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PART I

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HITLER SETS UP HOUSE

A Bachelor’s Domestic Turn after 1928

The headline stretched across the front page of the Regensburger Echo in inch-high letters: “Suicide in Hitler’s Apartment.” The story, carried in newspapers across Germany, concerned the death of Adolf Hitler’s twenty-three-year-old niece, Geli Raubal, on September 18, 1931. That morning, she had been found dead, apparently of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, in the Munich apartment she shared with her bachelor uncle, then the leader of the nation’s second-largest political party. For Hitler, the private tragedy threatened to damage him publicly because it struck at a vulnerable spot: his unconventional lifestyle.

In light of the personality cult that later developed around Hitler and that seemed to grip the German nation in a collective state of delusion, many historians have taken for granted that his decision to remain single was an effective strategy for winning female votes. Countless media images from the Third Reich document Hitler’s appeal to women as the nation’s most eligible bachelor; we see ecstatic throngs of women waving to a smiling Führer or trying to touch his hand. But before he rose to power and silenced his detractors, the advantage of being a middle-aged, single man aspiring to become chancellor was by no means obvious. Voters then, as now, preferred national leaders with outwardly stable personal lives, which for most meant traditional marriage and children.

Following the devastating defeat of the National Socialists in the May 20, 1928, Reichstag election, when they obtained a mere 2.6 percent of the vote, the party set out to broaden its appeal, particularly to the middle classes, by appearing to be more mainstream in both its message and leadership. Indeed, it was in this period that Hitler remodeled his public persona from radical firebrand to bourgeois politician.1 Among other changes, he appeared to settle down domestically after two decades of transient living. After leaving Linz in 1908, following his mother’s death, Hitler had occupied shabbily furnished rooms, slept on park benches, claimed a bed in a men’s hostel, and shared army barracks. On May 1, 1920, he sublet a small room (and was allowed the use of a large foyer) from a couple in their thirties, Maria and Ernst Reichert, living at 41 Thiersch Street in Munich, where he remained until 1929, except for a year’s absence while interned following the Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923.2 It was a “poorish” street, the address of an ex-soldier whose army pay had run out.3 In his memoirs, Ernst Hanfstaengl, who served as Hitler’s foreign press chief, suggested that Hitler kept his small room for so long for political reasons:

He lived there like a down-at-heels clerk. He had one room and the use of a quite large entrance-hall as a sub-tenant of a woman named Reichert. It was all modest in the extreme and he remained there for years, although it became part of an act to show how he identified himself with the workers and have-nots of this world. The room itself was tiny. I doubt if it was nine feet wide. The bed was too wide for its corner and the head of it projected over the single narrow window. The floor was covered with cheap, worn linoleum with a couple of threadbare rugs, and on the wall opposite the bed there was a makeshift bookshelf, apart from a chair and rough table the only other piece of furniture in the room.4

Hitler’s tax return for 1925, in which he claimed that his only property was a desk and two bookcases along with the books, largely matches Hanfstaengl’s description.5

On October 15, 1928, Hitler rented a chalet on the Obersalzberg and thereby established his first independent household at the age of thirty-nine (plate 1).6 He had been coming to this picturesque Alpine retreat since April 1923, when he had visited Dietrich Eckart, an aggressively anti-Semitic writer and early founder of the National Socialist movement, who was then hiding from the authorities at a small Obersalzberg inn after having slandered the German president, Friedrich Ebert, as a tool of world Jewry. (Party legend had it that it was on this trip that plans for the anticipated November Revolution, which would land Hitler in Landsberg Prison, were sealed.) Hitler later claimed to have “fallen in love with the landscape,” although the support among local inhabitants for National Socialism (Eckart felt well protected there) also impressed him. The Berchtesgaden group of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (<sc>NSDAP</sc>) had been founded on February 14, 1922, and events featuring anti-Semitic speakers (including, in the summer of 1923, Hitler) were well attended. Over the years, Hitler stayed at various local hotels. In 1925, following his release from prison, a supporter lent him a log cabin on the Obersalzberg, where he worked on the second volume of his political autobiography, Mein Kampf.7 (After 1933, the cabin was named the Kampfhäusl, or Battle Hut, and became a National Socialist pilgrimage site.) Perhaps the experience awakened a desire for his own home on the mountain; if so, it would be a few more years before he would act on it.

