HITLER: FROM “THE HOUSE OF MY PARENTS” TO VIENNA

“Adolf Hitler lived from April 20, 1889 to April 30, 1945—almost exactly fifty-six years. The difference between his first thirty years and the following twenty-six years seems to be inexplicable. For thirty years he was an obscure failure; then almost overnight a local celebrity and eventually the man around whom the whole of world policy revolved.” (Haffner, p. 1) But as a human being, he was always a failure; or at least strangely incomplete. As Sebastian Haffner put it: "His life lacked everything that normally lends weight, warmth and dignity to a human life: education, occupation, love and friendship, marriage, parenthood. Apart from politics his was an empty life and hence one [that] was strangely lightweight, and lightly discarded.” (Haffner, p. 4) What sort of person was Adolf Hitler? Here is one clue.

In 1939 Hitler ordered the complete destruction of the Austrian village of Döllersheim. The tiny village, birthplace of his ancestors, was converted into an artillery range for the army and blasted beyond recognition by guns and mortars. Why did the leader of the Greater German Reich order the obliteration of his father's birthplace and destroy the site of his grandmother's grave? Perhaps Hitler was obsessed with the possibility that he was one quarter Jewish; or just as likely, Hitler did not want to reveal too much about the tangled web of inbreeding in his family history. In 1930, he brought his nineteen-year-old nephew Patrick, whom he had never met before to Munich where he told him never to grant interviews to the press: “You idiots”. He shouted, “you're going to do me in. People must not know who I am. They must not know where I come from and who my family is. Not even in my book did I allow one word to come out about these things. I am an entirely nonfamilial being. I only belong to my folkish community.” (Haman, p. 51) Hardly any prominent figure in history has ever tried so hard to cover his tracks.

IN THE HOUSE OF MY PARENTS

In the first chapter of his autobiography Mein Kampf, written in prison in 1924 at the age of 35, Hitler described his parents as models of traditional German values: "My father [was] a dutiful civil servant, my mother giving all her being to the household, and devoted above all to us children in eternal, loving care." Like so much of Mein Kampf, the portrait of his parents is a partial fabrication. He loved his mother deeply; but he feared his father. There is abundant evidence of his feelings towards his father. He told his secretary Christi Schroeder, “I didn’t love my father, but I was all the more afraid of him. He had tantrums and immediately became physically violent. My poor mother would always be very scared for me.” (Hamann, p. 18) He told his lawyer Hans Frank about his father’s heavy drinking: “Even as a ten-to twelve-year-old, I had to take my father home from the bar. That was the most horrible shame I have ever felt. Oh Frank, what a devil alcohol is! It really was —via my father—the most horrible enemy of my youth.” (Hamann, p. 12)
His mother more than compensated for whatever affection Adolf Hitler missed in his father. According to the description given by her Jewish doctor, Eduard Bloch, after he left Nazi Germany, Klara Hitler was “a simple, modest, kindly woman. She was tall, had brownish hair which she kept neatly plaited, and a long, oval face with beautifully expressive grey-blue eyes.” She was also submissive, retiring, and a pious Catholic. Her first three children all died in infancy within weeks of one another in 1887-8 and her fifth child Edmund died at age six in 1900. Her sorrows could only have been compounded by life with her irascible, unfeeling, and alcoholic husband. Young Adolf adored her. Dr. Bloch later wrote: “Outwardly, his love for his mother was his most striking feature. While he was not a ‘mother’s boy’ in the usual sense, I have never witnessed a closer attachment.” His mother may have been the only person he genuinely loved in his entire life. If we can manage to look beyond the man that Hitler was to become, in the words of Ian Kershaw, “his family circumstances invoke for the most part sympathy for the child exposed to them.” (Kershaw, p. 12)

The adolescent Hitler, as young men have since time immemorial, tended to find refuge in a world of fantasy. At times he dreamed of writing music; at other times, he saw himself as a great painter. One neighbor of the family recalled: “When the postmaster asked him one day what he wanted to do for a living and whether he wouldn’t like to join the post office, he replied that it was intention to become a great artist.” (Kershaw, p. xxxi) He clung to this dream with amazing persistence. Even as dictator, he told his intimates that had his political “mission” not intervened, “I would have been one of Germany’s greatest architects.”

