honor, goodness, and kindness and love of our fellowman."<sup>12</sup>

The incessant bombings by the Allies killed only one member of the Herne Branch but drove

many others from the city for years at a time. At least six men died in combat. It would have been easy at the end of the war to give in to despair, but the Latter-day Saints in that battered city did not. Their meetinghouse still stood, and they gathered in increasing numbers as the dust of war settled.



Fig. 4. Members of the Herne Branch during World War II.  
(H. Ulstein)

#### IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Herne Branch did not survive World War II:

**Auguste Bweski** b. Pierlafkin, Ostpreußen, 19 May 1885; dau. of Martin Bweski and Gottliebe Librida; bp. 12 May 1909; conf. 12 May 1909; m. Adolf Starbatti; k. air raid 11 Nov 1944 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 114; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 362; FHL microfilm 245273; 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Julie Auguste Dobrzinski** b. Barloschken-Neidenburg, Ostpreußen, 1 Dec 1885; dau. of Frieda Dobrzinski; bp. 4 Sep 1927; conf. 4 Sep 1927; m. 19 Nov 1905, August Jedamski; d. stomach cancer 2 May 1943 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 166)

**Egon Drawe** b. Herne, Westfalen, 10 May 1939; son of Wilhelm Gottlieb Drawe and Marie Anna Müller; d. lung sickness or lung operation 6 Mar 1940 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 147; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 840; IGI)

**Wilhelm Gottlieb Drawe** b. Herne, Westfalen, 11 Aug 1900; son of Heinrich Christoph Christian Drawe and Karoline Justine Kijewski; bp. 14 Nov 1937; conf. 14 Nov 1937; m. Herne 19 Oct 1928, Marie Anna Müller; 7 children; d. stomach surgery Castrop-Rauxel, Westfalen, 15 Jul 1940; bur. Herne 18 Jul 1940 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 32; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 777; FHL microfilm 25757, 1935 census; IGI, PRF)

**Elfriede Berta Heider** b. Husen-Kurl, Westfalen, 10 Jan 1913; dau. of Hermann Karl Heider and Paulina Anna Schwabe; bp. 12 Jul 1921; conf. 12 Jul 1921; m. 9 Aug 1932, Otto Hellmich; d. stroke 21 Sep 1940 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 61; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 505; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 505; FHL microfilm 162780; 1930 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Hermann Karl Heider** b. Ober Peilau, Schlesien, 4 Nov 1873; son of Pauline Anna Heider; bp. 28 Jul 1920; conf. 28 Jul 1920; ord. deacon 10 Sep 1922; ord. teacher 1 or 2 Mar 1925; ord. priest 31 Jan 1926; ord. elder 6 Jun 1933; m. 3 Nov 1895, Pauline Anna Schwabe; d. stroke 5 Nov 1941 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 52; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 110; FHL microfilm 162780; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Gerlinde Waltraut Hoffmann** b. Herne, Westfalen, abt 1941; dau. of Emil Hoffmann and Klara Franziska Mixan; d. abt 1941 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 198; IGI)

**Eugen Walter Kalwies** b. Herne, Westfalen, 24 Feb 1934; son of Eugen Kahlwies and Martha Maria Rasavski; bp. 19 Apr 1942; conf. 19 Apr 1942; d. Argenfelde, Tilsit, Ostpreußen, 20 Sep 1943 (FHL microfilm 68803, no. 677; FHL microfilm 271376; 1930 and 1935 censuses)

**Gerhard Günther Klein** b. Herne, Westfalen, 17 Nov 1934; son of Karl Jakob Wilhelm Klein and Elfriede Sophie Waschke; d. spinal meningitis 30 March or 5 Apr 1940 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 71; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 769; IGI; AF)

**Maria Kruska** b. Awayden, Sensburg, Ostpreußen, 30 Mar 1871; dau. of Karl Kruska and Marie Duda; bp. 25 Jan 1925; conf. 25 Jan 1925; m. Awayden, Sensburg, Ostpreußen, abt 1892 or 22 Feb 1900, Michael Nadolny or Nadolmy; 3 children; d. stroke Awayden 1 Mar 1943 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 99; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 234; IGI)

