

# A MAN WITH GOOD MANNERS: A DAY IN COURT WITH KARL WOLFF (1964)

Sometimes the people let out a moan. Then again they sit silent and still for hours, focused, helpless. As incriminating evidence about Karl Wolff keeps coming from the witness stand, I hear an ethnic German from the Banat<sup>t</sup> whisper into the ear of a general staff officer's widow who is still fighting for her pension, "It's unbelievable to see the Germans washing their dirty linen in public again." "The guy ought to be hanged! Right away! Hang the whole lot of them!" a gentleman born in 1922 complains during the break. An old woman seated behind the press section keeps on muttering, "That's what was running our government. And now they're all innocent. No! Terrible. Yes, they gassed them. Transported them. Even the little kids. No. Arrogant specimen. Trying to talk his way out of it. Women too. All gone. Yes. No . . ."

During the six weeks of the Karl Wolff trial the German public has not been able to make up its mind about what to think of the man who was the personal aide of SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, a general of the Waffen-SS, the highest-ranked SS and police officer in Italy, the contact between Himmler and Hitler. The public knows that he was a man of the world, and still is today: a handsome showman, a society man. He was blond then, he's gone white now, his eyes are still brilliant blue. He's a warrior, a Teuton, a fullblood Aryan, progenitor of many children with two different wives whom he was more or less faithful to. A man who had prin-

ciples, the wrong ones unfortunately, but still principles that may be out of date now: people don't wear hats and aren't Nazis anymore. At most, they oppose Jews—Goldwater, for instance.<sup>2</sup> Wolff is accused of having been an accomplice in the killing of 120 Jews on one occasion, 300,000 on another, and 6,000 on yet another—clearly he is accused of murder. When Vera Brühne was on trial two years ago in the same courtroom in the Palace of Justice in Munich, accused of killing a doctor and his housekeeper, a total of two persons—she was also a handsome person, elegant, blond, slim, a woman of the world, but unprincipled, more unfaithful than faithful in her relations with her husband and other fornication partners—the German public was through with her after only one day in court. The mood was against her, and the case was clear. Later, we discovered that the jury, under pressure from public opinion in the city and the country, had no choice but to find her guilty. It is cheap to mock an accused; it is vile to make fun of someone already in police custody; it is impossible to make up for the opportunities to resist National Socialism that were missed by expressing a dislike for someone like Karl Wolff. And it is deplorable that the prudishness felt for Brühne was more poisonous than the aversion for the presumed crimes of an individual like Karl Wolff. This is naïve, and obscurantist—in every sense of the word. The writer, fortunately a member of the generation that did not experience National Socialism consciously, and thus missed the opportunity to be guilty-by-association—for admiring the system or for lacking the civil courage to oppose it—has never seen so many former SS men in one place as in the witness stand at the Karl Wolff trial. They wear their C&A suits over squared shoulders,<sup>3</sup> still bring their heels together sharply, though silently, these days, say *Jawohl* instead of

*Ja*, and when they leave the courtroom, one after the other, they bow briefly and with restrained masculine verve before the accused, Karl Wolff, SS-Obergruppenführer and general of the Waffen-SS a.D.<sup>4</sup> They say that today they think differently than they did then, that given the conditions at the time they could not act differently, that they suffered stabs of conscience even then. But when they finally get around to recounting their own memories and opinions, they turn out to be just as unrepentant, unimpressed, incorrigible as they were then.

The witness Wilhelm Karl Hinrich Koppe, sixty-eight, married, most recently the director of a factory, resident in Bonn, was a third level police general, in other words a commanding general during the war—which he emphasizes—a general in the Waffen-SS, an SS-Obergruppenführer, a high-ranking SS and police officer in the Warthegau from December 1939 to December 1943. He tells the tale of how he brought the activities of the Jewish extermination camp at Kulmhof (Chelmno) to a standstill. “I knew there were extermination actions. I heard about them by chance. One day,” Koppe recounts, “I was with Greiser (the *Reichsstatthalter* in the Warthegau who was hanged in Posen in 1946)<sup>5</sup> to discuss problems related to resettlement. It was my responsibility to settle Germans in the Warthegau. Himmler always used to praise my organizational skills. I re-settled about 300,000 people. From the Baltic states, the Dobrudscha, from Galicia.” The judge interrupts, “One of the requirements for resettling people was the expulsion of the population living there, wasn’t it?!” The witness, “*Jawohl*, the expulsion of Jews and Poles. That was pretty efficient. Anyway, while I was sitting with Greiser, Bouhler (head of the Führer’s Chancellery, who committed suicide in 1945) called. The conversation was about

