

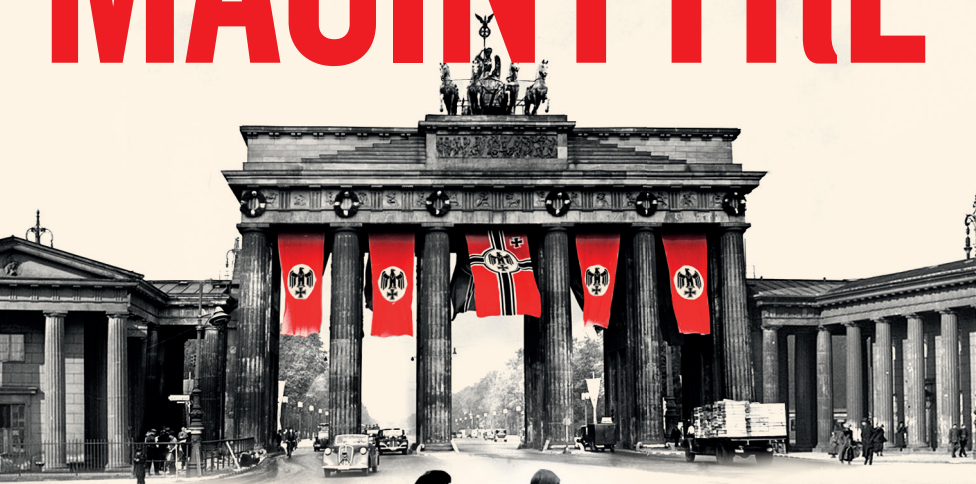
FROM THE MULTIMILLION-SELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE SPY AND THE TRAITOR*



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BOOK YET'
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AGENT SONYA

The True Story of WW2's
Most Extraordinary Spy

Agent Sonya

Agent Sonya

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‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor . . . What will my husband be?’
A traditional counting and divination game played by young women
to foretell the future

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Illustration Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations:

BArch: German Federal Archives

BStU: Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic

NACP: National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD

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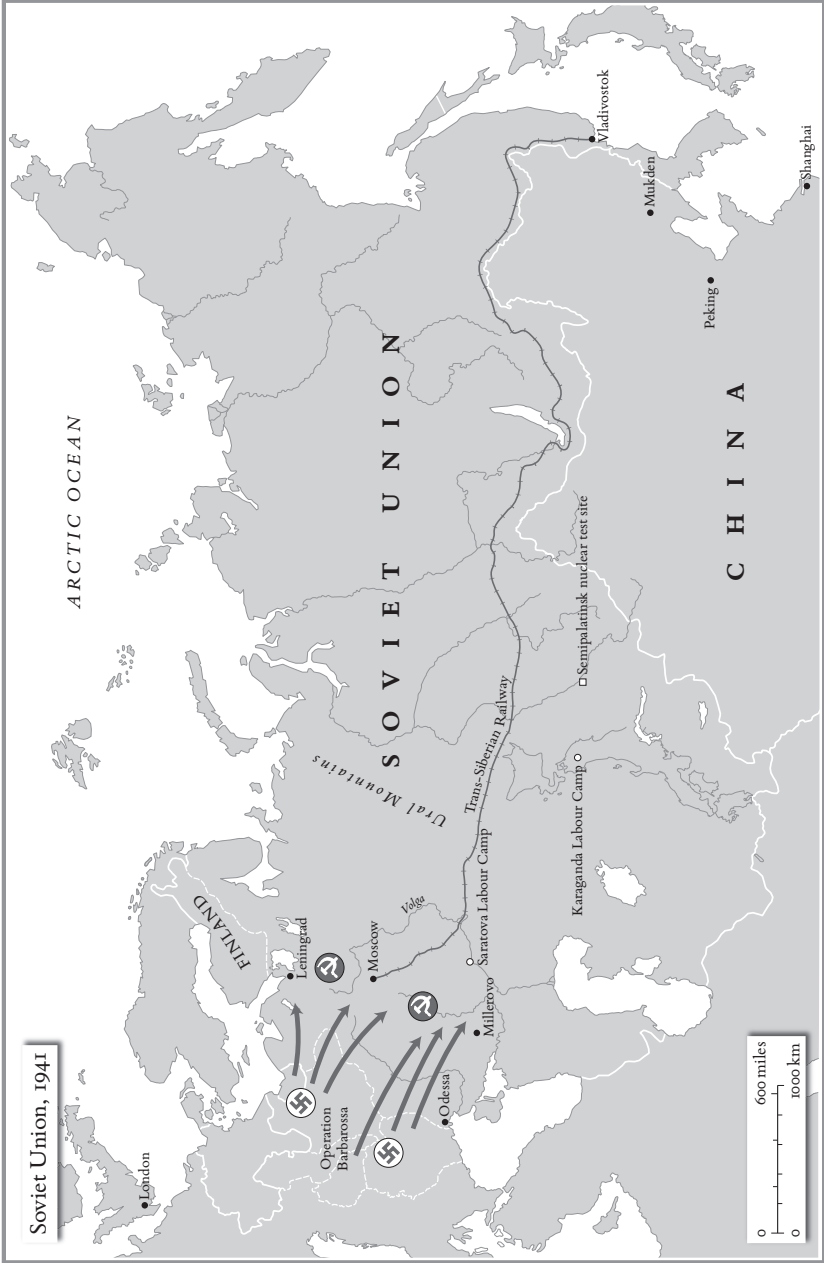
Maps

