

HITLER'S *RIENZI* EXPERIENCE: FACTUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Among the memoirs of August Kubizek's teenage friendship with Adolf Hitler, *Adolf Hitler, mein Jugendfreund*¹, is a remarkable story involving two intimately related events. The main event, known to historians as the "*Rienzi* experience," occurs in 1905. After attending a performance of Wagner's *Rienzi* at the Linz Theatre, a fifteen year-old Adolf Hitler climbs a nearby mountaintop with his friend where he dramatically incarnates the figure of *Rienzi*² from the opera, and claims to have a visionary experience in which he, like *Rienzi* before him for the Romans, is called to become the future liberator of the Germans.

The second event, hereinafter called Hitler's "confirmation," occurs thirty-four years later, in 1939, when Kubizek is invited to spend an afternoon with Hitler in Bayreuth. Here the opportuni-

ty arises to inquire of Hitler whether he, first, recalls that mountaintop experience; and, second, attaches any significance to it. Responding to the first, Hitler indicates that he vividly recalls it, while in response to the second he dramatically says: "In that hour it began," meaning that he regarded it as the inception of his political career.

Since Kubizek is the only witness for much of what is known about Hitler's teenage years, historians extensively rely on Kubizek's memoirs in their biographies of Hitler. Many, however, omit any mention of the *Rienzi* experience, while others mention it (though rarely Hitler's confirmation) only to trivialize it. In the late 1990s, however, one scholar credited these events and argued that they were significant for the telling of Hitler's life story—only to be criticized by another prominent historian for taking them "seriously."

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¹ Kubizek, August, *Adolf Hitler, mein Jugendfreund*. Sixth Edition, Graz und Stuttgart, Leopold Stocker, 1995; originally published: Graz and Göttingen, Leopold Stocker, 1953, hereinafter cited as "Kubizek." A condensed version of this work, translated by E. V. Anderson, was published in England as *Young Hitler: The Story of our Friendship*. London, Paul Popper, 1954; and in the United States as *The Young Hitler I Knew*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1955. A more recent translation by Geoffrey Brooks, also titled *The Young Hitler I Knew*. London, Greenhill, 2006, purports to be a complete and more accurate translation of the original memoirs, but nevertheless is also condensed, sometimes omitting significant portions of chapters. Further, Brooks closely follows Anderson's translation with only minor changes, some of which are improvements and some of which are not. Comparing both translations to the original, while the Brooks translation is slightly more complete, I prefer Anderson's as slightly more accurate for the quotations used in this article. In all subsequent citations, the page numbers of the original German and both translations are given. For example, in the citation, "Kubizek, p. 271; Anderson, p. 273; Brooks, p. 245," the first page number refers to the original German sixth edition, Leopold Stocker, 1995, the second to the Anderson translation, American edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1955, and the third to the Brooks translation, Greenhill, 2006.

² The name *Rienzi* is placed in italics when it refers to the name of Wagner's opera, and in regular type when it refers to the character of the historical figure, Cola di Rienzo, popularly called "Rienzi," whether depicted in historical accounts, fictional works, or dramatized in stage productions. Thus, the "*Rienzi* experience" refers to Hitler's experience after seeing Wagner's opera, *Rienzi, der letzte der Tribunen: Grosse tragische Oper in fünf Aufzügen (nach Bulwers gleichnamigen Roman)*.

An investigation of these two events is, therefore, in order. The first requirement for such an investigation is to present Kubizek's actual account of these two events, so that the reader will be conversant with the exact version of the stories whose factuality and significance are at issue.

1. KUBIZEK'S ACCOUNT OF THE *RIENZI* EXPERIENCE³

On a cold and rainy January evening in 1905, a scrawny, fifteen year-old Adolf Hitler⁴, wearing a black overcoat with a dark hat pulled over his face against the rain, hurried through the streets of Linz. He was rushing to the home of his friend, Gustl Kubizek, because something very important was happening that night: Wagner's *Rienzi* was to be performed at the Linz Opera House. Gustl was waiting for him at the door, and together they ran to the theatre in order to arrive before the crowd, for they could only afford the standing-room-only section and wanted to get the choice spots before they were taken. After securing their favorite positions in front of pillars (to lean against during the performance), they talked excitedly about the opera they were about to see. Both were ardent Wagner enthusiasts, and were already familiar with the script and the score. Then, as Gustl recalls, the lights went out and, "burning with excitement," they thrilled to Wagner's stirring overture, and "breathlessly" experienced the drama of "Rienzi's rise to be Tribune of the people of Rome and his subsequent downfall"⁵.

Gustl loved to go to the theatre with his new friend, for Adolf insured that each occasion was a "double feature." After every opera or concert, Adolf would immediately begin critiquing the

performance: praising or criticizing the composer, conductor, orchestra, singers, actors, stage settings, score or script. While Adolf and Gustl both took an immense interest in music and the theatre, for Gustl, Adolf's "performance after the performance" was always the highlight of the evening.

On this particular night, however, Gustl was to be disappointed. When the opera ended shortly after midnight, instead of talking about it in his usual way, Adolf did not say a word. Rather, he stuck his hands in his pockets and walked silently through the lobby, out the door, and down the street. Gustl followed him in complete surprise and after a while asked him if there were anything wrong. But Adolf merely turned his head to throw Gustl an uncharacteristically hostile, almost sinister look, and said, "Schweig!" (Silence!)

