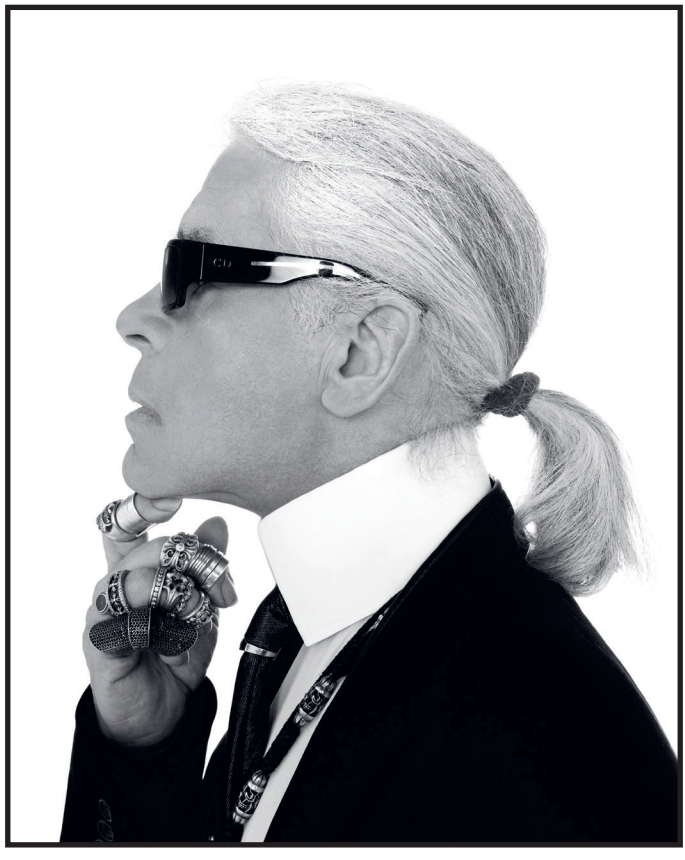
PARADISE NOW

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF

KARL LAGERFELD



WILLIAM MIDDLETON

PARADISE NOW

ALSO BY WILLIAM MIDDLETON

Double Vision: The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars Dominique and John de Menil

PARADISE NOW

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF

KARL LAGERFELD

WILLIAM MIDDLETON

EBURY
PRESS

001
Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Ebury Press is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

First published in the United Kingdom by Ebury Press in 2023

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529910933

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Je m'en fous de la postérité. Je m'en fous ! Je ne profiterai pas. C'est aujourd'hui: paradise now !

I don't care about posterity. Just don't care! It won't do anything for me. It's today that counts: paradise now!

—KARL LAGERFELD
(September 10, 1933—February 19, 2019)[1]

CONTENTS

PARADISE NOW

Prologue

SUPERSTAR!

It's Never Too Late for a New Life.[1]

IT WAS THE FALL of 2004 and Karl Lagerfeld was throwing everything into high gear. Karl, as most everyone called him, was just turning seventy-one, an age when his many fellow fashion designers were looking for an exit. Yves Saint Laurent, long perceived as his great rival, had retired two years before (and would die in 2008, when he, in turn, was seventy-one). Karl, however, was engineering a series of significant events, the first indication that he would be turbocharging the last fifteen years of his life.

By that time, he had already been in the public eye for fifty years. Karl was born and raised in and around Hamburg, the second-largest city in Germany, on the Elbe River just off the North Sea, an atmospheric port that was turned to face the world. As a teenager, he was given his parents' blessing to move to Paris, his emotional, intellectual, and spiritual home. Karl's slice of the French capital was quite concentrated, no more than a couple of square miles, on both sides of the Seine. His Paris extended from the Luxembourg Gardens and the Place Saint-Sulpice, where he had his first apartments, to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the aristocratic neighborhood where he lived for decades in a sequence of increasingly dramatic apartments, to the gilded streets around the Avenue Montaigne, where he began his career, to the top of the Champs-Élysées, where, with a view out onto the Arc de Triomphe, he launched his own fashion house, to the rue Cambon, the narrow street just behind

the Hôtel Ritz, the headquarters of Chanel, the historic house that he revolutionized, beginning in 1983, turning it into an international colossus that produced over $11 billion in annual sales.[2] Within that enchanted slice of Paris, Karl ascended to the very top of the city's social, financial, and intellectual worlds, managing to make himself into one of the most remarkable cultural figures of recent decades.

The designer had first started revving up around the new millennium. He had settled a thorny case with the French tax authorities establishing that he had, in fact, been an official resident of Monaco but agreeing to pay taxes on his French income.[3] For much of the '90s, he had been overweight, cloaking his gains in oversized black suits by avant-garde Japanese designers and concealing himself behind one of his longtime signatures, a large fan. Then, in the year 2000, he began a radical weight loss. He told everyone that he wanted to diet so that he would be able to wear the form-fitting designs of the hottest menswear designer around, Hedi Slimane for Christian Dior, who also happened to be a younger man whom Karl found quite attractive. He ended up dropping ninety pounds in thirteen months. "Like letting go of a parka of fat," Karl said.[4]

