To Trust in What We Cannot See



iUniverse Publishing

## Prologue

*January 1913*

The hallway smelled of stale cigarette smoke and something rancid, something I didn't really want to identify. I slowly walked to the door of the young artist. The man, Adolf Hitler, was loosely known among some denizens of the art world as a painter with only modest talent. He was twenty-four years old at the time.

History records that Adolf Hitler saw himself as an architectural artist, forced into making a living painting silly postcards and selling them to locals and tourists. Not yet involved in politics, he desired to be accepted in time to the famed Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. That never happened.

I knocked on his door. Silence.

Then, slowly, the door opened, and standing eerily before us was young Adolf Hitler.

"Guten Tag. What may I do for you?" he said.

Dr. Russ Gersema and I stood speechless.

Not knowing what to say, I simply asked, "May we come in? We'd like to see your art."

He paused, looked us over, then nodded and opened the door.

"I hope you have plenty of money with you," the future killer of six million Jews said with an awkward and unbusinesslike tone.

As he closed the door, Adolf Hitler turned back to both of us and then peered strangely at my covisitor; it forced my attention toward him too.

My partner in dimensional space-time travel, Dr. Russell Gersema, held a Steyr-Mannlicher M1912 semiautomatic handgun pointed directly at the forehead of the father of the future Nazi movement.

And he pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 1

*Present Day*

Literary critics say that every good story needs a villain, so I suppose this might just turn out to be a great story because it has historical men of immense villainy.

It's the story of the twentieth-century murderers who destroyed nations, killing groups of people and eliminating generations—a small group of criminals who killed millions of men, women, and children from 1917 to 1945.

Imagine if when these maniacal, middle-aged men were younger, that by happenstance or providence, you or I could do something to change *or even end* their lives, at one time and in one place. What would the world be like today?

What if the fabric of time and space allowed us to do it … and on another level fought against us while we changed history? What if we could see the many worlds that came into being due to the absence of these tyrants and choose which world we'd like to live in?

That is this story.

While I'm not a widely read author, I didn't choose to tell this story; it chose me. I've authored nonfiction books and coauthored a few fiction books, yet none has so captivated me as has this tale.

I couldn't even *think up* this story as a fiction piece if I had wanted to, nor could I have lived it. But I think I did live it.

And I wasn't alone.

I met Russ Gersema in a coffee shop in Vienna.

*It wasn't a Starbucks …*

Vienna doesn't like Starbucks.

Europe either, I've observed.

The funny thing is I don't even like coffee.

However, visiting coffee shops for long hours in Europe *does* have its benefits for even a coffee bean celibate like me. Some of it is the vibe; some of it is the lovely roasted coffee fragrance. For me, it's fairly simple: when I'm traveling, I don't have an office, and I need a place to think and write. Coffee shops work for this—and for parking a bike and meeting friends.

I'm a biking enthusiast. Over time, I've biked in some amazing cities. I enjoyed trekking across Iceland's capital city, Reykjavik, as well as Germany's capital city of Berlin and down the Danube, across the Austrian farmlands. I've biked Paris and stood next to where Victor Hugo lived and where Jim Morrison died, hoping, I suppose, for some deep inspiration to accost me.

Generally, I find bits of inspiration parking my road bike, sitting outside of a beer hall or inside a café, watching people, jotting down notes—experiencing strangers' lives from a safe distance. Watching people allows me to witness human nature as it unfolds, one story at a time, without any disruptive and inconvenient chance of actually entering into their lives. It is virtual life lived out in real life—comfortable and distant. Each city or town offers a particular café or pub in which to sit, watch, and push a pencil, strike a keyboard, or jot notes on an iPhone.

Another personal benefit of European coffee shops is being able to increase my European weight. The daily thick lattes and sugary coffee drinks offer *that* as a possibility for all who visit. *Ah,* but as I said, my tastes don't go to java, so the truer danger lurks elsewhere—in a brimming, hot cup of dark, almost black, liquid chocolate, the scent of which hovers at cafés' doorsteps each morning, inviting all willing victims to enter and grow fat.

Not American fat, just European fat. There's a difference.

