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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Baby Pictures
and the Abyss

In the realm of Hitler explanations, it's come to be called "the survival myth," and though no one believes it now, it struck a chord in the post-war popular imagination. The image of a Hitler who had escaped—escaped the Berlin bunker, escaped the flames that were said to have consumed him, escaped *judgment*—turned out to be a curiously seductive one, inspiring fantasists from the lowbrow (the legendary *Police Gazette* "HITLER ALIVE IN ARGENTINA!" series) to the highly cerebral (George Steiner's challenging parable *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*). Seductive, perhaps, because it reflects a feeling that although Hitler did not escape us physically, in certain important respects he may have eluded us. The survival myth suggests a persistent anxiety that Hitler has somehow escaped *explanation*.

Similarly suggestive is the debate that erupted in 1995 over the discovery of a few curved shards of bone reposing in a Moscow archive, said to be the surviving remains of Hitler's cranium. The controversy over the identity of the skull fragments—an important one because they could perhaps tell us something about the circumstances of Hitler's suicide, his final act of self-definition—may be a symptom of a more disturbing truth: Regardless of what became of his skull, a sure sense of Hitler's mind has escaped us.

The real search for Hitler—the search for who he was, who he *thought* he was, and why he did what he did—has been an expedition into a realm far more inaccessible than the rain-forest jungles of Argentina or the remote haciendas of Paraguay, supposed hideouts of the escaped Hitler in the survival myth. It's not a search for where Hitler has hidden but for what he hid within him. It's a trek into the trackless realm of Hitler's inwardness. A realm disguised by his own deceitfulness, camouflaged by thickets of conflicting evidence, a tangled undergrowth of unreliable memory and testimony, of misleading rumor, myth, and biographical apocrypha. A terra incognita of ambiguity and incertitude where armies of scholars clash in evidentiary darkness over the spectral shadows of Hitler's past and the maddening obscurities of his psyche.

Is it conceivable, more than half a century after Hitler's death, after all that's been written and said, that we're still wandering in this trackless wilderness, this garden of forking paths, with no sight of the quarry? Or, rather, alas, with too many quarries: The search for Hitler has apprehended not one coherent, consensus image of Hitler but rather many different Hitlers, competing Hitlers, conflicting embodiments of competing visions. Hitlers who might not recognize each other well enough to say "*Heil*" if they came face to face in Hell. The mountebank Hitler of Alan Bullock's initial vision might well not see himself in the possessed true believer, the mesmeric occult messiah of H. R. Trevor-Roper. Nor would the contemptuously laughing Hitler Lucy S. Dawidowicz limned in the seventies find much in common with the dithering, hesitant Hamlet Hitler of Christopher Browning, the state-of-the-art Hitler of the nineties.

Yes, an enormous amount has been written but little has been *settled*. And certain things have been lost and forgotten. Just to touch upon that which has not been settled: There is the question of the origin of Hitler's anti-Semitism, the degree of its "sincerity." (Was he a true believer, as H. R. Trevor-Roper has always insisted, or a cynical opportunist who merely manipulated hatred of Jews for his own advancement, as Alan Bullock and the theologian Emil Fackenheim have argued?) There are unsettled issues about such basic questions as Hitler's ancestry (did he fear he was "infected" by Jewish blood?), his sexuality (its relation, if any, to his political pathology), and the moment of his death. (Did he die "a soldier's death," shooting himself with his own hand? Or was it a coward's death—a kind of assisted suicide with the help of cyanide and a valet—as a controversial Russian autopsy report argued?) If his end is in doubt, so is the question of his advent and his success: Was it inevitable or resistible? Were Hitler's crimes the consequence of irresistible historical forces or an implacable personal will?

At the heart of these questions is the elusive, perhaps unfathomable object of the search for Hitler: the nature of Hitler's "thought-world." Was he "con-

vinced of his own rectitude," as Trevor-Roper firmly insists—did he believe in some deeply deluded way that he was doing good? Or was he deeply aware of his own criminality, as the philosopher Berel Lang has gone to great lengths to establish? Beneath this vexed question is the even more vexatious debate over Hitlerian exceptionalism—is Hitler on a continuum with previous and successive mass murderers, explicable within the same framework, on the extreme end of the same spectrum of the human nature we supposedly share with Jeffrey Dahmer and Mahatma Gandhi? Is there a potential "Hitler within" all of us, as some like to say? Or is he off the grid, beyond the continuum in a category of his own as Emil Fackenheim—who rejects the "Hitler within" notion—argues.

Then there is the question of Hitler's precise role and his degree of personal responsibility for the Holocaust. Powerful tendencies in contemporary scholarship have cumulatively served to diminish the decisiveness and centrality of Hitler's role. There is, first, the predisposition to look upon Hitler as the pawn of larger, purportedly "deeper" and more profound forces of history and society, forces that made the Holocaust "inevitable" with or without Hitler's agency. It's a predisposition expressed by the president of the United States, when at the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial, Bill Clinton spoke of the way the German "culture, which produced Goethe, Schiller, and Beethoven, then brought forth Hitler and Himmler"—Hitler as cultural *product* rather than (im)moral agent.

And there is a concomitant tendency to regard anything that hints of a "Great Man" theory of history as unsophisticated compared with the resort to explanation by Great Abstractions such as "Western racism," "eliminationist anti-Semitism," or even (still) "dialectical materialism." The Great Abstraction theorists are certain that if it hadn't been Hitler—given the historical circumstances of Germany—such forces would have produced someone *like* Hitler to execute the Final Solution.

It's a view that tends to deprecate or make relatively irrelevant the motive and psychology of the Hitler *we did* get. It's a tendency heatedly disputed by (among others) the influential polemicist Milton Himmelfarb, who took arms against Great Abstraction theories in a powerful 1984 essay entitled "No Hitler, No Holocaust." Himmelfarb's particular target in that essay was the theory that singles out Christian anti-Semitism as the true source of the Holocaust. Himmelfarb argues that abstract ideological or theological animus is not sufficient: "All that history [of Christian persecution of the Jews] could have been the same and Hitler could as easily, more easily, not have murdered the Jews. He could more advantageously have tightened the screws of oppression, as anti-Semitic tyrants had done in the past," without pushing for (and nearly achieving) utter extermination. That decision was Hitler's alone, Himmelfarb insists: "Hitler murdered the Jews not because he *had* to," not because he was impelled

by abstract historical forces toward an inevitable end but because of his own personal will and desire, "because he *wanted to*" (emphasis added).

He wanted to. It's a bit surprising that Hitler's desire should have become so controversial, but in fact it is another one of the cruxes that has embroiled Hitler explainers, particularly in the last decade: Just how badly did Hitler want to proceed with the extermination, and just when—on what day, in what week, or what year—did he give an irrevocable signal to proceed with the Final Solution?

The controversy over timing is more than a mere pettifogging squabble over days and weeks; those who argue different decision dates for the final authorization are in effect proposing different Hitlers, differently motivated, possessed by altogether different priorities and substantially dissimilar mentalities. Here again the tendency of contemporary scholarship has been to diminish Hitler as a motive force, to downplay his personal zeal for the slaughter, to portray him as a reluctant, indecisive, even dithering figure, inhibited by conflicting wartime priorities—perhaps even by timidity in the face of the "enormity" of the crime, as Christopher Browning suggested to me—from giving the final go-ahead.

This recent tendency runs directly counter to the powerful argument elaborated by the late Lucy S. Dawidowicz in *The War Against the Jews* back in 1975: that Hitler had made mass murder his mission, his highest priority as far back as November 1918 in an army hospital at Pasewalk on the western front, where, in the throes of a still-mysterious episode of (depending on whose account you believe) gas blindness, a nervous breakdown, hysterical blindness, a hallucinatory episode in which he heard "voices," or a providential vision from on high (Hitler's version), he resolved to avenge the "stab in the back" he believed caused the German defeat by exterminating the Jews he held responsible, all of them.

The controversy over the episode at Pasewalk is itself a subset of a larger schism among Hitler's explainers over two distinct modes of explanation: evolution or metamorphosis. Is it possible to find in the thinly distributed, heatedly disputed facts of Hitler's life before he came to power some single transformative moment, some dramatic trauma, or some life-changing encounter with a Svengali-like figure—a moment of metamorphosis that made Hitler *Hitler*? It's a search impelled by the absence of a coherent and convincing evolutionary account of Hitler's psychological development, one that would explain his transformation from a shy, artistically minded youth, the dispirited denizen of a Viennese homeless shelter, from the dutiful but determinedly obscure army corporal, to the figure who, not long after his return to Munich from the war, suddenly leapt onto the stage of history as a terrifyingly incendiary, spellbinding street orator. One who proceeded to take a party whose members numbered in the dozens and used it to seize power over a nation of millions; made that na-

tion an instrument of his will, a will that convulsed the world and left forty million corpses in its wake. Missing, metaphorically then, is something that will help us explain Hitler's baby pictures.

Those baby pictures: If I had to choose a single defining moment in the course of researching and thinking about the search for Hitler, it might have to be that evening in Paris when I witnessed—when I was on the receiving end of—French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann's angry tirade over Hitler's baby pictures. When I witnessed the way the acclaimed director of *Shoah*, the nine-and-a-half-hour Holocaust documentary, metaphorically brandished the baby pictures, brandished the scandalizing *idea* of the baby pictures in my face as weapons in his personal, obsessive war against the question Why. It was a moment that exposed both the passion behind the controversy over the problem of explaining Hitler—and the question at its core.

It might come as a surprise to many that the very notion of attempting to explain Hitler should seem not merely difficult in itself but dangerous, forbidden, a transgression of near-biblical proportions to some. And, in fact, Lanzmann does represent an extreme position, the end point of a continuum, what I would call third-level despair over explaining Hitler. The point at which the despair turns to outright hostility to the process of explanation itself. The point at which the search for Hitler doubles back on the searchers.

The depth and extremity of despair I encountered in the course of talking to Hitler explainers was one of the most surprising things I discovered in the process of writing this book. I began to get an intimation of what might be called first-level or evidentiary despair in some remarkable pronouncements by mandarins in the field such as Alan Bullock and H. R. Trevor-Roper. After fifty years, Trevor-Roper avers, Adolf Hitler "remains a frightening mystery." After fifty years, Alan Bullock could only say, "The more I learn about Hitler, the harder I find it to explain." Jewish-studies scholar Alvin Rosenfeld is even more definitive: "No representation of Adolf Hitler has seemed able to present the man or satisfactorily explain him."

But no one summed up the case for evidentiary despair more briskly and conclusively than Yehuda Bauer, a founder of the discipline of Holocaust Studies and widely regarded as the most authoritative historian of the Holocaust. Hitler is not inexplicable, at least *in theory*. Bauer told me in his Hebrew University office in Jerusalem. It's not impossible to explain Hitler, but it might just be too late. Too late, because too many crucial witnesses have died without giving testimony, because too many crucial documents have been destroyed, too many memories have faded, because all too many gaps in the evidentiary record will never be filled, too many ambiguities can no longer be resolved. "Hitler is not inexplicable" in theory, Bauer told me. "But the fact that something is explicable in principle does not mean that it has been explained."

