

1923

by C. Kevin Barrett

He lifted the sausage off the plate and sniffed it.

Bitter almonds.

He put the sausage back on the plate and stole a glance at the man sitting next to him through the haze of cigarette smoke. He'd known Hans Ehrlichmann for two years, ever since the unfortunate incident in Salzburg that had sent them north to Munich. Hans drew the massive porcelain stein to his lips, sucked in a mouthful of beer, then slammed it down onto the wooden table and wiped his dripping mustache with the back of his sleeve.

No, he thought, probably not Hans. Why wait until now and use poison? If he'd really wanted him dead he could

have done it on any number of occasions – privately, quietly.

He caught a glimpse of the waitress standing next to the kitchen door. She averted her eyes and slipped into the back. Wasn't there something out of place about her? The accent just a little too perfect; her teeth just a little too straight, too white. He pushed the sausages around in his plate, carefully lifting up each potato, turning over the dumpling.

Hans turned to him.

"Really Herr Hitler, you have the most peculiar eating habits. Just eat them!"

Adolf Hitler pushed the plate away and folded his arms.

"Smell them Hans, and if you are so certain, take a bite."

Hans leaned over and sniffed Hitler's plate. He looked back, his jovial smile replaced with a look of genuine concern.

"Who?"

"The waitress," Hitler replied as Hans reached for his revolver. "Don't bother getting up. She's already gone."

"Into thin air, Ja?"

Hitler nodded. That was how it usually worked.

Hans stood up and motioned for the owner of the Beer Hall. A minute later he came over to the table. He stood there, smiling, with his big calloused fists resting on his hips.

"What can I get for you?"

"Who was the waitress?" Hans replied.

"You mean my wife, Greta?" he said, motioning toward the bar where a large, dark haired woman in a green bodice filled steins.

"No," Hans replied, "the blonde."

"Blonde waitress?" the owner replied, puzzled. "It is just me and my wife, mein herr."

Hans gave a nod to Hitler who relaxed a little.

"Is there something the matter?" the owner added.

"No, not at all," Hans replied, the smile returning to his face. "Could you bring my friend another plate of sausages and potatoes? They are a little undercooked..."

"Really?" The owner said, reaching for one of the sausages. Hans grabbed his wrist.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Hans replied, "better to just throw them away, somewhere out back where your dogs can't get at them."

The owner acknowledged the request, although he was still at a loss as to why. He returned a short time later

with another plate and a fresh stein. He stood at the table for a moment as Hans cut up one of the sausages, smelled it, and then handed the fork to Hitler who chewed it thoughtfully and swallowed.

He gave the owner a weak smile. Hans motioned the owner away.

"That was close."

Hitler nodded in agreement as he worked his way through the plate with business like efficiency. The unpredictable nature of meals had made him cautious, forcing him to become very disciplined about food. It was not unusual for him to go several days without eating, especially when he'd been in an area for a while. That was when they usually tried something.

It had been that way for most of his life. Hitler remembered the very first attempt back in Vienna, when his mother had worked as a waitress at a sidewalk café. Adolf spent his afternoons with his mother, running errands or sitting on a wooden stool watching the foot traffic. Even then he'd known something was wrong about the two men standing across the street. What gave the men away was their size. They stood half a foot taller than the people around them. And then there was their skin color – bronzed, far from the pale and waxy complexions of the men

and women hurrying to and from work. The two men looked right at him.

They never lost eye contact with young Adolf as they ran across the street. Halfway to the other side there was the sound of a car horn and the screech of tires. The Mercedes hit both men dead on, sending them skidding thirty feet closer to the Danube. A crowd gathered. A man with a monocle wearing a dark wool coat leaned down and felt for a pulse. When he didn't find one he began searching through their pockets for identification. There was none, only two peculiar looking devices; one that looked like some sort of gun and the other like a small transistor radio. Both had shattered upon impact.

In the years since there had been other attempts. At times the frequency of these attacks was almost comical; two or three assassins showing up at the same time, stumbling over each other in a selfish attempt to get to him first. Once, when he had been in art school, they had rigged the gas lines in his apartment building to explode. Not counting on the lack of ventilation in the basement, the assassins had asphyxiated themselves before they could get out.

His enemies had come closest during the waning days of the war, lobbing cans of mustard gas into the trench where

Hitler was hiding. He'd awoken in a field hospital, gasping for every breath but nevertheless perfectly alive. No matter how many people they sent, no matter how careful the assassins seemed to be with their plans, something always went wrong.

Hitler thought he knew why.

He had a destiny to fulfill.

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Hitler pushed his chair back from the table. Immediately the men opposite him stood up, like two well-trained German Shepherds. Hitler waved them off.

"Are you leaving us Adolf?" Hans said.

"It is all this beer," Hitler replied, a pained smile on his face, "I will be back in a moment"

"Perhaps we should have someone go with you?"

"No," Hitler replied sternly. "I should think I can still go to the bathroom by myself."

Hans gave him a worried look and nodded. There was no use arguing with Adolf when his mind was made up. Hitler turned and started walking toward the back of the Hall.

A tall gentleman with dark hair followed.

Hitler stepped up to the long, porcelain trench that served as the urinal, unzipped his pants and began to pee.

He heard the bathroom door open and the sound of footsteps.

"Adolf Hitler..." the voice said. It had the intonation of someone who was not a native German speaker. He didn't need to turn around. The man would be tall, with perfectly straight white teeth and a deep tan.

"Yes," Hitler replied calmly, aiming the stream of urine at the stainless-steel grate.

There was a pause. He could hear the man's breathing change. The man took a deep breath.

"For unthinkable crimes committed against humanity —"

"— I sentence you to death," Hitler said, finishing the man's sentence for him as he zipped up his pants. He turned around and regarded the assassin's surprised gaze with indifference. The weapon the man held was no bigger than a Derringer, but he knew that it could easily remove both him, and most of the wall behind him.

"Wha—, how did you know?"

Just then the door behind him opened. Hans brought the stein down on the man's head. He collapsed, the look of shock still pasted across his face. Hitler stood with his hands folded behind his back as Hans removed the gun from the dead mans grasp and proceeded to riffle through his pockets.

"I thought so," Hans said, holding up the necklace.

Hitler took the necklace in his hand, running his thumb over the little gold emblem.

It was a Star of David.

"The Jews again," Hitler said, shaking his head.

"At least it wasn't the Russians" Hans replied, turning the gun over in his hands.

"Yes, Hans. They never do the speech."

"A small conciliation. You need to be more cautious."

"Perhaps, perhaps," Hitler replied, stepping over the dead man's body. "There will be time enough to deal with the Russians and the Jews later"

Hans nodded in agreement and they both returned to the Beer Hall. Destiny waited for no man, least of all Adolf Hitler.