The Ring

BACK in those days, the early 1940s, Shipham's Meat Paste came in glass pots with lids fastened by a brass ring-clip. This was the Gold bracelet which my sister Carol, wearing her horrid pink coat, pointed out to me, as it lay glittering at the bottom of the pond – the pond in the field just behind our house in Essex, which had once been a bomb crater. I was five years old, and interested in anything that glistered.

As I lay there drowning in my navy jersey and short brown overcoat, face down among the water-lilies and knowing nothing of foreshortening and refraction, I found that I still could not touch that bracelet. Feet came running across the field, and hands fished me out. They were just in time, or were they?

Did all that has passed before my eyes since then ever really happen, – the pink elephants at school, the prizes, *The Phoenix*, the blast of the steel furnaces in the Ruhr, the photos of the Dresden funeral pyres, the Pottersman Factor, the raucous beerhall audiences, my oldest daughter's coffin and the hate-wreath that followed, the life-size bronze statue of a racehorse, the handcuffs, the Austrian cops with drawn pistols pointed at my head, and all the rest? Or

were these just kaleidoscopic images in the blink of an eye, the life I nearly had but never did, flashing past in the last mortal second before it was snuffed out and God gathered me up, still only five, into His arms?

So many unanswered questions. Did I really make my mother happy in those years of childhood? "Da-vid." In my memory I can still hear her voice, crystal clear, calling down the garden from the back door of our house, against the background noise of John's geese loudly honking and the nanny goat, drifting toward the field, the pond. In the letter she later left tucked into her escritoire, for us to find after she died, she wrote of all the happiness we four had given her. No child can ask for more than that.

I was born the last of four, a non-identical twin in every possible respect. My twin brother, later a heavy smoker, balding early, and speaking always in almost a whisper, prone as a child to cruel chilblains and other frailties … Nicky always was – and still is – a good sort, but he had the same birthday as I; and if there is one thing about that date, the birth date, it is this: it is ones own very personal possession. For the rest of ones natural life it stands out from all other dates in history.

Mining the captured Nazi archives in the bowels of the underground Berlin Document Centre administered by the Americans in post-war Berlin, I heard Elke Fröhlich, then a young postgraduate history student from Munich working as my assistant, quietly gasp as she stopped turning the pages. In her hand she held a yellowing document for just a few seconds longer than the rest, January 30, 1944. I knew at once what that day was for her.

A year or two later I was interviewing Rear-Admiral Karl-Jesco von Puttkamer in Munich. He had been Hitler's naval adjutant, a member of his innermost circle, his military household, from 1934 (••) until the very end. Rather strangely, he had never been interrogated after the war. I was the first researcher he spoke to, and I taped all the interviews. He liked to reminisce, and I knew how to listen.

"You are so fortunate, Herr Kapitän," Hitler had once told him darkly before the war, when Puttkamer formally asked him

for permission to marry. "I can never get engaged or marry. I am wedded to Germany."

The admiral puffed at his cigar contentedly as he told me this little snatch of conversation. I knew at once that I would be using it in my Hitler biography.

"Roughly when was that, Herr Admiral?" I inquired.

"I can tell you exactly. It was the afternoon of March 24, 1938."

From across the room the admiral's wife beamed approval. It was the day they became engaged.

I gasped, as Elke had. March 24, 1938 – I almost asked him what time of day. "Herr Admiral," I said, as though it was a matter of general significance. "That was the afternoon on which I was born."[1]

1 More recollections on Hitler's people from page 000