



The S.S. Officer's Armchair: Uncovering the Hidden Life of a Nazi by Daniel Lee.

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Robert Griesinger was a rather ordinary Nazi. The armchair in which he hid his personal papers in May 1945 was a common piece of furniture in Prague at the time. But the book based on those documents is an extraordinary contribution to our understanding the Third Reich. Historian Daniel Lee (Queen Mary Univ. of London) begins his story as a mystery. At a dinner party in Florence, he meets a woman whose mother, in Amsterdam, has just discovered a cache of German documents hidden in the cushion of an armchair she had owned for years. The swastika-adorned papers, including passports and stock certificates, had all belonged to Griesinger. Lee decided to find out who this man was and why his papers had ended up where they did. Five years of research took him across Europe and back, and even to New Orleans. It also taught him more about his own family.

Lee quickly determined that the armchair in Amsterdam had come, like its owner, from Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1980, having been bought used in 1968 from a shop in Prague. He duly traveled to that city and explored its archives and used furniture stores. He learned that Griesinger was born in Stuttgart; Lee spent time in a hotel there, cold-calling every "Griesinger" in the phonebook. One of Robert's nephews answered a call and invited the author to view the house where Robert Griesinger had grown up. A portrait of Griesinger soon emerges: born into a prosperous, royalist-conservative family, he attended the University of Tübingen, barely passing the exams to become a lawyer (June 1933). By September, he was working at the Württemberg Ministry of the Interior. He also joined the SS and the Bund Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Juristen, the Nazi lawyers' association. There is nothing to indicate that Griesinger or his family had ever voted for Hitler; in fact it is unlikely. But he was an opportunist and suddenly the Nazis were the only game in town. When he joined it 1933,

The SS was a highly complicated organism of the Nazi state, which cannot be reduced simply to a homogenous group of "men in black coats." Despite all that has been written about the SS, today's historians still know far too little about how the organization functioned and how low-level members navigated their day-to-day lives. No book has ever been written on a low-ranking regular SS officer: these Nazis have vanished from the historical record. While academics have studied in some depth the SS's Main Offices in Berlin, such as the Reich Security Main Office and the Race and Settlement Main Office, and have shifted attention to some of these organizations more radical personnel, most popular histories have generally focused attention on the Armed SS (*Waffen SS*). It is a tactic that, as Griesinger's case study reveals, is grossly misleading, for it has resulted in most people conflating the regular *Allgemeine SS* (the General SS) with its more fanatical branches. Piecing together Griesinger's trajectory to shed light on where low-level SS member came from, personally and professionally, before they donned the infamous uniform enables us to question some of our most engrained historical images. (95)

Griesinger's prewar activities concerned his personal and career advancement. He moved slowly up the ranks as a civil servant in Württemberg and became an official of the political police

just before Heinrich Himmler merged every such local force into the Geheime Staatspolizei—the Gestapo. Lee was unable to discover what Griesinger did in Stuttgart while in the Gestapo because—as happened across Germany in 1945—all its records were destroyed. But, as Lee points out, he would have known about the basement torture cells in the building where he worked and been aware of the increasing persecution of German Jews.

Griesinger eventually left the Gestapo and took a teaching position at a rural agricultural college, a move calculated to provide him with additional living space, which he needed because in 1937 he had married Gisela Grosser, a recently divorced woman with a son. The couple soon added two daughters to the family. In August 1939, he was called up to serve in the 25th Infantry Division in France. His unit was soon in position near the coast, preparing for Operation Sealion, the anticipated invasion of England. When the Battle of Britain quashed that operation, Griesinger was demobilized and returned to teaching.

This peaceful interlude ended in June 1941, when he was recalled to duty in the now 25th Motorized Infantry Division and sent to Poland. During Operation Barbarossa in the Soviet Union, his division fought its way across Ukraine; on 19 September, Griesinger was hit in the thigh near Kiev. He was seriously enough injured to require evacuation and a long convalescence. He spent most of 1942 at the college in Hohenheim, busily sending applications to Berlin seeking an administrative post in Prague, where he had friends. In March 1943, his persistence was rewarded and he arrived in Prague. He never left. As the Red Army approached in April 1945, Griesinger sent Gisela and his two daughters to safety in Germany. He himself was apparently rounded up—like all other Germans—by Czechs, and put in a prison camp, where he died of dysentery in a prison hospital in late September 1945.