It was in Jerusalem as well that I was initiated into second-level despair, not

evidentiary but a deeper, epistemological futility, by Emil Fackenheim, perhaps the foremost "theologian of the Holocaust" (as an essay in *Commentary* characterized him). Fackenheim argued, contrary to Bauer, that Hitler is not explicable even "in theory," that even if we *had* all the facts, Hitler was in some way beyond explanation. That no amount of biographical and psychological data about a difficult childhood, a dysfunctional family, no concatenation of trauma and deformation, no combination of bad character and evil ideology, could add up to *enough*. Enough to explain the magnitude of Hitler's crimes. The systems of explanation, historical and psychological, that we employ to explain ordinary human behavior, however extreme, cannot explain Hitler, who represents, Fackenheim believes, a "radical evil," an "eruption of demonism into history" that places him beyond even the extreme end of the continuum of human nature. Fackenheim sees Hitler as more than just a very, very, very bad man, in the sense of ordinary human badness, but something else again entirely, something beyond that, the meaning of which we need to search for not in psychology but in theology. The explanation for which, if there is one, can be known or fathomed only by God.

But Claude Lanzmann goes further even than that, goes deeper to a third-level despair—to a revolt against explanation itself, to a personal war against the question Why. For Lanzmann, the attempt to explain Hitler is not merely futile but immoral—he calls the very enterprise of understanding obscene.

"There are some pictures of Hitler as a baby too, aren't there?" he has said. "There is even a book written . . . about Hitler's childhood, an attempt at explanation which is for me obscenity as such."

Obscenity? I tried to explore with Lanzmann the strength of conviction that would compel him to use "obscenity" as a term of abuse for investigators who, however misguided they might be, were at least well-intentioned. Why should the maker of a nine-and-a-half-hour documentary on Hitler's death camps become so incensed about a book on Hitler's childhood? What was it about the baby pictures? I sensed they disturbed, they scandalized him not because they conjure up a specific theory of Hitler's childhood, but because they give us Hitler as an innocent, Hitler before he becomes *Hitler*, "a Hitler without victims," as the phrase coined by the scholar Alvin Rosenfeld has it. A Hitler whose baby-faced innocence lures us down the path Lanzmann condemns, seduces us into constructing explanations for the evolution of innocent child into mass murderer—explanations that are, Lanzmann argues, inevitably obscene rationalizations, not merely exculpations, but virtually justifications for Hitler's behavior.

It's worth noting that when Lanzmann tells us "there are some pictures of Hitler as a baby," Hitler's baby picture has an interesting history as a pawn in the politics of Hitler's image making, his stage-managing of his self-presentation. The baby picture appeared publicly first in a photo book published by Hitler's

personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, in 1932, a book disingenuously titled *The Hitler Nobody Knows*.

Despite the title's seductive intimation of confidences revealed, *The Hitler Nobody Knows* was in fact designed to counter the subcurrent of scurrilous speculations and gossip, the whispered Hitler apocrypha, the rumors fueled by Hitler's Austrian-born foreignness, by some indefinable alienness he radiated, a sense of strangeness and peculiarity, the vague impression of unwholesomeness he made on many Germans, a sense exacerbated by rumors about his private life, his confirmed bachelor status, and the well-known sexual scandals among his closest aides. Hoffmann's book of photos was a bait-and-switch tactic, a strained attempt to make the point that the *real* hidden Hitler, the Hitler nobody knew, was—surprise!—a paragon of family-values normality, of wholesome German comradeship: It was Hitler's own, preferred, Hitler explanation. In a sense, it could be said Hitler's strategy has succeeded: He remains a figure that in some profound ways *nobody knows*.

The baby picture served a special purpose in this strategy. Along with the formal, somewhat mournful shots of his parents, it was designed at least in part to counter rumors that Hitler was illegitimate (it was not he but his father who was), that there was some shameful mystery about his family origins, perhaps "Jewish blood." The particular baby picture in question looks like it was taken when Hitler was less than two years old. In a snowy white, Dr. Denton-type outfit, complete with white booties, we see a round-faced, ruddy-cheeked child, a mildly pensive cherub. We could, considering what we know of what became of him, "backshadow" (the useful term coined by the scholar Michael André Bernstein to characterize this dubious but hard-to-resist habit of thought) into his dark, questioning eyes, into those lips pursed into what looks like a pout or a frown, a premonitory, melancholy, even a haunted and hurt expression. We could project upon that impressionable baby face the stirrings of some deep emotional disturbance in embryo. But we could just as easily see there not incipient demonism but a kind of gentleness and sensitivity. We could just as easily predict this child would turn out to be Albert Schweitzer.

One can sense why Lanzmann finds in the impressionable plasticity of the baby pictures a fatally alluring invitation, an invitation that lures the unwary into the seductive labyrinth of ratiocination, the deceptive and dangerous promise of understanding. Dangerous perhaps because at the heart of the labyrinth, the forbidden fruit on this particular tree of knowledge, lurks the logic of the aphorism "To understand all is to forgive all." To embark upon the attempt to understand Hitler, understand all the processes that transformed this innocent babe into a mass murderer, is to risk making his crimes "understandable" and thus, Lanzmann implies, to acknowledge the forbidden possibility of having to forgive Hitler.

It shouldn't be done, Lanzmann insists, it can't be done: Pacing the floor of

his office, Lanzmann declaimed: "You can take all the reasons, all the fields of explanation . . . and every field can be true, and all the fields together can be true. But . . . even if they are necessary, they are not sufficient. A beautiful morning you have to start to kill . . . massively."

No, Lanzmann insists, you can't get from there to here. You can't "engender the killing, the mass murders, the destruction of six million people," from the baby picture. No finite number of explanatory facts—psychological traumas, patterns of bad parenting, political deformations, personal dysfunctions—can add up to the magnitude of the evil that Hitler came to embody and enact. No explanation or concatenation of explanations can bridge the gap, explain the transformation from baby picture to baby killer, to murderer of a million babies. It is not just a gap, Lanzmann argues; it is an *abyss*.

Fritz Gerlich's Bloody Spectacles

This is a book about those who have searched for a way to bridge that abyss. About the passion of those who construct explanatory bridges, about those who seek to burn them, about the images we project upon the surface of the abyss, about those who become lost in it searching for Hitler. Some have been lost, literally, to memory. I'm thinking in particular of the First Explainers, as I've come to think of them. The heroic anti-Hitler Munich journalists who from 1920 to 1933 (when many were jailed or murdered) bravely went about the daily task of attempting to tell the world about the strange figure who had arisen from the Munich streets to become leader of a movement that would seize power and inscribe a new chapter in the history of evil.

My fascination with these largely forgotten figures, the reporters who were the first to investigate the political and personal life, the criminality and scandals of Hitler and "the Hitler Party," as they astutely called it, began to grow as I first began to pick up echoes and traces of their struggle with Hitler, buried in the footnotes of postwar historians, those attempting to somehow get past the nearly impassable barrier of the Auschwitz Hitler to the Munich Hitler, the Weimar Hitler from which the mass murderer evolved.

My fascination deepened when I came upon a nearly complete collection of flaking and yellowing, seven-decade-old back issues of the anti-Hitler *Munich Post* moldering away in the basement of Munich's Monacensia library archives. They've since been transferred to microfilm, but there was something about communing with the actual crumbling copies of the newspaper Hitler's party called "the Poison Kitchen," issues in which Hitler was a living figure stalking the pages, that served to give me a painfully immediate intimation of the maddeningly unbearable Cassandra-like frustration the *Munich Post* journalists must have felt. They were the first to sense the dimensions of Hitler's

potential for evil—and to see the way the world ignored the desperate warnings in their work.

As a journalist, I felt simultaneously a growing awe at what they'd accomplished, how much they'd exposed, and how completely they'd been forgotten. Theirs was the first sustained attempt to fathom the depths of the Hitler phenomenon as it began to unfold. One of the things I hoped to accomplish with this book was to begin in a modest way, at least, to rescue them from the limbo of historical oblivion, to begin to restore their vision of Hitler, a vision that has been, perhaps understandably, obscured by the post-Holocaust retrospective view that focuses primarily on the Berlin Hitler, the Auschwitz Hitler. The vision of the First Explainers was the vision of the men and women who were critical witnesses to the now-lost spectacle of Hitler becoming *Hitler*.

In addition to the courageous reporters and editors of the *Munich Post*, there were others such as Rudolf Olden, Konrad Heiden, and Will Schaber, the last still alive at age ninety-two and living in Manhattan's Washington Heights when I interviewed him. And Fritz Gerlich, a strange, enigmatic figure of brilliance, courage, and contradiction. The iconoclastic editor of a conservative anti-Marxist, anti-Nazi opposition paper called *Der Gerade Weg* (The right way, or the straight path), celebrated as a journalistic nemesis of Hitler in his time, largely forgotten now, Gerlich was murdered in Dachau for attempting to print a damaging exposé of Hitler five weeks *after* the Nazis had seized power and crushed the rest of the opposition press. A fascinating figure, Gerlich, a scathing Swiftian satirical scourge of Hitler, he possessed an uncanny insight into the racial dynamics of Hitler's pathology. A skeptical historical scholar Gerlich, nonetheless, came to believe in the prophetic powers of a controversial, probably fraudulent, Bavarian stigmatic and found in her a source of the faith that led him to gamble his life on a last-ditch effort to bring Hitler down with his pen and printing press. With an exposé to end all exposés of Hitler, he hoped: one final story that would shock the public and cause President Paul von Hindenburg to depose the newly installed Chancellor Hitler before it was too late.

It was a desperate gamble that failed. On March 9, 1933, storm troopers burst into Gerlich's newspaper office, ripped his last story from the presses, beat him senseless, and dragged him off to Dachau, where he was murdered on the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934. The nature of the exposé he'd been about to publish—some said it concerned the circumstances of the death of Hitler's half-niece Geli Raubal in his apartment, others said it concerned the truth about the February 1933 Reichstag fire or foreign funding of the Nazis—has been effectively lost to history; it is one of the evidentiary trails I've pursued to the bitter end.

But there was a moment in the course of that pursuit that crystallized for

me what I was trying to accomplish with what might seem like a quixotic pursuit of a quixotic lost Hitler exposé: what I wanted to recover as much as the lost exposé. I had managed to track down in Munich one of Gerlich's last living colleagues, Dr. Johannes Steiner, a retired publisher in his nineties who had been a partner in Gerlich's doomed anti-Hitler attack sheet *Der Gerade Weg*. Dr. Steiner's memory of that awful time, particularly the last days of Gerlich, when they were all on the run, was fragmentary. But there was one moment, one memory he'd preserved with frightening clarity for six decades: a memory of the Gestapo and Fritz Gerlich's spectacles. Gerlich's steel-rimmed glasses had become a kind of signature image for the combative newspaperman among those who knew him in Munich, an emblem almost of his steely determination and clarity of vision.

