

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 375. Hitler and the Mitford Sisters

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I met her in the Osteria Bavaria. She was very romantic.

The Osteria was a small inn. It's still there and hasn't changed much. Small tables.

There was a wooden partition and behind it a table to seat eight.

An adjutant would phone the owner to warn that Hitler might be coming and to have the table clear.

There was also a courtyard with one table under a pergola and this was Hitler's favourite seat when the weather was not cold.

Unity was quite often there. I was invited only every second or third time.

Like me, Mitford would be invited by the adjutant Schaub. She was highly in love with Hitler.

We could see it easily. Her face brightened up. Her eyes gleaming, staring at Hitler.

Hero worship. Absolutely phenomenal. And possibly Hitler liked to be admired by a young woman.

She was quite attractive. Even if nothing happened, he was excited by the possibility of a love affair with her.

Towards an attractive woman, he behaved as a 17-year-old would.

So that was International Man of Mystery and all-round villain Rudolf Hess talking about Unity, Mitford and Tom.

We ended last time with the British Fascist movement, I think it's fair to say, in the doldrums.

World War II had broken out. A lot of the leading fascists, but not all of the aristocrats,

but a lot of the other leading fascists, including Sir Oswald Mosley, have been put into prison.

But we're now going to backtrack a little bit because you're very keen to tell the story of the person you regard as Britain's most notorious Nazi.

I say Nazi, not British Fascist, because this is somebody, as we've just heard, in that sort of Barbara Cartland-esque prose.

You know, she's not at Cable Street. She's not going to grimy meetings of the sort of scum-thought branch of the BUF.

She is actually there in Germany with the Fuhrer, and that's Unity, Mitford.

It is. I mean, she is probably, I mean, not probably, she is the British person who has the most access to Hitler.

I mean, possibly of any foreigner, she has meetings with Hitler over 140 times.

And I would go further and say that, although obviously Oswald Mosley and indeed Unity Mitford's sister Diana, who marries Oswald Mosley,

are more significant figures within the history of British Fascism.

I would say that Unity Mitford is probably the best known British Fascist among the general public, simply because there is such a fascination,

enduring fascination with the Mitford sisters.

And so I think that it's worth having an episode on her, partly because of the inherent fascination of the story.

I mean, she is an intriguing figure, but also because I think the fact that a self-avowed Nazi can be integrated into a crucial part of the heritage industry is really, really interesting.

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So the first biography that was written of Unity Mitford, one of the six famous Mitford sisters, was by a man called David Price-Jones in 1977.

And he subtitled it *The Frivolity of Evil*, which is a play on the banality of evil.

It's, I think, a brilliant title.

And I think that there is a sense, perhaps, in which part of the appeal of fascism and, by extension, Nazism in 1930s Britain, there is an element of that, the frivolity of it.

Do you think among the upper classes?

Well, I think we talked in the last three episodes about the paranoia among much of the upper classes.

So there are definitely people out there, I don't know, in the 1920s, the Duke of Northumberland, very rich, very entitled people who feel genuinely, almost hysterically afraid of Bolshevism and of, you know, sell out by the mainstream political parties and so on.

But in the case of the Mitfords, I agree with you, there's a slight sense of incredibly sinister sort of role playing that has got out of control.

Yeah.

The fascinating thing you said about the heritage industry, so I live, as lots of listeners will know, in North Oxfordshire, very close to the Mitford family estate.

And there are walking tours, there are Mitford walking tours.

I know people, I mean, I know people, Tom, otherwise sane, well-adjusted people who are obsessed with the Mitfords, who love the Mitford sisters, who like going to the graveyard and seeing the Mitfords graves, who have lots of books on the Mitfords.

Now, for a lot of our overseas listeners, this will all be babble, they won't know who the Mitfords are.

So perhaps you should explain just who this extraordinary family are and why they have this hold over the British imagination.

OK, so the Mitfords are a very ancient family.

They had lands in England even before the Norman Conquest, given to them by Edward the Confessor, up in Northumberland, very near my Scottish estate, as it happens on the banks of Tweed.

But there's a kind of junior family from Hampshire, and these are the ones that end up with lands in the Cotswolds.

And the thing about the Mitfords is there are aspects of their heritage that seem to precondition them for a particular interest in Nazism.

So I'll go through Unity Mitford's grandparents.

So her grandfather on her father's side, so that's the Mitford side.

He was a very distinguished diplomat, served in Japan and all over the world, incredible linguist.

And he became a very good friend of Richard Wagner.

He went to Bayreuth.

He saw all the Bulgarian operas, including the *Valkyrie*.

So all these operas that Hitler was obsessed with?

Absolutely.

So Hitler will come to know this and they tell the story of statuesque goddesses, blond hair, who gallop around on horses, picking up the fall and dead and taking them to Valhalla.

While he's at Bayreuth, he meets Houston Stuart Chamberlain, Dominic, who we've had cause to

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mention in this series and indeed in the episode that we did on the rise of the Nazis.

So he is British, but he becomes actually in 1916.

So during the First World War, he becomes a naturalized German subject.

And he is vehemently anti-Semitic.

And the Mitford sisters grandfather translates his book, The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, into English.

So he'd written it in German.

So, you know, there's a bit of history there.

Her paternal grandmother was the sister of Clementine Churchill's mother.

So the woman who, Clementine, who marries Winston Churchill.

Yeah.

So that's an additional part of the mix.

And the Mitford sisters, in fact, often go to Chartwell to see cousin Winston.

And Churchill wasn't particularly interested in most of the Mitford sisters, although he admired Diana, who was by some way the most beautiful.

And Randolph, his son, has a massive, massive crush on Diana, as pretty much everyone in London society does.

