

# **The Unfolding Agony of Oppression**

*Victor Klemperer, Nazi Germany and Soviet  
Communism, 1933 - 1959*

By

**Andrew Sangster**

**The Unfolding Agony of Oppression: Victor Klemperer, Nazi Germany  
and Soviet Communism, 1933 - 1959**

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## **The translated diaries used in constructing the biography.**

*I Shall Bear Witness*, The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1933-41 translated by Martin Chalmers, Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998.

*The Bitter End*, The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1942-1945 translated by Martin Chalmers, Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999.

*The Lesser Evil*, The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1945-1959 translated by Martin Chalmers, Published Phoenix an imprint of Orion Books, London, 2004.

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## Foreword

‘I often wish not to wake up again’ wrote Victor Klemperer in 1937 in his loneliness. The Nazi net closed around him as a Jew, but he had no interest in Judaism or Jews, and no involvement with them. He felt nobody really understood him.

Andrew Sangster has done magnificent work in presenting this summary of Victor Klemperer’s long personal diary, in order to allow it to reach a wider audience. Klemperer lived in or near Dresden from 1933 – 1947, and in various towns in East Germany from then until he died in 1960.

One of the most interesting aspects of the diary is the perspicacity shown by Klemperer, deprived of precise news, in understanding what was really going on. He was unable, like many in hiding under the Nazis, to tune in secretly to the BBC and so was dependent on street rumour and gossip and reading between the lines of the newspapers. Astonishingly, he heard rumours about the negotiations between the Nazis and the Soviets in July 1939, when the talks were still top secret. After the pact became public the following month, Klemperer quickly noticed that the term ‘Bolsheviks’ was dropped from news broadcasts and other propaganda and replaced by ‘Russians.’ Jews, who had long been derided as Bolsheviks, were now considered ‘Plutocrats’ – changed overnight from communists to capitalists.

In April 1944, when Klemperer saw photos of Hitler and Mussolini meeting, he noticed that Mussolini was ‘hollow cheeked and broken’ — he was able to see the truth behind the propaganda.

Klemperer put his close observation of the nuances of the media to good use, compiling his notes into a book, to which he gave the Latin title *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (‘The Language of the Third Reich’). It was published in 1947, with a revised edition ten years later.

One aspect of the diaries which may well surprise the reader is the consistent accounts Klemperer gives of the extent of opposition voiced by

many ordinary Germans to the Nazi regime, and the personal friendship of so many to him. He describes his long friendship with his grocer Vogel. Vogel repeatedly helped Klemperer and Klemperer was able to repay the kindness after the war by helping him get permission to open a shop again. In 1945, once Germany was seen to be losing the war, opposition was openly voiced everywhere. At that time, Klemperer was in regular work, most often at nights, at first in a tea factory and then in stationery. By late 1944 he considered 99% of his fellow workers anti-Nazi.

Victor Klemperer and his wife Eva dutifully obeyed all the Nazi regulations which made life increasingly difficult for them. They sometimes talked about emigrating, but never got around to it. They had to give up their home, their car, most of their possessions, and even their cat. Extraordinarily, Klemperer was never deported to the camps. Certainly, his marriage to a non-Jew was a factor, but the Nazis redoubled their efforts to annihilate Jews when they realised the war was being lost, and it seems likely that Victor was rescued from imminent deportation by the British and American firebombing of Dresden in February 1945. Around 25 thousand were killed and the city was in chaos. Klemperer was able to discard his yellow star and flee, spending several months on trains from town to town without finding anywhere to stay, and ending up eventually back in Dresden. Eventually, he was reappointed a professor, 'but he could not believe in a loving God or the Church which had let him down.'

Klemperer's dairy about his life in East Germany after the war is quite different. Although life was much better than under the Nazis, it is hard at this distance to understand his often-expressed sympathy with the Soviets and their domination of his country. It is even harder to understand how he could describe West Berlin as an 'enemy country.' It is not clear why Klemperer felt able to support Stalin and his successors, and the lack of democracy they imposed on the so-called German Democratic Republic. Only towards the end of his life, in 1957, did he start to see communism as 'The Lesser Evil'.

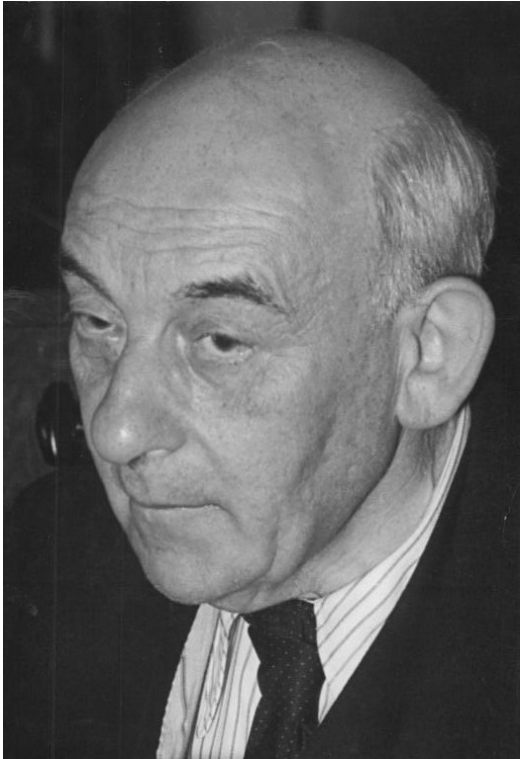
In other respects, Klemperer's life in his last decade was a truly remarkable one. He was able to resume lecturing, serving several different universities across East Germany. After his wife Eva died in 1951, he married a 25-year-

old student. Often in the diaries Klemperer seems very self-centred, and many a time fails to express sympathy for others who are bereaved or suffering. But in real life he must have had a real energy, charisma, and enjoyable personality to have achieved so much after such tribulations under the Nazis, and such success in his seventies. I imagine that those who attended his funeral might well have thought, like Hamlet, 'I shall not look upon his like again.'

Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton



## Preface



**Figure 1:** *Klemperer (1951)*  
**Photographer:** *Hans-Günter, GFA*

Imagine if you had fought for the country of your birth, later became a well-known professor, belonged to the major religious affiliation of your country and proud to be a national citizen. Then you are informed by a new government that because your dead father had reddish hair it made you and others with the same colour hair background, even though you were born with fair hair, traitorous sub-humans. As a matter of curiosity red hair has sometimes been associated with Jewish people, and there are centuries of anti-Semitic images of portraying Jews as red-haired. The colour of hair in human makeup is irrelevant, and red or ginger-hair is often associated with Vikings and some Germanic tribes and again is irrelevant as is the colour of eyes and skin.

Consequently, as red-haired you then suffer various prohibitions, losing your university post, the right to have a car, or travel, own your own home, denied a typewriter, telephone or books, not allowed on public transport, must wear a label which children are taught to jeer at, your pets must be killed, you are on a starvation diet, forced to work as a labourer although now ill and old, not allowed to smoke, so your 'genetically safe' wife collects cigarette-stubs off the pavement for you, while you survive on a small ration of potatoes. You are terrified to go out in public because the secret police are waiting for the slightest infringement by red-haired people of their regulations, such as walking near a public park from which you are prohibited, talking to a non-red-haired person, or breaking curfew rules applied to red-haired people or their descendants, and if caught you will be killed but have it concealed as committing suicide, illness, or shot while trying to escape. This was an evil oppression and although totally immoral was the law of the country. For twelve years you survive when over 90 per cent of fellow red-haired tainted people are murdered by the state. You survived the fascist era, but then live under a communist regime with lesser restrictions but still not free.

This was the life of the German academic Victor Klemperer who happened to be born of Jewish parents and who managed to survive the Nazi Third Reich only to suffer what he referred to as the Fourth Reich under Soviet domination calling it '*the lesser evil*'. His understandable hatred of Nazism made him grateful to the Soviet Union, he became a communist, developed a deep distrust of the Western powers where he thought Nazism and anti-Semitism still lurked, was highly supportive of the GDR, (German Democratic Republic) but by the mid-1950s he became more cynical about the GDR regime and the communist world in general. He started to see too many parallels between Nazism and Communism, not least the sense of fear, first by the Gestapo, later the Stasi, the East German secret police.

He bravely maintained a diary which if discovered would have meant instant death for him, his wife Eva, and others under the Nazis, and later denunciation for him and his second wife Hadwig in the GDR. In his diary, often packed with trivia, ranging from academia to his wife's toothaches and moods, he provided insights into the nature of oppression at a personal level, deliberately exploring the opinions of acquaintances, recording

overheard conversations, observing the reaction of the public, the *vox populi* (voice of the people) for their opinions on the regime, and their attitudes towards Jews, whether it was animosity or acts of kindness. For war news he relied on rumours, speculation, gossip, which was sometimes closer to the truth than official propaganda, or some rumours amounted to wild nonsense, with his heart rate increasing every time he thought the regime would collapse, but it took 12 years, and when he became a communist, he was always uncertain as to who or what to believe.

# Introduction

## The diaries

Victor Klemperer's daily diaries in their original German are simply vast in length and detail as he noted everything that passed through his mind. As with most people he commented on his family, his health, his work which was mainly academia, his friends and acquaintances, national and international developments with anything else which caught his attention. They are deeply personal even mentioning his distaste for close family members, written with no intention of ever being published. They include details of his thought processes and his deepest personal views which at times are almost embarrassing and so revealing that it is abundantly clear they were private to him. It is because they are so intimate and detailed that in places the trivia which he wrote can be far too tedious. Where they become of interest to any social historian are the years 1933 to 1959 when as a Jew, he was faced with the Nazi regime's growth to power, the Second World War, and then living under East German communist rule until his death in 1960. The diaries associated with this dramatic and important period were first translated into English by Martin Chalmers who was a professional translator and well-known 20th-century and contemporary German-language writer. It was a staggering masterpiece of work and understandably shorter than the original German texts but still amount to three volumes of some 1500 pages with an estimated 770,000 words. This study is a work of reduction, commenting on these three massive volumes intending to produce a short readable book while not losing the quintessential features of Klemperer's views and observations.

These diaries have two distinct values, first they are of historical interest during the 1933-1959 period of European history, but secondly, they are a study of the nature of man under the tyranny of questionable political systems. The diaries contain the insights of daily events by a highly intelligent academic German Jew, who managed to survive the Nazi annihilation of Jewish people only to find himself under Stalin's version of communism, then the early stages of the Cold War. His perceptions are

invaluable and are a source for understanding the dangers of totalitarian rule, nationalism, and racial bigotry.

