

The Experiment

by Barbara Kyle

Chapter 1

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Dr. Viktor Schiller's laboratory in Berlin had had no running water for days. The lights were flickering again, and it was so cold that his breath fogged the slide under his microscope. After five years of war's hardships he had grimly learned to carry on without enough to eat and not enough sleep, but he cursed the cold for making his fingers stiff and clumsy on the microscope, hindering his research. No scientist could work in these impossible conditions. He turned his head to divert his breath, and to force down his alarm. He knew it wasn't the cold. No scientist had ever faced the appalling evidence that lay beneath his lens.

Fritz's radio down the hall crackled with static over "The Blue Danube". The cheery music was supposed to calm the terrified citizenry, but it only reminded Schiller of the Allies' morning broadcast declaring that the Americans had reached the Elbe River seventy kilometers away and were sweeping south to the Danube. Yesterday, Doctor Verschuer had ordered all staff to destroy correspondence with colleagues in Auschwitz and other camps. How like a Nazi, Schiller thought in disgust. Did Verschuer really think that by whitewashing the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Human Heredity and Eugenics he could make the Nazis' sins disappear?

He felt a shiver, for he was officially a Nazi himself -- a reserve captain, a Hauptsturmführer, in the Schutzstaffel. Without membership in the Nazi party, of course, he would have had no laboratory privileges, no research funding, no professional advancement, but he loathed Hitler's band of thugs and everything they stood for, and had always worn his SS uniform with contempt. And now with a piercing shame as well. For he was just beginning to realize the extent of his own sin -- his breakthrough trial in genetic manipulation that enabled knowledge to be passed from mother to child. He had envisioned his experiment as pure research, and it had been wholly benign for the three subjects. His dream had been to advance mankind's wisdom. But now he saw, with a growing horror, how it had gone awry. In the wrong hands it might even be used to breed a race of killers.

Could the evidence before him be wrong? He looked again through the lens at the brain tissue from the stillborn child. He had dissected the hippocampus, vital for laying down new memory traces, and the amygdala, gateway to the limbic system, whose neural pathways mediated emotional arousal. As he peered again at the tissue on the slide the darkened, damaged cells answered his question. Not a definitive answer; for that he would need more equipment, more assistance, more time. But his lab supplies had been pilfered, his assistants had been sent to the front months ago, and time had run out. If the Americans had reached the Danube they were on the threshold of the camp at Ostenhausen. That would mean liberation for the inmates. He felt a swell of happiness for his friend Heinrich Knelmann, who finally would be free. But so would the three women who were Schiller's experimental subjects. Like infected research animals

escaping the lab. Given this new evidence, the potential for evil embodied in the women terrified him.

The radio music stopped. The lights flickered, then went out. Lifting his head in the darkness, Schiller felt the death of the light as a sign. Further investigation was impossible. It forced on him an appalling task, but one he could not shirk. Elimination of the carriers.

It sickened him. He'd never killed anyone in his life -- he was a *scientist*. His fingers felt for the gold crucifix on the chain under his shirt. "Dear God," he whispered into the confessional darkness, "forgive me."

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On Charlottenburger Chausee dirty snow lay piled against smoking ruins, and people in threadbare clothes scurried in the wake of Schiller's Audi Horch, one of the few civilian vehicles on the road. Driving out of the bombed capital, he was dismayed, as always, by the devastation. He thought of ancient Rome, sacked by barbarians. In the once lovely Grunewald section, his own family lay dead in the rubble, his wife Clara and their two young daughters, killed instantly last March when huge American air fleets had dumped their deadly tonnage. Thirteen long months later his grief still smoldered, but the flame was exhausted. As he drove across the Glienicker Bridge over the Havel River and through the miraculously undamaged suburb of Potsdam, he thought of the eastern barbarians approaching -- the Soviet army. Marching westward, they would soon fall upon the city. Everyone was predicting fierce street battles with Hitler's fanatic troops.

But Schiller's thoughts were on the Americans to the south. Could he reach Ostenhausen before them?

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Cresting a hill on the edge of the Thuringian Forest, he saw American tanks on the horizon. So near the camp! He drove on, passing snow-patchy fields where a farmer was out with his team of horses. Schiller had seen the man cultivating his land throughout the war, while ash from the camp crematoriums drifted over the countryside.

