

## The Interrogation

January 1945

Beyond the prisoner facing him, Eli Stoff saw daylight dimming through the room's single window. Across the table, the young soldier remained silent, staring at his hands, which he clasped tightly on the cold aluminum. A lighter, a broken cigarette, and a black and red enameled *Deutsche Jungvolk* membership badge lay to the side. Eli had the boy empty his pockets before he began his interrogation. Now, several hours in, the January chill seeped through the plaster walls. It was time to get inside Malcolm Schlick's head.

Eli lowered his voice and leaned forward. "So you had no choice but to sign on with Hitler's army. You did what you were told. I understand."

Eli was trained to "understand." He was an officer of the U.S. Army. Born in Vienna. Barely escaped when Hitler took over. Settled in Ohio. After five years in his new country, he was drafted, assigned to the Tenth Mountain Division in Colorado, then transferred to Camp Ritchie in Maryland for MI training. He arrived in Paris in late December, part of a six-man military intelligence team. His orders were simple: arrest all Nazis impersonating Allied officers, put them through rudimentary questioning, write up a report. But something about Malcolm Schlick made this case more complex. Eli couldn't put his finger on it.

Schlick still wore the olive-drab uniform he'd used to blend into the Paris streets, like so many of the beaten-down Germans trying to evade capture. Last night, Eli'd overheard traces of German in Schlick's otherwise fluid French as he bought a paper at the local newsstand. He noticed Schlick's uniform was scruffy, patched with dried mud—probably taken from a dead soldier. Curfew approached so Eli had quickly motioned his MI partner, Henry White, to act as backup before he approached the likely imposter.

Now the boy—because he *was* just a boy at seventeen—sat in a sterile room in an abandoned villa in Le Vesinet, red blotches flaring up on his neck. Eli couldn't help feeling sorry for Schlick, who he now knew hailed from a village near Salzburg, plucked from his family at fifteen to face front-line combat. Whether he joined the German troops of his own volition or under duress was yet to be determined.

Eli felt a slight tapping of the boy's foot against the wood floor.

"Can I get you a cup of tea or coffee?" he asked him.

Malcolm looked up, a sudden shiver twitching through his upper body. "*Ja, kaffee. Bitte.*"

That familiar Austrian-accented German. It matched up with Schlick's Salzburg narrative.

Eli regarded the boy more closely. Malcolm was unskilled in mastering his facial expressions, lacking that mask donned by the men Eli had faced over the past weeks, a mask he would get them, eventually, to drop. Malcolm seemed unpracticed, too, in arranging his body to hide distress. Fear, not anger, shone through the young Austrian's eyes, pressing on his brows, circling his mouth. Vulnerability spoke in the slack of his shoulders.

Eli had been trained to notice these signs as he interrogated suspects and prisoners. He worked to make them feel safe so he could learn more about Nazi plans or troop movements—anything to better inform Allied forces as they edged toward victory in an insufferable war. That's how he found himself stationed in a town west of Paris, face to face with a member of the *Hitler Jugend* just four years his junior.

Eli set down the container of coffee, its steam rising like a genie from an oil lamp. He paused while Malcolm drew the cup to his lips, then pressed on. "When did you learn French?"

"My parents sent me to private school. South of Salzburg, in Anif." Malcolm kept his head down, his sandy-colored waves falling into his face. "I learned French and English. And we had relatives in France. Visited them during summers when I was growing up."

The last time Eli was in Salzburg was in March of '38. He'd gone skiing in Tyrol on a class trip with his best friend, Toby Wermer. It was on the train back—at the stops in Salzburg and Linz—when he saw soldiers with Nazi banners and swastikas and realized the Germans had taken over Austria. Camaraderie earned on the school excursion quickly turned into a brawl, the one time he lost all control of his emotions.

"Did you ski in the winters?"

"I did. With my father. He started me when I was three." Malcolm's mouth relaxed for a moment. "But things changed...while I was still a young boy."

"Tell me more about how you became a soldier."

Eli went along with the boy's story that he hadn't joined the German Army of his own free will, and he purposefully didn't label Malcolm a Nazi. He knew to avoid words that might trigger the young soldier to shut down. It was part of a general avoidance of confrontation he'd learned long before his interrogation training—from all the times he'd been spat at, insulted and bullied in his own neighborhood.

