

A QUESTION OF POSSESSION a novel

John Fons

A Question of Possession is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the story, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real events or locales, or to persons - living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 2012 by John Fons

All rights reserved.

All rights reserved under international and pan-american copyright conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the copyright owner.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Fons, John

A Question of Possession / John Fons

1. Nazi Germany 2. Luftwaffe aircraft 3. Final Solution 4. Demonic Possession

2011963368

ISBN-13: 978-1468123104 (CreateSpace assigned)

ISBN-10: 1468123106

Book Design by Laura Granberry

Front cover photograph © John Fons

Author photograph © Michael Granberry

For Peter, Phyllis and Kathryn

CHAPTER 1

WHEN HE FIRST LEARNED OF HIS SON JACK'S

extraordinary predicament – that he was possibly possessed by the spirit of a dead German officer: *Can such a thing really happen?* – Paul Johanson foresaw – just like anyone with an ounce of common sense could foresee – that things might turn out like this; that Jack might wind up in serious trouble. What Paul didn't know, and what he couldn't have possibly known at the time, was that Jack was already in serious trouble.

Paul had chosen not to share this information, the information that had led to his feeling of foreboding, with his wife, Nell. *Things being the way they are between us, telling Nell anything about Jack – especially revealing Jack's incredible condition – would surely lead to conflict and rancor. Besides, would Nell even believe me?*

It was a Saturday afternoon in September, 1952; and both Paul and Nell were at home. Paul had not consciously heard the telephone ringing – it sitting on the newel-post at the foot of the front stairs in the front hall, and him sitting on the back porch in a faux-rattan folding chair. Actually, it was the fact that the telephone had stopped ringing that had caught Paul's attention – like when the crickets stop chirping; that absence of noise that snaps you awake in the middle of a summer's night.

Whoever had been calling on the telephone did not concern Paul. His only concern was: *What has taken Nell so long to answer the telephone?* In fact, Nell had been reading a book in her upstairs bedroom with the door closed; just another one of her efforts to provide separation, to avoid having to engage in conversation with Paul which, more

often than not, turned into bitter, acrimonious arguments – even over the most trivial of matters.

Upon hearing the ringing stop, and finally recognizing Nell's sweet voice reserved for talking with outsiders, Paul had been torn between listening to Nell's end of the conversation – probably with one of her D.A.R. old ladies – or to continue listening to the last few innings of a meaningless baseball game on the radio. The tone of Nell's voice – clearly less cheerful than the voice she would have used with someone she was trying to impress – captured Paul's attention; although he really didn't learn much from hearing Nell's terse replies to whoever it was on the other end of the telephone call.

Within moments after Paul heard Nell's business-like "Goodbye," she had appeared in the open kitchen door-way, her jaw set firmly, her eyes narrowed to slits; she was clearly upset. *What have I done now?* Before Paul could even begin to think about what he might have done to deserve such an angry gaze, Nell began relaying the contents of the telephone call.

"Do you have any idea what my bitch of a sister has done now?"

Paul instinctively knew that Nell was referring to her sister Rita – short for Henrietta. The two sisters had had a serious falling out several years ago; with Nell convinced that she was the innocent injured party. The crux of the spat, as Paul best remembered, was how Rita had criticized Nell on how she was raising her three sons. In reality, the animosity between the two sisters went much deeper, had a longer history, back to unresolved jealousy and rivalry. This animosity reached its culmination when their son, Jack, chose to live with his Aunt Rita. Nell's anger was directed primarily at Rita – "for stealing my boy Jack" – and then at Jack for his "disloyalty;" but also at Paul – for supporting, "indeed, for promoting" Jack's decision, and Rita's "theft." Nell had chosen to overlook the fact that it was her rejection of Jack – especially after the tragic accident – that had prompted Jack to choose to live with his Aunt Rita.

"No," replied Paul – for the moment relieved that it was not his head that was on the chopping block. "What has Rita done now?"

"That was the lady who runs the nursing home...informing me

that Rita has stopped coming to see Mother...has failed to pay the bill for August...and unless we pay the over-due amounts, and make new arrangements for future payments, they want us to take my mother out of their place. Rita didn't want to care for her, so why should I have to take care of that senile old lady?"

"Haven't they contacted Rita about it?" inquired Paul innocently.

"Of course they did...Why else do you think they've now called me," Nell retorted impatiently. "They said they've sent reminders by mail...that were never responded to...and they've tried to call Rita on the phone for days with no answer. Now they've been told by the phone company that the line to Fairways has been disconnected. It's just like the double-dealing bitch...she promises to do something...and then she fails to perform as promised...leaving me to pick up the pieces...and she's the one who has all of the money...while I have to scrape by."

"Now, Nell," interjected Paul, hoping to blunt Nell's growing anger, "aren't you being a little harsh...a little too quick to judgment when we don't yet know all of the facts?"

"That's right, take her side...just as you always have...I know enough right now to see that she is trying to stick me with Doddy."

"We don't know that for sure...That makes no sense...I think that there might be a more serious explanation...Maybe there has been a problem."

"What kind of a problem?"

"I don't have any idea what it might be," Paul lied. *It must have something to do with Jack, and with what Rita told me last fall in Kansas City; about Jack harboring the spirit of a dead German officer who could take control of Jack's body; and that she was now fearful that Jack might become a threat to her. But I'm certainly not going to tell Nell about that... Not now.*

"Well, right now, I'm more concerned about what we are going to do about Doddy...Well, don't just sit there Paul. We need to get going right now if we hope to get to the nursing home this afternoon...Mother must be frantic!"

"But, Nell...It's already after two o'clock...And it's a two-hour

drive to Fulton... We've got to pack and lock up... And it will take me some time just to track down Mrs. Northwick, and get her permission to use the Ford. By that time it'll be too late today to get anything done at the nursing home today; and then we'll need to drive on to Fairways to see what might have happened to Jack and Rita."

"Utter nonsense! If we leave now we can be back this evening... And Mrs. Northwick won't even be the wiser that we used the company car... And I have no intention of going anywhere near Fairways... I could care less about those two... the worthless, lying bitch... that traitorous whelp."

Having observed where his "driving on to Fairways" suggestion had gotten him, Paul pursued a different tack: "I'd really feel better about going on this trip if I had Mrs. Northwick's permission to use the Ford... If anything should happen..."

"Okay, okay. Go ahead and call your boss... *you spineless, weak sister*... If you had done what I told you to do years ago, and demanded a raise from that old skin-flint, we could afford a car of our own again." Seeing the pained look on Paul's otherwise quite handsome face – caused by her last few words – Nell offered a small concession to her hen-pecked husband. "We'll go tomorrow morning... regardless of whether you have her permission... If anything happens, you'll just have to tell her it was an emergency, and that you had tried to call her."

DURING THIER SUNDAY morning's two-hour drive in the company Ford sedan to the nursing home in Fulton, a small college-town in central Missouri, silence prevailed; Paul drove and Nell fingered the rosary beads, her lips moving as she silently recited the Hail Marys.

There were several times when Paul was tempted to breach the subject of Fairways and, more to the point, what he knew about Jack, about his possession, and about Rita's concerns for her safety. He knew he had to tell her something, sometime, but he just couldn't come up with a way of saying what needed to be said without incurring Nell's wrath, without causing Nell to overreact; to cut off any further discussion, to forever forbid Paul from pursuing efforts to find

and, if necessary, to save Jack and Rita.

