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Brunhilde Pomsel, 106 Secretary to Nazi propaganda minister
Joseph Goebbels



Ms. Pomsel in 2016. (Christof Stache /Agence France-Presse via Getty Images)

by [Emily Langer](#)

Brunhilde Pomsel, a secretary to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels who late in life came forward to publicly reflect on, if perhaps not fully reckon with, questions of personal and collective guilt in the face of the Holocaust, died during the night of Jan. 27 at her home in Munich. She was 106.

Her death was confirmed by Roland Schrotthofer, a director of "[A German Life](#)," a documentary drawn from dozens of hours of interviews conducted with Ms. Pomsel when she was 103. No other details were immediately available.

Ms. Pomsel was one of the last surviving members of the Nazi hierarchy's most intimate staff, but she spent all but the final years of her life in obscurity. She became widely known only after the premiere of the documentary in Nyon, Switzerland, in 2016. The U.S. release is forthcoming.

[The film](#), directed by Schrotthofer, Christian Krönes, Olaf S. Müller and Florian Weigensamer, presents an arresting portrait of an ordinary German swept into the Nazi apparatus in her youth, then left to reflect for more than seven decades on her complicity, if any, in its crimes.

Ms. Pomsel sparkled on camera in her lucidity. She confessed to harboring "a bit of a guilty conscience" but professed that she had known nothing of the murder of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust — the "matter of the Jews," as she termed it — until after the war was over.



Ms. Pomsel works at a typewriter during World War II. (Copyright Brunhilde Pomsel Private Collection/ Blackbox Film & Medienproduktion GmbH)

“Everything that is beautiful is also tainted,” she said in the film, obliquely. “And whatever’s horrible also has its bright side. Nothing’s black and white. There’s always a bit of gray in everything.”

Ms. Pomsel was born in Berlin on Jan. 11, 1911. She identified in herself a fundamental obedience that she traced to her father, a World War I veteran who instilled in her through beatings what she described as “this Prussian something, this sense of duty.”

“I’m not the kind of person to resist,” she said in the film. “I wouldn’t dare to. I’d say: ‘No, I can’t do that!’ I’m one of the cowards.”

Ms. Pomsel appeared to look back ruefully on what she described as the frivolity of her youth and her inattention to national affairs. In her early professional years, she worked for a clothing store run by a Jewish businessman and for a Jewish lawyer whom she recalled fondly. On the side, she worked for a Nazi Party activist, transcribing his memoirs of World War I.

She said that she did not have the heart to tell the Jewish lawyer that she had joined the cheering crowds at Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate on Jan. 30, 1933, when Adolf Hitler, whose anti-Semitic vitriol helped propel his political rise, was installed as chancellor of Germany.

“I was too kind for that,” Ms. Pomsel said. “You just couldn’t do that to the poor Jew.”

In 1933, through the intercession of her Nazi employer, Ms. Pomsel was hired as a secretary in the news division of the German government broadcasting corporation. The job, which came with an enviably good salary when much of the German citizenry was in dire straits, required that she join the Nazi Party.

“That was my fate. Who’s got control over their fate?” Ms. Pomsel said. “Especially in times of such upheaval.”

Even as the Nazi government launched its campaign of persecution and then deportation of Jews, she maintained her long-standing relationship with a Jewish friend, Eva Lowenthal, who would later perish at Auschwitz. Ms. Pomsel said she had believed that Jews deported were relocated to the Sudetenland, a portion of Czechoslovakia annexed by Germany in 1938, and that concentration camps were correctional facilities for people who had disturbed the peace.

“No one ever believes us. Everyone thinks we all knew everything. We knew nothing,” she told the filmmakers.

As for later generations, “the people who today say . . . they would have done more for those poor, persecuted Jews, I really believe that they sincerely mean it,” Ms. Pomsel said. “But they wouldn’t have done it either. By then, the whole country was under some kind of a dome. We ourselves were all inside a huge concentration camp.”

In 1942, Ms. Pomsel was promoted to work as one of several assistants to Goebbels, who as minister of propaganda oversaw all means of communications in Germany, including newspapers, magazines, radio, books, entertainment and rallies. He was one of the most well-educated members of the higher Nazi ranks but also “one of the more radical and virulent anti-Semites” within the regime, said Steven Luckert, a curator at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Working at a well-appointed office in the center of Berlin, Ms. Pomsel handled duties including taking Goebbels’s phone calls, recording his remarks in meetings and arranging his travel, at times to meet with Hitler. She recalled altering German casualty counts to present a falsely rosy picture of the Nazi war effort.

She remembered the diminutive Goebbels as an urbane man, with hands so well kept that they appeared to be manicured daily. “But no matter how elegant and well-fitting his suits were, he limped,” she said, recalling his club foot. “You felt a bit sorry for him. He made up for it though by being slightly arrogant.”

She said that Goebbels was often distant in personal interactions but raving in public appearances — including his speech at the Berlin Sportpalast in February 1943, shortly after the German defeat at Stalingrad, seeking to reinvigorate German morale and calling for “total war.” Ms. Pomsel, who attended the event, said that he was transformed from a man of “noble elegance” into a “raging midget.”

On the whole, Ms. Pomsel said, she enjoyed her work at the ministry. She came to know Goebbels’s wife, Magda, and their six children, who would occasionally visit their father at his office.

In the final days of the war, as the Nazi defeat became inevitable, she and other government employees hunkered down in the basement of the propaganda ministry, where they numbed themselves with alcohol. Goebbels and his family ensconced themselves in the Führerbunker, where Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945. The next day, Goebbels and his wife took their own lives. His children were poisoned.

“I will never forgive Goebbels for what he did to the world or for the fact that he murdered his innocent children,” Ms. Pomsel [recently told a German newspaper, according to the London Independent](#).

Ms. Pomsel and her colleagues surrendered to the Russians, who made her a prisoner for five years. After her return from the Russian camp, she worked in West German radio and television until her retirement. She lived outside Munich, never married and had no children.

The documentary, Ms. Pomsel [told](#) the London Guardian, was “absolutely not about clearing my conscience.”

“I didn’t do anything but type in Goebbels’s office,” she said in the film. “And I had no idea of what was behind all that. Well, very little, anyway. No, I wouldn’t see myself as being guilty.”

Unless you end up blaming the entire German population for ultimately enabling that government to take control. That was all of us, including me.”

She said that she had come to believe that “God doesn’t exist, but the devil certainly does. There is no justice, however,” she added, cryptically. “Justice doesn’t exist at all.”

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