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# LAST CITADEL

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*For Lindy*

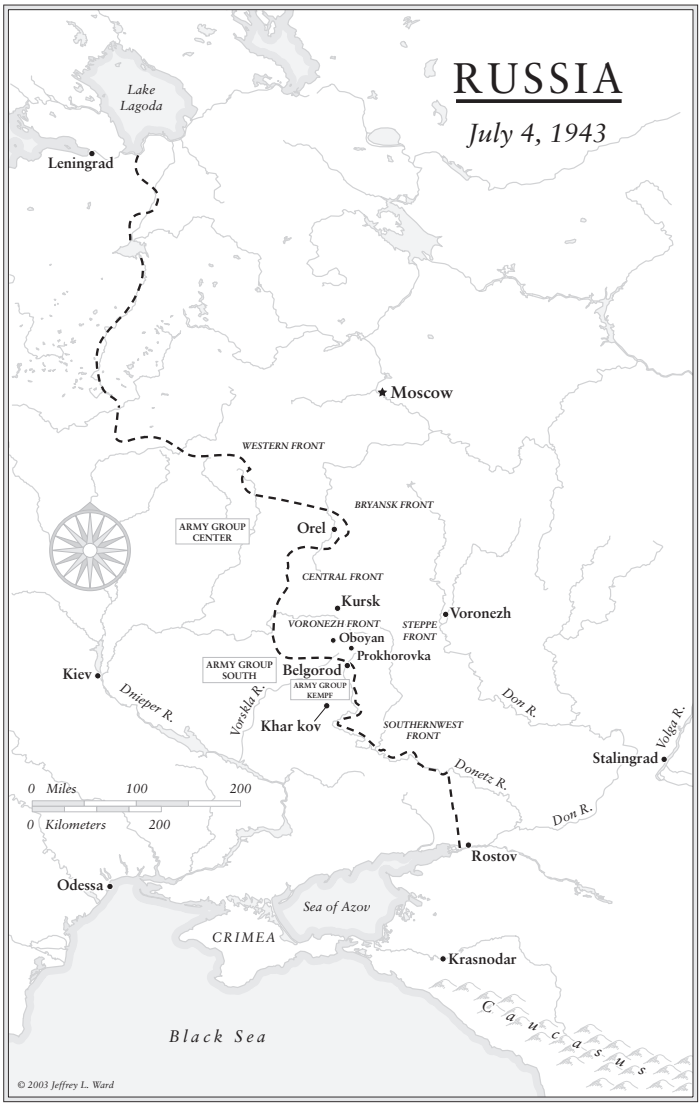
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## A SIGNAL TO THE WORLD

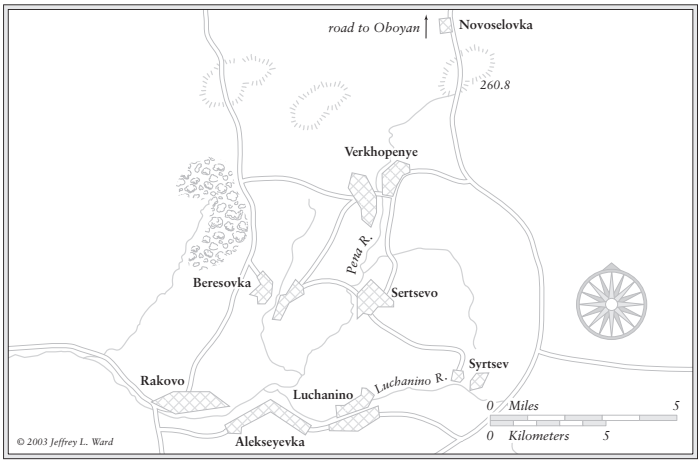
I have decided to conduct Citadel, the first offensive of the year, as soon as the weather permits.