schnapps. Greiser hung up. I asked, 'Is Bouhler ordering schnapps from you?' Greiser said, 'No, no it's for the task forces. For the extermination of Jews.' I reacted right away. I said, 'Listen here, kids, this will destroy our entire re-settlement plan. It's not something we can hide.' The extermination camp Kulmhof was right in the middle of the settlement area. I was furious, and summoned the inspector of the security police. I asked him, 'Why didn't you tell me about Kulmhof?' The inspector replied, 'That's not my responsibility.' I had the right to inspect everything myself, but seeing as I didn't have the authority to issue directives, there was no point. I could not request something from a lower-ranking officer. I would have had to issue a command. And then there were the questions from the settlers. They'd see the trucks with the Jews, and they'd ask, 'What are you doing with the Jews? You keep taking them in there and they don't come out again.' It made me blush red with shame. So I brought Kulmhof to a standstill!" He does not say how, he just says that he did.

The witness relates another episode about how he, the SS-Obergruppenführer, put a stop to the extermination of Jews. "Early in December 1943, I was transferred to Krakow, and General Lieutenant Schindler<sup>6</sup> came to see me. He was concerned about the Jews working in the weapons factories. Schindler said, 'Please help me keep some of the Jews here, otherwise the weapons systems will collapse.' My first response was that I wasn't authorized. Then I asked him, 'Would you be willing to come under my command if Speer<sup>7</sup> names me head of weapons in the Warthegau?' Schindler said, 'Of course. If it's a question of weapons, I am quite ready to do without a star. I'll make all kinds of sacrifices.' So I went to Berlin to see Speer. Speer agreed. From

then on, I could say, 'If you take the Jews away, we'll lose the war!' I'm an idealist," the witness asserts. "I joined the party because Germany, my Fatherland, was in danger of being overrun by Communism. At the end of 1931, I was assigned the task to set up SS-Sturm in Hamburg-Harburg. It was a big success. I mean, it's wrong to say it like that—from today's perspective—but that's how it was back then." He encountered Wolff in Berlin in September 1940. "I was having talks with headquarters. When you arrived in Berlin back in those days you always asked which of the higher-ranking fellows was around. They told me Wölfchen was in town. So we got together in the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse (the head office of the SS-Reichsführer) or in the Kaiserhof over a cup of coffee. We talked about the situation at the front. I was already pretty skeptical then. We'd had some big victories but the end of the war was not in sight. Wolff said our heroic armies were marching forward. He reassured me. I said, 'Listen, kids, don't you worry about the bombs and all that in the Führerbunker?' I said, 'Wölfchen, wouldn't it be smart to get the weapons industry . . .' Wolff interrupted me saying the Führer has thought of everything. A giant weapons center is being constructed in the east. There is loads of Jewish manpower. Poles and Jews. Hundreds of thousands. A million. It's already starting up, with a gas plant, an electricity station, rail connections, and all. I went home, much relieved. Later I discovered it was all a utopia." After the war he had "a hard time of it," using the false name Lohmann under which Stuckhardt, State Secretary in the Reich Ministry for the Interior, had provided him with a passport. He met with Wolff a couple of times, once in Wuppertal, once somewhere else. He can't remember what they talked about.

In fact, none of them seem to know much about their meetings with Wolff; they just can't remember. Even the statements they made during police questioning a year or two earlier have been erased from their memories. "I am so forgetful," says Himmler's former personal driver, now a bus driver in Wedel/Holstein, "that I have to note down my bus driver rank every week, otherwise I forget what it is." Now the topic is the review of Camp Soribor in the summer of 1942 or spring of 1943. Soribor was an extermination camp for the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto, established by Globocnik, one of the higher SS and police leaders in the General Government. (He is said to have committed suicide in May 1945.) It is certain that Himmler and Globocnik participated in the review, but the court wants to know if Wolff was there too. During police questioning one witness had made the surprising statement: "Once, I remember exactly, I came to a small station with Himmler and Wolff. A locomotive and one train car were waiting there. Himmler and Wolff got in." This had been an additional rail line. The train returned six or eight hours later, moving in the opposite direction and with the locomotive pushing the car. When the court asks, "Was Wolff there too?" the witness can't remember. "I don't want to protect Wolff. I didn't think it was right that he made money on all that." (The reference is to Wolff's magazine article from 1961 entitled "Eichmann's Boss, Heinrich Himmler" and began with the words "I, Karl Wolff, SS-Obergruppenführer and General in the Waffen-SS a.D. am speaking up. My conscience forces me to do so" (à la I, Claudius, Caesar and God). The witness said, "I thought about it the whole year. I cannot give that as evidence under oath.")

