

Behind the Smile: The Untold History of ‘The Führer’s Daughter’

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Heinrich Hoffmann's photograph, "The Führer's Daughter" of Rosa Bernile Nienau and Adolf Hitler at Hitler's home at the Berghof, 1933.

Heinrich Hoffmann, 1933, The Führer and Youth, Postcard, Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, accessed February 2024,

https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2087

“The Führer’s Daughter” is a photograph taken by Adolf Hitler’s personal photographer Heinrich Hoffmann. Hoffmann was born September 12, 1885, in the Kingdom of Bavaria, Germany and passed away at the age of 72 on December 16, 1957, in Munich, Germany.¹ He was a *Reichsbildberichterstatter*, or a photo reporter of the German Reich.² He played a significant part in Hitler’s propaganda campaign and received royalties that made him a millionaire during Hitler’s rule. Hoffmann was an intimate member of Hitler’s inner circle and was a devout follower of him as well. It is estimated that there are close to 10,000 photographs that Hoffmann took of him. Ultimately, it was through the lens of Hoffmann that the world saw Hitler. “The Führer’s Daughter” was originally taken on April 20, 1933, at Haus Wachenfeld, later known as the Berghof, Hitler’s “home” in the Bavarian Alps.³ The photograph depicts Hitler embracing young Rosa Bernile Nienau with a wide smile. Hitler inscribed the photo, in dark blue ink, “To the dear and considerate Rosa Nienau Adolf Hitler Munich, the 16th June

¹ “Heinrich Hoffmann”, Wikipedia

² Ibid

³ “The Führer’s and Youth (Adolf Hitler with a Little Girl), Postcard (1933)”, German History in Documents and Images

1933” before sending Bernile the photo.⁴ The photograph also has dried edelweiss flowers and a four leaf clover pressed onto the photo held behind a piece of glass which Bernile added upon receipt of the picture.



Hitler's gift to Rosa Bernile in 1933 showing the pressed flowers Bernile added and the written message Hitler added. Alexander Historical Auctions, "Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau 'A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His Sweetheart'", 2018, https://www.alexautographs.com/auction-lot/adolf-hitler-inscribes-a-photo-to-rosa-bernile-ni_5524959BB2

This picture was embossed in a Hoffmann Studio envelope addressed to Nienau's mother, Karoline, in Munich, and has Hoffmann's studio name on the lower-left corner.⁵ Since Bernile's grandmother was fully Jewish, this made six-year-old Bernile a quarter Jewish or "mixed race of the second degree" and therefore Jewish according to the Nuremberg Racial Citizenship Laws of 1935.⁶ This fact was known to Hitler in 1933, but he chose to remain in contact with her despite this fact. Karoline Nienau, born Karoline Helwig, and her mother, Ida Voit Morgenstern, moved to Munich in 1928. Despite Karoline's mother converting to Roman Catholicism, she was still considered Jewish because Judaism was seen to be a race not a religion.⁷ This photo is from a series of photos with Nienau and became the start of a long-lasting friendship between the pair.

⁴ "The Führer's child": How Hitler came to adore a girl with Jewish roots", The Santa Fe New Mexican

⁵ "Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau 'A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His "Sweetheart"', Alexander Historical Auctions

⁶ "Nuremberg Laws", Wikipedia

⁷ "Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau 'A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His "Sweetheart"', Alexander Historical Auctions

Other pictures portray the two holding hands, exchanging kisses on the cheek, or even just smiling at each other.⁸



Hitler and Nienau holding hands in a field of edelweiss flowers,
Alexander Historical Auctions, 1933



Hitler and Bernile hand and hand after their birthday
celebration at the Berghof, Bavarian State Library, 1933

They became pen pals, Karoline helping Bernile craft letters to send to Hitler often referring to him as “Uncle Adolf ” and Hitler affectionately calling Bernile “sweetheart”. They continued their visits at the Berghof and there is record of the two exchanging letters 17 times- Bernile even sent him a pair of knitted socks. Most of the letters were received and responded to by Chief Adjutant SS. Wilhem Brückner and are now stored in the Federal Archives in Berlin.⁹ Here is one example:

Munich, 27 September 1936. Dear Uncle Brückner! Today I have a lot to tell you. During the holidays we were on the Obersalzberg and I was twice allowed to dear Uncle Hitler! Unfortunately, you have never been up. [...] I am already working on the Christmas work. [...] Uncle Hitler I knit some socks again because I asked him if they fit him last year. He said yes! This year I can knit with finer wool, mum only helps me with the heel. They are

⁸ *Jugend um Hitler*, Hoffmann, 1934

⁹ “Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau ‘A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His “Sweetheart”’, Alexander Historical Auctions

going to be very warm, and where he always travels so much, his feet will not feel cold.