Ursula's Travels, 1928 – 50









Introduction

If you had visited the quaint English village of Great Rollright in 1945, you might have spotted a thin, dark-haired and unusually elegant woman emerging from a stone farmhouse called The Firs and climbing onto her bicycle. She had three children and a husband, Len, who worked in the nearby aluminium factory. She was friendly but reserved, and spoke English with a faint foreign accent. She baked excellent cakes. Her neighbours in the Cotswolds knew little about her.

They did not know that the woman they called Mrs Burton was really Colonel Ursula Kuczynski of the Red Army, a dedicated communist, a decorated Soviet military-intelligence officer and a highly trained spy who had conducted espionage operations in China, Poland and Switzerland, before coming to Britain on Moscow's orders. They did not know that her three children each had a different father, nor that Len Burton was also a secret agent. They were unaware that she was a German Jew, a fanatical opponent of Nazism who had spied against the fascists during the Second World War and was now spying on Britain and America in the new Cold War. They did not know that, in the outdoor privy behind The Firs, Mrs Burton (in reality spelt Beurton) had constructed a powerful radio transmitter tuned to Soviet intelligence headquarters in Moscow. The villagers of Great Rollright did not know that in her last mission of the war Mrs Burton had infiltrated communist spies into a top-secret American operation parachuting anti-Nazi agents into the dying Third Reich. These 'Good Germans' were supposedly spying for America; in reality, they were working for Colonel Kuczynski of Great Rollright.

But Mrs Burton's most important undercover job was one that would shape the future of the world: she was helping the Soviet Union to build the atom bomb.

For years, Ursula had run a network of communist spies deep inside Britain's atomic-weapons research programme, passing on

information to Moscow that would eventually enable Soviet scientists to assemble their own nuclear device. She was fully engaged in village life; her scones were the envy of Great Rollright. But in her parallel, hidden life she was responsible, in part, for maintaining the balance of power between East and West and (she believed) preventing nuclear war by stealing the science of atomic weaponry from one side to give to the other. When she hopped onto her bike with her ration book and carrier bags, Mrs Burton was going shopping for lethal secrets.

Ursula Kuczynski Burton was a mother, housewife, novelist, expert radio technician, spymaster, courier, saboteur, bomb-maker, Cold Warrior and secret agent, all at the same time.

Her codename was 'Sonya'. This is her story.

I

Whirl

On 1 May 1924, a Berlin policeman smashed his rubber truncheon into the back of a sixteen-year-old girl, and helped to forge a revolutionary.

For several hours, thousands of Berliners had been trooping through the city streets in the May Day parade, the annual celebration of the working classes. Their number included many communists, and a large youth delegation. These wore red carnations, carried placards declaring 'Hands Off Soviet Russia' and sang communist songs: 'We are the Blacksmiths of the Red Future / Our Spirit is Strong / We Hammer out the Keys to Happiness.' The government had banned political demonstrations, and police lined the streets, watching sullenly. A handful of fascist brownshirts gathered on a corner to jeer. Scuffles broke out. A bottle sailed through the air. The communists sang louder.

At the head of the communist youth group marched a slim girl wearing a worker's cap, two weeks short of her seventeenth birthday. This was Ursula Kuczynski's first street demonstration, and her eyes shone with excitement as she waved her placard and belted out the anthem: 'Auf, auf, zum Kampf', 'Rise up, rise up for the struggle'. They called her 'Whirl', and, as she strode along and sang, Ursula performed a little dance of pure joy.

The parade was turning into Mittelstrasse when the police charged. She remembered a 'squeal of car brakes that drowned out the singing, screams, police whistles and shouts of protest. Young people were thrown to the ground, and dragged into trucks.' In the tumult, Ursula was sent sprawling on the pavement. She looked up to find a burly policeman towering over her. There were sweat patches under

the arms of his green uniform. The man grinned, raised his truncheon and brought it down with all his force into the small of her back.

Her first sensation was one of fury, followed by the most acute pain she had ever experienced. 'It hurt so much I couldn't breathe properly.' A young communist friend named Gabo Lewin dragged her into a doorway. 'It's all right, Whirl,' he said, as he rubbed her back where the baton had struck. 'You will get through this.' Ursula's group had dispersed. Some were under arrest. But several thousand more marchers were approaching up the wide street. Gabo pulled Ursula to her feet and handed her one of the fallen placards. 'I continued with the demonstration,' she later wrote, 'not knowing yet that it was a decision for life.'

Ursula's mother was furious when her daughter staggered home that night, her clothes torn, a livid black bruise spreading across her back.

