

SECTION

I

The Mission

1938–1944

This is a long road we have to travel. The men that can do things are going to be sought out just as surely as the sun rises in the morning. Fake reputations, habits of glib and clever speech, and glittering surface performance are going to be discovered and kicked overboard. Solid, sound leadership... and ironclad determination to face discouragement, risk, and increasing work without flinching, will always characterize the man who has a sure-enough, bang-up fighting unit. Added to this he must have a darn strong tinge of imagination—I am continuously astounded by the utter lack of imaginative thinking... Finally, the man has to be able to forget himself and personal fortunes. I've relieved two seniors here because they got to worrying about "injustice," "unfairness," "prestige," and—oh, what the hell!

—Supreme Commander General Dwight
David Eisenhower in a letter to
General Vernon Prichard, August 27, 1942

"I think we got some work done, back at the start, because nobody knew us, nobody bothered us—and we had no money."

—John Gettens, Fogg Museum Conservation
Department, describing scientific breakthroughs
he made with George Stout, 1927–1932

THE MONUMENTS MEN

The Monuments Men were a group of men and women from thirteen nations, most of whom volunteered for service in the newly created Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section, or MFAA. Most of the early volunteers had expertise as museum directors, curators, art scholars and educators, artists, architects, and archivists. Their job description was simple: to save as much of the culture of Europe as they could during combat.

The creation of the MFAA section was a remarkable experiment. It marked the first time an army fought a war while comprehensively attempting to mitigate cultural damage, and it was performed without adequate transportation, supplies, personnel, or historical precedent. The men tasked with this mission were, on the surface, the most unlikely of heroes. Of the initial sixty or so that served in the battlefields of North Africa and Europe through May 1945, the primary period covered by our story, most were middle-aged, with an average age of forty. The oldest was sixty-six, an “old and indestructible”¹ World War I veteran; only five were still in their twenties. Most had established families and accomplished careers. But they had all *chosen* to join the war effort in the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section, and to a man they were willing to fight and die for what they believed. I am proud to introduce them to you and to tell, as best I can, their remarkable stories

Out of Germany

Karlsruhe, Germany

1715–1938

The city of Karlsruhe, in southwestern Germany, was founded in 1715 by the Margrave Karl Wilhelm von Baden-Durlach. Local legend held that Karl Wilhelm walked into the woods one day, fell asleep, and dreamt of a palace surrounded by a city. Actually, he left his previous residence at Durlach after a fight with the local townspeople. Still, always the optimist, Karl Wilhelm had his new settlement laid out like a wheel, with his palace in the center and thirty-two roads leading out from it like spokes. As in the dream, a town soon grew around his palace.

Hoping the new city would grow quickly into a regional power, Karl Wilhelm invited anyone to come and settle where they pleased, regardless of race or creed. This was a rare luxury, especially for Jews, who were relegated to Jewish-only neighborhoods throughout most of Eastern Europe. By 1718, a Jewish congregation was established in Karlsruhe. In 1725, a Jewish merchant named Seligmann immigrated there from Ettlingen, the nearby town where his family had lived since 1600. Seligmann thrived in Karlsruhe, perhaps because it wasn't until 1752, when the town finally felt itself a legitimate regional power, that anti-Jewish laws became the fashion. Around 1800, when inhabitants of Germany became legally obligated to take a surname, Seligmann's descendants chose the last name Ettlinger, after their city of origin.

The main street in Karlsruhe is Kaiserstrasse, and on this road

in 1850 the Ettlingers opened a women's clothing store, Gebrüder Ettlinger. Jews were forbidden by then to own farmland. The professions, like medicine, law, or government service, were accessible to them but also openly discriminatory, while the trade guilds, such as those for plumbing and carpentry, barred their admission. As a result, many Jewish families focused on retail. Gebrüder Ettlinger was only two blocks from the palace, and in the late 1890s the regular patronage of Karl Wilhelm's descendant, the Grand Duchess Hilda von Baden, wife of Friedrich II von Baden, made it one of the most fashionable stores in the region. By the early 1900s the store featured four floors of merchandise and forty employees. The duchess lost her position in 1918, after Germany's defeat in World War I, but even the loss of their patron didn't dent the fortunes of the Ettlinger family.

In 1925, Max Ettlinger married Suse Oppenheimer, whose father was a wholesale textile merchant in the nearby town of Bruchsal. His primary business was uniform cloth for government employees, like policemen and customs officials. The Jewish Oppenheimers, who traced their local roots to 1450, were well known for their integrity, kindness, and philanthropy. Suse's mother had served as, among others things, the president of the local Red Cross. So when Max and Suse's first son, Heinz Ludwig Chaim Ettlinger, called Harry, was born in 1926, the family was not only well-off financially, but an established and respected presence in the Karlsruhe area.

