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AN ALPINE SEDUCTION

Propaganda and the Man on the Mountain

When Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, a book appeared that celebrated the place he had chosen to call home. That place was not Berlin, but the Obersalzberg and nearby Berchtesgaden. In the world imagined by the book, the distance between the capital and the Alps could not have been greater. Adolf Hitler’s Adopted Homeland (Adolf Hitlers Wahlheimat, 1933) featured twenty-two drawings by Karl Schuster-Winkelhof of unspoiled natural landscapes, simple timber houses, villagers in traditional clothing, cozy domestic interiors, and the slow pace of mountain life.1 The afterword by Walter Schmidkunz, an accomplished mountaineer and author of popular books on climbing and skiing, bolstered the sense of a place beyond time, calling the mountains the “pedestals of eternity.”2 The artistic quality of the book itself, with its folksy graphic design and thick, cream-colored paper, evoked the craft production for which Berchtesgaden was known. The small rectangular format recalled an artist’s sketchbook or souvenir album of postcards. As a type, the book blended travelogue and propaganda, for the centerpiece of the drawings and text was Haus Wachenfeld, the most famous residence of the newly established Third Reich.

In 1933, Germans were still getting to know the man who within a decade had risen from obscurity to become the nation’s leader. Heinrich Hoffmann’s 1932 book, The Hitler Nobody Knows, explored the Führer’s personal side in different contexts, including relaxing on the Obersalzberg. Schuster-Winkelhof’s book narrowed the focus to the Alpine setting of Hitler’s domestic life and offered, in addition to a visual tour of the landscape, an intimate look at Haus Wachenfeld itself. Schuster-Winkelhof was uniquely positioned to offer these perspectives because he was Hitler’s neighbor: his father owned the Türken Inn, which was located directly beside Haus Wachenfeld. Hitler had frequented the establishment since his first stay on the Obersalzberg in 1923 and reputedly made speeches to its guests.3 According to Schmidkunz, Hitler had acted as a kind of mentor to the young Schuster-Winkelhof, who was a passionate climber and painter, and encouraged him to pack his bags and travel eastward.4 Schuster-Winkelhof’s first book, White Mountains, Black Tents: A Persian Journey (Weisse Berge, Schwarze Zelte. Eine Persienfahrt), was published in 1932.5 When the young man returned to the Obersalzberg, he pursued the idea of another travelogue, closer to home, and received permission to enter Haus Wachenfeld and sketch its rooms, including the most intimate of its spaces, the chancellor’s bedroom.

The book began with vistas of the Berchtesgaden valley and surrounding mountains, which enabled the reader to place the house in its topographical context and to experience what Hitler himself would see. One of the landscapes, for example, depicted the town of Berchtesgaden as glimpsed, the reader learned, along the route taken by the chancellor to a favorite local haunt, the Hochlenzer, a scenic mountain inn about an hour’s walk from his home.6 Similarly, once Schuster-Winkelhof entered Haus Wachenfeld, he framed the views to encourage the impression that the reader, standing in the artist’s footsteps, experienced the chancellor’s most private visual moments, such as in drawings that captured the views from Hitler’s bedroom window and balcony (fig. 44). The sense of intimacy created by the book, then, operated on several levels: the small format of the book, which encouraged holding it in one’s hands; the subject of the illustrations, especially those of the interior of the house; and the imagined gaze, which aligned the reader with the chancellor through the artist.

Perhaps because he produced drawings instead of photographs, Schuster-Winkelhof was permitted to reveal the most intimate space of the house: Hitler’s bedroom on the upper story. It was the only time that German audiences would be granted such a view. The caption said simply, “The bedroom of the people’s chancellor.” In the drawing, we see a metal-framed single bed, a nightstand with a lamp and vase of flowers, a small woven rug, two framed pictures on the wall, and a glimpse through a glass door to the balcony and mountains beyond (fig. 45). Schmidkunz described the framed pictures as a portrait of the Führer’s “beloved mother” and a crucifixion scene by Ludwig von Herterich, a much-honored painter of the Munich School. The selection seems strategic: in the context of Catholic Bavaria, one can hardly think of two more respectable pictures to hang above a bachelor’s bed. Although exceptionally simple and modest, the room avoided asceticism through its decorative touches and the comforting appeal of the bed’s thick duvets. The bedroom’s Spartan qualities, moreover, were balanced by Schuster-Winkelhof’s depiction of the ground-floor Wohnstube (sitting room), which radiated a warm Bavarian Gemütlichkeit with its large tiled stove, rustic wooden furniture, houseplants on deep windowsills, and cages of budgies (fig. 46). Schuster-Winkelhof, who seems to have enjoyed drawing animals, devoted two separate pages to Hitler’s dogs and birds (fig. 47).

In addition to giving us his own perspective of the house, Schuster-Winkelhof included a page of drawings he labeled, “The neighbors and how they view the house of the ‘Great Neighbor’” (fig. 48). Depicted were four men who lived near Haus Wachenfeld: the Türken innkeeper Karl Schuster (Schuster-Winkelhof’s father), leaning on a spade and dressed in a vest and long apron; “Bodner Hausl,” tenant of the Boden farm, who made a living with his ox transport; the elderly Josef Rasp of the Freiding farm; and the local forester. Except for the forester, who turned his back, the men stood looking directly at the artist (and viewer), who, the title implied, occupied the position of Hitler’s house or of Hitler himself. The viewer was thus placed in a conversation of glances with Hitler’s neighbors, evoking the bond that existed between the “great” and the common neighbors. The men’s portraits, while individualized, offered a typology of the indigenous inhabitants living close to the land with whom Hitler had chosen to surround himself, and, in that sense, they reflected back onto the “people’s chancellor” some of their own qualities as a Volk embedded in the soil. In the afterword, Schmidkunz reinforced the idea of a natural and unalienable bond among the neighbors, Hitler, and the land: “Hitler’s house has inserted itself into the chosen homeland and stands with a fraternal sense of belonging between the old Boden and Freiding estates, so much so that it is impossible to imagine it not being there, and the neighbors regard the chancellor as a Salzberger, as one of their own, who like them is inextricably and forever linked to the free German soil.”7

The final page of drawings in the book depicted the addition to the house of a garage and guest quarters carried out from May to June 1933. This might, at first glance, seem a jarring way to end a visual story focused on a traditional way of life. In place of modern building equipment and trucks, however, Schuster-Winkelhof depicted a large ox and a horse pulling wooden-wheeled wagons full of large stones. Around them, masons and laborers yielded pickaxes and shovels and carried pails. There was no sign of the large Mercedes to be housed in the garage or of the Nazi strangers who would occupy the guesthouse. The visual part of the book thus ended on a reassuring note about the continuity and strength of a rural way of life, symbolized in these hardy men and animals. While some change was acknowledged—the expansion to Haus Wachenfeld coincided with Hitler’s seizure of power and thus represented the dawn of a new political era—life on the Obersalzberg appeared to stand largely outside of time. Indeed, Schmidkunz insisted that, despite the minor alterations to the house, “the spirit who chose and furnished it as home and shelter remains inviolate, like the surrounding mountains, like the meadows and the forest and the soil.” In other words, while the face of Haus Wachenfeld grew less recognizable, Hitler and the land remained unchanged.8