Each morning in Vienna, I park my road bicycle at Herrengasse 14. Café Central greets bikers, pedestrians, tourists, and locals. The smell of hot chocolate draws me in, once again, like a lover obsessed. This particular morning was a rough ride. I took a spill right outside of the café, protected by my bike helmet but missing an Austrian driver by just inches as I rolled to the side of the small street. The smell of chocolate came at me as I lay on the ground, cajoling me to stand and enter Café Central, which I obediently did.

Since 1876, Café Central has been seducing and healing many. She's an aged adulteress. I can't run from her. I can't even bike from her. I simply surrender, paralyzed, like those before me.

It's been my recent life's work to replace each early-morning's biking episode (and supposed weight loss) with the zero-sum gain of hot chocolate shots and pastries. I comfort myself with the failed thinking that, for a century and a half, people have eaten at Café Central in Vienna and died; no amount of weight loss and biking will preserve a happy life. Eat, bike, and die.

Chocolate, on the other hand, lives on; it soothes all ills and allows slight moments of happiness to live forever, even as generations come and go.

I stood with a smile at the counter near the entrance, in front of a man I would soon come to know. I didn't know it then, but he would change my life forever.

I ordered my morning fix of piping-hot "Viennese Chocolate." It's so seductive it stops all conversations before they begin. At that moment, there's only one thought, only one love.

Well, there might be a second: Austrian pastries and cakes.

Over the years at the famed Café Central in Vienna, pastries, cakes, and crème-filled confectionaries have been served to hungry customers—enjoyed by a cross section of men and women, one pastry at a time, one bite at a time, the customers reluctant to finish such incredible food.

Often, for historically short periods, customers become prisoners of their own appetites, each renting history just for today as they eat and sip. Today, I am a prisoner in the current generation, occupying one of many booths around the outside edges of Café Central, enjoying pastries and hot beverages. Maybe it's not as current a generation as one would think, since pastry prisoners often hear older songs by groups like the Beatles as background music. The listeners age, yet the music's themes stay put.

My personal pastry favorite, the crème-filled Patisserie Chocolate Cake, was how this man came into my life. It's more accurate to say that a final *remaining* crème-filled Patisserie Chocolate Cake forced us together.

I ordered the rich, deep dark chocolate cake with its traditional crème-filled strawberries and then heard a deflated sigh behind me. A Midwestern accent seemed almost detectable in the comment spoken under his breath (but only to another American, I suppose). Next, he approached the clerk and placed his order, sans the desired heavenly, delicate cake. He then hung back a bit from the people at the counter, a misplaced, hungry American sitting alone with his thoughts.

"Welcome to Vienna," I said as I handed him my trophy dessert. "I believe this is yours?"

He looked surprised.

"No, actually, the man in front of me ordered that. I wish it were mine," he said with a slight smile.

"Well, I am that man who was in front of you, and this patisserie has your signature on it as a guest." I paused. "I'm here regularly anyway," I said as I extended the plate to him. "I'll have mine tomorrow."

He laughed the sort of light chuckle that had more to it than my comment required and then replied, "That's very kind of you. My *signature*, huh?"

"Yep. American, right? Midwest?"

"Almost. Kansas City. You?"

"Pacific Northwest," I replied.

He delicately manipulated his fork, unsheathing a portion of the cake's perfect top pastry layer. Once in his mouth, his eyelids reverently closed shut, as if in prayer.

I understood and sat quietly sipping my chocolaty morning shot-cup, silent in the reverence.

"May I join you?" I then asked.

"Of course, of course," he mumbled as he was licking his lips.

"What brings you to Vienna, my fellow American?" I asked.

He set down his pastry plate, picked up his small cup of Viennese coffee, and took an extended sip, as though either regaining his composure from this taste of heaven or preparing to measure his words for other reasons. I wasn't sure.

"Nineteen thirteen."

I paused. "Excuse me?"

"Nineteen thirteen brings me here. Directly here."

I wasn't sure how to take this odd response. I cocked my head and said, "Well, I think you're a little late."

He laughed. "Maybe not."