"They came to my school in '39. I was twelve. After the *Anschluss*, *Hitler Jugend* membership became compulsory for us. Nazi Party reps were always coming to speak." Malcolm's eyes seemed unfocused and distant as he continued. "They talked about how Hitler's youth organization developed future officers. Made it seem an honor, a stepping stone. There were gatherings, events. Special uniforms. Boys as young as ten were recruited. Many of my friends were excited to join."

"You weren't?" Eli remembered the pressures in Austria bubbling up and penetrating the broad consciousness of his non-Jewish neighbors, the friends of his family or the workers at his father's factory. Propaganda about the superiority of the Aryan race and against the Jews was ubiquitous. He could still see his classmates' eyes widen, taking in those uniforms in the train station on the way back from Tyrol. He understood the pull on an impressionable boy wanting to belong to something. Did Malcolm feel he had no choice? Or did he find the Nazis' message appealing?

"Let's say I had little interest in the military. I like music. I read a lot."

Of course the boy would be partial to music; after all Salzburg was Mozart's birthplace. Music was native to Austria's air. But Malcolm's affect—the direct way he answered Eli's questions—reminded Eli of Toby. Not in appearance—Malcolm was as tall as Eli and had a sturdy build, whereas Toby was short and thin, with dark hair he wore long and unkempt. But Toby was a voracious reader of novels and any periodical he could get his hands on, and a lover of all kinds of music. He was always asking questions no one would think to articulate or making observations that would get to some truth.

"How did that go over with your friends, your teachers?"

Malcolm glanced curiously at Eli. "Not all Austrians and Germans were Nazis, you know." His eyes glared at nothing in particular. "But they made it quite clear what was the acceptable behavior and point of view. Unfortunately, most of my peers became indoctrinated. Lost their ability to see the world differently." He swallowed hard. "Boys like me knew to keep quiet or bad things would happen."

Eli remembered how Toby learned to moderate his opinions over time. Like during the Olympics in '36. Toby hated that Hitler had muddied the games, as he'd put it, with his views of Aryan supremacy. Toby voiced his thoughts within earshot of several teachers at their school. After the unannounced search of his home by local authorities that evening, Toby could only silently cheer the four gold medals won by the Negro Jesse Owens.

Toby and Eli met when they were six and became inseparable. The difference in their religious backgrounds never came up until Toby had to defend Eli.

While Eli knew there were non-Jewish Austrians like Toby who

disagreed with Hitler's ideology—some who refused to join the Party—he nonetheless identified every soldier in the German Army as a Nazi. All his army buddies did. In fact, Eli lumped all German soldiers together as the same anti-Semites who had persecuted him and his family. But Toby didn't fit this mold. And, now, Malcolm Schlick didn't either. Still, Eli held onto his doubts.

"So when Austria came under the German Reich you joined *Hitler Jugend*."

"I told you I had to join. After '38, Austrians fell under the same Nazi laws." Malcolm pushed away from the table, the chair legs scraping the floor. "My parents signed me up the next year—they had no choice. From then on, most of Germany's and Austria's teenagers belonged to the *HJ*."

Eli had escaped Vienna just after the *Anschluss* when anti-Jewish discrimination was officially sanctioned. Everything happened so fast. The affidavits came through and his mother set straight to packing. He wrote Toby when he arrived in New York. Toby's letter back was cryptic: rapid changes in Vienna, the omnipresence of Nazi soldiers, pressure on his parents to join the party. Then he reverted to lighthearted Toby talk—books he was reading, new jazz he'd discovered. Toby no sooner fit into the Hitler Youth movement than Eli. But that was the last time Eli'd heard from Toby.

Eli was well aware of Nazi indoctrination but hadn't appreciated until now how systemic, pervasive and resolute its recruitment, and how very young its members. It was something he'd emphasize in his report. But he began thinking again about Toby, just fifteen when Eli left Austria. What if he were forced, like Malcolm, to join?

"Why would you keep your membership badge, if you were coerced as you say? Pocketed as if it were a memento." The black and red object sat between them. Eli picked it up and turned it over, its smooth enamel surface as cold as the dank interrogation room.