This attack is of the utmost importance. It must be carried out quickly and shatteringly. It must give us the initiative for the spring and summer of this year. Therefore all preparations are to be carried through with the greatest care and energy. The best formations, the best armies, the best leaders, great stocks of ammunition are to be placed at the decisive points. Every officer and every man must be impressed with the decisive significance of this offensive. The victory of Kursk must be a signal to the world.

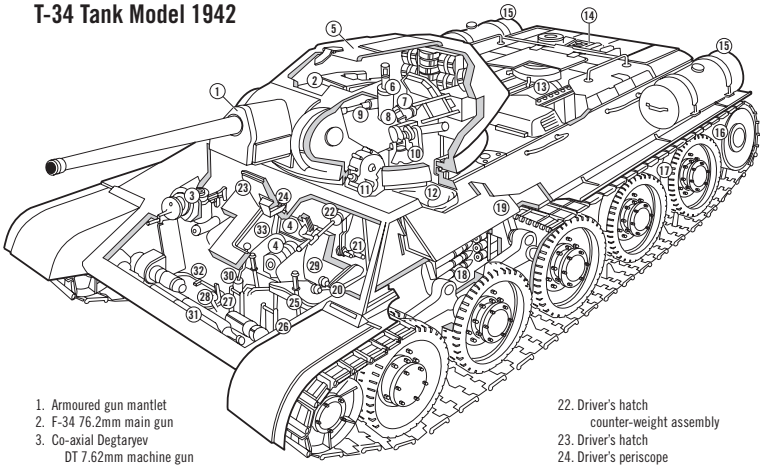
Adolf Hitler
Operations Order (No. 6)
April 15, 1943


RUSSIA
July 4, 1943
Lake Lagoda
Leningrad
Moscow
WESTERN FRONT
BRYANSK FRONT
ARMY GROUP CENTER
Orel
CENTRAL FRONT
Kursk
Voronezh
VORONEZH FRONT
STEPPE FRONT
Oboyan
Prokhorovka
ARMY GROUP SOUTH
Belgorod
ARMY GROUP KEMPF
Kiev
Dnieper R.
Vorskla R.
Khar kov
SOUTHERNWEST FRONT
Don R.
Volga R.
Stalingrad
Donetz R.
Don R.
0 Miles 100 200
0 Kilometers 200
Rostov
Odessa
Sea of Azov
CRIMEA
Krasnodar
Caucasus
Black Sea
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Oboyan
Psel R.
Psel R.
Orlovka
Vladimirovka
Voroshilov
Psel R.
Polezhaev
Petrovka
Prokhorovka
Prelestnoe
32TB
29TC
Lutovo
Hill 252.2
Oktlabrskii
Storozhevoe
Hill 241.6
Kalinovka
Novoselovka
Sukho-
Solotino
Verkhopenye
Komsomolets
State Farm
Storozhevoe 1
Sertsevo
Syrtsev
Rakovo
Luchanino
Luchki
Teterevino
area of detail below
Smogodino
Gertsovka
Butovo
Streletskoe
Berezov
N. Donetz R.
Rakovo
Tomarovka
Vorskla R.
0 Miles 4 6 8
0 Kilometers 8
Borisovka
Belgorod
© 2003 Jeffrey L. Ward


road to Oboyan
Novoselovka
260.8
Verkhopenye
Pena R.
Beresovka
Sertsevo
Syrtsev
Rakovo
Luchanino
Luchanino R.
0 Miles 5
0 Kilometers 5
© 2003 Jeffrey L. Ward
Alekseyevka

