CHAPTER ONE

Anschluss

It was a cold, gray late winter morning in Vienna and I had a sense that the mood throughout Austria’s capital city was just as somber. Life in Vienna had not been easy for most people in our country in these 20 years since the end of World War I, but the events of the past few days had deepened the general insecurity considerably further.

Most of my classmates at the Vienna Commercial Academy were more occupied with their usual teenage priorities, but we were all affected psychologically by the recent events in the city and the growing turmoil in our country. These uncertain developments had been dominating my own thoughts for some time.

I was 18 years old and soon to graduate from the academy. I would have normally been thinking about what I would do next. Travel for a bit? Get to work right away? I knew my father was expecting me to join his company in the wholesale cotton business. But somehow none of this seemed important right now.

The date was March 11, 1938 and Austria was at a crossroads. Even here in our school full of teenage boys, things were quieter than usual. There was a palatable tension in the air.

Morning classes were disrupted by the announcement that school was being dismissed and students should go home. No reason was given. Inside my classroom, puzzled glances were shooting all around. The room was buzzing with confusion and conjecture as we rose from our seats, walked slowly out the door and made our ways off the campus. Many of the other students walked in pairs or small clusters, but I was not feeling at all social.

I set off alone on the half mile walk to the trolley station, walking swiftly, passing others bound for the same destination. I didn’t pause for conversation. I boarded alone and took a seat by myself, deep in thought. I had not fully connected the school’s sudden dismissal with the recent disturbances in Vienna, but I had a general sense that things were headed in a dangerous direction.

Austria’s precarious situation was a direct result of Adolf Hitler’s aspirations for building an empire. Hitler was an Austrian by birth and grew up loving art. He had some talent as a painter and applied for the prestigious Vienna Art Academy. When he was rejected, it fueled a resentment that fermented over the years and never went away. Had he been able to establish a career as an artist, the history of the Twentieth Century might have been entirely different.

Hitler attempted to enlist in the Austrian Army at the outset of World War I, but was again rejected, this time for being deemed physically unfit. He ended up being accepted into a Bavarian division of the German Army and served through the entire war. Thus Adolf Hitler earned his German citizenship.

After the war, Hitler attended meetings of the ultra-nationalistic German Worker’s Party, a tiny group at the time, where his fierce intensity and oratory skills allowed him to rise rapidly to a position of influence. Hitler’s activism transformed the fledgling party and it began to build a significant following.

In 1920 Hitler engineered a name change to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, which became commonly known as the Nazi Party. He also adopted an official flag for the organization, incorporating a hooked cross, the swastika, as a symbol of German pride and Aryan identity. This was a symbol that had been in existence for thousands of years, but it would achieve a new stature in service to Hitler as perhaps the most chilling representation of evil in all of history.

The Nazis continued to grow in popularity, fed by widespread discontent as Germany floundered in the disastrous economic circumstances that followed its defeat in the war. The Nazis’ fierce advocacy of German nationalism was accompanied by focusing unrelenting blame on the supposed causes of the country’s problems: the devastating unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended WWI; the exploitive influences of capitalism; the dangerous popularity of Marxism; anything less than total loyalty to the German heritage; and the selfishness and greed of the Jewish “race.” Anti-Semitism had long been a force in Germany and Hitler had no qualms about exploiting it. Hitler loathed Jews.

In 1929 Wall Street crashed and the effects led to a worldwide economic collapse so severe it became known historically as the “Great Depression.” As bad as things had been for Germans (and Austrians) since World War I, they were all the worse now. Unemployment was even more rampant, a great number of families were homeless and food was so scarce that there was widespread starvation. Street fights and beer hall battles among feuding factions spilled out to become riots in the streets. Murders and assassinations were frequent.

