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Felix Kersten

A Man of Influence

FELIX KERSTEN, a practicing physical therapist in The Hague, had since 1928 made a good professional reputation for himself by ministering to nobles and notables, particularly the Dutch royal family. This lucrative and gratifying life might have gone on indefinitely had his skill not come to the attention of Heinrich Himmler, the powerful Reichsführer SS.

Himmler was tormented by painful attacks of colic and intestinal cramps that would temporarily immobilize him. No doctor or therapist had ever been found who could give him relief. Dr. August Diehn, a friend and patient of Kersten's in Germany, told a desperate Himmler about Kersten's extraordinary massages and recommended that the Reichsführer try them. Thus it was that on March 10, 1939, Kersten, having been summoned by Himmler, found himself face-to-face with the fearsome Nazi leader "whose part in many bloody deeds" he had often heard about "in awed whispers."[1] Kersten looked at Himmler in disbelief. He had seen pictures of him, but none had so totally captured the look of insignificance that he presented in person. He was, as Kersten remembered him, "narrow-chested, weak chinned, spectacled," strangely belying his reputation for unbridled cruelty.

In a high-pitched voice, Himmler pleaded with Kersten to help him.[2] After one of Kersten's rigorous massages, which miraculously gave him relief, Himmler insisted that he be taken on as a patient. "You can and must

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help me," he said. For all Himmler's plaintiveness, Kersten knew that to refuse could prove dangerous.[3]

This day would change Kersten's life. Nothing in his existence so far had prepared him for what he would experience during the next six years of war as Himmler's masseur. But before telling the tale of the extraordinary career of this little-known man, it is worth glancing at his origins.

Driven from Holland in 1400 by a flood of epic proportions, the Kersten family, bringing with them what remained of its workshops for making fine Flemish linen, resettled in the western German town of Göttingen. There, Andreas Kersten, a member of the town's municipal council, found favor with Emperor Charles V, who in 1544 granted him minor nobility status replete with a family coat of arms.

After a prosperous century and a half, the Kersten family again faced disaster when its workshops burned to the ground. Fortune then looked kindly on the Kerstens for the next two hundred years as successive generations worked a royal land grant of one hundred hectares of rich farmland. All this, however, came to a calamitous end when the family patriarch, Ferdinand Kersten, was mortally injured by a maddened bull as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Aspiring to a different kind of life, his youngest son, Frederick, took a civil service job in the Russian-controlled Baltic states. He married the postmaster's daughter, Olga, and moved to the Russian town of Yurev. Olga was highly respected in the region as a skillful masseuse whose talents would soon reappear in her son. Born at Dorpat, Estonia, in 1898, this new arrival in the family was christened Felix Kersten as his godfather, the French ambassador to the Russian court, stood in attendance. This was an auspicious beginning, but Felix proved to be only a mediocre student at school. Somewhat lackadaisical, he was better remembered for a gourmand's passion for good food.

In 1914, World War I broke out, heralding a new era of chaos in Europe. The Kerstens were one of many Baltic families distrusted by the Russians on general principles and exiled to towns deeper within Russia—in their case to a small village near the Caspian Sea. Felix, who was attending an agricultural college at Guenefeld in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, was now completely cut off from his family by the fighting.[4]

Being left to his own devices in Germany taught young Felix the rigors of survival. The somewhat indolent youth began for the first time to see the need to work hard if he were to get ahead. Within two years he had earned

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a degree in agricultural engineering. Then, because he was considered a German national, he was drafted into the kaiser's army. But at heart he did not feel any affinity with the Germans, resenting particularly the stiff-necked tradition of Prussian militarism. In an effort to avoid regular German army service, he volunteered to join a special legion made up of expatriate Finns living in Germany, who were mustered in 1917 to resist Russian domination of their homeland. Because of his service in defense of Finland, Kersten was granted Finnish nationality. Serving in Estonia, he had the opportunity to visit his hometown, Yurev, and by 1919, the year after the peace treaty of Brest Litovsk had been signed, his family could return home and rejoin him.

Having recovered from a bout of severe rheumatism at a military hospital in Helsinki, Felix made a fateful decision to become a physical therapist. Fortunate in having had as his first teacher in the art of massage a well-respected practitioner, Dr. Kollander, young Kersten went on to Berlin for further training.[5]

To save expenses, Kersten boarded at the home of family friends, the widow Lüben and her daughter, Elizabeth. As his training progressed, Kersten found that he not only had a natural talent as a physical therapist, but he had a certain charm that appealed to women. Throughout his bachelorhood women seemed to find him irresistible. But he found a companion and helpmate in Elizabeth Lüben, who served him through much of his life as his housekeeper—and virtually as an "older sister." They found in each other true friendship, in which mutual regard and companionship provided the ties that bound them.

