

# HANNA REITSCH

*Flying for the Fatherland*



**JUDY LOMAX**

# HANNA REITSCH

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This is the first major biography of Hanna Reitsch, associate of Hitler and flying heroine of Nazi Germany. Equally fanatical as pilot and patriot, she flew such revolutionary aircraft as the Gigant, the Me 163, and the manned version of the V1.

As the Second World War ended she was the last (with von Greim) to fly into and out of Berlin, and was in the bunker until only a few hours before Hitler's death. The American authorities suspected her of having flown him to safety and imprisoned her.

In post-war Germany, Hanna Reitsch could not escape the stigma of her association with the Nazis. She nevertheless became a close friend of Nehru and Mrs Gandhi, and was received at the White House by President Kennedy. In the 1960s she set up a gliding school in Ghana at the personal invitation of President Nkrumah.

Although she continued to make and break gliding records until just before her death in 1979 at the age of sixty-seven, many of her obituaries in the German press still concentrated on attacking her politically. None, though, denied her courage or ability as a pilot.

Judy Lomax has interviewed people who knew Hanna Reitsch at all stages of her life, including her American interrogator and her wartime colleagues. As well as describing her extraordinary flying experiences, Judy Lomax's book examines why Hanna Reitsch remained for many a symbol of Nazi Germany.

*Jacket design by Michael Hodson Designs*

*Jacket front: Hanna Reitsch on front page of Illustrierter Beobachter (courtesy of Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich); and Me 323 Gigant (courtesy of Associated Press Ltd, London)*

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*HANNA  
REITSCH*

*By the same author*  
WOMEN OF THE AIR

# HANNA REITSCH

## *Flying for the Fatherland*

JUDY LOMAX



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B – Bundesarchiv, Koblenz; F – the Editors of *Flugzeug*, Flugzeug Publikations GmbH, 7918 Illertissen, W. Germany; G – Hubert von Greim; H – RAF Museum, Hendon, London; IZ – Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich; N – Heinz Nowarra; P – Peter Petrick; Sch – Hans Schütz; R – Kurt Reitsch; RH – Jean Ross Howard; V – Karl Vey, Deutsches Aeroclub; W – Colonel Robert Work

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Wherever direct speech is given, I have used the spoken or written words of my sources, translated where necessary. When conversations and incidents were related to me from memory, I have endeavoured to check their accuracy, as I have also tried to do with written accounts.

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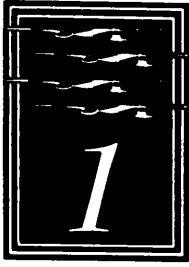
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Denn  
was auch immer auf  
Erden besteht,  
besteht durch Ehre  
und Treue.  
Wer heute die alte  
Pflicht verrät,  
verrät auch morgen  
die neue.

*Adalbert Stifter*

*For whatever survives on earth, survives through honour and truth.  
He who today betrays the old duty tomorrow betrays the new.*  
(Author's translation of quotation used by Hanna Reitsch on printed cards)



# *A Patriotic Childhood*

Hanna Reitsch was a child in one world war, and a heroine of Nazi Germany in the next. During her childhood in the eastern German province of Silesia, she absorbed the patriotic and religious beliefs of her parents. To these she added as a young woman an obsession with flying which, with her love for her Fatherland, became her lifelong inspiration and placed her on a public pedestal as a test pilot in the Third Reich.

She was born on a wet, windy night at the end of March 1912. Her character, even as a small child, showed all the contrasts of stormy weather: she was at the same time a compulsive extrovert and a self-conscious introvert. Her infectious laugh and sudden tears came equally readily, and she seemed to have inherited both her father's puritanical Prussian thoroughness, and her mother's Tyrolean exuberance.

Her mother, the eldest daughter of a widowed Austrian aristocrat, had convinced herself that she would die during the birth. It was always accepted in the family that this created an unusually and perhaps an unnaturally strong bond between herself and Hanna. Emy Reitsch was not normally a worrier; she talked effusively, with a basic common sense which drew family and friends alike to her for comfort and encouragement. Small and delicately built, she dressed simply, almost puritanically. Hanna adored her.