"The Germans in disguise in Paris had only one enemy. I had two—the Nazis I wished to escape and the Americans who, like you, see me as a spy." Malcolm grimaced as he eyed Eli. "I needed some proof of membership if I encountered my German comrades."

Eli silently smiled at the boy's agile response and decided to veer in a new direction, beyond his standard script. "What do you remember about the *Anschluss*?"

"Germans marching into the city. Arrests. My parents said opponents of the regime and minorities were targeted—their way of urging me to keep my views to myself. A synagogue near my father's office was destroyed." Malcolm's square jaw gave him an appearance of someone older just then. He fixed his gaze on Eli. "Your German is perfect. Perfect Austrian German. When did you leave...and why?"

Eli should have expected this question since nothing about this

encounter followed procedure. He'd kept digging for more from Malcolm, despite the fact that he already had what he needed. He knew Schlick was a deserter from the Ardennes Counteroffensive. He had a deeper understanding of the Hitler Youth movement and new insight about the current composition of the German Army.

But it wasn't that simple now. Malcolm's enlistment had been a suffocating sentence. It was the law that he and his parents had no choice but to obey. Malcolm could have been Toby. And, if Eli hadn't been Jewish, he could have been Malcolm. A jumble of feelings roiled inside Eli. His past and present blurred in his mind and, for a moment, he felt slightly dislocated.

Eli needed time to think. It was already late and he chose to avoid Malcolm's question by offering to get them some food before continuing. Frosty air from the central courtyard of the villa rushed into the six-by-six space when he opened the interrogation room door. As he stepped outside, he didn't worry about Schlick escaping. The arrest seemed liberating to the boy. Like most prisoners from Germany and Austria, Schlick had to be relieved to be apprehended by the U.S. instead of the Soviets. And American treatment would easily be an improvement over the life he was trying to escape as a soldier on the front lines of a depleted army.

It felt good to be in the open clearance, breathing in the crisp air. Eli stretched his head to one side, almost touching his shoulder, then to the other. The fading light of dusk had a calming effect on him. The villa was a safe haven, far from the battlefield and the fear they all harbored in wartime. He felt the ground, hard beneath his feet, the earth frozen solid by the frigid temperatures. Snapping sounds startled him for a moment—*gunshots?*—but they morphed into the crunching of footsteps just as Henry White appeared around the corner.

"How's it goin' in there?" White was officially a technical specialist but low man on the totem pole and Eli's MI partner when the two picked up Malcolm on the Paris streets.

"It...it's interesting." Eli stopped himself from saying more. "Can you bring us two plates from the mess hall?" Eli patted his comrade's shoulder in thanks, like a father to his son, even though Henry was less than two years younger.

He watched White's silhouette disappear into the main house, a sprawling structure shaped like a wide "V." The central foyer fed into a large dining area on one side and what had become the combat regiment's main office on the other. Much of the villa's furniture had been removed and the place repurposed when Eli's MI team arrived, including the separate brick building that may have served as storage and servant quarters but was now a series of interrogation suites.

He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. As he drew the tobacco into his lungs, he thought back to when he first arrived in

France. His MI team bonded well despite the clear hierarchy. Now a staff sergeant, Eli ranked above Henry, a T-4, and above Max Schultz, a corporal, but below First Lieutenant Greene, Master Sergeant Landenberger, and Captain Higgins. Titles and status didn't matter to Eli, especially since he'd trained with Henry and Max at Camp Ritchie, alongside thousands of GIs, many like him whose native tongues were also not English. Men being groomed into interrogators of prisoners of war. It was then that Eli began to realize his knowledge of German language and culture, so long a liability, was suddenly viewed by the U.S. Army as a valuable asset. And this isolated villa became a welcome respite from the military camp in Manchester, an old, grimy textile mill town full of ancient brick factory buildings, where his unit was deployed last June. The pressure then was much higher for all of them in intelligence to help turn the tide of the war. Eli played his part; his interrogations and analysis of aerial photographs led to the identification of fortifications along the Siegfried line and allowed U.S. troops to breach those bunkers and advance from France to Germany.

