

## *Chapter 18*

November 1945

**T**he five recorders meet at 7:30 P.M. in my office. “You know that I have brought you together to proceed with your recollections. I am interested only in the major events.” I pour the wine.

Reynitz says, “I understand and will keep my comments to those events. Hope you don’t mind my starting first.”

“Certainly not.”

“As an official recorder for the Reichstag, I took down Hitler’s speech to the Reichstag in February 1938,” says Reynitz, sitting very straight. “Hitler said, in brief, ‘It is intolerable that across our border, in Austria and Sudetenland [northern Czechoslovakia], live millions of our countrymen who want to be part of Germany. I demand their right of self-determination.’ He had convened the Reichstag to make this announcement for all the world to hear.”

## Witness to Barbarism

“This was Hitler’s first military action since the Rhineland invasion two years before, right?” I ask.

“Yes, it was,” Reynitz continues. “Hitler used a combination of tactics to occupy Austria: a buildup of pro-Nazis there, blunt diplomacy, and a show of force at the Austrian border. A subdued Austrian chancellor could do nothing and so was replaced by a pro-Nazi in March 1938. I remember that month. German forces marched into Austria and occupied the country with little opposition. This was called *Anschluss* [annexation]. Briefly, that was what happened.”

Reynitz goes on: “I remember that Hitler convened the Reichstag afterward, confirming his action and calling for a plebiscite, which produced over 98 percent in favor. There was also a plebiscite in Austria, with the same result. No one knows who counted the votes.”

“What was the reaction of the German people you knew?” I ask.



*Nazi roundup of Jews in Vienna—110,000 Austrians, 60,000 of them Jews, died in concentrations camps. Only 600 of 89,000 Jews remained in Vienna.*

Krieger picks up on this: “They said it was like a miracle that Hitler could do again what he did in the Rhineland—bloodless occupation. They viewed him as a strong, decisive leader who made his actions seem legal.

“In the fall of 1938, Hitler made a speech at the Sportpalast in Berlin that the Sudetenland was his last territorial claim in Europe. This speech was carried worldwide by press and radio. It was followed by a meeting in Munich of the leaders of France, Britain, Italy, and Germany. It resulted in the Munich Pact, which allowed Hitler’s troops to occupy the area.

“This was another bloodless takeover with the appearance of legality. It was supported by the German people I knew because Germans lived there,” Krieger concludes and rests in his chair.

Then the recorders and I discuss the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, who returned to Britain in triumph and made a speech to Parliament declaring achievement in Europe of “peace in our time.” I tell them about the news coverage of the event in the United States, which reported the Munich Pact as the appeasement of Hitler. I remember many press photos of Chamberlain in formal dress, with tall silk hat and the ever-present umbrella in one hand. He became a symbol of appeasement.

“I can’t imagine anyone being as gullible as Chamberlain. He was a fool,” I think to myself, as Jonuschat picks up our earlier discussion.

“Outside the Sudetenland, the rest of Czechoslovakia was then surrounded by German forces on the north, west, and south. Hitler wasted no time and forced that country to capitulate in March 1939. It was quickly occupied. We know now that Hitler threatened invasion beforehand, and there was little pretense of legality in that move.”

“I’ll say. There wasn’t a pretext. Hitler was on the march.” Then I ask Jonuschat about Hitler’s next move.

“Hitler’s press and radio stated that there would be an uprising of Germans in Memel, Lithuania. English newspapers reported that Lithuania was defenseless and that its leaders had signed a surrender agreement in advance of the occupation by German naval forces. Again, it was a bloodless action, but it was the last one.

“Hitler made a speech before a cheering crowd in Prague and a week later made a repeat performance in Memel. There was wide reporting of these events, followed by a few months of no military action,” Jonuschat ends his statement. The recorders watch him with pride.

“About Jews, what did Hitler do next?” I look at Buchholz.

Buchholz is ready as this is one of his pet subjects: “Hitler’s action against the Jews went step by step—with milder, then with stronger actions—always to see how far the German people would let him go.”

“Give me some examples.”

“First were the decrees. Next, stronger decrees forcing Jews to display the Star of David on their clothing. Changing their first names so all females would be called Sarah and all males, Israel. Cutting their rations in half and barring Jews from public transportation and the civil service. Almost everything possible was being done to force the Jews to leave Germany voluntarily,” Buchholz recalls.

