

To kill the Führer

‘Vater, how did Opa die?’ asked Catherine. ‘I know the story about a seizure, but I need to know the truth.’

She was seated in front of the heavy oak desk that occupied the centre of my office at Stuttgart Town Hall.

Seeking a moment to collect my thoughts, I glanced at the Oberbürgermeister’s robe hanging from a wooden coat rack beside the door before returning focus to my daughter.

‘It was suicide,’ I murmured, ‘but not really. Hitler gave your opa a choice between a public show trial and taking his own life. Standing trial would have meant he’d lose everything. The house ... his pension ... maybe even prison for Oma and us. So, he chose to swallow poison.’

After a moment’s silence, Catherine nodded. ‘That’s what I wanted to know,’ she said. ‘Thanks.’ As we sit silently, I saw her shoulders relax a little.

‘Why was he forced to commit suicide?’ she asked. ‘After all, he was the Desert Fox! Wasn’t he one of Germany’s greatest generals?’

‘Hitler believed that your opa was involved in the plot to assassinate him, the last one, on the 20th of July 1944. The Nazis knew it would cause a major scandal if Opa was publicly branded a traitor, so they offered him the option of suicide or trial. The Nazis then ascribed his death to complications from a war wound.’

A sceptical frown darkened Catherine’s face. ‘But

wouldn't a public trial have been better? After all, he would have been able to defend himself.'

I snorted. 'It would have been complete farce. The court would not have upheld our standards of law, Catherine. The judge would have been Ronald Friesler, the same thug in judicial robes who sent Sophie Scholl to the guillotine. As I said before, he wanted to spare me, your aunt Gertrude and your grandmother. So, he swallowed cyanide ... on the 14th of October 1944 ... and was buried with full military honours.'

'Was Opa really involved in the plot to kill Hitler?'

'I don't know; opinions differ,' I said. 'Another German general said that Opa believed the entire Nazi leadership needed to be killed if the war were to be ended.'

'I know the plot failed,' Catherine said. 'But what happened to the conspirators?'

'The bomb only ended up wounding Hitler. It was planted in the Führerbunker by Lieutenant Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg. Over the following months, the Gestapo conducted a massive roundup that relied on information acquired through torture. Stauffenberg was one of the lucky ones. He was executed by firing squad while many of the others were hanged from meat hooks with nooses made of piano wire. By the end, almost five thousand people were killed. It was a bloodbath.'

'I've heard it said that the July 1944 plotters were opportunists,' said Catherine. 'That they only moved against

Hitler after it was obvious Germany was losing the war.'

'Not true,' I said with a shake of my head. 'There was a coup planned as early as 1938, but Hitler was too heavily guarded. The conspirators couldn't get near him. There were other plots too. A group of officers planted a bomb on Hitler's plane during a visit to the Eastern Front in March 1943, but it failed to detonate. A second attempt was made a week later when Hitler attended an exhibition of captured Soviet weaponry in Berlin. It also failed.'

'But they kept trying, no?' Catherine asked.

'They did,' I confirmed. 'By mid-1943 it was clear to all but the most fanatical Nazis that the war was lost. The German offensive at Kursk had failed and the western Allies had landed in Sicily. So General Henning von Tresckow and his fellow conspirators decided to try again. They were determined to kill Hitler and install an autocratic government that would be acceptable to the Western Allies. All in order to negotiate a separate peace that would prevent a Soviet invasion of Germany.'

Catherine shrugged. 'Well, they were right that the Nazis were a disaster for Germany.'

'Indeed,' I nodded. 'So, during the latter part of 1943 and early 1944, Tresckow and Stauffenberg tried at least five times to get one of their co-conspirators near enough to kill Hitler with hand grenades or a pistol. None of these plans were successful because, by this stage of the war, Hitler no

longer appeared in public. He spent most of his time at his military headquarters in East Prussia with occasional breaks at the Kehlsteinhaus, his mountain retreat in Bavaria.'