The book’s association of Hitler with the eternal features of the landscape meant that although he was absent in Schuster-Winkelhof’s book—the Great Neighbor was not at home when the artist visited—he was, at the same time, present everywhere. Schmidkunz claimed that the special connection between Hitler and the Obersalzberg—“on whose shores his restless heart cast anchor”—had been formed in 1923, when he had first arrived there with Dietrich Eckart, Anton Drexler, and Hermann Esser, “the protagonists and pioneers” of National Socialism. “Those Berchtesgaden days,” he wrote, “have intimately bound Adolf Hitler to the mountains and to the land that became his adopted homeland.” For Hitler, Schmidkunz explained, the stillness of the land, with its soaring mountains and distant views into Austria, was not an escape from a turbulent world, but rather the ground on which to germinate and ripen his ideas. The land, then, was framed as an active participant, almost like another member of “the protagonists and pioneers” who had helped to forge the path toward the Third Reich.9

Further blending Führer and landscape, Schmidkunz implied a connection between the mythologies of the mountains and the coming of the Third Reich. In particular, he focused on two legends that were associated with the Untersberg, whose majestic peaks faced the front of Hitler’s house (and would later dominate the view through the window of the Great Hall). The first, as mentioned in Chapter 4, recounted the story of Charlemagne, who by 800 <sc>c.e.</sc> had conquered and united vast territories in Western and Central Europe, reviving the imperial tradition of the Western Roman emperor. According to the legend, Charlemagne slept enchanted, surrounded by his royal household, deep in the Untersberg. He would awaken when Germany’s ancient enemies arrived and the nation stood in desperate need. This would come to pass when the ravens no longer circled the mountain and the king’s beard had grown three times around the marble table where he sat asleep. When he awoke, he would unleash the last great battle of humankind, and so much blood would flow that it would fill the warriors’ shoes, and the bodies of the dead would form hills. This legend was popular across Germany and was often told with Frederick Barbarossa, the twelfth-century red-bearded Holy Roman emperor, as the sleeping king and the Kyffhäuser Mountain in Thuringia as his resting place (although in some versions, as previously noted, Barbarossa was also identified with the Untersberg). The second legend continues from the first and was also rooted in a natural feature. The war itself would be fought in the shadow of the Untersberg, on a field outside the village of Wals near Salzburg, where the emperor would hang his battle shield on a large, withered ancient pear tree, causing it to sprout leaves. Under his shield’s coat of arms, Schmidkunz wrote, “Germans will unite and defeat all enemies, and over the vanquished the bells of German cathedrals will ring in the thousand-year Reich.” This last embellished detail demonstrates how such German legends were woven into the rhetoric of National Socialism and Hitler’s rise to power portrayed as the fulfillment of folk prophesy.10

Haus Wachenfeld stood as the anchoring point in the narratives associating the Führer with the physical and symbolic power of Alpine topography. It was portrayed not only as his home, but also as the place where he absorbed nature’s powers, often by looking contemplatively out his windows. In writing about the house, Schmidkunz described the views to be seen from the windows and balcony, reinforcing the reader’s identification with the occupant, but also tying the house through sight lines to the majestic natural features around it. At the same time, however, he shifted the focus inward, to the simple comforts of the hearth, leaving sleeping medieval kings and end-of-days battles outdoors. Schmidkunz credited Hitler’s sister Angela with the coziness of the home, remarking more than once on her “thick slices of buttered bread,” which Hitler and children could not resist. A wholesome domesticity was also implied by Schmidkunz’s descriptions of how well Hitler slept in the mountains (as opposed to the capital), the presence of adoring children (whose affection was returned by the Führer), and the comfort of his beloved and loyal dogs. These and other details of Schmidkunz’s domestic narrative already seem formulaic by 1933: the vegetarianism and abstinence from drinking and smoking, the cultured mind revealed by the books possessed, the scant leisure time and strong work ethic, the inspiration and strength derived from nature, and the love of children and dogs. Without much variation, these formed the keystones in official descriptions of Hitler’s domesticity throughout the 1930s, the main points already having been established by Joseph Goebbels, Baldur von Schirach, and Heinrich Hoffmann in 1932.11

For Schmidkunz, what was remarkable about Hitler’s domesticity was precisely its lack of remarkability. “Hitler’s house,” he wrote, “which cynics once tried to falsely transform into an opulent ‘palace,’ harbors neither secrets nor noteworthy sights.” Yet it was precisely this ordinary, everyday quality, according to Schmidkunz, that attracted pilgrims to Hitler’s home. Pilgrimages to the Obersalzberg began soon after Hitler became Reich chancellor in January 1933, and the ecstatic joy of the crowds in seeing their Führer and perhaps even shaking his hand was captured by Hoffmann and transformed into yet more lucrative merchandise. These well-known images have obscured the fact, remarked upon by Schmidkunz, that people eagerly came to see the house even when Hitler was not in residence. Haus Wachenfeld served as an icon of the private Führer, and pilgrims seeking an intimate encounter with the man found it in their physical proximity to his home:

And now they know, this is where he lives and this is where he is a human being; he sleeps behind that southwest window on the upper floor; his desk is over there, on the ground floor, behind the bay window; yes, and those are the three German shepherds that the Reich chancellor loves so much! Muck, the black one, fierce, trained, who guards his master’s house as if he knew exactly who he has to protect, Wolf, the funny, playful one, and Blonda, the light-haired female. And the observers, who do not miss a thing, see the burbling fountain with the humorously carved head and see the blossoming flowers in front of the windows and on the balcony and know: from this felicitous vantage point, the Führer comprehends with joyful eyes the magnificence of the mountains. And for some of the onlookers, it may be thoughts such as these that first awaken them to that glory.12

Schmidkunz thus asserted that the pilgrimage to Haus Wachenfeld could be spiritually rousing, and that the experience was ultimately not about seeing Hitler, but rather seeing like Hitler. Schmidkunz’s own narration of Schuster-Winkelhof’s drawings similarly guided the reader through this process, suggesting both what to see and what to feel. Through empathetic looking, the pilgrim at Haus Wachenfeld, standing in for the reader, took on the subjectivity of the private Hitler, occupying his domestic spaces, eating his buttered bread, loving his pets, and, while gazing out at the mountains, absorbing their majesty and strength. The reader’s encounter with Haus Wachenfeld and its homey aesthetics, captured not just in words and images, but also in the intimate format of the book, represents a very different kind of experience from those analyzed by Susan Sontag in her influential essay, “Fascinating Fascism.” In particular, she noted how the fascist aesthetics of Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film Triumph of the Will, documenting the Nazi Party rallies in Nuremberg, glorified the ecstatic but disciplined masses, who subordinated themselves with an erotic energy to the will of the Führer.13 By contrast, the experience of Haus Wachenfeld produced in Adolf Hitler’s Adopted Homeland was a more cerebral and individual one requiring the projection of the self onto the private Hitler, as embodied and mediated by his house, and, through this identification, a coming into focus of his transcendent vision. In a sense, then, both the onlooker at Haus Wachenfeld and the participant at the Nuremberg rallies came to the same conclusion in terms of the Führer’s supremacy, but one arrived there through the feeling of standing in Hitler’s shoes, while the other was happily crushed beneath them.