But after a year in Dachau, after the Gestapo had dragged him out of his cell and shot him in the head on the Night of the Long Knives, Hitler's thugs chose a cruel and chilling way to notify Gerlich's wife, Dr. Steiner recalled. "They sent to his widow, Sophie, Gerlich's spectacles, all spattered with blood."

It's an arresting image, an acknowledgment perhaps of Gerlich as a man who'd seen too much, who knew too much to live, a token of how much his vision was feared and hated by the Hitler inner circle, for having seen through them. Something about that image stayed with me, once I'd heard it, kept me in Munich for weeks paging through the last fragile copies of Gerlich's newspaper and those of the *Munich Post*. It made me want to know more intimately—as much as possible across the abyss—these men who knew Hitler most intimately. It made me want to begin to restore to light the vision they had: the view of Hitler through Fritz Gerlich's bloody spectacles.

The Escape Artist

In a sense, this book is as much about the spectacles, the explanatory lenses through which we look at Hitler, as it is about Hitler. About the way those lenses color, distort, and shape our perceptions. About the way explanatory lenses often project our own preconceptions and agendas upon the shadowy shape-shifting images of Hitler. About the way what we talk about when we talk about Hitler is often not the Hitler of history but the meaning of evil. Not evil as some numinous supernatural entity but evil as a name for a capacity of human nature. To what degree does Hitler represent some ultimate, perhaps never-before-seen extension of that capacity? Or does he represent not a qualitative leap in that capacity but rather a figure whose distinctiveness and importance in this regard have been inflated by the quantity of his victims?

In many ways, it doesn't matter what *word* we choose to apply to Hitler. The use or nonuse of the word "evil" changes nothing about what happened, about

how many died. The choice of the word does not change a fact of history, but it is a fact, a facet, a reflection of culture: How we think about Hitler and evil and the nature of Hitler's choice is a reflection of important cultural assumptions and divisive schisms about individual consciousness and historical causation, the never-ending conflict over free will, determinism, and personal responsibility.

That some choose to use the word "evil" for Hitler's choice (no one doubts the *deeds* were evil in the sense of being horrifically, inarguably *bad*, but it's the nature of the mind and motivation of the perpetrator that's in contention) and some choose not to use the word doesn't make the former more virtuous or the latter less. Some historians, such as John Lukacs for instance, exhibit a positive aversion to the discussion of the word or its implications in relation to Hitler. While others, even an atheist such as Hebrew University's Yehuda Bauer, widely regarded as the most authoritative historian of the Holocaust and a polemical foe of "mystification," have little hesitation in using the word "evil." Yehuda Bauer told me he believes Hitler represents "near-ultimate evil," and his choice of the words "near" and "ultimate" are as carefully considered as his choice of the word "evil" is.

I found such choices, the reasons behind them, the assumptions they reflect as worthy of pursuit as the contentious debates over Hitler's ancestry and sexuality, say. In fact, I found the debates over Hitler's ancestry and sexuality worth pursuing *because* they were, beneath the surface, enactments of debates about exactly these questions—the way in which we explain or explain away evil—in disguised form.

In any case, at the very least the word "evil" turned out to be useful in a heuristic sense: as a catalyst, as a Rorschach test, as a way of bringing to the surface crucial distinctions and defining schisms.

One thing that surprised me in the course of speaking to Hitler explainers was that Yehuda Bauer turned out to be in a distinct minority among scholars. I found remarkable, at least at first, the pronounced reluctance of so many of them to call Adolf Hitler evil. It sounds strange even to say that, Hitler having become such an icon, an embodiment, a stand-in for ultimate evil in popular discourse. But that reluctance exposes the imprecision of our thinking on the subject of evil, reflects the difficulty we—both philosophers and laymen—have in defining what evil is, despite an intuitive sense that it exists and must exist in Hitler.

"If *he* isn't evil, who is?" Alan Bullock exclaimed to me. It's a somewhat backhanded endorsement of the idea, one that suggests a kind of definitional desperation in which Hitler is summoned to rescue a term that can't be defined or defended without him. And yet Bullock's exclamatory affirmation is an exception to the logic of most modes of contemporary discourse on both Hitler and evil, modes in which Hitler, ever the escape artist, escapes the category of

evil. Yes, Hitler has become a personification of evil in popular culture, to the point where philosophers take pains to deplore what is now called *argumentum ad Hitlerum*—the resort to Hitler to end discussion on everything from capital punishment (“Well, *Hitler* deserved it, didn’t he?”) to vegetarianism (“It didn’t improve *Hitler’s* character, did it?”).

But in the realm of scholarship, it’s remarkable to discover how many sophisticated thinkers of all stripes find themselves unwilling to find a principled rationale for calling Hitler evil, at least in the strict sense of doing wrong *knowingly*. The philosophical literature that takes these questions seriously makes a distinction between obviously evil *deeds* such as mass murder and the not-always-obvious nature of the *intent* of the doer, preferring the stricter term “wickedness” to describe wrongdoers who do evil deeds *knowing* they are doing wrong. I was drawn to the philosophical literature on the problem of wickedness (such as Alvin Plantinga’s symbolic-logic discourse on the theodicy of “transworld depravity”) by another defining moment in my encounters with Hitler explainers: my conversation in London with H. R. Trevor-Roper, former Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, one of the first and most widely respected postwar Hitler explainers. I’d asked him the deceptively simple question I’d begun asking a number of the Hitler explainers: “Do you consider Hitler consciously evil? Did he know what he was doing was wrong?”

“Oh no,” Trevor-Roper declared with great firmness and asperity. “Hitler was convinced of his own rectitude.” Hitler was wrong, in other words, dreadfully wrong to be so convinced; his *deeds* were evil, but he committed them in the deluded but sincere belief that he was taking heroic measures to save the human race from the deadly plague he believed the Jews to be. In taking this position, Trevor-Roper is doing no more than affirming the tendency of twenty-three centuries of Western philosophic thought on the question of evil. It is a tendency first articulated in Plato’s *Protagoras*, in which it is argued that no man does wrong knowing he’s doing wrong but does so only out of ignorance or delusion.

And Trevor-Roper is not alone. Perhaps the most unexpected echo of his “rectitude” argument—evidence that it’s more than an academic quibble—is one I found in the excited rhetoric of the chief Nazi hunter in Israel, Efraim Zuroff, the director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Jerusalem headquarters. When I asked Zuroff, a big, tough, outspoken Brooklyn-born Israeli, whether Hitler was conscious he was doing wrong, he was even more emphatic than Trevor-Roper. “Of course not!” he practically yelled at me. “Hitler thought he was a doctor! Killing germs! That’s all Jews were to him! He believed he was doing *good*, not evil!” To Zuroff, real evil is something he reserved for certain of the war criminals he was hunting, the middle managers of the Holocaust, the ones who participated in mass murder without conviction, for reasons of ca-

reer advancement, not “banality” but selfish viciousness, cold-blooded personal ambition.

But the most characteristic contemporary escape from calling Hitler evil, escape from calling him a knowing, responsible agent, is the therapeutic evasion, in which Hitler is seen less as consciously evil than as an unconscious *victim*. If evil is defined as conscious wrongdoing, UCLA psychoanalyst and psychohistorian Dr. Peter Loewenberg (who’s written cogent and influential studies of the mass psychohistorical trauma afflicting the German populace after the World War I defeat) told me, Hitler can’t be said to be consciously evil, because he was so much a prisoner of his unconscious impulses—the dark, chthonic, unanalyzed forces that drove him to mass murder. The unspoken implication is that Hitler was *himself* a kind of victim, a helpless prisoner or pawn of those unconscious Freudian drives. Only a person who has fully owned, made conscious his unconscious impulses can choose evil freely, Loewenberg told me—although I’d suggest this implies that only fully and successfully analyzed clients of Freudian psychoanalysts are capable of committing evil.

One of the continuing subtexts of the conversations in this book is precisely this struggle, this difficulty so many thinkers have of finding a way to call Hitler evil. It’s not merely a question of words and names; it’s a question about who Hitler really *was*, what his attitude was toward the crimes he committed.

I was particularly drawn to the struggle of a few rigorous philosophers and theologians to find a way to reclaim Hitler for evil (or “wickedness”). It’s something theologian Emil Fackenheim is concerned with in his critique of explanation; it’s something the philosopher Berel Lang makes a sustained and impressively rigorous case for in his attempt to place Hitler in the context of a “history of evil.”

But it was fascinating to observe the discomfort the notion of calling Hitler consciously evil caused in so many thinkers. I have a notion why that might be, a conjecture that occurred to me when thinking about Trevor-Roper’s crisp, emphatic rejection of the idea that Hitler was consciously evil: that beneath the Socratic logic of the position might be an understandably human, even emotional, rejection—as simply *unbearable*—of the idea that someone could commit mass murder *without* a sense of rectitude, however delusional. That Hitler could have done it out of pure personal hatred, knowing exactly what he was doing and how wrong it was. Trevor-Roper’s position on evil can be looked upon as more than a matter of logic, more than a theory about the nature of evil, but as an article of faith about human nature: an unwillingness to *conceive* of a human nature capable of that degree of conscious wickedness. It was an early indication to me of the way a stance on explanation can serve as consolation.

I don’t pretend in this book to offer definitive answers to such ultimate

questions. Rather, I'm interested in the range of solutions that a range of thoughtful explainers offer, focusing in particular on the way they construe Hitler's subjectivity, his inwardness, his "thought-world," to make their arguments. "Thought-world" is the useful term Albert Schweitzer employed to describe the object of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Indeed, if there is a model for my approach, it might be Schweitzer's work, published nearly a century ago, once widely known, now rather neglected, a fading copy of which I came across in a secondhand bookstore in Jerusalem at the time I was interviewing theologian Emil Fackenheim and historian Yehuda Bauer. Schweitzer's work helped crystallize what most intrigued me about the controversies over Hitler I'd immersed myself in. It's a work about the attempts to explain another larger-than-life figure in history, Jesus, whose mythic, apocryphal, and supranatural dimensions have, somewhat like Hitler's, interpenetrated and obscured the fragmentary, conflicting scraps of evidence about his actual existence.

I have a sense that the mention of Schweitzer will for many readers conjure up the warm and fuzzy veneration for the sainted doctor who abandoned the comforts of Europe to tend to lepers in equatorial Africa. But there is another Albert Schweitzer, the brilliant, caustically critical historian of theology who sparked a worldwide controversy when his landmark book about Jesus explainers was first published in 1906. This Schweitzer, before he became a doctor, was nonetheless a surgical intellect: He was taking a scalpel to a couple of centuries of efforts to explain Jesus by the methods of modern thought, in particular the "scientific" positivism of German Protestant "Higher Criticism."

Schweitzer's was by contrast a work of explanatory pessimism, if not despair. He argued that the grail of the "quest of the historical Jesus"—to get beneath Jesus' transfiguration by nineteen centuries of post hoc dogma, beneath what those who came later made of him, to who *he* thought he was, his own sense of himself, his thought-world—might be irretrievable now even to the best efforts of historical inquiry. Instead, Schweitzer's examination of attempts to explain Jesus suggested that such theories revealed less about Jesus than they revealed about his would-be explainers and their culture, the kinds of needs their explanations fulfilled.

