

Table of Contents

Foreword by Michael J. Neufeld	vi
Introduction by Brian E. Crim	viii
Class of '31	01
Chronology	169
Index	173

Foreword

I first encountered Walter Jessel in the late 1980s, while following up investigative journalism into the Nazi records of Wernher von Braun and his team of rocket engineers. Jessel's June 1945 assessments of their characters and political attitudes, which are found in their Army security records in the US National Archives, were acerbic, penetrating and highly quotable. He noted the blinkered, Nazi-influenced views of many his interrogees, who offered themselves as "the true saviors of Western Civilization from Asia's hordes. Which does not prevent them from playing with the idea of selling out to Asia's hordes if such recognition is not soon extended."

Jessel, having been young and clear-eyed enough to leave Nazi Germany in 1933, went to Palestine and then the US. Like many German and Austrian Jewish male refugees in his age group, he became a US Army intelligence officer in World War II because he was a native speaker of German. After serving in front-line intelligence roles, he was at the US military occupation headquarters in ruined Frankfurt am Main, his hometown. There he sought out members of his small high-school class of 1931, leading to the memoir that follows. More detail on his life and the origins of his heretofore-unpublished book is given in Brian Crim's Introduction. All I can do is to endorse Jessel's work. His stories of the varying fates of his classmates—who ranged from Nazi enthusiasts to a Communist resistance figure who died as a concentration-camp prisoner—are consistently fascinating. These profiles demonstrate the same penetrating evaluation of character seen in Jessel's assessments of the rocket engineers.

Class of '31 is very much a document of its time, late 1945 into mid-1946. Jessel found most of his non-Jewish classmates were more-or-less-willing collaborators with the Nazis, but unable to see how they were responsible for Hitler's seizure of power or the crimes of the regime. It made him pessimistic about the future possibilities for a German democracy. Noteworthy is how he much expected a continuing cooperation with the Soviets in Germany—a

liberal position. He certainly felt differently only a few years later, as he continued his intelligence career in the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

More than anything else, the book paints a vivid picture of what western Germany was like during the first year of American occupation: ruined cities contrasted with a nearly intact countryside, while most of the population struggled for basic necessities, but refused to accept responsibility for anything that happened to them. West German democracy turned out better than Jessel expected, but his observations explain much about why that society took two decades or longer to come to grips with the Third Reich's crimes. I am sure you will find it engaging reading.

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Introduction

In early 1945, intelligence and technical teams assigned to Anglo-American forces descended upon the disintegrating Third Reich determined to locate and secure Germany's "wonder weapons" before they wreaked more havoc. Hitler's infamous March 1945 Nero decree pledging a horrific scorched-earth strategy was no empty threat, especially after months of indiscriminate V-1 and V-2 attacks on London and the Netherlands during the war's endgame. Neutralizing the missile sites, equipment, and personnel responsible for unleashing a last barrage of nihilistic destruction was a priority for Allied armies racing towards Berlin. The most coveted prize were the rocket scientists and engineers responsible for building the V-2 ballistic missile, especially the wunderkind Wernher von Braun. As the Red Army approached the Peenemünde missile complex on the Baltic coast, the SS evacuated the most valuable personnel and material into the interior of the country. Fearing the SS would rather liquidate him and his elite team of scientists and technicians than allow them to fall into enemy hands, von Braun and his inner circle disappeared into the Bavarian countryside and patiently awaited contact with American troops. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship. More than the freighters full of equipment and caches of documents recovered from caves and hastily abandoned warehouses, the "German brains" who designed and built the V-2 rocket along with dozens of other weapons in various stages of development proved invaluable to America's emerging military-industrial complex.

The rocket team's journey from captivity in Germany to their brilliant "second act" with the US Army and eventually NASA began with a series of debriefings with the Army Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC) in a ski chalet near Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Upper Bavaria. One of the interrogators assigned to the rocket team was thirty-two-year-old Second Lieutenant Walter Jessel. Jessel had explicit instructions from Supreme Headquarters Allied

Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) to sort out, in Jessel's words, "Nazi hangers-on and enforcers from technical staff in order to bring the latter to the US."¹ Jessel and his fellow officers faced a difficult task distinguishing between esteemed scientists responsible for revolutionary military technology and those who were either expendable or so tainted by the regime's criminality as to preclude contractual employment of any kind. As candid as Jessel's military screening report reads, his diary entries from that week in June are even more frank: "The team consists of rocket enthusiasts, engineering college graduates, professors, all unrepentant Nazis aware of their bargaining power with the Americans." Jessel noted that German army personnel attached to the team understood "that their chances of going to the US are smaller than those of technicians. To improve these chances, they sing."²

