



FLATIRON  
BOOKS

# *At the Wolf's Table*

Author Q&A with Rosella Postorino

## **1. What inspired you to write *At the Wolf's Table*?**

In September 2014 while reading an Italian newspaper I happened to find a brief article about Margot Wölk, Hitler's last living food taster. She was ninety-six years old and it was the first time she confessed her experience; she had kept it a secret her whole life. In the interview she said she had never been a Nazi but had been forced by the SS to become a food taster because she had moved to her parents-in-laws' house when a bomb destroyed her apartment in Berlin, the city where she was born. Her husband was fighting on the Russian front, and unfortunately, her parents-in-law lived in a country village very close to the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's headquarters hidden in the forest, and she was recruited together with fourteen other young women to taste Hitler's food in order to check whether it was poisoned. She described the tasters' meals as very distressing moments, as a real nightmare, but she also remembered how delicious and fresh the food was. I felt that this contradiction represented the very contradiction of her role: She was a victim being forced to risk life and limb three times a day just by eating, but she was also guilty, because she was working for Hitler, an inhuman, evil person. That's why I was struck by her story and decided to meet her. I searched for her address, but when I found it three months later and wrote her a letter to ask if we could meet, she had just died. However, her story had already become my obsession and I thought that the only way to understand why it obsessed me was to write a novel loosely based on Frau Wölk's experience. My question was: What would I have done if I had been in her shoes?

## **2. Can you talk about your research process for the book? What surprised you most in your research?**

First of all, I visited Parcz, called Gross-Partsch during World War II, the country village where Margot Wölk lived with her parents-in-law, and I visited the Wolf's Lair together with a guide who escorted me through the ruins of Hitler's, Goebbels', Goering's, and others' bunkers (there are only ruins because at the end of 1944 the Nazis blew them up before leaving while the Red Army was advancing) and also told me anecdotes about Hitler---for example, he couldn't fall asleep unless he heard frogs croaking. In the area around the Wolf's Lair there are many marshes, meaning many mosquitoes too. The soldiers once used gasoline to kill the mosquitoes but they killed the frogs too, so Hitler forced them to look for other frogs in the area, otherwise he couldn't sleep. Today there's a bed and breakfast in the Wolf's Lair, so I spent one night in a place where Hitler and his men had lived, and it was a very strange feeling. I also went to Berlin and visited the building where Margot Wölk had lived her whole life except for the years in East Prussia, and I talked with her neighbors.

Moreover, I read many books to re-create the setting of my novel, not only historical essays, but also novels set during the Nazi regime, diaries, memoirs, letters, biographies, and so on. While reading the testimonies of that period, I was surprised by the human instinct for survival: During the war, people lost parents, husbands, sons, brothers, their homes, their dignity, but most of them didn't lose their will to live. I think this is fascinating and touching.

### **3. Why did you choose to write about ten of the women instead of all fifteen?**

Because I didn't want my characters to be flat. I wanted to be able to manage each of them, and it was simpler to manage ten women than fifteen. All the tasters are seen from Rosa Sauer's point of view, so we know better the women she knows better; we're close, intimate, with the ones she's intimate with. But we can also hear the Fanatics (with whom Rosa doesn't have a close relationship) talking; we see them interact with her. They aren't silhouettes; they exist. I also thought that the process of tasting Hitler's food wouldn't change by reducing the number of women to ten.

### **4. What was the most challenging part of writing this novel and shaping the characters of each woman?**

I wanted to show how young women who were forced into a coercive condition live in fear but slowly get used to terror and try to reproduce a sort of normalcy in their claustrophobic prison. So it was very important to build situations where each of the tasters could move and interact, expressing her own personality, which should not be monolithic but contradictory, as is everyone's personality in real life. The characters emerged easily. I could see and hear them, they were alive, their personalities were quite clear for me. I don't know how it happened; that's the magic of writing. I worked harder to build scenes that could show how young they were and therefore how much they needed to develop close relationships, because they needed support and help, but also how suspicious they were of one another. They couldn't completely trust anybody, and they probably would've sacrificed anyone to save themselves. You can develop a good character only if you develop complex relationships between her and the others. You have to concentrate on their relationships, which are sometimes based on friendship and solidarity, sometimes on rivalry and betrayal. You need to put them in dangerous situations to understand how they get by.