In those years, Karl would begin every day at 5:00 or 6:00 a.m., waking up in his eighteenth-century apartment and putting on a robe in white, starched cotton piqué. As rigorous as he was about his work, he could be equally exacting about his appearance, often spending two hours every morning getting ready.[5] His first task was to tie his shoulder-length hair back into a ponytail, which he had been doing since the late 1970s. "My hair is too wavy, undisciplined, and it does not stay in place even when short," he explained. "The only way for me to be correct is to pull my hair back."[6] Only later, in the 1990s, did he turn his signature flourish white with a dusting of dry shampoo. After several hours of sketching every morning, in his office adjacent to his bedroom, Karl would go to his perfectly arranged closets to dress for the day. Newly trim, he began wearing his tailored suits, or jackets and skinny jeans, with white shirts with high collars that he had custom-made at Hilditch & Key. In September 2003, just after he turned seventy, Karl made one

of his many appearances on French television with his sleek new look. The host suggested that, with his powdered hair and grand lifestyle, it was as though he were living in another century. "I am both more simple and more modern than that," he explained. "I prefer living in the 3rd millennium, rather than the 18th century, or the 19th century, which I hate, or the 20th century, which was fine. I prefer today."[7]

Karl's birthday, September 10, happened to fall on a Friday. He rarely wanted to celebrate his own birthday, bristling at anything that focused too much on his past. Still, two of his close friends, Françoise Dumas, a beautifully connected publicist and event planner, and Bethy Lagardère, a former model from Brazil and the widow of French industrialist Jean-Luc Lagardère, asked if he would let them organize a birthday dinner. Karl agreed. It would be one of the first times he had done such a thing, and they had twenty-four hours to make it happen.[8] The party took place in the spectacular eighteenth-century town house of Lagardère (one of the grandest private houses in Paris, on the rue Barbet de Jouy, it is now owned by another of Karl's close friends, Bernard Arnault). "It was such a splendid day, with an incredible light," Lagardère remembered. "We had a salon cleared out and placed a long table, for 14 or 16, at a diagonal. We wanted to make the décor very special, so we filled the room with white orchids. And we started inviting Karl's friends."[9]

The evening, though hastily organized, had no problem attracting guests. More than a dozen dropped what they were doing to attend: Princess Caroline of Monaco and Ernst of Hanover, actresses Jeanne Moreau and Isabelle Huppert, designer Hedi Slimane, politician Roselyne Bachelot, and decorator Jacques Grange and his partner, gallerist Pierre Passebon. It was a *dîner placé*, so Dumas and Lagardère had the seating impeccably organized. When Karl arrived, though, he had a surprise guest. "He hadn't told us that he was bringing someone like Amanda

Harlech or another good friend, and then he suddenly appeared with Yoko Ono," Lagardère remembered with a laugh. "Karl seemed to be quite pleased with himself."[10]

The room had dark wood paneling and doors, eighteenth-century drawings in gold frames, and French windows looking out onto the garden. The long table was lit with massive, gilded candlesticks and covered with white orchids in oversized crystal bowls filled with fresh green grapes, by Karl's favorite Paris florist, Lachaume. Guests were served by a half dozen waiters, wearing their white double-breasted jackets with white shirts and black ties. After his extreme loss of weight, Karl was quite particular about what he ate. To prepare the birthday dinner, Dumas and Lagardère went straight to the top, turning to Guy Savoy, widely recognized as one of the best chefs in the world. Savoy came up with an exquisite menu for Karl and his friends: lobster from Brittany with an eggplant and sea crab salad, artichoke soup with black truffles, candied lamb shank with truffled potatoes, and a warm chocolate cake, layered with praline and chicory crème. Although Karl rarely drank, France will always be France, so Savoy paired the meal with well-chosen wines: a white Burgundy, Meursault, 2001, and a red Bordeaux, Château La Lagune, 1995.[11]

That night, Karl wore a dark suit, a white dress shirt with a vertiginous officer's collar, a narrow black tie, and a pair of jet-black sunglasses. As usual, his hair was pulled into a ponytail and powdered white. He was, as he tended to be in private, warm, engaging, interested in others. Around the table, it was obvious to all that he was in great spirits and the evening became particularly festive. "The dinner went on and on," said Lagardère. "Everyone was in such a great mood. The light was exceptional, the meal was perfect, there was a real sense of harmony. We could have planned it out for a month, and it would not have been as much of a success."[12]

As the party eventually wound down and guests made their way back to the entrance of the house, they found one final treat. In the center of the courtyard, the *cour d'honneur*, Dumas and Lagardère had arranged

to have dozens of votive candles positioned on the old cobblestones, lighting up the Paris night, forming a giant *K*.[13]

The following Friday, at a much more public event on the top floor of the Pompidou Center, was the moment that Karl turned from being an important designer into an international superstar. "Fashion designers think they are famous," Dior Homme designer Hedi Slimane said at the time. "In fact, they are not, not even Calvin Klein. There's only one famous fashion designer, and that's Karl."[14]

The catalyst for his new level of renown: a capsule collection Karl had designed for H&M, the Swedish colossus, with $6.2 billion in annual sales, and one thousand stores in nineteen countries (now over $25 billion in sales every year). The man responsible for turning Chanel into one of the most exclusive fashion brands in the world was going mainstream. He intended to do what no one else had ever successfully achieved: fuse the elegance of high fashion with the power of the mass market (two decades before, in 1983, when Halston attempted it with JCPenney, it ruined his career, with Bergdorf Goodman dropping him overnight).[15]

Karl's collaboration with H&M illustrated a host of qualities that set him apart from other designers. He was always completely focused on the moment. Although he had a great grasp on history, he found nostalgia horrifying. He also had a fascination about, and knowledge of, everything that was happening in the world of style. It was rare that any fashion trend, a new piece of music, or any artistic movement escaped his attention. And, unlike many designers, certainly those who were septuagenarians, Karl was always eager to take risks.