So their grandfather on their mother's side, he was also an absolutely massive anti-Semite.

He goes on a journey through the Holy Land, goes to Jerusalem.

And he says of the Jews, if they have been expelled from Jerusalem, they are the rulers of London, Paris and Berlin.

And his daughter, so the mother of the Mitfords, Sydney, seems to have inherited this instinctive anti-Semitism, although she was a great admirer of the Mosaic dietary laws, because she firmly believed that Jews never got cancer and attributed this to their not eating pork or shellfish.

So she...

That's a very unusual medical opinion, isn't it?

Yes.

Yes.

So their father, David, who in Nancy Mitford's pursuit of love is Uncle Matthew, you know, hates foreigners, damn foreigners, all that kind of thing.

So he becomes Lord Reedsdale when his brother dies in the First World War.

So he's the younger son, but inherits the title because his brother dies.

He is a spectacularly hopeless investor.

So every investment he makes goes wrong.

And at one point he decides to go gold prospecting in Canada.

So he buys a gold mine at a place called Swastika.

You couldn't make that up, could you?

And he goes out there with Sydney, his wife.

And there Sydney conceives their fourth daughter and fifth child, who when she is born is given the name not just of unity, but of valkyrie.

So after devalkyrie.

Yeah.

On the recommendation of her paternal grandfather.

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So she is unity, valkyrie, Mitford.

And so all of this is giving her a certain pedigree, a certain heritage.

So she is one of seven children.

So the oldest is Nancy in 1903.

Pamela in 1907. Pamela is the boring one.

Tom 1909.

He's the male one.

Diana in 1910.

She's the beautiful one.

And then there is a gap of four years.

And so unity is born in 1914 during the First World War, which makes the fact that she's given this name of valkyrie or the more extraordinary.

And then you have Jessica, who comes to be known as Decker, and then Deborah, who comes to be known as Debo.

So it's an amazing accumulation of children.

And all of them will have astonishing careers, which is why they are objects of such popular fascination.

But I think for our purposes, by Miles, the most interesting one is unity, because she goes even further than Diana.

Even further than Diana, who's actually married the leader of the British Union of Fascists.

And in fact, because unity, Jessica and Deborah are born several years after Diana, they are kind of grouped together as the young girls.

And so they all slightly live in Diana's shadow.

Diana is incredibly beautiful, incredibly glamorous.

And so unity, I think in particular, feels that she has to show off if she is going to make a mark.

And so that's what she does.

And her character is enhanced by the fact that compared to the other girls, she is very big bone.

She's very glum thing.

Statuesque.

Statuesque, you might want to say.

And she has these, she has these kind of incredibly large, baleful eyes.

And she developed the technique of sitting at table, slowly shoveling mashed potato into her mouth, gazing at her father.

And her father would become more and more furious by this.

And he'd bellow at her, stop staring at me.

And she would continue to stare at him.

Then he would absolutely explode and she would slide under the table and stay there and refuse to come out.

She obviously took a pleasure in rousing her father to a condition of absolute fury.

And I think there's a sense in which of all the girls, she is perhaps the most difficult to handle.

So the restylers, like a lot of aristocratic families at this time, did not approve of sending their daughters to school.

They saw that as vulgar.

Yeah.

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Nancy Mitford said of her father that he thought one got thick calves from playing hockey. He didn't want that at all.

Yeah.

And Unity is so stressful to have around that they do actually send her to school.

And on both occasions, she ends up being expelled.

And the final time she's 17, Lord Reesdale himself goes to the school to try and persuade the headmistress to take her back.

And the headmistress refuses.

Right.

Meanwhile, as Unity is kind of going to school, being expelled, coming out of school, wondering what to do.

Diana is out there.

She is a society beauty.

She's a bright young thing.

She's married Brian Guinness, who's fabulously rich.

Even war is dedicating our bodies to her.

And for Unity, you can see that this makes her even more glamorous than she'd been when they were children.

And she kind of like a moth drawn to a flame.

She immediately starts hanging out with Diana.

Yeah.

And thinking, you know, this is the person who I want to impress.

So 1932, she comes out, which doesn't mean that she doesn't have the coltation that it has today.

It means that she joins this kind of circle of gals who are upperclass, who are being presented at the court, who are circulating around various dances and parties and so on with the aim of meeting a handsome young man.

Unity, she cuts a tremendous dash.

Save the Daily Express in the summer of 1932.

Comments on her that she was the prettiest girl.

Right.

Because it's a bit like red carpets today.

People are interested in debutantes, devs, as that's called.

Yes.

But Unity is, I think, an intimidating figure to men.

She's very, as I said, statuesque.

She has a fondness for stunts.

She has a rat, Ratchela, which she keeps in her handbag and at dances, she will take it out and stroke it.

That's very Ron Weasley behaviour, Tom, for Harry Potter listeners.

She also has a snake called Enid, and the story goes is that she kind of will on occasion wear it instead of a necklace.

Now, I'm not entirely convinced whether that's true.

These stories seem to come from her younger sister, Jessica, who is prone to exaggeration.

And the simple reason I'm hesitant about that, applying all my historical acumen, is that I think rats

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and snakes don't necessarily get on well.

Well, Theo, our producer says this is all very Nazi behaviour.

I mean, this is very good at Nazis in an Indiana Jones film.

Except that at this point, Unity still has absolutely no interest in politics, let alone in fascism. Right.

But 1932 is the year in which Diana Guinness, as she is by this point, starts her affair with Oswald Mosley.

And Unity is kind of coming along in the train.

So that actually, you know, they all go to a ball hosted by Lady Ross Child, who is obviously a very significant Jewish society figure.

