

## Pieces of War

By Rachel Ulatowski

### *Bombs.*

Bombs and Nazis. Bombs, Nazis, Jews, and Death - all making a strange, yet fitting combination, at least for the young blonde haired man standing on the streets of Leipzig, Germany, on December 4th, 1943, with a letter crunched into his white-knuckled fist. He must have been nineteen, maybe twenty. A certain limp in his left leg had kept him away from the front lines. It saved his life, so he thought, and he lived the last years of his life believing he, too, must save life. The sky blackened and, silently, the bombs began to rain down onto Leipzig. All around, the chattering and bustling of folks stopped abruptly. Silently, every head on the street turned to see the bombs. Some of them waited. They gaped up at the falling sky, as if harboring some far-flung hope that their blonde hair and blue eyes would save them this time. Others ran, screaming, for shelter, some diving to the ground and cramming into the crevices of buildings, arms over their heads, shaking in fear. This young man, though, just stood. He stood staring up at the sky, silently mouthing some incomprehensible words, maybe it was a prayer or maybe he was just saying all the things he'd never get a chance to say. Either way, the bombs continued to fall on the now lone figure standing on the edge of the street as blackness rained down upon him. The next morning, the sun rose cautiously, setting a red hue over the ashes of the man and two thousand other souls, Nazis, Jews, and Germans, different, yet all dying the same, simultaneous, pitiful death at the sound of a single *bang*.

Two years later, in June of 1945, the sun was rising again, setting the same red-hue over Leipzig, the ashes of the dead having long been cleared away and, apparently, forgotten. Just mere miles away from where the young man had stood among the falling bombs, former SS-Oberstgruppenführer, Engel Schmid sat outside his home. There was something strange about seeing him out there. While all the other Nazi leaders were running, tails between their legs, to South America, Engel Schmid, 'supreme' Nazi leader had returned to his home. However, to Avishag Haber, the strangest thing about him were his eyes. Perhaps, it was a matter of having been accustomed to seeing eternal blankness where there should have been a soul, in the eyes of her captors or, perhaps, it was a matter of having made a habit of looking into the eyes of Germans, searching for, at the very least, a glimmer of remorse. Whatever it was, fourteen year-old Avishag, noticed his eyes. They must once have been a brilliant blue, now, however, the color had

become dulled. The whites were a deep pink and a strange manic light shone through the pupils of his unblinking eyes. It was as if a dead man had become possessed with a deranged spirit.

She continued to watch him silently, beginning to understand why the habitants of Leipzig had begun to refer to Engel as a madman. Those who had not spotted him claimed to have ‘heard’ him. Reportedly screeches and howls rang from the depths of his home where stories held that Engel Schmid was creating *wunderlich* inventions. The stories, perhaps, explained why he had not yet been reported by the various Jews who had returned to their homes after liberation: the idea of a madman who made whimsical creations was simply too appealing. Now, Avishag’s curiosity peaked as she saw him in person. He looked like he had just survived an air raid. He was covered from head to toe in soot, dust, and grime, with black smudge marks lining his face, hands, and arms. However, the faded olive green patches that shone through the dirt indicated that he had not so much as bothered to take off his Nazi uniform. Avishag’s stomach twisted sickeningly at the sight of the swastika band wrapped around his right arm.

She stared at him for a long period of time. Never once did he glance at her. He remained sitting with a blank expression on his face, the manic light alive in his eyes, mouthing something to himself, while scratching his dirty fingernails back and forth across the crude ground. Eventually, he caught Avishag’s eye. He held her gaze for several moments before rising abruptly and retreating back into his house.

The sight of that swastika bobbing up and down on his arm before disappearing behind the door almost made Avishag turn away, but not quite. If the stories were true, there was *something* in that house. Maybe it was hope, maybe it was lunacy, but that childish belief in the impossible and unusual was still very much alive in Avishag’s hopeful, yet damaged, heart and it gave her the mad initiative to walk up to the door of a former Nazi and knock. For the longest time the door remained shut. She stood firmly, though, straining for the slightest sound from inside the house, but all was silent. Finally, the door creaked open just a crack and a single faded blue, bloodshot eye appeared.

“*Was willst du?*” Engel rasped. “What do you want?”

“I - I” Avishag faltered under his glare. “They say you make... make *maschinen*. I want to see.”