Neither Kurt, who was two years older than Hanna, nor Heidi, who was four years younger, caused Emy any serious concern: it was Hanna whom she considered the most sensitive of her three children, and whom she felt she had constantly to protect against real or imagined dangers, and Hanna who needed to be calmed and guided.

Hanna also loved her father, but from a respectful distance. Doctor

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Willy Reitsch, an eye specialist, spoke only when he had something to say. He was thought to resemble Beethoven, with heavy eyebrows and a dark brooding expression, until he smiled: then he seemed more approachable. His outlook on life was serious, based on traditional Prussian concepts of honour and duty, and his appearance was always immaculate. Strict and expecting high standards of behaviour, he found it easier to deal with his son's misdemeanours than with the naughtiness and high spirits of his daughters. Kurt could be beaten, a ritual in which, while he was still small enough, his father would lay him across his knee and apply the full force of his hand.

On the one occasion when her father raised his hand to Hanna in anger, she ran away from home. She was seven years old, and had belched loudly and proudly, an accomplishment which she had just been taught by Kurt. It was long after dark when she returned home, frightened out of the woods by trees which seemed in the gloaming to have turned into menacing villains.

Both her parents were deeply religious and intensely patriotic, making no distinction between their respective Prussian and Austrian origins; their shared German-speaking background was more important than artificial territorial boundaries, and both felt themselves to be Germans in the broader cultural sense. Hanna learnt from an early age to believe in God and Germany, and to love her home in Silesia.

Doctor Reitsch and his wife had settled soon after their marriage in Hirschberg, a picturesque old Silesian town in a peaceful valley of fields, farms, and sun-dappled villages surrounded by wooded hills and snow-capped mountains. To the south lay Austria, to the east Russia; in 1918 Czechoslovakia became the southern neighbour and Poland the eastern. Although Silesia had for a short time, more than six centuries earlier, fallen under Polish rule, it had for several hundred years been under Austrian or German domination. In the nineteenth century it was firmly and patriotically a part of Germany, with strong Austrian traditions. The mountains reminded Emy, who never lost her soft Austrian accent, of the Tyrol.

One or other of the children often accompanied their father, a respected member of the community and of the local Masonic lodge, on home visits to his patients, or went with their mother on Lady Bountiful tours to distribute presents of food to those considered to be in need.



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Hanna joined happily in the rough-and-tumble of her brother and his friends, dressed as often as not in practical lederhosen. After Heidi was born, she was fiercely protective, but still preferred the company of boys. Heidi, who was quieter, more even-tempered, and less physically adventurous, was considered the prettier of the two girls. Both were blue-eyed and blonde, but Hanna's features were sharper, her expression more intense, and the set of her jaw more determined.

When she was four, according to a much-told family story, Hanna made her first attempt to fly, and had to be restrained from leaping with arms spread as wings from the first-floor balcony. Later she took to climbing trees, and when she was eleven fractured her skull after falling from her perch on a high branch.

Their life was frugal and peaceful. The girls' dresses were lengthened and passed down until they could no longer be made to fit. Pleasures were made rather than bought, and among the most eagerly anticipated were family walks on fine summer weekends: then the children were sent to bed early on Saturday evening and woken at half past one in the morning to dress in the dark, before taking a tram through the valley to the foot of the nearby mountain range.

The sense of adventure made the three-hour uphill walk as dawn gradually broke over the mountains seem easy, although Heidi occasionally flagged. Then Hanna kept her going by telling her stories, old familiar tales and new ones drawn from her endlessly fertile imagination – her cousin Gertrud, who was nearer Heidi's age, never forgot sitting under a tree while Hanna kept a group of children enthralled with her story-telling ability.

Even after such an early and strenuous start to the day, there was always a family service at home before Sunday lunch. Grace was said before every meal. The existence and presence of God was accepted unquestioningly by the children. Willy Reitsch was a Protestant, but hated to parade his feelings in public and so rarely went to church. Emy, a devout Catholic, had agreed to bring the children up in her husband's faith, but made secret early morning visits to her church, often taking Hanna with her. The grandeur and solemnity, and the pervasive smell of incense and burning candles, made a deep impression on the child.