So the two walked along the narrow streets in silence until they reached the intersection of a road that led to the Freinberg, a mountain overlooking Linz. Here, instead of continuing toward their homes, Adolf suddenly veered to take the road up the mountain. Gustl was confused, and wanted to ask him where he was going. But Adolf's face looked so solemn that Gustl swallowed the question and followed him in silence. When they reached the top, Gustl noticed for the first time that the clouds and rain of the earlier evening had passed and the sky was now a bright vault of stars. Then occurred what Gustl describes as "the most impressive hour I ever lived through with my friend":

"Adolf stood in front of me; and now he gripped both my hands and held them tight. He had never made such a gesture before. I felt from the grasp of his hands how deeply

³ Permission to quote and paraphrase extensively from Kubizek's memoirs for this article has been graciously granted in writing by Mag. Wolfgang Dvorak-Stocker on behalf of the copyright holder, Leopold Stocker Verlag GmbH, Graz, Austria.

⁴ There has been considerable debate as to the date when Adolf and Gustl attended this opera, as well as Adolf's age at the time. The dates when the opera was actually performed have been ascertained from the local Linz newspapers by Herr Friedrich Ortner of the Oberösterreichische Landesbibliothek, Linz. These dates are: Tuesday, January 3 and 10; Thursday, January 5 and 19; and Sunday, February 12, 1905. Presumably, Adolf would have attended one of the early January performances while he was home on Christmas vacation from attending school in Steyr. In any event, Kubizek's account is not quite correct either as to the date of the performance (Kubizek suggests that it was November 1905), or Hitler's age at the time. At one point Kubizek refers to Hitler's age at the time of attending this opera as seventeen (Kubizek, 118; Anderson, 101; Brooks, 119); and at another point as sixteen (Kubizek, 272; Anderson, 273; and Brooks, 245). He was fifteen; his sixteenth birthday would not have been until several months later, April 20, 1905.

⁵ To reduce the number of notes, all of the facts recited and quotations in Section I of this article (except the phrases "double feature" and "performance after the performance") are taken or paraphrased from Kubizek, 111-118; Anderson 98-101; Brooks 116-119. It should be noted, however, that both translators have drastically condensed this particular chapter of Kubizek's memoirs, omitting approximately half its total length.

moved he was. His eyes were feverish with excitement. The words did not come smoothly from his mouth as they usually did, but rather erupted, hoarse and raucous. From his voice I could tell even more how much this experience had shaken him.

Gradually his speech loosened, and the words flowed more freely. Never before and never again have I heard Adolf Hitler speak as he did in that hour, as we stood there alone under the stars, as though we were the only creatures in the world.

I cannot repeat every word that my friend uttered. I was stuck by something strange, which I had never noticed before, even when he had talked to me in moments of the greatest excitement. It was as if another being spoke out of his body, and moved him as much as it did me. It wasn't at all a case of a speaker being carried away by his own words. On the contrary; I rather felt as though he himself listened with astonishment and emotion to what burst forth from him with elementary force. I will not attempt to interpret this phenomenon, but it was a state of complete ecstasy and rapture, in which he transferred the character of *Rienzi*, without even mentioning him as a model or example, with visionary power to the plane of his own ambitions. But it was more than a cheap adaptation. Indeed, the impact of the opera was rather like a sheer external impulse which compelled him to speak. Like flood waters breaking their dykes, the words broke forth from him. He conjured up in grandiose, inspiring pictures his own future and that of his people.

Hitherto I had been convinced that my friend wanted to become an artist, a painter, or perhaps an architect. Now this was no longer the case. Now he aspired to something higher, which I could not yet fully grasp. It rather surprised me, as I thought that the vocation of the artist was for him the highest, most desirable goal. But now he was talking of a *mandate* which, one day, he would receive from the people, to lead them out of servitude to the heights of freedom.

It was an unknown youth who spoke to me in that strange hour. He spoke of a special mission which one day would be entrusted to

him, and I, his only listener, could hardly understand what he meant.

His words were followed by silence".

There they stood, two youths lost in a mystical experience, shrouded among the trees and rocky crags of the Freinberg, looking out from their heights to the heavens above and the city bathed in starlight below. After what seemed like an eternity to Gustl, they walked back down the mountain, again in silence, as though no words could add to what had taken place. When they were near the bottom, Gustl heard a clock chime: three hours had passed since they left the theatre.

Adolf accompanied Gustl to his home where they solemnly shook hands. Then, instead of walking in the direction of his own home, Adolf turned back toward the Freinberg. "Where are you going now?" Gustl asked him in surprise. "I want to be alone," Adolf whispered. From this point on we can only assume that Hitler spent the rest of the night alone, either on the summit of the mountain or walking the streets of Linz, pondering his experience and what it might portend.

This entire event is generally referred to by historians as the "*Rienzi* experience," and consists of four elements: That 1) Hitler had a visionary mountaintop experience, 2) as a teenager, 3) after a performance of Wagner's *Rienzi* at the Linz Theatre, 4) as a result of which he believed that he had received a calling to become the savior of the German people.

While neither Gustl nor Adolf ever again mentioned this event to each other during the years they spent together, it remained deeply etched in Gustl's memory. The emotional depth and dramatic power of such an event, Kubizek believed, could not fail to affect the life of his teenage friend. He often wondered, therefore, when he later read of Hitler being hailed as the *Führer* and 'savior' of the German people, and of his rise to become chancellor, whether Hitler remembered it as he did and attributed the same significance to it. This caused Kubizek to seek Hitler's confirmation both of the facts of Kubizek's recollection, and its importance for Hitler's subsequent career.