Walter Jessel was no ordinary American intelligence officer. Born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1913, Jessel understood more about his interrogation subjects than their language. The product of a wealthy assimilated Jewish family, Jessel watched his native land sink into Nazi tyranny as friends and business associates either aligned themselves with the new regime or accepted it without question. Now donning an American uniform, Jessel spent the final days of the war vetting everyone from prominent Nazis to craven opportunists desperate to avoid the consequences of the previous twelve years. Jessel acquired an understanding of the culture of wartime science inside Nazi Germany, particularly the overriding ambition and amoral technocratic outlook of the rocket team living in the isolated enclave of Peenemünde. After several days of interviews and surveillance, Jessel arrived at this damning assessment of his subjects:

They were enthusiastic technicians with the mission according to Goebbels of saving Germany. As a team, they were granted all the financial support, materials and personnel they required, within the means of the German war machine. Continuance of the work depended on continued conduct of the war. At a time when the generals were dissatisfied with the party rule to the extent of attempting to overthrow it, Peenemünde was out of touch and sympathy with such developments—not for love of the party necessarily but because their work and the war were one.³

1 Walter Jessel, *A Travelogue through a Twentieth-Century Life: A Memoir* (1996), 140.

2 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 140.

3 Appendix A—HQ Third US Army Intelligence Center, Interrogation Center: Special Screening Report, June 12, 1945, RG 260, FIAT, Box 8, National Archives and Records Administration.

While most American observers fawned over the rocket team, easily seduced by the charismatic von Braun and excited by his promises, Jessel exercised the cautious skepticism one might expect from an intelligence professional. As an educated German forced to flee his own country at the hands of men like those he interrogated, Jessel's perspective deserved more attention than it ultimately received.

Jessel's evaluations of his interrogation subjects were so comprehensive and insightful that historian Michael Neufeld quoted them at length in his definitive study, *The Rocket and the Reich: Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era* (1996). During the course of researching my book on Project Paperclip, the intelligence operation responsible for bringing the rocket team to the US, I read Neufeld carefully and decided to retrieve every report Jessel wrote during his stint as an interrogator with the CIC. As a former intelligence analyst and consumer of intelligence products, both historic and contemporary, I consider Jessel's reports unusually honest and forthright assessments obscured by thousands of repetitive and mostly indistinguishable documents. Jessel's reports belied personality, experience, and even caustic humor. I was determined to learn more about the man behind the intelligence and soon discovered an obituary for Walter Jessel, dated April 2008. I acquired an e-mail address for his eldest son, Alfred, and requested any personal papers or memoirs which might aid my research. I was not disappointed. Not only did Jessel keep a diary from his time in the military, adding even more detail to his meticulous screening reports, he wrote a remarkable separate memoir recounting a four-month long investigation into the fate of his former classmates from Frankfurt. The more I read about Jessel's life before and after his one week interrogation of rocket scientists, the more convinced I became that *Class of '31* deserved the audience Jessel hoped for when he completed the manuscript in 1946.

Walter Jessel's Twentieth-Century Life

In June 1945, just days after interrogating the rocket team, Jessel drove two German counter-espionage officers to a farm and exhumed the order of battle for the Soviet Union's intelligence services. "It was promptly couriered to Washington," Jessel wrote, "where government analysts pronounced it the single most complete and understandable report on that—by then—high priority intelligence target." The operation resulted in his promotion to first lieutenant and his distinguished postwar intelligence career. When Jessel recounted the

story to his son Alfred almost fifty years later, Alfred responded, “Pa, you’ve got to write your memoirs.”⁴ For the next year Jessel poured through his private archives, organized them, and produced *A Travelogue through a Twentieth-Century Life*. He dedicated the work to his grandchildren and donated a copy to Harvard University. Fortunately for me, Jessel’s very personal memoir derives from detailed diary entries and a wealth of personal documents from every phase of his life on three continents. A journalist for many years, Jessel writes beautifully and is as thorough and reflective in the autobiography as he was in his intelligence reporting. Walter Jessel’s extraordinary personal journey spanned Germany’s two world wars and America’s Cold War. He may have been more fortunate than most German Jews ensnared in the Third Reich, a fact he freely admits, but Jessel never lost sight of the regime’s cruelty or the extent to which his fellow countrymen collaborated.