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Music was as natural a part of their life as religion. Indeed, it was through their mutual love of music that Willy and Emy Reitsch had met. Willy was an accomplished amateur cellist. Although he was not otherwise a sociable man, he liked to invite other music-lovers to his home to play and to listen to string trios and quartets. The connecting doors between his consulting-room and the living-room were then thrown open to make more space, and Emy acted as hostess to both listeners and performers. Her parents' musical gatherings were among Hanna's earliest and happiest memories.

Almost before she could talk, Hanna could sing in tune, in a clear, high voice. One of her mother's favourite three-part Austrian yodelling songs was a prelude to every meal. Kurt played the violin, and Hanna and Heidi the piano, although they often found their father's perfectionism discouraging when they were practising.

Hanna was six when the First World War ended, leaving the family unharmed and life in Hirschberg outwardly as quiet and uneventful as before. Although Willy Reitsch explained to his children that patriotism was equally valid and important to people of every nation, it was felt particularly strongly in Silesia. By the Treaty of Versailles the eastern territory of Upper Silesia became part of Poland, and in the rest of the province the terms imposed on Germany by the Allies were bitterly resented.

Emy and Willy Reitsch shared the general feeling of injustice, and the fear that Communism might spread. Militant Communist uprisings in their own country following the Russian Revolution, and the experiences related by refugees from Baltic areas previously partly occupied by Germans, as well as by returning prisoners of war, strengthened the conviction that Communism was an evil which must at all costs be resisted.

Hanna absorbed her parents' patriotic outlook. She loved the town and surrounding countryside of Hirschberg as much as the spacious first-floor flat which had always been her home. In pride of place in her bedroom was a framed photograph of Emy Reitsch; posters and pastel drawings of the mountains partially covered one wall.

Heavy, dark wooden furniture, art books, pictures, and piles of music gave the flat an atmosphere of genteel and cultured solidity. It had a distinctive smell, neither pleasant nor unpleasant – a combination of aromas drifting from the kitchen, where simple but plentiful

food was prepared on a huge range, from the consulting-room, where ether and other substances were stored in a row of carefully labelled jars, from the polish used on the parquet floors, and from a heating stove which stood in one corner of the living-room.

The dining-table was the family focal point. Mealtimes were cheerfully prolonged gatherings at which each member of the family related the experiences of the previous few hours. Hanna and Emy talked most. It was over the dinner-table that Hanna shared her enthusiasms, and voiced her grievances when she felt that she had been unfairly treated at school. This was usually when her 'honour' was at stake: then she would plunge from her normal exuberance into a depth of depression in which she sometimes convinced herself that she could no longer bear to live. She had inherited her sense of honour from her father; but it was sometimes difficult to tell exactly what she meant by it. Emy, who was protectively aware of her daughter's sensitivity to criticism, was usually ready to rush into school to sort out any difficulties; her husband was less sympathetic.

Hanna was, as a friend at the girls' school she attended in Hirschberg put it, 'difficult to overlook'. Outwardly she had such an air of self-confidence that few people outside her family were aware of how unhappy she sometimes felt. She could rarely stop talking for long, and laughed loudly, suddenly, and – or so it seemed to those who found her laugh irritating rather than infectious – unnecessarily often. The school class reports frequently commented that 'Hanna Reitsch laughs without reason.' She enjoyed being the centre of attention. If she considered a lesson to be boring it was often because she had not had enough opportunities to speak – 'and that', she admitted, 'is terrible for me.'

Hanna was aware that she talked too much and was inclined to exaggerate, a tendency which she made strenuous but unsuccessful attempts to curb. 'Hanna always talked in superlatives,' one of her schoolfriends told me. 'Everything was larger than life when she talked – but that was just her way of expressing herself. There was no malice in her, although she could sometimes seem bossy or overpowering.' Her natural ability to talk was useful when she was required to give a class lecture, but the rest of her school work was rarely better than average.

