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 More detail on his life and the origins of his heretofore-unpublished book is given in Brian Crim's Introduction.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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