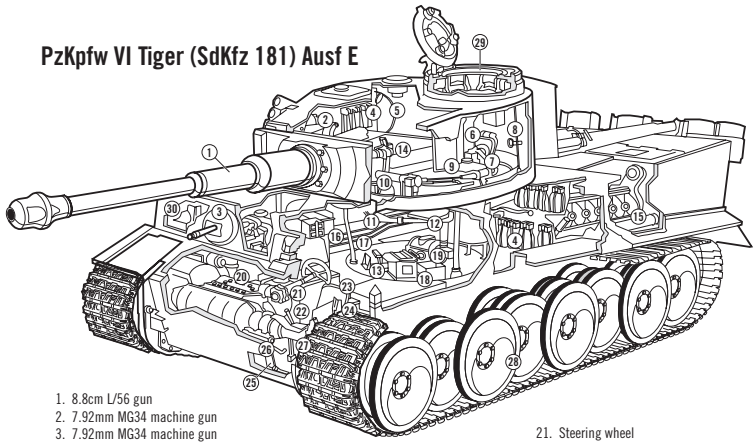
## T-34 Tank Model 1942



1. Armoured gun mantlet
2. F-34 76.2mm main gun
3. Co-axial Degtaryev DT 7.62mm machine gun
4. DT 7.62mm machine gun ammunition
5. Turret hatch
6. Gunner's PT-5 periscope
7. Periscope sight
8. Range scale elevation knob
9. Telescopic sight
10. Power traverse gearbox
11. Main gun elevating mechanism
12. Commander/Gunner's seat
13. V-2 12 cylinder diesel engine
14. Transmission and braking assemblies
15. External fuel tanks
16. Drive sprocket
17. Main road wheel
18. Left-hand side main gun ammunition
19. Internal fuel tank
20. Speedometer and rev counter
21. Firing pedals for main gun and machine gun
22. Driver's hatch counter-weight assembly
23. Driver's hatch
24. Driver's periscope
25. Steering levers
26. Clutch pedal
27. Foot brake
28. Accelerator
29. Driver's seat
30. Gear lever
31. Compressed air bottles for engine cold weather starting
32. Belly escape hatch
33. Machine gunner's seat

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## PzKpfw VI Tiger (SdKfz 181) Ausf E



1. 8.8cm L/56 gun
2. 7.92mm MG34 machine gun
3. 7.92mm MG34 machine gun
4. 7.92mm machine gun ammunition
5. Escape hatch
6. Commander's seat
7. Commander's traverse handwheel
8. Revolver port
9. Traverse gearbox
10. Gunner's traverse handwheel
11. Gunner's elevating handwheel
12. Gunner's seat
13. Machine-gun firing pedal
14. Binocular Telescope
15. Maybach Engine
16. Radio Set
17. 88mm ammunition bins
18. Hydraulic traverse foot control
19. Hydraulic traverse unit
20. Steering unit
21. Steering wheel
22. Gearbox
23. Driver's seat
24. Handbreak
25. Accelerator
26. Foot break
27. Clutch
28. Overlapping bogie-wheels
29. Commander's cupola
30. Machine-gun ammunition storage

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# ONE

**May 10, 1943**
**1440 hours**
**Reichs Chancellery**
**Berlin, Germany**

The SS colonel eased shut the high, heavy door. The portal closed with a hiss and a soft tap. How many trees went into this, he wondered, lives sacrificed out of the forest to make one of Hitler's castle gates? The black eagle emblem of wartime hung at eye level against the carved wood. Colonel Abram Breit imagined this symbol of the Reich to be a spread-winged vulture. That's what he left behind in the briefing room – a death scene, a picking apart, sinew by vessel, of Germany.

Breit walked several steps into the hall, striding across the same black eagle laid in mosaic in the floor. Blood-red banners trickled down the walls. He buttressed his back against one of them and lit a cigarette.

He exhaled smoke and stared into it, tired and sad. He replayed the voices of the briefing room, Hitler with his generals and advisers. Citadel – the looming, titanic battle for Kursk on the Eastern Front – consumed the hours. Since morning Breit had watched the little wars between the generals, battling over Hitler as if the *Führer* were a spot of high ground; candor fell in combat with flattery, reason was mauled by pride. Around and above the grand table, more banners festooned the room, great ebony

swastikas circled like the buzzards of Breit's imagination. Everywhere Hitler's minions had hung the images of Hitler's belief, to let no eye wander to another way of thinking, to any other allegiance, certainly to no thoughts of Germany's welfare, only the Nazis'.

