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## Interview of Josef Wolkerstorfer in Linz, 28 July 1978

Between February and August 1978 I lived in Vienna, completing research in Europe for my book “Hitler’s Hometown”.<sup>1</sup> Most of the work consisted of sifting through police reports from the *Bundeskanzleramt* at the *Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv* (then on the *Wallnerstraße*) and various documents at the *Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes*. I also looked at materials in the *Oberösterreichisches Landesarchiv* and the *Archiv der Stadt Linz*, where I had spent most of the summer of 1975 (as well as ten days at the Berlin Document Center). Although not absolutely sure, I believe that either the historians Gerhard Botz or Harry Slapnicka helped arrange an interview with Sepp Wolkerstorfer (1905–1990), the Nazi *Bürgermeister* of Linz, 1938–1940. Wolkerstorfer and I agreed to meet in the restaurant at the *Hauptbahnhof* at 13:00 on 28 July 1978. We spent roughly five hours together, mostly in discussion though also on a tour of Leonding. While I foolishly did not record the interview on tape, I took copious notes that may be of use to future researchers. Most of these were taken in English, but I made a point of writing down Wolkerstorfer’s most significant remarks in German. What follows is a record of that afternoon interview.

Wolkerstorfer showed up exactly on time. I recognized him immediately from pictures taken during and after the *Anschluss* of Austria to the German Reich. He was nearly 73 years old, but appeared much younger than his age. He was stocky, muscular, and walked with a slight, barely perceptible limp – the consequence of losing a leg during the war. As we had both eaten, we took a corner seat and sipped mineral water or apple juice throughout most of the afternoon.

The conversation began, oddly enough, with a discussion about clothes. Wolkerstorfer reminded me that he had been a haberdasher before the *Anschluss*

1 Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler’s Hometown: Linz, Austria, 1908–1945* Bloomington 1986; deutsch: *Patenstadt des Führers: Eine Politik- und Sozialgeschichte von Linz 1908–1945*, Frankfurt–New York 1993.

and throughout his life considered it essential to be properly dressed. After his release from Nuremberg and Glasenbach, he returned penniless to Linz.<sup>2</sup> Within days, he dropped in on an old *Schulkamerad*, then living in Linz-Urfahr. According to Wolkerstorfer, his school chum had fled to Moscow after 12 February 1934. Eleven years later he parachuted into Upper Austria as a major in the Red Army. In return for his services the Soviets appointed him *Polizeidirektor* of Urfahr. According to Wolkerstorfer, his Communist friend gladly provided him with enough money to buy a new suit in order to land a good job. He also came to his defense on certain unspecified occasions.

After recounting this tale, Wolkerstorfer took out his billfold and removed a cigarette-card picture of himself standing next to Hitler. “*Das ist für die Enkel,*” he proudly explained. Wolkerstorfer then became more serious by suggesting that I start taking notes. It was very important for me to know, he emphasized, that I was in the presence of one of the few surviving individuals who had supped at the table of “the greatest son of the German people.” He spoke first of “Hitler,” then “*unser Führer,*” and for the rest of the afternoon “*mein Führer.*” Overall, Wolkerstorfer claimed to have spent time with Hitler on five separate occasions. The first occurred on Sunday, 13 March 1938 at the Hotel Weinzingger. As I was well acquainted with Botz’s published 1971 interview, there was nothing new to learn.<sup>3</sup> Wolkerstorfer did point out, however, that this was the only time he heard Hitler converse in Upper Austrian dialect.

The second meeting appears to have taken place the following autumn (most likely on 19 October 1938).<sup>4</sup> On this occasion Wolkerstorfer accompanied Hitler and his entourage to the theater. While the two did not spend much time in conversation, Wolkerstorfer claimed that both had gotten to know each other as *Linzer*.

The most significant, and impressive time spent in Hitler’s company, Wolkerstorfer recounted in expansive detail, took place in February, 1939. This

2 On 30 July 1948 the *Volksgericht* Linz sentenced Wolkerstorfer to three years imprisonment for his role in the illegal NSDAP as well as on one count of denunciation following the *Anschluss* (OÖLA, LG Linz Vg 7141/47). He was released, however, on the basis of time served in both Nuremberg and Glasenbach. Walter Schuster, *Deutschnational – Nationalsozialistisch – Entnazifiziert: Franz Langoth. Eine NS-Laufbahn*, Linz 1999, p. 179.