2. KUBIZEK'S ACCOUNT OF HITLER'S CONFIRMATION

Thirty-four years later, in 1939, Hitler confirmed to Kubizek that the *Rienzi* experience was

the actual inception of his political career. This is the background of how that came about. Adolf and Gustl originally met each other at another performance at the Linz Theatre sometime before the *Rienzi* experience⁶. From their very first meeting they became inseparable friends. When Adolf moved to Vienna in early 1908, Gustl joined him and the two shared a room for several months until Gustl was called away for summer military training. When Gustl returned, however, he found that Adolf had moved out and left no address. Gustl had no idea what had happened to him until he saw his picture in a magazine many years later.

The two did not meet again until thirty years later, in 1938, although they did communicate once by letter. In 1933, when Kubizek read in the newspapers of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, he immediately recalled the *Rienzi* experience and thought: "What the sixteen-year-old had seen in a visionary's trance had really come to pass"⁷. Kubizek then wrote a congratulatory letter to Hitler, and six months later received a warm reply. There was, however, no further contact until 1938, when Gustl watched Hitler's triumphal motorcade drive through Linz after the *Anschluss*, and gathered the courage to go to the hotel where Hitler was staying. Hitler welcomed him and the two briefly renewed their acquaintance, but the opportunity did not arise on that occasion for Kubizek to remind Hitler of the *Rienzi* experience.

The following year, however, Hitler sent Kubizek an invitation to attend the annual Wagner Festival in Bayreuth as his personal guest. At the conclusion of the Festival, August 3, 1939, Kubizek was invited to spend an entire afternoon with Hitler at *Haus Wahnfried*, where they reminisced about the Wagner performances they had attended

together, and about Hitler's grandiose plans as a youth. "Ah, how well I knew those plans from long ago!" recalls Kubizek: "In his talks of thirty-five years ago their fundamentals were already determined. But now it was no longer mere fantasy." Hitler said to him: "Now I have you as my witness in Bayreuth, Kubizek, for you were the only one present when as a poor, unknown person I first gave utterance to those ideas. And now you can see what has come of it"⁸.

Then they rose and walked out to the garden to stand before the gravesite of their teenage idol, Richard Wagner. After silently communing with the Master, the opportunity arose to mention the *Rienzi* experience. Kubizek recounted the entire story, watching for Hitler's response. He was not disappointed: Hitler, he writes, "vividly recalled that hour and had all its details in his memory"⁹. Kubizek was still not sure, however, whether Hitler attached the same significance to it as he did. That was to come later that same afternoon when Hitler introduced him to Frau Winifred Wagner. After the three of them sat down to talk, Kubizek records:

"When our conversation turned on the youthful enthusiasm with which we dedicated ourselves to the works of the Master, I recalled again that memorable *Rienzi* performance in Linz. And now Hitler evoked for Frau Wagner the unique experience of that night, concluding with the words that have remained engraved on my memory, 'In that hour it began'¹⁰.

The clear implication is that Hitler regarded that night on the Freinberg as the inception of his political career. If these events occurred, therefore—both Hitler's dramatic experience and his confirmation of its significance—then the *Rienzi* experience must have been a very important moment,

⁶ The date of their original meeting is disputed by Franz Jetzinger who argues that Kubizek and Hitler did not meet in the fall of 1904, as Kubizek claims, but in the fall of 1905. Jetzinger presents several facts whose implications are that it would have been impossible for them to have attended the *Rienzi* opera together, given its dates of performance, since they had not yet met. However, although Jetzinger specifically refutes dozens of Kubizek's facts, and appears to have been aware of the dates of the *Rienzi* performances in Linz, he does not specifically challenge Kubizek's account of the *Rienzi* experience. Jetzinger, Franz, *Hitler's Youth*. London, Hutchinson, 1958, 167-74. Translated by Lawrence Wilson (in condensed form) and reprinted in the United States under the same title with identical pagination (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1976. All subsequent citations are to the Wilson translation, hereinafter cited as "Jetzinger."

⁷ Kubizek, 271; Anderson, 273; Brooks, 245.

⁸ Kubizek, 284, Anderson, 288; Brooks, 255.

⁹ Kubizek, 118, Anderson, 101; Brooks, 119. (Kubizek's first mention of Hitler saying, "In that hour it began.")

¹⁰ Kubizek, 286; Anderson, 290; Brooks, 256. (Kubizek's second mention of Hitler saying "In that hour it began.")

perhaps *the* most decisive moment in Hitler's life.

Normally, the detailed report by an eyewitness of such an experience in a major public figure's life, especially when it is confirmed by the subject himself, is credited by historians as furnishing an important insight into the subject's character and life story. In the case of the *Rienzi* experience, however, this has not happened. Perhaps the unusual nature of the story itself, which runs counter to almost all accounts of Hitler's youth by historians and biographers, can explain this different treatment. In any event, it is reasonable to ask whether there is any corroboration of Kubizek's account.

3. CORROBORATION

Direct corroboration of both the *Rienzi* experience and Hitler's confirmation of its significance appeared more than thirty years ago. The source is a passage in Albert Speer's prison memoirs, *Spandau: The Prison Diaries*, originally published in German in 1975¹¹. The relevant entry, dated February 7, 1948, recounts that Speer was present during a conversation that took place in the summer of 1938 between Hitler and Reich Minister of Labor Robert Ley, in which Hitler explained his reasons for selecting the overture of Wagner's *Rienzi* as the introductory music for the Nuremberg Party Rallies. Speer recalls Hitler saying:

"You know, Ley, it isn't by chance that I have the Party Rallies open with the overture to *Rienzi*. It's not just a musical question. At the age of twenty-four this man, an innkeeper's son, persuaded the Roman people to drive out the corrupt Senate by reminding them of the magnificent past of the Roman Empire. *Listening to this blessed music as a young man in the theatre at Linz, I had the vision that I too must someday succeed in uniting the German Empire*

*and making it great once more*¹² (Emphasis added)".

