

## ***ADOLF HITLER: BIOGRAPHY AND CHARACTER***

“Adolf Hitler lived from April 20, 1889 to April 30, 1945—almost exactly fifty-six years. The difference between his first thirty years and the following twenty-six years seems to be inexplicable. For thirty years he was an obscure failure; then almost overnight a local celebrity and eventually the man around whom the whole of world policy revolved.” **(Haffner, p. 1)** The biography of Adolf Hitler is unique among the great political leaders of history. But as a human being, he was always a failure; or at least strangely incomplete. As Sebastian Haffner put it: *“His life lacked everything that normally lends weight, warmth and dignity to a human life: education, occupation, love and friendship, marriage, parenthood. Apart from politics his was an empty life and hence one [that] was strangely lightweight, and lightly discarded.”* **(Haffner, p. 4)** What sort of person was Adolf Hitler? Here is one clue.

In 1939 Hitler ordered the complete destruction of the Austrian village of Döllersheim. The tiny village, birthplace of his ancestors, was converted into an artillery range for the army and blasted beyond recognition by guns and mortars. Why did the leader of the Greater German Reich order the obliteration of his father's birthplace and destroy the site of his grandmother's grave? Perhaps Hitler was obsessed with the possibility that he was one quarter Jewish; or just as likely, Hitler did not want to reveal too much about the tangled web of inbreeding in his family history. In 1930, he brought his nineteen-year-old nephew Patrick, whom he had never met before to Munich where he told him never to grant interviews to the press: *“You idiots”. He shouted, “you’re going to do me in. People must not know who I am. They must not know where I come from and who my family is. Not even in my book did I allow one word to come out about these things. I am an entirely nonfamilial being. I only belong to my folkish community.”* **(Haman, p. 51)** Adolf Hitler was a secretive man. Hardly any prominent figure in history has ever tried so hard to cover his tracks.

### ***IN THE HOUSE OF MY PARENTS***

In the first chapter of his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, written in prison in 1924 at the age of 35, Hitler described his parents as models of traditional German values: *“My father [was] a dutiful civil servant, my mother giving all her being to the household, and devoted above all to us children in eternal, loving care.”* Like so much of *Mein Kampf*, the portrait of his parents is a partial fabrication. He loved his mother deeply; but he feared his father. There is abundant evidence of his feelings towards his father. He told his secretary Christi Schroeder, *“I didn’t love my father, but I was all the more afraid of him. He had tantrums and immediately became physically violent. My poor mother would always be very scared for me.”* **(Haman, p. 18)** He told his lawyer Hans Frank about his father's heavy drinking: *“Even as a ten-to twelve-year-old, I had to take my father home from the bar. That was the most horrible shame I have ever felt. Oh Frank, what a devil alcohol is! It really was –via my father—the most horrible enemy of my youth.”* **(Haman, p. 12)**

Their mother more than compensated whatever affection the Hitler children missed in their father. According to the description given by her Jewish doctor, Eduard Bloch, after he left Nazi Germany, Klara Hitler was *"a simple, modest, kindly woman. She was tall, had brownish hair which she kept neatly plaited, and a long, oval face with beautifully expressive grey-blue eyes."* She was also submissive, retiring, and a pious Catholic. Her first three children all died in infancy within weeks of one another in 1887-8 and her fifth child Edmund died at age six in 1900. Her sorrows could only have been compounded by life with her irascible, unfeeling, and alcoholic husband. Young Adolf adored her. Dr. Bloch later wrote: *"Outwardly, his love for his mother was his most striking feature. While he was not a 'mother's boy' in the usual sense, I have never witnessed a closer attachment."* His mother may have been the only person he genuinely loved in his entire life. If we can manage to look beyond the man that Hitler was to become, in the words of Ian Kershaw, *"his family circumstances invoke for the most part sympathy for the child exposed to them."* **(Kershaw, p. 12)**

The troubled adolescent, as young men have since time immemorial, tended to find refuge in a world of fantasy. At times he dreamed of writing music; at other times, he saw himself as a great painter. One neighbor of the family recalled: *"When the postmaster asked him one day what he wanted to do for a living and whether he wouldn't like to join the post office, he replied that it was intention to become a great artist."* **(Kershaw, p. xxxi)** He clung to this dream with amazing persistence. Even as dictator, he told his intimates that had his political "mission" not intervened, *"I would have been one of Germany's greatest architects."*

