

HE WAS MY CHIEF

The Memoirs of
Adolf Hitler's Secretary

Introduction by Roger Moorhouse

CHRISTA SCHROEDER



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Translation by Geoffrey Brooks



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This is the first English language paperback edition.

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Introduction

CHRISTA SCHROEDER WAS AN ordinary woman cast into quite extraordinary times. Born in 1908 in the pretty central German town of Hannoversch Münden, she trained as a stenotypist before moving to Munich in 1930. Whilst there, she replied to an advertisement in the newspaper for a secretarial position at the headquarters of Hitler's stormtroopers – the SA. The association thus forged would be a lasting one. Graduating to a position as Hitler's personal secretary in 1933, Schroeder would be part of the Führer's entourage for the following twelve years, right up the bitter end in 1945.

This memoir, compiled from contemporary notes and letters as well as postwar reminiscences, is Christa Schroeder's own record of those extraordinary times. It gives the reader a fascinating insider's viewpoint on many of the salient events of the Third Reich. She expounds not only on political developments such as the Röhm Purge of 1934 or the attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944, but also on military matters from the Polish campaign through to the final collapse of the Nazi regime, which she experienced from the comparative safety of Berchtesgaden.

Yet it is not primarily for her political insights that Schroeder is of interest. Her experiences certainly ranged widely, but there is a backbone to her book which is not concerned with grand politics

– a subject about which she claimed to have little knowledge or understanding – rather it gives an intimate view of the workings of Hitler’s household and of the various characters working therein. In this regard, there is a refreshingly gossipy, chatty flavour to the book, as it illuminates some of the foibles and idiosyncrasies of members of Hitler’s entourage, as well as addressing more substantial themes such as Hitler’s often difficult and mysterious relationships with women.

Hitler looms large in the book, of course. As secretary to the Führer throughout the Third Reich, Schroeder knew Hitler as well as anyone and was extremely well placed to comment on his behaviour and personality. Indeed, Schroeder was herself no shrinking violet, and often spoke rather too bluntly to her employer. In the winter of 1944, for instance, she asked Hitler to his face if he still believed that the war could be won. Indeed, it seems that her candour almost became her undoing when she was ostracised by Hitler for a number of months after making the mistake of publicly contradicting him once too often. Yet, for all that, Schroeder’s is nonetheless a not unaffectionate portrait. Indeed, her presentation of the leader of the Third Reich as a rounded, three-dimensional, human being – with likes and dislikes, hopes and fears – is fascinating. She details his bourgeois manners, his vehement abstemiousness, his mood swings, even his sense of humour. Her description of Hitler is not of the wide-eyed fanatic, so familiar to the modern reader; rather he appears as a generous – even avuncular – benefactor, a kisser of ladies’ hands; a man who chatted easily with his secretaries and had a passion for Bavarian apple cake.

For all its gossipy revelations, however, there is a dark side to Schroeder’s story. For one thing, the ‘tone’ of her book is utterly unapologetic; there is nothing, for example, of the sense of perspective or *mea culpa* that one finds in the memoirs of Hitler’s other secretary, Traudl Junge – who famously concluded that ‘we should have known’ about the horrors of the Third Reich. This lack of remorse is,

in part, a consequence of Schroeder's rather cantankerous character: even the editor of this volume, Anton Joachimsthaler, described her as 'tough', 'extremely critical' and even 'wounding' in her ways.

Yet there is more to it than that. Schroeder claimed – convincingly, I think – to have known nothing of the horrors of the Nazi regime and of the crimes being committed in Germany's name. One might legitimately ask how a secretary in the Reich Chancellery could have long remained ignorant of the Holocaust. Yet, for all her closeness to the epicentre of power in Hitler's Germany, Schroeder would have argued that hers was a rather mechanical task largely restricted to the typing up of speeches and mundane daily correspondence, in which such events were rarely mentioned, or else couched in an impenetrable fog of euphemisms and double-speak. The most sensitive of instructions, of course, would always have been transmitted in person, thereby leaving little or no 'paper trail'. Moreover, Schroeder was if anything *too* close to Hitler and the Nazi elite – too close to gain an objective view, too close to question the propaganda, too close perhaps to catch a glimpse of the ugly truth. Confined in the rarefied atmosphere of Hitler's 'court' – in the eye of the Nazi storm – Schroeder was effectively insulated from the grim realities of the world outside.

As the logical corollary to this ignorance, Schroeder found it difficult to imagine that she personally had done anything reprehensible. Nonetheless, classified by the Americans as a war criminal of the first order, she was interned for three years after 1945. This treatment evidently rankled. As she complains in this book: 'Whether my guilt was as great as my expiation is something I do not know to this day.'

