

Chapter 28

December 1945

We meet again the next evening. I cannot help but wonder why the recorders have been so open and frank with me. And rarely have they corrected or contradicted one another. At Berchtesgaden, they were interviewed separately and recited identical stories. Maybe they are simply meticulous reporters, who can tell only the truth. Perhaps it is because I'm a lawyer and ask questions appropriately. Whatever the case, they are not party members, and they didn't like Hitler. I believe what they say.

"Well, there's not much more to cover beyond what happened at Berchtesgaden during the summer before you came here. I think I'll start with you, Dr. Reynitz, as you are most familiar with the area from visiting your daughter in Munich. Am I right?"

"Yes, I think so." Reynitz looks to the others. They nod.

"You're elected. You might start with a description of the town."

“As you may know, Berchtesgaden, Germany, is a town of 5,000, only about ten miles from Salzburg, Austria,” says Reynitz. “It is famous for its markets and winter sports. On a mountain near the town was Hitler’s home, the Berghof. It had an underground bunker and served occasionally as his headquarters during the war. In late April 1945, our team of recorders was ordered by Hitler to go to the town and wait for him.”

“Why did you wait for him?”

“When I left Berlin, Hitler still had not made up his mind whether to continue the war from the Alps or to stay in Berlin. He had ordered Himmler to send thousands of SS troops with full equipment and conceal themselves in the Alps.

“All of us stayed in a Berchtesgaden hotel and waited. The last two of our colleagues to arrive—Kurt Haagen and Gerhard Herrgesell—had recorded Hitler’s final conference, at which he said he would stay in Berlin. They said Hitler learned that the trusted head of his SS, Heinrich Himmler, had sent only about half the number of SS troops ordered to the Alps and had tried to negotiate peace through Swedish leaders. Hitler called Himmler a traitor and refused to see him or talk with him on the telephone,” Reynitz concludes.

“Members of the inner circle were beginning to leave Hitler, were they not?”

“Yes, and there were more of them, as we learned later.” Reynitz still sits on the edge of his chair. The others are attentive.

“We waited in our hotel rooms, still apprehensive that we might be drafted into the Volkssturm and ordered into battle. We heard on the radio that Hitler was killed while defending Berlin. Then we heard that he had committed suicide on April 30.”

“All eight of us recorders were quartered in the same hotel and had chats all summer about what occurred in all of Hitler’s military-situation conferences. In that way we were able to learn the whole story,” says Krieger, who speaks slowly.

“You see, two of us recorded each conference, then spent the next two days finishing the transcript. So usually each of us recorded conferences every third day. We were all interested in learning the main events we missed because Hitler gave us strict orders not to talk with each other about anything said at the conferences. That summer we were free to do so for the first time. We did, and all of us gained from the experience.”

“Tell me more of that time in Berchtesgaden.”

Hans Jonuschat says: “We all gathered, except our colleague Kurt Haagen, who did not wish to meet with us. But Gerhard Herrgesell told us that many of our documents, stenograms, and transcripts had been burned by SS troops at Hintersee, a village a few miles away.”

Karl Thoet picks it up: “When the SS said they were going to burn all the documents, I went to one of our generals there and told him, ‘Der Fuehrer wants all of his documents preserved for history, even if they fall into enemy hands.’ He didn’t seem to pay much attention, and as far as I could see, he did nothing. The SS was in charge of the area, and several regular army generals were just waiting for Hitler’s instructions, as we were.”

“Hitler had learned that Goering was planning to take his place as leader,” says Heinz Buccholz. “Bormann convinced Hitler of this, and Hitler ordered the SS to arrest Goering.”

I look at Krieger, who seems ready to speak. He says, “By radio in Berchtesgaden, we heard that Hitler had committed suicide along



Bormann gazes at Hitler.

with Eva Braun, by then Mrs. Hitler. Our wait was over on May 5, when American troops occupied the town of Berchtesgaden.”

“How did you get along with the Americans?” I ask Jonuschat.

He sits straight up and runs his fingers through his sparse hair.

“We were relieved because we knew the Americans were no threat to us. We told them who we were and offered to cooperate. The Americans realized we were in the civil service in the Reichstag before the war and not members of the Nazi party or SS. They told us we were free to go as we wished. Herrgesell, Peschel, and Haagen went elsewhere.”

Reynitz continues the discussion: “The Americans questioned us separately about our histories before and during the war. We told our stories in great detail, and they told us our stories were exactly alike. That’s why they cleared us.

“They were intensely interested in and asked us many questions about Hitler’s conduct during the war. We told them about the verbatim records of Hitler’s military conferences that the SS had burned in Hintersee, about four miles away,” says Reynitz. “They immediately wanted our help in finding the records.”

“What did you do?”

“Three of us went in a Jeep with an American official—Counter-intelligence Corps agent George R. Allen of the 101st Airborne Division—to Hintersee. We looked around and found this pit with burned papers in it. He dug around deeper in the ashes until

finally he found some envelopes that had not been completely burned. We recognized the stenograms and transcripts of Hitler's military-situation conferences that we or our colleagues had dictated to the typists.

