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A FRIENDSHIP WITH
HITLER INFECTS
A NOBLE BRAHMIN LINE.
BY JOHN SEDGWICK

THE HARVARD NAZI

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MANY AMATEUR GENEALOGISTS delve into the family archives in search of heroic ancestors—royalty, most commonly—to make them feel better about themselves. What if, instead, they turn up a villain, and not just some charming rogue, but a committed Nazi who was instrumental in bringing Adolf Hitler to power? How should they feel then?

Historian Stephen Norwood raised this discomfiting topic for me when he claimed, at a Boston University conference on the Holocaust, that Harvard had been “complicit in enhancing the prestige of the Nazi regime.” His evidence? The school’s warm welcome in 1934 to Ernst “Putzi” Hanfstaengl upon Hanfstaengl’s return for his 25th reunion. Hitler’s leading international propagandist, Hanfstaengl was cheered by several admiring classmates when he gave the Nazi salute. He was also recommended for an honorary degree by the *Harvard Crimson* and invited to university president James Bryant Conant’s house for tea. “[Harvard’s] record was shameful and

NEWS FROM THE FRONT: Nazi propagandist Putzi Hanfstaengl with the führer.

unjustifiable,” Norwood told the *Boston Globe*. It went without saying that Hanfstaengl’s was worse.

That’s Ernst Franz Sedgwick Hanfstaengl, with an emphasis on the Sedgwick. Putzi is—or *was*—my cousin, albeit a distant one. His familial line branched off from mine seven generations back, making him my fifth cousin. Like so many Sedgwicks, he was a person of some worldliness, culture, and sophistication. Though dead since 1975, he is also the one Sedgwick who will never go away, the one who calls all the others into question.

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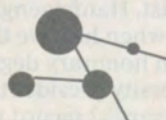
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I am up on Putzi, I should explain, because I have spent a couple of years now researching my extended family for a multigenerational memoir. Growing up, I'd heard intriguing bits about him—that he was Hitler's piano player and a remarkable whistler but not much more than that. A cousin, Irene Briedis, visited Putzi at his house in the town of Uffing, outside Munich, in the mid '60s. He was very charming with her, Irene said. He played the piano in the bravura style that had won over Hitler, and he showed her the attic where his wife had briefly sheltered the future führer after the failed beer hall putsch of 1923. She told me Putzi was "very nice."

I gathered more details about him from the many volumes of Hitleriana, including the recent accounts of Ron Rosenbaum and Lothar Machtan, who turned to Putzi as an eyewitness to

Recent biographies have turned to Putzi, Hitler's propagandist, as an eyewitness to the führer's sexual perversions.

Hitler's sexual perversions. (It's for this reason that Putzi was featured in a CBS miniseries about Hitler in 2003.) I read Putzi's *Unheard Witness*, a breezy memoir of his Hitler years written in the 1950s, when Putzi was trying to rehabilitate his image. I tracked down a Ph.D. dissertation about him and reviewed his FBI file. Without quite realizing it, I was searching for exculpatory evidence, proof that, even with a Nazi, things are never black and white.

BORN NEAR MUNICH in 1887, Putzi was a hulking bear of a man with a massive head. He had an aristocratic bearing and, with it, an air of superiority that could be irksome. This may account for a reputation as a pompous buffoon that he spent much of his life fighting. Third Reich chronicler William Shirer, for example, called him "an immense, high-strung, incoherent clown." Still, Putzi was extremely well connected in artistic and social circles on both sides of the Atlantic, and he was a talented, if showy, pianist. At Harvard, he played fight songs at pep rallies for the football team, once banging away on an upright piano perched on the back of a flatbed truck steaming through the streets of

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Cambridge. After graduation, he ran his father's New York art gallery and occasionally dropped by the Harvard Club and played the piano there at breakfast for a young New York State senator, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was a contact that would prove useful later.

Putzi met Hitler through a friend from Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club after returning to Germany. The friend put Putzi in touch with an American military attaché who had just discovered "a most remarkable fellow." When Putzi went round to a local beer hall to hear Hitler speak, he was initially disdainful. With his "odd little mustache," Hitler seemed "like a waiter in a railway station restaurant." But when Hitler began his speech, decrying the

Putzi was initially disdainful. But when Hitler began his speech, he was mesmerized by the dynamism of his voice.

many deprivations and humiliations of Germany after its defeat in World War I, Putzi was mesmerized by his words and by the dynamism of his voice.