As Paul had expected, Doddy was not frantic, not a bit; she was more rambling than lucid, barely able to understand even the simplest directions, clearly not able to recognize even her own daughter. Contrary to Nell's assertions that the nursing home was ready to throw the old lady out the front door, the manager and staff were most solicitous and flexible in setting up arrangements for Doddy's continued care; plans that would not break the Johanson's already slim budget. Once a plan was settled on, and Nell wrote the check for a portion of the back-due amount, and another for future care, they said their thanks and goodbyes; it was pointless to stay any longer with the non-responsive, comatose Doddy.

Returning to the company Ford sedan in the nursing home's parking lot, Paul recognized that it was "do or die," "now or never" time. Screwing up his courage, he said to Nell, who was standing on the other side of the sedan, extracting her sunglasses from her purse, "I really think we need to go on to Fairways...to check things out. I have a really bad feeling about what might have happened...that Jack and Rita are in serious danger."

"What makes you think I give a damn about what has happened, or might be happening to them? And what do you know about them that you haven't been telling me?"

Again screwing up his courage, Paul said, "Do remember my bowling trip to Kansas City last fall? Well, Jack and Rita were also in Kansas City that same weekend visiting with the Kaufman's, and I had lunch with Jack and Rita."

"So I suppose you just happened to run into them...And were the Jews – the Kaufman's – with them?"

Sensing that his attempt to persuade Nell to travel on to Fairways was about to go in the wrong direction, Paul plowed ahead with what he hoped would be his best selling point: "Rita had told me that she had uncontroverted evidence that Jack was sharing his body with the spirit of a German officer who was killed in '45, at the end of the War...that this spirit could take control of Jack's body...and that she had reasons to believe that this spirit might try to harm her in his ef-

forts to return to Germany. She wanted me to speak with Jack...to impress upon him why he needed to be careful not to give the spirit any opportunity to take control...or to have access to any weapon or implement which he could use to overpower Rita.”

“So you believed the bitch? You know that Rita actually believes that Jack might be crazy...Why else would she have taken him to that Menninger’s mental clinic in Kansas...and had him seen by that Jew shrink...You know the guy who wrote that awful report...saying all those awful things about me...and you, too.”

“Yes, I do... I also believe that Jack is possessed by this German guy. Look, I know how you feel about Rita and Jack, but I just think that it would be a grave mistake...something that we will regret for the rest of our lives...if we don’t go to Fairways...and to not at least have explored what might have happened to Jack and Rita.”

“If you think it is so important...if your conscience is bothering you...if it is because you love these two people so much...then go ahead...drive on to Fairways...But don’t expect me to lift a finger to help you any further than this.”

“Thank you...You won’t regret doing this.”

‘FAIRWAYS’, WHICH WAS the name of the farm located a short distance from the town of Greenville – basically a farming community which also had brick manufacturing plants that used a particular type of clay that was found and mined in the area. The countryside around Fairways consisted of rolling hills, with fields and pasture-lands, dotted with dense woods. The main-house which was set at the top of a hill, surrounded by towering elm trees, overlooked the fields, pastures, barns and other out-buildings situated on both sides of the graveled country road that came from town and led to other farms farther away from town.

Arriving at Fairways, Paul and Nell were immediately struck by the sight of the place. The usually immaculately kept fields, pastures and lawns surrounding the beautiful house were uncut, overgrown with weeds. Parking the company Ford sedan on the graveled spot in back

of the house, they could see no sign of life, even the nearby chicken house was quiet, apparently empty; although groups of Hereford cattle could be seen grazing in the pastures some distance from the house.

Attempting to gain entrance to the house, Paul found that the doors – back, front and side – were locked. Peering in through accessible first-floor windows, Paul could see that the house had an unliv-ed-in appearance. Checking the garage, hoping to find a spare house-key hanging on a hook somewhere, Paul noted that the spot usually occupied by Rita's big wood-sided Ford station wagon was empty; and he found no key.

Returning to the sedan, where Nell was leaning against a fender – her faced tilted up to catch the mid-day sun – Paul, with a perplexed look on his face, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "It's clear that no one is here...and from the little I could see through the windows, no one has been here for a while. None of this makes any sense to me... Its time that Jack should be back in school...They can't still be away on vacation, if that's where they might have gone to begin with."

"Well," said Nell, without even looking towards Paul, "did you see any signs of a struggle...anything to suggest that it was a hasty departure?"

"No...But that doesn't mean that everything is all right. I think we need to get into the house."

"And how are you planning to do that? Break a window?" inquired Nell sarcastically.

Ignoring her remark, Paul said, "Not knowing what we might find if we did get into the house, I'd prefer to have the police here when that happens."

"You chicken-shit...Besides, you aren't going to find anything suspicious in this locked-up house...Do really expect to find Jack and Rita in an upstairs bedroom...locked together in some death struggle? Or maybe Rita alone, her throat slashed...with the killer – presumably the dead German in Jack's body – having fled the scene...locking the doors behind him. And how did he get away...in the Ford station wagon? Jack is only thirteen...he can't even drive. And even if he could drive, he'd stick out like a sore-thumb trying to drive that big

station wagon...And I can just see the gas station attendant's reaction when Jack tries to buy gas...And where would he go? No, if you find anything of importance in that house, I'll eat my...your...hat."

"You may be right about everything you've just pointed out," said Paul sheepishly, "but I am just convinced that there is something in this house that we are meant to find."

"I can't wait to see you try to convince the police to help you break into the house based on your premonitions...On what you've told me about a potentially possessed teenager and a dead German's spirit, you'll be lucky that they don't lock you up, sending you off for a psychiatric evaluation."

"Despite what you say, I'm going for the police. Are you coming with me?" Paul said with uncharacteristic confidence. *You can only push me so far, Nell... On this one I'm sure I've got it right.*

AT THE ADAMS County Sheriff's office – located in Greenville, across the street from the courthouse square – Paul, carefully choosing his words and statements, explained the circumstances of how they learned about Rita Kaufman's long absence from the farm, it's unkempt appearance, and the fact of Jack's absence from school, convincing the reluctant deputy to accompany him and Nell – who had come along after all, but said nothing – back to Fairways.

Within fifteen minutes of his arrival at Fairways, the deputy saw enough to agree that an examination of the house and its environs was warranted. Using a pick, the deputy was able to unlock and open the back-door. Upon entering the kitchen, the trio was immediately greeted with the strong, musty, stale odor of a closed-up house. Except for the unpleasant odor; which was traced to rotten produce in the kitchen pantry, plus the thin layer of dust covering any of the highly-polished flat surfaces, nothing else appeared out of the ordinary on the first-floor. A quick trip to the second-floor – where all of the bedrooms were located – revealed only minor clues that the inhabitants had left in a hurry; closets in disarray, open dresser drawers, clothing piled on the floor, toiletries cluttering the bathroom sink.

His policeman's interest now sufficiently aroused, the deputy commented that he thought that a systematic examination of the basement and of the out-buildings would be in order. As the deputy and Paul exited the house to begin their further explorations, Paul expressed his feeling of vindication to Nell by giving her a wink and a tip of an imaginary hat – to which she responded by thumbing her nose at him.