While pilgrims to Haus Wachenfeld may have felt enlightened by their trek, their presence increasingly irritated the resident and his neighbors. The pilgrimage phenomenon brought as many as five thousand people per day to the chancellor’s driveway, blocking nearby roads and overwhelming local businesses. If Hitler was in residence, the crowds would wait for hours, chanting, “We want to see our Führer!” In their enthusiasm, some had ripped away the wooden pickets of the Führer’s fence to keep as “relics.”14 Seeking to put more distance between himself and the boisterous onlookers and also needing space to house his guards, Hitler asked his neighbor Karl Schuster, the owner of the Türken Inn, to sell him a piece of his adjacent property (see fig. 48). Schuster refused on the grounds of having six children to consider, but offered to let Hitler use the land for free. Despite having supported the National Socialist Party in its early years and been a member since 1930, as well as having known Hitler personally for a decade, Schuster soon learned that old loyalties meant little to the Führer when someone stood in his way.15

A month after Schuster refused Hitler’s request, he found himself accused of having insulted the drunken SA and SS men who frequented his inn. The incident triggered a boycott by the Berchtesgaden chapter of the <sc>NSDAP</sc>, whose members blocked the hotel’s entrance and forced out guests and staff, leaving only the family within. When they tried to leave, they were hit by rocks and spat upon by the pilgrims waiting near Haus Wachenfeld. Ostensibly because of the threat to his safety, Karl Schuster was taken into “protective custody” and imprisoned for two weeks. Hitler, meanwhile, refused all contact with his neighbor, and as the hotel’s finances went into the red, Schuster sought out buyers. Offers evaporated, however, when local officials made clear that the hotel’s license would not be renewed. Finally, Angela Raubal, Hitler’s bread-baking sister—who was wholly unsympathetic to her neighbor’s plight but aggrieved by how it inconvenienced her—notified Martin Bormann, who compelled Schuster to sell him the property and, after the family left in November 1933, transformed the hotel into barracks for Hitler’s SS bodyguards. The Schuster family was forbidden to resettle anywhere near the Berchtesgaden region, and its adult members were compelled to sign an agreement not to speak about having been Hitler’s neighbor or about their expulsion. When Schuster did confess the truth to his new neighbors, who were suspicious of a man who refused to talk about his past, he was again imprisoned. Around Berchtesgaden, by contrast, talk about the family’s treatment was spreading, prompting the town’s <sc>NSDAP</sc> chapter in January 1934 to publish a notice in the local newspaper forbidding any further discussion of “the Schuster case.” Those who disobeyed were warned that they would be labeled enemies of the state and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. Karl Schuster, a broken man, blamed himself for his family’s ruin and died of a heart attack in 1934, at the age of 58.16 Eager buyers of Adolf Hitler’s Adopted Homeland could not have guessed how quickly the book about the “Great Neighbor” had become a tale of misfortune.

The acquisition of the Türken Inn did little to staunch the Nazis’ desire for more space on the Obersalzberg to accommodate Hitler’s growing entourage as well as to conduct government business and host state visits. As the regime’s machinery of oppression churned out masses of victims—some forty-five thousand Germans were held in concentration camps and unofficial torture centers in the first half of 1933 alone—the need to protect Hitler also grew more pressing.17 In the years following the Schusters’ eviction, Bormann directed a radical and violent transformation of the mountain, as its original inhabitants were removed to make way for a heavily guarded enclave of the Nazi elite. If, as Schmidkunz maintained, Hitler’s neighbors had thought of him as one of their own, he, clearly, did not return the sentiment. While a few of the villagers departed voluntarily, content with the compensation they had received, many refused to go. Some had businesses that were beginning to flourish with the increased tourism. Others felt the compensation Bormann offered was grossly inadequate. And yet others simply did not want to leave their homes and farms, which had often been in the family for generations. Those who made trouble found themselves on the receiving end of Bormann’s brutal tactics. In winter, a favored method to hurry a departure was to remove the roof of a house that was still occupied—the residents tended not to last long in the freezing temperatures and deep snowfalls. In other cases, recalcitrant sellers were threatened with deportation to the Dachau concentration camp. This was no idle threat: a young photographer named Johann Brandner who dared to petition Hitler directly about the loss of his shop was sent to Dachau for two years. By 1937, the majority of the original inhabitants had been removed and their houses demolished to improve Hitler’s views or accommodate the needs of the new elite community.18 And yet, throughout the period of seizure and evictions, National Socialist propaganda continued to celebrate a people and way of life on the Obersalzberg that the Nazis were systematically destroying.

In 1935, Hoffmann published a book of photographs celebrating Hitler’s mountain life, and revealing, through its title, the Nazis’ proprietary mindset: Hitler in His Mountains (see fig. 41). Eighty-six images documented Hitler relaxing or working at home on the Obersalzberg and in other southern Bavarian locations. Schirach provided the foreword, in which he stated that Haus Wachenfeld, now “famous worldwide,” had become a “symbol of the Führer’s steadfastness.” To this very day, he wrote, the same “unaltered gable [of the house] greets the Untersberg as in the time when its occupant stood at the beginning of his path.” True, he admitted, there had been some modifications to the house, some workrooms added, but the bewitching power of the Alps remained unchanged and could still be felt when the clacking of the secretaries’ typewriters and the ringing of the telephones had ceased: “Then, at night, the mountain house stands under myriads of stars and the Führer stands absorbed in the glowing moonlit landscape, the details of which have been familiar to him for decades.”19 With a strategic deployment of sentimental imagery, and following on Schmidkunz’s lead, Schirach thus dismissed and diverted attention from the fact that the house was in constant flux and, after the 1935–36 expansion, more than anything a testament to Hitler’s enormous wealth and power.

