

# The Box on the Back Seat

One theme overshadowed my interviews with Hitler's People – the Jewish tragedy: the Final Solution.\* How much had they known, what had been said in Hitler's presence? There had been virtually no mention of it in the post-memoirs of the Allied good and great; and for that matter, what place had it in a Hitler biography either?

The answer was this: If I were William Shirer, writing on the rise and fall of the Third Reich, it would be quite proper just to lay responsibility at Hitler's door. He was the head of State.

I was however a Hitler biographer: I was dissecting the *person*, and not the post, and it became relevant to think the unthinkable, and to inquire how far he himself was involved, or had been shielded from the ugliest decisions.

The absence of any direct paper trail, or any archival evidence, even after sixty years or more, was what required me to start thinking outside the conventional frame. Could it be, as SS *Obergruppenführer* Karl Wolff had put it, that Himmler, his chief, had

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\* The Final Solution of the Jewish Problem went through many different shades of meaning as the years passed, and depending on whose lips were speaking the phrase. The first Foreign Ministry file labeled *Endlösung der Judenfrage* was dated 1936.

decided to act on his own and that “the Messiah of the coming two thousand years” should be kept immaculate!<sup>1</sup> So Wolff quoted Himmler in his private papers; but Wolff himself was quite definitely in the know, however much he protested his ignorance later.

Typical of the plight of my critics was one signal which they offered, signed by Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller on August 1, 1941, asking for *Anschaungsmaterial*, visual materials, on the operations of the *Einsatzkommandos*, the SS task forces, to be sent in for Hitler to look at. The document was considered [robust] enough for defence lawyers to spring it on me in the Lipstadt Trial in 2000, but it had only the flimsiest of pedigrees – it came from a Moscow source, it was a typed copy, the file-number provided by Lipstadt’s lawyers did not exist, there were no supporting or contextual papers, and no reference to it, dated before or since, had turned up in the archives. Besides, what did “visual materials” mean? Or “activities” for that matter – because in addition to the more murderous ones, the task forces had a dozen different tasks to perform in the East, mostly Intelligence gathering.

As for Hitler, there was not a single wartime document showing he knew of the Holocaust, and there isn’t one even now. Since 1965 I had trawled through the archives and found no Hitler order, nor even evidence that he knew what was going on.

On January 19 (••) 1945, told by Generaloberst Heinz Guderian that the Red Army had now overrun Auschwitz, Hitler’s only mild response, recorded by the relays of stenographers, was a resigned, “*Jawohl*” – okay. The name Auschwitz meant nothing to him. [*Auschwitz was overrun Jan 27, 1945; the Lagebesprechung was however – mistakenly? - dated earlier, I think.*]

To my mind these stenographers, together with the adjutants and secretaries, were a vital source. On Hitler’s orders Bormann had recruited a dozen verbatim stenographers in September 1942, to write down every word spoken in his presence; they were the elite in a very specialized profession. The Americans interrogated them closely, and all said the same thing: the topic never came up in his presence.

I located the interrogating officer concerned (•• *add name source*), and he provided copies of his reports to me. I located several of the twelve stenographers – including Karl Thöt, Ludwig Krieger, and Heinz Buchholz (one, Heinrich Berger, had been killed by Stauffenberg’s bomb).

I was not the threatening presence that the Americans had been, and I won these men’s confidence; but I got the same answer.

I was very impressed by these civil servants; they all needed postgraduate degrees to qualify as government stenographers. I found that Dr Krieger lived only a stone’s throw from the German Parliament building in Bonn, where he was still employed as a verbatim stenographer. He had kept all his papers. In World War I he had been personal secretary to the legendary Colonel Walter Nikolai, head of Military Intelligence, and he produced to me his shorthand diaries of that earlier life as well; he had never been asked about them, and although I sent strong recommendations to both the Federal Archives and the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, the diaries are to be feared lost by now.

Krieger had much to tell me. He described the May 1943 war conference at which Vice-Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the *Abwehr* Intelligence Chief, reported to Hitler that a body of a British officer had floated ashore, carrying in his document pouch top-secret letters which apparently revealed that the Allies were about to invade Sardinia, and not Sicily as common sense dictated.

“I was dying to interrupt,” Krieger told me, “and say that this could well be a British Intelligence plant. But as a mere stenographer, of course I had to remain completely silent.”

Canaris insisted that the documents were genuine.

“Even as Hitler was leaving the conference room,” continued Krieger, “he suddenly turned back and said: ‘*Herr Admiral*, might this not just be a British trick, to fool us into believing that they will be invading Sardinia, instead of Sicily?’”

Once again Hitler was right, as events proved; but since the Battle of Stalingrad he had lost his sureness of touch, his *Fingerspitzengefühl*.