**Kurt Walter Müller** b. Kappel, Chemnitz, Sachsen, 12 Sep 1900; son of Robert Wendelin Müller and Anna Maria Boeckel; bp. 28 Jul 1926; conf. 28 Jul 1926; m. 3 Jun 1922 or 19 Oct 1928, Marianne Hildegard Uhlig; d. stomach cysts or tumors 14 Jul 1941 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 174; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 230; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 230; IGI)

**Egon Anton Rutrecht** b. Börnig, Herne, Westfalen, 24 Nov 1920; son of Anton Rutrecht and Martha Marie Lau; bp. 1 Jun 1929; conf. 1 Jun 1929; ord. deacon 6 Jun 1933; stormtrooper; k. in battle Mischkino, south of Leningrad, Russia, 13 Feb 1943 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 106; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 499; FHL microfilm 271408; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Karl Heinz Rybak** b. Recklinghausen, Herne, Westfalen, 9 Nov 1919; son of Franz Rybak and Auguste

Konetzka; bp. 23 Jul 1928; conf. 23 Jul 1928; ord. deacon 6 Jun 1933; k. in battle 20 Dec 1941 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 110; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 438; FHL microfilm 271408; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; IGI)

**Fritz Gustav Semrau** b. Herne, Westfalen; or Nekla, Posen, 26 May 1920; son of Hermann Emil Semrau and Marie Martha Hildebrandt; bp. 14 Jun 1928; canonicer; d. field hospital 239 by Stadniza, 10 km south of Semljansk, Voronezh Woronesh, Russia, 24 Aug 1942 (Semrau; FHL microfilm 245261; 1925, 1930, and 1935 censuses; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Karl Theodor Spittank** b. Sodingen, Herne, Westfalen, 6 Nov 1910; son of John Otto Spittank and Ida Wilke; bp. 27 Jun 1931; conf. 27 Jun 1931; m. 12 Feb 1934, Franziska Skrycak; corporal; k. in battle Babiza 27 Jan 1944; bur. Glubokoje, Belarus (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 181; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Heinrich Herbert Uhlstein** b. Herne, Westfalen, 15 Apr 1909; son of Christian Max Uhlstein and Johanna Karolina Weis; bp. 2 Nov 1924; m. Herne 24 Dec 1931, Sara Gärtner; d. Witebsk, Russia, 30 Jun 1944 (IGI; FHL microfilm 245289; 1935 census)

**Karl Heinz Friedrich Vahrson** b. Herne, Westfalen, 13 May 1916; son of Karl Heinrich Otto Vahrson and Anna Martha Maria Meier; bp. 8 Aug 1926; conf. 8 Aug 1926; k. in battle or d. Herne 12 Mar 1945 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 126; CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, all-mission list 1943–46, 186–87 and district list, 202–3; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 387; FHL microfilm 245289; 1925, 1930, and 1935 census; IGI)

**Auguste Elfriede Liesette Wilke** b. Langendreer, Westfalen, 15 May 1870; dau. of Andreas Wilke and Wilhelmine Menthof; bp. 19 May 1930; conf. 19 May 1930; m. 19 Sep 1903, Wilhelm Haarhaus; d. heart failure 15 Jun 1942 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 157; CHL microfilm 2447 pt. 26 no. 550; IGI)

**Julia Zywitz** b. Schönwiese, Saalau; or Heilsberg, Ostpreußen, 15 Mar 1866; dau. of Johann Zywitz and Julia Schimitzki; bp. 18 Aug 1914; conf. 18 Aug 1914; m. 10 Mar 1917, Wilhelm Chmielewski; d. pyelitis 1 May 1944 (FHL microfilm 68796, no. 27; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 53; FHL microfilm 25739; 1925 and 1930 censuses; IGI)

## NOTES

1. Helga Gärtner Recksiek, interview by Michael Corley in German, Salt Lake City, December 12, 2008; summarized in English by Judith Sartowski.
2. *Hundert Jahre Gemeinde Herne* (Herne Ward, 2001).
3. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL LR 10045 11.