They are deeply personal diaries, with his lengthy comments on academia and some personal observations being tedious and often ignored by Chalmers. They are even more overlooked by this exploration to highlight the essential features of these invaluable documents relating to a turbulent time in European history, but without losing sight of the character of Klemperer. As noted, the diaries were not meant for publication, they were never revised or revamped in the light of later thoughts, changing times, or altered to avoid repetition or contradictions. He wrote down every detail as he was unsure of its significance in the future. The diaries were part of his toolbox as he kept in the diaries notes on his proposed autobiography (*Curriculum Vitae*) and his book on the language of the Third Reich.

His work was written as events unfolded, it is not an autobiography, nor a memoir which can be adjusted with the benefit of hindsight or new perceptions. He knew keeping a diary was dangerous, but he treated it as his personal testimony at great risk, writing as he saw it, as the events unfolded, stating what he believed at the time. Primo Levi and others wrote about the camps, of which Klemperer was for a long-time mainly ignorant. However, his insight into everyday Germany through observing the public gives some understanding for the social history of Germany under fascism and then communism, and a profound understanding of human nature under stress. His diary provides a safe window seat on Germany during the Nazi regime, then life under the Communists. It raises questions as to how far Germany was anti-Semitic, why Jewish people did not flee when they could, and why it took so long for an intellectual like Klemperer to perceive the flaws of Soviet communism.

## **The man**

For any reader of these diaries Klemperer the man remains an enigmatic figure, with much depending on the reader's personal thoughts as to the behaviour of this diarist. He had a difficult relationship with his siblings, could be cantankerous, sometimes bad tempered, and often suspicious about other people. At times he can appear over-judgemental, cynical, and

sometimes unpleasant, not least showing little sympathy for someone's death, and rejoicing that he was still alive. He had a paranoia about dying at any moment and it is easy to detect a sense of serious hypochondria. He took his first wife Eva for granted, and there is a distinct possibility she felt restrained in her life's ambitions by Klemperer's own career. When she died, he was naturally filled with remorse, but within a year he married Hadwig who was nearly 50 years younger and a student. He often felt guilty about betraying Eva and for marrying a young woman who would not have children by him. He was constantly ambitious to prove himself as an important academic, and after 1945 he appears as an old man always in a hurry. However, he lived through some of the most dangerous times and places in Europe's history. He was always totally honest about himself, both his faults and his failures. His honesty is the hallmark of this diary, and he holds nothing back, and bravely maintained this honesty even though these diaries would lead to his rapid execution. He was direct with his writing as he was with many friends and colleagues, he was educated, intellectually gifted, evidently a good speaker and lecturer, but above all he was dedicated to ensuring his diary told the truth as he perceived it for future generations.

## **Book explained**

This study will start with a short description of Klemperer's early life, there then follows a brief commentary of his diary entries for the years 1933-1959. Each year is preceded with a précis on the main features of the year and occasional insertions or footnotes to explain the historical background of some events. When *'italics appear with quotation marks'*, they indicate precisely what he wrote in his diary. The main purpose is looking at the appalling events and incidents of everyday life during this period of vast turmoil through the eyes of an intelligent and thoughtful man who provides us with a view of dangerous times from a safe window seat.

## **Sketch of his early life**

Victor Klemperer was born in 1881 the son of a Rabbi Wilhelm Klemperer, in Landsberg an der Warthe (now the Polish town of Gorzow Wielkopolski), he had three brothers and four sisters. His father, once Jewish orthodox, became a member of the Reform Synagogue where men and women worshipped

together with heads uncovered, not observing the dietary requirements, nor adhering to the Sabbath obligations.

Anti-Semitism in Europe had been rife for centuries which meant conversion to the Church was for many Jewish people a means of escape from the bigotry they suffered. It was often a state requirement to have a Christian background, so Wilhelm Klemperer raised no objections when his sons converted, but his daughters retained their Jewish faith and had Jewish husbands chosen for them according to custom. Victor Klemperer described his religious transfer as pleasurable scepticism and there seems to be no indication in his diaries of religious fervour or belief. Victor's brother Georg (16 years older than Victor) became a famous surgeon tending to dominate the others, the brother Felix was also a doctor, and Berthold a lawyer who married a general's daughter. As became clear in his diaries Klemperer's sibling life was often disagreeable.

Unlike his brothers Victor did not attend senior school, working in a factory making fancy goods mainly for the British market. After a few years in what might be described as a 'dead-end job' he started to show interest in literary and intellectual pursuits. He returned to the school which his brothers had once attended, later enrolled at Munich University studying literature and languages, with a special interest in France which was not popular in Germany, especially since his interest was drawn to the French Enlightenment. No professor was able to supervise him, and to Georg's frustration Victor gave up his studies in 1905 for journalism. His brothers were unimpressed when he married Eva Schlemmer who was a musician with a Protestant background, whose family were irritated by her marrying a Jew, while Victor's brothers felt her social standing was insufficient. It was a marriage which lasted but with the usual up-and-downs. Victor started to make his money from intellectual articles, reviews, biographies and addresses often to Jewish audiences throughout Germany. It was at this stage that Klemperer converted to the Protestant Church, with him and Eva enjoying cinema and theatre, with Klemperer writing reviews on what they had seen. It was not an easy way to make a living, but it was clear that Klemperer had some success, his reviews being more successful than his personal writings. He decided that gaining a doctorate would enhance his chances of success, and with the financial backing of his brothers returned

to Munich University where he completed a dissertation on a 19th century German novelist. Here he was further influenced by a liberal Professor Vossler of Romance Literature and Language, relating to the Latin and neo-Latin fundamentals which formed the basis of some modern European languages, and he wrote his post-doctoral thesis on Montesquieu, a French Judge, historian, a man of letters, and political philosopher.

