

# I WAS HITLER'S CHAUFFEUR

*The Memoirs of  
Erich Kempka*

ERICH KEMPKA

*Introduction by* Roger Moorhouse



# **I Was Hitler's Chauffeur**

'I have portrayed the events related in this book to the best of my knowledge and conscience. I have omitted nothing and inserted nothing, but have portrayed the historical facts as I personally experienced them.'

Erich Kempka



*Erich Kempka (1910–1975)*

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**Erich Kempka**

Introduction by Roger Moorhouse

Translation by Geoffrey Brooks



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Frontispiece: Erich Kempka

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1. Kempka and Adolf Hitler at the Wolf's Lair; Hitler and Benito Mussolini on the Ukrainian frontline
2. Hitler visiting a factory in Steyr, Austria; Kempka and Hitler
3. Hitler travelling to Berlin's Kroll Opera House; Hitler during the election tours of 1932
4. Hitler at Martin Bormann's wedding in 1929; Reichsleiter Martin Bormann
5. Eva Braun
6. Flugkapitän Hans Baur; Kempka in 1975; Hermann Göring at the Nuremberg War Trials
7. Major Otto Günsche, Hitler's adjutant; Otto Günsche at the Friedland Camp
8. An American soldier at the Führer-bunker, July 1945; A Soviet officer stands at the Führer-bunker



## *Introduction*

**E**RICH KEMPKA WAS ONE of those silent witnesses who is easily forgotten or overlooked by historians. Born in 1910 in the industrial city of Oberhausen in the Ruhr, he grew up in humble circumstances as one of ten children born to a family descended from Polish immigrants. As a young man, he served an apprenticeship with the DKW vehicle distributors in nearby Essen, before finding a job as a driver for a local newspaper. In those early days of the motor car, it was a choice of career that would serve him well and would propel him to the very heart of coming events.

Already a Nazi party member from 1930, Kempka served as chauffeur to the party's regional leader – or Gauleiter – in Essen, Josef Terboven. Early in 1932, he was recommended by Terboven as a reserve driver for Adolf Hitler's personal motor pool. Accepted for that post, he would also be named as one of the eight original members of Hitler's bodyguard – the *SS-Begleitkommando*.

As Hitler's chauffeur, Kempka journeyed right across Germany. Indeed, as he related, his first action after his appointment was to jump into the Führer's six-litre Mercedes and drive the 480 or so kilometres from Munich to Berlin. During the election campaigns of 1932 – the last year of the Weimar Republic – Kempka accompanied Hitler everywhere, covering an astonishing 132,000 kilometres in crisscrossing the country to meet Hitler's plane and deliver him to his various speaking engagements. At other times, he recalled, there was a more relaxed atmosphere, as Hitler – ever the enthusiast for

the motorcar – would sit alongside him, chatting easily and map-reading with a road atlas spread across his knees. The connection thus forged would be the defining relationship of Kempka's life. He developed a 'strong personal bond' with Hitler, which, it seems, was reciprocated. Kempka would be a constant companion, faithful servant and close confidante to Hitler for the next thirteen years, until the collapse of the Third Reich.

From this vantage point, Kempka was naturally well placed to observe Hitler at close quarters and to pass comment, not only on his master's foibles but also on those of many of the individuals that made up Hitler's inner circle, including his private secretary Martin Bormann and his personal physician Dr Theodor Morell. He was also one of the few Germans of that era who were well acquainted with Hitler's long-term mistress Eva Braun. Indeed, it would be Kempka who insisted on carrying Eva Braun's body up from the Reich Chancellery bunker on 30 April 1945, prior to its cremation in what remained of the Chancellery garden.

Kempka was also well placed to comment on other salient events of the Third Reich. 'It's a funny thing', the American prosecutor said of Kempka at Nuremberg, 'that you happened to be everywhere.' He was present, for instance, at the so-called 'Night of the Long Knives', when SA-leader Ernst Röhm and many of his fellows were murdered. Yet, his focus in this book was very much on events at the very end of the war, specifically the circumstances of Hitler's death and his own remarkable escape from the bunker and from Berlin.

It was in this capacity, indeed, that Kempka was to come to the attention of the world. At the Nuremberg Tribunal in the summer of 1946, Erich Kempka took the stand as an eyewitness of those tempestuous last days of the Third Reich. He was called, in the first instance, in the trial *in absentia* of Martin Bormann, whose

defence attorney chose the unusual tactic of arguing that his client could not be charged as he had been killed in the battle for Berlin the previous year. In his rather breathless testimony before the tribunal, Kempka claimed to have been one of the last people to have seen Bormann alive, and vividly described the circumstances of the Soviet attack in which the former Reichsleiter was thought to have perished. Despite Kempka's evidence, however, the myth of Bormann's survival would persist for more than two decades, spawning numerous unconfirmed sightings in Latin America, until his remains were finally discovered – not far from where Kempka had last seen him – in 1972.\*

Of course, Kempka would also serve as a witness to another high-profile death. Though he had not seen Hitler's death itself, he was nonetheless present in the immediate aftermath and was to be intimately involved in the circumstances surrounding Hitler's cremation. That afternoon, he was contacted by Hitler's adjutant Otto Günse, who demanded that he bring 200 litres of fuel from his motor pool to the Reich Chancellery garden. Though he did not know it at the time, that fuel was to be used to cremate the bodies of Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun. Kempka would be one of the small group, who stood that afternoon and watched the two bodies burn.