The pilgrimages to Haus Wachenfeld featured prominently in the book. Hoffmann captured Hitler waving to the crowds assembled outside the fence to his house, shaking hands, and walking through a throng of outstretched arms. Unlike the disciplined crowds depicted by Leni Riefenstahl, the pilgrims swarmed around the Führer, pushing to get closer and trying to touch him. Nor did they resemble the idealized, young, and athletic types favored by Riefenstahl. In one photograph, a stout middle-aged woman salutes the Führer with her upraised arm while firmly clutching her handbag under the other; in another, Hitler shakes the hand of an older woman whose broad smile reveals decayed teeth. (In later images of the pilgrimage, Hoffmann would focus on groups of young blond girls.20) Yet what differentiated these masses from those envisioned and filmed by Riefenstahl was, above all, the potential emergence of one from the many: the person whose hand the Führer shook or the child who received special attention. Schirach explained that “every now and then, someone breaks ranks, usually a small boy, who has some worry. Maybe the father is unemployed, the mother ill, and he knows of no other option than to ask the Führer for help. And the Führer does help. Behind the lad’s fresh face before him, his clear eyes see the grave fate that threatens this small, brave family. And so he comforts, as he has done a thousand times before, with deeds and few words, as the father of his faithful and beloved people.”21

Breaking from the ranks of the pilgrims could, however, also be a joyous occasion. Youth around Hitler, Hoffmann’s 1934 book devoted to the relationship between Hitler and Germany’s young, included an illustrated sequence about a child picked out of the crowd by the Führer. In the foreword, Schirach explained that one summer day in 1933, as Hitler was greeting the throngs of pilgrims in front of his house, a child’s voice piped up and announced that it was her birthday. Out of the dense crowd, “the Führer fished up a blond little lass” with “bright blue eyes” and invited her to tea. In fact, the girl’s visit had been arranged in advance, but Schirach told the “fairy tale” (his own term) as it was presented in the photographs—as one of the many fortuitous and magical events that could happen to pilgrims at Haus Wachenfeld. The first image depicted a smiling young girl under the caption, “The favored birthday girl.” The second image showed Hitler leading her up the driveway, away from the gathered pilgrims, to Haus Wachenfeld (fig. 49). The caption reinforced her privileged position: “Out from the crowd.” We then see her indoors eating dessert (“a birthday feast”) and standing on the terrace with Hitler, his hands cupped around her face. In the fifth and final image, the girl, standing on her toes, thanked Hitler with “a long kiss.”22

Nothing remotely like this happens in Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will. Although the camera recorded individual faces and voices in the crowd, there was never a moment in which one person was extricated for special treatment by the Führer. Indeed, the effect of the film on the viewer relied on his or her identification with the unbroken mass that symbolized the newly united nation. The visualization of the mass and its performance required an architecture designed for monumentality and spectacle, such as the site of the Nuremberg rallies, with its large and anonymous marching fields, grandstands, and stadiums. By contrast to Riefenstahl’s film viewer, the reader of Hoffmann’s book, like that of Schuster-Winkelhof’s album, was encouraged to imagine the thrill of the singular—not dissolving into the mass, but exiting from it (at least, temporarily). And it was the architecture of the Führer’s domesticity, personalized and intimate in scale, that functioned as the stage set for that other, unique experience. These two imagined encounters with the Führer, as a part of a uniform mass or as an individual, and their two architectural spaces, the monumental and the domestic, complimented each other and opened up different emotional roads to the leader: one, as Sontag argued, through joyful submission and loss of self, the other through the fantasy of recognition and intimacy, however fleeting.

More broadly, Schirach depicted the pilgrimages to Haus Wachenfeld as yet another manifestation of the national unity Hitler had achieved by overthrowing the hated democratic institutions of the Weimar Republic: “This daily encounter between Adolf Hitler and his people is a dazzling revelation of the new German unity. For this mass, which jubilantly greets him, is in itself already an image of the new national community. Here is the industrial worker from the west, whose journey here was made possible by the Strength through Joy association, and beside him boys from East Prussia, farmers from Upper Bavaria, municipal officials, teachers, students, and soldiers. In order to see the Führer, they have set out in the very early morning hours, have stood seven hours or longer in the blazing heat of the Obersalzberg, until in the afternoon the long-awaited hour strikes and they get to look into the eyes of the man who, for some of them, has been the symbol of their struggle for ten years.”23 Here on the Obersalzberg, people and leader came together in a manner more genuine and direct, Schirach implied, than under the former parliamentary system. Recalling the dictum typically attributed to Marie Antoinette, the pilgrimage images published by Hoffmann in this and other books seemed to ask: Who needs democracy when you can have cake with the Führer instead?

Hitler in His Mountains continued to build on the myth, already elaborated before 1933, of the Führer’s love of children. In Hoffmann’s images, this affection was communicated not just with smiles, but with physical contact as well—Hitler stroked the children’s faces, placed a hand on their shoulders, and embraced them tightly. He also indulged them with autographs, sweets, and conversation (fig. 50). As with the pilgrims, Haus Wachenfeld occupied center stage in Hitler’s encounter with Germany’s children. This took place most often on the terrace rather than in the house, with the Alps providing a spectacular backdrop for Hoffmann’s camera.

Historians researching mental illness among Hitler’s relatives raise the possibility that he chose not to have children of his own out of fear of passing on (and thereby exposing) his family’s genetic defects.24 Hoffmann’s mythologizing lens, however, eliminated such concerns and made Hitler the symbolic progenitor of an idealized Aryan race. “You are blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, spirit of our spirit,” Hitler had declared to the assembled Hitler Youth at the 1933 Nuremberg Party Congress, and Hoffmann’s images reiterated that claim.25 Indeed, Youth around Hitler presented a veritable catalogue of perfect specimens: “Many German tribes,” the caption for a collage of different girls and boys read, “but only one race.” In some cases, Hoffmann heavily touched up images to make the children look even more beautiful. After 1934, he abandoned such interventions, which jarred with the more naturalistic photographic tastes of contemporary audiences, but continued to depict children with Hitler who physically seemed to reflect the regime’s racial ideologies. And appearances were everything. In 1933, the blond, blue-eyed birthday girl photographed enjoying dessert at Haus Wachenfeld had been denounced as part-Jewish to the Bavarian Political Police when the images had first been published as postcards. Although the revelation was kept secret, she was no longer permitted to come to the Obersalzberg. Hitler nonetheless sanctioned the continued use of her image in National Socialist propaganda, including in Youth around Hitler, which cynically presented her as an object of Hitler’s affection and a model Aryan type.26

Long before and after Hitler, politicians have seen the advantages of appearing publicly with children or presenting themselves as father to the nation. But the extent to which Hitler and his propagandists worked to cultivate the myth of his special relationship to children was unprecedented. Even in the 1930s, it was viewed—at least by the foreign press—as exceptional.27 Children were at the heart of National Socialist programs intended to improve the race, from eugenics to health and education.28 The belief that Hitler truly cared about children helped to instill confidence among parents, who were asked to entrust their children’s welfare to the state. In 1936, a Munich newspaper printed a photograph of Hitler chatting with a young girl on the terrace at Haus Wachenfeld and asked, “Is there any better judgment passed on a man than when children acclaim him and give him their trust?”29 Hitler’s unmarried status, and the need to avoid insinuations of the “oddball” bachelor, also made such publicity especially valuable. The fact that images of Hitler with children were among the most popular of all Führer images during the Third Reich suggests how much German audiences enjoyed and cherished this myth.30

Indeed, the trope of Hitler’s connection to children was so widespread that it continues to be perpetuated in history books, despite our knowledge of the millions of children killed in euthanasia programs, concentration and labor camps, as well as by war and famine under Hitler’s regime. Aside from the period’s propaganda, however, there is little evidence to support its veracity. Richard Reiter, the nephew of Maria (Mitzi) Reiter, a sixteen-year-old Berchtesgaden girl Hitler pursued romantically in the late 1920s, was among the local children invited regularly to Haus Wachenfeld. In his case, Hitler’s adjutant, Julius Schaub, was the instigator of these visits and the person with whom he had a relationship. Asked whether Hitler seemed to genuinely enjoy children, Reiter recalled that, in private, “he behaved rather woodenly and did not quite know what to do with us.” In front of the camera, by contrast, “his acting ability made him look as if he adored kids.”31

