

## PROLOGUE

## Death on Capri

April 1992

1

I was living in Rome when I learned, by accident, of Professor Strickland's murder.

The news reached me from a friend in Toronto, who had heard it on the radio that morning and telephoned to offer his condolences. He was surprised that I hadn't read about the incident in the Italian papers—the murder had occurred two days before in Naples—and even more surprised that I hadn't known my professor friend was in Italy.

“There was a fine eulogy,” my friend reported. “One of the foremost historical minds of his generation, they claimed. But no mention of his past. Probably that will appear in tomorrow's papers.”

I thanked my friend and, since it was too late to call the Canadian embassy, left my apartment to see what the papers had to say. At the corner kiosk, I purchased all the dailies likely to carry the story and then visited my favourite *trattoria* on via Garibaldi for my evening meal.

None of the papers reported the incident. Possibly the previous day's papers had done so—my friend had said the news was presented as a late report. But this was the least of my worries; more importantly, I had to decide what to do next—whether to journey to Naples or return to Toronto and involve myself in the professor's estate, of which I was the literary executor. He had no living relatives so the issue of familial condolences wouldn't fall among my other duties. As I considered my dilemma, my responsibilities became painfully clear. Pressing on that anxiousness, too, was a small knot of hurt that the professor, whom I considered a friend, hadn't written that he was coming to Italy.

I returned to my apartment where I paced about my small rooms in a

kind of dream-like state, but a neatly staggered dream, in which I only slowly was able to distinguish reality from unreality. Still, I experienced a good deal of futility along the way, such that at one point I found myself making a list of things-to-be-done, a list that I tore up several times before I got it right. The frustration I experienced was like the frustration I had felt often this past year while reading the published and unpublished writings of this individual. I had spent the last year planning a kind of biography of the man, a task that I had come to doubt that I, or indeed anyone, had the talents to master. I must go to Naples, I decided, to pay my respects and solicit what information I could; then to Toronto to deal with matters there. I telephoned the station and learned that there was a train to the southern city at three in the morning. Then I booked a flight to Toronto, leaving three days hence. At the back of my mind was the plan to return to my Rome apartment, and my desk laden with notes and xeroxed materials, as quickly as possible and complete my study of this famous—or should I say—infamous individual.

It was dark on the way to the station. On the way, I seemed to experience the old city as never before—a candle-lit Piranesi dreamscape of dungeons and torture cellars—with images of sadism and cruelty conjured up by the barred windows of the sharply indented palazzos and waters of the stagnant Tiber, whose exudations that night were particularly foul.

Once on the train, I managed a partial sleep, then awakened to something unreal: a view of the Tyrrhenian Sea at dawn. The shore, which the tracks hugged closely at this spot, was a mass of congealed volcanic rock with the occasional dwarf cypress or ilex clinging precariously to its ancient, pockmarked surfaces; and the odd, shell-white villa grappling some ledge of igneous rock. It was a sight that invoked the age of the Caesars and their penchant for this gorgeous stretch of coast, from whose idyllic retreats these tyrants had governed much of the ancient world. But the landscape, though spectacular in the strained morning light, seemed an imposition upon the anxious state of mind into which I had awakened from fitful sleep.

Soon the train turned inland and I glimpsed the great, horseshoe-shaped Bay of Naples and the mist-wreathed city crowding its shores. A flat-snouted mass, resembling a supine Pompeian figure, pressed

against its rear: Mount Vesuvius. The volcano seemed to slouch in Naples' backyard—a streamer of grey smoke ascending innocently from its mouth into the flawless sky.

I had the address of the Canadian consulate and was waiting outside its impressive walnut doors when it opened at nine o'clock. The official, a vice consul, into whose office I was ushered, was a youthful Ottawan in his late forties, with a head of curly, metallic-grey hair that appeared freshly coiffed and grey, imperturbable eyes that scrutinized me from a perfectly tanned face. His immaculate silk suit, the colour and sheen of sealskin, made my own crinkled cotton garments seem a sorry spectacle. He knew about Strickland's murder, of course, though he hadn't been the one to break the news to the press. We sat in his antique-filled office, its walls covered with paintings of the stark Canadian tundra, with a view across a parterred garden of the granite-blue waters of the Golfo di Napoli. Everywhere in that photogenic city, it seemed, one glimpsed the sea peering between buildings or through patches of lush foliage. The diplomat displayed not the slightest emotion as he related what he knew. He carefully avoided the word "murder" until pressed on the subject.

"... But nothing more complicated than robbery, I suspect. His wallet and watch were stolen, even the shoes on his feet! His hotel key told us where he was staying and, of course, the management had his passport, which told us who he was."

Then, affecting slightly more interest in the affair, he remarked: "He was quite the international figure, I hear, friend of prime ministers, etc."

"A renowned historian, yes," I replied without elaboration, recalling that a former Canadian prime minister had sought Strickland's advice on a number of occasions, though the latter avoided such public attention.

Strickland hadn't been murdered in Naples, the consul told me, but on the island of Capri, across the Bay of Naples.

"... His body was found two days ago by some Swedish botanists on the island's upper slopes—amid some Roman ruins. The body... he was bludgeoned to death by some unidentified object... a nasty piece of business! The local police transported the body to a morgue here in Naples... and are awaiting instructions from our consulate, in fact." The official emitted a sigh of frustration when he had finished, as if the whole nasty

affair were an aggravation to him and that in any case a consular appointment in this old Bourbon city hadn't been his first or even second choice of career. I had no difficulty convincing him that I was Strickland's friend and literary executor—having been provident enough to bring along some of the professor's letters—nor he convincing me that the body should be interred on Italian soil.

“Otherwise the complications become immense,” he pronounced sternly.

I offered no resistance since Strickland had wanted, if possible, to be buried in Italy. He had mentioned this in passing one evening, even citing a burial site of choice: a cemetery in the medieval hill town of Fiesole, overlooking Florence—a place I had visited the winter before. But in discussing the matter now, we decided that a gravesite in Tuscany was too remote and settled on a local cemetery.

When queried about Strickland's religion and whether he would have wanted a religious service, I answered without hesitation: “*Catholic.*”

“Splendid,” the consul said. “That simplifies matters considerably. Is tomorrow agreeable? I could probably arrange a simple funeral,” he said, with a look again signifying that he would like to get this unpleasant business over with as soon as possible. “But remember, we're in Italy not Canada,” he cleared his throat, leaving me to fill in his meaning on my own.

He put through several phone calls, speaking first with someone at the morgue, then a funeral *direttore*, and finally a church official, someone whom he called *eccellenza*. As I watched this immaculately coiffured diplomat at work, I became aware of something that I hadn't perceived until then: the man's malaise reached deeper than Strickland's murder and really had nothing to do with the professor or myself. Congenial nonchalance, supreme lack of interest, verging on boredom, was what I detected now in the man's vocal mannerisms and eye movements. After the calls, all of which seemed to produce the desired effect, he instructed his secretary to type up a document allowing me to collect Strickland's belongings. We agreed to meet at the cemetery the following afternoon. By the end of our meeting, which lasted a tidy forty minutes, I had exchanged my half-hearted dislike of the man for a kind of half-hearted empathy.

I followed the narrow, maze-like streets to the morgue, attached to

police headquarters a short distance away, and presented my letter with its official seal to the *carabiniere* to whom the vice consul had spoken on the telephone. The officer led me into a dark, prison-like chamber containing a single item of furniture, an ancient refectory table whose surface looked as though it had been mauled by lions. A pair of expensive pigskin valises, inscribed with the initials ‘SS’ in brass letters, sat on the table—and that was all. No wallet, merely these twin cases, turned over to the Naples’ constabulary by Capri’s Grand Hotel Quisisana, where Strickland had arranged a week’s stay but in fact had spent only a single night. The valises contained tousled clothing, several leather-bound notebooks, an expensive gold-nibbed fountain pen, an aluminium rubber-sealed canister of India ink, and half a dozen scholarly books in English and German. There was a pocket notebook—found on Strickland’s body evidently—also his passport. But the officer said he would need to keep that.

The young *carabiniere* had little to report. The case was still under investigation, he said, in a tone that suggested there was little likelihood of an arrest. I corrected his use of the word *Americano* when referring to Strickland. *Canadese*, I corrected him, then I corrected myself. “*No, no, perdonare . . . Austriaco, Austriaco.*”

“*Sì, sì,*” he returned, showing little interest in the distinction. I asked if he thought that theft had been a motive for this heinous crime and saw his eyes register a kind of alert, as though his and his country’s reputation were being impugned.