Berta Kuczynski demanded to know what Ursula had been doing, 'roaming the streets arm in arm with a band of drunken teenagers and yelling at the top of her voice'.

'We weren't drunk and we weren't yelling,' Ursula retorted.

'Who are these teenagers?' Berta demanded. 'What do you mean by hanging around with these kinds of people?'

"These kinds of people" are the local branch of the young communists. I'm a member.'

Berta sent Ursula straight to her father's study.

'I respect every person's right to his or her opinion,' Robert Kuczynski told his daughter. 'But a seventeen-year-old girl is not mature enough to commit herself politically. I therefore ask you emphatically to return the membership card and delay your decision a few years.'

Ursula had her answer ready. 'If seventeen-year-olds are old enough to work and be exploited, then they are also old enough to fight against exploitation . . . and that's exactly why I have become a communist.'

Robert Kuczynski was a communist sympathizer, and he rather admired his daughter's spirit, but Ursula was clearly going to be a handful. The Kuczynskis might support the struggle of the working

classes, but that did not mean they wanted their daughter mixing with them.

This political radicalism was just a passing fad, Robert told Ursula. 'In five years you'll laugh about the whole thing.'

She shot back: 'In five years I want to be a doubly good communist.'

The Kuczynski family was rich, influential, contented and, like every other Jewish household in Berlin, utterly unaware that within a few years their world would be swept away by war, revolution and systematic genocide. In 1924, Berlin contained 160,000 Jews, roughly a third of Germany's Jewish population.

Robert René Kuczynski (a name hard to spell but easy to pronounce: *ko-chin-ski*) was Germany's most distinguished demographic statistician, a pioneer in using numerical data to frame social policies. His method for calculating population statistics – the 'Kuczynski rate' – is still in use today. Robert's father, a successful banker and president of the Berlin Stock Exchange, bequeathed to his son a passion for books and the money to indulge it. A gentle, fussy scholar, the proud descendant of 'six generations of intellectuals', Kuczynski owned the largest private library in Germany.

In 1903, Robert married Berta Gradenwitz, another product of the German-Jewish commercial intelligentsia, the daughter of a property developer. Berta was an artist, clever and indolent. Ursula's earliest memories of her mother were composed of colours and textures: 'Everything shimmering brown and gold. The velvet, her hair, her eyes.' Berta was not a talented painter but no one had told her, and so she happily daubed away, devoted to her husband but delegating the tiresome day-to-day business of childcare to servants. Cosmopolitan and secular, the Kuczynskis considered themselves German first and Jewish a distant second. They often spoke English or French at home.

The Kuczynskis knew everyone who was anyone in Berlin's left-wing intellectual circles: the Marxist leader Karl Liebknecht, the artists Käthe Kollwitz and Max Liebermann, and Walther Rathenau, the German industrialist and future Foreign Minister. Albert Einstein was one of Robert's closest friends. On any given evening, a cluster of artists, writers, scientists, politicians and intellectuals,

Jew and Gentile alike, gathered around the Kuczynski dining table. Precisely where Robert stood in Germany's bewildering political kaleidoscope was both debatable and variable. His views ranged from left of centre to far left, but Robert was slightly too elevated a figure, in his own mind, to be tied down by mere party labels. As Rathenau waspishly observed: 'Kuczynski always forms a one-man party and then situates himself on its left wing.' For sixteen years he held the post of Director of the Statistical Office in the borough of Berlin-Schöneberg, a light burden that left plenty of time for producing academic papers, writing articles for left-wing newspapers and participating in socially progressive campaigns, notably to improve living conditions in Berlin's slums (which he may or may not have visited).

Ursula Maria was the second of Robert and Berta's six children. The first, born three years before her in 1904, was Jürgen, the only boy of the brood. Four sisters would follow Ursula: Brigitte (1910), Barbara (1913), Sabine (1919) and Renate (1923). Brigitte was Ursula's favourite sister, the closest to her in age and politics. There was never any doubt that the male child stood foremost in rank: Jürgen was precocious, clever, highly opinionated, spoilt rotten and relentlessly patronizing to his younger sisters. He was Ursula's confidant, and unstated rival. Describing him as 'the best and cleverest person I know', she adored and resented Jürgen in equal measure.

In 1913, on the eve of the First World War, the Kuczynskis moved into a large villa on Schlachtensee Lake in the exclusive Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf on the edge of the Grunewald forest. The property, still standing today, was built on land bequeathed by Berta's father. Its spacious grounds swept down to the water, with an orchard, woodland and a hen coop. An extension was added to accommodate Robert's library. The Kuczynskis employed a cook, a gardener, two more house servants and, most importantly, a nanny.

Olga Muth, known as Ollo, was more than just a member of the family. She was its bedrock, providing dull, daily stability, strict rules and limitless affection. The daughter of a sailor in the Kaiser's fleet, Ollo had been orphaned at the age of six and brought up in a Prussian military orphanage, a place of indescribable brutality that left

her with a damaged soul, a large heart and a firm sense of discipline. A bustling, energetic, sharp-tongued woman, Ollo was thirty in 1911 when she began work as a nursemaid in the Kuczynski household.