## Fantasy and Failure

It is difficult to dispute the judgment of Sebastian Haffner: "Adolf Hitler's father made a success of life. His son began by making a mess of his life." **(Haffner, p. 1)** He went to a number of schools and performed poorly. At age fifteen, his mother sent him to a new school several miles away. His midterm report card showed failing grades in German, French, Math, and stenography. He disliked most of his teachers because *"they had no sympathy with youth: their one objective was stuff our brains and turn us into erudite apes like themselves."* His French teacher, Dr. Huemer testified at his trial in 1924:

He was decidedly gifted, if one-sided, but had difficulty controlling his temper. He was considered intractable and willful, always had to be right and easily flew off the handle, and he clearly found it difficult to accommodate himself to the limits of a school. He demanded unconditional subordination from his schoolmates. **(Haman, p. 11)**

Dr. Huemer seems to be in the minority in remembering Hitler at all. Other teachers and classmates claimed that he had not stood out at school in any particular fashion, either negatively or positively. **(Kershaw, p. 17)** At the end of what we would call the ninth grade, Hitler talked his dying mother into allowing him to drop out of school.

He fantasized about becoming a great painter and architect. He had few friends aside from a young upholsterer's son named August Kubizek. *"He had to speak,"*

recalled Kubizek, “*and needed someone to listen to him.*” This friendship also set the tone for Hitler’s later relationships. Anton Kubizek was a quiet, dreamy youth. He felt strongly about little or nothing; Adolf had strong feelings about everything. He found Hitler’s self-assurance attractive. Whether Adolf was haranguing him about the mental deficiencies of teachers or the greatness of Richard Wagner’s operas, Kubizek was gripped as never before. Anton was highly impressionable; Adolf was on the lookout for someone to impress. It was a perfect partnership. Like the later mass audiences that Hitler would entrance, Kubizek remained a submissive and passive partner in their “discussions.” **(Kershaw, p. 21)** As the historian Werner Maser wrote, “Genuine interest in others was totally alien to him—the man who could inflame the masses and identify himself with their longings as few others, never bothered to find out what his friends—let alone strangers—thought and felt.” All of his life, when forced to listen to others, Hitler would immediately withdraw into his own world.

The historian Ernst Nolte argues that the dominant feature in Hitler's personality was **infantilism**—defined as “*persistence in remaining in the child's world of being aware on no one but himself and his mental images.*” He never grew up into the adult world of compromise and moderation. His famous fits of rage were either calculated to intimidate his opponents; on the other hand, perhaps they were the grotesque anger of a spoiled adult child. Inflexibility was the keynote of Hitler's life. He continued to make the same spelling and grammatical errors in adulthood that he made as a child. His daily routine was maintained intact down to the smallest detail. Any deviation in routine always led to an outburst of temper. **(Spielvogel, p. 126)** As Führer of the Greater German Reich, Hitler arose late, pursued the lazy artist's life, and enjoyed late night monologues with his cronies--in much the same way he did in Vienna. His boyhood friend August Kubizek summed up Hitler's personality in this way:

The most outstanding trait in my friend's character was the unparalleled consistency in everything he said and did. There was in his nature something firm, inflexible, immovable, obstinately rigid, which manifested itself in his profound seriousness and was at the bottom of all his other characteristics. Adolf Hitler simply could not change his mind or his nature. **(Spielvogel, p. 126)**

In 1907 he persuaded his mother to finance his attempt to study art in Vienna. He failed the entrance exam for the Academy of Fine Arts; the committee noted simply: “Sample drawing unsatisfactory.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler later described this experience as an “abrupt blow”: “[*I was*] so convinced that I would be successful that when I received my rejection, it struck me as a bolt from the blue.” He sought an explanation and was told by the Rector of the Academy that there was no doubt about his unsuitability for the school of painting, but that his talent plainly lay in architecture. Hitler left the interview, as he put it, “*for the first time in my young life at odds with myself.*” After a few days of thought he concluded that the Rector was right and that “*I wanted to become an architect and obstacles do not exist to be surrendered to, but only to be broken.*” In reality, his rejection was a body blow to his pride and he did not bounce back as quickly as he as his own story suggests. He applied again the next year and was rejected again. **(Kershaw, pp. 24-5)** All of his life he bore the wound of that rejection. He raged that the art schools were staffed by “pip-squeaks” and aimed only “at killing every genius.”

