

17. THE BIRTHDAY

[April 1944]

Today I am going to tell you about one of the worst days of my life. For three decades, I didn't talk about that day at all and, according to my mother, I wasn't supposed to. "Now, Hansel," she had said one day that spring, "we will never raise the subject again." And we didn't, neither between us nor with any other member of the family.... Of course, my mother wasn't always right; I know that now. It is better to talk about some things, but it can be difficult, even fifty years after the event.

The day before it happened, we went to see Uncle Kurt. He had gotten a leave of absence from the eastern front, where he was flying a *Messerschmitt ME-109*, and we all agreed to meet at my grandmother's place. That made sense because his parents had long since died and he liked to hang out at my grandmother's because she was his aunt, which means he wasn't really my uncle, although I called him that. He was actually Aunt Martel's and my mother's cousin, but I couldn't very well call him *that*.

On the way to my grandmother's place, my mother, Helmut and I stopped at the poster column near the canal. It held only two pieces of news and one of them was three weeks old:

"March 30," it said, "Today, the Führer summarily dismissed Field Marshal Erich von Manstein and Field Marshal Paul von Kleist, both for disregarding the Führer's stand-fast order in the Ukraine. Despite Russian advances, following these acts of disobedience, the German armed forces scored numerous victories during their retreat."

The other poster seemed much more recent and looked like this:

Since November 18,
the Anglo-American pirates of the air have
killed 6,100 innocent women and children in Berlin
and have seriously injured 18,400 more.
Now, more than ever, the War Fortress Berlin cries out:
Hail to the Führer!

Uncle Kurt was already there when we arrived at my grandmother's apartment. He wore his uniform, and I instantly spotted the new Iron Cross on his chest. In fact, his being a hero was the

reason for his being here. A week's leave was part of the reward.

Uncle Kurt let me examine the medal and I told him about my grandmother's Mother's Cross, which was so much prettier, but I didn't tell him that part. He also let me read the citation, which he fished out of his pocket.

"In the name of the Führer and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces," it said, "I hereby confer upon Corporal Kurt Förster, Staff Company II/Fighter Squadron 300, the Iron Cross First Class with Swords. Signed at Division Fighting Position, on April 15, 1944, by Gutemann, Colonel and Division Commander."

There was also an official seal depicting an eagle, with wings spread wide, clutching a swastika. When I looked up to return the document, I saw Uncle Kurt holding Helmut in his lap and I read the inscription on the buckle of his Air Force belt.

"God With Us," it said.

Uncle Kurt was rocking Helmut on his knees and reciting an old German children's rhyme. "Hop, hop, goes the rider—when he falls he cries—if he falls into the ditch, the ravens will devour him—if he falls into the swamp, the rider goes kerplunk!"

That was the occasion to part his knees and let the child fall to the floor—ever so gently, to be sure—amidst great laughter all around. Helmut couldn't get enough of it.

"One more time, one more time," he kept begging.

Just then, my mother called us to the table for our evening meal and I noticed Uncle Kurt insisting on the same ceremony that my father had taught me. We men had to stand at the table until all the ladies were seated, and then we sat patiently with our fingertips on the table's edge until all the ladies had taken their first bite, and then we ate our sandwiches, always using fork and knife and never touching any food by hand, and later we cleared the table and washed the dishes in a big enamel basin in the kitchen with water brought to a boil on the gas stove, and then we dried the dishes with a towel, while the ladies chatted in the living room. To Uncle Kurt, as for my father, proper etiquette was very important.

"The ladies of the house did the cooking," he said to me. "It is only right that we do our part by cleaning up afterwards."

Uncle Kurt was equally gallant later when he insisted on walking us home in the dark along the canal, but we weren't quite ready to go as yet. I first had to inspect my latest gift—Aunt Martel never failed me on that account. This time, she had bought me a fingerprint kit, complete with dusting powder, dusting feathers, a magnifying glass, 32 classification cards, and a booklet explaining the entire procedure. Naturally, I took everybody's fingerprints before the evening was spent.

I also took a few more minutes in Aunt Martel's room. She thought I was studying her jewelry case, as I often did, filled, as it was, with a treasure of glistening brooches, ear rings, and pearls. On this day, however, I do not know why, I had another plan. I knew the key was in Aunt Martel's purse and the purse was in her room. I took the key and opened the glass door to her secret cupboard. I didn't care about her love letters; everybody knew about those. I wanted a closer look at the chocolate hussar!

He sat on a magnificent horse which was chocolate, too. And he had been sitting there for twenty-six years, ever since 1918. I was surprised how heavy he was. He seemed to weigh a pound, and he made my mouth water. Nothing was left out, not one button on the uniform, not even a nail on the horse's hoofs. I thought of biting off a leg, but knew it would be too obvious. The horse wouldn't stand straight. I bit off the soldier's head instead!

Aunt Martel didn't notice a thing, at least not on that day, but when I went to bed later that night, I told Teddy the Bear what I had done. We worried about the next day when Aunt Martel would come for a visit, and we had trouble falling asleep.

Two fierce-looking Chinamen, in flowing gowns, came through the balcony door. They bound me, hand and foot, to the four posts of Aunt Martel's bed. They tied up Teddy, too. "Pleasant dreams," one of them said, and he attached a strange-looking gadget above my head. As in the movies we had seen at school, he took a puff from an opium pipe.