In 1914 he accepted a post as lecturer in Naples University on German literature. It appeared from his early writings that he was not carried away with the bellicose language of the Great War, but he always regarded himself as totally German and his country as being right, returning from Naples in May 1915 when the Italians joined the Allied side of the conflict. At the age of 34 Klemperer was declared fit for military service (having once been rejected in 1903) and joined the Bavarian field artillery, seeing service on the Western Front until March 1916 when he fell ill. He was declared unfit and transferred to the east with the army's book censorship office, where he was allowed to live with Eva in private accommodation, free from frontline danger. His service in the German army was to bear some fruit as it lessened some of the early bigotry against his Jewish birth.

After the war he was ill at ease with the political ramifications which exploded in defeated Germany, not least the growing anti-Semitism. His earlier diaries revealed a deep concern as to where German political machinations were leading. Thanks to his old friend Professor Vossler he was invited to Dresden Technical University in 1920 to the Chair of Romance Languages and Literature where he stayed until 1935. He was hard working and devoted to his subject and introduced modern French literature, edited a scholarly journal, and tried to inspire German and French understanding. Dresden was more a technical university and Klemperer's area of expertise was regarded as a minority subject. The Chairs associated with the humanities were not ranked highly in a technical university, and too often his ambitions were dashed as he was passed over every time a better post became available. His frustration was deep, even falling out with Vossler his good friend, and at times it is possible to detect a sense of bitter cynicism arising, which he acknowledged, stating that he could only avoid it by hard work at his studies without giving thought to



their worth. He was and would remain a prodigious worker at his studies and became involved in educational reform in Saxony.



**Figure 2:** *Klemperer about 1930*

**Photographer:** *Ursula Richter*

His wife Eva was not always in the best of health, occasionally suffering from bouts of depression, with some suggesting it might have been because she felt her own career prospects were subordinated to those of her husband. They continued to enjoy the cinema together and went on a cruise of the Mediterranean, but his frustrations at the lack of academic advancement never ceased, but he was becoming acutely aware of the political dangers growing in his country, especially in 1933 when Hitler rose to power.

## Part One, 1933 to 1939, Nazi Regime

### 1933

Klemperer wondered whether the Nazi regime would survive, he was acutely aware of the growth of anti-Semitism, and the seeming acceptance of Hitler by other nations while appreciated at home as he appeared to have restored Germany's place in the world.

By 1933 Klemperer's hatred of Nazism was evident, he could sense the terror and *'everyone cringing with fear'* but it was a mild prelude for the years to come. When a young man whom Klemperer had virtually fostered explained he admired Hitler, Klemperer wanted nothing more to do with him. The stage of animosity was being irretrievably setup. The Nazi regime had started in 1933 with the incremental process of marginalising Jews from public life, which as the 1930s passed would increase in humiliating restrictions resulting in total exclusion, then the Holocaust. In 1933 he heard of the exclusion of Jewish lawyers and judges, the boycotting of Jewish shops, he was not allowed to conduct examinations, publishers were becoming wary of him, and as he would do for the rest of his life stated that he was first and foremost German. 1933 was only a start with Klemperer feeling there was no dangers to his life, but an estimated 37,000 Jews fled Germany, mainly those dismissed from the public services.

### The diary

(Writer's Note on diary passages: Klemperer refers always to the *'English'* when it would be more accurate to state British or even British and Commonwealth, especially in the War Years, but with this in mind I decided to keep with Klemperer's use of English as this is the way he expressed himself.)

In January 1933 Klemperer's diary indicated he was unhappy about the new dean, that Eva was obsessed with building their own house, with their

two cats being the only things making Eva happy. The opening page sets the tone, worried about Eva, unhappiness with his academic world, but with Hitler rising in power with anti-Semitism rife, these domestic concerns occupied him as they would many.

To help Eva build their house he needed a loan which was difficult to obtain. On hearing of the death of friends, he appeared to have an obsessional fear of death, *'I am gripped by the thought of death, and it never leaves me now even for an hour'*, which would be a lifelong feature. By March he had heard that the *'German Nationals'* wanted to eliminate the academic training of schoolteachers, in which he was actively involved, and noted that *'politics everywhere and everywhere the terror of the Right'*. The political interference in his ivory-towered academic world would dominate his thinking, with his diaries being the safest place to allow his private thoughts to be exposed. He would later add that what he described as *'terror'* would be better described as a *'mild prelude'*. He realised the Reichstag fire was not perpetrated by the communists but the Nazis. He watched the violence on the streets, heard the never-ending propaganda on the radio, the torchlight processions, and heard Hitler's speech from Königsberg, writing *'I understood only occasional words. But the tone! The unctuous bawling, and truly bawling of a priest'*, and he promptly voted for the Democrats wearing his Bavarian Service Cross. He knew that in Bavaria the Nazis (National Socialists) doubled their vote, having to listen repeatedly to the Horst Wessel song while it was promised no harm would come to the Jews. He worried that he would lose his post, fail to obtain a loan, concerned about a left arm pain always contemplating his death.