This testimony is as strong and direct in its corroboration as one can reasonably expect for a private event in an historical figure's life. It comes from a credible source, and confirms all of the elements of Kubizek's account of the *Rienzi* experience; namely, that: 1) Hitler did have a visionary experience; 2) as a youth; 3) after hearing a performance of *Rienzi* at the Linz theatre; and 4) which gave him the inspiration for his subsequent career.

All of the dates and circumstance surrounding Speer's recollection support its corroborative value. First, the conversation Speer is recalling took place in the summer of 1938, a full year before Kubizek's conversation with Hitler. This establishes that, not only did Hitler "vividly recall" the story when Kubizek recounted it to him the first time, but also that Hitler did not merely "seize on the story" to retell it to Frau Wagner (which, as we shall see, some historians insinuate). Second, the date of the diary entry, February 7, 1948, is also significant, in that it is five years before Kubizek's memoirs were published. At the time of the entry Speer had been in prison for almost three years, cut off from communication with the outside world, making it unlikely that he and Kubizek either conspired or invented the same story out of whole cloth. Finally, Speer's diaries were not published until twenty years after Kubizek died, making it impossible for Kubizek to have gotten the story from Speer. Thus, both Kubizek's and Speer's recollections are independent and untainted by any knowledge of the other.

In addition to Kubizek's and Speer's testimony, however, there is abundant independent evidence that the story of *Rienzi* made a deep impression on Hitler as a teenager. Joachim Köhler, for example, cites evidence that: "In his parents' house in the village of Leonding, outside Linz, he used to wrap a tablecloth around himself and pretend to be a 'Roman senator'¹³. According to Brigitte Hamann,

¹¹ Speer, Albert, *Spandau: The Prison Diaries*. New York, Pocket Books, 1977. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. First American publication: New York, Macmillan; 1976. Originally published in German: *Spandauer Tagebücher*. Frankfurt-am-Main, Ullstein Verlag, 1975; All subsequent citations are to the Pocket Books edition, hereinafter cited as "Speer".

¹² Speer, Albert, *Spandau...*, op. cit., 96.

¹³ Quoted by Köhler, Joachim, *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple*. Madden, MA, Polity Press, 2000, translated into English by Ronald Taylor, 27; citing Knopp, Guido, *Hitler: Bilanz*. Berlin, 1995, 117. Köhler's work was originally published as *Wagners Hitler: Der Prophet und sein Vollstrecker*. Munich, Karl Blessing Verlag, 1997. All subsequent citations are to the Taylor translation, hereinafter cited as "Köhler".

Hitler's sister Paula recalls that, as a teenager, "it was important to Hitler to be looked on as Rienzi incarnate." Further, she reports, "Among the Kubizek family his alleged statement, 'I want to become a people's tribune,' was passed on"¹⁴. These testimonies, though they do not directly refer to a mountaintop experience, nevertheless indirectly support it; the teenage Hitler's infatuation with Rienzi was exhibited not only to Kubizek on the Freinberg, but also to other members of the Hitler and Kubizek families.

Further, there is considerable evidence that Hitler's teenage identification with Rienzi continued throughout the rest of his life. At the beginning of his political career, for example, when Hitler was struggling in the early 1920s to become recognized as the savior of Germany, the nickname used for him by Rudolf Hess, his personal secretary, was "The Tribune"¹⁵. Later as chancellor, Nicholas von Below, Hitler's personal adjutant, records hearing Hitler speak of a conscious parallel with Rienzi: "Like the hero of Wagner's opera," von Below writes, "the Führer too felt that he had been called to save the German Fatherland"¹⁶. Henry Picker, in turn, corroborates von Below's account. Picker records Hitler saying, during one of his late-night bunker conversations, that it had been "at a performance of *Rienzi* in Linz that he first had the idea of becoming a politician—a tribune of the people"¹⁷. Thus, even during the war Hitler is still crediting the *Rienzi* experience as the inspiration for his career, and still referring to himself by the same term—"Tribune"—which Hess adopted as his nickna-

me at the beginning of his political career, and which had so infatuated Hitler as a teenager.

Considering all this corroborative evidence, let us now briefly survey the various ways historians and biographers have dealt with this story.

4. HISTORIANS' APPROACHES TO THE RIENZI EXPERIENCE

After the publication of Kubizek's memoirs, historians were perplexed by the *Rienzi* experience. On the one hand, it is a factual, eyewitness account that has never been contradicted. On the other hand, its implications for telling Hitler's story run so counter to the accepted version of his life that no historian has dared to consider them. This has resulted in five approaches to it by historians over the half-century since Kubizek's account appeared.

The first approach consists of ignoring Kubizek's account of the *Rienzi* experience by simply omitting any mention of it, which is exemplified by Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*¹⁸; William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*¹⁹; and Karl Dietrich Bracher's *The German Dictatorship*²⁰. Perhaps this could be explained by the fact that Speer's diaries corroborating Kubizek's account had not yet been published—except that each relies on Kubizek for other facts and events that equally lack corroboration. Let us consider the strangeness in this behavior by asking: Why did these biographers omit the most portentous story in Kubizek's memoirs while crediting others? It is further interesting to note that after Speer's corroboratory evidence appeared

¹⁴ Quoted by Hamann, Brigitte, *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, translated into English by Thomas Thornton, 24, citing a statement by Kubizek's widow, Paula, in *Ein junger Mann aus dem Innviertel (A Young Man from the Inn District)*, a film by Gerog Stefan Toller and Axel Corti, n.d. (see endnote 110, 410; and endnote 51, 408). Hamann's work was originally published as *Hitlers Wien: Lehrjahre eines Diktators* (Munich, Piper Verlag, 1996). This and all subsequent citations are to the Thornton translation, hereinafter cited as "Hamann".

