

The Good Brother

‘Why the smile?’ Sophie asked. She was wearing denim jeans, fashionably torn at the knees, a beige silk blouse and black leather jacket. She looked gorgeous.

I shrugged. ‘I just love this place. Great food and a super view of the Tan.’ What I didn’t say was that I’d be happy just about anywhere in her company. I glanced through the window and across Domain Road. The afternoon sun cast dancing shadows through the autumn leaves in the Royal Botanical Gardens.

‘So, what’s all this about Albert Göring?’ Sophie asked as she sipped her pinot noir.

‘You remember that conversation in the faculty lounge the first time we met?’

Sophie nodded. ‘I mostly remember you, to tell the truth, and you’re just as lovely today.’

‘Stop it!’ I blushed. ‘I meant the conversation about our parents, and their influence on our work. I remember you said you wrote your thesis on the ’68 Paris riots partly because of your family background.’

‘That’s right. And...?’

‘I don’t think I ever told you about my granddad.’

Sophie shook her head.

‘He fought as a partisan with the Bielski brothers in Poland during the war.’

‘That’s amazing! I loved that movie with Daniel Craig ...’

‘*Defiance*,’ I volunteered.

‘Yeah ... *Defiance*,’ she echoed. ‘So, he was a hero!’

I shrugged. ‘It was ... complicated.’

Her brow furrowed. ‘How so?’

‘The rest of his family ... parents and three sisters ... were all shot by the German Ordnungspolizei ... the Order Police.’

‘Like in Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*?’ she asked, her face darkening.

I nodded.

‘So, he was the only one to survive the war?’

‘He survived in the physical sense.’ I sighed. ‘But mentally ... that’s another story. He lived with us, and there were days when he was unable to get out of bed because of his depression, and other times, for no apparent reason, he would lose his temper over the smallest things. He never spoke about his war experiences, and we knew never to mention that time of his life, but it was always there. The Holocaust has been a constant part of my entire life.’

‘It must have been hard for you and your parents.’

I grimaced, trying to hold back sudden tears. ‘The unpredictable outbursts were bad, but the most difficult thing was his inability to show any positive emotion. I don’t think he ever told me he loved me, or anyone else for that matter.’

Sophie placed her hand over mine. At that moment she struck me as the most compassionate person I’d ever met. It was one of the reasons I adored her.

‘Is that why you decided to do your doctorate on the Holocaust?’ she asked.

‘Actually, it was the idea of my honours thesis adviser. She suggested that I use my fluency in German to scour the archives and find a Holocaust-related issue that no one had written about. I remembered a journal article about Hermann Göring’s brother who was anti-Nazi. She – my adviser – thought it was a great idea.’

Sophie shook her head. 'Wow. You mean to tell me that Göring had an anti-Nazi brother?'

'Yes, he did,' I replied. 'Hermann was two years older, and the second-most powerful man in the Third Reich. While his brother was giving orders to murder Jews, Albert devoted himself to their salvation. It's an amazing story that hasn't really received the recognition it deserves.'

'But ... but how did he survive? Did Hermann protect him?'

'That was part of it,' I said, 'but I think the Nazi hierarchy also turned a blind eye out of a desire to avoid the embarrassment of such a high-profile arrest.'

Sophie pondered this for several moments in silence. 'So, he was kind of another Oscar Schindler?'

I nodded. 'But Thomas Keneally didn't write a book about him.'

'But your doctoral thesis will provide some of that long-overdue recognition?'

'Yes, and I hope it provides a teaching position somewhere.' I grinned.

'Tell me about him, Albert I mean,' she prompted, putting down her glass.

'Well, Albert moved to Vienna after the Nazis came to power in Germany, which was fine until the Anschluss of '38.'

'Because ...?'

'Because the Anschluss was the German annexation of Austria.'

'Of course.'

'I suppose you could say that he fled the Nazis, but the Nazis followed. He worked in the film industry and counted Jews among his closest friends.'

‘How do you know so much about him if historians have ignored him?’

‘Serendipity mostly,’ I replied. ‘I took a semester off between my second and third years at uni and travelled through Central and Eastern Europe. I wanted to see the sights ... and visit the shtetl where my grandpa lived.’