When there was a disruption in the class, Hanna could usually be

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found at the bottom of it, well aware of the weaknesses of individual teachers and of how to play on them. She saw nothing wrong in minor deceptions, provided they hurt no one, such as using her excellent sight to catch a glimpse of some other girl's work, or copying a crib for a Latin translation. In spite of her highly developed sense of honour, Hanna never considered such subterfuges to be cheating. It was rather an expression of friendship both to give and to accept whatever help was available.

Although she was friendly and sociable, Hanna also enjoyed solitary walks and bicycle rides. Her destination during her last few years at school was often to some vantage point from which she could watch the activities of a gliding club on the Galgenberg: her parents never knew how often she cycled the few miles from Hirschberg to lie on the grass gazing enviously at the easy soaring flight of the birds and the attempts of the gliders to emulate them.

Walking, cycling, tree-climbing, and shooting with an airgun, as well as skiing and skating, were a natural part of life in Hirschberg, though Emy Reitsch discouraged other sports in case they caused injury or unfeminine muscles. Running in the streets, as many of the other girls did, was forbidden because it was unladylike.

It was in music, rather than in sport or study, that Hanna excelled. Her clear, high, soprano voice, and her ability and willingness to show off, made her a favourite of the music teacher, her father's friend Otto Johl. Among the sopranos in his 'Little Choir' Hanna's was the dominant voice, and on school open evenings she was often called upon to sing a solo, or a duet with the star of the contraltos.

Her social life was unsophisticated. Although many of her classmates had boyfriends, and Kurt's friend Gustav-Adolf admired her adoringly from a distance, she showed no romantic interest in the opposite sex. She was not allowed out alone in the evenings, and could only go to the local cinema if the film was considered suitable. Visits to her schoolfriends, who came from socially acceptable families in the area, took much the same form as the tea parties of their mothers.

From time to time there were receptions and dances, usually given by army officers and their wives: open sandwiches and wine were served and everyone, young and old, fat and thin, joined enthusiastically in old-fashioned waltzes and polonaises. Cavalry officers, many of them sporting Iron Crosses from the First World War, provided

occasional daytime entertainment on horseback at steeplechases and mock hunts.

Sometimes a military band played in Hirschberg, stirring the patriotic feelings which Hanna and her friends shared with their parents. But the schoolgirls of Hirschberg were not interested in politics. Their school study of history stopped with the 1848 revolutions in Germany, Austria, and France, and discussions on current affairs were not part of the curriculum. According to two British students, who stayed with the Reitsch family, Frau Reitsch would occasionally launch into a tirade against the government, in which she indiscriminately blamed other nations for anything she thought was wrong in Germany: sometimes the culprits were the French, sometimes the Russians, sometimes the British, occasionally the Jews, but most often the Italians – as a Tyrolean, Emy Reitsch was aware of problems and tensions with Italy in the southern Tyrol. The message from Willy and Emy Reitsch was however more often one of international tolerance.

Frau Reitsch extended a warm welcome to the two British students, who spent Christmas 1928 as guests of the family in Hirschberg. James Tucker, who bore his inevitable nickname of 'Tommy' with fortitude, was struck by the depth of the Reitsch family's religious fervour; but Nora Campbell, a puritanical Scottish Presbyterian, considered the dolls dressed in Tyrolean costumes which represented the holy family in a crib under the Christmas tree to be little better than pagan idols.

It was a Christmas to be remembered, a Christmas of clear skies and crisp snow, skiing and skating, concerts in the town and musical evenings at home, visits and visitors, church in both the Protestant and the Catholic churches, and ceremonial present-opening round a candle-lit tree on Christmas Eve. In the evening of Christmas Day, they were joined by the von Bibersteins and the von Müllenheims, family friends whose aristocratic names Nora and Tommy found secretly amusing.