While Paul and the deputy combed around outside, Nell took the opportunity to do some additional snooping of her own. *Maybe Paul's conviction that something bad has happened, and that we'll find some clues in the house, is correct after all.*

Once she had satisfied her curiosity on the first-floor – by opening drawers, looking through papers on the desk in the den, Nell mounted the front-hall stairs to the second-floor, headed directly towards Jack's room. She began with Jack's desk, where she found some recent brochures for western resorts and dude-ranches in the Rockies; suggesting a leisurely planned vacation, not a hasty, spur-of-the-moment exodus. *If, indeed, they had taken a trip out west, surely they would have returned by now; Jack would have been back in school. Besides, that wouldn't explain the unpaid bills, the cancelled utilities. And what about the unkempt appearance of Fairways...Rita would never let that happen. My God! I'm beginning to think like Paul.*

Now sufficiently convinced that something might be amiss, Nell – always intrigued by a good mystery story – riffled through the papers on Jack's desk and in its drawers. As she delved deeper into Jack's belongings, into the nooks and crannies adjoining his desk, and on the shelves in his closet, Nell stumbled upon dozens of cheap 'Big Chief' lined-writing tablets – the kind in which school-children did their lessons, practiced hand-writing. These tablets were piled helter-skelter, and in no apparent order; yet Nell was drawn to them. Thumbing through a few of the tablets, Nell quickly realized that they were filled with writings – mostly in pencil – the kind that one would find in a diary or a journal. But what intrigued her most was the fact that the tablets were not written all in the same hand, or all in the same style. It was as if two different persons had done the writing. *So, does this indicate that Jack is really possessed by the spirit of a dead German, or is*

Jack just suffering from a split personality? In any case, these are not materials that I want Paul or the police know about – at least not until I have a chance to go through them. I suspect that if Jack is the author, then he will say some terrible things about me. I don't have time to read them here. I'll need to take them with me.

Loading all of the 'Big Chief' tablets that her search had revealed into an empty book-bag she found hanging on the back of Jack's desk chair, Nell gave the bedroom another look-around and, spotting nothing further of interest, returned downstairs. Making sure that Paul and the deputy were nowhere to be seen, Nell quickly exited the house – carrying the book-bag in a way that it would not attract attention – and dashed to the rear of the Ford sedan; where she opened the trunk, slipping the book-bag into the trunk, hopefully out of view.

When Paul and the deputy returned to the house, they found Nell sitting on the back-porch steps, working on her cuticles. "Did you two find anything of interest on your hunt," Nell asked smugly.

"Not really," Paul said. "Only further evidence that Rita and Jack left in a hurry...there are a lot of things in the barn that needed to be attended to that were left open, giving the good, and the bad, animals access to things they shouldn't have access to. Also, the lack of electricity has left the cattle, the horses without well water."

"And I can't report that we found any signs of foul-play," the deputy chimed in.

"How about you," Paul asked, his question directed at Nell. "Or did you just spend your time doing your nails."

"Oh," replied Nell, "I did look around a bit, but I didn't find anything of interest." *You think you're so smart Paul. But you have outsmarted yourself. You knew things about Rita and Jack that you didn't see fit to share with me. Well, if you can hold back on me Paul, I am certainly not going to share what I found with you; even if what I have found holds the key to what has happened to Rita and Jack; even if it were to provide valuable information possibly leading to their rescue.*

"Then let's get going," said Paul. "We have a two-hour trip ahead of us after we stop by the Sheriff's office to file a Missing Persons Report."

“That’s my recommendation...although I can’t guarantee it will produce any results...we really don’t have any good leads right now...But it wouldn’t hurt to get it on file,” the deputy said. “And it shouldn’t take too long to fill out the report.”

THE STAY AT the sheriff’s office, filling out the Missing Persons Report was a lengthy process, taking much longer than the deputy had indicated he thought it would take. When Paul and Nell arrived at the Sheriff’s office, Nell made a great show of putting her purse in the trunk – for security purposes, of course – and having Paul lock the trunk; where it would stay until the company Ford sedan was parked in the garage behind the house in Saint Louis.

“We’ll need some information about the folks you say are missing,” stated the deputy as he inserted the Missing Person form into his typewriter.

“Yes, of course,” said Nell. “There is my son, Jack Johanson, and my sister, Rita...that’s short for Henrietta...Kaufman.”

“That’s not quite correct,” interjected Paul. “Remember, Nell, Jack is now Rita’s son...His name now is Jack Kaufman...He was officially adopted by Rita.”

“That’s just a legal technicality...I should have never agreed with you to let that happen. In retrospect, what a horrible mistake that was,” complained a sullen Nell.

“Hey, folks...I don’t care what you two think...What’s the kid’s name?” the deputy stated, clearly irritated.

“Okay,” Nell said. “There’s the two of them...Rita Kaufman...and the boy, Jack Kaufman.”

“Anyone else,” asked the deputy.

“No.” said Nell.

“I think there was someone else,” Paul said somewhat reluctantly.

“What...What else haven’t you told me?” Nell demanded. “This withholding of information from me is becoming quite tiresome”

“Well, I’m not really sure if she was still living with Rita and Jack... She was a displaced person...a Jewish refugee who Rita had spon-

sored. Her first name is Hannah...but I don't know her last name...I only met her once...just briefly in Kansas City.”

“That ain't much help, Mister,” grouched the deputy. “You got any pictures...Any descriptions you can give me...For all of them, I mean?”

“No, but there may be some pictures of them back at Fairways,” offered Paul.

And so it went on for the next twenty-minutes: Like two ancient fencing foes engaged in a grudge-match – Lunge, thrust, parry; lunge, thrust, parry.

THE SKY WAS getting dark by the time Paul and Nell departed the Adams County Sheriff's office in Greenville. Paul wanted to stop and get something to eat on the road – at one of the eateries the Ford sedan passed as they went through the many small towns en route to Saint Louis – but Nell demurred, even though neither of them had had anything to eat since an early breakfast. “We can eat at home... I'm sure that you can find something in the refrigerator to cook up for our dinner,” proclaimed the ever-economizing Nell.

At home, while Paul puttered about in the kitchen preparing their make-shift dinner, Nell went back out to the garage, to the company Ford sedan, to “retrieve my purse,” she explained when demanding the key to the trunk from Paul. But, as was her real purpose, she also retrieved the book-bag filled with the tantalizing tablets filled with mysterious writings. Entering the back door, quickly moving through the kitchen while Paul had his back turned working at the stove, Nell passed into the front hallway and up the front stairs to her bedroom; hopefully without attracting Paul's attention or curiosity.

“What was that all about,” Paul asked when Nell returned downstairs to the kitchen.

“What do you mean,” Nell responded, flashing Paul an innocent ‘who, me?’ look.

“Oh,” replied Paul, “you know...your mad dash out and in the back door, then rushing through the kitchen and straight upstairs...like the devil was after you. Are you hiding something from me?”

“Of course not...What would make you say that?”

“Because you’ve never, in your life, gone out to the garage in the dark to get anything out of the trunk of a car...That’s what you always have me do for you.”

“I know...but you were busy...and I was afraid that if I didn’t get my purse now...while I was thinking about it...I’d forget where I had put it...and would be scrambling around tomorrow morning trying to find it before I set out for work.”

*I’ll bet she found something at Fairways, and she is hiding it from me...
But I’ll just wait a bit to see what she does with it.*

OVER THE NEXT several evenings – after returning home from work and hurriedly eating the dinner prepared by Paul – Nell sifted through the writing tablets, trying to discern some semblance of order. The process was complicated because none of the tablets was dated; although she soon was able to identify, by the different handwriting, which writings were apparently authored by Jack, and which were apparently authored by another person – the real or imagined German named ‘Fritz’ – all of which gave her some idea of time-frames. The topics addressed in the writings also differed, so that was also of some help in organizing them into coherent, cohesive groupings. As Nell scanned through the tablets, she quickly came to the conclusion that the writings were beyond the ordinary; they were truly extraordinary – covering topics and matters of scope and depth far beyond the capabilities of a mere boy.