There were further grounds for her bitterness. After the war, she was interrogated at length by Frenchman Albert Zoller, who was serving as a liaison officer with the US Seventh Army. Zoller typed up and embellished his interrogation notes and published them under his own name as *Hitler Privat*, in 1949, describing the work as the

memoir of Hitler's 'secret secretary', but with Schroeder receiving no credit and, of course, no royalty. She would later complain that Zoller had also taken many of the material mementoes – Hitler's sketches etc. – that she had been given or had rescued from the ruins of the Third Reich. But, what rankled most perhaps, was that she claimed that he had also appended her name to various comments, opinions and anecdotes that she had never given.

Christa Schroeder's memoir was published, in German, soon after her death, aged seventy-six, in 1985. Understandably perhaps, given the injustice that she clearly felt, the book had a hint of obsession about it. She waxed bitterly lyrical about Zoller's perfidy, and appended lists of errors and statements that, she said, had been falsely attributed to her. As a self-confessed 'fanatic for truth', it seems, she was desperate to set the record straight, to put an end to what she perceived as her exploitation and misrepresentation by a generation of historians and writers.

Despite being a critical and commercial success, however, Schroeder's book did not find an English language edition until the present volume, over two decades later. This is peculiar; especially if one bears in mind the reception accorded to the memoir of Hitler's other secretary – Traudl Junge's *Until the Final Hour* – which was published to great acclaim in 2002. It may have something to do with Schroeder's rather prickly and unrepentant nature, and with the precise instructions that she left regarding how the memoir was to be prepared and published. It may also be that such personal testimony was simply out of favour in the mid 1980s. History, at that time, was at the height of its postmodernist spasm and was perhaps too busy finding obscure new perspectives and spurious grand narratives to bother too much with the simple memoirs of a simple secretary.

But there may be another reason why Schroeder's memoir was overlooked by British publishers in the 1980s. Two years before its original publication, the world had been stunned by the grand hoax of 'The Hitler Diaries', supposedly discovered in the GDR, but

quickly demonstrated to have been crude forgeries. In the process, of course, a number of historians, publishers and newspapers were embarrassed. And, in the aftermath, many of those same publishers recoiled when they were presented with any work that they considered to be even vaguely similar.

Thankfully, such once-pressing concerns are now history themselves. And, moreover, historical tastes have shifted once again and memoirs and first-hand accounts are once more seen as being of particular value. Though Christa Schroeder was perhaps not as insightful or perspicacious as the modern reader might have hoped, her memoir will certainly not disappoint, not least because so few memoirists stood as close as she did to the very heart of the Third Reich. Her book is engagingly written and contains much of interest: from thumbnail sketches of the characters of Hitler's entourage to an insider's view of the great events of the day, and an illuminating, highly personal portrait of Hitler himself. It fully deserves its place in the canon of first-hand accounts of the rise and fall of the Third Reich.

Roger Moorhouse, 2009

Editor's Introduction

A FEW YEARS AGO I was asked by Walter Frentz, a former Luftwaffe newsreel correspondent attached to Führer-HQ, if I would escort a lady to meet him in Munich. In this way I chanced to know Frau¹ Emilie Christine Schroeder. As her first name, uncommon in Germany, suggests, she was no ordinary person and did not resort to cliché. Educated, musically gifted, always on the quest for truth and the meaning behind matters, she was also tough and extremely critical of people, the modern environment, of herself and her own past. Sometimes she could be direct and wounding in her own way, but the rough exterior hid a nervous, often insecure and sensitive being within.

I was the author of many technical and historical works and was working at that time on a book about Hitler's planned broad-gauge railway for Europe. Thus Frau Schroeder found in me somebody with whom she could converse about her life, her past and Hitler himself. Frau Schroeder was a fanatic for truth. In a newspaper cutting which I found later in her papers she had underscored twice

¹ Christa Schroeder never married. The practice of addressing women as 'Fräulein' or 'Frau' depending on their marital status was current into the 1970s but has become discontinued in modern Germany as part of the process of female emancipation, and all women out of their teens are now accorded the prefix 'Frau' irrespective of their civil status.

in red the following passage, adding a marginal note: 'This is the correct definition of Truth.'

The truth is an amazing thing. You can bend it, hide it, trim it, pluck the feathers from it and shake it to pieces. But you can't kill it. Eventually it always resurfaces, one day somewhere it breaks through. There are times when the truth – frequently in the interests of a State – grows dim, when it becomes a target for destruction. But some day it reappears. The same may be said for our private and business lives.

