German author Hans Peter Richter has written numerous stories and novels for children and young adults. He is best known to English-speaking audiences for his novel *Friedrich*, a story exploring the dangers of prejudice and racism. Set in Germany in the 1930s, *Friedrich* portrays the friendship of two boys, one Jewish and one Christian. The difference in their religion becomes an issue when Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and the Nazi Party rise to power in Germany. Hitler’s government implemented laws designed to separate German Jews from the larger population and to strip Jews of their rights. As the 1930s came to a close, Hitler’s persecution of the Jews became increasingly violent and widespread until his policy eventually involved the systematic murder of every Jew in Europe, a policy known as the Final Solution. Set against the backdrop of Hitler’s brutal reign and told from the point of view of Friedrich’s non-Jewish best friend, *Friedrich* examines the disastrous, tragic consequences for one Jewish family living in Nazi Germany.
Biography of Author Hans Peter Richter

Hans Peter Richter was born on April 28, 1925, in Cologne, Germany. The son of Peter and Anna Richter, Hans came along just seven years after the end of World War I (1914–18), a time when the nation was crippled economically and many people suffered from hunger, unemployment, and homelessness. As a consequence, Richter stated in Something about the Author Autobiography Series (SAAS), while the family did not have a great deal of money, “My mother was intent on never letting me go hungry. This attitude of my mother's can be recognized to this day by the size of my girth [the measure of his waistline].” Growing up in Cologne, Richter and his friends got into a fair amount of mischief. He even wrote a book about his childhood misdeeds, called Ich war kein braves Kind (“I wasn’t a good child”).

Richter grew up in Cologne and attended school there. In writings about his childhood he has singled out one teacher, Philipp Neumann, as being responsible for his love of books and as a significant influence on his character. Richter

Chronology of Events Relating to Friedrich

April 28, 1925: Hans Peter Richter is born in Cologne, Germany.

January 30, 1933: Adolf Hitler becomes the chancellor of Germany.

April 1933: A law is passed that prevents Jews from holding jobs as civil servants.

September 15, 1935: The first of the Nuremberg Laws are passed; one of these laws strips Jews of their German citizenship.

November 9–10, 1938: A series of riots, later known as Kristallnacht, erupts throughout Germany and Austria. Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses are vandalized and many thousands of Jews are beaten, arrested, and sent to concentration camps.

September 1, 1941: All Jews in Germany must sew the Star of David to their clothing.

April 30, 1945: Hitler commits suicide.

May 8, 1945: World War II ends in Europe; Germany is defeated.

1961: Damals war es Friedrich is published; the English-language edition, under the title Friedrich, is published in 1970.
has written about Neumann as an exceptional person who was intensely admired by his students, many of whom remained in contact with the teacher for many decades after leaving school. In SAAS, Richter declares that “Whatever I am, I owe in large part to this teacher.” In Richter’s novel Friedrich, Neumann is represented by the character Herr Neudorf, one of the few people in the novel who publicly encourages support for the Jews.

While still a teenager, in 1942, Richter became a soldier in the German army. He served until the end of World War II in 1945. During the war, frequent bombing raids on Cologne resulted in his childhood home and most of his family possessions being destroyed. After the war ended, Richter held a series of jobs, working as manager of a local theater and as an accountant in a marmalade factory. He struggled to earn enough to survive in an economy that had been crippled by the nation’s defeat in World War II. In 1949 Richter began several years of studying at various German universities, including the University of Cologne and the University of Bonn. He earned degrees in psychology and sociology, receiving a doctorate degree from the University of Hanover in 1968. In 1952 Richter married Elfriede Feldmann; together they have four children, Ulrike, Claudia, Leonore, and Gereon.

Much of Richter’s career has been spent teaching and writing scholarly works. He also worked as a radio and television broadcaster and has written several scripts for those media. But he is best known internationally as an author of stories and novels for children and young adults. He became a writer of fiction after a family friend overheard him telling stories to his children and encouraged Richter to write the stories down and try to publish them. While most of his stories and novels are categorized as fiction, Richter acknowledges that many of them have a basis in his own life. He stated in SAAS: “I can only write about things that I myself have experienced or at least have been a witness to.”