Naturally, perhaps, this moment was to be one of those that rather defined Kempka's life. Accordingly, his memoirs, first published in German in 1951, originally carried the sensational title *Ich Habe Adolf Hitler Verbrannt* ('I Cremated Adolf Hitler'), before being toned down somewhat for a 1975 reissue as 'The Last Days with Adolf Hitler'. That later edition also contained an accompanying text by one Erich Kern, who was himself a veteran of the *SS-Leibstandarte* and, by the 1970s, was an extremist, right-wing journalist, with some rather dubious connections. Kern's text, which was billed as

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\* Bormann's remains were initially identified from memory by Hitler's dentist, Dr Hugo Blaschke. However, definitive identification came only when a DNA test was carried out in 1998.

providing ‘background and context’ to Kempka’s memoir, was in fact more of an extended and intemperate rant, which railed against the Western Allies and against a generation of historians that – according to Kern – had peddled lies and distortions about Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Even in the 1970s, Kern’s text must have seemed somewhat close to the knuckle. Yet, to the modern reader, it is faintly ridiculous – tilting as it does at imagined enemies and insistently defending the indefensible. For this reason, the editors of this first English-language edition have made the decision to remove Kern’s original introduction and most of ‘background and context’ that accompanied it. The only sections of that original text that have been retained in the present volume are those that genuinely do provide a modicum of context to Kempka’s recollections of those dramatic final days during the battle for Berlin. They are presented here as appendices.

Yet for all Kern’s self-righteous bile, Kempka is a genial and engaging host. Self-deprecating and modest in nature, he also comes across as surprisingly un-ideological for someone who was an Obersturmbannführer in the SS.\* Of course, it is possible that he was simply tailoring his memoir to the mores of a post-war audience, and the association with Erich Kern certainly does not suggest that Kempka was politically beyond reproach. Yet, one does have to wonder how ideologically motivated and ideologically shaped he really was, especially given his Polish ancestry. We cannot know for sure, but it may well be that his fealty to Hitler was much more that of servant to master, than that of acolyte to prophet.

Kempka also possessed a good ear for the killer phrase and so soon became a favourite interviewee for a generation of historians and documentary film makers. James O’Donnell, for instance, quoted Kempka’s memorable description of Hermann Fegelein

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\* A rank that was equivalent to that of a lieutenant colonel.

having ‘his brains in his scrotum’ and his remark that when Magda Goebbels was around Hitler one could ‘hear her ovaries rattling’. It is colourful quips and observations such as these that help to raise this memoir above the ordinary.

This book is part of a series. Along with Christa Schroeder’s *He Was My Chief* and Heinz Linge’s *With Hitler to the End*, it forms the third volume of what one might call the ‘Household Series’. Taken together, the three books make for tremendously enlightening reading, giving us a precious and fascinating insight into the realities of life in the Nazi inner circle and showing both the dynamics and the petty rivalries of the clique of senior personnel around Hitler.

Crucially, in my opinion, these three memoirs also show us Hitler as the members of his household saw him – not as a ranting political extremist, but as a man. This is not merely an academic exercise or an intellectual parlour game; it should serve as a healthy corrective, reminding us that for all his well-documented extremes, Hitler was nonetheless a man who could inspire loyalty, affection, even love. He could be charming and avuncular; he was a kisser of ladies’ hands and seems to have treated his household almost as one would an extended family. As Kempka related, Hitler was not like a ‘boss’; rather, he played the role of ‘an elder, fatherly friend’, someone with whom the members of the household could discuss their ‘personal problems and needs’. On their trips together, he recalled, Hitler rarely spoke about politics and even used to bring along a snack for his driver.

Such insights cannot, of course, rehabilitate Hitler or even soften his rightly heinous reputation. But they should at least remind us of his fundamental humanity; remind us that after all is said and done, ‘we’ are the same as ‘him’. We naturally like to think of individuals such as Hitler as a breed apart – something very different from ourselves. Memoirs such as Kempka’s, however, remind us most emphatically that this is not the case.

I would lastly like to thank the publisher of these three volumes: Michael Leventhal of Frontline Books, for his vision and inspiration in bringing these 'household' memoirs to an English-speaking audience for the first time. I have no doubt that those thanks will be echoed in time both by general readers and by a generation of historians and specialists.