By mid-March Klemperer and Eva purchased some land where they hoped to build their house. They often walked to view their plot at Dölzschen, with Eva constantly visiting the site by taxi, planting cherry trees and gooseberry bushes in their proposed garden. Klemperer implied in his diaries that for her it was an obsession but raising a loan would cause him many problems.

They were visited by Johannes Thieme who had stayed with them in Leipzig in the 1920s when they had virtually adopted him as a foster

child. Klemperer was devastated that Johannes admired the Hitler regime, believing the Nazis would unify Germany. His wife Trude was less fervent, with Klemperer observing how Johannes was deeply influenced by the '*Nazi advertising*'. Later in May when Johannes invited Klemperer to his home, Klemperer slammed the phone down. This visit had brought home the political divisions, with Klemperer admitting that he had been depressed by the defeat of 1918, but it '*did not depress me as greatly as the present state of affairs. It is shocking how day after day naked acts of violence, breaches of law, barbaric opinions appear quite undisguised as official decrees*'. He found it disturbing that other political parties such as the Socialists had their newspapers banned, men who had murdered a communist were released, and information about Marxist and passive literature were removed from prison libraries, all of which his young unofficial foster child Thieme considered correct. Klemperer felt that Hindenburg was a mere '*puppet*' and displaying the same unstable signs as Klemperer's father just before he died. He heard that in Breslau Jewish lawyers were banned from the courts, he hoped the new government would be toppled, but noting that the ignominy of letting all this happen in the first place should not be forgotten. He wrote: '*I for my part will never have faith in Germany*', yet for the rest of his life Klemperer always maintained he was thoroughly German. For escapism he and Eva continued to go to the cinema though he never enjoyed a film if he felt it had no appeal to Eva.

On 21 March he listened to what was known as Potsdam Day with the reopening of the Reichstag, but he heard the '*gruesome medieval reviling of the Jews*' with Jewish judges being dismissed. He recorded that his academic work had slowed down, noting he was suffering from '*fatigue and lethargy, Weariness of life and fear of death*', which given the circumstances of living as a Jew in Nazi Germany was hardly surprising, though it would become far worse. He heard of children at school bursting into the Horst Wessel song, of toothpaste carrying the swastika emblem, noting a '*mood of fear such as must have existed in France under the Jacobins. No one fears for their lives yet, but for bread and freedom*'. This depression deepened when meeting some acquaintances and hearing about the boycotting of Jewish shops, which would soon become endemic. SA men stood in front of Jewish shops warning customers they were supporting the foreign boycott by destroying

the national economy. Klemperer was notably annoyed that students were forbidding Jewish colleagues to enter the Student's House, recalling it was Jewish money which established the building.

His diary indicated Klemperer's prescient fears, writing *'I have the impression of swiftly approaching catastrophe...everything I considered un-German, brutality, injustice, hypocrisy, mass suggestion to the point of intoxication, all of it flourishes here'*. He expected to survive as they rented part of their flat for financial reasons, fenced in their plot of land, but admitting for the first time he felt hatred towards a political group which he never experienced in the war.

He met with an SA man to discuss drains on their plot of land, it was the first time he had met such an official and found him polite. He was acutely conscious of the growing climate that as a Jew he could not be an Aryan and therefore not German, and *'I must be grateful if I'm allowed to stay alive'*. He heard in his academic world Jews were not allowed to conduct examinations, and since Jews wrote lies, their books must only be written in Hebrew. A friend called Dember lost his academic post, then Klemperer heard that his famous surgeon brother Georg was obliged to retire, with Victor noting that he had lost touch with his family. His wife Eva was in a state of depression, their finances were in an appalling state, not knowing how to raise any money: both these issues would dominate his thinking for a long time.

Klemperer continued his work at the university giving lectures on France to about six people and cultural history to about 20, but he was no longer allowed to examine. Eva was unwell and depressed, and Victor could not finance their new house. The situation became worse later in the year because like others he had to pay for 'Winter Aid and National Work'. These campaigns were run by Goebbels, to show the Nazis were helping the needy and finding work for the unemployed. Most of the money was gained by SA thugs waving tins in people's faces.

They were concerned because their black tomcat was ill with expensive vet's bills, and such was their life Klemperer took comfort in watching the growth of a leaf, and happier if Eva started the day without depression. He reflected that his brother Berthold died at 59 (1931) questioning himself

whether he would die at the same age, indicating that it was not only Eva suffering from depression. He cheered up when he heard a publisher was going to print one of his studies, and another academic had proposed that he wrote another volume on Romance literature. As the Jewish prohibitions came into force, it would be impossible to find publishers, and he was warned that putting his views on paper was dangerous, making him wonder about his diary-keeping in which he held nothing back. The publishing situation depressed him further wondering whether to give up academic scribbling and start writing his autobiography.

In trying to borrow money he felt that he had been swindled and decided to pursue the matter with the police. However, his mind was distracted from these domestic issues by noting that Goebbels in a speech had stated the Nazi regime would not tolerate other political parties, and the general chatter that many Jewish people were considering emigrating. Much of the interest was on Palestine for which Klemperer had strong opinions describing it as a place which *'exchanges nationalism and narrowness for nationalism and narrowness...a country for capitalists'*. Later in November he heard of more people fleeing to Palestine noting that *'I cannot help myself, I sympathise with Arabs who are in revolt there whose land is being bought'*, and with the benefit of hindsight it remains a contentious issue.