He joined the nascent Nazi party and quickly worked his way into the inner circle. The piano, however, was his entrée to Hitler himself. In 1923, Putzi visited the Nazi leader at his apartment in a rundown section of Munich. There was an upright piano out in the hall, and one day, Putzi played a bit of Wagner's *Meistersinger*. He played it in a grand, Lisztian way that won over Hitler, who, Putzi wrote, marched about the hall, "waving his arms."

There were peculiarities, no question: the trench coat and slouch hat that made Hitler look like a desperado, the heavy whip he liked to carry and snap suddenly. Those touches were almost comically sinister. But what Putzi found most disturbing was Hitler's eerily submerged sexuality. Indeed, Putzi's close-up view has proved fascinating to modern scholars determined to explain Hitler's rage as sexual repression. Machtan, in his widely castigated *The Hidden Hitler*, describes the homosexual undertones of the pair's friendship. (Not for the first time: Putzi was labeled "Hitler's boyfriend" in a *New Republic* article in the late '30s.) In Putzi's memoir, though, he is, if anything, fiercely homophobic,

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claiming one of the things that soured him on the Nazis was the number of "fairies" in the inner circle.

Beyond these troubled meditations, Putzi was surprisingly tolerant of the man who ultimately became a synonym for evil. To believe the memoir, the two made a rather charming odd couple, one whose differences seemed only to strengthen the friendship. When Putzi played some of the rousing football marches from his Harvard days, he writes, he had Hitler "fairly shouting

Putzi turned the cheer "Harvard! Harvard! Harvard! Rah! Rah! Rah!" into the infamous Nazi rally cry "Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!"

with enthusiasm. "That is it, Hanfstaengl, that is what we need for the movement, marvelous," and he pranced up and down the room like a drum major. Putzi wrote more marches for the führer, including one that took the cheer "Harvard! Harvard! Harvard! Rah! Rah! Rah!" and turned it into the infamous "*Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!*"

Putzi drove Hitler to museums in an attempt to give him some cultural gloss, joined him for the melodramatic movies Hitler loved, and once snuck him through a communist checkpoint by passing himself off as an American businessman and Hitler as his valet. In one cozy moment, Putzi advised him to grow out the mustache—that "ridiculous little smudge which made him look as if he had not cleaned his nose." He recommended something more manly, like a Van Dyke. Hitler, of course, demurred.

Things turned more serious in the beer hall putsch of November 1923, when Hitler finally tried to make good on his threat to remove the communists from their seats of power in the German government. With his lieutenants in tow, and backed by a gang of henchmen, Hitler interrupted a speech by a government official to declare that, in effect, *he* was in charge now. When the insurrection was put down, Hitler fled the city, seeking cover at the Hanfstaengls' farmhouse in Uffing. It was an unlikely choice. But Hitler had always displayed a fascination with Putzi's attractive wife, Helene. Bizarrely, Hitler often gave her flowers and hand kisses, once even dropping to his knees to profess his love for



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her. When the frightened Hitler burst in that night, Helene hid him in the attic. In the morning when she rushed upstairs to tell Hitler the police had come to arrest him, she found him "in a state of frenzy." He pulled out a revolver. "This is the end," he declared. "I will never let these swine take me. I will shoot myself first." In Putzi's account, Helene grabbed the gun and jerked it out of the startled leader's hand before he had a chance to pull the trigger. If that happened—and there are no other accounts to corroborate it—it was one of the most fateful single acts in modern history. Moments later, the police hauled Hitler away to prison.

Putzi was there to host a quiet celebratory dinner after Hitler emerged a year later. He had a hand in editing the memoir Hitler wrote in prison, *Mein Kampf*, "crossing out his worst adjectives and the excessive use of superla-

Helene rushed upstairs to tell Hitler the police had come to arrest him. He pulled out a gun. "This is the end," he declared.

tives" but leaving the deranged core largely intact. Gradually, though, Putzi lost influence. His inside position went to savages like Joseph Goebbels. For Hitler, image-buffers like Putzi were useful only on the way up. Once he was in power, they may have only reminded him of his social deficiencies.

