

CHAPTER THREE

Meeting with the German Reichskanzler

June 1933

1

Streichland wasn't sure that he would hear from the party Führer again, after his abbreviated meeting with him at Bad Reichenhall airfield on that windy April day in 1927. He followed the leader's skittish career in the papers and on the radio. The man seemed to be the common thread that ran through the news of the day. There was the post-war economic depression, which hit Germany harder than the other countries devastated by The Great War, producing a deflated currency and five million unemployed by 1931. There was the reparations debt levied upon the nation, which Germans could never hope to repay and which stood as an unremitting symbol of their humiliation and defeat. There was the endless political squabbling among the right, left, and centre groups, resulting in eleven parties running in the Reichstag elections of November 1932. There was the failure of the Weimar Republic to redress these matters. Many felt that Germans were temperamentally more suited to being ruled by a Kaiser or Bismarck figure than by a dysfunctional parliament. There was the violence on the streets, which violence always seemed close to the surface of day-to-day reality, such that there wasn't a person in Germany who hadn't experienced some version of it first-hand—Streichland included.

These were problems that, with or without the extremist Workers' Party, existed throughout the republic, but were somehow given focus by this party Führer. His name came to be associated with these problems in that he, and he alone, articulated them and even dared to point a finger at their root cause—though always careful, Streichland noticed, to avoid offering solutions of his own; proposals that would have pinned him down or allowed him to fail himself.

During our interview sessions one evening, Streichland spoke of this difficult period in the nation's history, the events seemingly as fresh

in memory as if they had occurred yesterday.

“ . . . The man, an Austrian *émigré* remember—thus an *Ausländer* or outsider to many Germans—couldn’t vote until granted honorary citizenship. From his vantage point as leader of a disgruntled minority party—though one that had grown considerably over its decade long struggle—the man pummelled the shaky republic. He had his own newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, though it was often silenced by the authorities. But even without the paper, he had the presses and airwaves of Germany to transport his message to the masses. Whenever he spoke, whatever he had to say, he was quoted at length—and since his speeches were usually inflammatory they were quoted verbatim. Thus he had the entire German communications network at his disposal in his bid for power. This network kept him in public view, quoted his attacks, his at times justified jeremiads against the ineffectuality, corruption, and treason of the republic. Over and over his message became: ‘Everything great and noble in our country has been threatened.’ So numerous were his enemies that he hardly needed to seek them out: they came to him with outstretched arms, begging denouncement. He had only to turn a searchlight on the moment to catch it in the act of its own defilement . . . ”

And so Streichland watched as much of the country softened towards this *Ausländer* bohemian corporal; watched as many of his colleagues underwent fervent changes of heart, joining this Führer and his brown shirts in their disgruntlement with the status quo. Did he undergo a change of heart himself? He would never answer that question directly—only indirectly; presumably because too simple-minded a query. But then one evening he provided a kind of tentative answer.

“ . . . Like so many others I was of two minds—one the product of a conscious reaction, another the product of an unconscious one. Consciously, I listened to the leader, heard and even gave weight to his fulminations—for there was always a good deal of common sense in what the man had to say—rationalizing to a degree that it wasn’t he himself but the forces, the idealism, moving through him that merited attention. The moment was ripe for overthrowing—and he was the most articulate voice arguing the case for revolution. The man was a cipher, I knew, but then history often makes use of ciphers like this to bring about change. But no,

I didn't take the man seriously, although many of my colleagues did. I didn't because I experienced another reaction—a deeper, more unconscious emotion. I could still tap into my first clear impressions of the man: my first instinctual revulsion. Instinctively, I was repelled by the man, and saw him as someone who could lead the German people to destruction. It was a primitive, more atavistic response—to be sure—yet valid nonetheless; the same response, only in reverse, as that of many of my colleagues, who felt drawn to this pseudo Messiah.

“A whole generation in their thirties and forties—wounded souls drained by the country's defeat—found solace in his words. The spiritual and physical hunger they felt—physical hunger, remember, is always the great catalyst of the other appetites—was requited by this Führer. . . . Can you imagine, one of my colleagues, who taught the history of Christianity, told me one day that this Führer awakened in him the same feelings that another Saviour awakened in the early pilgrims suffering under the stern Roman rule, feelings that drove those disenfranchised citizens into the arms of the rebellious Christian sect. Such latent desires did this Führer awaken in you to remake your own life—drawing upon a deep reservoir of disaffection within a whole generation. The despair and frustration were already in place; he had merely to touch the sore spot, which, uncannily, he knew how to do.