Roger Moorhouse, 2010

# Chapter 1

## *Hitler Employs Me*

EARLY ON 25 FEBRUARY 1932 a telegram reached me\* in my office at the Gau HQ in Essen. ‘Be at the adjutancy, Private Chancellery, Kaiserhof, Berlin on 26 February 1932,’ it read. My boss, Gauleiter Terboven, had been in Berlin for a Reichstag sitting over the previous forty-eight hours. Was he behind it? I had no clue, nor any idea that this despatch was to change the course of my life, a young man with a world full of possibilities.

After receipt of this telegram I never had a minute to myself. On the slow train to Berlin, I sat bolt upright on a hard bench in a third-class compartment. The long journey seemed endless. Feverishly I reflected but could think of no serious misdeeds I had committed. Reassured, I began to dream that the cable might offer a favourable change of direction in my life.

When the train arrived finally at Friedrich-Strasse station in Berlin, I hurried through the bustle of the great city to Wilhelm-Platz. For several minutes I stood before the Kaiserhof Hotel, admiring this imposing modern building, before entering the vestibule through the revolving door. Ladies and gentlemen, apparently from the highest part of society, jostled around me.

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\* Erich Kempka (b. 16.9.1910 Oberhausen, Rhineland; d. 24.1.1975 Freiburg-Heutingsheim). Electrician after leaving school; 31.3.1930 mechanic at DKW; 1.4.1930 joined NSDAP and SS, employed as driver at Gau Essen; 1.3.1932 entered the Führer’s service as chauffeur. Final rank: SS-Obersturmbannführer. (Translator’s Note)

I reported to one of the many staff standing around. He seemed to know what to do with me and signalled for me to follow him through long corridors, over thick, plush carpets. On reaching Wilhelm Brückner's room, I was briefly welcomed by Adolf Hitler's adjutant and told to wait in the hotel lobby. To my surprise I found another thirty men there. After short conversations between us I discovered we had all been summoned to the Kaiserhof Hotel by telegram from all corners of Germany. It was obvious how uneasy we all were. Very quickly we ascertained that each of us was the chauffeur for a leading personality of the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei). Thus we were all to some extent prominent in our own professional calling. It would have to be an extraordinarily important job for us all to have been summoned here. Each man hoped privately that he would be the one to land the unknown position. Finally the call came: 'They are waiting for you gentlemen in Room 135!'

Trailing behind another member of staff we were led into Adolf Hitler's living and work quarters in Berlin. From habit we formed a semi-circle, smallest to the left, tallest at the right. As the smallest, I was on the left flank. My hopes plummeted as I looked at my much taller, well-developed colleagues. Beginning with the tallest, Brückner called us forward individually to be quizzed by Hitler on our technical knowledge and personal details. Finally came my turn. 'Erich Kempka . . . father Ruhr mineworker from Oberhausen, twenty-one years old . . . presently chauffeur for Gauleiter Terboven.' Those were my replies to Hitler's first questions. Then he snapped out rapidly: 'What types of vehicle have you driven? . . . Do you know the 8-litre compressor motor? . . . What is the horse power of this vehicle? . . . Where did you learn to drive? . . . You are on a blind zigzag bend doing eighty kilometres an hour when you see an oncoming car. What are your next actions?' The questions came so quickly that I had to react lightning fast. It was not easy, and I had not expected this man to have such a degree of technical knowledge.

After answering the last question to his apparent satisfaction Hitler offered me his hand.

I was surprised to learn that I had apparently done well in this test. This made me feel elated. Just the idea of driving across the length and breadth of Germany alongside such a man, whom all Germany considered one of the outstanding personalities on the political scene, thrilled me. All the candidates for the job had been through the mill and now waited anxiously for what came next: a disappointment. Hitler addressed us briefly and in his emotional way explained what a responsible post was held by the man at the wheel. It had been a great pleasure for him to have had such a large number of responsible men before him. He left us with a brief salute, not having mentioned why we had been sent for. Brückner explained to us that a second chauffeur was needed to assist Julius Schreck for Hitler's personal service. The man chosen would be notified at the appropriate time. Each of us received fifteen Reichsmarks expenses and were then dismissed.

Now began hours of uncertainty. I wandered around Berlin waiting for the time of my train's departure. The meeting with Adolf Hitler had impressed me deeply. Now that I knew what the vacancy was, I lived in hope but suffered from doubt. It was a relief to climb aboard the train bearing me back to Essen. A few days after my return home I received another telegram: 'On 1 March 1932 report to Rudolf Hess at the Brown House, Munich.' My hopes had been fulfilled! I had been chosen to accompany and chauffeur the man about whom all Germany was talking, Adolf Hitler.