At nine o'clock, Frau Reitsch clapped her hands and made an announcement: 'You will all take the last tram to Himmelreich and climb to Spindler-Baude and spend the night on the mountain.' They felt and looked like polar explorers as they climbed in the clear, cold light of a full moon. The snow was frozen on the trees so that it did not

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fall off however hard the branches were shaken. Hanna enthused inexhaustibly, demanding agreement from the others that the light on the snow, and the snow on the trees, were beautiful, glorious, heavenly; that a particular tree looked like a king with a crown; that it was like being in fairyland.

For Willy and Emy Reitsch it was a Christmas tinged with sadness, the last one for which it could be guaranteed that the family would be together. Kurt left home to join the navy in the New Year. Hanna was already working for her school leaving examination, the Abitur. It was the door to the future, enabling her to start studying towards becoming a doctor. When she passed it in 1931, her parents were delighted, and presented her with a gold watch. She refused the gift: it was not at all what she had been waiting for.

Instead she was determined to keep her father to a bargain which had been her chief motivation during her last few years at school: he had promised that she could have a course of lessons at the gliding school at Grunau, a few miles from Hirschberg, provided she did well in the Abitur and did not mention flying again until she had had her results. Dr Reitsch had imagined that her strange wish was merely a passing childish whim, particularly when she kept her side of the deal: Hanna was normally so little given to reticence that he had taken her silence to mean that she had forgotten about wanting to fly.

Hanna's obsession with the idea of flying was, however, so great that she had exercised a self-control of which no one had considered her capable. Keeping quiet about something which she longed to talk about was the most difficult thing she had ever done. She had been helped by a book which she had come across in the school library, a slim volume translated from sixteenth-century Spanish with the unexciting title *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola*. The prescribed prayers and meditations, which involved considerable soul-searching and depended on a firm belief in the tenets of Christianity, were to be repeated three times a day. Hanna found no difficulty in thinking about herself and God first thing in the morning and last thing at night, although remembering to do so at midday was not always so easy.

Quite why she wanted to fly, she could never explain: she talked vaguely about the love she shared with her mother for the mountains, about birds, about physical and psychological freedom, and about

being nearer to God. After seeing a film about the start of the flying doctor service in Australia, she decided that she would combine flying with medicine by becoming a flying medical missionary.

Although Dr Reitsch was reluctant, his sense of honour gave him no option but to keep his promise. He had encouraged his daughter's interest in medicine by describing the intricate mechanism of the eye, and had demonstrated operations on pigs' and sheep's eyes which he had brought home from the local butcher. Hanna's mother assumed that both medicine and flying would be interludes before marriage, but stoically accepted Hanna's right to make her own decisions.

When Hanna left the girls' school in Hirschberg, with the intention of studying medicine, she was an idealistic and ambitious nineteen-year-old. Her promised flying lessons would, or so she persuaded herself and her parents, eventually enable her to take her skill as a qualified doctor to those most in need of her care in some dimly imagined and vaguely exotic, but deprived, part of the world. Once the cloud of secrecy was lifted, she could chatter gaily about her intention of becoming a flying doctor in Africa. The ambitions of her schoolfriends were more mundane: marriage, domesticity, and motherhood, or, for the more emancipated, teaching.

Before allowing her either to learn to fly or to embark on her medical studies, Hanna's parents insisted that she should make up for her lack of interest in domestic matters: cooking, washing, ironing, and cleaning had always been entrusted to a maid, or rather a series of maids. She was enrolled for a year's course as a boarder in Rendsburg at the Koloniale Frauenschule (Koloschule), an establishment where young ladies were prepared for life and work in the colonies. Although by 1931 there had been no German colonies for well over a decade, there were still strong ties with African territories which had been removed by the Treaty of Versailles.

The Koloschule, which overlooked the Kiel Canal, was opened in 1926. It served as a reasonably priced all-round finishing school, although the emphasis was on team-work and on practical rather than decorative and social skills. It was all supposed to be good character training, with the bonus that there was a plentiful supply of young men not far away at the naval training school.

