

The Brass Compass

Excerpt
by Ellen Butler

Unbeknownst to me, my training started as a child, long before the Nazis came to power, before the war, and before my stay at the prestigious Swiss finishing school, Château Mont-Choisi in the idyllic town of Lausanne. Had my mother realized the path her machinations put me on, I doubt she would have ever let me out of her sight.

Chapter One

Into the Night

February 1945
Germany

“*Was ist sein Name?*” What is his name? The SS officer’s backlit shadow loomed over his victim as he yelled into the face of the shrinking man on the third-story balcony. “We know you’ve been passing messages. Tell us, who is your contact?” he continued in German.

Lenz’s gray-haired head shook like a frightened mouse. With his back to me, I was too far away to hear the mumbled response or the Nazi’s next question. I pulled my dark wool coat tighter and sank deeper into the shadow of the apartment building’s doorway across the street from where my contact underwent interrogation. The pounding of my heart pulsated in my ears, and I held my breath as I strained to listen to the conversation. In front of Lenz’s building stood a black Mercedes-Benz with its running lights aglow, no doubt the vehicle that brought the SS troops. None of the neighboring buildings showed any light, as residents cowered behind locked doors praying the SS wouldn’t come knocking. This was a working-class neighborhood, and everyone knew it was best to keep your mouth shut and not stick your nose in the business of the Schutzstaffel.

Their presence at Lenz’s home explained why my contact at the bakery was absent from our assignation earlier today. I dreaded to imagine what they had done to Otto for him to give up Lenz’s name ... or worse, mine. Even though I’d never told Otto my name, a description of me could easily lead the SS to their target.

“*Lügner!*” Liar!

I flinched as the officer's ringing accusation bounced off the brick buildings. A young SS Stormtrooper stepped out onto the balcony and requested his superior look at something in his hand. I should have taken their distraction to slip away into the darkness and run; instead I stayed, anxiously listening, to hear if Lenz would break under the SS grilling and reveal my identity. Clearly, they suspected he was involved in spying and would take him away. They probably also knew he had information to spill and would eventually torture it out of him, which was the only reason he hadn't been shot on sight. It was only a matter of time before he gave me away. My friends in the French Resistance had been directed to hold out for two days before releasing names to allow the spies to disband and disappear. I wasn't sure if the German network applied the same rules, so I remained to see if he would break before they took him.

"Where did you find this?" the officer asked.

The trooper indicated inside the apartment.

"*Zeig es mir.*" Show me. He followed his subordinate through the doorway into the building.

Lenz turned and braced himself against the balcony. I watched in horror as he climbed atop the railing.

"*Halt!*" a bellow from inside rang out.

Lenz didn't hesitate, and I averted my eyes, biting down hard on my cold knuckles, as he took his final moments out of the hands of the Nazis. Sounds of shattering glass and buckling metal ripped through the darkness as his body slammed into the SS vehicle. In my periphery, a neighboring blackout curtain shifted.

"*Scheisse!*" the SS officer swore as he and his subordinate leaned over the railing to see Lenz's body sprawled across their car. "Search the apartment. *Tear it apart!*"

The moment they crossed the threshold, I sprinted into the night.

My breath puffed out in small plumes of smoke as I dodged through alleys, in and out of darkened doorways, moving on the balls of my feet. Silently, I cursed the cloudless sky as the moonlight bounced off the cobblestones, its brightness clear enough to land a plane. Unless waiting at midnight at a drop zone for needed supplies, a spy preferred the inky blackness of cloudy skies. Especially when escaping the enemy.

A few kilometers from Lenz's apartment, I paused behind the brick rubble of a bombed-out building. My gaze searched the area for any sign of movement. Standing alert, I held my breath, attuning my senses to the nighttime sounds, and listened for the whisper of cloth, the click of a boot heel, or heaven forbid, the cock of a gun. The thundering of my heartbeat slowed, and I balled my fists to stop my shaking hands. All seemed quiet ... for the moment.

