

CHAPTER ONE

The Messenger

April 1926

1

In 1925, at the age of twenty-five, and while a *Privatdozent* or private tutor at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, Stefan Streichland published a book: *The Phenomenology of History*.

It was a slim book, an accident of a book, written while its author was completing his post-doctoral degree, his *Habilitation*, for that university. The book was, in his own words (captured on our taped interviews in Toronto): “. . . a lightning swift re-evaluation of modern history, and the ineptitude of nations and their leaders to channel the energy of the turbulent nineteenth century to some good . . . an attempt to understand that great upheaval in consciousness and society known as Romanticism . . .”

By his own admission Streichland had put a great deal of himself into the work—of which only one copy, as far as I can determine, has survived. “My book was a critique of the modern age and its failure to understand the great ideas of the Romantic era. It was an attempt to mine its best intuitions, to utilize its best energies. I suppose it struck a chord of recognition in those who read it because my disgruntlement with the new century meshed with their own personal unease. It brought me a modest and quite embarrassing success at the time—at least among the staid nationalists of the Catholic south, who were as disillusioned with the idea of a Germanic Marxist state as were their Protestant brethren to the north. The book was a jeremiad against Marxism and its flattened, impoverished vision of the individual and his potential for advancement on this earth.

“But the book wasn’t an accomplishment I could feel good about for very long. What, after all, did a twenty-five-year-old *Privatdozent* know about history? Modern historians were a mass of contradictions on

the subject of their own age. A chapter in the book dealt with some of those contradictions. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the book sold several thousand copies, largely, I suspect, because of its sensationalist cover, which depicted a human skull blown apart by one of those splinter mines of the Great War. I couldn't, upon its publication, bear to look at it—the book being more the sketch or cartoon of the one that I had hoped to write than an accomplished work in its own right.

“The publication, however, changed my life. The spring following its appearance in 1925, a visitor arrived at my basement office. The man, in his mid-forties, was a jovial fellow with a round, cherubic face—a teacher of Latin from Oberammergau. After greeting me deferentially as ‘Herr Doktor Professor,’ the man told me that he carried an important message from the leader of a new political party gaining momentum in the south—the *Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei*—the National Socialist German Worker's Party.

“‘Our leader has read your *Phänomenologie*,’ he didn't stumble over the title as others often did—‘and is impressed with your views on history. No doubt you've heard of him. He commends himself to you and hopes he'll have the pleasure of meeting you soon. He hopes, too, that you'll consider a membership in our party. He's reserved a special number in your honour . . .’

“I was, as you can imagine, taken by surprise. I had followed the career of this fledgling party, and its demagogic leader, an Austrian émigré like myself, since my own arrival in that southern city five years before. I had often passed the party's offices in the *Sterneckerbräu*, the building draped with garish red and black flags, and been surprised to see its newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, on display at newsstands about the city. The other papers were often critical of this ‘vagabond Viennese’ and his unruly followers—especially *Die Münchener Post*, an organ of the Social Democrats.

“The paper had accused the man of promulgating violence against the state and pressed to have him deported to his native Austria. Then, three and a half years before, on November 8, 1923, this dour-faced leader and his brown-shirted *Sturmabteilungen*—gangs of First World War veterans, as far as I could tell—mounted a putsch against the state.

Government troops repelled the coup, which took place at Munich's venerable Feldherrnhalle. Its leader was arrested, convicted of high treason, and sentenced to five years in prison. But then the authorities—in what seemed a cynical and cowardly move—remitted the sentence after a mere six months.

“This brash attempt to overthrow the government for vague national socialist purposes was still a much debated topic among my students and colleagues. I had supposed that the leader's despotic character had been unmasked. Bavaria—and Germany as a whole—had experienced so much economic and social strife since its defeat in the Great War that an extremist group such as the NSDAP seemed more a symptom of the national crisis than a serious threat in itself.

“Though unconvinced by the affable Latin teacher's plea—I couldn't bring myself to dislike the fellow—I let him finish his speech and then spoke, declining the man's offer and making the excuse that I was an Austrian citizen and unable to participate in German elections.

“‘Likewise, our Führer,’ the man opposed. ‘But fortunately that doesn't matter. He doesn't need to run for office, he already holds office! He is our party Führer after all!’

“I probably replied that my joining the *Nationalsozialistische* Party would hardly be of consequence to anyone—least of all the group's leader.