Hitler’s encounters with his neighbors and other local people, which feature prominently in Hitler in His Mountains, were undoubtedly also carefully stage-managed. But what is more striking in this case is how quickly the images Hoffmann published depicting Hitler as a good neighbor became outdated. For example, the book included a photograph of Hitler shaking hands with his neighbor, the farmer Josef Rasp. The caption referred to the Führer’s “most tender understanding for the elderly.” In 1935, Hitler had bought the 78-year-old’s property, but the contract gave designated family members, including Rasp himself, a lifelong right of residence. In the summer of 1937, however, in violation of the contract, Rasp and his family were forcibly removed and their farmhouse was demolished. Rasp died shortly thereafter. And yet well into the 1940s, Hoffmann continued to use the image as a testimonial of Hitler’s “tender understanding.” Like the myth about Hitler’s love for children, the fiction about Hitler’s good relations with his neighbors was widely disseminated at the time and continues to be maintained in some history books.32

If the house on the mountain represented the place where the Führer communed with his followers, young and old, it was also the setting in National Socialist propaganda for Hitler’s confrontation with the powers of nature. Hitler in His Mountains portrayed the Führer hiking in the Alpine landscape or absorbed deep in thought in front of a majestic sunset or soaring mountain peaks (fig. 51). Unlike the images of Hitler on the Obersalzberg in Hoffmann’s 1932 book, The Hitler Nobody Knows, which had depicted the Führer in a happy, relaxed state, the photographs in the 1935 book suggested a more intense and purposeful engagement with nature. In his 1934 book about Hitler’s rise to power, Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s press chief, presented the mountain as sanctuary and inspiration: “In the tranquility of Obersalzberg, our leader has often designed his most important plans, made his greatest decisions, and perfected the schemes for the most eventful demonstrations.”33 The ability to do his best work on the mountain, a claim Hitler made himself, was about more than getting a good night’s sleep.34 Rather, Hitler was portrayed as tapping into and channeling the primordial energies around him. In the foreword to Hitler in His Mountains, Schirach wrote, “Here he dictated the second part of Mein Kampf, and it appears that the monumental architecture of the mountain landscape recurs in the structure of the work, which has given support and hope to hundreds of thousands of people.”35 Schirach thus suggested that the Führer was not only in the mountains, but that the mountains were also in him, infusing and shaping the power of his words and actions.

The imagined bond between Hitler and the Obersalzberg mobilized a host of associations with mountains in modern German culture. Romantic artists and writers in the eighteenth century had been the first to explore and define the human encounter with the fearsome, sublime nature of mountains. In his landscapes, German painter Caspar David Friedrich employed the Rückenfigur—an anonymous, solitary individual seen from behind—to encourage his audiences to imagine, through identification with this person, the overwhelming feelings evoked by the confrontation with the sublime. Friedrich was one of Hitler’s favorite artists, and Hitler’s poses in some of Hoffmann’s photographs, in which he stands or sits alone framed by and communing with the majesty of the mountain landscape, recall Friedrich’s lonely figures.36 But unlike them, Hitler is never anonymous, and if we are meant to feel the emotional pull of the landscape, it is always through him.

German audiences did not need to draw directly on eighteenth-century imagery to grasp Hitler’s message. The fascination with mountains, and particularly the Alps, in the 1920s and 1930s films of Arnold Fanck, Leni Riefenstahl, and Luis Trenker provided well-tilled ground for the positive associations that Hitler’s propagandists sought to create for his Alpine identity. These German and Tyrolean directors portrayed the Alps as an antidote to decadent civilization, a place of primal energies, physical vigor, and heroic struggle. Sentimental love plots unfolded amid the breathtaking scenery, which echoed and magnified human emotions. In recording the landscape, the camera appropriated Romantic imagery, including that of Friedrich, to evoke the mystical, overwhelming beauty of the sublime. Mighty and inscrutable, the mountains reigned supreme in the natural order, demanding submission and even death. Siegfried Kracauer, writing in 1947, and, later, Susan Sontag detected in these elements the beginnings of a fascist mindset. While more recent scholarship has demonstrated this to be a limited view of the genre, its romantic idealism, sentimental pathos, and preoccupation with transcendent power are defining characteristics of Nationalist Socialist propaganda about Hitler at home in the Alps.37

By contrast to these earlier traditions, however, Nationalist Socialists did not tremble before nature, but rather treated it as one more thing to be brought under their dominion—the Führer, rather than the Alps, is the ultimate power in narratives about Hitler in the mountains. The construction of the Kehlsteinhaus, a pavilion perched defiantly on a remote mountain crag, exemplified this attitude, although it was not a project intended for public consumption. Hitler’s much-photographed monumental window in the Berghof’s Great Hall, which framed and claimed the Untersberg for his domestic space, was the period’s most iconic image of nature contained (see fig. 25). Published photographs of the window never included human figures, which would have been dwarfed both by the frame and the mountains beyond.38 Indeed, and unlike the sometimes-tiny human figures found in Romantic landscape paintings, Hoffmann almost always photographed Hitler outdoors on the Obersalzberg from a close angle, to seem proportionate to the size of the mountains around him. In Hitler in His Mountains, photographs of Hitler and Fritz Todt, the Reich’s chief engineer, inspecting road construction in the Alps reinforced the idea of the Führer’s will reordering the landscape. These images also portrayed Hitler bringing modernity to the mountains, suggesting technology could serve and enhance, rather than destroy, traditional life. A gentler, non-mechanistic version of Hitler’s ability to tame nature was reproduced in the popular images by Hoffmann of Hitler hand-feeding roe deer that appeared in the 1933 book Germany Awakes (Deutschland Erwacht) and on postcards (see fig. 43).39 Like the photographs of Hitler with children, these images suggested that innocent creatures instinctively sensed Hitler’s innate trustworthiness.

Despite the seemingly topographical specificity of Nazi propaganda about Hitler in his Obersalzberg home, Hitler’s encounter with the mountains carried a broader message about German space. Hitler in His Mountains opens with a stunning photograph of the Berchtesgaden valley seen from a distance, the caption for which reads: “Berchtesgaden, the Führer’s destination [Ziel] after weeks of hard work.”40 This established for the reader the book’s setting, but also introduced the idea of this vast space as a longed-for coming home, a place of rest and reward after struggle—“Ziel” can be translated not just as “destination,” but also as “goal,” “ambition,” or “end.” In subsequent images in the book, Hitler is shown looking out over the openness of natural space, including from the balcony and terrace of Haus Wachenfeld (fig. 52). Hitler’s domesticity was thus associated with an imagined abundance of space in the Alps, which, in turn, was presented as the source of all good things: the renewal of body and spirit, a nurturing domestic life filled with healthy blond children and loyal pets, warm relations with down-to-earth neighbors, and the bounty of nature itself in the hearty food, pure water, and fresh air. In short, National Socialist propaganda situated Hitler’s mountain home in the midst of the Nazis’ conception of Lebensraum (living space), the racial utopia that in their eyes justified war and genocide. When Germans purchased one of Hoffmann’s books or postcards depicting Hitler’s domestic bliss within this vast natural space, they were consciously or unconsciously buying into a dream, embodied in Haus Wachenfeld, of a promised land. In this light, the pilgrimages to Haus Wachenfeld can be seen not just as paying homage to the Führer, but also as a desire to travel to the promised land, the place of abundance that Hitler held out as the ultimate reward for sacrifice and suffering. Nestled in the most “German” of landscapes, the Alps, Haus Wachenfeld gave Lebensraum a form and shape, made it seem a tangible and realizable goal. In helping Germans to frame their desire for Lebensraum, as imagined in a picturesque small house surrounded by nature’s bounty, Hitler’s domesticity thus had a central role to play in National Socialist propaganda.

