

## Chapter 20

Later November 1945

I meet again with the recorders at my living quarters. They all arrive at 7:00 P.M.

“Who wants to begin?” I ask. “We left last time with the conquering of Poland.”

“I will.” Reynitz raises himself and puts his wine glass on a side table. Pulling himself forward, he says, “Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf* that Russia would provide ‘new territory.’ He had spoken often of this and, as a step in that direction, had made the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan and Italy.

“This was mentioned later at war headquarters. I learned there had been arguments between Hitler and his military chiefs about this question. On one side, the military chiefs contended that attacking Russia first, with the greatest military strength of the German forces, would assure success, while attacking Holland, Belgium, and France first

would diminish strength. Also, Britain and France could be counted on to do little but complain about an attack on Russia, as they did when Poland was struck.

“The other chiefs had argued that military history proved attacks cannot be successful if one’s rear is exposed. Also, Britain and France had declared war on Germany two days after the invasion of Poland.

“As usual, Hitler had given public assurances to the world, after the Polish invasion, that his goals were satisfied. This was his usual statement, to make Britain and France keep their guard down.” Reynitz recalls.

“Then what happened?” I ask Thoet, who sits on the edge of his chair.

“Denmark and Norway were taken over in early March 1940. There was no advance warning. When it happened, Hitler announced there was documentary proof that Britain and France had decided to carry out their joint flanking actions through those northern states, by force if necessary. Hitler said that his move was a friendly occupation.” Thoet stretches, clasping his hands behind his head.

I ask Krieger, “What was the feeling of the people you knew in Germany?”

“Generally, I think those German civilians believed Hitler’s reasons for taking Denmark and Norway. After Britain and France declared war on Germany, it seemed a reasonable move to them. However, we were nervous about the widening aggression. We were more concerned when it was announced in mid-March that our troops had struck through Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

“Hitler, as usual, announced this move after it happened. His propaganda told about proof, mainly by documents, that Britain and

France and others were preparing to strike at Germany through the same route. This happened quickly, and British, Canadian, and Belgian forces were trapped at Dunkirk.” Krieger leans back in his chair.

Thoet wants to contribute. “What happened at Dunkirk?” I ask.

Thoet runs his stubby fingers through his thick hair and begins: “As I learned later, Hitler had considered attacking the Allied troops surrounding Dunkirk, but he left the attack to the planes alone, without ground support. He dallied for two days because he wanted to keep up the momentum of the blitzkrieg into France and was reorganizing his troops. The dalliance was a huge mistake.”

“Why was it a mistake?”

“Because in those two days more than 300,000 Allied troops were evacuated across the English Channel into Britain. When Hitler finally decided to send in his troops to capture the Allies, it was too late. He had been too busy reorganizing his troops. The Allies had already been rescued. I learned this at German war headquarters.”

I am reminded of the 1942 movie *Mrs. Miniver*, starring Greer Garson and showing Allied fighter planes providing cover for thousands of boats—from small motorboats and larger workboats to yachts and destroyers. I tell the recorders about how the British, French, and Belgian soldiers waded into the water and were pulled



*Greer Garson, left, as Mrs. Miniver*

aboard the boats, which quickly moved from the beach. The British Spitfire fighter planes drove away the German planes, permitting the evacuation to continue. Hitler had miscalculated in thinking planes alone could hold the enemy troops.

The recorders nod, and I continue: “Then, Winston Churchill was made prime minister of Britain when Chamberlain resigned on May 10, 1940. Churchill said, ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.’ He started the air bombing of Germany almost immediately, demonstrating the determination of the British. I admire Churchill and have followed his career.”

I open a window as the room feels a bit stuffy. “Then what happened?” I ask Reynitz.

He sits up straight: “I was worried about the expansion of the war and what might happen to my family in Berlin. I lived in an apartment there with my wife and two young daughters while I continued to work in the Reichstag, although there was little work to do.



*Winston Churchill*

“About the same time as the invasion of the Benelux countries—Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—British planes started to bomb German towns. As soon as possible, I moved my family to a smaller town, 45 miles from Berlin,” Reynitz concludes.

I think of Churchill's speech to the House of Commons and excuse myself. I go to rummage through some papers in my bedroom to find an issue of *Stars and Stripes*, then return to my seat. "Prime Minister Winston Churchill's media speech after the evacuation of Dunkirk in mid-March 1940, was anything but humble:

We shall not flag or fail. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing ground. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.

