

The Case of A. H.

He was an abused child. Although he would never admit to it, all the evidence points to the fact that his father verbally and physically mistreated him, his brothers and sisters, and his beloved mother. Typical of wife and child abusers, his father suffered severe frustrations in his own life. A bright and ambitious man, he never enjoyed opportunities to get ahead, and he turned to the bottle. He was well into his fifties when the boy was born, and his alcoholism aggravated his personal sense of failure, driving him to strike out at the most convenient targets: his wife, his children. The subject claimed to have respected his father, but he was secretly very grateful and felt very guilty when the old man died during the boy's thirteenth year. Now he had his mother to himself. She adored him; she protected him; she pampered him. In her eyes, no matter what he did—fail in school, disrupt his classes, alienate his peers—he could do no wrong.

He was very bright, but he graduated from high school without any distinction and was repeatedly denied admission to the university of his choice. When his mother died soon after, he was emotionally devastated. The severe anxiety that he suffered and held in check in his developing years—an effect, probably, of his abuse as a child—seized his life. He left his suburban home for the big city, and he suffered an extended breakdown.

He went for months at a time without bathing or changing his filthy clothes. Despite a small but adequate inheritance, he chose to live in run-down, vermin-ridden hotels frequented by derelicts and vagrants. For weeks at a time, he would speak to no other living soul. Those who knew him said he seemed to wallow in filth and degradation. Later, it would be claimed that his self-inflicted humiliation was an unconscious identification with his mother, a submissive victim to her husband's abuses.

At the very depth of his squalid existence, he was saved by an accident of history: war. He fled his homeland in order to join the army of a strong, aggressive neighboring nation. Later, he claimed that his experiences as a soldier, in what he believed was a great crusade, marked the turning point of his life. He was the perfect soldier, obeying orders willingly, priding himself in the cleanliness of his uniform and his person, risking his life repeatedly. He was awarded one of his adoptive country's highest decorations for heroism.

When the war suddenly ended in defeat for his side, he heard the news and promptly went blind for over a week before spontaneously regaining his sight. From that day on, he dedicated himself to winning back for his adopted nation its former power and prestige. Commentators have said that this consuming ambition—this lust for national and personal power—came from his identification with his abusive, powerful father.

His personal habits became the opposite of those he had practiced during his humiliating days in the big city. He often bathed several times during the day. If he got a spot anywhere on his clothing, he would completely change his outfit, including his underwear. He washed his hands many times a day and avoided anything that he thought was dirty or contained germs. He neither smoked nor drank nor ate meat. He thought about death constantly—a psychological remnant, some said, of having survived a childhood during which many of his brothers and sisters died of disease. He often had four or five medical doctors in constant attendance, despite the fact that he would let none of them examine him thoroughly because he was afraid they might discover some terminal disease.*

Most of his loyal followers never witnessed his quirky behavior, his neurotic habits. His spellbinding speeches and his gifted propagandists hid the real man behind a myth of perfection. History holds him responsible for the death and terrible suffering of millions, and he is often regarded as the symbol of evil in our century. His neurosis and his graver personality problems all seem rooted in his tragic past as an abused child. His name: Adolf Hitler.

*D. M. Kelley, *22 Cells in Nuremberg* (New York: Chilton Books, 1947).