

## Hitler's Birthplace

Braunau am Inn, Upper Austria

# Living in the Shadows of Evil

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## Introduction

Adolf Hitler, the world's most ruthless dictator, was born in 1889 in the quiet town of Braunau Inn in Upper Austria, 50 miles north of Salzburg and 80 miles east of Munich. "Living in the Shadows of Evil" examines a protracted process of transformation underscoring a series of social, psychological and political changes within the Braunau community, in relation to Adolf Hitler's birthplace. To the townspeople's dismay, the house retains its Nazi symbolism and continues to attract tourists and neo-Nazis making regular pilgrimages to the

site. “Living in the Shadows of Evil” represents a town’s struggle to free itself of this unwanted legacy.

### Proposal

Constructed in 16<sup>th</sup> century style European architecture, the bland, three-story yellow house located on Salzburger Vorstadt 15 is where Hitler spent the first three weeks of life. Living above a local pub, Hitler moved with his father Alois Hitler, his mother Klara, and two half siblings to a second house and then a third location in Braunau, before moving to Linz and then Vienna in 1907.



Salzburger Vorstadt (2017)



Photo credit: Karen Frostig

Following the Anschluss, Martin Bormann, Hitler’s personal secretary bought the house in 1938. He turned it into a library, which he designated as the official “birthplace of Nazism.” Briefly occupied by US troops at the end of World War II, the building was turned into a documentary exhibition site about concentration camps. The property was restored to its original owners in 1952, and has been used as a city library, technical college and a day-care center for disabled persons. Since 2011, the house has remained vacant.

The Austrian government officially seized the property in 2016, in a preemptive move to interrupt future neo-Nazi activities at the site. Currently owned by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, a new debate has emerged regarding the future use of the house. A twelve-member council, representing the different fields of political administration, academia, and civic society, was assigned the task to determine what social function the house would serve.

“Living in the Shadows of Evil” is a timely and fleeting installation project that sets the stage for subsequent actions taken by the Austrian government, to transform the site’s identity in the process of physically renovating the building.



“Hitler Entering Vienna” (2016)

Artist: Karen Frostig

Proposed as a temporary, nighttime, site-specific intervention, “Living in the Shadows of Evil” consists of a series of short videos to be projected onto the exterior and interior walls of this dark house, prior to anticipated renovations. The plan is focused on the house as an existing structural framework for telling the story about the



“Jews Forced to Clean Streets” (2016)

Artist: Karen Frostig

house. Nighttime videos projected onto the building's facade will capture historic images taken from the archives, documenting the brutality of Hitler's regime. Concurrently, nighttime videos capturing intimate conversations by community members and local officials about the house and its role within the community, video-taped in kitchens, living rooms and offices, will populate the interior spaces. Revealing the community's feelings and reflections about Hitler's birthplace, the projections will be imprinted on the hollow walls of this empty house.



"Auschwitz Gate" (2016)

Artist: Karen Frostig

The strength of the project will lie in the film's ability to capture the sense of shame emanating from the house. The film will examine how community members reconcile their unique position of living in the town where Hitler was born, with the ongoing need to remember the victims of National Socialism. A number of questions will come into focus, such as: 1) How do parents, teachers and clergy explain the significance of the house to children? 2) Are there generational differences in remembering the past? 3) Does remembrance come with an expiration date?

While the film's focus will be on the voices of Braunau residents, the project director's personal history, as the granddaughter of murdered victims, is likely to create a subtext. How the house *functions* within the community, is unconsciously used by Braunau residents to transfer conflicted feelings about the past onto the house, and how

the house serves the community as a means of coping with the past, will be of special interest.



“Victims Marching” (2016)

Artist: Karen Frostig

The history surrounding Hitler’s birthplace can never be fully eradicated. However, disrupting the site’s narrative with a carefully orchestrated, graphic depiction of the history of National Socialism, accompanied by authentic conversations with local townspeople, can succeed in changing the public’s orientation to the site. Figuratively



“Destruction of Berlin 1945” (2016)

Artist: Karen Frostig

speaking, the past will be superimposed onto the past in the present, while resetting how the building's history is carried forward. Care will be taken to ensure that the project does not erase history, glorify the past, revive the victim myth, or re-victimize the victims.



“Hitler’s Speech” (2016)

Artist: Karen Frostig

The powerful symbolism associated with Hitler’s birthplace as the last point of access to the past, makes changes to the site historically significant and noteworthy to a range of audiences. A documentary film of the projections will take place in real time. Developed primarily as an experimental film and a teaching tool, the film will be submitted to film festivals, and marketed to museums and relevant institutions.

Sponsoring new conversations about fascism, racism, Antisemitism, xenophobia, terror, and hate, in addition to conversations about democracy, citizenship, and human rights legislation for minority groups, comes at a time when Europe and other parts of the world are dealing with these very issues. The film will shed light on how communities, living in the shadows of evil, come to terms with their inherited legacies.

Acknowledging this tragic history through the prism of public art puts forth a unique opportunity to think about the past not as a static event, but as a dynamic phenomenon responsive to changing world-views. Using this moment to depict a collective reworking of the past, the film will examine a remarkable story about a community's transformation, encapsulated and projected onto the walls of the very house where Hitler was born.