Reminiscing about his early days on the Obersalzberg while at his military headquarters on the eastern front in 1942, Hitler recounted how in 1928, he had learned that a chalet was for rent on the northern slope of the mountain. The vacation home had been constructed in 1916–17 by Otto Winter, a leather goods manufacturer from Buxtehude (near Hamburg), who had given it his wife’s maiden name, Wachenfeld. The small, two-story structure had been built in the traditional style of upper Bavarian farmhouses. Hitler recalled that the house was made of poor materials, but had the advantage of a shady location and a spectacular view. From his front balcony, he could see Salzburg in his native Austria as well as the Untersberg, a mountain swathed in medieval legends. Winter’s widow, Margarete Winter-Wachenfeld, a National Socialist Party member, rented the house to Hitler’s older half-sister, Angela Raubal. Hitler had persuaded his sister to leave Vienna and resettle with her youngest daughter, Friedl, on the Obersalzberg to run his household. This is somewhat surprising, given that the siblings had been estranged for over a decade after Hitler had left Linz. In the 1920s, however, he renewed contact, and, presumably, the relationship deepened. Raubal certainly had ample domestic skills: beyond raising three children and her younger half-sister, Paula, on her own after she was widowed, she was also then managing a kosher kitchen for Jewish students in Vienna.8 Whether motivated by sentimental or strategic reasons, Hitler’s decision to live with his sister helped to soften his image. He acquired a ready-made family, and, in later years, Raubal served as the public female face of his home life.

Hitler’s domestic turn after 1928 coincided with a new source of personal income: sales of Mein Kampf, the first volume of which was published in the summer of 1925, followed by the second in 1926 (both volumes would eventually be combined into a single book). While the book would only become a best seller after 1933, Hitler’s tax statements from 1925 onward indicate considerable royalties. Indeed, he may have rented Haus Wachenfeld under his sister’s name in order to avoid paying taxes on a second residence. And yet despite the sales revenue from his book, on his tax returns, Hitler denied being financially solvent, claiming indebtedness and high professional expenses, which the Munich Finance Office disputed. He was often in arrears on his taxes, either out of neglect or an inability to pay. After Hitler became chancellor, royalties from Mein Kampf made him a millionaire, and by 1934 he owed an astonishing 405,494 Reichsmarks in overdue tax payments—the equivalent of millions of dollars today. Hitler resolved the problem later that year by making himself exempt from paying taxes altogether.9

But having more money did not automatically open every door for Hitler. When, in September 1929, he sought to rent a grand apartment at 16 Prince Regent Square in the Bogenhausen district of Munich, Hugo Bruckmann acted as his legal representative in securing approval of the lease from the Municipal Housing Authority. Although Hitler in the 1920s did have a considerable following in Munich, where the National Socialist movement had begun and which he would later designate its capital, party members made up less than 1 percent of the city’s population (and only 0.64 percent in Bogenhausen) before 1930. Moreover, while their social backgrounds were diverse, the majority of National Socialists came from the lower-middle and working classes, groups without great economic or political pull.10

Bruckmann, by contrast, was one of the city’s social and cultural heavyweights, living in a palatial mansion on Caroline Square, an elegant neoclassical space designed in 1809 by Karl von Fischer. He managed the art publishing firm F. Bruckmann, founded by his father, who had established its reputation by recruiting to his list of authors some of the leading German architects and artists of the nineteenth century, including Gottfried Semper and Wilhelm von Kaulbach. In 1899, seeking to give voice to the formative minds of his own generation, Hugo Bruckmann published The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century (Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts), a sweeping anti-Semitic discourse on Aryan culture by Houston Stewart Chamberlain that became an ideological bible for the Nazis. Chamberlain was an honored guest in the celebrated literary salon hosted by Bruckmann’s wife, Elsa, born Princess Cantacuzène of Romania. In the early 1920s, both Bruckmanns enthusiastically embraced Hitler’s cause, and it was at their home that he was introduced to Munich’s cultural luminaries, including the architect Paul Troost, from whom he would commission National Socialism’s first monumental buildings. Through the Bruckmanns, Hitler thus gained access to influential new social circles, and when he sought entry into one of the city’s most prestigious neighborhoods, he again employed the publisher’s social capital. Whereas Bruckmann counted among Munich’s social elite, Hitler’s associates reminded some observers of its criminal bottom. An international story that ran on September 12, 1929, just as Hitler submitted his lease for approval, linked his name with a ring of “bomb-throwers” who had been terrorizing northern German towns.11 Bruckmann’s support undoubtedly would have had a reassuring effect. Nonetheless, other tenants in the building, who included a lawyer, factory director’s widow, and senior government official, must have eyed the newcomer with some trepidation.12

