



In Hitler's Munich

**Making History**

As a boy growing up in Munich **Edgar Feuchtwanger** witnessed the rise of Germany's dictator at extraordinarily close range.

# I was Hitler's Neighbour

**L**ibraries have been filled with books about Hitler and the Third Reich and as an academic historian I have made my own contribution. I am also one of the dwindling band of survivors of that period and my vantage point was a particularly close one. I was born in Munich in 1924. In 1929, when I was five, Hitler moved into a large apartment about 100 yards from where I lived on Grillparzer Strasse in a similar flat with my parents. Social Democrat propaganda in the election campaigns of the early 1930s proclaimed: 'Hitler says he is a friend of the workers, but he lives in a nine-room flat in Munich.'

For my family it was a dangerous proximity. My father's elder brother was Lion Feuchtwanger (1884-1958), one of the most successful writers of the Weimar period. His novel *Jew Suss* (1925) was a worldwide bestseller. In 1930, coinciding with Hitler's electoral breakthrough in September of that year, he published another novel *Erfolg* (Success). It was a panoramic picture of Bavaria in the early 1920s, the period that culminated in Hitler's failed Munich Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923. There is a biting satirical portrait of Hitler as 'Rupert Kutzner', the garage mechanic with the gift of the gab, who founds a political party, the Truly Germans. Hitler was furious and Goebbels, in his newspaper *Der Angriff* (The

**The foundation stone for the House of German Art is paraded through Munich, October 15th, 1933.**

Attack), threatened revenge when they came to power, as they did a little over two years later. For the Nazis my uncle Lion was public enemy number one among the Weimar intelligentsia. Nevertheless my parents only left Germany following Kristallnacht in November 1938, when my father's brief incarceration in Dachau made it plain that the situation was life-threatening. Until my teens Hitler's comings and goings were thus part of daily life. I witnessed, from the opposite side of the road, his transformation into the Great Dictator.

When Hitler first moved into our neighbourhood his housekeeper was his half-sister, Angela Raubal. Hitler had an affair with her daughter Geli, about which much has been written and much remains mysterious. When Geli shot herself in the flat in September 1931 it caused a major personal and political crisis for Hitler. He kept her room untouched and this may have been one of the reasons why he never gave up the flat. It was also useful to him as a staging post in his incessant comings and goings to the Berghof, his mountain retreat near Berchtesgaden, especially once he was in power. In the 1930s there were no helicopters or radar and flying into a mountainous region could be hazardous. The Munich to Salzburg autobahn was one of the first to be opened, largely for Hitler's use, and it began about a mile down the road from our flat. It became the axis of his



life as Führer and was intrinsic to the way the Third Reich functioned or malfunctioned.

One of my early visual memories of Hitler probably dates to 1933, when he had just become chancellor. I was being taken for a walk and was on the pavement in front of his house when he came out to get into his car. He was wearing a white-belted raincoat and when a few casual passers-by shouted 'Heil Hitler' he slightly lifted the trilby hat he was wearing. The image of the man of destiny was not yet fully formed. He was not sporting a whip, as he sometimes did in his early days, but which he soon discarded.

By the mid-1930s even an unannounced private movement, such as I often witnessed, took a very different form. Hitler was nearly always in uniform. The bottom flat in his block had been taken over by his SS bodyguards. Three of those long Mercedes cars familiar from the newsreels were parked by the kerb-side. There was always a small crowd of onlookers, kept on the opposite side of the road. Suddenly the chauffeurs would come out and start the engines. The blackshirt bodyguards came out, their jackboots clattering on the pavement. Then the Führer himself came, giving a cursory salute. He would take his seat by the driver of the first car and the motorcade would roar off. 'The great globe itself,' as Shakespeare puts it in *The Tempest*, 'shook under his tread.'

Some of the most dramatic events of the 1930s could be seen from our doorstep. Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA, or Stormtroopers, the Nazi Party's paramilitary wing, lived only a little further away from us than Hitler, but in a large villa. I saw Röhm once, when he voted at a small cinema converted into a polling station in the first plebiscite staged by Hitler to legitimise his regime, on November 12th, 1933. Röhm had been of great use to Hitler in his early days and was the only one among the regime's leading men allowed to address him as 'Du'. By the summer of 1933 the SA had swelled to three million men, dwarfing the German army, then still restricted in size by the Versailles treaty. Röhm saw himself as the leader of the revolutionary force that would carry National Socialism to the four corners of the world, just as the armies of the French Revolution had done. This was the background to the tensions that led to the Night of the Long Knives in 1934, the defining moment in Hitler's consolidation of the Nazi dictatorship.

