

SOLITAIRE

**MAGDA GOEBBELS: A Banality of Ambition and
Evil**

BYRON WILLIAMS

FIFTY METERS BELOW the air raids, destruction and desperation of Berlin, the moment was simultaneously paralyzing and surreal for the 'unofficial' First Lady of Nazi Germany. For more than a decade, she had done her part in aiding the Nazi cause, presenting herself as the prototype of what German women should aspire for. She had willfully played the role of über mother. But now, it was coming to an unmerciful end.

The Führerbunker shook and the lights flickered with the impact of each Soviet Union mortar cascading from the sky. The dust that emanated when a mortar struck a nearby building made the simple act of breathing in the already tight quarters more laborious.

Like the buildings of Berlin, the ideology of the Third Reich was now in ruins. Magda Goebbels, wife of Josef, the Reich's Minister of Propaganda could neither hear, nor feel. She looked less like a first lady and more like the epitome of exasperation. Mentally and physically, it was as if she had been the recipient of a massive dose of Novocain – but her blonde hair was nevertheless well coifed. Her nails were perfectly manicured. The nail polish and lipstick flawlessly matched the red designer suit created by a member of the Association of Aryan Clothing Manufacturers. Her personal numbness could not nullify her duty. Even at this late hour, she would maintain her standards for the Führer.

The Soviets, along with their reputation for severe brutality, were closing in. The Führerbunker no longer held any strategic value. The transformation was complete. What began as a convenient sanctuary, while still able to use the undamaged portions of the Reich Chancellery for military strategy, had become a claustrophobic domain – where orders were given to divisions that no longer existed. It had lapsed into a scene of debauchery, a possible precursor to the imminent Soviet arrival. Like *Dante's Inferno*, those still inhabiting the Führerbunker had put aside all hope. There was no longer any need to continue discussing the best way to commit suicide. They drank in excess, while openly engaging in orgies for all to witness.

It was the evening of May 1, 1945, and the wife of the Nazi propaganda minister, was sitting alone, playing 'solitaire.' Adolf Hitler and his wife, Eva Braun, had committed suicide the day before. Stoically crestfallen, Magda's thoughts raced between what she perceived as the good times, what could have been, and what needed to happen now.

She, with her husband's approval, had already killed six of her seven children. Several hours earlier, the children were dressed in their white nightgowns and prepared for bed, with Magda combing their hair. Consistent with their bedtime ritual, they sang 'Hitler is our Savior' in unison, led by their mother.

Adolf Hitler is our savior, our hero

He is the noblest being in the whole wide world

For Hitler we live

For Hitler we die

Our Hitler is our Lord

Who rules a brave new world

On this night, a children's song became a premonition. In Magda's mind, for Hitler, they would, indeed, die. Just a few hours earlier, the Goebbels' children had been enjoying their time in the Fuhrerbunker, oblivious of their cruel fate. But now, they lay individually stacked in their bunk beds, without a pulse, as their mother shuffled the deck of cards not far from their room.

Since they arrived at the Fuhrerbunker, Magda had found it difficult to look at her children without bursting into tears. Their fate, the tangible evidence of their parent's fanatical commitment to Nazi dogma, had been contemplated for months. Magda's despair for her children was exceeded only by her inconsolable grief as she stood by Hitler's door, after he and Eva Braun had said their goodbyes to the staff, before retiring for the final time. Magda had pounded on the door with her husband in the background,

her muffled voice barely penetrating Hitler's well-fortified chamber. Magda had begged Hitler – her Führer, her savior – to not give up ... to seek another alternative. When Hitler came to the door, she had fallen prostrate, pleading with him not to commit suicide. Hitler had mumbled a few nearly unintelligible words, and then he had taken a step back and slowly closed the door. By the time the iron door closed, so too did Magda's hopes of a future.

But that was yesterday. Today simultaneously represented her past, present, and what remained of her future.

Her thoughts turned briefly to her oldest son, Harald, from her first marriage with Günther Quandt. She wondered how he would receive the news contained in her farewell letter. By the time Harald – who was in a POW camp in North Africa – received this correspondence, he would have heard of the tragedy. But Magda believed, at least she hoped, her letter might help him understand why.

She wrote:

My beloved son!

By now, we have been in the Führerbunker for six days already – daddy, your six little siblings and I-for the sake of giving our national socialistic lives the only possible honorable end.

You should know that I stayed here against daddy's will, and that even until last Sunday, the Führer wanted to help me get out. You know your mother. We have the same blood. For me, there was no wavering.

Our glorious idea is ruined and with it, everything beautiful and marvelous that I have known all my life. The world that will come after the Führer and national socialism is no longer worth living in. Therefore, I took the children with me. They are too good for the life that would surely follow, and a merciful God would understand me if I gave them salvation.

You will live, and I ask only one thing from you ... that you never ever forget you are a German. Never go against your honor, and through your life, see that our deaths won't be in vain. The children are wonderful. They never complained or cried.