On October 1, 1929, Hitler took possession of the new apartment, which occupied the entire third floor of the imposing five-story building designed by the Munich architect Franz Popp in 1907–8. The apartment measured about 4,300 square feet and consisted of a spacious entry hall, nine rooms, two maid’s chambers, two bathrooms, and a kitchen (figs. 1, 2). It was reached by climbing an elegant staircase or using an elevator; near the kitchen, a second stairwell led to the basement, where a laundry was located, and to the courtyard in the back. The layout of the rooms was divided into two connected wings that followed the street facades of the corner building. Despite Hitler’s protestations to the tax authorities, he was able to afford, either through his own income or gifts, the considerable annual rent of 4,176 Reichsmarks, which was about double the annual salary of a skilled metalworker.13 To these expenses must be added the cost of equipping the household and the staff to run it. Unlike Haus Wachenfeld, which came furnished, the Prince Regent Square apartment was rented empty. Hitler’s few pieces of furniture hardly sufficed to fill its generous spaces, and so he turned to Elsa Bruckmann to make it livable. She willingly took on the task, for the Bruckmanns shared a passion for domestic design. In 1897, Hugo Bruckmann and the art critic Julius Meier-Graefe had founded a new periodical, Dekorative Kunst (Decorative Art), devoted to the concept of aesthetic environments that integrated art and life. The Bruckmanns’ own home captured this spirit, with its gracious, tall rooms overflowing with paintings, furniture, sculpture, vases, and books, providing an ideal setting for salon discussions about art and literature. In an essay from the 1930s, Elsa Bruckmann wrote that their home had been a revelation to Hitler the first time he had seen it.14

Among the furniture purchased by Elsa Bruckmann for Hitler’s apartment were items by the Jewish-owned Royal Bavarian Furniture Factory, M. Ballin. The prestigious Munich firm, founded by cabinetmaker Moritz Ballin in the nineteenth century, received commissions from European royal houses and also furnished luxury hotels, villas, businesses, and ocean liners. In the twentieth century, the firm worked with artists, such as Bruno Paul and Paul Troost, who embraced neoclassical styles, which Hitler also favored. Nonetheless, Hitler’s patronage of a Jewish firm is inconsistent with the National Socialist stance on boycotting Jewish businesses. It may be explained by the role that Bella Ballin, the wife of the firm’s owner and a former nurse, had played in saving Hermann Göring’s life after he had been shot by police near the couple’s home on November 9, 1923, during the Beer Hall Putsch. Nonetheless, after 1933, restrictions on Jewish businesses drove away customers and, after its bank froze its credit, the firm was appropriated and thus “Aryanized.” On November 10, 1938, during Crystal Night, Robert Ballin and his brothers were imprisoned in a concentration camp, as were all adult Jewish men in Germany. Göring’s intervention secured their prompt release from Dachau and, in 1942, as the family faced deportation to the death camps, their emigration visas.15 In recent years, the Ballin furniture created for Hitler has garnered high prices at auctions of Nazi memorabilia.16

While the move to a luxury apartment in Bogenhausen signaled Hitler’s social respectability to the city’s better classes, it also entailed political risk. Even after the National Socialist Party abandoned its electoral focus on working-class voters in 1928, it continued to style Hitler as the people’s leader. But two upscale residential moves in rapid succession—to an Alpine resort frequented by prominent and wealthy Germans and to an affluent area of Munich—challenged that image. Indeed, concern about alienating the working classes may have been another reason why Hitler’s sister signed the contract for Haus Wachenfeld. When Hitler’s move to Prince Regent Square became known, the left-liberal newspaper Berliner Volkszeitung (Berlin People’s Paper) was quick to expose what it saw as his hypocrisy. It sarcastically reported that in order to better serve the will of the people, Hitler had taken a stately apartment in “Munich’s most feudal neighborhood.” His household, it noted, included a valet and two dogs of the same breed, the latter in the manner of Otto von Bismarck, implying that Hitler was now styling himself after the old aristocracy. The New York Times picked up the story, suggesting that Hitler’s lavish new lifestyle disclosed “material as well as moral” support for “the would-be German Fascisti” among Germany’s wealthy industrialists.17