Karl Thöt showed me his shorthand diary covering his three years with Hitler. It was a curiously spectral volume, containing only frameworks, so to speak – settings and scenes, but not the actual top secret stuff that made up the twice daily situation conferences he was recording.

I persuaded him to spend a day dictating the diary onto tape for me; it contained all the little detail, the local colour which is the very stuff of history and the personalities who make it come true:

At the noon conference the heater promised by the Führer is indeed there – a small china stove. . . In the afternoon, before a brief reception of seven officers handpicked for special missions for which the Führer briefs them in a short speech, he inquired in General Schmudt's presence whether the stove was warm enough for us. When we said it was, he was hugely pleased and laughed out loud.<sup>2</sup>

The horrors that these stenographers heard, the plain truth of their fatherland's situation, crippled by the world's onslaught, ablaze from end to end with horrifying air raids, undermined by treachery, eroded by starvation and pestilence – the grim truth was so frightful that two of the stenographers buckled under the mental strain and suffered nervous breakdowns within days of starting. Unlike the generals and admirals, who each heard only their own sector, then saluted, clicked their heels and left, these humble scribes, like their Führer himself, heard it all.

Among the private papers of stenographer Ludwig Krieger I found a note dated December 13, 1945: "In the Führer conferences which I reported in shorthand there was never any mention of the atrocities against the Jews. For the present it must remain an unanswered question, whether Hitler himself issued specific orders . . . or whether orders issued in generalized terms were executed by subordinates and sadists in this brutal and vile manner."

As General Schmudt himself had advised Walter Frentz, "If you know what's good for you, you'll destroy those negatives." It was contraband knowledge, and it was not allowed into the *Sperrkreis*, the innermost, cordoned-off, zone of the Führer's headquarters.

As his paranoia grew in the middle of the war, Hitler directed one adjutant, the lanky six-foot-two (188cm) SS officer Richard Schulze to attend every audience he gave, even the tête-à-têtes with Himmler. So what did he, Schulze, know?

I already knew the answer and I invited him over to London for the David Frost programme on June 9, 1977, when my Hitler biography finally came out, and sat him in the second or third row of the audience, next to Pilar; when Frost, in a well-staged fit of adenoidal desperation shrilled at me the question – did Hitler *know* or not – I held up a hand, and asked for a microphone to be reached over to Schulze.

Like a barrister examining a witness, I invited him to identify himself.

“I was Hitler’s personal SS adjutant from 1942 to 1944.”

“– In other words, throughout the Holocaust period?”

“Yes. He ordered me to be present as a witness at every meeting.”

“Please tell Mr Frost and our television audience at home what discussion, if any, there was in your presence about Jews and the Final Solution.”

“Mr Irving, there was never even one word spoken on the subject.”

This is not verbatim, but an accurate rendering of our exchange – it was necessarily brief, because Frost had had no advance warning of Schulze’s presence, and I could see wild off-camera semaphoring going on to get this ambush over. As newspapers reported, it had a huge impact on the viewers.

As I drove round Germany and Austria I did not neglect the widows. Some knew nothing, but others – pleased with my visit – often vanished upstairs and came back clutching dusty suitcases stuffed with notebooks and papers from some attic room.

I left no stone unturned. The widow of Heydrich’s successor, the last chief of the R.S.H.A, SS *Obergruppenführer* Dr Ernst Kaltenbrunner, was subsisting in genteel poverty in a dark little apartment in Linz; she looked gaunt and hollow-eyed and there was nothing

that she possessed or still knew. Most of it was in London. Years later I found myself in the Public Records Office looking at wartime snapshots of her found in Kaltenbrunner's pocketbook by British Intelligence, after he was brought to London for questioning.<sup>3</sup> She had once been beautiful, radiant, and womanly. I could not easily connect her with the fragile shadow that had answered to that bell-push still defiantly marked KALTENBRUNNER in Linz.

On the same journey I visited the widow of Austrian Nazi, Dr Arthur Seyss-Inquart, hanged with Kaltenbrunner at Nuremberg in 1946. She did have a few of his papers, including an interesting essay by him on the controversial "telegram" he was supposed to have sent in March 1938 from Vienna to Berlin, formally inviting the Germans in. It was a concoction by Berlin – specifically, it was the idea of Ernst von Weizsäcker – and Seyss-Inquart himself never saw it until 1945; but it was one of the strands in the rope that hanged him. I gave a copy of his essay to the archives. Nowadays every invading Power copies the "letter of invitation" idea.

In Linz on a subsequent occasion, I took the opportunity of calling on Leo Raubal, born in 1906, the brother of Hitler's niece Geli, who had shot herself in 1931. Their mother had been Hitler's half-sister.