Just thinking about what these writings might contain, just contemplating the ramifications of what all this might mean, gave Nell a shiver of fright. *If these writings are true; if they are not the manifestations of a sick mind – then Jack may indeed be possessed by an evil spirit; he may be a lost soul!* With these thoughts, these concerns, these trepidations, in the forefront of her mind, Nell picked up the first ‘Big Chief’ tablet – simply labeled ‘JACK’ at the bottom of the red front-cover bearing the profile of the solemn Indian Chief – made the sign of the cross, folded over the cover, and began to read:

CHAPTER 2

BIG CHIEF TABLET ONE | JACK

My name is Jack. I am writing down what happened to me after Fritz, the spirit of the dead German soldier, came into my life, because that event made me different from everyone else. Maybe someday people will want to know why I was different, and I may need what I am now writing to help me remember and explain why. I have also asked Fritz to write down stuff about his life before he died; and about his time living with me as a spirit.

I don't remember many of the events and details of the day Fritz entered my body. Up until the blow to my head, it was probably like any other day. My Dad – Paul Johanson – probably woke me up that morning by yelling up from the kitchen either “Get up, Jack!” or maybe it was “Daylight in the swamp boys,” something he often heard as a teenage lumberjack in Wisconsin’s “north woods.”

My older brother, David would already have left the double bed which he and I were then sharing; probably standing outside our only bathroom banging on the door yelling at my other brother, Chris to let him in. They were both in high school. Chris, being the oldest brother – close to 16 years old – had certain privileges not extended to David and me; like spending inordinate amounts of time doing whatever teenage boys do in the bathroom. I had to wait until they had both finished with the bathroom before I got my turn. If I couldn't hold my pee until then I was forced to race down two flights of stairs, to use the

ancient toilet in our dark, smelly basement.

Being the nuisance “kid brother,” life was never pleasant, and often it was downright risky; especially since both of my parents worked all day, and my older brothers hated babysitting me after school. I feared the times when both my brothers were at home, and I was alone with them. They would often tease me and torment me unmercifully – pinning me down on my back, with their bony knees digging into my arms, giving me fifty “gill-burgers.” Gill-burgers were one of my more painful torments, consisting of hitting my chest with fists with the middle knuckle extended.

Whenever I tried escaping these torments by locking myself in the bathroom, my sadistic brothers would light cigarettes, blowing the smoke under the door saying it was poisoned gas or pretending that the house was on fire. They knew that I could not escape by climbing out the second-floor bathroom window, and that I would ultimately unlock the door; once again falling for their ruse, listening in tears to their whoops of laughter. On other occasions I would try to escape my brothers’ torments by crawling under a bed to get away from them; only to be driven out by threats of being hit with the leather belts they flicked at me while I cowered under the bed.

Once Chris and David even locked me in the kitchen pantry; where I remained imprisoned for hours. When they tried to release me from imprisonment, the door key broke off in the lock. After much cursing and failed efforts to unlock the door by other means, the lock was bypassed by pulling the pins out of the hinges and prying the door open from the hinged side. I was freed just moments before my parents got home; but I didn’t dare tell my parents of this escapade.

Another time my brothers and their friends were playing “track and field” games in a vacant lot in another part of our neighborhood. I was designated as the “water boy” and sent off to fill a gallon glass jug from a water faucet on the outside of an adjacent apartment building. Being only four or five years old at the time, even the empty jug was too heavy and awkward for me to carry. When I had turned on the faucet, trying to hold the jug to the spigot, the jug filled with water, quickly becoming too

heavy for me to hold on to it. The partially-filled jug shattered on the concrete sidewalk. Instantly, I knew I was in trouble, even though dropping the jug wasn't my fault.

Knowing what fate awaited me back at the "track and field" games, if I returned empty-handed, I ran away, back to our house, hoping to hide from my brothers. It wasn't too long before I heard my brothers coming up the alley to our house, where they called me out. I was petrified with fear, but I came out to them, trying to explain through stifled tears how I dropped the jug of water because it was too heavy for me to hold on to. Ignoring my efforts at explanation, Chris grabbed me, threw me over his shoulder, and started walking back down the alley to where they had been playing.

One of Chris' friends shouted, "Let's ship him to Siberia."

Several others picked up in cry. With the chant ringing in my ears the gang marched down the alley following Chris – with me over his shoulder trying not to cry – to the next cross street where there was a large postal box. At the box – which was equipped to handle large packages – one of the guys pulled down the lid and Chris started shoving me into it.

They were all still chanting, "Send him to Siberia."

At this point I burst into tears, yelling "No! No!"

To the sounds of laughter and shouts of "cry baby," Chris ended my physical torment by letting go of me and walking away from me. I was left there in humiliation and tears, hanging on the side of the mailbox. After I was sure they were out of sight, I scrambled down from the mailbox and ran home. My brothers and their friends kept teasing me about the 'Siberia' episode for weeks. Again, I was too scared to ever tell my parents about it, or to complain to them about how my brothers were treating me when they had me alone.

CHRIS WAS EXTREMELY bright and talented. Although he did well at school academically, he was often in trouble for breaking the rules. He used to brag to David about his "stink-bombs" in chemistry class, or his Bunsen burner "flame thrower" in his

high-school physics class. He was also always collecting things that didn't belong to him. Some things he claimed he "rescued," and some things he just stole. Much of his ill-gotten treasure he kept in his bedroom; where I loved going through his stuff when he wasn't around: There were arrow-heads, stone axes, a carbide miner's lantern, an army rifle clip with real bullets, different-style knives, and all types of other dangerous things. A lot of this stuff – which he didn't want our parents to see – he kept hidden in a bunker he excavated in a nearby vacant lot which he had under constant scrutiny; it could be seen from the upstairs back-porch of our house. He claimed that among his 'spoils' hidden in the lot was a dummy bomb used for bombing practice. I often spent time on the porch watching Chris and his friends playing in the vacant lot, hoping to see this "bomb."

David was less of a "collector" of stuff than Chris was. He was more interested in collecting friends – especially girl friends – than Chris was. David also ran with a different bunch of buddies, having a distinctly more conventional approach to life than my curious older brother. As a result, David just wasn't as interesting to me as Chris was. There wasn't any stuff of his that tempted me to go through his things as I did Chris' stuff – as easy as it would have been to do since David and I shared the same bedroom, as well as the same old four-poster double bed that had once been my parent's bed. They were now sleeping in twin beds, beds which David thought we should be sleeping in. When David complained to Chris about his having to sleep with me, Chris explained that our folks had no other choice – "They don't need another surprise." I didn't know at the time that he was referring to me; that I was the "surprise."

BY THE TIME I got up on that fateful day, Mom would have left for work; traveling by street car to a clerical job in a savings and loan company. After my brothers had gone out the back door to catch a street car headed in the opposite direction – headed for high school, I would have dressed myself; wearing the usual hand-me-down short pants and a used pull-over type shirt.

(Photos of me taken at the time – make me look like a war orphan.) When I finally came downstairs, Dad would still have been in the kitchen reading the morning paper; drinking a cup of coffee at the oilcloth covered kitchen table.

Waiting for me on the kitchen stove pilot-light would have been a bowl of almost room-temperature cereal; either oatmeal, Cream of Wheat or Ralston. In silence, Dad would have handed me the paper's funny pages, and then watched me struggle with eating the lumpy, cement-like cereal. When I finished eating what I could of the cereal, he would have put the bowl in the sink together with his empty coffee cup, washing them in cold water and putting them on the side to dry. He and I would have left the house at the same time, but headed in different directions; Dad driving the company car to the store at which he worked as the office manager, and I would walk the several blocks to the parish school where I was a first-grader.