What they were often doing, Schweitzer believed, was not explaining Jesus but explaining *away* some disturbing unresolved elements in his biography, ones that were discomfiting to the modern sensibility—elements, in particular (from what Schweitzer believed were the earliest sources), that made Jesus look too Jewish, too primitive, too apocalyptic, too resistant to easy assimilation to the "rational religion," the etherealized spirituality of nineteenth-century liberal German Protestantism.

They were, in effect, turning their portraits of Jesus into self-portraits: Jesus as a nineteenth-century liberal German Protestant. I'd argue that Hitler

explanations, similarly, are cultural self-portraits; the shapes we project onto the inky Rorschach of Hitler's psyche are often cultural *self*-portraits in the negative. What we talk about when we talk about Hitler is also who *we* are and who *we* are not.

The Escape from Hitler

Previous examinations of the literature of Hitler explanations have tended to be preliminary brush-clearing operations to make room for the author's own candidate for explicatory primacy. One brilliant exception is a work by Professor Alvin Rosenfeld, chairman of the Jewish Studies Department of Indiana University, but his book *Imagining Hitler* focuses primarily on fictional representations of the Führer—on novels, film, pulp mythologizing.

Gordon Craig and John Lukacs have done great services in their thoughtful studies of the rationalizations of postwar German historians, although in his book *The Hitler of History* Lukacs has an explanatory agenda of his own: discrediting revolution by portraying Hitler as the very model of a modern revolutionary rather than as a "reactionary."

Both Saul Friedländer and Ian Kershaw have produced important works that emphasize multifactorial rather than single-pointed explanations for Hitler, the complex interrelation between Hitler's consciousness, his projected image, and the German people's creation and reception of it. And, more generally, David H. Fischer offers an absolutely invaluable guide in *Historians' Fallacies* to the ways in which the longing for certitude, the wish to have some explanation, has led many to press premises beyond the logic of causality.

If there is one thing that distinguishes my effort from previous literature on the subject, it is my desire to examine the nature of those wishes and longings, the subtexts and agendas of Hitler explanations in fact-to-face encounters with some of those engaged in the search for Hitler. Not just with historians and biographers but with philosophers, psychologists, and theologians as well. I am concerned less with defining absolutely the (perhaps irretrievable) truth about Hitler as I am with the meanings projected upon the unknowable, the agendas that shape the accounts of those obsessed with it.

In any case, as I proceeded in this fashion, I found myself surprised and struck, prompted to think more deeply about certain questions, by the kinds of observations, conjectures, and self-revelations that emerged in such face-to-face encounters with the explainers—ones often unexpressed in their published work, ones that might have escaped me or not emerged at all if I'd relied only upon their written words.

I'm thinking, for instance, of George Steiner describing with great candor his anxiety that the highly controversial Hitler character he created in his novel

The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H., a Hitler who had escaped from the bunker to South America, had, in fact, escaped in some way from *him*, from Steiner, had taken on a disturbing life beyond his control. There was Hyam Maccoby, Steiner's intellectual nemesis, the chronicler of Christian anti-Semitism, explaining why he's come to believe Christmas is "a sinister festival."

There was Emil Fackenheim wrestling out loud with the conflicting impulses: to question God—to demand from God an explanation for Hitler's dreadful success—and to limit such questioning, because to hold God fully accountable (to the point of rejecting faith) might violate Fackenheim's own commandment against giving Hitler a "posthumous victory."

There was Alan Bullock, the most scrupulously sober-minded and restrained of Oxford historians, being driven to struggle with the same question—the problem of theodicy, the silence of God—in the vocabulary of mysticism, in terms of Incompleteness, the incompleteness of our understanding of Hitler and the incompleteness of God's omnipotence.

Then there was the wonderful Viennese expatriate Gertrud Kurth supplying me with the missing testimony, perhaps the last word, on Hitler's alleged genital incompleteness—what Bullock calls "the one-ball business"—testimony that seems to pull the rug out from under a number of elaborate psychosexual explanations of Hitler.

I'm thinking as well of the notion of the art of evil that emerged in my conversation with Berel Lang, a conversation that considered the relationship between Hitler's self-image as an artist and the character of the Nazi regime in which evil became a kind of art. And there was the time when David Irving (whom I witnessed revising aloud his "Revisionism") conjured up one of the single most chilling images of Hitler's cold-bloodedness: the moment in the aftermath of the June 1934 Blood Purge when Hitler emerges from a shower and, in effect, brandished his own baby picture, ostentatiously washing off the blood of his victims and declaring himself "clean as a newborn babe."

I'm thinking also of the way firsthand encounters with the explainers led me to seek out some firsthand experience of certain Hitler sites, the most haunting of which—the one that somehow embodied, in its fragmentary ruined desolation, the state of the art, or at least the state of evidence of Hitler explanations—was a shell-blasted ghost town, the ruins of the Austrian village once called Döllersheim in the hill country near the Czech border, a region local Nazis once proudly boasted of as Hitler's "ancestral home."

Döllersheim is the "foul rag and bone shop" of Hitler origin questions, the site of certain curious Hitler-family genealogical ceremonies that were memorialized in the parish register of the Döllersheim church and have been provoking questions and controversies ever since Hitler became a public figure. These questions and controversies may have doomed Döllersheim to its

grim fate, blasted out of existence by artillery shells—some claim on Hitler's express order, some claim by the Russians later on—to erase his past from the map.

If the ruins of Döllersheim are an implicit allegory of the escape of Hitler from explanation—the absence or erasure from the record of a factual foundation upon which to construct an explanation—the edifice of contemporary scholarship on the Holocaust can be said to be founded upon an implicit attempt to escape *from* Hitler.

It could almost be said that "two cultures" of Hitler discourse have emerged. While the specter of Hitler looms ever larger as an icon and embodiment of ultimate evil in popular culture, on the other hand, in academic and scholarly literature a focus on Hitler (often characterized as a quaintly "Hitler-centric" perspective) has become increasingly unfashionable and *déclassé*, regarded almost disdainfully as a relic of the much-reproved Great Man Theory of History. Disparaged in favor of purportedly more sophisticated explanatory modes—Great Abstraction theories, the ones that emphasize "deeper" trends in history, society, and ideology.

While the satiric vision of "Hitler studies" in Don DeLillo's brilliant novel *White Noise* was one of the inspirations for this book (why not take a look at what passes for "Hitler studies" in the academy?), in actuality the study of Hitler (as opposed to the study of the Holocaust) in the academy is notable more for its absence, for Hitler's presumed irrelevance, rather than his presence. The disparagement and diminishment of Hitler's role accords with a phenomenon the historian Michael Howard has observed about explanation in history: Speaking of the efforts to explain the cause of the First World War, Howard noted the tendency to believe that "any event so great must have a cause equally grave or great or deep." Hitler, that Chaplinesque caricature, is surely not grave or great enough. No one could be.

The preference for great and grave abstraction is an explanatory strategy that can itself serve as a kind of consolation. Great abstractions have an appearance of inevitability and irresistibility that can be consoling: Nothing could have prevented the Holocaust. No one's to blame for the failure to halt Hitler's rise. If it hadn't been Hitler, it would have been "someone like Hitler" serving as an instrument of those inexorable larger forces. The alternative is to believe that a single soul had the power and the will to bring about the war and the Holocaust—that a single individual *wanted to*; that the human nature we presumably share with Hitler could have produced such a being. A notion that some might find both irrational and possibly unbearable.

One of the first, most perceptive reviews of postwar Hitler literature took note of this flight, this escape from the person of Hitler into impersonal abstraction. In 1948, less than three years after Hitler's death, Irving Kristol,

then a leftist litterateur, later the godfather of neoconservatism, published a remarkably prescient essay in *Commentary* under the title "What the Nazi Autopsies Show." By Nazi autopsies, Kristol meant the first wave of postwar, postmortem examinations of Hitler and the Holocaust—the first attempts to explain Hitler in the light of full knowledge of the magnitude of his crimes. Attempts, Kristol says, that shied away from crediting Hitler with full responsibility and tended to view him as a "pawn" of larger forces.

Kristol speaks of the unpleasant shock he felt upon hearing "the distinguished British historian H. R. Trevor-Roper say in an aside that [Hermann] Rauschning's *Revolution of Nihilism*—that vulgar and sensational book authored by a former Hitler ally—has turned out to be a more reliable portrait of the Hitler regime" than the more sophisticated "prewar explanations which produced the 'delusion,' as Trevor-Roper calls it, that Hitler was only a pawn."

Kristol makes a point of declaring—in support of Trevor-Roper's view that Hitler was no pawn but the "sole maker," prime mover, and final cause of the Final Solution—that, "the longer we stare at Nazism, the more our eyes focus on Hitler. . . . Hitler was Nazism" (emphasis added). It's an observation which might sound obvious to some but which, in fact, was much disparaged before the war and has become even more disparaged in the past two decades with "functionalists," inevitabilists, and abstractionists arguing Hitler's relative irrelevance to what went on around him. It's a tendency that Saul Friedländer, a believer in complex causality, nonetheless argues has "gone too far" in removing Hitler from the picture.

Explanation as Consolation: Billy Goats and Scapegoats

The continuing controversy over the decisiveness or the importance of Hitler's personal responsibility, his own desire to commit the crimes he committed, is due in part to the doubt that still remains about the origin and nature of that desire. The inaccessibility of the "black box" of Hitler's inwardness has resulted in a consequent inability to assess how much of that inwardness was shaped or constructed by outer forces—the pressures of bad history and bad ideas—and how much it was the product of internal psychology and will, of (one hesitates to use such an inappropriate, old-fashioned-sounding term) bad character, evil inclination, knowingly wicked choice. In part, it is the egregious failure of psychological and psychoanalytic explanations of Hitler, which have discredited any effort to locate the origins of Hitler's evil within him, within his psyche.

Here Schweitzer on Jesus is a particularly useful model. His long-untranslated doctoral dissertation, "The Psychiatric Study of Jesus," is a fascinating examination of the desperate efforts of fin-de-siècle "scientific

psychiatry" to diagnose—at nineteen centuries' distance—the figure of Jesus as a "psychopath" who suffered from clinical delusions, heard voices, claimed to talk to God and foresee the end of the world. Jesus as, thus, a paranoid schizophrenic whose mystery and beliefs could be reduced to a psychiatric case history. Similarly, the long-distance psychoanalytic study of Hitler relies heavily on certain unprovable, poorly corroborated, questionable "facts"—such as Hitler's alleged monorchism, a purported "primal scene," his alleged obsession with his own purported "Jewish blood," his alleged indulgence in an outré excretory sexual perversion. Hitler's psychoanalytic explainers contradict each other and give new life to the old phrase "often in error, never in doubt." Still, if psychoanalytic theories of Hitler are unsatisfying in explaining Hitler, they remind us again of the powerful function of explanation: as consolation, as insulation, protection against having to face not just the inexplicability of horror, but the horror of inexplicability.