He was first approached about the H&M project by Donald Schneider, the former art director of French *Vogue*, who had been doing advertising campaigns for the firm. Schneider called Karl to propose his idea. "I asked him if he knew this Swedish company, and he said, 'Of course: all of the assistants are wearing it.'" One of the first times Karl

had clocked the brand was in the elevator at Chanel, going up to the studio. There was an attractive young woman with him, wearing jeans and a tweed coat, and carrying a quilted leather bag. When he complimented her, she said, "The bag is Chanel but the coat is H&M—I can't afford a Chanel coat."[16] Karl had noticed that this brand was in his world, sensing its relevance and its potential. "He immediately got it," Schneider said of their phone call. "I think it was maybe a two-minute conversation. I said, 'Oh, great, I'll organize the first meeting.'"

Schneider was starting to hang up when he heard Karl say, "No, I have a question."

"And I thought, 'Oh no, here we go, he is going to want €10 million or something.'"

Instead, Karl asked, "Donald, have you asked anybody else, have you asked another designer?"

"No, you're the first."

Karl's response: "OK, then let's do it."

"I have thought about that a lot over the years," Schneider explained. "I am sure that other designers I could have called at the time, like Tom Ford, would have wanted to know who had done it before. 'No, first you try it with a couple others and then if it's really successful we can talk about it.' And that was the big difference with Karl. He sensed what it could mean, he wanted to do it, and he wanted to do it first."[17]

Karl may have been eager to make such a bold move, but even some members of his team were dubious. Caroline Lebar, who had worked with Karl since 1985 at his eponymous label, asked him: "But have you actually seen the clothes at H&M?" Lebar mentioned the poor quality of the fabrics, the fit, the ugly interiors of the stores. She was horrified. Karl's reaction: "Oh, you're really bourgeois, aren't you?"[18]

Karl decided to unveil the project for H&M, which he had kept secret for the better part of a year, on Friday, September 17, at the restaurant Georges on the sixth floor of the Pompidou Center. The slick, futurist space had floor-to-ceiling windows, a rooftop terrace, and a spectacular view out over the city of Paris. A sound system blared the latest in

dance music and Europop, while a disco ball spun and colored lights bounced off the glass walls. Along the interior walls, glass display cases had mannequins with highlights of the thirty-piece collection, primarily in black or white, priced from $19.90 for a T-shirt to $149 for a wool and cashmere coat.[19] The range included women's wear, menswear, and such accessories as leather bags, lingerie, and a fragrance dubbed Liquid Karl. The clothes—jersey skirts, turtleneck sweaters, tuxedo shirts, and sequin jackets—were graphic, modern, and undeniably Parisian.

The party attracted a thousand guests—international fashion editors, models, friends of Karl. The designer, notoriously late, arrived only slightly behind schedule, with the model Erin Wasson, whom he had selected to star, along with himself, in the H&M campaign. With a small group, they made their way up the Pompidou Center escalators and into the party. "It was a beautiful summer evening, and everyone was out on the terrace under the open sky, drinking champagne and having little bites to eat," Schneider recalled. "There were sofas and chairs everywhere, it felt a little like a beach club. Karl came up the escalators with his entourage and it was like Michael Jackson entering. People started screaming, and clapping, and jumping on one another to get a view of him."[20]

He was surrounded by a ring of photographers, cameramen, and journalists. One Spanish reporter, upset at not being granted an interview earlier in the day, tried to jump into the center of the circle and had to be removed by security. Sébastien Jondeau, the designer's chauffeur, bodyguard, and private secretary, kept an eye on the scrum. Karl, at the center of it all, and seemingly delighted at the commotion, made his way into the crowd.

"He loved being in the limelight," explained Anna Wintour, the editor in chief of *Vogue* and a close friend of Karl's for decades. "He was the first to understand the power of celebrity and he used it and he amplified it. Some designers are very elitist, and, though Karl was a snob in some ways, he was also very democratic. He wanted to appeal to the world—I mean, he wanted everyone to come to his party."[21]

Exactly three weeks later, on Friday, October 8, Karl pulled off another coup. By that point, he had been creative director of Chanel for just over two decades. He was the first to show how the DNA of a great designer could be tweaked, teased, and even tossed aside in order to create work that was completely new and relevant. "Karl was the first of us to take an old house and renovate it and make it new, as he did beginning in the eighties," said Tom Ford in 2005. "When I was at Gucci in the nineties, I very much had in mind what Karl had done at Chanel. I think he has done an amazing job of not only continuing what Coco Chanel did and would have done but also renovating and reinvigorating the brand, so that it is something that constantly speaks to contemporary life."[22]

Karl was presenting the Chanel 2005 Spring/Summer Ready-to-Wear Collection in the Carrousel du Louvre, an auditorium complex under the museum. Chanel combined two of the halls, to accommodate a large audience and bigger sets. In recent years, runways had been brought down to floor level, placing the audience closer to the models and the clothes. For that season, Karl decided to raise the runway like it had been in the past.[23] He had the long stage covered with red carpet and he booked ninety-five models for the show.[24] As the fashion professionals were taking their seats, just outside, in the parking garage, a black Mercedes pulled to a stop. Out stepped the film director Baz Luhrmann with Nicole Kidman.

The actress was at the first height of her fame, after such award-winning films as *Moulin Rouge*, *Cold Mountain*, and *The Hours*, and Karl had the idea of offering her a new role, the star of an advertising campaign for Chanel N°5.[25] Kidman appeared in a black Chanel pantsuit, a white silk scarf tied around her neck, her blond hair pulled up in back and falling down around her face in ringlets. Kidman and Luhrmann, along with his wife, the costume designer Catherine Martin, and a half dozen bodyguards, moved slowly through the garage. The group reached a small room, with beige curtains for walls, where they were greeted by

Karl. His great friend Ingrid Sischy, the editor in chief of *Interview*, was standing with the designer. There were kisses all around and they posed together for photos, with flashes lighting up the little room.