Breit ground the last of the cigarette into the sole of his boot. He pocketed the white shred and lit another. In the smoke he recalled Hitler's eyes, gray and wavering. In the past month, Hitler had become obsessed with reading about Verdun, the meat-grinder battle of World War I France. Hitler had been a corporal on the Western Front. As a runner he was wounded and gassed. Breit saw in Hitler's eyes the memory of the trenches, and the parallels to be drawn between the butchery of Verdun and what awaited Aryan manhood in the trenches of the Kursk bulge.

This was Germany's third summer of campaigning in Russia. The Reds had yet to swoon the way these generals had promised Hitler before the invasion in '41. Now the army lacked the resources for another major offensive in the East. Instead, their available forces were to concentrate on one smashing blow against the Kursk salient, a segment of the front line that ballooned westward into the German midsection.

The plan called for two immense forces to blast across the Russian defenses – Field Marshal von Kluge from the north, Field Marshal von Manstein out of the south – and converge in the center at the city of Kursk, pinching off the Soviet bulge. The operation was designed to surround massive Soviet formations and, more important, shorten German lines to free up men and machines desperately needed elsewhere. The Americans were sure to come to Italy this summer, and *Il Duce,* Mussolini, was ill-prepared to go it alone.

Hitler was going to commit every available soldier, gun, tank, and airplane to the action. This would be the

largest buildup of German armed power of the war. If Citadel succeeded, it would be a loss of blood that Hitler could scarcely afford. If Citadel failed, the ruin of men and matériel would be even greater; worse still, Germany would be exposed to a Russian counterstrike. That could be fatal, the beginning of the end. Citadel would be the last German offensive of the war in the East.

The stakes for Hitler were higher today than at any time in the war. He was being asked to gamble, to throw the dice once on Citadel with everything riding on the table. There would be no second go-round, no backup plan. This was do or die.

The chief problem was that Citadel was obvious. A quick glance at the map of the Eastern Front lines presented the most elementary scenario to any war college student. The Kursk bulge was clearly the best place for an attack, a pincer action was the plain solution. Germany knew this. Russia knew this. The coming fight was going to be without surprise; once begun, it would be brute strength against strength, two behemoths pressing chests.

The *Führer* fretted aloud in the briefing room. He stabbed his finger at the maps spread across his conference table, aerial photos of Soviet defenses in the Kursk region. Even from three miles in the air, the groundworks dug by the Russians looked incredible; the amount of armaments and men flowing into them was monumental. And these defense works would be arrayed directly in the path of the planned German offensive. How could this be, Hitler wanted to know.

The buzzards flew from their perches then.

Field Marshal von Kluge spoke first, flapping to the table and sweeping a hand in the air over the foreboding maps. We will crush these pitiful defenses, the Field Marshal vowed, speaking in bald propagandistic phrases, the kind Hitler loved to hear. German ground forces have always penetrated enemy defenses and will do so in this

case. Besides, look at the technological advantages we have, *mein Führer*. Look at our new tanks. Our Panthers and Tigers. Our tanks will make the difference, without fail.

Colonel Abram Breit had been brought to Berlin and was in the room to speak to this question of what impact the superior German armor would have on Citadel. Breit was the intelligence officer for the 1st SS Panzergrenadier Division *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. His division was to be in the vanguard of the Citadel assault. *Leibstandarte* would enter the fight with thirteen of the new Tiger tanks. It was his job to predict how the battle would go. After von Kluge spoke, Hitler glanced at Breit.