“The Latinist, whose zealotry was extreme but whose manners remained those of someone reared on the classics, didn't press me further. ‘Isn't an invitation to greatness enough?’ I recall him saying and then he requested permission to examine my library. He spent the next few minutes perusing my books while I remained seated at my desk. After some minutes, he praised my collection of classical texts and excused himself, as politely as he had introduced himself earlier, promising to visit me again soon.

“I mentioned the meeting to the family in whose house I was residing at the time—Alma and Wilhelm Schönborn. They knew of this new party and its bellicose leader and weren't very impressed. We had a good laugh about the incident.

“That summer I treated myself to my first real vacation, spending

the months of July and August in the resort town of Chiemsee, on the lake of that name, an hour's drive south of Munich; lodging in a modest eighteenth-century timbered inn on the edge of the lake. My room, on the third floor, had a small wooden balcony that provided a splendid view of the lake and its two small islands. Each of these held an imposing man-made structure, one religious and the other secular; each vying for its own portion of the azure heavens. On the more rugged island stood the Benedictine monastery of Frauenchiemsee. The granite slabs of its steep, Golgotha-like steps were worn smooth from the pilgrims who had mounted them over the centuries. On the other, more manicured island loomed Schloss Herrenchiemsee, another of mad King Ludwig's toy castles. Its vast gold leafed and mirrored rooms were stuffed with heavy Renaissance furniture and lugubrious Romantic landscapes.

"I felt as vigorous in mind and body as I had felt in my life. At twenty-six, I was content with my life. I enjoyed my teaching, my daily walks through the Englischer Garten and occasional excursions to the alpine forelands, south of the city. Despite the slightly cynical tone of my book, I wasn't discouraged by the transformed European world or the prospect of the bright new century, a century which, despite a very difficult birth, still held much promise. My future at the university seemed secure, and my adopted country, if only it could manage to stabilize its volatile economy, was a most agreeable place to live—Munich especially, situated on that broad river that begins as a mere trickle in the nearby Alps. With its close proximity to the mountains and their many deep-water lakes, the city seemed a more pastoral, open-aired, and brighter place than Vienna, my birth place.

"I had brought a stack of books with me and notes for another study I planned to write—on Friedrich der Grosse; the Prussian ruler's congenial but contentious reign. My *Phänomenologie* had included a chapter on the king—but a mere introduction to his life and work. I took my breakfast in the inn's dining room. Its glassed-in veranda had a panoramic view of the lake and its twin isles. Afterwards I repaired to my room, and the work table that the management had been kind enough to provide for the Herr Professor, where I spent my days writing. On good days I moved the table outside to the balcony and worked there—until the sun reached its zenith

and made work impossible. I enjoyed my noon meal on the inn's outdoor patio under a magnificent mature plane tree—planted to commemorate the birth of Prinz Franz Josef. The view of the Chiemgauer Berge and Kaisergebirge peaks was superb. After the meal I slept, one of those deep, midday sleeps of an hour or so that I have allowed myself since my early twenties, which restore my energies to their fresh morning state. Then I returned to my desk for another two or three hours of work.

“In late July, a package arrived from the Latin teacher, forwarded by the university. Inside were samples of the NSDAP newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, recently revived after its suppression in 1924, printed on cheap butcher-stock paper. There was also a copy of a new book—together with a note conveying the Latinist's greetings. That afternoon I began reading the book in the shade of the plane tree and completed it at midnight in my room by dim electric lamp. When I had finished I was trembling like an animal anticipating a major storm.

“What I read shocked and frightened me. I was familiar enough with the theories of the Viennese school of mind analysis to realize that a deeper book lay buried beneath the superficial one—webbed in its dark, interstitial depths like the antediluvian tree stumps on the bottom of Lake Chiemsee that often floated to the surface after centuries of dormancy, much to the consternation of the ferry captains who plied its waters. Here was a sort of *Bildungsroman* such as Goethe and many of the other Romantics had written: a book about one's education in the world, a *growth book* in which the writer disclosed his psychological development in detail, unveiled his spiritual self. Here was described a most difficult struggle; here a will steeled by hardships. Here an assortment of prejudices, formulations, ideals; egotism of a staggering sort. Thus something quite inhuman—the style of which was cold and heartless. A simulacrum, I decided, of the author's own soul. The author was the leader or Führer of the new *Nationalsozialistische* Party. The man had written the book during his brief incarceration in Landsberg prison.