The conversation was about the show that was about to begin.

"We're in your hands," Luhrmann said to Karl.

"I know how to do this," the designer reassured them. "You're good on films—I'm good at this."[26]

Over the years, Karl had very carefully created his public image: tight ponytail, dark glasses, severe tailoring, expansive knowledge of history and culture, amusing, if bitchy, comments. The codes were as rigorous as those he had established for Chanel, and no less effective. He had crafted such a vivid public persona, very different from how he was in private, and he loved to make it clear that he was in on the joke.

"It's your show," Luhrmann said to the designer, suggesting that he should stage-manage their appearance. "You're directing us."

"It's not my show," Karl replied. "It's *our* show. We're all performers."[27]

Inside the Carrousel du Louvre everyone was already in their seats, a wall of photographers massed at the end of the runway, growing impatient, when, from the far corner of the room, the actress suddenly appeared, the lights catching her blond hair and strict Chanel jacket. Pandemonium. As Kidman made her way to her front-row seat, she was surrounded by a crush of photographers and journalists. "*Nicole*!" "*Baz*!" The bodyguards formed a protective barrier around them as they made their way to their places. Some suggested there were as many as one hundred photographers and cameramen barraging Kidman.[28] One fashion editor who was positioned in the row just behind her, Hamish Bowles of *Vogue*, said it reminded him of the crowd scenes from *The Day of the Locust*.[29] As the commotion continued, the show was running almost an hour late. "He wanted a spectacle, he got a spectacle," one of the photographers grumbled after the show. "There has never even been a crush like that at Cannes."[30]

Karl was compelled to make a public announcement, asking everyone

to go back to their places so they could start.[31] "He wanted to create a buzz," recalled Stefan Lubrina, the set designer who worked with Karl on that show and all of his major productions for three decades. "But that got out of control—he didn't want that much of a buzz!"[32]

As the presentation finally began, the set was lit by the brightest of lights, and the room was filled with a remix of Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." At the end of the runway, in front of the photographers, separated by the same kind of barricades used for the Cannes Film Festival, appeared a slew of supermodels: Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Amber Valletta, Shalom Harlow, Kristen McMenamy, Eva Herzigová, Erin Wasson, and Nadja Auermann. They wore Chanel evening ensembles in black satin, posing as a group. As they walked, they were followed in the aisles by male models in tight black sweaters, holding cameras with old-fashioned flashes. At the end of the show, Karl came down the runway to give the actress a kiss.

That night, at his eighteenth-century apartment at 51, rue de l'Université, known as the Hôtel Pozzo di Borgo, Karl hosted a high-voltage dinner in honor of Kidman. The invitation showed a drawing by Karl of the actress wearing a Chanel haute couture ball gown he had designed in pale pink ostrich feathers and silver crystals with a train that was over thirteen feet long.[33] Guests entered through the courtyard of the designer's house, into the main entrance, with its double-height ceiling and dramatic marble staircase. Karl had turned the ground-floor dining room into a photo studio, doing portraits of many as they arrived. "He always enjoyed being with his friends and talking," said Amanda, Lady Harlech, who was one of Karl's closest collaborators at Chanel and Fendi since 1996. "But he was not really good at what I would call social small talk in a room with lots of people. So, instead of staying seated, he loved taking pictures."[34]

Kidman arrived for the dinner wearing a strapless Chanel evening gown with silver beaded embroidery. From the entrance of the house, guests were directed out the back doors to a massive structure that had been built for the evening on the lawn of the garden. It was more like

a medium-sized auditorium than anything that could be called a tent. The interior re-created an eighteenth-century space in a way that felt seamless—many thought they were still in the house—but on a scale that allowed for oversized video screens.

"I think that was one of the most beautiful Chanel dinners that has ever been given," recalled Virginie Viard, who began as an intern with Karl in 1987 and became his successor as the creative director of Chanel in 2019, after he died. "The rue de l'Université was magnificent that night. I was super happy for him."[35]

The main event of the dinner was the debut of the Chanel N°5 commercial, directed by Luhrmann and starring Kidman. The two-minute-long film was set in a fictionalized version of Manhattan, with the actress running through traffic-clogged streets in the pink Chanel ostrich haute couture gown, her train sweeping behind her. Hounded by the paparazzi and the subject of spinning, intrusive headlines, she was a prisoner of her own celebrity. She escaped into a Yellow Cab, only to discover that she was sharing the back seat with smoldering Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro. "I must have been the only person in the world who didn't know who she was," the actor said. As the music swelled, they had an immediate romance, followed by the realization that it would be an impossible love. Instead of running off together, there was a tearful goodbye. She chose duty over passion, attending a film premiere alone. "She takes the stairway to glory," was Karl's description of the scene.[36] Kidman ascended a steep set of red carpeted stairs, now wearing a black Chanel evening gown Karl had designed in silk velvet, with a plunging neckline in back, and a three-foot-long diamond chain with a pendant that spelled out N°5.

That night, the French national news covered much of the day's action. "It's not the Festival de Cannes, it's the Festival de Karl," one journalist announced. The coverage led with the mayhem as Kidman appeared at Chanel, showing the scenes in the audience and shouting of the photographers. Reports detailed the fashion highlights of the collection and broke the news of the commercial by Luhrmann, announcing that it would be screened on French television the following week.

One report showed the designer standing on the runway immediately following the show, just after he had given the actress a kiss. A television reporter rushed up to him, asking if it was true that she had been paid $7 million for her participation.