[...] Mummy also sends you greetings and many greetings and kisses from your Bernile!¹⁰ Bernile soon became known as “The Führer’s Daughter”.¹¹ They originally met in the spring of 1933 when she and her mother joined a group of visitors celebrating Hitler’s birthday at the Obersalzberg and was chosen to have a closer visit with him, likely also because they shared a birthday and for her bright blue eyes and blonde hair. Their correspondence and meetings continued until 1938, when Karoline and Bernile were forbidden from visiting the Führer and from visiting his home in Berghof by one of Hitler’s secretaries due to their Jewish ancestry.¹² Eventually when Hitler learned she had been blacklisted from the property he was not happy. According to Hoffman, “Hitler was furious with those who had denounced his little friend” and remarked “There are some people who have a positive genius for spoiling all my little pleasures.”¹³

This photo was deployed as propaganda to depict Hitler as not just a father figure to children but to Germany as a whole, humanizing him. Eventually another high-ranking individual, Hitler’s personal secretary- Martin Bormann, intervened and halted the communication between the two. Bormann even forbade Hoffmann from printing any more pictures of Hitler and “his little friend” and wanted to destroy the books that Hoffmann had printed with photos of Bernile.¹⁴ In Hoffmann’s postwar memoir, “*Hitler Was My Friend*”, he captions a picture of the two “Hitler’s Sweetheart- it delighted him to see her at the Berghof until some busybody found she was not of pure Aryan descent.”¹⁵ These pictures continued to circulate and were sold as postcards with Bernile earning the name “The Führer’s Daughter.” On October 5, 1943, at age 17, Bernile died of spinal poliomyelitis in Schwabing Hospital in Munich, and the story of the relationship between her and Hitler was buried with her until quite some time later.¹⁶ On November 13, 2018, the Alexander Historical Auction House in Chesapeake City, Maryland sold this photograph to an anonymous, international buyer for

¹⁰ “Bernile Nienau”, Wikipedia

¹¹ “Up for Auction: Photo of Hitler Embracing Young Girl he Knew was Jewish”, Stuart Winer, 2018

¹² “Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau ‘A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His “Sweetheart””, Alexander Historical Auctions

¹³ *Jugend um Hitler*, Hoffmann, 1934

¹⁴ “Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau ‘A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His “Sweetheart””, Alexander Historical Auctions

¹⁵ *Hitler Was My Friend*, Hoffmann, 1955

¹⁶ “Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau ‘A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His “Sweetheart””, Alexander Historical Auctions

\$11,520. The auction house had received this picture through consignment from Germany.¹⁷ Andreas Kornfeld, the auction house's vice president of sales says, "it is a mystery how it made it to the US".¹⁸ They spent months investigating its the authenticity of this 11 ¾" x 9 ½" photograph and soon deemed it to be authentic and prepared it to be sold. Alexander Historical Auctions received quite a lot of backlash for profiting off of this type of material but they maintain the position that if no one finds and sells these items they will essentially fall through the cracks and that they are doing their part to preserve history.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸"Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau 'A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His "Sweetheart"', Alexander Historical Auctions

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Heinrich Hoffmann, 1933, The Führer and Youth, Postcard, Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, accessed February 2024,

https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2087

This source was found at the Prussian Heritage Image Archive which is an agency of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. This archive is housed at the Otto Nagel-Haus in Berlin and offers photographs, cartoons, and drawings in the fields of history, culture, and fine arts.

“The Führer’s and Youth (Adolf Hitler with a Little Girl), Postcard (1933)” German History in Documents and Images, accessed February 2024,

https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2087

The German History in Documents and Images is a collection of historical materials that recount German history. This is a project that breaks down and analyzes maps, documents, letters, photographs, postcards, and other primary source materials. It is categorized into different sections with headings including: Government and Administration; Parties and Organizations; Military and War; Economy and Labor; Nature and Environment; Gender, Family, and Generations; Region, City, and Countryside; Religion; Literature, Art, and Music; Elite and Popular Cultures; and Science and Education.

Heinrich Hoffmann. *Jugend um Hitler: 120 Bilddokumente aus der Umgebung des Führers*. Berlin: Verlag Heinrich Hoffman, 1934.

Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler’s personal photographer compiled 120 picture documents of Hitler around children at youth rallies, parades, schools and Hitler’s home. This series served as a glorification of Hitler and paints him as a family-oriented man though it does appear he genuinely enjoyed the company of children. Jugend Um Hitler translates to Youth around Hitler. Hoffmann printed 14 similar books, each with a different theme to humanize Hitler. The photos in this particular book contain ones of Hitler and Rosa Bernile Nienau with the famous postcard photo on the last page of the book. The ones on display show the pair holding hands walking through the Bavarian Alps with wide smiles

and cheery eyes. The introduction of this book was written by Baldur von Schirach, the Reichsjugendführer (National Youth Leader). This book was originally published in German and later translated by Zeitgeschichte-Verlag.