Ollo understood children far better than Berta, and had perfected techniques for reminding her of this: the nanny waged a quiet war against Frau Kuczynski, punctuated by furious rows during which she usually stormed out, always to return. Ursula was Ollo's favourite. The girl feared the dark, and while the dinner parties were in full swing downstairs, Muth's gentle lullabies soothed her to sleep. Years later, Ursula came to realize that Ollo's love was partly motivated by a 'partisanship with me against mother, in that silent, jealous struggle'.

Ursula was a gawky child, inquisitive and restless in a way her mother found perfectly exhausting, with a shock of dark, wiry hair. 'Unruly as horsehair,' Ollo would mutter, brushing ferociously. Hers was an idyllic childhood, swimming in the lake, gathering eggs, playing hide-and-seek among the rowanberry bushes. Part of each summer was spent in Ahrenshoop on the Baltic coast in the holiday home of her Aunt Alice, Robert's sister.

Ursula was seven when the First World War broke out. 'Today there are no more differences between us, today we are all Germans who defend the fatherland,' her school headmaster announced. Robert enlisted in the Prussian Guards, but at thirty-seven was too old for active service and instead spent the war calculating Germany's nutritional requirements. Like many Jews, Alice's husband, Georg Dorpalen, fought bravely on the Western Front, returning with a patriotic wound and an Iron Cross. Wealth cushioned the Kuczynskis from the worst of wartime privations, but food was scarce, and Ursula was sent to a camp on the Baltic for malnourished children. Ollo packed a bag of chocolate truffles made from potatoes, cocoa and saccharin, and a pile of books. By the time Ursula returned, an avid reader and several pounds heavier from a diet of dumplings and prunes, the war was over. 'Take your elbows off the table,' her mother admonished. 'Don't slurp.' Ursula ran out of the dining room and slammed the door.

Germany's defeat and humiliation marked the beginning of the end of the Kuczynskis' halcyon existence. Great cross-currents of political

violence swept the country. A wave of civil disturbance triggered the Kaiser's abdication, and a leftist uprising was brutally suppressed by remnants of the imperial army and the right-wing militias, or *Freikorps*. On 1 January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht founded the German Communist Party (the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, or KPD), but were captured and murdered within days. Thus was ushered in the Weimar Republic, an era of cultural efflorescence, hedonism, mass unemployment, economic insecurity and roiling political conflict as the polarized forces of the extreme Right and radical Left clashed with growing fury. Robert Kuczynski's politics shifted farther left. 'The Soviet Union is the future,' he declared after 1922. Though he never joined the KPD, Robert declared the Communist Party to be the 'least insufferable' of the available options. In his journalism, he advocated a radical redistribution of German wealth. Right-wing nationalists and anti-Semites took note of Robert's politics. 'He is not only against us,' one German industrialist remarked darkly. 'He is also extremely impudent.'

The tumultuous fourteen-year period between the fall of the Kaiser and the rise of Hitler is seen as a time of mounting menace, the backdrop to the horror that followed. But to be young and idealistic in those years was intoxicating, edgy and exciting, as the world went mad. War debts, reparations and financial mismanagement triggered hyperinflation. Cash was barely worth the paper it was printed on. Some people starved, while others went on lunatic spending sprees, since there was no point keeping money that would soon be valueless. There were surreal scenes: prices rose so fast that waiters in restaurants climbed on tables to announce the new menu prices every half an hour; a loaf of bread costing 160 marks in 1922 cost 200,000,000 marks by the end of 1923. Ursula wrote: 'The women are standing at the factory gate waiting to collect their husbands' pay packets. Every week, they are handed whole bundles of billion-mark notes. With the money in their hands, they run to the shops, because two hours later the margarine might cost twice as much.' One afternoon, in the park, she found a man lying under a bench, a war veteran with a stump, a pitiful bag of possessions clutched to his breast. He was dead. 'Why do such awful things happen in the world?' she wondered.

Though life at Schlachtensee continued much as before, with its cultured conversation and fine furniture, millions were politically radicalized. In 1922, the Foreign Minister, Walther Rathenau, was assassinated by ultra-nationalists after signing a treaty with the Soviet Union. Every day Ursula witnessed the grotesque disparity between the urban poor and the wealthy bourgeoisie, of which she was a part. She devoured the works of Lenin and Luxemburg, the radical novels of Jack London and Maxim Gorky. She wanted to go to university, like her brother.

Jürgen was already a rising star of the academic left. After studying philosophy, political economy and statistics at the universities of Berlin, Erlangen and Heidelberg, he gained a doctorate in economics before embarking for the US in 1926 to take a postgraduate degree at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. There he would meet Marguerite Steinfeld, a fellow researcher in economics, whom he married two years later.

Berta put her foot down: her wayward daughter did not need more education; she needed some womanly skills, and then a husband. In 1923, at the age of sixteen, Ursula was enrolled in a trade school to study typing and shorthand.

