

## *Chapter 11*

October 1945

I arrange for Hitler's former recorders to meet in my living room at 7:30 P.M. It is a large room, with upholstered furniture arranged in three conversational groups. I greet them and say I am glad they could come.

"Sit down, men, and have some wine." I pour, and after a few bits of opening conversation, say, "I'd like to know about some of Hitler's characteristics." With this broad question I hope to draw a variety of responses.

Reynitz sits forward in his chair and starts: "Hitler was smarting for a long time after the bombing attempt on his life on July 25, 1944. His actions were bizarre."

"Bizarre in what way?"

"He ordered that, instead of the usual army salute to a superior officer, henceforth the troops meeting an officer should use the Hitler

salute—right arm straight and upraised, heels together, with the salutation, ‘Heil, Hitler.’”

“That was a crazy order, don’t you think?” I ask.

“It certainly was. It shows some of his character, demoniac to say the least.” Reynitz is tall and thin, with a long face. “He also ordered the formation of the Volkssturm (People’s Militia) by drafting all able-bodied people, ages 16 to 60, regardless of sex. It wasn’t very effective.”

“What did the SS do?” I glance at Buchholz, who sits with his legs crossed. He is of medium height, with a heavysset, roundish face, and precise in his answers.

“The SS, who followed the front lines of the German army, destroyed all statuary, burned books, libraries, museums, and land-office records. The purpose was to destroy any reminders of a conquered nation’s heritage,” says Buchholz, without wasting words.

“Even land records, imagine that. That would make it almost impossible to prove ownership. He certainly was thorough.” As a lawyer, I thought this was a terrible thing to do and told them so.

“What was Hitler’s outstanding characteristic?” I ask Reynitz.

“To Hitler everything was black or white, never anything in between. Compromise was a sign of weakness, he thought, because it might show uncertainty. When he adopted a position, he stuck by it even though in many cases it made no sense. This was his most revealing characteristic. I cannot emphasize this enough,” Reynitz replies. He seems to have been an unusual observer, even of obscure events.

“Why did the generals carry out his orders if some of them made no sense?” I ask Reynitz.

“Because of two things—the oath and the chain of command,”

Reynitz answers, pulling out a copy of the oath from his pocket. “I brought it along as I knew it would come up.

“The oath was taken in groups standing in formation with right hands raised. The leader held the flag bearing the swastika in his left hand and held his right hand straight up as he told the group to repeat after him:

I swear to God this holy oath, that I will render to Adolf Hitler, Fuehrer of the German Reich and People, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, unconditional obedience, and that I am ready as a brave soldier, to risk my life at any time for this oath.

“The Bible was not used. The oath was meant to maintain discipline in the event of a coup or rebellion in Germany. The groups taking this oath included *everyone* in the armed services,” Reynitz concludes.

“In this chain of command, each person had a superior and was afraid to oppose Hitler’s orders. All had taken the same oath, and even speaking against an order could bring swift punishment too dreadful to contemplate. The oath instilled this natural fear,” Reynitz concludes. He is sharp. I admire him.

“Did Hitler have an excuse for his invasions?” I ask Buchholz.

“Hitler’s excuse for all his invasions of other countries was Lebensraum (living space for a greater Germany). He didn’t trust his regular soldiers, who were drafted, leaving this chore for the SS, the loyal private army who did his dirty work. The SS followed the regular army like a giant vacuum cleaner and decimated each invaded country

to make it more manageable for Lebensraum,” says Buchholz, sipping his wine.

“That is a great statement, full of meaning and said in few words.”

“Thanks,” is all Buchholz says.

“How did Hitler manage to kidnap the men who were sent to concentration camps?” I ask Krieger. He rubs his chin thoughtfully before beginning.

“The SS would post signs in a city or town to the effect that, ‘All men ages 16 to 60 will gather in the town square next Tuesday at 7:00 A.M. Anyone disobeying this order will be shot.’ A good number of men came on time, but some went into hiding. The men who reported were put into railway boxcars and sent to German concentration camps at night, to avoid Allied bombers. If trains were not available, they were trucked or marched.”

“What about those who failed to show?” I ask.

“Terrible things. Those who hid were hunted down by the SS and shot. They were left lying in the street as a lesson to others.”

I think for a moment about Krieger’s reply. “You certainly have the facts. Where did you get them?”

“Read it in two foreign newspapers I bought at a kiosk in Berlin. You see the papers were available because so few Germans could read them, and Hitler needed information on what other countries were saying about him.”

“The SS were downright ruthless. I guess Hitler wanted them that way. Did he make any friends in his daily life?”

“Hitler was aloof and did not make friends. His thinking was that his orders would less likely be followed by friends. They might try to talk him out of it. He had an inner circle of those he trusted, but they

were not friends. I mean he didn't warm up to anyone," says Krieger, standing up to stretch. He is of average height, getting bald, long-faced and rather good-looking. He is serious to the extreme. After all, he was in charge of the Stenographic Office of the Reichstag.