Walter Jessel was only five years old when World War I ended, plunging Germany into prolonged economic despair and humiliating national decline. The Jessel family avoided this misery thanks to the ingenuity of Jessel’s “workaholic inventor-businessman” father.⁵ Julius Jessel formed a profitable electronics and radio company at a time when every German household was in the market for the invention. Julius Jessel’s sales catalog listed his “expert understanding, solid business principles and intensive work” as the reasons why he became a “leader in the radio wholesale business in Germany [and earned] an outstanding reputation.”⁶ Walter Jessel similarly credits his father’s success to financing boarding schools for his sister, exotic vacations, and, most important, the family’s escape from Nazi Germany. Julius Jessel employed thirty people in his company and amassed a net worth of approximately three million dollars. When the Nazis came to power and instituted the policy of “Aryanization,” which amounted to the systematic dismantling and theft of Jewish wealth in Germany, the Jessel family lost approximately ninety percent of its wealth.

Both Julius Jessel and Walter’s mother, Bertha Kaufherr, were raised in Orthodox Jewish environments, but they rejected their upbringing and embraced German liberalism and strove for total assimilation for themselves and their children. Three of Bertha’s brothers served honorably in the Imperial German Army during World War I, each earning an Iron Cross. Walter recalled

4 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 1.

5 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 6.

6 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 9–10.

bitterly that after his uncle Max fell ill and died in 1941, “the Nazis shipped his widow to the gas chambers.”⁷ One of the more insidious myths propagated by the Nazis throughout their years in the shadows of Weimar politics was the so-called “stab in the back” legend claiming that German Jews either shirked military service, profited from the war, or fomented communist revolution at home and abroad. In truth, approximately 100,000 Jews served in the military, 80,000 of whom saw front service; 35,000 were decorated; 23,000 promoted; 2,000 became officers; and 12,000 died in action.⁸ The Kaufherrns were more typical than the Nazis cared to admit. Walter Jessel recalled several examples of friends and family continuing to embrace their “Deutschum” (Germanness) in the face of state-sponsored racial animus. In describing his parents’ “German” worldview, Jessel specified certain core values: “Anti-imperialist, anti-nationalist, anti-revanchist, pro-Weimar, pro-League of Nations, religion-blind, pro-democratic social progress (mother more than father), and avid readers of the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*.”⁹ The Jessel family watched helplessly as the Nazis eradicated each of these values and institutions in a few short years.

When it came time to send Walter to school, his parents could have sent him to the Jewish school or the more humanistic gymnasium in Frankfurt, the Musterschule. They chose the latter. Of the twenty-two boys in the class of 1931, eight were Jews. “If there was an underlying anti-Semitism,” Walter recalled, “the . . . faculty kept it easily in check. Looking back at this environment, I was growing up to be a secure, sub-patriotic, social-democratic German and budding European.”¹⁰ Jessel cited his favorite teacher, Paul Olbrich, for instilling respect for Weimar institutions and helping organize one of Jessel’s formative experiences in his life—a four-week boy scout camp with French school children designed “as an experiment in practical rapprochement.”¹¹ Jessel fell in love with languages and continued to foster the cosmopolitan perspective he received at home. In 1929, two Eastern European Jewish immigrants joined his class and exposed, according to Jessel, the deep cultural divide between the “assimilated Frankfurt Jewish families” and the immigrants carrying all the visible markers of Jewish difference. “To them,” Jessel wrote, “we were

7 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 14.

8 Brian E. Crim, *Antisemitism in the German Military Community and the Jewish Response, 1914–1938* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 13.

9 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 21.

10 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 23.

11 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 24.

anti-Semites like the rest of Germans.”¹² The newcomers’ presence represented the world Jessel’s parents rejected, but soon Jewishness of any kind would become a liability. Twenty students graduated from the Musterschule in 1931 with an Abitur, the rough equivalent of a high school degree combined with junior college. With the Third Reich just around the corner, Jessel noted that there were no class reunions: “Our interests, our personal relations, our ideals and soon our allegiances became centrifugal.”¹³ Aside from a chance meeting with a former teacher in New York City in 1939, Jessel did not see anyone associated with the Musterschule again until the fall of 1945.

