

Hitler's Secretaries

This article deals with the four most noteworthy female secretaries of Adolf Hitler. Their comments offer a fresh, different view on the Nazi dictator, whose life has mostly been examined by male historians, that base their works on the memoirs and recollections of men who were in contact with Hitler. In addition to the secretaries' impressions, an evaluation of their books and documentary films consisting of their interviews is provided.

"In the initial stages of the Russian campaign I found that Hitler was nearly always good-tempered and ready for a joke. One night after the usual tea hour at Wolfsschanze ended Hitler accompanied us to outside the bunker doors. There we stood chatting for a while in the darkness. Suddenly I realized that I had left my flashlight in Hitler's room, and asked the manservant to fetch it. He returned empty-handed. 'Where could it be then?' I said. Hitler, in jovial frame of mind, defended himself with a smile: 'I have not stolen it. I may be a thief of lands, but not of lamps. And it is better that way, for they hang you for the little item, but for the bigger on they let you go!'" - Christa Schroeder

"I asked Hitler why he only ever went to hear Die Meistersinger or other Wagnerian operas. [Hitler answered:] 'It is just my luck that I can never say I like something without finding that I'm stuck listening exclusively to one piece of music or hearing one particular opera. I once said that Meistersinger is really one of Richard Wagner's finest operas, so since then it is supposed to be my favourite opera and I do not get to hear anything else. The same thing happened with the Badenweiler March. And I was once invited to visit Frau Ley. She had a Scotch terrier bitch with seven puppies and was very proud of them. Just to be polite I said: Those are really delightful little creatures - although I think they're horrible, like rats. Next day she sent me one as a present.'" - Traudl Junge

Traudl Junge

"Once King of Bulgaria was asked to the Berghof. As I was wandering around the kitchen I happened to see the King drive up to the main entrance. Planning to reach my room unseen, I quickly ran across the yard behind the house so as to use the back door. I burst right into the ceremonious procession in which the Führer was leading the King through the living room to the Great Hall. I was holding an apple I'd just bitten into in my right hand, and two ping-pong bats in my other hand. My mouth was full too, so there was nothing I could say or do. Hitler and his guest looked at me in some surprise. When the Führer greeted me before dinner that evening, I apologized and he said, in very friendly tones, 'do not worry, child, kings are only human too.'" - Traudl Junge (This quotation is noteworthy since Hitler was always very worried that his staff would make some mistake regarding the etiquette during the official ceremonies)

A bit unintuitively, the most famous of Hitler's secretaries is the one with the shortest service record, only two and a half years. There are several reasons for this state of affairs: Being younger than the other secretaries Traudl Junge has been in the position to live past the post-war era when it was impossible to talk about Hitler in any other way than negatively. Secondly, her book and two filmed interviews in which she recalls her experiences working with the Führer, have made her known even to the general public. Thirdly, Junge was the secretary who typed Hitler's last private and political will and testament in the Führerbunker a day and a half before Hitler's suicide.

When Junge's trial period as a Hitler's secretary was about to end she was summoned in front of Hitler for the confirmation of her new job. She was expecting a loyalty oath, countless background checks, and to be forced to join the Nazi Party. Instead Hitler only wanted one promise from her: Since she would be a young girl working among a lot of male military personnel, she would have to promise to report to Hitler any harassment by them.

In June 1943, Traudl Humps, as she was known then, married Hitler's SS aide Hans Junge - just three months after she had stated that she "had no interest in men". The fact that they both worked close to Hitler enabled Hans Junge to - finally, after several pleas - get away from Hitler's entourage for a frontline duty in the ranks of the Waffen SS. He died in combat in Normandy in August 1944.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the entire Traudl Junge case is the fact that even though she was in the center of power, she knew less about the Holocaust than an average female student in Nazi Germany. Unlike the rest of the Germans she could not choose her whereabouts or the people with whom she spent her time. She simply was too close to Hitler to gain any perspective, since her "knowledge" about what was happening in the world came from Hitler and his single-minded entourage.

"The waiting time before lunch passed in easy conversation [in Berghof]. Hitler talked to Eva Braun, teased her about her dogs, which he said were nothing but a couple of dusting brushes, whereupon she replied that Blondi wasn't a dog at all but a calf. I was surprised to find that the man who had just come from a military briefing had left all his serious, official thoughts behind the heavy curtain that separated the Great Hall from the living room." - Traudl Junge

Filmed interviews: "Blind Spot: Hitler's Secretary" is a 90-minute 2002 documentary film consisting only of "talking heads" -style interviews with Traudl Junge in German, so do not expect anything grandiose. "Secretary to Hitler" is a 23-minute extra episode of the documentary series "The World at War" which was made in the 1970s. Compared to the "Blind Spot," this production is at least in English (although not fluently) and features some photographs to interrupt the talking heads footage.

Junge's memoirs - "Until the Final Hour : Hitler's Last Secretary" - offer an interesting window into the life around Hitler. The 2004 film Downfall ("Der Untergang") - about the last days of Adolf Hitler - is partly based on Junge's memoirs and is a film worth watching.

Recommendations: Sadly it must be stated that the book is superior to the filmed interviews.

"[After Hitler left his headquarters for a trip.] It was strange the way peace and quiet suddenly fell over the whole camp. As if the engine of the entire power plant had suddenly been switched off. I realized for the first time ... how Hitler's personality was the driving force behind all these people. The puppet-master who held the string of the marionettes in his hands had suddenly let them drop." - Traudl Junge

Gerda Christian

"She was a young Berliner, not only very capable but attractive and always well-humoured, and knew how to goad Hitler into talking at tea, in the Staircase Room and when travelling in the Mercedes. Dara knew how to give her face just the right look to excite a man. Hitler was delighted by her skill with cosmetics and would pay her the most unfettered compliments. " - Christa Schroeder of Gerda Christian

Gerda Christian - born Gerda Daranowski and nicknamed "Dara" - began working in the Reich Chancellery in 1935, and for Hitler in 1937 after Johanna Wolf and Christa Schroeder became overworked. She had a half-year break from working for Hitler in 1943 after she married Luftwaffe major Eckhard Christian (Traudl Junge was brought in during this period to fill in for Gerda). In addition to working for Hitler, she was also entangled with Hitler's inner circles because of her earlier marriage to Hitler's driver Erich Kempka.