A shock awaited me as the door opened. Whether by accident or design, Leo was the image of Hitler himself – the lick of black hair across his forehead, the mustache, the fierce and fanatical eyes, the hollow, gaunt expression.<sup>4</sup> He confirmed what I had gleaned about Geli's suicide from the papers of Julius Schaub (which his son Roland Schaub had turned over to me). She had killed herself to escape Adolf's attentions.

Christa Schroeder also related to me that Emil Maurice – Hitler's (Jewish) chauffeur and founder of the SS – had told her at the funeral of one of their circle that he had started an affair with Geli, and that Hitler had ordered her to break it off.

At the time I met Leo he still had his sister's letters, but he did not volunteer this to me, and why indeed should he have? They have since been sold into obscurity by a Munich auction house, which was not permitted to copy them first. Her grave, regularly

venerated and visited by Hitler, was dug over by the municipality recently and she was reburied in a common grave.

While in Austria, I also drove over to see Paula Kubizek, the widow of Hitler's schoolfriend August Kubizek. I took the old highway to her home in Eferding.

Her husband had related many childhood episodes to her and in particular about a nostalgic luncheon he had had in July 1939 with Adolf, then just turned fifty, at Winifred Wagner's home in Bayreuth. He had started to remind Adolf of the night they once spent as teenagers on a hilltop overlooking Linz in 1906, both intoxicated by the story and music of Richard Wagner's opera *Rienzi* which they had just seen. Hitler, seventeen, eyes on fire, had declared that one day, like *Rienzi*, he would rise to greatness and "save his country." Halfway through Kubizek's misty-eyed recital of this at Bayreuth, Hitler placed his hand on his arm to stop, and actually completed the story for him; he turned to Frau Wagner, and said: "That was when it all began."

Winifred later confirmed the whole extraordinary episode to me, and here was the widow, doing just the same.<sup>5</sup>

Some time after pulling away from Frau Kubizek's little terrace home I switched on the car radio. Bavarian radio began to play Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 9 in C Major – known, and for good reason, as *The Great*. I drove back to Munich along the empty highway with the windows rolled down and the Austrian mountain sunshine beaming in. The last grand chords were sounding as I slipped back onto the Inner Ring of the Bavarian capital. Why does one remember these things?

August Kubizek's memoirs should be an object lesson for historians.\*

As with many others, Christa Schroeder's for example, others had adapted his text to the dictates of political correctness. The published book contained passages, oft quoted since, suggesting

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\* August Kubizek, *Hitler mein Jugendfreund* (Stocker: Graz & Göttingen, 1953).

that Hitler hated the Jews even as an adolescent. In 1996 Dr Brigitte Hamann published a book on Hitler in Vienna, which argued that he was not an ingrained anti-Semite at all, except when it suited him.\* I had always stated the same. Examining Kubizek's original manuscript, she found that these anti-Semitic passages had been shoe-horned into it after the war by the publisher.<sup>6</sup>

Hitler's chief valet from 1933 to 1939, Karl-Wilhelm Krause, relates that his publisher also made sweeping political changes to his manuscript *Zehn Jahre Kammerdiener bei Hitler* without his knowledge. I was sure that this would never happen to me.

I visited Winifred Wagner two or three times in Bayreuth, once with Elke Fröhlich in tow, who shared my incidental but disappointed hope of leaving with tickets for the next *Ring* cycle. The matriarch of the Richard Wagner clan and mistress of Bayreuth, Winifred had married the composer's son Siegfried and could now converse only in German, any English skills she may have possessed having long fallen into disrepair. A large bosomy Englishwoman, she reminded me disconcertingly of Mrs Hall, my kindergarten headmistress thirty (••) years before.

Her famous mansion, "Haus Wahnfried," was much as it had been when "Wolf" used to visit. "*Hier Kapellmeister Wolf*," Hitler would say when announcing himself discreetly by phone during the Years of Struggle: "Bandmaster Wolf here." Stepping over the threshold and raising her hand – almost – to his lips in the courteous old-Austrian fashion, as she told me, he would utter an ineffable sigh, and say: "Gnä' Frau, now that I have seen Wahnfried, the Berghof no longer pleases me." He probably said it in all the stately homes, I thought; still, it was a good line.

She spoke of him wistfully, and they certainly exchanged romantic letters, documenting something deeper in their relationship; or was that just a melody which Hitler instinctively played to women

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\* From Kubizek we learned that Hitler's first crush was a Stefanie Rabatsch. Writer Anton Joachimsthaler did the legwork in the Linz city archives, and reported in *Korrektur einer Biographie: Adolf Hitler 1908-1920* (Munich: Herbig, 1989) that she was born Stephanie Isak, a Jewish name.

of a certain age? (Christa Schroeder told me similar stories, as the same dreamy twinkle invaded her helpless eyes.)

