

Prologue: July 1933

*Oompa-pa! Oompa-pa!* The throaty voice of Ursula’s bellows greeted Ilse as she entered the house. Her sister’s music lesson was still going on. Shutting the door quietly behind her, Ilse Sauer entered the front parlor and paused in the archway. Without skipping a beat, Ursula shot Ilse a smile and rolled her eyes toward Frau Schmidt, whose back was to the entryway. Although she was only a decade older than fifteen-year-old Ursula and sixteen-year-old Ilse, Frau Schmidt was a serious and dedicated music instructor. She rapped her empty cigarette holder on the back of the chair she stood behind, keeping time and a close eye on her student’s fingering.

When Ursula misplayed a note, Frau Schmidt clucked her tongue and stepped forward. “You’re still not concentrating on that particular section of this polka. We’ve talked about this so many times!”

Mimicking the rebuke, Ilse shook her head at Ursula in mock disapproval, which triggered an eruption of giggles from the younger sister. Frau Schmidt whipped around, catching them in the act.

After swallowing her smile, Ilse shifted her case to her left hand, cleared her throat, and cowered at Frau Schmidt’s stern gaze. Ursula continued to beam, not bothering to hide her merriment.

Ilse mumbled, “Excuse me, Edith—er, I mean Frau Schmidt. I’m sorry to intrude on Ursula’s lesson.” With lowered eyes, she asked, “When might you be finished? It’s past suppertime, and Mutti will need us home.”

Frau Schmidt exhaled and tensed her shoulders, but then nodded. “I’d say we’re finished. Wouldn’t you?” she asked Ursula. “I’m not sure your concentration is all here today, anyway.”

With a smile playing about her lips, Ursula put away her schifferklavier<sup>1</sup> and gathered her sheet music. Ilse stood in the doorway and shifted from foot to foot, preparing a fitting apology. She approached Frau Schmidt with her chin bent low.

“My apologies. For my actions, I mean. We were just having a little laugh. It wasn’t meant to be at your expense or to interrupt the lesson.”

“It’s fine. It’s nothing new with Ursula, though, coming from you, it *is* a little surprising. But no matter. How are your flöte<sup>2</sup> lessons coming along? Is—”

Ursula bumped her way over with her schifferklavier and inserted herself between the two older frauen<sup>3</sup>. “Oh really, Frau Schmidt, that’s not very nice!” she cried jokingly. “To point out how I’m so much more fun than Ilse!”

Ilse swatted Ursula’s hip with her flöte case and sighed.

“Careful now, big sister. You may be older, but I have the heavier weapon!” Ursula brandished the schifferklavier case in the air, as high as her petite, one-and-a-half-meter frame could lift it.

“Alright girls, time to go.” Frau Schmidt ushered them toward the doorway. “And don’t forget to keep practicing that section. We have the performance coming up, and I know how little time you’ve spent on it.”

“How is that possible? Who’s your spy?” Ursula demanded.

“We all have our ways. You’re not the only cunning one.” With a mysterious wiggle of her eyebrows, she added, “Say hello to your Mutter for me.” She closed the door behind them. The heated embrace of July wrapped around the girls.

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<sup>1</sup> accordion

<sup>2</sup> flute

<sup>3</sup> Women

Ursula set down her case and huffed in exasperation. “I’m going to murder Mutti! How could she tell Frau Schmidt I haven’t been practicing?”

“You haven’t. And it is what Mutti and Vati pay for.”

“Thank you very much for taking their side.” Ursula gathered up her case and walked down the stairs, turning left toward the Main River and not bothering to wait for her sister.

“I’m not on anyone’s side,” Ilse called out as she rushed after her.

Once she caught up, she grabbed Ursula’s elbow. “You’re so talented. So much better than I am at the flöte. I don’t want that to go to waste, and neither do Mutti and Vati.” Ilse’s green eyes implored her sister’s blue ones.

Almost as quickly as she got upset, Ursula yielded. After a brief half-hug, she chirped, “Oh, you’re just too nice to me sometimes!” She shook her head, “Better than you at music! That’s not true, and you know it. But thanks for saying so.”

Ilse reached out and took Ursula’s heavy case. “Let me carry that for you. I’m stronger.”