4. Presiding Bishopric, “Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955,” 257, CHL CR 4 12.
5. Edith Kalwies Crandall, telephone interview with Judith Sartowski, May 6, 2008.
6. Helga Gärtner Recksiek, “My Book of Remembrance” (unpublished autobiography); private collection.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ingrid Gassner Schwiermann, telephone interview with the author, November 30, 2009.
10. Herbert Uhlstein, interview by the author, Bountiful, UT, June 20, 2006.
11. *Hundert Jahre Gemeinde Herne*.
12. Helga Gärtner Recksiek, “Book of Remembrance.”

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## OBERHAUSEN BRANCH

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The thirty-one Latter-day Saints living among the nearly two hundred thousand inhabitants of the city of Oberhausen would have had reason to feel lonely, had there not been a close connection to the other branches of the Ruhr District. As World War II approached, this branch was so weak that only two leaders were shown on the branch directory submitted to the mission office in Frankfurt: Gustav Müller as branch president and Anton Pyta as Sunday School superintendent.<sup>1</sup> Because the address given for Brother Müller is in Essen, it can be assumed that district president Friedrich Biehl asked him to preside at the meetings in Oberhausen.

Documents in the mission office show that the Oberhausen Branch had been established less than a year before the war began: “December 18, 1938: the branch moved into a new hall in the little city of Oberhausen, because the members are closer to there than to Duisburg.”<sup>2</sup> The meeting rooms were rented in a Hinterhaus at Rolandstrasse 43. No description of the setting is available.

American missionary Erma Rosenhan provided some detail regarding the Oberhausen Branch in her diary after a visit there in 1939: “Sunday, August 13, 1939: Went with Bro. Naujoks to Oberhausen. It is



just a small branch of about 20 to 25 persons. Only 6 were present. I had to play the organ there too. Bro. Naujoks and I both talked. We sang a song too and I accompanied. Sunday School and [sacrament meeting] followed one another.”<sup>3</sup>

Oberhausen Branch <sup>4</sup>	1939
Elders	3
Priests	2
Teachers	0
Deacons	1
Other Adult Males	3
Adult Females	22
Male Children	0
Female Children	0
<i>Total</i>	31

Nothing is known about the activities of the branch members during the war, but the list of losses indicates that they were not excluded from the sufferings of the inhabitants of this important industrial city.

#### IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Oberhausen Branch did not survive World War II:

**Minette Borrmann** b. Altenburg, Anhalt, 5 Jan 1870; bp. Oberhausen, Oberhausen, Rheinland, 26 Nov 1932; missing as of 15 Nov 1946 (FHL microfilm 68802, no. 2; IGI; AF; PRF) Friedrich “Fritz” Wilhelm Jakob Hemp b. Duisburg 3 Aug 1912; son of Friedrich Hemp and Helma Roemmert; bp. 21 May 1927; m.; missing as of 15 Nov 1946 (FHL microfilm 68802, no. 9; FHL microfilm 162781; 1930 and 35 censuses)

**Frieda Minna Krohse** b. Abau Schönwalde, Westpreußen, 24 Jan 1906; dau. of Ernst Krohse and Emilie A. O. Brauer; bp. 19 Oct 1930; conf. 19 Oct 1930; missing as of 15 Nov 1946 (FHL microfilm 68802, no. 10; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 557)

**Josef Sattler** b. Liege, Belgium, 12 Apr 1908; son of Jakob Sattler and Maria Katharina Schapperdoth; bp. Oberhausen, Oberhausen, Rheinland, 18 Sep 1926;

k. in battle Western Front 5 Sep 1944 (CHL microfilm 2458, form 42 FP, pt. 37, all-mission list 1943–46, 186–87; IGI)