“Yet—we should remember—he won the souls of only half the people. In the Reichstag elections of 1932, his party secured only thirty-seven per cent of the vote, which fell to thirty-one per cent in a subsequent election four months later. Even when he was proclaimed chancellor, his rating only rose to forty-four per cent—the highest he ever received. So we could be generous and say that he won the soul—the minds—of only half the German people; the rest found him repulsive, at least initially. . . . that is to say, instinctively.”

* * *

But did Streichland change his mind over time? Did he change it after 1933 when the opposition literally handed the chancellorship to this flamboyant Führer, in the mistaken belief that they could control him? The

Führer, after all, promptly dismissed the cabinet and formed his own government. A year and a half later, following President Hindenburg's death, he incorporated the office of president into that of Reichskanzler, an act accomplished under the auspices of the insentient German courts.

This was the question I put to him on another occasion while we dined at one of the ethnic restaurants near the campus that we frequented at the time. Did his own attitude towards the leader change after 1933?

"Yes and no," he replied. "If anything my low opinion of the man culminated in 1933—reached, let's say, a first stage of disillusionment. There were certainly others to come. But by then my opinion of the Republic had sunk very low as well . . ."

He was adamant, however, that he never lost touch with his initial reaction to the man, experienced on that windy airstrip at Bad Reichenhall—"tossed up like a vivid dream from the unconscious"—that the man was evil and would lead the German people to disaster.

But then he insisted on another distinction . . . I will never forget the look on his face when he made it. His features went ashen, as though his face had been consumed in flames and only the ashen form remained.

"You see I thought I could play God to this Satan . . . and in the process garner some important truths about human nature and about history, which was always my driving passion . . . believing that I could always fall back on the powers of reason and imagination to penetrate the darkness . . . that I could harness this Führer . . . play some part in the way history works through such shallow yet charismatic personalities. What foolishness! I believed that I plumbed the depths of the man's soul, that I alone did so . . . even developing a kind of self-satisfaction because of my seeming clairvoyance—imagining that I possessed something of Nietzsche's acute psychological instinct, his seasoned nose for decay within civilizations . . . and could work clandestinely on history's behalf! Madness! I had seen to the horizon merely, not beyond. My powers of imagination were no match for this demon's. I had much to learn, all of us did, about the human soul, the demented human soul, to say nothing of the history-making process itself. The learning would come in slow, painful stages. But my naïveté sufficed at the time. Foolishly, I stood aloof . . . believed that I stood aloof. Life lay in wait for me like a furtive beast and I

stepped innocently into the lair. . . .”

2

The Reichskanzler had been in power for a mere six months—but what an eventful six months. The Reichstag fire, in February, had been the signal event for more revolutionary acts. The Communists, supposedly, were responsible for the fire, but there was speculation that radicals from the Reichskanzler’s own party had set the venerable old building ablaze—home to the Reich parliament since Bismarck’s time—in order to impugn the Communists and Socialists, who were certainly capable of such incendiary acts themselves. Still, whoever the true villain, the results were clear and swift. With the support of President Hindenburg, the Reichskanzler rushed into law a “Decree for the Protection of the People and State,” suspending the sections of the constitution that supported individual freedoms. Thousands of Communists and Socialists were arrested, and their effectiveness in the Reichstag terminated. Yet another election followed. But even with the image of the Reichstag fire and the new chancellor’s stern retributive measures fresh in everyone’s mind (something the Reichskanzler was able to remind everyone of since he now controlled the state radio and presses, and his evening *Deutscher Rundfunk* broadcasts reached twenty million households), the party won only forty-four per cent of the vote—or seventeen million souls. The other parties, Communist and Social Democrat among them, held firm. The German people, or a majority of them at least, withheld their support from the new chancellor.

Then, in late March, the Reichskanzler proposed another decree—known as the “Enabling Act”—intended “to remove the distress of the people and state.” The decree, which was to remain in effect for four years, removed power from parliament and placed it in the hands of his chosen cabinet—thus in the hands of the Reichskanzler himself. It passed only because all possible opposition had been silenced. The man’s power was nearly absolute, except that he was head of the government merely

and not the state. President Hindenburg still oversaw matters of state, with virtually unlimited powers should the aged field-marshal choose to exercise them—including the power to impose military law upon the nation. This he could do by means of the Reichswehr—the remnant army from the Great War—of which he was still the commander-in-chief.