“*È possibile, possibile . . .*”

There was nothing more to be gained from the meeting. I signed for one of the valises, the scholarly books, writing materials, and notebooks but turned the other valise with its contents over to him—the fine summer weight suits in cotton and Merino wool, the luxurious cotton shirts, and other items of clothing—a more than equitable exchange, I gathered, judging from the fellow’s suddenly conciliatory tone.

I had nothing to do for over twenty-four hours. I booked into a hotel and treated myself to a fine meal at an expensive *ristorante*. The aromas of simmering garlic and tomatoes issuing from the eateries along the *viale* had jarred my appetite awake.

The next afternoon, I travelled to the cemetery, about a forty minute

taxi ride from the city. It was an attractive enough setting, though not as appealing as the site overlooking Florence. The service was an abbreviated one, the casket a plain wooden box with a single coat of black paint. A priest was resurrected from his afternoon siesta for the occasion (to whom I felt obliged to pay a large gratuity after the ceremony). In addition, there were the two grave diggers cum pallbearers, athletic Neapolitans in their mid-twenties, the aloof consul, and myself.

“*Per favore*. Would it be possible. . . ,” I tendered my request hesitantly to the priest in my novice Italian, “to perform the service in Latin?”

The priest, who had a cherubic face and moist brown eyes that appeared freshly varnished, returned a questioning then a sceptical look—finally settling on no look at all; or at least none that betrayed his true feelings. “*Latino? Ah, un conservatore! Latino. Sì, sì, è possibile. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine . . .*”

As the five of us gathered for prayers about the freshly dug grave, a figure appeared from behind the lichen-encrusted grave stones: a small elderly man in a mouse-grey trench coat that looked as ancient as himself. At first, I thought that he might be some cemetery official, come to collect his fee, but then he took his place behind the consul and myself, and joined in when the priest began the prayers, first in Italian and then, the cleric casting a sly glance in my direction, in hesitant Latin.

The ceremony was brief and to the point and devoid of emotion on everyone’s part, my own included. After the service, the mysterious stranger stepped forward to sprinkle a handful of earth on the casket. For some minutes, I lingered after the others had withdrawn, raking my own Catholic past for prayers of solace and commiseration. When, finally, I turned from the grave, hoping to speak with this individual, he had disappeared. The corpulent priest was stuffing himself into his tiny Fiat. The consul was waiting wearily in his luxuriously appointed Alfa Romeo coupé, its throaty engine spewing noxious fumes into the frail, spring air. He had offered to drop me at the train station. But the aged figure, in the tattered trench coat, had vanished as eerily as he had appeared.

On the return ride through the congested suburbs the formerly steely consul warmed to me and sounded almost sincere when, at the train station,

he shook my hand and declared how sorry he was for the “whole disturbing affair.” He hadn’t recognized the stranger by the grave, he said, and gave no indication that the fellow was of any interest to him. I thanked him for his help, professional and heartless as it had been, and we parted. He wasn’t to blame, I told myself, for Strickland’s murder.

On the way to the station’s luggage room to collect Strickland’s and my own valises, I wavered in my purpose momentarily but then purchased my ticket to Rome. The thought of remaining in Naples and prodding whomever could be prodded into investigating Strickland’s murder seemed pointless. Possibly it had been, as everyone seemed to think, a case of simple robbery. Imagination might suggest more sinister possibilities but couldn’t shed any light on them at the moment. Once on board the train my sense of uselessness passed, and I made a kind of compromise resolution on behalf of my dead friend: I would make sense of his life at least—if not his death.

\* \* \*

Death can loosen the most longstanding of lethargies. Certainly Strickland’s death shook me from mine, though lethargy isn’t perhaps the right word. I had struggled with the professor’s papers since leaving Toronto the year before but found that my labours, all of a kind perhaps, hadn’t produced very satisfactory results. For the better part of a year I had meandered like a blind man through Strickland’s notebooks, trying to survey the general terrain. Possibly I had been struggling with a certain image given off by the writings themselves, which suggested that the man wasn’t what he appeared to be, and now his murder seemed to strengthen that suspicion.

Extraordinary things had happened to Stefan Strickland—christened Stefan *Streichland*—during his ninety-two years on this earth. In 1933, at the age of thirty-three, he had been approached by Germany’s new Reichskanzler to write the official history of the Reich and to serve as the leader’s personal advisor, a position that he accepted and held until 1944, when he fled the tyrant’s service for good. Though a historian of considerable renown, Strickland had been rendered mute by the compelling

events of his life. Or let's say his published books, of which there were a good many—translated into over a dozen languages—had done justice to his intellectual life but not his lived one. This, at least, was what I had concluded after studying his published writings the past year. In several of these books he had tried to spring loose from the role of objective observer and write a deeper, more personalized history—history from the “heart and not the head,” was how he described it—but had failed in the task. This failure, he recognized, in the last years of his life, as the failure of history generally in the modern era. “History is dead,” he told an interviewer a few years before his death, “in the sense that Nietzsche suggests ‘God is dead,’ meaning that the spirit has departed the body, rendering the idea no longer serviceable and of use.”

Do not misunderstand. It wasn't that I had accomplished nothing thus far. I had sorted through the early notebooks, read and reread all the published books—most of them written in German—transcribed the many hours of conversation that we had taped together. I had begun to organize the work into decades, hoping to provide a kind of order, a kind of insight by this organization . . . though the war years, and Strickland's role as historian and special advisor to the German Führer, would, I knew, be the centre of my study, and on those years I would need to exercise a particular organization. The task of completing my research and writing up the whole remained and would take, I estimated, at least three or four years. What I hadn't yet done was reach the point where the whole began to spring from the parts and shape itself into a life—initially, I mean. I still had a long way to go before reaching that stage. Certainly the method by which I would make the final rendering wasn't yet clear. I hadn't slept on the problem deeply enough; hadn't let it ferment in my unconscious long enough. I needed the man's murder to jolt me awake. But awake I certainly was upon returning to Rome . . . my anxiousness was supreme.

2

My relationship with Stefan Strickland had begun two and a half



years before, when I was appointed assistant professor of modern European history at St. Michael's College, the Catholic college of the University of Toronto. I got my first glimpse of Distinguished Professor Emeritus Strickland at the noon mass one day at St. Basil's church, the parish church affiliated with the college. More precisely, the back of the man's aristocratic head, with its shock of zinc-grey hair forming a kind of monk-like aureole about the distinguished head. I knew that Strickland still retained an office at St. Michael's—he had retired from teaching at age eighty—and I had intended, upon settling into my duties at the college, to seek him out. But I hadn't yet had the chance to do so and, thus, didn't recognize the person in the pew ahead of me. Instead, I assumed the person to be some cleric, one of those European scholar priests who take up residence at the nearby Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies from time to time, individuals ambered in the scholastic life, who wear civilian clothes and keep to themselves during their tenure at the institute—their work in the dusty archives too arcane to be shared with their lay colleagues in any casual sense.

I saw his face for the first time when he returned from communion and again when, after the service, he rose from his pew and rushed from the church. He was an imposing figure. The man was over six feet tall, stood as straight as a pole, and moved with the agility of a much younger man. From his appearance, I would have guessed him to be in his mid- to late-sixties. His face had a positively youthful look—by which I mean the youthfulness of late middle age. There was an innocence to the face as well, an innocence that I have come to associate with the celibate life, particularly when that life is devoted to scholarship.

Later, in the faculty lounge, I encountered him at the lunch counter and introduced myself. I was surprised to discover that the man wasn't a priest but Professor Stefan Strickland, the person I had wanted to meet.

"Adrian Wagner," I introduced myself. "I have been an ardent admirer of your work for many years," I stumbled a greeting that must have sounded like an apology, taken off guard as I was by my miscalculation.

Vibrant blue eyes tracked me from the kindest of faces; eyes that, despite their years, still emitted a crystalline quality. The nose was narrow and sharp; the overall structure of the face aquiline and strikingly

handsome; the skin healthy and bronzed, despite the late October season.

“You teach European intellectual history?” he echoed my hasty account of myself in his Austrian accent.

“I have done a good deal of work on Burckhardt.”

That elicited an approving response, a transformation of the whole face in effect.

“Oh, so you admire Burckhardt also?” I asked shyly; whereupon he burst forth on the subject of the Swiss historian with an enthusiasm that I hadn’t expected and hadn’t experienced before—even from the devout Burckhardt scholars I had encountered at the university of Basel during my researches in its archives.

He wanted to know what I had done, or intended to do, with my Burckhardt studies, and I disappointed him, I could tell, when I confessed that I had set them aside upon completion of my dissertation.