Field Marshal von Manstein, the man whose proposals gave birth to Citadel, replaced von Kluge at the map table. Hitler smiled over at Breit. This was when Breit saw deeply into Hitler's eyes, when Hitler with a look apologized for skipping over Breit. They were the eyes, he realized, of an ill man. Hitler's physician had been treating him for constipation, prescribing ever more powerful laxatives. Hitler's eyes were lusterless, their striking blue was clouded. The Field Marshal began his comments. He said we may have waited too long. The Reds are getting ready for us. We should have attacked them in April, just after the spring thaw, the Russian *rasputitsa*. Breit watched Hitler agree, the dull eyes growing duller in disappointment and pain. Hitler did not know what to do. He slumped beside the great table where Germany lay and watched his visions of conquest and empire be pecked at by his commanders, who could not agree. His puffy face nodded; his chin sagged to his chest.

Field Marshal Keitel spoke next. We have to attack in Russia this summer, he said. For military as well as political purposes. Our allies demand that Germany not be passive in the East. The Italians need to see our resolve, as do the Finns and the Turks. Japan is concerned that we

have not made sufficient progress against Russia. The German people require this, as well. The bombings and the failure at Stalingrad have taken their toll on morale. We must fight and win, Germany must retake the momentum. Our troops insist on a victory. Hitler listened and nodded, swayed again by whatever voice held the floor.

Breit backed quietly out of the room while Keitel talked. He came out here alone into the bannered hall and smoked.

The great door to the conference room slid open. Another black uniform with silver gleams and black leather strapping, the garb of the SS, slipped out. From the pack in his hand, Breit shook out the nub of another cigarette and held it up.

'Captain Thoma.'

The young SS officer accepted the cigarette and a light. He sucked the first drag down like a man without fear of ever dying, smiling and posing in the soft light, his blond head tilted back.

'What do you think, Colonel?' Thoma asked. The captain had been invited to the conference to speak to the training progress of the SS tankers in their new Tiger Mark VIs. Thoma, too, had been ignored by the generals during the meeting, left to stand aside as some kind of statuary, an example for Hitler of how attractive Germany's soldiers were.

He spoke now with the smoke coming out of his nostrils like a young dragon.

Breit said, 'I think, Captain, they don't care a fig about what you and I have to say.'

'I suspect they should listen. You and I know more than all of them put together.'

'Do we?'

'Did you hear what Guderian asked? "Why should we attack in the East at all this year?" Of course we should attack.'

Yes, Abram Breit thought, I heard Guderian, the general in charge of rebuilding Germany's armored forces. And I heard Hitler's reply: 'Whenever I think of the attack my stomach turns over.'

'Tell me, then, Captain, why you believe we should attack Russia this summer. Even if we grind through those growing Russian defenses, will we be able to hold our gains? The Reds outman us two to one, they outgun us two to one. And after we surround the Soviets, can we keep the pocket sealed? Will we be able to clear the pocket with the forces we'll have left after fighting our way to Kursk north and south? In view of all this, tell me why Guderian is wrong, Captain.'

Thoma tossed his cigarette to the polished floor and ground it out, careless and again very young. 'We have the tanks, Colonel. The Tigers. I've been training with them for the last five months. My men and I are more than ready. The Tiger can beat any tank it meets on any battlefield. Sir.'

'But out of twenty-three hundred tanks, you've got only a hundred Tigers for the battle. The Soviets have over three thousand T-34s.'

'One Tiger is worth a hundred Red tanks.'

'Is this what you would have told the *Führer* if he'd asked?'

'Yes. Absolutely.'

Thoma had almost come to attention with his remarks. It seemed he was defending a maligned friend. Breit took in the tank commander's hard posture and erect Aryan beauty. How many, Breit thought, how many of these young men will be flung into the flames to forge Hitler's dreams?

'What about the new Panther tanks?'

Thoma grinned a little at this. Both men knew about the difficulties the Mark V had been having in development. The Panthers had not yet proven themselves

reliable, yet Hitler's generals had insisted that Citadel be postponed for months in order that two hundred of the Panthers be built and shipped to Russia for the offensive. Thoma reveled a bit in the Panthers' failures, none of which had cropped up in his Tigers.