Consider, for instance, two particularly revealing explanatory patterns that emerge in the popular and scholarly literature, patterns that involve two remarkable reversals: the tendency to see Hitler as a victim, and the apparent need to find a Jew to blame. Let's begin with a classic instance of the former: Hitler seen through the lens of contemporary American popular culture, Hitler integrated into the explanatory framework of pop victimology—Hitler as a serial killer suffering from low self-esteem. In November 1991, *Unsolved Mysteries*, the enormously popular "reality" TV series, devoted a "special edition" to a topic that was something of a departure from their usual fare of Lindbergh-baby and psychic-healer probes: a special edition devoted entirely to the mystery of "Diabolic Minds." It turned out to be a series of three portraits of possessors of said diabolical minds: Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy—and Adolf Hitler.

So there we have it: Hitler as serial killer. An all-time, most prolific one, yes, but basically a kind of workaholic Hannibal Lecter, explicable in the psychobabble of serial-killer pseudoscience as the victim of a dysfunctional family: "He had a stern father and was unable to establish a healthy relationship to his mother," we are told by *Unsolved Mysteries*. Had there been more time, problems with Hitler's "inner child" might have been invoked. But the real "explanation" for Hitler turns out to be that terrifying contemporary plague: low self-esteem. Thus, the segment concluded: "He subjugated and killed millions because he could not overcome his feelings of inferiority."

Silly as it might seem on the surface, the explanation does offer a kind of consolation on a couple of levels. For one thing, it makes Hitler a more familiar figure: We know serial killers, or feel we do by now; we've seen their families on *Geraldo*; they don't spring out of some demonic abyss; some of us are charmed by Hannibal Lecter—if you set aside the cannibalism, he seems like good

company. Hitler was far worse, we remind ourselves, but—the implication is—we know his syndrome. That alone, that he is a type, not a *sui generis* singularity, is to some degree comforting.

And beyond that, he's a type we know, we feel a bit sorry for—perhaps even identify with—painful feelings of low self-esteem and bad parental bonds being not uncommon. And even more consoling is the implicit premise that Hitler was a victim/product of a *preventable* syndrome. A better society with better parenting, self-esteem programs in schools, equals no more Hitlers.

Another comic but instructive manifestation, really a kind of barnyard reductio ad absurdum of Hitler psychological explanations, is the Billy-goat Bite Theory, an extremely bloody variant of what might be called the Genital Wound school of Hitler interpretation, a mode of explanation that has at various times been employed to elucidate the prose of Henry James and the sanguinary appetite of Jeffrey Dahmer. It has led some to look for the source of Hitler's evil or pathology in a putatively absent left testicle, in the aftereffects of a case of syphilis, or in a malformation of his penis. Some might say it's the ultimate instance of phallogocentric thinking to insist that whatever was wrong with Adolf Hitler had to originate with his genitalia. But genital-wound theories of Hitler have been rattling around in "Hitler studies" for decades.

The billy-goat bite story first came to light in 1981 in a memoir published in Germany under the title *Tödlicher Alltag* (Deadly Routine). Its author, Dietrich Güstrow, who was then a prominent attorney in West Germany, and whose book was widely and respectfully reviewed, tells us that in 1943 he served as a military court-martial defense attorney for a certain Private Eugen Wasner before a secret military tribunal that tried the soldier for "maliciously slandering the Führer." In fact, according to Güstrow, Private Wasner was being tried for an embarrassing *explanation* of Adolf Hitler. According to the lawyer's memoir, the occasion of Private Wasner's slander was a barracks bull session in which Wasner boasted that as a youth he had attended the same school as Adolf Hitler, in Leonding, Austria. Bitter about recent defeats on the eastern front, the private told his buddies, "Adolf has been warped ever since a billy goat took a bite out of his penis."

Wasner proceeded to give a graphic description of the bloody consequences of young Adolf's attempt to prove he could urinate in the mouth of a billy goat—a preposterous story on the face of it. And yet Güstrow declares forty years later, "Regarding the truth of Wasner's report, I never had any doubts." (Subsequently, doubt has been cast upon Güstrow's reliability.) But Güstrow goes further than merely vouching for the truthfulness of the story. He makes explicit the implication of Wasner's report: the traumatic billy-goat bite as an explanation for Hitler's subsequent derangement. To Güstrow, that billy-goat bite was—like the single "shudder in the loins" in Yeats's "Leda

and the Swan," like the single bite of the apple in Genesis—an act of appetite from which whole histories of sorrow and tragedy would ensue. In a sense, Güstrow's own appetite—his hunger to find in this incident a single satisfying explanation for Hitler's psyche—is more revealing than the uncorroborated, secondhand story he tells about the billy goat. It's an example of the hunger for single-pointed explanation, the yearning to find some decisive turning point, some moment of metamorphosis that can explain Hitler's crimes as the result of a terrible trauma that made him "crazy"—a moment of metamorphosis that could "engender" the Holocaust from Hitler's "craziness" alone rather than his willful determination. Such a yearning tells as much about the explainer as about Hitler. For Güstrow, pillar of the postwar German Federal Republic, believing that a billy-goat bite explains Hitler, that a preposterous, obscene accident created Nazi Germany, can be seen as a way of absolving German society and culture—absolving himself—of implication in Hitler's crimes. The billy goat becomes a kind of *scapegoat* upon which he projects—and thereby purges—his own guilt.

If the Billy-goat Bite Theory is a reductio ad absurdum of the search for Hitler, the range of purportedly more sophisticated psychological explanations is often not much more impressive. Consider the attempt of the renowned Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller to portray Hitler as a victim of an abusive father. It was Miller's "book on Hitler's childhood" that so incensed Claude Lanzmann, triggered his tirade on the baby pictures, his incendiary attack on explanation, in my encounter with him. While I would not characterize it as "an obscenity as such" as Lanzmann does, the fifty-five-page Hitler explanation Miller included in *For Your Own Good*, an otherwise admirable plea against corporal punishment of children, had raised serious problems in my mind as well.

In seeking to advance her crusade against the evil of corporal punishment, Miller strains to prove that Adolf Hitler's evil can be traced to brutal corporal punishment by his father. Unfortunately, to accomplish this she employs dubious evidence. (We have mainly Hitler's self-pitying word for it that he was the victim of savage paternal beatings, an account contradicted by some who remembered his father as a far milder sort. In addition, harsh corporal punishment was widespread at the time—Chekhov suffered from paternal beatings, for instance—and only Hitler grew up to be *Hitler*.) Miller proceeds to use dubious evidence in the service of dubious psychologizing: She takes at face value the controversial, unproven theory that Adolf's father's father was a Jew; she argues that Adolf's father's beating his son and the son's subsequent anti-Semitism can be attributed to self-lacerating rage about this putative "Jewish blood." And a final leap from explanation to exculpation actually sees her rising to the *defense* of Hitler's veracity. In seeking to swat away the doubts raised by some about the portrait of Hitler's father as an abuser, she dismisses

evidence to the contrary by saying, "As if anyone were more qualified to judge the situation than Adolf Hitler himself."

Yes, and who more deserves our trust and confidence? I recall being stunned when I came across that passage. Here Adolf Hitler himself has been appropriated into the rhetoric of victimology used on behalf of kids talked into accusations of satanic ritual abuse: *Believe the Children*. Believe the child even if he's Adolf Hitler, even if the account of abuse comes not from Hitler as an innocent child but from the adult hatemonger who spoke about his childhood beatings not in some tearful therapeutic confessional but in the *Führerbunker*. Believe him because he was *once* that innocent in the baby picture.

An inadvertently parodic counterpoint to Miller's demonization of Hitler's father can be found in the work of Erich Fromm, an equally respected and even more renowned psychoanalytic thinker, who singles out not Hitler's father but his mother, Klara. Fromm's version of father Alois is not the abusive monster Miller gives us. Fromm assures us that Alois was a well-meaning, stable fellow who "loved life," whose devotion to his honeybees was admirable, and who was "authoritarian" but "not a frightening figure." Instead, Fromm tells us, Hitler's mother Klara was the catalyst of his neuroses. In his retrospective psychoanalysis of Hitler (published in his 1973 book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*), Fromm confidently assures us that Hitler can be explained by Fromm's own "necrophilous character system" theory, which postulates a love of death and dead bodies and, consequently, the inclination to commit mass murder. Fromm asserts that this "necrophilous development" had its origins in the "malignant incestuousness" of Hitler's attachment to his mother. "Germany became the central symbol for mother," Fromm writes. Hitler's fixations, his hatred for the "poison" (syphilis and Jews) that threatened Germany, actually concealed a deeper, long-repressed desire to destroy his mother.

Fromm's serene confidence in these grandiose abstractions and his unsupported leaps of logic based on them are breathtaking as he proceeds to his conclusion: Hitler's deepest hatred wasn't Jews—it was Germans! Germans symbolized his mother. He made war against the Jews because his real goal was to ignite a worldwide conflagration in order to cause the destruction of Germany—to punish his mother.

Theories of Hitler as a victim of bad parenting (the Menendez defense of Hitler, one could say) are extensions of the common, careless attempt to explain (or explain away) Hitler as a victim of a mental disease, dysfunction, or syndrome—Hitler as "madman," "psychopath," "demented," "criminally insane." All of which tend to exculpate if not excuse the crimes he perpetrated on grounds of what the courts call "diminished capacity," an inability to know right from wrong. Popular notions of Hitler as "the carpet chewer," the thrower of frothing fits, a man not in control of himself but in the grip of some madness,

suggest he is someone to be pitied rather than reviled, someone who could have been rescued by therapeutic intervention.

To these mental-illness theories can be added a strain of explanation that attributes Hitler's state of mind to a physical illness, thus removing him even further from conscious culpability. One of the most seriously argued recent versions of these might be dubbed, in view of the Oliver Sacks title: the encephalitic "awakening" hypothesis about Hitler.

A 1975 paper in the *Journal of Operational Psychiatry*, "Hitler's Encephalitis: A Footnote to History," reviewed the widespread reports of "post-encephalitic sociopathy" in the medical literature of the twenties and thirties, when the phenomenon began to show up. A number of English and European physicians had noted profound personality changes in war veterans who had been stricken with Epidemic Encephalitis in the trenches. Years after they had recovered from the physical symptoms of the disease, they suddenly began to manifest disturbing personality shifts. The literature of the time used terms such as "moral insanity" and "moral imbecility" to describe these post-encephalitic sociopaths. They also noted that these sociopaths weren't classic loners but often were possessed of a manic charisma. The journal cites a 1930 article, "Zur Kriminalitaet der Encephalitiker" in *Acta Psychiatrica*, for instance:

The post encephalitic moral imbecile is often possessed of cleverness and brilliance . . . an exceedingly plausible and ready liar . . . devoid of all moral and altruistic feelings . . . knows neither shame nor gratitude . . . [displays] viciousness and maliciousness with a gloating over the misfortunes of others . . . a coldly egotistical, vengeful, base, vile impertinence . . . truly explosive outbursts . . . criminal actions . . . wanton destructiveness . . . murder . . . arson . . . mythomania . . . cruelty as well as fraud . . . malicious denunciations . . . grandiloquent and ecstatic states . . . inclination to lie . . . to confabulate past adventures . . . to simulate and deceive.

