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INSIDE THE AUSTRIAN COLLAPSE

Behind the scenes that hard day at Berchtesgaden, revealing what Hitler said to Schuschnigg and what the Austrian public never knew about the German plot to stage in Vienna a counterpart of the Reichstag fire, as a pretext for invasion. Schuschnigg spoiled that pretext, only to furnish another one himself. Uncovering the plot in the hope of averting invasion he merely brought it on.

FEBRUARY twelfth is no emancipator's birthday in Vienna. On that day, 1934, its streets were woven with barbed wire, they resounded to troops, artillery, and armored cars. Vienna was not being defended from an external enemy, its own government was attacking the homes of its people. It was destroying the largest political party of the city. Social Democracy was being wiped out.

Every year, when February twelfth recurred, Vienna remembered and shuddered. It was sure this day would be chosen for a sudden furious blow of revenge struck by the suppressed population against the authoritarian regime.

Last year, year before last, before the twelfth of February, the police raided all known meeting places of the workers, and the army was ready to march. But there were no demonstrations, only a few threatening handbills appeared mysteriously on automobile seats, in theatres, and on the streets. This year the police made their usual raids. But not even the handbills appeared.

Not all of Austria's fears were of the Left. The whole world spoke of the day when Germany and Austria would be united—under Berlin. It was a peril, but not this year. For Hitler was having difficulties. He had carried through the purge in the army. Dr. Schacht had resigned. Hitler's anniversary speech and the meeting of the Reichstag had been postponed. This year he was too busy to worry about Vienna. No, Vienna was not afraid of Hitler.

But February twelfth did bring its doom this year. The sound of it came first gently, in the whisper of a rumor. At about seven in the evening the news spread through the cafés that Chancellor Schuschnigg had gone to visit Hitler at Berchtesgaden. This

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was verified by late evening newspapers. Only these emphasized that the visit was at Hitler's invitation, and that nothing would be discussed which went beyond the Protocol of July 11, 1936. This was Austria's charter of sovereignty. In it Germany guaranteed the independence of Austria, and foreswore interference in Austria's internal affairs.

Even so, the news came as a shock. It was followed at once by a second shock; the newspapers which published it were suddenly confiscated. This frightened the Viennese. Schuschnigg's visit to Berchtesgaden must mean more than the newspapers admitted. It might mean a terrible crisis. Perhaps after all Hitler had decided to act.

The public could only guess and fear. It knew none of the preliminaries of the Schuschnigg visit, none of the secrets which had been ferreted out by the Austrian government. This is the history of these preliminaries and of the all-day conflict between Schuschnigg and Hitler at Berchtesgaden which ensued.

The narrative must begin with a secret annex of the Protocol of July 11, 1936. For it was the abuse of the agreement in this annex which led to the downfall of Schuschnigg and the disappearance of Austria.

This secret annex was an undertaking on the part of the Austrian government to set up a Committee of Seven, which should function within the framework of the Fatherland Front (Austria's single political party), and should prepare for the admission of former Austrian Nazis. At the time it seemed a harmless undertaking. Schuschnigg looked upon it as a gesture of reconciliation. The Germans had been enraged that the Fatherland Front had suppressed the Austrian Nazis. Schuschnigg had retorted he could not tolerate Nazis as such any more than he could socialists. But he was willing that Austrian Nazis as good racial Germans (Nationalbetonten) should enter the Fatherland Front if they accepted its obligations. This Committee of Seven was established to supervise their entry.

Schuschnigg was duly warned about the committee after it had begun to function. For a year, he was told over and over again that it was not observing the restrictions in the secret annex. But he was no man to invite trouble. "Don't peddle rumors to me," he would say, "bring me evidence."

Toward the end of January he was to have evidence. He was told that if he raided the office of the Committee of Seven in the Teinfaltstrasse, he would find complete plans for a German invasion of Austria. He ordered the raid. The plans were found.