Klemperer was conscious that in the group he lectured was an Eva Theissig who was a Nazi cell-leader but seemingly fond of Klemperer, asking if she could stay in touch for advice. He hoped, but knew it was only a hope, that this was a sign of young people's dissatisfaction with the regime. The 'Heil Hitler' (salute) was announced, and Klemperer recalled when once meeting a colleague, a mere nod of the head had been sufficient, now it was a matter of raising arms, introduced to *'avoid suspicion of an attitude hostile to the state!'* Disconcertingly he heard from the cleaning lady that her postman husband had witnessed a colleague sacked for not saluting.

By August Klemperer was hardly working at the university, he picked up the first rumours of the early concentration camp brutality, which at this stage were intended for those opposing the regime. He was beginning the long road of fear but decided his daily diary had to be done. To relax he and Eva went on a mystery bus tour and sat at a table with *'two elderly ladies*

*of better society, superior gossips, completely Aryan'* and recalled parts of their conversation which included that a doctor, who was such a fine man had been deprived of his livelihood because he was Jewish. This encouraged Klemperer to write that *'I simply cannot believe that the mood of the masses is really still behind Hitler. Too many signs of the opposite'*. Yet he admitted that telephone, letters, and talking had to be cautious because of the concern of informers making everyone *'cringe with fear'*. When they took another mystery trip, they avoided the coffee tables and cabaret by going for a walk. His work was being rejected by publishers, their excuse being it was about France and unnecessary, but undoubtedly his Jewish background was causing difficulty in the current racist climate. Probably for the same reason he was having trouble with the authorities about paperwork concerning his service on the frontline during the Great War being asked to submit evidence, when it eventually arrived it was not strictly correct, but Klemperer could not be bothered to pursue it further.

In mid-September he spent time with friends, some looking for work outside Germany, some considering Palestine. Klemperer objected to some other colleagues because they were less harsh on the Nazi regime than Klemperer, who measured everyone by their political attitudes. He watched a film on a Nuremberg rally writing in his diary *'what stage direction of the crowds and what hysteria! Hitler consecrates new standards by touching them with the "blood Flag" of 1923. Gunfire every time the flags touch'*. The blood flag being the one which headed the failed Munich Putsch.

He was concerned in early October that they would not be able to build their home at Dölzschen which meant staying in their apartment which Eva regarded as a prison. He was more irritated by some Jewish people as they *'were beginning to submit inwardly and to regard the new ghetto situation atavistically as a legal condition which has to be accepted'*. The situation was becoming so taunt that they became more and more selective with their friends, describing *'Mussolini's regime as almost human and European'*. His feelings were not helped when he was told of an acquaintance, 60-year-old Erich Mühsam who had been released from a concentration camp only to be called back because he kept a diary. This incident reminded him of friends who had warned Klemperer about his notetaking, noting that *'but then so far I am not suspected of anything'*. Later in July 1934 Klemperer heard

that Mühsam had hanged himself while in custody; such unlikely deaths would accumulate over the years.

The news was depressing as many of his acquaintances were moving, many of whom had lost their posts. He heard from an academic acquaintance that a friend had converted from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism, because he did *'not want to be a second-class Christian because his mother was Jewish'*. Klemperer had hoped that when Germany left the League of Nations, this would accelerate the fall of the government, but he was wrong. This happened on 19 October and was promptly followed by a plebiscite to confirm that the nation was content with a one-party state (12 November). Klemperer was instantly suspicious knowing that people would be scared not to vote, questioning the ballot's integrity.

In early November he was still trying to borrow money for Eva's house realising it was the only thing which might cheer her up. However, it was the month of the planned plebiscite, and he was unsure where he stood in terms of personal safety, knowing that it would be a fixed result *'so why be a martyr? On the other hand: say yes to this government? It is unbelievably unpleasant'*. He clashed with some friends who thought it safer to vote yes, who in turn challenged him as to why he was still in post, to which he responded that he had not been appointed by the government, and *'that I represented Germany's cause with a very clear conscience, that I was a German above all'*. Klemperer described how Goebbels gave a calm evaluation about the vote, then Hitler in a *'mostly hoarse, strained agitated voice, long passages in the whining tone of the sectarian preacher'*. When it came to the voting Klemperer voted No and Eva left the two voting sheets blank. Klemperer concluded that everyone was too afraid, and the regime dominated everything without opposition. He was more upset by the BBC reporting that everyone in the concentration camps had voted Yes.

By December there was a sense of depression in their personal lives in the ice-cold dreariness of their apartment, so cold the water in the bath froze, and Klemperer feeling that Eva was depressed and blaming the situation on him. He was equally aware that at the university he was becoming more restricted in what he could do, and he wondered how long he would hold his post as a Jew. The only comfort he could record was their enjoyment of their two tomcats.



## 1934

Klemperer and Eva moved into their new home in Dölzschen having secured a loan from a half-English colleague. He felt a pervading sense of fear, heard of a colleague sent to prison for cracking a joke about Hitler, was worried about his reluctance to give the Hitler salute, warned by a schoolteacher to be careful with what he said in lectures, and he was aware of Goebbels' campaign against grumblers.