The explosions above are now shaking the bunker. The elder kids keep the younger ones covered and their presence is a blessing. They make the Führer smile once in a while.

Last night, the Führer had taken off his golden party pen and pinned it to me. I am proud and happy.

May God give me the strength to perform the last and hardest task. We only have one goal left. To show our loyalty to the Führer even in death. To be able to end our lives with him ... is an honor.

Harald, my dear son, I want to give you what I learned in life. Be loyal! Loyal to yourself, loyal to the German people, and loyal to your fatherland. Be proud of us and try to keep us in dear memory.

It is difficult to start a new page. Who knows if I can even fill it ... but I would like to give you my love and strength and take away the pain of our loss. Be proud of us and try to remember us with pride and happiness.

We all have to die. Isn't it more beautiful to live less, but with honor and dignity, than to have a long life in shameful conditions?

I must finish. Hanna Reitsch is taking this letter and leaving again. I embrace you with my sweetest and deepest love.

My dear son, live for Germany!

Your Mother

How Harald would receive Magda's final correspondence was now beyond her control. Her decision had been made and partially carried out. The only thing that remained was for her husband to come through the door and inform her that it was time to carry out the remaining portion of their decision. They would go up to the Reich Chancellery gardens, kill themselves, and like the Fuhrer yesterday ... the Goebbels would also have their bodies burned.

Magda and her husband had expressed no interest in living in a world that did not include Adolf Hitler. They were mere hours from bringing their final vision to fruition. Until then, she quietly pacified herself, gently stroking the golden party pen Hitler had given to her before committing suicide, which now adorned the right lapel of her red suit. It was his personal badge and had worn it on his uniform for the past twelve years. Magda recalled how her Fuhrer, his posture stooped and his body racked with the effects of Parkinson's Disease, had removed the badge from his lapel and with his trembling hand, entrusted it with her.

This was a silent affirmation of who and what she was in the Nazi cause. It was Hitler's way of saying vociferously that it was indeed her, Magda – not Emmy Göring, wife of the now out-of-favor Hermann Göring, and certainly not Eva Braun – who bore the face of German womanhood. It was a bond she shared exclusively with Hitler.

Ironically, for the past twenty-four hours, with her husband as the chancellor of what remained of the German Reich, and unbeknownst to the people of Berlin who were trying to survive the Soviet onslaught, she was officially the nation's first lady. A fitting end for someone keenly aware that among the Nazi's public faces, she had the distinction of being the only woman and one of the few who bore the true Aryan physical characteristics feverishly promoted by the Reich's propaganda for decades.

With Hitler's token of appreciation in possession, only one question remained ... how long could she play solitaire before her husband returned to make that final trek to the Reich Chancellery gardens?

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SOLITAIRE WAS MAGDA'S way of composing herself. Always, after heated fights with her husband, it was by playing solitaire that she had found relief. It represented something that she could not fully achieve in life. Perhaps, it was dealing cards from a shuffled deck into a prescribed arrangement on a tabletop that appealed to her. It had a quality of manipulation and control. On the surface, Magda's life had epitomized control. But this was a façade – part of Nazi propaganda orchestrated by her husband. When things spiraled out of control in her life, it was solitaire that brought her back to sanity.

As she shuffled the deck, a Soviet mortar shook the Fuhrerbunker. The force with which it struck was a reminder that time was running out. When she took her eyes off the cards for a moment as she shuffled, they fell to the floor. Magda reached down to pick up the scattered cards to start again. Placing them back on the table, she noticed that the card on top of the disorganized pile was the queen of hearts – the card that represented the much-loved mother or adored daughter. Magda froze. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the stoic look of the queen of hearts unearthed feelings she had suppressed for most of her adult life.

“Why are you staring at me?” asked Magda.

“So, it has come to this ... alone in the Fuhrerbunker, your children murdered, and you, awaiting the final command from your husband,” the queen of hearts replied.

“Are you here to torment me in my final hours? It's too late for me. What's done is done!”

“Ah, but if it was that easy, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now. Ordinarily, your seven piles of cards would have been lined up, with the first card from each pile face up. Instead, there are still cards on the floor.”

This was not supposed to happen. Solitaire was Magda's attempt to compose

herself, not create more discomfort. Especially not at this late date. She had already thought of her surviving child, Harald, and had written him a letter, but the queen of hearts had forced her to think about her mother, Auguste Behrend, her childhood, and her stepfather, Richard Friedlander.

Magda was born Johanna Maria Magdalena Ritschel on November 11, 1901, in Berlin. The only certainty of her birth was that of her mother. It had been assumed that Oskar Ritschel, who had married her mother shortly after Magda's birth, was her father. But the father's name on her birth certificate was blank. Ritschel and Auguste had divorced in 1905, and Auguste then married Jewish businessman, Richard Friedlander, and moved with him to Brussels in 1908. Though Magda had enjoyed a relationship with Ritschel throughout her life, it was not comparable to the uniqueness of her relationship with Friedlander. The presence of the queen of hearts had Magda reflecting on the period of her life as the adored daughter.