There were two. The first was for an assault on the German legation in the Metternichgasse. This was to be undertaken on January 30, the anniversary of Hitler's accession to power in Germany. Being a holiday, the German legation on that day would be entitled to fly the otherwise forbidden Swastika. Thereupon Nazis in uniforms of the Sturmkorps and Monarchists of the Fatherland Front, ostensibly enraged by the sight of the

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Nazi symbol, would demand removal of the flag and then storm the building, set it afire and attack the legation personnel. This would give Germany the pretext for invasion. This was the notorious strategy of the Reichstag fire.

The second plan was for the invasion of Austria by the German Reichswehr and the Austrian Legion. It was worked out to the smallest detail. And it bore the signature, not of a member of the German General Staff, but the initials "R.H." Hitler's official assistant in the German government is Rudolph Hess.

Other discoveries, though not so startling, were significant. Schuschnigg at once ordered the Committee of Seven to Police Headquarters, where each was interrogated for hours. It became clear that Leopold and another member, Tavs, must have known of the two plans. They were arrested. The other members were set at liberty.

The next step was to make an immediate protest in Berlin. The details of the two conspiracies were sent to the Austrian minister, Herr Tauschitz. He was instructed to demand explanation, satisfaction and reparation. He hurried at once to the Foreign Office and protested with the greatest indignation against the violation of the Protocol of July 11, 1936.

This was in the time of Germany's January crisis, which ended in the removal of Von Neurath as foreign minister and in the purge of Von Fritsch and the other 17 generals. The Austrian plots played their part in this crisis. For Von Neurath warned against adventure in Austria, and the generals were as emphatically hostile to it. It was their belief—mistaken, as it later developed—that invasion would cause a general European war.

Herr Von Papen, the German minister in Vienna, rushed to Berlin to discuss the situation with Hitler. He found the Fuehrer in a rage over the arrest of the Committee of Seven, which he denounced as a breach of the Protocol of July 11. But, he told Von Papen, he was prepared in his anniversary speech of January 30 expressly to renew the pledge of Austrian independence "under certain conditions which he should have to discuss personally with Herr Schuschnigg." That was the first mention of the fateful Berchtesgaden visit. Herr Von Papen brought the message to Schuschnigg at Vienna.

But Schuschnigg was in no temper to meet Hitler. His first impulse was to publish the documents, send them to Paris, to London, to all capitals, to cry to the world how much store could be set by the word of the Fuehrer. Why should he want a new pledge of independence from a man who already had broken faith?

Here enters the sinister personality of Guido Schmidt, Austrian foreign secretary, whom history may identify as the man who unlocked the gates of his country to Hitler. Schmidt had been the negotiator of the Protocol of July 11. He cautioned his chancellor not to act precipitately. He exhorted him to behave like a German. It must not be his role in history, he

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It must not be his role in history, he urged, to accuse a fellow-German of duplicity. He should go to Hitler. He could lay the documents before him. He could demand satisfaction. If Hitler did not give it to him, then he could publish the documents.

He also pointed out that a new pledge from Hitler guaranteeing Austrian independence would have immediate political benefits. The Austrian Nazis had complained that Hitler had let them down in signing the Protocol. A new Hitler promise would embitter them again, and bring them closer to Schuschnigg.

His final argument was that under the Protocol, Austria undertook not to conduct an anti-German policy. To denounce Hitler publicly would violate the Protocol, and give him the pretext for any step he chose to take.