“You’re taller. That doesn’t mean you’re stronger.”

But Ursula allowed Ilse to carry her instrument and opted for the much smaller flöte case. They linked arms and walked along the edge of the Mainkai.<sup>4</sup> The river’s surface was a slate grey mirror, with the cloudy sky gazing down upon itself. The depths of the watery looking glass reflected the stony bridges and red-tiled houses of Würzburg.

As they drew closer to their home on the Theodor Korner Straße,<sup>5</sup> a man in a solid black uniform approached from the other direction. When he was only a few meters away, the black and red swastika on his left arm stayed by his side while his right arm shot high in the air.

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<sup>4</sup> Walkway next to the Main River

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Corner Street

“*Heil Hitler!*” he proclaimed.

Caught off guard, the girls stopped and gave a nervous nod rather than the expected return salute.

The soldier stared at them and cleared his throat menacingly.

Faltering and flustered, Ilse panicked. It was too late to fix their mistake, so she quickened their pace along the walkway, clunking Ursula’s case painfully against her side and pulling her little sister along with her. Neither turned around to see if the Nazi soldier was still watching them. After a few seconds of retreat, they ducked into an alcove.

“I’m so sorry! I don’t know what came over me!” Ilse exhaled baffled breaths and tried to stop her hands from shaking. “How could I be so stupid?” She gulped the hot air, which collided with her anxious panting. Erratic hiccups followed.

Ursula laughed evenly. “Stupid? More like ridiculous!”

“What do you mean?” *Hiccup!*

“I’m sure he didn’t expect two young women to behave like strict Nazis. Besides, we aren’t even members of the Party.” Ursula put both her hands on Ilse’s shoulders. “It’s fine.”

Ilse closed her eyes and tried to breathe evenly. “Of course, you’re right. I don’t know why I overreacted. It is fine.” Her heart slowed to a regular rhythm, and her hands relaxed.

After considering it for a moment, Ilse asked, “But how can you be so calm about it? Didn’t he scare you, just a little?”

Before Ursula could answer, the clock on the Kappele<sup>6</sup> began to chime out over the city. Abandoning her question, Ilse tugged on her sister’s hand. “Oh, we’re already so late! Mutti expected us half an hour ago. Let’s hurry.”

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<sup>6</sup> Medieval Church

“Yes, yes. But if I get a blister, I’m blaming you.” Ursula matched her sister’s long-legged pace the rest of the way home.

Eager to confront her mother about Frau Schmidt, Ursula burst through the Sauer’s front door, dropped her case on the hand-hooked rug, and ran down the steps to the kitchen, catching the sleeve of her blouse on the stem of a carved wooden apple. “Sheisse!<sup>7</sup>” she mumbled, but she freed herself and continued her mission.

With an amused sigh, Ilse unpinned her hat and tucked it away, along with their instrument cases, in the hall closet. After inspecting her brown shoes for any signs of mud or street dirt, she followed Ursula downstairs to help their mother with dinner.

“. . . and I still don’t see why you had to tell her! I know that piece backwards and forwards! She’s just so serious!”

Margarethe Sauer shook her head as she poured the mushroom gravy over the pork chops she’d fried earlier. She kept her back to Ursula, not willing to ruin a perfectly good jägerschnitzel and knödel<sup>8</sup> for her daughter’s complaints. These pork chops had been a rare find at the butcher yesterday. Burnt gravy was not an option.

“I’m glad to hear she’s doing her job. And you know you’ve become much better at that thing since she took over your lessons. You sound wonderful now. Like a real concert performer.” After turning off the range, she wiped her hands on her apron and faced the two teenagers in front of her. Growing into women with each passing day. How was it possible?

Margarethe’s comment earned a brief pause and a pleased expression from her younger daughter. “It is lovely for you say that, but I’m still not happy,” she insisted as she flopped in a

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<sup>7</sup> Shit

<sup>8</sup> Pork chops in mushroom gravy with wheat dumplings

wooden chair at the kitchen table. But the upturned corners of her mouth told a different story. Give her a compliment and Ursula could usually be appeased.

“What do you need from us, Mutti?” Ilse asked.