Unlike the sarcastic reaction from the left-leaning press that had greeted The Hitler Nobody Knows, the Nazis’ virulent suppression of the freedom of expression after 1933 leaves us with few contemporary publications to evaluate the responses of German audiences to Hitler in His Mountains. Under Goebbels’s control, the German press participated in the creation of the Obersalzberg myth. Positive stories about Haus Wachenfeld, often illustrated with Hoffmann’s pictures, began to appear soon after Hitler seized power. By the mid-1930s, the foreign press also came to play a significant role in perpetuating and disseminating this Nazi propaganda. Accounts by the German press in exile offered, unsurprisingly, a very different perspective. An article entitled “A Führer behind Barbed Wire,” published in April 1937 by Neuer Vörwarts (New Forward), the Social Democratic newspaper operating in exile from Czechoslovakia, directly challenged the myth of Hitler’s closeness to the German people and their love for him. It pointed to the enormous security measures surrounding the newly renovated Berghof, including the expanded “no entry” zone on the Obersalzberg, the exclusion of civilian traffic, watch towers, barbed wire fences, patrols, and an around-the-clock guard of 150 SS men protecting Hitler. As it noted, the highly idealized stories about Hitler’s mountain retreat published by sympathetic reporters had managed to overlook this reality and what it signified.41

The exiled German press also brought attention to the massive transformation of the house itself, which Nazi publicists had tried to downplay by emphasizing the eternal nature of the mountains or of Hitler’s spirit. In June 1937, an article that appeared in the Pariser Tageszeitung (Parisian Daily News), a left-liberal émigré publication, described the Berghof as a “palatial house” that could accommodate “forty or more” guests in “large bedrooms” with “exquisite furniture” comparable to a “luxury hotel.” Further stripping away the image of a cozy domesticity, the reporter noted that whereas Hitler’s sister had once taken care of his home, it was now in the hands of “skilled hotel staff.” The article also commented on the heavy security measures, included air raid defenses on surrounding mountains and bomb and gas shelters deep inside the Obersalzberg itself. Further emphasizing the Führer’s isolation, the reporter claimed that children from Berchtesgaden would be brought up to the Berghof to be photographed with Hitler “while he pets their heads,” but that he himself never went to the town to see his people. The article concluded by arguing that “Hitler, when ruling Germany from his mountaintop in Bavaria, is as remote and invulnerable as the Dalai Lama on a Himalayan summit.”42

Despite the lack of objective media reports within Germany, other evidence points to the tremendous popularity among German audiences of Haus Wachenfeld and the idealized domestic Hitler envisioned as its occupant. As noted earlier, Hoffmann’s books about the “private” Hitler, including Hitler in His Mountains, were enormous commercial successes, selling hundreds of thousands of copies and being reissued multiple times. Additionally, Hoffmann engaged in lucrative business deals with companies interested in marketing their products through his images. The Reemtsma Cigarette Company, for instance, distributed National Socialist collector albums of Hoffmann’s images. The albums featured essays by Nazi spokesmen such as Goebbels and Dietrich, and the page layout included designated places to attach photographs, which were obtained through coupons found in Reemtsma cigarette packages.43 About 2.3 million copies were produced of the 1936 cigarette album Adolf Hitler: Pictures from the Life of the Führer (Adolf Hitler: Bilder aus dem Leben des Führers), which included a chapter on Haus Wachenfeld.44 These large albums, bound in rich colors and decorated with images and gilded lettering, “were meant for display in domestic settings, like family or travel albums.”45 The process of the consumer completing the album by submitting the coupons, receiving packets of photographs in the mail, and attaching them to the correct pages also reinforced the personal (albeit systematic) nature of these books. Hoffmann, moreover, sold millions of postcards drawing on the photographs that had been included in his books as well as on the great many more that had been omitted. The Führer’s house, both before and after its transformation into the Berghof, appears to have been an especially sought-after image, based on the countless variations published as postcards by Hoffmann and other photographers in the region (see plates 1, 11).

Indeed, the commercial exploitation of Hitler’s domesticity and other motifs of Nazi propaganda soon became an issue of concern for the regime. The groundswell of popular support for Hitler that followed the National Socialists’ seizure of power in January 1933 tempted many German manufacturers to employ Nazi references to boost their products’ appeal. Goebbels moved quickly to regulate the flood of Nazi-themed merchandise and, on May 19, 1933, passed the “Law for the Protection of National Symbols.” Local authorities were vested with the power to seize goods and prosecute manufacturers or merchants who sold products that used Nazi symbols in ways that were deemed to “violate” their “dignity.”46 Lists of banned goods, including the names and locations of their producers, were published periodically in the Deutscher Reichsanzeiger (German Reich Gazette), the official state newspaper. Over the years, such contraband included Stormtrooper gingerbread, wine bottles and ashtrays ornamented with swastikas, women’s brooches with “Heil Hitler” in imitation diamonds, and alarm clocks that played the Nazi anthem, “The Flag on High.”47 What began as a legal measure quickly grew into a broader cultural campaign. A profusion of newspaper and journal articles warned of the damage done to the German people by kitsch, an argument that had already been made by the German Werkbund at the turn of the twentieth century in its design reform campaign.48 Beginning in 1933, government and cultural authorities, hoping to educate consumers, organized exhibitions of banned Nazi merchandise and similarly “tasteless” products, which attracted tens of thousands of viewers and international attention.49 Much like contemporary arguments about German art, critics of kitsch goods medicalized the threat—one Nazi spokesman declared that “kitsch is spiritual cocaine for our nation’s soul”—and decried the subservience of culture to market forces.50

Because Haus Wachenfeld (and later the Berghof) was so closely identified with the Führer, its commercial use also fell under the broad new legislation. This raises an interesting question regarding what might have threatened the “dignity” of the house. It is easy to understand how kicking a ball decorated with a swastika or wiping one’s mouth with a swastika-covered paper napkin—further examples of banned objects—would have been problematic from Goebbels’s perspective.51 In the case of Haus Wachenfeld, by contrast, the quality of the merchandise seems to have been the deciding factor in determining approval or rejection of commercial designs. Thus, porcelain ornamental plates depicting Haus Wachenfeld tended to be approved, while terra-cotta ones were not.52 Similarly, a design for velvet cushion covers with an image of “our Führer’s country home” was rejected as an example of “tasteless products.”53 The concern about the kitschy quality of Nazi merchandise was not limited to Haus Wachenfeld. Guidelines to help interpret the law emphasized the need for high standards in a design’s conception and execution—all “artistically inferior” reproductions of National Socialist symbols were to be rejected.54 Nonetheless, many products did receive approval, since the Nazis realized that such popular consumer goods increased their hold on the public imagination, as consumers brought these loaded symbols into the intimacy of their homes and made them a part of their everyday lives.55 Thus, children played with toy wooden models of Haus Wachenfeld and saved their pennies in Haus Wachenfeld replica coin banks; framed color prints of Haus Wachenfeld hung on living room walls; Hoffmann’s books lay on coffee tables; and the postman delivered postcards of Haus Wachenfeld from friends vacationing in southern Bavaria or just writing to say hello.

