



Midnight Conference

In Germany's last hour 16 Nazi officials meet at Berchtesgaden, mourn in their cups and recall Hitler's gravest moments.

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BERCHTESGADEN, GERMANY—Sixteen men are sitting around a large banquet room in a Berchtesgaden hotel. Twelve of these men are former administrative members of the German Government; four are Americans. It is 10 o'clock, the night of May 8. Two hours later, at one minute after midnight, the unconditional surrender of Germany becomes a fact.

All of the Germans are technical experts, some legal, others economic. These men have information, perhaps important information. The war is over for them. They are ready, some even are willing, to talk, and in this hotel at Hitler's hide-out town they gather in the final hours of Germany's defeat to talk with the Americans who captured them.

One of the protocol experts stands up. His name is Heinz Bucholz. He is tall, slender, scholarly looking.

"I would like to describe," he says, "the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler on the morning of July 20, 1944."

His voice rolls on, in even clipped sentences. Sometimes, when he becomes excited, his tone is shrill.

THE attack on Hitler, Bucholz says, took place at a military conference on the East Prussian front, inside the Fuehrer's air raid shelter, which was a small underground room about 24 feet long and 10 feet wide. There were about 20 persons there. The most important were Hitler; Gen. Jodl, his personal chief-of-staff; Gen. Keitel, then commander-in-chief of the Wehrmacht; Colonel Brant, the famous horseman and cavalry expert; representatives of the various military services; two legal experts, who also acted as stenographers; Bucholz and his assistant.

Most of the officials were standing around a wooden table covered with maps; several were sitting on window sills. The conference had been delayed for the arrival of Gen. Keitel. A few minutes later he came in, accompanied by Count von Stauffenberg.

"When von Stauffenberg entered," says Bucholz, "the Fuehrer gave him a puzzled look. He had not recalled seeing him before. Keitel then introduced von Stauffenberg as the head of the Wehrmacht training section, which was organizing replacement divisions for the East Front."

Stauffenberg was carrying a brief case under his arm. When everybody took their places around the table, as the conference opened, the count placed the brief case between the legs of a wooden horse under the table, next to Hitler and Col. Brant. The brief case was hitting against Brant's legs, so he picked it up and placed it on his other side, away from Hitler. Bucholz pauses.

"I need not tell you," he says, "that inside the brief case was a chemical time-bomb and that von Stauffenberg was the direct agent in the assassination attempt. It is interesting to point out," he adds, "that Col. Brant, who put the brief case further away from the Fuehrer, was also a member of the plot ring. It happened,

however, that he was not aware an attempt was being made at this time against the Fuehrer's life. He was also not aware that the brief case contained a bomb." Bucholz smiles sardonically: "That was unfortunate for Col. Brant."

AS the conference progressed, Bucholz continues, a guard came in with a message that von Stauffenberg was wanted on an outside phone. The count excused himself, left the shelter, walked across to a parking place and drove to an airport to take a plane for Berlin.

Less than five minutes after the count left, the bomb in the brief case exploded with a terrific force and with a blinding yellow flash. Col. Brant and the stenographer were immediately torn apart; the men sitting on the window sill were blown outside. For an instant there were no sounds, then the cries of the wounded, and immediately following the voice of Keitel: "Where is the Fuehrer, where is the Fuehrer?"

When the smoke lifted, Hitler was found leaning across the table; his left arm, which had been extended over a map, was badly bruised. His hair and trousers were singed, and his ear drums were broken from the explosion.

"Keitel offered to assist the Fuehrer from the room, but the Fuehrer brushed him aside and walked out unassisted, his left arm quivering but otherwise unhurt."

During the next few weeks, Bucholz continues, there were trials for over 600 conspirators, many of them high Army officers, some of them intellectuals, some administrative officials. They were all executed.

The conspirators had hoped to form a new government, then sue for peace.

"It was very poorly planned," comments one of the Reichschancellor heads dryly. "They were amateurs. They made no attempt to seize control of the press, of the radio, the utilities. They were amateurs," he repeats. "Besides, they thought that all they had to do was kill the Fuehrer, and the revolution would succeed by itself. They were wrong." He smiles grimly. "The party was too strong."

The other Germans sitting around the room nod in agreement.

LATER in the evening the early tension breaks, and bottles of wine are opened, cigarettes are passed around. They talk of events that made history, discussing them in the clinical tones of surgeons discussing operations. One of the men was a stenographer at the Reichstag fire trials.