Richter’s first books, children’s books including Karussel und Luftballon (Uncle and His Merry-Go-Round), were published in the late 1950s. In 1961 he published what has become his best-known work: released in Germany as Damals war es Friedrich (At that time It was Friedrich) and published in 1970 in the United States simply as Friedrich, this novel has
sold more than two million copies worldwide and has been translated into several different languages. When it first appeared in Germany, Friedrich did not meet with instant success; the German public had little interest in reading about the painful events of the recent past. It wasn’t until many years later, when it became widely accepted in Germany that the events of the Holocaust should be confronted rather than ignored, that Friedrich achieved widespread recognition. The novel has earned numerous awards in Germany and elsewhere, including the American Library Association’s 1972 Mildred L. Batchelder Award, which is given to outstanding books for young audiences that were initially published in a foreign language.

Richter has explained that Friedrich, for all its success, has been misunderstood by many as a story written to specifically represent the suffering of Jews in Nazi Germany. His intention, however, was to write a novel illustrating one example of the barbarism that results from racism and prejudice. Numerous events in world history could have illustrated this point, but Richter has explained that he chose the era of Nazi Germany because he experienced those events firsthand. He stated in SAAS that, with Friedrich, he “wanted to show how human beings, because of being different, were persecuted, disadvantaged, or even killed.” The fact that such occurrences are not limited to the Holocaust is suggested by the original German title, which translates to “At that time it was Friedrich.” In other words, in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, the Jews were the victims of unimaginable atrocities. But both recent and ancient history teaches of many other examples of innocent people being enslaved, imprisoned, and sometimes slaughtered.

Richter has received praise for two other novels based on his experiences as a young man during the World War II era. *Wir waren dabei* (1962; *I Was There*) tells the story of the narrator and two friends growing up in Nazi Germany and becoming soldiers in the German army. *Die Zeit der jungen Soldaten* (1967; *The Time of the Young Soldiers*) gives a detailed account of a young man’s experience as a soldier during wartime. Both novels are critical of Nazism and explore the nightmare of war. They examine the ways in which young people were drawn in by the enthusiasm and peer pressure of the Hitler Youth, an organization that Christian German boys were initially encour-

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aged and eventually forced to join. The novels also show the ways in which that enthusiasm fell apart once the young men were faced with the harsh realities of war.

**Historical Background of Friedrich**

The history of anti-Semitism, or prejudice against Jews, in Germany dates back to the beginning of the Jewish presence in that country. Over the centuries, Jews were periodically persecuted in Germany and throughout Europe, with anti-Jewish violence peaking during times of national struggle or economic difficulties. During the 1920s, the Jewish community in Germany was active and vibrant, while at the same time numerous Jews had become assimilated, or absorbed, into the larger German population. Jews, making up about 1 percent of the total population, held positions in a variety of fields, from politics to education to the arts. As Germany was caught in the net of the worldwide Great Depression, which began in 1929, the fairly comfortable position Jews had enjoyed in Germany became threatened.

The power of Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist, or Nazi, Party in German politics increased rapidly from 1928, when it won just 3 percent of the vote in national elections, to 1932, when it became the largest political party in the country with 37 percent of the vote. A significant part of the Nazi Party ideology, or system of beliefs, involved blaming the Jewish people for Germany’s defeat in World War I and for its economic difficulties. Initially a political party for the more radical fringe in Germany, the Nazi Party gained increasing support as more and more people became convinced that the existing democratic government, the Weimar Republic, was not strong enough to solve Germany’s problems. Soon after the Nazi Party became the nation’s largest, the German president appointed Hitler the chancellor, or prime minister, of Germany. Through political persuasion as well as violence and intimidation carried out by the party’s military-style organizations—the SA, or Storm Troopers, and the SS, which became the head of police and security issues in Hitler’s government—Hitler defeated all political opposition and took control of every branch of government. He declared himself the Führer, or leader, and became a dictator with absolute power over the nation.
Ridding Germany of the Jews

In addition to his plans to revitalize the economy and rebuild the military, Hitler initiated a campaign to rid the nation of its Jewish citizens; the initial plan involved making life for the Jews so difficult that they would immigrate, or move, to other countries. Within four months of becoming chancellor, Hitler’s government called for a boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses. While it only lasted for one day, the boycott signaled the government’s attitude of hostility toward Jews that would soon take the form of anti-Jewish laws and policies. With the passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, Jews were declared a separate race, a law that allowed the government to include in their persecution anyone who had Jewish relatives, whether that person practiced Judaism or not. The Nuremberg Laws also stripped Jews of their German citizenship and made it illegal for Jews to date or marry non-Jews. Over the next several years, a series of laws restricted Jewish activity and further segregated Jews from other Germans; most professions became

The boys in the Hitler Youth were trained to use weapons and were schooled in anti-Semitic Nazi beliefs.
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