Only the Koloschule girls were allowed to swim in the canal, a privilege which was however less appreciated than were the frequent

## *A Patriotic Childhood*

opportunities to wave at the German navy. Whenever a naval ship approached, it hooted an advance warning and slowed down as it passed under the windows of the imposing purpose-built school-house. By then, the girls had all run from the kitchen, the laundry, the fruit and vegetable garden, the hen run, and the pigsty, and were lining the bank. Hanna gained considerable kudos among her fellow pupils from having a brother in the navy, although on the one occasion when she and some of her friends were invited to spend a few hours at sea on his ship it was cold and rough.

For the first time in her life, Hanna was separated for more than a few days from her mother, on whom she was still unusually emotionally dependent: she later claimed that she would, she was sure, have died if anything had happened to Emy before she was nineteen. She shared a bedroom with a girl who became her closest friend and confidante in a tower overlooking the canal. In the evenings, Hanna and Gisela sat together at a window on the spiral stairs of the tower: they called it their Orion window, and considered it their private and secret place. They were there at Hallowe'en, and made a pact that wherever they were and whatever they were doing, at eight o'clock every All Souls' Eve for the rest of their lives they would think about each other. Neither of them ever forgot the tryst.

The girls were divided into four groups. Hanna's and Gisela's group was always the noisiest: they sang while they were polishing, they sang when it was their turn to work in the garden or to make cheese, and they sang when work had stopped in the evenings. When they were not singing, they were usually talking and laughing. Almost the only time when they did not sing was during pig duty. The pigs were no problem when they were still small enough to be endearing; but the bigger they grew, the fiercer and the more frightening they became. Unfortunately for Hanna, her pig duty was the week before they were to be slaughtered, and so they were at their biggest and most ferocious.

Meals were prepared by the pupils, using as far as was possible home produce. Work outside, to which few of the girls had previously been accustomed, started early, and gave them all hearty appetites. The highlight of the day was the second breakfast, at which all the previous day's left-overs were set out. It was a free-for-all scramble for the best bits, and it was not long before Hanna had put on a



considerable amount of weight. As she was so short, this did little for her appearance, and the bows with which her clothing was adorned gradually flattened as she became fatter.

The skills that Hanna was supposed to have acquired at the Koloschule were rarely used later. She never again mended her own shoes, made another pair of boy's trousers, baked her own bread, or bottled and made wine from freshly picked fruit. On her one attempt to demonstrate her culinary expertise at home, she cooked more than enough to feed the entire school, and her family were so sick of rice by the end of the week that any further half-hearted offers to cook were refused.

There were tears when the time came to leave Rendsburg. First Hanna cried, and then Gisela, and then Hanna again, and soon everyone was vowing eternal friendship. Hanna had by then had her first taste of flying, during the school holidays, but still expected to become a doctor.



## *Winged Student*

It was during her first holiday from the Koloschule that Hanna's ambition to enrol on a course at Grunau was at last realised. Gliding was a peculiarly German sport, developed in the years after the First World War as a way of circumventing the ban on powered flying imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. It was predominantly a male activity, although women were not barred, and Hanna was the only girl on the course.

'This looks easy,' she thought on the first day when it was her turn to climb into the pilot's seat and fasten her harness. The other pupils were the ground team, and were ordered first to walk and then to run forwards, keeping the bungee attached to a ring in the nose of the glider taut. As it started to move forwards, Hanna concentrated on what the instructor had said about using the ailerons and foot pedals to hold it steady. Then it was released: ignoring the order to stay on the ground, she gave way to the temptation to see what would happen if she pulled the stick back a little.

After a series of kangaroo jumps the glider came to an ungainly halt. Hanna's attempt to laugh as if nothing had happened was interrupted by the anger of the instructor, Pit van Husen. As a punishment for her disobedience and lack of discipline, she was grounded for three days: she was not even to sit in a glider.

It was not a good beginning, but she put a brave face on her humiliation and frustration while the others progressed to their first free flight. She told herself over and over again that in gliding the one unbreakable law was strict discipline, and that disobeying an order could involve both the pilot and others in unjustifiable danger.