Two years later, it was not Hitler’s finances but rather the life he led within the apartment that came under press scrutiny when his half-niece, Geli Raubal, the eldest daughter of his sister, Angela, was found dead of a gunshot wound. The murky circumstances of the young woman’s suicide fed speculation that perversity lay beneath the thin veneer of bourgeois respectability with which Hitler had clad himself in his Bogenhausen home. When police were summoned to the apartment on the morning of September 19, 1931, Raubal had already been dead for many hours, and the staff’s description of what had happened seemed suspiciously rehearsed. Hitler himself was not present, having spent the night away on a campaign trip. The staff reported that after he had left the previous afternoon, Raubal had seemed agitated and had locked herself in her bedroom. When she did not emerge the following morning or respond to a knock at her door, the staff forced their way in and found her face-down on the floor, dead of a bullet to the chest. The pistol, which belonged to her uncle, lay beside her. There was no suicide note; on her desk was a half-completed letter to a friend in Vienna about an upcoming visit. The staff claimed to have been at a loss to explain the young woman’s motive. Nazi publicists later issued a statement that Raubal, who aspired to be a singer, had taken her own life because of anxiety over an upcoming performance, which would have been her first in public.18 Few journalists believed the official version.

Within days, the story had appeared in newspapers across Germany, and Hitler feared it would damage him politically.19 Several accounts questioned the nature of the relationship between the twenty-three-year-old girl and her forty-two-year-old uncle. The Regensburger Echo, a left-liberal weekly, asserted that it had been a long time since anyone had believed it to be merely one of kinship. Hitler had paraded his beautiful niece in public, taking her to the theater and political events, and even the most servile Nazis, the article claimed, had laughed behind the back of the over-solicitous uncle. But as Hitler’s political star ascended, he again and again postponed legitimizing his relationship with the young woman who hoped to become his wife. She found herself reduced to the role of nursemaid, caring for him after his increasingly common nervous breakdowns. Exhausted by the demands made upon her and disappointed by her feckless uncle, the young woman took her own life.20 The newspaper thus managed to create a narrative around the suicide that made Hitler look ridiculous, immoral, and weak all at once.

The Regensburger Echo reported, as did other newspapers, that Raubal had lived in an apartment adjacent to that of Hitler, although on the same floor. This information seems to have been given to the press to obfuscate the fact that niece and uncle lived in the same dwelling. When Raubal first moved into Hitler’s apartment in the fall of 1929, he had her register as a subtenant of Ernst and Maria Reichert, his former landlords from Thiersch Street. They had moved with him to the new apartment, where Maria Reichert served as a housekeeper. This arrangement was undoubtedly intended to make it appear as if the then–twenty-one-year-old was not sharing domestic space with her bachelor uncle. And, indeed, few in the general public knew that Hitler’s niece lived with him.21

The Social Democratic Münchener Post (Munich Post), a newspaper that relentlessly opposed the Nazis before their rise to power, sought to expose the lie of Hitler’s domestic respectability. In an article published on September 21 under the headline “A Mysterious Affair: Suicide of Hitler’s Niece,” it reported that its sources had revealed that Hitler and his niece had “had yet another heated argument” before he left the apartment on Prince Regent Square. The reason was that “the fun-loving, twenty-three year-old Geli, a music student, wanted to go to Vienna. She wanted to get engaged. Hitler was firmly against it.” The paper also reported disturbing details about the body: the nose bone had been shattered, and the corpse bore serious injuries. It thereby implied that Geli had been beaten or even murdered by her jealous uncle, forcing the Munich police department to reopen its investigation of the death.22

Hitler moved quickly to contain the damage; his lawyer threatened a libel action if the newspaper did not print a retraction. The Münchener Post was thus compelled to publish a statement by Hitler denying the charges, which appeared in the next day’s edition. It was not true, he wrote, that he had had a heated argument with his niece. It was not true that he was firmly against his niece going to Vienna. It was not true that she intended to become engaged or that he had anything against an engagement. And so the text continued, rebutting point-by-point the newspaper’s allegations.23