3 Gerhard Botz, *Hitlers Aufenthalt in Linz im März 1938 und der Anschluss*, *Historisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Linz* (1971), pp. 185–214.

4 Hitler appeared unexpectedly in Linz on 19 October 1938. Together with Arthur von Seyß-Inquart, Konrad Henlein, General Wilhelm von Leeb, Martin Bormann, August Eigruber, and Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the dictator made an inspection trip to the new South Bohemian frontier. See Harry Slapnicka, *Oberösterreich, als es „Oberdonau” hieß (1938–1945)*, Linz 1978, p. 352.

occurred during the dictator's stop-over in Linz on his return trip from former *Gauleiter* Hubert Klausner's funeral in Klagenfurt, i. e. 18–19 February 1939.<sup>5</sup> Wolkerstorfer began by explaining that he received an unexpected "*Anruf vom Gauleiter.*" „*Pass auf!*," *Gauleiter of Reichsgau Oberdonau* August Eigruber said. "*Folgendes! Du fährst morgen mit mir nach Klagenfurt.*" An hour later the telephone rang again. "*Pass auf! Adolf Hitler kommt nach Klagenfurt und anschliessend nach Linz.*" Eigruber ordered Wolkerstorfer to accompany him to the train station. Later, however, the *Gauleiter* reported that Hitler would be traveling via Salzburg. (This part of the story strikes me as not quite right, because Hitler spoke on 17 February in Berlin at the opening of the International Automobile Exhibition. Later in the afternoon, he delivered a confidential address to selected auto workers at the Hotel Kaiserhof. It is most likely, in other words, that the dictator flew to Klagenfurt but evidently returned to his home in Berchtesgaden by train).

Several days later, Wolkerstorfer continued with considerable excitement, an „*SS-Untersturmführer vom Führerbegleitkommando*" suddenly appeared at his desk in the *Rathaus*. The SS officer told Wolkerstorfer that the *Führer* would be arriving at Linz *Hauptbahnhof* at exactly 20:00. He then ordered Wolkerstorfer to receive Hitler in person. Wolkerstorfer told me that he was absolutely terrified at the thought of welcoming the dictator by himself, i. e. without Eigruber. Nevertheless, he organized a small entourage and proceeded unobtrusively to the train station. Aside from a handful of waiting passengers and two or three policemen, the platform was largely empty. At exactly eight o'clock, the „*Sonderzug fährt langsam ein.*" As it came to a stop, Hitler climbed out of the third carriage and greeted Wolkerstorfer with a broad smile. As the two men and their associates made their way to waiting limousines, Hitler looked around, grinned, and remarked: "*Bürgermeister, Linz sieht genau*



**Josef Wolkerstorfer**

Archiv der Stadt Linz

5 Hitler spent two days in Linz discussing plans to redesign his *Patenstadt* with the architect, Roderich Fick, and Dr. Fritz Todt, director of major engineering and construction projects in Greater Germany. Slapnicka, Oberdonau, p. 356.

*so schlecht aus wie immer.*” He then laughed and made a number of wisecracks about his hometown and fellow citizens. At this point in the interview, Wolkerstorfer paused to let me know that Hitler had a terrific sense of humor and could be very funny.

Shortly after arriving at the Hotel Weinzing, a supper was served for fourteen guests. Among them, Wolkerstorfer recalled, were Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Martin Bormann, and liaison officer Karl Bodenschatz. Hitler insisted that the Mayor be seated on his right. After exchanging a few pleasantries, the dictator suddenly asked: *“Wie geht’s in Linz? Alles in Ordnung? Was ist los?”* Wolkerstorfer responded: *“Mein Führer, Not und Elend ist vorbei. Der Unterschied zwischen Linz vor dem Anschluss und jetzt ist wie Nacht und Tag. Es gibt keine Arbeitslosigkeit mehr. An den Reichswerken Hermann Göring, an der Reichsbahn, in der Schiffswerft und am Bau der neuen Brücke wird fest gearbeitet.”*