He stared at her unblinkingly for a long while. Finally, he turned from the door and walked away into the interior of the house, but he left the door ajar. Avishag hesitated, her heart-pounding, as she wondered whether to follow or not. Pushing the door further opened, she stepped into the house. It was destroyed. All the furniture had

been overturned, a wooden table lay in splinters in the kitchen area, broken glass, and trampled books were strewn around. All was eerily silent as she followed the sound of Engel's footsteps to a door that led to the cellar.

Descending the cool stairs, she entered into a dim room, in even more disarray than the kitchen and living area. The floor, ceiling, and walls were torn up, exposing strange tubes and wires that ran along the course of the cellar. Gears and strange metallic objects were strewn over the floor. Drawings and designs were plastered to every wall and intellectual books of subjects foreign to Avishag lined a few broken shelves. Lying in the very middle of the room was the machine itself. Scraps of metal and wood had been forced together in an unappealing way connected with an astounding amount of wires and screws, forming a hollow circular structure. Several gears lined one side of the metal, locked together like pieces of a puzzle. A gap in the rectangular apparatus revealed a worn, wooden chair with a lever and strap attached to it. The whole apparatus was hooked to a pulley, hovering precariously inches off the ground.

Engel had retreated to a corner of the cellar, where he was hunched over an array of papers with odd lines, angles, shapes, and numbers scrawled across it. However, Avishag could tell that he was watching her suspiciously from the corner of his eye.

"So it's true," Avishag said, a surge of both dizziness and excitement rushing through her. "You're really doing it. You're going to rewind the clock... go back in years?"

Engel ignored her and asked, suddenly, "What's your name?"

"Avishag," She answered timidly, startled at his sudden question.

"Unusual name," He muttered, before turning back to his papers.

"My papa named me. He chose Avishag because it means 'Father's joy'. He used to say I was his joy," Her lip quivered a bit and her throat tightened as she added, unable keep a hint of bitterness from leaking into her tone. "They killed him. The *Gestapo* - they *killed* him."

Engel said nothing. Avishag tried to peer into his eyes, hoping to see something. Perhaps anger or remorse or sadness, but she couldn't make out what she saw. Maybe it was because his eyes were already permanently glossed over with the presence of all three. Silence prevailed again.

"Will it work?" Avishag finally asked.

Anyone besides a child and a madman could see that it would *not* work. Despite the wires and gears and Engel's pretence of understanding complex equations and physics, it was quite clear that his 'machine' was nothing but a dirty chair surrounded in metallic objects.

Again, Engel ignored her question. "I'm not bringing your father back" He snapped at her. "Not enough space."

"I didn't say I wanted to bring him back," She retorted, indignantly. "I... he... we - *Jews*... we don't have a place in the world anymore. I, if its possible, I just want to see him... one more time."

Several tears found their way down her dark cheeks, as she was reminded of the kindly Jewish man, bleeding out on the ground at the feet of the Gestapo. Engel made no indication that he had heard her, so Avishag began to slowly walk around the room. She stopped at a wall that was plastered over with drawings and sheets. In the very middle of the nonsensical scribbles, was a photograph. The man who had stood in the storm of bombs looked out of the gray, faded, photograph at her. There was no doubt the young man was Engel's son. It wasn't the startling bright blonde hair or blue-hued pupils that gave it away. It was the light in his eyes. He had the same manic light. It, however, was not the manic light of a madman, but the manic light of a reckless lover of people and of life. After all, one had to be a bit mad during the Second Great War to have loved and cared so much, while gaining so little.

"Your son?" Avishag asked, pointing to the photograph. "He died in war, didn't he? Are you going back save him?"

Engle shook his head. "He didn't go to war. A leg injury kept him off the front lines. He died anyways, buried in a pile of rubble in Leipzig two years ago."

Avishag tried to offer condolences, but, instead, stared at Engel intently for a moment, as if seeing him for the first time. She could tell from the raw pain in his voice that he loved his son, loved him very much. It was a new concept, thinking that the Nazis were capable of love.

Engel finally turned to look at her, a bitter sort of snarl forming on his face. "He loved *your* people. Always carried on about how his life had been saved and how he was meant to save lives. He harbored Jews in this house. Fancy that - the son of a Nazi leader cramming Jewish scum into every nook and cranny of this very house."

He looked away from Avishag, his eyes having become suspiciously misty. He leaned over, resting his hands on a table scattered with tools. "I killed him," He said in a low voice. "I *killed* my son."

Avishag felt a shiver run up and down her spine, as she began to back away. “But, but you - you said he died from the bombs. You couldn’t stop that, could you?”