There are rumours that Christian wrote memoirs. If this is true, they have remained unpublished, even though countless other memoirs by those close to Hitler have been published in German, and recently re-published in English.

"I Do not know why you women have to keep changing your clothes. When I think a dress is particularly pretty then I would like to see its owner wearing it all the time. She ought to have all her dresses made of the same material and to the same pattern. But no sooner have I got used to something pretty, and I'm feeling I haven't seen enough of it yet, than along comes something new." - Hitler according to Traudl Junge

"Once I asked: 'My Führer, why haven't you married?' His answer was rather surprising: 'I would not make a good father, and I think it would be irresponsible to start a family when I cannot devote enough time to my wife. And anyway I do not want children of my own. I think the offspring of men of genius usually have a very hard time of it. people expect them to be just like their famous progenitor, and won't forgive them for being only average. And in fact most of them are feeble-minded.'" - Traudl Junge

Christa Schroeder

"Clever, critical and intelligent, Schroeder had a turnover of work which no other secretary ever matched." - Dr Karl Brandt, Hitler's personal physician.

Christa Schroeder was one of Hitler's personal secretaries for over a decade, from 1933 to 1945. She was a very keen observer of human nature, and her highly-valued memoirs provide interesting details about Hitler and other notable Nazi individuals. Until her death in 1984, Schroeder keenly read everything written about Hitler, and considering how unbalanced most of it was, it must have played a part in her motivation to write her memoirs to set things straight.

After the war was over Schroeder - a shorthand typist - was classified as a major war criminal, before the system finally came into its senses in 1948. This was not her only trouble with the victorious Allies, as the next chapter reveals.

In 1945 Schroeder was interrogated by Albert Zoller, a French liaison officer serving in the 7th US-Army. This interrogation and later interviews in 1948 formed the basis for the ground-breaking 1949 book "Hitler Private" ("Hitler Privat - Erlebnisbericht seiner Geheimsekretärin" in German). However, Zoller never gave Schroeder any royalties from the book, and he also seized some of the sketches Hitler had given to Schroeder. Be aware of the fact that this book is only partly based on Schroeder's recollections, while the rest, about one third of the content, have simply been collected from other sources.

Schroeder's memoirs - "He Was My Chief: The Memoirs of Adolf Hitler's Secretary" ("Er war mein Chef" in German) - were published in Germany in the 1980s, which was not a favourable decade to publish Hitler related material. Nonetheless, it took surprisingly long period of time, two decades, before her memoirs turned up in English.

"Hitler knew how to charm a person under his spell during conversation. He could expound even the most complicated subjects clearly and simply. He had the power to relate something so convincingly that he fascinated his listeners. In March 1945 Gauleiter Forster came from Danzig totally demoralized. Danzig was surrounded by 1,100 Russian tanks and the Wehrmacht was opposing this force with four Tiger panzers, and these were short of fuel. Forster was determined to hold nothing back and tell Hitler the whole truth about the situation in Danzig. To my surprise he returned from his talk with Hitler a changed man. 'The Führer ... assured me that Danzig will be saved, about that there is no doubt,' he said in relief." - Christa Schroeder

Johanna Wolf

"Then came that grey, rainy day when Fraulein Wolf, eyes red with weeping, met me on the way to the Führer bunker. 'Stalingrad has fallen. Our whole army has been annihilated. They are dead!' She was almost sobbing. And we both thought of all that blood, and the dead men and the dreadful despair." - Traudl Junge

Johanna Wolf was hired into Hitler's personal secretariat in 1929 as a typist, eventually becoming a senior secretary in his Private Chancellery. Unfortunately, for the historians, Hitler's most senior secretary was one of those private secretaries who actually were "private." She consistently turned down all attempts to extract any information from her regarding her service with Hitler or working with the elite of the Third Reich.

After a decade and a half in Hitler's service it was no wonder that while Hitler addressed his other secretaries formally as "Frau" or "Fraulein", he called Johanna "Wölfin" (She-Wolf) because of her interest in wolves. She was often ill, and her work rate was questioned, but nobody could do anything about her since Hitler personally protected her.

"From his youth onwards Hitler had a great lust to read. He told me one day that during his youth in Vienna he had read through all 500 volumes at the city reference library. This passion for books ... enabled him to extend his knowledge into almost all areas of literature and science. I was always amazed at how precisely he could describe any geographical region or speak about art history or hold forth on very complicated technical matters. In the same way he could describe with amazing detail how theaters, churches, monasteries and castles were build." - Christa Schroeder

"Hitler hated snow, and sunshine made him feel bad. He did not like the sun and had bought the Berghof precisely because it was situated on the north side of the Obersalzberg. The house was in shadow all day, and the thick walls made sure no warmth got through from outside. ... Hitler's clothing was purely functional. He hated trying things on. ... From 1933 Hitler avoided personal contact with money which seemed in some way repugnant to him. Before 1933, when paying off a taxi, he would always give a big tip 'almost equivalent to the fare.'" - Christa Schroeder

"Hitler never spared himself. He would reject tiredness and would call upon endless reserves of energy. He was a prisoner to the delusion that an iron will could succeed everywhere." - Christa Schroeder