



## *The S.S. Officer's Armchair: Uncovering the Hidden Life of a Nazi*

by Daniel Lee.

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In 2011, historian Daniel Lee (Queen Mary Univ. of London) hosted a dinner party in Italy, and one of the guests asked him for assistance. Her mother had just had an old chair re-upholstered, a chair she had owned since 1968, when she bought it in Prague. In the re-upholstering process, a stash of papers was found inside the chair, papers that, it turned out, had belonged to Robert Griesinger, a bureaucrat with the Nazi occupation forces in Czechoslovakia during World War II. Lee set out to uncover Griesinger's life and his role in the Nazi war machine. *The S.S. Officer's Armchair* is the impressive and engaging result of that quest.

Griesinger was, Lee writes, a "low-ranking Nazi," one of those figures heretofore "doubly invisible" to history because under-studied by historians and conveniently forgotten or ignored by their families. That veil of invisibility must be lifted to allow us to fully understand how Nazism worked, especially its reliance on "consent and conformity."

Improbably, Griesinger's father was born to a German immigrant father in New Orleans; his grandmother, too, had deep American roots: her father was a leading composer in the city going back to the 1810s and her parents were slaveholders in Louisiana (38). Griesinger himself was born in 1906 in Stuttgart. His father served in the Great War. Already as a teenager in the 1920s, Griesinger became fascinated with politics, which had drawn him into anti-Semitic and anti-Communist circles by the time he left for his university studies in Tübingen in 1924. He ultimately earned a Juris Doctorate and became a lawyer in June 1933—the same year he joined the Nazi Party and the Nazi Lawyers' Association (94).

Griesinger joined the *Schutzstaffel* (S.S.) in 1933, but never actually worked full-time for the organization; he held other jobs while a member. The massive later expansion of the S.S.'s role in the Nazi state included early-career middle- and upper-middle-class Germans. These individuals, outside of their regular jobs, met to train twice a week under section leaders, one of whom was Griesinger. Their experience tells us much about the prewar nazification of German society (101-2).

Griesinger worked as a legal official in the civil service in Württemberg. He moved up the ladder to larger towns in the region till 1935, when he joined the Gestapo. Eventually, he handled Jewish affairs in Stuttgart, but left to join the Ministry of the Interior in May 1937. His career took a strange turn in 1938, when he joined the Agricultural Law faculty at the University of Hohenheim, despite lacking any background in the field. Nevertheless, he soon became a top administrator at the university. After war broke out, he served with the 25th Infantry, invading France in 1940, and then with Army Group South, which invaded the Ukraine as part of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941.

The most engaging parts of the book center on Lee's interviews with Griesinger's relatives, especially his daughters Jutta and Barbara and his nephew Jochen. Both daughters were children when their father died in 1945. Their mother remarried in 1946 and the family settled in Switzer-

land, the homeland of their new stepfather; that marriage failed in the 1950s. Because of their mother's remarriage and no doubt the atmosphere of silence in postwar Germany, there was no discussion of Griesinger's Nazi past. Until Lee revealed it to Jutta, she had no idea her father had been a Nazi and not just an ordinary lawyer. Her desire to learn more encouraged Lee in his work. His goal was to determine whether her father had been a perpetrator of war crimes, while hers was to fill in gaps in her family story (54).

Although there is no documentary evidence, Griesinger, like most of his S.S. colleagues, undoubtedly committed atrocities against Jewish civilians during Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. He was injured in Kiev just before the slaughter of the Jews at Babi Yar and returned to Germany to convalesce.

After almost a year at home, Griesinger sought and received a bureaucratic position in the German occupation regime at Prague. He and his family arrived there in March 1943. Griesinger worked with the Ministry of Economics and Labor, managing the forced labor of Czech civilians, including Jews. He and an office staffed with men in their twenties and thirties, most with law degrees or doctorates, developed and carried out the programs of the Nazi occupation. Though he was only a mid-level bureaucrat, Griesinger and his family lived in a nice residence in Prague (with a maid and a chauffeur) in a neighborhood previously home to a prominent Jewish community. Griesinger "loved" (195) his job in Prague, which marked the pinnacle of his career as a Nazi.

As the war came to Czechoslovakia, Griesinger sent his family to his in-laws in Liechtenstein; a journey that typically took a few days lasted six months. His wife worked briefly as a translator for US occupying forces in Germany. Griesinger spent time in an internment camp, fell ill, and died in a Prague hospital. He was buried in a mass grave in a cemetery, along with twenty-two other Germans.

No one would call Griesinger a high-level official, and no postwar war-crimes prosecutor on any level would have considered putting him on trial. Nonetheless, he benefited greatly from his work for the Nazi regime; he lived his "best life" as an occupier of Prague, with all the benefits of occupying the former home of Holocaust victims.

When Lee presented all this to Jutta Griesinger, she stated that she was not embarrassed by her father's Nazi past. As a woman then in her late seventies, she had never been confronted or challenged with the facts of her father's offenses; they were a non-issue in her life (240). Her daughter Astrid more openly admitted her grandfather's complicity in war crimes, but stated that perhaps he did not truly believe in the Nazi program (242).

These family members were vital to Daniel Lee's research into the life of Robert Griesinger. One suspects he likes them, while yet being (silently) disappointed in their reactions. That is where he ends his welcome and thought-provoking book, leaving us to contemplate the levels and meanings of perpetration, nazification, and historical blame in the Third Reich.