‘Which shtetl?’

‘A place called Volozhyn. At the time it was part of Poland, but now it’s in Belarus. However, my interest in Albert Göring was piqued in Prague, a city I love.’

‘Prague?’ Sophie echoed.

‘A wonderful city,’ I sighed. During the war Albert worked at the Skoda arms factory in Pilsen, which is only an hour or so out of Prague. While his factory was churning out weapons for the German Army, he was utilising his position to save as many Jews as he could.’

‘Amazing,’ marvelled Sophie.

‘It is remarkable,’ I agreed. ‘And I made an unsuccessful pilgrimage to try and find his grave on the outskirts of Munich. To pay my respects.’

‘Nice,’ smiled Sophie. ‘But tell me more about him.’

‘His father, Heinrich Göring, was a senior imperial diplomat who served as governor of German South West Africa during the 1880s. Hermann and Albert were born to Heinrich’s second wife, Franziska Tiefenbrunn. They had a half-brother and two half-sisters from their father’s first marriage. That second marriage was quite the scandal because she came from a peasant background.’

‘Was Albert close to Hermann?’

‘I think so,’ I replied. ‘Hermann was his elder brother. But having said that, while on trial at Nuremberg, Hermann described Albert as his antithesis.’

‘In what way?’

‘By all accounts, Hermann was a defiant child. He was transferred from school to school and at one of those schools he severed the strings of every violin and cello in the school orchestra, before taking off to avoid the consequences. His father finally sent him to military school, where he thrived.’

‘And Albert?’

‘He was more of an introvert who preferred reading to roughhousing. Unlike his brother, he had no interest in politics. He viewed the racial policies of the Nazi Party with disgust.’

‘But I wonder why he chose such a different path,’ Sophie said.

‘There are all sorts of theories,’ I replied. ‘Their father, Heinrich, was away from the family on diplomatic missions for extended periods. Some people think that Albert was really the son of the family physician, who was a Jew.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Sophie.

‘Yeah. The story goes that Fanny became infatuated with Doctor Hermann von Epenstein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism. During Heinrich’s many absences, von Epenstein acted as a surrogate father to the Göring children. Some people think he might have been more.’

‘More?’ echoed Sophie.

I nodded. ‘There are those who think Epenstein was Albert’s biological father. There was a strong physical resemblance and Fanny brought the kids to live at Epenstein’s Bavarian castle near Nuremberg.’

‘Very Ramsay Street, German-style,’ Sophie muttered.

I laughed. 'Yeah, they were more than neighbours. In 2016, Albert's daughter, Elizabeth, told the BBC that her mother confided that Albert had confessed to being Epenstein's son. He and Hermann shared the same mother, Fanny Göring, which would make Albert Hermann Göring's half-brother.'

'And with Jewish blood,' she said, glancing up at me.

'Indeed,' I smiled. 'Rather ironic, if true.'

Sophie nodded in agreement.

'In summer the Göring family lived in another one of Epenstein's castles, Burg Mauterndorf in Salzburg. Everything was inspired by German romanticism and nationalism, with hunting horns calling diners to the table, servants dressed in medieval garb, and even minstrels, as if they were living in the Middle Ages.'

'Decadent,' she quipped, and we both began to laugh.

'World War I set them on sharply different paths. Hermann became a famous fighter ace, while Albert served in the signal corps. In 1919, Albert enrolled at the Technical University of Munich where he earned a degree in mechanical engineering. Coincidentally, Heinrich Himmler studied agronomy there.'

'Did they ever meet?' asked Sophie.

I shook my head. 'There's no evidence of a meeting. There were thousands of students on campus.'

'An interesting coincidence, nonetheless.'

I shrugged. 'By this time Albert had transformed from a shy bookish child to a bon vivant and ladies' man. He landed a job in Vienna and went through two marriages. He enjoyed Viennese culture – the wine, the social life – and he had a wide circle of Jewish friends, including two brothers, Oskar and Kurt Pilzer, who were part owners of a Viennese film company.'

‘So, Albert thrived after the war?’ Sophie asked.

‘Oh yeah,’ I confirmed, ‘by comparison with Hermann, who bitterly resented his loss of status from war hero to unemployed veteran. He hated the reparations imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles and gravitated toward a political activist named ...’

