



## *The Man Who Painted Postcards*

In the summer of 1910, the city of Vienna was in holiday mood.

Sunlight glittered on the spires of Austria's capital. Trams rattled down the wide avenues. And in the city's famous Prater amusement park, a giant wheel arced through the sky, its red cabins packed with delighted day-trippers.

Half an hour's walk away, in a shadowed room on a quiet street that few people ever visited, a young man sat painting postcards.

If you had glanced at him, you might easily have forgotten him. He was a little shorter than average, with a pale, serious face and short dark hair. He wore old clothes and battered shoes.

The only remarkable thing about him, in fact, was his eyes: clear, unwavering, almost hypnotically blue. If he looked up at you, you couldn't help noticing them.

Now, as the sound of the city drifted through the window, the young man was intent on his work, his brush flicking across the paper.

Few people knew his name. He lived in the Men's Home on Meldemann Street, a dormitory for people who could not afford a house in the city. There, in the reading room, he spent his days painting.

He was twenty-one years old. Nothing interesting had ever happened to him, and it probably never would.

He had been born on Easter Saturday, 1889, in the sleepy little town of Braunau am Inn, on the border between the empires of Austria and Germany.

His father was a very strict man, quick to lose his temper. When the young man was a little boy, the slightest thing might provoke his father to lash out and hit him.

His mother was very different, quiet and gentle. Her son kept her picture by his bedside for the rest of his life.

As a child, he had been just like any other boy. He played cops and robbers with his friends, and sang in the church choir. He read stories about cowboys and Indians, and dreamed up adventures in the sun-dappled woods.

But as the years went by, the skies darkened. His younger brother caught measles and died. His father's temper got worse, and almost every evening there were bitter arguments.

When the boy was eleven, his parents sent him to school in the nearest city, Linz. It took him an hour to get there every day, and he knew nobody. He found it hard to make friends and his schoolwork began to suffer.

Gradually he stopped trying. He spent his time day-dreaming about the great heroes of German and Austrian history.

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One day his father asked him what he wanted from life. The boy said he wanted to be an artist.

‘Artist, no!’ his father shouted. ‘Never, as long as I live!’

But when the boy was thirteen, his father died unexpectedly. Now, at last, the boy was the man of the house and could do whatever he wanted.

In 1905, when he was sixteen, he persuaded his mother to let him drop out of school. He spent his days painting and his evenings at the theatre, dressed in black, carrying an ivory-topped cane.

Two years went by. The boy became a young man, and it was time to unveil his talents to the world. That autumn he moved to the empire’s capital.

Vienna was a city fizzing with colour, packed with people from all backgrounds: Austrian officers strolling in their splendid white uniforms, Czech politicians arguing in the city’s cafés, Jews hurrying to prayers in their sweeping black coats.

Amid such energy and excitement, the young man felt lost. He had long dreamed of studying at the Academy of Fine Arts. He took the exam – and failed. His drawings, said the examiners, were ‘unsatisfactory’.

Then came worse news. At the end of 1907, his mother died. The young man was alone.

Back in Vienna, he spent his days wandering through the parks, simmering with rage at a world that had not given him what he wanted.

Most nights he went to the theatre. Again and again

he watched Richard Wagner's operas of German gods and heroes, thrilled by the sagas of dwarves, dragons and warrior maidens.

In his own mind, he too was a great German hero. One day, he would stand triumphant atop the blood-soaked bodies of his enemies.

Yet reality refused to live up to his dreams. He applied to the Academy a second time, and failed again. He ran out of money, moved to the Men's Home and painted postcards to earn a few coins.

There he sat, day after day, at the long oak table near the window, copying paintings of Vienna's great buildings.

To the other men who drifted in and out, he was not a great artist, let alone a great hero. He was just a man who painted postcards.

The weeks became months; the months became years.

In the spring of 1913, the young man decided to try his luck across the border, in the German city of Munich. He had never cared much for Austria anyway. He hated the empire's other peoples, especially the Jews, and preferred to think of himself as German.

Once again he settled down to a life of painting pictures for tourists. And then, a year later, everything changed.

On 1 August 1914, Germany entered the First World War. The next day, a crowd poured into the centre of Munich, swept up with patriotic enthusiasm. And there, right in the middle, was a pale young man with dark hair, his blue eyes shining with excitement.

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His name was Adolf Hitler, and he was going to war.



For most men, the First World War was a journey into hell. It was an unending nightmare of howling machines and thundering guns, a mad, fevered dream of death.

For the man who painted postcards, though, the war was a turning point. On the day war was declared, Adolf Hitler admitted, 'I sank down upon my knees and thanked Heaven.' At last, after years of drift, he had found a cause.

Within a few weeks he had arrived on the Western Front, where the armies of Germany, France and Britain were digging themselves into deep trenches etched like scars across the map of Europe.

There he served as a dispatch runner, carrying messages to the front line, the ground shuddering beneath the guns, the shells screaming overhead. Almost every day men died around him.