¹⁵ Hess, Wolf Rudiger, *My Father, Rudolf Hess*. London, W. H. Allen, 1986, 35.

¹⁶ Quoted in Köhler, Joachim, *Wagner's...*, op. cit., 36; citing Nicholas von Below, *Als Hitlers Adjutant 1937-1945*. Mainz, 1980, 76.

¹⁷ Quoted in Köhler, Joachim, *Wagner's...*, op. cit., 26; citing Henry Picker, ed., *Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier* (Stuttgart, 1976), 53.

¹⁸ Bullock, Alan, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*. Although the first edition (New York, Harper Brothers, 1952) appeared before Kubizek's memoirs were published, Bullock did not see fit to mention the *Rienzi* experience in his Completely Revised Edition: New York, Harper & Row, 1962.

¹⁹ Shirer, William L., *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1960.

²⁰ Bracher, Karl Dietrich, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism*. New York, Prager, 1970. Translated by Jean Steinberg. Originally published as *Die Deutsche Diktatur: Entstehung, Struktur, Folgen des Nationalsozialismus*. Köln, Verlag Kiepenhauser, 1969.

none of these historians saw fit to suggest that it might affect their version of Hitler's life story²¹.

A second approach consists of accepting the *Rienzi* experience by including a brief account of it, but otherwise treating it as a "factoid;" i.e., a fascinating and intriguing tidbit of information of no intrinsic significance. This approach is exemplified by Joachim Fest in *Hitler*²²; John Toland in *Adolf Hitler*²³; Robert Payne in *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*²⁴; William Carr in *Hitler: A Study of Personality and Politics*²⁵; Charles B. Flood in *Hitler: The Path to Power*²⁶; and Klaus P. Fischer in *Nazi Germany*²⁷.

The third approach goes beyond the mere mention of the *Rienzi* experience to an attempt to explain it away. Bradley F. Smith, for example, trivializes it to nothing but one more example of Hitler's after-opera fantasies: "Some performances had the effect on him of religious experiences. On such occasions, he would leave the theatre deep in introspection"²⁸. Note, however, that Smith's "explanation" is counter-factual: the only evidence for Hitler's behavior after performances at this time in his life comes from Kubizek, who insists that there was only one such occasion—after all others Hitler would immediately begin talking. Smith's apparent purpose is to find a reason to avoid taking the *Rienzi* experience seriously as a significant event in the young Hitler's life.

The fourth approach is illustrated by Joachim Köhler, who in the mid-1990s did take the *Rienzi* experience seriously. In *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple* (originally published in German in 1997), he devotes a chapter to the thesis that, not only did the *Rienzi* experience actually occur, it furnished the theme of Hitler's life²⁹. Upon seeing the opera as a teenager, Köhler claims, "Hitler quickly recognized his own embodiment in the figure of the Roman tribune"³⁰. This suggests that Hitler was not, as almost all biographies depict him, *simply* a lazy, feckless, shiftless, teenage high-school dropout, but already by age fifteen had some political vision of himself that was clear enough to recognize its embodiment in the figure of *Rienzi*. Köhler further claims that: "Hitler remained faithful to *Rienzi* throughout his life"³¹, and insists that many of his decisions, actions, statements, and attitudes as *Führer* are traceable to the influence of that one particular night when Hitler first heard Wagner's opera, *Rienzi*.

This was too much for Ian Kershaw, whose first volume of his monumental biography, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, was published in 1998³². Kershaw's thesis is that Hitler's personality is a "void" or "black hole" and, therefore, there can be no human narrative or story line. As a consequence of Köhler's thesis, however, Kershaw felt that he must inaugurate a fifth approach to the *Rienzi* experience,

²¹ Stone, Norman, *Hitler*. Boston, Little Brown, 1980, which appeared after Speer's diary was published, also omits any mention of the *Rienzi* experience.

²² Fest, Joachim C., *Hitler*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, 22-23. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. Originally published: Verlag Ulstein, 1973.

²³ Toland, John, *Adolf Hitler*. Garden City, Doubleday, 1976, 23-24.

²⁴ Payne, Robert, *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*. New York, Praeger, 1973, 52-53.

²⁵ Carr, William, *Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics*. London, Edward Arnold, 1978, 139. It should be noted that it was Carr who first noted Speer's statement, writing: "One might well doubt the authenticity of this tale [of the *Rienzi* experience] were it not for Hitler's comment to Ley in 1938 that the music of *Rienzi* inspired him to believe that he would succeed in uniting the Reich and making it great." Carr, however, fails to develop this observation further.

²⁶ Flood, Charles B., *Hitler: The Path to Power*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1989, 8.

²⁷ Fischer, Klaus P., *Nazi Germany: A New History*. New York, Continuum, 1996, 82.

²⁸ Smith, Bradley F., *Adolf Hitler: His Family, Childhood and Youth*. Stanford, Stanford University, The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1967, 103.

²⁹ Köhler, Joachim, *Wagner's...*, op. cit., Chapter 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³² Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1999. Published the previous year in Britain (London, W. W. Norton, 1998). All quotations or references are to the American edition, hereinafter cited as "Kershaw".

which is to go on the attack against any attempt to see it as significant for Hitler's life story.