Yeah.

Neither Diana nor Unity have any problem with this at all.

But by October 32, Mosley is starting to go full fascist.

So he's putting on the black shirts.

He's holding his rallies.

You know, we talked about this in the previous episode.

Exactly.

Yes.

Unity is, she's still oblivious to this.

She's become an art student.

She actually seems to have been very good at art.

And you can imagine her becoming a kind of Bohemian figure, a posh Bohemian figure.

Yeah.

I love posh Bohemian figures, as you know, Tom.

I know you do, Dominic.

I know you do.

But we talked in the previous episode how Mosley's wife, Simi, who is the daughter of Lord Curson, even as Oswald Mosley is having his affair with Diana, she falls very dangerously ill.

So she gets has a burst appendix.

Mosley goes to a hospital with her, spends the morning with her, then goes out and has lunch with Diana.

And Unity is with Diana.

And she is immediately besotted with him, idolizes him, calls him the leader, joins the fascists, and becomes actually, you know, you were saying that she's not out there walking the streets.

Actually, she does start walking the streets.

She starts selling the black shirt on the streets of Oxford.

And she takes it quite seriously.

Yeah.

Although seriousness with the Mitfords is always relative.

So there's a brilliant account by Anthony Rumbold, who's the son of Horace Rumbold, who was ambassador to Germany in the buildup to the Nazis taking power.

And he goes down to Swinbrook, the Mitford estate.

Which is lovely, by the way.

Swinbrook is a beautiful village.

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David Cameron went there with François Hollande for a pint.  
So if you look at the top, there's pictures in the wall of Cameron Hollande.  
Yeah, I bet he did.  
Anyway, so Unity is there with Jessica, the communist.  
And the two girls set on this poll chap, Anthony Rumbold,  
and say, are you a fascist or a communist?  
And he says, well, I'm neither.  
I believe in democracy.  
And they answer, how wet?  
Oh, God.  
You know, which is very, very Mitford.  
So actually, Unity seems to, you know, she's thrown herself wholeheartedly into fascism  
in exactly the way that her younger sister, Jessica, has become an absolutely committed Stalinist.  
They're both very into their respective dictatorial figures.  
But I think there is a sense in which, for Unity,  
that the trudging around streets selling fascist magazines is already becoming boring.  
And she is already thinking, I want to go beyond what Diana has, by this point,  
has bagged Oswald mostly.  
They haven't got married, but they're clearly together.  
She's thinking, how can I go one better than Diana?  
And of course, you know, Diana has her fascist leader,  
but there's an even more significant fascist leader who Unity decides to go after.  
So just before we get onto that, can I just ask a sort of slightly serious question?  
I mean, this is such a, these are such unserious people, I think,  
that it seems weird to ask a serious question, but I'll do it anyway.  
So we talked a little bit earlier in the episode about other aristocrats  
who are drawn to fascism because of, because of fear,  
because of their kind of paranoia and whatnot.  
With Unity Mitford, you haven't mentioned her at any point reading a book, for example.  
Is she somebody who is, this is frivolity that has got completely out of hand,  
the frivolity of evil?  
Or is there any seriousness and genuine ideological commitment to this at all?  
I think at this stage, it's absolutely frivolity, a desire to shock.  
I think with Diana, who's very bright, very well read, very, very smart,  
I think it is thought through.  
I think that she commits herself to Oswald mostly,  
not just because he's incredibly good looking and charismatic,  
but also because she completely comes to believe in what he's saying.  
Right.  
So she is a thinker.  
Unity is not a thinker.  
It seems to be much more instinctive.  
So Nancy Mitford, the eldest of the Mitford girls who will become very famous novelists,  
one of her novels, she gives a portrait of Unity as a fascist



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and compares her to the suffragettes.

Says that in an earlier age, her yearning for a cause,  
the sense that she wants to be part of something bigger than herself,  
it well have led her to campaign for votes for women.

And I think that maybe a few decades later,  
she might have become a kind of Marianne Faithful equivalent.  
She might have become a posh groupie.

Exactly.

So I think that she is looking for kind of charismatic men.

I think she's looking for excitement.

She wants to shock.

I mean, I think all these kind of elements that you can see very much  
in the way that people behave in the 60s,  
I think it's already there in the 30s,  
which may well be why people, you know,  
through the 60s and into the present day identify with the Mitford so strongly.  
There's something quite 60s about their whole attitude.

But obviously with Unity, it goes in a very, very dark direction.

And she gets her opportunity to meet Hitler because in August 1933,  
she travels to Nuremberg as part of a delegation of British fascists  
that actually includes William Joyce,

who will go on to become Lord Haw-Haw again,

who we talked about in earlier episodes.

And at Nuremberg, Unity sees Hitler and she says of him,  
the first moment I saw him, I knew there was no one I would rather meet.

Very good.

Love at first sight.

Lovely voice.

So she goes back to England.

And this is when Nancy spoofs her because she is going around  
mooning over Hitler in the way that she might have done in the 60s over Mick Jagger.

So she is giving the Hitler salute to everyone.

You know, she'll go down to the post office and click her heels and say,  
hi, Hitler.

And it's all very odd.

And say for Jessica, her younger sister, who's the communist,  
who you think would be vehemently opposed to this on one level she is,  
but it's still a bit of a game.

It's like they've kind of chosen their rival pop stars.

Yeah.

You know, Unity's chosen Mick Jagger.

Jessica's chosen Paul McCartney.

And this obsession leads to her the following year.