"Heil Hitler!" The nervous, acne-faced guard at the main gate looked hardly more than a teenager, Schiller thought as he returned the idiotic salute and drove in. He rarely came to this awful place. Even its peripheral sights made him slightly nauseous: the railroad tracks that brought transports of frightened prisoners to the gates, the rows of electrified barbed wire, the watch towers. Last summer, driving past a half-dead work gang shuffling to labor in the village munitions factory while their guards barked orders, Schiller had noticed a corpse entangled in the barbed wire fence. The prisoner had been shot days before, trying to escape, and they'd left his body to rot on the wire, the stench overpowering in the August sun. But on this cold spring afternoon as Schiller drove in, the din of cruelty and the smell of fear had vanished. It was as though the camp itself was holding its breath, waiting for the Americans. The broad Appellplatz, used for roll-call, was vacant. Commandant Reinhardt had probably confined all prisoners to barracks, terrified of a last-minute uprising. No officers in sight. Schiller had heard that

in the past days most of the SS men had left. But the rank-and-file guards were still stationed on the watch towers. Their life was following orders; they had nowhere to go.

He parked and went into the hospital block, passing the central office where soldiers were destroying documents. No wonder; he knew of the vile experiments that went on in F Block under the direction of the sadistic Dr. Helmut Kleist. Kleist had infected prisoners with typhus and polio to test experimental drugs for pharmaceutical firms. He'd injected women with caustic sterilizing chemicals directly into the uterus without anesthetic, just to observe toxicity levels. He'd conducted tests for the navy, observing how long men lasted when given nothing but salt water, and how long before they perished in freezing water. To Schiller, Kleist was a butcher. *Yet what am I?* he thought, suddenly rocked with guilt. He'd held to the moral justification that the three subjects of his own experiment had enjoyed improved rations and had suffered no discomfort, not even the mental distress of being told what the operation was for. *But now, because of me, these women have to die.*

In his office he found Heinrich Knelmann writing at the desk. Looking up in surprise, Heinrich got to his feet. It always jarred Schiller to see his friend in that faded striped uniform with its yellow double-triangle badge with a "J" for *Jude*, Jew, his eyes haggard from long imprisonment, and his face, once handsome, now bony and pale. They were both thirty-four and both taller than average, but Heinrich had become stooped and looked a decade older. Yet, in Schiller's eyes, Heinrich would always remain the athletic, gregarious undergraduate of their medical school days.

"They're coming," Schiller said. "Maybe by nightfall, maybe just hours."

"We've heard."

"You'll be free."

They stood still, aware of the extraordinary moment. Then they both strode forward, and embraced.

"Viktor, how can I ever thank you?"

Schiller waved away the thanks. Though pulling the strings had been far from easy. He'd told Verschuer and Commandant Reinhardt that this exceptional Jewish researcher was essential to his ongoing genetic experiment and must not go to the gas chamber yet; he needed him as an assistant here. But only by going to the top and exploiting Reichsführer Himmler's interest in the project had Schiller been able to stretch that "yet" to over two years. "Where will you go?" he asked.

"America, on the first boat I can get. I've prayed that my son got to my sister's. I'll find her, and raise my boy." Tears glinted in his sunken eyes. "You won't accept thanks for my life, but I swear I'll somehow find a way to repay you for the life of my child. Hannah would have thanked you too."

Schiller had to look away. He hadn't been able to save Heinrich's wife in this hellish place, but he had succeeded in smuggling their baby son to Switzerland in the care of a Red Cross nurse, with instructions to send the child to Heinrich's sister in America. Still, Heinrich hadn't seen his sister since they were children. Given all the unknowns, who could say if his boy was even alive?

A rumble made them both turn. Mortar fire in the distance. American guns.

"Viktor, why have you come?" Heinrich's bewildered look said it all: Why would an SS medical officer walk straight into the Americans' hands?

Schiller felt a clammy dread sweep over him. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the desk's left drawer, from which he pulled out his Luger pistol. It was standard issue to all SS officers, but he had never used it. He hoped he could remember how to load it.

He turned to Heinrich. "Where are the subjects?"

"Sophie Grossmann's in the infirmary, recovering after the stillbirth. Hilde Wentzler's back in G Block barracks after her miscarriage."

Schiller realized that he'd never known the women's first names. How like Heinrich to distinguish such a human detail.

"The gypsy woman's in the infirmary, too," Heinrich added, "with her newborn, a girl."

A baby, Schiller thought. Dear God.

"You've come to tell them, is that it? Explain the gene to them, before they're set free?"

Stricken, Schiller looked down at the gun in his hand. "No." When he looked up, Heinrich, too, was regarding the gun, and his eyes filled with alarm.