Hitler and the Nazis took advantage of the social turmoil to accelerate their rise in power. By 1933 the Nazis allied with Franz von Papen of the right-leaning Deutsche Nationale party to gain a majority in the governing (parliament) Reichstag to elect Hitler as chancellor of Germany. He wasted no time in consolidating absolute power, demonstrating the ruthlessness that would be a hallmark of his legacy. His secret police, the SS and Gestapo, murdered hundreds of political opponents and imprisoned thousands more. He shut down the Reichstag and declared all opposition parties to be illegal. No one dared to stand up to him.

It was not long before Hitler set his sights on new conquests.

The German term “Anschluss” translates to annexation. Germany and Austria shared a common language, border and Germanic heritage. The concept of bringing Austria into a “Greater Germany” had been embraced by many Germans for years. There were those in Austria, as well, who were attracted to the possibility. This was fueled by the seemingly endless economic disaster that followed World War I.

Among the conditions imposed by the victors in the treaties that ended WWI was a permanent ban on Germany’s annexation of Austria. It did not take long for Hitler to ignore this prohibition, just as he willfully ignored many other tenets of the treaties (most notably by his aggressive build-up of German military power). Hitler seeded the growth of a Nazi movement in Austria and from the mid-1930s on they did much to disrupt Austrian government and society. Austria’s ruling Christian Social Party banned the National Socialist (Nazi) party and jailed some of its leaders. Hitler was outraged.

By 1938 the Nazis had rebuilt the German military to sufficient power to cause great concern among the main (Entente) Allied Powers, victorious allies of World War I -- Britain, France, Russia and the United States -- and greatly intimidate the government in Austria. (Italy was among the Allied Powers in WWI, but Mussolini’s fanatical fascism and territorial ambitions were distancing Italy from its former allies by the late 1930s.)

Hitler summoned Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg to a meeting at the Nazi’s Bavarian mountain estate in Berchtesgaden on February 12, 1938. Here he demanded significant inclusion of Nazis into Austrian government. It was an obvious first step toward Nazi control of Austria. Hitler had advocated Anschluss in his manifesto, “Mein Kampf,” and in many speeches. Although von Schuschnigg agreed under extreme pressure and intimidation to Hitler’s demands, he had no intention of dissolving Austria’s independence.

Upon his return to Vienna, von Schuschnigg organized a national plebiscite (referendum), to be voted upon nationally on March 13, and posing one single question:

“Are you for a free, German, independent and social,

Christian and united Austria, for peace and work, for

the equality of those who affirm themselves for the

people and Fatherland?”

The essence of the plebiscite was a vote for or against Austrian independence. This strategic move infuriated Hitler still further; he realized that the inevitable outcome would make it much more difficult for Germany to seize control of its neighbor. Hitler sent menacing communications to von Schuschnigg, threatening invasion, and he moved German troops to the Austrian border. He gave the Austrian chancellor a clear ultimatum: cancel the plebiscite or face the wrath of the German Army, which would march to Vienna, undeterred by any foolish resistance from Austrian troops, in order to protect Austrian Nazis and others loyal to their Germanic heritage.

Hitler simultaneously organized energetic Nazi opposition inside Austria, which led to rioting and street battles in the capital.

These were the upheavals in Austrian life that had been provoking great agitation in my mind in recent days…motivating me to do some things that were an unusual departure for me…and were now occupying my thinking, again, on his March 11 train ride home from school.

For the past several nights, I had been going downtown into the center of Vienna to join growing crowds who were showing their support for maintaining Austrian independence. The First District downtown was surrounded by the famous Ringstrasse, a wide, historic boulevard that housed some of Vienna’s most prominent and opulent buildings. Here was located the Austrian Parliament Building, Vienna State Opera, Academy of Fine Arts, University of Vienna and famed Burgtheater, among other prominent government and private institutions. It was here, naturally, that pivotal events would impact Austria’s future.