'They'll do their best, Colonel. But the Tiger will be the tank history remembers when Citadel is done.'

'The Americans are going to land on the Continent, Captain Thoma. We don't know when but it will be in Italy and it will be this summer. That would be a very bad thing if we don't have enough forces there to hold them off.'

Breit rattled out one more cigarette for himself. He would go back into the briefing after finishing it. He'd heard all he needed in the room, but did not want anyone to note his absence for too long. Breit did not want to be noticed at all.

He offered another cigarette to Thoma. The Captain shook his head.

'There will be a Citadel, Colonel. There has to be.'

'Why, Captain?'

'Because this is our time.'

'Yes, Captain. I quite agree. I think we should slip back into the room separately. It'll be quieter that way. You first, please.'

Thoma clicked his heels unnecessarily, there had been nothing formal about their chat out here in the hall. The sound was hard, the way Thoma made himself at Breit's doubting of the coming battle. Thoma is right, Breit thought, watching the young officer pull open the huge door and disappear behind it. There will be a Citadel. Yes, there must be. Because it is indeed Germany's time.

Time for Germany's doom.

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**May 11**
**1210 hours**
**Old National Gallery**
**Berlin**

The Impressionists room was often crowded at lunchtime. The more beautiful the weather, the more Berliners strolled for their midday break. The Americans and the British did not bomb on perfect spring afternoons. The Yanks did their work only in the mornings, and the Brits raided at night. So far, they'd mainly contented themselves with wrecking the areas in north Berlin, the manufacturing districts. Downtown remained the nerve center for running the Nazi state, for parks and museums, and the myth of German survival.

Abram Breit carried his sack lunch, a sandwich and a French apple, here to the Old National Gallery beside the Spree River. He spotted an opening on a bench across from a Monet, a blue and violet study of the *Palazzo da Mala* in Venice. Monet had been so smitten with the dazzling light of Venice on his first trip there that he stayed for four months, painting the ancient facades and canal waters. Breit walked in front of the painting on flat soles, careful not to clout his polished boots against the wood floor.

He snuggled in on the bench. The buttocks of a heavyset woman rested against his hip, she stared at a Cézanne on another wall, a sketch pad in her lap. Breit dug his sandwich out of the paper bag and unwrapped it, making a game of how quietly he could handle the wax paper. He chewed and looked at the Monet. Breit had always wanted to view the world the way a painter did, to see behind form and color to the world's vibrations, to gaze not just at an object but at light itself. Abram Breit had tried as a child to make paintings, drawings, anything with a brush or pen, and failed; he lacked the gift of the

painter, the sight. So he chose instead to exercise his love of art by becoming a student of it, then a teacher. When the war began, he was a thirty-eight-year-old professor of art history at Heidelberg University facing the reality of military service. He approached the SS, which quickly accepted him into its intelligence corps. Breit was an educated man, with the manners and bearing of the upper class. He was an exemplar of that legend of superiority the SS liked to concoct, especially in *Leibstandarte,* the first of the SS divisions, grown out of Hitler's personal bodyguards.

Breit began his work for the Reich by valuating art taken from dispossessed Jews. He made no judgments on where the art came from; few in Germany did that sort of thing once the deportations started. The plight of the Jews was not his concern. Breit busied himself arranging collections and shows, selecting which pieces would be put on public display and which would hang in the private galleries of Goebbels, Speer, Himmler, Göring, Hitler. For this service, the *Führer* had awarded him the War Merit Cross with swords that hung on the left breast of his tunic. Breit had chosen this Monet for this museum.

He finished his sandwich and began his apple. He was wary not to crunch through the skin and pulp. Breit made no noise.

