

Chapter 14

Mid-November 1945

I work nights to handle the pileup of papers on my desk concerning evidence for trial of the other three concentration-camp cases. The determination of which detainees to prosecute requires my review of the work of lawyers, officers, and staff, as well as of other resources.

I continue to talk with Hitler's recorders. The five gather at my living quarters after lunch on Saturday.

"Our discussions ended with Hitler appointed chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg in January 1933. I would like to carry on from there if that is okay with you."

"That will be fine. We are through with most of our work for the trial, and this is a good time for us," says Krieger.

"Good. Who wants to start?"

Reynitz volunteers: "It becomes more vivid to me in retrospect that Hitler started with milder, then moved toward stronger actions.

He was testing the people, step by step, to see how far they would let him go. He became bolder each year. He was attuned to the feeling of Germany and other countries as well. He seemed to know how far he could go before a backlash might occur.”

“What things did Hitler change after being appointed chancellor?”

Reynitz replies: “He started in 1933 by outlawing the labor unions and raiding their offices. I was not surprised by this because, before coming to power, he called unions ‘Marxist organizations led by Communists and Jews.’ His action pleased the large industrialists, who openly supported him with money.”

“What happened to the unions?” I keep looking at Reynitz, who sits on the edge of his chair. The others look on approvingly.

“The unions were replaced by the ‘Labor Front’ headed by [Nazi leader] Robert Ley. Later, leaders of other organizations, including professional groups, were replaced. Hitler’s appointees became the leaders of national groups—representing lawyers, journalists, doctors, architects, engineers, and so on. He obviously wanted no independent groups in the country.”

“That is a good statement, true to fact,” Krieger approves. The others nod their consent.

“What did he do to accomplish that?” I look at Jonuschat, who leans forward, stroking his chin.

“He started to take away the independence of the separate states and later appointed his own men as state governors. This was a bold



Robert Ley

move. The governors eventually appointed local officials and judges. Power was becoming centralized in Hitler's hands."

"Good observation. Wish I had as good a memory. Nice going."

"These events are indelibly fixed in my mind. You would remember them too, if they had the effect of changing the government so radically."

"What about the Communists?" I ask Jonuschat again.

"Hermann Goering raided the Communist headquarters early in 1933 and publicly stated that he had uncovered a plot for a national revolution. All the Communists who could be found were arrested, and soon they disappeared. They were put in concentration camps, as I discovered later. Their seats in the Reichstag were immediately vacant," Jonuschat concludes.



Marinus Van der Lubbe

Reynitz picks up the thread. Relaxed, he says confidently, "In late February, less than a month after Hitler gained power, the Reichstag building was set on fire, and blame was put on the Communists. A young man, Marinus Van der Lubbe, a Hollander and admitted Communist, was charged and put on trial with a few other Communists for setting the fire. Goering testified that he found documents stating that this was the beginning of violent overthrow of the government. I was one of the court reporters.

“The day after the fire, Hitler issued a decree suspending constitutional rights—including free speech, free press, and free assembly. The search for Communists was stepped up. Now there appeared to be a legal right to arrest Communists and to deprive them of their seats in the Reichstag,” Reynitz continues. I decide not to interrupt him. He has a terrific memory.

“At the trial, Van der Lubbe said that he alone decided to set the fire, contradicting Goering’s testimony. While the trial dragged on for weeks, there was more and more street talk that Nazis had helped to set the fire, at many places in the large building. Van der Lubbe testified that he had used only his shirt to start the fire in one place. The jury convicted Van der Lubbe and set the other defendants free.”

“Anything more about the Communists?” I ask Krieger. He seems ready to answer, and he usually has something important to say.

“The trial increased concern about Communist activities. There was growing pressure by the Nazis in the Reichstag for action on the issue. The pressure was intensified by Hitler’s followers. Mobs of them gathered repeatedly outside the building. Included were uniformed troopers and civilians wearing swastika armbands and bearing flags. It was an intimidating demonstration.”

“What happened then?”

“This was the atmosphere in which the Reichstag adopted, by the necessary two-thirds vote, the Enabling Act that suspended its legislative authority. The Enabling Act recessed the Reichstag and gave Hitler the right to govern by decree until 1937. This was later extended for another four years, but in fact it became moot after the war against Poland. Hitler was now an absolute dictator, answerable to nobody but himself. He moved quickly to centralize the government.”

So the fire had two purposes—to get rid of the Communists and to help pass the Enabling Act. “That was a quite a stroke,” I offer, eager to learn more. Turning to Reynitz, I ask, “What did he do about the Weimar Republic’s constitution?”