So in the spring of 1934, going to Munich, where she knows Hitler has his main base,



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and she enrolls in a language school right next door to the Nazi headquarters.  
And she is joined by Diana.  
All that summer, all that autumn, she spends hanging out in the Austria Bavaria,  
as described by Rudolf Hess.  
She goes to the Nuremberg rallies.  
You know, again, a bit like going to a Glastonbury or something,  
get caught up in the excitement of the crowd.  
She's wearing her black shirt.  
She becomes an object of absolute fascination to all the SS officers.  
You know, this very valkyrie-like fascist blonde aristocrat in her fascist uniform.  
She's advised by them don't wear too much makeup.  
Hitler doesn't like makeup, so she watches that very carefully.  
Ten months after she started going to the Austria Bavaria,  
finally someone comes over and says the Fuhrer would like to meet you.  
She goes over to hang out with Hitler.  
And she writes to her father, to Lord Reedstahl.  
It was the most wonderful and beautiful day of my life.  
I mean, what on earth is going on in her head when she's meeting Hitler,  
when she's hanging around with these people who already, at this stage,  
for the avoidance of doubt, who already steeped in violence and in bloodshed,  
and have made no secret of their...  
I mean, frankly, anyone who's read Mein Kampf or Hitler's speeches in the 1920s will know,  
and we discussed this on our Rise of the Nazis series.  
They have made no secret of their general sidel ambitions.  
So what on earth is she thinking?  
So she does have a copy of Mein Kampf signed by Hitler,  
and also signed by pretty much every other luminary in the Third Reich,  
like a kind of autographed book.  
Right.  
The question of what she's thinking, so Nancy Mitford,  
who remained devoted to her, even though Nancy was very much on the left,  
she wrote later about unity that with her, the whole Nazi thing seemed to be a joke.  
She was great fun.  
She was the driver and central Europe in a uniform with a gun.  
Unity was absolutely unpolitical.  
No one knew less about politics than she did.  
That is the classic posh dilettantes get out.  
Oh, it's great fun.  
We knew nothing about politics.  
So I think there is an element of that.  
I think there is an element.  
Oh, it's all tremendous laugh.  
And if people are shocked, then so much the better.  
I think there is also undoubtedly a sense of kind of erotic fascination,

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particularly with the SS and the storm troopers.

So she calls them the darling storms.

Oh, Jesus.

Unbelievable.

And when she comes back after one trip to Munich,  
the family Nanny, who's rejoices in the Spanish name of Bloor.

I do wish you wouldn't keep going to Germany, darling.

All those men.

So she certainly identified something that's going on.

But I think you're absolutely right that to say she's in an erotic days  
or it's all just a tremendous laugh or she's doing it to shock,  
does not excuse her because she goes full in on the darkest aspects of Nazism.

She knows that if she's going to keep Hitler's attention,  
she has to keep herself kind of absolutely within his gaze.

She has to nail her colors to the Nazi mast.

And so she does this by taking up with a man who even by the standards  
of the Nazis is a monster Julius Stryker who edits the Sturma, the storm trooper.

And who, you know, shaven head, moustache, looks like a thug.

And, you know, to put it into context at the Nuremberg trials,  
the other Nazis kind of avoided Stryker because they regarded him not really as vulgar,  
but as they regarded him as a monster.

I mean, that's the kind of person we're talking about.

Yes.

And also quite a lot of people in Britain from her aristocratic circles say,  
but he's so common.

But I think there's an element in which the mitfords are so posh that that doesn't bother them.  
You can imagine George Orwell, for instance, tying himself up in knots about this,  
feeling incredibly embarrassed.

But for the mitfords, there's a sense in which the fact that so many of the Nazis are very non-you.

Yeah, to use Nancy mitfords terminology, you are non-you.

You is acceptable 7% of the population and non-you is the other 93%.

So Unity feels absolutely no requirement to kind of compromise with her own upper class morays or  
behavior

because she knows that actually people like Stryker will love that.

So there's a kind of sense of a commonality between the upper classes and the lower classes  
that, again, someone like Orwell would never be able to buy into.

He'd be far too embarrassed about it.

So Unity goes in big with Stryker, who is in charge of the press.

There is quite a significant figure for Mosley.

And so when Mosley gives a speech in Leicester, Stryker sends him a telegram saying,  
congratulations, I very much approve of the speech you gave.

And Mosley sends him a telegram back saying, the power of Jewish corruption must be destroyed in  
all countries

before peace and justice can be successfully achieved in Europe.

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So he's going in big on the anti-Semitism as well.

And actually intriguingly, that apparently was not quoted in the Lord Skodolsky biography.

It was quoted in the David Price Jones biography of Unity, caused quite a stir.

But I mean, Mosley definitely sent it.

And there's a sense in which Unity is acting as a broker between the significant power players in Nazi Germany

and the British Union of Fascists.

And it's interesting that this is the exact point when Mosley is beginning, 1934 or so, 1935,

Mosley is going all in on the anti-Semitism himself, something that he hadn't really mentioned in 1932

when he set up the British Union of Fascists.

So I wonder whether his sister-in-law, presumably his wife, they're all in this atmosphere of increasing anti-Semitism.

I think Diana and Mosley definitely less so.

And you can tell that because you just have to look at what Unity is doing, who is going full in.

So she writes a letter to Der Stürmer in which she says,

we urgently need a publication like Stürmer to tell the people the truth.

They will soon see it as to be hoped that in England too, we shall be victorious over the world enemy in spite of his cunning.

So she's talking about the Jews there.

We look forward to the day on which we shall declare with full power and might,

England for the English,

Jews out with German greetings,

Heil Hitler, Unity Mitford, P.S.

If you should happen to find room in your paper for this letter, please print my name in full.

I do not want my letter initialed U.M.

for everyone should know that I am a Jew-hater.