As Germany’s situation deteriorated, the Jessel family experienced increased anti-Semitism from unexpected quarters. “The culture of envy flourished among the unemployed,” Jessel wrote.¹⁴ Julius Jessel began illegally transferring money to Switzerland and later to France and Walter, at age seventeen, began a flirtation with Zionism. Walter joined the Kadimah, a boy scout troop, and consumed the works of Émile Zola and Theodor Herzl. He was never “unduly enthusiastic,” he recalled. “I couldn’t quite see embracing a new narrow nationalism to escape a regressive old one.” One day when his scout troop encountered a Hitler Youth group in the Taunus mountains, the Nazi boys began singing their trademark song, “Wenns Judenblut vom Messer spritzt, dann gehts nochmal so gut” (“When Jewish blood squirts off the knife, all goes twice as well”).¹⁵ Jessel understood, more so than his father, that his future might lie outside Germany: “I sensed war coming—civil war at least . . . and saw no sense in joining my father’s business.”¹⁶ Historian Marion Kaplan determined that women and children were often the first to experience and internalize the suffocating hatred of Nazi laws and culture.¹⁷ In Walter Jessel’s case, thanks to his quick mind and liberal education at the Musterschule, he recognized that “the handwriting was on the wall” several years before Hitler’s election. Jessel thought his mother “had a clear perception of likely events, but my father looked to his advisers and relatives than at that wall.”¹⁸ Eighteen years old and idealistic in 1931, Jessel enrolled in French courses at

12 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 25.

13 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 26.

14 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 25.

15 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 25. Jessel’s translation.

16 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 26.

17 Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

18 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 9.

the Interpreters Institute in Mannheim Business College in hopes of working for the League of Nations. His father arranged for an apprenticeship at Ideal Blaupunkt Werke, another electronics firm in Berlin. Jessel capitalized on his fluency and represented the company in Paris for three months in 1931–32, but the events of 1933 shattered Jessel's privileged existence and scattered his family across the globe.

With the League of Nations out of reach, Jessel took a job with his father and watched in horror as Hitler assumed power in 1933. "I felt scared and apprehensive," he wrote, "not only as a Jew, but aware of the consequences for Europe—that the continent would be torn apart by war."¹⁹ Assured by his "Aryan" business partners and employees that the Nazis were only targeting "recent Jewish immigrants from the east" rather than a successful businessman "with a long German history," Julius Jessel "was carried along by his conviction that the Germans needed him so badly that, as a vitally essential Jew, he could continue his normal life."²⁰ Nonetheless, Julius prepared for the worst and opened an account with \$4,000 in Strasbourg, France, and Walter acquired an identity card for commercial travelers, allowing him greater freedom of movement than most Jews. Meanwhile, Walter watched former friends in the company turn against him, one even arriving to work wearing his "SS officer's black deathhead uniform."²¹ As bitter and angry as Jessel was, he remembers his former friend warning him in all seriousness to "get out, leave Germany. He probably could have had me picked up by the Gestapo ... but he did not."²² A few months later, Walter emigrated to Palestine, but his parents and sister remained in Germany, enduring many more difficult years in the Third Reich. Walter recounts his family's most frightening experience in the fall of 1936, when the regime rounded up Jewish men for forced labor and escalated the pace of imprisoning "enemies of the Reich" in the growing complex of concentration camps:

Expecting the Gestapo, Mama went to bed with a butcher knife by her side determined "to take one of them with me." Next day, according to my sister, two Gestapo men appeared at the front door a noon, arrested my father and took him to the police station. Lisa [Walter's sister] and my mother remained "dumfounded and numb, well aware that we would never see Papa again."²³

19 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 28.

20 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 10.

21 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 28.

22 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 28.

23 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 11.

Fortunately, Julius came back a few hours later. Walter theorizes that one of his father's powerful friends interceded, but financial records indicate Julius' freedom was purchased at the cost of his remaining wealth.

