



On Hitler's Mountain

By Ms. Irmgard A. Hunt
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Introduction

"The strange man with the sharp, hypnotic eyes and dark mustache held me stiffly, not at all like my father would have, and I wanted to cry and run away. But my parents were waving at me to sit still and smile. Adolf Hitler, the great man they so admired, had singled me out, and in their eyes I was a star. As the crowd applauded, I saw my grandfather turn away and strike the air angrily with his cane."

As a little girl, blue-eyed, blonde haired Irmgard Hunt was the perfect embodiment of Aryan purity. And this, her startlingly candid memoir, offers an intimate glimpse of ordinary life in Germany during the reign of the Third Reich, under the shadow of the Führer's mountain retreat in Berchtesgaden.

Indoctrinated at a young age, Irmgard joined the Hitler Youth, nearly betrayed her anti-Nazi grandfather, lost her father when Germany invaded France, and tried to navigate an adult world of hypocrisy, denial, deprivation, and fear. Recounted through the eyes of a child, *On Hitler's Mountain* makes no apology for German atrocities, but instead presents a vivid and compelling document of a time when a nation's moral center collapsed.

Questions for Discussion

1. Irmgard frequently mentions her country's passion for order, from the "well-starched" linens in homes, to the mysterious pastime of "marching or walking in long, orderly rows." How did these innocent, even commendable, traits subtly enable Nazi triumph? What other aspects of German family life, culture and temperament facilitated Hitler's ascendancy, and how did the Nazis try to bring further into line those that didn't?
2. When Irmgard joined the Hitler Youth, she "was completely seduced by a feeling of belonging, of being united with all young Germans wearing this uniform." How did the Third Reich capitalize and propagandize that feeling of unity, of nationalism? How did that seductive feeling leave the country vulnerable to a cult of personality and facilitate unquestioning acceptance?
3. What rare attributes did grandfather Pöhlmann possess that enabled his resistance to Nazi ideology? How does he embody personal choice, passive resistance, and steadfast morality, even after he finally joined the Nazi party?
4. While playing dog and owner with the new girl Wiebke, what does Irmgard learn about power, control, and dominance?
5. Irmgard realizes that her mother Albine is still conditioned to look "to leadership, to government, rather than her own individual responsibility." Do you think Albine's outlook was shaped by the mores of her generation? If so, how did Irmgard escape the dictatorial conditioning of her own childhood?
6. Did the mad orgy of looting following Hitler's suicide reveal a moral collapse long hidden by the "much-touted" German honesty and passion for order or do you think people were simply trying to sustain themselves in a time of much scarcity?
7. Irmgard states that the Nuremberg trials were "the first time that the vast majority of the German public heard about the enormity of the crimes" committed by the Nazis. Yet she mentions several instances that suggest otherwise. Is it possible that, as a child, she simply was not privy to details adults already knew? Or do you think the adults studiously ignored disconcerting facts, much as they selectively accepted or discarded the changes to customs and holidays demanded by the Nazis?
8. Which detail or incident in Irmgard's reminisces struck you as the most unexpected?
9. Describe the changing tone of this memoir, as the recollections shift from early childhood to rebellious adolescent, from pre-war acceptance to post-war disillusionment.
10. Consider the Marshall Plan, "the most comprehensive and costly reconstruction and aid program the world had ever seen." Would the implementation of a similar plan, after Germany's defeat in WWI, have prevented Hitler's rise by undermining the need for a "strong leader"? Do you think the rise of the Third Reich was unique, or is it possible, that given the right set of circumstances, we might face the same harrowing moral dilemmas today or in the near future?

About the Author

Irmgard A. Hunt has been an executive at a number of environmental organizations, and as a consultant to several international not-for-profit organizations. She holds a B.A. from Columbia University (which she earned at age forty-eight) and an M.P.A. from Harvard University. She lives in Washington, D.C.