The Reichskanzler had left the stormy seas of political struggle only to enter the even stormier seas of political office. Yet throughout these turbulent months—the incessant attacks on the Communists and Socialists, the numerous arrests, the murders, the lorry-loads of SA policing the streets, the disbanding of all political parties except for the NSDAP—the man seemed to gain in stature. He was constantly in the news. His speeches were reprised in the newspapers. His voice stormed the radios of the nation as people sat down to their meagre suppers. And since Germany was a thin wedge of a country and not a longitudinal one like the great Soviet Union, with different time zones, the whole nation could be found at home, and thus held hostage, at six or ten o'clock each evening.

And, indeed, the man was exceedingly good at holding the nation hostage. His voice, his forceful way of declaiming injustices, the resonant timbre of his attacks upon the Communists and Socialists, his high moral tone and idealism, his repeated invocations of the Christian God, touched the most vital nerves of many of his listeners. One evening, while sitting down to his own humble meal, Streichland turned on the radio to hear him speak. After several months' experience with radio the leader had learned not to shout; had learned to build his voice gradually, to employ timbre and vocal nuance effectively. Streichland's notebooks record his reaction: "I could feel something in my spirit give way; could almost believe that the man might lead the German people to a better and more just future. But mostly what I felt was how others must feel: how others must hear the leader's measured plea as though a lifeline thrown to a drowning soul, a whole nation of drowning souls.

"Yet what did the voice say? It inveighed and inveighed. It promised an end to strife on the streets, the threat of recurrent revolution, economic suffering, corruption, the false promises of self-serving politicians. *'Christ himself would resort to physical violence were he alive*

in present day Germany,’ the voice raged. Who, hearing such fervent, pious anger wouldn’t be moved? When the speech concluded, a chastened male voice broke through the static to announce a concert: Bruckner’s *Second Symphony*, from Berlin’s Philharmoniker, under the direction of Furtwängler. It was one of my favourite symphonic pieces. I loved the work, the marvellous adagio in particular, which I consider one of the most moving meditations in all of music, but didn’t want the crude emotion aroused in me by the Reichskanzler’s speech to pollute Bruckner’s exalted music; so I turned the radio off and, for many minutes, sat silently at my eating table without stirring. My soup was cold when I returned to it. . . .”

3

Just after noon, in mid-June, the telephone rang at the Schönborn residence.

Gretchen, the Schönborn’s elder daughter, who was nine at the time, answered the call: long distance from Berlin for the Herr Doktor Professor. The girl called upstairs to him. Streichland happened to be sitting at his desk at the time. The caller was the Reichskanzler’s male secretary, Herr Hess, telephoning from Berlin. Streichland was told to be patient a few minutes, the Reichskanzler wished to speak with him but had stepped outside his chambers momentarily. For a good five minutes Streichland waited, listening to the crackling of the receiver and imagining the great distances that the lines had to traverse in order to reach Munich—wondering why the Reichskanzler wished to speak with him . . . yet not altogether surprised by the call. For since January, when the man had been proclaimed chancellor, he had the strongest premonition that he would hear from the leader soon.

At last the Reichskanzler came on the line, breathless, apologetic, enquiring about his well-being as though he were an old and trusted friend. He hoped that Streichland remembered their meeting of years ago as fondly as he remembered it himself. He had been rereading his

Phenomenology, he said, and found it an even better book than on first reading; had he produced his planned sequel? He hardly waited for answers to his questions but rushed headlong into “the urgent matter at hand.” He wished to arrange a meeting—“a propitious meeting of minds”—as soon as possible. There was a project he wished to discuss with him. He would be in Munich the following week. Would Streichland join him for supper at his apartment at that time?

Streichland was surprised but not really shocked by the call. He accepted the offer, thanked the caller, and the conversation came to an abrupt end. He stood staring at the ebony and brass contraption on the table in the Schönborn hall, amazed that he had uttered so few words in response. If compliance is all he wants, I can hardly complain, he thought. For he was at once pleased and displeased by this sudden communication from Germany’s new leader.

A week later, at precisely six o’clock, a chauffeur collected him from his lodgings and transported him to the Reichskanzler’s apartment near the Prinzregenten Theatre. A small contingent of guards, wearing black uniforms, policed the dwelling. Their chief, older than the chauffeur and less friendly, escorted him inside the elegant neo-rococo structure to an open-rail elevator, which shuffled him to the second floor. A valet, in a white linen tunic, opened the door, and ushered him inside. The high ceilinged room was furnished with overstuffed chintz couches and chairs, modern beech-wood tables, mahogany book cabinets, and a lovely Biedermeier chest of drawers, furnishings of a type popular among the German middle classes in the late nineteenth century.