“I pondered the factors that could have produced such a startling piece of *realpolitik*. Though not a chronicler of history per se—my own preference then as now is for historiography, the evolution and philosophy of history—I could see that here was something worthy of attention for its

view of the modern epoch. Here was an active nihilism to rival Nietzsche's theoretical one. But how would Germans, and the European world generally, receive such a book? My fear was that no one would read it; that it would be dismissed summarily. For days I remained at my desk agitated, writing about the tract—which in my mind demanded the strongest possible response. By the end of my stay at Chiemsee I had produced an impassioned critique of the work—though with no idea what I would do with it.

“When, in September, I returned to my teaching duties, I searched the library's periodical holdings for reviews of the book. Few had paid it any attention. It had received little notice except in the party newspaper, which devoted several issues to it. The response of the other German papers—the European ones had ignored it—was sanguine at best, relegating this vexatious Führer to the status of *Fanatiker* and dismissing him accordingly. But a colleague, a professor of Greek philosophy and a Jew, was more pessimistic and presented me with an ominous interpretation of the fanatic's racist ideology.

“Both man and party I put out of my mind, drawing consolation from the staid and sensible German character, and the usually balanced German press. I didn't altogether discount the man's wilful character, as reflected in his fiery *Bildungsroman*, but believed that his party would remain the fringe organization that it was: home to a disgruntled minority who couldn't accept Germany's defeat in the Great War—or so I pleasantly reassured myself . . .

“Later, I realized that I had been unduly mollified by the fact that the Bavarian press deemed the party leader persona non grata and that the government prohibited him from speaking in the province because of his revolutionary views. . . .”

2

Early the following March, as winter was beginning to loosen its grip on Bavaria, Streichland received a special courier letter—stamped with a heavy, vermilion beeswax seal that resembled a blood clot—written on behalf of the NSDAP Führer and signed by a Herr Hess, party

secretary. The leader intended to visit Munich shortly and would like to meet him, the letter said, in language that seemed to him at the time quite neutral—neither friendly nor unfriendly. Details regarding time and place were to follow.

The next day a front page article in the *Münchener Zeitung* explained this cryptic missive. Three and a half years before, the Bavarian parliament had banned the NSDAP from holding public meetings on its territory. Now the government had rescinded that decree—in exchange for the leader’s pledge never to use violence again to achieve his goals. The party was free to hold rallies in Bavaria once more. Indeed, it intended to hold one later in March at the Circus Krone, when its Führer would speak. The consolation that Streichland had allowed himself, based on the leader’s absence from the political arena, vanished immediately.

Later that week, the cheerful Latin teacher showed up at his office again, greeting him as though he were an old friend. His Führer, the classicist explained, would arrive “home” the following week, after a whirlwind speaking tour of Saxony. The leader had been loaned an airplane by one of his supporters and was to land in Munich the following week. He hoped that Streichland would meet with him at that time. The teacher would transport him to the rendezvous spot himself.

But I’ll let Streichland describe this meeting with the party leader in his own words.

“. . . By then, in fact, I very much wanted to meet this Führer. The manuscript I’d worked on the previous summer lay on my desk but luckily hidden from view under other papers so that my visitor didn’t see it. My review detailed unequivocally what I thought of this *Realpolitiker* and his extremist views.

“Despite my reservations, despite a simmering fear that this leader had the potential to be a very destructive force in the lives of the German people, I had come to understand that the leader’s vision, in a most peculiar way, was a distinctively modern one—especially in its desperate spirit; its bastardization of many of the fine ideas of the last century; exemplum of that dangerous kind of pessimism Nietzsche and others had warned about. But despite the book’s many oversimplifications and distortions, I felt I should meet this creature whose presence cast a spell

over so many lives. My visitor, the well-spoken and intelligent Latinist from Oberammergau, who taught the poetry of Catullus and Virgil, was ample proof of this.

“A few days later the man arrived at the Schönborn residence in an old, open, chauffeur-driven Benz, with a patched linen roof stretched tautly across its umbrella-like frame. The day was a particularly clear and crisp one, though of a type that brings trepidation to Bavarians. A Föhn—the weather system that originates above the hot sands of the Sahara and pushes its way up the boot of Italy, turning to something German and nasty once it crosses the Alps—had been predicted all week and seemed to have arrived during the night. I was aware of the change in barometric pressure the evening before in the pain that lodged itself at the back of my head—and had spent a restive night. When I awoke at dawn, I could see, in the bars of intense blue outlining the peaks to the south, that the sky had the look of the dreaded Föhn. By the time the Latinist arrived, the sky was filled with tumultuous white clouds racing northward, and a brisk wind was blowing through the city.