Hitler's anger and embarrassment at failing the entrance examination for the Vienna Art Academy was all the more intense because his friend and roommate Anton Kubizek was accepted by the Viennese Academy of Music. At first Adolf tried to keep his rejection a secret, but in the midst of an argument, he finally admitted, "*they rejected me, they threw me out, they turned me down.*" For a teenager to fail to pass a difficult entrance examination is neither unusual nor shameful. But Hitler could not bear to tell his friend or his family. The blow to his self-esteem was profound and his bitterness showed. He would fly off the handle at the slightest provocation: "*Choking with his catalog of hates, he would pour his fury over everything, against mankind in general who did not understand him, who did not appreciate him and by whom he was persecuted. I had the impression that Adolf had become unbalanced,*" his roommate recalled. **(Kershaw, p. 39)**

In 1938, when Hitler was at the peak of his power and fame, the novelist Thomas Mann wrote a perceptive essay *Brother Hitler*, in which he analyzed the "artistic" elements in Adolf Hitler's personality. Mann wrote:

The whole pattern is there: the recalcitrance, sluggishness and miserable indefiniteness of youth; the dimness of purpose, the what-do-you-really-want-to-be, the vegetating like a semi-idiot in the lowest social and psychological bohemianism, the arrogant rejection of any sensible and honorable occupation because of the basic feeling that he is too good for that sort of thing. On what is this feeling based? On a vague sense of being reserved for something entirely indefinable. To name it, if it could be named, would make people burst out laughing. **(Fest, p. 51)**

### **The Hardest School of My Life**

In *Mein Kampf*, he wrote the oft-quoted sentences about his years in Vienna:

I owe it to that period that I grew hard. In this period there took shape within me a word picture and a philosophy, which became the granite foundation of all my acts. In addition to what I then created, I have had to learn little, and I have had to alter nothing. Vienna was and remained for me the hardest, but also the most thorough, school of my life. **(Spielvogel, p. 22)**

Hitler did not recall his Viennese years with any fondness: "*To me Vienna, the city which, to so many, is the epitome of innocent pleasure, a festive playground for merrymakers, represents, I am sorry to say, merely the lingering memory of the saddest period of my life.*" **(Spielvogel, p. 22)** He said that hunger was his constant companion. That too was a lie. His family inheritance was equal to the yearly income of a lawyer. But he squandered his money in an aimless attempt to live a cultured life. He visited the opera and toured Vienna's museums. Instead of making a serious attempt to find work, he preferred to fantasize about a great future as an architect, painter, or writer. Hitler's strange relationship with his "friend" Kubizek continued until 1908. Finally, Kubizek returned to their apartment that summer after a brief trip and found that Hitler had moved

out without leaving a forwarding address. When next they met, Adolf Hitler was Chancellor and Führer of Germany.

He sank into the underclass of the great city. Hitler made much of his poverty in *Mein Kampf*. The “mother’s darling” had lost his “soft downy bed” and the carefree existence he had enjoyed in Linz. Instead of the “hollowness of comfortable life”, he was now thrown into “a world of misery and poverty”, with “Dame Care” as his new mother. **(Kershaw, p. 29)** His only source of money was a small orphan’s pension. He worked at a few construction jobs. In the summer he would sometimes sleep in the open on a park bench; in winter when the weather turned cold, he sought shelter in a hostel for the homeless. For almost three years, from 1910 until 1913, Hitler’s address was the hostel for the homeless on 27 Meldenmannstrasse. He remarked later, “*In my imagination, I lived in palaces.*” For a while he struck up an arrangement with a shady character named Reinhold Hanisch who sold his paintings and postcard scenes on the street. This relationship soon turned sour. Hitler filed a complaint about Hanisch that resulted in a short jail sentence. In 1938, when he had the power to do so, Hitler had Hanisch tracked down and murdered to erase another embarrassing reminder of his past. **(Fest, p. 47)**

