

THUNDER --- POINT

JACK HIGGINS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS ♦ NEW YORK

THUNDER POINT

G. P. Putnam's Sons
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For my daughter Hannah

Whether Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, Head of the Nazi Party Chancellery and Secretary to Adolf Hitler, the most powerful man in Germany after the Führer, actually escaped from the Führer Bunker in Berlin in the early hours of May 2, 1945, or died trying to cross the Weidendammer Bridge has always been a matter of conjecture. Josef Stalin believed him to be alive, Jacob Glas, Bormann's chauffeur, swore that he saw him in Munich after the war and Eichmann told the Israelis he was still alive in 1960. Simon Wiesenthal, the greatest Nazi hunter of them all, always insisted he was alive, and then there was a Spaniard who had served in the German SS who insisted that Bormann had left Norway in a U-boat bound for South America at the very end of the war . . .

PROLOGUE

BERLIN — THE FÜHRER BUNKER

30 April 1945

The city seemed to be on fire, a kind of hell on earth, the ground shaking as shells exploded, and as dawn came, smoke drifted in a black pall. In the eastern half of Berlin, the Russians were already formally in control, and refugees, carrying what they could of their belongings, moved along Wilhelmstrasse close to the Reich Chancellery in the desperate hope of somehow reaching the West and the Americans.

Berlin was doomed, everyone knew that, and the panic was dreadful to see. Close by the Chancellery, a group of SS were stopping everyone they saw in uniform. Unless such individuals could account for themselves, they were immediately accused of desertion in the face of the enemy and hung from the nearest lamp post or tree. A shell screamed in, fired at random by Russian artillery. There were cries of alarm and people scattered.

The Chancellery itself was battered and defaced by the bombardment, particularly at the rear, but deep in the earth

protected by thirty meters of concrete, the Führer and his staff still worked on in a subterranean world that was totally self-supporting, still in touch by radio and radio-telephone with the outside world.

The rear of the Reich Chancellery was also damaged, pock-marked by shell fire, and the once lovely gardens were a wilderness of uprooted trees and the occasional shell hole. One blessing: there was little air activity, low cloud and driving rain having cleared the sky of aircraft for the moment.

The man who walked in that ruined garden on his own seemed curiously indifferent to what was happening, didn't even flinch when another shell landed on the far side of the Chancellery. As the rain increased in force, he simply turned up his collar, lit a cigarette and held it in cupped hand as he continued to walk.

He was not very tall, with heavy shoulders and a coarse face. In a crowd of laborers or dock workers, he would have faded into the background, nothing special, not memorable to the slightest degree. Everything about him was nondescript, from the shabby ankle-length greatcoat to the battered peaked cap.

A nobody of any importance, that would have been the conclusion, and yet this man was Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, Head of the Nazi Party Chancellery and Secretary to the Führer, the most powerful man in Germany after Hitler himself. The vast majority of the German people had never even heard of him, and even fewer would have recognized him if they saw him. But then he had organized his life that way, deliberately choosing to be an anonymous figure wielding his power only from the shadows.

But that was all over, everything was finished, and this was the final end of things. The Russians could be here at any moment. He'd tried to persuade Hitler to leave for Bavaria, but the Führer had refused, had insisted, as he

had publicly declared for days, that he would commit suicide.

An SS Corporal came out of the Bunker entrance and hurried towards him. He gave the Nazi salute. "Herr Reichsleiter, the Führer is asking for you."

"Where is he?"

"In his study."

"Good, I'll come at once." As they walked toward the entrance several shells landed on the far side of the Chancellery again, debris lifting into the air. Bormann said, "Tanks?"

"I'm afraid so, Herr Reichsleiter, less than half a mile away now."

The SS Corporal was young and tough, a seasoned veteran. Bormann clapped him on the shoulder. "You know what they say? Everything comes to he who waits."

He started to laugh, and the young corporal laughed with him as they started down the concrete steps.

When Bormann knocked on the study door and went in the Führer was seated behind the desk, examining some maps with a magnifying glass. He glanced up.

"Ah, Bormann, there you are. Come in. We don't have much time."

"I suppose not, my Führer," Bormann said uncertainly, unsure of what was meant.

"They'll be here soon, Bormann, the damned Russians, but they won't find me waiting. Stalin would like nothing better than to exhibit me in a cage."

"That can never be, my Führer."

"Of course not. I shall commit suicide, and my wife will accompany me on that dark journey."

He was referring to his mistress, Eva Braun, whom he had finally married at midnight on the twenty-eighth.