Some fine leather-bound editions filled the cabinets: works of Schopenhauer, Goethe, Nietzsche—the Schopenhauer the rare Leipzig edition of 1860. He removed one of the Nietzsche volumes. It was the lovely octavo, *Musarionausgabe* edition, published by the philosopher’s sister. Most of the modern German historians were represented: Herder, von Humboldt, von Ranke, Droysen, von Rochau; together with the chief British historians of the same period—some of Streichland’s own favourites among them: Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle (a handsome three-volume edition of the latter’s *History of Frederick the Great* in English). Many of the books had notes in the margins or had whole paragraphs

marked; and all of the books that he looked at had their pages meticulously cut.

Other volumes in the collection were of a more dubious nature; inferior works that he wouldn't have allowed in his own library—books by Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Arnold Spengler among them. And there, wedged among these more questionable items, was his own *Phenomenology*. He removed the volume and found that it, too, had been underlined and commented upon—extensively; and masterfully bound in glove-soft morocco, a binding meant to last for generations. He was impressed. The Reichskanzler, it turned out, was an avid reader. The man had dropped out of school at an early age but no matter. The man was that most unique of all wanderers on this earth—a self-educated individual.

He perused the print and watercolour collection. There, too, he was surprised at the man's good tastes. Some fine seventeenth- and eighteenth-century etchings hung on the damask-covered walls, and a pair of absolutely exquisite watercolours—a bucolic lowlands scene by Antoine Pesne and a view of the Alps at sunrise by Caspar David Friedrich.

A strange mix of odours permeated the room, despite the fact that its elegant French doors were open, leading to a balcony overlooking an inner courtyard. There was the smell of burnished leather books from the cabinets but also the smell of fetid vegetation. Geraniums, for some reason, came to mind, though there were no plants or flowers in the room except for a vase of apricot-coloured roses. The voices of children happily at play ascended from the courtyard below, amplified by the enclosed space. He chose an armchair by the window, delighting in the scatter of evening light upon the silk-covered walls and richly-grained mahogany surfaces. These impressions coalesced to produce the most felicitous if also expectant of moods.

After some minutes, the Reichskanzler entered the room with outstretched palms and shook his hand. His host's eyes were the first thing that struck him: deep Prussian-blue. They sparkled with a youthful enthusiasm but conveyed a dazed look as well, as though he had just awakened from sleep. The man looked more youthful, less aged than at their previous meeting, and slightly fuller around the waist. He wore a casual jacket of ink-blue linen that matched his eyes, a white starched shirt

dressed with a yellow silk tie, and wool trousers, the earthy colour of turf. The flamboyant jacket and tie enhanced the youthful appearance. He continued to hold him by the arm while leading him into the room next door, where a table had been set at one end.

They sat, the Reichskanzler at the head and Streichland at his right, and the valet began serving the meal, beginning with soup and black bread, which the Reichskanzler attacked voraciously. The conversation remained superficial, with his host doing most of the talking. After a time, the latter stopped his narrative to query Streichland about his own life, and Streichland provided a brief summary of events since their last meeting, concluding with the thankful remark that his life hadn't undergone the fateful changes that the chancellor's own life had undergone in the interim.

The waiter next brought a bourguignon of beef and vegetables, at least for Streichland; the Reichskanzler was served separately from a casserole that contained only root vegetables and no meat. No wine was served. Throughout the meal, the Reichskanzler continued to speak freely, as though conversing with an old and valued friend, mentioning the difficulties that he had encountered convincing the old president—“*der alte Hindenburg*”—to proclaim him chancellor. He spoke also of the party rally at Nürnberg in September, the largest such rally thus far, and how he hated preparing speeches for so many “avaricious followers.” He hoped that Streichland could take the time from his teaching duties to attend.

His host finished each course ahead of him, including the dessert, which followed immediately upon the main dish, a simple bread pudding with a spoonful of nutmeg-dusted cream on top—a dessert that reminded him of the puddings that they used to serve at the orphanage. The Reichskanzler instructed the waiter to serve the dessert in the parlour, where the setting sun was flooding the room with its dusky, ochre light.

The Reichskanzler chose one of the armchairs by the window, and Streichland the chair across from it. Then, as though their previous conversation had been a mere prelude, he jumped into what he termed “the business at hand.” He had in mind a special project now that his position as chancellor was secure. He had great plans for Germany, plans that others had attempted but failed to put into effect—“thwarted by