At this point in the interview, Wolkerstorfer digressed to tell me what he thought about Albert Speer. Fourteen days after the *Anschluss* Hitler’s architect turned up in Linz in order to prepare preliminary plans to fulfill the dictator’s boyhood dream of transforming his hometown into a cultural Parnassus. Wolkerstorfer claimed to have acted as a kind of local guide. Speer was not impressed: *“Linz, dieses Barocke, das ist nichts für mich. Das ist für die Süddeutschen.”* From the tone of his voice it was clear that Wolkerstorfer disliked Speer. Even so, he boasted of meeting him subsequently in Berlin, where he inspected various top-secret scale models for the reconstruction of both Linz and Berlin. Before continuing our conversation, Wolkerstorfer reiterated his disdain for Speer, considering him a traitor for obliging the Allies during his testimony at the Nuremberg trials.

Returning to his dinner conversation with Hitler, Wolkerstorfer went on to say that the dictator asked about the cultural scene in Linz, especially performances at the *Landestheater*. Wolkerstorfer responded that the theatrical director, Ignaz Brandtner (1886–1960), lacked sufficient funding to upgrade and improve productions. For that reason he had appealed in desperation to the hard-pressed municipal council. The Nazi mayor suggested that Brandtner stage a fourteen-day production of *“Die lustige Witwe”* as an initial step in a larger subscription drive to renovate the provincial theater. Each and every seat was sold out, Wolkerstorfer proudly told me. Furthermore, *“das hat dem Führer gefallen!”* In Wolkerstorfer’s radiant view Hitler was utterly charming and *“unerhört gescheit.”* He made one feel at ease, never made use of the famous *“Führerblick,”* and had a fantastic memory. Wolkerstorfer even went so

far as to claim that only he could talk to Hitler about Linz, both recalling stories about the school path between Leonding and the city.

Wolkerstorfer continued: “*Schluss mit dem Essen. Er [Hitler] sagte dann: ‘Also gut. Und was ist nicht in Ordnung?’*” Before recounting his response, Wolkerstorfer tried to convey to me his momentary sense of anxiety and excitement, particularly when Bormann took out his notebook. “*Stellen Sie sich das vor, Herr Doktor;*” Wolkerstorfer told me. “*Was hätte ich sagen sollen?*” But certain things were “*nicht in Ordnung.*” The Nazi mayor initially thought of mentioning complaints about the exchange rate of Austrian Schillings to Reichsmarks, but realized that the issue was of greater concern to bankers than to ordinary people. Instead, he said “*Mein Führer, der Bau von Wohnungen ist unbedingt nötig!*” Since the *Anschluss*, he explained, municipal funding proceeded through Reich German channels in a lengthy process that normally took two years. To compound matters, numerous appeals to Berlin had fallen on deaf ears. At this point the room fell silent. Nevertheless, Wolkerstorfer told Hitler that the construction of 3,000 living units had to get under way immediately.

*“Der Führer stand auf und sagte, ‘Also gut, wir sehen uns heute noch.’ Und geht. Stille im Hotel. Vollkommen ruhig. Kaltenbrunner meinte ‘Das hätte ich nicht gemacht an Ihrer Stelle.’ Ich antwortete: ‘Das ist aber mein Führer!’”*

After Hitler had left the dining room, the dinner party adjourned to the hotel fireplace. The Reich Minister for Armaments and Ammunition Fritz Todt made a point of remaining for an unspecified time to discuss building and construction materials. At 23:30 the elevator doors opened. An adjutant emerged, saying “*Bürgermeister Wolkerstorfer zum Führer!*” Upon entering Hitler’s suite, Wolkerstorfer found the dictator leaning against a desk. Todt stood on one side, Bormann on the other. “*Ich fühlte mich als Angeklagter;*” the former mayor chuckled to me. But Hitler was by no means displeased: “*Das ist sehr interessant, was Sie gesagt haben. Teilweise sehr deutlich. Aber ich fühle mich auch als Linzer. Ich helfe Ihnen. Ich baue Ihnen diese 3.000 Wohnungen. Und jetzt hängt es ganz von Ihnen ab, wie schnell die 3000 Wohnungen fertig sind.*”