So she is absolutely pinning her colours to the mass and

striker when he prints this letter, which he does, he blazes it over his newspaper.

He also makes sure to tell his readers that Unity is related to Winston Churchill.

And this makes her incredibly newsworthy in Britain, in Germany.

And of course, it achieves exactly what Unity wants it to achieve.

Namely, it gives her credibility with Hitler.

Well, Tom, before we started, I said, I made it very clear to you that I disapprove very strongly of the Mitfords.

And I have to say that nothing you've said in the last half hour has changed that position.

One Iota, in fact, I hate them even more than I did before we started.

So on that bombshell, I think we should take a break and we will return after the break to find out what happened to Unity Mitford,

her relationship with Hitler.

And Tom, you will be able to solve, I hope, one of history's most intriguing mysteries.

We love a mystery on the rest of history, don't we?

Did Unity Mitford have Hitler's child?

One has the sense that Unity was in a preferable position to a mistress,

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more protected because not dependent upon that mutable physical tie.  
She could sit and babble away as a mistress would never have dared.  
Her intimacy with Hitler was odder than that.  
She was light relief, a combination of younger sister, court jester and talisman.  
He may also have enjoyed the fact that his henchmen did not really want her there, but could not say so.  
He was impressed by Britain, fascinated by its ability to command an empire.  
And like so many people, he was compelled by the British aristocracy.  
In his way, he was probably impressed by Unity herself.  
Quite simply, Hitler felt happier with her around.  
So that Tom is Laura Thompson and takes six girls the lives of the Mitford sisters.  
So this is the real core of the story, isn't it?  
Unity Mitford's relationship with Adolf Hitler.  
And it's the extraordinary thing is that this posh airhead, who you might think has nothing to offer at all, becomes part of Hitler's inner circle.  
Yeah, so Laura Thompson's book is brilliant.  
It's about all, as the title implies, it's about all the Mitford sisters.  
And she is much more generous to Unity than David Price-Jones is in his biography.  
Both of them are agreed that almost certainly there wasn't a sexual relationship between Hitler.  
And therefore, the entire premise of this episode has been destroyed.  
No, we'll come to the story that maybe Unity was carrying Hitler's love child later in the episode.  
But for now, let's act on the assumption that there's a platonic quality to Unity's relationship with Hitler.  
If that's the case, then what is going on?  
I think Laura Thompson absolutely fixes on it, which is that Hitler is charmed.  
So Laura Thompson talks about all the Mitford sisters having this yearning towards lightness, which I think is a kind of wonderful phrase.  
Even when you're going into the dark, they speak the language of the nursery.  
They talk to people with utmost confidence that everyone is going to be interested in what they have to say.  
And so that means that Unity perhaps is relaxed with Hitler in a way that very few people are.  
Because most people are either terrified of him or desperate for something.  
But Unity has already got what she wants.  
She wants to hang out with him.  
And so now she can just kind of prattle away using all her kind of nursery language.  
Dear sweet Hitler, the blissful Fuhrer.  
Oh, my God.  
I might write some thinking, Tom.  
I read in your notes, she encourages Hitler to do impressions.  
She does, yes.  
So she gets him to tell jokes and she gets him to do impressions, particularly of Mussolini, which apparently she finds so funny.  
So it's evident that Hitler is able to kind of relax with her and to be a tremendous laugh.  
All his impressions, all his gags flowing out in a way that normally one doesn't associate with the

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dear, dear Fuhrer.

So definitely Unity amuses him.

But I think there is also a sense he feels that she has been sent by fate because of the fact that her middle name is Valkyrie.

Because she was born in Swastika.

Because her forebears are such significant figures in the history of antisemitism.

He feels, you know, what are the odds that this girl would come from Britain with all these markers?

And he's quite superstitious.

You know, he's the man of destiny.

I think there's a slight element of that as well.

And so he gives her considerable marks of favour.

So he gives her a gold Swastika badge with his signature engraved on the back that give him to very, very few people.

He invites both Unity and Diana.

So Unity introduces Diana to him.

And you can imagine what a thrill that must have given the younger sister to introduce the glamorous elder sister to the Fuhrer.

They get given splendid seats at the Olympic Games.

Hitler rather naughtily sits her next to Ava Brown, who is incredibly jealous and in fact stages a suicide attempt to try and get attention.

And Hitler probably does pay attention to Ava Brown.

And so that again kind of alerts Unity to the fact that melodrama and histrionics, this is how you keep Hitler interested.

I think Unity is also playing a kind of political role in a very gauche, clumsy way because she is unbelievably indiscreet.

So anything she's told, she will blab.

So Hitler knows this so he can use her basically to communicate with upper class circles in Britain.

So there's an occasion where he lets slip that he's crossed with Mussolini.

Unity immediately reports that to all her contacts back in London and for Foreign Office and number 10, a buzzing with possibilities for peeling Hitler off Mussolini.

And likewise, she's very indiscreet about what she's heard in London.

So she tells Hitler that according to Randolph Churchill, London has no air defences.

I mean, and this is verging on the treasonous.

I don't think she thinks of it in those terms, but she is blabbing away.

And I think what Unity, what she is very patriotic.

She's very, you know, she's very proud to be British, but she also loves Germany.

She loves her darling Führer.

And I think she wants Britain and Germany to be in an alliance.

And it may be that at the margins of her thoughts, she's thinking that she perhaps could play a role if perhaps the darling Führer would marry her.

You know, a kind of domestic alliance.

So as a schoolgirl, she had told a friend of hers, her ambition when she grew up was to become the power behind a mighty throne.

So perhaps there's an element of that.

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I mean, just to put that into context, before the First World War, the British elite had been very, very pro-German.