Pauline Kohler, *The Woman Who Lived in Hitler's House*, New York: Sheridan House, 1940

This book is based on the true story of Rosa Bernile Nienau who was known as the “Führer’s Daughter”. This book explores Nienau’s life and her relationship with Hitler along with her experiences living in his home in the Bavarian Alps. It also delves into the deeper historical context of the Nazi regime and World War II. Kohler includes interviews with Nienau’s family members as well as personal, first-hand accounts as Kohler was Hitler’s maid, providing a comprehensive account of this little-known aspect of Hitler’s life. This book was originally published in German and later translated by the Sheridan publishing company.

Heinrich Hoffmann, *Hitler Was My Friend*, London: Burke Publishing Co, 1955

One of Hoffmann’s many photobooks of Hitler’s personal life in an attempt to humanize him. He includes memoirs and details of the Führer. He chronicles how his career developed all the while his professional relationship and personal friendship with Hitler grew. The introduction was written by Roger Moorehouse

Wikipedia, “Heinrich Hoffmann (Photographer)”, Last modified 27 February 2024, accessed February 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Hoffmann_\(photographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Hoffmann_(photographer))

The Wikipedia page of Heinrich Hoffmann discusses his life before, during, and after serving as Hitler’s personal photographer. It details scandals of stolen paintings that Hoffmann was entangled in as well as the numerous books that Hoffmann wrote about Hitler, which include children’s books and collections of his photographs. It also explores his professional medical background as a psychiatrist.

Wikipedia, “Bernile Nienau”, Last modified 14 March 2024, accessed March 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bernile_Nienau&action=history

The page about Nienau discusses in light detail her life before Hitler, though it is clear that documentation of who she was only kept with the intention to chronicle her interaction and personal friendship with Hitler.

Wikipedia, “Nuremberg Laws”, Last modified 26 February 2024, accessed March 2024,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_Laws

The Wikipedia page of the Nuremberg Laws summarizes what the laws were, how they came into effect, and what their subsequent consequences of these laws were. It further discusses the implications on certain minority groups and the broader historical context of the Nazi party.

Stuart Winer, “Up for Auction: Photo of Hitler Embracing Young Girl he Knew was Jewish”, 11 November 2018, The Times of Israel, accessed February 2024,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/up-for-auction-photo-of-hitler-embracing-young-girl-he-knew-was-jewish/>

This photograph is up for auction at the Alexander Historical Auction and is expected to sell for up to \$12,000. This photograph shows Adolf Hitler embracing a young Jewish girl as they celebrate their joint birthday which he later autographed for her despite knowing she was Jewish. It explores the relationship between the two.

“Adolf Hitler Inscribes a Photo to Rosa Bernile Nienau ‘A Young Jewish Girl Who Became His “Sweetheart””, Alexander Historical Auctions, 13 November 2018, accessed February 2024,

https://www.alexautographs.com/auction-lot/adolf-hitler-inscribes-a-photo-to-rosa-bernil-e-ni_5524959BB2

This is the auction house that obtained the photograph of Hitler and Nienau. They are based out of Chesapeake City, Maryland and have been operational since 1991. They offer a platform to buy and sell military and war related historical items.

Ian Shapira, “The Führer’s child’: How Hitler came to adore a girl with Jewish roots”, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 15 November 2018, accessed February 2024,

https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/the-fuhrer-s-child-how-hitler-came-to-adore-a-girl-with-jewish-roots/article_87b183fc-ae68-5a43-a82d-329e3d501a80.html

Shapira explores the history of young Bernile and Hitler and how Hoffmann's photograph came into possession of the auction house and subsequently sold off.

Barry Hoffmann Nazi Postcard Collection, Clark University, 2022, Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, accessed February 2024,

<https://www.clarku.edu/centers/holocaust-and-genocide-studies/rose-library/postcards/>

This is a collection of 1,471 postcards that are connected to the Nazi Party in Germany. The Nazi party focused on anti-big business, anti-bourgeois, and anti-capitalist rhetoric which later shifted to be anti-Semitic and anti-Marxist. These themes are evident in the collection of postcards, illustrating the intended goal of these photos. Hitler established a Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda headed by Joseph Goebbels, Goebbels successfully ensured that the Nazi message was communicated through art, music, theater, films, books, radio, educational materials, and the press. Postcards were merely an extension of the propaganda department. Postcards were an affordable way to stay in contact with family and friends and this common form of communication became interwoven with images of Hitler and party symbols. Many photographs portrayed Hitler's image, building a myth of his supposed invincibility and charisma, casting him as a hero, father figure, and protector of Germany. By late 1943 the mass printing of postcards stopped due to extreme material shortages from the war. I could not determine whether "The Führer's Daughter" is among the postcards in the collection.