"Hitler permitted no one to know any more than what was absolutely necessary to do his job. This requirement helped him to maintain centralized control," Reynitz adds.

"Extreme secrecy. I would say. What about Lidice?" I suddenly think of what I have read in the *Stars and Stripes*.



*Reinhard Heydrich*

"The town of Lidice, Czechoslovakia, was decimated by the SS on June 9, 1942, owing to the murder there of Czech Commander Reinhard Heydrich. He was responsible for the evacuation of over 300,000 Jews from Germany and the submission in 1941 of a plan for a 'Final Solution' [extermination] to the 'problem' of the Jews. It was adopted at the Wannsee Conference near Berlin, in January 1942.

"Hitler gave the eulogy at Heydrich's funeral," Krieger continues.

"Did Hitler order the destruction of the town of Lidice?" I ask.

"Yes, and he personally went to Heydrich's funeral because of Heydrich's actions against the Jews."

"Did those at the military-situation conferences object to any of Hitler's plans?" I inquire of Jonuschat. He sits perfectly relaxed.

"Yes, at first. Only two had the nerve to do that—Alfred Jodl

and Erwin Rommel. When this happened, Hitler would make a speech in a rage (he was strongest at this), sometimes for 20 minutes. This would quiet them. That is why the top brass attending military-situation conferences thereafter made only constructive suggestions.”

“What about uprisings within Germany?” I ask Reynitz. He sits up straight. All eyes are on him.

“He had a plan to put down any demonstrations or riots in any place in Germany. If one began, the place would be crushed with air bombing, artillery, and tank fire. Heinrich Himmler was in charge of the plan and was ready at all times to implement it. Hitler made no announcement until the day of invasion of a country, so that no one would have time to demonstrate. The invasion would be a *fait accompli*.” He says this casually, though it is tremendously important. Typical Reynitz.

“How did Hitler act at his military conferences?” I ask Buchholz.

“Hitler listened to the reports at his military conferences and asked many questions. There were a dozen-to-two-dozen officers—army, navy, and air force. When the reports were concluded, he gave his order of battle, many times opposed to the advice of his military brass.”

“How could he do that?”

“Hitler relied on his intuition, stating, ‘You know nothing of politics.’ All the recorders think he was psychologically sick, especially when he acted against the advice of the generals to retreat and regroup.”

“This is important. Did he say he was relying on his intuition?”

“Yes, he said it many times, as if the military chiefs knew little compared to himself.”

“Did he have any spies?” I glance at Buchholz again.

“He had *two* spy systems to check on whether the field commanders were following his orders. A party member would secretly report to Martin Bormann by scrambled radio message, and an SS man would report to Heinrich Himmler or his stand-in, by the same method. The field commanders didn’t know who was a loyal party member or who was an SS man. One field commander who didn’t follow orders was never seen again. I don’t know what happened to him.”

“Did Hitler have any humor?” I look at Reynitz. He seems ready.

“His humor was rare. I recall one occasion. My colleague Ludwig Krieger and I entered the conference room where Hitler was alone. Krieger saluted, kicking his heels and raising his arm, almost falling down. Hitler said, ‘For God’s sake, don’t fall down here. We have enough casualties.’

“Hitler laughed only twice that I ever saw. On one occasion the military situation was severe, and he was pondering how to get out of it. He asked those around the room, ‘What do you think?’ But he didn’t wait for an answer. He said that we would always tell him, ‘Fuehrer, give us the order and we will follow.’ Then, as if he had made a big joke, he was laughing heartily,” Reynitz continues.

“The other time he talked about many things, then switched to the subject of lawyers. All of a sudden he said, ‘I want to know who, if any of you in this room, has studied law?’ To his astonishment, it was a majority. Some were generals, adjutants, and one SS man. Then he laughed and said, ‘What did I tell you?’ Those in the room knew Hitler didn’t like lawyers and didn’t trust them. They also knew he didn’t like intellectuals—professors, scientists, journalists, even college graduates.”

“What peculiarities did he have?” I ask. Buchholz is eager to talk.

“Hitler was a vegetarian and usually ate by himself, unless there were foreign leaders visiting him. He was afraid of canned string beans because, he said, they were often poisonous. He never ate them.”

“At most of his headquarters he had greenhouses where fresh vegetables could be grown. All his vegetable dishes were prepared by an elderly woman who had been with him for many years. She knew how he liked his vegetables prepared, and he trusted her completely,” ends Buchholz.

Reynitz picks it up: “Next to poisoning from green beans, his main fear was toothaches, although he never mentioned having one. He always kept two dentists at headquarters to be ready in case he should get a toothache. His medical doctors gave him pills for his wild tremors and nervousness, and some of us thought he was taking too many pills. It was very noticeable in 1943 that his health was failing.

“He was even irritated by flies in the conference room. If an adjutant failed to keep them out, he disappeared the next day,” Reynitz finishes his interesting little tale. There seems to be no end to his knowledge.

“What kind of life did Hitler have?”