At night, she wrote: poems, short stories, tales of adventure and romance. Denied an academic education, she poured her energies into her imagined world. Her childish writings reflected a craving for excitement, a sense of theatre, a love of the absurd. Ursula was always the central character in her own stories, and she wrote of herself in the third person, a young woman achieving great feats through determination and a willingness to take risks. Of one character she wrote: 'She had overcome the physical weakness of her childhood, she had toughened up and was strong.' Her little sisters called her 'Fairy Tale Whirl'. Her diary reflected the usual sulky teenage preoccupations, but also an irrepressible optimism. 'I am in a bad mood,' she wrote. 'Grumpy and growling, I am a hot-head, a cross-breed with a black mane of hair, a Jew's nose, and clumsy limbs, bitching and brooding . . . but then there is blue sky, a sun that warms, drops of dew on the firs and a stirring in the air, and I want to stride out, jump, run, and love every human being.'

The year Ursula's formal education ended, Hitler launched the Munich beer hall putsch, a failed *coup d'état* that turned the future Führer into a household name and landed him in prison, where he dictated *Mein Kampf*, the Nazi bible of bigotry.

Absorbing her father's political instincts, shocked by the human degradation she had witnessed, appalled by fascism and entranced by these swirling new ideas of social equality, class war and revolution, Ursula was drawn inexorably to communism. 'Germany's own Socialist revolution is just around the corner,' she declared. 'Communism will make people happier and better.' The Bolshevik Revolution had proven that the old order was rotten and doomed. Fascism must be defeated. In 1924, she joined the *Kommunistischer Jugendverband Deutschlands*, the Young Communist League, moving into the ideological home she would occupy for the rest of her life. She was sixteen years old. Like other communists from affluent families, Ursula played down her privileged background. 'We lived much more modestly than one might have supposed,' she insisted. 'One great-grandfather sold shoelaces from a barrow in Galicia.'

Ursula's fellow young communists came from all corners, classes and communities of Berlin, united in a determination to overthrow capitalist oppression and usher in a new society. In that heady atmosphere, friendships bloomed swiftly. Gabriel 'Gabo' Lewin was a middle-class boy from the suburbs. Heinz Altmann was a handsome apprentice, whose urging had given Ursula the 'final impetus' to join the party. These were the young footsoldiers of German communism, and Ursula was thrilled to be one of them. The May Day demonstration of 1924 left her with a lifelong appetite for risk. The bruising from the policeman's truncheon eventually faded; her outrage never did.

At weekends, the Young Communist League ventured into the countryside to explain Marxism-Leninism to the German peasantry, who frequently responded by setting their dogs on the youthful evangelists. One evening, in Löwenberg, north of Berlin, a sympathetic farmer allowed the group to sleep in his hayloft. 'That evening we were particularly cheerful,' Ursula wrote. 'As soon as we lay down, someone began to imagine the place twenty years later. Löwenberg

in 1944: it has long since become communist. For a long time we argued over whether money would already have been abolished. We would then unfortunately be very old – in our mid-thirties!’ They fell asleep, dreaming of revolution.

Ursula was one of nature’s missionaries. She was never preachy, but she loved to convert, and tended to chip away at unbelievers until they saw the world as she saw it. She set to work on the family nanny. ‘I tried to explain things to her. She found what I said made sense,’ Ursula claimed. Olga Muth was not remotely interested, but allowed the girl to believe she was listening.

The Kuczynskis did not approve of their daughter being beaten up by policemen and spending her nights in haylofts with a bunch of young communists. Observing that ‘reading was her only field of interest’, Robert arranged an apprenticeship in the R. L. Prager Bookshop on Mittelstrasse, specializing in law and political sciences. Berta bought her a pair of heels, a dark blue dress with white collar, gloves and a brown crocodile leather handbag. Mother and nanny inspected Ursula as she set off for her first day at work.

‘Nothing in front and nothing behind,’ said Ollo. ‘You still look like a boy.’

‘But the legs are quite nicely shaped,’ said Berta. ‘You can only see that if you take small steps.’

Ollo agreed: ‘Ursel will never be a lady.’

Like everything Olga Muth said, this was tough but true. With her long nose, thatch of hair and forthright manner, there was nothing ladylike about Ursula. ‘I’ll never turn into the famous beautiful swan,’ she wrote in her diary. ‘How could my nose, my ears and my mouth get smaller all of a sudden?’ Yet, even as a teenager, she gave off a powerful sexual allure that many found irresistible. She giggled when the worker mending the roof of the Dresdner Bank wolf-whistled her as she cycled to work: ‘He blows a kiss, and spreads his arms wide.’ With her bright eyes, slender figure and infectious laugh, she was never at a loss for a dance partner at the teenage parties in Zehlendorf. At one of these, she wore ‘bright red scanty shorts and tight-fitting shirt with stiff collar’, and danced until half past six in the morning. ‘There are those who say I kissed

twenty boys,' she told her brother. 'It can't have been more than nineteen.'