He met some Aryan-German friends who disliked the regime, but some who seemed more in favour. He heard rumours that the regime might collapse, hoped that after the Night of the Long Knives that the Nazis would '*eat one another up*', anticipated the regime would collapse after the Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss murder, and hoped the proposed occupation of the Saar would topple the regime. None of his hopes were fulfilled, and when the posts of Chancellor and President were united, he and Eva had the courage to vote no. During this year he remained safe but in a world of growing fear with considerable foreboding about the future, despite knowing Aryan German friends who felt the same way.

### The diary

During 1934 Victor and his wife Eva had rapid mood swings from depression to slight hope, for Eva concerned about her desired new house, with Victor over the Nazi regime, especially when it influenced his university post or his finances. Both were worried about their health, Eva with long-term dental problems, Victor over his heart and eyes, suffering a paranoid fear of an early death which would haunt him for another 26 years. He amused himself with their Christmas tree, with both he and Eva finding solace with their pets. The year 1934 for Klemperer revolved around personal issues, his life at the university, his acquaintances, and friends, but above all the hope that Eva and he could find the finances to build their own home, all against the backdrop of the unfolding political machinations of the Nazi regime.

By mid-January he was concerned that the governance and constitution of his university were changing for political reasons, with Klemperer noting '*no one dares to resist openly; each one is always an isolated individual, who feels*

*powerless*'. He wrote about a distant colleague Dr Bergsträsser in the Engineering Department who told the joke of Hitler talking to Herr Moses, asking him if he had set the famous bush on fire himself and was promptly sent to prison for ten months by a special court. Later in the month Klemperer expressed concern that one of his pupils would betray him because of his failure to give the Hitler salute. At the end of January, no students attended, because they were expected to celebrate 30 January, the date Hitler came to power, which Klemperer named the '*solemn hour*'. As he reflected on this date, he found the Nazi suppression of the other right-wing parties as '*incredibly cynical*', noting that Göring claimed they had not helped the regime, with Klemperer recalling that the Nazis had needed them for their initial support. In mid-February while attending the faculty meeting, he watched the '*salute*', one assistant professor wore a SA uniform and another a party badge, noting that '*this arm raising makes me literally feel sick, and the fact that I always dodge it will cost me my neck one day*'. By early March he was becoming concerned that he was sharing too many thoughts with his students, hoping he '*was inoculating a couple of the younger ones or turning them into carriers of infection*', but he worried how long he could continue without raising his arm. By mid-March there were rumours that the humanities department would be closed, but he still anticipated a change of government. On 7 May Klemperer was shocked to find there were no students for the lectures, only to discover that the students were still returning from Labour Service, and he felt university life was '*being throttled*'. He was aware of Goebbels' latest campaign '*Against Fault Finders and Grumblers*', knowing he could easily be accused of both. On the academic front the future appeared gloomy, and by November he had few students and was obliged to lecture on Italy which was not his expertise making him grumpy. At the end of 1934, while giving a French lecture, he was approached by a woman schoolteacher warning him to be cautious with what he said, until he was sure of where the students stood politically.

Klemperer had occasional letters from his siblings, especially Georg who with his family were hoping to settle in America and asking Victor whether, with his knowledge of France that he should seek a post in that country, to which Victor wrote in his diary that it would be like taking '*coals to Newcastle*'. In March his eldest widowed sister Grete (Margaret) visited him, and he found it, according to his diary amicable '*without the feeling of*

*last year*'. It is evident from these notes that he had not had comfortable relationships with his family. Grete was, Klemperer noted, determined to be Jewish, whereas he saw himself first and foremost as German. In June Georg wrote again and was critical of Victor's insistence he was German and would stay that way, while many of his family were heading for America where his nephew said, *'we want to set up a Klemperer colony there'*.

In terms of friends and acquaintances they diminished as the question of national politics and anti-Semitism were becoming contentious even within close families. In early February the Klemperers went to supper with the *'respectable Köhlers'* which delighted him, as *'they're completely Aryan people from quite different circles of society...and hold onto the vehement hatred of the regime and to their belief that it must fall in the foreseeable future'*. This hope that the regime would collapse occupied Klemperer's mind, but his hopes constantly faded as quickly as they rose. The Köhlers were invited back a few weeks later with other guests, with one called Professor Johannes Kühn, whom Klemperer respected, but upset his equilibrium by claiming the German revolution would be different from the Russian and French because it would be bloodless. In the postwar period he would have serious clashes with Kühn who seemed to him to be pro-Nazi. Even social gatherings of a genial nature were likely to upset Klemperer and with good cause. When he asked Frau Schaps preparing to visit her family in Haifa as to how the remaining young Jews in Berlin felt, she told him that they thought the worst was over and they could get back to business, which Klemperer found *'infinitely shameless and dishonourable'* as they seemed to accept *'a return to the medieval ghetto'*. Klemperer was a student of texts, an observer of people, political life, and his perceptions were sadly closer to the truth, perhaps more than he wanted. In March they entertained a Kurt Rosenberg who had lost his job as a lawyer and discussed how long the regime could last. Rosenberg felt there would be a financial collapse, but this would not necessarily mean a political downfall. Reflecting on his many friends who had lost their jobs and yet remained wealthy made Klemperer feel *'humiliated and helpless'*.