**Elisabeth Spindler** b. 25 May 1894; bp. 6 Feb 1913; missing as of 15 Nov 1946 (FHL microfilm 68802, no. 21)

**Anna Temme** b. 18 Oct 1895; bp. 11 Oct 1919; missing as of 15 Nov 1946 (FHL microfilm 68802, no. 22)

**Frieda Theunissen** b. 24 Apr 1907; bp. 25 Jun 1927; missing as of 15 Nov 1946 (FHL microfilm 68802, no. 24)

#### NOTES

1. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL LR 10045 11.
2. West German Mission quarterly report, 1938, no. 45, CHL LR 10045 2.
3. Erma Rosenhan, papers, CHL MS 16190.
4. Presiding Bishopric, “Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955,” 257, CHL CR 4 12.

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## WUPPERTAL BRANCH

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A week after the president of the West German Mission departed Frankfurt, he wrote from Copenhagen, Denmark, regarding the status of several small branches. Two of those were the Barmen and Elberfeld Branches of the incorporated city of Wuppertal. President Wood recommended that the two branches be joined into one in order to strengthen the Church’s presence in that city.<sup>1</sup> It is not known precisely whether that happened or when. For purposes of describing the activities of individual Saints from Wuppertal, it will be assumed that the two branches were indeed combined.

The Wupper River runs west through a narrow valley toward the Rhine. On its way it links the historic towns of Barmen on the east and Elberfeld on the west. The city of Wuppertal was formed by combining those towns and several others. Beginning in 1903, the famous *Schwebebahn* (suspended monorail) allowed easy travel through the city as it glided suspended above the river. By the time World War II began, 405,000 people were living in Wuppertal.

<b>Wuppertal-Barmen Branch<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>1939</b>
Elders	6
Priests	1
Teachers	0
Deacons	2
Other Adult Males	4
Adult Females	20
Male Children	1
Female Children	1
<i>Total</i>	35

<b>Wuppertal-Elberfeld Branch<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>1939</b>
Elders	2
Priests	2
Teachers	3
Deacons	4
Other Adult Males	5
Adult Females	22
Male Children	3
Female Children	3
<i>Total</i>	44

Very little is known about the Wuppertal Branch during the war, and the available eyewitness testimonies do not mention the location of the meeting rooms or leadership of the branch. It is known only that in the summer of 1939, the Elberfeld Saints were meeting in rooms in the Hinterhaus at Uellendahlerstrasse 24, and their Barmen counterparts met at Unterdörnen 105. Neither branch had a functioning Relief Society, MIA, or Primary at the time.<sup>4</sup> One eyewitness identified Paul Schwarz as the branch president in 1943; he had been the president of the Barmen Branch in 1939.<sup>5</sup>

Rudolf Schwarz (born 1914) was the superintendent of the Sunday School in the Barmen Branch

when the war began, but he was soon in uniform (for the third time). He married Charlotte Becker in 1938 and was a father to little Helga. When it came time for his unit to swear the oath of a German soldier, his staff sergeant refused to allow him and two other soldiers to participate, insisting that they were not Catholics or Protestants. (One was of the Baptist faith.) When the commanding officer learned the next day of the mistake, the three were ordered to report to the parade ground in dress uniform, and the ceremony was repeated for their sake. According to Rudolf, “This was a very interesting beginning in the German army.”<sup>6</sup>

With his time and grade as a soldier, Rudolf was a top sergeant and adjutant by the end of 1941. By then, the German army had moved hundreds of miles into the Soviet Union and was experiencing the terrible Russian winter. On January 7, 1942, the Red Army broke through the German lines, and chaos threatened. The temperature dropped to thirty to forty degrees below zero, and the Germans were not as well dressed as their enemies. At a time when a determined commander was needed, Rudolf’s captain had a nervous breakdown and was out of commission. Rudolf stated, “I felt it was my job to take over the command.” He organized a scouting mission, learned that the enemy soldiers were only about one hundred feet away, and then positioned his men with their machine guns to repel the attack. They were successful, and Sergeant Schwarz accepted the surrender of about one hundred soldiers. Many were wounded, so he transferred them to a local village and asked the women there to care for the men. All this was done without any involvement of the captain, who afterwards was awarded the Knight’s Cross (although Rudolf claimed that everybody gave him the credit for the victory).