When she arrived home every evening, she avoided her parents, explaining that she was tired and locking herself in her room. During

the daytime she joined in the team-work on the ground and concentrated even harder than before, watching what the others did and listening to the instructor's comments so that she could learn from their mistakes. In her determination to keep up with their progress, she pretended that her bed was a glider, using a walking-stick as a rudder.

Her nocturnal exercises paid off: when her three-day punishment was over, she had not after all dropped behind, and was the first to complete the thirty-second A test successfully. To prove that it was not a fluke, she did it again. A gratifying roar of approval went up from the onlookers. She no longer minded that as the only girl on the course she came in for considerable teasing from the men about her size – she was only just over five foot, and weighed only a little over six stone.

The director of the school, Wolf Hirth, who was almost a god to the younger pilots, was intrigued: first he had been told that this chit of a girl was a positive menace to flying, then that less than a week later, when she had missed much of the practical experience, she had passed her first test with apparent ease. He decided it was time to make a personal assessment, and was impressed. Hanna was given his particular attention throughout the remaining days of the course, during which she successfully completed her B test. It was the start of a lifelong friendship with Wolf Hirth and his wife Lala, as well as with a fellow pupil called Wernher von Braun. While they sat together on the grass between lessons, von Braun told her about his dream of a rocket that would fly to the moon.

During her last few months at the Koloschule, Hanna told Gisela again and again every detail of her introduction to flying. She stood on a table so that she could be seen while she re-enacted her experiences for the entire school. If her parents had hoped that she would be satisfied with one gliding course, they were to be disappointed: she was obsessed, and extracted a promise of another before she started her medical studies so that she could take her C test.

Again she was the only girl on the course, although this time she was treated with greater respect as the protégée of Wolf Hirth. Her enthusiasm was however once again to get the better of her self-discipline: on her test flight she was revelling so much in the sensation that she was at last flying as freely as a bird that she forgot that she was

## *Winged Student*

supposed to be in the air for only ten minutes. When she at last looked at her watch, she realised to her dismay that she was already several minutes overdue. So that the glider would not have to be hauled back before the next flight, she decided to land on the starting-place. It was a manoeuvre requiring a skill and control which Wolf Hirth, who was watching anxiously as she made a perfect approach and landing, did not expect from someone so inexperienced. 'From the flying point of view,' he told her, 'the performance was perfect.' Hanna glowed with pride, although she had also again been reprimanded for disobedience.

As a mark of his trust in her ability, Wolf Hirth allowed Hanna to fly a new glider which normally only he and the instructors were allowed to touch. She had permission to stay in the air for as long as she liked. A strong west wind over the ridge ensured perfect gliding conditions, and she sang as she made full use of the weather conditions to soar to her heart's content. Every now and then, the less privileged pupils, among them a young journalist called Wolfgang Späte, looked up to see if she was still in sight.

When she landed, after five and a half hours, Hanna was astonished to find that she had broken a world record. Records were constantly being made and broken in the early days of gliding: it was only ten years since it had been considered an achievement to stay in the air for nearly a quarter of an hour.

For the first time, the name of Hanna Reitsch was heard on the radio. Wolf Hirth and the Grunau school also received considerable publicity. Since the first post-war gliding camp in 1920, Hirth had been working hard to catch up with his elder brother's pre-war reputation as a pilot. In spite of the disadvantages of needing glasses and of having lost a leg in a motor-cycling accident, he had achieved his childhood ambition of becoming as famous as his brother. By the time Hanna became his protégée, he was one of Germany's leading glider pilots and designers.

Hanna set off for Berlin for her first term as a medical student with only one thought: she must continue to fly. Her studies took a poor second place. She spent much of her time at a flying school at Staaken on the outskirts of the city, working towards a licence to fly powered sports aircraft and hanging round the workshops. Powered flight presented her with no problems, but she found it neither as

challenging nor as stimulating as gliding: it lacked the poetic appeal and closeness to God and the elements of flying without an engine.

‘Powered flying is certainly an unforgettable experience, but gliding is incomparable,’ she explained. ‘Powered flight is a magnificent triumph over nature – but gliding is a victory of the soul in which one gradually becomes one with nature.’