"You're not thinking of--"

"Heinrich, don't you see? They were never expected to leave this place!"

The grim reality of it silenced them both.

There was a shout down the corridor. Then a commotion of voices. A corporal ran past the open door, yelling, "The commandant has hanged himself!"

It rocked Schiller. There was so little time. He opened the right drawer and rifled beneath papers and files, and found the box of bullets.

Heinrich gripped his arm. "Viktor, there's no certainty that the gene implantation was even successful."

"I fear it was," he said, loading bullets. "And worse. I dissected the Grossmann infant's brain."

"Worse? What do you mean?"

With the gun loaded, Schiller turned to him. "My only intention was to advance knowledge. You understand that, don't you? I thought it might one day lead to an elevated human consciousness. Something magnificent -- the inheritance of wisdom. Instead, it appears to produce a chromosomal mutation in the offspring that deadens the limbic pathways. Deadens conscience itself. Think what that means, Heinrich. If the subjects live to reproduce, their progeny will constitute a new sub-species with enhanced abilities but with no sense of right and wrong. They could one day wield a tyranny more brutal even than the Nazis."

"Viktor, calm down. What analysis did you do? What tests? Who's corroborated your findings?"

"None. No one. There's been no time!"

"Then you could be mistaken." He took the gun and laid it on the desk, beyond Schiller's reach. "You can't take that chance."

"Can I take the chance that I'm not? Heinrich, don't you see how appalling this is? I have a theory. The infant was a male and that's the crux of this thing. It's because the chromosomal change--"

A gunshot exploded down the hall. Schiller heard frantic shouting.

"Jew, out!" a voice barked at the doorway. It was Helmut Kleist. The fat little doctor was sweating in fear, and his Luger was pointed at Heinrich. Glancing at the hall Schiller saw that Kleist had rounded up a half-dozen other inmates, physicians like Heinrich, and armed guards were marching them toward the door to the courtyard. In horror, he realized what Kleist was doing. These prisoner physicians had been forced to assist in Kleist's depraved experiments. He was going to eliminate them.

Two corporals grabbed Heinrich and began to drag him to the door.

Schiller lurched to block their way. "No!"

"Hauptsturmführer, step aside," Kleist said. "He knows too much. If these Jew doctors testify, we'll hang."

Schiller stood firm. Kleist aimed his revolver at Heinrich's forehead. He fired. Heinrich was thrown back by the blast, and fell. Kleist and his men ran out.

Stunned, Schiller dropped to his knees at his friend's side. The obscene red-black hole in Heinrich's forehead wept bright blood. His eyes were glazed. "Viktor . . . I beg you . . . see about my son . . ."

Schiller watched in anguish as blood trickled down Heinrich's temple to the floor. It felt like his own life's blood draining. A moment later, his friend was dead.

Rage roared into Schiller, possessing him. He got up, grabbed the Luger, and burst into the hall. Kleist's men, marching the prisoners, had almost reached the far door, with Kleist bringing up the rear.

Schiller aimed at the fat man's back. "Butcher!" He fired. Kleist fell.

The two corporals stared at him, aghast. The prisoners blinked at one another, then silently and swiftly ran.

A gleeful shout outside: "The Americans! They're coming!"

Schiller yelled at the corporals, "Get out!"

They fled. Schiller was alone.

He went to a hall window. Prisoners were leaving barracks, hundreds swarming onto the Appellplatz, some running, many more shuffling and limping. Skinny men, women, children, all in rags. Their voices set up a low hum of hope. The guard on the main gate watchtower was staring down the road in dumb shock. Schiller felt in shock himself, his heart still raging at Heinrich's death, his hand still trembling from the murder he'd just done. But his ears picked up the faint growl of tanks, the whirl of motorcycles. He couldn't see past the gate, but he could tell from the guard's gaze that the enemy was near. They'd come on so fast!

His mind lurched. *They'll arrest me . . . just another SS officer.*

There might still be time to escape. Drive out the rear gate and through the village, and make a run for the Swiss border. But that would mean leaving the subjects. His heart was hammering. If he took the time to finish what he'd come to do he would surely be arrested. He closed his eyes, silently begging God for an answer.

It came. When he opened his eyes, he knew. *The mutation must not leave the camp.*

He dashed down the hall to the infirmary and crossed the corridor to the women's ward. All but the sickest had gone out to greet their liberators, and even some of the feeble ones who remained were shuffling toward the door, making a bottleneck Schiller had to squeeze through. He heard a tank rumble through the main gates, and faint cheers. At the far end of the ward he saw a woman hurrying out the back. A flash of wiry red

hair: Grossmann. His mind jumped to Wentzler in G Block. He'd go after Grossman, then take a shortcut to G Block.