‘Adolf Hitler.’

‘Precisely. By 1923, Hermann was one of Hitler’s chief lieutenants and participated in the so-called Beer Hall Putsch.’

‘What was that?’

‘It was an attempted armed coup, during which Hermann Göring was shot,’ I said. ‘He took one to the groin.’

‘Couldn’t have happened to a nicer fellow,’ said Sophie. ‘If only that had been the end of him ...’

‘If only, and it almost was. The bullet had ricocheted off the muddy ground and started a serious infection. Hermann was cared for by two Jewish women who probably saved his life.’

‘What a bitter irony,’ Sophie said.

I was distracted by her mouth as she spoke. The other night she came back to my house, and we lay on my bed and talked. I’d leaned over to kiss her, but then hesitated. Did I dare go further? I wanted to, but was afraid of spoiling things. Unsure what to do, I began to massage her shoulders. After a while she rolled over and I worked on her back. She was enjoying it and that had tempted me, but I decided to play it safe. Better to take it slow.

‘Ahem,’ Sophie cleared her throat.

‘Sorry,’ I shrugged. ‘I was daydreaming about ... well, you know.’

‘Stay on track,’ she grinned. ‘There’ll be time enough for more of that. Besides, Nazis and making out shouldn’t mix.’

‘Point taken,’ I grinned back. ‘So, anyway, Hermann became a morphine addict and was institutionalised in Sweden for a time.’

‘So he was a drug addict in addition to being a Nazi mass-murderer?!’

‘Yep,’ I confirmed. ‘And Hermann’s descent into drugs marked the beginning of a twelve-year estrangement between the two brothers. It got worse when he joined up with Hitler; Albert viewed the Nazis with disgust and felt that Hermann’s association with them brought shame to the family. But that’s enough about me and my thesis. What about you? You’ve been to Europe? Tell me about it.’

Sophie smiled. ‘Yes, several times. I love Italy in particular. And France of course, although my love of France is more ... complicated.’

‘Oh, what’s your favourite city?’ I asked.

‘Venice ... I love Venice.’

I shook my head. ‘Too touristy.’

‘You just haven’t been there during the off-season,’ Sophie said. ‘In October the weather isn’t too bad and there are usually no loud Americans to be seen, or heard.’

‘Then maybe, one day, we should get tickets,’ I grinned.

‘Hold on there, cowgirl,’ laughed Sophie, raising her palms. ‘Tell me more about the Görings.’

‘Really? Okay then. Well, as Hermann was rising through the ranks of the Nazi Party, Albert was trying to become a filmmaker in Vienna. He was also working to acquire emigration visas for his Jewish friends and acquaintances. By the time the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938, Albert was exhausted. But he agreed to meet his brother for the first time in twelve years.’

Sophie reached over and put her hand on mine. I paused, then muttered, ‘I’m sorry.’

She smiled, took a sip of her pinot, and said, 'Sorry for what?'

'For blathering on ad nauseam. I can get carried away sometimes. We were talking about you.'

She shrugged. 'Well, you already know many things about me. You know I'm from Sydney. And that I majored in history there before coming to Melbourne for postgraduate study on the '68 riots in Paris ...'

I smiled. 'Not ancient history.'

Sophie glanced at me with a shy smile. 'Well, what you may not know is that I come from a family of Holocaust survivors as well.'

I was gobsmacked. My mouth fell open in astonishment.

'My paternal grandfather, Poppa, was French. In early 1944, he and his family were deported to the Drancy Transit Camp and then to Auschwitz. He was lucky enough to be selected for a work detail, but of his parents and two siblings, only he survived.'

'I'm sorry,' was all I could murmur.

Sophie nodded. 'My grandmother was luckier. She was sent from Germany to England in 1939, through the Kindertransport.'

'And her family?'

She simply shook her head.

'My poppa came to Australia in 1948 and met my grandmother, who had emigrated to be with her aunt and uncle, the only family she had left. Poppa studied pharmacy and opened his own chemist shop in Surrey Hills. So, the family was quite well off.'

'Was he ... scarred by the experience?' I asked in a hesitant voice.