As if tired of sitting, Jonuschat stands to answer: “Hitler lived a spartan life. He always had a small bedroom with scant furniture. Once I was called there to record what he said with an officer present. I had difficulty finding a place to write.” After stretching, Jonuschat sits down.

“Were there any religious services?”

Reynitz, who seems the most religious of the group, plunges in: “No, there were no religious services or singing of hymns at any time

at headquarters. Hitler hated the Roman Catholic Church, although he was raised as a Catholic.”

“Did Hitler complain about anything?”

Reynitz sits upright and continues: “He complained that there was too much work and not enough relaxation during the war. He was always moving, except when looking at a map. Eventually this routine and the setbacks on the war fronts affected him, and he slowed down considerably. He gradually became worse in 1944 and 1945, more bent over and walking in a shuffle. His hands were trembling more. He became red in the face. We learned later that he had the onset of Parkinson’s disease. He never said anything about his health.” (Later I learn that Hitler actually showed signs of Parkinson’s disease about the beginning of October 1944. A progressive disease, its origin and cure are unknown, and no medications were then known to control it.)

“What about foreign leaders?” I ask Krieger.

He stands up, stretches, and says calmly: “Benito Mussolini had meetings with Hitler many times, and Hitler often mentioned that Mussolini was a strong man and led a party like his own Nazis, called the Fascisti. When Mussolini was still in power, Hitler said at a conference, ‘His Fascisti can hold their own.’ General Jodl responded, ‘I have been to Italy, and I saw no Fascisti.’ Mussolini had been in power for over 20 years in Italy, and Hitler admired him. But Hitler lost faith in him even before his downfall.”

Krieger carries on: “One time Mussolini came to headquarters with Gen. [marshal and president] Ion Antonescu of Romania, another ally of Hitler. Fake maps were placed on the table to show German forces in Russia at much better positions than actually existed.

“He didn’t get much help from Francisco Franco of Spain, and he

called him, 'That sausage.' He spoke one time about Marshal Josip Tito of Yugoslavia, saying: 'I wish he was on my side. He is a tough guy. I would give several divisions for a guy like him.'"

"What about you recorders? Did he say anything to you?" I ask Buchholz. He is relaxed but has a ready answer.

"For our part there was nothing to complain of. For example, one day before the conference started, he asked about our families in Berlin. He asked where we lived and inquired, 'What kind of food do you get on your ration card?' 'Very little,' I said. He made no further comment but looked at me thoughtfully for a moment before an adjutant called in the military men for the conference." Buchholz straightens.

"Hitler would not permit the conference room to be over 14 degrees Centigrade [about 58 degrees Fahrenheit]. He noticed that our hands and legs were cold, as we sometimes rubbed them.

"When we were alone he would ask my colleague and me if the cold room made it difficult to write our notes. We both said our hands and our legs were cold. He ordered electric heaters placed under both ends of the conference table. For our hands, he said to use wristlets, which could become fingerless woven gloves when we wrote." Buchholz relaxes in his chair.

"Why did he like it so cold?"

"Apparently he would sweat from being so vigorous at the conferences," Buchholz answers and goes on. "Hitler said he and others, during cold weather in World War I, used wristlets to keep their hands warm so that their fingers would be free for using weapons. Of course, we tried his suggestion, but we found it interfered too much with our rapid writing of shorthand." Buchholz is direct as usual. His face shows his disgust with Hitler wanting it so cold.

Karl Thoet hasn't said anything. He is a short man of medium build, with heavy brown hair and brown eyes set in a round face. Choosing to listen, he doesn't usually volunteer. Now he surprises me.

"I noticed Hitler sometimes used a typewriter, pecking with two fingers. The tremors in his hands made longhand impossible."

"Was Hitler afraid of anything?" I ask him.

"He was afraid of poison gas coming into the vent system in the bunkers in Berlin, so he had special filters installed. There were always emergency generators at the bunkers to run the fans, lights, water, and toilet facilities."

"Did you notice anything else?"

"He always demanded that the whole office staff go down into the bunker in Berlin when an air-raid warning sounded. He would go down last. At headquarters we usually worked above ground, and the fortified bunker was always underground," Thoet continues.

"I think Hitler was kind to his office staff because all of them were so subservient, and he felt it so easy to dominate them. We learned later that when he visited the staff lounge, unannounced, he sat down and did all the talking. It was a rambling monologue—then he abruptly left."

"What about friends, did he show any friendship to anyone?" I ask Reynitz, repeating my earlier question to Krieger.

"Hitler had no friends, even in his inner circle. I think he avoided friendships so his orders would be followed by everyone without hesitation. Eva Braun was the exception, though he rarely had time to see her," Reynitz remembers.

"This is a good place to stop," I say.

"Yes, indeed," says Krieger, and all of them leave.

*In Frankfurt, Germany, at the structure where Hitler spoke to cheering crowds. The author at the podium, right, and with his Jeep driver near an abandoned American tank at the stadium, below.*