“. . . but I intend to return to him in a book I am contemplating . . . on historical failure or misprision in history.”

This elicited another lively response.

I described my project briefly. My idea was to write a book about history’s ignorance and misjudgement of its most prescient thinkers. . . . I mentioned some of the figures in my proposed study . . . Vico, Herder, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Spengler . . .

The idea had come to me during my work on Burckhardt, who, in his precious solitude, his abstemious existence as a humble professor at Basel, had peered into Europe’s future more penetratingly than anyone before him. Burckhardt, who was born in 1818, had predicted the rise of ferocious nationalism, of Prussian militarism, and of a host of “great simplifiers” who would exercise demonic control over peoples—in short, perceived the whole staggering panoply of ills that would assail European civilization in the twentieth century. But to no avail, no one had listened.

“Misprision? Failure?” Strickland’s eyes brimmed with interest but also, I could tell, confusion. My heart sank for his look reflected poignantly my own doubts regarding my project at the time. He grew less sceptical as he heard more of what I had to say and then even seemed to warm to me. In any case, he didn’t dismiss my project outright, though disappointed, I think, that I hadn’t chosen to make a career of Burckhardt alone, who, in his

estimation, possessed “one of the purest historical minds . . . as brilliant and pellucid a mind as Goethe’s or Heine’s.”

But his response was peremptory. The expressive face conveyed now another message: a desire to eat his lunch in private. We parted. He chose a leather armchair in an alcove by one of the leaded bay windows, balancing his lunch tray on his knees, and immersed himself in the book that he was carrying at the time. And I dined alone and rejected at the other end of the lounge.

Though little of significance passed between us on that first encounter, the man made a deep impression upon me. That night, after completing my lecture preparations, I sought the two books of his that I owned at the time. One was his study of Frederick the Great of Prussia, a book that I admired greatly, the other a collection of essays, published in 1982, on a number of modernist historical figures, which I had read as a graduate student. Both were written in German and had been published at Zürich and the Hague respectively. Included in the collection were several essays on the Third Reich and its tyrannical leader. I began the essay on the German Führer’s view of history. The essay was psycho-historical in approach and seemed at first to promise much but proved disappointing. I kept expecting to be drawn into the Führer’s life—and into his world—but was continually held back. The leader’s intelligence was finely delineated, the author appearing both to praise and condemn it at once, but the person never quite stepped onto the stage prepared for him by the author.

One section of the essay in particular stood out:

*Impatient with the bulk of written history, indeed with all history lacking in what he called “the compost of realism,” the man displayed rare historical acumen—not unlike that found in the great nineteenth-century intuitionists whom he admired so much—though lacking their depth and subtlety of thought. But what the man lacked in this regard he made up in breadth of understanding, in his intuitive grasp of the whole . . .*

Towards the essay’s end there was this observation:

*There was, it is true, nothing particularly discerning or subtle in what this Reichskanzler-Führer wrote or said—or indeed the style in which he said it. But what if the man had possessed such subtlety of thought and style? Wouldn’t we, as a civilization, have something to worry about. . . ?*

*But in the writings that have come down to us—Mein Kampf, the table talk, the speeches—we sense another kind of gift: one that contains nothing of the spiritual or metaphysical so-called but rather talent of the highest political or metapolitical kind . . . compellingly down-to-earth and “real” in its intuitive grasp of history and humanity’s desire, one wants to say will, to effect significant change . . .*

The passage must have impressed me as a student for I had underscored it in pencil; now, having met its author, it impressed me even more, though deliberately controversial and perverse, it struck me, in its conclusions. Suddenly I remembered something about Strickland that I had read in a journal years before—when this book of essays had appeared possibly. Some reference to the writer’s own involvement with National Socialism. I knew, from the dust jacket of the volume, that Strickland had been born in Vienna, but little else about the man.

That night, I read the other essays in the volume, staying up late to do so. How radically books change for us over time, depending on our mood, alertness, life experience. The book wasn’t the one that I had read as a graduate student. Undoubtedly my brief encounter with its author, and my own more mature self, contributed to my response, but beyond that there was something about the essays that I had missed upon reading them for the first time, and might well have missed this time were it not for my faint recollection regarding Strickland’s past: his involvement with National Socialism. On this reading, the essays seemed to possess a dark subtext or subplot. The pieces, written between 1950-80, treated a range of nineteenth-century figures—Goethe, Schopenhauer, Napoleon, Nietzsche, Bismarck, as well as Germany’s Reichskanzler-Führer; and together comprised a fine study of the European mind in the last century. Many were exemplary, but some, notably the essays on Bismarck and the Reichskanzler-Führer, appeared to withhold more than they delivered. That was my impression, at least. Undoubtedly my faint recollection of the review tainted my reading. I could hardly wait to find the article in the library the next day.

The piece proved quite different from what I remembered: not a review of the essay collection but of his earlier study of Frederick the Great of Prussia, the other book of Strickland’s that I happened to own at the time.

The reviewer, the Regius Professor of History at Christ Church College Oxford, praised the study but, in the review's final paragraph, took an obscure detour and raised the issue that I had remembered imperfectly. Why, the Regius Professor wanted to know, hadn't the author included a chapter on the German Führer and Frederick the Great?

*Professor Strickland shows admirably the mythology attendant upon the Prussian king down to the present era, even writing discerningly on the writer Thomas Mann's lifelong fascination with the king (the great German novelist had wanted to write a novel about his favourite historical figure but composed a brilliant essay on him instead). But why hasn't Professor Strickland included Germany's modern Führer among this assortment of adulators? This would have been a logical choice for the author who, after all, was a professor of modern history at the University of Munich when the future Reichskanzler entered the political arena in that city.*

*Professor Strickland must have gleaned much from his coign of vantage at that illustrious university during the 1920s and early 1930s. He remained a member of that university's faculty until after the war, when he immigrated to Canada. Germany's Führer was enamoured of Frederick as of no other historical figure; he studied the man's life and spent much of his "table talk" regaling his dinner guests on his hero's exploits. The mythos of Frederick the Great isn't complete without a mention of this obsession and its effects on modern history. Professor Strickland, perhaps more than any other historian, could have shed light on this dark influence.*

That was all. Obviously I had projected a good deal more on the Regius Professor's critique than it contained. No reference was made to Strickland's affiliation with National Socialism, yet that was what I had remembered from the piece, rather what I had projected upon Strickland himself. To this day, I still wonder about my intuition at the time.

### 3

Months passed before I saw the professor again. An unusually cold winter drove us into the warrens of our lives. But finally, mid-March, the cold let up, and one of those unexpected transformations, which can

vanquish winter almost overnight in these parts, occurred, bringing the first intimations of spring: the smell of sodden grasses rising from the thawing earth. It was late afternoon and I was rushing across the park that separates St. Michael's from the rest of the university when I saw Strickland coming towards me. We were a hundred metres or so from each other—I returning from the library, he heading in that direction; each carrying a stack of books under his arm.

“Professor Strickland,” I called out, well in advance of our meeting.

His eyes, which were reading the scattered gravel path with great determination at the time, raised themselves in my direction. We stopped and shook hands. But after we spoke a few moments, I realized that he didn't know who I was. Or rather believed me to be someone else. He didn't acknowledge his confusion but revealed himself nonetheless, though quickly trying to conceal his miscalculation. Finally, he did remember me, though only after I teased his memory a little.

“Yes, yes, of course—Herr Professor Wagner. Failure! You have written on the phenomenology of historical failure.”

I let his imperfect recollection stand without correction.

“I have just finished rereading your Frederick book. What a remarkable study,” I said, more confident of myself this afternoon than at our previous meeting.

“Ah, Friedrich was a remarkable ruler.”

As he spoke, his eyes, which were an even deeper blue out-of-doors than indoors—an oceanic blue tinged with violet in the thickened March light—took on a somewhat dreamy look. His coat, a beautifully tailored cashmere, which he wore with a vermilion silk scarf tucked neatly under its collar, was more an English or Italian than a Canadian weight. He looked cold. I couldn't very well keep the man standing there.

“Are you heading for the library?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I've just left it myself but let me walk with you that far, if that's all right. I'm in no hurry to get back to the college.”

“Well . . . if you wish,” he hesitated, his eyes registering a little of the resistance that I had sensed at our first meeting. But then they softened and he accepted my offer.

“Yes, of course, that would be all right,” he repeated my words as if for his own comprehension, and we walked off briskly together in a westerly direction into a sky that looked as though it were on fire. Amber shafts shot skyward from the wan, low-lying sun, tingeing the blue overhead with rose madder and majestically silhouetting the Gothic spires and turrets of the nineteenth-century university, a replica of the grand British institutions Oxford and Cambridge.