For the first time, he realized that 'Life is a constant horrible struggle'. If you killed your enemies, you might live. But if you allowed yourself to feel pity, they would kill you.

To his fellow soldiers, Corporal Hitler remained a man

apart, a thin, unsmiling fellow, always at the edge of the group. They called him 'the artist'.

Yet they respected his bravery. After delivering a message under heavy fire he was awarded the Iron Cross medal for courage, and on another occasion he was wounded when a shell exploded in his dugout.

But by the autumn of 1918, the German Army was on the brink of defeat. With their home population close to starvation and morale at breaking point, they were falling further back every day.

One night in October, the British attacked Hitler's unit with blinding gas bombs. He managed to deliver his last message, but by the morning, he remembered, 'my eyes were like glowing coals and all was darkness around me'.

Two weeks later, recovering in hospital, he heard shattering news. Germany had collapsed. There were crowds in the streets, the Emperor was gone and the war was over.

That night, Hitler buried his face in his pillow, and for the first time since the death of his mother, he wept.

It was all for nothing, he thought bitterly. He and his friends had given everything. And now they had been betrayed, stabbed in the back by cowards and traitors!

But there was worse to come. By the time he left hospital, Germany was in chaos. All authority seemed to have collapsed; all the certainties of life had been blown away.

In the Palace of Versailles, outside Paris, the leaders of Britain, France and America prepared a peace treaty, forcing the Germans to accept the blame for the world war.

Under the Versailles Treaty, Germany surrendered its

empire and handed over vast stretches of land to its neighbours. Its army, navy and air force were severely limited, and it promised to pay colossal sums of money to the Allies in 'reparations', to make up for the damage of the war.

To Hitler and his old comrades, Versailles was a stark humiliation. What was even more alarming, though, was the situation at home.

When he returned to Munich, he found it unrecognizable, a city haunted by the ghosts of wartime and the hatreds of the future.

By the spring of 1919 the city had been taken over by Communist revolutionaries, who wanted to sweep away Germany's history and build a new world, in which everybody would be equal. But they did not last long.

Within months their experiment was over, crushed by soldiers with machine guns, flame-throwers, tanks and aircraft. The streets of Munich ran red with blood.

It was against this background that, in the autumn of 1919, Hitler's commanding officer entrusted him with a special mission.

With the old Germany in ruins, dozens of new political parties were competing for attention. Hitler's mission was to sneak into a meeting of one little group, the German Workers' Party, and find out what they wanted.

So as night fell on Friday, 12 September 1919, he made his way into the centre of Munich. Just before he reached the medieval Isar Gate, he turned down a narrow alley, towards the Sternecker beer hall.

There, in an upstairs room, he found about twenty



people waiting. He settled into a seat at the back. A man took the stage and began speaking about what was wrong with Germany.

At the end, somebody piped up with a question. And then something extraordinary happened.

Suddenly, almost despite himself, Hitler was on his feet. And a moment later the words were flowing out of him, an unstoppable flood of rage and resentment.

Later, nobody remembered what he had said. What they remembered was the way he said it: the raw, bitter passion of a man whose life had been one failure after another, and who blamed the world for his misfortunes.

People had turned, curious to see who was talking. And soon they were listening, first with surprise, then with enthusiasm. By the time Hitler sat down, the room was electric with energy.

The postcard painter had found his purpose. His life would never be the same again.



A few weeks later Adolf Hitler joined the German Workers' Party. But as he spoke at meetings across the city, nobody seriously imagined that he would become master of Europe.

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So when people went to his meetings, pushing their way through the crowd into a sweaty Munich beer hall, what did they hear?

The performance was almost always the same. Hitler would begin slowly, even quietly. But as he went on – his voice rising and his eyes blazing – a lock of hair fell over his forehead and his face gleamed with sweat.

He would get louder, and louder, and louder, until he was screaming with rage. And by the end his audience would be in a frenzy of excitement, stamping and cheering in approval.

So what did they see in him? They saw a corporal from the trenches, an ordinary soldier who told them what they wanted to hear.

His message was simple. Germany had been betrayed, stabbed in the back by its leaders and cruelly punished by the Treaty of Versailles.

And who was to blame for all this? The real villains, he said, were the Jews. They controlled the cowardly politicians. They had stolen the people's money. And they had been plotting Germany's downfall from the start.

Many people knew this was an old, old lie. Jewish Germans did not control the politicians, and had not stolen anybody's money. In the war, Jewish soldiers had fought with tremendous courage. Even the officer who recommended Hitler for the Iron Cross was Jewish.

Yet many of those who listened to Hitler's speeches believed him. With their country humiliated, they were

desperate to find somebody to blame. And because the Jews were different, with their own history and religious faith, they had always been easy targets.

For many of the men and women in the beer halls, there was another, even more chilling threat on the horizon.

They had watched with horror as revolution had engulfed another troubled empire – Russia. There, the Communist Party had seized power, murdering the imperial family and promising to build a new world of total equality.