He never did, and he knew this. As a child, he'd abandoned his wish to be an artist, letting it loose without a pin drop in his heart. As a student, he'd kept his nose in books while Germany rebuilt itself from the debacles of World War I. Again, as a young professor, he stuck to his classrooms and towers at Heidelberg, avoiding the street clashes between the roving brown shirts of the National Socialists and the red sashes of the Communists. When the war started, Abram Breit took up his duty in the dungeons of Jew basements, in echoing great galleries, peering through magnifying glasses at canvases and into

tomes of art history. A few years and five million men marched past him, history fell out of the sky, horror rolled past in trucks and train cars, Germany tore itself to pieces across the globe, and Breit stood silent.

No more.

He chewed the apple thoughtfully, mulling the pulp on his tongue. He stood and walked around the bench to face the other direction, away from the vivid Monet. Sitting, he set his eyes to the Picasso and the Braque he'd chosen for display in this room.

The war had cost Breit his love of the Impressionists. Those painters had become bourgeois, coveted by the well-to-do, sold for large sums, even during their lifetimes. Their groundbreaking work – softening the image, the destruction of age-old realism – had fallen headlong into the mainstream. Monet, Manet, Renoir, Seurat – these weren't the names of painters any longer so much as they were investments, portfolios for the Jews and others to hedge their bets during the war, hide their money in something other than currency, no different than gems or gold bars. Breit cared only for one Impressionist now, the crazy Dutchman van Gogh, who never while alive sold one painting. Van Gogh, of all the Impressionist masters, was untouched, left alone with that madness that had become his vision. Breit preferred the Cubists, the artists who had moved away from the emotion and decorative symbolism of Impressionism. The Cubists – Picasso and Braque among them, who were put on their path first by the prophetic work of Cézanne – reconstructed the form on the canvas out of its base geometric elements, the spheres, cones, cylinders, and boxes of every object. These were egalitarian ideals, to break man's world into simple patterns, into every man's vision, mad or genius or gifted or not, even Abram Breit's.

The Impressionists looked at their world and made it pretty, captured like butterflies pinned to a mat. But not

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Picasso. Not Braque. Not like the abstract Russian Kandinsky. These men shattered the world in their hands and gave it back made only of building blocks, with room for the individual and imagination; they invited the viewer onto the canvas and asked him to build a new world out of these raw parts. Abram Breit had fallen in love with the Cubists.

He remained a silent man. There was nothing he could do about his nature. But he could do with his life what the Cubists had done with the image, break his nature into its basic elements and take a clean look. So Breit did this, slowly, with the small brush strokes he never could muster with his hands, but could with his mind. In the mirror, in his tailored SS uniform, he began to see what he was made of. He shuddered to find so much reluctance and cowardice. Abram Breit faced the fact that he'd turned into a man he'd never wanted to become; he was not an artist, not a teacher anymore, not an individual at all. He wore SS black, the absence of all color. Abram Breit had become so silent a man that he was gone. His cowardice had erased him.

Breit was aroused for more truth. Yes, he'd been a coward. And what had been the canvas for his cowardice? He looked outside his window, into battered Berlin, across Europe, to the Balkans, into Russia. There he saw Germany's fear and vanity. Undisguised, plain as paint and framed in flame, Breit grasped Hitler's madness and genius – genius is madness, in a way – the driving forces behind the war, a global conflict made by Breit's country and people; but Hitler's madness was not like van Gogh's. The *Führer* had grown openly corrupted by power, by the saluting hordes and goose-stepping world risen around him. Hitler had men on all sides who were devious for their own gains. Germany was in the wrong hands. That, like a sphere, a cone, a circle, a square, was an elemental truth. No man was so silent he could turn away from this.

First, Breit requested a transfer from the art archives to military intelligence. Most of his cataloging work was concluded; the flow of confiscated art had slowed as Germany became *judenfrei*. *Leibstandarte* granted his request. In late 1942, Breit trained for three months in Munich. Then he was assigned back to Berlin, as divisional liaison to Hitler's staff. The *Führer* himself made the request, delighted with the artwork Colonel Abram Breit had selected for his chalets and castles.