As we walked, we moved effortlessly into a discussion of his Frederick book. Subtly I led him into a discussion of Germany’s Reichskanzler-Führer, using the Regius Professor’s review as bait. The commentary flowed from him. For a man in his ninetieth year, he walked at a brisk pace. Indeed, I could hardly keep up with him. His speech was as energetic as his walk; the range and quickness of his mind truly astonishing.

He was, in effect, answering the complaint of the Regius Professor, though I had merely alluded to the review in passing, supplying me with what the reviewer had said was lacking in his book: a discussion of the German Führer’s lifelong obsession with the Prussian king. I was engrossed. We reached the library much too soon. I felt that I should stick to my word and allow the man to go about his business inside. But Strickland didn’t want to stop. He would be finished his work in a couple of hours, he said, and planned to dine at one of the cafés bordering the campus. Would I care to join him?

“The German Führer must be incorporated into your failure book. His life was altogether an attempt not to become that!”

This was the taunt, the gambit, and so I accepted his invitation. We agreed to meet at his office at seven o’clock.

After our meal together, at a Hungarian restaurant close to the campus, we returned to his book-laden office at St. Michael’s and talked until one in the morning. My role that evening was chiefly one of auditor; nothing of my own life or work was discussed—though he referred several times to my “phenomenology of failure” book, as though he had read the work or possibly even written it himself. Mostly he talked about his own life, spurred on by my questions and mounting curiosity. He spoke of his studies at the University of Vienna 1917-21; his departure for Germany in 1921 to complete his doctorate and *Habilitation* at Munich University; the

publication of his first book at age twenty-five—“a naïve reassessment of modern history,” he described it, “nevertheless a modest beginning.” And, most importantly, his meeting and eventual relationship with Germany’s future leader, whom he referred to as the “Reichskanzler-Führer,” never, I noticed, by the leader’s surname. This relationship, of course, was a complete surprise to me.

“... From 1933 onward, yes, I became a kind of historical conscience for the man, an amanuensis you might say. Strangely, he needed that . . .”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Had this person really served as “historian and personal advisor” to Germany’s infamous Führer? The leader’s “amanuensis,” as he termed it? Was this fact known, or was I the first to hear of it? Strickland seemed to gauge my dismay.

“I suppose this is all quite strange to your young ears. No, it’s not common knowledge—not commonly known at all, in fact. Though it should be. I have lived with too many secrets for too long . . .”

So swift was his mind that he didn’t always complete his thoughts, though ordinarily, I could tell, the most careful and concise of speakers.

“It was essential I enter the man’s service for my *own* sake and naively, vaingloriously, I believed at the time, for history’s sake as well. What fledgling historian wouldn’t have responded to the challenge? To witness the unfolding of that history first-hand? Certainly many would have applied for the position had it been advertised in *Die Neue Rundschau*. . . . Yes, the man read my paltry book, with its chapter on Friedrich—full of youthful, undigested idealism—and sent an emissary to seek me out. Hah! I refused his blandishments but later changed my mind. I took my cowardice by the throat and accepted his offer. Shortly thereafter we met . . .”

Occasionally, Strickland stopped to regard me quizzically, as though the thought had struck him that he was revealing too much; or that I wasn’t the person he thought I was. But then he seemed to gain a second wind and let the words, the putative confessions, pour from him. Often he emitted a strange muffled laugh, a commentary upon his own bizarre, absurd life, I thought at the time. The storm-filled eyes flashed and seemed, at times, to be interviewing me, testing the effect of his words on me, ferreting out my prejudices. I tried to maintain a look of calm, to conceal my nervousness—my horror, too. Were he to sense intimidation on my part, I



told myself, he would stop talking and I would probably never hear from him again. My genuine if also tremulous response propelled him from revelation to revelation.

What I heard was shocking indeed. Nowhere in the vast literature on the Third Reich had this “discipleship” been documented. How was this possible—I wondered? At one point, unable to contain my curiosity further, I put the question to him.

He answered unflinchingly.

“What documentation could exist? I, myself, have ample documentation . . . but, no, you are quite right. The matter is not common knowledge. I was never a member of the visible entourage. I shunned the zealous tribe and the Führer, give him his due, understood my need to remain aloof. In fact, after a time he insisted that I depart Germany. I spent much of the war in Italy, though we kept in regular communication. Our meetings, when they did occur, were all the more significant as a result . . .”

I sat stunned. Strickland’s tale of his relationship with the German Führer seemed beyond comprehension. My brain was flooded with questions, but I didn’t know where to begin. My decision was made for me, however, by the clock on the desk. The hour was late—nearing one o’clock. Exhilarating as our talk had been, I decided to end it, as Strickland was showing serious signs of exhaustion. His eyes kept trying to close, though his mind, his words, rushed on regardless, as though issuing from another part of himself. I suggested that we stop and offered to drive him home.

As he stepped from the car, he turned to me. “I have a special request to put to you,” he said, pausing to gauge my response before pressing on. “But for the moment, let me ask only this: please keep what I have told you this evening as your own. Oh, I understand the historian’s compulsion to make his discoveries known. But you must promise to keep our discussions to yourself for now. I have a proposition I wish to put to you. You will learn of it soon enough.”

The words, like everything else about the man, were measured and crisp, as cryptic and startling as anything uttered by him thus far, but the body from which they issued was moribund. I helped him up the stairs of the house, one of those grand nineteenth-century mansions in an upper class area of the old city, to his second floor apartment. He asked me to wait

while he fumbled with his keys and painstakingly unlocked the mahogany door.

His enjoiner struck me as preposterous at the time. What use could I possibly make of these revelations, these confessions? And yet, I must admit, the thought of doing just that had already caught fire in my mind.

Lights came on at the flick of a switch. He turned to me.

“We shall meet again soon,” he said with a look of genuine affection and a final beam of recognition from those expressive eyes. But then the brightness extinguished itself, and a sad tired look overtook the face. A hand extended itself wearily.

“Yes, it is true,” he said by way of summary and without specific prompting on my part, “a most aberrant and, to some, abhorrent life! I supped with the devil, you might say. I suppose I might easily have been put to death. The irony is that the Führer, too, would have put me to death at the end. I had become a despised human being. At least I had accomplished that much.”

#### 4

Throughout that spring we met weekly for supper, dining at any number of ethnic restaurants near the campus, in whose slightly shabby, candle lit corners we could conceal ourselves and speak privately. Afterwards, we strolled through a darkened Queen’s Park to his office at St. Michael’s, where we continued our conversations until midnight or beyond; and then, each of us exhausted by then, he from speaking and I from listening, I would drive him to his posh Rosedale apartment.

Never did I seek him out during the day, not wanting to distract him from his work: the new book that he was writing at the time—“attempting to put my intellectual affairs in order.” Besides, I had my own end-of-term duties to attend to and couldn’t have managed more frequent visits.

I grew to like the man, despite his at times abrasive and aloof manner, despite his eccentricities—and he certainly had many of these. His occasional generosity of spirit and, of course, his magnificent intellect,

which seemed so absolutely in charge of itself, appealed to me. I lost my initial shyness and soon was able to meet him on his own ground—much of the time at least. The thinkers he admired and knew well, and from whom he drew sustenance, I admired and knew also, though not perhaps as well as he did. I was also drawn to the man because of my own fascination with this period of modern history—“the eon of the German Reichskanzler-Führer,” as he referred to it—though I myself hadn’t experienced the war first-hand, having been born to Swiss-German parents in Toronto in 1959. He responded candidly to my questions, despite the fact that they weren’t always the most astute questions.

Yet our relationship, for all its many virtues, never reached that stage of intimacy that is possible between two like-minded individuals, where each gives of himself to the other: the deep friendship that is possible between members of the same sex in particular, which falls just short of physical intimacy. We never reached that stage, though we came close to it, I am convinced. The failure to do so was possibly as much mine as it was his own for I settled too diligently into the role of pupil, of *amanuensis*—to use his own apt term for his relationship with Germany’s Führer—taking instruction from, and in a sense growing too dependent upon, the master. The difference in age between us, nearly sixty years, kept us apart as well; the range and quality of the man’s experiences proving intimidating at times. Then, too, there was his inherently aloof nature. Certainly friendship wasn’t something that he sought or needed at this stage of his life.