Working at Prager's was boring and exhausting. The manager was a chain-smoking tyrant with a large, bald, slightly tapering head, devoted to inventing fresh indignities and pointless tasks for his employees. Ursula nicknamed him 'The Onion' and pronounced him a capitalist exploiter. Her time was spent 'shaking out the dust cloth, standing in windowless niches'. She was not permitted to read on the job. 'Surely there are other professions,' she reflected. 'Lumberjack, for example. Could I become a female lumberjack?' Her small salary was rendered almost worthless by the raging inflation. She would remember her teenage years in the Weimar Republic through a series of politically tinted images: 'The wealth of the small, privileged circles and the poverty of the many, the unemployed begging at street corners.' She resolved to change the world. For Ursula was ambitious and confident: she would transform society in more radical ways than her father, and she was determined to be a better mother than her own. These twin ambitions would not always sit comfortably together.

Robert and Berta Kuczynski gave up trying to rein in their daughter's politics. In 1926, Robert took a temporary position at the Brookings Institution, alongside Jürgen, researching American finance and population statistics. He and Berta would visit America periodically over the next few years, leaving Ursula and Olga Muth to run the household together, reinforcing the bond between them. 'Our Ollo, who never had anyone to love. Ollo, the hysterical, grey little creature, always dissatisfied, that is besotted with each one of us, Ollo who walks through fire for us, does everything for us, lives only for us, knows nothing of the world but her six.' Ursula's letters to her part-time parents reflected her wry resentment: 'Dear Mummy, I trust your maternal feelings will sustain your keen interest in all our little trivia.' Another letter urged: 'We are unanimous in our hope that Mummy will soon stop coming up with bright ideas on household matters, recommendations on how to cook cabbage, how to clean the house, and other advice.'

While Ursula spent her days dusting books, her brother was writing them. In 1926, the 22-year-old Jürgen Kuczynski published *Return to Marx* (*Zurück zu Marx*), the opening rumble of an avalanche of print he would unleash over the coming decades. Jürgen loved the sound of his own voice, but even more the sound of his pen. His lifetime output was prodigious: at least 4,000 published works, including acres of journalism, pamphlets, speeches and essays, on politics, economics, statistics and even cookery. Jürgen would have been a better writer had he been able to write less. His style became less florid with age, but he simply could not bring himself to say in a few words what might be said in many. His study of labour conditions eventually ran to forty volumes. *Return to Marx* was a comparatively slim work of 500 pages. With typical grandiosity, he told his sister that he ‘hoped the workers would read it with pleasure’. Ursula offered some editorial suggestions: ‘Write easier, short phrases. You should strive for simplicity of presentation, so that everyone can understand. Sometimes the text is only complicated when, for greater persuasiveness, it is repeated in two or three places, changing only the form and structure of the phrase.’ This was excellent advice, which Jürgen ignored.

At home and at work, Ursula was a drudge; outside those places, she was a revolutionary.

A few weeks before her nineteenth birthday, Ursula joined the KPD, the largest communist party in Europe. Under its new leader, Ernst Thälmann, the party was increasingly Leninist (later Stalinist) in outlook, committed to democracy but taking orders and funding directly from Moscow. The KPD had a paramilitary wing, locked in escalating conflict with the Nazi brownshirts. The communists prepared for battle. On moonlit nights in a remote corner of Grunewald forest, her earliest friends from the Young Communist League, Gabo Lewin and Heinz Altmann, taught Ursula to shoot. At first she consistently missed the target, until Gabo pointed out she was closing the wrong eye. She proved to be an excellent shot. Gabo gave her a Luger semi-automatic pistol, and demonstrated how to take the gun apart and clean it. She hid the weapon behind a beam in the attic at

Schlachtensee, concealed inside a torn cushion. When the revolution came, she would be ready.

Ursula joined the anti-fascist demonstrations. 'Terribly busy,' she wrote. 'Preparing for the Anniversary of the Russian Revolution.' During lunch breaks she sat in Unter den Linden, the tree-lined boulevard running through central Berlin, reading *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Flag*), the communist newspaper. Often she sought out the working-class cab drivers and fruit sellers, many of whom were communists, and avidly discussed politics with them. In her diary she wrote: 'So many starving, so many beggars in the streets . . .'

One afternoon Ursula joined a group of young leftists, members of the Social Democratic Party as well as the KPD, for an afternoon of swimming and sunbathing at a lakeside outside Berlin. Ursula later recalled the moment. 'I turn around, and there is a man in his mid-twenties, well groomed, with a soft slouch, a clever, almost beautiful face. He looks at me. His eyes are wide, and dark brown, he is a Jew.' The young man asked if he could sit with her and chat. 'I have no time,' she said. 'I have to go to a Marxist workers' class.' He persisted, asking if they might meet again. 'I could consider it!' Ursula said, and skittered away. A few days later, the young man with the brown eyes was waiting outside the building where her Marxist class was held.