The bond between stepdaughter and stepfather had quickly cemented. Magda and Friedlander had developed an organic closeness that drew the envy of Auguste. Magda's mother saw in their relationship what she wanted from both parties, for herself. Sadly, it had been beyond their capacity to give Auguste what she desired. Even after Auguste and Friedlander divorced in 1914, Magda had remained 'daddy's little girl.' She even took Friedlander's name. She reveled in having Friedlander as an advocate. It gave her self-confidence and the belief that she could achieve any goal.

Friedlander had doted on Magda. He was the one she initially sought out in times of crisis, because he never judged her. In him, she knew every word that came out of his mouth began with his profound love for her.

Magda's precocious nature and beauty at a young age had created tension with her mother. Friedlander was the one who always made the peace between them. During such heated moments, he would often take Magda by the hand and walk with her to the local Jewish bakery. Without saying a word during the walk, it was understood that once they arrived at the bakery, Magda could have whatever she desired. With so many things to choose from, Magda would deliberate for several minutes before choosing the same

item, Alexandertorte. Alexandertorte consisted of pastry strips filled with raspberry preserves. Each bite offered a calming effect on the young Magda. The sweetness of the pastry represented the love between her and Friedlander. She was known at the bakery as *La petite fille de papa* (daddy's little girl).

Friedlander had been an assimilated Jew, but he had observed traditional festivals such as Passover and Yom Kippur. Though she had attended a Catholic convent, Magda had grown up with a familiarity and appreciation for Judaism. She had always provided the final reading at the annual Seder meal at the Friedlander home, and once she concluded, her eyes would immediately search for the reciprocal look of pleasure from her stepfather, and never did he disappoint. When the meal was over, it was Magda who had led those in attendance in singing Eliyahu HaNavi (Elijah the Prophet). This tradition continued well after Friedlander and Auguste had divorced.

But Magda, languishing in the Fuhrerbunker with the queen of hearts tormenting her, had unintentionally released emotions she had sentenced to solitary confinement decades ago. The Alexandertorte that had held the promise of sweetness with each bite was now replaced by memories of agony and bitterness. The life-altering compromises she had made that eventually led to her sequester in the Fuhrerbunker, could not assuage the gift of Friedlander in her life. How had she managed to not think of him or even speak his name for so long?

Was the queen of hearts asking: "How did your life become so bereft of authentic relationships?"

Impulsively, Magda responded, "What about my Fuhrer? What about my children?"

But the queen of hearts clearly said, "You call being surrounded by desperation and death in your last hours authentic? And don't you find it telling that Hitler was your first thought of defense, who's now dead, and not your children whom you murdered? As for your children, the love you demonstrated was invariably part of Nazi propaganda. In 1942 alone, your children appeared thirty-four times in Nazi short films, portrayed as part

of the ideal German family. The narcissism you shared with your husband made it easy to transform your children into exploitable pieces in the Nazi agenda.”

Noticeably uncomfortable, Magda shot back, “That’s not true!”

Using silence as an enforcer, the queen of hearts said nothing.

Magda objected to the suggestion that she and her husband were without empathy or compassion, and that her children were somehow used as pawns in a sadistic game of megalomania. That the children were dead by her hand was proof of her compassion. For Magda, it could not be seen any other way. Death by a loving mother was preferable to living in a world prepared to offer an endless supply of persecution. Her children were too good for such a fate.

What Magda couldn’t deny, even in the few hours she had to live, was that a part of her was built on the foundation of love that Friedlander had provided. The queen of hearts was there to remind her that she once had love – authentic love – but she had chosen to fritter it away for something she perceived was more important. And now, the life she had chosen had presented her a bill she had no ability pay. Were it not for this internal encounter, she could have easily convinced herself – as she had been doing for years – that she was willing to accept the consequences. Suddenly, without warning, she was not so sure. The queen of hearts was no help, offering only a bewildering look of disappointment.

“The only gift my mother had given me was to remind me of what I did not want to be – a child of a poor, single mother whose genealogy was questionable, if not a social embarrassment,” Magda lamented. “If she hadn’t married my father...”

“You meant stepfather, didn’t you?”

“Why are you being so technical? You know what I meant.”

“Actually, I don’t know. And it’s quite possible that neither do you – at least nothing you’re willing to admit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Now is not the time to change history, pacifying yourself with the rationalization of untruths. It has been your way of doing things practically your entire life. What do you gain now by lying to yourself?”

“You don’t understand! Yes! Yes! I wanted more. Was there anything wrong with that?”

“But for you, Magda, ‘more’ was indefinable, constantly changing, without moral boundaries. You say Auguste’s only gift to you was to show you what not to be. But she had married Friedlander, whom you acknowledged was a positive force in your life. You don’t see that as a gift provided by your mother?”

Magda sat quietly, gripping the queen of hearts between her thumb and index finger with cautious intensity.