

Corruption of words

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

*I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*, by Victor Klemperer

In 1995, the diaries that Victor Klemperer kept during the Third Reich were published in Germany and quickly sold more than 150,000 copies. Now available in English, they are a remarkable testimony to the life of a German Jew. As fascism and communism in Europe fade into the shadows of history, such personal documents, along with key works of literature, may be the best vehicles for helping us remember--and younger generations learn--what everyday life felt like in those times and places.

The son of a Jewish rabbi who moved to Berlin to serve the Reform Congregation, Klemperer himself confessed no religious faith as an adult. He thought of himself more as a German than as a Jew. He neither attended synagogue nor kept kosher. He married an "Aryan" and was formally registered as a Christian, but had no contact with the church. Klemperer was an intellectual, an academic, whose specialization was Romantic literature. If he believed in anything bigger than himself, it was in the values of the French Enlightenment and its watchwords of liberty, equality and fraternity.

When Hitler was appointed chancellor in January 1933, Klemperer's world began to unravel. Now he was a Jew whether he liked it or not. Disoriented by this turn of events, he no longer took pride in his German identity, but felt as though he had no other. He increasingly found one purpose, one activity that kept him spiritually alive: his love of words and their power. He had kept diaries all of his life. Now they became more than random notes about his research interests or introspective analyses of his psyche. He began a painstaking exercise in analyzing the Nazi corruption of words, and in observing how it began to infect the language of ordinary Germans. Carefully and precisely, he described the changing fabric and texture of everyday life.

Klemperer declared that he would become a witness--not to the headline events that would later interest historians, but to the mundane and trivial details of life that Nazi

ideology slowly but inexorably reshaped. He declared, moreover, that he would bear witness up to the end (part of the original German title that the American publishers have unfortunately dropped). So long as there was war, and so long as he was alive, he would look, listen and write.

From the first, Klemperer was aware that Hitler represented a threat to Jews. Within days of Hitler's appointment, Nazi supporters flexed their muscles at the Technical University in Dresden, where Klemperer taught. He was soon excluded from faculty meetings. Fewer and fewer students enrolled in his classes.

At first, he saw these changing circumstances as an opportunity to devote his time and energy more fully to his research in French literature. But personal concerns continually diverted him. His wife's mental health was fragile. Often she was confined to bed. Her great hope--and increasingly his great hope for her--was to move out of the city. They completed arrangements for construction of a house on a piece of property that they had acquired on the outskirts of the city, planted a garden, and retreated from the storms of belligerence that were brewing over Germany.

Caring for his wife entailed the everyday tasks of buying groceries, preparing meals, and reading aloud to her until she was able to fall asleep late at night. In whatever time remained, Klemperer continued his philological research and worked on his diaries. But he had his own health concerns. Physical exertion left him tired and out of breath. He worried that his heart was weak. He had urinary problems and for a time had to be catheterized regularly. Even in the midst of these troubles, Klemperer reports moments of childlike delight. His descriptions of buying and driving his first car recall a world in which the automobile represented sheer adventure, and provide relief from the sense of impending political doom.

But the security of one's own house and the freedom of one's own car were nothing more than brief illusions. In 1935, Klemperer was fired from the Technical University. Though he had been granted a small pension, money became a continual concern. He resorted to borrowing from friends and family, but Nazi laws restricted how much he could receive each month. He considered fleeing the country but was unable to attain a visa--and was uncertain that he wanted to leave.

Day by day, month by month, year by year, Klemperer records how the Nazi noose tightened around his neck. Jews could no longer drive. Jews could no longer ride

public buses without a special permit. Jews could walk only on designated streets. Klemperer had to wear a Star of David on his coat whenever he left the house. He and other Jews were subject to unannounced house searches by the Gestapo, sometimes accompanied by threatening words and even beatings. Local authorities demanded that he make alterations to his house. Soon they informed him that he would have to move out and rent it to an Aryan. Later he was told that he would have to sell it at a discount. The Klemperers were moved back into the city, into apartment houses reserved for Jews.

Klemperer's borrowing privileges at local libraries were revoked. He and other Jews were forbidden to buy books or newspapers. When it finally became impossible for him to continue his work on French literature, he decided to read and analyze the books that the Nazis themselves were reading and writing. Friends lent him materials. His wife used her contacts. Klemperer knew that he risked severe consequences if a house search turned up his notes or writings. He worried that his diary would be found, and regularly delivered its pages into the safekeeping of an Aryan friend in a nearby town.