He looked up at me from his cream-filled vacation break. "Umm, do you know what happened here in 1913?" he asked as he pointed a couple times to the ground with his fork, slowly licking the frosting from his lips when he finished the question.

He had a genuine way of speaking—a kind way, as if he was fully present and wanted me to learn.

I stumbled a bit with a few ums and ahs, finally recovering with a quick (and, I thought, pithy) response. “As an author and historian, I’d say elegant Vienna was at the terrible threshold of this continent’s first European war—”

“No. I mean right *here.*” He stabbed the fork into the air above the café’s floor, while at the same time moving his other hand in increasing semicircles. “At Café Central. Right where we’re seated.”

I was dumfounded, looking at him as though the international travel guru, Rick Steves, was quizzing me about a tourist spot.

“I have no idea.”

This tall, early-forties Midwesterner reached his hand toward me and said, “Oh, please excuse me; that’s very rude of me to just launch in with such a strange response to your honest question without even giving you my name. Let’s start with that first. Okay?”

I nodded and took his hand. “I’m Russ Gersema, from Kansas City, Missouri,” he said.

I returned his handshake, introduced myself, and responded to the typical question strangers tend to ask one another, “What do you do for a living?” I told him I was an author of seven books, with an eighth on the way.

“Eight books? That’s wonderful. *Wonderful.* What genre?”

“Actually two genres—historical fiction and biographical nonfiction. My first book came out about five years ago.” I saw him glancing at the traces of gray and silver in my hair.

As if apologizing, I said, “I became an author later in life.”

He paused and took a long look at me. “Eight books in five years—that’s a fast pace.” He paused again for a few seconds. “Author, not *writer*, I noticed you call yourself.”

“I’m not a writer. I don’t put together prose for others—clients or ad copy. I write from my own authority, hence the title of author.

“Explain that.”

“Well, I was married for many years. I lost my bride ten years ago. A publishing company approached me a few years after that to write about what I had endured through that experience.”

I paused to put in check my unexpected emotions.

He responded, “I’m sorry for bringing up such deep pain.”

"No, it's … okay," I said, rather unconvincingly. "You asked about *author* versus *writer*. My pain, as you put it, actually pushed me forward. I wrote the book about pain, and it's been published, forcing a type of authority on me that I would never have chosen. Since that point, I've authored other books."

He nibbled some more, all the while watching me, watching my eyes.

"We have something in common," he said, quickly adding in embarrassment, "I mean, I mean we have something professionally in common."

"You're an author too?"

"No, but I do appreciate authors *and* writers—especially those over the years who write from their personal experiences, as you do." He looked at me. "I'm genuinely sorry for your loss."

I thanked him for his kindness and understanding. The unintentional and awkward pain made its exit.

He savored another bite of the chocolate cake, cleaning the silver fork with his thin lips, which were barely visible under his full moustache. I remember thinking how his face resembled that of a man from the turn of the nineteenth century.

Then he laughed that type of hearty chuckle often reserved for only close friends. "Author? Me? No, I'm not an author. I dabble a little in science, and I am a collector and seller of books, rare books." With an arched eyebrow, he quietly added, "Very rare signed books …"

"Really? How rare?"

"Oh, I don't know. Nineteenth-century rare, some in the early twentieth century."

"Good for you," I said, realizing that it sounded as though I was patting a child on the head. "I mean, it sounds difficult."

He smiled his chocolaty grin and let the matter lie.

Searching for common ground, I said, "I collect books too. My office is full of 'em. Maybe more accurately it's that I collect autographs that just happen to be inside books. Certainly not rare autographs or rare books."

He looked hard at me and with intensity stated, "All autographed books are rare. Each book touched the hands of the person whose story is in that book."

He paused. "Do you get that?"

I responded, "I suppose I do."

He took another sip of coffee.

"Do you sign your books?" he asked.

"Sure, when someone asks me to do so. Some are autobiographical books about history, touching on *my* history, I suppose, and the history around me. Even my fiction books flow from personal experiences of mine or others I know. I experienced the events of the books I write, so, as I said, I have the authority to pen them."