### Fantasy and Failure

It is difficult to dispute the judgment of Sebastian Haffner: “Adolf Hitler’s father made a success of life. His son began by making a mess of his life.” (Haffner, p. 1) He went to a number of schools and performed poorly. At age fifteen, his mother sent him to a new school several miles away. His midterm report card showed failing grades in German, French, Math, and stenography. He disliked most of his teachers because “they had no sympathy with youth: their one objective was stuff our brains and turn us into erudite apes like themselves.” His French teacher, Dr. Huemer testified at his trial in 1924:

> He was decidedly gifted, if one-sided, but had difficulty controlling his temper. He was considered intractable and willful, always had to be right and easily flew off the handle, and he clearly found it difficult to accommodate himself to the limits of a school. He demanded unconditional subordination from his schoolmates. (Hamann, p. 11)

Dr. Huemer seems to be in the minority in remembering Hitler at all. Other teachers and classmates claimed that he had not stood out at school in any particular fashion, either negatively or positively. (Kershaw, p. 17) At the end of what we would call the ninth grade, Hitler talked his dying mother into allowing him to drop out of school.

He fantasized about becoming a great painter and architect. He had few friends aside from a young upholsterer's son named August Kubizek. “He had to speak,”
recalled Kubizek, “and needed someone to listen to him.” This friendship also set the tone for all of Hitler’s later relationships. Anton Kubizek was a quiet, dreamy youth. He felt strongly about little or nothing; Adolf had strong feelings about everything. He found Hitler’s self-assurance attractive. Whether Adolf was haranguing him about the mental deficiencies of teachers or the greatness of Richard Wagner’s operas, Kubizek was gripped as never before. Anton was highly impressionable; Adolf was on the lookout for someone to impress. It was a perfect partnership. Like the later mass audiences that Hitler would entrance, Kubizek remained a submissive and passive partner in their “discussions.” (Kershaw, p. 21)

All of his life, when forced to listen to others, Hitler would immediately withdraw into his own world.

In 1907 he persuaded his mother to finance his attempt to study art in Vienna. He failed the entrance exam for the Academy of Fine Arts; the committee noted simply: “Sample drawing unsatisfactory.” In Mein Kampf, Hitler later described this experience as an “abrupt blow”: “[I was] so convinced that I would be successful that when I received my rejection, it struck me as a bolt from the blue.” He sought an explanation and was told by the Rector of the Academy that there was no doubt about his unsuitability for the school of painting, but that his talent plainly lay in architecture. Hitler left the interview, as he put it, “for the first time in my young life at odds with myself.” After a few days of thought he concluded that the Rector was right and that “I wanted to become an architect and obstacles do not exist to be surrendered to, but only to be broken.” Of course, this is the version Hitler of events that Hitler chose to give in Mein Kampf. The truth was more complex and less flattering. In reality, his rejection was a body blow to his pride and he did not bounce back as quickly as he as his own story suggests. He applied again the next year and was rejected again. It was entirely typical that Hitler would have done so without in any way trying to address the artistic and educational deficiencies that led to the first rejection. (Kershaw, pp. 24-5) All of his life he bore the wound of that rejection. He raged that the art schools were staffed by "pip-squeaks" and aimed only "at killing every genius."

Hitler’s anger and embarrassment at failing the entrance examination for the Vienna Art Academy was all the more intense because his friend and roommate Anton Kubizek was accepted by the Viennese Academy of Music. At first Adolf tried to keep his rejection a secret, but in the midst of an argument, he finally admitted, “they rejected me, they threw me out, they turned me down.” For a teenager to fail to pass a difficult entrance examination is neither unusual nor shameful. But Hitler could not bear to tell his friend or his family. The blow to his self-esteem was profound and his bitterness showed. He would fly off the handle at the slightest provocation: “Choking with his catalog of hates, he would pour his fury over everything, against mankind in general who did not understand him, who did not appreciate him and by whom he was persecuted. I had the impression that Adolf had become unbalanced,” his roommate recalled. (Kershaw, p. 39)

If Hitler could not be a real artist, the next best thing was to pretend to be one. When he left Vienna for Munich in 1913, he described himself as “an architectural painter.” He informed the Austrian authorities that he was a “self-employed artist” and earning money to fund his training as an “architectural painter.” (Kershaw, p. 82) His artistic pretensions might have seemed comic to others but Hitler took them very seriously indeed. In 1938, when Hitler was at the peak of his power and fame, the
novelist Thomas Mann wrote a perceptive essay *Brother Hitler*, in which he analyzed the “artistic” elements in Adolf Hitler’s personality. Mann wrote:

The whole pattern is there: the recalcitrance, sluggishness and miserable indefiniteness of youth; the dimness of purpose, the what-do-you-really-want-to-be, the vegetating like a semi-idiot in the lowest social and psychological bohemianism, the arrogant rejection of any sensible and honorable occupation because of the basic feeling that he is too good for that sort of thing. On what is this feeling based? On a vague sense of being reserved for something entirely indefinable. To name it, if it could be named, would make people burst out laughing. *(Fest, p. 51)*

**The Hardest School of My Life**

In *Mein Kampf*, he wrote the oft-quoted sentences about his years in Vienna:

I owe it to that period that I grew hard. In this period there took shape within me a word picture and a philosophy, which became the granite foundation of all my acts. In addition to what I then created, I have had to learn little, and I have had to alter nothing. Vienna was and remained for me the hardest, but also the most thorough, school of my life. *(Spielvogel, p. 22)*

Hitler did not recall his Viennese years with any fondness: “To me Vienna, the city which, to so many, is the epitome of innocent pleasure, a festive playground for merrymakers, represents, I am sorry to say, merely the lingering memory of the saddest period of my life.” *(Spielvogel, p. 22)* He said that hunger was his constant companion. That too was a lie. His family inheritance was equal to the yearly income of a lawyer. But he squandered his money in an aimless attempt to live a cultured life. He visited the opera and toured Vienna's museums. Instead of making a serious attempt to find work, he preferred to fantasize about a great future as an architect, painter, or writer. Hitler’s strange relationship with his “friend” Kubizek continued until 1908. Finally, Kubizek returned to their apartment that summer after a brief trip and found that Hitler had moved out without leaving a forwarding address. When next they met, Adolf Hitler was Chancellor and Führer of Germany.

The unhappy young man craved respectability and acceptance by the bourgeois world; instead he felt rejected. Hitler, the self-styled artist, seemed utterly unaware even of the artistic currents. Modern art and the *avante garde* passed him by. He knew nothing of Schönberg, Richard Strauss, or the Secession movement. He was ignorant of the expressionist paintings of Gustav Klimt or Oskar Kokoschka. “Instead the young man from Linz,” writes Joachim Fest, “relived in Wagner and Bruckner, the raptures of his parent's generation.” At heart a country hick, Hitler stood outside the locked gates of Viennese society; he was not a revolutionary. He was just lonely. *(Fest, pp. 34-36)* It is hard to escape the conclusion that Adolf Hitler was a complete failure at age 24. He was an embittered loner, similar in many ways to the psychological profile of U.S. political assassins. *(Loader)*
He sank into the underclass of the great city. Hitler made much of his poverty in Mein Kampf. The “mother’s darling” had lost his “soft downy bed” and the carefree existence he had enjoyed. Instead of the “hollowness of comfortable life”, he was now thrown into “a world of misery and poverty”, with “Dame Care” as his new mother. (Kershaw, p. 29) His only source of money was a small orphan's pension. In the summer he would sometimes sleep in the open on a park bench; in winter when the weather turned cold, he sought shelter in a hostel for the homeless. For almost three years, from 1910 until 1913, Hitler's address was the hostel for the homeless on 27 Meldenmannstrasse. But as he remarked later, “In my imagination, I lived in palaces.”

His economic prospects did not seem promising. Although he liked to refer to himself in Mein Kampf as a worker, there is no evidence that he actually ever worked as a laborer. According to his associate Reinhold Hanisch, a fellow resident of the men’s hostel, “I knew Hitler could never had done [physical] work for an hour. I have never seen him do any hard work.” He bridled at the suggestion that he should accept a “mere bread and butter job.” He did sometimes go to the railway station to carry bags for passengers. Hitler and Hanisch made a business arrangement: Hitler would paint scenes of Vienna and Hanisch would sell the paintings in taverns and on the street, since Hitler was too shy and too poorly dressed to hawk his own wares. The two agreed to split the profits. (Hamann, p. 155) Hitler managed to sell enough to scratch out a living for himself and his new partner. They now had enough money to spare themselves the need to look for odd jobs or to stand in line every day in front of some fleabag hotel for a room for the night. Hitler’s darkest period in Vienna was over. This relationship soon turned sour. Hitler filed a complaint about Hanisch that resulted in a short jail sentence. In 1938, when he had the power to do so, Hitler had Hanisch tracked down and murdered to erase another embarrassing reminder of his past. (Fest, p. 47)