“It’s nice to hear one of my girls is willing to help out.”

“Oh, what a silly thing to say! You know I’m always willing to help!” Ursula protested.

Margarethe smiled. Willing, yes, but Ursula’s cooking attempts were usually disastrous. Over-seasoned pork, soggy crusts, and burned dumplings.

“I’d say that’s true. At least when someone is urging you along.” She grabbed two aprons and tossed one at Ursula, who yelped when it hit her chest. Margarethe handed the other to Ilse. “That dough needs to be rolled out.” Her chin tilted toward a towel-covered, ceramic bowl. “The pear filling is in the icebox. Put that together for me while I finish the jägerschnitzel so we can get the pie in the oven while we eat. And be quick about it. Vati is already up there waiting. He’s liable to start banging his silverware on the dining room table at any moment.”

The girls put on their aprons. Ilse brought the bowl and a rolling pin over while Ursula grabbed the flour from the pantry. After setting the sack down, Ursula flung a handful of flour across the wooden surface. A bit of the white powder clung to her fingers and palm, so Ursula clapped her hands in front of Ilse’s face, dusting her sister’s nose and chin with flour. She laughed mischievously at Ilse’s surprised expression.

“Oh, that’s it!” Ilse cried merrily. She scooped up a bit of flour and dropped it in Ursula’s white blond hair, making it even whiter. “How do you like that? You look like Mutti!” she squealed.

The girls grabbed onto each other and trembled with giggles, white dust shaking from their heads with each movement. Suddenly, a sharp clang halted their amusement.

Margarethe kept her hand on the ceramic bowl of sugary pears and declared, “Alright, that’s enough. No need to waste perfectly good flour, hmm? Let’s finish this.”

Ursula and Ilse mumbled their apologies and got to work, but not before Ursula patted Margarethe’s back and left a white handprint on Mutti’s flowered housedress. “Entschuldigung,<sup>9</sup> Margarethe,” she said gravely while stifling a chuckle.

Margarethe saw right through it. Silly, playful girl. But Margarethe didn’t mind, especially now. It was a joy to see Ursula’s outgoing spirit inspire some mirth in Ilse, who was often so pensive. After touching her back, Margarethe’s hand was coated in white. Ursula caught her eye, and the two shared a grin. Kitchen sounds of scraping, chopping, and pouring filled the warm, mushroom-scented air as each frau completed her task.

Once the pie was in the oven, Ilse and Ursula helped Margarethe carry the dishes upstairs to the dining room. Ernst Sauer sat at the table and read the newspaper, whose headline announced, “Nazi Party Declared the Only Political Party in Germany.” When the food came in, he put down his paper.

“Ah, here it is. I was starting to think you’d forgotten about me. It smells delicious!” He beamed at his wife.

No matter the meal, his flattery was always welcome. She put the jägerschnitzel on the table with relish but spoke modestly, “Oh, you’ve had this dish so many times.”

“And every time is a treat.”

Margarethe and her daughters took their chairs, and all the Sauers bowed their heads as Ernst said grace. “In the name of the Vater, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen. Dear

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<sup>9</sup> I’m sorry

God, bless this meal and all the members of this family. Guide everyone in your Holy Church during these changing times—“

“Especially the Holy Vater,” Margarethe chimed in.

“Yes, especially him, and all those who work for you here on earth. For this, we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” intoned the chorus of female voices as they crossed themselves quietly.

“Let’s eat!” Ernst declared.

They passed the platters around and filled their plates. It wasn’t long before Ernst brought up what he’d been reading about earlier.

“It’s official. Germany is a one-party country. Hitler’s totally in charge now.”

“What does that mean for us?” Margarethe asked with an edge of alarm in her voice. “For Catholics?”

“Many things, I’m sure. Most likely no more elections, if it’s just the Nazis in charge.”

Margarethe’s face contorted as the lines in her forehead deepened.

“Don’t get so upset,” Ernst added. “We can’t get worked up about this. If we worried over every little political change that happened in this country, we’d be crazy by now.”

“But what does the Holy Vater have to say about all this? Surely he has given some guidance for all the Catholics in Germany.”