Delighted to have a *receptive* listener, Winifred regaled me with stories about the years with Hitler: in one, his pal “Putzi” Hanfstaengel had phoned frantically from England on the eve of war – Hitler was lunching with her – and pleaded for a written safe conduct [*freies Geleit*] if he now returned to Germany. (Hitler had played a cruel practical joke on Putzi in 1937 and he had fled abroad.) Hitler would not go beyond a verbal okay, exclaiming, “*Ach Gott* – of course he can come back!” Hanfstaengl insisted on having it in writing, and Hitler told her to put the phone down. “If he won’t take my word for it, a letter won’t convince him either.”<sup>7</sup>

She had interceded on behalf of many people. Once he had squeezed her hand on leaving and said, “Frau Wagner, if you ever need to get a request to me personally, give it to Dr Brandt” – his young traveling medic – “because if your letters fall into the hands of *Reichsleiter* Bormann there’s no guarantee they’ll reach me.”

“Don’t expect of me, Mr Irving,” this formidable dowager admonished, the last time we met, “that I will join the horde that now wheel overhead and screech their infamies upon Hitler’s name, now that he is down. He was my friend and I for one believe that friendship is for life – it is to be bestowed in foul times as well as fair.”

Those were the words she used, to the best of my recall. Uttered even in private in Germany and Austria now, they would suffice to get her imprisoned.

The correct language to use about all the Nazis now is written in a pen dipped in vitriol. Hitler’s foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, is routinely and universally condemned, which brings me to his widow, a member of the very wealthy Henkell champagne family. First let me describe her.

Traveling on the London Tube between Maida Vale and Baker Street, I once found myself sitting opposite a middle-aged working-class man with a large chromium-plated water tap seemingly screwed into his forehead; I have never yet been able to figure that out – whether he had perhaps some witty response ready for those

who asked, some play on words: A tap on the head? Water on the brain? Being polite and English however – that's how long ago it was – nobody in the compartment paid the slightest attention to him however.

I remembered him when I first visited Ribbentrop's widow, Anneliese; she had a large and rather disconcerting hole in her forehead where something had been clinically removed, and into which a small stack of gambling chips could comfortably have fitted. In the more indiscreet recesses of my mind I puzzled why a trowelful of Polyfilla or plasticine had not been applied, at least to spare *our* feelings.

The foreign ministry staff had not liked her any more than they liked her husband the minister: they told me that she had often sat in on her husband's meetings, knitting in a corner of the room, like Madame Defarge the *tricoteuse* at the foot of the guillotine.

With the Ribbentrops too I earned gratitude because I had gone the extra miles. I had found a certain December 1937 document for which the family had long been searching. Ribbentrop had mounted the scaffold with, slung around his neck in history, the legend that he had advised Hitler that Britain would never fight.

I have a suspicion that this legend was a product of British Intelligence disinformation, designed to sink him forever in the eyes of his colleagues. He certainly always denied it, and claimed to have issued a categorical warning to Hitler in 1937, while still ambassador in London, warning explicitly that the British would fight. In the British official volumes of German documents is a footnote stating that no such memorandum had been found. (••)

He had made the mistake of taking the only copy out of the German foreign ministry archives in 1945, so that he could hand it to the British upon his surrender. It vanished into Field Marshal Montgomery's papers as a souvenir, and many years would elapse before I found it in the British foreign office library in Cornwall Street, London; it was too late to halt the legend, of course, but Anneliese and her sons never ceased to express gratitude for this small favour I had done their family name.

It was always this evenhandedness that gave me my competitive

edge. When my friend Michael Bloch, who speaks no German, embarked on his well-meaning Ribbentrop biography, I urged him to visit Rudolf, their younger son. Rudolf would not however receive him.

“Michael,” I ventured, innocently alluding to his name, “perhaps he thinks you’re a Jew.”

“I am,” wailed Michael Bloch, pathetically.<sup>8</sup>

Ribbentrop had died within minutes of Kaltenbrunner and Seyss-Inquart, at the same place and for the same reason. When a subject was dead, then I felt an even greater obligation to see things his way. He was unable to defend himself. Perverse, perhaps, but I felt that Ribbentrop was like the boy we all knew at school whom nobody liked – and so nobody liked him. Everybody seemed to have their own funny, even distasteful stories about the foreign minister. I went the other way, and looked for those who knew him closely and still saw him differently.

Surprisingly, one was a diplomat who became a postwar ambassador to the Court of St. James’s in England, Hasso von Etzdorf. I had already found his diary in foreign ministry archives. Another of course was Ribbentrop’s son Rudolf. He told me he had returned from the eastern front in the autumn of 1944 and found his father brooding over a news story in the *Daily Mail*, about Nazi atrocities discovered in Majdanek, near Lublin. Rudolf had exclaimed, “Father, can’t you recognise atrocity-propaganda when you see it – it’s the ‘hacked-off hands’ again!” This time however it wasn’t.