People had loved traveling to German holiday.

And when we did that podcast about holidays and people getting those terrible spas, all of that kind of thing.

People love German literature.

They love German philosophy, you know, intelligent thinking people.

And between the wars, there are lots of people.

It's rather like Lord Darlington and Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Remains of the Day*.

People who think, gosh, the First World War was such a tragedy, a friendship between Britain and Germany.

You know, they're so like us.

They're so high-brow, the Germans, tremendous culture, all that sort of stuff.

So actually, Unity, she's a very outlandish version of this.

Yeah.

But there'd be lots of aristocrats back in Britain and an intelligent, well-educated people who would say,

yes, Britain and Germany should be friends.

And she should be the two great pillars of the world order and all this kind of stuff.

And the Mitfords are all fascinated by Germany, with the exception of Nancy, who's a tremendous Francophile.

And her fascination with Paris, you know, she goes to live in Paris.

She has a famous romance with a colonel in the Free French.

And she is making a statement there that she is not part of this obsession with Germany, that has shaded into avert sympathy with fascism and Nazism.

Because Diana is not the only member of her family who Unity introduces to Hitler.

So she gets her parents over.

Lord Reedsdale, a.k.a. Uncle Matthew, famous for thinking, you know, once a hun, always a hun, he's immediately charmed by Hitler.

So also is Lady Reedsdale, who the first time she meets Hitler, despite not speaking German, she lectures him on the best way to make bread.

Lord Reedsdale is completely won over by Hitler and he goes to the House of Lords and defends the Anschluss.

Lady Reedsdale goes even further, goes back, starts writing articles overtly in favour of Hitler, becomes very hostile to Churchill, calls him that wicked man, becomes devoted to the protocols of the Elders of Zion,

that very sinister text, you know, all the darkest anti-Semitic tropes and kind of writes too true.

And I always said so in the margin.

So Lady Reedsdale is going full in.

Meanwhile, of course, there's Diana.

Hitler is very taken with Diana as well, very handsome and describes Diana in Unity as perfect examples of Aryan womanhood.

And Diana in turn is able to smooth the way for Mosley so they go over to Germany and they actually get married in Goebbels' drawing room.

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Even though Goebbels doesn't like them, Hitler insists on it and Hitler is at the wedding. Unity, interestingly, isn't because it's still the wedding has to be kept secret at this point and they know that if Unity's there, she'll blab.

She'll tell everybody.

But of course, Hitler and Mosley didn't think much of each other, did they?

No.

Because we were talking in a previous episode about whether Mosley would have been the British Fuhrer.

I don't know if the Nazis invaded Britain or something and actually Hitler and Mosley held each other in quite low regard.

But I think there's a sense of, you know, alpha males kind of squaring up.

Right.

And so the, again, this is part of the social dynamic of what's going on.

I mean, it's like a kind of very dark social comedy.

So Pamela, the second Mithrid sister, she meets Hitler, describes him as being like an old farmer in a brown suit.

And she goes on to marry a fascist sympathiser who nevertheless serves very bravely in the war.

Tom, the only son, he meets Hitler.

And his sympathies with Germany and by extension, Nazism are such that he insists on serving against the Japanese, where he dies in the war in Burma.

Deborah, who is very, very apolitical, but she goes and meets him.

In fact, the only members of the family who don't meet Hitler are Nancy and Jessica, the communist.

Right.

And Violet Hammersley, who is a family friend of the Mithrid, she wrote to Nancy and said, you Mithrids, you do like dictators, which is obviously very true.

But obviously for aristocratic people like the Mithrids, to go back to your thing about class as well, Tom, they would regard democracy and sort of nonviolence and stuff.

They'd regard them as awful vulgar, suburban, middle class values, wouldn't they?

No, I don't think so, not necessarily.

I mean, Deborah Debo, who goes on to marry the man who in due course becomes the Duke of Devonshire.

I mean, she's a kind of classic conservative.

Yeah, but the others.

But Diana, Unity, they would think of them as middle class and bourgeois and boring, and they would think dictators as fun, wouldn't they?

They love dressing up.

Isn't that wonderful?

Yes, I think that's true.

And I think that that hence the phrase frivolity of evil.

But I think if you are tempted by that to think there isn't really any harm being done, there are dimensions to Unity's behavior that I think are completely shocking.

So this terrible story is told that she comes back from Germany and she tells her siblings how in Germany she'd met an old woman who was very obviously Jewish, loaded down with lots of bags. And the woman asks Unity the way to the railway station.



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And Unity, I told her the wrong way because I saw how heavy the bundle was.  
Wasn't that wonderful of me?  
No, we're a monster.  
We're a monster.  
And here is a former friend of Unity's who'd been at our college with her.  
Once she boasted that it was such fun to have supper with Stryker as you'd have the Jews in after the meal.  
They'd be brought up from the cellar and be made to eat grass, then entertain the guests.  
Oh, Tom, this is very bad form.  
I mean, there's no...  
No, there's nothing funny about that at all.  
And so she becomes increasingly notorious in England.  
So there's a famous ditty is published in one of the papers about her.  
You can't criticize Unity with impunity.  
If you try to belittle her, you have to answer to Hitler.  
Hitler, she gets caught up in a riot in Hyde Park where I think Atlee was speaking and she's kind of goose-stepping around in her black uniform,  
has to be bundled into a cab.  
She, like her mother, is busy writing articles in favour of Hitler in the British press.  
And she stays committed to Hitler, even as it becomes increasingly evident that Britain is going to be going to war with Germany.  
So 1939, she goes to Bayreuth, the festival there with Diana, and Hitler basically says to them, look, you should get out of Germany because we are going to be going to war.  
And Diana, Julie goes back home, but Unity stays there.  
And maybe one of the reasons why Unity stays there, and a very physical evidence, both of Hitler's favour and of her desire to become German, is that Hitler has given her a flat.  
So he had given her a choice of four flats in Munich.  
She'd gone round, she'd chosen the one that she wanted, went round the house saying, oh, these curtains won't do at all.  
We must get rid of this awful sofa.  
Meanwhile, the two people who are being dispossessed, both of whom are Jewish, are sitting in the hallway sobbing.  
And she pays them no attention at all.  
So this is the background to the most famous incident in her life, which is when war is declared. Britain declares war on Germany.  
She goes, she's in Munich, she's in her flat where she's living that's been taken from the Jewish couple.  
She goes to the English Garden in Munich.  
She has a very small caliber kind of pearl handle pistol.  
She shoots herself through the head.  
But the bullet isn't sufficiently, you know, it's a small caliber bullet, so it doesn't kill her.  
She's found, she's bundled into an ambulance, taken to the hospital.  
She's recognised, Hitler sends her flowers, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, they all sent her flowers.