THE ESSENTIAL JEW

The psychological consequences of failure are either directed inward in the form of critical self-reproach; or outward in the form of projected anger. Logically, Hitler should have embraced the Marxist cause, but he preferred to identify himself with the establishment. He clung desperately to the pretense of refinement and social polish, wearing a decent suit, a dark overcoat, and carrying a walking stick with an ivory handle. In his memoirs, he claimed that Vienna was crucial to intellectual development: “In this period my eyes were opened to two menaces of which I had previously scarcely known the names: Marxism and Jewry.” (Kershaw, p. 29) He found an ideology that provided an explanation for his personal failure as well as a target for his resentments. Hitler found it all too easy to transform his impotent anger and frustration into race hatred. Once that hatred had crystallized, it remained a permanent and growing feature of his character. Hitler had a desperate psychological need for a scapegoat—some person or group of persons to blame for his personal failures. He needed an explanation for a world he could not fathom. He needed, as he later put it, “a deliverance from the emptiness of my youth.” In a psychological sense, Hitler needed the Jews.

Vienna was perhaps the most anti-Semitic city in Central Europe and Hitler was exposed to endless pamphlets on the theme in his wanderings through the coffeehouses. In 1910, the year he arrived in the city, the Jewish population stood at 8.6 per cent.
Leopoldstrasse, Hitler had his first, fatal encounter with alien-looking Orthodox Jews. He described that encounter in these words:

One day when I was walking through the inner city, I suddenly came upon a being clad in a long caftan, with black curls. Is this also a Jew? At Linz they certainly did not look like that. Secretly and cautiously I watched the man, but the longer I stared at this strange face the more mind reshaped the first question into another form: is this a German? (Kershaw, p. 61)

In Mein Kampf, Hitler described this as the moment when the scales fell from his eyes. Following this encounter Hitler wrote he began to buy anti-Semitic pamphlets. He was now able to see that “Jews were not Germans of a special religion, but a people in themselves. Wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity.” (Kershaw, p. 61)

Vienna's alien Jews were just the tip of the iceberg, the most visible sign of a deeper social malaise. The Jews were like leeches that fasten themselves to society and infect everyone. Thus, whenever we cut open a social sore like prostitution, Hitler commented, “we always find a little Jew, blinded by the sudden light, like a maggot in a rotten corpse—an icy shudder ran down my spine when seeing for the first time the Jew as a cool, shameless and calculating manager of this shocking vice.” (Kershaw, pp. 45-46)

**Hitler and Women**

Scholars and biographers have argued for decades over the question of Hitler’s sexuality: Was he homosexual? Was he a sexual pervert? Based on the evidence of his own words and the account given by Kubizek, Adolf Hitler certainly appears to have been an acutely disturbed and sexual repressed personality. It is certain that, by the time he left Vienna at the age of 24, Hitler had no sexual experience. This was unusual for a city where young men were widely expected to visit prostitutes while, at the same time, saving themselves for marriage. Women frightened him; certainly he was afraid of their sexuality. He later described his ideal woman “a cute, cuddly, naïve little thing—tender, sweet, and stupid.” All accounts from people who knew the young Hitler agree on his unusual prudishness—unusual even by the standards of the late Victorian period. But his prudishness went far beyond the norm. It amounted, according to Kubizek’s account, to a deep disgust and repugnance at sexual activity. Hitler avoided contact with women. He was repelled by homosexuality. Prostitution horrified, but fascinated him. (Kershaw, pp. 45-46).