Abram Breit became a spy.

This was not so hard to do. There were many ears in Germany listening for betrayal, some to punish the betrayers, some to welcome and encourage. Breit let slip a comment or two here and there, words that he could have easily explained away as too much *schnapps* or a simple misunderstanding. He traveled to East Prussia, around Germany, to conquered France, a loyal and efficient junior member of the general staff. It was in Switzerland he was approached.

All he knew was that he would be working for something called the Lucy network. These were German patriots, he was told, like him, men and women who were the real guardians of Germany's precious future. They would do everything they could to stop the Nazi war machine. Whatever secrets Breit could funnel into Lucy would be channeled to Hitler's most powerful enemy, Soviet Russia.

Breit was unfazed at the destination for his treasons. What he wanted most was what the Cubists demanded: a change, a new world, a new Germany, a renewed Breit. The Russians could give him all that.

He finished the apple. He slipped the core into the paper sack, making less rustle than the woman still sketching the blue Monet. Breit set the bag on the bench beside him. He cupped his chin in his hand and rested his eyes on the Picasso. The painting was one of the artist's

early Cubist treatments, *Bread and Fruit Dish on a Table*. In this work, Picasso had brushed away all depth perception. The table and its bowl and loaves all seemed to be on a single plane; the backdrop of a curtain and a wall came forward, impinging on the objects they ought to exist behind and apart from. There is no difference, Picasso painted, between the object and its surroundings. Everything is one. Everything is connected. Art can change minds. And because it can, it must.

Breit stood. He left the paper sack on the bench, it was trash. He stepped toward the door to leave the museum.

A blue-suited security guard, an older gentleman with a handlebar moustache, swept in behind him. The guard gave Breit a *tut-tut* for leaving the rubbish of his lunch on the bench. The elder man scooped up the paper sack and took it away. Breit nodded his head in silent apology. The man inclined his own head and disappeared.

Breit walked out of the museum with a hundred others, lunchtime was done. He ambled along the banks of the Spree to the Monbijou Bridge. He crossed halfway over the river. Cars trundled behind him, Berliners strolled past returning to their work administering the Nazi regime. The river glistened under the sun. Breit tried to view the light on the green ripples the way Monet had seen the canals of Venice, and could not. All he caught was glare and motion, people on his left and right ignoring him and the river. This was unfair, Breit thought, to be excluded like this, to be as blind as everyone else.

But I am not blind, Breit thought. And I am not mute.

At that moment the old museum guard would have in his hands two folded sheets of paper pulled from the crumpled bag Breit left on the bench. The Old National Gallery was one of a half-dozen drop sites around Berlin the Lucy network had arranged for him. The two pages were filled front and back with coded script. They would reach Moscow tomorrow, after being routed through

Lucerne, the base for Lucy. The coded sheets gave an exacting report on Hitler's meeting yesterday with his generals, every detail Breit could recall about the coming battle for Kursk. Breit related the *Führer*'s desperation, the indecision of his generals, the immensity of the forces to be committed to Citadel, the fantastically high political stakes for Germany, the last throw of the dice. He described the deterioration of Hitler's physical condition, Hitler's obsessive fretting over an approaching American invasion of Italy and Mussolini's chronic weakness, even the training and morale of young Captain Thoma's Tiger tank crews, the number of tanks to be involved, the mechanical problems popping up with the Panthers, everything Breit could gush to the Russians to help them beat the Nazis out of Germany like dust out of a rug.

Abram Breit was a spy. He remained a quiet stroller through the war, but he was not a mote or a minion, not like these speechless souls shuffling across the river. Breit was a changed man whom Hitler would personally hang on a meat hook if even a whisper surfaced of who he was, and how much influence Abram Breit was finally having with what he could see, hear, and tell.