history or human fate.” No history or human fate was going to thwart these plans now. The modern world had become the testing ground for the major ideas of all time: freedom, nationhood, self-realization, the power of the will. He had been ordained, he said, by Providence, to refine and clarify these ideals. Then, making one of those extravagant gestures that Streichland remembered from their first meeting, gestures that suggested that the rallies and public speeches and behind-the-scenes machinations represented only one side of the man’s nature, he confided: “I remember our meeting in 1927 fondly. I have loved that part of Bavaria since first setting eyes on it in the twenties. That afternoon at Bad Reichenhall aerodrome, gazing towards our beloved Austria, I understood my role in history as never before . . . and that is what I wish to convey to you this evening . . . because you understand the crisis of the present age and the need for action better than anyone . . . individual action. What is it you so wisely remark about our great Friedrich in your book? *He saw the future with the clarity most of us expend upon the past. Because of which, he accepted the future as the great challenge of his life, applying his full mental and spiritual resources to the task.* Nicely put, Professor! That is why I wish to bring you . . . *to share . . .*” he made another grandiloquent motion of his hand that seemed to reach all the way to the mountains, while his eyes clouded over with a kind of dreamy somnolence . . . “*this vision of a new future, a new Germany, led by a reinvigorated Volk!*”

Streichland listened without response, not altogether sure what the other meant. Then the man’s speech took a more practical turn. He mentioned a history of the Reich—“an official history of the Reich.” The phrase “history from the inside” was used. Streichland could see that the leader wasn’t altogether sure what he meant. The man alluded to his plans for Berlin’s renewal—worked out with a favourite architect—and spoke of a similar reconstitution of German history.

“What I propose is a revisioning of German history—from Friedrich to the present. I want someone outside time to record what is happening, but not only record, to inspire events, to inspire the future, to inspire me!”

Throughout the older man’s monologue, which began quietly and hesitatingly but gained strength as it progressed, Streichland continued to

remain silent.

“What we need,” the leader punctuated his words with another thrust of his arm—“is a new breed of historian. A higher, purer conscience to keep an eye on history. A kind of impartial witness, unswayed by history, by individual bias . . . can you grasp what I mean?”

“Absolutely, absolutely,” Streichland broke his silence at last, wanting now to contribute something of his own to this one way emotional outpouring, to show some sympathy with the man, whose seniority, he was reminded, was that of older to younger brother rather than that of father to son. “Nietzsche without the Nietzsche,” he blurted without hesitation.

“Excellent! Excellent!” his companion exclaimed, taking Streichland’s turn of phrase and marching with it triumphantly about the room; though, in fact, the man remained seated and had merely propelled himself forward in his chair .

Then Streichland spoke his mind. In recent years he had given much thought to these matters himself, to the climacteric in modern civilization that the great nineteenth-century German visionaries had proclaimed; a crisis really within history itself: *what we humans perceived human history to be—thus human destiny*. He was embarked on a book of his own on the subject, he told his host, a more discerning study than his youthful *Phenomenology*, entitled *The End of History*. He spoke of an age coming or having already come to an end and of a new age beginning, an age that required new strength, tensility of will, indeed a new vision of mankind.

He spoke of the need for history—our understanding of past and present—to change accordingly; to drop its subjective blinkers; to gain charge of its own destiny—to apply subjective insight objectively to human struggle. At one point he used the term “psychological.” “History or rather historians spend too much time overcoming each other’s and the age’s biases—and not enough time perceiving what is genuinely new about their age. It is the lack of insight that I find so deplorable. A matter of perceiving both woods and trees equally. Historians, as a group, lack such wide vision . . .”

He spoke forcefully, eloquently, on matters close to his own heart.

They weren't profound ideas and weren't finalized certainly. The insights would come later, gleaned from hours of quiet contemplation, quiet servitude, drawn from the cocoon of the unconscious; nonetheless, honest ideas, inaugural ideas, delivered by a mind that was in full possession of its powers.

Streichland could see that his host was moved, was sympathetic to his way of thinking, his manner of speech, his person. Again and again his listener sprang forward approvingly in his chair and, when Streichland had concluded his impassioned plea, reached forward enthusiastically to grasp Streichland's hand.

"*Bravo! Bravo!*" the man applauded, "you understand history as well as I do myself! My instincts were right all along! You are the right man for the job! Let us then do what we believe and proclaim: *For Germany's sake! For history's sake!*"

Streichland returned the other's handshake fervently. Whatever hesitations he had felt, whatever negative impulses he had felt percolating upward from his unconscious, including the impulse to kill this man, all of which had been genuine in their time, expressive of equally valid truths, were that instant shunted aside.

Instincts and prejudices were brushed aside. What remained was the sense of a united purpose, a united point of view, the sense of a confirmed task, overseen by a vigilant Providence . . . a sense of history unveiling its arcane secrets layer by layer, of fate reaching out and touching him on the shoulder with its sword. But perhaps most of all a feeling *of supreme mastery over his own destiny!*