

Dusk settled into dark over the Cologne skyline. On a broad street in a nice neighborhood of the city, Gertrud Kühlem—no one called her Mucki yet—heard a knock at her apartment door. She peeked into the kitchen, and in the dull yellow light of a petroleum lamp, her father leaned over and gave her mother a kiss.

“We won’t be alone anymore,” he said.

They had been expecting that knock. Almost every night, Gertrud would watch as a stream of her parent’s friends drifted into their spacious kitchen. Chairs filled up around the large wooden table, and dark brown beer bottles and white porcelain coffee cups filled the table. As far back as Gertrud could remember, the adults would talk about politics, but joke and laugh too. By the end of 1932, Gertrud noticed almost all the talk was politics, no laughing. She had turned eight that summer, and her parents let her stay in the kitchen. Words whirled around Gertrud as she sat in the corner, trying to parse what she heard: President of the Reich, monarchist, Weimar Republic, Social Democrat, National Socialist, SA, SS, Nazi, Fascist, Communist.

She knew her parents were Communists. On days when her father was particularly proud of his party, he’d hang a red flag with a yellow star and hammer and sickle in the middle from the window. He was a trained welder, who supported unions and wanted a better world for workers.

The people who came to the apartment were also Communists. That night, a friend named Franz said that the behavior of the SA was scary, but still seemed mild. “How will it escalate?” he asked.

His girlfriend, Ilse, looked worried. “Don’t you want to send your daughter out?” she asked Gertrud’s mom. “We shouldn’t be talking about this in front of kids.”

“No, she stays here,” said her father. “She will be the one who has to deal with the consequences of this. She needs to understand.”

Gertrud didn’t understand a lot of what they were talking about, but she did see that the world could be better than it was. Their family was lucky to have a big apartment in a nice neighborhood on the edge of the *Innenstadt*, or Center City. In other sections of Cologne, some apartment buildings looked like they were about to collapse. On the street, men stood around during the day, looking and hoping for work. Those who could sing or play the accordion played whatever tunes they knew and hoped for spare change to be thrown into their cups.

How such people lived and how to make it better was what the Communists talked about.

“All people on earth should have the same rights.”

“People are poor and they don’t have work. Inflation has destroyed the country.”

“When Hitler comes to power, they will say, ‘Oh, Hitler is good; he’s brought us jobs, and the kids have food to eat again.’”

“People won’t realize he’s abusing us, at least not at first.”

Gertrud knew her father hated Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialists—the Nazis. “He will be a catastrophe for Germany. He is a criminal,” he told her once.

Gertrud had also heard the Nazis called Brownshirts, the SA, and the SS. These men hated the Communists, and sometimes the Communists went to the Neumarkt to confront the Nazis. This particular night, her parents had decided to stay in rather than go to the Neumarkt.

There was hard knock at the door of Gertrud’s apartment that stopped the conversation. Gertrud’s father disappeared into the vestibule and reappeared with another comrade, a man named Walter. Blood obscured Walter’s face.

Walter had been at the Neumarkt.

“He was an especially brutal SA man,” Walter said as he slumped down on a chair in the kitchen.

Gertrud’s mother grabbed a bottle of antiseptic and cotton bandages. Her work at the pharmacy helped in situations like these. As she cleaned Walter’s wounds, his whole being—from teeth to fists—stayed clenched, his body ready to fight.

Around him, the conversation came back to Hitler, the Nazis, and what they should do next.

2 — Fritz

Fritz Theilen strained his ears to hear what was going on in the next room. The voices from the cramped kitchen were audible, but hushed. Fritz was sitting in the bedroom of the apartment, where he and his parents had their beds. The apartment was just two rooms. His parents couldn’t afford a bigger place since his dad was constantly in and out of a job depending on whether the Ford factory needed him or not, and he didn’t earn very much when he did have a job. His father and uncle had inherited the house from Fritz’s grandparents, so his whole extended family lived in the four-story building in the Ehrenfeld neighborhood. Though they couldn’t often afford to buy meat, Fritz regularly smelled sausages cooking in his uncle’s butcher shop on the first floor. Fritz knew that others in the neighborhood couldn’t afford the meat either; they paid on credit, waiting until the end of the week when they got a paycheck to give his uncle money.

In the bedroom, Fritz was waiting for the voices in the kitchen to get louder, which they invariably did, so he could overhear what

the adults were talking about. His parents were members of the Social Democratic Party, and his dad’s friends would come over to the apartment, go into the kitchen, and close the door. Fritz’s mother would shuttle him and the other kids who had come over into the bedroom, where they were expected to play. But that was hard to do when they knew secrets were being discussed in the next room. Fritz desperately wanted to know what was going on.

He knew that politics were important, and there seemed to be news every day, and not good news. He knew that around his neighborhood, “Nazi” was almost like a curse word. You weren’t supposed to say it, and you definitely weren’t supposed to be one. He remembered there had once been a banner that was strung up across Venloer Street, the main street in the neighborhood. He was too young to read the words at the time, but the banner said EHRENFELD STAYS RED, a phrase people said in the neighborhood. It meant that they were Communist and Socialist party members, and had no plans to support the Nazis. He had also seen fights in the streets of Ehrenfeld between the leftists and the Nazis. He didn’t hear very much from his parents about what was going on or why these fights were happening, but the hunger, unemployment, and discord didn’t seem to be getting any better.

He also knew his parents thought that the Nazis would bring war to Germany again. When the voices in the kitchen got louder, Fritz could tell that the parents were scared.

Fritz was cleaning up in the basement with his dad when he heard the sound. The *boom-boom-boom* was faint at first, and too rhythmic and constant to be someone hammering. The sound got closer and louder. Then he could hear notes, rising and falling: the blasts from brass instruments melded with men’s voices in a strong chorus. Fritz and his dad ran up the stairs and outside to see what was going on.