The unhappy young man craved respectability and acceptance by the bourgeois world; instead he felt rejected. Adolf Hitler moved through the excitement and glitter of pre-war Vienna like a shadow, unloved and unattached. Hitler, the self-styled artist, seemed utterly unaware even of the artistic currents. He knew nothing of Schonberg, Richard Strauss, or the Secession movement. He was ignorant of the expressionist paintings of Gustav Klimt or Oskar Kokoscka. “Instead the young man from Linz,” writes Joachim Fest, “relived in Wagner and Bruckner, the raptures of his parent’s generation.” At heart a country hick, Hitler stood outside the locked gates of Viennese society; he was not a revolutionary. He was just lonely. **(Fest, pp. 34-36)** It is hard to escape the conclusion that Adolf Hitler was a complete failure at age 24: Unemployed, uneducated with no friends, no hint of a love-life, and few prospects. He was an embittered loner, similar in many ways to the psychological profile of U.S. political assassins. **(Loader)**

### ***THE ESSENTIAL JEW***

The psychological consequences of failure are either directed inward in the form of critical self-reproach; or outward in the form of projected anger. Logically, Hitler should have embraced the Marxist cause, but he preferred to identify himself with the establishment. He clung desperately to the pretense of refinement and social polish, wearing a decent suit, a dark overcoat, and carrying a walking stick with an ivory handle. He bridled at the suggestion that he should accept a “mere bread and butter job.” In his memoirs, he claimed that Vienna was crucial to intellectual development: “*In this period my eyes were opened to two menaces of which I had previously scarcely known the names: Marxism and Jewry.*” **(Kershaw, p. 29)** He found an ideology that allowed him to explain his failure and a target for his resentments. It is impossible to explain the precise cause or the exact beginning of Hitler’s hatred of the Jews; but it is also clear that anti-Semitism was the oxygen of his mental life. It was all too easy to transfer his impotent anger and frustration into race hatred. Once it had crystallized, it remained a permanent and growing feature of his character.

Vienna was perhaps the most anti-Semitic city in Central Europe and Hitler was exposed to endless pamphlets on the theme in his wanderings through the coffeehouses. Anti-Semitism was also a powerful political tool used by the Mayor Karl Lueger to win election after election (Hitler called Lueger "the mightiest mayor of all times"). In 1910, the year he arrived in the city, the Jewish population stood at 8.6 per cent. In the Leopoldstrasse, Hitler had his first, fatal encounter with alien-looking Orthodox Jews. He described that encounter in these words:

One day when I was walking through the inner city, I suddenly came upon a being clad in a long caftan, with black curls. Is this also a Jew? At Linz they certainly did not look like that. Secretly and cautiously I watched the man, but the longer I stared at this strange face the more mind reshaped the first question into another form: is this a German? **(Kershaw, p. 61)**

For Hitler, the answer to this question was a resounding no! He continued his observations:

The moral and physical cleanliness of this race was a point in itself. It was apparent that these were not water-loving people, and unfortunately one could tell that even with eyes closed. Later the smell of these caftan-wearers often made me ill. It was repelling suddenly to discover the moral blemishes of the chosen people.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described this as the moment when the scales fell from his eyes. Vienna's foul-smelling Jews were just the tip of the iceberg, the most visible sign of a deeper malaise. The Jews were like leeches who fasten themselves to society and infect everyone. Thus, whenever we cut open a social sore like prostitution or drug use, Hitler commented, *"we always find a little Jew, blinded by the sudden light, like a maggot in a rotten corpse—an icy shudder ran down my spine when seeing for the first time the Jew as a cool, shameless and calculating manager of this shocking vice."*

By the end of his Vienna years, the basic pattern of Adolf Hitler's character was in place:

1. A paranoid hatred of Jews.
2. Laziness and a habitual need to project personal failure onto scapegoats.
3. An inability to form loving ties with anyone, especially women, and a corresponding tendency towards manipulation in relationships.
4. Extreme self-absorption in unrealistic fantasies.

## REDEMPTION BY WAR

In August 1914, the First World War broke out; an event the twenty-six year old Hitler remembered as *"a beautiful sacred moment"* and more personally, as *"a deliverance from the emptiness of my youth."* In a psychological sense, war was redemption of sorts. He found a home in the List regiment and a sense of being a part of a feared military

machine--the German Army. He had left Vienna for Munich to avoid service in the Austrian army. He petitioned the King of Bavaria requesting permission to serve. The answer arrived: *"With trembling hands I opened the document, [thus began] the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence."*

He was by all accounts a zealous soldier. He spent most of the war serving as courier delivering messages back and forth between the front-line trenches and regimental headquarters. The job fitted his personality and allowed him to remain a loner, so far as possible, within a military setting. Some of his comrades remembered him as a brown-noser because of his overly-zealous attitude. When his fellow soldiers relaxed, he would often ignore their tales of sexual exploits and other soldier talk, and take extra time to clean his rifle or polish his bayonet. One man who served with him said that Hitler never relaxed and always acted "as if we'd lose the war if he weren't on the job every minute."