The author of the 1975 paper is convinced he's found The Answer: He's explained Adolf Hitler's charismatic political persona as product of reawakened disease. However dubious that conclusion, the doctor's list of symptoms captures uncannily well the central contradiction in attempts to explain the duality of Hitler's thought-world: the apparently simultaneous presence of spell-like, unconscious possession ("explosive outbursts . . . ecstatic states") and conscious calculation, cynical manipulation—a dichotomy that the two great English-language Hitler biographers, Alan Bullock and Hugh Trevor-Roper, have debated for decades after Hitler's death.

The 1975 review article takes seriously the notion that Hitler's charisma,

the spectacular mass appeal that transformed him from obscure grumbler in the trenches to world-bestriving conqueror, was the product of an infection: "The newly acquired charisma made such individuals, if as gifted, able and ambitious as Hitler, a mortal but as yet unfathomable danger to society." An unfathomable danger but in some ways a more comforting, easier-to-live-with one. The germ theory of Hitler suggests that the source, the magnitude of evil manifested in him, comes not from his humanness (thus implicating ours) but from an external microbial intervention. Unfathomable evil becomes, if not fathomable, diagnosable—indeed, perhaps curable, or at least preventable. The encephalitic-sociopath theory of Hitler is a paradigm of explanation as consolation: the impulse to find a way to avoid facing the possibility that Hitler *chose* to be who he was, that he was a deliberate perpetrator rather than a victim.

But encephalitis is not the only microbe to have been diagnosed as the true explanation of Hitler's criminal derangement. One of the most curious and revealing Hitler explanation quests has been Simon Wiesenthal's persistent if quixotic effort to explain Hitler's psyche as the product of a case of syphilis. For decades now, Wiesenthal, famed as the preeminent hunter of Nazi war criminals, has been trying to track down the spectral spirochete he believes responsible for Hitler with the same relentless determination he applies to tracking escaped SS men in South America.

Wiesenthal's devotion to this of all possible Hitler-explanation theories is puzzling at first glance, because the syphilitic explanation of Hitler, while a frequent feature of prewar rumor and speculation, had long fallen into neglect until Wiesenthal attempted to revive it in the 1980s. His persistent propagation of it is puzzling also because of the particular variant of the story he's chosen to pursue: one in which the putative source of Hitler's infection was not just a prostitute in the Viennese lower depths (as in some versions of the story) but a specifically *Jewish* prostitute. Her Jewishness then becomes Wiesenthal's explanation for the elusive grail of Hitler studies—the origin of his anti-Semitism. And the syphilis—the mentally deranging effects of the final, tertiary stage of the disease—becomes the source of the deranged virulence of his Jew-hatred. Which makes Wiesenthal's syphilitic-Hitler theory an example of *both* the Hitler-as-victim trend and the concurrent tendency to find a Jew to explain his derangement.

But Wiesenthal seems deadly serious in his search for the source of Hitler's putative syphilis. He first heard about the story, he says, from a now-deceased expatriate Austrian doctor who told him that he'd known another doctor from Austria whose father *might* have actually treated Hitler for syphilis. While the thirdhand evidence for the truth of this is sketchy at best, the evidence for the existence of a Jewish prostitute who had sex with Hitler is nearly nonexistent. Yet Wiesenthal seems to abandon the strict standards for evidentiary identifi-

cation he applies even to despised war criminals to convict—virtually to *create*—this alleged Jewish whore. How does he know she was Jewish? Even if the source was Hitler (perhaps in a statement to the phantom doctor), must we take *his* word here? Is she supposed to have identified herself as Jewish to him in the act? But Wiesenthal accepts it and even suggests it as an explanation for another unresolved mystery in Hitler's biography: the mysterious death of his half-niece Geli Raubal. She killed herself, Wiesenthal told one writer, because Hitler infected her with the syphilis he'd gotten from the supposititious Jewish prostitute.

Consider these other instances of what seems to be the proliferation of Jewish suspects singled out by various explainers as the true source of Hitler's metamorphosis, most often as the true origin of Hitler's anti-Semitism.

Among them we find:

The Seductive Jewish Grandfather Explanation: The conjecture, which has been the subject of a bitter, unresolved debate among historians and biographers for four decades now, that Hitler believed a spectral Jewish seducer impregnated his paternal grandmother, Maria Schicklgruber, fathering Hitler's father and engendering in Hitler a pathological fear that he was poisoned by "Jewish blood"—and a need to exterminate that doubt by exterminating the Jews.

The Seductive Jewish Music Teacher Theory: The belief that the true cause of his half-niece Geli Raubal's death was Hitler's discovery that she was engaged to or impregnated by a figure variously described as a "Jewish music teacher" or "a Jewish violinist" she met in Vienna, whereupon Hitler either drove her to suicide or had her murdered. The corollary of which is that grief or guilt for her death led to his transformation into a grim murderous figure obsessed with vengeance against the Jews. In other words, to parody this interpretive tendency: After Geli's death, it was No More Mr. Nice Guy.

The Bungling Jewish Doctor Theory: The belief that the defining trauma of Adolf Hitler's life was the agony of his mother's death in 1907 when he was eighteen, an agony Hitler witnessed firsthand, an agony caused and prolonged, some believe, by the well-meaning but misguided ministrations of Dr. Eduard Bloch, the Jewish doctor whose alleged malpractice, in one caricature of this explanation, "caused the Holocaust."

Of course, Hitler's own deeply disingenuous effort to trace the origin of his anti-Semitism to a single Jew should not be neglected. In *Mein Kampf*, he claims that until he came to Vienna in 1907, when he was eighteen, he had little or no contact with Jews and that he looked upon anti-Semitism as a rather vulgar, déclassé prejudice. Until a kind of revelatory, visionary conversion experience: his first sight of, he asks us to believe, or the first time he came face-to-face with, an

Ostjuden, an Eastern European Jew in shtetl garb: "Once, as I was strolling through [Vienna's] Inner City," he tells us, "I suddenly encountered an apparition in a black caftan and black earlocks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought . . . but the longer I stared at this foreign face, scrutinizing feature for feature, the more my first question assumed a new form: Is this a German?"

The claim that this shocking apparition, this one Jew, suddenly, powerfully jolted him, opened his eyes to some truth about Jews, into seeing them, as he hadn't before, as alien and threatening—impelled him into searching out the dark truth about their malign influence on the world in anti-Semitic literature—does not survive close examination. It seems, in fact, to be a forged, retrospective construct designed to give the impression that there was some powerful, unmistakable, intrinsic evil essence emanating from this Jew that shocked Hitler into awakening out of a previous innocence about Jews in general. When, in fact, the scholar Helmut Schmeller has pointed out the presence in Linz, where Hitler had spent his youth before Vienna, of a rabidly anti-Semitic newspaper, the *Linzer Fliegende Blätter*, which featured malicious caricatures of caftaned and earlocked Jews. It's likely, then, that, had there been any such first encounter in Vienna, it would have been construed, seen through the lens of Hitler's previous familiarity with sinister caricatures of *Ostjuden*.

But there is something *echt* Hitler, one might say, in the spiteful focus on a single hapless wandering Jew guilty of nothing more than wearing traditional garb; in the maliciously spiteful delight he takes in making it seem that there might be, somewhere still living, perhaps reading his words, a single Jew who bears responsibility for his murderous hatred, who made Hitler Hitler. It is a cautionary instance, a warning against the perils of shifting the responsibility for Hitler's hatred from Hitler himself to some person, trend, or tendency supposedly responsible for it.

A most recent instance of this explanatory tendency focuses on the behavior of a few Jewish Bolsheviks in Munich back in 1919. It is an inference about Hitler's "crystallization," as John Lukacs calls it in *The Hitler of History*. It's an inference Lukacs draws from some recent studies of Hitler's behavior in the murky nine-month period after he returned to Munich from the army hospital in Pasewalk in January 1919 and before he joined the embryonic Nazi Party in September 1919 and emerged transformed into an electrifying charismatic hatemonger.

Most Hitler explainers have him undergoing a transformation, metamorphosis, crystallization, whatever you choose to call it, before he returned to Munich in 1919: as far back as Vienna during his "lost years," or in any case not later than November 1918 at Pasewalk, where Hitler himself claimed he received a visionary impetus to redeem Germany's betrayal by Jews and Bolsheviks. But a recent book by an Austrian scholar, Brigitte Hamann's *Hitlers Wien*, argues strenuously from an exhaustive study of the extant testimony that there

is little reliable evidence of Hitler expressing anything but friendly feelings for Jews during his sojourn in Vienna (contradicting those historians who believe the claim by the anti-Semitic pornographer Lanz von Liebenfels—that Hitler visited his Vienna offices in 1909 and personally expressed to him his admiration for Liebenfels's scurrilous anti-Semitic hate sheet *Ostara*).

But certain recent, ambiguous discoveries in Munich archives have led some scholars to argue that when Hitler returned to Munich in early 1919, he still lacked the passionate intensity of the sort he did not display until the autumn of that year when he joined what became the Nazi Party. One piece of evidence adduced for this view documents Hitler's successful candidacy for a position on the soldier's council in a regiment that remained loyal to the short-lived Bolshevik regime that ruled Munich for a few weeks in April 1919. Another is a piece of faded, scratchy newsreel footage showing the February 1919 funeral procession for Kurt Eisner, the assassinated Jewish leader of the socialist regime then in power. Slowed down and studied, the funeral footage shows a figure who looks remarkably like Hitler marching in a detachment of soldiers, all wearing armbands on their uniforms in tribute to Eisner and the socialist regime that preceded the Bolshevik one.

Hitler a designated mourner for a Jewish socialist? Even if true, does his presence in that army detachment or his candidacy for a loyalist regimental post prove anything about his convictions or lack of them at the time? Does it prove that—if he wasn't a *sympathizer* with Jewish socialists—he was at least still an empty vessel lacking the hate-filled rage at Jews and Marxists he manifested a few short months later? Was Hitler still a man without qualities at that late date?

John Lukacs views evidence such as this as testament to his belief that Hitler's ideas were still "inchoate" as late as March 1919 and that he lacked passionate conviction until something happened to "crystallize" it in April: the brief bloody advent of the hardline Bolshevik regime in Munich that succeeded the murdered Eisner's democratic socialists and that, also, prominently featured Jewish leaders. This short-lived Bolshevik regime became notorious for the summary execution of some prominent right-wing nationalists (members of the wealthy occult racist Thule Society who bankrolled the birth of what became the Nazi Party). A regime that was itself overthrown by right-wing militia forces who visited even more bloody reprisals on the Bolsheviks.

All of which leads Lukacs to argue that "it is at least possible (in my opinion probable)" that what crystallized Hitler the inchoate into Hitler the hatemonger and scourge of Jews "were his experiences during the winter and spring of 1918–1919: the German collapse, but even more, his witnessing of the ridiculous and sordid episode of the Munich Soviet Republic with its Jewish and lumpen intellectuals et al."