“The Centre Party disbanded last week. There’s even talk of negotiations starting between the Vatican and the Nazis.” Ernst set his knife down with a loud thump on the table.

The girls jumped, but Margarethe didn’t notice.

“That doesn’t seem right—no choices for the people. And Hitler? He almost seems like he wants to be worshipped. Like a god.” Margarethe shuddered.



Ernst spoke with a bit more authority. “His plans for the economy and the Wehrmacht<sup>10</sup> seem to be working. Plus, lots of Germans trust the Nazis. Really, don’t you think Hitler has some good ideas? Especially considering how our country was embarrassed after the Great War? It’s time for us to show them who we are and to get our economy up and running again.”

“Perhaps,” Margarethe conceded. “Although, I simply thank God that you returned from the Great War and that you have enough painting jobs to put food on this table. I’m not sure I want to toss aside all options just for the country to save face. Even if—” she crossed herself before her next statement, “even if the Holy Vater agrees with Hitler.”

Ernst stiffened at her words.

Perhaps she had pushed too far. And yet, she did not apologize. She loved Ernst, but she didn’t agree with him on this.

On the other hand, Margarethe didn’t really like tension either.

She dropped her gaze from his, took a drink of water, and placed a forkful of leeks in her mouth. “Have you tried the leeks yet? I put in more parsley, like you asked.”

The girls’ heads swiveled back and forth as if they were watching a tennis match. Their parents rarely disagreed so vehemently. Ernst turned to them, looking for allies.

“What do you think, girls? You’ve been awfully quiet so far. You’re getting older. You’ll need to know about these things when you have your own homes.”

Ilse cleared her throat and offered her opinion. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I’m even more scared than Mutti. Every day at school it seems like more people are talking about

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<sup>10</sup> German Armed Forces

joining the Hitler-Jugend.<sup>11</sup> They're so stern, like executioners in Medieval paintings. All they do is march and hike and look angry.”

Her eyes ignited as another thought occurred to her. “And they destroy what they don't like. Those book burnings last May? I couldn't stop myself from going to the one in Würzburg. A child ripped my copy of Shakespeare from my arms and threw it in the fire!”

Her words began to percolate wildly, topics rising rapidly like bubbles in a boiling pot. “And what Hitler says, what Goebbels says . . . the things on the radio? About Jews? It scares me so much that I don't want to open my mouth for fear that—”

She stopped abruptly when she focused on the shocked faces around her. “I mean, I . . . I'm sorry. I'm not sure what came over me.” Margarethe reached to her left and laid a reassuring hand on Ilse's—it was cold and clammy.

“It's fine my dear. No need to apologize. Vati asked your opinion, and you gave it.” But Margarethe couldn't bring her eyes to meet Ilse's glowing ones. Everyone shifted in their seats.

To ease the tension, Ursula offered, “I'm not sure we should talk about this at dinner at all. It's all a little too dark for me. Plus, I don't really see the point in being worried.”

Ernst and Margarethe's faces relaxed at Ursula's cheery confidence.

Bolstered by their approval, Ursula added, “We're one little family in a whole big country. I say let's focus on ourselves, what works for our family. It's no fun to be scared all the time!”

“So we should just ignore what's going on around us? That's idiotic and selfish!” Ilse's voice cut across the room like an ax slicing through wood,

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<sup>11</sup> Hitler Youth

Ursula turned her wounded eyes toward Ilse. “I was only trying to make everyone feel better. Why would you say such a mean thing to me?”

With her mouth open, Ilse cast her eyes down and offered no response. Her words seemed to surprise her as much as Ursula.

“Alright, that’s enough of that,” Margarethe interjected. How had the exchange spiraled out of control so quickly? One daughter ashamed and the other distressed. “No one has touched their dinners! Let’s all eat and save this conversation for another time? Or perhaps forget it all together?”

After she looked at each of them encouragingly, everyone agreed. Ernst cut into his jägerschnitzel and smiled apologetically at Margarethe, who accepted it with a nod and a bite of her knödel. Ursula slurped up her leeks comically and tried to get Ilse’s attention—an attempt to lighten her sister’s mood.

But Ilse looked down and pushed her food around on her plate. She was no longer hungry.