Who had been guilty? He shrugs his shoulders. Ach, who knows? It was all so mysterious. There were reports that Goering had ordered it, but no one really knew. Dimitroff, the Bulgarian Communist who was one of the chief defendants, had made a powerful impression.

"Yah, that Dimitroff," he says. "A strong personality, without doubt a strong personality."

The second protocol expert raises his hand. His name is Gerhard Hergesell. He is a lawyer by profession and a judge by administrative rank. He is slender, tense, black-haired with dark features. His mouth twitches nervously. He bows toward the Americans.

"With the permission of you gentlemen," he says. "I will describe the military conference which took place at the Fuehrer's shelter in the Reichschancellory in Berlin on the night of April 22, 1945." His voice is metallic, expressionless, and he leans forward in his chair as if he is testifying on a witness stand.

"There were present at that meeting about 20 of us, mein Fuehrer (he uses the expression 'mein' Fuehrer when referring to Hitler, the others 'der' Fuehrer), Reichsleiter Bormann, Keitel, Jodl and their adjutants."

The usual briefings on military developments had taken place earlier that night, Hergesell says, because of "the current critical situation." The Russians had taken the Tempelhof air field, were said to be at the Alexanderplatz and were even then shelling the heart of Berlin.

"The noise of the artillery," he adds, "sometimes made it difficult for us to hear each other."

DURING the conference there were two important phone calls for Hitler. One was from Admiral Doenitz, who came increasingly into Hitler's favor during the last few months. Doenitz was reporting from a north German base, saying that he had switched the coastal artillery to face inland and that he had everything in readiness to continue the war in that section. Hitler listened patiently over the phone, then hung up with a brief "thank you."

The next phone call was from von Ribbentrop, the foreign minister. Ribbentrop had important communications on the San Francisco conference. The Russians and Allies were facing an open split over the Polish question. There was still hope for a deadlock. Hitler listened with the same resigned expression, hung up with the same curt "thank you."

As the six-hour conference went on couriers came in bringing fresh reports of the Russian advances in the street fighting in Berlin.

After Hitler heard the complete military report he seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. Then he suddenly said: "Keitel, Bormann and Jodl must go at once. I shall stay here."

"I need not tell you," Hergesell says, "that this produced a great shock. Immediately everyone tried to persuade mein Fuehrer that this was impossible. But mein Fuehrer was adamant. 'In this way,' he said, 'I shall serve my people best. I shall stay here in Berlin until the end. The others must go and carry on as best they can.'"

He kept repeating "I shall stay here until the end," Hergesell says, during the remaining hours of the conference. Up to that time Hitler had been determined to fight on in hope of a deadlock, in the hope there might be a split among the Allies. Now it was all changed. He seemed to have become resigned. For him the war's periphery was the battle for Berlin. Nothing seemed to matter.

"Keitel, Bormann, and Jodl," says Hergesell, "continued to argue with mein Fuehrer. Before they had always followed him blindly. This was the first time they would not agree with him. Keitel refused to leave. He exclaimed: 'I could never face my family again if I should leave you now.' Bormann also refused to leave. But Jodl was cold. 'I will never die in this rat-trap,' he said. 'If I must die, I shall die in the open, like a soldier.'"

THE word of Hitler's decision to remain in Berlin spread like wildfire, and many people kept coming in with attempts to persuade him to change his course. But he kept repeating: "Here I shall stay until the end. That is my duty to the German people. In that way I shall save my honor."

At another time he said: "Let Goering take care of the negotiations. He is a more skillful negotiator than I am."

"In my opinion," continues Hergesell, looking toward his fellow Germans, "that was an ironical expression. We all believed that mein Fuehrer had lost faith in Goering for a long time, ever since the failure of the Luftwaffe. Many believed that it was the failure of the Luftwaffe that cost us the war."

The conference ended and, Hergesell points out, that was the last time he saw Adolf Hitler. Taking the minutes of the historic meeting, he boarded a plane at Berlin for Bavaria.

"I have no doubt," he concludes, "that mein Fuehrer died as he said he would—in the ruins of Berlin."

A few minutes later the church chimes of Berchtesgaden ring out. It is midnight. The war with Germany is officially at an end. The Nazis around the table look at each other. They are deathly quiet.