

PROLOGUE

Dr. Samuel Goudsmit, the village of Haigerloch, Swabian Alps, 24 April 1945

Lt. Colonel Boris Pash slammed the oversize padlock against the massive steel door sending ripples of sound cascading from the rock face. At the base of a sheer cliff, the door sealed the entrance into Heisenberg's secret lab. "Dr. Goudsmit," Colonel Pash said, "take a look at this."

A note stuck to the cold steel with black electrical tape warned of lethal viruses. The mayor, a man named Ruhemann, had signed it. Pash said, "You believe it?"

When General Groves selected me to be the scientific advisor to Project Alsos, he pointed out that I'm a rare commodity, a nuclear physicist not involved with the atomic bomb project. It didn't hurt that before I emigrated to America, I'd been on a first name basis with all the top Nazi scientists. None of that meant I knew anything about germs, except they could kill you. "It might not hurt to talk to Ruhemann. Maybe Breker got it wrong."

"Sergeant Beatson, take some men and go find the mayor."

Our mission was to beat the French and Russians to the top Nazi atomic scientists. Otto Hahn, the nuclear chemist we captured yesterday in nearby Tailfingen, told us how to reach Heisenberg's lab, confirming what we'd already learned from the British. They had an agent in Berlin, Anton Breker, a Ph.D. physicist. In 1943, he'd gotten word to them that the bombing

would soon force Heisenberg to move his bomb research to Haigerloch. Funny thing, the British never received another piece of intelligence from Breker after that. They figured the Nazis must have finally caught up with him.

Trying to bypass the French advance, we'd fought our way through collapsing Nazi lines, liberating the village. In return for the British intelligence, we brought Dr. Rudolf Perierls along. A leader in their Tube Alloys program, the code name for their atomic bomb project, he'd gone into the village to see what he could learn. I saw his Jeep returning as Beatson's left.

Perierls, a Berlin Jew who had escaped in 1933, was now a naturalized British citizen. A frail-looking man with tiny owlish glasses, he looked out of place as he reported to the trim and fit colonel. "I spoke to the innkeeper where Heisenberg stayed. He says the scientists had a farmer plow over something they buried in a field."

"Will he show us where?"

"Whenever we want. He's anxious to keep the bombers away from his village."

Pash pointed to the note. After reading it, Perierls said, "We never had an informant more reliable than Anton Breker. You can see how accurately he described the cave. He even mentioned that when Heisenberg scouted the area, he played the organ in the church up there." He pointed to the ancient church built on the plateau above the cliff. "Besides, Heisenberg used the same trick at his lab in Berlin. It had a sign calling it the Virus House. Colonel, open this door and you'll be looking at his nuclear lab. His atomic bomb project."

"Dr. Goudsmit, you still want to wait?"

"You've already sent for the mayor. A few more minutes won't matter."

The wait was short. An elderly man with perspiration peppering his bald patch, the mayor's unease couldn't be missed. Colonel Pash wasted no time. "You write this note?"

Every pore of Ruhemann's face oozed sweat and fear. "Yes...Yes, sir, but Professor Heisenberg told me what to say."

"Did he say anything about germs in there?"

"Dangerous chemicals he said, not germs. The sign would keep the curious away."

"Open it."

"I...I don't have the key." The poor man's quivering voice telegraphed his lying.

"Sergeant Beatson!"

"Yes, sir."

"Shoot the damn lock off, then shoot him."

The mayor had the key out before Beatson could raise his weapon, but the violent shaking of his hands kept him from sticking it in the lock. Shoving him aside, Pash opened the lock himself.

Inside we saw a small room with empty boxes and some scattered papers on a gray metal desk. On the desk, I noticed a small framed picture that brought moisture to my eyes. It showed me standing next to Heisenberg in front of our house in Ann Arbor. He'd been our guest during his visit to the University of Michigan in the summer of 1939, the last summer of peace. I'd spent many hours trying to persuade him to remain in America. His conviction never wavered that he must remain in his homeland to help it survive the Nazis. My wife had snapped the picture as he left, before this damnable war turned friends into enemies.

