

~~CORNHILL~~

ADOLF HITLER'S HOUSE.

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We were looking for Adolf Hitler's house. It was mid-afternoon on a bare and cold day, with the clouds touching the trees, though it was June.

At the very top of the hill we called out to a passing woman and asked her the way. We knew it must be somewhere near. Behind us there were the ruins of what must have been a pill-box -- white blocks of concrete flung together. She came towards our car slowly, half-bending, her eyes narrowed as if she could ^{not} see us properly. Then she said, 'Ya, ya, de^s Führers Haus --' She used the word Führer without any hesitation. '-- there, by Goering's house, just under the road.' And she pointed downwards, to where the road looked over the side of the hill, across a sheer drop. Yet her directions did not seem quite convincing. It would be a strange place for a house, there on the steepest part of the hill. She was a pale woman, bent and a little timid, with thin lips and lost eyes, as if somewhere she had lost her way in the years, though she was not old.

There were many other cars about -- German, American, English and French. It was like the scene of a great, but somehow casual and untidy, pilgrimage. There were no signposts, people did not seem to know exactly what to look for, and everything lay in a strange hush, perhaps only because we were at the top of a very high hill, almost a mountain. From here the vast, long valleys below began to look like ditches covered ^{with} moss and the mountains on either side like boulders that could be found in a field, of an indeterminate greatness and height, so that one could not tell whether there were two kilometres or twenty between them.

We drove down to the end of the tarmac road, where she had pointed, and stopped. We walked to the edge and looked down, but there was only a grassy slope, as we had thought, and trees beyond. Below us, to the left, we could see the hotel now used by American troops as a rest camp. We had passed it on the way up, and we knew that the gutted and half-ruined building

at its side, looking like a long-neglected stable, with grooms' quarters overhead, had once been a hotel for Hitler's guests, for diplomats and friends when they came to visit him at the house. The American hotel was built straight on to it, a new, bright thing growing out of a ruin, with a terrace overlooking Berchtesgaden. It seemed odd to me that the two should be so close together, indeed touching. The gutted windows of Hitler's hotel were shuttered up, and the roof was still unrepaired. But perhaps a contrast had been intended.

Cars were parked in front of it, and I could see people strolling about in the courtyard taking photographs. On another hill to its right there were more people: it seemed to me they were examining something -- an aerial or beacon perhaps-- but it was impossible to say what from this distance.

Near us, on our own hill, were other groups of people staring below just as we were, their cars parked behind them. Now and then one group would glance at the other, as if for a sign as to why we had all come. The hill itself offered us no explanation: it was a few roads, a ruined pill-box and a gutted hotel, and for the rest trees with a slight wind going through them. If there had been signposts -- 'To Goering's house', 'To Hitler's house', 'To the Personal Bodyguards' house', 'To the Bunker', our reasons for coming would have seemed clearer. But all we had was our curiosity, and that curiosity was itself mysterious to us. Our coming had turned the place into a kind of shrine, but the shrine was altarless and unblessed.

And I noticed that when we passed these other people on our way back to the car we did not hear them speak. Like us they were talking in hushed voices. I was an Englishman with American people, the others were French and German: it was as if Hitler was a mystery, and perhaps a guilt, common to all of us.

Just before I got back into the car I noticed behind us a dark, gravelled space which did not rise gradually with the hill but in three tiers of equal size. I began to wonder what this could be. Perhaps it was the foundation of some future building. Then I said, 'This might have been Hitler's house'. I had heard that it was now in complete ruin, and it struck me that perhaps the invading troops -- or SS troops before them -- had taken away every stone, tile and brick. But there was no

one to ask. And it seemed an absurd place for a house, after all, immediately on the road like that, and cut off from a direct view of the Bavarian hills. The tiers could as easily be the site of a new cafe: for over ten years had passed since the end of the War, though it was very difficult to realise that, because of the look of the gutted hotel and the pill-box. I had seen other places with just that look of disorder, lying under the same hush, a few days after a battle.

So we drove down to the lower road again, where the hotel was, and once more we asked the way. This time it was a man, dressed in the traditional lederhosen and green felt hat of Bavaria. He too used the word Führer without any hesitation, and he spoke rather casually, hardly glancing down at us as we sat in the car. He told us how to get there, crisply and slowly, as if he had heard the same question asked many times before and in the same hushed, rather forbidden tone. Perhaps he was one of the workers whom Hitler had specially transported from other parts of Germany for work on the hill. Or perhaps he had been a waiter at Hitler's hotel, even a servant in the house itself. Certainly on his face there was a kind of dedicated look; and also the casualness of his answer seemed to accuse us -- not us as foreigners, for we were in a German car, but as sight-seers. He seemed to say, 'Oh, yes, you all come and visit his shrine, but he died in your name. You can't have him^h back...' There was an absolutely assured and calm pride in his voice when he said, '~~Der~~^S Führer...'