Ribbentrop’s problem was that his lieutenants at the ministry were career diplomats, while he was an outsider. One such diplomat was Walther Hewel, one of the few top Nazis to have spent any time outside Germany, let alone Europe. He had a world view.

He had spent twelve years planting rubber in Java; in his handwritten diary he had encrypted his more sarcastic comments by writing them in Javanese, referring for example to Ribbentrop as *kepala oerang*, head-man. The words foxed me for some months and I tried every simple method, for example letter-substitution, of deciphering. My brother John, who had served with the RAF

during the counter-insurgency operations in Borneo, picked up the little volume and translated the words with ease.

It was not continuous, it was an occasional diary, like Anthony Eden's, which I read years later; this is the best kind of diary, except that it was precisely when Hitler – to whose staff Hewel was attached as liaison officer – was busiest, for example invading the Soviet Union, that there was least spare time to write a diary.

It did contain nuggets, all the same: "For myself personally," said Hitler on June 2, 1941, "I would never tell a lie; but there is no falsehood I would not perpetrate for Germany's sake!" Walther put it in his diary.

On the day that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, he again quoted Hitler: "Now it is impossible for us to lose the war: we now have an ally who has never been vanquished in three thousand years, and another ally," he added pensively, referring to the Italians, "who has constantly been vanquished but has always ended up on the right side."

The Italians, I remarked after quoting this unwittingly prophetic remark at a lecture in Chilliwack in British Columbia a few years later, had never once ended a war on the same side as they began, except for a notable occasion when they changed sides twice. A couple – I was told they were Italians – flounced out.

The 1941 Walther Hewel diary ended with Hitler in reflective mood, with his whole campaign strategy falling to pieces.

"How strange," he mused, "that with Japan's aid we are destroying the positions of the White race in the Far East – and that Britain is fighting against Europe with those swine the Bolsheviks!"

I borrowed the diary from Blanda Benteler, an elegant lady living in Westphalia. As a Red Cross nurse she had looked after Walther after a plane crash in 1944, and then married him. (Himmler had officiated.)

She invited me for tea in her mansion near Bielefeld.

Only after she had sized me up did she reveal the existence of her husband's diary. Besides, as she put it, "You are the only historian who has ever bothered to ask."

I heard the same slightly perplexed words from Freifrau – roughly, baroness – Marianne von Weizsäcker at her isolated home on Lake Constance. I cannot recall whether I had first announced my coming – on this occasion, I probably had. Hers was a famous family. One son, the lawyer Richard, became mayor [*Regierender Bürgermeister*] of Berlin from 1981 to 1984 and then president of West Germany. Another, Carl-Friedrich, had been an atomic physicist in the Nazi era, and then a peace activist; , when writing my book *The Virus House*, I found that he had proposed in a paper to the German War Office in July 1940 that, if they once got an atomic reactor working, they could extract a new explosive from it, plutonium.

It was on account of her late husband, Ernst, that I had come to see her however. From 1938 until 1943 he had been Ribbentrop's *Staatssekretär*, or Permanent Under-Secretary. He had straddled the awkward fence between Nazi subservience and, when things began going wrong, anti-Nazi conspiracy, particularly after his displacement in 1943 to the Vatican as Germany's ambassador.

Yes, revealed his widow Marianne now, Ernst had not only kept diaries but he had written her copious letters too. Only one other writer had expressed interest in them so far, another foreigner: Leonidas Hill, later a professor at the University of British Columbia. An expert on the Munich Crisis of 1938, he had picked up stray clues that they existed in various collections; I don't think that he ever quite grasped one obvious flaw – that much of the diary had been written on loose leaf pages and was therefore exposed to what the Americans call Monday-morning quarterbacking.

It is clear to me that, facing prosecution as war criminal, Ernst actively rewrote many pages to adapt them to the needs of the times, and that his seemingly prophetic criticism of Ribbentrop was one such product – very useful when it came to his own trial by the Americans in 1948, the “Wilhelmstrasse trial.” Careful cross checking with the letters written during the war, which were less easily tampered with, still made the diaries a valuable source. I was able to persuade Ullstein, my Berlin publisher, to take on this project too, and they issued Hill's edition of the Weizsäcker papers soon after.

Those were the years when I drove around Germany with an empty cardboard box on the back seat, which I gradually filled with diaries, letters, and documents as I visited the still living witnesses of that era.

In Bavaria I tapped yet another unexploited source: living quietly on Lake Chiemsee I found Elisabeth, the frail old widow of General Eduard Wagner, the much feared army quartermaster-general. She looked like Granny Clampett in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. When things began to go wrong, he had joined the plot to kill Hitler in 1944, and when that went wrong, on July 20 of that year, he put a bullet through his head.