"No idea," Karl said quickly. "I don't work in accounting!"[37]

1

BLURRED ORIGINS

My mother had a cousin in Münster who was an archbishop. The only time I met him, I said that when I grew up that I wanted to be dressed just like him. My mother was horrified! She said, "Do whatever you want to do in life but it is out of the question that you become either a priest or a professional dancer."[1]

KARL OTTO LAGERFELD WAS born in Hamburg on Sunday, September 10, 1933. That should not be a contentious statement but, throughout his life, Karl tended to shave five years off of his age. Decades of obscuring his date of birth has meant that any anecdote that becomes too specific requires arithmetic. When he moved to Paris, in 1952, he was not fourteen years old, as he had long claimed, but nineteen. When he won his first big fashion prize, in 1954, he was not sixteen but twenty-one. And when he took over the responsibilities of Chanel, in 1983, he was not forty-five years old, as he suggested, but fifty.

Karl would not be the first fashion designer to blur the outlines of an origin story. Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, for example, led an astonishing life. Born into poverty in the center of France, and abandoned to an orphanage for six years of her youth, she revolutionized the world of style, bringing women's wardrobes from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and turning a small hat shop in Deauville into an international fashion and beauty empire. Her modest beginnings, which made her success even more impressive, were not something that she was interested in discussing. In 1947, Chanel asked elegant French writer Louise

de Vilmorin to pen her life story. And they sat down for a series of interviews about her childhood. "But Louise de Vilmorin was distraught," noted Chanel biographer Edmonde Charles-Roux. "She was unable to get her to say as much as one word that was true."[2]

In February 1948, in order to sell the project to an American publisher, Chanel flew to New York with the pages de Vilmorin had written. There was little interest. Chanel, very much in character, blamed the author. Five decades later, French writer Patrick Mauriès published the text for the first time, with a backhanded title: *Coco's Memories*. "This is not a memoir," he pointed out, "it's Chanel's imaginary life."[3]

There is nothing so false in Karl's own past. He certainly embellished parts of his story and consistently lied about his age, but the general outlines of his youth are widely accepted. His beginnings have something of the sense of a fairy tale, an account that, like all good folklore, includes plenty of darkness.

Karl was born in one of the most elegant sections of Hamburg, Blankenese, a leafy neighborhood of two- and three-story houses built on a verdant hillside that slopes down to the Elbe River. His family lived at Baurs Park 3, on a landmark, early nineteenth-century park with sloping lawns, mature trees, and unobstructed views of the river. His father, Christian Ludwig Otto Lagerfeld (1881–1967), having traveled around the world in his youth, made his fortune as the first German manufacturer of evaporated milk. Karl's mother, Elisabeth Bahlmann Lagerfeld (1897–1978), was a formidable woman who doted on Karl, her only son. She could also be incredibly harsh.

Otto Lagerfeld was born and raised in Hamburg, the son of a prosperous import-exporter, primarily of wine and coffee, with offices in Venezuela, New York, and San Francisco.[4] By the time he was twenty-one, Karl's father began his apprenticeship with a Hamburg coffee importer and, to learn the business, shipped out to Maracaibo, Venezuela. After a few years in South America, he traveled to the United States, where two of his brothers were already living. He arrived in San Francisco just a couple of days before the great earthquake of 1906, escaping the most

serious damage because he was across the bay in Sausalito.[5] By the end of that year, he traveled to Kent, in King County, Washington, south of Seattle, and the headquarters of a new kind of dairy producer, the Pacific Coast Condensed Milk Company, later known as Carnation Milk. The firm had begun producing its dehydrated product only seven years before. The company slogan was "The Modern Milkman," with advertisements showing black-and-white Holsteins grazing in pastures with the snow-covered Mount Rainier in the background. "From contented cows," the ad promised, "Green grass the year round on the North Pacific Coast."[6] Otto Lagerfeld began a working relationship with the firm that lasted for over fifty years.

Dairy cattle, which were, after all, the source of the family's fortune, took on a significant place in their lives. "I'm the son of a dairy farmer," Karl once said. "We had 120 cows. My father gave a name to each one, and ever since, I have loved this animal."[7] Karl even said that his mother used the family business to justify not wanting to nurse her children. "She was amusing," Karl said of his mother. "She liked to say, 'I don't breastfeed my children—why else did I marry a milk canner?'"[8]

Otto Lagerfeld was sent to spread the gospel of this new product in Russia, where he spoke the language, installing himself in the Eastern Pacific port city of Vladivostok. There, he sold Carnation Milk along with other American- and German-produced staples. In 1914, when Germany declared war on Russia, Otto, who had been in the country for seven years by that point, applied for citizenship. Instead, he was arrested, under suspicion of espionage, and sent off to exile in Siberia for the remainder of the war. In the turmoil of the Russian Revolution, in 1917, he was able to flee Siberia, travel to Saint Petersburg, and then return to Hamburg.[9]

In 1919, he founded his own company, first importing Carnation. In 1923, he began producing a German version, "Glücksklee," or "Lucky Clover," with a distinctive red-and-white label with a green four-leaf clover (a brand that still exists). As Karl later summarized, "After World War I, my father started importing concentrated milk to Germany

and to France. Then, working with Americans, he built factories in both countries."[10]

In 1922, at the rather advanced age of forty-one, Otto Lagerfeld married Theresia Feigl, who, that same year, died giving birth to their first child, Karl's half sister, Theodora, or Thea. On March 8, 1929, Otto Lagerfeld announced his second engagement, to Elisabeth Bahlmann. The following year, on April 11, 1930, they were married in her family's hometown of Münster.[11] The groom was forty-eight years old; the bride was thirty-two.