In the main text, Kershaw adopts Smith's trivializing approach almost word for word³³. In the footnote, however, he deals with Köhler³⁴. He begins by offering a brief summary of the main facts of the *Rienzi* experience as though they were factual. He writes, for example, "Plainly, the strange evening had made a lasting impression on Kubizek," implying that the experience must have happened to have made an impression. Nevertheless, he goes on to call Kubizek's account "highly fanciful," and an "imaginary depiction," implying that the *Rienzi* experience is fictional. Yet, while the artful use of these two phrases seems to imply that the event did not happen, neither phrase actually denies that the *Rienzi* experience occurred. On close reading, they could equally well imply that while the event may have happened Kubizek's description of it is over-dramatized. This, of course, is bad historical method; since Kershaw was not present, he has no way of judging whether Kubizek's account is over- or under-dramatized. Thus Kershaw takes a decidedly ambiguous and unhistorical approach to the *Rienzi* experience: neither fully crediting nor fully denying it.

Kershaw uses the same ploy to cast doubt upon, while backhandedly crediting, Kubizek's story of Hitler later saying, "In that hour it began". Kershaw does not deny that Hitler said it; rather, he labels it a "melodramatically absurd claim" for Hitler to have made—though what is melodramatic or absurd about saying it in 1939 when Hitler was at the height of his power is left unspecified. Similarly, Kershaw casts doubt upon Kubizek's claim that Hitler vividly recalled the story when Kubizek first recounted it, by insinuating that Hitler merely 'seized on the story' after Kubizek's first telling in order to impress his hostess with "his early prophetic qualities". This, of course, is counterfactual, since we know from Speer that Hitler had no need to 'seize' the story from Kubizek; he had referred to the same event a year earlier.

Kershaw clearly sees the implications of Kubizek's story and the direction of Köhler's argu-

ment; for he accuses Hitler (and by implication Kubizek for reporting it) of "reading in mystical fashion back into the episode an early prophetic vision of Hitler's own future." Of course, if the *Rienzi* experience actually occurred, there was no reason not to recount it; and if it really were the event that first turned his thoughts to a political career, it can hardly be called an over-dramatization to have said so. This, however, is the implication that Kershaw wishes to avoid, which is made clear at the end of the footnote where he ridicules "later writers," specifically mentioning Köhler by name, for "taking seriously" such stories.

In the second volume of Hitler's biography, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*, Kershaw is even more direct in dismissing Kubizek's account. Kershaw writes of Hitler's confirmation: "Hitler recounted the tale to Winifred Wagner, ending by saying, with a great deal more pathos than truth: 'That's when it began.' Hitler probably believed his own myth"³⁵. Thus, Kershaw treats Kubizek's account of the 1905 *Rienzi* experience as a myth, whereas Kubizek's account of Hitler's confirmation in 1939 is treated as a fact, but only a fact about Hitler repeating a myth.

Thus the treatments by historians of the *Rienzi* experience fall into five categories consisting of those who: 1) dismiss the story by omitting any mention of it; 2) treat it as a factoid; 3) attempt to explain it away; 4) believe it furnishes the theme of Hitler's life; and 5) belittle anyone who takes it seriously. Let us note that this is a strange set of behaviors for historians to take toward a single piece of historical testimony that is as strongly corroborated and pregnant with significance as the *Rienzi* experience. This behavior suggests that there is a story behind it—and there is.

5. STORY BEHIND HISTORIANS' APPROACHES TO THE RIENZI EXPERIENCE

It begins with Franz Jetzinger, a Social Democratic politician in pre-war Austria who suffered under Hitler, grew to hate him passionately, and ended up after the war as librarian of

³³ Ibid., 21.

³⁴ Ibid., fn. 128, 610.

³⁵ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*. New York and London, W. W. Norton, 2000, 198.

the provincial government in Linz. Prior to the war, Jetzinger had come into possession of a file containing many official documents relating to Hitler's youth, which Jetzinger carefully hid during the war. After the war, he began to dig into them to piece together the real story of Hitler's youth, and set out to find every other document relating to Hitler, as well as to interview anyone he could find in Linz and Vienna who had ever known Hitler prior his emigration to Germany in 1913.

It was Jetzinger who discovered Kubizek, whom he interviewed and to whom he addressed many written inquiries, to which Kubizek dutifully replied. Jetzinger even encouraged Kubizek to write his own book of reminiscences. Over time, however, Jetzinger developed a strong animus against Kubizek and, when Kubizek published his memoirs in 1953 before Jetzinger published his own book, Jetzinger was incensed.

When Jetzinger finally published *Hitlers Youth* in 1956, it contained vituperative attacks on Kubizek's credibility as well as specific refutations of dozens of "misstatements" in Kubizek's book³⁶. But Jetzinger went beyond attempting to correct facts; for he was appalled that Kubizek, after all that had happened, could still admire and value his teenage friendship with Hitler. Thus Jetzinger's main complaint was not with the facts, but with the tone and what he believed to be the purpose of Kubizek's book. He accused Kubizek of attempting to "rehabilitate his friend"³⁷ by "obscuring the true features of the abominable criminal, Hitler, with a mist of myth and flattering fairy-tales"³⁸.

Jetzinger's attack left all subsequent historians and biographers in a quandary about what to do with Kubizek's testimony. On the one hand, Kubizek is a valuable eyewitness—the only one for this particular period of Hitler's life. On the other hand, his testimony is tainted by Jetzinger's attack. No historian was willing to risk either defending or basing a new interpretation upon a set of memoirs

written by someone accused of attempting to rehabilitate Hitler.