On June 30th, 1934 Hitler had asked Röhm to convene a meeting of SA leaders on the Tegernsee, 30 miles south of Munich. I was woken up early that morning by a lot of noise and car doors being slammed outside Hitler's house. It was the moment when Hitler drove out to the Tegernsee to arrest Röhm and his fellow SA leaders, allegedly finding most of them in bed with rent boys. They were brought to Munich and shot. Simultaneously Hitler struck out against those who were trying to rein him in from the opposite end of the political spectrum by restoring something like the rule of law. Franz von Papen, the vice-chancellor, was put under house arrest and some in his entourage were murdered, as was General von Schleicher, Hitler's immediate predecessor as chancellor. It was the greatest political



Edgar Feuchtwanger, c. 1935.

massacre in Europe since St Bartholomew's Night in 1572. The army was fatally compromised by its involvement and by its complicity in the murder of its senior officers. Hitler had paved the way to succeed Hindenburg as head of state when the latter died five weeks later. The armed forces swore a personal oath to Hitler as commander-in-chief, which in later years became one of the obstacles to a military coup against the dictator.

Hitler became the personification of the regime. He travelled ceaselessly up and down the country to festivities of one kind or another: the annual Nuremberg party rallies, the opening of a new stretch of autobahn or the Wagner festival at Bayreuth. At the weekend he would often come into Munich, stop off at his flat and then move on to the Berghof. There only the people he wanted to see had access to him. He could issue commands, which had the force of law. He no longer involved himself much in the day-to-day business of government, but could take the key decisions, without a debilitating process of consultation, that eventually drove the world into war.

Munich itself was the scene of many of the festivities that Hitler attended and which had a kind of numbing effect on people, distracting them from a daily grind marked by shortages. There was, for example, the annual celebration of the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, or the Day of German Art. Soon after coming to power Hitler had ordered the construction of a neoclassical building called the House of German Art, which was about a mile from where he and we lived. It would exhibit the 'healthy' art that was to be the hallmark of the new Reich, as opposed to the *Entartete Kunst* (degenerate art) of the Weimar period, itself displayed at the notorious Exhibition of Degenerate Art in 1937. On the Day of German Art, held in mid-July, there was a great procession of floats through the streets, illustrating German history, watched by Hitler and other leading figures of the regime. The streets were draped in different colours and at dusk all the windows were lit by coloured lights. For us as householders it meant that for days we had no daylight because of the draperies hanging from the top of our building. In the evening we had to light candles in holders screwed into the window frames. In a democracy it would have been impossible because too many people would have refused to cooperate. Under the Nazis any opposition would have been more than one's life was worth. However, it looked impressive and even foreign observers thought that Hitler had found the knack of manipulating the masses and instilling them with a sense of purpose. In several countries the First World War had led to the politicisation of previously excluded sections of the population. The sociologist Max Weber had written about the need for a charismatic leader and many thought they had found him in Hitler.

The public, in Germany and beyond, were thus fed a diet of sensational events. Hitler's foreign policy coups, by which he smashed the Versailles system and recast the map of Europe, became the most important part of the narrative. The start was hesitant because Hitler believed that the French in particular,

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realising his agenda, would move in and strangle his regime at birth, so in 1933 he talked a lot about peace. Strangely it was Mussolini who was the first to stand in his way, when he moved troops to the Brenner Pass in July 1934 in order to prevent a Nazi takeover in Austria. But the Duce's Abyssinian adventure broke his alignment with the western democracies and drew him into the ill-fated alliance with Nazi Germany. By 1935 Hitler was getting into his stride. The Saar plebiscite in January gave him the chance for a spectacular journey down the Rhine, which as a schoolboy I had to record in my exercise book. Then there was the reintroduction of conscription in March 1935, which those who opposed Hitler at home, like my parents, expected to lead to intervention by the western powers. Hitler got away with it and his prestige soared. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland a year later was the event which shifted the balance of power in Europe.

Two years later came the beginning of territorial expansion, the Austrian Anschluss. On Saturday March 12th, 1938 the six-wheeled grey vehicles in which Hitler can be seen entering Vienna suddenly appeared at the bottom of our road. I did not see him

**Aerial view showing the street on which Hitler and Feuchtwanger both lived. The Feuchtwanger's lived in an apartment in the building that stands alone in the far left halfway down the photograph. Hitler lived at the right hand corner on the opposite side of the same street.**

leave, but saw him return in triumph the following Wednesday. Hitler struck his familiar pose, standing in his car, holding on to the windscreen with his left hand while raising the other in the Nazi salute. The crowds lining the street were rather thin and dispersed in a twinkling as Hitler's car drew to a halt in front of his house and he went inside. Six months later it was the turn of Czechoslovakia. A joke making the rounds was 'Chamberlain takes his weekends in the country, Hitler takes a country at the weekend'. During the Munich conference, at the end of September 1938, large crowds watched the comings and goings outside Hitler's flat. The declaration that Chamberlain waved on his return to London claiming 'peace in our time' was signed in the flat. Those who knew the true nature of Hitler and Nazism guessed that the Führer would hardly have glanced at, before signing, a document that to him was meaningless. By the time, six months later, when Hitler's seizure of the rump of Czechoslovakia revealed the futility of appeasement, my parents and I had left Germany for good.

Edgar Feuchtwanger taught history at the University of Southampton. His books include *From Weimar to Hitler: Germany 1918-33* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).