Elisabeth's father, Karl Bahlmann, Karl's namesake, was an accomplished politician and administrator in the province of Westphalia. He died young, in 1922, at the age of sixty-three, when Karl's mother was twenty-four. Elisabeth, by all accounts, was an independent young woman: she cut her long hair into a bob, which she wore for the rest of her life, and was an avid reader. "My mother was interested in the history of feminism," Karl later explained. "And in my childhood, I heard about Hedwig Dohm, a German-Jewish feminist who was a writer in Berlin. The rights of women in Germany in the 1870s were limited to the Three Ks—*Küche*, *Kirche* and *Kinder*—the kitchen, the church and the children. But nobody remembers her—people remember the English suffragettes but the first to care about women's rights was Hedwig Dohm."[12]

Elisabeth left the provinces for Dresden when she was eighteen years old, and for Berlin during the 1920s, where she may have worked for a department store or as a director of a fashion house.[13] "I was lucky to have parents who were very open-minded," Karl later explained. "Although I am not sure that they were completely innocent in their youths. My mother always said, 'You can ask me about my childhood and about the time since I have known your father. But everything in between is none of your business.'"[14]

Elisabeth Bahlmann also lived in Cologne and Munich before meeting Otto Lagerfeld, the widower, apparently when both were on holiday on the Baltic coast. He was distinguished-looking, still handsome, with dark hair and a mustache, and favoring gray suits. She was an attractive

woman with fine features, short dark hair, and piercing somber eyes. The year after their wedding, 1931, Otto and Elisabeth had their first daughter, Christiane, or Christel. The birth of their son, Karl, came two years later.

The year 1933 in Germany may have been one of the more eventful, and ultimately tragic, in history. In the presidential elections the year before, Adolf Hitler had come in second, winning no more than 35 percent of the national vote. By the end of January 1933, to appease his party, he was named chancellor. In February, the Reichstag, seat of the German parliament, burned to the ground. Hitler issued the Reichstag Fire Decree, suspending most civil liberties throughout Germany, including the freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and habeas corpus. The country's political and social leadership was fractured, seemingly frozen. There was a sense of anarchy, a fear of communism, and a political void that Hitler was able to exploit. Throughout March, the Nazi Party began to seize control of state governments.[15] By the end of the month, in a series of legislative moves, Hitler forced votes that gave him and his party full dictatorial power. "The one-party totalitarian State had been achieved with scarcely a ripple of opposition or defiance," wrote William Shirer, the American journalist who was a firsthand witness to the events of those years.[16] By May, all trade unions were dissolved. From June 30 to July 2 was the "Night of Long Knives," when Hitler had hundreds of his former allies and political opponents murdered.[17]

The Weimar Republic, which had begun in 1919, was over. It had been a time of rampant inflation, political unrest, and class conflict, but it had also been an era of tremendous personal freedom and artistic excitement, much of the creativity that inspired Karl. Think of the vigorous paintings of Berlin bohemians by Otto Dix; great German expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and Marlene Dietrich's star turn in *The Blue Angel* (1930); *The Threepenny Opera* (1929), the

modernist musical by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill; or Christopher Isherwood's 1935 novel of his time in the German capital, *Goodbye to Berlin*, and the 1972 film it inspired, *Cabaret*. The family of a successful businessman like Otto Lagerfeld enjoyed the cultural excitement of those years while being insulated from much of the hardship. "My parents lived in a protected world in the late '20s and early '30s," Karl once explained. "They always talked about how marvelous life was then: how pleasant, how luxurious, how divine."[18] That insouciance was coming to an end.

Karl's altering of the date of his birth, from 1933 to 1938, was not accidental. Yes, it reduced his age by five years, but it also shifted his childhood away from the Nazis. If he had been born in 1938, he would have been too young to have seen what happened in the late '30s and during much of World War II. Although his childhood was more sheltered than many, he was very present for the horrors of Nazi Germany.

The German book publisher Gerhard Steidl, founder of Steidl Verlag, worked closely with Karl for three decades. He believed that Karl had gone so far as to falsify his birth certificate and passport, physically altering the year of his birth, turning the "3" into an "8."

Early in their relationship, in the mid-1990s, the publisher asked Karl about it. "I was young and naïve," Gerhard Steidl said of his decision to broach such a sensitive subject. "So, I asked him, 'Why do you say you were born in '38 when you were obviously born in '33?'"[19]

Karl's answer was revelatory. "I was ashamed," he told Steidl. "I was ashamed that I was born in the year when Hitler started his project of killing the Jewish population of Germany. And I did not want to be connected to that year."[20]

Put that directly, his desire to distance himself from his true date of birth is understandable. "You know, 1933, even today, means the far right," Steidl continued. "It is a terrible date in Germany and in world history. So, he said that he changed it because he did not want his birth date connected with such an infamous year."[21]

The fact of the matter, however, is that Karl came into the world at the same time as the Third Reich.

2

THE WEIGHT OF GERMAN HISTORY

There was one thing I hated and that was being a child. I thought it was humiliating. I wanted to be a grown-up person as soon as possible.[1]

KARL'S EARLIEST YEARS WERE spent in the splendor of the family home in the Hamburg district of Blankenese. "I've always had a nostalgia for that part of Hamburg with the river, the boats, and that poetic atmosphere," he said. "The first sounds I remember were the ships on the river, and my first memory in life was sheer tulle curtains at the windows, blowing in the wind."[2]