Eli exhaled smoke into the winter air. He hadn't had the luxury of private reflection, but tonight found himself dwelling on his role as both an Austrian Jew and an Allied officer. It was easier to work steadily within the parameters of his MI training—the physical, the technical, the linguistic: interpretation of aerial codes, weeding out liars and killers, finding the enemy's secrets of war—rather than exploring his own emotions or reconciling his feelings about returning to the European fray just six years after escaping it. How he and his parents just picked up and left, how they had to abandon his grandmother in the midst of the crisis. The tears. The promises to find a way to get her later. The sadness he'd seen in his mother's eyes ever since.

Back then, Eli didn't register the finality of the family's predicament. He didn't consider that he'd never see Gramma Jenny again. Now, Malcolm Schlick was pulling him backward, to all the bullying and insults and fear of that time. But also to the lovely parts of his childhood and his special friendship with Toby. Eli was Toby's protector, and then in that final year Toby became Eli's. But once Eli moved to the Midwest and began a new life where he was safe, he somehow let that part of his life fade away like an old photograph.

Eli had a sudden impulse and pulled out his wallet, quickly rifling through identification cards, a few American dollars, a cropped family portrait. And there it was—the discolored photo of he and Toby in Tyrol. It was so sunny that Eli had to squint to avoid the glare off the snow. Toby was in the middle of a laugh, his head tilted up toward Eli. It hit Eli then: he escaped and Toby was left to fight as a German.

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"I'm a Jew," Eli said evenly.

Malcolm chewed a piece of beef, his head lowered over his plate. He took another bite before responding. "You were lucky. How'd you get out?"

"A childhood friend of my mother's lived in New York with her husband. They were poor. Didn't know the kind of people who could vouch for us." Eli hesitated, random thoughts coursing through his mind. *Also an Austrian. Also a non-Jew.* "She found a generous Jewish businessman and convinced him to take a chance on us. My parents and I got out in the nick of time. What about your family?"

Malcolm's deep-set eyes darkened. "I haven't seen them in over a year."

"Have you been in touch at all?"

"No. I was deployed as part of the Twelfth SS-Panzer-Division."

Eli took a deep breath as Malcolm's words sunk in. *Hitler Jugend* had become Germany's military reserve. At sixteen, Malcolm was at the front line fighting a grueling war counter to his beliefs and against his will while Eli was completing his final year at a public high school in Columbus, Ohio.

"You said you joined the movement when you were twelve. Were there tests you had to pass? Training to become a member?"

"We had to recite all the verses of the Horst Wessel song." Malcolm began to sing, mockingly: *Die Fahne hoch! Die Reihen fest geschlossen! SA marschiert mit ruhig festem Schritt.* [The flag on high! The ranks tightly closed! The SA marches with quiet, steady step.] His voice was low-pitched, guttural.

"And...?"

"We had to answer a bunch of questions about Hitler's life and about Nazi ideology and history. We ran sprints to show we were physically fit. They made us take courage tests."

"Like what?"

"I had to jump from a second-story ledge."

Eli clenched his jaw, holding back his outrage at the harsh tactics Nazis employed with mere children. He tried shutting off his anger, thinking about something else. The Camp Ritchie classroom instruction. The times they role-played to hone their skills as interrogators. Each had taken turns acting the part of a German, provoking one another with coarse words or flagrant taunts, or compelling anguish that could compromise their objectivity as they extracted information from the man facing them across the table.

"And if you refused?"

"I told you—refusal was not a choice. Failure wasn't an option." Malcolm pushed away his plate, half-eaten, placed both his hands on the table and leaned toward Eli. "My father was severely beaten, his

print shop was ransacked. Just because he refused to become a member of the Nazi Party." At that, Malcolm let out a contemptuous laugh that sent a shiver down Eli's spine. "At least it kept him from being drafted. The thugs broke his leg and it never healed properly. He was lame...and ineligible."

*An Austrian worker persecuted in the preamble to this war. His son forced to fight against his will.* Eli tried to be skeptical about what Malcolm had told him but he kept asking himself, *how can he make up this kind of detail?* He committed to memory all the facts to include in the report. Even though the write-ups are typically brief and perfunctory, he suspected his peers shared his own ignorance.

"Tell me more about your HJ activities."

"By 1940 it became an auxiliary force that performed war duties. For a while I was active in fire brigades, assisted with recovery efforts. Around the Salzburg train station, mostly. Plenty of devastation resulted from Allied bombings. It kept me busy."

"So where were you deployed once you became part of the Nazi fighting forces?"