Wolkerstorfer concluded this dramatic tale by boasting that he had succeeded in carrying out Hitler’s instructions, constructing 2000 apartments in Linz-Urfahr alone. He also claimed to have met the dictator on two other occasions. He did not mention that he had been eased out of office on 5 June 1940 in the wake of a scandal involving the sale of ration stamps on the black market. He did allude to his activities as an official in the *Hermann Göring-*

*Werke*, but refrained from saying a word about his conviction in August 1942 by a special court in Leoben for mismanagement and perjury in a similar affair involving spoiled potatoes in the steel complex. Because he enjoyed the protection of both Kaltenbrunner and Eigruber, however, there is little reason to doubt Wolkerstorfer's claim of two other brief encounters with his *Führer*. The first would have occurred on 13 March 1941 during Hitler's tumultuous reception at the *Göring Werke*, the second in the course of the dictator's last hometown visit in April 1943. Whether Wolkerstorfer actually served as a guide on that occasion, as explained to me, may be open to question.

Here I must confess that Wolkerstorfer's candor made a favorable impression on me. Having examined his file at the Berlin Document Center, I was well aware of his record of corruption. While he certainly evaded the subject, he made no effort to lie or distort his activities in any meaningful way. Nor did I bother to ask. There was, however, one notable exception. It concerned the fate of the Upper Austrian Jewish community. Wolkerstorfer responded with feigned sympathy, explaining that a number of Jewish families had consulted him after the *Anschluss*. He claimed that he had wished to provide assistance, but had no choice other than to encourage them to emigrate. Here Wolkerstorfer was being disingenuous, or as the British say, economical with the truth. As Michael John's research has revealed, Wolkerstorfer not only orchestrated November pogrom in Linz; he also personally supervised the burning of the synagogue and kept the fire department from extinguishing the blaze.<sup>6</sup>

Wolkerstorfer's unrepentant account of his experiences with Hitler struck me as both fascinating and, quite frankly, gripping. During my student days in Göttingen (1966–1968), Professor Percy Ernst Schramm had regaled me with stories regarding encounters with the dictator at the *Führerhauptquartier*. But these were brief and concerned military matters involving Hitler and his generals. Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s I met a fair number of individuals both in Europe and the United States who had either seen or met Hitler. Each and everyone, including Jewish refugee professors in graduate school and a Polish army officer, was impressed. Schramm, for example, was no Nazi, but even he observed "*Er war begabt, sehr begabt.*"

Ironically, my intention in interviewing Wolkerstorfer had not been to learn about Hitler and his relationship to Linz. The bulk of my research had focused on the interwar period, and for that reason I was much more interested in learn-

6 Michael John, „Bereits heute schon ganz judenfrei...“. Die jüdische Bevölkerung von Linz und der Nationalsozialismus, in: Franz Mayrhofer / Walter Schuster (eds.), Nationalsozialismus in Linz (vol. II), Linz 2001, p. 1354.

ing about the activities and development of the NSDAP in Upper Austria prior to the *Anschluss*. I had examined police reports and other documents in nearly fifty boxes in Vienna; I was anxious to determine to what extent the documentary sources corresponded to Wolkerstorfer's recollections: Was the early party primarily a movement of *Sudetendeutsche*? Why were there so many interne-cine quarrels? What had been the relationship of Linz Nazis to the *Heimwehr*? What had been the impact of 12 February 1934 on Hitler's movement? To what extent – if any – did Nazis and Social Democrats subsequently cooperate? What role the Upper Austrian NSDAP had in the Dollfuss *putsch*? How did the „illegal” party recover and reorganize after the July Agreement (*Juliabkommen*) between Austria and the German Reich 1936? Who had organized the *Anschluss* in Hitler's hometown?

I was also interested in learning about the role and activities of certain personalities, for example, Judge in the *Volksgerechtshof* and Mayor of Linz 1943–1945 Franz Langoth, August Eigruber, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, *Gauinspektor* of *Oberdonau* Franz Peterseil, and, above all, Peter Revertera-Salandra, the Security Director between 1934 and 1938.