'Lies and deceit plough the soil of the world' is an old German proverb. The lie will always be with us, but we should never lose patience in waiting for Truth's hour. 'The truth may sink, but it never loses its breath,' reads an inscription over the portals of a patrician's house: and we should remember the old saying, 'The truth must have a thick skull, for how many times is it stood on its head?'

Christa Schroeder wanted to get to the very roots of a thing; she hated distortions, but basically could never come to terms with her own past. Whether that would actually be possible after twelve years close to Hitler is another matter.

Her relationship with the Nazi party

She was not a National Socialist in the true sense. She often said: 'If the job offer had been made to me in 1930 by the KPD and not the NSDAP, perhaps I would have become a Communist.' She was a woman who looked at things critically, observed them, pronounced on them, could analyze them, and so found herself tossed back and forth between Hitler, the friends and events of yesteryear, the Nazi system, the consequences of the war and the cruelty of the extermination programme for the Jews. In her notes she stated:

After three months I was told that I had to join the Party since only NSDAP members could be employees. Since I knew nothing of politics and did not want to lose my job I signed the application form and all was well. It changed nothing in my life. As I was a member of the Reich Leadership Section I never came into contact with the small centres and was only asked once or twice to take part in gatherings and suchlike. I suppose I went a few times to the big assemblies in the Zirkus Krone, but I felt nothing in common with the speakers or the masses and I must have appeared terribly stupid.

An alternative view of her appears in the US Army intelligence report of 22 May 1945² in which it is reported that: 'Mr Albrecht . . . interrogated her. She was rather stupid, dumpy and an ardent Nazi.'

In her shorthand notes, Frau Schroeder wrote of this event: 'After the interrogation was over, Lt Albrecht brought me back to Hintersee and had a very friendly conversation with me. When I expressed regret that my whole life, all the years, had been for nothing, he replied, "No, everything has a purpose, nothing is wasted." He added that his wife had assured him so.'

Her letters and postwar notes

In her note of 18 February 1979, Frau Schroeder perhaps admits her inner turmoil, the sporadic progress of her self-set task and her quest for truth:

For years everybody has urged me to write down everything I know about Adolf Hitler. Some time ago I began transcribing my shorthand notes from 1945. But instead of devoting myself to the task, and working industriously at it for two to three hours daily,

² Univ. Pennsylvania, Charles Patterson Van Pelt Library, microfilm 46M-11FU US Army 101st Airborne Division, Counter-Intelligence Corps, 22.5.1945.

I became aware repeatedly of the many layers of Hitler's character. It plunged me into depression.

I was in that psychic condition which the Russian author Ivan Goncharov described in his 1859 novel about Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, who constantly planned great things for tomorrow or the day after, but then proceeded with his life 'in a certain capricious torpor', preferably spending his time in bed, always exhausted and drunk thinking over his fine plans, intentions and prospects.

It was my mistake to assume that I could unveil the 'true face' of Adolf Hitler. It is simply impossible, because he had so many.

She considered that in Hitler's personality of many layers and pluralities the spectrum extended from extreme kindness and concerned attentiveness to ice-cold brutality. In her copy of the disputed Zoller book mentioned at greater length below she corrected her copy of the text at pages 10–12 and left the following passage standing:

For a long period he was the only string-puller behind all events which occurred in the Reich. Everything to him was calculation and subtlety. To his death he played the role of the theatrical director. Hitler had the gift of a strange magnetic radiance. He had a sixth sense and a clairvoyance which was often decisive for him. He weathered all dangers which threatened him, observed in some mysterious way the secret reactions of the masses, and fascinated his conversation partners in a manner which defies description. He had the sensitivity of a medium and the magnetism of a hypnotist. If one reflects on the series of extraordinary strokes of luck which kept him safe during all the many attempts on his life, and from which he concluded that Providence had selected him for his mission, then one can perceive the significance which the imponderables assumed in his life. These were, I believe, the most prominent characteristics of the peculiar person who almost undermined the

basic foundations of the world. There was not just one Hitler, but several Hitlers in one person. He was a mixture of lies and truth, of faithfulness and violence, of simplicity and luxury, of kindness and brutality, of mysticism and reality, of the artist and the barbarian.

She asked her friend Anni Brandt for her impression:

This morning Anni Brandt³ confirmed it to me. At the beginning of March 1945 she – Anni – was invited by Eva Braun to tea at the Reich Chancellery, which she took with Adolf Hitler. When a servant appeared and whispered to her that her husband had arrived and was waiting for her downstairs, Hitler wanted to know what had been said. He was always inquisitive when something was whispered, and if one wanted to arouse his interest in anything, the simplest way was to whisper about the matter to a neighbour and one could rest assured that Hitler would enquire.