The restrictions on Jews occurred under the more general restrictions of wartime Germany. Food became scarce, and Jews received a smaller ration than Aryans. Homes had to be darkened at night to hinder enemy planes from locating their targets. One evening, the Klemperers returned home, switched on the lights, and only later noticed that they had failed to pull the shades. A complaint was lodged against them, and Klemperer spent a week in jail. He later wrote in his diary that it had been one of the most terrifying experiences of his life. He had feared not for his physical safety but for his sanity. Placed in solitary confinement and denied reading or writing materials (though toward the end of the week he managed to acquire a small square of paper and a pencil), he felt his world shrink to four bare walls.

The leaders of the Jewish community were expected to provide laborers for factories and for municipal work such as clearing the streets of snow. Klemperer eventually managed to be exempted on the basis of his health problems. By 1942 he was giving all his time to two tasks: keeping himself and his wife alive, and keeping his diaries. Entries become longer, more detailed.

Despite pressures from within and without, Klemperer resisted isolation. He found a place for himself in the Jewish community and, through his Aryan wife, maintained indirect contact with a wider circle of friends. He always had his ear to the ground. In

the early '40s, he noted that individual Jews were being arrested, never to return. The wife of one was told that her husband had died of an illness, but Klemperer believed that the truth was plain to see. Soon groups of Jews were being rounded up and shipped to concentration camps.

Klemperer himself managed to slip through the Nazi net. Not an extraordinary will to live nor clever machinations but sheer circumstance conspired to save him--his marriage to an Aryan, his poor health and the vicissitudes of history. Klemperer again and again ironically notes his reaction to the news of others' deaths or deportations: not grief or fear, but "Hurrah, I am still alive!"

By the end of 1943, Klemperer was one of only a handful of Jews still in Dresden, and he was convinced that he would be included in the next deportation. But circumstances again changed. On February 9, 1944, Allied bombers, which up to then had avoided Dresden, finally attacked. No one in the city anticipated the relentless waves of assault. The Klemperers moved back and forth between their apartment and a bunker, waiting for the air sirens to sound and signal the end of the attack. Still another wave of bombs would fall. Hour by hour, the city was reduced to rubble. The bunkers were overflowing with people. In the chaos, Klemperer was slightly injured by a fire bomb and was separated from his wife.

In one of the book's most haunting passages, Klemperer describes his trek the next day through the ruins of the city in search of food, shelter and his wife. As he wanders aimlessly along the banks of the Elbe River, they accidentally meet. Their reaction is not so much joy as a strange confidence that a new era is finally beginning. They rip the star off his coat and flee Dresden. A slow, chaotic journey by train takes them to western Germany in search of Klemperer's old teacher and mentor. They hope that he will take pity on them. He gives them a warm reception and a bite to eat, but no invitation to remain. They finally move through a series of temporary shelters for war refugees.

The last entries record the arrival of American troops. Klemperer is able to receive a pass to travel through the occupied country back to Dresden, now in the Soviet zone. Much of the trip is by foot. The book ends as the Klemperers once again climb the hill to their house and garden. It is late afternoon, and all is again peaceful and quiet. (Klemperer would remain in East Germany, join the Communist Party and resume his academic career.)

As dramatic as these highlights are, to tell the story does not do justice to Klemperer's achievement. There is in his diaries no smooth flow of events, no skillful development of a plot. We read instead of the daily search for a few rotten potatoes, or the necessity of filing papers with local authorities, or the frustrations of another sleepless night. The diaries remind us that the people who lived through the events of the Nazi era spent most of their time simply enduring them. To plod through the diaries is to plod through life with them--slowly, quietly and unsensationally.

Klemperer notes that war and persecution bring out some people's faith in God, but that he is unable to see a larger power directing these events, bringing good out of evil. No sociological, political or theological explanation is adequate to account for what has happened to him or other Jews. Today a Daniel Goldhagen (in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*) may claim to have found an interpretive key--German anti-Semitism--but Klemperer observes life on the ground, with all its contradictions. He encounters Germans who hate Jews, but is also regularly surprised by the number of Germans who quietly walk up to him on the street and assure him that the Nazi madness will soon pass. They, too, seem simply to endure dark, tragic events that they do not comprehend, yet that shape their lives.

Nevertheless, terrible events do not render Klemperer speechless. He has utter confidence that learning to look and listen, to observe and describe, is meaningful. He believes that language has power truly to communicate, and therefore to effect communion among us, when we love words and care for them. Klemperer suggests that bearing witness is a matter not of grand intellectual schemes but of keeping one's ear to the ground. To bear witness is to record the elusive feel of life, to become aware of the larger cultural, historical forces shaping our language and the words of those around us, and to resist the ideologies of any age that would manipulate words and empty them of beauty and meaning.