When the time came for Walter Jessel to contemplate emigration, he and his father never seriously considered America even though several family members already resided in Chicago and San Francisco. Walter and Julius shared a legitimate fear that "with so many German Jews seeking refuge there Nazi-exported antisemitism might inflect that society as well."²⁴ The Nazis made Palestine an appealing option by allowing emigrants to take a certain amount of money with them, a policy designed to undermine British rule in Palestine and inflame the Arab population. Walter put a plan into action. First, he purchased a Mercedes convertible. Second, he retrieved his father's money from France and Switzerland. Third, he signed on as contributing reporter covering the Middle East for the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, and, finally, he drove to Trieste and caught a boat to Palestine. Walter was the first to admit how lucky he was in comparison to his fellow German Jews, but at age nineteen he held his family's fate in his hands. Walter's ability to get his family out of Germany depended on his gainful employment. Furthermore, the longer they stayed in Germany the fewer options were available to them, even with financial resources.

Jessel was one of thousands of "Zekes," German immigrants who lived alongside Jewish natives of Palestine, immigrants from Eastern Europe, and Zionists from all over the world. "Zekes were accepted as bona fide Jews," Jessel wrote, "but most were thought to lack the deep, single-minded conviction required by Zionism."²⁵ Jessel fell into this category, but he clearly enjoyed his four years living in Palestine, although his first attempt at finding work ended in failure. Partnering with another "Zeke" he knew from Frankfurt, Jessel tried selling electrical equipment in Jerusalem without any knowledge of the market or the fact that electrical outlets differed from one continent to the other. The business folded quickly, but Jessel received a tip from a British army officer and joined *The Palestine Post's* international, multilingual staff. While working at the small publication, Jessel learned the advertising business, did some reporting, and generally made himself useful in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In June 1936, Jessel discarded his German passport and became a citizen of Palestine, which meant he was free to travel anywhere in the Middle East as a British subject.

²⁴ Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 29.

²⁵ Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 35.

Shortly after this benchmark, the Arabs began a three-year revolt in Palestine protesting the dramatic increase in Jewish immigration. The revolt drew Jessel further into Palestinian politics than he cared for. The Jewish paramilitary force known as the Haganah came calling, and Jessel balked after witnessing their violent tactics: “To me it promptly brought to mind what the Nazis were doing to their political enemies of all races and faiths. I simply wasn’t enough of a Zionist to accept inhumane treatment of other human beings; it hit an exposed nerve.”²⁶ The manner by which Jessel recounts this period in the memoir suggests he wanted succeeding generations in his family to know that he never strayed from the liberal and cosmopolitan values inherited from his family and progressive teachers at the Musterschule.

By 1938, Walter believed his family’s future in Germany was coming to an end and decided America was the best option for all concerned. Jessel applied for and received an immigration visa to the US on the German quota. His parents booked him passage on the SS *Europa* leaving Bremerhaven on February 18, 1938, allowing him one last glimpse of Germany before his return as an American soldier seven years later. Protected by his British passport, Jessel traveled freely, observing the odd mixture of oppression and misplaced optimism taking hold of Germany, even among some Jews. Honoring a request from his father, Walter agreed to help a prominent Jewish businessman take a message to his son in America. As they drove together on the Autobahn, the man raved about Hitler’s public works project. “Isn’t this a wonderful road?” he exclaimed. “I can now drive to Berlin in seven hours. Hitler has done some remarkable things for Germany. Business is good. People have money to spend. If only they’d drop that anti-Jewish nonsense. I’m as good as a German as any of his followers.”²⁷ Walter included this story in *Class of ’31*, noting that the businessman died in Buchenwald in 1939 and the rest of the family fled to New York. Jessel believed the message he carried helped this rescue. Around this time, Jessel’s family too faced danger, and time was running out for emigration. Jessel’s family was still in Frankfurt during Kristallnacht (November 9–10, 1938) and one of his uncles, Theo, committed suicide rather than enter the concentration camps. In an incredibly risky act, Walter’s parents hid an “Aryan” anti-Nazi writer named Gottfried Kapp in their home and escaped a visit by the Gestapo unscathed. Kapp was eventually caught and killed himself during interrogation on November 21, 1938. Urged by his wife and children, Julius

26 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 39.

27 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 46.

Jessel finally relented and left Germany for England in March 1939. Bit by bit, the Third Reich had fleeced Julius Jessel, leaving him the total of 400 Reichsmarks when he arrived in America in April 1940. Walter rarely saw his father after emigrating in 1933, but his mother wrote he spent his last years “in despondency.”²⁸ He never recovered financially and struggled to adjust to life in America. After a series of heart ailments, Julius Jessel died in March 1949.