Hitler willingly blamed him now for the defeats: "Aha! The swine! He did well to shoot himself. . . In the open countryside of the Ukraine we have bazookas in abundance. And in the hedgerows of Normandy we have none! He did it on purpose."

She had published a small book, *Der Generalquartiermeister*, printing extracts from his diaries and letters, but I could see that there were omissions, and that is why I called on her.

Elisabeth produced several folders containing two thousand pages of letters that he had written to her.

Once again no other historian had bothered to visit.

"Will you trust me with them for a few days, to copy?" – that was the rather brutal formula I now invariably used. (The Germans are a fundamentally courteous people and cannot very well exclaim, "Trust you? Huh!")

I drove back to London and microfilmed them with her permission (and at my own expense). I found that there was indeed much that she had felt better leaving out.

On September 9, 1939, Eduard Wagner had noted in his diary: "It is the Führer's and Göring's intention to destroy and exterminate the Polish nation. More than that cannot even be hinted at in writing." On the eleventh, as the lethal repression of the Polish people began: "Nothing like death sentences!" he had rejoiced, "*Nichts wie Todesurteile!*"

I gave a complete set of copies to the German archives, as was now increasingly my habit.

Growing more ambitious, in the early 1970s I twice went behind the Iron Curtain with East Berlin's official permission to dig for buried documents. On each occasion I notified the authorities in London of my intent.

Field Marshal Milch, whom I was also intensively interviewing, had described to me where he had buried a metal chest containing Reich air ministry files in 1945. From his description however they had taken no special precautions. When we reached the location, west of Halle, I found it was a very swampy patch of woodland and after only an hour or two we abandoned the search. Nothing would have survived a quarter century buried there.

More promising was the treasure map placed in *Stern* magazine's hands by Curt Gasper, one of Dr Goebbels's senior staff who had returned from South America. *Stern* asked me to mount a second expedition. Gasper described having buried a five-liter preserving jar contained the shorthand notes of Goebbels's very last bunker diaries. Fleeing Berlin on about April 22–3, 1945 (•• *check JG book*), and making for Hamburg with Wolfgang Balzer and Richard Otte (Goebbels diary-clerk), Gasper had encountered British troops near Perleberg; they had doubled briefly back and buried the jar in a local wood.

I questioned Gasper in 1970 and Otte in 1971.<sup>9</sup> The pads had no spirals, which ruled out using a simple metal detector. But the jar had been sealed with wax, and thanks to Gasper we had a map of the wood with a dot marking the spot – perhaps a twenty-five yard radius would have to be searched.

Otte, like Ludwig Krieger, was an active civil servant in Bonn, and not permitted to travel behind the Iron Curtain; maybe he had other reasons for not taking the risk. So I would be on my own.

I asked a Cambridge archeological don, whose team had developed a proton magnetometer, to test whether an empty five-liter jar would generate a sufficient magnetic anomaly in the earth's magnetic field for his equipment to detect; in the iron-heavy clay of East Anglia it did, but what about in Mecklenburg?

I persuaded my friends in Köpenick, East Berlin, to drive out to

the wood and mail me a sample of the soil – heaven knows what the *Stasi* censors made of that. British wartime censors would have just quietly swapped the soil for some other and mailed it on.

The sample was very sandy, as expected, with little or no iron content. I therefore prepared a cruder backup method: I had a local London metal works manufacture several four-foot long forged steel rods, each tapering into a vicious five-inch spike at one end (one of these spikes we shall again be meeting years later in this narrative).

I based my team at a large modern Potsdam tourist hotel, of the kind which had its elevator instructions written in experimental or pidgin English, and we drove out to Perleberg for several days in convoy.

The communist authorities thoughtfully provided some assistance, including a microbiologist who would certify the age of any mould and flora around the jar if we found it. A rather silent *Stasi* officer in plain clothes rode shotgun on the back seat of my Rover.

This search also drew a blank and twenty more years would pass before I held the unpublished Goebbels diaries in my hands.

From the day we arrived in the wood, it was clear that the Cambridge scientists would have their work cut out. Tangled undergrowth had grown up since 1945, clogging the radius to be searched. They methodically mapped out their magnetic field grid, and paced it off and prodded. The roots created multiple cavities and false echoes. An old army bayonet was our only find; the savage mosquitoes protecting the wood left bite-marks which I still bear.

As we trailed back to Potsdam for the last time, I overtook an endless column of Russian army trucks whose engines seemed to be running on peanut butter, to judge by the smoke and stench.<sup>10</sup>

The *Stasi* officer made a final effort at small talk.

“Books,” he grunted. “How do you, eh, write a book?”

I hauled out past yet another peanut-butter burner before I answered.