Engel spoke again, still turned away from her. “I was going to report him to the Gestapo... and I told him so. That was the last thing I ever said to him. You know what they found next to the ashes of my son? A burned letter. He killed himself trying to send me a letter to beg for the lives of his Jews.”

Engel stood silently for a while, before spinning around abruptly, his face a startling shade of purple. He grasped a mallet and flung it in Avishag’s direction, missing her, but ripping another hole into the wall beside her.

“My son died!” He screamed. “HE’S DEAD! HE’S DEAD BECAUSE OF *YOUR* PEOPLE! THEY KILLED HIM! *WE* KILLED HIM!”

He continued throwing metallic objects throughout the room, sweeping his arm across the tables to knock over the contents and grasping his hair in his fist while kicking his feet and creating gaping holes where his jackboots connected with the walls. Avishag stood petrified, unable to run. Finally, after a scrap of metal the size of a door had been flung across the room, followed by a shower of screws and nails, he slumped against the wall, exhausted. He slid down onto his haunches, shoulders shaking with sobs, as he wept into his hands.

“The fool,” He finally said, brokenly. “He was suppose to be safe and he killed himself over *Jews*, of all people. I deserve to die... And I *am* going to die, now. They’ll come. They’ll come for me and send me to Camp Ashcan and they’ll kill me... but not... not until I save my son. I die happy if my son will just live.”

Avishag, her heart still pounding, stared across the room at Engel who had sprung to his feet. He had run towards his apparatus and was madly pulling levers and pressing switches. Every once in awhile an arc of electricity shot across the metal, burning into his fingers. Despite the flow of blood getting heavier with every shock, Engel didn’t blink an eye. In a fit of pure rage, with spit and foam flying from his mouth, his nose trickling blood, and sweat and tears carving trails in the dirt on his face, he tried to connect wires and pull levers and screw in metal, somehow irrationally believing a scrap of metal could bring his son back to life. It was all to no avail. The apparatus stood there... still, metallic, ugly, and silent.

“WORK!!!” He finally screamed, pounding his bleeding fists onto the walls of the machine. “WORK!!!! THEY’RE GOING TO KILL ME!!!! I HAVE TO SAVE HIM, I HAVE TO SAVE HIM!!!!”

He began to howl, the anguished, tortured sort of howl that Avishag had only ever heard ring out from the gas chambers of Sachsenhausen. Sobbing he fell to the ground, dragging and ripping out his fingernails on the crude metal, as he slithered to the ground. Avishag stood in silent horror and fear. *He deserves it*, a part of her thought. He deserved to suffer. He deserved to *die*. She could have left him. She *should* have left him. He tried to stand up, again, trying to tie together wires and fumbling with a tube, until another arc of electricity sent him to the ground. Avishag approached him cautiously. Finally, as his hands were outstretched, reaching desperately for his apparatus, again, Avishag caught his arm firmly, the arm with the swastika wrapped around it.

“Herr Schmid,” She said quietly. “It doesn’t work. It *won’t* work.”

He stood staring afar off into the distance, before his blue eyes met her brown eyes. Broken eyes met broken eyes. One pair belonged to a Supreme Nazi leader, who had once howled on the ground where his son’s ashes lay, the other to a Jewish girl who had been sent to live in Sachsenhausen, who had once howled on the ground where her father’s body lay shot through the heart with a Gestapo’s bullet. One wanted to save his son before he died. One wanted to see her father before she died. Unbeknownst to both of them, this very house was the house that had been to her only a black lump in the darkness when her father carried her there in the dead of night. Engel’s son was the same man who’s back Avishag had only glimpsed when he brought her family food. Her and Engel were laying in the same spot where her father had bled out. Avishag was that then eleven-year old girl who Engel had hated so much as to be willing to turn in his own son to the Gestapo. They were the same. They were two parts of the same story.

“I love my son,” Engel finally whispered. “I love him *so much*.”

Avishag said nothing, she merely extended a small, brown hand. After a moment, Engel with his white, charred, and bloodied hands, grasped Avishag’s. They sat there for a long while. German and Jew joined at last. They weren’t so different after all. The Germans fought a war just to try to prove to the world that they were different, but, in the end, the only difference between races was that one got bombed and the other got gassed.

No one would ever understand, though. No one would ever comprehend how, when the doors were broken down and the soldiers dragged SS-Oberstgruppenführer Engel Schmid to pay for his crimes at the noose, how it came to be that a young Jewish girl clung to his hand up until she was thrown off, weeping for the man who had killed her father and his own son.