Walter did not have a job waiting for him in America, but, as luck would have it, he befriended some influential friends of Henry Luce, the owner of the TIME–LIFE media empire, on the voyage to New York. Walter regaled them with his life story and passed along glowing letters of reference from *The Palestine Post*. After just a few months of odd jobs in New York, including giving speeches promoting tourism to Palestine, *TIME* magazine hired Jessel to scour international news, translate, and occasionally summarize news from Europe. The junior position paid just enough to sponsor his family’s immigration to America. Jessel eventually worked for Luce-owned publications in Connecticut, both as a photographer and reporter, capitalizing on his impressive foreign language abilities and experience with *The Palestine Post*. Jessel was mostly appreciative and positive about his first years in America, but he quickly determined the limits of acceptance from his conversations with recent immigrants and American Jews. Walter’s old friend from Germany, Helmut Kurz, now an American citizen, admonished Walter over dinner. “Walter,” he said, “you must know your place in society. You must not court a Christian girl. If you refugees don’t respect our code, anti-Semitism in America will become as virulent as in Germany.”²⁹ According to Jessel’s memoir, he rarely experienced anti-Semitism in America, but was constantly aware of his status as a minority.

Jessel enjoyed working for the *Hartford Courant*, but with Europe at war and his adoptive country edging closer and closer to joining the fight, Jessel believed his background and skills had to count for something. A few months before America entered the war Jessel offered his services to an editor he knew to be a reserve officer in military intelligence:

He sent me to see Thomas Dodd, (later Congressman and Senator Dodd, and Christopher Dodd’s father), who ran the Hartford office of the FBI at the time. After a little conversation, Dodd asked me to mingle with the crowd at a downtown bar which was a hangout of the

²⁸ Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 12.

²⁹ Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 64.

German-American Bund, and report back to him. The Bund was Hitler's mouthpiece in the US and suspected of espionage. I flunked.

Undeterred by his initial foray into the world of intelligence gathering, Jessel was eager to enlist just days after Pearl Harbor. Unfortunately, Jessel was still classified as an "enemy alien" and had to wait another two years before the draft board declared him eligible. Jessel remembers being put off by the parade of National Guard troops marching through Hartford on December 8, 1941. "Sorry, but it reminded me of one my earliest childhood memories: the parade of the defeated German Army down the main street in Frankfurt," Jessel wrote. He was also worried that the men so eager to fight were "appalling far from a match for Hitler's robots."³⁰

Increasingly frustrated with watching and reporting about the war instead of fighting it, Jessel enhanced his already impressive fluency in languages by applying to the American Council of Learned Societies for a full fellowship in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic. He was accepted and spent two months at Columbia University, but never got the chance to use Arabic during the war. Jessel wrote the Connecticut Navy recruiting station that he was wasting time as a reporter, lamenting that "I can't quite resign myself to popping flashbulbs at women's clubs for the rest of this war."³¹ The draft board conducted a loyalty investigation and finally inducted the thirty-year-old Walter Jessel into the US Army on May 20, 1943. Four months later, Jessel became an American citizen. The army sent Jessel to the University of Mississippi to instruct GIs in advanced German, specifically military jargon, and moved him around to different units where he sat idle for months. Jessel felt aimless and unappreciated by the expansive military bureaucracy. His diary entry from April 1, 1944, read simply, "End of a completely wasted year."³²

Jessel's fortunes changed when he received orders to attend the Military Intelligence Training Center at Camp Ritchie near Hagerstown, Maryland. Jessel was one of 2,200 recent German Jewish refugees assigned to the facility because of their knowledge of European languages and German culture. The Army realized the "Ritchie Boys" were natural interrogators, counter-intelligence assets, and intuitive psychological warfare specialists and entrusted them with extremely sensitive and dangerous missions.³³ Jessel's commander at

30 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 88.

31 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 89.

32 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 111.

33 See the award-winning documentary *The Ritchie Boys* (2004) directed by Christian Bauer for a profile of some prominent German Jewish refugees serving in the US Army.

Camp Ritchie, General Banfill, told him laughingly at a dinner in Germany after the war, “I always knew there was something we could do with them kikes.”³⁴ Jessel took the comment in stride. Upon completing the course in September 1944, Jessel was given a temporary appointment as a second lieutenant for the duration of the war.