I had journeyed to the Ringstrasse alone on these nights in early March, taking the electric trolley across the city from my home in the suburbs. Each night an unlikely alliance of von Schuschnigg’s (Catholic, capitalist) Christian Social Party and the opposition Social Democrats (workers’ party) gathered to show their support for the upcoming plebiscite and opposition to a Nazi takeover. Our pro-independence crowd marched along the historical street hoisting signs and passing out pro-plebiscite leaflets, singing patriotic songs and chanting anti-Nazi slogans. On one of these nights they broke the windows of the ornate German Travel Agency, the de facto headquarters of the Nazi Party in Vienna.

Elsewhere on the boulevard a crowd of Nazis would be gathering, dressed in their trademark “uniform” of brown shirts, short pants and white knee socks, equally as animated in their chanting in favor of unification with the “Fatherland.”

Ultimately the two crowds would come together and emotions would elevate to a fever pitch. Each side would scream antagonistic comments to the other as our swarms drew near, shaking fists, throwing rocks and inevitably mixing into violent fist fights. There was no interference from the police and, thankfully, no guns were fired. While the crowds on each side were substantial, there were few onlookers. Most residents of the affluent area were staying inside with curtains closed.

I found myself on these nights right in the middle of things. Being a Jew, I was well aware of the violent anti-Semitism taking place in Germany (even though at this early stage concentration camps had not yet become dedicated death camps) and I loathed Hitler. I had stayed for several hours each night before having to head home. My father and stepmother had no idea where I was going on these nights; they did not ask and I did not volunteer the information.

I was confident that the majority of my fellow Austrians would prefer to maintain our independence. Newspapers and radio broadcasts uniformly condemned Hitler’s ambitions and strongly supported an affirmative vote on the plebiscite. The preponderance of leaflets and signs backed independence.

There was little doubt in my mind during these excursions that the plebiscite would pass resoundingly and Austria would stay free.

I stepped off the trolley and headed directly for my family’s home in the peaceful suburb of Waehring (Vienna’s 18th District). No other family members were present. I turned on the radio and learned that Chancellor von Schuschnigg would be giving a major speech later in the afternoon. I remember sitting in front of the radio, curious and in rapt attention. At approximately 3 p.m. the chancellor spoke:

“Austrian men and Austrian women: this day

has placed before us a serious and decisive situation.

The German government has presented the Austrian

chancellor with an ultimatum asking me to resign and

appoint a new chancellor selected by them. If we fail

to do so, German troops will immediately advance

into Austria.

“…Thus we bow to violence.

“Since we do not intend at any cost to shed

Austrian blood, we have given orders to our troops to

retire without resistance…

“I hereby regretfully resign as chancellor of Austria.

May God bless Austria and the Austrian people.”

As the radio broadcast of von Schuschnigg’s speech ended, the Austrian national anthem, *Land der Berge, Land am Strome* began to play. (It translates to Land of the Mountains, Land on the River). But before it had progressed even half way through it abruptly terminated…and moments later the German anthem *Deutcschland Uber Alles* took over and played in its entirety at maximum volume.

What I had just heard sent a chill down my spine. I sat there stunned. The whole speech, the unimaginable implications of it all were quite surreal.

I felt the need to go back to the city center to join my countrymen in showing our support for a free and independent Austria.

I thought that perhaps we would be fighting the Germans. I had no plan, no weapons, no one else to go with me downtown. But I was willing to fight…and also I was compelled by curiosity to observe this historic event.

Shortly after the speech I boarded the trolley for the First District. On the way a mixture of excitement and trepidation churned through my mind in anticipation of the situation I would encounter. I was totally unprepared for the reality that greeted me. There was no mass gathering of patriotic Austrians in defiance of the Nazi encroachers. It was quite the opposite.

Nazi flags and banners were flying from nearly every building. Not a single Austrian flag was to be seen. Men were marching through the streets carrying torchlights -- many in brown shirts, all with swastika pins or armbands -- playing drums and chanting the Nazi theme song “Horst Wessel Lied.” On the streets crowds of men and women were cheering.