Kersten's professional training would take a new leap forward in 1922, when he met a Chinese master masseur named Dr. Ko through a well-known German surgeon, Professor Bier, who specialized in unorthodox medicine in Berlin. Ko, a wizened, wrinkled Chinese gentleman with a graying goatee, had been trained in a Lamaist monastery in northwestern Tibet by monks who were masters of the art of healing through massage. He found in Kersten a worthy apprentice to whom he could pass on his "secret" technique of "physio-neural therapy."

After long discussions—part philosophical, part therapeutic theory—and having subjected himself to a rigorous test massage by Kersten, Dr. Ko took him on as his student, explaining ". . . you are the one I have been awaiting for thirty years. According to my horoscope, fixed in Tibet when I was still a novice, I was to meet, this very year, a young man who would know nothing and to whom I would teach everything. . . .[6] In later life

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Kersten would often quote from Goethe's *Roman Elegies* to describe his art: "See with a feeling eye, feel with a seeing hand." He described the process more scientifically with somewhat enigmatic words such as these:

> The fundamental effect of this physio-neural therapy, which is often really astonishing, rests on an intensive treatment of the tissues, based on anatomy and physiology. The essential point is its ability to penetrate in a way that is quite beyond the scope of ordinary manipulation. Blood and lymphatic fluids in the vessels treated are pressed towards the heart while unwanted blood is correspondingly sucked back. In brief, the circulation in the blood and the lymphatic vessels is strengthened and accelerated. The consequence of this is a more rapid renewal of the blood and a more effective nourishment of the tissues and muscles treated. Ordinary massage cannot include this specialized procedure, as this demands a fundamental and specialized insight into the anatomy and physiology of the human body and a technical training which is no less fundamental.[7]

The rigid life discipline that Dr. Ko demanded of his student did not include a monklike existence; Kersten was delighted to discover that Dr. Ko believed that pleasure was salutary if balance was to be sustained in the nervous system. But Kersten's bliss in studying under Dr. Ko would not last. It was in the autumn of 1925 that Dr. Ko confided in his pupil that his horoscope, prepared in Tibet long ago by wise lamas, stipulated that he must return to his Tibetan monastery and prepare for a state of "apparent death," awaiting a new foreordained incarnation eight years later.

Kersten was distraught. He knew he would never see his teacher, nor benefit by his inspiration again. But taking some of the sting out of Ko's departure was the realization that he would assume control over his teacher's practice. Kersten prospered; helped by his faithful friend Elizabeth Lüben, he soon moved to a more gracious apartment and made his rounds in an elegant limousine driven by a liveried chauffeur. Launched on what began as a successful career in Germany, Kersten broadened his clientele to include patients throughout western Europe. In 1928, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands was among the notables who summoned Kersten. Her consort, Prince Hendrik, who was suffering with serious heart problems, had been told by specialists that he probably would not survive for more than six months. Kersten miraculously revived the prince's health with a series of "physio-neural" massages. To assure Hendrik's complete recovery, or at least extend his reprieve from death, Queen Wilhelmina convinced Kersten to

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make his home in The Hague as royally appointed physician. While he kept his apartment in Berlin, which was minded by Elizabeth Lüben, he resided in The Hague, devoting most of his time to the prince, who responded to his treatments by leading a normal existence for many years thereafter.[8] Kersten felt good about his return to the Netherlands, homeland of his ancestors. But his newfound prosperity made him property-conscious and he could not resist a tempting bargain back in Germany—a three-hundred-hectare estate at Gut Hartzwalde, some fifty miles east of Berlin.

In February 1937, Kersten, the ever-eligible bachelor at age forty, met in Berlin a lovely and well-educated young woman from Silesia named Irmgard Neuschaffer. After two months of courtship, conducted mainly through correspondence, they became engaged. Soon thereafter they were married and departed on a whirlwind honeymoon to Finland. The Kerstens' first child, a son, was born on the estate at Hartzwalde, although he was then spending most of his time with the Dutch royal family. The Kersten family's idyll was, however, rudely interrupted by the dislocations of Hitler's war, which would thrust Kersten into a strange and almost unbelievable career as

Felix Kersten with his wife, Irmgard, and their three sons—Ulf, Arno, and Andreas—at their home in Hartzwalde during World War II. (Courtesy of the Kersten family)

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Himmler's physical therapist—as well as a secret intriguer along the fringes of power in the heart of the Third Reich.