“I sat beside the teacher in the back of the chauffeur-driven auto. The fellow talked non-stop, conversation that ranged over a wide field, from his efforts to teach indolent students the Latin poets to his adulation of his beloved Führer, who was to land, it turned out, not at Munich’s aerodrome but at a small airfield near Bad Reichenhall, a three-hour drive from the city. But then, once we entered the Salzburg motorway, the fellow stopped talking and fell asleep. The wind, I remember, howled through the seams of the shellacked linen canopy and the rust fissures in the floor.

“As we circumscribed Chiemsee, the lake on which I had spent such a happy sojourn the summer before, I glimpsed the high Salzburger and Kitzbuehler ranges to the south. Their snowy peaks glistened against patches of piercingly blue sky. Here was monumentality indeed, such as man could never hope to achieve in his own earthly endeavours. Suddenly I seemed to grasp why this party Führer had chosen to land amid such formidable scenery. It was, as I would observe in my notebooks afterwards, my first intuition into the workings of the man’s mind.

“After another hour, we arrived at our destination, an aerodrome

situated on a small moraine amid the alpine forelands, the mountain's peak shorn to accommodate a single asphalt runway, wooden hangar, and cement block tower; the site overwhelmed on three sides by towering, snow-capped Alps.

“Half a dozen pre-war Benzes were parked on the grass, their dented and rusted chassis splattered with mud. Party flags flapped angrily on their chromium radiators—the ancient pagan symbol of the swastika set in black relief against a white sun-like orb on a blood-red background—colours that mimicked the German national ones of black, crimson, and gold. My companion disappeared into the cement block structure, so I wandered about the field on my own, concentrating on returning the circulation to my arms and legs after the long drive.

“Several single engine craft were scattered about the field, their wings trussed to cement anchors in the ground; one of which was being disembowelled by a mechanic. A group of men in derelict army greatcoats gathered outside the hangar. Others crowded together in the small tower, including among them the Latinist and another, heavy-set man, who was scanning the horizon with a pair of binoculars. The wind, I remember, was brutal. Gusts gathered in invisible funnels and whistled across the flat expanse of asphalt and sodden fields, a wicked coldness at their centre. Looking back towards the tower, I saw the Latinist draw the fat man's attention in my direction. I turned to face the expanse of mountains and sky before me—a panorama, I realized, which included much of Austria, and farther west, the high peaks and hidden valleys of the Tyrol, where I had spent my childhood.

“‘Perfect fighter plane weather,’ I overheard our uncommunicative chauffeur exclaim to another man before heading off to inspect the plane undergoing repair. Why fighter plane weather, I wondered? The remark mystified me. One wouldn't see or hear the planes, perhaps. Clouds would hide their forms, winds blanket their roar. One would be looking at blank sky, as I was now, the sharply contoured clouds with great bruise marks like dark dream material at their centres, and suddenly the lethal dots would appear. The dots would transpose to horizontal lines and then, too late, the planes would be upon you. You would hear the drone. The lines would become streaks of fire. There would be no time to seek shelter.

“Suddenly, in exactly the spot my eyes had fixed upon in the sky, a form materialized. I must have raised my hand in recognition. Someone behind me let out a shout. Other shouts followed. The spot grew larger and larger, finally tilting on its side so that I could see what it was. The delicate fin shape turned, still many kilometres away, deflecting sparks of sunlight from its wings and fuselage. The Führer’s plane.

“The craft approached from the north. It fought the wind battering it and seemed to require all its strength to land; shakily, forcefully, it struggled to the ground, its propellers tearing at the wind to stabilize its descent. The wheels touched once, sent puffs of smoke sideways like discharges of cannon fire, then touched a second time, made contact, and wheeled smoothly as on a bed of oil towards us, the fuselage quivering madly in the wind like an arrow lodged in a block of wood.

“The men on the field moved out to the runway, joined by the others in the tower, the Latinist among them. The plane took a long time to come to a stop. At the end of the runway it turned and, noisily revving its engines again, began accelerating back down the runway, as though on second thought it would take off instead; but then it turned abruptly and raced towards the group of welcomers, stopping before them, its engines choking a few last gasps before coming to a stop. Clouds of exhaust and hot fusel oil wafted across the field.

“I started towards the plane. But already I stood at the end of the line, waiting to greet the leader; at the head of which stood the fat man in a silver-grey military greatcoat. When the door of the plane swung open, the group started to applaud, but a hesitant almost embarrassed applause, with something of a rehearsed quality to it. The hole in the plane gaped but no one appeared. I saw a shadow, some fumbling of personages inside the cabin, and then, jerkily, tremblingly, like someone who was ill, the man known as *der Führer* emerged. A second round of applause followed, louder than before but equally restrained. An arm flew skyward, an abrupt, startling salute, then a softer, more feeble wave, an amazingly weak gesture after the sterner, almost terrifying salute. There was another shout from the welcomers. Then, what can only be described as a sort of burlesque, attempted and given up: the business of who should descend the ladder first. Instantly the frail figure grew firm, and one could feel the

force with which he held them all: the fear. One could feel it in the stiffness of the man's descent down the ladder, and the way his followers shuffled in a group to greet him, none daring to meet him alone. None, that is, but myself, who stood off to the side, aloof, waiting . . .”

Streichland stopped here in his lively and detailed rendition of these events and frowned. It was a peculiar expression: a mouth in the expressive act of protest or dispute. I re-experience that frown every time I hear the tape. It was as if he had reached some impasse, not in his recollection of these events—he would never do that—but in his understanding of them; as if he himself had heard enough to incriminate himself; or, perhaps, enough in the simple sense of surfeit—satiation with his own horrific life. It was an impasse that would be reached often in his reconstructions—his painstaking reconstructions—of his past; an almost rehearsed moment of alarm, played for all it was worth, in the drama of his life.

But then he took a deep breath and pushed on.

“Numerous handshakes followed, and much slapping of the Führer's back by Hess and the obese Göring. But the man wasn't to be occupied with these followers for long. With a kind of severing motion, he released himself from his retainers and headed for the open field—to a spot where there was an unimpeded view of the surrounding mountains—his excitement suggesting that he had never seen such a sight before.

“The others knew enough to leave him alone, or perhaps had been schooled to do so by Göring, clearly the major-domo of this event. Evidently the man wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He started walking in a direction that took him close to me, though he didn't appear to notice me, passing me without acknowledgement. The others continued to hover about the plane as if seeking reassurance. Göring, in fact, had started to give everybody a tour of the aircraft.

“As he passed in front of me, his shoulders straightened and he clasped his hands behind his back. You could see the twin shoulder blades press against his flimsy coat, one slightly lower than the other, like unborn horns or wings. Clearly the man was lost in a trance, staggering like a child tracing some indistinguishable form in the sky. Understand, there were only mountains and scudding white clouds, through one section of

which the sun glowed like an electric filament. Suddenly he noticed me, and our eyes locked together, despite the distance between us. He started towards me, and I, without any foresight on my part, started towards him. It wasn't fear, exactly, I felt; though I wasn't lacking in fear, either. Rather, a feeling of pure premonition, a sense of our destinies becoming interlocked. He held out his hand. I held out mine, introduced myself.

“You've come, you've taken the time to come”—he greeted me with what I thought was real warmth in his voice. With some excitement, he pointed towards the peaks to the south. The peaks were spectacular. One moment the erratic sunlight would burst through the clouds to illuminate several ranges at once and the next cast a giant shadow over them. ‘Our beloved Austria!’ he cried out. Both of us, he noted approvingly, were lapsed Viennese. Did I not miss the grand old city—its boulevards, Ringstrasse, concert halls, bohemian cafés? He hoped one day Germany and Austria would become ‘geographic and spiritual allies’—that was his phrase. I remember he made a kind of abracadabra motion with his hands as if to make the mountains rise up before him or even disappear. Each of us had this geography in common, a kind of common language or lingua franca, did we not? His cheeks had the warm, flushed tone of someone who had just awakened from sleep.

“I regard these mountains and think that humanity needs another million or so years before it can equal them . . .’

“The man's speech had a rustic lilt to it, much like the speech of the peasants in the Tyrol. In any case, it was different from what I expected, the voice husky, roughened at the edges but strong—like the wind, with its cold, steely centre.

“He seemed intent on sorting out our respective pasts. He had first visited Vienna at age seventeen. I had begun my university studies there at the same age—eleven years later. Munich, too, we had in common—both of us immigrants to that very Austrian-like city. He discovered yet another correspondence of sorts, which seemed to please him enormously. He made some reference to opera, and I recalled productions of *Meistersinger* and *Tristan* at Munich's Hoftheater. He had seen the same productions! I recalled with particular pleasure a performance of Mahler's *Second Symphony*, at the Neue Musikfesthalle, under Walter's direction; but he

wasn't familiar with the work.