I ask him to continue.

“Then came the violence of Krystalnacht [Night of Crystal, or Shattered Glass], named after a night of breaking windows in Jewish shops and synagogues all over Germany in November 1938. Hitler’s order came after the reported killing by a Jew of a minor German for-

eign officer in Paris. The order, as we now know, included instructions to arrest thousands of Jews and to take things of value from the synagogues. The Jews were arrested ‘for their own protection.’ They were sent to concentration camps, I was told.”

“Go on.” I notice that all the other recorders are looking at Buchholz. He seems to have a lot to say.

“A friend of mine said his two young children participated in looting a Jewish shop the night before. He was ashamed of what his children did and scolded them. Their reply was, ‘Everyone else was doing it. The police just watched and did nothing.’” Buchholz finishes.

“That’s revealing,” I say. (See appendix.)

“This was carried further,” recalls Reynitz. “About a week later, Goering called a meeting of gauleiters and kreisleiters from all over Germany. These were the chiefs of key areas in the structure of the Nazi party [not the local or state government]. *Gau* is a major area around a big city. *Kreis* is a cluster of small towns. *Leiter* means leader. The meeting was held at the new Luftwaffe Ministry compound, and I was one of the recorders.

“Goering said it was decided to impose a fine of a thousand million marks on all Jews in Germany. He said, in brief, ‘You have seen how the people feel. [There was no significant objection in Germany, although most Germans didn’t understand its purpose.] We have decided they deserve to be fined. Besides, we can use the money, starting with money from insurance claims for the damage [of Krystalnacht], which will be paid in foreign currency. Then you must see that money, valuables, and businesses will be taken from Jews in each locality, wherever found, to help pay this fine. Bank accounts, jewelry, automobiles, everything of value.’”

“How in the world could Hitler get by with all this?” I wonder. “Was Goering furious at that meeting?” I look again at Reynitz.

“Goering was firm but not furious. He was stronger when he complained that plate glass for stores was expensive and that some of it could be bought only in other countries at higher prices. He thought like Hitler, so he carried out his orders, all coming out of Hitler’s hostility toward the Jews. Of course, many Nazis, too, hated Jews because of their wealth or status. I am speaking of Nazis who had little or nothing of their own. They were quite willing to carry out Hitler’s orders against the Jews.”

Reynitz goes on: “At another meeting Goering discussed repayment of the debt for rearmament. He had a simple answer: ‘It will not be Germans who will pay. It will be the losers. So, why worry about it?’”

“What about unemployment?” I question Thoet. He hasn’t said a word so far today. I note that he is a small man, most often a colleague of Reynitz. Born in 1906, he became a verbatim reporter for several states of Germany, then for the Reichstag. After a short military service, he was chosen by Krieger, in September 1942, as one of the best recorders to serve at Hitler’s military conferences. No wonder—utmost detail is his habit, and he has a keen memory. The other recorders watch him as he prepares to speak.

“Employment was getting better. Millions went back to work in factories and other places or were busy in Nazi organizations or the military. The autobahns [super highways] were being built. They were said to be important for military and civilian needs. The plans for the autobahns were drawn years before Hitler gained power, but until the money could be found, they were gathering dust.”

“I wondered how the autobahns could be designed and built so fast. Now, I know. Thank you very much. That was wonderful information. I didn’t know that the plans for the autobahns had been drawn years before Hitler,” confesses Krieger.

“Neither did I,” adds Reynitz.

“How was the general economy going?” I ask Thoet.

“In 1939, between Hitler’s military buildup and Hjalmar Schacht’s genius for financing it, the whole economy picked up quickly. I must also tell you that Schacht had a falling out with Hitler and was relieved of his position. Schacht thought there was too much spending on armaments and had made a negative remark about Krystalnacht,” Thoet recalls.

“What else did Hitler do?” I look at Buchholz and turn a page in my notebook.

“Church leaders began to speak out from their pulpits against the gassing of retarded people as ordered by Hitler. A highly respected bishop in Berlin gave a strong sermon against the killing of mentally incompetent people and called it murder. Public reaction was also strong. This practice ended, but there was no official response to the protests. It was just quietly stopped,” Buchholz remembers.

“Why do you suppose Hitler did this?” Everyone is looking at Buchholz.

