

Hitler's Piano Player - The rise and fall of Ernst Hanfstaengl
confidant of Hitler, and ally of JDR by Peter Conradi.
Gerald Duckworth and Co., 2005.

Ernst Hanfstaengl was a gilded German youth from a very prosperous mercantile family, educated at Harvard, who returned to Germany in time to fall under the spell of Adolf Hitler at the beginning of the latter's political career. Putzi - as he was universally known (later much to his chagrin) - was mesmerized by the dictator and became his main conduit and apologist to the foreign media. As a deeply talented musician he was also Hitler's favourite pianist and frequently played for him at social gatherings and in times of great stress.

Later, Hanfstaengl fell out with Hitler and his inner circle and, after a failed attempt to bump him off during the Spanish civil war fled to Switzerland whence, via internment in England and Canada after the commencement of the Second World War he ended up ensconced in seclusion in the United States providing 'expert' opinion (of varying quality and usefulness) to the American administration and FDR on the Nazi regime until 1944. Following the end of hostilities he was returned to England and thence to Germany, and after denazification he was released and finally died in November 1975 at the age of 88.

Ernst Hanfstaengl emerges from the pages of this superb biography as a chancer, always eager to play both ends at once, and devoted to himself above all things. He was a committed anti-Semite whose views barely wavered, even as the news of the Nazi genocide became widely known, and his devotion to Hitler and love for the man was strong enough to be deeply disturbing.

In spite of his subject's lack of likeability however, Conradi presents Hanfstaengl's life in a compelling way, and also sheds fascinating light on aspects of the early years of the Nazi party and its pre-war period as the government of Germany.

This is a valuable addition to the corpus of material on the men and women who sustained the innermost reaches of the Nazi party.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh