

Chapter Fifteen
The Fate of Czechoslovakia
September 1938

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Along with most of his fellow Europeans, Professor Streichland clung to the long and shortwave bands of his radio that week.

The British prime minister had departed for England at noon on Friday, September 16, less than twenty-four hours after he had landed on German soil. Almost immediately, the Czech president announced that he wouldn't agree to a plebiscite on the Sudetenland—at least on the German leader's terms. President Benes wouldn't consent to his country's dismemberment and the loss of its formidable mountain defences to a foreign power. The Wilhelmstrasse's reaction was swift and surgical, orchestrated by the minister for propaganda; the Czechs were castigated for their obdurateness and the Reichskanzler's threat to resolve the crisis one way or another by October 1 was repeated. The report went on to cite new atrocities by the Czechs against Sudeten Germans.

Shortly afterwards, Berlin radio issued an important announcement. The British prime minister was to journey yet again to Germany to confer with the Reichskanzler. This second meeting, scheduled for Thursday of that week, would take place at Bad Godesberg, a small tourist town on the Rhine. Early Tuesday morning, the eel-thin Herr Hess knocked on Streichland's Berghof door. In his usual gruff manner, facial muscles twitching uncontrollably, the deputy brought word from his master that the latter wanted him to attend the conference in his role as official historian.

"Our overgenerous Führer has decided to give the English one last chance at Spa Godesberg," the deputy almost choking on his words. "He has also requested you follow along. So you should follow along. But, Herr Professor, don't think that our Führer has given the matter much thought—or considers your presence essential to the conference. But you had better be present on site regardless. My secretary will assist you with travel and hotel arrangements. You should prepare to leave immediately."

The pockmarked deputy produced a letter on weightless stationery attesting to Streichland's identity, the document conferring on him the new and amusing title of "Führer Reichshistoriker *ordinarius*." He instructed Streichland to keep the paper on his person at all times—"otherwise we can't guarantee your safety." The man's manner was contemptuous, to say the least, but conveyed his usual nervous agitation as well. Could the man be afraid of him?

Streichland returned a nervous smile as he was a little afraid of the deputy—the man who stood, after all, second in line to the Führer. He lowered his head and thanked his visitor. Meekness and humility, mixed with a touch of indifference, was the wisest response to creatures of cunning such as this. Inwardly, however, he ruminated on why the man might consider him a threat and how he might nurture that response.

The morning was a particularly busy one. Ravenous-looking officials from Hungary and Poland arrived at Haus Berghof, one delegation following upon the heels of the other, to make territorial demands of their own regarding Czechoslovakia, which news Streichland gleaned from chef Franz Josef. Then, an adjutant arrived at his room just before noon, with instructions to drive him to Munich's Ainring aerodrome, where a plane would fly him to Köln.

Bad Godesberg was a Rhine spa on the Köln-Koblenz railway line with a history extending back to medieval times. Here the Rhine marked the old Roman border between civilized Gallia and the dark hinterland of Germania Magna, which symbolism no doubt was part of the Reichskanzler's choice of meeting place. Bad Godesberg am Rhein was also the reputed resting place of the Germanic gods Wotan and Thor; and nearby Aachen the former residence of the great Charlemagne, whose spectral presence the Reichskanzler seemed determined to invoke. The meeting place was also closer to the British Isles than the previous one, a symbolic halfway point between Berchtesgaden and London, which Streichland took to be an auspicious sign.

At the Köln station, he encountered Herr Castorp en route to the conference. The perfervid Reichsrat seemed pleased to see him and invited him to share his first class compartment, reserved for Propaganda and Interior Ministry staff. On the short journey, Streichland felt more at ease with the official than in the past—sufficient to actually engage him in serious discussion about the upcoming conference. The Herr Reichsminister,

as the Reichsrat referred to his employer, was to arrive in the morning; the Reichsrat himself had been sent ahead to prepare for his chief's arrival and supervise broadcasting arrangements for the legions of reporters expected to descend on the small town from all over the world.

Herr Castorp, who was only thirty, seemed aged since their last meeting, his washed-out blue eyes craving sleep or relief from his responsibilities; evidently he, "together with the rest of the Wilhelmstrasse," had managed little sleep of late. Streichland recalled the many propaganda reports that he had read the past few weeks and wondered what part the Reichsrat had played in them—probably a large one. The fellow was certainly well-informed, while at the same time wasn't in the least perturbed by the patent fabrications of his ministry. The feeling at the ministry was that the Führer had already or would shortly achieve his goals—and without show of force; and that this second conference was a *pro forma* affair to sort out details.

"Britain, in any case, has confirmed her willingness to grant our Führer his wish, and France no doubt will soon follow behind. This is good news indeed. Of course I can't provide absolute assurances in these matters. After all, we are dealing with the Führer, whose view of the future always exceeds that of mere mortals, and who knows things we cannot know," the Reichsrat concluded nervously.

The moment he set foot on the platform of the small station Streichland could smell the river. Together Herr Castorp and he shared a taxi to the Rheinhôtel Dreesen—the resort nestled mid-way up the river's steep bank—and entered its brightly lit lobby shortly before midnight. This was the place where the Reichskanzler and his large retinue of Ministerialrate were to reside and the conference was to convene. Already the place bristled with armed guards, and he had to show deputy Hess's letter and have Reichsrat Castorp vouch for him in order to gain accommodation, which turned out to be one of the establishment's plainer rooms on the top floor. The small chamber had a single nondescript wooden bed and washstand. Communal bathrooms were situated at either end of the hall. The clerk who escorted him to his room had never seen the Führer in person and chatted excitedly about the conference. Forcing open the tiny window, he pointed across the moon-bathed river to a sprawling structure on the opposite bank, bedecked with red and blue lights.

"That's Kurhotel Petersberg, where Herr Chamberlain will lodge. He

will travel to the Dreesen by ferry. All traffic on the river will be halted during the conference," he reported, proud that he would play a small part in such a momentous event.

The hotel only grew quiet around two o'clock, and he had difficulty sleeping. The odour from the river was particularly strong and sour, like a poorly aged wine. But at last he slipped into a light sleep, until the dampness uncomfortably infiltrated his rest, and he had to rise and shut the window. Not until dawn did he stir again.

He had arranged to meet Herr Castorp for lunch, otherwise he had the morning to himself, a freer guest, he supposed, than anyone else at the conference. He decided on a stroll about the property before breakfast. The Dreesen, despite its high Baedeker rating, was a slightly shabby *fin de siècle* hotel, really a three and a half not a five star establishment. The carpets in the hallways were worn and its upholstery smelled of mothballs. The hotel's setting, however, was superb. The property rose halfway up the Rhine's steep bank and offered a splendid view of the river in both directions. The grounds were beautifully groomed and carefully thought out, with a series of lawn terraces descending to the river and the hotel's dock, at which several luxury motor launches were moored.

And here, the morning mist rising from its glassy surface, was the mighty Rhine. Beginning as a glacial trickle in the Swiss Grisons, and fed by numerous tributaries and runoffs from the surrounding mountains and plateaus, the river moved sluggishly on a journey that marked the borders or traversed the heartlands of five European nations, cleaving the continent in two before releasing itself into the North Sea. Beyond the rift valley rose the Westerwald and Sauerland massifs—which the clerk had pointed out in the moonlight the evening before—the seven prominent spurs known as the *Siebengebirge* or Seven Sisters; their rugged beauty attesting to the volcanic upheavals that had convulsed the region during the Tertiary period. Farther west and north, other cataclysmic disturbances had laid down the great coal beds of Aachen and the Ruhr. The Reichskanzler had chosen the scene of his drama well.

In the dining salon, he was given a choice seat by the window, which provided an even better view of the Siebengebirge against the morning sky. Except for a scattering of tanned, fit-looking officers in full military dress—field-grey summer tunics and crimson-striped breeches—who occupied several tables at the room's centre, there were no others present. The

officers stopped their conversations to toss him a suspicious glance but then resumed their conversations.

He had borrowed the previous day's Köln and Berlin papers from the hotel's library and read wearily of the conference and its promise of European peace. As was his habit when he travelled, he ordered a substantial breakfast and then returned to his room. While waiting for the elevator, he saw Herr Castorp crossing the lounge and waved to him. The Reichsrat came over, and they exchanged a few words. He was rushing to meet with Reichs-Rundfunk technicians but would be free at noon, he explained, the Reichsrat even more exhausted looking than the evening before.

Streichland found a shaded spot on the terrace, where he could read the morning papers and work on the notes that he had brought with him. The euphoria of travel, of settling into a new place, vied with his misgivings about the conference and the nagging worry that the German leader was about to change the borders of Europe or risk everything in the attempt. At noon, Herr Castorp joined him. The Reichsrat, whose boyish enthusiasm and clear-eyed innocence seemed severely challenged by the conference, had nothing but frustration to report. His chief, Herr Goebbels, would arrive within the hour and expect the impossible of him. He couldn't linger and likely gave himself indigestion by the speed with which he wolfed down his bratwurst. The fellow really had little to relate, and Streichland was glad to see him go. He could watch events from a distance in private, which was what he liked to do.

That evening, he had a long wait outside the dining salon and indeed might not have obtained a table at all were it not for Herr Schmidt's intervention. The interpreter spotted him in the line at the door and beckoned him to join the Foreign Ministry's table of delegates. Referring to him as "one of the Führer's special historians," the jovial interpreter introduced him to the translators, legal experts, and male secretaries seated about the table—their chief of staff, von Weizsäcker, among them. These colleagues of Herr Schmidt welcomed him and included him in their Foreign Office gossip. The Führer, he learned, had arrived mid-afternoon. Seeming to direct his remarks directly at him, Herr von Weizsäcker quipped: "Can't you sense the palpable tension about the room, Herr Reichsprofessor, and the fitful glances dispensed to all newcomers, lest our Führer or some other important personage enter the room?" But Herr Schmidt made a wager that

the leader wouldn't join them but would dine alone in his suite.

Evidently Herr Schmidt was to serve as official translator for the conference, a subject that caused much lively discussion about the table. His comments on the British prime minister showed the same sardonic wit that the man had displayed at their first meeting. The conversation turned to the Führer's recent Italian junket, and Herr Schmidt regaled him with stories about the trip, including one unfortunate incident that had occurred. Apparently the ministry's *chef de protocole* had allowed the Führer to appear improperly attired at the inspection of the Italian guard of honour with King Victor Emmanuel. "The king arrived at the event arrayed like a peacock in resplendent gold and silver braid cap and uniform; while our Führer showed up bare-headed in simple evening dress. Our leader was furious and sacked our poor colleague upon returning to Berlin."

Herr Schmidt's tasks as interpreter were demanding, to say the least, particularly with the constant changes in foreign policy emanating from the chancellery of late. The friction between ministry and chancellery staff was evident in the conversation about the table; as was something else—the antagonism between these old Foreign Office officials and the ministry's new chief, Herr von Ribbentrop, who was likely dining with the Reichskanzler in his suite that moment. Streichland had many questions he would have liked to put to this select group of privileged individuals but chose to remain silent instead.

After the meal, Herr Schmidt hurried off to prepare himself for the morrow but not before giving Streichland his room number (he and the other Foreign Ministry delegates were installed in the deluxe frontal suites on the second floor) and suggesting that they dine together again next evening. Streichland decided to retire himself, as the hotel's common rooms were filling with party, state, and Wehrmacht officials, eager for another night of drinking. He took a brief stroll about the gardens to savour the night air, which smelled even more potently of the river at night than during the day. A giant Union Jack had flown above the Petersberg since the afternoon, and he could see its limp form now, illuminated by spot lights on the hotel's lawn. Festive red and blue lights were strung about the hotel's terraces—welcoming beacons for the British delegation, which was to arrive tomorrow.

He retired to his room and prepared for an early night. But the noise of carousing from below lasted until well past midnight. He would have

closed the window but the room was stuffy. For a long time he couldn't sleep or drifted into half-sleep only to twitch awake nervously after a few minutes. His mind couldn't dislodge itself from the conference and his own part in it. Would he play a part this time? The Reichskanzler had never solicited his advice, at least on state matters. Besides, what could he possibly say—stand up to the Führer when no one else in Europe had the courage to do so? He couldn't stop the despot in his reckless move to confiscate this northern region of Czechoslovakia.

He would play no role in the conference, he was sure. His role, as it had always been when it came to the Reichskanzler's current moves, would be that of silent observer. Later, of course, he would exact his revenge; the historian's *revanche*. Later, he would do more than observe; and what he would have to say wouldn't please the leader. Some actions merited neither analysis nor understanding but plain condemnation; and this surely was one of them.

Nevertheless, his removal from these affairs of state produced an uneasy response. How he would have loved to play a more significant role, to step on the world's stage that moment and plead the case for reason and decency; alas, he knew, he would have no such honour. Finally, after one o'clock or so, the noise having abated, he managed a middling sleep, supported thankfully by sheltering dreams.

At seven next morning, he breakfasted at his usual table by the window, while perusing a fresh batch of Berlin and Köln papers. Except for the group of fit-looking officers who occupied the same tables at the centre of the room, he was again the only person in the dining salon. The officers gave him the same querulous looks as the day before—though of a less challenging nature this morning. After breakfast, he exchanged the papers for others in the reading room and went upstairs to bathe and prepare for what he knew was going to be a long day. Then he occupied his humble desk by the window, overlooking the Seven Sisters, intending to transcribe his notes from the day before.

What would the conference produce? He attempted to analyse the event this morning. Would today's meeting bring the Sudeten crisis to a conclusion? Would the Reichskanzler have his deeper needs satisfied? There was no shortage of papers in the hotel library and no shortage of opinions regarding the Reichskanzler's demands. The question that nagged the real-historian, he decided this morning, painful as the situation was to

behold—for what historian liked to see nations like Britain and France demean themselves in this way?—pertained to the Reichskanzler's real aims. Yes, he wanted to neutralize this "air craft carrier in the heart of Europe"—as he referred to the anomalous Czechoslovakian state; wanted to reunite the three million Sudeten Germans with their supposed "homeland"; wanted to possess the country's formidable Maginot line of defences, of great strategic importance to Germany's weak south-eastern flank. But was that all?

Beyond this—Streichland couldn't help but believe—a deeper motivation, a deeper cynicism inspired the Reichskanzler's actions and could, at any moment, spawn entirely different desiderata in the man's incensed brain. The man's sense of his own destiny demanded gargantuan risks—else that destiny wasn't sufficiently put to the test. "Without great risk, nothing is gained in life; with great risk, everything becomes possible," the man had declaimed on their recent walk down the Obersalzberg. He wanted to force his will upon, and express his deep contempt towards, his European neighbours, whom he regarded now as a group of enfeebled personalities—"desiccated England," "decadent France," "haughty Czechia," "rabid Russia." So that one might legitimately ask: could any human concessions satisfy the man? Czechoslovakia might be the immediate focus of the man's ambitions but it wasn't the central or final focus. Of this, he was certain.

Yet no European statesman and certainly none of the world's news services had noted this, their psychological acumen being particularly deficient in this regard—unlike the Reichskanzler's own. So that the man's claim that no statesman of vision other than himself existed on the European continent seemed frighteningly valid. None capable of cutting through the cobwebs of the man's rhetoric to grasp his true intent; to perceive that the man was testing not only the West's resolve on "useless, redundant Czechoslovakia" but their resolve in general; and finding such resolve wanting, concluded that Providence was grooming him to recast the European continent in his own image. But he mustn't prejudge events—he told himself. The Reichskanzler was a man of infinite surprises and no doubt would continue to surprise them all in the days to come.

Having concluded his notes, Streichland returned to his watching post in the gardens. The day was another autumn extravaganza, the sky an unblemished sapphire, infused with a hint of black. The air was sharp and

mild at the same time, tainted with the odour of the river, whose sluggish waters were a burnished copper this morning. He reached the cushioned wrought iron settee that he had commandeered the day before, beneath a giant blood beech. Within moments he had passed into a gentle, late-morning sleep.

He awoke refreshed and, shortly after noon, saw a red and white striped motor launch start its engine on the opposite bank and shuttle the British delegation and their large enclosed auto across the Rhine to the Dreesen's dock. Herr Chamberlain stood beside the auto for the crossing, inhaling deep breaths of river air to fortify himself for the conference, about which he was probably as apprehensive as everyone else. The prime minister wore a raven-black morning suit of an old-fashioned cut and carried his trademark umbrella, which he used as a sort of crutch.

Disembarking on the Dreesen's dock, the diminutive figure moved immediately to a stretch of verdant lawn. He seemed to test the ground for solidity with his umbrella and then, looking about him uneasily in his stiff high-collared shirt, turned a full circle, as though some such gesture was required of him. A look of wonder mixed with regret passed across the world-weary face; or perhaps the minister merely paused to ask himself why he tolerated such histrionic meetings. Then he made an even stranger gesture. Spotting a bed of red roses nearby he went to it and sniffed the blooms in a most demonstrative fashion.

A reception party, stepping from several black Tourenwagens, arrived to greet the delegation, including Minister von Ribbentrop and interpreter Schmidt, both dressed in identical black suits that gave them the appearance of clerics. After numerous forced handshakes, the parties reverted to their respective automobiles, and the cavalcade proceeded up the steep road to the Dreesen—where it was met at the front door by a smiling but clearly jittery Reichskanzler.

While the conference was in session, in one of the hotel's second floor meeting rooms, Streichland returned to the hotel for a late lunch on the terrace. He chose a table off to the side, away from the tralatitious gaggle of world reporters in their stale, slept-in clothing, drinking great quantities of Rhine wine and beer. The snatches of English, American, French, and Italian that he heard showed the extraordinary range of interest in the conference. He received many querulous looks and thought that perhaps one or another of these news mongers might approach him and

enquire who he was, this quiet observer who fraternized with Propaganda and Foreign Ministry staff yet ate most of his meals alone.

Luckily, no one disturbed him, and he was left alone to enjoy the Dreesen's delicious fare. After the meal, he reverted to his watching post, halfway down the river bank, the comfortable wrought iron settee beneath the majestic blood beech, whose foliage provided ample protection from the blistering afternoon sun. The river remained eerily quiet, devoid of traffic, with the European barges and tourist craft sequestered several kilometres upstream and downstream for the duration of the conference.

The first meeting concluded by mid-afternoon. The British limousine shuttled back to the dock and discharged a somewhat stooped Herr Chamberlain and his trio of grey-suited ministers into the motor launch for the return passage. The transaction took some time, as the big English auto—a Rolls Royce, loaned probably by the British embassy in Berlin—had to be manoeuvred gently on board the small craft. Why the party required its own auto and couldn't have used a German one on either bank was a mystery; but perhaps these British peace makers needed to add a little symbolism of their own to the proceedings.

Herr Chamberlain conveyed a notable stiffness as he waited for the auto to be driven on board, gripping his umbrella tensely and intermittently driving its sharp tip into the grass as though trying to remove a noxious weed. The rose beds, alas, were no longer of interest to him; so Streichland could only surmise that the conference had gone badly. This time the diminutive minister sat in the closed auto, poised rigidly upright, peering out the open window perhaps at the limp Union Jack above the Petersberg.

He didn't dine with Herr Schmidt as planned. That afternoon, hurrying through the lounge, the interpreter spotted him and stopped momentarily to rush his apologies about supper and enquire whether he might visit Streichland in his room later that evening. It was nearly eleven o'clock when he arrived. He couldn't stay, the interpreter regretted—considerably out of breath—but supposed that the Reichsprofessor might appreciate a summary of the day's events. The Herr Prime Minister had come with a proposal, basically offering the Reichskanzler all of his demands tendered at the Berghof the previous week.

“... But, wouldn't you know, when Herr Chamberlain—in that prim, self-satisfied way of his—delivered his proposal our Führer declared it out of date. Imagine the shock on Herr Umbrella's face! Things had changed in

the interim to render the proposal inadequate, the Führer said, and began citing, among other things, claims by the Hungarians and Poles to their portion of the Czechoslovakian carcass. At this Herr Umbrella balked. Indeed, I must confess I was shocked at this turn of events myself. Then our Führer stated new demands; in particular a faster more comprehensive cession of the Sudeten territories. The meeting ended abruptly and the Herr Prime Minister departed in a most angry mood. However, they are to meet again tomorrow. So there you have it! For your ears and no others— Reichshistorian Streichland! I shall keep you informed!”

Disposing of him with a brusque, impatient look, the interpreter dashed off, tossing, with a gesture that was like flinging a scarf about his neck, this farewell in his wake: “Sleep well! Don’t let your dreams carry you away! Remember we’re still dealing with human beings here! Tomorrow promises to be a busy day!”

He was grateful for the visit but confused by the interpreter’s intentions as well. Why the latter had presented him with a summary of the day’s events he didn’t know; perhaps to assuage his own guilt over his participation in these one-sided negotiations. Or perhaps the Reichskanzler had instructed him to report to his Reichshistorian.

He prepared for sleep convinced that the Reichskanzler was toying with his enemies, or those he deemed his enemies, and would shortly spring to his senses. Likely, the leader would soften his attitude and accept the British terms, which were after all the terms set down by him at Berchtesgaden, a fair and reasonable set of concessions under the circumstances. His sympathies, however, went out to the poor Czechs, who, like the Austrians, would soon find the German army in their backyard. Obviously the Dreesen’s other guests were in need of a good night’s rest tonight, for they, too, settled down shortly after midnight.

The next morning, from his watching post in the garden, Streichland observed a motor launch on the opposite bank start up its engine and ferry the trio of grey-suited ministers from the British delegation—but no prime minister and no automobile this time—to the Dreesen dock; and then return with them a short time later. And mid-afternoon, a redoubtable Herr Schmidt crossed the river to the Petersberg with a large brown envelope in hand—a communiqué from the Führer to the British prime minister no doubt. An hour later the interpreter returned, sans envelope, and disappeared into the Dreesen. Sometime after that, Herr Chamberlain’s

grey-suited ministers shuttled across the river again, presumably with a response to the communiqué.

This whole pantomime might have been amusing to watch were it not so deeply troubling—troubling to see history play itself out predictably in this way, to imagine the petty haggling and bartering that must be going on, and the misunderstandings that could so easily accrue through the translated messages. Streichland was glad that he took no part in these exchanges, glad that he wasn't Herr Schmidt. His challenge as a historian wasn't to participate in or shape history but record and make sense of it afterwards—or nonsense, as the case may be. In the meantime, he would stay removed from this tedious drama unfolding before his and the world's eyes at Bad Godesberg am Rhein.

He didn't spot Herr Schmidt in the dining hall that evening, only the man's ministry colleagues, who, seeing him standing in line at the restaurant entrance, motioned him to join their table. The conversation was generalized among the six ministerial and legal experts present. Things had evolved much as he had surmised from his watching post. The two leaders hadn't conversed in person but in written communiqués; though the two sides were expected to meet again before the conference was concluded. Midway through the meal, Deputy Minister von Weizsäcker joined them, breathing anxiously and looking quite red-faced as though he had just dismounted from his horse. Mindful of the eyes riveted upon him from the reporters about the room, the deputy shielded his mouth with his hand before sharing his news with his staff in hushed tones.

"It's on, gentlemen! Another meeting between our Führer and Herr Chamberlain . . . confirmed for later tonight . . ."

Then, in a masterfully neutral tone, one that could never be charged with treason or disrespect in a court of law, he added: "It looks, gentlemen, as though we're in for another of our Führer's midnight history lessons. So be forewarned!" Then he proceeded to speak and act as though nothing were amiss and he were a vacationer joining his fellow vacationers for a meal. Feeling that he was less welcome at this table of diplomats this evening than on the previous one, Streichland excused himself when the waiter arrived with the dessert menu.

A little after seven next morning, he was breakfasting at his usual table by the window in the dining hall when one of the Foreign Ministry's legal experts whom he had met the evening before, a Herr Paravant, entered

the room and gestured that he wished to join him. Streichland cleared the table of morning papers to make room for the fellow. Herr Paravant was a slight slip of a man in his mid-thirties with a narrow, elongated head set off sharply by a black goatee.

“There’s far too much happening for my tastes,” he began, with a sigh of exasperation.

His job, Herr Paravant confided (the man was an expert in international law), was to translate the results of the conference into impermeable legal prose. He had been up half the night drafting a tentative agreement, he said, but couldn’t sleep a minute longer. Perspiration formed on the man’s brow as though he had just mounted a steep set of stairs. Although no other diners were present—except for the Reichswehr early risers, who congregated at their usual spot in the middle of the room—the advocate spoke in hushed tones of the events of the night before.

“The meeting between Herr Chamberlain and our Führer,” he reported, “only began at midnight and didn’t conclude until two in the morning. As you can imagine, by this time our British guests were exhausted and befuddled. Our Führer, on the other hand, was in fine form, having slept during the afternoon and dined late!”

The Advokat had been on call in the adjoining room—“along with almost everyone else in the ministry.” He had reached this point in his report when Herr Schmidt, looking quite pale-faced and in need of sleep himself, showed up at the salon entrance. The interpreter scanned the room as if it were filled with diners before acknowledging and joining them, borrowing an armchair from an adjacent table to hold his sizeable frame.

Herr Schmidt was far from friendly at first, as though regretting his candid disclosures of two evenings ago. But after reviving himself with some black coffee, he opened up and gave his own account of what had happened the night before.

“Herr Chamberlain felt betrayed by the Reichskanzler’s change of mind, the escalation of his demands, and it seemed that nothing would come of the meeting. Communiqués passed across the river throughout the day. I myself got to deliver one of these—you may have noticed. I didn’t, of course, know what the missive said until Herr Chamberlain opened it in my presence. At the midnight conference, things heated up further when the Führer presented his demands in writing to the ‘Birmingham plutocrat,’ as our Führer calls Herr Chamberlain behind his back. Of course Herr

Chamberlain grew incensed and accused the Führer of presenting an ultimatum to the Czechs—*ein Diktat*—and one impossible to carry out. The Führer, waving the piece of paper in the air, denied this—couldn't the Herr Prime Minister see that the paper was clearly marked *memorandum*? Chamberlain's face turned pale. At precisely this moment, an adjutant arrived dramatically to report that the Czech government had ordered a general mobilization of its troops. We thought all was lost. The moment was lost psychologically for the British, in any case. But the Führer, always resourceful, always full of surprises, recovered himself and tried to assuage Herr Chamberlain, who, I must say, looked defeated by this time. He would withhold military action until he had heard from the Czechs. At the end, everyone was worn out and not thinking very clearly, except, of course, for our Führer, who thrives on such midnight confrontations. That's all I have to report for the present, Streichland!"

Advokat Paravant, who had nodded agreeably throughout his colleague's report, gave a final nod of approval.

"I'm sure there'll be a general announcement this morning," Herr Schmidt concluded. "The British have agreed to deliver the *memorandum* to the Czechs. Who knows how they'll react!"

Later that morning, Streichland had just occupied his watching post under the majestic blood beech when he saw a flurry of activity outside the hotel. A brown-uniformed Ministerialrat was flailing his arms and shouting loudly, reporters were gathering anxiously, and a microphone and speakers were being hastily installed on the terrace. Obviously a press conference was about to take place. Holding to the rear, hidden from the Propaganda Ministry officials who were orchestrating the event, Herr Castorp among them, Streichland joined the throng.

A bull-voiced Reichs-Rundfunk official reported that the talks had gone "promisingly" and that Herr Chamberlain had agreed to transmit a "memorandum" from the Führer to the Czech prime minister outlining his demands—the contents of which sounded indeed like a *Diktat*. The Führer had departed for Berlin to await word from the Czechs. The "untimely" Czech mobilization was mentioned. Then the bullish voice announced that the conference was concluded and dismissed the group summarily. The official allowed no questions, which caused groans of disgruntlement among the members of the press corps.

Reporters scurried across lawns to their autos or headed on foot to

the train station. The British prime minister had left as well, he heard one reporter tell another in a broad American accent. Streichland entered the lounge to observe the departures from one of its comfortable leather armchairs. Herr Castorp noticed him, after the Reichsrat had checked out, and came over to talk. A permanent look of worry had imposed itself upon the boyish features. The washed-out eyes, peering blearily through their thick lens, looked on the verge of tears. Sheepishly, he confided: "The next few days will most certainly determine everything . . . *everything!* Be sure to visit us at the ministry. We can talk then." And the Reichsrat was off, in a great flurry, to one of the waiting automobiles, carrying his matching black leatherette cases.

Within half an hour the Dreesen was deserted. At the noon meal, the dining salon was empty, and Streichland was able to obtain a table by the window. He ate his most leisurely meal to date at the hotel and read more vacuous reports in the papers of the day before. And he pondered what to do next; where to go next. But he didn't wish to join the crowds departing the town by rail; so he decided to remain where he was—to extend his stay.

He informed the front desk of his plans, and a cordial Herr Dreesen emerged from the manager's office to greet him, the first that he had seen of the proprietor, the Reichskanzler's old party friend. The owner was delighted to meet the Herr Reichsprofessor and pleased that he was extending his stay. A full-bodied man of late middle age, with handsome suntanned features, Herr Dreesen oozed the ingrained hospitality of the born innkeeper. He was chagrined to learn that his distinguished guest was lodged on the third floor and apologized profusely for this "oversight." With a snap of his fingers he arranged for him to be moved forthwith to the second floor. He escorted him himself to a lavish suite of rooms, a large sitting room and bedroom, furnished with antiques and fine watercolours. French doors in both rooms led to a common balcony, which Herr Dreesen swung open to reveal a spectacular view of the river and Seven Sisters. His voice ringing with pride, he informed Streichland: "This is the suite we offered Reichsaussenminister von Ribbentrop!"

Within minutes his valises followed, and, a short time later, the writing table that he had requested; not the card table that they had given him before but a fine eighteenth-century gaming table in flaming maple and golden satinwood, which didn't cramp his legs. He napped deeply, with the balcony doors open, and awoke to a room flooded with golden light and the

air scented with roses. The apprehension, the unease, of the last few days was lifted; though a temporary reprieve, he knew.

That afternoon water traffic returned to normal on the mighty river of Wotan, Thor, and the other Teutonic gods. A steady stream of industrial barges and pleasure craft plied the eruginous waterway in both directions. And that evening the hotel began to fill with guests—affluent, well-dressed elderly couples for the most part, who travelled with expensive pigskin luggage and the occasional manservant; new tourists or possibly old ones who had been sojourning at the hotel when the hastily convened conference was announced and had to be shunted elsewhere for the duration. The peace and pace of Hotel Dreesen returned to what it normally was—that of a comfortable Rheinhofel for the affluent middle classes.

That evening, the dining salon displayed these new lodgers in formal attire. Even the waiters seemed transfigured; to move with a more graceful, relaxed gait. Instead of gossiping about *Mitteleuropäisch* politics, they regaled their guests with descriptions of the area's luxury spas and Kurhotels, its curative iron-rich springs, and the day trips offered by the Dreesen. Of course were someone to mention the conference, as he heard one couple do, then they sprang to life as experts on the proceedings, not the political but the social aspects of the event, the meals and Rheinwein consumed, and consumed in great quantities, room preferences, and the fresh flowers that had to be flown in from the Duce's Italy to adorn the first class suites.

Before retiring, Streichland telephoned his friend Christoph in Berlin. Though they usually corresponded monthly, they hadn't spoken on the telephone since July. His friend wasn't at all surprised to hear that he was in Bad Godesberg.

"I would gladly join you there for a few days were it possible," the Hungarian repined. "But the situation here is . . . well . . . you can imagine . . ."

Their conversation followed its usual indirect course, intimating much but revealing little, the coded language that they used whenever they spoke on the telephone now.

". . . But, of course, there's much to relate," he told Christoph. "Things have gone well for our Führer, as you might expect. I shall remain here another two days, then come to Berlin. I think I should be there at this time."

The reference to the Führer's success was meant to trigger an alarm and to signal, in fact, the opposite meaning: *Things had not gone well for the*

leader.

“I am delighted, my friend, and look forward to your visit.” Christoph was elated. “By the way, don’t miss our master’s Sportspalast speech tomorrow evening! It should be a good one and might settle matters once and for all! We’ll have much to talk about when you arrive . . .”

The next day, he played the role of tourist and toured the surrounding country by deluxe motor coach. Returning to the hotel late afternoon, he encountered Herr Dreesen at the front desk, the hotelier exuding warmth and hospitality in his gold-braided uniform. The jovial innkeeper invited him to a private gathering in the hotel’s Bismarck lounge that evening to hear the Führer’s Sportspalast speech. Streichland thanked the handsome, tanned proprietor and went to his room to rest.

When he entered the lounge, around seven-thirty o’clock, he found the room filled with a select group of guests, about sixty or seventy in number. Most of them were couples, dressed in formal evening attire, as though guests at a gala ball. Herr Dreesen and his wife were formally attired as well, he with his gold party badge displayed prominently on the satin lapel of his evening jacket. They welcomed each of the arrivals personally, a mix of hotel guests and local friends, it seemed, and directed them to a buffet table where a great quantity of food and drink had been laid out. Frau Dreesen, a jovial, heavy-set woman, with startling copper-toned eyes and healthy rubicund complexion, held his hand affectionately, while reiterating how pleased she was to meet such a “close personal friend of the Führer’s.”

The guests took their crystal glasses and gold-rimmed plates of food and seated themselves in the comfortable chairs about the room. The evening was the coolest so far in the Rhenish resort and a thriving fire burned in the fireplace. Streichland chose a seat by one of the open terrace doors, preferring the tonic air of the river to the artificial warmth of the fire. A radio console in one corner was broadcasting a selection of Johann Strauss waltzes. The late September sun, already low in the sky, had passed from view behind the hills on the river’s opposite bank, and its golden afterglow, like the charged colours of the blood beeches on the Dreesen’s lawn, flooded the lounge.

At half past the designated hour, the dreamy Viennese waltzes ceased, and a steel-voiced announcer came on the air. Raucous noise from the Berlin sports arena drummed through the room, from an audience, they were told, which numbered over twenty thousand persons. There followed

the usual anticipatory remarks during which Herr Dreesen's agile waiters replenished their guests' Dom Perignon. Then the lights dimmed and the Reichskanzler began to speak. It was a voice that was hoarse, phlegmatic, drained of life, a voice that had to struggle even longer than usual to find the right timbre—not the voice of Germany's confident Führer-Kanzler. But then, with the phrase *Herr Benes*, a spark was struck, and a fire ignited; the words tempered suddenly to a fine steel by the man's wrath. The enemy was engaged, struck in the heart, execrated and repelled. The enemy was Herr Benes, the Czech president, who lacked the Reichskanzler's vision for his country and had the audacity to reject the Godesberg *memorandum*. This wilful Benes who dared threaten the Führer's dream of a greater German Reich . . .

But our dreams won't be thwarted or our rights forfeited, the voice with its dreary insistency and singular monotony let up a moment to gasp for air and adopt a posture of feigned reasonableness, foreswearing any *further territorial demands in Europe*. But the respite was a momentary one and the mouth began spewing its venom again: *Germany has no interest in these Czechs!* With every gasp, every denunciation, every spasm of hatred, the audience of twenty thousand strong reacted with renewed vigour; and then, when the Reichskanzler had finished—it was an unusually short speech for him—the Sportspalast erupted in a final thunderous ovation, choking the airwaves with the refrain: *Führer befehl, wir folgen! Führer befehl, wir folgen!*

The guests in the Dreesen lounge broke into applause of their own at this finale, jumping from their comfortable armchairs to do so. All repeated the vile incantation, one woman shouting the words into Streichland's ear: *The Führer commands, we follow!* He must have let out a silent gasp, for the woman returned an antagonistic look, and for a moment he feared that she or her oversized Bürger husband might reprimand him for his lack of enthusiasm. He emitted a fake cough, which, in effect, turned into the real thing. The guests made hungrily for the dessert table, which the Dreesens had cleverly withheld until after the speech. Muffling his cough, he snuck outside through the terrace doors, with the image of the woman graven on his mind, her look of absolute transfiguration, as though the Führer had descended upon the grand salon and singled her out for special recognition.

Christoph met him at Berlin's south station the following evening and was overjoyed to see him. Embracing Streichland affectionately, he

said: “How good, dear friend, to see you at this terrible hour!” Then added: “Give me your bags. We’ll take a taxi to the Sans Souci to deposit them—then the Csárdá and Tiergarten!”

Christoph was as discouraged as Streichland had known him to be, describing the situation as “serious this time and possibly fatal!” His friend gently wrested his valises from him. “You’ve brought too few clothes and too many books for a crisis like this!” he half-scolded Streichland, trying to strike a note of levity, while they sought a taxi on the busy platz. But there were no taxis to be found in Berlin this evening. So they decided to walk to the hotel.

On the way, Christoph described the mood of the city the last few weeks.

“You’ll find the city much changed. This has been a nerve-wracking time for Berliners. They hoped to enjoy the all-too-brief northern summer but could see nothing but war on the horizon. No one wanted to talk about the crisis, however, because no one could express his true feelings without blaming someone—and everyone knew who was to blame!”

Indeed, the worry and irascibility was palpable on the faces of pedestrians they passed—unlike the faces of the Dreesen’s loyal Führer followers. No one dared look them in the eye, except to dismiss them or discharge the most antagonistic of looks.

“You heard his speech last night . . . have you noticed how his fulminations have gained a new stridency, a new militancy—with the Czech government serving as scapegoat. . . . But you heard the speech. Notice how the vitriol spills over to reveal his own dark soul. Again and again, he castigated Herr Benes, but using language that most accurately describes himself—words like *duplicitous*, *dictatorial*, *demoniacal*. . . . Now who do those words truly describe—not the Czech president certainly!”

Their walk to the hotel was interrupted by a military parade through the city centre. They heard the crush of heavy vehicles as they reached the Linden and made a detour in its direction.

“Oh yes, I forgot to mention. He has arranged a display of force for God knows what reason, perhaps to reassure himself that he still has an army should his Sudeten demands be rejected.”

But though the army, and local Polizei, had prepared for the event, Berlin’s civic population had not—or would not. Only a scattering of onlookers stood at the corner of Linden and Wilhelmstrasse to observe the

divisions of studious young warriors pass in their new armour-plated vehicles, the heavy spiked wheels of which reduced the summer-softened asphalt to a viscous consistency in spots.

The few Berliners who happened to be in the vicinity of the parade stood stunned by what they saw. They, too, had clung to their radios the past few weeks and prayed that war wouldn't touch their lives. Few, if any, had come to watch the parade but had merely happened upon it, as they themselves had done. Some passed on immediately but with an invisible shake of their heads; others stopped querulously to observe the parading columns and then walked guiltily on. A range of emotions filled the blank faces—shock, disbelief, plain alarm—but certainly not enthusiasm. Even on the dishearteningly fresh faces of the soldiers one saw little enthusiasm—only a kind of boyish wonder; as though these young men were play-acting the role of warriors.

The columns rumbled down the Wilhelmstrasse at an accelerated pace. The timing was all wrong, in any case, for a swift equinoctial dusk was descending upon the city, draping machinery and faces alike with a deathly hue. They followed the divisions as far as the Reichskanzlerplatz. Across the platz, not more than two hundred metres distance, stood a triumvirate of figures on the chancellery balcony. The Reichskanzler, in resplendent commander-in-chief uniform, was positioned at the centre; with the widely contrasting figures of Herr Göring and Herr Goebbels on either side of him. Behind them, in their shadow, like some ordinary manservant, hovered the solivagant Herr Hess, the spastic thrusts of the man's head evident even from this distance.

By the time Christoph and he had reached the platz, the mighty trio had disappeared; no doubt whisked inside by Herr Goebbels. The propaganda wizard wouldn't have been pleased with such a pathetic show of support from Berliners, who, beleaguered by the tensions of the past few months and weary from a long day at work, wanted only to return to their homes and family suppers.

The next morning, they met at his friend's office. The Reichskanzler's *Diktat* was to expire at two that afternoon, after which time the tyrant vowed to wipe Czechoslovakia off the map. Neither of them had any heart for work—though Christoph felt that he needed to stay by the telephone—so they decided to await events in the latter's office.

At ten o'clock, the radio reported a new development. Herr

Chamberlain's government had ordered mobilization of the British army and placed its fleet on high alert; and had also begun the evacuation of school aged children from its cities.

They ate lunch in Christoph's office. Finally, only minutes before the expiration of the Reichskanzler's *Diktat*, came the announcement that broke the tension of the preceding hours: news that the British, French, and German powers were to convene in Munich tomorrow—to resolve the fate of the Sudetenland; a move masterminded, it was given out, by Germany's "longstanding and loyal friend Herr Mussolini." The Italian leader would mediate the conference in the Reichskanzler's adopted city. The announcement made no mention of President Benes or the Czechoslovak state.

The news took them both by surprise but also brought some relief. They decided to leave the stuffy office for a walk, to discuss this new turn of events—free from the listening ears and probing eyes of the library. Once in the Tiergarten, Christoph gave vent to his pent up emotions.

"I would guess the Führer has won his gambit. Britain and France will most certainly capitulate. They'll cede the Sudeten territories to him and spare themselves and Europe another war—at least for the moment."

Streichland had drawn more or less the same conclusion.

The ensuing conference, at Munich's Führerbau, the symbolic home of the party in the Bavarian capital, lasted from mid-afternoon until two-thirty in the morning. At its conclusion, the powers who had convened the conference dismantled the Czechoslovak state, ceding the entire Sudeten portion of the country to Germany. Days later, on Sunday, October 1, the date set by the Reichskanzler in his Godesberg *Diktat*, German forces occupied the Sudetenland. The country's natural mountain defences, together with its formidable man-made ones, were surrendered intact. And the resident Czechs, nearly a million of them, were cruelly evicted from their homes without being allowed to take any possessions or farm animals with them. As a culminating humiliation, the Czech government was excluded from the discussions, its ministers sequestered in an adjacent room of the Führerbau and made to await their country's fate. *Führer gets cake and devours it too*—a crass headline, in one of the American papers, put it. Yet it was how history would put it as well.

Photographs in the European papers over the next few days showed a British prime minister with a startled look on his face, a transparently

broken French prime minister, a cocky Duce, and a reinvigorated Führer-Kanzler: the conference's dramatis personae posing before, during, and after the signing of the vile agreement. Streichland was given many photographs of his own, when he visited Herr Castorp at the Propaganda Ministry later in the week. The photographs, presented to him proudly by the Reichsrat, were added to the other doleful material in his valises. The photos tested human understanding and credulity to the full: jubilant crowds greeting the French prime minister upon his return to Paris; similar crowds greeting the British leader as he landed at Heston aerodrome, waving a paper he called *a guarantee of harmony . . . assuring peace in our time*.

Evidently, on the morning following the conference, and with insufficient sleep, Herr Chamberlain had visited the Herr Führer at the latter's Prinzregentenplatz apartment, to request the leader's signature on a *memorandum of peace*. According to Herr Schmidt, whom Streichland encountered at the Foreign Office a few days later (the indomitable interpreter looking quite exhausted from his translation marathon in three languages—but optimistic nonetheless), the demure Birmingham plutocrat had surprised the sleepy Reichskanzler with his request. Herr Schmidt related the incident: "I was present at the meeting. The Führer signed the hastily composed document—but with noticeable hesitation. With the dubious paper in hand, the prime minister returned to England, waving it at the welcoming crowds at the aerodrome. The memorandum states the desires of Great Britain and Germany to remain friends and maintain a European peace—but it's a completely worthless piece of paper. . . at least that's the opinion of most of my colleagues at the Foreign Office. I saw the Führer sneer when he described the document to von Ribbentrop afterwards."

Streichland decided to stay on in Berlin, at least until he could ascertain the truth of the conference for himself. In the end, however, he found the affair to be all too predictable—humanly and inhumanly predictable. The Reichskanzler had pulled off his greatest gambit, his greatest triumph, or so the German papers proclaimed in unison. Only a few dissenting voices were heard and these from across the Channel.

Herr Duff Cooper, First Lord of the British Admiralty, resigned from the British Cabinet with the statement: "It was not for Serbia or Belgium we fought in 1914 . . . but . . . in order that one great power should not be

allowed, in disregard of treaty obligations and the laws of nations and against all morality, to dominate by brutal force the continent of Europe. . . . Throughout these days, the prime minister has believed in addressing the Herr Führer with the language of sweet reasonableness. I believe he might have been more open to the language of the mailed fist.”

And the wise Herr Churchill, a government “back-bencher,” as they were known in England, put the matter even more bluntly in an emotional speech to the Commons: “We have sustained a total, unmitigated defeat. . . . Do not let us blind ourselves, all the countries of Mitteleuropa and the Danube Valley, one after the other, will be drawn into the vast system of Führer politics radiating from Berlin.”

The Englishman’s words elicited derision from some of his peers at Commons. To Streichland’s ears, however, Herr Churchill’s assessment was just and, more frightening, probably prescient. In time, no doubt, he would gain a fuller picture—the historical picture. But would it matter all that much? From the start, a futility had hung like a dark cloud over the proceedings. He couldn’t help but conclude that no one, not even the Reichskanzler, understood what was happening or what was at stake. The affair was largely a game to him, whose rules he invented as the game progressed; and in time he would grow weary of the game. What then? Historical imagination would prove the chief tool in assessing the damage, not the mass of documents that would land on his desk pertaining to the crisis—the so-called Rankeian *facts*.

Already, from his researches, he knew what these documents would say. In his mind, he had already set fire to them and was allowing his imagination to begin its rueful reckoning. For what remained forever opaque in all such determinations were the Reichskanzler’s true motives, which weren’t so much motives as a perdurable hatred—a yearning for revenge against the Czechs, who had stood up to him; but even more deeply, a yearning for revenge against those who questioned his sense of history, a yearning for revenge against humanity at large. What remained forever elusive, which no documentation could reveal or evince, was the strength of the man’s will, the degree of his risk-taking, the depth of his pessimism.

End of chapter