When Dr. Diehn, president of the German Potassium Syndicate, introduced Kersten to Heinrich Himmler in March 1939, he had an ulterior motive that went beyond bringing relief to Reichsführer's acute attack of colic. He hoped that Kersten would also "persuade him not to nationalize [privately owned] property"—particularly Diehn's potassium empire.[9] Kersten may not have single-handedly saved Diehn's potassium, but he was so successful in treating Himmler's ailment that the Reichsführer asked him to leave the Dutch royal family and tend him exclusively. Kersten refused, but he agreed to treat Himmler as often as his time and royal obligations permitted.

Suddenly Felix Kersten suffered, much as his ancestors had when they had been driven from Holland by the flood in 1400; but the flood that now engulfed him was of a different sort. It was the flood of Hitler's panzers that inundated the Lowlands in May 1940 as the first strike in Germany's campaign to conquer western Europe. The Wehrmacht's lightning seizure of the Netherlands caught Kersten in Germany, where he was making his medical rounds of patients. When his career with the Dutch royal family ended after the queen and her family escaped to London to avoid capture and exploitation by the Nazis, Kersten had little choice but to remain in Germany and succumb to Himmler's insistence that he work for him. Himmler's private aide, Rudolf Brandt, remembered that the Reichsführer had offered Kersten 100,000 reichsmarks as a carrot to sweeten the deal if his treatments proved successful.[10] But whatever monetary incentive was offered him was not as compelling as the implied threat that he had to accept Himmler's offer or suffer serious consequences. Nor could any payment compensate Kersten for the risks he would have to take as an employee in the devil's domain with its endless internecine plotting and its all-pervading aura of mutual suspicion.

Any probability of achieving job gratification by serving Himmler, much less being able to avoid guilt by association as his doctor, seemed remote to Kersten as he thought about the pitfalls ahead. Kersten seemed to have been genuinely appalled by Himmler's philosophies and beliefs—an amalgam of destructive Nazi dogma and psychic fantasy. The Reichsführer had convinced himself that he was a reincarnation of Germany's ninth-century mythic folk hero Henry the Fowler, duke of Saxony, who became King Henry I in 919, and had chosen Genghis Khan as his personal role model.

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Why, then, did Kersten accept the position given him by such a neurotic man, devoted to such an evil cause? The short answer is that Kersten, as a person without a country to protect him, was trapped in a web of dangerous circumstances from which he could not easily extract himself. There was probably little or nothing he could have done to reject Himmler's "invitation" to serve him. With the Gestapo under his command, the Reichsführer was in a position to decide the fate of most everyone in Germany—certainly defenseless expatriates such as Kersten. And it could not have cheered Kersten when, after the German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940, the Gestapo told him that it would not be responsible for his or his family's safety unless he moved to Berlin. This was said more as a threat than a warning,[11] and reminded Kersten that because of his favored position with Himmler, he was an object of envy and jealousy throughout the Reichsführer's inner circle, particularly among Gestapo leaders who suspected his Dutch connection.

Kersten did, in fact, try to find a way out. He was a Finnish national and, having fought in Finland's defense against Russia, was still a reserve officer in Finland's army, but his country's ability to protect its nationals in Nazi Germany was virtually nil. Nonetheless, he paid a discreet visit to the Finnish embassy and appealed to the ambassador, T. M. Kivimäkki, for help. Kersten explained his predicament. He described how the Reichsführer was frequently beset by almost unbearable pain that only he, with his unique massage treatments, could relieve—at least, that is what Himmler firmly believed. Kersten also explained how his privileged vantage point provided a window on the war's progress, and that his insider's view of Nazi leaders in action made him a remarkably well-informed person. But this did not compensate for the personal risk to which he was exposed. He confessed his grave doubts about the wisdom of treating Himmler under the present tense circumstances—he admitted that he was frightened.

The Finnish ambassador, however, made it clear to Kersten that it was "his duty" to remain in Himmler's employ and report secretly to the Finnish embassy all intelligence he gleaned as a result of his proximity to the founts of Nazi power. Kersten was apprehensive, but he promised to do what his government wanted of him. He was flattered that he had been asked to play a role in a war that promised to be one of the greatest dramas of history, but he was worried as well. Kersten left the Finnish embassy that day with the exhortations of his ambassador and key officers to do all he could to increase the already astonishing degree of confidence shown him by Himmler and report to Helsinki on a regular basis what he was able to learn.[12]

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Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler with his physical therapist, Felix Kersten. (Courtesy of the Kersten family)

How and when it was that Kersten came to realize what levers of influence his skillful hands represented, and how the proximity to Himmler they gave him could be exploited, is a matter of conjecture.