'So, Hitler became a hermit?' asked Catherine.

'Sort of, I suppose. His paranoia had increased to the point where he rarely saw anyone beyond his personal circle of trust. The Gestapo was also suspicious of disloyalty within the army officer corps.'

'So, is that why they opted to use a time bomb? In July 1944 I mean.'

'Correct,' I confirmed. 'Tresckow and Stauffenberg thought it was the only option that would work. They were also living in constant fear of betrayal to the Gestapo. That's why they decided to go ahead with the plan to kill Hitler, even if it failed. They thought the world would see that there were people in Germany prepared to act against the Nazis.'

'Where did Himmler fit into all of this?' asked Catherine. 'He was head of the SS and Gestapo, after all.'

'Funny you should ask that,' I quipped. 'Himmler was content to leave the anti-Hitler resistance alone because he also realised that Germany was going to lose the war. Once Hitler was dead, he hoped to negotiate peace with the British and Americans.'

'Then he was both evil and stupid.'

I nodded. 'That's a fair way to put it. But Tresckow and the other army conspirators had no intention of removing

Hitler just to see him replaced by the head of the SS. They planned to kill them both. In fact, Stauffenberg's initial assassination attempt on the 11th of July was aborted because Himmler wasn't present. The same thing happened three days later.'

'You mean they missed out on two chances to kill Hitler just because Himmler wasn't there as well?' Catherine exclaimed in wide-eyed disbelief.

'I'm afraid so,' I sighed. 'But there's more.'

'More?' she echoed.

I nodded. 'On the 15th of July, Stauffenberg flew to Hitler's command post in East Prussia carrying a briefcase bomb that he intended to plant in Hitler's conference room. After activating the timer, he would excuse himself, wait for the explosion and then fly back to Berlin.'

'In other words, the same plan they put into place on the 20th of July,' Catherine observed. 'What happened this time?'

'Himmler and Göring were there, but Hitler was called out of the room at the last moment – and Stauffenberg aborted ... again.'

'I'm infuriated just listening to this,' Catherine said. 'I can only imagine how frustrated Tresckow and Stauffenberg must have been.'

'It wasn't just frustration they were feeling. On the 18th of July, they heard rumours that the Gestapo was onto them and that Stauffenberg might be arrested at any moment. This

turned out not to be true, but at the time there was a sense the net was closing. They decided to seize on the next opportunity to kill Hitler, regardless.

‘So, von Stauffenberg was a liberal democrat?’

I shook my head. ‘Hardly. He was a hardcore German nationalist who had shown some sympathy for the Nazi Party during the early 1930s. But once Stauffenberg witnessed the atrocities inflicted by the SS and Wehrmacht in Poland and Russia, his attitude changed. He came to believe that the Nazis were staining the honour of Germany.’

‘And what about Tresckow?’ asked Catherine.

‘There the picture is murkier,’ I frowned. ‘Tresckow showed no hesitation about deporting thousands of orphaned children to forced labour camps. I think he was more concerned about losing the war than with Nazi atrocities and war crimes.’

‘He was an opportunist,’ growled Catherine.

I shrugged and went on. ‘Some of the other conspirators were monarchists who wanted to reinstate Germany’s 1914 boundaries with Belgium, France and Poland. Others yearned for a German-dominated Europe, but they agreed on one demand ... no reparations. They wanted a clean slate for Germany.’

‘Do you think the Allies would have accepted these demands?’

‘Of course not,’ I declared. ‘Remember the Allies issued

their demand for unconditional surrender at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943. There was no way Roosevelt and Churchill would be willing to accept anything less.'

'Then how did the actual assassination attempt unfold on the day?' Catherine asked.

'Stauffenberg flew from Berlin to East Prussia on the Thursday morning – the 20th of July – with a bomb concealed in his briefcase. He was scheduled to provide a briefing at the Wolfsschanze on the readiness of the Home Army. A little after noon, Stauffenberg primed the bomb inside his briefcase and entered the conference room. He placed the briefcase beneath the table near where Hitler was standing. After several minutes, Stauffenberg was summoned to take a pre-arranged phone call and left the room.'