I DON'T REMEMBER anything about school that day, but that's not surprising. I didn't particularly like first grade at the parish school. Most of my class-mates were older and bigger than I was, and they had been together since kindergarten. My mother had wanted me to attend kindergarten at the parish school the previous year so she could go to work. I remembered hearing my mother say that I had interfered with her being able to go back to work. Despite her desire and powers of persuasion, the principal and the pastor would not accept me for kindergarten because they said I was too young – less than five years old; so I went to kindergarten at the neighborhood public school instead. When I showed up for first grade at the parish school the following school-year, the kindergarten teacher came into the classroom and took me to her kindergarten classroom of five-year olds. I don't know what my mother did or said that evening when she charged into the priests' house to change the Monsignor's mind, but I was allowed to stay in first grade. I would have preferred to have stayed in kindergarten, but my preferences were never considered; it was what Mom wanted that counted.

It was made clear to me by the Mother Superior – who ran the parish school – and the nun – who was in charge of first-grade – that I was unwelcomed and unwanted, just like at home.

It was a very lonely time for me. Even though there were boys in first-grade that lived in my neighborhood who played together, I was not often invited to play with them. As a result, after school I was left to play alone at home, avoiding – as best I could – my big brothers who were supposed to be looking after me; hiding out in my own world of make-believe and ‘let’s pretend’, using a hand-full of hand-me-down lead soldiers, a dime-store army tank, a cannon with a spring plunger that could shoot stuff out of its barrel, a die-cast P40 fighter aircraft, and my favorite toy – a highly-detailed, plastic model of the twin-tailed P38 fighter aircraft.

I DO REMEMBER that it was a day in early May, 1945, when I suffered the life-threatening, life-changing blow to my head. Chris and David were charged with my care that afternoon, taking me to the vacant lot to play at Chris’ fort with their friends. I vaguely recall seeing two boys sitting on a large metal projectile – shaped like a bomb – attached to a long rope which hung from a limb of a very tall tree. I had been playing my own game of ‘cowboys and Indians’ among the huts that Chris and his friends had built out of old Christmas trees. When I came out of one hut – chasing one of my pretend Indians – running towards one of the other huts, I caught a glimpse of something large out of the corner of my right eye coming straight towards my head.

The next thing I remembered seeing was our living room ceiling spinning around above me. I was lying on the sofa on my back. I had no idea how long I had been there, how I got there, of what had happened, or why I was lying there – except that I had a terrible headache. I could feel a lump on the right side of my head, and I felt that my pants were wet. I shut my eyes to help stop the room from spinning. How long they were shut I don’t know, but my next recollection is of opening my eyes, seeing a

double-vision version of Dad standing over me with two figures – who might have been my brothers – standing behind him. It could have been minutes or it could have been hours later. It was still daylight. I heard voices and saw faces but I couldn't see the faces clearly or understand what the voices were saying.

Several more hours passed before I became aware of my surroundings, finding myself sitting in a chair in the kitchen. The radio – located on the radiator next to where I was sitting – was playing and a voice was saying, “The Germans have surrendered.” I don't know whether it was the announcement or the room spinning, but I start throwing up on the kitchen floor. After that everything went blank again. Whether I woke up again that evening, or even if I was well enough to attend school the next day, was beyond my recollection. I believe I was seen by our family doctor the next afternoon, because that is what my mother told me; but I was never told by anyone what injuries I may have received – except for “a nasty bump on the head!” I didn't know it at the time, but that “nasty bump on the head” had changed my life forever!

IT WAS MONTHS, perhaps years, before the events leading up to that “nasty bump on the head” were explained to me. My brothers were reluctant to talk about what happened to me that afternoon. All they would ever tell me about the accident is that the “bomb” contraption upon which two of my brothers' friends were riding had hit me in the head as it was moving quickly through the air. I was knocked up into the air, landing on the ground several feet away from where I had been running when the “bomb” struck me. No one remembered seeing me in the path of the rope swing before it happened. I was left lying on the ground for perhaps a half-hour, lying motionless as if I was dead.

Chris told me that he, David, and their friends debated for some time on what to do with me. Eventually, Chris said he thought he detected me breathing, whereupon he picked me up and carried me home. When he and David got me home, they put me on the sofa in the living room, and called Dad at work.

During the time they waited for Dad to get home I remained unconscious, motionless. Except for the time when I was sitting on a chair in the kitchen, throwing up, they thought I had remained unconscious until the next morning.

FOR THE NEXT several years, life around me went on, but not as usual. When Chris went away to college, David moved into his own room, and I got the big four-poster double bed to myself. David became a bigger social-butterfly – staying after school for cheerleader or theatre practice – and I became a latch-key kid with the house all to myself, at least until my parents came home from work. I loved the peace and quiet of being alone in the house after school; and I came to dread the evenings and weekends when I had to deal with my parents' constant bickering and fighting, and my mother's unpredictable, but always difficult, moods. I tried to avoid Mom if I could. Let's be clear, I never called my mother Mom, or even Mommy to her face; I called her 'Mumby', because as a small boy, just learning to talk, I could only say 'Mumby'. Unfortunately, Mom thought that my calling her 'Mumby' was 'cute'; insisting that I call her 'Mumby' when addressing her. So if I inadvertently use 'Mumby'; you'll know of whom I am speaking, and why.

As capable as my brothers had been in making my life a living hell, they were not nearly as successful as Mom became. Even the physical abuse imposed on me by Chris and David was nothing compared to the physical and mental abuse Mom heaped on me on a regular basis. Besides the screaming and the whippings, it was her rejection of me that made my life miserable. I never remember my mother showing me any love and affection, even as a small boy. Dad witnessed or at least knew about these abuses, but I never saw or heard him intercede on my behalf, and if he did, his efforts were ineffective. At least he hugged and kissed me and was generally kind and gentle towards me when Mom wasn't around.

I WANTED TO be liked and accepted by my classmates, but I had no skills in knowing how to make that happen. My athletic skills were also pathetic; I did not like to wrestle or engage in physical contact with the other boys because I was afraid of getting hurt. When teams were picked, I was usually the last to be picked, with good reason; I was skinny, weak, uncoordinated, and lacked any self confidence.

These handicaps also made me the perfect target for the school-yard bully. The bully's name was Bobby Malone. He was new to the school, and was an older, tougher, stronger boy always looking for a fight. Bobby was also clever; he never picked a fight in the school yard where he could be observed by the nuns who watched us like hawks. Instead, he would pick out his victim – a weak loner like me – and follow him home. Once he knew the prey's route home – living on a side street would be best – he would get to his point of attack and lay in wait. I knew Bobby wanted to beat me up.

In the school yard he told me, "You're a big sissy and I am going to hurt you."

I was scared. For days I avoided my usual way home, even hanging out with other kids who lived nearby on my walk home. This worked for a while, and I thought he had given up trying to fight me. And then one afternoon when I arrived at my house, there he was sitting on my front porch steps just waiting for me.

"Are you ready to fight me sissy? Or are you going to call for your mommy to come protect you?"

I knew there was no one there to protect me. In as strong a voice as I could muster up I said, "No. I don't want to fight you."

"Well fine," he responded, "I'll just wait here until you father gets home and I can tell him what a sissy his little boy is."

At this point I climbed the front steps going around him. I got to the front door and unlocked it. Bobby lunged at me, grabbed my arm and started pushing me into the house.

I screamed, "Let go of me! Get out of my house."

At this moment, my brother David, who was coming in the backdoor from high school, hearing my outcry, ran to the front door. He grabbed Bobby, and pushed him out the door.

“Let go of Jack and get out of here! I’d better not ever see you around here again! If I do I’ll break both of your arms!”

Unfazed by David’s threats, Bobby sneered, “You’re little brother is just a sissy and needs to be taught a lesson!”