“First thing I do,” I said, “I open the windows of my big study, and I hang out a large banner, white on red, on the wall, along the whole building.” The whole floor is mine, I explained. “The red

banner reads: *Arbeitsbrigade David Irving* – DAVID IRVING LABOUR BRIGADE. MY TARGET: COMPLETION OF BOOK BY OCTOBER. LONG LIVE THE FIRST OF MAY!”

The *Stasi* man was the picture of hopelessness. I gathered that East Germans did not have much contact with the English sense of humor. He reached for the radio and clicked it on. “*Donnerwetter*,” he exclaimed. “*Auch bei Ihnen!* – You do all that crap too!”<sup>11</sup>

The 1945 Three-Power victory conference had been held at the Potsdam’s Cecilienhof palace. Here was the large round table with twelve ornate chairs at which the world leaders had held their plenary sessions. There were no guards around when I visited, so I slipped over the rope. Churchill – no way. Harry S. Truman – too meek and, by an accident of history, also a mass killer. Clement Attlee – “a modest man, with much to be modest about,” as Churchill once mocked. Stalin – a leader even Hitler secretly admired.

I stood the Paillard-Bolex on a ledge, pointing at the table. As its motor whirred, I selected one chair and sat down. It was really too dark, and the film has probably not recorded my choice for posterity.

Throughout this period of intensive research I felt frustrated that I was a lone ploughman, working so very large a field. My own resources were very limited. These witnesses to real history would not live forever, and the risk to their precious papers seemed even more urgent.

I suggested to the Federal Archives and the Institut für Zeitgeschichte that they broaden what I was doing systematically into government-sponsored research efforts. In the United States there were university-funded oral history projects. There were thousands of taped and transcribed interviews in American libraries. In Germany there was virtually nothing.

Helmut Heiber had pioneered a small project, and his *Zeugenschriften*, interviews conducted purely from the historian’s and not the public prosecutor’s point of view, are an exception. Professor Richard Suchenwirth had started a small project on Luftwaffe of-

ficers. But I knew of no others.

The witnesses on the Adolf Hitler years are now nearly all gone. I know of only one or two at the time that I am writing this.\* Otto Günsche died last year, Traudl Junge the year before.

Fritz Darges, one of Bormann's adjutants, still lives near Celle, though his eyesight is damaged. Incredibly, his life was saved by a fly: all Hitler's closest staff knew the story – it was July 18, 1944, and Hitler had flown back to the Wolfs' Lair from the Obersalzberg for the last time to take charge of the worsening crisis on the eastern front. The Soviet Army had broken through Army Group Center four weeks before, and he was ramming newly-raised grenadier divisions into the gap. He and his generals were poring over situation maps in the conference hut.

The windows were open and insects buzzed in from the Masurian swamps all around. One ugly beast circled the room, and kept landing on Hitler's shoulder.

He kept swatting at it, finally lost patience and snapped at Darges, "Herr *Obersturmführer*, get rid of it. Now!"

Darges misjudged the mood. "It's an airborne insect, mein Führer," he replied. "So it's the Luftwaffe's job" – and he nodded lazily toward airforce adjutant von Below.

"Herr Darges," he rasped, "*Sie kommen sofort zur Ostfront.*" You leave for the eastern front at once. He was not joking. Within the hour the major was kitted out with combat gear, helmet and backpack and making for the front. Two days later, Count von Stauffenberg's bomb exploded inches from where he normally stood, and Darges alone, of the whole Inner Circle, is now still alive.

Bormann's other adjutant was Heinrich Heim. Primed with all my usual questions, I visited him in Munich one day. A modest painting hung on his sitting room wall. "Painted by Lukas Cranach the Elder," said Heim. It was worth a lot.

In my view he had earned it. It was Heim who had performed one of the greatest services to history: he had written the *Table Talk*. Perched at an adjacent table to Hitler's for lunch and dinner from

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\* In prison in Vienna, December 12, 2005.

1941 onward, he had taken down an almost verbatim first-person account of Hitler's private remarks, encompassing every subject under the sun. Bormann had corrected and authenticated the typescript at the end of each day.

I asked him too what talk there had been about the Final Solution. Heim had the disconcerting habit of fixing his gaze at an elevation some way above your head when speaking to you, and some degrees to the left or right. No talk at all, he replied.

"Really," Hitler had said in his earshot in December 1941. "Really, the Jews should be *grateful* to me for wanting nothing more than a bit of hard work from them."

He had seen no reason not to believe Hitler. He wrote the Table Talk notes right through to July 1942 – when they reveal Hitler talking of his final aim of shipping all Europe's Jews to Madagascar. They suggest that he was not informed about what was really happening.

I was not always lucky. In 1970 I managed to locate Margaret Gruhn, the young woman of questionable lifestyle whose marriage to the elderly Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg in January 12, 1938 – with Hitler and Göring as witnesses – had ultimately propelled Hitler to absolute power.