"Dunkirk was a blunder on Hitler's part, and it probably made him lose the war. It was a great victory for the Allies. But let's continue. How did Hitler attack France?" I inquire of Thoet.

He leans forward before speaking: "From Dunkirk, Hitler sent his troops on the English Channel to Calais, Verdun, Sedan, and Belfort, near the Maginot Line. He encircled Alsace and Lorraine with Panzer tanks and poured through the line. The French guns there pointed eastward and could not swing around. The French had abandoned them a few days before."

Thoet continues: "Finally—after the railroad yards and some industries were bombed by the Germans—the French declared Paris an open city."

Then I tell the recorders, "Premier Paul Reynault of France radioed a plea for America to help him 'before it was too late.' A few days later he again appealed to America to 'send clouds of planes to crush the evil force that dominates Europe.' Hearing this frightened me because if Hitler took France, the only Allied force left in Europe would

be Britain. Do you know whether the German people were told about this?”

Buchholz stands, stretches, and says: “Germans were informed about the war in France only when the fighting was over. The Reichstag was called into session, and I was among those assigned to record his speech. Hitler repeated that he had proof that the French were about to strike at Germany through Holland and Belgium, so German forces had to prevent this.”

“Again Hitler made an excuse for his aggression. He was good at that,” I comment.

“Yes, but who believed it?” says Buchholz.

“Would you carry on?”

“He spoke some time, glorifying himself. He was bragging about the quick success in conquering France, thus overcoming a longtime enemy of Germany,” Buchholz recalls, then stretches, and sits down.

Jonuschat and Krieger stretch in their chairs. I watch them relax as I turn the page. Finally, everyone settles down.

“What brought the invasion of France to an end?” I look at Jonuschat.

“France and Germany signed a peace agreement at Compiègne on June 21, 1940, in the same railway car Germany had surrendered in 22 years before. Hitler was there to witness the humiliation of the enemy. I remember the date because it was so important.”

“What did the German civilians think of it?”

“There were doubts in the minds of many of the people I was in contact with—about whether the attack on France was justified or reasonable. But we were told only of quick successes with few

casualties. Everyone was relieved that it had been mastered in such a quick and decisive way. I learned later at war headquarters that there were many losses on our side but more on the French side,” Jonuschat concludes.

“I understand Marshal Henri Petain at Vichy, in mid-France, was put in charge of the French government, but only for domestic affairs. The Germans kept military affairs in Paris. Is that right?” I ask Buchholz.

“Yes, and that was when air bombing of Britain began in earnest. Then came the heavy bombing raid on Berlin, where I lived, in August 1940. I was surprised because Hermann Goering, chief of the Luftwaffe, assured the German population in several speeches that no enemy flier would appear over German territory. If any did, he said people could call him ‘Meier,’ a common name in Germany.”

“Can you tell me what Hitler was planning next?” I ask Reynitz.

“Perhaps I can because of personal experience,” Reynitz recalls. “There was sly talk of invading Britain. I recall a meeting. I was assigned for duty at the Ministry of Propaganda. There the press people were told what *had* to be published and what could *not* be published.”

“Did the press follow those instructions?”

“Yes, of course—it was controlled by the government.”

“Did you hear anything else?”

“There were several briefings at these meetings. At one of them the leading man, the director of this conference, said, ‘We are expecting something, but I can’t tell you where or when it will happen, just that there’s something in the air.’ It was revealed at a military conference later that Hitler had planned to invade Britain.”

“Did Hitler actually talk about Britain?”

“There were questions and answers about Hitler’s earlier offer to Britain to make peace and join with him if there should be war with Russia. I thought to myself, after Hitler had told so many lies about *not* invading neighboring countries, who could believe him? I must add that invasion of Britain wouldn’t shock our population because it would stop the bombing of Germany,” Reynitz finishes.

I ask Thoet, “What was said about the bombing in Germany?”

“The Germans were told by radio that British bombers were killing innocent women and children, a most inhuman thing to do. This was repeated many times. Even Josef Goebbels made strong speeches on the radio to that effect.”

“What was said about the bombing of Britain?” I ask. “It seems to me that with each bombing the other, something must have been said.”

“Nothing was said about bombing Britain, but in November 1940, Goering spoke on the radio and told how Coventry, England, was hit by a heavy Luftwaffe air raid. And he went on to say that other cities in Britain would be bombed. I felt fortunate that my family was out of Berlin,” Thoet recollects.

I can see everyone is getting tired and suggest we take a break.