"I had hoped that even now you would reconsider whether or not to make a break for Bavaria," Bormann told him, but more for something to say than anything else.

"No, my mind is made up, but you, my old friend, you have work to do."

Hitler stood up and shuffled round the table, the man who only three years previously had controlled Europe from the Urals in the east to the English Channel. Now, his cheeks were sunken, his jacket appeared too large, and when he took Bormann's hands, his own shook with palsy. And yet the power was there still and Bormann was moved.

"Anything, my Führer."

"I knew I could depend on you. The Kamaradenwerk, Action for Comrades." Hitler shuffled back to his chair. "That is your task, Bormann, to see that the National Socialism survives. We have hundreds of millions in Switzerland and elsewhere in the world in gold in numbered accounts, but you have details of those."

"Yes, my Führer."

Hitler reached under his desk and produced a rather strange-looking briefcase, dull silver in appearance. Bormann noted the Kriegsmarine insignia etched in the top right-hand corner.

Hitler flicked it open. "The keys are inside along with a number of items which will prove useful to you over the years." He held up a buff envelope. "Details of similar accounts in various South American countries and the United States. We have friends in all those places only waiting to hear from you."

"Anything else, my Führer?"

Hitler held up a large file. "I call this the Blue Book. It contains the names of many members of the British establishment, both in the ranks of the aristocracy and Parliament, who are friendly to our cause. A number of our

American friends are there also. And last, but not least," he passed another envelope across. "Open it."

The paper was of such quality that it was almost like parchment. It had been written in English in July 1940, in Estoril in Portugal, and was addressed to the Führer. The signature at the bottom was that of his Royal Highness the Duke of Windsor. It was in English and the content was quite simple. He was agreeing to take over the throne of Great Britain in the event of a successful invasion.

"The Windsor Protocol," Hitler said simply.

"Can this be true?" Bormann asked in astonishment.

"Himmler himself vouched for it. He had the Duke approached by his agents in Portugal at the time."

Or said that he had, Bormann told himself. That devious little animal had always been capable of anything. He replaced the document in its envelope and handed it to the Führer, who replaced it and the other items in the briefcase. "This is standard issue to the U-boat captains at the moment. Completely self-sealing, water- and fireproof." The Führer pushed it across to Bormann. "Yours now." He gazed in space for a moment in reverie. "What a swine Himmler is to try and make a separate peace with the Allies, and now I hear that Mussolini and his girlfriend were murdered by partisans in northern Italy, strung up by their ankles."

"A mad world." Bormann waited for a moment, then said, "One point, my Führer, how do I leave? We are now surrounded here."

Hitler came back to life. "Quite simple. You will fly out using the East-West Avenue. As you know, Field Marshal Ritter von Greim and Hannah Reitsch got away in an Arado just after midnight yesterday. I spoke personally to the Commander of the Luftwaffe Base at Rechlin." He glanced at a paper on his desk. "A young man, a Captain Neumann,

volunteered to fly in a Feiseler Storch during the night. He arrived safely and is now waiting your orders."

"But where, my Führer?" Bormann asked.

"In that huge garage at Goebbels' house near the Brandenburg Gate. From there he will fly you to Rechlin and refuel for the onward flight to Bergen in Norway."

"Bergen?" Bormann asked.

"From where you will proceed by submarine to South America, Venezuela to be precise. You'll be expected. One stop on the way. You'll be expected there too, but all the details are in here." He handed him an envelope. "You'll also find my personal signed authorization in there giving you full powers in my name and several false passports."

"So, I leave tonight?" Bormann asked.

"No, you leave within the next hour," Hitler said calmly. "Because of the driving rain and low clouds there is no air cover at the moment. Captain Neumann thinks he could achieve total surprise, and I agree. I have every confidence you will succeed."

There could be no arguing with that and Bormann nodded. "Of course, my Führer."

"Then there only remains one more thing," Hitler said. "You'll find someone in the bedroom. Bring him in."

The man Bormann found in there wore the uniform of a Lieutenant General in the SS. There was something familiar about him and Bormann felt acutely uncomfortable for some reason.

"My Führer," the man said and gave Hitler a Nazi salute.

"Note the resemblance, Bormann?" Hitler asked.

It was then that Bormann realized why he'd felt so strange. It was true, the General did have a look of him. Not perfect, but it was undeniably there.

"General Strasser will stay here in your place," Hitler said. "When the general breakout occurs he will leave with the others. He can stay out of the way until then. In the confusion