My fingers curled around the tiny film cartridge, filled with information vital to the Allied cause, nestled in my coat pocket. Dropping down to one knee, I slipped the heel of my right boot aside and tucked it into the hidden cavity. The coded message I'd planned to pass to Lenz would have to be burned, but I couldn't take the chance of lighting a fire right now. It would have to wait until morning.

My body cooled from the run, and I blew into my hands to warm them as I assessed the situation. There was no way I could return to the Nazi's home. If my absence had yet to be noticed and arouse suspicion, there was still a distinct possibility the SS would be knocking on the *Oberst's* door at sunrise demanding admittance. I had to assume, even though Lenz didn't reveal me, Otto already had, or would be tortured into doing so. Lenz's suicide did not guarantee my safety. Eventually, the SS, or worse, the Gestapo, would follow up on the slightest possibility that the *Oberst* housed a spy, especially considering his most recent house guests included the Minister of Armaments and War, Albert Speer, along with half a dozen army officers and a pair of naval captains.

Even though, due to his injury, the *Oberst* no longer led troops into battle, he was a brilliant tactician, and his home remained a hot bed of strategic planning. Army leaders had spent hours in his luxurious dining room talking weapons, troop movement tactics, and maneuvers. Though *der Führer* never deigned to visit, on at least one occasion, the *Oberst* had been summoned to consult with Hitler's top military advisors in Berchtesgaden. It was the exact reason why, when the chance for me to imbed myself into his household fell at my feet, I did so without hesitation, despite the high level of risk and against my superior's strong objections.

I tilted my head against the rough brick, and my mind flashed back to the fateful day in November 1944 when I'd been returning to my job as a telephone operator in Stuttgart, acquired for me by a special operations executive or SOE agent. I carried a small net sack of food I'd purchased using my meager ration cards and watched two giggling children skip down the sidewalk ahead of a thin, gray-haired woman. She absentmindedly called for them to slow down, but her attention was focused on a piece of paper in her hand.

It happened in an instant. The little boy threw the girl's doll into the street, and with a cry, she ran after it. I saw the car's driver hadn't seen the contretemps or the child run into the road. The groceries dropped to the ground as I raced into the street. My fingers snatched the little girl's hood and I yanked. We stumbled out of harm's way as the driver swerved to miss us both. That moment of squealing tires, burnt rubber, and boy's distressed yell was perpetually seared into my mind.

After the children had been calmed and the agitated driver returned to his car, the distraught housekeeper poured out her sob story, no doubt worried that I would complain of her inattention to her employer. In a babbling monologue, with tears shimmering in her sunken eyes, she told me the two motherless children had been foisted into her charge when their last nanny moved to Frankfurt to take care of a sick parent and injured brother. The household was moving to be with the *Oberst*, army colonel, in Oberndorf, Germany. I slowly rocked the little girl in my arms while sympathetically nodding as she explained the situation. Finally, she rounded out her story by asking if I knew of anyone willing to leave Stuttgart and take up the position.

My mind churned at the mention of the colonel and his position in Oberndorf, the home of the Mauser K98k factory, the *Wehrmacht's* rifle of choice. The housekeeper's plea couldn't have been more perfect. My cover identification characterized me as the eldest of four children, a far cry from the truth. However, I took the initiative to weave a beautiful, nurturing tale about

raising my brothers and sister while lovingly comforting pint-sized Klara, as Dagobert, the imp who'd thrown the doll, hid behind Magda's skirts. Five days later, after a nerve-racking investigation, I moved into the household, along with a newly acquired Minox mini spy camera and instructions for passing information to my contact at the *Marktplatz* in Oberndorf.

A rustling sound jerked my attention to the right and sent my heart a-rabbiting. The perpetrator, a tiny four-legged creature, squeaked and darted across the street. A silent breath of laughter puffed out in relief, even as I realized that those few minutes I'd let my guard down could have cost me my life. With renewed determination, I rose and continued my stealthy journey into the night.