By 1935, Otto Lagerfeld moved his family into a more protected part of the country, twenty-five miles north of Hamburg. Karl later suggested, improbably, that the move took place because they felt that being so close to the river was too humid.[3] Nevertheless, his father, who had already lived through a surprising amount of historical upheaval, bought a property in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, on the outskirts of the town of Bad Bramstedt. As Karl described their move, "I spent my childhood in the country, near the Danish border, in an isolated house in the middle of a forest."[4] The estate, known as Bissenmoor, included a large white country house that had been built around 1900. The drive ended in a cobblestone circle in front of the house, set off by flower beds, manicured shrubs, and tall pine trees.[5] It was a three-story structure with a

large veranda on the ground floor, the family's bedrooms on the second floor, and a steep pitched roof in red tile surmounted by a central cupola. Karl's room was in the center, with two large French doors that opened onto a terrace.[6] Bissenmoor sat on over twelve hundred acres of pasture and wooded land.[7]

Otto Lagerfeld, who was fifty-two when Karl was born, was a distant presence, focused on the running of his company, Glücksklee. He always wore a hat and carried a cane, preferring his suits in light gray *fil à fil*, a woven fabric that Karl never really liked.[8] "At that time, those kind of people did not really spend a lot of time talking with their children," Karl said of his father in 2008. "It wasn't necessary. He was always nice. In fact, my mother said: 'Ask your father—he's nicer than I am.' And he would say, 'Do what you want but not in front of your mother, because she will make fun of me.'"[9]

Both of his parents were polyglot, with his father said to have spoken nine languages. He encouraged Karl, when he was young, to learn Russian. His parents often spoke French together. "When I was five, I asked for a French tutor," Karl recalled. "I hated not being able to understand what they were saying, which is why they were speaking French."[10] His mother, trilingual, had assembled quite a library of German, French, and English literature. "Her great passion was reading," he remembered. "She would shut herself in her room to read."[11]

The first tome in his parents' library that attracted Karl's attention was *Das Nibelungenlied*, an epic poem from the German Middle Ages.[12] The story was one of Richard Wagner's inspirations for the four operas in his Ring Cycle (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 1853–1874). The Lagerfelds' copy featured illustrations by a nineteenth-century German artist, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. "It was a thick book, with images that were pretty terrifying," Karl recalled. "It was not a book for children. But my mother said, 'If you want to read it, learn how to read.' And that is how I learned."[13]

His mother went on to encourage young Karl to read Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary

figure. "My mother was fascinated by Goethe and literally forced me to read his entire works," Karl explained. She focused Karl on the complete edition of his works, forty volumes published by Johann Friedrich Cotta in 1832. There were some elements of Goethe that Karl found tedious. His poetry, for example, was less than inspiring. But Goethe's *Elective Affinities* was, throughout his life, Karl's favorite German novel.[14] Goethe had a vast range of interests, moving between the disciplines of literature, theater, philosophy, science, aesthetic criticism, politics, and religion. There was an expansiveness about Goethe's intellectual life, an ambition that inspired Karl from an early age.

There were other significant literary discoveries. His mother introduced him to such figures as Gustav Stresemann, the German statesman, and Walther Rathenau, an industrialist and author who was assassinated in 1922 by the Organisation Consul, a forerunner of the Nazis.[15] He also learned of Eduard von Keyserling, a nineteenth-century author of stylized novels. "He writes about the passions of the Baltic aristocracies in the 1880s," Karl noted. "Ravishing!"[16] He was struck by the spareness of the prose. "Keyserling is Impressionism. With three words, you see the place, the area, you smell the air. His descriptions, which still strike me today, are so evocative with such few words."[17]

But Karl was particularly taken by another historical German figure that he was encouraged to read: Count Harry Graf Kessler (1868–1937). "I have been a huge fan of Harry Kessler since my early youth because of my mother," Karl later explained.[18] Kessler was intellectually rigorous, international, and urbane. Kessler never missed the opening of a major cultural event, whether it was the premiere of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* or Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera*. One week, at his apartment in Berlin, he had Albert Einstein over for dinner, followed, the next week, by Josephine Baker, who improvised a dance around his sculpture of a crouching nude woman by Aristide Maillol.[19] W. H. Auden considered Kessler "probably the most cosmopolitan man who ever lived."[20] Karl was fascinated. As he once said, "If I identify with anyone, it would be Harry Kessler."[21]

The son of Hamburg bankers, Kessler was born in Paris and grew up in France, England, and Germany. He studied law and art history and was an army officer and a diplomat. In the decades before and after World War I, he was at the center of European intellectual and artistic life. Gerhard Steidl often discussed him with Karl. "His mother idolized Harry Graf Kessler," Steidl explained. "He was left wing, referred to by some as the Red Count, he was a minister in a new German government prior to Hitler, and he was interested in Jewish culture."[22] Intellectually and politically, Kessler was progressive. "Karl cared about Kessler because of the connection between politics, social engagement, and art," Steidl continued. "Karl said very often that before the war, before Hitler, that that was Germany: looking to the future, building a better future for workers, for women, for children. And that, in turn, led to great cinema, to theater, to literature, to music and so on. And Karl found all of this in the person of Harry Graf Kessler."[23]

Settling in Berlin in the late nineteenth century, and then also in Weimar, Kessler was an editor for a literary journal, a museum curator, and an author. In 1909, he conceived and wrote the libretto for *Der Rosenkavalier*, the very successful comic opera with music by Richard Strauss. More than his other works, Kessler has been best remembered for his journals. The English translation of his diaries leading up to the First World War, *Journey to the Abyss: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler, 1880–1918*, characterized them as "his greatest work, fifty-six years of journals, chronicling his life led at the center of European art, literature, and politics during the greatest cultural and political transformations in modern history."[24]

