Gerhard Thamm Lecture: Two Germanies

In April 2007, I attended an international conference on teaching and learning. I was fortunate enough to hear a lecture by Herr Gerhard Thamm, who lived in Germany as a teenager during World War II. He later worked for the United States in various intelligence and diplomatic capacities. His lecture was called "Two Germanies," and he discussed how in the "hinterlands" outside of the large German cities like Berlin, the war did not touch the lives of people as much as it did in the urban areas. Here are some highlights from my notes during the lecture. I thought you might be interested in hearing about what life was like in wartime Germany from someone who lived through it.

In World War II era Germany, there were really two Germanies. One area was the heavily bombed industrial and urban centers of the nation, such as Dresden and Berlin. The other area was the unbombed farmlands, including small towns and rural areas. Herr Thamm lived in Silesia, which was in Germany at the time of World War II, but now is part of Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic.

Germany had about 89 million people in the early 1940s; roughly 4 million served as soldiers, and about 500,000 were stationed in the USSR. When the NSDAP (Nationale Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partie, or the National Socialist Workers' Party, the Nazis) came to power, they had a broad base of appeal. The Nazis were not socialists in the traditional, Marxist sense, but they did appeal to workers (Arbeiter is "worker" in German) who leaned politically to the left, and to the ultra-nationalists, who leaned more towards the right. The government that preceded the Nazis was the Weimar Republic, and it was a fragmented entity where no one political party or point of view held sway. The Nazis were clever in appealing to both the right and the left. Moreover, the Nazis delivered on what they promised. If one wanted to be a part of something or pursue a certain career, the Nazis would provide the means to do so. They confiscated land and redistributed it, which made people who were poor and had no homes very happy. Housing, good roads, groceries, and some fiscal compensation went a long way towards attracting people to the party. Of course, this era would not last, but one must note that at first, the actions of the Nazis were most attractive to the casual observer. This unification of the population masses included most social classes and both educated and uneducated persons. Thus, one can see the means by which the Nazis came to power: They appealed to almost everyone through providing increased employment and increased satisfaction of life to the average person.
Only bit by bit did the true aims of the Nazis become clear. The slow, inevitable denial of privileges to Jews and other people who had differing beliefs, both religious and political, was subtle and not all that apparent at first. While rights became curtailed, the systematic execution of the Jews did not even start until 1941. For most people, it was easy to ignore the racism at first. However, the ultimate goal of the Nazi government was to exterminate all Jewish persons in an efficient and effective way.

In the hinterlands, life was not all that different. People farmed their crops, raised their animals, and had a relative refuge from the bombing and other atrocities of the war. Later, the hinterlands became a refuge for Jews and other persecuted people, as well as political enemies of the Nazi government. Herr Thamm went on to show a series of slides that depicted German farms and rural villages during the war. Indeed, these were a sharp contrast to the photos of concentration camps and bombed out cities in other parts of Germany.

And that's when time ran out. It was a very interesting lecture, and the perspective Herr Thamm offered was not one I had really heard before.