Although his regiment suffered appalling losses, Hitler avoided serious wounds. But given his moodiness and aloof behavior Hitler never rose beyond the rank of corporal. According to one of his officers, his bearing was exceedingly unmilitary; his uniform was often slovenly, he slouched and generally remained taciturn unless some remark would stir him into delivering a harangue. Franz Wiedemann, adjutant of the List regiment, later testified at the Nuremberg trials that Hitler's promotion to NCO was denied because "we could discover no leadership qualities in him."

Still Hitler was a brave soldier. His luck in avoiding wounds convinced some comrades that he had some special feeling of invulnerability. He received both the Iron Cross First and Second classes. Just what he did to receive these awards has been lost to history. A Nazi schoolbook claimed he captured 15 French soldiers and marched them back to captivity. Hitler never mentioned the specifics of the award. The Iron Cross First Class was a very significant step in his life because the award was seldom given an enlisted man. From that point forward, no one could question his patriotic credentials; any more than an American could question the patriotism of a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient. The medal gave Hitler instant credibility and legitimacy.

## ***THE VISION IS BORN: (RUDOLF BINION & R. G. WAITE)***

Defeat left Hitler despondent. To make matters worse, he was wounded less than a month before the end of the war. A British mustard gas attack at Ypres left him blinded and afflicted with a hoarse and painful throat--it also gave his speaking voice that distinctive timbre. We will never know what went on in Hitler's mind as he lay in hospital recovering from the mustard gas. Rudolf Binion has used the tools of psychohistory to present the following argument. The smell of the mustard gas reminded Hitler of the iodoform administered to his dying mother in 1907. Both mustard gas and iodoform are sharp-scented liquids that burn through the skin and leave a foul odor behind them.

Binion argues that Hitler, lying in his hospital bed, relived his mother's martyrdom, except that this time Germany, his surrogate mother, was being defiled. Once he made the connection that in both cases the Jews had been responsible, Hitler had found the solution to both his personal and political

problems. In Binion's judgment, "Dr. Bloch had been right in treating one poison with another; the time had come to apply the same treatment to Germany's disease--to poison the poisoners, or Jews." Lucy Dawidowicz commented that the history of the Holocaust begins in Hitler's hospital bed. In the last chapter of *Mein Kampf*, written in 1924, Hitler made statements that certainly psychologically foreshadow Auschwitz:

If at the beginning of the War and during the War twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas, as happened to hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers in the field, the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain. (**Spielvogel, p. 270**)

There is one alternate theory to explain Hitler's pathological hatred of Jews. Let's look at the argument presented by R. G. Waite. Waite perhaps came closest to explaining the real roots of Hitler's anti-Semitism when he observed that Hitler felt "Jewishness to be an evil with himself, a poison to be purged, a demon to be exorcised." Perhaps it simply was that Hitler could not convince himself that his own family tree was completely Aryan. He certainly took pains to cover his tracks and obscure his origins. Even in his body language, gestures such as covering his mouth and nostrils, repeatedly while speaking, to obscure facial features he felt to be "Jewish" lend some credence to Waite's theory. The famous mustache was designed to draw attention away from his "Jewish" nostrils.

Waite concludes that Hitler's anti-Semitism was the product of a "borderline personality." Hitler's disorder began in childhood, solidified in his adolescence in Vienna and early adulthood in the Great War, and was powerfully reinforced and normalized in a society Hitler ultimately shaped to his own personality traits. Borderline personalities also tend to embrace admired qualities (Aryan toughness, will, masculinity, creativity) while projecting despised characteristics (degeneracy, softness, femininity) onto other scapegoats. Ultimately, it is impossible to prove or disprove such theories, but it is also clear that by the age of thirty, Adolf Hitler was consumed by his hatred of Jews. In a letter dated September 16, 1919, called the first political statement of his career, Hitler stated his motives quite clearly: "*A rational anti-Semitism. . . must lead to the systematic legal fight. . . . Its ultimate goal must unalterably be the elimination of the Jews altogether.*"