Ten days later, the anti-fascist Berlin newspaper Die Fanfare (The Clarion) repeated the claim of sexual violence. Under the headline “Hitler’s Lover Commits Suicide: Bachelors and Homosexuals as Nazi Leaders,” it printed a drawing of an overweight SA Stormtrooper distinctly resembling SA chief Ernst Röhm wielding a whip and standing over a prone woman on the ground, her arms protecting her head. The article, drawing on a story in the Berlin Neue Montagszeitung (New Monday Gazette), maintained that it was known in Nazi Party circles that Geli Raubal had long been Hitler’s lover, and that her suicide had been provoked by disappointment and disgust: “Hitler’s private life takes forms that the young woman obviously could not bear.” This euphemistic language hinted at the darkest sexual perversities. The article then dropped a second bombshell: Raubal was not Hitler’s first female victim. In 1928, the newspaper reported, a young woman in Berchtesgaden had also killed herself because of Hitler. The article was wrong about the actual suicide. Mimi Reiter, unnamed in the article, had attempted to hang herself after being romanced by Hitler, an affair that had begun when she was just sixteen years old. Fanfare thus implied that Hitler’s female lovers experienced something so awful and demeaning that they were driven to kill themselves. The article then broadened the picture of deviancy among the Nazi leadership by reminding readers of Röhm’s homosexuality, which the Münchener Post had exposed the previous summer. How much value, it asked, did Hitler’s words on the sanctity of the family carry when the party was led by men who preferred the company of boys in the Hitler Youth or drove women to suicide? Rather than protect German families, the article inferred that high-ranking Nazi bachelors and homosexuals would prey upon them.24

As Ron Rosenbaum has written in his investigation of Raubal’s suicide, “what’s remarkable is how widespread, how public, and how ugly and damning the publicity about Geli Raubal’s death was—and not just in Munich. It was as if her death suddenly unleashed or legitimized the expression of the unspoken, the publication of the most vile and virulent whispers about Hitler, embodying the belief, even the wish, by his opponents that he was as much a monster of perversion privately as he was in his politics—a belief, a wish that had already spread beyond the borders of Germany.”25 According to Hans Frank, then the Nazi Party’s lawyer, Hitler agonized over the “terrible filth” being spread about him and swore he would not forget.26 It was a promise that he would keep after he came to power in 1933, when his SA thugs attacked the newspapers and writers who had been involved.27 More immediately, in the wake of the scandal and spreading rumors, the Nazis, who themselves had never hesitated to attack the private lives of their opponents, realized that they needed to better control the story of Hitler’s domesticity.

Six months after Raubal’s death, in March 1932, Hitler’s photographer and publicist Heinrich Hoffmann published a book, The Hitler Nobody Knows (Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt), which revealed and celebrated the private man (fig. 3). It marked the beginning of a profound transformation—realized through images, text, and architecture—that shifted Hitler’s domestic space from a site of rumored sexual and moral perversity to the anchor, in the public’s view, of his humanity and honor. Whereas journalists had once used the bloodshed in Hitler’s private life to explain the violence of his politics, in the hands of National Socialist publicists, Hitler’s home life became a mirror of their leader’s innermost civility, a reflection of a gentle private man that smoothed away the vicious edges of his public rhetoric and actions. It was one of the most remarkable and effective makeovers of his political career. And yet, when one looks at the effort involved in achieving this new domestic image and in maintaining it over the years, it also becomes clear that the process was never entirely finished and that the bachelor Hitler remained vulnerable to suspicions about his unconventional domestic life, which had erupted so publicly after Raubal’s death.

After spending much of his adult life seemingly oblivious to his domestic surroundings, in the 1930s, Hitler developed an acute sensitivity to the architectural spaces of his homes and to how these reflected upon his identity. While our focus will be on his private residences, the story of this transformation must begin with the Old Chancellery, where he first worked closely with the woman who would become his faithful interior decorator, Gerdy Troost. For when Hitler was appointed chancellor on January 30, 1933, he refused to move into the official residence at 77 Wilhelm Street in Berlin. He took a look around the former eighteenth-century palace and decided it was too shabby for the Führer. Over the course of its renovation in 1934, as the Nazis strangled the democracy out of Germany, Hitler’s interior world at the Chancellery grew ever more polished and refined, a denial—in the form of delicate porcelain vases and soft Persian rugs—of the brutality beyond its doors.