Jessel finally landed in France in November 1944, in time to participate in the final drive into his native Germany. Jessel specialized in interrogating captured German intelligence officers and participated in surveilling POWs. His diary from February 12, 1945, offers an intriguing window into the mindset of some “typical” German soldiers:

“People in the Rhineland say the cities were being destroyed because of the persecution of Jews.” ... Overheard at bugged office quarters: A Captain PW [POW]: “They are said to have exterminated 3 million Jews.” Medical officer: “I heard 4 million.” Captain: “I can’t believe it.”³⁵

Jessel received his final wartime assignment on April 7, 1945, joining Patton’s Third Army as an intelligence officer. Jessel witnessed his hometown of Frankfurt in ruins, but neither he or his family felt any regret. “Now those who wanted Hitler can thank the Führer for everything,” wrote Jessel’s mother, “There would have been no need to destroy the cities if those beasts hadn’t wanted to keep their heads a little longer.”³⁶

Jessel’s job only intensified with the German collapse as he and other “Ritchie Boys” began screening and interrogating “the overflowing POW compounds” in Bavaria.³⁷ Jessel was so overwhelmed by the sheer number of detainees he ordered the rank-and-file POWs to type their own personal histories.³⁸ Embittered by his countrymen’s expedience and historical amnesia, Jessel wrote his mother on Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day) that “the Nazis are gone, so much so that nobody knows anyone who ever was a Nazi. Only cowards are left, but that was to be expected.”³⁹ Jessel’s CIC unit landed some of the

34 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 215.

35 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 121. Jessel’s entries echo the remarkable transcripts published in Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer’s *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying, The Secret WWII Transcripts of German POWs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

36 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 130.

37 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 135.

38 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 135.

39 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 134.

more infamous Nazis in the regime, including SS General Ernst Kaltenbrunner, chief of the Reich Security Main Office (RHSA); Julius Streicher, the savagely anti-Semitic publisher of *Der Stürmer*; Ernst Bohle, head of the Nazi party office responsible for using Germans citizens abroad to influence foreign policy and Undersecretary of State in the German Foreign Office; Professor Karl Haushofer, the academic inspiring Hitler's "Teutonic version of geopolitics"; and members of the Abwehr's (Germany's intelligence organization) document forgery unit.⁴⁰ It was during this marathon of interrogations, most of which contributed to the International Military Tribunal proceedings in Nuremberg, that Jessel spent a week in June 1945 with Wernher von Braun's rocket team. A few days later Jessel embarked on the mission to unearth the Soviet intelligence order of battle, which resulted in his promotion to First Lieutenant on June 16, 1945 and a golden ticket to join the intelligence outfit of his choosing.

Invited by a friend, Jessel transferred to the Economic Branch of the Field Intelligence Agency, Technical (FIAT) for the remainder of 1945. FIAT cataloged, evaluated, and disseminated German scientific and technical information to interested parties throughout the government and private industry. The position brought Jessel home to Frankfurt where he began the process of tracking down his classmates and wrote the bulk of *Class of '31*. Jessel enjoyed the down time and light workload, but his objective was joining the Strategic Services Unit (SSU), the surviving remnant of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and core of the future Central Intelligence Agency. Cashing in on his fame as the officer who discovered the Soviet intelligence cache, Jessel transferred to the SSU in February 1946 and remained with the CIA until 1963. Once more, Jessel's background and natural skepticism came in handy as legions of former Axis notables came out of the woodwork to ingratiate themselves with Americans hungry for intelligence on the expansive Soviet target. "Rivalries between intelligence services left us wide open to intelligence swindlers in a lucrative market," Jessel wrote, "a subject on which I specialized in CIA."⁴¹

Shortly after joining the SSU, Jessel met the love of his life, Cynthia Jacobsen, who worked in the highly secretive X-2 department (counter-intelligence). Their courtship extended throughout 1946 and 1947, although Walter joked he was never permitted to know what she did on a day to day basis. The two were married in Heidelberg in the summer of 1947 and remained in Germany and Austria until 1949. The couple returned to the US and Jessel

40 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 136–40.