I heard that she was living in seclusion in Berlin's working-class Neukölln district. I drove over there, parked, and rang the bell. A little hatch opened in the door – the kind that Mafia dens or seedy nightclubs might have, and the woman agreed she was the one I was seeking. I explained my purpose. The hatch banged shut before I could draw breath, and did not open again.

I had however won the confidence of most of Hitler's people to the point that all, or nearly all, felt comfortable talking with me. Most did so without inhibition. Field Marshal Erhard Milch recalled his irritation when Hitler refused to sanction the first use of poison gas against England. Germany alone had developed nerve-gas agents, Sarin and Tabun; the Allies did not even know such fearsome weapons existed.

"We signed a convention," Hitler lectured the Luftwaffe com-

mander, “and I will never permit Germany use nerve gases first.” The official records back this up.

There was another side to the Hitler coin however. Johannes Göhler – who attended the Hitler conferences as the ill-starred SS *Gruppenführer* Hermann Fegelein’s adjutant – had often written to his wife in August 1944 and 1945 from Hitler’s headquarters.

His admiration of Hitler was total. In one such letter he wrote, on September 7, 1944, “On this point even the Führer yesterday said, ‘Those who don’t want to fight don’t deserve to survive.’” He had said much the same thing after the defeat at Stalingrad.<sup>12</sup>

But Göhler also recalled to me – not once, but twice, as I asked him to repeat his recollections some years later – one less altruistic conversation which he had overheard between Hitler and Himmler in the bunker in the very last days of the war.

The Reichsführer SS had buttonholed Hitler – he needed to discuss something urgent with him. “Afterwards,” said Hitler.

When the others had all left, Hitler swung himself up on to the table, pushing the tattered maps aside.

“Mein Führer,” began Himmler, “the American forces are approaching Buchenwald concentration camp: what shall we do with the prisoners if we are unable to evacuate them in time?”

Hitler sat there, said Göhler, his legs dangling. “If you cannot evacuate all the prisoners in time,” he said, “they will have to be *liquidiert*.”

Göhler related the whole scene to me, the dangling legs, the word *liquidiert*, as though it had happened just the week before. He was now a wealthy and successful Stuttgart businessman, driving a fast, silent swift Mercedes sports car.

I asked him to repeat the story some years later; he did so, word for word, but with a significant addition: “They will have to be *liquidiert*,” Hitler had said, “otherwise the Americans will turn them loose on the surrounding countryside and there will be an orgy of rape and murder throughout Thuringia.” The people had suffered already so grievously he added, that he would at least spare them that.

The military situation had by then already outrun his ability to

command events. The GIs captured the Buchenwald camp with all its diseased and starving inmates. Nobody was up to any orgies by then. I relate the story as evidence that I did persuade Hitler's people to reveal the underside of their memories as well.

Then one day in 1973 Göhler's wife told me, between sobs, that her husband had concealed one thing from me, and I was off on the chase again.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Karl Wolff, confidential manuscript, 1952, in IfZ files, ZS-317.
- 2 Diary of Karl Thöt, Feb 20, 1943; *Hitler's War* (2001), page 296.
- 3 PRO file KV.2/274, private property secured from Kaltenbrunner on capture, forwarded on Aug 28, 1945 by Camp 020; the file includes his 1945 pocket diary.
- 4 Leo Raubal jr. (born Oct 2, 1906; died Aug 1977) was the son of Hitler's half sister Angela Raubal; captured 1942 at Stalingrad, repatriated 1955.
- 5 See *Hitler's War*, 2002 edition, pages 189 and 892.
- 6 Brigitte Hamann, *Hitlers Wien* (Piper Verlag, Munich 1996). Cf R Boyle, "Hitler adopted anti-Semitism 'merely as stepping-stone to power,'" in *The Times*, Nov 26, 1996. – On page *xiv* of *Hitler's War* I had already warned: "For the few autobiographical works I have used, I preferred to rely on their original manuscripts rather than the printed texts, as in the early post-war years apprehensive publishers (especially the 'licensed' ones in Germany) made drastic changes in them – for example in the memoirs of Karl-Wilhelm Krause, Hitler's manservant." – SS *Obersturmbannführer* Karl Wilhelm Krause, *Zehn Jahre Kammerdiener bei Hitler* (Hamburg, n.d.)
- 7 The hilarious resulting correspondence between Bormann and Hanfstaengl is in Bormann's files, Bundesarchiv NS.19/171.
- 8 Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop* (Bantam; Crown Books, New York, 1993)
- 9 I interviewed Gasper on Jul 1, 1970, and Otte on March 31, 1971.
- 10 An article, "Potsdam and the Peanut Butter Engine," was the only fruit of this trip, published in various newspapers. See David Irving, "Potsdam Notebook," *The Sunday Times*, February 21, 1971
- 11 *Quick* magazine published the anecdote a few weeks later.