Sophie shrugged. 'I think he suffered from survivor guilt. He would sit at his desk in his study and stare out the window. Sometimes, if I stayed with them during the holidays, I'd wake to hear him crying.'

'I can relate,' I nodded. 'And what about your maternal grandparents?'

‘They were born in Australia and were relatively unscathed.’

‘How lucky can you be,’ I quipped.

‘My parents both grew up in traditional Jewish homes and kept up the traditions. Each Shabbat eve my mother prepared dinner and my father would say the blessings. When we were old enough, Papa insisted we take over. We celebrated the festivals of Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. I think it had to do with Jewish continuity. About perpetuating the traditions that would bring a death sentence under the Nazis.’

I smiled and stretched my hand to clasp hers. ‘So, it seems we have something else in common besides ... you know.’

She blushed and gave my hand a gentle squeeze. We locked eyes, and after a time she said, ‘A penny for your thoughts?’

‘I was just thinking how beautiful you are,’ I murmured.

She lowered her eyes, then looked up at me and said softly, ‘Why thank you.’

I jumped when the waitress appeared, flashing a bright smile. ‘What can I get you ladies?’

‘Ah, snapper for me please ... and sparkling water for two,’ Sophie said smoothly, glancing across at me.

‘And, uh, I’ll have the blue-eye. Can we also have a caprese salad to share?’ I asked.

‘Excellent choice,’ said the waitress, nodding her approval before disappearing towards the kitchen.

Sophie was silent for a long time, then said, ‘Thanks for letting me into your world.’ She was gently massaging my hand with her thumb. It’s a great comfort to know that you understand me.’

I smiled. ‘I feel the same way.’

‘Good,’ said Sophie. ‘Now, you were talking about Albert and his obnoxious brother.’

‘So ... back to the Görings ... well, Hermann didn’t waste any time after the Anschluss, winding up the local antisemites with speeches about Jewish racial inferiority.’

‘Hateful bastard,’ muttered Sophie.

I nodded. ‘Albert and his sister Olga pleaded with Hermann on behalf of Archduke Josef Ferdinand, the last Habsburg Prince of Tuscany, who had been imprisoned at the Dachau concentration camp.’

‘Really!’ Sophie pondered. ‘Did it work?’

‘Oh yeah,’ I replied. ‘The next day he was released.’

‘I wonder why Hermann agreed,’ mused Sophie.

‘Funny you should ask,’ I said. ‘Richard Sonnenfeldt, the translator for the American prosecution team at the Nuremberg trials, wrote in his memoir that Hermann wanted to impress his little brother.’

‘Crazy,’ remarked Sophie. ‘One of history’s greatest monsters had a human side, after all.’

‘A human side that Albert exploited. He would regularly intercede with his brother for the release of a Jewish friend or a political prisoner. He became a master manipulator of Hermann’s ego, calling on his sense of brotherly duty. Albert would say, “Hermann you’re so powerful, here’s a good Jew who doesn’t belong in a concentration camp. Can’t you just sign a paper?” And Hermann would respond, “This is the last time I’m going to do this, so don’t ask me again.” A month later, Albert would be back.’

‘What an amazing story,’ marvelled Sophie. ‘How many did he save?’

‘At least a hundred,’ I replied. ‘He signed passports to help Jews escape the Third Reich, and on one occasion persuaded Reinhard

Heydrich to release a group of Czech resistance fighters. Another time, he joined a group of Jewish women in Vienna who had been forced to scrub the cobblestone streets on their knees. When the SS officers inspected his identification, they ordered the scrubbing to stop, realising they could be held responsible for publicly humiliating Göring's brother.'

Neither of us spoke for a time, then the waitress appeared with our food.

'Thank you,' I said as she placed the plates on the table.

'Bon appetit,' smiled Sophie, as she cut into her fish.

'There are many such stories,' I continued. 'Albert once came upon a group of Nazi thugs who had put a sign around an old woman's neck proclaiming, "I'm a Jewish sow". Albert pushed through the mob and punched two Gestapo officers. His life might have ended right there, as the crowd turned on him. But when the SS officers saw his name on his papers, they escorted him to safety.'

'He must have been a man of great courage,' said Sophie.