“And you’re nothing but a bully,” said David. “You’re just lucky I don’t call the police and report you for breaking into our house!”

At this, Bobby stormed down the steps yelling back over his shoulder at me, “I’ll get you Jack Johanson, you just wait and see. You won’t always have your big brother around to protect you.”

I knew he was right. *What am I going to do now?* I thought nervously.

CHAPTER 3**BIG CHIEF TABLET TWO | FRITZ**

At Jack's request, I am writing about my life before I died; and what impact I have had on Jack's life by my spirit living in Jack's body. Like Jack, I want to leave a record explaining to those people who might think that I am just a figment of Jack's imagination, that I am the 'real' spirit of a 'real' dead German officer. Unlike Jack, whose body I now share, I did in fact die in early May, 1945, somewhere in Bavaria. By all rights Jack's body should be mine alone. However, through a quirk of fate – or by the hand of God, Jack did not die when he received a death-dealing blow to his head, and his spirit – which was free of his body for just a moment – returned to his body at the very instant that my spirit gained entry into his body. As such, I am dependent entirely on Jack for my earthly existence, including my sight, my hearing, etc. While I continue to have my own thoughts, memories, feelings, etc., I am personally impacted by what Jack experiences and how he feels.

I am a German by birth and by choice. With all my heart and soul I love Germany; wanting nothing more than to spend the rest of my days in Germany. I was quite shocked, disappointed, and angry that I ended up in the body of a six year old American boy, let alone having to share his body. I was not expecting to have another chance on this earth. If I had, I would not want to happen what has happened to me. If I had a choice, I would have requested the sole possession of the body of a recently deceased German fellow of about my own age. Then I would have been able to carry

on my life in Germany without major changes – like learning a new language. Even if the deceased German's body was situated with family and friends who were not to my liking, I could have adapted to those surroundings or moved elsewhere. With the turmoil and chaos existing in Germany at the time of my sudden death, it would not have been difficult for me to drift away in my inherited body to a different locale where I wouldn't be recognized.

But here I am stuck in Jack's body. There are many difficulties associated with sharing Jack's body, beyond the fact that he is a young boy. For as long as he remains a young boy there is no certainty that I am ever going to get back to Germany. To begin with, I spoke very little English, and Jack neither spoke nor understands any German. What Jack heard, what he said, and what he read was incomprehensible to me. I have been compelled by my new circumstances to learn English if I am to figure out what I was faced with in terms of what kind of life I had in front of me. Fortunately, Jack's youth has proved to be an advantage – at least insofar as to learning English. While Jack was reasonably proficient in speaking rudimentary English, he was just learning to read and write the language in school, and – by sharing his young body – I became able to comprehend the un-comprehensible English along with him.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS I lived on the periphery of Jack's consciousness; just learning English and observing what was going on in Jack's world. Although I could sense Jack's feelings, they really didn't mean anything to me because I had no reference point as to what drove his feelings. Until I could discern Jack's upbringing I was at a loss ascertaining just how Jack's character might affect my plans. Although I thought of Jack as just a means to an end, it ultimately came down to my own self-preservation. As much as I disliked the situation I found myself in, I needed Jack; and I needed him to be as tough, strong, brave, clever, and capable as I am. Though for this to happen, I had to take a personal interest in finding out everything I could about Jack; assessing what kind of person Jack was or was going to be.

What I discovered about Jack over the next several years – both

through observation of his life-style and by exploring his memories – was that I was stuck in the body of a boy who – if significant changes in his development did not take place – was never going to grow up to be a real man. Jack was bright and creative; but he was also lazy, he was a liar, and – above all – he was a coward. It was clear to me, based on my experiences as a commander of fighting men daily facing death, that without some serious changes in Jack’s persona – Jack was headed for a very troubled, dreadful life. This is not what I wanted to happen to Jack; for what happens to Jack impacts me. If Jack was to become the well-functioning adult that I needed him to be, then I would have to be the person who would make that happen; because no one else in his family appeared to care about Jack becoming a man.

If Jack was to be the vehicle to get me back to Germany, then Jack must be able to act on his own, and to act in a mature fashion. Only then would Jack be of any use to me in accomplishing my ultimate agenda; solving the mystery of my sudden, strange death – was it murder or was it an accident, and, in any event, who was to blame? There were circumstances and situations during the last days of Germany’s collapse about which I needed to find closure. I also had family matters to attend to, including the safety of who was still alive.

How does one help another person to overcome years of incompetent upbringing and low self-esteem?

This was the task with which I immediately found myself confronted. My life experience and self-esteem were one-hundred and eighty degrees different from Jack’s. I was blessed with good, loving, supportive parents, a happy home life, positive life situations, and supreme self-confidence.

How do I impart my own experiences to Jack in a way that brings about a life-changing transition in him?

These were my thoughts as I contemplated on how to rescue Jack. I began to catalogue all of those experiences that I thought made me the person

that I think I am, and to determine which of these life experiences could in any way be used to help turn Jack around.

I CAN'T REMEMBER a time during my youth when I was not happy. I have to put it in those terms because I never really thought about whether I was happy or unhappy until now. As I think about it now, I was surrounded by familial love in a way that even if something bad happened to me, like a broken leg skiing, or the death of a favorite horse, or the failure to win a game or a school prize, or even the death of a close relative, I was never forced to bear the pain alone. At no time do I recall having to ask myself whether I was loved. Certainly, I have no recollection of being rejected by my parents or siblings.

Our house was always filled with joy and laughter, and not just at holidays or on birthdays. Each of my brothers and sisters, and there were two of each – with me in the middle, treated each other with respect, even though there were frequent opportunities for disputes and occasional fights, which was to be expected in a large, competitive family like ours. Besides, there was always someone around – a parent or an older sibling – to referee the more contentious problems.

My older sister, Marta – also known as the “Wise one” – could smell a problem developing between us boys: Wolfgang (“Wolfie”); me – Fritz (“Trouble”); and Ernst (“Toad”); and get it resolved quickly. As my nickname implies, I was the one that usually set a problem in motion, and the one who Marta would focus her concerns upon. She seldom had to involve our parents in these matters, as her word was law. If she had to involve either Poppa or Momma the resultant inquiry was likely to take the form of the Spanish Inquisition, with justice being delivered swiftly and painfully to the wrongdoer. Yet, as Christian believers, justice was more often than not tempered with a large dose of mercy.

I remember the time when I was ten, and my brothers and I – together known as “the Troika” – were picking apples in the orchard close to our house. It was a sunny, but cool, fall afternoon; a perfect day for picking the ripe apples hanging in abundance from the trees. Momma had prom-

ised us that our cook, Hilda, would bake her wonderful apple strudel for dessert if we would gather a bushel of apples. It did not take long for the three of us to collect the requested bushel of apples. However, instead of taking the bushel basket of apples directly to the kitchen, I suggested that we pick some of the un-ripened apples and throw them at whatever happens to catch our fancy, be it animate or inanimate.

“Hey, Wolfie, I bet you can’t hit Herr Muenster’s rooster,” I dared.

Wolfie, who was twelve years old, had a strong arm and was an accurate thrower, and I knew that I would probably lose the bet. But I didn’t care about that. What I wanted was for him to kill our neighbor’s prized rooster for waking me up too early in the mornings.

“Do it!” urged the Toad, who despised the rooster as much as I did.

The rooster was a beautiful bird with feathers of many colors, combined with bright, piercing eyes, and a large red comb which flopped to the side of his head as he moved about. When on the ground, he would strut about as if he were a great king. But his most notable feature was his crowing, which he exercised on a regular basis, especially early in the morning greeting the rising sun. Poppa told us that the rooster had a noble lineage for his breed, and that this particular rooster had earned ribbons at local fairs.