If *Armchair* provided only was a portrait of a typical *Schreibtischtäter* (desk criminal), it would not amount to much. But Lee invests his book with himself, as signaled by his often first-person narrative. His five years of travel, archival research, and writing benefited two people above all: Robert Griesinger's daughters. Jutta was eight when her father died, and Barbara only six. Thanks to Robert's nephew in Stuttgart, he was able to track down and speak to both women.

I asked Barbara whether she wanted to stop the interview. We had by then been speaking for several hours. It was a hot summer day and we were both tired. "Don't go. Not yet. I am finding it all very interesting," she said softly. "I don't have any memories," she continued. "It's like I'm reading a story or a history book." (206)

The two women, in their seventies when Lee met them, had grown up knowing almost nothing of their father. Their mother, Gisela, remarried soon after the war and discouraged any questions about Robert.

This was especially poignant for Daniel Lee, a British Jew whose first book concerned the fate of Jewish children in Vichy France.¹ When he visited the house in Stuttgart, where the newlyweds Robert and Gisela lived in 1936, he learned that the other occupants of the two-family home were Fritz and Helene Rothschild. Lee's research in French archives revealed that Fritz's business knowledge had proved so useful to the Nazis that they employed him as a commodities trader for most of the war. The Rothschilds were not deported to Auschwitz until May 1944. Fritz was killed on arrival, but Helene survived: "She died in Wembley in 1983—the same part of London and the same year in which I was born" (145).

1. *Pétain's Jewish Children: French Jewish Youth and the Vichy Regime* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2014).

An unexpected, much closer link between the author and Griesinger became clear in his reconstruction of Robert's movements in Ukraine in 1942:

After learning from military sources that Griesinger's division had taken part in the execution of Jews only days after entering the USSR, I took out a large map of Ukraine and placed it on my dining-room table. Using colored drawing pins, I began to plot the route the 25th Motorised Infantry Division took to Kiev in July 1941, putting in pins to mark the towns along the way: Rivne, Novohrad-Volynskiy, Zhytomyr. At the back of my mind I had an ulterior motive for wanting to know Griesinger's precise route through western Ukraine. It even had a name: Stavyshe. That was the name of the small shtetl, sitting among several lakes, in which Israel Pougatch, my mother's grandfather, was born in 1903.... My pursuit of Griesinger prompted me to ask questions about my own family, just as I had been quizzing Jutta and Barbara about theirs. Like them, I had been avoiding such questions. Other people's families were more interesting, and came with fewer strings attached. But now I had a reason to look into my family's past. I was asking questions about the Pougatch family for the first time, to learn more about Griesinger. At least that is what I told myself. (171)

Lee then called his maternal grandmother, who told him about Yiddish-language letters her father used to receive from Stavyshe. The outbreak of the war broke the postal service, but no letters ever came from the Pougatch family even when it was over. Lee found no records of Griesinger's activities in the Gestapo in Stuttgart, nor proof that he personally had shot Jews in Ukraine in 1941, But he did learn what Robert did in Prague. He and his family lived in a nice villa, with a German-speaking servant. He worked in an office devoted to shutting down Czech companies and sending their employees to work in German factories. Griesinger worked hard and did a good job. But he never learned Czech, a distinct disadvantage in May 1945.

The author concludes with an epilogue justifying his years of work:

After the war the Allies and most Germans held the Nazi state and its leaders, together with the Gestapo and the SS, responsible for the atrocities carried out between 1933 and 1945. Despite his significance in the lives of a number of the regime's victims, Griesinger remained, simply, a nameless and faceless bureaucrat. This book shows that it is possible to trace the life of one of those ordinary Nazis whose role in war and genocide seems to have vanished from the historical record. Returning texture and agency to one such perpetrator affords Griesinger the opportunity to stand in for the thousands of anonymous ordinary Nazis whose widespread culpability wreaked havoc on so many lives and whose biographies have, until now, never seen the light of day. (247)

The S.S. Officer's Armchair is an engrossing, beautifully written book, embellished with over thirty photographs, two maps, and unusually complete endnotes.