Change

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MAY 1, 1933. Germany’s first great holiday since Hitler’s accession to power had come. It was the first National Labor Day. The entire nation was aflame with enthusiasm. Bands played, parades marched, religious services and patriotic demonstrations were held in every town and village. And yet, was there not a tinge of artificiality in all this jubilancy? The flame of enthusiasm was indeed being fanned vigorously by a bellows, the bellows of propaganda. All schools were required to take part in the parades; pastors were required to laud the achievements of national labor and laborers.

We, too, in our old village in East Prussia spent this first day of May in parading and listening to the monotone of the village minister in his little, crowded stone church. Now, just before supper, Herr Falckner, the head master of our boarding school, was to speak to us. The older ones of us were quite convinced that this would really be the only event of the day worth remembering.

WE WERE all seated in our accustomed places in that old, somewhat bleak assembly hall of the school, the youngest in the front row, we older ones in back, just one row in front
of our teachers and the domestic help of the house. Even though we were chatting a bit among ourselves, we all heard a door slam shut upstairs, and knew that Herr Falckner would be with us in a moment. This was further confirmed by the unmistakable sound of his footsteps on the spiral stairway as his shoes squeaked slightly on every step. He walked into the room with quick strides, almost militarily. Just a trace of stiffness, though, betrayed the beginning of old age. As he stood there in front of us in his severely plain grey suit, he looked more than ever like an old soldier. His tall, gaunt figure had something inspiring, and at the same time, pathetic in it. It was as if he were standing alone, facing a whole army against him, seeing his fate clearly, and yet standing there intrepid and unafraid. His face reflected these same emotions. Deep furrows around his mouth and on his forehead seemed to tell of many a battle waged to attain an ideal. He spoke to us, slowly and deliberately as always, and with a seeming sincerity that held our attention to each word. In a courageous and yet tired voice, he began:

“I am truly happy to have this opportunity to speak to you today.” Could this man ever be really happy? “The very fact that today is a Labor Day offers me a wealth of subject matter. Physical labor, mental labor, spiritual labor — on all of these phases I could well speak at considerable length. Today, however, I do not intend to dwell upon the national aspects of labor and laborers, since I am sure you have all heard enough of that already. I realize, of course, that this attitude of mine certainly is not the generally accepted one today; in fact, if it were known, it would undoubtedly be violently opposed by certain authorities. Yes,” and he raised a bony hand ominously, “any one of you could send me to the Brachten (the nearest concentration camp) by just repeating these very words to the proper authorities.”

I thought, “The good man surely has confidence in us. And yet, he knows that every last one of us would stand back of him if he got into trouble.”

His voice rose, became stronger and more passionate. “But I am not afraid. I shall continue as I have done; steering a straight course towards those ideals upon which I founded this
school ten years ago. No political movement shall interfere. Never shall these halls be debased by the domination of political powers. I should rather close down the school, be driven into utter poverty, yes, even to death, rather than swerve an iota from the course I have set before me."

"Believe me, that is saying something," I mused. "That man deserves respect. I surely hope that everything will turn out all right for him. You've got to hand it to him, he really does have courage."

MAY 1, 1934. A year has passed, and again we celebrate our National Labor Day. Again, at five o'clock, the headmaster, Herr Falckner, is going to speak. The hall is almost the same, the same old wooden floor, the same green walls, the same hard chairs. Only now the two German flags, the "Black, White and Red," and the Swastika, are hanging on the front wall. And all of us have on our uniforms, signifying our loyalty to the Fatherland and to its government. True, many of our classmates, particularly almost all of the foreigners, have left since last year. With us are our parents and also certain officials from the village, who have apparently received special invitations. Herr Falckner appears, also in uniform, and begins, if anything a little more light-heartedly than the year before.

"Comrades! I am truly happy to speak to you again today, on this momentous occasion, significant for our nation and for our school alike. It is my great privilege to tell you at this time of the great changes that have taken place within these walls in the past year.

"TODAY the German people may be divided into four groups. The first are those who have been National Socialists before our leader Hitler's accession to power. The second are those who, by long wrestling with their own consciences, have won their way to National Socialism. They have been overshadowed by the third group, who unscrupulously and purely for their own personal advantage and comfort, have turned to National Socialism on principle.
"I am very proud to count myself among the second group, among those who through long and earnest searching have at last found their way to National Socialism. I feel myself greatly privileged to account for the resultant change in our school at this time."

My mind wanders back—back over the year that has just passed, over the year that has seen a change, a change in a man, a change in a school, a change in a nation.

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To the City Streets

By Gene Kindig

To the song of the streets,
   To the hustle and bustle,
To the wild-waving cop
   In the swift traffic hustle,
To the whine of the motors,
   To the roar of the cars,
To bewildered pedestrians
   Gazing at towers,
To the red and green stop lights
   Blinking their eyes,
To the screaming newsies
   Of half-pint size,
I doff my cap,
   And my heart goes with it.
The reason? There is none.
I just want to be in it.