Shortly after the attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944, Dr Karl Brandt was sent packing. He was obliged to leave the Rastenburg FHQ and had not seen Hitler subsequently. Now Hitler sent for him. Hitler was unsure and at first could not look Dr Brandt in the eye, but then began to converse with him as they used to do in the past. All the more incomprehensible for me was it therefore when only weeks later Hitler sentenced him to death.⁴ Thus it is

3 Anni Brandt née Rehborn (b. Langenberg 25.8.1904). German Ladies' national swimming champion (crawl and backstroke) during 1923–9 period; 1928 Olympic Games Amsterdam; introduced to Hitler 1925 and from then until 1945 part of his intimate circle at the Berghof. Married surgeon Dr Karl Brandt 17.3.1945, one child: taken into US custody April 1945.

4 SS-Gruppenführer Dr (med.) Karl Brandt (b. 8.1.1904 Mühlhausen, Alsace, d. 2.6.1948 Landsberg Prison, executed as war criminal). Dr Brandt was arrested by the SS on 16 April 1945 for defeatism after sending Hitler a letter on 1 April 1945 expressing doubt in final victory, and sending his wife and child to Bad Liebenstein so that they would fall next day into American and not Russian hands. On 17 April 1945 he was condemned to death by court martial but was still at Kiel awaiting execution when Hitler's death was announced, and Speer had him freed.

understandable that at Ludwigsburg, while amongst the doctors being transported to Belgium for war crimes trials, Professor Brandt, in reply to my question, 'What was the boss, a good or evil man?' should answer spontaneously, 'He was a devil!

Frau Schroeder concluded:

Thirty-three years have now passed since then. I was never a person interested in politics. It was only Hitler as a man who interested me then: what I experienced of him under dictation; in his personal presence at the evening tea sessions in the 'staircase room' of the Radziwill Palace; in the larger circle at the Berghof at mealtimes or at midnight around the fireplace: and later during the war in the Führer-HQs at tea after the nightly military situation conferences. How I saw everything then – that is what I want to write about.

Frau Schroeder worked only sporadically at her notes. She had a hackneyed book marked 'Shorthand Exercises' on the cover and a lever arch file for manuscripts. The old book contained her shorthand notes made during the period of her internment postwar. The last entries are dated August 1948. They were taken down in Stolze-Schrey shorthand and not, as *Quick* magazine (Issue 19, 15 May 1983, p.156) alleged, 'in a secret script which only Frau Schroeder could read'. At this juncture I would like to thank the shorthand historian Herr Georg Schmidpeter who transcribed those stenographic notes not already typed up by Frau Schroeder. Besides these she had many other notes, observations and slips of paper with jottings noted down as items were remembered or on which she was working currently. By the year of her death, 1984, she had cast 95 per cent of her shorthand notes into typed folios of 162 pages for a manuscript. Some of these pages date from the 1976–84 period and do not appear in the shorthand notes.

The genesis of the Zoller Book

In the first days of her confinement at the US Army Internment Camp Augsburg in May 1945, Frau Schroeder was interrogated by Albert Zoller, a French liaison officer to the US 7th Army. He asked her to write down everything she knew about Hitler, the circumstances of Hitler's life and events during the Nazi period. In 1949 after her release Zoller informed Frau Schroeder that he intended to publish her notes under her name. She was supplied with some limited manuscript material to the book but when Zoller failed to produce the entire manuscript despite repeated requests she refused him permission to use her name as author.

In 1949 the book was published using Zoller's name as author. The original language was French with a translation into German, the result being published by Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf, under the title *Hitler privat – Erlebnisbericht seiner Geheimsekretärin*. The Foreword depicted the person and activity of the 'Secret Secretary' in such a manner as to make it seem that Frau Schroeder was author of the book, but had allowed Zoller to appear as author with her full agreement.

Parts of the text foreign to her notes had been interpolated. The German version was a re-translation from French of the original German draft, this resulting in frequent shifts of meaning. Statements were attributed to Frau Schroeder regarding military-technical matters of which she had no knowledge, or of conversations at military situation conferences which she never attended, and so on. She recognized at once that the falsely attributed statements must have been made by prominent arrestees at the Augsburg Internment Camp, such as photographer Heinrich Hoffmann or adjutant Julius Schaub or others whom Zoller had also interrogated. She did not dispute the veracity of what was alleged in these statements, only that she disputed having spoken or written them herself.