Himmler considered Kersten his property. While he insisted that his needs had first priority and Kersten must be on call at all times, he also felt that he had the right to loan him out to friends or political associates for whom he wished to do favors. Kersten's only defense was to perform test massages permitting him to drop a patient if they did not work. And it was his professional prerogative to make the determination whether or not his ministrations were useful.

In late January 1940, Himmler requested—that is, ordered—Kersten to accept as a patient Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who, according to the masseur, seemed to suffer from bad headaches, giddiness, impaired vision, and stomach pains. Aside from the fact that Ribbentrop was not a likable person, Kersten saw troubles ahead in treating such highly placed officials: if the therapy did not help the patient, or if the patient capriciously did not find Kersten's ministrations to his liking, the masseur

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ran the risk of falling into his bad graces. Already suspect as a foreigner, Kersten did not want to make new enemies who would undermine his protected position at Himmler's court. Ribbentrop was a particularly risky case; he and Himmler were rivals for Hitler's favor, and Ribbentrop resented the Reichsführer's interference in foreign matters through his foreign intelligence apparatus, RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt—Reich Security Main Office) Amt VI. But there was nothing Kersten could do about it, particularly since he realized that Himmler expected him to produce any potentially useful morsels of information gleaned from Ribbentrop in the course of the treatments. Realizing that this could be a two-way track, Himmler warned Kersten not to divulge to Ribbentrop information about his own health. Specifically, Himmler did not want the foreign minister to know about his stomach and intestinal affliction. Kersten commented in his memoir: "Ribbentrop had to think Himmler was perfectly strong. Once he knew that Himmler was ill and unfit, he could intrigue and snipe at him even more than at present."[13]

Trouble began almost immediately. Ribbentrop questioned Kersten's loyalty. He was aghast to learn that the masseur was not a Nazi Party member and had no intention of joining it. Ribbentrop complained to Himmler, asking why his masseur had not been politically trained or been "encouraged" to apply for party membership.

For a variety of other reasons, Ribbentrop's demeanor grated on Kersten. He recalled, for example, one conversation with Ribbentrop in which the foreign minister defended a well-publicized and much-criticized incident that occurred while presenting his credentials as German ambassador to the king of England at the Court of St. James's: he had snapped to attention and given His Majesty a stiff-armed Nazi "Heil Hitler" salute. In recounting the incident for Kersten's benefit, he protested that he had been correct in abiding by Nazi protocol, rather than British. Ribbentrop argued that by simply accepting Germany's outstretched hand, England would have been spared war and survived under the "powerful protection of the Greater German Reich," but by snubbing him—in effect, snubbing Germany—England was doomed to "lose everything." Nazi Germany, particularly Ribbentrop, badly underestimated and misunderstood Britain's resolve under Churchill's leadership.[14] The German foreign minister's festering hatred for England, and his advice to Hitler on the eve of the war that the British would not fight to protect Poland despite its agreement with Warsaw to do so, have been credited by many as encouraging the Führer to attack, thus sparking the world war that erupted in 1939. Certainly, Kersten was among those who had no

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respect for Ribbentrop. He would soon become exasperated with his patient on many counts; by September 1943, he refused to continue his treatment and thereby made a highly placed enemy out of the foreign minister.

Among other prominent Nazi patients treated by Kersten, thanks to Himmler, was Dr. Robert Ley, leader of the Deutschearbeits, the Nazi's German Labor Union. This relationship, beginning in November 1940, contributed to Kersten's growing realization that most high-ranking Nazi officials were unstable, neurotic men, not only evil of intent but quite unfit for the duties demanded of them.

Ley had been fired from a prewar job with the I. G. Farben Chemical Works because of chronic drunkenness, dishonesty, and general trouble making. Had it not been for Himmler's insistence that Kersten treat Ley, the masseur would have had nothing to do with this badly flawed, unattractive man. Kersten would try to alleviate Ley's pain, which was caused perhaps by a malfunctioning pancreas, but rarely did he have any success. It would be easy to suspect that Kersten on purpose had not tried very hard to please his patient. When Kersten related the sordid details of Ley's chronic drunkenness to Himmler and asked him to relieve him of this hopeless case, the Reichsführer suggested that he taper off the treatments so that no scandal about Ley's excessive drinking would occur.