And this time, following his directions, we found what remained of the house. We drove up the hill again to where the road turned suddenly, just short of where we had been standing before. Above us, on a little crest, we saw an inn, still half ruined, -- this must be the 'Personal Bodyguards' Quarters'. And in front of us lay a black pile, simply a rise in the ground with grass beginning to grow over it -- nothing more. This was Hitler's house. Really there was nothing to see. We climbed up over the mass of bricks, chipped stone, piping and rotten wood, worn smooth now and very hard to the feet, until we reached the top. Not one of the walls was standing. There was only this hard, black platform of rubble. I noticed we had come up by a winding path between the weeds, trodden there by so many visitors year after year. Two young men dressed in wind-suits and crash-helmets were standing on the edge of the platform, in

silence, a few yards apart, gazing out across the mountains. Behind us rose a green slope with fir-trees and bushes, very quiet and undisturbed, and the back windows of the house must have opened straight on to this view. I wandered about among the bricks, kicking at the rubbish in the hope of finding something interesting. But there was only earth and brick-dust. I thought I might take a piece of brick and keep it on the desk in my room, but then I forgot all about it. There was a piece of matted, burnt straw at the edge of the platform, and it struck me that this might have been part of a thatched roof. And I came across a sudden hole which may once have led to a cellar, even to the bunker itself, but when I peered down I could only see empty cigarette cartons, paper bags and orange peel.

Standing near us there were two young couples, and I noticed that one of the men was talking in a very animated way, but almost in a whisper, while the others leaned forward close to him, concentrating. Now and then they glanced cautiously about them as they listened, nodding as if to say, 'Really? So that was how it was? That was how they arranged things here?' I imagined to myself that he had been one of Hitler's personal troops and that he was telling them how he had opened his window on to just this green slope behind them on so many occasions. He spoke as if he had a special knowledge of the place and they were ignorant. He kept pointing, and the others would follow his hand slowly, a little hesitantly, as if they thought that someone might suddenly rush across and expose them for seditious thinking. It was strange, how everyone here looked as though they were aware of being watched and overheard.

There was nothing else to see, so we decided to go up to the 'Personal Bodyguards' Quarters', on the crest. Clearly it had once been bombed: the walls and roof were intact, but everything looked ramshackle, with piles of cement and sand in the cobbled yard outside, as if repairs were only just beginning. One of the workers was standing on the roof, tall and clear against the sky, and at this moment, as we climbed up from Hitler's house, he was gazing out across the mountains into Austria, altogether lost, his tools forgotten in his hands. All the time we climbed he did not move.

The place was now an inn, and through one of the windows I saw a cosy room, with a scrubbed wooden farmhouse floor and a stove. We walked round to the stables and here we saw the

first signpost -- 'THE BUNKER' -- with an arrow pointing to the back of the house, where there was a kind of kiosk, like the pavilion on a cricket ground. At first it was difficult to see where the entrance to the bomb shelter could be, but then we realised that it must actually be inside this pavilion. A young man dressed in a bright check shirt and lederhosen was leaning against the counter quietly attending to some accounts, pencil in hand. He did not glance up as we came nearer.

On a stand at his side there were photographs of Hitler's house as it had been before the War, an expensive mountain chalet with the typical overlapping roof of the Bavarian country, looking very white and tidy in the sunlight. We began glancing through them. They were all the same -- just the house, its windows and main door closed, on a still summer's day. Then we found others, taken from precisely the same position, which showed it in a ruined state, its windows blasted out but the walls and part of the roof intact. These confused us even more, and we wanted to ask the young man questions. None of us knew how the house had become a mere black pile of rubble, but we thought the demolition had been done by Allied troops.

First we asked him where the entrance to the Bunker was, and he raised his eyes slowly. He had a sharp face, ruddy from the mountain winds, and round, rather staring eyes. He did not speak at once but pointed behind him to a concrete opening like the top of a well, almost hidden in the shadows.

'Can we go down?'

'Certainly. The price is one Mark.'

Then we asked about the photographs and, pointing to the first ones, he told us that Hitler had not built the house himself but bought it from a private owner soon after he came to power. He spoke to us casually, giving us the information in a flat tone, as if he had been asked the same question many times before and had his answer pat. We asked which of the Allied troops had done the damage and he replied, glancing down at his accounts again, 'None'. No Allied troops had done it, they had only seen it in its demolished state just as we had seen it a few minutes before. The house had first been bombed from the air -- hence the second photographs -- and then, when the War was nearly over, it was rased to the ground by the last SS troops, so that not a sign should remain.

'But we thought Allied troops had done it!'

'No.' And he added with quiet pride, 'They did it themselves.'