On the evening of February 11 Schuschnigg set out on his historic journey. He spent the night at Salzburg, then rode by car to the frontier with part of his staff. Before he and his foreign secretary Schmidt crossed into Bavaria, he turned to the officials who were to remain behind;

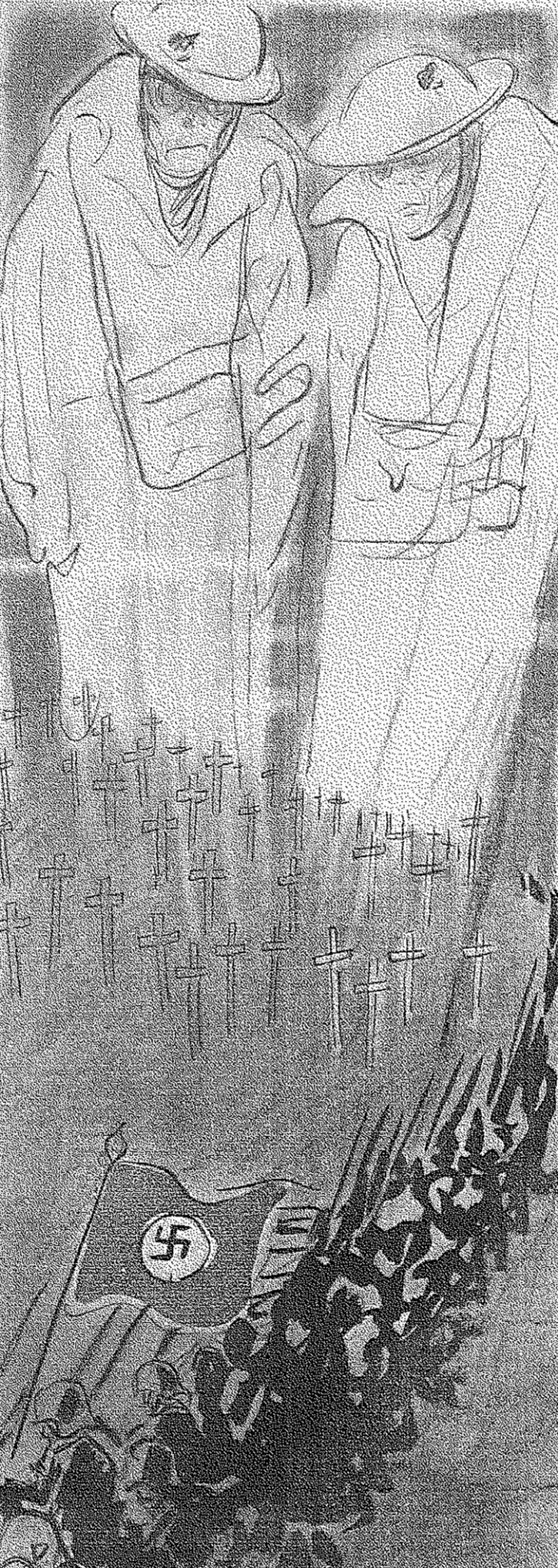
"When you return to Salzburg," he ordered, "you are to telephone me at Berchtesgaden every two hours. If I do not come to the telephone myself you will know that something is wrong." He did not accept the "hospitality" of his eminent host with a complete sense of security.

The reception at Berchtesgaden however, was disarmingly cordial. Hitler, accompanied only by his immediate staff, welcomed him, and undertook to show him the informal Bavarian "White House." As he went about, he explained everything and how it had been done according to his own personal plans. (Herr Schuschnigg did not, as later repeated by the wits of Vienna, ask him if he had hung the wallpaper himself.) Hitler could not refrain from leading him to his "favorite spot," a position in the garden where the view stretched across the valley and far into Austria.

But that was the end of polite ceremonial, for the two chancellors, accompanied by Schmidt, then retired for their first private talk, where later they were joined by the new German foreign secretary, von Ribbentrop. Hitler, as might have been expected, spoke first. He went on speaking for a long time. He began slowly, oratorically, then worked up gradually to a full and warm rhetorical flow. He ranted in generalities. He appealed to Schuschnigg as a German. He chided Austria as a land which had not kept the German race undefiled.

The speech went on and on. Schuschnigg, who is a chain-smoker, wanted to light a cigaret, but could not. For at Berchtesgaden smoking is forbidden. Hitler had suffered from a gas attack in the war, and cannot stand the irritation of his delicate throat. Schuschnigg was to be with the Fuehrer for eight terrible hours that day, and when he left in the evening he was nearly a wreck. He had failed to get through his dominant program. He had failed in part because he could not soothe and strengthen his nerves with the nicotine to which he was ac-

customed.