Our relationship was a peculiar one. I didn’t understand it at first, especially his willingness to be so open with me about his past; and then, on our fourth or fifth meeting, he said something that helped me do so: he called me by another name. It was a Russian name and he uttered it with great affection. He didn’t notice his mistake and thus didn’t attempt to rectify it. His confusion, I realized later, wasn’t that he believed me to be someone else but rather that I reminded him of someone else: someone he had known a long time ago, I guessed, and for whom he had felt deep affection. It was a momentary slip but a significant one. He would make it again on another occasion and that other time I would recognize the name, having encountered it by then in his wartime notebooks.

One evening, we talked about an item in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*

concerning former Nazis living in Canada. The article quoted a Canadian Jewish Congress report that as many as 1500 Nazi “enablers” had settled in Canada after the war, many of them under false names, and certainly false pretences. A Royal Commission had been proposed to smoke them out. But Strickland, who had read the article, considered the idea benighted and futile—coming too late to be of more than “self-exculpatory use to humanity.” I didn’t think I could press him on the point, as it lay just a little too close to home. He was revealing so much about his life, and revealing it so candidly, that I didn’t want to complicate matters. Ground was being prepared for even deeper revelations, or so I believed, and this was enough for me.

Confirmation of this came after the end of term. I was visiting him just prior to his departure for his annual summer sojourn in Europe. Usually he travelled for a few weeks, visiting France or Italy or Ireland, a favourite spot, before repairing to the Swiss Engadin, the village of Sils Maria, for a summer of writing. A week after exams were over, he asked me whether I would consider entering his life in a more substantial way—by accepting responsibility for his papers after his death. We weren’t at the moment at any significant juncture in our relationship, and certainly I hadn’t expected such an honour—he merely changed the subject abruptly as he would often do and put the question to me. Obviously he had been mulling the matter over for some time and decided the time was right to raise it.

“There is another matter,” the rich baritone tones softened suddenly and sounded almost apologetic. “I have left a good many things unfinished in my life . . .”

He gestured towards the row of battleship-grey cabinets lining one wall of his office, cabinets whose sides were battered and whose seams were rusted, reminding me of the metal sheathing on derelict ships; the sturdy locks of which, I had noticed, were always engaged.

“You could begin reading my early notebooks as soon as your work is completed for the term. I would leave you to it for the summer.”

He stood up from behind his desk, where he always sat during our conversations, and motioned me to follow him.

His office consisted of the principle main floor rooms of an impressive but dilapidated mansion on the St. Michael’s campus, one of a

handful of nineteenth-century private dwellings that the university had inherited over the years but lacked the funds to renovate or submit to the wrecker's ball. The room where we sat had been the drawing room of this spacious residence, an elegantly proportioned space in the late-Victorian style, with high ceilings and ornamental friezes and pilasters that were still more or less in one piece, though much in need of paint. The wide bay window had some lovely William Morris stained glass tableaux bordering its top. The room contained floor-to-ceiling bookcases against two walls, the row of battered file cabinets, and a magnificent mahogany partner's desk that must have adorned some barrister's office in London's Strand during the reign of George IV, its surface covered with papers and books.

The adjacent room, to which he led me, had been the dining salon of the house. It was an equally spacious and elegant room, with leaded mullions in a side bay window and shoulder-high oak wainscoting stained a walnut colour, which rendered the room darker and more sombre than the front one. It had devolved into an even less orderly office than the drawing room, its walls obscured with bookcases, and its centre filled with a massive seventeenth-century refectory table in black walnut—salvaged from an Italian monastery, I learned later, full of the appropriate scars and wormholes of age, and stacked with manuscripts. Off this room was yet another, smaller, one—a pantry or scullery situated between the dining room and demolished kitchen, with piebald marble counter top and befouled granite sink. In the sink was an old pigskin satchel, which Strickland picked up and brought to the refectory table. The satchel creaked as he opened it. Inside, were perhaps a dozen artist's sketchbooks—expensive tablets for watercolours and drawings, made of handmade vellum, and bound in leather.

“Here,” he said, with a tremolo of pride in his voice. “You can begin with these. I'll leave you my office key and you can study these journals over the summer. Disturb nothing, however.”

The musty smell emitted by the satchel was overpowering.

At his suggestion, I took one of the sketchbooks and opened it. The pages were filled with fine writing that fitted their blank spaces as neatly as if lines, of which there were none, had guided the writer's hand; the writing—German, all of it—in black India ink and eminently readable. The

entries consisted of a few pages at most and always gave clear indication of place and date. The place was Munich, though one lengthy section cited Berlin; the dates, the months January-June 1933. But before I had the chance to read any of the entries, he snatched the book from me and returned it to the battered satchel, and the latter to its resting place in the befouled sink.

“Let’s talk seriously now,” he insisted, upon returning to the main study. His life was “complex,” he explained, “more complex than any of the lives studied in your failure book.” He had hoped to set certain matters straight at the end of his life but found the task overwhelming. “Because the mind struggles at each stage to acquit itself, just as the body tries to repair itself after an illness. Thus its predilection for excuses, exculpations. . . . I myself have become painfully aware that no simple self-evaluation is possible . . .”

For some time he continued like this, clumsily and apologetically—he could juggle arrogance and humility like no other person I have known—without expressing himself very clearly. His accent grew thicker as he spoke, as if he were being sucked back into his native tongue. As soon as an opening appeared I tossed him a lifeline.

“Do you mean some kind of biography?”

“Oh heavens, no,” he blurted, pausing in his run-on patter as if suddenly startled by the suggestion. “Unimaginable! Biography? Not at all! Always I have been a diligent observer. But it is more than diligent observation that is at stake here. As a historian, I have observed what I could, drawn what conclusions I could—though not yet spent in my evaluations, I trust! But I haven’t been able . . . myself . . . to put these observations to use, to take full possession of my privileged position . . . not done justice, you might say, to what I have seen, what I have known. My detractors would imply as much, at least, and will most certainly do so after my death.”

And then with genuine pleading in his voice: “You see, I haven’t had the heart for this task myself.”

The man was more emotional than I had known him to be; on the verge of tears, in fact. Again I tried to toss him a lifeline.

“What you call *Real-history* in one of your essays, is that what you

mean?”

My words seemed to spark something or focus what he was struggling to articulate for his face underwent a transformation, assuming the youthful look that it sometimes did when he became excited.

“Yes, yes, excellent, you remember! But not you yourself . . . understand. That would be too . . . others. . . .” He couldn’t complete his thoughts. Then he rushed to complete them, like someone pursued: “Your task would be to prepare . . . organize. Elementary archival exercises, merely.”

His injunction was blunt but confusing at the same time.

Upon his death, his papers were to go to the university. My task would be to prepare, organize, and catalogue them for future use. “We are all born posthumously, are we not?” This point he made quite clear. The ultimate evaluation—of whatever sort—was to be undertaken by others, and at a much later date. He would pay generously for these services and even proposed that I take a leave of absence from my teaching duties for a year or two. Then, more ominously, peering at me with those piercing eyes, he added: “There are those who would prosecute me if they knew, as though a lifetime of self-persecution isn’t punishment enough . . .”

Of course I hadn’t the slightest idea what he was referring to, unless it was to the article in the paper about Nazis hiding in Canada under false names and the proposal to flush them out.

Continuing, he said that he had saved everything: “*both good and bad.*” Then added: “I have been rereading Rousseau’s *Confessions* and have come to appreciate his complaint about living the double life . . . suffering the double life. I have published one version of my life”—he motioned towards the bookcases—“now it’s time to publish the other”—he motioned towards the file cabinets. “I have done the preliminary work; it’s all there,” he continued to wave accusingly at the cabinets containing his unpublished notebooks. “But as a historian, I want to be fair to posterity and not cloud the evidence . . . I certainly don’t want to be accused of tainting the evidence . . .”

I was led to understand that these cabinets contained extensive “personal writings” dating back to the 1920s and reaching to the present. Material of so honest and intimate a nature that he had never found a way of

using it in his more formal writings. He truly didn't know himself what he had. Reviewing some sample notebooks recently from the period 1936-39 he had been shocked and overwhelmed at how much there was—"none of it utilized by me."

"Fortunately or unfortunately, I have always been fastidious about certain things, dates in particular. This should aid you in your work."

He didn't say much more, except that he wanted me to withhold judgment on his proposition for a few days, "to sleep on the matter thoroughly, to let your unconscious mull the matter over." I should return then and give him my "thoughts"; first my "thoughts," the actual decision could wait until I had sampled the evidence. I found the whole thing a bit absurd as I had already made up my mind to accept the job.