IRONICALLY, PUTZI had been pretty well shunted aside by the Nazis when he attended his Harvard reunion. The trip, in fact, revealed how isolated he was. While a few Nazi sympathizers may have cheered for him, most Americans he encountered treated him only with scorn. When he arrived in New York, he was greeted at the docks by thousands of protesters calling him a Nazi. Worse for Putzi, in Harvard Stadium he was photographed shaking hands with a Jewish judge—a picture that eventually got into Hitler's hands. Putzi considered it a PR coup, taking the anti-Semitic stain off the Nazi regime, but Hitler was furious that Putzi was consorting with enemies of the state.

Still, Putzi was determined to prove himself to the führer. So he was thrilled when, in 1937, a special assignment came to him from party headquarters

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to fly to Spain, then in the midst of its civil war, and brief some German correspondents. As Putzi recounts the story, he was summoned to the cockpit just 10 minutes after takeoff and informed by the pilot that the plan was to drop him over enemy lines. Putzi was terrified, sure he would be shot by Spanish communists before he ever touched the ground. The party had sent him on a suicide mission! The pilot took pity on him and, feigning engine trouble, brought the plane down near Leipzig for "repairs." There, Putzi slipped away to the train station and escaped to Switzerland. A letter from Hitler lieutenant

Putzi was terrified, sure that he would be shot before he reached the ground. The Nazis had sent him on a suicide mission!

Hermann Goering, Putzi's erstwhile friend, somehow reached him at his Zurich hotel. It asked Putzi to please come back; all was forgiven. "I assure you the whole affair was only intended as a harmless joke," Goering wrote, adding in a handwritten postscript, "I expect you to accept my word."

As presented in Putzi's memoir, the letter seems like another chilling example of the Nazis' black art, attempting to lure Putzi back into their clutches so he could be liquidated. But David Marwell, a historian, concluded that the episode was indeed a joke, a kind of elaborate frat-house prank intended for the amusement of Hitler and Goering. According to one report, the two Nazis viewed a short film made during the incident, finding the footage so uproarious that at one point Hitler stood up and clapped his hands. Then, unaware his seat had snapped up behind him, he tumbled to the floor when he tried to sit down again.

Marwell had gotten a copy of the film from the original cameraman and showed it to me one evening in New York City. It opens with Putzi being escorted from his apartment, then cuts to Staaken airfield. There is a darkly lit interior scene of Putzi sitting in his seat, then the fateful exchange with the pilot. Finally the disembarking on the ground near Leipzig. And that's it. There is only one moment to suggest this is, indeed, all a big joke. It comes at Staaken airport when a young attendant, standing behind Putzi,

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appears to be trying to do everything he can to keep from laughing.

Putzi found it unbearable to think of himself as the butt of such a joke, according to Marwell. "He wanted so desperately to be taken seriously," he told me.

Despite all this, Putzi spent the next two years in England, scheming to return to Germany. The matter was soon out of his hands. When the war broke out in 1939, Putzi was seized by British authorities as an enemy alien, then shipped to a Canadian detention center. There he managed to get a letter to his old Harvard Club friend FDR, offering to provide analysis of the Nazi regime in exchange for his freedom. The president bit, and though he wasn't freed, Putzi was eventually quartered at Bush Hill, a rural estate outside Washington. He monitored Nazi radio broadcasts and wrote the president advisory memos but offered no useful tips.

The FBI would, in time, develop a 131-page file on Putzi, essentially concluding that he could not be trusted. As a relative, I'd always assumed his greater pull was to the country of my family. He may have had a postadolescent fascination with Hitler, but surely, I thought, once the tanks started to roll across Europe and news began to surface about the Nazi death camps, Putzi would have severed his youthful allegiance. The truth seems to be more complex. Despite his Sedgwick blood and countless other American connections, including a son who joined the American army, Putzi Hanfstaengl was never one of us. He was one of them. That's why he returned, after the war, to Germany.

The definitive words were spoken at the end of his life. Asked about Hitler in an interview with Marwell, Putzi seemed unable to get the Nazi leader out of his bones and appeared preoccupied with the führer's tactical mistakes. "He forgot the winter," Putzi said bitterly, referring to Hitler's ill-fated march on Moscow. "He forgot the distance."

So he was a Nazi to the end. What does that make me? No Nazi, certainly. Nor a sympathizer. But it does reduce the degrees of separation between Hitler and me. A humbling reminder, I think, about evil—that there is no clear line of demarcation around it but merely gradations of complicity. I remain at a safe remove, but I can't say I am entirely in the clear. Adolph Hitler was, after all, a friend of the family. **B**