Catherine's brow furrowed. 'If the bomb was placed near Hitler, why wasn't he killed?'

'No one really knows for sure.' I shrugged. 'The prevailing theory is an officer named Colonel Brandt moved the briefcase behind the leg of the conference table, thereby deflecting the blast.'

'What happened to him?' asked Catherine.

'To Brandt? He lost a leg and died the next day. But he's a bit player in this drama. The bomb wounded more than twenty people. Hitler suffered a perforated eardrum and his clothes were singed, but he survived.'

'More's the pity,' sighed Catherine. 'Did Stauffenberg

get away?’

‘He saw the explosion and assumed that Hitler was dead. He climbed into a staff car, passed through three checkpoints and drove to the airfield. He was airborne and on his way to Berlin before anyone realised he was the one who planted the bomb.’

‘What happened then?’

‘By the time Stauffenberg landed at around 4 pm, news of Hitler’s survival had reached the conspirators.’

‘How big was the conspiracy and how many officers were involved?’

‘No one knows, exactly. But the plan called for units of the Reserve Army to seize control of ministerial offices, radio stations and telephone exchanges in Berlin. This was codenamed Operation Valkyrie. And in some cases, that took place, but the plot collapsed that evening when Hitler telephoned Goebbels.’

Catherine’s brow furrowed. ‘But Goebbels was the propaganda minister. How was a spin doctor able to crush a coup attempt?’

‘The commander of the Berlin security battalion was an officer named Otto Remer. Major Remer was told by General Paul von Hase, one of the anti-Hitler conspirators, that Hitler was dead and was ordered to arrest Goebbels. However, when Remer arrived at the Propaganda Ministry, Goebbels informed the major that Hitler survived the assassination

attempt. The major demanded proof whereupon Goebbels placed a call to the Wolfsschanze, and Remer spoke to Hitler. Realising that he'd been taking orders from conspirators, Remer moved his troops to Berlin military headquarters and arrested Stauffenberg and the other plotters.'

'My God!' spat Catherine. 'Are you telling me the plot failed just because this one major was loyal to Hitler?'

I shook my head. 'Not really. I think Hitler's survival doomed the conspiracy to failure. There's no way the German army would have sided with the conspirators so long as the Führer remained alive. Remember, they had taken oaths of allegiance to Hitler as a person. But the most contemptible figure in the whole affair was Friedrich Fromm.'

'Who was he?' asked Catherine.

'Fromm was commander of the Reserve Army.'

'You mean he was Stauffenberg's direct commander?'

'Yes,' I confirmed. 'He was aware of the Valkyrie plot but tried to play both sides. He did nothing to stop the conspiracy, but moved to execute Stauffenberg and the other conspirators once it became clear that Hitler had survived – and that landed him in big trouble.'

'Why?' asked Catherine. 'You would think that Nazis would be appreciative of such decisive action.'

'Put it this way ... when Fromm tried to take credit for snuffing out the conspiracy, Goebbels was reported to have said "You were in a damned hurry to put all the witnesses

underground.”

‘They suspected him of involvement in the plot,’ mused Catherine. ‘But was he involved?’

‘Fromm was a fence-sitter who tried to play both sides, but it didn’t help.’

‘The Nazis killed him anyway?’

‘Oh yes,’ I nodded. ‘They tossed him into prison and shot him just before the end of the war, but he was just one among thousands.’

‘What do you mean?’ Catherine asked.

‘Over the following weeks, the Gestapo rounded up nearly everyone who had any connection with the coup plotters. They discovered letters and diaries in the homes and offices of those arrested that revealed the failed coups of 1938, 1939 and 1943.’

‘Which led to further arrests?’

‘Precisely,’ I agreed. ‘The Gestapo cast a very wide net and not everyone arrested was involved in the 20th of July conspiracy. But the Nazis saw this as an opportunity to settle scores with many others suspected of opposition sympathies.’