That night, after dropping him off at his apartment, I returned to the university and took a stroll about the campus to consider his strange offer. My mind, as I said, was already made up, but I owed it to the man to think through his proposal. Its unspecific nature didn't bother me as I had every confidence that once immersed in the work I would know what to do; would find the necessary route through the material—including the book that likely lay concealed there; and that it would be a book that I could write, would want to write. His attempt to steer me from such a course didn't deter me in the least; or, let's say, carried little moral or legal imperative for me at the time—the man was near the end of his life, after all. Besides, his protestations hadn't been all that forceful, I convinced myself; clearly he didn't want his life—his intimate perspective on the "terrible eon of the German Reichskanzler-Führer"—to be forgotten.

Behind my murky and perhaps immoral reflections glowed a faint glimmer of light: here was a life that had much to teach us; here was a life that must be told. Then I had another, more troubling insight: hadn't a similar proposition been put to Stefan Streichland by the German Führer when Streichland was in his early thirties—to serve as the man's historian? Evidently he had agonized over the leader's proposal only to realize the impossibility of refusing it. The proposition put to me now was like the one put to him in 1933; with nothing less than the "continuity of history"—to use his own phrase—at stake in this transference of responsibility. I couldn't refuse the challenge even if I wanted to. Thus was struck the



strange pact between us; the compulsion that I have felt ever since and shall probably take with me to my grave—a compulsion not towards Stefan Strickland alone but towards history; towards past and future alike.

As he himself observes in one of his notebooks: “History need only concern itself with past and future. Respect towards the past, as towards one’s progenitors; strict discipline towards the future, as towards one’s progeny. The present can usually take care of itself.”

\* \* \*

That summer, Strickland left me alone with his notebooks—or some of these notebooks, at least—sending me encouraging letters and, on occasion, instructions from his retreat in the Oberengadin, letters written in his precise Italianate script on the finest Italian stationery. He left me the keys to his office and one of the four file cabinets—a cache of notebooks from the period 1921-1933, but no writings from the actual war years themselves.

My task, at this stage, was simple enough: familiarization with the man’s personalized style, so different from that of his published books; familiarization with his life, in Munich, 1921-1933; familiarization with Germany itself during that turbulent time, a country already marching towards its own destruction. Here, in stacks of unlined sketchbooks, were the most detailed notes, often set out in dramatic form—the keenest observations and reflections. These were writings that required little editorial work—that required no ordering or editing at all. Indeed, the entries, once some small difficulties of translation were overcome, were complete in every respect. They possessed an immediacy, even at times an eloquence and dramatic power, which placed them closer to literary narrative than historical chronicle; any responsible publisher would have been delighted to publish them.

Here was a dark life darkly adumbrated. Nothing, in fact, had been wasted; every scrap of experience had been mined for significance. The revelations, like all such revelations of the heart, reached me in stages; and certainly the last of them wouldn’t reach me until after his death, when all the notebooks were made available to me. By then I would have earned,

under the man's careful tutelage, my passage to these disclosures.

By August I had read the notebooks and most of the published books. I was impatient to get my hands on the war notebooks in the other cabinets. My part in the exercise had become unclear again—as there wasn't much organizing and paring to be done, though possibly the war notebooks would require such. What did the man really want? Did he know himself? It became obvious that he hadn't revealed his full intentions. "No biography!" he had made quite clear. "And definitely not a novel, either," he had laughed churlishly at the notion. Yet certainly he wanted something to come of these writings and the life contained in them—the age contained in them. Their publication seemed assured in any case. *Realhistory* was the word that kept returning to mind, Strickland's own term for the kind of personal, psycho-historical account that he himself had hoped to write after the war—drawing upon these fragments—but hadn't written; a species of the same insightful, critical commentary that he found in his own mentors: Rousseau, Burckhardt, Tolstoy, Nietzsche—those dark souls whose insights into themselves and their ages have shaped our own conception of the past. Had the failure been one of unachieved form? Or, more deeply, of moral will?

## 5

Strickland returned from his summer in Sils Maria a warmer, friendlier person than I had known him to be, quite open to the possibility of my doing something more with his life than previously discussed.

Although he asked to be left alone for a few days, he seemed very happy to see me when we met. After we exchanged pleasantries, he requested an account of my labours. I was prepared for this and delivered my report as planned. I praised the writings in the notebooks and solicited clarification of my role once more.

"You said no book, but that would be the obvious outcome of such labours . . . such an exceptional life. . . ," I mounted my case carefully.

Surprisingly, he didn't disagree. "We shall reappraise the matter," he

said. “Meantime, I am sure you would like to see more. Remember—you have raked the surface merely.”

His whole nature seemed to warm to me that evening, after our long separation; there was an openness, an ease of conversation, a genuine trust, that I hadn’t felt in my relations with him until then. The university had agreed to my request for a leave of absence, and I suggested that we meet on a regular basis. He acquiesced happily, accepting, too, a plan conceived by me over the summer, which was to tape-record our sessions.

“We’ll work chronologically—supplementing your recollections with the journal entries of the time, which seem quite complete in themselves. Perhaps between the two we’ll achieve that *real-history* you speak of in your published books.”

I was taking some risk, I knew, speaking so frankly, but the suggestion didn’t seem to bother him; indeed, he greeted my proposal in a jovial and, for him, generous spirit.

We set to work immediately, I at the Benedictine refectory table in the inner office, he at the barrister’s desk in the front room. Lunch and mid-afternoon tea we shared together in his study. The sun, filtering through the William Morris *Angeli Laudantes*, lent the rooms the aura of a medieval chapel. The contents of one cabinet after another were made available to me. This was indeed a sound method, as the cabinets were organized chronologically more or less. Frequently we shared a meal together at the end of the day at one of the restaurants near the campus and then returned to his office for our evening’s work—our taped conversations. He supplied a portable tape recorder and I the tapes. I had my questions ready—prepared during my work among the notebooks that day—and he his answers; though unlike his file cabinets, his mind wasn’t organized chronologically, and often strayed in several directions at once.

I had worked through the notebooks from 1921 to 1933. These detailed his years as a graduate student at the University of Munich and, later, as a junior professor at that institution. In 1925, at the age of twenty-five, he had published his first book— *The Phenomenology of History*—and drawn the attention of the man who was to become Germany’s leader. In my own mind, having sketched a rough plan for a biography of some kind, I had decided that this relationship would be the

centre of the life: Strickland's appointment as Reichshistorian and personal advisor to the Führer. Though there was more to the man's life than his relationship with the sinister leader, our evening sessions immediately focussed on it.

This was "a most peculiar relationship"—to use Strickland's own frequently cited appraisal—and it lasted from 1933 until 1944, when Strickland reached an important moment of truth in his life and fled the Führer's service for good. How close had he been to the Reichskanzler-Führer? I put the question to him at our first taping session. Though I was hesitant to rush ahead like this in the man's life I wanted to know exactly what lay ahead of me in this regard.

"Oh very close . . ."

The voice grew husky—one can hear the huskiness on the tape—but then clears. Then he rushed ahead, sweeping me along with him.

". . . but not in the way you might think. Indeed, I felt no pressure to meet with the man on a regular basis. In fact, shortly after we met and I, reluctantly, consented to his proposal to serve as his official historian, he insisted I leave Germany—to reside with an old friend of his in Tuscany, a Baron von Feuerbach. Von Feuerbach had been a kind of mentor and sponsor of the future Führer during the latter's Viennese days and later during his Munich struggles, and had given financial support to the fledgling National Socialist party."

Strickland responded to what must have been a look of puzzlement on my face, for his voice suddenly grew tremulous—one can visualize as well as hear the transformation when one listens to the tapes.

"Oh yes, he wanted me out of Germany. Imagine the detractors I had gained, must have gained, by then . . . mercifully few of them surfaced to state their case. His secretary—a man I abhorred—warned me once, with considerable delight in his voice, that I was the most despised of the Führer's advisors because the most intimate. Oh, it wasn't that I feared for my life. In fact, I never feared for my life.

"Our relationship was such we didn't need each other's presence to reinforce it. Months would pass, and we wouldn't see each other, but upon meeting everything would be as before. Our minds and natures were alike, you might say. Of course there were parts of his nature I didn't see, as there

were parts of my own nature he didn't know. This is not to say I approved of what I saw."

By now the voice had become relaxed, almost matter of fact, the man's body sunk in the voluminous leather chair in his office, eyes closed, if I remember correctly. I sat before the desk in what I was told was a Savonarola chair, a veritable torture device constructed of black walnut, another worm-eaten relic rescued from some Italian monastery.

