How are Nazi war criminals made? Is it in their genes or are they formed by their bringing up and their childhood habitat? With Heinrich Himmler, one of Hitler’s closest henchman and the man in charge of the “Final Solution”, neither can be said to be true.

Himmler’s father was the son of a low-ranking, very Protestant, civil servant who was a classic case of upward social mobility. His only son, Gerhard, was only seven when he died, and he was brought up by his pious Catholic mother. He later studied at Munich University. He became private tutor to the brother of the king of Bavaria.

He married Anna Maria Heyder, the daughter of a Munich businessman. She brought a fortune to the marriage. Their union produced two sons; the second was Heinrich, born in October 1900. His godfather was Prince Heinrich, the son of the king’s brother.

Mr. and Mrs. Himmler believed in regular habits, hard work, religious observance, and for their sons classical history, Latin and Greek. He was very much a home-loving father who shared with his boys his liking for stamp collecting and stenography. They were encouraged to make friends with the children of the upper middle class. The family went to church and confession every week, was monarchist, conservative in politics and economically secure. There is nothing to suggest there was any significant instability in the family. Certainly Heinrich got enough love for that not to be an excuse for later deviant behaviour.

In 1906 Heinrich started at the cathedral school. The long summer holidays were spent mostly in the very pretty, soothing, foothills of the Bavarian Alps.

When later one of his fellow pupils Wolfgang Hallgarten, who had fled the Nazis to the US and became one of its leading historians, found out who Himmler was he could not believe that Heinrich had become the Gestapo leader. He remembered him as a model pupil who had been liked by his teachers; although among the boys he was considered a swot and had been only moderately popular. He was not bullied and had his friends. A school report from 1914 reads: “He is an apparently very able student who by tireless hard work, burning ambition and very lively participation achieved the best results in the class. His conduct was exemplary.”
He was fascinated by war and the military. When his brother who was two years older than him reached the age of 17 and joined the Territorials, Heinrich wrote in his diary: “If only I was old enough, I’d be out there like a shot.” When Heinrich reached 17 his father wrote to the local military authorities stating that “[m]y son Heinrich has a strong desire to be an infantry officer by profession”. He was accepted.

Ironically, once sent to his reserve battalion he became homesick. Constantly he asked his parents to write more often. “Dear Mother! Thank you so much for your news. It’s so horrid of you not to write again”, he wrote in one letter. Most of the correspondence with his family has been preserved. Although he tried to present himself to his parents as manly and adult, his letters continued to demand their lively participation in his everyday concerns and their permanent support in dealing with them. A bit later when he got regular leave on the weekends, he invariably went home.

Meanwhile in Bavaria the political atmosphere was deteriorating. The social democratic prime minister was shot by a right-wing extremist. The left proclaimed a soviet republic.

It was then that Himmler started to change his outlook on life. He joined the Landshut Free Corps – an armed group of volunteers made up mainly of anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic soldiers returning from World War 1. But he only stayed a member for a couple of months. He still wanted to be an officer in the regular army, but he was not accepted.

Then Himmler turned 180 degrees in another direction – he went to study agriculture at the Technical University in Munich, a surprise to all since his family had no connection with the countryside or landowners. In a while he was given a placement (internship) on a farm. He found the physical labour difficult and after five weeks he became badly ill with suspected paratyphoid fever.

While ill he read everything he could lay his hands on – Jules Verne, historical fiction such as Goethe, Thomas Mann and Celtic poetry. None of them were war-like or anti-Semitic. But then he turned to reading about politics including a book on the Freemasons whose author claimed they were strongly influenced by the Jews. Himmler wrote in his diary: “A book that sheds light on everything and tells who we have to fight first.” But it is unclear whether he was aiming his barb at the Freemasons or the Jews.

Back in the university his health recovered, and he shared a room with his brother. He had many friends including two girls he was drawn to. The friends regularly went to concerts, the theatre, the ice rink, museums and dances. When he got ill they all came to visit him and brought him meals. He became a member of the Apollo duelling fraternity, popular among students.

He still went regularly to mass, confession and took communion. In his diary he wrote: “God will come to my aid.” After a Christmas Eve mass with his family he wrote: “We were standing in front of the choir and the solemn mass was a powerful experience. The Church reaches people through its imposing ritual and God through a simple and sweet child.”