Children live in a closed world, and young Harry assumed life as he knew it had gone on that way forever. He didn't have any friends who weren't Jewish, but his parents didn't either, so that didn't seem unusual. He saw non-Jews at school and in the parks, and he liked them, but buried deep within those interactions was the knowledge that, for some reason, he was an outsider. He had no idea that the world was entering an economic depression, or that hard times bring recriminations and blame. Privately, Harry's parents worried not just about the economy, but about the rising tide of nationalism and anti-Semitism. Harry noticed only that

perhaps the line between himself and the larger world of Karlsruhe was becoming easier to see and harder to cross.

Then in 1933, seven-year-old Harry was banned from the local sports association. In the summer of 1935, his aunt left Karlsruhe for Switzerland. When Harry started the fifth grade a few months later, he was one of only two Jewish boys in his class of forty-five. His father was a decorated veteran of World War I, wounded by shrapnel outside Metz, France, so Harry was granted a temporary exemption from the 1935 Nuremberg Laws that stripped Jews of German citizenship and, with it, most of their rights. Forced to sit in the back row, Harry's grades dropped noticeably. This wasn't the result of ostracism or intimidation—that did occur, but Harry was never beaten or physically bullied by his classmates. It was the prejudice of his teachers.

Two years later, in 1937, Harry switched to the Jewish school. Soon after, he and his two younger brothers received a surprise gift: bicycles. Gebrüder Ettliger had gone bankrupt, felled by a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, and his father was now working with Opa (Grandpa) Oppenheimer in his textile business. Harry was taught to ride a bicycle so he could get around Holland, where the family was hoping to move. His best friend's family was trying to emigrate to Palestine. Almost everyone Harry knew, in fact, was trying to get out of Germany. Then word came that the Ettliger's application was denied. They weren't going to Holland. Shortly thereafter, Harry crashed his bicycle; his admission to the local hospital was also denied.

There were two synagogues in Karlsruhe, and the Ettliger's, who were not strictly observant Jews, attended the less orthodox. The Kronenstrasse Synagogue was a large, ornate hundred-year-old building. The worship center soared four floors into a series of decorated domes—four floors was the maximum allowable height, for no building in Karlsruhe could be higher than the tower of Karl Wilhelm's palace. The men, who wore pressed black suits and black top hats, sat on long benches in the bottom section. The

women sat in the upper balconies. Behind them, the sun streamed in through large windows, bathing the hall in light.

On Friday nights and Saturday mornings, Harry could look out over the whole congregation from his perch in the choir loft. The people he recognized were leaving, forced overseas by poverty, discrimination, the threat of violence, and a government that encouraged emigration as the best “solution” for both Jews and the German state. Still, the synagogue was always full. As the world shrank—economically, culturally, socially—the synagogue drew more and more of the fringes of the Jewish community into the city’s last comfortable embrace. It wasn’t unusual for five hundred people to fill the hall, chanting together and praying for peace.

In March 1938, the Nazis annexed Austria. The public adulation that followed cemented Hitler’s control of power and reinforced his ideology of “*Deutschland über alles*”—“Germany above all.” He was forming, he said, a new German empire that would last a thousand years. German empire? Germany above all? The Jews of Karlsruhe believed war was inevitable. Not just against them, but against the whole of Europe.

A month later, on April 28, 1938, Max and Suse Ettlinger rode the train fifty miles to the U.S. consulate in Stuttgart. They had been applying for years to Switzerland, Great Britain, France, and the United States for permission to emigrate, but all their applications had been denied. They weren’t seeking papers now, only answers to a few questions, but the consulate was crammed with people and in complete disarray. The couple was led from room to room, unsure of where they were going or why. Questions were asked and forms filled out. A few days later, a letter arrived. Their application for emigration to the United States was being processed. April 28, it turned out, was the last day the United States was taking requests for emigration; the mysterious paperwork had been their application. The Ettlingers were getting out.

But first, Harry had to celebrate his bar mitzvah. The ceremony was scheduled for January 1939, with the family to leave thereafter. Harry spent the summer studying Hebrew and English while

the family's possessions disappeared. Some were sent to friends and relatives, but most of their personal items were boxed for passage to America. Jews weren't allowed to take money out of the country—which made the 100 percent tax paid to the Nazi Party for shipping all but meaningless—but they were still allowed to keep a few possessions, a luxury that would be stripped from them by the end of the year.