“Throughout our conversation, a strange premonition pressed itself upon my consciousness that one day I would strike out against this individual. It was a thought like no other I had had in my life. This response—more instinctive than rational—puzzled me at the time and would do so for many years to come, as nothing in the man's appearance, or words, warranted such a reaction. His manner, in fact, was one of pure civility. He conveyed the look of the zealot, to be sure, the look of someone who had suffered in life. He looked worn out, too, more than one would have expected for his mere thirty-eight years. His black hair was spare and slicked back and had the sheen of fresh tar. There was nothing stylish about the man. He wore a frayed gabardine raincoat and dowdy serge trousers, which were a size too big for him. And he smelled badly . . . yes, a strong animal-like odour, when the wind changed direction, wafted my way . . . which, of course, could have come from his clothes, from the plane's leather seats.

“What I experienced, you understand, was no simple emotion—no simple anger or hatred or even plain fear—but a more atavistic response: some deep, irrational impulse undercutting my thoughts that I would do the world a great service by getting rid of this person.

“Little details accentuated his eccentricities, which were certainly in evidence. Amid these observations, this strange premonition persisted: that the man was dangerous and should be put to death. Yet it was a stillborn impulse. I had never, you understand, engaged in an act of violence in my life. The impulse lasted for several minutes, during which time I feared that I might reveal myself. But then it passed, and I was able to continue our conversation as though nothing had happened.

“He asked many questions and seemed to like the innocent young Herr Professor's answers—especially my hesitations, my demurrals. I was, at twenty-seven, a most questioning young man—a beginning teacher, remember, with all the idealism and naïveté of the profession fresh about me.

“He had indeed read my *Phänomenologie*—imagine! I mean really read it—word for word. He quoted whole passages from the Friedrich section verbatim. Since I had abandoned the work, jettisoned it from my

consciousness, I found his praise strange indeed. He delivered a few political diatribes, too, and I responded to them as honestly and bravely as I could. I suppose what saved me was the fact that I wasn't intimidated by him, so that I could speak my mind. I sensed that he was impressed, though heaven knows that wasn't my intention. At one point, as though thinking out loud, he said: 'Your acute sense of history would be an asset to our cause.' There was an embarrassing personal quality to the man's praise. I felt an intimacy was being thrust upon me that I didn't desire and certainly hadn't sought. When he invited me to supper I made a quick excuse. 'Next time, then,' he said. He had seen through my fabrication, though absolving me of any duplicity. It was the first of many such excuses on my part; the first of many such absolutions on his part as well.

"He offered to have his chauffeur drop me at my Munich lodgings. But in the minutes that followed, during which the others drew him aside, it was decided that he should drive to Munich with Göring, and that I should return in the Latin teacher's car. I thought the arrangement just fine as I wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

"The cortège of ancient Benzes descended the hill and made for the motorway. For the first half-hour the Latinist spoke non-stop, impressed obviously that his guest stood in such high regard with his party chief. But I gave the man small satisfaction. I refused his questions and finally told him I wanted to sleep. Of course I was too distraught to sleep. I had savoured raw political power for the first time—and would remember its acrid taste for the rest of my life.

"And my manuscript, the one I had started to write in response to the Führer's vile testament . . . I destroyed it . . . though my publishers would probably have welcomed another book from their contentious young author. I had bigger things on my mind. Our meeting suggested that we would meet again, that I would have an opportunity for a much deeper response . . . a much deeper book—to refute the man's fiery testament. I would bide my time . . . await history's next move. But that, too, was mostly an unconscious reaction on my part. My unconscious was quite active in those days and I usually heeded its impulses, much like the age itself. . . ."

3

“The following evening the Führer addressed a large group of supporters at Circus Krone. I read the report in the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* and received an even fuller account of the event from one of my colleagues. Seven thousand people pushed their way into the squalid, smoke-filled entertainment hall. There were labourers and tradesmen in work clothes; also members of the middle and upper classes, many of whom were dressed in formal attire, accompanied by their wives or lady friends. My informant—a Jewish colleague at the university—gave me a detailed report on the gathering, noting a preponderance of attractive women of all ages.

“There was a brass band and gangs of fit, young brownshirts brandishing flags and mock Roman standards, with foil-covered *papier-mâché* eagles gripping the cross bars. Hawkers sold party flags for ten pfennig apiece. The leader arrived a half-hour late and addressed the crowd in a shrill, thin voice lacking resonance and clarity of tone. *Unmuzzled at last!*—he began, in soft, wounded tones to great applause—before enumerating the ills of the age, citing the vile reparations treaty at the end of the war, the Red prevaricators in Berlin, the failures of the Weimar’s emasculated governors, the economic slavery of the masses. . . . He called for a new, stronger Reich—free of the shackles of debt and guilt and pseudo-socialist thought—tossing a fair sprinkling of anti-Semitic sulphur on the flames. Jews were both symptom and cause of Germany’s woes—both bacteria and resultant disease. Vile stuff! Everywhere dissolution and pollution! Look about you and you see a country bereft of purpose and direction, uncertain of itself and its future. Führer-less and Führer-wanting.