Ley, on one occasion, tried to pressure Kersten to donate his estate at Hartzwalde to the German Labor Union, arguing that he, Ley, needed a love nest where he could entertain girlfriends. As an incentive, Ley promised Kersten that through his labor movement he would finance a physiotherapy clinic, ostensibly to train students in the art. Kersten declined the offer and left as Ley drunkenly shouted after him: "I, Robert Ley, will make you famous! Heil Hitler."[15]

During the two years that Kersten treated Ley, he admitted to secretly jotting down items of more than usual interest concerning government plans that were carelessly mentioned by Ley while under the influence of drink. Among the nuggets of intelligence Ley mentioned was Hitler's intention to establish a comprehensive system of socialized medicine and socialized industry.[16]

While treating Ley, Kersten had the occasion to meet his wife, who was clearly embarrassed by her husband's chronic inebriation. Kersten also treated this woman, whom he described as a "beautiful, . . . tall, elegant and ice-cold blonde" for a gallbladder problem. She once confided in Kersten that she was terribly unhappy with her husband, described by her as a "wild beast," whom she feared would one day murder her. Her fears may have

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been justified. He once allegedly lunged at her in the presence of Kersten and began to rip her dress off, shouting drunkenly that she was beautiful and he, Kersten, "must see more of her." Only when Kersten threatened to report this unseemly tableau to Himmler did Ley calm himself and beg him not to ruin his career. Within a year, Mrs. Ley committed suicide by shooting herself.[17]

Kersten's patients were not confined to German notables. Himmler bragged about his masseur's skill on one occasion and recommended that Italian foreign minister Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, try him. Himmler, when introducing Kersten, said that he "is the magic Buddha who cures everything by massage." The Reichsführer was clearly impressed with Kersten's skill and found it politically useful to loan him out.[18] Count Ciano, suffering from chronic stomach trouble, had earlier been told about Kersten by Signor Cerutti, the former Italian ambassador to Germany. Upon meeting Kersten, who was traveling with Himmler in Italy during the summer of 1940, Ciano engaged the masseur's services. Kersten found the cosmopolitan Ciano a pleasant person to be with. Once again Kersten was ever alert for gossip—or better—and seemed to have learned much about Mussolini and Fascist political attitudes during his stay in Rome during November and December of 1940. Among other conclusions Kersten drew from his experience with Ciano in Italy was that the Nazi regime in Germany was not well thought of by either Italian aristocrats or the common man. Ciano, in confidence, criticized Germans as pompous and haughty. Guido Buffarini, Italy's minister of the interior and a friend of Ciano's, with whom Kersten had also become friendly, predicted correctly that there would inevitably be a separate Italian peace concluded between Italy and the Western Allies. Ciano felt the same way, but confided in Kersten that before peace could be reached, his father-in-law would have to be overthrown. This, Ciano believed, was a certainty.

A measure of the confidences exchanged by the Italian foreign minister and Kersten during their massage sessions can be noted by the fact that Kersten admitted that Himmler and Ribbentrop were fierce rivals at sword points. This apparently pleased Ciano, who had little respect for his German opposite number, blaming him for getting the Axis into a European war that could not be won.[19]

Himmler was no better disposed toward Italy than Ciano was toward Germany. But Ciano nonetheless was willing to make frank comments to Kersten that revealed his animosity and deep fear of Germany. "National Socialism," in Ciano's opinion, was "a poor imitation of Fascism." The

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Italians are afraid of the Germans, Ciano told Kersten, because they never know what Hitler will do next. Kersten felt that Ciano spoke with him so frankly because he was a Finn, not a German, and because he could thus trust his discretion.[20]

Count Ciano was pleased by his new friendship with Kersten, and believed the masseur's massages had been beneficial to his health. On December 12, at a farewell banquet, Ciano bestowed on Kersten on behalf of the king of Italy the "Cross of a Commander of the Order of Maurice and Lazarus." In his speech, Ciano observed impishly, but apparently sincerely: "Most persons receive orders because they give good dinners. But I am giving this to you because of your excellent services as a physician."

In his memoirs, Kersten observed that his stay in Italy had provided him with a breath of fresh air. Germans, he complained, were essentially the same barbarians of antiquity: "They do not know how to amuse themselves." As a self-proclaimed good judge of women, he observed that German women "left him completely cold in contrast with Italian beauties." And, he added, "the pattern of the German mind was alien to the Italian soul."[21]

Kersten's many satisfied patients kept him from being overly modest, and the urgency with which Himmler often summoned him when unbearable pain struck and his unique ability to bring relief made it obvious to Kersten that he could exert considerable influence on his present master. But Kersten first awakened to the potential of his influence when he courageously intervened with Himmler to save anti-Nazi dissidents, Jews, and many others perceived as malcontents in his adopted homeland, the Netherlands, from mass deportations to Polish Galicia and the Ukraine on orders from an enraged Hitler during the winter of 1941.