In July, Harry's bar mitzvah ceremony was moved forward to October 1938. Emboldened by his success in Austria, Hitler proclaimed that if the Sudetenland, a small stretch of territory made part of Czechoslovakia after World War I, was not given to Germany, the country would go to war for it. The mood was somber. War seemed not only inevitable, but imminent. At the synagogue, the prayers for peace became more frequent, and more desperate. In August, the Ettlengers moved up the date of their son's bar mitzvah ceremony, and their passage out of Germany, another three weeks.

In September, twelve-year-old Harry and his two brothers took the train seventeen miles to Bruchsal to visit their grandparents for the last time. The textile business had failed, and his grandparents were moving to the nearby town of Baden-Baden. Oma (Grandma) Oppenheimer fixed the boys a simple lunch. Opa Oppenheimer showed them, one last time, a few select pieces from his collection of prints. He was a student of the world and a minor patron of the arts. His art collection contained almost two thousand prints, primarily *ex libris* bookplates and works by minor German Impressionists working in the late 1890s and early 1900s. One of the best was a print, made by a local artist, of the self-portrait by Rembrandt that hung in the Karlsruhe museum. The painting was a jewel of the museum's collection. Opa Oppenheimer had admired it often on his visits to the museum for lectures and meetings, but he hadn't seen the painting in five years. Harry had never seen it, despite living four blocks away from it his whole life. In 1933, the museum had barred entry to Jews.

Putting the prints away at last, Opa Oppenheimer turned to the

globe. “You boys are going to become Americans,” he told them sadly, “and your enemy is going to be”—he spun the globe and placed his finger not on Berlin, but on Tokyo—“the Japanese.”¹

A week later, on September 24, 1938, Harry Ettlinger celebrated his bar mitzvah in Karlsruhe’s magnificent Kronenstrasse Synagogue. The service lasted three hours, in the middle of which Harry rose to read from the Torah, singing the passages in ancient Hebrew as had been done for thousands of years. The synagogue was filled to capacity. This was a ceremony to honor his passage into adulthood, his hope for the future, but to so many the chance for a life in Karlsruhe seemed lost. The jobs were gone; the Jewish community was shunned and harassed; Hitler was daring the Western powers to oppose him. After the ceremony, the rabbi took Harry’s parents aside and told them not to delay, to leave not tomorrow but that very afternoon, on the 1:00 p.m. train to Switzerland. His parents were stunned. The rabbi was advocating travel on Shabbat, the day of rest. It was unheard of.

The ten-block walk home seemed long. The celebratory meal of cold sandwiches was eaten quietly in an empty apartment. The only guests were Oma and Opa Oppenheimer, Harry’s other grandmother Oma Jennie, and her sister Tante (Aunt) Rosa, both of whom had moved in with the family around the time Gebrüder Ettlinger went bankrupt. When Harry’s mother told Opa Oppenheimer what the rabbi had advised, the veteran of the German army went to the window, looked onto Kaiserstrasse, and saw dozens of soldiers milling about in their uniforms.

“If the war would start today,” the canny veteran said, “all these soldiers would be off the street and in their barracks. The war will not start today.”²

Harry’s father, also a proud veteran of the German army, agreed. The family left not that afternoon, but the next morning on the first train to Switzerland. On October 9, 1938, they arrived in New York harbor. Exactly one month later, on November 9, the Nazis used the assassination of a diplomat to put into full force their crusade against German Jews. *Kristallnacht*, the Night

of Broken Glass, saw the destruction of more than seven thousand Jewish businesses and two hundred synagogues. The Jewish men of Karlsruhe, including Opa Oppenheimer, were rounded up and put in the nearby Dachau internment camp. The magnificent hundred-year-old Kronenstrasse Synagogue, where only weeks before Heinz Ludwig Chaim Ettlinger had celebrated his bar mitzvah, was burned to the ground. Harry Ettlinger was the last boy ever to have his bar mitzvah ceremony in the old synagogue of Karlsruhe.

But this story isn't about the Kronenstrasse Synagogue, the internment camp at Dachau, or even the Holocaust against the Jews. It is about a different act of negation and aggression Hitler perpetrated on the people and nations of Europe: his war on their culture. For when Private Harry Ettlinger, U.S. Army, finally returned to Karlsruhe, it wasn't to search for his lost relatives or the remains of his community; it was to determine the fate of another aspect of his heritage stripped away by the Nazi regime: his grandfather's beloved art collection. In the process he would discover, buried six hundred feet underground, something he had always known about but never expected to see: the Rembrandt of Karlsruhe.