41 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 216.

continued his career with the CIA, performing a variety of roles that included managing information systems. Jessel discovered a passion for information technology and even enrolled in Harvard Business School at the CIA's expense. Jessel partnered with IBM on a CIA project and eventually decided to "look over the wall" at the private sector, joining IBM full time in September 1963.⁴² The Jessels moved to White Plains, New York and eventually Boulder, Colorado, where Walter retired in March 1979. A lifelong nature lover and activist, Walter spent the next thirty years working on numerous environmental causes. Walter Jessel died in April 2008 at age 95.⁴³ Cynthia Jessel died in December 2014 at age 91.⁴⁴ They were married for sixty-one years.

CLASS OF '31

Walter Jessel was the consummate professional, but the reality of living amid the rubble of his hometown and learning the fate of not just German Jews, but European Jewry altogether, weighed on him heavily. Jessel spent months in 1945 interrogating the people responsible and grew to loathe the weak-willed Germans almost as much as the genuine Nazis. He related his perspective in the introduction to *Class of '31*: "Frankfurt's ruins were the logical outward consequence of the mental and moral decay of its people—a decay, which, as a boy, I had witnessed in its early stages, and which had impelled me to leave."⁴⁵ Jessel's parents cautioned him against judging the family's former friends and neighbors too harshly, including those who distanced themselves from the Jessels for being Jews. Jessel's father wrote Walter that their neighbor Held was in fact "a decent person" and urged Jessel to remember Held was only human "so that *we* don't commit an injustice."⁴⁶ Soon after settling in Frankfurt for the FIAT posting, Jessel discovered that his aunt, his father's sister who refused to leave Germany, died in a death camp in Poland. Thinking his father could not handle the truth in his ailing state, Jessel told him she died in a Jewish old-age home, most likely Theresienstadt, and perpetuated the lie until he returned to America in 1949.

⁴² Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 77.

⁴³ "Walter Jessel spent his life fighting for change," *Daily Camera*, April 15, 2008, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.dailycamera.com/ci_13140551.

⁴⁴ "Cynthia Jessel, 1923-2014," *Daily Camera*, December 15, 2014, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dailycamera/obituary.aspx?pid=173460769>.

⁴⁵ Jessel, *Class of '31*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 155. Emphasis in the original.

FIAT disbanded in November 1945, approximately four months before Jessel joined the SSU. Jessel decided to use this interval to find his surviving classmates or their families and address the question haunting him since his emigration—"Would the people of other nations, if they were placed in the same position as the German during the Hitler regime, behave in the same manner?"⁴⁷ Jessel credits his interview subject Ilse Rossert, the wife of the only classmate to openly oppose the regime, with a related question crucial to the book: "What was it for 12 long years that kept the German people from sweeping the Nazi government from the face of the earth?"⁴⁸

Jessel left his family the original manuscript for *Class of '31* and included a few chapters in his 1996 memoir, but he changed some of the names in the 1996 version, leading me to believe he was protecting the identities of his interview subjects in case *Class of '31* was published soon after the war. Jessel probably feared repercussions for his interviewees, either from OMGUS (Office of the Military Government, United States) authorities or embittered ex-Nazis, depending on the sentiments expressed. After decades of leaving *Class of '31* on the shelf, Jessel had a visceral response revisiting the memoir in the 1990s: "Re-reading this ... after half a century moves me deeply and immerses me again in the horrors of 1944 and 1945 and the events leading up to these years—to the point of not sleeping too well. I suggest to the reader that is not bedtime reading, but this is the way it was."⁴⁹ Jessel further explained to his family the reason for not including his Jewish classmates in the original manuscript, noting that "the eight who emigrated, myself included, knew the enemy; in Germany we would have faced slavery and death." Jessel wrote that "our fates cannot be compared with those of the classmates we left behind—who were equally young, educated and adaptable."⁵⁰ He implied that if the Jewish members of the class of 1931 could leave Germany and prosper, so too could the non-Jews, but they chose to remain. Interestingly, Jessel revealed that most of his Jewish classmates also became US soldiers.

Jessel essentially organized his diary entries into the narrative structure of *Class of '31*, introducing each classmate or their surviving family with the character sketch written by "Dr. Erding," the alias for Jessel's mentor at the Musterschule, Paul Olbrich. Readers will undoubtedly be shocked by how personal and often hyper-critical Olbrich's sketches appear, considering the modern American

47 Jessel, *Class of '31*, 164.

48 Jessel, *Class of '31*, 165.

49 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 194.

50 Jessel, *A Travelogue*, 205.

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