Leaning across the small table with clasped hands and deftly moving his cup aside with his elbows, he asked, "Do you have one of your books in your backpack?"

Embarrassed, I wondered how he guessed I might have one on me.

"Come, come, *Author*, no need to blush when a paying customer asks to buy a book! Get it out and show me. I'd like to own one of your stories."

I reached into my backpack and withdrew a dog-eared copy of my third book, a fiction tale of a young man on a wild adventure. "I have this copy …" I said with a slight pause.

My new friend opened his wallet and placed a twenty-euro banknote on the table. "This should cover it, don't you think?"

"No, no, no. Please allow me to give it to you as a gift." I found my voice raising, but I didn't know why.

"I tell you what. I'll take your free copy of—what's the title?"

"*A Change of Time,*" I answered.

"Okay, a free copy of that one, if you'll allow two requests," he said. I nodded in agreement.

"First that *I* can pay for the cakes and coffee tomorrow—"

I interrupted with "And hot chocolate?" We both laughed.

"And second, that you autograph this copy right now."

Again, I nodded yes.

"Great. Write this: 'To my new friend, Russ Gersema, on our delightful time at Café Central in January 1913."

"What?" I said with a twist of my head toward him as I reached for a pen.

He smiled. "Those exact words or no deal."

I opened the flyleaf and wrote exactly as he said, writing slowly so that I didn't smudge the gel ink.

"So, you're famous? Penning autobiographies would make that seem so," he said nonchalantly.

"No, not famous at all," I replied as I finished my inscription and placed the Café Central promotional pen back on the table. Embarrassed by his questioning, I glanced at the floor and then looked up at him, apprehensive that this new acquaintance might ask me how many copies each of my titles have sold.

He picked up the book and the pen and glanced past my inscription as he placed a thumb on my signature and pressed down, briefly closing his eyes, whispering a word or a number as he did so. I couldn't tell. Putting both the pen and the book into his sport coat pocket, he turned and looked at me.

I felt a sudden chill run down my spine—the kind we all experience in winter when an open door lets in the cold. Summer doesn't often lend itself to that sensation.

He said, "You know, in a real way, all history is simply a collection of written anecdotal experiences, isn't it? Many authors remain unknown. Most are undervalued." His decision not to query me, as some strangers do, about the tonnage of books sold seemed intentional and even kind.

He paused and then continued, "Each book I collect has its author's autograph sealing the personal nature of history—various authors drawing together their readers, helping each of us to better understand ourselves through their lives. When they sign their books, their physical DNA touches all that came from their minds. It's really quite amazing."

He looked out past the busy Austrian waiters and flow of customers, seemingly over the din of the plates and cups, almost as if none of those things were even there.

I was slowly warming to this soft-spoken, pensive man.

I interrupted the momentary quiet with a question. "So … 1913? It's obvious I'm not as well versed an historian as I've pretended to be."

"Oh, no, again, please forgive me. It's a bit complicated, and I certainly don't wish you to feel slighted by my comments. Would you allow me to rephrase my response by asking you a question instead, *Author*?"

"Certainly." Then with a smile, I stated, "And please don't call me that. My first name will do."

He looked at me, smiled, and ate some more of his (and my) treasure, gently holding up the café's beautiful silver fork as a delicate tool, as though it were a baton and he a conductor.

My enigmatic new acquaintance wiped a small amount of crumbs from his moustache with a lace napkin, the color of edelweiss, and leaned over to me as we sat at the table near the front. He asked me one simple question.

"What do Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Hitler, and Tito all have in common … *other* than the obvious?"

He interrupted himself. "Allow me to throw in Emperor Franz Joseph, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and Sigmund Freud, for good measure."

Rick Steves was no longer quizzing me. International historian Stephen Ambrose took his place.

"I, I … ugh—"

He cut me off—I think to save my fragile and failing sense of self-worth.

"They were all here in this very café in January 1913."

I looked at him bewildered. "What? Together?"

His twinkling eyes seemed to shout. "They were around each other regularly in this elegant Viennese coffee shop! They were here, and the world never knew it, nor could they have known it."

I was shocked. I asked him to repeat what he had just said.