A baby cried. He wheeled around. The gypsy woman, his third subject, lay in the corner on a cot with her newborn. The young mother looked pale and anemic, but fiercely self-possessed. As Schiller approached, her dark eyes, wary and calculating, met his. It shook him to his core. Kleist had deserved to die . . . but this innocent young woman? He knew that if he hesitated he could not go through with it. He quickly made the sign of the cross, aimed down at her heart, and fired. Trembling, he moved to shoot the baby next. The tiny girl looked at him -- *into* him -- freezing his heart. Would God ever forgive him?

A crash at the door jolted his aim and his wild shot hit the floor. Several prisoners ran into the ward, swarthy men, shouting. Schiller saw their shirt badges, black triangles with a "Z" for *Zigeuner* -- gypsy. One big-boned young man rushed to the cot where the dead woman lay with her squirming baby. "Lina!" he cried. His furious eyes turned to Schiller, and he lunged at him and slammed him against the wall. The blow to his backbone made Schiller drop the Luger, and it skidded along the floorboards. His eyes locked with the gypsy's as a voice burst over a loudspeaker outside: "Greetings from the American people!"

The gypsy stepped back, his face dark with rage. He snatched up the baby and ran out the back.

Schiller grabbed the gun and ran out after him. In the warren of barracks alleys the man and baby had vanished.

Schiller hurried down the alley toward G Block. The camp was in chaos. A gray tank with an American flag waving from the turret was rumbling over the Appellplatz. Prisoners had roped the huge Nazi eagle over the gate and were pulling it down. Others swarmed the incoming troop trucks and motorcycles, grabbing at the soldiers' boots and sleeves. Many were rushing for the now open main gates.

The voice on the loudspeaker called: "Stay where you are! Food and medical care will be available to you all! Stay where you are!"

But the prisoners kept running. Schiller had to back up against the G Block barracks as a gang of them rushed headlong past him for the gate. Among them he glimpsed a tall stout woman, dirty and bedraggled, but still strong looking. Wentzler. He thought: She's going to make it out. So will Grossmann.

Panic gripped him. He had failed to destroy the mutation. And now his arrest was inevitable -- as a war criminal. Incarcerated, he could never track the escapees. Never contain what he had unleashed.

A desperate idea took hold. *Heinrich*.

He ran back to his office. The bullet that had ended his friend's life had gone through his brain: on the inmate uniform, no blood. Schiller stripped. He pulled off Heinrich's grimy clothes and wooden shoes and put them on. He emptied his own wallet of Reichsmarks and then, using a roll of bandage gauze, strapped the Luger to his calf, stuffed the money in beside the gun, and rolled the pant leg down. Finally, he turned Heinrich's left wrist, still warm, to check the prisoner number tattooed on the inner forearm. 17233. Shaking, he gathered the experiment files from his desk and dumped them in his metal wastebasket, along with his wallet, then got matches from the drawer

and set the papers alight. At the last moment he remembered the crucifix around his neck. A gift from Clara. When he'd lost her and their daughters in the bombing, only his faith had saved him from despair. Lifting the chain over his head he dropped the crucifix in the waste basket where it disappeared among the flames. The desecration chilled him.

On an impulse too strong to ignore, and too raw to question, he kneeled by Heinrich's body as he would to a priest in the confessional. "Forgive me," he whispered. The sins on his conscience were terrible -- two murders, and something far worse: for joining his research to the Nazis' vision, the world would pay a horrific price, unless he could stop what he had set in motion. He had to destroy the evil he had spawned.

He pulled Heinrich's body into the closet and closed the door.

Across the courtyard he found the prisoner induction office empty, but the tattooing equipment was all there. He closed the door and picked up the tattoo needle.

A half-hour later he walked out the open gates of Ostenhausen with a mass of those prisoners most determined to leave. He felt dazed and battered, almost disoriented. Heinrich's foul clothes were tight, the wooden shoes painful. His spine ached from the gypsy's assault, and the fresh tattoo on his inner forearm stung. But in the maelstrom of his mind lay a still center of certainty: he would track down those two remaining subjects. And the gypsy baby. And, somehow, honor his friend's dying plea about his son.

It all seemed staggeringly impossible. The only thing he could deal with now was escape. The future was a fog.