"The first major action we saw was last June during the Normandy campaign. We started with more than twenty-thousand. Left with less than fourteen. As casualties mounted, members of *Hitler Jugend* were recruited at younger and younger ages. Some twelve-year-olds were among the Germans' fiercest fighters."

Eli was incredulous—all his comrades would be. The Allies were fighting an army filled with virtually every teenage male in the German Reich, and some even younger. He asked himself why he trusted Malcolm. Because he was a fellow Austrian? Because he reminded Eli of Toby?

He jotted down key words in his notepad. "What happened after Normandy?"

"We were sent back to Germany, refitted; then back for the Ardennes Counteroffensive. It was brutal. Last week, after I barely dodged a bullet, I broke down. My superior officer found me huddled inside a bunker, shaking and crying. I'd wet my pants. He screamed in my ear, said to toughen up." Schlick's face was expressionless at first. Then his eyes misted over. "I was ready to die. Escape was my only hope."

Through the small window, Eli watched the evening sun sink into the horizon, a hollowness filling him. There were no rules of engagement in war. Just human beings killing one another, shooting into the darkness and, perhaps, killing not a man but a boy. He was glad that Malcolm had fled and their paths had crossed. His detailed report would differentiate the young Austrian from the true infiltrators and spies swarming around Paris but likely have no consequences. Regardless, the boy would be treated well as a POW because that was



the American way. Malcolm would have a future when all this was over and that knowledge gave Eli a sense of peace.

When Eli spoke again, his voice was gentle. "What do you see yourself doing? That is, if there wasn't a war."

"You know, for those of us living under Hitler, duty to the Fuhrer, the Fatherland—that was all that mattered. One's life was nothing. It's almost hard to imagine myself as separate, apart from that." Malcolm had a dreamy look in his eyes as he leaned back in his chair, his body looser, his face no longer prematurely lined. "I might be a writer. Or a musician. I guess I never had a chance to consider this. What about you?"

"When I got to America, a future opened up for me. There were many possibilities even though we were poor. Before I joined the Army, I attended a university. Studied the American system of law and the country's history."

"Will you continue your education after the war?"

Eli's life in Ohio suddenly felt like a distant memory, out of step with his reality as an MI officer. "I guess I haven't thought that far ahead. Learning about your experiences got me thinking more about my childhood...all the memories." He turned away from Malcolm. "It was difficult to be a Jew in Austria."

Malcolm's mouth tightened. "My parents sent me to a private Catholic school. Our neighbors were like us. I never got close to any Jews. Hadn't ever thought about what it might be like to be persecuted. But I didn't like to be told how to think...or what to think." Schlick fell silent and several moments passed. "It was more about what was ethical. I was uncomfortable belittling any group—Jews, Gypsies, whoever was different. I never really considered how they... how someone like you might feel. And I saw no way to fight it." He nodded his head as if affirming this disclosure before he continued. "If I have a future, I want to live in a better world."

Malcolm's words rose into the space like smoke, lifting but lingering as Eli hung onto the boy's hopes. "Turns out we were both persecuted, weren't we?" Eli looked expectantly at Malcolm as he searched for a way to express his aspirations. "I want to get back to Ohio and my new life there. You know, when I lived in Vienna I skied slopes west of Salzburg. They were beautiful. But that was when I lived in a different world. After this war ends, I may never come back to Austria or Germany." He'd never said this aloud before, had never thought this way until now. "And I will finally search out and meet the generous businessman who gave me my freedom."

He turned toward the room's tiny window as their silence was broken by the sound of steps—close, then moving farther away, softening into tranquil background noises. Voices, too, with muted tones of admonishments and appeals to hurry up, mingling like the din

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of childhood. Above it all arose a gravelly humming—sober and restrained—to the tune “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Eli stood and walked to the window, lifting it up, the cold air seeping inside. He motioned Malcolm to come look. It was pitch black outside but for the whirls of snowflakes descending, filling the crevices of the hard earth. A white sheen blanketed the army quarters, transforming it into the villa of its past. Stars flickered through the clouds, their glimmer brief, transient.

The hollow whoosh of wintry wind dissipated into darkness. Eli felt very small and alone. The war stood between him and his family. Between him and his dreams.

Malcolm Schlick, in custody, was now safe.