There are a couple of problems with this conjecture. First, there is no need

to believe that Hitler's "allegiance" to the socialist regime was anything more than pro forma. His presence as a designated mourner could be little more than a case of a soldier—in a phrase that later became infamous—"following orders." Either that or acting in an undercover intelligence capacity on behalf of right-wing officers in the army, a role he might have been playing when he ran for a position on the soldier's council, since he proceeded to inform on his "comrades" to the nationalist regime that succeeded the Bolsheviks. He was, of course, playing an undercover role in September 1919 when he first visited a meeting of what soon became the Nazi Party.

The other problem with Lukacs's conjecture—that Hitler didn't "crystallize" until April 1919 when he witnessed the "ridiculous and sordid" behavior of Jewish Bolsheviks—is the unspoken implication. It's one Lukacs himself is too sophisticated to endorse explicitly, but it's there in the tone of his condemnation of the "ridiculous and sordid" behavior of Jews and intellectuals in the brief reign of the Munich Soviet regime: that what crystallized Hitler was *something deplorable done by Jews*. That if those "Jewish and lumpen intellectuals et al." had only behaved better, Hitler might not have become Hitler. That up until that point he might have gone on mildly disliking Jews, but the horrors of the Jewish Bolshevik rule (barely three weeks! a handful of casualties!) gave birth to a genocidal monster. Made Hitler's transformation from mildly anti-Semitic slacker to mass murderer of Jews at least "understandable." It is this kind of understanding that makes Claude Lanzmann's crusade against *all* explanation—emotionally at least—"understandable." Particularly when we repeatedly find attempts to explain Hitler focusing not on what *Hitler* did but on what *Jews* did.

Some of the more sophisticated postwar explainers avoid the tactic of trying to find a Jew who personally affronted or aggrieved Hitler but instead find reasons to point fingers at Jews Hitler never knew. George Steiner, for instance, in his disturbing novel, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*, aroused angry attacks from some fellow Jews over the way his fictional Hitler explains himself as the product of what might be called Jewish mental inventions, those of three Jews in particular: Moses, Jesus, and Karl Marx. Steiner's Hitler argues that the tolerance, the secret approval, the permission he received from the rest of the world to exterminate the Jews can be explained by the universal hatred mankind has for the Jewish "invention of conscience," for the torment inflicted on man by the ethical demands of Moses, Jesus, and Marx, three Jews guilty of the threefold "blackmail of transcendence."

(What's striking about the efforts to find a Jew to "blame" is the neglect it entails of a far more obvious class of suspects as decisive sources of Hitler's anti-Semitism: other anti-Semites. While Daniel Jonah Goldhagen in *Hitler's Willing Executioners* offers an exhaustive array of nineteenth-century German anti-Semitic predecessors to Hitler, there is perhaps an even more important

American source of Hitler's hatred of Jews. A crucial source of his vision of a Jewish world conspiracy and a perhaps crucial source of funding for Hitler's own conspiracy to seize power in Germany: Henry Ford. It's remarkable how easily—or conveniently—Ford's contribution to Hitler's success has been lost to memory in America. It wasn't lost to Hitler, who demonstrated his gratitude by placing a life-size oil portrait of the American carmaker on the wall of his personal office in party headquarters in Munich and by offering, in the twenties, to send storm troopers to America to help Ford's proposed campaign for the presidency. The worldwide publication of Ford's vicious anti-Semitic tract, *The International Jew*, which Hitler and the Nazis rhapsodically read, promoted, and distributed in Germany, the influence of Ford's work and fame—he was an icon of the Modern Age in Germany—helped validate for a gullible German public Hitler's malignant vision of the sinister "Elders of Zion" Jewish conspiracy.)

With Steiner's threefold "blackmail of transcendence," we've come a long way to a far more rarefied and sophisticated realm of explanation than the billy-goat and encephalitic-sociopath theories. But I am not sure all would agree it's brought us closer to satisfactorily explaining Hitler. Still, there is an earnestness in Steiner's search for an answer I cannot gainsay—an earnestness, a near desperation apparent in the work of a number of the explainers I respected, however skeptical I might be of their explanations. I found myself empathizing in particular with Simon Wiesenthal, now in his eighties, taking time away from his restless hunt for the last living escaped Nazi war criminals to try to hunt down the last, lost traces of that syphilitic Jewish prostitute story, the supposedly historical episode that Wiesenthal believes can prevent Hitler's escape from explanation.

It's clear that Wiesenthal desperately wants to believe in this phantom woman, this spectral Jewish succubus purportedly responsible for Hitler's metamorphosis, despite the lack of any real evidence for her existence. If he could find the proof for it, he once told an interviewer, "I would be very happy because this would give the whole story of Hitler and the Jews a different picture." Would it really, even if it were true? What's the explanation for his focus on such a shaky conjecture? Even if he found the phantom Jewish prostitute, somehow identified her as the carrier, the bearer of the germ of Hitler's anti-Semitism, what could be the point? Wouldn't it inevitably tend to do something utterly unjust: make it seem as if the whole weight of the Holocaust should come down on the fragile shoulders of one poor woman of the streets?

One answer is that, yes, it is utterly unjust, but that, for someone like Wiesenthal who faced the horror in person, felt the horrific force of the hatred that killed millions all around him, it might in some way be preferable to have an unfounded explanation of that hatred than an utterly inexplicable hatred.

Perhaps for him bad logic, a flawed explanation for an unbearable tragedy, is preferable to no logic. The Jewish prostitute story might be cold comfort but some consolation.

The Lost Safe-Deposit Box

In taking note of agendas beneath the surface of explanations, I don't wish to seem unsympathetic to explainers who seek solace in some certainty rather than none. Indeed, the hope of finding some satisfactory way of explaining Hitler was what initially drew me to the literature, an impulse similar to Simon Wiesenthal's—the hope that I could track down something, somewhere, something buried in some archive, in some dying witness's memory, in some long-lost unpublished memoir, in some document never seen before, in some connection never made before, at the end of some tantalizing evidentiary trail never exhaustively explored before, a glimpse of some truth, some answer to the question "What made Hitler *Hitler*?"

Two factors, two progressive realizations, led me to shift course. First, there was a recognition, a concession to the reality of evidentiary despair, the evidentiary impoverishment Yehuda Bauer had described: the fact that there are certain crucial Hitler questions that, because of the incompleteness of the evidence, might never be resolved with any certitude. And second was my growing curiosity about another, contradictory phenomenon: the remarkable confidence, despite the shakiness of the evidence, of so many schools of explanation. And not just among scholars: I found it fascinating how many educated people cited Alice Miller's Hitler explanation as gospel, for instance, despite its dubious premises; remarkable how often, in discussing the subject with nonspecialists, how confident so many seemed that they'd figured Hitler out, usually citing one book they'd read, such as Miller's or Erich Fromm's or one apocryphal theory such as the "Jewish blood" or the sexual-perversion story. My own experience had been that the more I looked into such stories, into the range of explanations and the evidence to substantiate them, the less certain I became. But it began to seem to me that the less people knew, the more important to them it was to seem certain about Hitler, to be able to dismiss any mystery with simplistic pronouncements such as "he was a paranoid" or a pawn of big-business interests—much the way he had been dismissed and disparaged and underestimated before 1933. I became fascinated with this phenomenon, with the recurrent abandonment, when it came to Hitler, of "negative capability" (the quality first defined by John Keats as the ability to tolerate uncertainty without "irritable reaching" for certainty). I was stunned by what seemed to be a compulsive assertion of certainty, or of contradictory certainties, by the psychohistorians in particular. It was Hitler's *father*! No, it was Hitler's *mother*

who caused the trouble! It was his missing testicle! No, it was a primal scene! "Irritable reaching" devolved into a desperate lurching after a single answer, a single person, none of which on closer examination was nearly sufficient or convincing.

All of which led me to shift my focus—with Schweitzer's *Quest* as a model—from a search for the one single explanation of Hitler to a search for the agendas of the searchers, an attempt to explain the explainers. From hoping I could find some previously unknown ultimate truth about Hitler to the more modest hope of critically assessing the claims of some explainers and seeing what I could learn from the struggle of those I admired. Finding in the efforts of scholars and explainers of all sorts if not *the* truth about Hitler, then *some* truths about what we talk about when we talk about Hitler. What it tells us about Hitler, what it tells us about ourselves.

"The Nazi genocide is somehow central to our self-understanding," Michael André Bernstein has written. It could be said as well that one's way of understanding or explaining Hitler can reflect a characteristic way of understanding the nature of the self. In particular, a position on the decisiveness of Hitler's personal role in the Holocaust frequently reflects a position on the possibility or relevance of autonomous agency, of free will, of freedom to choose evil, and responsibility for the consequences of such a choice.

"So many modernist thinkers wish to persuade us," Robert Grant, a lecturer on political philosophy at the University of Glasgow, has written, "that our subjectivity," our ability to choose, our reasons for choosing a course of action, are "wholly contingent, a mere epiphenomenon, historical deposit or social construct, in short an illusion and the real source of our actions and motivations lie elsewhere." Elsewhere in *Great Abstractions*, in deeper "inevitable" forces of history that make Hitler, that make us, nothing but particles borne forward on waves of powerful forces that make our power to act or choose on our own a virtual illusion. And absolve Hitler, absolve us, of responsibility for such illusory choices.

It might be said that the marginalization of Hitler in contemporary thought is an analogue of the "death of the author" vogue in contemporary literary theory: the Holocaust as a "text" produced not by human agency but somehow, autonomously, inevitably, by culture and language.

Even among some "intentionalists" who believe Hitler's desire to commit genocide was decisive, that intention is often portrayed as less a knowing choice than something shaped, *dictated to him*, by irresistible internal or external pressures beyond his power to resist to intend otherwise.

Of course, Hitler's will, his intention and choice alone were, if necessary, not sufficient for his success. As sophisticated explainers such as Saul Friedländer and Ian Kershaw emphasize, his success was the product of multiple

factors—of the interaction and interrelationship between Hitler and other historical figures and forces including the Nazi Party, the German people, and the complicity and passivity of those in power inside and outside Germany.

But those forces, too, are necessary but not sufficient, and the tendency of much recent literature has been to deny and diminish Hitler's freedom to choose, to have chosen, the murderous course he did. Denying him that freedom permits him another kind of escape, an escape from responsibility.

In examining these questions, in thinking about my own role, I'd cite a remark made to me by Milton Himmelfarb. In an article I wrote for *The New Yorker* on Hitler theories and the Bullock/Trevor-Roper dispute over Hitler's "sincerity," I'd referred to him as "the scholar, Milton Himmelfarb." When I met the author of the important—indeed, defining—polemic "No Hitler, No Holocaust" in his White Plains, New York, home, he gently and with great humility suggested he'd like to amend the record. No, he told me, he didn't think of himself as a scholar. He was attached to no university. Rather, when he thought of how he'd describe himself, he conjured up for me the name of a discount-clothing chain in the New York area called Syms, one that heavily advertised itself with the slogan "an educated consumer is our best customer." With a wry grin, Himmelfarb told me he thought of himself less as a scholar than as "an educated consumer of scholarship." What I've attempted in this book is to approach not all but certain aspects of Hitler scholarship with the eye of an educated consumer. This is a selective and subjective study, focusing on certain currents and subcurrents, certain thinkers whose work I was drawn to exploring in depth and often in person. I have many regrets about others I would have liked to have spoken directly with, and several more volumes of this kind could well have been written without exhausting the subject, although not without exhausting this writer.