In the case of a more upscale clientele, the marketing of Haus Wachenfeld assumed a different role. In February 1938, Innen-Dekoration (Interior Decoration), a publication that had been founded in 1890 to promote new directions in interior design, featured the Berghof on its cover and included two articles discussing its creation. In April 1939, the lifestyle magazine Elegante Welt (Elegant World, or Smart Set), which offered stories about home decoration, fashion, and leisure, republished the articles in a slightly modified form, adding a remarkable series of color images of the house’s interior. Although the audiences for these magazines differed, the Berghof essays targeted a group that overlapped both: educated, urban, middle-class readers with an interest in design and the resources to hire professionals to build or redecorate their homes. Consequently, the articles paid special attention to the relationship between Hitler and his designers, and, in particular, to the work of his interior decorator, Gerdy Troost.56

As the client, Hitler stood at the heart of the renovation. His desire, readers learned, to enlarge the old house with “a great hall” that would “retain, despite its impressive spaciousness, an appealing sense of homely comfort” had been the decisive factor in the design. The “challenging and rewarding task” of giving material expression to the “Führer’s ideas” fell first to the architect Alois Degano, who skillfully blended old and new through the interlocked structure of the whole. The broad slanting roof, traditional to the region, most obviously united the different parts of the house, but the article also pointed to window and wall surface treatments, repetition of detailing materials, and dynamic balancing of floor and ceiling heights to create a sense of overall coordination. The result was “a powerfully serene building” that “by avoiding anything palatial in nature preserved the character of an authentic, native ‘Berghof,’” or mountain farm.57

But in fulfilling the Führer’s wish for “homely comfort,” it was Gerdy Troost who received the most credit. Her stated responsibilities encompassed everything to do with decor, color choice, and fabrics. “With what certainty of taste,” marveled the writer for Innen-Dekoration, “has she shaped the expression and mood, melody and livability of the rooms.” Troost’s method of creating color harmonies was described in detail, specifically how she would select an object in a room as the basis for color themes, counterpoints, and variations. In the small living room, that object was a celadon tile stove; in the Great Hall, a seventeenth-century Gobelin tapestry. Colors were repeated among rooms, extending the color harmonies throughout the house. The writer also noted how the essential simplicity of the furniture forms contributed to a visual language that unified the house. Learning how Troost had deftly combined color and form to give the Führer his dream home undoubtedly evoked the reader’s admiration for her skills, while also reinforcing the complexity of interior decoration as an endeavor. By thus focusing on how Troost and Degano had overcome the project’s considerable architectural and aesthetic challenges, these articles served as an endorsement for hiring a professional for home renovation, while the positive image they conveyed of a collaborative design process inspired trust.58

In providing insight into how Degano and Troost worked, the articles also encouraged readers to consider the design qualities most valued at the Berghof. In particular, they focused on livable spaces, honest use of materials, simplicity and clarity of forms, and quality of execution. Also highly desirable was the interweaving of the domestic interior with the natural outdoors through balconies, windows, and terraces—a point that was visually reinforced by the vibrant color photographs included in the Elegante Welt article. All of these principles had been advocated by design reform movements since the end of the nineteenth century, including the so-called International Style that arose in the 1920s. Unlike the latter, however, which celebrated modern industrial materials such as concrete and steel, the articles about the Berghof emphasized traditional, homegrown elements, like the red stone from the neighboring Mount Untersberg used for the Führer’s outside stairs and terraces. While new technologies and industrial products were employed in the Berghof’s construction, the articles ignored this fact and focused instead on natural, “authentic” detailing.59 Moreover, the attention to the Berghof’s complex color schemes, the use of woven textiles and plush fabrics, and the dominance of wood in the interior emphasized the desire for a visually richer and “warmer” domestic environment. These preferences speak, in part, to the reaction in Nazi Germany against the industrial aesthetics and methods of high modernism as exemplified by the Bauhaus. At the same time, however, the design values promoted by the articles reflected broader trends in Europe and the United States toward a commercially more acceptable, “softer” form of modern design. Designers working in this vein were willing to accommodate clients’ desires to blend traditional and modern elements, prioritize comfort, and play with decorative features.60 Thus, the magazines’ message to their affluent readers on how to create a “genuine” and tasteful home, as viewed through the lens of the Berghof, cannot be reduced simply to an ideological reaction against high modernism, since it also incorporated continuities with past reform movements and with broader stylistic trends beyond Germany.

Of the various National Socialist efforts to educate the German public on matters of aesthetics and taste, those with the highest profile occurred in the House of German Art in Munich. The annual Great German Art exhibitions, which began in 1937 and featured ideologically correct, state-approved works in sculpture, painting, and drawing, attracted broad media attention and hundreds of thousands of viewers each year. Less well known today are the German Architecture and Applied Arts exhibitions that were held there in winter and meant to complement the summer fine arts shows. The design exhibitions informed the public and professionals about state architectural and urban planning projects as well as sanctioned new directions in the decorative arts and interior design. In addition to display cabinets of individual objects, the crafts section of the show contained entire room ensembles, from living rooms and dining rooms to home offices and children’s rooms. The high quality of the work presented, typically created by hand and with expensive materials, meant that it came with a correspondingly high price tag. Nonetheless, the shows were very popular. The first exhibition, from January to April 1938, attracted 260,000 visitors and sold a third of the displayed objects for sale. The second show, from December 1938 to April 1939, attracted even more visitors—295,000. Plans for future exhibitions were put on hold with the start of war and the restrictions placed on nonstrategic building, although the fine arts shows continued through 1944.61

Despite the Nazis’ violent and highly publicized closure of the Dessau Bauhaus in 1932, modern design by no means disappeared from German homes during the Third Reich. While government housing authorities turned away from the radical modernity of the Weimar period, modernist houses and interiors continued to be commissioned on the private market. Similarly, commercial firms and retailers offered their customers a wide range of home-decorating options, including modernist styles. Design journals such as Innen-Dekoration, die neue linie, and Schöne Heim (Beautiful Home) continued to publish the work of modernist designers, including women, up until the war years. One even finds Bauhaus products in official Third Reich publications.62 Nonetheless, by the mid-1930s, the image of domestic interiors found in guidebooks and design magazines had undergone a noticeable change. This was due, in part, to the influence of the first National Socialist building projects, designed by Paul Troost, which displayed the regime’s preference for a functional classicism. The Nazi ideology of “blood and soil” also resulted in a greater emphasis on Heimat styles, which drew on regional traditions. Additionally, wood emerged as the preferred design material, a shift that was not entirely political. Among nationalists, German wood was hailed as a homegrown “hero” in the fight against the alien industrial materials of international modernism. But metal had also become scarce by 1935–36, as Hitler began to rearm the country for war.63 It may be that many German consumers would have preferred to purchase the tubular metal furniture that had become so popular in the early thirties. But by 1935–36, the rearmament economy curtailed the materials available to designers and, along with the regime’s more clearly defined ideological and aesthetic goals, the look of German homes began to change.