Thus the various positions of historians toward the *Rieni* experience become understandable: for five decades most historians found Kubizek's overall credibility too dangerous. Thus we can also understand the odd reaction that Köhler's thesis elicited from Kershaw: he was defending Jetzinger's interpretation, which requires that everything about the *Rieni* experience be kept doubtful and tainted, so that no new interpretation of Hitler's youth could threaten the standard version.

6. INVESTIGATIONS INTO KUBIZEK'S CREDIBILITY

This situation clearly called for an investigation into the specific question of what to believe and what not to believe in Kubizek's testimony—for, even if Kubizek's aim were to "rehabilitate" Hitler, many of the facts he recites might still be true. Thus, for example, although Kershaw denigrates Kubizek's account of the *Rieni* experience, he nevertheless quotes Kubizek frequently, citing him as a source in at least 103 of the 501 footnotes to his first two chapters in *Hitler: Hubris*. Indeed, Kubizek is a prime source for almost all biographers of Hitler, even those who ignore or trivialize the *Rieni* experience. The general practice appears to be that each historian may freely take from Kubizek whatever materials support his or her thesis, with the truth of the thesis being the sole guarantee of the truth of the source.

Obviously, someone would eventually have to investigate what was actually true, and specific investigations into Kubizek's credibility were forthcoming. In 1996, Brigitte Hamann published *Hitlers Wien: Lehrjahre eines Diktators*, whose purpose was to investigate the credibility of all the witnesses, including Kubizek, who claimed to know Hitler prior to his entry into politics. Hamann first acknowledges the problem created by Jetzinger's charges against Kubizek's credibility:

³⁶ Jetzinger, Franz, *Hitler's...*, op. cit., Appendix I, 167-174. Jetzinger's work was originally published in Austria as *Hitlers Jugend: Phantasien, Lügen—und die Wahrheit* (Vienna, Europa Verlag, 1956). Wilson's translation is considerably condensed, omitting more than half the work (including the last of the original work's seven chapters), and rearranging parts. Appendix I of the translation appears to be a condensed summary of Jetzinger's specific refutations of Kubizek extracted from Chapter 6 and the omitted Chapter 7 of the original work.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 184. Jetzinger's animus toward Kubizek is also discussed by Spotts, Frederic, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*. London, Hutchinson, 2002, xvi. The latter work is hereinafter cited as "Spotts".

“Most historians have believed Jetzinger, not Kubizek. For Jetzinger, who was doubtless against Hitler and thus politically correct, deftly know how to undermine the credibility of Kubizek, ‘Hitler’s friend,’ and to make him politically untenable. And because Kubizek died in 1956, the year in which Jetzinger’s book was published, he could not defend himself”³⁹.

Hamann then specifically examines the facts in Kubizek’s memoirs alleged by Jetzinger to be misstated. In most instances, however, Hamann finds Kubizek to be more accurate. She therefore concludes that, although “regarding dates he is not very reliable, and sometimes his memory deceives him. . . Yet, altogether, Kubizek is reliable”⁴⁰.

As might be expected among scholars, however, Frederic Spotts, who also made a specific investigation into the credibility of Kubizek’s memoirs, comes to a diametrically opposite conclusion. In *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, Spotts researches the actual writing of Kubizek’s memoirs, and insists that they were not written by Kubizek, but by someone else, either “a ghost writer or an editorial assistant”⁴¹. In either event, Kubizek’s “real writer,” Spotts charges, “produced a script concocted of shaky memories and invented stories with the intent of idealizing the late Führer.” Spotts concludes that Kubizek’s book, “a mixture of the possibly true, the provably false, and a ghost-writer’s fancy, is no better than a historical novel and its verbatim quotations are outright inventions”⁴². Thus, even after two investigations, the overall credibility of Kubizek’s memoirs is still in dispute.

However, we need not be further detained by the debate concerning the “overall” credibility of Kubizek. Our concern is directed toward the factuality of only two specific events that Kubizek recounts: the *Rienzi* experience in 1905, and Hitler’s confirmation in 1939. Therefore, we shall focus only on this question: What about the

factuality of the *Rienzi* experience? Even Spotts concedes that some of the facts in Kubizek’s account are “possibly true.” How, therefore, have the specific facts of the *Rienzi* experience and Hitler’s confirmation of it (for, if the event actually occurred Hitler’s confirmation of it is only “icing on the cake”) fared in the argument over Kubizek’s general credibility?

7. THE INVESTIGATORS AGREE: THE *RIENZI* EXPERIENCE IS HISTORICAL FACT

Surprisingly, this is the one point upon which Hamann and Spotts agree: the *Rienzi* experience is historical fact. Hamann recounts Kubizek’s story of the *Rienzi* experience without objection⁴³, and blesses its factuality under her general endorsement of Kubizek’s reliability. Spotts, however, is more emphatic. Despite his dismissal of Kubizek’s overall credibility, Spotts specifically accepts the factuality of the *Rienzi* experience, unequivocally insisting that it is the “one story [of Kubizek’s] that is anchored in fact”⁴⁴. Basing his judgment on Speer’s corroboratory diary, Spotts goes even further to provide powerful support both for Kubizek’s account of Hitler’s confirmation, and Köhler’s thesis that Hitler’s visionary experience on the Freinberg provides the theme for the rest of Hitler’s life. “The *Rienzi* experience,” writes Spotts, “marked the primal scene of his political career”⁴⁵.

Based on the results of these two investigators, therefore, Kubizek’s account of Hitler’s 1905 *Rienzi* experience seems both satisfactorily corroborated and solidly grounded. Neither investigator takes issue with Kubizek’s account of Hitler’s 1939 confirmation.