In any case, if the particular nature of the way this Himmelfarbian consumer was educated has any bearing upon the book that resulted it may lie in a predisposition to Empsonian ambiguity and uncertainty rather than the certainties of theory. A preference for close reading (of documents, memoirs, police reports) and for close listening (to the voices of the explainers) in an effort to hear the unspoken subtext, the significant elision, the hidden agendas, conflicts, and in particular the doubts beneath the surface—to sense the nature of the longing that drives the explainers and the kinds of solace explanations offer.

Consider, in this respect, one further excursion into a particularly poignant subcurrent of Hitler-explanation apocrypha in which the sense of something missing, something lost, something escaped finds an echo in a deeply resonant, recurrent image: the lost safe-deposit box. It's remarkable how often it turns out that the evidentiary trails of certain arcane, apocryphal, but persistent Hitler explanations disappear into a limbo that is not exactly a dead end so much as a

lost end, the dead-letter box of historical truth: the lost safe-deposit box. A place where allegedly revelatory documents—ones that might provide the missing link, the lost key to the Hitler psyche, the true source of his metamorphosis—seem to disappear beyond recovery.

Take the case of the lost Hitler exposé of Fritz Gerlich: the last stifled effort by the last of the anti-Hitler Munich journalists left at large in the weeks following the Reichstag fire; a desperate attempt to get into print a purportedly devastating Hitler scandal in time to wake up the world to the truth about the new Reichschancellor before it was too late.

But it was too late, as I've noted. Gerlich's final exposé was ripped off the presses by a squad of SA storm troopers on March 9, 1933, just as Gerlich's newspaper *Der Gerade Weg*—then the last surviving, openly anti-Hitler paper in Germany—was about to go to press. Because of the respect Gerlich had earned from his contemporaries both for his courage and for his intellectual integrity, a mystique has grown up around the lost scoop, about its content and its ultimate fate. In fact, it's developed a kind of survival myth of its own—about the escape and survival of the lost truth about Hitler. The lost Gerlich scoop has become a symbol for all the lost secrets about Hitler, for the dark explanatory truths whose revelation might have—but did not—save history from Hitler.

No copy of Gerlich's investigation has ever come to light, but there are at least two stories about copies of the scoop escaping. According to the postwar biography of Gerlich by his colleague Erwin von Aretin, while the Brownshirts were busy sacking the place, a duplicate set of Gerlich's press-ready copy and the documentary material supporting it was spirited out of the newspaper offices by a Count Waldburg-Zeil. Von Aretin reports that Waldburg-Zeil carried the materials off to his estate north of Munich and buried them on the grounds for safekeeping. But, Von Aretin dishearteningly adds, "during the war, Waldburg-Zeil dug them up and destroyed them because they were too dangerous to possess."

Nonetheless, there is a second survival story about the fate of Gerlich's final exposé, a more open-ended one. One of Gerlich's last surviving colleagues, Dr. Johannes Steiner, directed me to this story. Dr. Steiner was the one who provided me with the unforgettable image of Gerlich's bloody spectacles. He put me back on the trail of the lost exposé by referring me to the son of Gerlich's biographer, the late Von Aretin. The son, Professor Karl-Ottmar Freiherr von Aretin, had become a historian in his own right, specializing in aspects of the German resistance in Munich and Bavaria. He had a distinct memory of his father telling him about what sounds like the escape of a *different* set of Gerlich documents from the ones Waldburg-Zeil destroyed.

According to the younger Von Aretin's statement to me:

There was a state's-attorney inquiry into the matter of Geli Raubal. My father had a copy of the documents on his desk [in Gerlich's office] in February 1933. When the situation became difficult, my father gave these documents to his cousin and co-owner of the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, Karl Ludwig Freiherr von Guttenberg, in order to bring them to Switzerland and deposit them in a bank safe. As my father remembered, these documents showed that Geli was killed by order of Hitler. Guttenberg carried the documents to Switzerland but kept secret the number of the safe-deposit account because he thought it would be too dangerous to tell anyone. Guttenberg engaged in the 20 July 1944 [anti-Hitler coup attempt], was killed in 1945, and took the secret [of the account number] with him to the grave.

The implication: somewhere in Switzerland, perhaps even now, a lost key to Hitler lies locked away in a long-neglected safe-deposit box, slowly turning to dust. But this is not the only instance of a tenuous evidentiary trail leading to an ambiguous survival in a lost safe-deposit box. The image, or a close variant of it, recurs several times in Hitler-explanation lore.

There is the purported fate of the Pasewalk case notes, for instance, a story about the doctor who treated Hitler's hysterical blindness in 1918—the treatment that, some Hitler explainers believe, might have been responsible for Hitler's metamorphosis from insignificant, obscurity-seeking corporal to charismatic, mesmerizing führer-in-the-making. Hitler biographers Rudolph Binion and John Toland have both adopted a version of the speculation first put forward in thinly veiled fictional form by émigré German novelist (and friend of Franz Kafka) Ernst Weiss, who argued that the episode represented one of the great tragic, Kafkaesque ironies of history. Weiss claimed to have learned, through sources in the émigré community, the true story of the "voice" Hitler heard at Pasewalk in the feverish extremity of his breakdown at the time of the German surrender, the voice Hitler claims to have heard summoning him to a mission to avenge Germany. It was that moment, that vision in which, Lucy Dawidowicz believes, Hitler defined the mission of his life: to murder the Jews.

According to Weiss's account, much of which Toland and Binion and the German historian Ernst Deuerlein have lent credence to (although others, such as Robert Waite, dispute it), that voice was actually the voice of a staff psychiatrist at Pasewalk, a Dr. Edmund Forster, who sought to cure Hitler's hysterical blindness by putting him in a hypnotic trance and implanting the posthypnotic suggestion that Hitler had to recover his sight to fulfill a mission to redeem Germany's lost honor. Weiss seems to have befriended Dr. Forster when Forster fled Germany after 1933, shortly before his suicide. According to Weiss's novelistic account of Forster's story, the Pasewalk psychiatrist had dis-

covered, in the course of his hypnotic sessions with Hitler, a profound and shameful secret of Hitler's psyche, the key to his pathology. A secret so shameful that as soon as Hitler took power, Forster was pursued, harassed, and ultimately driven to his death by the Gestapo, which was determined to recover from him his case notes on the medical treatment of Patient Hitler at Pasewalk, to silence him, and to erase that secret from history.

According to Weiss's fictionalized account, a fearful Forster, desperate to preserve the truth about Hitler from destruction, crossed the border to Switzerland shortly before his death and locked the Pasewalk case notes in a safe-deposit box in a bank in Basel. Purportedly quoting Forster, Weiss says, "The most important part [of Forster's records are] the part concerning [Hitler's] relationships with women." Weiss has Forster giving special treatment to this secret: " 'I wrote it down in hieroglyphics which no one but me can decipher.' " Unfortunately, Forster killed himself before confiding whatever secret he may have learned, and with Weiss dead, we cannot be sure how much he fictionalized.

Forster's death again leaves us with no key to his Swiss safe-deposit box and no key to Hitler, leaves us with the image of the truth stranded, abandoned, or moldering away in some basement bank vault, perhaps untranslatable even if recovered, because of Forster's hieroglyphics.

The unreadable cipher in the lost safe-deposit box: an irresistible metaphor for the explanation of Hitler that has eluded us, for the irretrievable enigma of his psyche. There have been similar disappearances of other phantom proofs purportedly crucial to deciphering Hitler's mind. There were, for instance, Hitler's alleged pornographic drawings of Geli Raubal, which were said to have disclosed the truth about his psychosexual nature, drawings which, once recovered from a blackmailer, were said to have disappeared into a safe in Nazi Party headquarters in Munich. There was the rumored "Austrian secret-police dossier" about Hitler's alleged Jewish ancestry, said in one version of the apocryphal story to have been stashed in a safe in the home of the Austrian chancellor's mistress until stolen by Hitler's minions.

We are clearly in the realm of folklore here, not verifiable history. And yet there's something in the image common to these tales, the image of the locked safe or the lost safe-deposit box that seems to capture in the way folklore sometimes can—and history sometimes can't—some deeply felt collective longing, a shared myth about a figure who was himself as much a piece of self-created folklore as history.

Some light may be shed on the deeper source of this image by its manifestation in a different context. Once, in the course of investigating a shady cancer-cure clinic south of Tijuana, Mexico, I came upon a smooth-talking "metabolic technician" who told me he was seeking to recover a lost cancer-

cure formula devised by a certain Dr. Koch, a formula said to have disappeared after Koch's death in the 1930s. The metabolic technician believed he knew what had become of it, however; he'd had some indications that the formula for this philosopher's stone of health might still be found "in a safe-deposit box in a bank in Detroit," although he worried about reports that—like the secret of Hitler's sex life hieroglyphically entombed in a safe-deposit box by the Pasewalk mesmerist—the formula might be in code, and that without the actual begetter of the formula, the safe-deposit box might contain nothing but an indecipherable matrix of meaningless numbers.

These lost safe-deposit stories clearly serve as expressions of anxiety about—and talismans against—an otherwise apparently inexplicable malignant evil. In fact, despite the despairing tone of the safe-deposit box myths, they represent a kind of epistemological *optimism*, a faith in an explicable world. Yes, something is missing, but if we don't have the missing piece in hand, at least it exists somewhere. At least somewhere there's the lost key that *could* make sense of the apparently motiveless malignancy of Hitler's psyche or the cancer cell. A missing piece, however mundane or bizarre—a Jewish grandfather, even a billy-goat bite—but something here on earth, something we can contain in our imagination, something safely containable within the reassuring confines of a box in a Swiss bank. Something not beyond our ken, just beyond our reach, something less unbearably frightening than inexplicable evil.

When the recent controversy over Swiss-bank holdings of gold and valuables stolen from murdered Jews hit the press, for a brief moment a part of me felt a frisson of what I knew was false hope. That somehow, some lost and long-forgotten safe-deposit box would come to light and yield up one or another of the apocryphal grails of Hitler explanations. That the search for the stolen legacies of the dead would somehow materialize the missing key, the lost link needed to bridge the abyss between the baby picture and the baby killer. Needless to say, this was not a realistic expectation. But it made me think of a term of art in the philosophic literature on epistemology, the study of the nature and limits of knowledge: "the mind of God." It's a term used even by non-believers to express the idea of a realm in which the truths that elude human investigation—the answers to mysteries we fail to solve for lack of evidence—exist, even if they exist beyond our grasp. That's what the lost safe-deposit box folklore gestures at: the missing explanation of Hitler locked up tight in the inaccessible, indecipherable mind of God.

PART ONE

THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING



In which theories about Hitler's "racial origins" become the origin of a debate about Hitler's psyche