“I can only surmise it was done as a part of Hitler’s goal to get rid of more undesirables—another attempt to reach the stronger German society he envisioned. Also, I suppose, taking care of mental illness was expensive and revenues were short. I should add that earlier those with chronic illnesses were sterilized, and there was no public protest about that.”

“Did Hitler do anything remarkable regarding children or unwed mothers?” I remember, during my war-crimes investigations in the summer of 1945, seeing a large hospital in middle Germany. The occupation troops called it a “baby farm” because it had handled many unmarried maternity cases. An American officer-nurse there had worked with German nurses who told her that many of the maternity patients were single women whose babies were signed over to orphanages before admission. She said German women in that town outnumbered local men almost three to one and there had been what amounted to “free love,” with government encouragement.

Now Thoet tells me, “Girls, usually members of the Nazi party, would have children by other members of the party or the SS. Each girl was required to sign a document giving up any control of the child. Each child was placed in an orphanage controlled by the party. There the children were indoctrinated in Hitler’s philosophy like any other children. The employer of each girl was required to pay her for several weeks before and after birth. She went back to work and remained single. Neither parent was allowed to see the child.”

“Can you imagine? Weren’t there any laws against this?”

“There were paternity laws, but they were not used in these kinds of cases. The employer and the government paid all costs. And the practice was kept as secret as possible. Remember, Hitler wanted as many Germanic-type children as possible. So there was no discouragement of the practice.

“I didn’t hear any protests from the churches or the public. Maybe that was because payment of expenses was kept so secret,” Thoet concludes and leans back in his chair.

“How about the Rev. Martin Niemoeller?” I ask Reynitz about a



famous inmate of Dachau. “He has received a lot of publicity in the foreign press and radio, I notice.”

“Hitler ordered a constitution for the new ‘Reich Church’ for all Protestants soon after he became chancellor. Reverend Niemoeller was a popular Lutheran minister, and he objected from his pulpit to the state takeover of the Protestant churches,” Reynitz tells me. “He was arrested and tried in 1937, but the jury acquitted him. He was arrested again in 1938 for offenses against the state.

“I was one of the reporters at his second trial before a Nazi special court. A Lutheran myself, I was particularly interested in the trial,” Reynitz continues. “Gestapo men testified against him, saying they attended his services where he spoke from the pulpit against Nazi actions and especially about mistreatment of the Jews. Niemoeller testified firmly in his own defense about people being put in concentration camps without a trial, among other things.

“Thoet and I agreed during a recess that if the jury acquitted him, Niemoeller would go to a concentration camp. That’s exactly what happened,” Reynitz concludes.

“What occurred then?” I ask, looking at Krieger.

He says calmly, “In April 1939, I heard Hitler’s speech at the Reichstag. He said the reports that he was planning to attack Poland were an invention of the international press. This was typical of him.

“It was the same pattern of diplomacy and promises. Up to that time each bloodless invasion came after promises, even signed treaties, assuring no invasion. Between invasions there was a space of time—a cooling-off period—before starting the next. Between times Hitler was clever in using the fear of war and Communism to frustrate and confuse those who might oppose his next move, in or out of Germany.

“Hitler had openly demanded the return of the Polish corridor, including return of the ‘Free City of Danzig’ [*Gdansk* in Polish], which was set up by World War I treaties. Poland refused. This area was important to Hitler’s plans because it divided the large German state of Prussia,” Krieger finishes on a distraught note.

“Did you get any feeling of how the German people viewed this?” I glance at Reynitz, who seems serious and ready to talk.

“The German people were nervous about these demands. They understood Hitler’s pattern of demanding the return of lost territories where Germans lived, but they could feel the possibility of war. There was open discussion about this because Allied countries were making pleas to Hitler not to start war.

“Then came the *big surprise*,” Reynitz continues. “Hitler announced late in August 1939 a nonaggression pact with Russia. Hitler’s radio and press stated that neither Germany nor Russia would attack the other and that each would remain neutral in case either country became involved in war with a third power.

“We learned later that there were secret agreements in the pact dividing up much of eastern Europe. Russia would get eastern Poland, Estonia, and Latvia and would be free to take Finland. Germany would get the western part of Poland and Lithuania.”

“Remarkable. It is difficult to imagine,” I say and look at Jonuschat. He is solemn.

“How did the people of Germany take this?”