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And on the 10th of September, you know, even as the war with Britain is in its opening weeks, Hitler finds time to come and visit her.

And she doesn't recognise him because she's mentally shot.

And as she comes to, she tries to commit suicide a second time by swallowing her swastika badge, but that doesn't work.

And it's only after six weeks that she recaptures her ability to speak.

And on the 8th of November, Hitler comes again.

It's the last time they meet.

And Hitler says, you know, what do you want?

Do you want to stay here?

Or do you want to be sent back to England?

And she says, I would like to go back to England.

And so he arranges for her to be taken to Bern in neutral Switzerland.

And the phony war is still on.

So it's perfectly possible for her to be taken by rail from Switzerland all the way back to England.

So her mother and Debo, her younger sister, go and get her.

I mean, it must have been hideous for her that, you know, being jolted along the bullet in her head.

When she arrives in Folkestone, there's a kind of tremendous scandal because there seem to be armed guards everywhere.

And this will become the subject of much public criticism.

And it's uncertain whether the armed guards are there to stop people from looking at her.

Yeah.

Or whether they're just coincidental.

But there is this feeling that she is getting special treatment that would not be afforded to other people.

To protect her from the crowds and the press, presumably.

Yes.

And so in the comments, Herbert Morrison, who will of course go on to become Home Secretary in the coalition government,

he describes her as a British subject who had been openly assisting the cause of an enemy government

and asks, would a working class person receive similar treatment?

Well, he's right.

Yeah, he is absolutely right.

Think about the cases of British citizens, British subjects.

Yeah, Shamima Begum.

Who have been, you know, working with the Islamic State or whatever.

I think YOUNCEE MITFORD should have been dropped into the channel from a great height personally.

Well, so lots of people do.

But she goes to the right cliff in Oxford.

There they say there's no chance of extracting the bullet from her brain.

And so she is left essentially with the mental age of a 10-year-old, a bright 10-year-old.

She's left permanently incontinent.

She's kind of described by people as a kind of large dog.

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She's shambolic.

She's kind of her limbs going everywhere.

She's like a kind of, you know, a big, an enormous puppy.

Tom, just on the suicide attempt.

The suicide attempt is the day that Britain declares war on Germany.

Is that right?

The 3rd of September.

And this is because it's not just that her two beloved countries are going to war with each other.

But is it also that she has been proved so comprehensively wrong that all her silly daydreams and fantasies are...

Oh, we just don't know.

Is there any sense of guilt before she does it?

I mean, she never says.

She never really talks about it.

Does she remember it?

Nobody knows.

And I don't know.

I'm guessing it's the tension.

You know, all her dreams were vested in this dream of this alliance between Britain and Germany.

But anyway, basically to cut a long story short, she never really recovers.

And in due course, she gets meningitis and dies at the age of 33.

So I think in 1948, so after the war, she's never in prison.

So unlike her sister Diana, who gets locked up in Holloway, she's never in prison.

Her parents, her parents, they split up in the war, didn't they?

They do because the moment that Britain declares war on Germany, Lord Reisdale, who is an absolute patriot, swings behind the British war effort, goes back to thinking that the Huns are beastly.

Lady Reisdale doesn't.

Lady Reisdale remains an enthusiast for Hitler.

And, you know, succession of tragedies over one.

So they split up.

Jessica, the communist sister has gone to America.

She doesn't come back.

She, you know, kind of absolute sense of rupture between her and her parents.

Tom dies in Burma, and then you have the death of Unity in 1948 of meningitis.

And the question, Tom, which Theo, a producer desperately wants you to answer, is whether she was carrying Hitler's child when she returned to Britain.

Right.

So this was a theory that was prompted by the release of declassified documents in 2002, which quoted an MI5 officer called Guy Little, who said,

we had no evidence to support the press allegations that she was in a serious state of health.

And it might well be that she was brought in on a stretcher in order to avoid publicity and unpleasantness to her family.

So that led to the theory that she'd never actually shot herself.

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And if she'd never shot herself, why did Hitler let her go away?

And so the theory that then came that actually she was burying his child.

This is why how she came back.

And Martin Bright, who was the political editor of the new statesman at the time, he received a phone call from a woman who claimed that Unity Mitford had gone to a private maternity hospital in Oxford.

And so putting two and two together and coming up with eight.

The theory was that Unity Mitford had Hitler's love child.

This child was then taken away, brought for fostering.

And therefore, Dominic, the Hitler dynasty may be roaming the Cotswolds even as you sit there.

So frankly, if you've met some people from the Cotswolds, you wouldn't be entirely surprised.