Visitors to the first Architecture and Applied Arts Exhibition at the House of German Art encountered examples of this conservative shift in domestic design on the second floor, where the show’s crafts section was housed. Folkish hand-woven textiles, rustic pottery, heavy wooden furniture, marquetry, and medievalizing decoration were abundantly on display, although some modern designs inspired by Art Deco also found their way into the show. Additionally, visitors encountered numerous examples of Paul Troost’s historicizing classical style. Indeed, despite having been dead for four years, Troost’s presence was everywhere in the exhibition. The first and second rooms of the architecture exhibition, on the ground floor, gave pride of place to his National Socialist building projects, reinforcing his primacy in the lineage of National Socialist architects. Upstairs, the crafts exhibits—arranged in open, room-like settings by Gerdy Troost— included several dining and living room ensembles showcasing Paul Troost’s furniture and decorative objects.64 Also on display were examples of his wife’s designs, and undoubtedly one of the most attention-grabbing displays of the show represented a marriage of their work: on a dark dining room table by Paul Troost, his widow laid out her design for the Führer’s table service (fig. 53).65

Here was a tangible piece of the Führer’s domesticity, on view to edify the public about good taste in domestic design as defined by two of his favorite designers and as practiced by the Führer himself. The china was designed by Gerdy Troost and executed by the Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory, one of Germany’s oldest and most distinguished makers of porcelain. The dishes were decorated with an interwoven pattern, colored “orange with gold,” that resembled basketwork. The stylized folkish motif and color choice suggest that the pattern was designed for the Berghof, and a color image by Walter Frentz of a formal table laid out in the dining room confirms this.66 The silverware, produced by the firm of F. H. Wandinger, bore Hitler’s monogram and the national emblem of the eagle clutching a swastika. The glassware was crafted by the Franz Steigerwalds Neffe firm and the Glass School in Zwiesel, and the bobbin lace place mats were woven by the United Workshops for Art in Handicraft.67 All these producers were located in Munich or Bavaria, in keeping with Troost’s preferred patronage of Bavarian artists and firms.

Hitler’s tableware was not, of course, one of the items for sale at the exhibition. But even though one could not take it home, it was possible to imagine doing so. If the dining room suite and porcelain service were beyond the means of most exhibition visitors, the intimate setting—only four places were set at the table—made this example of Hitler’s domesticity feel familiar. Here, it seemed, was the table not of a prince or ostentatious millionaire, but of a man, as his propagandists repeatedly insisted, “like you and me.”68 Gerdy Troost’s simple, beautifully crafted display reinforced the message about the private Hitler as an individual of refined yet modest tastes. If viewers searched these objects for evidence of Hitler’s character, they may well have imagined that they had physical proof of the mythic mountain dweller who invited children to tea, cared for his neighbors, and spent his few spare hours reading about art. Surely, this was not the table of a megalomaniacal dictator?

But if the dishes could have spoken, the exhibition’s visitors would have heard another story. In 1938, the Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory was under the management of the Bäuml brothers, who had taken over from their father, Albert Bäuml, a decade earlier. When Albert Bäuml had originally leased the firm in 1888, it had been in a period of long decline. He revived its high artistic standards and restored the firm’s lost prestige. Among the artists with whom he worked was Paul Troost, who maintained a relationship with the firm from 1908 until his death. The directorship of the three brothers—who expanded the manufactory’s production into new areas, including an affordable “people’s dinnerware”—was also considered highly successful. In 1938, however, life had become very difficult for the Bäuml brothers, whose father had been born Jewish and converted to Catholicism. Beginning already in 1934, the brothers had faced racial denunciations made by opportunists seeking to take over the firm. In a testimonial written for Gerdy Troost’s postwar trial, Fritz Bäuml, the eldest brother, recounted how Troost, whom he had known since her marriage to Paul Troost in 1925, had intervened forcefully on his and his brothers’ behalf with the Bavarian prime minister, Ludwig Siebert. Another threat came from Heinrich Himmler, who wanted to annex the Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory to his SS porcelain factory in Dachau, which used concentration camp labor to create expensive Nazi-themed porcelain objects. Himmler, however, made the mistake of approaching Hitler about the matter while Gerdy Troost was in the room, and, according to Bäuml’s testimony, her “energetic intervention” put an end to the idea. Bäuml also noted that even though she knew about their Jewish background, she continued to work with the firm at “considerable risk to herself.”69 One of these commissions, ironically, was for Hitler’s table service.

The worst threat the Bäuml brothers faced came in October 1944, when they were notified of their imminent deportation to a Thuringian mine, a satellite of the Buchenwald concentration camp. There the brothers would have served as forced laborers under the harshest conditions; many of the work camp inmates in this region, including those forced to work and live underground in the hellish Mittelbau-Dora, died of exhaustion, disease, and starvation. In his testimony, Fritz Bäuml recounted the futility of appeals made to ministry after ministry and how, “at the last minute,” the brothers turned to Gerdy Troost. After a “long discussion,” Troost managed to convince Paul Giessler, the acting Gauleiter for Munich and Upper Bavaria, to rescind the order. “And thereby,” Bäuml wrote, “Frau Troost saved us from the concentration camp.”70

As such trial documents reveal, Gerdy Troost did, on several occasions, bravely protect those with whom she and her late husband had working and personal relationships. But countless others in Nazi Germany had no such friends with connections to high places. Seven months after visitors had admired Hitler’s beautiful china and crystal in the House of German Art, the streets of the nation were littered with the broken glass of Jewish synagogues, shops, and homes. On the night of November 9, 1938, in coordinated riots, SA Stormtroopers unleashed their hatred on the nation’s Jewish residents as they burned synagogues, murdered men and women in their homes and beat them in the streets, imprisoned thirty thousand in concentration camps, and destroyed thousands of Jewish shops and homes. But even after Crystal Night, as the November pogrom came to be known, the aura that Hitler’s propagandists had spun around him as a decent and honorable man did not dissipate. Many Germans refused to blame their Führer for the violence in their midst and believed that he would restore order and end the ever-more-brutal persecutions happening before their eyes.71 One of these people was Gerdy Troost, who even when confronted with her friends’ nightmares, never stopped believing in the image of the gracious Hitler that she herself had helped to create.