Frau Schroeder worked through a copy of Zoller's book striking out all passages which did not originate from herself. She claimed 160 to 170 pages as her own work and 68 to 78 pages as from other sources, or as being individual passages re-worded or given a different slant by Zoller. In a letter dated 21.11.1972 to Frau Christian she explained:

It is interesting how Zoller put words in my mouth which are mythical and in reality must have originated from his confidential conversations with General Staff officers which he obtained in his capacity as an interrogation officer. It was quite improper for him to have used these as material for a private publication.

His crafty solution was to put these statements into the mouth of 'the Secret Secretary' where to the outsider and uninformed they appear credible. Here is an example. He writes – puts into my mouth – 'If in military situation conferences the conversation turned to rumours about the mass murders and torture in the concentration camps, Hitler would refuse to speak, or brusquely halt the talk. Only seldom would he respond, and then to deny it. In front of witnesses he would never have admitted the inhuman harshness of the orders he had given. One day some generals asked Himmler about the atrocities in Poland. To my surprise he defended himself with the assurance that he was only carrying out Hitler's orders. But he added immediately: 'The person of the Führer must under no circumstances be mentioned in that connection. I assume full responsibility.' It was moreover self-evident that no Party member, no SS-Führer no matter how influential, would have dared to have undertaken such far-reaching measures without Hitler's agreement . . .

'The foregoing', Frau Schroeder concluded, 'seems absolutely credible, and it originates, and can only have originated, from somebody present at the military situation conferences who did not

want to be named, and so the "Secret Secretary" said it. I do not think you could get more crafty than that.'

My own involvement begins

In 1982 Frau Schroeder asked me if I wanted to publish her notes with my own commentaries. This surprised me. I knew of her bad experience with the Zoller book and that she did not want the notes published in her lifetime. Another of her reasons for having delayed publication was that no sooner were memoirs published than they would be pulled to pieces by contemporaries, a sin of which she was of course guilty herself with respect to the books of Linge, von Below, Hoffmann, Krause, Henriette von Schirach and so on. Frau Schroeder wanted no remuneration for the notes. She declined money or reward in kind, emphasizing repeatedly that her pension was sufficient, she had no special wants and was content with what she had. She had no interest in selling the notes. That remained the position until her death although there was no shortage of offers.

When I failed to reply promptly to her enquiry the matter was dropped for a considerable period. As far as she was concerned that was an end to it. Once Frau Schroeder returned from hospital after the removal of a carcinoma, however, she raised the matter of the notes again, and of my compiling them together with a commentary. At the time she could not flex her fingers and had difficulty in typing. She also tired very quickly. The day before she left for the Schlossberg Clinic at Oberstaufen she invited me to call and we spoke in detail about the publication of her notes in the presence of the female friend with whom she was to travel on the morrow. On her return by ambulance she was clearly seriously ill. A few days later she telephoned and asked me to drop by. After explaining that she was to be re-admitted to hospital she gave me a large, old black trunk containing her literary bequest. She was anxious that under no circumstances 'should her entire literary estate fall into the hands

of journalists, or no matter who,' and I should remember what she had always said and wanted.

Complying with her wish that her notes should be published after her death, and recognizing that they contained much interesting material, I arranged them in order and supplied the commentary. If the book does not always appear to flow smoothly, the reason is that it was necessary to use incomplete pages of manuscript and single detail notes just as Christa Schroeder prepared them and wanted them published.

Who was Christa Schroeder?

Emilie Christine Schroeder was born on 19 March 1908 in Hannoversch Münden. Her relationship with her mother was not close. The mother was a single parent with a very strong personality who failed to provide her daughter with the warmth and affection she probably craved. The mother died in 1926 when Christa was 18, leaving her orphaned and alone.

After completing secondary education on 11 April 1922 she began a three-year commercial training course at a firm owned by distant relatives, C.F. Schroeder Schmiergelwerke KG, in her home town. Meanwhile she also attended the Commercial Career and Business School, completing her training on 1 April 1925, and continued working thereafter for the Schroeder firm as a shorthand typist until 19 July 1929. She had a great talent for shorthand writing which she continued to develop by intensive continuation training and courses. She often took part in shorthand competitions and not infrequently would emerge with first prize.

In October 1929 she left Hannoversch Münden for Nagold, Württemberg, where she was employed as the sole legal secretary to an attorney. She remained there until 20 February 1930 when she left for Munich in search of a better position and to advance her career. In this period of the Great Depression, Germany had almost 7 million