He is quick to answer: “I learned later that Goering, pragmatic as usual, talked Hitler into recessing instead of dissolving the Reichstag. Besides making it easier to pass the Enabling Act, the Reichstag could be useful. Hitler could call it into session for important pronouncements, to get the attention of the German people and other nations.”

“Hitler was smart to take Goering’s advice. Could you go on?”

“Goering reminded Hitler of this later, when I was present at war headquarters. He said, ‘I told you it would be useful to keep the Stenographic Office of the Reichstag. Those men are here now to help you.’

“To keep the Reichstag subject to his call, Hitler had to keep the constitution of the Weimar Republic. He never tried to set aside the constitution. With the Reichstag suspended, my position continued, with little for me to do. Occasionally I found outside work for lawyers and the courts,” concludes Reynitz modestly.

“That was a good dissertation, I must say. You have fine recall.” I compliment Reynitz.

“Thank you. But all that is burned into my mind.”

I turn to Jonuschat: “What did Hitler do about the Jewish question? This was the overriding issue for him, I take it.”

“Yes. When the Enabling Act was passed in March 1933, Hitler had his Nazis everywhere in Germany organize a campaign to boycott places owned by Jews. They carried banners on the sidewalks, in effect saying, ‘Jews own this place—stay away.’ I noticed that many civilians

ignored the banners and went into these places. The Nazis usually did nothing to stop them, coming or going.”

“Then how did he carry out this policy?”

“After a short time, Hitler issued his first decree against Jews, calling for a national, one-day boycott against their shops, businesses, and professional practices. This was the start—the first step in forcing Jews to leave Germany. I noticed that some Jews left, but the poorer Jews lacked the means to leave. Hitler said publicly, ‘Jews are not Germans.’” Jonuschat concludes and relaxes into the davenport.

I turn to Reynitz and ask, “What happened next?”

He moves forward, pulls his ear, and begins: “In May 1933, Hitler dissolved all political parties but his own. He outlawed strikes of any kind. He talked openly about exterminating all his opponents and frequently mentioned Jews, Gypsies, and Communists. That word, *exterminating*, is closest to the German word meaning ‘take out by the roots.’ I was shocked at his use of that word applied to human beings.

“I was also shocked when Hitler openly stated, ‘We will never get some old bucks into our party, but that doesn’t matter for we will take their children.’ If ‘old bucks,’ by their education and moral beliefs, were openly opposed to him, they were taken away, probably to concentration camps.” Reynitz warms to his subject. I do not interrupt.

“He took the children by forming them into organizations—the Jungvolk when they entered school, the Hitlerjugend when they reached 14 years. They marched, drilled, and greeted each other with a raised right arm and a proud ‘Heil Hitler.’ They were in uniform, and the ambitious ones advanced in rank as in the military. These youth groups were formed before 1933; and now they grew in importance.” Reynitz is attentive to detail.

“Did he take any action regarding education?” I ask Krieger.

Krieger answers with care: “One of Hitler’s first acts in 1933 was to take over the educational system. The emphasis was on ideology—teaching students to think as Hitler did. In some Catholic schools, Hitler’s portrait was hung on the wall next to the crucifix.”

“How effective were the new schools?”

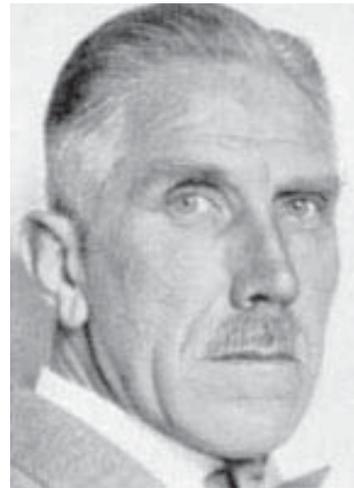
“This new schooling was so powerful that students would sometimes inform on parents or relatives who spoke against Hitler or the Nazis. German civilians had as much to fear from Hitlerjugend as they did from the Gestapo and SS. No matter who did the informing, any reported criticism meant confinement in a concentration camp without a trial. Now that Hitler was in power, his opponents became practically silent,” Krieger concludes.

I ask, “Did the ministers and priests complain about this?”

“Some ministers and priests protested some of Hitler’s actions from the pulpit, and they eventually disappeared, probably to concentration camps. Germany was half Protestant—mostly Lutheran—and half Catholic. The Lutherans were split and had no strong leader, especially after the official Reich Church was decreed in 1933 under a new constitution drafted by the Nazis for all Protestants,” Jonuschat replies.