Already millions of Russians had been killed. The thought of Communism in Germany filled many people with terror.

For Hitler, their fear and anger made them the perfect audience. He had always loved music. Now he played on their feelings like a master musician, coaxing them into a frenzy of hatred.

The months went by, and his audiences grew. The German Workers' Party became the National Socialist Party – or Nazi Party, for short – and Hitler took over as its leader.

To attract veterans of the First World War, the Nazis were organized like an army, with ranks and uniforms. Hitler designed their flag himself: a bright red banner, with a white central circle around a jagged black cross, known as a swastika.

For Germany, the long nightmare went on. By 1923 its treasury was empty and its money was worthless. That January, a loaf of bread cost 163 marks. In July a loaf cost more

than 1,630 marks. By October it cost 9 million marks, and by November it cost 233 *billion* marks.

People's savings were wiped out overnight. The German mark was worth so little that when people went shopping, they took wheelbarrows stuffed with banknotes to pay for their groceries.

Society seemed on the brink of collapse. Businesses closed down. Even the city trams stopped running.

Hitler saw his chance. On the night of 8 November 1923, he gathered his supporters in one of Munich's largest beer halls. Leaping onto a chair, he drew his pistol and fired a shot through the ceiling. This was the moment, he shouted, when the Nazis would seize power and rescue Germany from disaster.

Unfortunately for Hitler, the German people completely ignored him. He and his friends were arrested, and he spent a year in prison.

He was not daunted, though. Instead, he used the time to write a book, *Mein Kampf* ('My Struggle'). Here, for the first time, he set out his dark vision of Germany's future.

Human life, he wrote, was a fight for survival. Mankind was divided into competing races. The Germans were the master race, destined to take revenge for the First World War and assume their rightful place as masters of Europe.

In Hitler's mind, he was the heir of the knights of old. He would lead his armies deep into Russia and build a new empire in the east. But in his vision there was no humanity, no pity. Among the conquered peoples, the weak would be killed and the rest forced into slavery. And above all, there

would be no mercy for what he called 'our mortal enemy, the Jew'.

The Jews, he wrote, had been behind all Germany's misfortunes. Greedy, treacherous and cruel, they had to be 'removed' from Germany before they destroyed it.

The next war, then, must be a war of extermination. There would be no pity and no surrender. This time the Nazis would fight to the death.



In normal times, Hitler's message would have fallen on deaf ears. People would have seen it for what it was: the terrifying fantasy of a failed artist, the lunatic daydream of a lonely, angry man.

But these were not normal times. Germany was bitter, broken and bleeding. Every family had its own stories of suffering and loss. And soon after Hitler emerged from prison, fate dealt the Nazis a mighty hand.

In October 1929 the world's banks were gripped by a sudden panic. From New York, a tremor of fear ran around the world. Businesses tottered, and millions of people found themselves out of work.

In every town in Germany, people came home ashen

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with grief. Their savings ran out. Their kitchen cupboards became dusty and bare.

Soon, many were begging for food. On street corners, lone figures stood with signs around their necks: 'Looking for Work of Any Kind'.

The mood was angry. The tension rose. On the streets of the capital, Berlin, there were bloody clashes between Communist supporters and armed Nazi fighters, Hitler's dreaded storm troopers.

Terrified of a Communist revolution, many Germans asked themselves if the Nazis might have the answer. Businessmen began giving them money, and in the summer of 1932, almost fourteen million people voted for Hitler's party.

The sunshine faded. The leaves turned brown. The snow began to fall.

Christmas came, but millions had no jobs. As the church bells welcomed the New Year, thousands of people were living on the streets, shivering and starving.

And it was now that Germany's political leaders made their fatal mistake.

For months they had been squabbling about the right way forward. Now, almost in desperation, these rich, well-connected men invited Hitler to help them run the country.

He would be their puppet. He could rant and rave as much as he liked, but they would pull the strings. And when he had seen off the Communists, they would get rid of him.

That was what they told themselves, anyway. They had no idea what kind of man they were dealing with.

At 11.30 on 30 January 1933, the man who painted post-cards took the oath of office to become Chancellor of Germany.

That night, torches burned in the darkness. Through the streets of Berlin marched thousands of Nazi storm troopers.

On and on they came, their steel helmets gleaming in the torchlight, their tramping feet like the drumbeat of an army. And up went the chant, again and again: '*Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!*'

Yet even then, in the glow of victory, there was a hint of what was coming.

One of the people watching the parade was a teenage girl called Melita Maschmann. She passionately believed in Hitler's promises, and was certain he would make Germany great again.

That night her parents had taken her to watch the march. As the storm troopers streamed past, their swastika flags raised in triumph, Melita felt a 'burning desire' to join the Nazis and devote her life to her country.

But then, without warning, one of the storm troopers stepped out of line and dealt a savage blow to a man in the crowd, only a few feet from where Melita was standing.

Her parents hurriedly drew her away, but it was too late. Melita had heard the man scream in pain. She had seen him fall to the ground, blood pouring from his face. And,