"Do you remember what we saved Europe for?"

Not that Schuschnigg was anxious during the first speech. He had awaited it, for though this was his first meeting with Hitler, he knew the Fuehrer's ways. When Hitler finally paused, his chance had come to speak, and speak he did. Quietly, with dignity, with precision and clarity he told about the documents found in the raid on the headquarters of the Committee of Seven. He made his demands, he asked for honor and honesty from Germany.

Hitler cut him off with an outburst of rage. What did he mean? How did he dare to throw these charges into his face? What had he, Hitler, to do with these plots? The conspirators were Austrians, weren't they? Their conspirings were internal affairs of Austria, weren't they? The Protocol of July 11 forbade him to intervene in internal Austrian affairs, didn't it? How had Schuschnigg ruled in Austria, bearing down on good German men, that they had to resort to such designs? Why should he reproach him, Hitler, for the consequences of his own poor policies at home? For his part, he knew nothing of the plot to attack the German legation. How should he know anything about it, a plot hatched by Austrians in Austria?

As for the plans of invasion, the Fuehrer raged on. What business were they of Schuschnigg? Germany had plans for the invasion of every neigh-

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est neighbor. That was a military duty. It had nothing to do with politics.

The plans were in the hands of the Committee of Seven. What had that to do with him? Was he to be held responsible for the legation messenger service in Vienna? The plans had been signed "R.H." There were plenty of RH's in Germany other than Rudolph Hess. What did Schuschnigg mean by his personal insinuations?

The Fuehrer's voice shrieked as he asked these questions, and his eyes burned with wrath. He beat his breast, he waved his arms. He was a torch of indignant passion, and Schuschnigg had to admit to himself that he put his case furiously but well.

Schuschnigg had another turn to speak, and, like the good lawyer that he was, began pressing with his evidence.

The investigation of the police, after the raid, had shown that the communication was constant between the Committee and German Nazi headquarters, the Brown House in Munich. Just a few days before, he reminded Hitler, the Austrian customs authorities at the Bavarian frontier town of Passau had seized a German limousine, which turned out to belong to the mayor of Passau. In it were three Austrians, and a prominent German Nazi, and the rear of the car had been crammed full of Nazi pamphlets, most of them personal attacks on him. What more proof could anyone ask? It was impossible, he argued, that the Committee of Seven, which maintained such close relations with Germany and was financed by Germany, should leave its German advisers ignorant of the plans for the attack on the German legation.

Again Hitler interrupted, but not to answer to the point. It was as though he had not listened to the evidence. He simply let fly again in a new outburst of anger. Schuschnigg, he cried, was the most disgraceful ruler in Europe. He had no following. His own people were against him. He was the worst terrorist that ever had sullied the history of the German race. Nobody stood behind him. His political life hung by a thread.

"Why!" he shouted, "I have only to march into Austria and all the people will rise and greet me as a savior!"

Schuschnigg drew himself up stiffly at this mention of invasion. "I have brought you my evidence," he said quickly, "and you take it as an insult, you pay no attention to the facts. I had better return to Austria."

Hitler glared at him, his face flushed.

"Obviously you don't know with whom you are dealing. You stand before the greatest German who has lived for centuries!"

The two chancellors faced one another, and then the antagonism in Hitler melted away. He relaxed, and he even produced a wan smile. The time, he said, had come for luncheon.

The luncheon was to confront Schuschnigg with a fresh and disconcerting surprise. The door opened, and two men entered in general's uniforms. They were introduced as General Von Keitel and General Von

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Reichenau,—the two men who had come to the fore after the Reichswehr purge. Von Keitel was the new commander-in-chief of the army; Von Reichenau was in command of the German forces on the Austrian frontier. They expressed the supremacy of Nazi control over the Reichswehr. Still more, they expressed Germany's readiness to invade Austria. Schuschnigg was taken aback. He had believed he was to be the Fuehrer's only guest. But there were to be other additions to the luncheon party. In filed more officers in field uniform. They were the entire staffs of the two generals. The room was suddenly transformed into a military meeting. And last of all came a countryman of the Austrian chancellor, Herr Muehlmann, an escaped Nazi conspirator, sentenced to prison during the Schuschnigg regime.