“This is important,” I think. “What about the Catholics?” I stand, then pace.

“The Catholics were another matter. A concordat was negotiated with the pope in 1933. Hitler sent his emissary, Franz von Papen, to make a treaty with Vatican



Franz von Papen

Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, in early 1933. (Incidentally, Pacelli became Pope Pius XII in 1939.) The concordat was signed about three months later. The essence of it was to say, ‘You leave us alone, and we will leave you alone.’ You know that Hitler was brought up as a Catholic,” Jonuschat answers.

“How did the concordat work?”

“The word went down from the pope to all ranks of the church to the effect, ‘Do not criticize Hitler or the Nazis—this is best for the church.’ I cannot tell you how much the concordat strengthened Hitler, but I believe it was the greatest single thing he accomplished up to that time. People were saying, ‘Even the church is on Hitler’s side,’” Jonuschat ends. I am surprised at his answer.

“Why do you think the pope agreed to that?” I ask Krieger.

“I think the pope agreed because he saw two alternatives and chose the least harmful to the church. On one hand were the Communists. After the 1917 Russian revolution, Stalin imposed his will on the people by purges, killing millions. Russia was atheistic and had an expansionist policy.

“On the other hand, the Nazis at that time were not atheistic and seemed to have limited goals—to stop Communism, to increase jobs, to regain German land lost after World War I, and to end reparations. I believe the pope thought Hitler would eventually go away, while the Communists, believing in world domination, were a permanent force of evil,” Krieger states with conviction.

I rise to open the window a bit. “What about the officers from World War I? How did they take to Hitler?” I address Krieger again.

“Some World War I generals and colonels were critical of Hitler. They were pensioned, and their uniforms were taken away. This was a

lesson to other military officers,” he replies. “But obviously Hitler could not carry on without military experts. Many of the World War I officers supported him.”

“Naturally, they would. They seem to have liked the war, the bang-bang of it,” I respond, and the recorders all laugh. “What then?”

“Hitler was condemned by the League of Nations for his treatment of the Jews. A few months later, he withdrew Germany from the disarmament conference and the League and ordered a plebiscite. These actions were approved by over 90 percent of the vote. It was not reported who counted the vote,” Reynitz answers.

“Where did you get this information?”

“I read British newspapers almost every day for several years, learning more from them than from the controlled press and radio in Germany. There were also other publications available in Berlin. I suspect that these newspapers were an important source of information for Hitler, telling him what other countries knew about his actions and how they felt about them. Apparently sales of English papers were not considered important because so few Germans could read them—less than 1 percent, I would guess,” Reynitz continues.

“I should mention the peace pact signed in the summer of 1933. It was made by France, Britain, Italy, and Germany to maintain peace in Europe. As it turned out, this pact was meaningless. But it showed again how Hitler operated. He took actions like this to assure other nations he would not resort to war.”

“What did Hitler do next?” I turn to Jonuschat, hoping he will have something to add.

“He was secretly building his military machine. Some armament factories were starting to appear. It would take some time—this was

only his first year in power—but he was smart enough to plan for his most likely potential enemies, France and Britain, to lessen their guard.”

“You certainly kept well-informed,” I tell Jonuschat. I am pleased the recorders are being so open and so frank.

Jonuschat leans back in his wing chair, runs his hand through his hair, and continues: “Hitler made a speech, which I recorded, in the Reichstag on January 30, 1934, to report on his first full year as chancellor. It was, of course, broadcast on radio. I remember it was highly acclaimed by most Germans, who felt by now he was providing the leadership the nation needed. Looking back now, I see that the events I have mentioned, taken together, caused radical changes in German society and government. They were unprecedented in the history of the country.”

“This is a good place to stop,” I say. “It’s getting near dinner time, and I know you want to go. I must say that Hitler had an eventful, if horrible, first year. I’ve learned so much and want to express my appreciation for your good memories and straightforward discussion. I can’t thank you enough.”

“We are glad to give all the information you want,” Reynitz answers.

The man is fast becoming my favorite of the recorders. Tall and thin, his back straight, Reynitz leads the recorders back to quarters with a long stride. He is uniquely qualified to answer my questions. With a keen and analytical mind, honed by an excellent education and anchored in common sense, he earned a doctorate in economics from the University of Berlin in 1929. His skill as an observer has been developed from the perspective of one on center stage, just out

Witness to Barbarism

of the spotlight's full glare. For me, he has been the right man at the right place at the right time, an eye-and-ear witness to Hitler's rise and fall.



Liberation at Dachau, April 28–29, 1945.



An American GI gives the last of his cigarettes to liberated prisoners.