"We took the papers back to Berchtesgaden. Agent Allen went back to the pit again twice in the next few days to recover all he could, around 800 pages. Altogether there were verbatim records, some partial, some complete, of around 50 of Hitler's military conferences. This amounted to about 1 percent of Hitler's documents originally stored there," concludes Reynitz.

"What made the SS burn those important papers?" I ask Thoet.

"I don't know. Hitler did want all of them preserved for history. That I know for sure."

Thoet continues: "Gerhard Herrgesell and Kurt Haagen were the last of Hitler's recorders to leave Berlin. They told us what happened in the last ten days before Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945. General Jodl stayed with Hitler almost to the end and said as he left, 'I don't



General Jodl

want to get killed in this mousetrap.' Hitler decided to stay in Berlin to the end. His last conference was with one person, his adjutant."

Krieger picks it up again: "Agent George R. Allen came to our hotel in the evenings, and we five would gather to chat in German. That was really fun. Sitting on beds or on the floor, we talked about many things besides Hitler and the war, things like history and philosophy and our families in Berlin."

“We couldn’t get to Berlin and our families because of Russian occupation,” Reynitz says. “We all stayed in the town and helped the Americans by translating to English the notes and transcripts found in the pit. [The papers are now kept at the University of Pennsylvania Library, in the original German language. They are fairly good illustrations of how Hitler conducted his military conferences.] We also helped all summer with the translation of voluminous other documents found elsewhere. We answered many questions about our observations at Hitler’s headquarters during the war.

“We were advised by Allen that it would be dangerous to try to reach Berlin, as the Russians controlled the area west of there, and they were not noted for taking prisoners. We were told that before everything was cleared up between the Russians and the Allies, we should go to the Dachau camp, where our talents could be used. And that’s what we five did, arriving here late in September 1945,” Reynitz concludes.

“That brings us just about up to date. Anyway, it is time to adjourn. What do you think?”

Krieger glances at his wristwatch. “It is 10:30, time to hit the sack. I guess you’re right.” He looks at the others, who nod agreement.

As they go to the closet for their topcoats, I say, “This may be our last discussion all together, and I want to thank each one of you for your wonderful memory of the facts and the way you presented them. I’m grateful to all of you. You’ll be hearing from me from time to time.”

“It’s been a pleasure,” says Krieger. He shakes my hand. The others do, too, and show me their smiles for the last time.

Before they leave Dachau, Hitler's recorders give me memos detailing their impression of Der Fuehrer. All write that he often ignored reality and relied on his intuition.

Hans Jonuschat puts it this way: "One should think that he was blinded concerning the realities of power in Germany and in foreign countries, particularly with his enemies. He would overlook or treat in an offhand way such things as would not conform with his deductions . . . [He had] a demonic nature."

Karl Thoet writes: "Der Fuehrer was a very energetic and fanatical man. He was demonic, possessed by the idea to secure a happy future to the German people, not minding any resistance and using all his power to break it."

Ludwig Krieger also remembers that "Hitler's total will and actions were directed only by the idea to win the war. All things hindering himself and the army . . . ought to be exterminated and eliminated."

Heinz Buchholz tells of Hitler's consideration of a possible uprising in Germany: "At a special occasion, he said that he would order Himmler [if a riot should occur] to exterminate these elements before they could become dangerous."

Ewald Reynitz concludes, "Hitler was a maniac. He couldn't distinguish reality from fantasy."

Not too long after my last meeting with the recorders, I reach the magical number of 92 service points. The right to go home is mine. About the same time comes an order from Munich that Colonel Cheever wants to see me there. I can't imagine what he wants from me.

Witness to Barbarism

On the way to see Cheever, I think about my situation. I am fed up to my eyebrows with war crimes. Two reasons: I am exhausted from working more than 60 hours a week for a long period, and the war crimes have filled me with disgust. I can't wait to be done with it.

When I arrive in Munich, I am ushered into Colonel Cheever's office. I salute him and stand at attention.

"At ease, Captain. Have a seat."

"Thank you." I take a chair.



The author before leaving Dachau and upon mustering out.

"I know you have the points necessary to return home, but I want to make you an offer. If you'll stay another two months, I can see that you are made a major."

Witness to Barbarism

“Sir, I have no interest in that and choose to return home. I want to start a law practice.”

“I can understand that, but with being made a major, your pay will go up. Besides two months is a short time. We need you in your position until we can find a replacement who would have the respect of the lawyers there.”

“Sir, I appreciate your offer, but I still choose to return home.”

“I can't do any more, and it is obvious you have given your rights a lot of thought. I give you my warmest regards.”

Standing up, I salute him, make a military about-face, and depart. On the way back to Dachau, I think of home. Oh, how good it will be to get back. I don't give a second thought to the colonel's offer.



*An interpreter reading sentence to Kommandant Martin Weiss, above,
and to Dr. Klaus Schilling, below.*