I was stunned. I just could not believe my eyes. That was the day my love of my country and my fellow Austrians began to die.

But things were even worse than what I was observing. Events were moving fast. I learned later that Hitler’s security chief, Heinrich Himmler, was already active in Vienna with his SS secret police brigade. The Nazis had been busy all night rounding up high ranking Austrian officials, socialist leaders, Catholics, high profile patriots…and prominent Jews. They had obviously compiled lists of their “enemies” in advance and executed their arrests with ruthless efficiency. Even the Vienna headquarters of the Boy Scouts (known to have a large Jewish membership) had been raided. The head of Vienna’s police commission, an outspoken anti-Nazi, had thrown himself out of a high window in despair.

The city’s newspapers, previously so opposed to Anschluss, were now full of praise for the merger with Germany. (Most of the city’s newspaper editors were Jews and they were arrested in the first wave of SS activity.) Likewise Vienna’s radio station, RAVAG, was celebrating the greatness of the Fuhrer and transition to a “unified Germany.”

On this same morning, March 12, the 8th Army of the German Wehrmacht Government crossed the border en route to our capital. And Adolf Hitler himself crossed into Austria at Braunau, the city of his birth, greeted by adoring crowds. The same jubilant reception accompanied him at each stop on a triumphant journey to Vienna.

I had seen enough and headed back to the trolley station in a deeply troubled state of mind. The scene ahead of us as the trolley left the downtown area behind was serene and normal, not reflecting in any way the drastic transformation of the city center. But onboard it was strangely silent. When a woman boarded wearing the insignia of the Catholic (Christian Social) party, I spoke to her:

“You had better take that off. It’s all over.”

I disembarked at our local station and walked to our house. Only the family cook was present when I arrived and she told me that my father and stepmother had gone to my uncle’s house and that I should join them right away. I got on my bicycle and pedaled hard.

I was stunned and bewildered, full of anxiety about what was to come. I was anxious to be with my family…to tell them what I had just seen and make sure they knew the danger. I suspected that they were just as shocked and worried as I was.

The Jewish community in Vienna was well aware of what had happened to Jews in Germany after Hitler had gained power. Jews were blamed for all of the country’s problems. Jobs and education were restricted. Violence against Jews was encouraged. People were harassed on the streets and beaten savagely. Families were rounded up and taken away; property was confiscated; houses and businesses were looted. (That Hitler’s “ultimate solution” was on the horizon, the systematic extermination of the Jews, was not yet known.)

My uncle Hans’ house was in an adjacent pleasant suburb and the scene outside was lovely and tranquil, as always. But inside was a different story. Between my immediate family and my two uncles’ families, the emotions were turbulent.

“This is unbelievable…”

“How can such a thing happen in Vienna…?”

“What are we going to do? Our whole life is here!”

My father, Paul David Perutz, was the oldest of four siblings and all four branches of our family were gathered at his brother’s house to try to deal with this crisis. My uncle Hans was married to a British woman, Annie, whom he had met while studying the cotton business in Liverpool. They had three daughters. Hans was my father’s business partner and they were very close. He was also an ardent Zionist.

Their youngest brother, Leo, was a famous novelist and playwright. He was very successful, well connected in Viennese literary circles and had a masterful way with German, his native language. For these reasons, he was the most reluctant to leave. Uncle Leo was married to Gretl and they had three children.

My aunt Lilly was the only sister. She was married to a successful engineer, Arthur Furst, and they had three children, as well.

My father took charge and spoke up above the din:

“Be quiet everyone, please! Sit down. It is important that we talk. We must make a plan to leave Austria at once. We have no alternative. There is no time to lose.”

No one, not even Leo, dissented on that necessity.

The planning began that night with each father beginning to formulate a strategy for getting his family out. No contingency plan had been in place.

It may seem strange now in retrospect, but the fact is that none of us saw this coming.