Well, there you go.

So I think it's unlikely.

Let's put it like that.

It seems very unlikely to me.

Well, I don't think any Hitler biographer would give this theory the slightest house room, would they?

Or indeed, I think many Mitford scholars either.

And the fact that there are Mitford scholars, the fact that they are the subject of such enduring fascination,

I think is interesting because I think there is a sense that what both Unity and Diana did, as I said, it's become part of the heritage industry.

And I think the reason for that is basically that Nancy Mitford, when she wrote *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*,

these are such brilliant novels, such an affectionate rendering of her upbringing.

And, you know, she takes elements of her various sisters and folds them into characters within the narrative.

That it's made the fascist affiliations of both Diana and Unity seem something eccentric, something glamorous.

I think it's the glamour of evil.

I think that's as horrible as that sounds, especially when you hear the stories of Unity's behaviour.

Yeah, so with Unity, you have her early death.

And with Lady Mosley, you have the fact that she remained stunningly beautiful right the way up to the end.

Laura Thompson, in her wonderful book, describes her in her final years,

a tall wraith, like a long exquisite wisp of grey-white smoke, entirely beautiful at the age of 90.

Well, she would be appearing on these chat shows, Tom, wouldn't she, in the 1970s, 1980s?

Well, Dominic, I'll read you what she said on *Desit Island Disks* when Sue Lawley, the presenter, asked her about the Holocaust and whether she believed in the six million figure.

And her reply, I don't really, I'm afraid, believed that six million people were killed.

I think this is just not conceivable, it's too many.

But whether it's six or whether it's one makes no difference morally.

It's completely wrong. I think it was a dreadfully wicked thing.

So that's pretty mind-blowing.

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I mean, sure, she's acknowledging that Hitler did wicked things, but she is engaging in Holocaust denial on the BBC's premiere radio interview show in 1989. It's extraordinary.

And actually, I mean, neither Lady Mosley nor Saros would ever really seem to have been crippled by guilt

or had any sense of guilt or regret or any of these things.

And I think with Diana, it's precisely because she absolutely holds to her devotion to Oswald Mosley.

And also because they both have this sort of aristocratic, this bump just self-confidence, don't they?

They don't ever think, you know, it would be, again, it would be bourgeois and suburban to say,

oh, I feel sorry, I've made mistakes and all these kinds of things.

They have this kind of invincible assurance, self-assurance.

I mean, we left Mosley just to wrap up his story.

We left Mosley in prison, didn't we, in the Second World War.

He was released on medical grounds in November 1943.

And actually, the rest of his story, his life is kind of an irrelevance, really.

He's released, he's kind of a toxic figure.

He sets up something called the Union Movement, arguing, bizarrely as it may sound, for European unity.

But it's a sort of, you know, Christian unity against Bolshevism and all this kind of thing.

He's kind of the European Union as a kind of disguised fascist bulwark against communism.

He then moves into anti-immigration so that it's not so anti-Semitic,

but it's more racist against people who've moved to Britain from South Asia and the Caribbean.

So that's in the late 1950s.

He actually stands for election, again, in North Kensington in 1959 and receives 8% of the vote.

So this is in an area where there have been racist riots.

And he still does very badly, yeah, Notting Hill.

So he still does very badly, which is a sign of how toxic his reputation has been.

The British Union of Fascist, obviously, has broken up.

It goes into, eventually, into other far-right movements, you know, the British National Party,

the National Front in the 1970s, 1980s.

But, I mean, ultimately, these are quite small organisations that are never remotely likely to win a single parliamentary seat.

Meanwhile, he's gone to Paris.

Yes, exactly.

You know, a bit like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

Yeah, and actually his close neighbours.

The thing that we forget, because in the, certainly, I remember growing up, you know, Oswald Mosley was this sort of name.

He was the symbol of far-right racism, but also he was a ludicrous figure because he was such a failure.

But actually, you forget that in the 1920s and 1930s, you know, there are a lot of people who thought he might want to be prime minister.

That he was a serious and imaginative political thinker.

And then he made those series of stupid gambles, leaving the Labour Party, setting up the new

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party, then the BUF,  
that actually led nowhere because fascism, I think, in Britain had nowhere to, you know, it didn't  
have enough space to expand into,  
because the parliamentary system was too resilient and crucially Britain won the First World War.  
So, actually, it ends up being associated with eccentric people like the Mitfords and never really  
wins over Middle England, I would say.  
What do you think, Tom?  
Well, having done four episodes on it, saying that fundamentally it wasn't very important is perhaps  
not the net.  
Well, I think there's a difference between being important and being interesting.  
Absolutely.  
Well, so hence, hence unity.  
Yeah. I mean, she strikes me, you were so keen to do, I thought you were going to present a kind of  
revisionist account of the Mitfords.  
But actually, I held them in very, very low regard before we did this.  
And I actually held them in lower regard now than I did an hour ago, Tom.  
So, the people who run the Mitford heritage industry, you know, they should not be ringing to thank  
you.  
Although probably the nature of their story is such that probably the people who listen to this and  
think,  
I'll go over to that graveyard and swim broke and check out their graves.  
Well, as I say, I think it's all down to Nancy, who I think was a great, great novelist and writer.  
And I think that it's testimony to the power of her fiction that she has cast such a kind of golden  
luster over all the other war monster assistants.  
Well, she was also an absolutely towering snob.  
So, not a friend of the rest of history, in my mind at least.  
OK, Tom, thank you very much. That was absolutely fascinating.  
Thank you to everybody for listening and we will be returning next week on Monday with some  
absolutely non-fascist themed material.  
So, we will see you then. Bye-bye.