That evening he spoke more fully of his Reichshistory project. The quiet soughing sound of the portable recorder allowed him to weave the tapestry of his life.

"... At our second or third meeting, I believe, the Reichskanzler mollified me, for he wanted something from me no one else could give him—something more precious than mere service. He wanted me to exonerate him historically and was willing to grant me inordinate freedom to do so. He wanted me to write the official history of the Reich or rather of himself—beginning with his hero Friedrich the Great and culminating in himself..."

This first session, too, Strickland spoke of the other, "deeper" book that he had intended to write, drawing on these personal experiences, for which the journals were to have been the "seed beds." I asked him why he didn't complete this book—this *Realhistory*, as he called it—though clearly possessing the talents for such a task.

"You seem capable of anything you put your mind to"—there was obvious hesitation in my voice as I put the question to him. The recording captures my uncertainty perfectly. I remember thinking that I was taking some risks asking such a bold question but was reassured by his response. It was a serious response, beaten honestly on the anvil of the man's life.

"It is like this," he began painstakingly. "Everyone who survived the inner circle [he meant the Führer's inner circle] has published his memoirs . . . *Erinnerungen* . . . inside versions of what it was like, his role in the leader's affairs, etc., grovelling to excuse himself morally, to acquit himself historically. I want nothing to do with that. I understand too well the propensity of the mind to exonerate itself . . . its need for self-exculpation and self-delusion. Or maybe I don't understand it well enough. No matter, my work stands as one response . . . one kind of truth . . ."—he motioned, I

remember, towards the locked file cabinets and his unpublished writings—“but not without integrity, I trust. I don’t want to taint it with the foul breath of apologia . . .”

He paused momentarily and seemed to forget where he was. Suddenly the voice shifted gears, resumed its authoritative tone again . . . *basso profundo*.

“One can’t view one’s own history historically. I will help as much as I can, but someone else must determine the scope and shape, must finish the job. History deserves to know all it can about this terrible eon—now our mythology . . . history’s vast project for the future, its perpetual homework and original sin. . . . Besides,” he offered as afterthought, “one grand ego sparring with another—imagine the vanity possible there!”

His words struck me as overly dramatic at the time but, in retrospect, sound as normal as any other in the man’s universe.

He looked at me for a sign before continuing.

“You see, I feel a certain guilt, which is only natural, but guilt isn’t really the issue. I have tried as honestly as I can to work through that guilt in my work, my published books . . .”

He waved his arm as though an audience were present. I remember this detail precisely; there is even indication of movement in the voice trailing off on the recording. In fact, he was motioning towards the translations of his books—into English, French, Italian, Swedish, Japanese, other languages—which filled one whole bookcase. On the tape you hear him start to raise his voice. It is as though his soul is sinking into quicksand and can only save itself by the lifeline of speech.

“Yes! History must choose its own judges to penetrate the evidence. You see the evidence is . . . so terrible . . . it leaves one breathless. The images we have alone . . . have you considered that were it not for the photographs, the films, no one would believe . . . could believe what happened. How fortunate for history that German technology excelled in that respect too! That films and photographs were taken and taken in great abundance. History requires penetration of the evidence beyond personal sentiment, self-pity, hysteria . . . beyond, I would even suggest, Judeo-Christian guilt. We need . . .” he raised his voice to a near thunder, the small speaker on my cassette player can’t handle the overload. I think of

the way der Führer would begin his speeches in a beguiling *pianissimo* and bring them gradually to a shattering *crescendo*—had Reichshistorian Stefan Streichland taught the man that too? “We need a special kind of deity to penetrate the evidence. . . .”

\* \* \*

The year passed quickly. My days were spent in the Strickland archives, my evenings in Strickland’s mind. These meetings, from first to last, were like dream sessions—with him acting the part of Virgil in Dante’s *Commedia* and I of his star-struck pupil; the pair of us sleepwalking through the man’s past. Little prodding was required on my part to return the wanderer to the most important moments of his life. His past was his life; his life his past. He did most of the talking, though occasionally I managed to stutter a question or two, an observation or two, such as I did one evening regarding our respective tasks—his Reichshistory under the Führer, my Streichland project under him. His good humour asserted itself instantly: “But ours isn’t as demonic a relationship, I trust!”

Often I feared that I was exchanging selves with this other being, and my own life was receding slowly from me. But I was driven in my task, though towards what point of clarity I couldn’t have said—couldn’t have articulated—at the time. *Realhistory* would have been my glib, frustrated response to any such question of purpose. But what did I know about such things then? Slowly I was being sucked into the man’s world, into the maelstrom of the German Reichskanzler-Führer. Carlyle, in his study of the French Revolution, writes that “its flaming reality becomes . . . the great poem of our time.” Strickland made a similar claim for that mad German dream, National Socialism, that it had become “the blood-soaked metaphor . . . the teeming mythology . . . of our age; a mythology from which we can’t flee, but which we must in understanding overcome if our civilization is to proceed.”

In a way, he was tempting me—an innocent—with the forbidden fruit, but this was a ruse on his part, I am convinced, a propaedeutic device to draw me into his world, a world as far removed from my own innocent one as could be. My relationship with the man, I would come to realize, had

been staged from the start. He had managed the whole thing—even, I am inclined to believe, his own death. He had wanted to convey a certain image of his life—a reconstituted image of his life—ninety per cent of which was real and true. But he kept an important ten per cent under clouds until the end of my journey through that life . . .

But I am rushing ahead of myself here. His challenge at the time seemed simple and clear enough. He wanted to breathe life into those terrible times; to show their human as well as their inhuman side. To bequeath humanity “a sense of historical wholeness . . . an image of historical wholeness”; and I was to serve as *amanuensis* in that venture. Thus a certain continuity between himself and the past, between himself and the future, would be achieved.

By spring, I had amassed a great deal of material and recorded hundreds of hours of conversations, though, in fact, I had mined only about a third of the file cabinets. The thought of returning to full-time teaching in the fall sent me into a panic. Strickland, give him his due, sensed my predicament and announced one day that he wished to underwrite my work for another two or three years—“as long as it takes”—but with one proviso: that I leave Toronto.

“You have made a good start,” he said. “You may take xerox copies of the notebooks with you . . . I have no qualms about that. Actually I would prefer if you didn’t remain in Toronto. There are too many prying souls here who want facile answers to some very complicated questions. Also, you need to be free of my influence, to find your own Archimedean point of vantage—and that you can do better in Europe than here.”

In truth, I wasn’t altogether sure why he wanted me to go abroad, but it seemed a fine idea at the time—and I didn’t question him further about his motives.

“But where would you suggest? Not Germany, surely?”

“Oh no! Not Germany! Why not Italy, where I myself spent the war years? It’s the perfect vantage point from which to view the past—one’s own and the tribe’s. It provided me with the objectivity I needed at the time.”

The thought of escaping the confines of his office, and of avoiding the Canadian winter, was so appealing that the irony of his remark escaped



me completely.

As the first crocuses were poking their colourful bonnets above the winter-hardened lawns of the campus, I embarked for Rome, where, I discovered, spring was well underway and the walled garden of the Trastevere villa where I had rented a modest apartment had a mimosa tree in full bloom. The aroma of its blossoms permeated my sleep my first nights in that strange city. Its sight, in the crisp Roman sunlight each morning, its branches weighed down with fine gold tassels, appeared like a vision; an omen of everything pure and good in this world. . . .

## 6

Within a week of Strickland's murder I was back in Toronto, after an absence of about a year.

I was summoned to a lawyer's office on Toronto's Bay Street to receive confirmation of my legal status as Strickland's literary executor and, much to my surprise, to discover that I was the beneficiary of a sizeable bequest from his estate; "funds to serve you in your labours ahead" were the instructions in the will that Strickland had redrawn shortly after we had started work together. The funds, which were granted without restriction, were indeed more than adequate to extend my leave of absence for several years. Only one small proviso was attached to the bequest: that I deliver his edited papers to the university library "within three years." Both the man's vanity and humility were evident in the wording of the will: "What is worth preserving for posterity," it stipulated, "should be preserved in publication form; items of lesser value should be relegated to the university archives."

Thus my responsibilities were clarified, legally at least; morally, they were already clear. There were no other proscriptions, which meant I was free to deal with the man's life as I saw fit. Whether this had been his intention or not I cannot say, but I suspect that the interdictions placed on my labours while he was alive were meant to die with him.