A drop of water hit me in the middle of the forehead, followed by another and another still. I heard a thousand drips, in a thousand places; water upon forehead, water upon water; I saw dark Bedouins on camels racing through the dunes carrying off blonde slaves; water upon forehead, water upon water; black men in the jungle danced around a boiling kettle filled with white explorers; water upon forehead, water; I saw the sky become a burning fire, and it fell into the water. Water became blood!

I woke up with a start. I saw the cuckoo clock and heard rain. All the pots on the floor were filled to overflowing. The entire ceiling was dripping, because half the roof had burned some weeks ago and the shrapnel made new holes every night.

The next day was going to be special, in a strange sort of way. Mr. Eisler was sick and we had been told that the 7th and 6th grade boys would all be joined together in Mr. Barzel's room. Thus, I was slated to be in class with Dieter for the first time since the middle of 2nd grade when I was skipped to grade 3 and he wasn't.

Dieter and I took the long way to school that day, east through the gardens and later across the canal on the trolley bridge. We could find more shrapnel that way. Our teachers always told us not to touch the stuff, but we knew perfectly well what was and wasn't dangerous. We had seen the demonstrations in the school yard. Mr. Barzel and Mr. Eisler, certainly, always exaggerated, even told us not to pick up toys and pencils lest they explode in our faces.

"The terrorists are capable of anything," they had said.

When we got to school, we remembered what day it was. The school was decorated with flags, one from every window, and there were nearly a hundred of them. Mr. Barzel called on Thirty-One to recite the story.

"Our beloved Führer, Adolf Hitler," he said, "was born in the Austrian village of Braunau on the Inn River on April, the 20th, 1889. When he was a little boy, he shed tears about the senseless boundary line that separated the Germans in Austria from the Germans in Bavaria. He swore that this boundary line would go, that one day all Germans would happily live together in a nation united. Fifty years after his birth, Adolf Hitler's great dream came true. Greater Germany became a reality. But," Thirty-One droned on, "Adolf Hitler did many other heroic deeds as well..."

Nobody listened, not even Mr. Barzel. He kept smiling at *me*. He had been especially nice to me for a week, even told me I could have my lunch in the classroom and that I didn't have to go down to the yard.

"Too easy to catch cold down there," he had said.

But I knew better. He was still thinking of my *mother*. She had come to meet me every afternoon with Helmut, but Mr. Barzel kept appearing from nowhere, almost stumbling in his eagerness to catch up with her, and insisted on walking us home. That spoiled the whole fun. Come to think of it, she must have been a very beautiful woman. Men's jaws dropped wherever she appeared; even I had noticed that. But when Mr. Barzel asked my mother to visit his apartment after school, she stopped meeting me.

That's why Dieter and I walked home alone that day, and this time we took the regular route. The city had certainly changed a lot since first grade. Plywood, cardboard, and X-ray film had replaced the glass windows in the buildings across from the school. The big cigarette ad at the corner was half gone. "WHY IS JUNO ROUND?" it still asked, but the answer was missing. And all the tall brick buildings on either side of Stuttgarter Strasse had turned into hollowed-out skeleton houses with black scorch marks on all the walls.

Except that something was different on that day! While we had been at school, a rare spring snow storm had swept over the city and left a few centimeters of white fluff on all the sidewalks

and roads. Even as we stepped out of the school gate, big round flakes of snow were still drifting down like cherry blossoms, sticking to our clothes and the walls of ruins, covering the scorch marks around all the empty window holes, covering the craters and piles of reclaimed bricks, covering the iron railing along the canal that had not yet been ripped out to make guns, and even covering the inscription on the block of cement on which Bismarck's statue once stood. But I knew what the sign said, I had read it dozens of times on my way to school:

“We Germans Fear God, But Nothing Else in the World—Otto von Bismarck, February 6, 1888.”

We stopped at the center of the footbridge to feed the gulls. They flew down from the black gutted houses along the canal, now dressed up in fluffy white. Their cries mixed with the air raid sirens.

“A birthday party coming right up,” Dieter said, and I knew he meant the planes. We also knew that there was no need to hurry. The sirens were always early, we had heard the story on the radio a thousand times; the planes were still “over Hamburg, going southeast ...”

A plane came out of nowhere! It flew low and fast along the canal and its wing tips almost touched the crowns of the linden trees. They had new green leaves, covered with a dusting of snow. I saw red-and-yellow tongues flickering along the wings, bullets stitching their way across the bridge.

One plane, a burst of thunder, a single cry on Dieter's lips.

I saw his head, half gone, half turned into a bloody mess. I saw the flutter of his hand, his body jerk, snow turning red. There was no solid ground beneath my feet, I could not breathe, my mind was numb, my body turned to stone. I couldn't move; my words, they wouldn't come. A streak of lightning flashed inside my head, I thought I'd fall, a bolt-struck tree. I shut my eyes, I opened them; I heard gulls fly overhead in raucous rage....

And the red snow at our feet started to melt and the bridge turned, upside down, right side up; I knew Dieter was lost; upside down, right side, my legs carried me down the steps; faster turned the bridge, and I raced to the corner pub that wasn't there; upside down, and I passed the acacia tree; faster and faster spun the bridge—till my legs collapsed at my mother's feet.



Ronnie Olsthoorn, United Kingdom

A Spitfire ready to attack

This 1940 version had a maximum speed of 367 mph. Its machine guns—four on each wing—were sighted so that the bullets from all eight converged at a distance of about 250 yards.