He spoke with unmistakeable pride, yet he was too young to have fought in the war. And it struck me that what I had sensed in the other man, when he had told us the way up here, was perhaps no devoutness for the memory of Hitler at all -- the name may have become meaningless to him -- but simply the pride of one who had been elected high priest by so many awed faces day after day all enquiring the same thing -- 'Hitler's house? the bodyguards? the Bunker?' He may even have come to that road day after day in the tourist season just to enjoy a moment's power... Perhaps we had brought the mystery with us, and these inhabitants were doing no more than bowing to our need. And there was money to be made...

Then, after we had paid the entrance fee, the young man gave us each a typewritten sheet on which the lay-out of the underground rooms was described: '1. Entrance to the administration and Bormann-Bunker. 2. Machine gun position. 3. Entrance to the heating and fresh-air-system. 4. Dog kennels...' And at the bottom were written the words: 'Further there are the state archives, telephone-central, kitchen, bath-room and toilets of the body-guard unit, which can not be visited due to the lack of lighting.' Each sheet bore a circular stamp in blue ink: 'HOTEL TURKEN. Neben Hitler-Haus.'

We descended the concrete well, down a narrow, spiral staircase, and we could hear a man's voice echoing in one of the corridors below as he explained something loudly in German. At the bottom the first thing we came to was a machine gun emplacement -- two square holes in the wall, and firing steps. I peered through these holes, hoping to see across the mountains, but they were closed, perhaps immovably now.

We were not yet in the shelter itself. Before us there was another staircase, steep and long, with electric bulbs fixed in the ceiling at intervals and a gutter for water to drain along, under planks. Everything was silent now, apart from the trickling of mountain water. The bottom looked very far below. It was like the staircase leading down to an underground railway, but without advertisements or any ornament, only bare concrete walls.

Our footsteps echoed as if we were wearing heavy military boots. The first word that came into my head as we walked down, staring at the foot of the stairs below, was evil. I imagined Hitler being shown the shelter for the first time and the clear, rasping tones of his staff, their heels sounding out on the concrete steps as ours were now. At the bottom there was another machine gun emplacement. Then the living quarters began, on either side of a long corridor.

One room was much like another, its walls doorless and bare, with light-brackets and piping hanging down and at floor level little air-vents which led from the fresh-air-system at the end of the corridor, clogged now with cigarette cartons and waste paper. On the right we passed the two dog kennels -- low, dark tunnels cut into the wall, like lions' dens, with cage doors. In the first room we came to, that belonging to a bodyguard unit, someone had emptied a magazine of bullets into the ceiling and walls, hardly chipping them.

Hitler's room was neither bigger nor more elaborate than the others. The water-pipes and sockets were twisted and smashed, and the walls dividing the inner rooms were in ruins. Clearly the shelter had never been lived in, for there was no trace of a bath or wash-basin anywhere, only the pipes necessary for them, and tiles on the floor.

I began to wonder what truth this typewritten plan in our hands could have: perhaps it had never been decided which room should be allotted to whom and the list had been drawn up by the owners of the hotel above us in the interests of tourism. But at the foot of the list there were the words 'Eva Braun's Bath-, Dressing-, Bed- and Livingroom'. This promised to be the most exciting thing of all. So we hurried down to the end of the corridor, the safest and most secluded part, where her quarters lay. We were not alone in the shelter. Yet there was hardly a sound, only the shuffling of feet as people walked from one room to another, seldom talking.

And here, in Eva Braun's room, things were a little different.

For one thing the quarters were larger and the bathroom more elaborate than the others. One could actually see the layout of the four rooms as they would have been. Of all the inner walls dividing the dressing-, living- and bedroom from each

other, only that belonging to the bathroom was still standing; and a large hole had been kicked or machine gunned into that. The damage was wilder here than anywhere else in the shelter. More people had come here. They had crowded into the bathroom just as we were crowding now, waiting for the others to come out. In all the other rooms we had been alone; but here there was a concentration of people.

The piping which would have led to the bath was savagely twisted, the tiles on the wall had been ripped or kicked away, and the light sockets had been torn again and again out of their beds so that they hung now ~~xx~~ from limp, dusty wires. The walls were covered with writing in pencil. Hitherto we had only seen names scrawled here and there, those rather sad messages written by American tourists to posterity -- 'Ada and Jack S-- , ^{Westport,} ~~Winton,~~ Conn.' But here all the walls were covered. Above where Eva Braun's bath would have been someone had written in German, ADOLF AND EVA, THE DEVIL-PAIR, and on another wall, under a ^{Star of} ~~a~~ David ~~is~~, there were the words, again in German, THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE WHO OPPOSE THE JEWS. Under a Nazi swastika there were six names, in block capitals. Day after day for ten years people had come here and spent their fury, muffled under the earth. And no doubt when they had emerged from the concrete well back again into the quiet stable-yard they had looked ordinary and safe, spectators like ourselves.