‘Was there any sort of due process in all this?’ Catherine asked.

‘Hardly,’ I scoffed. ‘The Nazis held show trials that were filmed for propaganda purposes. The military officers among the conspirators were court-martialled and expelled from the

army. They were then tried by a so-called People's Court where the presiding judge was Roland Friesler, who I already mentioned.'

'When did the trials take place?' Catherine asked, her voice tight.

'The first trials were held on the 7th and 8th of August 1944. Hitler ordered that those found guilty should be hanged, but some of the accused beat the hangman by taking their own lives.'

Catherine shrugged but said nothing.

'Tresckow killed himself with a hand grenade the day after the assassination. Before pulling the pin he reportedly said: "I am convinced we did the right thing. Hitler is the enemy of Germany and the world."'

'I read somewhere that the Pope was involved,' said Catherine. 'Is this true?'

'Good question,' I replied. 'A report by SS General Ernst Kaltenbrunner stated that, at the very least, Pope Pius XII knew about the coup.'

Catherine sat looking at me across my desk with a pensive expression on her face.

'Papa, you said earlier that Hitler believed Opa was involved in the coup attempt. Was he right?'

'We don't know,' I sighed. 'I've looked into that question and opinions are mixed. Some historians say my father

supported the coup, but not Hitler's assassination. Others say he knew about the conspiracy and wanted Hitler arrested and placed on trial.'

'Did you ever discuss it with Oma?'

'On her deathbed, she told me that Opa believed an attempt on Hitler's life could trigger a civil war.'

Catherine looked solemn. 'So why did Hitler believe Opa was party to the coup?'

I shrugged. 'Apparently some of the conspirators said that Opa agreed Hitler had to be removed for the sake of Germany.'

'But weren't those confessions obtained under torture?' she snapped.

'True,' I nodded, 'but the Gestapo discovered written plans drawn up by the conspirators in which Opa was to become a member of the post-Hitler government.'

'But just because Opa's name was mentioned doesn't mean he knew about it,' Catherine protested.

'That's right,' I agreed. 'But from our perspective wouldn't you prefer it if he was involved? Wouldn't that have been the more honourable thing?'

Catherine sat in silence for several moments before nodding. 'You're right. I never thought about it like that.'

'Not so simple after all,' I said.

'In some ways maybe,' she agreed.

'Your oma told me that Opa lost faith in Hitler in 1943 when he learned what was happening to the Jews – the death camps, slave labour ... She said he lost confidence in Germany's ability to win the war.'

Catherine nodded, indicating to me to continue.

'That was when he met the conspirators who wanted to oust Hitler.'

She frowned.

'In the reprisals that followed the failed attempt on Hitler's life, Opa's defeatist attitude to the war would have enraged Hitler.'

'Of course.'

'The problem for Hitler was how to eliminate Germany's most popular general without revealing to the people that he had ordered his death.'

'So, what did he do?'

'He decided to force Opa to commit suicide.'

'Oh no! I can't imagine what that must have been like for Opa and the family,' Catherine said, dismayed.

'I was only fifteen, but even so I was part of an anti-aircraft crew – the Führer demanded a lot of the Hitler Youth. I was lucky I didn't end up on the front line, like some boys my age. They gave me leave to go home and visit my father.'

‘So, at least you got to see him.’

‘We all knew that your opa was under suspicion after the failed attempt. They’d executed his chief of staff and his commanding officer.’

‘Oma and the family must have feared the worst for Opa.’

‘When I arrived home your opa was eating breakfast. I joined him and then we walked in the garden. “At twelve o’clock two generals are coming to discuss my future employment,” he told me. At that stage I think he was still not sure what was about to happen to him.’

‘So, what did happen?’

‘Around midday, a dark-green car pulled up outside our garden gate. Two generals got out and went into the house. They weren’t rude. They asked my father’s permission to speak to him alone quite politely. I left them to it.’