Conversation at the luncheon was stiff to the point of painfulness. But it was a fitting preparation for what was to follow. For as soon as the meal was ended, the negotiations began at once. The two chancellors, the two generals, the two foreign secretaries, and the Austrian conspirator repaired to the conference room. Here there was a new atmosphere. The time for argumentation had passed. Hitler took charge, and in a quiet business-like way informed Schuschnigg of the German demands.

These were three. First, an amnesty for all imprisoned Nazis in Austria, as well as for the entire Austrian legion in Bavaria. Second, the appointment of a "Nationalbetonter" (in effect, a Nazi sympathizer) as Minister of the Interior and a similar man to be Minister of Justice in the Austrian cabinet. Third, full political activity for Austrian Nazis. If these demands were not accepted, Germany would march into Austria.

In return for Austria's acceptance of the demands, Hitler offered to make a new explicit declaration in his next Reichstag speech, guaranteeing Austria's independence.

Schuschnigg replied without hesitation. An amnesty, he said, might be considered, but the inclusion of the Austrian Legion was out of the question. The appointment of a new Minister of the Interior might also be discussed. The Fatherland Front might open its ranks to former Nazis, but only for political activity within the framework of the Fatherland Front, and not as Nazis. But nothing, he said, could be decided there and then. Austria was governed under a constitution, and decisions of this importance could only be made by the cabinet after consultation with President Miklas. Moreover, he added, he must consult the President by telephone forthwith. But before he spoke to him he wished to make one comment. Austria had been threatened with force. This threat could have no bearing on the German demands. Other nations, he reminded Hitler, had been occupied by German armies, Belgium, Serbia, Rumania, and had regained their freedom. So would Austria.

With this dramatic utterance, he left the conference room to telephone to the Austrian President. When he returned, he was again emphatic. The

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President had authorized him to say that nothing could be decided without a full cabinet conference. He did not add, as he might have done, that the president had told him to get out of Berchtesgaden as quickly as ever he knew how, so as to extricate himself and his country from the perilous situation.

Once more the German demands were formulated, and this time the threat of invasion was more clearly defined. The Austrian government was given until three days later, the following Tuesday at six p.m. to accept the demands. Otherwise, Germany would march in. If the demands were accepted, Austria's independence would be guaranteed anew in the Reichstag speech. With this formulation, the negotiations came to their virtual conclusion. Schuschnigg repeated that nothing could be decided until the requirements of the Austrian constitution had been met. The Constitution, he declared, would not permit special privileges for Nazis. If the Nazis of Austria were permitted political identity the same would have to be allowed for monarchists, socialists, and communists. He rubbed it in that according to his deepest conviction all men must be equal before the law.

But he did not bang shut the door of negotiation. It was not for nothing that he had been educated by the Jesuits. He admitted there were possibilities in the German demands. Once the principle of equality was respected, he was prepared to advise his colleagues on how the demands might be met.

Herr Hitler sat before him, staring. In the background were the two generals, the symbols of Germany's military power. The ultimatum had at last been frankly avowed and set. After enduring eight hours of pleading and bullying. Schuschnigg finally rose to depart, a man of thirty-nine with snow-white hair, pale, exhausted and beaten.

The leave-taking was ice-cold. Only the traditional bowing and heel-clicking of men with military training, saved it from utter formlessness. In a few moments, Schuschnigg and Schmidt were speeding back to Salzburg. The first act of the death tragedy of Austria had ended. The "hard day at Berchtesgaden," as Schuschnigg was to describe it in his speech before the Austrian chamber, was over. ●