In May he greeted his colleague Heinrich Wengler who had replaced Klemperer in examining primary school teachers, learning that Wengler was inclined towards communism and that his mother was English, which Wengler spoke fluently. It was from friends he picked up circulating

rumours, ranging from the regime drifting towards Bolshevism, to Berlin residents expecting the government to collapse at any moment. In June he heard of friends wanting to move to Palestine, causing Klemperer to vent more rage on that situation, stating that '*to me the Zionists, who want to go back to the Jewish State of 70 AD [when Rome destroyed that city] are just as offensive as the Nazis*'. When Frau Schaps returned from visiting Haifa, he heard more about Zionist attitudes which raised his level of anger, not helped by a friend Walter Blumenfeld who told Klemperer that anti-Semitism was so deep-rooted he was edging towards Zionism.

In raising money for the house, he was depressed when his hope in gaining a loan from his friend Harry Dember collapsed. This depression deepened with publishers showing no interest, too much housework, lack of time for his book *18ième*, his code word for his work on 18th century France, all sent him into a spiral of mental anguish. By mid-February he was concerned he could never find the funds for the house, being constantly concerned over a court case when he lost money through seeking a loan. However, in July Klemperer was delighted and relieved when to his astonishment the case was resolved in his favour.

Dölzschen was an upmarket area, with Klemperer referring to '*our petty bourgeois neighbours*' preparing their gardens, and Eva spending her time in their proposed garden. He noted that she was at her happiest doing this, but still no sign of a loan to build their house. By the beginning of spring, they had managed to build the cellar. It was his half-English colleague Wengler who came to his rescue because he had assets in England. The government demanded that the funds from his deceased mother's estate had to come to Germany, giving Klemperer an opportunity for the loan. All this with the rumours of Hitler's possible downfall raised his spirits during June and July when arrangements were finalised with Wengler. The Klemperers would have been happy with a flat-roofed house, but the authorities insisted on a typical German styled raised roof, which made the prospect even more expensive, but Eva came up with the idea of a German gable which stopped the property being '*un-German*'. When their architect Prätorius told them how much a gable would cost Klemperer was angry, but when Eva cried, he capitulated. On 2 September the roof was raised with a small party and a celebration amongst their friends, during which

he made a brief speech managing '*a dig at the regime*', but fortunately for him it went over the heads of some of the workers.

During September their house continued to be built and they prepared for moving. It meant that he had to return library volumes not least because he had to pack some fifty boxes of his own books. Moving house was exhausting, depressing him, because parts of the project, including his '*electrified kitchen*' were still incomplete, and all he could see was chaos. He was soon working at his desk, aged 53, worrying about his own death with his lifelong paranoia, and not helped when Eva had forgotten his birthday. The only sense of happiness, predictably, was the safe arrival of their cats. Even his brother Georg wrote and congratulated him with Victor noting that nearly all the males of the Klemperer family were in America.



**Figure 3:** *The Klemperer House today*  
**Photographer:** Von SchiDD, Eigenes Werk

The political nature of the regime remained his main concern and preoccupied his thinking. He had observed on 25 March the '*big Rally of the Saxon SA*', some 125,000 men parading before the governor of Dresden with pomp and ceremony. On 1 April, Easter Sunday they were back with the Köhlers, where they were given to understand that it was the opinion of many social circles that the regime was preparing for war. In mid-June Klemperer heard of Röhm's (Chief of the SA) message to his men before he went on holiday, namely '*we wish to grant our enemies the brief hope that we shall not come again. But on the 1 August, we will be back again in full force and*

*do what is necessary*', with Klemperer wondering what it meant. This all led to what is known as the Night of the Long Knives, when Röhm and others whom Hitler saw as a personal challenge were murdered. Klemperer had no sympathy, *'only delight that they are eating one another up'* but was later depressed when it *'calmed down'*. Klemperer recorded that many of his friends were aghast that a *'Chancellor could sentence and shoot members of his own party'*. He hoped it portended disaster for the regime as the national financial situation was close to disaster and the harvest had failed. His contempt for the regime grew, and he wrote that Hitler was the author of this absolutist system, and *'the dreadful thing is that a European nation has delivered itself up to such a gang of lunatics and criminals and still puts up with them'*. Klemperer was alert to Goebbels and his propaganda, writing that the man was *'no psychologist'*, that he was *'simply boring'* and *'binds the whole person'* and *'tyrannises him'*. It was fortunate, given the number of people who knew Klemperer kept a diary, and heard his cynical comments, that the authorities never discovered his writing. He must have reflected on his acquaintance Erich Mühsam who had been returned to the concentration camp for diary-keeping and had purportedly hanged himself.

In addition to the political machinations of the Röhm affair came the news of the murder of the Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss in a failed putsch by Austrian Nazis, with Klemperer noting that the *'second blow struck the brow of the bull'*, wondering how long Hitler could survive. On reflection, at the beginning of August, he felt that there was going to be no political collapse, especially when he heard that Hindenburg was possibly dying, which was confirmed the next day. When the offices of President and Chancellor were combined it astonished Klemperer as the army swore its traditional oath to Hitler with Eva suggesting *'we belong to this band of slaves'*. The poll which followed was as Klemperer observed governed by *'mass intoxication'* and *'fear'*, but he and Eva voted *'No, out of a certain degree of despair and not without fear'*. Klemperer as a university employee was expected to take the oath which concerned him, but he was consoled by his friend Blumenfeld (who had been retired and was not required to participate) who advised him to see it as taking the oath to the two offices of Chancellor and President, not to Adolf Hitler, which was not the way the regime regarded the requirement. He failed to attend the first university session but was obliged to attend another where it only took two minutes