Rudolf Hamburger was an architecture student at Berlin Technical University. Four years older than Ursula, Rudi turned out to be a distant relative – his mother and Berta Kuczynski were second cousins – and from a similar background. Hamburger was born in Landeshut in Lower Silesia, where his father, Max, owned textile mills manufacturing army uniforms. The second of three sons, Rudi was brought up in an atmosphere of liberal politics and lightly worn Jewish intellectual culture. Max Hamburger built a model housing estate for his 850 workers. The family was politically progressive, but far from revolutionary. Rudi was already a passionate advocate of architectural modernism and the Bauhaus movement. His fellow students, he wrote, included 'an Austrian aristocrat, a Japanese who designed interiors in meticulously co-ordinated pastel shades, an anarchist and a Hungarian girl with a completely unjustified belief

in her own genius'. Another contemporary was Albert Speer, 'Hitler's architect', the future Nazi Minister of Armaments and War Production.

Ursula felt a surge of attraction, and on an impulse invited Hamburger to a communist meeting. They got on well. She invited him to another. 'Finally time to be with Rudi again,' she wrote in her diary. 'He helps me make the tea. He doesn't realize I have put the gas on low so it boils slowly . . . My winter coat is too thin, Rudi says. He wants to try to make me a little vain.' She bought a new coat and then reproached herself for the extravagance when others were dying of starvation. 'I long for Rudi,' she wrote. 'Then I am angry that such a person can turn my head. And that I need him so much. And then I fall asleep, sobbing.' One night, as they walked home from a concert, Rudi paused under a street lamp. 'He stood against the light. His thick hair was still unruly in the same surprising way, his dark eyes never lost their melancholy and veiled expression, even when he laughed or was deep in thought.' That was the moment she fell in love. 'Can a second, a sentence, the expression in the eyes of a person suddenly change everything previously felt into something new?' she wondered. Rudi walked her home. 'That night he kissed me,' she wrote. 'I was sad because my lips were so dry. Such a small thing, but I had been thinking of the kiss all afternoon, with quiet rejoicing.'

Rudi Hamburger was almost the ideal boyfriend: kind, funny, gentle and Jewish. Both sets of parents approved. If she became too serious, he softly teased her. And when he talked about his ambition to become a great architect, the large brown eyes danced with light. He was generous. 'Rudi gave me a bar of chocolate,' she told her brother. Sweets were rare, and she was keen to stress this was not some bourgeois self-indulgence. 'He did not spend money on it. We do not do such nonsense. But if someone gives him something, he always shares with me.'

Rudi hinted at marriage. Ursula held back.

Because there was only one problem with Rudolf Hamburger: he was not a communist. They might share a Jewish heritage, cultural interests and chocolate, but Ursula's lover was not a comrade, and he showed no signs of converting.

Hamburger's politics were liberal and progressive, but he drew the line at communism. Their disputes followed a pattern.

'You question socialism in general and our beliefs in particular,' she would remonstrate. 'Your views on communism are determined by emotions and lack the slightest scientific foundation.'

Rudi listed his objections to communism: 'The exaggerations in the press, the primitive tone of some articles, the boring speeches filled with jargon, the arrogant dismissal of opposing views, the ham-fisted behaviour towards intellectuals, whom you isolate instead of winning over, insulting opponents instead of disarming them with logic and recruiting them.'

Ursula dismissed this as a 'typical petty bourgeois attitude'. But privately 'she knew that a kernel of truth lay in what he said'. This made her even crosser.

The fight usually ended with Rudi cracking a joke.

'Let's not quarrel. A world revolution is no reason to shout at each other.'

Rudi joined Red Aid, a workers' welfare organization linked to the communists. He read some Lenin and Engels, and declared himself a 'sympathizer'. But he flatly refused to join the KPD, or participate in Ursula's activism. Beneath his placid nature, Hamburger was remarkably stubborn, and no amount of cajoling could persuade him to join up. 'There are things about the party that disturb me,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll get there slowly, if you give me time.'

After one particularly vehement argument, Ursula wrote: 'When Rudi questions the viability of socialism itself, I get upset and answer back. For him it's as if we are having a difference of opinion about a book or a work of art, while for me it's about the most vital problems, our whole attitude to life. At times like this he seems like a stranger to me.' But Ursula was not about to give up. She copied out a list of communist quotations and presented them to Rudi, an unlikely sort of love-token. 'I believe that, if we stay together, it is only a matter of time until he joins the party,' she told Jürgen. 'But it could well take another two years.'

In April 1927, Ursula quit Prager's and the hated Onion, and took a job as archives assistant at the Jewish-owned Ullstein publishers, one

of Germany's largest newspaper and book publishers. One of her first acts on taking up the job was to write an article for *Die Rote Fahne* about inadequate working conditions in her new workplace. 'One thousand two hundred free copies were distributed at the entrance here and made quite an impression.' It certainly made an impression on the management.

After less than a year at Ullstein's, Ursula was fired. She was a troublemaker, and at a time of political upheaval and intensifying anti-Semitism the publishers wanted no trouble.

'You have to quit,' Hermann Ullstein told her.

'Why?' asked Ursula, although she knew the answer.

'A democratic enterprise can offer no prospects to a communist.'