I tore myself away to follow Colonel Pash through another door to what turned out to be the main chamber. A concrete pit about ten feet in diameter with a steel lid on top, filled the center. Tightly packed graphite blocks covered the shield. A heavy grill-like structure of metal stood several feet above it. A winch and scores of aluminum wires hung down into the pit from the iron grid.

“Is this it?” Pash asked me.

“We need to see inside to be certain, but I'd say we've found Heisenberg's atomic pile.”

Peierls nodded his agreement.

“Sergeant, get the cover off this thing.”

A few minutes later, we stood around the edge, gazing into the dark pit. It consisted of an oversized steel cylinder with more graphite blocks lining its outside edge. A bowl-shaped steel vessel, extending wall to wall, set about four feet down in the cylinder. Empty now, the heavy water that no doubt once filled it would have reached the brim.

Studying the pit from every angle, the colonel paced around it. He turned to Peierls and me, his disdain obvious. “We fought our way through German lines for this? A miserable hole in the ground? You think we've found the damn Nazi bomb project?”

“It looks to me like a reactor experiment, but not big enough to have gone critical.” Again Peierls nodded.

After circling the pit once more, Colonel Pash looked at Peierls and me. “Maybe you two can explain something.”

“What?” I said.

“The Nazis developed jet aircraft and the V-2 rocket. We know they're damn capable. A Nazi scientist discovered fission. They controlled half the world's uranium after capturing the mines in Czechoslovakia. The only heavy water plant in the world fell into their hands when they occupied Norway. They put Werner Heisenberg in charge of their atomic bomb project before anyone else even had a bomb project.

“With a start like that, maybe one of you whizkids can tell me why they ended up with nothing more than a damned hole in the ground. What the hell happened to their bomb?”

“Colonel, I wish I knew. I've had nightmares about the Nazis getting the bomb before us. Maybe after we've had a chance to study the documents and talk to the scientists, we'll find out what went wrong.”

ONE

Anton Breker, Berlin, 11 March 1938

Slush from a passing car splashed across the windshield of my '37 Opel Olympia as I pulled into an empty parking space along the curb. The wipers strained before finally gathering enough momentum to push the icy mess off to the side. Wet snow coated the skeletal branches of the oaks in front of the looming gray building.

I opened the door and cursed as my shoe splashed into an icy puddle. Glancing at the spike capping the tower-like structure at the building's east corner, I kicked my heel against the curb to dislodge the ice and pulled the greatcoat tight against the frigid blasts from the north. That spike made the tower resemble the pointed helmets Kaiser Wilhelm's soldiers wore in the Great War. The war to end war, except our glorious Führer seemed bent on starting another.

I was late but I needed a smoke. Pulling an American cigarette from the pack in my coat pocket, I stuck it in my mouth. Lighting it, I inhaled deeply, not caring that everyone knew I wanted to quit. As I glanced up, the man I'd come to see rushed from the main entrance, Otto Hahn, the foremost nuclear chemist in the world. To avoid hearing his rebuke, I took one more deep drag, then threw the cigarette into the muck, where it sizzled a moment before succumbing to the cold.

“Professor Hahn!” I called.

“Herr Breker. I waited as long as I could. I've got to hurry now.”

“I'll walk with you.” Trying to accommodate the just noticeable limp in my left leg to Hahn's stride, I fell into step beside him, barely able to keep up. Nearing sixty, Hahn had grown a bit heftier in the dozen years I'd known him. The fat cigar crammed between his teeth remained a constant, as much a part of his face as his thick nose. “You said on the phone you wanted to discuss how to approach Herr Duisberg.”

With his jaw squared and his teeth clinched, Hahn reminded me of a lit fuse. “I know Fraulein Meitner means a lot to you. Still you must try to restrain your temper. We all must obey the law, Herr Duisberg included. Don't say something you'll regret later.”