One night, after a visit to the theater, Hitler dragged his young friend Kubizek into Vienna’s Red Light district. Adolf took his friend not once, but twice, along the rows of windows where the women displayed their bodies and tried to attract customers. He cloaked his voyeurism behind a cloak of middle class self-righteousness by lecturing his friend on the evils of prostitution. As we have seen, he linked prostitution to the Jews, but if he made the connection on this occasion, Kubizek did not record it. Though repelled by sex, Hitler was at the same time plainly fascinated by it. It is probably impossible to explain the precise origins of his disturbed sexuality, his recoiling from human contact, his fear of women, his inability to forge genuine friendships, and his
emptiness in human relations. All had their roots in his troubled family life, but, as we have seen, Hitler made every effort to destroy any evidence that might prove politically embarrassing. (Kershaw, p. 46)

As a soldier in the First World War, Hitler’s prudishness struck his comrades as distinctly odd. His comrades respected him and even liked him, but they could not understand him. His lack of a sense of humor made him a natural target for good-natured ribbing. One day a fellow soldier asked Hitler, “What about looking around for a Mamsell?” Hitler replied, “I’d die of shame looking for sex with a French girl, have you no German sense of honor left at all? His fellow soldiers laughed at Hitler’s obvious discomfiture. On another occasion, a soldier who was friendly with Hitler asked him bluntly, “Haven’t you ever loved a girl?” Hitler replied, “I’ve never had time for anything like that, and I’ll never get around to it.” (Kershaw, pp. 92-93)

It is pure speculation to attempt to psychoanalyze Adolf Hitler based upon his own carefully edited memoirs and the comments of a few acquaintances and friends who later published accounts of their relationship with the young Hitler. Mein Kampf was designed to present Hitler’s biography as he wished his followers to see it—his childhood was merely a prelude to the political mission of Germany’s future savior. Mein Kampf was not designed as autobiography but rather as political myth. On the other hand, many of Hitler’s “friends” from Vienna either wished to please the powerful man Hitler had become or to somehow cut him down to size. Reinhard Hanisch, his fellow resident at the men’s hostel and the man who hawked Hitler’s paintings, obviously wanted to portray Hitler as negatively as possible simply to get personal revenge. Any Hitler biography must wrestle with the problem of penetrating the layers of lies and separating fact from myth. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a few conclusions about Hitler’s personality.

The historian Ernst Nolte, for example, argues that the dominant feature in Hitler’s personality was infantilism—defined as “persistence in remaining in the child's world of being aware on no one but himself and his mental images.” (Spielvogel, pp. 128-29) He never grew up into the adult world of compromise and moderation. His famous fits of rage were either calculated to intimidate his opponents; on the other hand, perhaps they were the grotesque anger of a spoiled adult child. Inflexibility was the keynote of Hitler’s life. He continued to make the same spelling and grammatical errors in adulthood that he made as a child. His daily routine was maintained intact down to the smallest detail. Any deviation in routine always led to a serious outburst of temper. (Spielvogel, p. 126) As Führer of the Greater German Reich, Hitler arose late, pursued the lazy artist’s life, and enjoyed late night monologues with his cronies—in much the same way he did in Vienna. His boyhood friend August Kubizek summed up Hitler's personality in this way:

The most outstanding trait in my friend's character was the unparalleled consistency in everything he said and did. There was in his nature something firm, inflexible, immovable, obstinately rigid, which manifested itself in his profound seriousness and was at the bottom of all his other characteristics. Adolf Hitler simply could not change his mind or his nature. (Spielvogel, p. 126)

By the end of his Vienna years, the basic pattern of Adolf Hitler's character was in place:
1. A paranoid hatred of Jews.

2. Laziness and a habitual need to project personal failure onto scapegoats.

3. An inability to form loving ties with anyone, especially women, and a corresponding tendency towards manipulation in relationships. All of his life, Adolf Hitler’s relations with other human beings were characterized by emptiness and coldness. When forced to listen to others, he paid little attention and withdrew into his private world. As the historian Werner Maser wrote, "Genuine interest in others was totally alien to him—the man who could inflame the masses and identify himself with their longings as few others, never bothered to find out what his friends—let alone strangers—thought and felt." With any human being he came into contact with, wrote Ian Kershaw, “any relationship was based upon subordination to his mastery.” (Kershaw, p. 93) Magda Goebbels, the wife of the propaganda minister and a member of Hitler’s intimate circle, remarked, “in a sense, Hitler is not human—unreachable and untouchable.” (Spielvogel, p. 127)


*The Vienna years were over. They had indelibly marked Hitler’s personality and the basic stock of political views he held. But these personal views had not yet coagulated into a fully shaped ideology. For that to happen, an even harder school than Vienna had to be experienced: war and defeat. And only the unique circumstances produced by that war and defeat enabled an Austrian dropout to find appeal in a different land, among the people of his adopted country. (Kershaw, p. 69)*