Although Wolkerstorfer provided me with much needed information, little of what he said on that radiant summer day will add to the thoroughly researched and carefully reconstructed articles recently published in “*Nationalsozialismus in Linz*.” Of these, the most significant for the pre-*Anschluss* period is the piece by Thomas Dostal.<sup>7</sup> According to my notes, Wolkerstorfer responded as follows:

- 1) The Nazi movement in Linz had little success prior to 1934, although roughly 50 % of the local *Heimwehr* eventually joined Hitler's followers.
- 2) Wolkerstorfer never met Richard Bernaschek, the leader of the *Republikanischer Schutzbund*, who was executed in Mauthausen in April 1945. Following the *Anschluss*, he had some contact with Bernaschek's lieutenants, Franz Schlagin and Otto Huschka, who returned to Linz as Nazi city councilors. But the contacts were minimal and Wolkerstorfer did not get to know either man at all well. On the other hand, Wolkerstorfer took pains to emphasize that after 12 February 1934 members of the So-

7 Thomas Dostal, Das braune Netzwerk in Linz: Die illegalen nationalsozialistischen Aktivitäten zwischen 1933 und 1938, in: Mayrhofer / Schuster, *Nationalsozialismus in Linz* (vol. I), pp. 21–136.

cial Democratic *Schutzbund* and *Arbeitersportbund* in Linz went over to the NSDAP. “*Frankstraße, Wiener Reichsstraße, Kleinmünchen. Die waren in der illegalen Zeit zu 80 % zur NSDAP gestoßen. Wieso diese große Anzahl? Meiner Meinung nach hat die Führerschaft [in den Augen der] Arbeiterschaft versagt.*” Those Social Democrats imprisoned in Garsten near Steyr in Upper Austria, he claimed, received support from Hitler’s party, not from the Socialists. (That Social Democratic leaders such as Otto Bauer had either fled abroad, were themselves under lock and key, or simply found themselves unable to lend assistance to *Schutzbündler* jailed by the Dollfuss-Schuschnigg regime was a matter Wolkerstorfer seems not to have taken into account).

- 3) The Nazi July *Putsch* in Austria 1934: “*Das war eine reine Wiener Unternehmung. Bei uns aber ist die Exekutive sehr scharf vorgegangen.*”
- 4) Between 1934 and 1938 the provincial Director of Security, Count Peter Revertera-Salandra, kept close tabs on the illegal NSDAP in Linz. Wolkerstorfer claimed that Revertera was sympathetic to Hitler’s followers and enjoyed playing a cat and mouse game with them. Thus although Wolkerstorfer found himself behind bars twelve times prior to the *Anschluss*, his sister managed to secure his release within days, sometimes within hours. During an unspecified period before 1936, however, he was locked up for several months. While cooling his heels, Wolkerstorfer expressed indignation that he had to share a cell with common criminals. Even so, he claimed that at least 80 % of the guards expressed sympathy for the Nazi cause.

Following Wolkerstorfer’s release as part of the *Juliabkommen* of 11 July 1936, Hitler’s underground movement intensified its activities in Upper Austria, as it did elsewhere in Austria: “*Für jeden Bezirk und für jede Stadt wurde ein Führer bestimmt.*” In order to maintain “*Selbstständigkeit und Geschlossenheit*” the illegal *Gauleiter* August Eigruber forbade any and all contacts with Austrian Nazis who had fled to Germany in 1934. He and Wolkerstorfer organized Linz into five districts. They also succeeded in recruiting municipal waiters and cloakroom girls to report bits and pieces of information overheard in conversation with government officials in restaurants and coffee houses. In addition, the illegal *Gauleitung* organized a number of pranks to embarrass the authorities. In 1937, for example, Wolkerstorfer led a noisy caravan of 20 to 30 Nazi-driven automobiles to disrupt traffic on the *Landstraße*



in Linz. As Security Director, Revertera had no choice but to take Wolkerstorfer into custody. Several weeks later, however, he arranged for his release. “*Er war sehr prima,*” Wolkerstorfer recalled.