'And principle,' I added.

'Yes, and principle,' she echoed.

'When Jewish friends in Vienna were arrested,' I continued, 'Albert forged documents to help them escape. And while working at Skoda he collaborated with the Czech underground to sabotage weapons the company was producing. When caught by the Gestapo, he invoked his brother's name to gain his release.'

'There must be whole families who owe their lives to Albert,' said Sophie.

'No doubt about it,' I said, spearing a morsel of fish on my plate.

'He would send trucks to concentration camps with requests for workers. Once loaded, the trucks would drive into a forest and the people would

be allowed to escape. He also supplied Jews with exit permits and helped to transport their assets out of Nazi Germany.'

'And the Gestapo had no clue?' Sophie asked.

'Not at first,' I replied. 'But he could only get away with it for so long. By 1944, the Gestapo had issued a warrant that Albert should be killed on sight. He went to ground in Prague and was eventually saved by his brother, who asked Himmler to rescind the warrant.'

'This would make for an amazing book,' said Sophie.

I grinned. 'That's the plan. A doctoral thesis that I can turn into a best seller!'

'So how does the story end?'

'The brothers met for the last time in May 1945 in the exercise courtyard of a jail in Augsburg. Hermann was on his way to Nuremburg for trial and Albert was detained for simply being his brother.'

'Guilt by association,' said Sophie.

I nodded. 'Unjustified in this case. But anyway, Hermann was sentenced to death for war crimes and crimes against humanity. But he cheated the hangman by swallowing a cyanide capsule smuggled into his cell.'

'What a coward!' spat Sophie.

'Oh yeah. One of his most disgusting crimes was the use of concentration camp inmates for medical experiments in the hopes of saving downed German airmen.'

'How?' asked Sophie?

I sighed. 'German pilots were freezing to death in the icy waters of the North Sea. So Hermann Göring ordered the Luftwaffe medical department to try and find ways of restoring their body temperature. So they dumped concentration camp prisoners in tanks of freezing water and experimented with methods to revive them.'

‘That’s appalling!’ muttered Sophie.

‘You don’t know the half of it,’ I replied. ‘One of the methods they tried was to place a frozen man between two naked female concentration camp prisoners.’

‘That’s appalling.’

‘And Göring ordered them to conduct pressure-chamber experiments to observe the effects of high altitude on the human body.’

‘I ... I ... I knew Hermann was a murderous degenerate,’ stuttered Sophie, ‘but I’d never heard of this.’ After everything his brother did, it’s hard to understand how Albert might have any fondness for him.’

I shrugged. ‘Tolstoy divided families into happy and unhappy, but I don’t think it’s that simple. And perhaps the saddest part of this story is the injustice meted out to Albert merely on account of his name. He was imprisoned at Nuremberg for over a year.’

‘Really?’

‘Yep. At first, Albert’s interrogators didn’t believe his story. But many of the people he had saved submitted sworn statements on his behalf. Then a new American interrogator named Victor Parker appeared on the scene. He was a Jewish refugee whose real name was Paschkis. His aunt, Sophie Paschkis, had married the composer Franz Lehár. The Lehárs were among those Albert had helped save. Victor Parker heard from his aunt that Albert had helped Jewish people escape. So Albert’s stories were validated and he was released.’

Sophie pushed back in her seat, looked at me and said, ‘Thank God for that.’

‘The story’s not yet over,’ I warned. ‘Albert was then arrested by the Czechs on charges of Nazi collaboration. However, this time members of the Czech resistance who had worked in the Skoda factory

where Albert had been a manager saved him. They testified that Albert helped sabotage Nazi war production and he was again released.'

Sophie smiled and let out a sigh of relief. 'It's like a spy novel.'

'One by Le Carré. They always have sad endings.'

'Why sad?' she asked.

'Well, after the war, Albert was shunned because of his family name. He was unemployable as a Göring, but refused to change his name, which would have been the simple solution. He became an alcoholic, suffered from depression, and after reported infidelities, his third wife, a Czech woman named Mila Klazarova, divorced him. She emigrated with their only child to South America. Albert never saw or spoke to his daughter again. He eked out a modest living as a writer and translator, but mostly lived on his pension with his housekeeper, who was to become his fourth wife.'