The man used to drive Himmler to Dachau and watch them do experiments on humans. "Was Wolff there too?" "I suppose. Can't

say.” “Did Wolff know about the experiments on humans?” “No. Wolff was good to everybody, to the plain folk too. Whenever something was not real, he didn’t want anything to do with it.” During police questioning he had said, “As Himmler’s most trusted associate Wolff had to know something.” (Wolff did know. That had already been established in Nürnberg.)

Max Ruhnkoﬀ, a businessman, Globocnik’s personal aide, the man who organized the special train, the train that consisted of a locomotive and one train car, never did and still doesn’t know a thing. Nothing about the million and a half Jews who were murdered in the Lublin region under the direction of Globocnik (the assessor’s comment about Globocnik is: “an incredible exterminator of humans!” The witness, “If you say so . . .”). He knows nothing about Wolff joining in the sightseeing trip to Camp Soribor. But he remembers every detail until the moment the train departed: there had been trouble because the train hadn’t arrived, apparently couldn’t enter the station, and all the planning was upset. Himmler had been furious. Wolff calmed people down. There were cars available—a Mercedes and a Horch—but Himmler apparently didn’t want to travel in the convoy of cars. Finally they did decide to take a car and met the special train along the way, at the station Himmler’s driver had described. Question: “How long did the gentlemen’s visit to Soribor last?” Witness: “From lunchtime till evening.” “Did Wolff go too?” “I couldn’t say.” Then memories seem to dawn: “I think I remember that Wolff was there for a short time, but when the convoy left he did not go along.” End of statement.

And so it goes on. With every former SS man giving evidence, mornings and afternoons. The witnesses for the prosecution are

the comrades of the accused. The opportunity to try an outstanding representative of the Third Reich, a man who was higher-ranking than Eichmann, a man who was Himmler's trusted associate, who competed with Heydrich to become Himmler's deputy, whose colleagues from the SS, the *Reichstag*, the immediate environment of Himmler and Hitler were executed if they hadn't already committed suicide—this singular opportunity is fizzling out. The accused, and not the court, is determining the direction of the trial. The supporters of National Socialism, and not its opponents, are unveiling the truth about the regime. I overheard the young people sitting on the public benches wondering whether there wasn't something to National Socialism after all.

*After two shorter trials in 1946 and 1948 a re-trial of Karl Wolff was held in Munich in 1964; Wolff was found guilty of being an accomplice in the murder of 300,000 people and was condemned to fifteen years in penitentiary, and stripped of his civil rights for ten years. He was released in 1969.*

## NOTES

1. Banat is a region that overlaps the boundaries of Romania, Hungary, and Serbia with many formerly ethnically German communities.
2. Barry Goldwater (1909–1998) was the Republican candidate in the 1964 US presidential election.
3. C&A is a department store chain in Germany and other central European countries, known for reasonably priced, generic clothing.
4. The suffix “a.D.” stands for *außer Dienst*, literally translated, “out of service,” meaning retired.
5. The *Reichsstatthalter* was the local representative of the Nazi regime whose job it was to implement the Nazi ideological agenda in a given occupation zone. The Warthegau, or Wartheland, and Posen are regions of Poland the Nazis seized and occupied in their invasion of 1939.



6. Not to be confused with Oskar Schindler, Generalleutnant Schindler was the Nazi inspector-general for weapons in the occupied zones of Poland.
7. Albert Speer (1905–1981) was an architect and Hitler's inspector-general for planning in the capital of the Reich. After 1942, he was minister of munitions and general economic planning for the Reich. He was tried and convicted at the Nürnberg trials (1945–1946), and released from prison in 1966, claiming he knew nothing of the mass-murder perpetrated by the Nazis.