Several other women flew from Staaken, but it was only with one, Elly Beinhorn, that she struck up more than a passing acquaintance. Elly, who was five years older, had just returned from flying round the world: she had had a pilot’s licence for three years and had already become a household name for her solo long-distance flights. Her pleasure in flying was, however, different from Hanna’s: for Elly, it was principally a way of enjoying new experiences, and she made it pay by writing about her travels.

Hanna also struck up a friendship with a fellow pupil, the actor and broadcaster Matthias Wiemann, and a brief acquaintance with a gang of workmen who allowed her to drive their tractor. When they started arguing among themselves about politics, the divisions she discovered upset her. Her political interests were limited, and there had never been any dissension on the subject in her family. She felt that it was enough to be patriotic: it did not occur to her that this could be expressed in a variety of ways, nor that politicians could be devious. Because she was open and honest, she assumed that other people were equally honourable, and could not in any case imagine that politics could have anything to do with flying, or have any direct bearing on her own life.

Hanna wrote to her mother, with whom she exchanged frequent letters, that unless she could bring herself to go about Berlin without continually thinking of flying, she would never again be able to learn how to stand with both feet on the ground. At the same time, when she was in the air she felt somehow closer to God. Her mother wrote her homilies about humility whenever a flying success threatened to go to her head. Hanna often resented these at the time, confident that she had deserved any praise which came her way; but then she would search earnestly for any sign that her mother might be right, and be grateful for Emy’s determination to keep her feet, metaphorically at least, on the ground.

Wolf Hirth, whom Hanna called her ‘flying father’, also urged her

## *Winged Student*

to keep her flying in perspective. The career opportunities for male pilots were limited enough; for women, there were, in his opinion, none. At home in the holidays, Hanna nevertheless spent most of her time either at Grunau, or at the Hirths' home. In the evenings, she spent hours going through the typescript of a book Hirth was writing about the art of soaring flight.

It was a mutually beneficial exercise: through Hanna, Wolf could assess the clarity of his explanations, and she in turn absorbed the theory of soaring in thermals and air waves. Hirth had discovered the technique of soaring in cloudless thermals; he had deliberately flown in search of thunderstorms and into a strange elliptical cloud with an even stranger name, the Moazagotl. This appeared in southerly winds above Hirschberg, a phenomenon first noted by and so called after a farmer, Gottlieb Moetz. After Wolf Hirth and the son of a local teacher, Hans Deutschmann, had flown simultaneously into the Moazagotl in March 1933, Hirth's report on their experiences was greeted with excitement. Gliding had until then relied chiefly on the air currents created by hill slopes.

Hanna longed to put her new theoretical knowledge to the test. The opportunity presented itself, out of a clear sky, in May 1933. She had returned to Hirschberg from Kiel, where after her first term in Berlin she was continuing her medical studies with increased dedication – there were no opportunities for gliding on the flat north German plains, where there were neither ridges to give lift nor airfields from which a glider could be towed. Wearing a light summer dress and sandals, she was invited by Wolf Hirth to join him and Lala, who were on their way to do some filming at Grunau. She could fly a new training glider, a Grunau Baby: it would, Hirth suggested, be useful practice if she were to fly blind, using only her instruments.

There was no indication as he towed her to 1200 ft that she would find herself for the first time really 'flying blind', although the prospect would not have alarmed her: she was confident that in any situation she would be able to react immediately and correctly to the readings on her instruments. Knowing that one day she would have to rely on them, she had trained herself to take whatever action would be necessary to keep control: using a set of nine flash cards showing every combination of readings she had tested herself until she was sure that she would instinctively have the right reaction in any emergency.

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Judy Lomax is the author of *Women of the Air* (1986) and *Walking in the Clouds: Impressions of Nepal* (1981).

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*Jacket back: Hanna Reitsch with Hitler in the Chancellery, Berlin, 1941  
(Courtesy of Peter Petrick)*

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*Flying for the Fatherland*



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