With a patchy job record, little experience and unemployment still rising, Ursula found she was unable to get another job. She refused to accept handouts from her parents. She wanted a challenge, somewhere unfamiliar and some space to think and write. She needed an adventure, on a different stage. She chose America.

The great Lenin had written: 'First we will take Eastern Europe, then the masses of Asia. We will encircle the last bastion of capitalism, the United States of America. We will not need to fight. It will fall as a ripe fruit into our hands.' America was ready for revolution. Besides, Jürgen was still living there, and she wanted to see him. Her mind was made up: she would go to the US and return when Rudi completed his architecture studies. Or possibly not. It was a quixotic decision and, for an unmarried woman of twenty-one who had never been abroad, a remarkably bold one. Ignoring her mother's entreaties and rejecting her father's offers of financial support, in September 1928 she boarded an ocean liner bound for Philadelphia. Rudi waved her off, wondering if he would ever see her again.

America on the eve of the Great Depression was a place of roaring vitality and grinding poverty, opportunity and decay, bright hope and impending economic calamity. Ursula was independent for the first time in her life. She found a job teaching German to the children of a Quaker family, and then as a maid at the Hotel Pennsylvania. Her English, already good, improved rapidly. After a month, she took the train to New York and headed to Manhattan's Lower East Side.

The Henry Street Settlement, founded by the progressive reformer and nurse Lillian Wald, provided medical care, education and culture to the city's immigrant poor. Immigrants could stay there rent-free, in return for a few hours of social work every week. Wald was the animating spirit of the settlement, a campaigner for women's and minority rights, suffrage and racial integration, a feminist ahead of her time, and to the latest arrival at Henry Street Settlement a revelation and an inspiration. Ursula left her first and only meeting with Wald deeply impressed by the American woman's personality and philosophy: 'The task of organizing human happiness needs the active cooperation of man and woman; it cannot be relegated to one half of the world,' Wald declared. Ursula moved in and got a job at Prosnit Bookshop in upper Manhattan.

Ursula would stay in the US for almost a year. The experience shaped her profoundly, beginning a love-hate relationship with the capitalist West that would endure for the rest of her life. The political and economic extremes of America at the end of the Roaring Twenties were comparable to those in Weimar Germany. New York had surpassed London as the most populous city on earth, with more than ten million inhabitants, and the city was exploding with energy, creativity and wealth, an obsession with new technology, cars, telephones, radio and jazz. Yet, beneath the glittering surface, disaster was brewing, as investors, large and small, poured money into an overheating stock market in the belief that the boom would never bust.

Unlike the Onion, Prosnit was happy to have a bookworm as an employee. Ursula already knew her Marxist-Leninist literature; she could quote chunks of it from memory, and rather too frequently did. Many of Prosnit's customers were American communists, and the shelves offered new left-wing horizons in the form of the proletarian literature movement: books written by working-class writers for a class-conscious readership. Ursula was swept up by the intellectual vigour of the American Left. One new book in particular spoke directly to her heart. April 1929 saw the publication of *Daughter of Earth* by the radical American writer Agnes Smedley. Thinly disguised autobiography, the novel tells the story of Marie Rogers,

a young woman from an impoverished background who struggles with relationships, and takes up the causes of international socialism and Indian independence. 'I have no country,' declares Smedley's protagonist. 'My countrymen are the men and women who work against oppression . . . I belong to those who die for other causes – exhausted by poverty, victims of wealth and power, fighters in a great cause.' *Daughter of Earth* was an instant bestseller, and Smedley was hailed as 'the mother of women's literary radicalism'. For Ursula, the book was a call to arms: a woman fiercely defending the oppressed, demanding radical change and prepared to die for a cause that sounded romantic, glamorous and risky.

A few weeks after arriving in New York, Ursula joined the American Communist Party. That spring she attended a socialist holiday camp on the Hudson River, where she met Michael Gold, an acquaintance of her parents and at that time America's most famous radical voice. Gold was the pen name of Itzok Isaac Granich. The son of immigrant Romanian Jews brought up in poverty on the Lower East Side, he was a committed communist, founding editor of the Marxist journal *The New Masses* and a ferocious polemicist. Gold liked to pick fights. When he described Ernest Hemingway as a 'renegade', Hemingway sent back a curt reply: 'Go tell Mike Gold, Ernest Hemingway says he should go fuck himself.' Ursula declared Gold's novel *Jews without Money* 'one of my favourite books'.

Both entranced and repelled by New York, Ursula missed her home, her comrades and her family. Above all, she missed Rudi.

In the autumn of 1929, Ursula sailed for Germany. A few weeks later, the American stock market crashed, hurling millions into poverty and ushering in the Great Depression.

It was only when she saw Rudi waiting at the dockside that Ursula realized how much she loved him. Her doubts about Rudi's politics had eased during her American sojourn. He would see the light eventually. Ursula Kuczynski and Rudolf Hamburger married in October, in a simple ceremony attended by family and close friends.

The newly married couple were happy, jobless, broke and, in Ursula's case, extremely busy fomenting rebellion. As a point of principle they refused to accept money from their parents, and moved into