Most of the scrawled messages were obliterated now by fresh coats of whitewash. Perhaps at the end of every day the custodian came along the corridor with a brush and a pail of whitewash, to wipe out the worst obscenities and curses, especially in Eva Braun's bathroom.

There was nothing else to see, and the air was chilling us. We went back down the corridor, past the 'state archives, telephone-central, kitchen, bathroom AND TOILETS of the Body-guard unit', which could not be shown because of the lack of lighting -- a mere dark corridor, its floor covered with rubbish and the rooms no different from ^{those we had seen.} ~~anywhere else.~~

We walked back up ^{the} long staircase and I lifted one of the planks covering the gutter: it ran like a hidden mountain stream underneath, the water very clear, its concrete bed worn after the passage of nearly twenty years into the colour and smoothness of a damp cave floor. It seemed quite unbelievable -- twenty years since it had all begun, yet we were still awed and hushed and

moved to anger by the memory. Twenty years had passed, yet this was still our lifetime, the key to our lifetime.

And as I walked up the echoing staircase it seemed clear to me for the first time that Hitler had succeeded with us all, not only with the Germans. I suddenly remembered the years before the war. They seemed so lacking in mystery to me now---only shops filled with goods, and occasional strikes, and the churches empty, and a kind of heaviness in the air, as if we had all ceased to believe in anything. I remembered feeling in 1938, 'But a war can't happen to us!' as if we were the everlasting suburbans of life, whom fate would spare. 'War' was a word much like 'God': one had heard that it was awesome, but somehow it no longer applied, it belonged vaguely to the people of the past, who had shed blood just as they had believed in God, because they lacked our special, modern insight. Perhaps we would even be spared death! 'They' were so clever nowadays! It was the epoch of race-records and daring flights and endless arguments about security and power and wage-packets and industrial welfare, as if there were nothing in the world beyond men, and the stomachs of men... At least, that was the world I felt I had grown up in.

Is this why we come here, I wondered, to stare into the dead face of a man who woke us up from that bloated, ruminating sleep? who said again and again that the blood had drained out of our bodies, that we were all brain and mental calculation, and that only murder would make the blood flow again? who wanted war and only war as his price? who menaced us again and again until hardly a sane person in the world could say his name with calm feelings? Our most active faculties seemed to be our brains (was not the whole epoch like a marvellous brain-wave, quite cut off from the past?), so he took our brains and incited them to fury. He made

pacifism ridiculous, not many years after there had been wholesale massacres of soldiers in trench-warfare. You had to choose, for or against. If you were squeamish about killing people all you had to do was to turn them into an idea---a 'Fascist', a 'Trotskyite', a 'Communist', a 'Jew' and finally a 'German'. The intellect then drove the rest of the creature into action. Men fighting in Spain actually could not believe sometimes that the other side---the 'Falangists' or the 'Reds'---were really men like themselves; they thought they were a kind of other species, naturally base. ~~That was~~

That was why Hitler invented 'propaganda'. Propaganda meant the deliberate incitement of the brain. Within a few years all we had to do in order to contemplate the murder of thousands upon thousands of human creatures, by bombing raid (if we were Angl-Saxon) or by furnace (if we were German) was to enrage ourselves with an idea like 'The Germans are the monsters of the concentration camps' or 'The Jews are an inferior race'. For our intellects were our last remaining springs of action, since church, and class, and family, and even patriotism in the old sense, were dead as springs of action...

It was just as if we needed new gifts of murder to bring all this down in ruins and renew the feeling of mystery in the world. No wonder we kept on saying afterwards, 'The Germans are guilty!' ^F Only the Germans are guilty' ^A as if we had nothing to forgive ourselves, and the moral death in Europe at that time was not our moral death too. No wonder we all come back here, French, English, German and American (forgetting who was guilty) and tread about this hill with the same hushed steps, the same thoughts in our minds, of awe and puzzlement and fascination, as if Hitler had been the leader of us all, and as if there

he had been their host, how they had enjoyed many a party in these same rooms during the winter nights, and how well they had all eaten. They would come in, from a conference, say, and they would order coffee perhaps, or take a snack of ham and eggs. Then, strangely, a moment after he had said these words, one of the German men to whom he was talking burst out with---but in English, 'Ja? Ja? Ham and eggs (hem und ex)?' He cried out with that encouraging, polite wonder of the tourist being told anecdotes by a guide, as if all this, the house of the bodyguards and the Bunker, were very far from him, as far at least as the English and Americans with their ham-and-eggs, legendary and a little unreal.

And it struck me again and again on that mountain how quiet we had all become, we Europeans, how much spectators of the past and even of ourselves, as if our heads could not grasp what our hands had done.

Zurich, 1955.