Leaving the bushel basket behind and, as quietly as we could, we commenced our search for the rooster in the hopes of finding him on our property. Herr Muenster kept a ferocious bull on his land, and we were clearly forbidden to go onto his land. The rooster often came onto our property in search of bugs and other edibles. On that particular afternoon we observed him sitting on the fence separating our property from Herr Muenster’s, facing away from us. Wolfie scanned the area around us – like a soldier on patrol – to see if anyone was observing us, and seeing no one, he switched the hard, green apple to the hand of his throwing arm, and hurled it at the rooster.

Wolfie’s aim was good, but not precise; the apple struck the rooster a glancing blow on his right wing, knocking the bird to the ground on Herr Munster’s side, where it began to make loud squawking noises and to run around flapping its good wing. Realizing that the dreadful bird had not suffered a fatal blow, we had to then capture the wounded bird be-

fore Herr Munster found it in that condition and began a search for the culprits. But, there was no way that we could capture the wounded bird without climbing the fence and going onto Herr Muenster's land. Who of the Troika was brave enough to enter the forbidden land, face the dangerous bull, grab the wounded, but lively, rooster, and make it back alive?

"It's my fault. I made a bad throw. I will go get the rooster," exclaimed Wolfie.

"No, it was my idea, so I'll go get it. Anyway, even if you had killed the bird, we still would have had to go onto Herr Muenster's property to retrieve it; so I'll do it. Anyway I don't see the bull."

"But the rooster is making so much noise, the bull is sure to notice it soon."

"I'm the smallest, and maybe the bull wouldn't see me if I went over the fence to get the rooster."

"How would you get back in time Toad if the bull did see you?"

"You could tie a rope around me, and if the bull sees me you could pull me back over the fence before he gets here."

"We don't have a rope here, and by the time we got one from the shed, it will be too late. We have to act quickly before the rooster gets too far away, or the bull or Herr Muenster hears all the squawking."

Considering the options, and weighing the risks, I started towards the fence. *Then it occurred to me, What if I can even catch the rooster without being seen by the bull or Herr Munster, and what if I can get back over the fence safely; what are we going to do with the wounded rooster? Even if we can restore it to health; where can we nurse it without being discovered? And if we kill it, Herr Munster will still want to know how it got killed. We are going to be in trouble whatever we do at this point.*

"We need to rethink this!" I said; explaining to my brothers my concerns about trying to retrieve the rooster.

"We should tell Poppa!" Wolfie suggested.

"We don't have any other choice."

We retrieved the bushel basket of apples and made our way back to the house. As we walked along, we talked about who should tell Poppa.

"It was my idea. It is my fault. I'll tell him."

"But I'm the oldest, and I should have known better than to act on one

of your hare-brained dares. You really are Trouble.”

“That’s all the more reason why I should tell Poppa. I will take the blame. Let’s just make sure that the Toad doesn’t get blamed for any of this.”

We entered the big house through the servants’ entrance. As soon as the massive oak door opened, we inhaled the wonderful aroma of the meal being prepared by the cook. The heavy bushel basket of sweet-smelling apples slowed our passage into the large kitchen where Hilda was standing at the cook-stove ladling juices from the baking pan over the golden-brown pork roast.

“Where have you been so long getting these apples?” she asked. “I hope I have time to get Louisa to prepare them for me to make the strudel for dinner. Your papa won’t be happy if it is not ready.”

She placed the pork roast back into the oven, shaking her head, mumbling, “You boys!” We looked at each other, hoping that the Toad would not blurt out anything about our misadventure. There was no need to worry about the Toad talking out of turn, because our older sister Marta came prancing into the kitchen commenting in a sing-song tone,

“I saw what you were doing. Herr Muenster will be angry.”

“Hush up, Marta!” I scolded. But it was in vain.

“And Poppa will be very upset. You know how he has warned you not to cause problems with Herr Muenster.”

“What have you boys done today?” asked Hilda, who hearing parts of the conversation, quickly became interested in what Marta was saying. “Herr Muenster is not a neighbor you want to be angry with you. He is as dangerous as that bull he keeps.”

“We know! We know,” yelled Wolfie. “We were already planning to tell Poppa about what happened this evening.”

“Please don’t you tell him first” I pleaded. “Poppa needs to hear it from us; not you” I said, looking directly at Marta.

I dreaded even thinking about what Poppa would do if he thought we were trying to hide something from him. Poppa was a stickler for honesty and accepting responsibility. He expected it from those who worked for him; and from his family even more so. He placed great stock in the well-earned reputation of his centuries’ old family name and title; tak-

ing extreme steps to avoid sully that name and title – Kurt Baron von Bruckner. Nothing would be worse for Poppa than having his own flesh and blood undo all that he had done to achieve and protect his image; especially when Herr Otto Muenster might be the beneficiary of Poppa’s downfall.

According to Poppa, Herr Muenster was more than just a neighbor; he was a powerful industrialist who, from humble beginnings, made his fortune during the Great War designing and manufacturing airplane propellers. He would like nothing more than to destroy Poppa who, to Herr Muenster’s twisted way of thinking, represented all that was perceived to be evil and burdensome about German aristocracy.

Even though German aristocracy was abolished with the Kaiser’s abdication at the end of the Great War, nobles – like a Duke – were permitted to continue using their titles. Poppa used his title only in family related matters; but never in everyday commercial activity, preferring instead to be addressed simply as “Herr von Bruckner.” For reasons Poppa had not disclosed, he was convinced that Herr Muenster held a grudge against him, using the “empty title” label as justification for attacking Poppa’s integrity. The “empty title” label was being applied by the nouveau rich to those Germans who used, or who were entitled to use, hereditary titles, believing that those titled persons held unearned privileges not available to the nouveau rich.

WE TOOK OUR dinner that evening in the wood-paneled dining room. While not a formal occasion, a meal served in the dining room required that the children be scrubbed and wear their better clothes, and that the servants be dressed in clean uniforms. Poppa, a devout Catholic, offered the blessing to begin the meal. The meal was presented in several courses, with much attention given to detail; what piece of silverware to use, where to place a used fork or spoon, etc. Despite the deference to etiquette and table manners, the banter among us was casual and light-hearted.

As the delicious-looking, delicious-smelling apple strudel was being served, I glanced at Wolfie, slightly nodding my head as a signal to him to

broach the subject of Herr Muenster's wounded rooster. Apple strudel was one of Poppa's favorite pastries, certain to put him in a good mood after consuming the enormous slice placed in front of him.

"My God, Ursala, this strudel is outstanding!" exclaimed Poppa. "Please tell cook that she has outdone herself."

"I will," replied Momma. "But you may also want to thank the boys. Cook tells me that they picked apples for her this afternoon."

"Well, of course...Thank you, boys. It was very decent of you to lend a hand to cook so she could give us such a wonderful treat."

"Father," interrupted Wolfie, "Before you praise us too much, I think you better hear what happened this afternoon while we were picking the apples."

"Did you get hurt?" Poppa inquired, glancing at each one of us to see if he could observe any wounds or bruises.

"No," replied Wolfie, "Not us...but Herr Muenster's rooster had a close call when I hit him in the wing with an apple."

A dark cloud of concern quickly passed across Poppa's previously smiling, happy face. After a slight pause, Poppa's face brightened again. "I hope that whatever happened to that rooster, it is serious enough that I won't hear that noisy bird waking me so early in the morning. I truly detest that crowing, strutting rooster. He is waking me too early...every morning."

Poppa's blue eyes darkened with the color rising in his cheeks. "Besides, that damned rooster reminds me too much of his overbearing owner...Herr Muenster."