It took nearly a month before I could gain access to Strickland's

office. Miss Macpherson, his secretary of over twenty years, a fiftyish Scotswoman with a thick brogue and piercing beryl eyes that tracked you like the eyes of a predatory bird, shunted me through his rooms as though I had never set foot in them before. Though I had had many dealings with the woman during my year among Strickland's papers, I still wasn't accepted by her. She had been the perfect person to shield the great man from the world when he was alive and proved equally adept at this task when he was dead. She had managed to keep a TV producer from rooting through Strickland's offices after his death, I learned. On this visit she pointed out some intricacies of the man's file system that I hadn't known—and afterwards handed me a ring of keys with a look that questioned whether Strickland's trust had been wisely placed. I tried not to take offence and took her querulous, protective nature to be the measure of her devotion to her dead employer.

A most peculiar feeling overcame me that evening when, Miss Macpherson having left for the day, I was alone in the great man's office. I had worked in these rooms for nearly a year but had always felt like an intruder there. Strickland's instructions had been terse and strict: *Disturb nothing!* Finally, I had the keys to all the cabinets, to all his private papers. My thoughts weren't of this uncharted territory, however, but of something quite different. I sat in my usual chair, the worm-eaten Savonarola torture chair, and looked across the George IV barrister's desk to the leather chair where Strickland had sat. Grief that hadn't yet laid siege to my heart lay siege to it now—over a month after Strickland's death—and I found myself weeping for the man for the first time.

That evening, I didn't touch the papers in the locked cabinets but spent the time meditatively in his rooms. I wanted nothing to disturb my consciousness of the man; mostly, I suppose, I wanted to expend my grief amid familiar surroundings. By eleven, the hour when Strickland's and my evening sessions would usually start to wind down, my tears were spent and I was ready to leave. That evening, I crossed some important emotional threshold in my relationship with Strickland and felt better—almost, I want to say, freer—for it.

One problem presented itself, however. Strickland hadn't taken into account that his right to his office would die with him. While the actual

dwelling belonged to St. Michael's, the office fell under the jurisdiction of the history department, my own academic home at the university. The chairman, a thin, terse man with a brisk, ungenerous nature, decided that the space should be returned to his department forthwith; that Strickland's books and papers should be "packed and out within the month." I argued my case with the man, and he, begrudgingly, extended the deadline to the last week of August—"but not a day beyond." That left me a summer in which to relocate Strickland's vast library and papers—but where? I spent a frantic day with an incensed Miss Macpherson trying to deal with the problem.

A person's life is never sufficiently organized when he dies, I suppose, and Strickland's was no exception. Manuscripts existed for at least three other books, in addition to the many *Realhistory* notebooks. Strickland must have kept everything that he had ever written; this was the impression, at least. After some time with the uncharted notebooks, I was still a tourist negotiating a foreign land—taking in the general terrain of the place but few of the details. My project, as I had been plotting it innocently the past year, seemed quite daunting.

Something good, however, came of this encounter with my unbending chairman. Miss Macpherson at last acknowledged that I wasn't the enemy; that indeed we had enemies in common. Slowly she warmed to me. She even brought me tea in the afternoon. I responded to this turn in her nature gallantly and solicited her advice whenever possible. Unfortunately, she, too, was to be "packed and out" by the end of the summer—relocated to the economics department—which didn't please the crisp-natured Scotswoman one bit. We became if not life friends then compatriots drawn together in adversity.

One afternoon—I arrived at Strickland's office at ten each morning and worked until late in the evening—I made an important discovery. Though the early notebooks, those up to 1942, were neatly organized and filed, those for 1943 and beyond were not; indeed, they hadn't been handled for a very long time—decades perhaps. Pages were stuck together and even mildewed, suggesting that they might have been stored in damp quarters at one time. Fortunately, Strickland had always used a good quality permanent ink, and the writing was for the most part legible. The file cabinets stacked

in a neat row were a decoy in effect, their contents not so much filed as buried; possibly their author had wanted to keep these writings out of sight, and the illusion of organization suggested by a steel cabinet had been enough for him.

And then I thought to query Miss Macpherson on the matter, and she told me an amazing thing. She had organized and filed the early notebooks herself—not Strickland. The news was startling. What else had the burly Scotswoman not told me? Well, as far as she knew, Strickland hadn't touched these papers in years. I couldn't contain my surprise. The notebooks had sat for years mouldering in cardboard boxes. Then one day he had asked her to sort and file them chronologically. She, not Strickland, had got as far as 1942—and then quit.

“It was a wee bit of a task as it's all in that awful German. I could read the dates but na' a thing besides. I told him enough was enough. As far as I could tell, he ne'r looked at any of it 'til you came along.”

The lady's memory was as sharp as her tongue.

“Why, he hadna' even known where I keep the keys. He didna' want to know—he left these matters to me.”

The news was as important as anything that I had learned thus far about the man.

After this, I realized that a move of Strickland's papers in the short time allotted to us was an insurmountable task. I decided to act on my own and Strickland's behalf. Encouraged by Miss Macpherson, I went to see the president of the university, to plead my case. My task as literary executor was impossible, I told the administrator, unless my leave was extended for another two years and unless Strickland's office was left undisturbed for that time, with Miss Macpherson in charge on a part-time basis. I summarized the professor's accomplishments, citing a major study of his work that had appeared recently in Germany, along with the many books and Ph.D. dissertations written on him over the years. I mentioned the CBC production currently underway on his life. I especially played up Strickland's generous bequest of his papers and library to the university, plus significant funds to establish a chair in modern European civilization.

The president, a man of middle age, had met Strickland on a number of occasions but hadn't known him. His manner was one of enormous

reserve in the wake of another's significant achievements. His questions were succinct and businesslike and, beneath a veneer of inscrutable aloofness, conveyed the impression that he had all the time in the world to sit in his opulent office, furnished with Canadian pine antiques and Group of Seven paintings, and ponder such requests. There wasn't a single sheet of paper on his desk, only a pen and pencil set embedded in a slab of emeraldine Cape Dorset marble.

"He set out to make a reputation for himself, that's for sure. We should be proud," he said blankly, in a non-committal way.

Then the decision-making apparatus sprang to life, and he cleared his throat together with his thoughts. "Yes, I believe we are proud! You have it! Keep the office intact. Take two years off and do the job properly"—already his mind was engaged in drawing up a contract—"without salary, of course!"

At least I had, as they say, purchased time for myself and Strickland. Miss Macpherson was delighted when she heard the news, though she was still destined for the economics department in September. On her own time, however, she would help me with my labours until Christmas.

The secretary had more news to tell me. I had been perplexed why Strickland had chosen Capri for his pre-summer vacation. I knew that he liked to travel for a few weeks before settling down to work in the Oberengadin—but usually to more isolated spots such as Ireland's south-west coast or the Faroe Islands. I raised the matter with Miss Macpherson one afternoon, during our tea together—our breaks had grown from perfunctory affairs to half-hour chats by then—and her face lit up in surprise: "You mean you didn't know?" No, I hadn't known; but what she had to tell me was news indeed. Quite unexpectedly, the previous winter, Strickland had heard from an old wartime friend, who resided on the isle of Capri.

She reached in the cabinet where she kept Strickland's correspondence—this collection, too, was vast and would require a prodigious act of sorting—and produced copies of these letters. The letters had been sent from Capri. A quick read of the first told me what I wanted to know. The friend had discovered Strickland's whereabouts after all these years and had written to him the previous fall, inviting Strickland to visit

him in Capri. I recognized the name from the notebooks: a Hungarian, who had served in the Abwehr, the German army's intelligence bureau, during the war. The man had been a close friend of Strickland's, indeed a valued confidant, whom Strickland had believed killed during the final months of the war. He must have been the elderly gentleman at the grave site, I realized, the shadowy figure who had disappeared before I had a chance to speak with him.

Miss Macpherson and I set to work immediately. I rented a photocopier, hired a graduate assistant, and the three of us copied everything that could be copied.

I now had, in this rich trove of materials—my recorded interviews, the complete *Realhistory* notebooks—everything that I needed to finish my study. It was my intention to leave the office and its mouldy contents in Miss Macpherson's charge and return to Rome with these resources by November. There was also Streichland's long-lost friend on the isle of Capri, who, I felt sure, could shed much light on my professor's wartime experiences. In the back of my mind was a plan to journey south to Capri, possibly in the spring, and seek out this friend; to apprise him of my Streichland-project and solicit his help. Things didn't evolve quite as smoothly as I had hoped, but I was back in Rome, settled in my Trastevere apartment, by the end of the year. The afternoon that I arrived back in Rome the sky was an auspicious, Botticelli blue. I was a child as pure in my idealism, my sense of purposeful beginnings, my naïveté, as that sky, but a child about to enter adulthood quickly.