A week later, Rudolf was in combat again and assisted in the destruction of Soviet tanks, for which he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Soon the enemy was not the Red Army but the terrible cold. Rudolf and his men were crossing a long stretch of ice and learned an important lesson in survival:



Fig. 1. Wuppertal-Elberfeld Branch in early 1939. (G. Blake)

We walked about thirteen hours. We found out that the cold makes you mentally and physically very unstable. At some time you would like to lay down and forget all about it. If we saw somebody laying down or sitting down, we kicked them and told them to go on. Two of [the men] died. It was a great march, and nobody can imagine how painful it was to walk under that condition. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink. . . . Everybody had problems walking—like you had arthritis everywhere.

By March 1942, Rudolf Schwarz was a platoon commander and was soon on his way home on leave. He first visited his parents and attended church with the Wuppertal Branch, then headed south to Bavaria, where his wife and daughter were staying in the town of Unterelsbach (Upper Franconia). From there it was back to the Eastern Front, where Rudolf stepped on a land mine on July 7, 1942: “A terrible noise, and I was thrown up into the air and I turned around in the air and fell on the ground.” His men carried him back to a field hospital, and

he spent the next year in various hospitals. Surgery and orthopedic devices eventually allowed him to walk again, but he was released from active duty in 1943. While in the hospital in Deutsch Krone, Pomerania, he was visited by Lotte and Helga. His condition was worsened several times by infections and appendicitis, but he eventually recovered and was downgraded to reserve status.

Gerda Rode (born 1921) was surprised in 1942 when she received a letter from an LDS soldier of the Bad Homburg Branch, near Frankfurt. Hans Gerecht had been a missionary in Wuppertal in 1937–38 and recalled her as a “very blond girl.” It was several months before she responded to his letters. He was already a Wehrmacht soldier and as such was not free to visit her. In April 1943, he was given leave to go home to Bad Homburg and asked her to join him there. Just after they parted, she received a telegram with the text: “Do you want to be my wife? Please let me know immediately. Hans.” Her reply was one word in the affirmative.

In June 1943, Hans Gerecht was allowed to visit his fiancée in Wuppertal. He was there just in time to experience a horrific attack on the city. As they were huddled in a cellar, the building was hit; one man close to them was killed, and they ended up digging their way out of the rubble. After moving Gerda and her mother to a safe location, Hans returned to help rescue their neighbors. They soon learned of a comical situation involving a Brother Fischer from the branch. He was suffering from diarrhea and was sitting on the toilet when a bomb hit his apartment building. When the house collapsed, he dropped a full story—still seated on the toilet—but was not seriously injured.



*Fig. 2. Missionary George Blake at the pump organ in Wuppertal. This model of organ could be seen in meeting rooms all over Germany during the war. (G. Blake)*

Returning to their apartment house, Gerda, her mother, and Hans gazed upward into the open apartment; the building’s façade had been blown away. They were able to go upstairs and rescue a very expensive mattress, after which they went to the Bühlers, another LDS family, and were given a place to sleep. Homeless, the three took the train to Bad Homburg. Hans was soon given another leave, and he and Gerda were married in Frankfurt on July 24, 1943. She recalled one important aspect of the event: “I had nothing to wear. A sister in Frankfurt gave me her long black dress and a white veil. This sister was so kind, she gave this dress to all the brides, and it fit them all. We were all undernourished and slim.” After a few days together as

man and wife, Hans was on his way back to the Eastern Front.

