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Books of The Times

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

OTTO SKORZENY, a 6-foot 3-inch Viennese with a scarred face, is known to the world as the man who rescued Mussolini from imprisonment and as the commando officer whose troops in American uniforms did much to contribute to the confusion behind the American lines during the Battle of the Bulge. There were few soldiers who served Hitler better than this fellow-Austrian, fellow-adventurer. His own account of his war experiences, "Skorzeny's Secret Missions: War Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe," is now published in this country.



Otto Skorzeny

This is a curious book. It contains some interesting material; but, due to its author's intellectual and literary limitations, it is much less interesting than it might have been. Skorzeny seems to be a superbly resourceful and a joyfully enthusiastic fighting man. His loyalty to Hitler was absolute. The unsuccessful putsch of July, 1944, which nearly succeeded in the assassination of Hitler, was "a criminal enterprise" to Skorzeny, who took an active part in its suppression. Fighting for Hitler to Skorzeny was the same thing as fighting for "the salvation of Germany."

Type of Vassal for Any Hitler

Obviously, then, Otto Skorzeny is not the type to indulge in self-revelations, to explore his own or other people's characters. His book is the proud record of the military achievements of an insensitive, unscrupulous and essentially stupid man, who never regrets for a moment that he devoted his great abilities as a soldier to the service of a monstrous leader and an infamous state. If a new Hitler appeared in Germany tomorrow, one feels after reading this book, Skorzeny would be at his side.

In April, 1943, after considerable service on the Russian front and six months of dull recuperation at a Berlin arms depot, Skorzeny was transferred to the army's secret service and put in charge of a commando unit. He sincerely admired the British commandos and did his best to imitate their training and equipment. In this, he says, he was aided by captured British agents who "willingly" supplied information. Whether their "willingness" was induced by torture Skorzeny doesn't indicate. His book is bare of de-

tails, anyway, and always open to doubt. How much can this Nazi bravo be believed?

When Skorzeny was first summoned to Hitler's headquarters he "lived through an unforgettable moment. Here was the man who, more than any Chief of State, had taken so decisive a hand in the destiny of Germany! Here was my master whom I had been following loyally for years. Here was my leader in whom I had absolute confidence!" It is a good example of Hitler's ability to inspire adoring devotion in his followers.

Amazing Change Wrought in War

Less than a year later, in September, 1944, Skorzeny found Hitler changed for the worse: "I saw an infinitely weary man, who had aged terribly and who stooped considerably; even his voice, so vibrant before, now seemed weary. His left hand trembled so violently that he was forced to clutch it with his right. Was this a result of the attempt made on his life on July 20? Or had the Fuehrer simply crumbled under the terrible weight of his responsibilities which he had shouldered and which he had now borne alone for several years? I could not help wondering how this old man could still find the energy needed for the accomplishment of his task."

The principal events chronicled in "Skorzeny's Secret Missions" are: the rescue of Mussolini, a triumph of expert espionage, efficient organization and daring skill; the organization of secret forces surrounding Vichy, which were never used for whatever nefarious purpose Hitler had in mind; the kidnapping of Niklas Horthy, son of the Hungarian Regent; the capture of the Hungarian Government's buildings and of the Regent himself to prevent a Hungarian capitulation to Russia, and Skorzeny's part in the Battle of the Bulge.

Like so many soldiers, Skorzeny was disgusted by the red tape and interference of "top brass" and "our beloved bureaucrats." He complains of too little and too late. If only the jet planes had been manufactured in quantity sooner, as they could have been! If only buzz-bombs had been developed sooner! If only there had been more gasoline, more planes, more everything!

In the course of his choppy, sketchy, superficial and badly written narrative Skorzeny has included a number of interesting facts. Two of them are about Heinrich Himmler. While Skorzeny was trying to find out where Mussolini was confined Himmler "mobilized" the clairvoyants and astrologers of Berlin to help provide the answer. Himmler was enthusiastic about a vague plan to bombard New York with buzz-bombs launched from submarines. "I have always been convinced," said Himmler, "that the Americans are incapable of suffering direct blows, especially when they do not expect them."

This edition of "Skorzeny's Secret Missions" was translated by Jacques Le Clercq from a French edition, which in turn was translated from a much more extensive German

"SKORZENY'S SECRET MISSIONS: War Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe. By Otto Skorzeny. Translated from the French by Jacques Le Clercq. 236 pages. Dutton, N.Y."

Declassified and Approved for Release by the Central Intelligence Agency Date: 2001, 2005