'So, the name that once enabled him to save hundreds of Nazi victims became a burden in the end,' Sophie said quietly.

The patter of raindrops on the restaurant window caused me to look across Domain Road at the trees in the park. People passed by beneath umbrellas under a bleak overcast sky. It was as though the world was crying.

'His daughter, Elizabeth, later said that her mother forced her to write letters, but he never answered them. She interpreted that lack of response as a sign he didn't want her, but who knows?'

Sophie looked solemn. 'Albert's family was another casualty of Nazi madness.'

I shrugged. 'Perhaps, but Elizabeth still respected her father. Apparently, Mila never said a word against him. And Albert was the only German her Czech grandmother respected, or so she said. In his final

years, Albert lived on a small government pension and food packages sent by Jews he had saved. He died in obscurity.'

'So sad,' Sophie said.

'Very,' I agreed. 'It seems Albert was a philanderer, but he did the right thing by his last housekeeper. He knew that if he married, his pension would be transferred to his wife on his death. So, he married Brunhilde in 1966, to ensure she would receive his benefits. One week later, he died of pancreatic cancer.'

Sophie shuddered.

'There was no public recognition of his anti-Nazi activities.'

'That's something you can fix,' said Sophie.

'Belatedly,' I replied. 'Albert was the subject of a short write-up in a German magazine when he was still alive. Aside from that, his story remained largely unknown until he became the subject of a TV documentary in 1998. Since then, there have been a couple of biographies, but I think I can do better.'

'How modest,' smiled Sophie.

I laughed and bowed theatrically.

'But seriously, I think I can give Albert the justice he deserves – and the history department agrees.'

'That's great news,' said Sophie, her eyes crinkling in pleasure.

'There's one piece of the puzzle that has yet to be found, and I hope I can help with that.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You're familiar with the Righteous Among the Nations award issued by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem?'

'Of course,' nodded Sophie.

'Well ... Yad Vashem has denied that recognition to Albert.'

'That's outrageous!' said Sophie.

‘Yeah, despite all the testimonials from Jews he saved from certain death, Yad Vashem said there wasn’t enough primary source material to justify the award.’

‘That’s bureaucratic nonsense!’

I nodded. ‘You know, I found an image online of Albert’s grave at the Göring family plot in Munich. Apparently, the tombstone was removed because nobody in the family paid the fees. As I looked at it, I envisaged the smoky cabaret dens and bohemian cafes that he would have frequented. I could almost picture him saving that innocent man from the wrath of an antisemitic mob in Vienna. I imagined being a fly on the wall as Albert pleaded with his brother to save innocent Jewish lives. It was a surreal experience.’

‘Wow,’ was all Sophie could say.

‘The Göring family motto was “We are not among those who yield, but among those who believe.” In the end, it was only Albert who embodied that principle.’

‘So true,’ sighed Sophie.

We concentrated on our meals, then Sophie said, ‘This has been so interesting. You’ve taught me a lot. I look forward to reading your thesis.’

‘Yeah ... about that ...’

She looked at me with an expectant smile.

‘I’ll be spending at least six months digging through the archives in Berlin, Munich and Prague. I hoped ...’ my voice trailed off.

‘Hoped what?’ she asked with a smile.

‘I hoped you might come with me ... at least for part of the time. I have a study grant that will cover accommodation, food and travel. Also, I could help out with your ticket.’

‘Wow ... that’s a surprise,’ she said. Her face was wreathed in smiles. ‘I think I’d like that.’

‘You speak French, right?’

She nodded.

‘Then you’ll know the term *coup de foudre*.’

Another nod. ‘It means lightning strike.’

‘As well as love at first sight,’ I added. ‘When you know, you know.’ I took her hand in mine. ‘I’m saying that in the short term I want you with me in Europe. And in the long term, I’m saying that I’m going to win you ... that I hope you’ll be my life partner.’

Several moments of silence ensued.

‘I’ll have to think about it,’ she said in a quiet voice.

‘You do that, but, in the meantime, can I begin to draw up an itinerary?’

She said nothing, but her smile gave me cause for hope.

Bernard Marin A.M.

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