Catherine hesitated, looked at me for a long moment, ‘And then...?’

‘*Well, at least they are not going to arrest him*, I thought.’

‘But...?’

‘After few minutes I heard my father go upstairs and into my mother’s room. I followed him, anxious to know what was happening. He was standing in there, his face pale, and when he

heard me is turned and said in a tight voice, "Come with me." I followed him into my room. "I have just told your mother that I shall be dead in a quarter of an hour." He continued calmly, "Hitler is charging me with treason. I am to die by poison. The two generals have brought it with them. It's fatal in minutes. If I accept, none of the usual steps will be taken against you and the family."

"Do you believe them?" I said.

"Yes", he replied. "It is in their interest to see that none of this comes out. You must promise to remain absolutely silent. If you breathe a word of this to anyone, they will no longer be bound by the agreement."

'So, what did you do?' Catherine said, blinking anxiously.

'I was scared. My father had just placed the fate of my family in my hand, and for a long time, I didn't speak. Then your opa said in a thin voice, "It's better for one of us to die than for all of us to be shot." He hesitated for a moment, then with a wry smile said, "Besides, we have almost no ammunition, and they have the place surrounded."

"Oh Papa—" I began, but he gripped my arm hard and said dryly, "I'm to be given a state funeral. In a quarter of an hour, they'll telephone my aide from the Wagnerschule reserve hospital in Ulm to say that I've had a brain seizure on the way to a conference." Then he looked at his watch. "I must go, they've only given me ten minutes." We embraced hurriedly and went downstairs together.'

Catherine's eyes filled with tears. She stared at me in disbelief. 'How could he be so calm?' she said almost to herself. 'What courage.'

'As your opa went into the hall, his little dachshund jumped up at him with a cry of joy. 'Shut the dog in the study, Manfred,' my father said, and waited in the hall while I removed the excited puppy and pushed it through the study door. Then we walked out of the house together. The two generals were waiting by the garden gate. We walked slowly down the path towards them, and I noticed everything, as if it were exaggerated. Even the crunch of the gravel sounded unnaturally loud.'

'That must have been awful!'

'As we approached, the generals saluted. 'Herr Field Marshal,' they said and stood aside for your opa to pass through the gate. A group of villagers stood outside watching. I felt myself beginning to sweat. The SS driver opened the door and stood to attention. My father slipped his marshal's baton under his arm, and calmly shook my hand and stepped into the car.'

A crimson flush spread across Catherine's face.

'The two generals then climbed into the car and shut the doors. My father did not look back as the car drove off up the hill and disappeared round a bend. When it had gone, I turned and walked silently back into the house.'

'My God, what an ordeal for you and Oma to go through, not to mention poor Opa!'

'Twenty minutes later the telephone rang and the person on the line told us that Opa was dead.'

Catherine looked dazed.

'Later we heard that the car had stopped a few hundred yards up the hill at the edge of the wood. The Gestapo were watching the area with instructions to shoot my father and storm the house if he resisted in any way. The driver got out of the car, leaving my father inside. When the driver returned ten minutes later, he saw my father slumped forward with his cap off and the marshal's baton fallen from his hand.'

'You must have grieved for your father,' Catherine said.

'It was the end for me. I deserted and then surrendered to the French. What was the point for fighting for such barbarians who could do that to my father?'

She shrugged. 'But you made sure he was remembered for all the right reasons. You helped to establish museums honouring him, and you became friends with the children of his enemies, the sons of General Patton and Field Marshall Montgomery. If that isn't a symbol of post-war Anglo-German reconciliation I don't know what is ...'

'You're making me blush.' I gave her a shaky smile. 'Let's keep our focus on Opa, dear Catherine. Today most Germans view the Valkyrie conspirators as heroes. I'd like to

think Opa was one of them.'

I have drawn heavily on the article 'The Forced Suicide of Field Marshall Rommel, 1944,' *EyeWitness to History*, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2002) and gratefully acknowledge it/

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23 August 2023

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