- 5) Franz Langoth and Hermann Foppa represented the interests of business and industry. As members of the *Großdeutsche Volkspartei*, they initially had little interest in the NSDAP. But they were also skilled politicians, astute at sensing changes in popular sentiment. It was Kaltenbrunner, Wolkerstorfer claimed, who won them over to Hitler’s cause. Wolkerstorfer evinced enormous personal respect for Langoth but disapproved his stubborn refusal to speak to men who worked with their hands.
- 6) Wolkerstorfer expressed great admiration for Ernst Kaltenbrunner and August Eigruber. Kaltenbrunner, he contended, could be “*kühl und abweisend,*” but was otherwise “*ein lieber Mensch und guter Kamerad.*” Eigruber, in contrast, was “*unbedingter Sozialist, der mehr auf der Seite der Arbeiter gestanden ist. Seinem Wesen nach war er unbedingt Sozialist. War gut bekannt mit Langoth, glaube ich.... Als Gauleiter parteilich unbedingt. Er war einzigartiger Kenner der Partei. Einmalig.*” In his capacity as Gauleiter Eigruber tended to favor provincial interests over Linz, but was shrewd enough to recognize Hitler’s obsession with Linz. He, too, could be “*kühl und abweisend,*” but had the good fortune to make a good impression on Hitler, an impression that worked to the advantage of both Upper Austria and Linz.

If memory serves me correctly, our interview ended shortly after 16:00. I thanked Wolkerstorfer profusely for his time, deliberately remarking “*das waren noch Zeiten!*” Wolkerstorfer reacted with obvious satisfaction. He then inquired if I had time for a special treat. As trains leave Linz hourly for Vienna, I responded in the affirmative. Wolkerstorfer then proceeded to say that I was one of the few Americans he’d encountered who evinced some understanding of the “*damalige Zeit.*” We walked downstairs, crossed the street, and climbed into Wolkerstorfer’s four-door Mercedes Sedan. As his limp was more pronounced, he explained that he had lost his leg in an American air raid. Even so, he had virtually no difficulty in walking or in driving a standard shift automobile. As we drove through the streets of Linz toward the west, Wolkerstorfer let me know that he had won a kayak championship in 1932, adding that the key to good health was to refrain from alcohol and tobacco.

Within less than a half hour, we drove into Leonding and parked by the cemetery. I recognized the village from pictures, but was nonetheless struck by the beauty of the place, particularly St. Michael's church and the stunning view of the Alps to the south. We proceeded through the gate over a well-worn path to the "*Führers Elterngrab*." The plot was filled to overflowing with flowers, as my wife and I found it on a subsequent visit in 1985. After a few moments, Wolkerstorfer ambled back to his car. As we approached the gate, he seized my left arm, asking if I recognized the house across the street, i. e. *Michaelsbergstraße* 16. At that time, the structure was slightly run-down and in need of repair. I knew from photographs that it had been Hitler's boyhood home. Wolkerstorfer then tightened his grip, saying "*Und von diesem Haus aus ist unser Führer in die Welt gegangen, um sein Volk zu retten.*"

The former Nazi mayor drove leisurely back to Linz, making his way along a scenic road on the Freinberg. Close to the summit he pulled to the curb, and we again climbed out of the car. Leaning against a stone wall, we beheld a gorgeous view of Linz and the Danube bathed in the setting sun. Wolkerstorfer reminded me once again that the foundation stones of the town's prosperity had been laid by his „Führer.” But as an after-thought he added that Bruno Kreisky also deserved credit for Austria's present high standard of living. My deliberately nasty response was "*Er ist aber Jude.*" Wolkerstorfer shot back: "*Stimmt, Kreisky treibt aber keine Judenpolitik!*" (In all fairness, I recall a good many *Ehemalige* making similar remarks during the Kreisky years).

Wolkerstorfer and I engaged in brief chit-chat about world affairs. His view was that Austria was more secure than any time since the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. He also wanted me to know as an American that no one should fear a recrudescence of Nazism, "*denn der Nationalsozialismus war einmalig. Er kommt nicht wieder. Damals,*" he continued, „*waren wir 10,000 Idealisten in Linz.*" The present generation of Austrians and Germans, he believed, were both unable and unwilling to sacrifice themselves for a cause. As we bade farewell at the train station, Wolkerstorfer asked me to send him a picture postcard from the Ozarks. I obliged and never heard from him again.