“Years later I read the notes the man had made for the speech. The madman had ranted for over two hours.

“That Friday I lectured at the university as usual. On my way to the auditorium maximum I passed some youths distributing NSDAP flags and propaganda leaflets. Copies of the *Völkischer Beobachter* and its companion the *Illustrierte Beobachter* were stacked on a table, the latter displaying a full-page photo of the leader in leather breeches and Tyrolean

felt hat, chatting with a group of Bavarian peasants in native costumes. Another filled an easel frame and was draped with a poppy-red satin ribbon, on which a sprig of primula had been pinned—a kind of homemade shrine.

“That afternoon, I remember, I gave a particularly apt and dynamic lecture. I paraphrased Burckhardt on the role of the enlightened, humane ruler and bemoaned a lack of such leaders in the recent past. Without specific reference to the age, or the ‘Caesar Augustus of the present hour,’ as the Latin teacher had referred to the leader, I created a mood or tension that, to sensitive ears, reflected back upon the present age. The good students delved my meaning; the poor ones drifted towards sleep.

“I had planned to spend the weekend quietly, working at my desk in the third floor flat I rented from the Schönborns at the time. The house, one of those capacious, red-brick domiciles built for the upper middle classes in the late nineteenth century, was situated on Bruderstrasse, two doors in from fashionable Prinzregentenstrasse and the Englischer Garten. Though only the middle of March, spring had come to the Bavarian plain that Saturday. The Föhn had passed and two days of mild, dry weather had melted most of the city’s snow.

“On Saturday, I helped Wilhelm Schönborn clear the back lawn of debris. Over the winter, leaves from the catalpa trees at the property’s rear had mulched into leathery masses. The great heart-shaped leaves resembled stacks of discarded handbags and wallets and appealed startlingly to the imagination of the Schönborn’s young daughter, Gretchen, as she helped her father and me rake the leaves into pyres. Alma, the mother, could be seen through the kitchen window making one of her delicious meals.

“At noon, I joined the family for lunch. We were in the large, warm kitchen enjoying our soup and bread when we heard the sound of pounding drums. Little Gretchen ran to the front door with a piece of toast in her hand. But her father rushed after her and stopped her from going outside. I followed to see what was happening. The sound had a powerful appeal. The child responded by jumping and squealing wildly and begging to be let outside. Skin drums pounded. The crisp spring air formed a giant membrane that carried the sound with startling clarity. There followed the

brass cornets, tubas, cymbals . . . which turned the pounding into a kind of sentimental nineteenth-century marching music. Normally I despised music that exploited emotion in this way. Yet the music was surprisingly stirring. On a day as vital as this one, it was stirring indeed.

“Alma looked distraught, hoping the parade wouldn’t pass by her street. But it would, her husband assured her, with a grim look on his face. To celebrate their leader’s return, NSDAP supporters had organized a parade down Prinzregentenstrasse. The whole of Munich had been invited to join in. For all we knew, the whole of Munich had done so. Neighbours peered from second storey windows or gathered on front steps; others lined up obediently along the fashionable street.

“Wilhelm proposed a compromise and suggested we view the parade from the roof. Little Gretchen seemed about to break into tears, but I took the child in my arms and assured her that she would have the best view of all. We went upstairs, through my third floor quarters, and forced open the steel-reinforced door to the roof. Smells of burning wood wafted from the chimney next door. Southward, across the slate roofs of the city, past numerous twin-steeped churches, the Alps shimmered in the afternoon haze. The sky was cloudless and still. I continued to hold Gretchen in my arms. By then, the child had calmed down and clung to me with all her might.

“We didn’t have long to wait. The band, or bands as it turned out, were at the rear of the parade. Phalanxes of *Sturmabteilung* headed it, wearing brown shirts and trousers, and high black boots. Most wore shiny black caps that resembled the beaks of predatory birds. The child seemed to sense the disapproval of the adults beside her—for she remarked on how mean the marchers looked. Next came the non-uniformed followers, marching almost as rigidly as the uniformed ones; veterans, many of them, of the Great War, judging from the medals emblazoned across their chests. But there were many younger men as well, in a wide variety of attire, from formal Sunday suits to lederhosen and full alpine regalia, looking as though they were trying to mimic the guards in front, miming a maturity and self-confidence they didn’t possess. Then the parade turned formal again. Mature men marched past in fancy, finely-tailored suits and sleek riding boots. Many displayed razor blade moustaches such as the leader

himself favoured.