“The people I knew expressed astonishment. They were stunned. Up to that time they were always told that the Bolsheviks were our real enemies. Then, all of a sudden, without any preparation, there was a treaty with Russia. The people couldn’t grasp the idea. They

talked about it on the streets and in their homes.” Jonuschat answers so quickly, it startles me.

“That must have been quite a blow to the Communists.” I get up from my chair and look out the window. A few lights flicker in nearby windows.

“Nothing was heard from the Communists until much later. I suppose they were waiting for the party line. Finally, they made a public statement to the effect that Stalin made the pact to prevent Hitler from going farther east.”

“A lame excuse,” I think, as Jonuschat continues.

“I read the English newspaper, which quoted other nations. I bought the paper at a kiosk in Berlin. They were also in the dark until the announcement. All countries reported great surprise. Japan called it a ‘pact with Satan’ and renounced the Anti-Comintern Pact,” Jonuschat recalls.

“That’s quite a surprise,” I say. “What did Hitler do to protect himself against revolt in Germany?” I look at Buchholz. This is a serious question. Dictators are more apprehensive about their own people than anyone else.

“Delayed news was typical of Hitler. He always waited until an event happened before announcing it. It was always the same, starting with his occupation of the Rhineland,” Buchholz recalls. “My guess is that he did this for two reasons. First, he apparently didn’t want to give anyone time to prepare for protests in Germany. Second, I think he felt that when Germany and neighboring countries were faced with a *fait accompli*, it would be too late for them to do anything about it. Looking back, I see that all of the protests from other countries were only verbal.”

Reynitz recalls, “I remember reading in *Mein Kampf*—Hitler noted that ‘an alliance with Russia embodies a plan for the next war.’”

“What happened next?” I look at Karl Thoet, who sits up straight, apparently eager to contribute.

“Hitler addressed the Reichstag on September 1, 1939, and I was assigned to record his speech. He said that Polish troops had started firing on Germans along the frontier that very day and that he ordered a return of fire to remove any element of insecurity.

“Hitler immediately hit Poland with his blitzkrieg, capturing western Poland up to the agreed-upon dividing line, and Stalin’s forces moved westward to the dividing line, so that Poland no longer existed. In hindsight, one can see that if Britain and France interfered with Hitler’s forces, at least Russia would not. Also that Hitler’s use of the blitzkrieg would conquer Poland so fast that Britain and France would not have time to interfere. It took a little longer than expected.”

“How did German civilians react?” I again ask Thoet.

“I did not talk with many people, and everyone was careful to speak very little about the invasion of Poland. But I did hear several remarks from civilians about the ‘Sitzkrieg’ in the west. I mean France and Britain did not react immediately.”

“Why didn’t the Germans talk about it much?”

“Because of fear of the Gestapo and other informers. There were no public protests, and I gathered that many Germans felt this was Hitler’s way of regaining the Polish corridor and uniting Prussia. There certainly was an atmosphere of fear that Hitler had gone too far, especially, when two days later Britain, France, and others declared war on Germany,” Thoet grimly recalls.

Then I tell the recorders that the pact with Russia and Hitler's invasion of Poland a week later were heavily reported by the newspapers and radio in the United States: "The stunning effect of the blitzkrieg was described in bits and pieces but finally summarized as a completely new type of warfare. This included advance planes bombing and strafing, followed by tanks and slow-flying Stuka planes bombing and strafing in cooperation with tank fire, followed by armored vehicles carrying troops with rifles, grenades, machine guns, mortars, and ammunition. Finally came the foot soldiers to mop up and occupy the invaded area. Poland's resistance was knocked out in a relatively short time. It startled most of the Americans I talked with.

"After a period of silence, we heard that the Communists were saying that Stalin could now show his might in stopping the Fascists from moving farther east. In America, the Communists came off as tightrope walkers," I say, realizing our discussion must end for the day. "This has been quite a session. I've learned so much about the beginning of the war."

"We enjoyed telling it to you—it is so clear in our minds," Krieger answers, and the others nod.

"Certainly, we enjoy reminiscing," says Reynitz. "But you know, we are not members of the Nazi party, and we disliked everything Hitler did. We enjoy hearing about the feelings in the United States, too."

"Thank you, and have a good night." With that, they go to the closet for their topcoats and leave.



*A victim points out tormentor Josef Jarolin, above; and Jarolin takes the stand, right.*