The news of the terrible attack on Wuppertal was communicated throughout the West German Mission, and a relief campaign was instituted. The following report was filed in Frankfurt regarding that campaign:<sup>7</sup>

Jul 1943:

According to general newsletter no. 2 of the West German Mission dated June 27, 1943, as well as by the request of the Hamburg District Presidency, a request is being made of all members to voluntarily donate anything they can—be it money, clothing, or other items—for the relief of the members of the Ruhr District, especially the branches in Barmen and Elberfeld, who have lost their homes in recent air raids. The following items were then collected and prepared for shipment to the district leaders in Hamburg:

Brother Louis Gellersen	200 Marks
Brother Christian Tiedemann	20 Marks
Emma Hagenah (non-member friend)	5 Marks

225 Marks total

The following items were donated by Sister Helene Gellersen of Stade:

[coats, underwear, sweaters, pants, blankets, jackets, pens, paper, cutlery, soap, cups, etc.]

Stade on July 9, 1943

Louis Gellersen, branch president



*Fig. 3. Sisters of the Wuppertal Branch. (G. Blake)*

In March 1944, Gerda Rode Gerecht’s mother passed away. Three months later, her brother Ernst was killed in the first fighting against the invading



Allies near Normandy, France. Just prior to her brother's death, she welcomed Hans home for a furlough. When it came time for him to report for duty again, he convinced her to ride the train to Vienna, Austria, with him so that they could spend more time together. He smuggled her onto a troop train; after they said good-bye in Vienna in May 1944, she returned to Bad Homburg.

During the last year of the war, Rudolf Schwarz was sent to a technical school in Nuremberg, not far from where his family was living in Unterelsbach. His course was not yet completed when Nuremberg was devastated in the attack of January 2, 1945, but he was at least prepared to work as a draftsman. Rudolf returned to Unterelsbach and found work in the nearby town of Bad Neustadt. With the American army approaching the area in March 1945, the local Nazi Party leader approached Rudolf and informed him that he was to lead the local Volkssturm (home guard); he was the best man for the job, based on his combat experience.

My job was to get about 100 old men ready to fight in that very last battle. It was a joke, but I couldn't get out right away, so I started training and organizing in regulated time with these men which I hardly knew. . . . After a while the situation got real critical, as the front line came closer to our area. One day we could hear the artillery from the American army. I had to make a decision one way or the other what to do with that Volkssturm. . . . I [received] orders from the Party that I was in charge of the whole area. . . . Needless to say we didn't have any weapons. So I dissolved the Volkssturm as an organization. I told the men to go home and take care of their families.

Rudolf knew that he could be shot as a traitor, but the Americans were in town within hours, and he explained to them that no defense would be offered by the local men.

One day in April 1945, Gerda went to the home of Hans's parents. She recalled what happened there:

I had a key. I waited for them and lay on the sofa. "Gerda," [Hans] called with a voice full of love and sadness. "Gerda," I heard my name the

second time. I looked around; I didn't see him but felt his presence. Later I heard that this must have been the time that he was shot in the face. . . . He died at that very time. This was confirmed when I was notified . . . that he had given his life for the fatherland in heavy fighting.

One last tragedy awaited the young widow: Gerda's father, Heinrich Jakob Rode, was shot with several other men by the Gestapo in April. She made inquiries after the war and was told that seventy-two men were rounded up as traitors—apparently having refused to fight as Volkssturm—and executed by the Gestapo. She claimed to have found the mass grave in 1948 near Immigrath, about twenty miles south of Wuppertal. During her visit, she located a neighbor who confirmed that the atrocity had indeed occurred there. A monument marked the spot, but no names were engraved thereon.

The city of Wuppertal suffered substantial losses inflicted by 126 air raids. At least 8,363 people were killed, and 38 percent of the city was destroyed (including 64 percent of the dwellings). The American army entered the city on April 16, 1945.<sup>8</sup>

In the summer of 1945, Rudolf Schwarz was determined to take his family (which now included a son named Roman) back to Wuppertal. His wife had acquired some nice furniture during her four years in Unterelsbach, and they wanted very much to take it back with them. Rudolf was successful in arranging with a railroad agent for the shipment of the furniture in a box car to a point close to Wuppertal. After arriving there, local friends were enlisted to transport the valuable cargo to Wuppertal, where the Schwarz family prepared for life in a new Germany.

#### IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Wuppertal Barmen and Elberfeld Branches did not survive World War II:

**Catharina Emilie Callies** b. Elberfeld, Wupperthal, Rheinprovinz, 7 Feb 1869; dau. of Johann Ferdinand

Callies and Katharina Rau; bp. 20 Sep 1942; conf. 20 Sep 1942; m. 1 Oct 1890, Ernst Ewald Steffens; d. stroke 12 Nov 1944 (FHL microfilm 68808, no. 55; CHL microfilm 2447, pt. 26, no. 879; FHL microfilm 68803, no. 879; IGI)

**Karl Adolf Harzen** b. Elberfeld, Wuppertal, Rheinprovinz, 23 Nov 1890; son of Alexander Harzen and Auguste Druseberg; bp. 13 Nov 1932; conf. 13 Nov 1932; ord. teacher 26 Nov 1933; d. pleurisy 30 Jan 1941 (CHL CR 375 8 2430, no. 976; FHL microfilm 162777; 1935 census; IGI)

**Richard Kühhirt** b. Mühlhausen, Sachsen (province), 22 May 1896; son of Julius Kindhoff or Windhoff and Christine Kuhirt; bp. 27 Mar 1905; conf. 27 Mar 1905; m. 2 Jun 1915, Luise Emma Seyfarth; d. influenza and heart attack 25 Feb 1941 (FHL microfilm 68786, no. 35; FHL microfilm 271381; 1935 census; IGI)

**Mathilde L. Oswald** b. Mühlhausen 27 May 1872; dau. of Ludwig Oswald and Regine —; bp. 29 Oct 1903; conf. 29 Oct 1903; m. Fritsch; d. old age 5 Jul 1943 (FHL microfilm 68803, no. 922; FHL microfilm 25770; 1930 and 1935 censuses)

**Ernst Rode** b. Elberfeld, Rheinprovinz, 22 Jun 1909; son of Heinrich Jakob Rode and Alwine Morenz; bp. 15 Apr 1923; conf. 15 Apr 1923; m. 14 or 16 Dec 1934, Hilde Metzger or Melzer; private first class; k. in battle France 12 Aug 1944; bur. La Cambe, France (SLCGW; FHL microfilm 68808, no. 51; FHL microfilm 68786, no. 568; www.volksbund.de; IGI)

**Emilie J. E. Schrick** b. Vohwinkel, Rheinprovinz, 18 Jan 1870; dau. of Wilhelm Schrick and Julie Hollhaus; bp. 6 Apr 1930; conf. 6 Apr 1930; m. 10 Feb 1890, Karl Amhäuser; d. asthma and old age 10 Feb 1941 (CHL CR 375 8 2430, no. 904; FHL microfilm no. 25710; 1930 census; IGI)

**Heinrich Wagner** b. Elberfeld, Rheinprovinz, 21 Nov 1856; son of Heinrich Wagner and Wilhelmine Meissner; bp. 28 Oct 1910; conf. 28 Oct 1910; ord. deacon 6 Jul 1913; ord. priest 21 Mar 1915; d. 25 Jun 1943; bur. Elberfeld, Wuppertal (FHL Microfilm 68786, no. 580; www.volksbund.de; FHL microfilm no. 245291; 1925 and 1935 censuses; IGI)

## NOTES

1. M. Douglas Wood, papers, CHL MS 10817.
2. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
3. *Ibid.*
4. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL LR 10045 11.
5. Gerda Roda Gerecht, "My Marriage to Hans Gerecht," CHL MS 19186.
6. Rudolf Schwarz, unpublished autobiography; private collection.
7. Lübeck Branch history, 10, CHL LR 5093 21.
8. Wuppertal city archive.