“And then, walking by himself . . . and making no attempt to keep in step with the others . . . wearing the same tired gabardine he had worn at the aerodrome, his head bare and hair slicked back and separated as if by a hatchet, the party Führer.

“‘There,’ pointed Wilhelm mockingly, ‘is the great man himself.’

“‘You hear, Gretchen,’ said Alma, with mock innocence of her own. ‘Stefan knows that man. He knows the famous man.’

“‘And behind him, his infamous henchmen,’ scowled Wilhelm through clenched teeth.

“We had always, in our discussions on this new party and the types that it seemed to draw to its ranks, done so in mocking terms.

“Following the leader, in another phalanx, marched the obese Göring, looking very satisfied with himself, and behind him Hess, the leader’s *Sekretar*, his head jerking spastically from side to side as his eyes roamed the crowds on either side, crowds that lined the princely street in great numbers by now; followed by the Latinist, looking about him approvingly in every direction. Only he appeared to notice us on the roof, throwing us a long, intense look that penetrated me to the core. The fellow, of course, knew where I lived, having picked me up and delivered me to the Schönborn residence days before. I hid my face in the child’s locks. Then the bands themselves—the first of which now came into view; the sound funnelled down the wide street, the skin drums amplified terrifyingly by the tall mansions and civic buildings lining Prinzregentenstrasse.

“Despite the music, the marchers, the parade lacked coherence, lacked a centre. Certainly no centre was provided by the leader in his tightly buckled raincoat, though a great deal of attention was lavished upon him by the onlookers. The leader himself, from this height, looked weary and bored; his walk stiff and strained, as though he were in pain; his left arm held rigidly by his side. His sad body—the narrow, almost non-existent shoulders, the distended waist, strapped cruelly tight by the coat’s leather belt—emanated something frightening: a brutish determination, visibly given off, to have its own way in life. It conveyed what ungainly bodies often convey to the world, that the person thrives

despite the body's humiliations; and worse, in this instance, that the world would pay dearly for his infirmities.

“As the figure passed the opening provided by our street, I had the same feverish presentiment I had at the aerodrome, though an even stronger emotion than last time. How easy it would be to hurl something at this creature and break the concentration of the mob. Just then, the child let fly the piece of precious toast she had been holding. The slice sailed through the air towards the paraders and seemed about to clip one of the brownshirts on the back of the neck. Several marchers, on the fringe of the line, saw it coming and broke their step as if under siege. But the missile struck no one and landed innocently outside the marching stream. The pounding of the drums joined with the pounding of my chest and the quick animal gallop of the child's heart. The child must have sensed my mood and acted instinctively on my behalf.

“The column passed from view, the drums extinguished themselves. The onlookers returned to their houses. A strange, dizzy sensation overcame me, like that experienced after strenuous exercise or a severe fright. I set Gretchen down. I didn't want to alarm the child by my behaviour. I must have looked like a madman, for the parents, and little Gretchen, were staring at me strangely.

“‘Stefan, you don't look well,’ Alma said. ‘Wilhelm, take Gretchen downstairs. Stefan's not feeling well.’

“Alma led me to my rooms, where she insisted that I lie down. Wilhelm closed the hall door. She felt my forehead. She got some water, which she forced me to drink, and offered to stay with me. But I assured her I was all right and wished to be by myself.

“She left me then, promising to bring me some tea. Alone, I tried to understand my response—my near fainting spell—to this leader. Nothing had happened to me after all. Neither I nor my adopted family had been put at risk. I could make no sense of my violent impulse. I had wanted to kill this Führer. With a peculiar lucidity unfamiliar to me but familiar perhaps to the momentarily insane, I imagined how I might have accomplished the deed. Wilhelm kept an old army rifle from the Great War in the cellar and a supply of ammunition in a locked metal box. If only I had known how to use the weapon I might have used it that day.

The barrel could have been concealed between the loose bricks of the roof's balustrade. I would have had a clear shot; my target not more than a hundred and fifty metres away. I could have slain this being whose stern, inhuman gaze and narrow, pinched shoulders seemed a threat to everything frail and beautiful in this world. . . .”