CONCLUSION

From this investigation the conclusion may be drawn that August Kubizek’s accounts of the 1905

³⁹ Hamann, Brigitte, *Hitler’s...*, op. cit., 57-58.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴¹ Spotts, Frederic, *Hitler...*, op. cit., xvii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁴³ Hamann, Brigitte, *Hitler’s...*, op. cit., 24.

⁴⁴ Spotts, Frederic, *Hitler...*, op. cit., 227.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

Rienzi experience, and Hitler's 1939 confirmation of it, are *prima facie* established as factual; in that all of their elements are both uncontradicted and extensively corroborated; namely, that Hitler: a) as a teenager; b) had a visionary mountaintop experience; c) after a performance of *Rienzi* at the Linz theatre; d) which he credited as the inception of his political career.

Nevertheless two secondary questions remain unsettled regarding: first, the accuracy of the details of the after-opera, mountaintop experience; and second, the emotional tone of Kubizek's account. On the basis of several years' study of the facts surrounding this event, allow me to venture opinions on these two questions, as well as to state their limitations.

In regard to the exact details of the account, the following considerations are relevant. On the one hand, Kubizek did not record this account in the manner set forth in his memoirs until almost half a century after the *Rienzi* experience allegedly took place. Therefore, caution must be exercised in regard to exact quotations and details. On the other hand, Kubizek: 1) does record it as the most memorable event in his four-year friendship with the teenage Hitler; 2) felt it to be significant at the time and later (in that he recalled it when Hitler became chancellor); 3) had the opportunity to confirm his recollection of both the details and their significance twice; first, when he recounted the events to Hitler who "vividly recalled" them, and again when Kubizek heard Hitler recount them to Frau Wagner. Based on the latter considerations, it is my opinion that Kubizek's basic outline of what occurred that night on the Freinberg is *prima facie* reliable, although the date it occurred and Hitler's age at the time appear to be in error. Further, the fact that Kubizek may have been helped by a "ghostwriter" in writing his memoirs does not, in my opinion, weaken their veracity (as some commentators have averred), but rather strengthens it: it is the function of a good ghostwriter to probe his

subject's memory and help to bring details to the surface⁴⁶.

Two limitations on this opinion are: First, that Kubizek apparently wrote a shorter version of the *Rienzi* experience for Nazi Party purposes, and also discussed it with Franz Jetzinger who kept notes. Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to check either of these sources⁴⁷. Second, my opinion on reliability relates only to that portion Kubizek's chapter on the *Rienzi* experience recounted in Section I above. Since both the Anderson and Brooks translations omit approximately half of Kubizek's text, I express no opinion on either the reliability or tone of what is omitted.

As to the tone of the translated portions of Kubizek's *Rienzi* experience account, some commentators have judged it to be "overwrought." Based on the facts that Kubizek: 1) felt this event to be highly significant at the time; 2) recalled its significance years later when Hitler is appointed chancellor; and 3) sought to confirm that Hitler felt the same significance; and on the further facts that Hitler: 4) evinced a great interest in *Rienzi* to both his own and Kubizek's families as a teenager; 5) vividly recalled that particular night when Kubizek mentioned it in 1939; 6) confirmed both Kubizek's account and estimate of its significance; 7) stated the significance of the *Rienzi* experience to others both before and after Kubizek's retelling; and 8) seems to have had a fixation on *Rienzi* for the rest of his life, it is my opinion that the tone of Kubizek's account is what one might expect.

However, since Kubizek and Hitler are the only two witnesses to the *Rienzi* experience, it is impossible for any other person to judge its tone, except based on Kubizek's account. In such a case, I follow the rules for accepting historical testimony recommended by Charles Sanders Peirce, the second of which is to believe that the "principal testimonies are true" until they are "conclusively refuted." Peirce adds: "There is no surer mark of inexperience in

⁴⁶ As a practicing trial attorney for many years, I had frequent occasion to interview witnesses about events they had witnessed, and I can personally testify to the vital role of someone discussing, questioning, and going over the same event multiple times to bring out all the details lodged in a witness's memory. I have also personally known at least one very reputable ghostwriter who describes performing the same function in order to get details from their subjects, without which the full story could not be told.

⁴⁷ Hamann, Brigitte, *Hitler's...*, op. cit., Chapter I, note 5 (407), and notes 234 and 235 (415), indicates that these documents are located in the Upper Austrian Provincial Archive Linz, political files, under the titles, *Jetzinger-Materialien* and *Kubizek, Erinnerungen*.

dealing with witnesses than a tendency to believe they are lying without any definite, objective, and strong reason for the suspicion”⁴⁸.

In summary, therefore, as an eyewitness account that has been corroborated on all essen-

tials, it is my opinion that Kubizek’s account of the *Rienzi* experience meets all the tests of what the American law of evidence defines as “primary evidence,” or a “*prima facie* case”⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Peirce, C. S., “On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents”. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Vol. 2, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1998. The Peirce Edition Project, eds., 113.

⁴⁹ The term “primary evidence” is legally defined as “original or first hand evidence; the best evidence that the nature of the case admits of....That evidence which the nature of the case or question suggests as the proper means of ascertaining the truth.” In the case of the *Rienzi* experience, the proper evidence is the testimony of a witness who claims to have been present and to have observed the event in question. The Latin term *prima facie* means “at first sight, on the first appearance,” or “on the face of it”; and in an American legal case means, “a fact presumed to be true unless disproved by some evidence to the contrary.” *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 4th Edition.