

Hitler's Biographer Warns About Power

By Jerry Belcher

Adolf Hitler lives!

Not literally — and in Argentina — as certain sensational journals never seem to tire of saying. But his spirit is alive and thriving in much of the world, according to his biographer, Robert Payne.

Silver-haired Robert Payne, whose book "The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler" has just been published, said in an interview here that he has spent more than 20 years studying and researching the life, philosophy and techniques of the late Nazi dictator.

'Mistrust the Powerful'

As he puts it in the biography: "The conclusion to be learned from the life and death of Hitler is a very simple one: No man can be trusted with power. To be enduring, power must be shared to the widest possible extent: the single ruler defeats the purposes of our common humanity . . . No man, once he has come to power, remains completely sane."

The peril of power is quite evident today, according to the author. "Ninety percent of the nations of the world today are under military dictatorships," Payne said.

And, ominously, he added: "It could happen here — maybe within the next five years."

Corruption, Apathy

Payne, English-born but now an American citizen, said high-level corruption, economic disruption and the apathy of the masses to politics were keys to Hitler's rise to power in Germany.

The New York City writer said he sees distinct signs of a similar drift in the United States.

"The Watergate situation is one of the indications. "It is absolutely frightening. The atmosphere here and now is very much the atmosphere of Germany in 1933."

Regarding the subject of his biography, Payne said he still retains a vivid memory of a brief encounter with Hitler in 1937. He was introduced to the Nazi dictator through Deputy Fuehrer Rudolf Hess.

Pasty-Faced?

Payne and Hitler were together only a few minutes.

At that time, he said, most of the world had the impression of Hitler as a pasty-faced little man "with an absurd mustache."

He wasn't that way at all, according to Payne. "His skin was bronzed, he had steely blue eyes and a certain elegance of manner. He had a sweet voice and rather more charm than most people are allowed to possess. He had a crisp, cold mind. He definitely was not a clown."

Payne's book, of course, is not based solely on that

long-ago meeting but primarily on long research. The author of six other books, including biographies of Gandhi, Lenin and French writer, Andre Malraux, he began collecting and researching material on Hitler in 1949.

Club Selection

He did not start writing until 1971, and finished early last year. The book was published earlier this month by Praeger and is the Book of the Month Club's principal selection for April.

Selection by the Book of the Month Club usually makes any book a best-seller — and Payne admitted that he's never had a best-seller so far.

He said his next book will be a complete change of pace — a biography of Greta Garbo.