We all laughed loudly, except Momma. "Poppa" scolded Momma. "I don't think you should be talking about Herr Muenster that way. You will give the children the wrong impression about him."

Giving Momma a firm look, Poppa intoned, "Why don't you take the girls into the library, while I talk to the boys for a moment, or two."

"But Poppa," protested Marta. "I want to hear too. I saw what they did, and I can help you figure out how to punish them!"

"Marta. I'm sure you did, and I am sure you could...but I don't think I need your help. But you can help your mother with getting Maria ready for bed. Thank you."

Marta began to protest, but then having thought better of it said nothing. Tight-lipped and petulant, she stormed out of the dining room following Momma and Maria. We all knew that Marta was making a mistake in trying to get Poppa to change his mind; *I retain the painful memories of failed efforts.*

After Momma and the girls have left the room, Poppa, observing that the doors have been closed, stated, “Momma is correct. We must be careful about how we talk about Herr Otto Munster, or any other person. First, I don’t believe in maligning others, regardless of how I might feel about them. Second, in Herr Muenster’s case, he is becoming a force to be reckoned with. Finally, we don’t need to have Herr Muenster as our enemy.” Poppa paused, and then said, “Let me tell you boys why Otto Muenster is more than just a difficult neighbor with an annoying rooster. I, too, would like to see the end of that bird. However, I think we need to find some way to solve this dilemma. Nature could take care of the problem for us. There are plenty of predators out there – like foxes and weasels – who would find a wounded rooster easy prey. But we can’t count on that happening.” Poppa paused for a while, clearly thinking about what, and how much, to tell us. “We have a serious problem with Herr Muenster, and the solution to this problem needs to have a positive outcome for everybody.”

“In 1914” he began, “When Germany was drawn into the conflict between Austria/Hungary and Serbia, I was offered a commission as an officer in the *Wermacht*. But because I had had flight training as a civilian, I was assigned to the fledgling Luftwaffe, first as an instructor, and then as a pilot. By the time I had married your mother, and you – Wolfie – were born, I was a Major, commanding a *Jagdeschwader* (Fighter wing) in France. I also had responsibility for aeronautical development and product procurement for new fighter aircraft.

“One of the innovations being worked on at the time was the mounting of the machine guns on the plane’s fuselage right in front of the pilot so that he could better coordinate the aiming and firing of the guns. Previously, the machine gun was mounted on top of the wing above the pilot’s head. Critical to placing the machine gun directly in front of the pilot – at his eye-level, was technology allowing the machine guns to fire their bullets through the aircraft’s propeller, without shooting off the propel-

ler. Our engineers developed a mechanism that synchronized the bullet firing mechanism with the rotation and speed of the propeller so that the bullets would pass precisely between the spinning propeller blades.

“Otto Muenster was in the business of designing and manufacturing airplane propellers. His design was adequate for the earlier model aircraft, but his design would not maintain the consistent rotation essential to synchronization with the bullets being fired by the machine gun mounted on the newer aircraft. The result was the loss of propellers, the loss of aircraft, the loss of valuable pilots, and the refusal of pilots to fly aircraft equipped with Muenster’s propellers. As the officer responsible for product development and procurement, I advised Herr Muenster that the Luftwaffe would no longer purchase his propellers, but would purchase propellers from his competitors whose propellers were operating satisfactorily with the advanced firing system.

“Needless to say, Herr Muenster was furious. He came to see me in France, at the Western Front, where he yelled and screamed at me in his lowbrow German protesting to me that he had a perfectly good design, that I was wrong in blaming the crashes and deaths on his product, and that I was destroying his business. When I persisted in my position, Herr Muenster offered to make it worth my while monetarily if I would withdraw my objections to his product. I quickly and adamantly rejected his dirty bribe, threatening to throw him out of my office. Having failed to bring me over with a monetary bribe, Herr Muenster turned next to intimidation; threatening to go over my head, having me removed from my job if necessary.

“I subsequently learned from my superiors that Otto Muenster made quite a stink about my refusal to withdraw my order not to use any of his propellers with the planes utilizing the advanced firing system. There were even rumors that he offered bribes to members of the General Staff and tried to use political influence with some of the Kaiser’s advisors and friends. To their credit, the General Staff stood by my order, especially when their pilots – especially their aces: like Baron von Richthofen, Ernst Udet, and Herman Goering – refused to fly any of the advanced aircraft equipped with a Munster propeller.

“Ultimately, finding no one who would submit to his bullying tactics,

Herr Muenster redesigned his propeller so that it would function with the advanced firing system. Thus, his propeller firm survived, his fortune may well have been expanded, and I made an enemy for life. Herr Muenster used part of his considerable fortune to purchase the estate next to ours. If he could have, he would also use some of his fortune to purchase a title; but with the demise of the monarchy, none were available. Even ancestral titles such as ours are no longer being used much in public. Yet people like Otto Muenster, who wanted the prestige associated with a title, let their envy of those who have titles drive them to distraction. The fact that I was never made a member of the General Staff may have been a blessing in disguise; how much more it would have caused Otto Muenster to dislike me.”

Poppa paused in his soliloquy, hoping that the importance of what he had told us would sink in. After looking intently at each of us, he continued, “So now I think you can appreciate the delicacy of your dilemma. I say your dilemma because nothing would please Herr Muenster more than to get you in his clutches for maiming or killing his prized rooster. And...He would take great delight in embarrassing me through shaming you.”

“Poppa” I interrupted. “Would it help the situation any if we were to buy a new rooster and take him to Herr Muenster; explain what happened, and throw ourselves on his mercy?”

“That would, of course, be the noble thing to do. It may be difficult to find such a prized rooster quickly. You may want instead to offer to pay Herr Muenster the amount of money necessary to purchase a replacement rooster. But let’s wait until the morning to see whether we hear the rooster crow. Who knows, the rooster may not have been hurt as badly as you think, and he could be as good as new in the morning. If we don’t hear him crow in the morning, then we can assume that he did not survive the night, and we can put your plan into effect. You had better hope that we hear that damn rooster crow at dawn! Even if he does, I still have to consider an appropriate punishment for your foolish adventure.”

IT WAS A long night of tossing and turning waiting for daylight. *Will the*

damn rooster crow, or not? I awoke before dawn, and leaving the confines of my bedroom, headed to Wolfie's room.

"Are you awake?" I inquired softly entering Wolfie's bedroom.

"What do you think? Of course I am...I've barely slept a moment all night!"

"Me neither. I've been praying for hours that we hear his crowing."

"That's funny. I've been praying that we don't."

"Why?"

"Well, because even if I broke his wing, he could still survive the night to crow his heart out this morning. And eventually Herr Muenster might find out that his rooster has been damaged and is no longer as valuable as he used to be. We are better off if he is dead! For Poppa's sake, at least we won't have to live with the uncertainty."

"You may be right. I hadn't thought about that. Well, it's in God's hands now. He'll know what's best."

We waited and waited. The sky turned brighter and brighter, but no rooster sounds reached our searching ears. More time passed. The sun finally cleared the trees in the east, but we still heard no sound of crowing. My stomach began to churn. "Oh, God," I silently prayed. *Poor Poppa! Poor us! We are not going to hear the rooster crow. Maybe St. Peter, after having denied Jesus in the Temple courtyard, had prayed for the same thing, but in vain.*

With long faces and little appetite we dressed and made our way downstairs to face Poppa at the sun-streaked breakfast table. He put down his newspaper as Wolfie and I entered the bright kitchen.

"At least I got to sleep until the alarm clock went off this morning. But, what got you two up?" he inquired sarcastically laughing at the sight of our glum faces.