"They were in this café, day in and day out—enjoying the cakes and coffees we both enjoyed today. One hundred-plus years ago, these men sat near each other reading newspapers; playing chess with friends; discussing the politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, England, Germany, and the Balkans—nations just ready to explode into regional conflict and, in time, to cause a world war—actually, to cause two world wars.

"In fact, it's often been repeated by locals at the Café Central that young Stalin played a game of chess with young Hitler." He paused. "No one knows who won. Ha!"

My alt-history teacher continued, "We *do* know that young Trotsky played chess with any and everybody here. It was also here that Lenin eventually met with Trotsky. In time, Lenin made the introduction for Stalin to come to Vienna and meet Trotsky for the first time in late January 1913—*right here*."

I blurted out, “Imagine if something accidentally happened, at just *that* moment—or any other of the moments—that could have changed the course of the European wars!”

He stared at me and said, “Yes. Think of that.”

Lost in this new moment, I added, “Think of what could be done if we could go back in time and see them together, here in this place … and do something.”

“Yes,” he muttered under his breath, “and *do* something.”

I caught his change of tone, though not the meaning. I shivered again, unsure of whether it was the cold or his tone that had again gotten to me.

He paused, collected his thoughts, and then smiled widely, stretching out his arms in the way a man does when he wakes up in the morning. Then he took his final sip of coffee and said, “Indeed, *Author*. And that’s just the start of it.” He rose from the table, drawing me to my feet, as well.

I stared at him, a bit bothered by his reuse of this new nickname and more than a bit stunned by the history he was telling me; it was a minor personal irritation mixed with huge global fascination. On this very floor space, in this deliciously decorated Victorian-era café where we’d been sitting, once sat young men who would change the entire world. The lights seemed to flicker a bit. For some reason, I hadn’t noticed that the café’s lights were gas lit.

Russ Gersema looked at me, taking what appeared to be his final visual inventory of “the author” and then nodded toward the door. Strange, I could hear horse hoofs on the street. I looked out our window to where I had locked my bike, helmet, and gloves to the bike stand. They were *all* gone.

He looked at me, stroked his moustache, and said, “Shall we take a stroll?”

## Chapter 2

*1913*

As we exited the café, I don't know what shocked me more—the sheer cold air or the smell.

The odor of sewage nearly overcame me. The temperature dropped to what must have been thirty degrees Fahrenheit, buckling my knees.

Off to my left side—where my bike had been locked—was a crew of wooly-clothed workmen holding either pickaxes or shovels, most leaning against a horse cart, all smoking pipes and looking down into a large pothole, the center of which held a broken clay pipe. Sewage was seeping out of it. What struck me was how none of them seemed to be in a hurry. Nor did the smell seem to overwhelm them, as it did me.

I spoke to them in my broken German. "Wissen Sie wo mein bike ist?" They completely ignored me, looking at one another and then staring into the sewage hole they were digging.

"Don't worry. I know when your bike is," my walking friend said to me.

I stopped. "Don't you mean *where*?"

"Yes, I do, *and* I mean when."

Snowflakes were coming down. I looked up.

Everything around me had changed. Horses and carts, carriages and pedestrians were everywhere. Cobblestones echoed the clanging sound of horseshoes plodding along.

In an instant, as I felt the cobblestones under my soles. I also felt the weight of the clothes I was wearing. They were made out of harsh and heavy wool. And someone else's hat was snuggly on my head.

It was extraordinary. I felt like a man unsure of whether he was waking up from a dream or entering into one.

I looked into the same *platz*, through which less than half an hour ago I had ridden my bike on a sunny summer morning, and saw nothing familiar. *Nothing.* Men in suits made of thick fabric with overcoats hanging loosely on them walked side by side with women in long, flowing dresses, holding winter snow umbrellas that seemed to collide at times with their large-brimmed hats. They all seemed to be strolling—none in a hurry.

My new friend, cavalier about the change, yet obviously seeing my confusion, turned to me. “Quite amazing, isn’t it?”

***(Chapter Two continues from here…For your purchase of the entire book please visit DennisMansfield.com or your favorite online book source.)***