The author Ian Buruma, in the introduction to Kessler's interwar diaries, *Berlin in Lights: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918–1937)*, underscored the poignancy of his observations. "The Europe of Kessler's diary is a lost world encrusted with glittering layers of myth, spun by Isherwood, Grosz, Brecht, and Weill, among others," Buruma wrote. "What infuses Kessler's descriptions of 1920s Berlin, Weimar, Paris, and London with such melancholy beauty is the author's own awareness

that, even as he was writing, that world was doomed to almost total destruction. It was decadent in the most literal sense."[25]

Kessler, just like Karl, was not a mild-mannered observer. In March 1911, he went to the house of Walther Rathenau, whom he very much admired, in the Berlin suburb of Grunewald. "He had the room painted in a Biedermeier style, cold, formal tones: cornflower blue, sepia brown, ochre yellow," Kessler wrote. "It is as if everything that is hidden under the stiff bourgeois façade of dead 'culture,' of petty sentimentality, and of stunted eroticism, comes to the fore like a skin rash. The whole thing a mixture of stiff dignity and schoolboy fantasy, as if thought up together by a banker and a masturbating boy."[26]

Harry Kessler was also a book publisher. In 1913 in Weimar, he started the Cranach-Presse, which became legendary in the history of book publishing. Inspired by the turn-of-the century Arts & Crafts movement, Kessler paid tremendous attention to every detail of the fifty-three books that he published between 1928 and 1932. Karl had a collection of practically every publication of the Cranach-Presse.

Through the Paris sculptor Auguste Rodin, Kessler met the sculptor Maillol, whom Kessler hired to produce engravings for a publication of Virgil's *Eclogues*, and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who became Kessler's secretary. The high point of Kessler's work as a publisher was a version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, published first in German and then in English. "This 1930 version of *Hamlet*, illustrated by Edward Gordon Craig, is often regarded as the most bold and ambitious example of 20th century book art," noted the British Library. "Elegantly put together, with obsessive attention to detail, it uses hand-made paper and decorated binding, fine images, and beautiful typefaces to enhance the dramatic effect of Shakespeare's play."[27]

Having been fascinated by books from the earliest age, Karl, by the 1990s, became a book publisher. He worked with Gerhard Steidl, conceiving and publishing dozens of books on fashion, art, photography, and translations of German literature. "And Harry Graf Kessler was a role model as a publisher," Steidl pointed out.[28]

Another aspect of his character that was meaningful for Karl: Harry Graf Kessler was homosexual. He was a strong gay man, a Prussian officer, who achieved tremendous success in a variety of creative fields. Particularly at that time, he was a rare positive role model. It also has to be said that Count Kessler was quite the dandy. "Even the way I dress is, in a way, inspired by him," Karl once explained.[29] Kessler wore thin dark suits, with narrow ties, overcoats with extravagant fur lapels, and high-collared white dress shirts. He was always impeccably groomed, even when he joined his workers on the loud, dirty printing press.[30] Kessler had the same sense of formality, and flair, that Karl favored in the last decades of his life.

For all of those reasons, Karl made sure that he was never far from his writings. He bought multiple copies of the complete German editions of the journals. "The nine volumes of his diaries are always near my bedside in all of my houses," Karl explained. "Kessler represents for me Germany at its best, a Germany now gone forever."[31]

The 2009 film by the Austrian director Michael Haneke, *The White Ribbon*, though not a film that everyone has seen, is not easily forgotten. It explores a series of mysteries and tragic acts in a northern German village just before World War I. It was the winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, nominated for two Academy Awards, and winner of the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Although shot in color, the director, in postproduction, had all of the color drained out in order to produce a lustrous, but menacing, black and white. "I was shocked by *The White Ribbon*," said Karl. "It is so beautifully observed and gorgeously filmed—it is a masterpiece. But I was sick for three days after seeing it because I practically lived what is shown in the film."[32]

It is set in a village called Eichwald, a small, northern German town that is not unlike Bad Bramstedt. The rural landscape, the modest scale

of the architecture, are very familiar. As Karl pointed out, "The place where Haneke filmed was not even 20 miles from where I spent my youth."[33] In the opening moments of *The White Ribbon*, an unseen narrator sets the scene. "I don't know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true," he intones. "Some of it I only know from hearsay. After so many years, a lot of it is still obscure, and many questions remain unanswered. But I think I must tell of the strange events that occurred in our village. They could perhaps clarify some things that happened in this country."

Although calm on the surface, Eichwald is the scene of a host of malicious acts: a trip wire is strung between two trees to fell, violently, a horse and rider; the infant son of the local baron is abducted and beaten with a cane; a doctor mistreats his midwife girlfriend while abusing her daughter; a pastor insists on complete purity from his children and punishes any infraction by making them wear a white ribbon around their arm, symbolizing their loss of purity. It depicts a repressed and repressive society, with violent acts that erupt without warning and senseless reprisals.

Haneke encourages viewers to see the story as an exploration of the rise of Nazism. The children in the film, most of whom are quite frightening, would have become young adults by the time Hitler swept to power. The name of the village seemed to be a combination of "Eichmann" and "Buchenwald." *The White Ribbon* provoked a great amount of academic analysis. As one scholar noted: "It depicts the fictional community of Eichwald as a template for a nation's biopolitical destiny, its future set on a course toward violence, fanaticism, and genocide."[34]

Karl also reacted strongly to the religious elements of the story. As he said, "The film reminds me of the depraved pastor when I was young who insisted, 'You have to go to catechism class or you will go to hell.' I told him that my mother said that hell doesn't exist."[35] Both of his parents were Catholic but they were living in a part of the country that was mostly Protestant. Otto Lagerfeld's parents, however, had been Protestant. "I know that his mother was very mean," Karl said of his paternal grandmother. "They were strange people. They were Protestants who

had become Catholic, and those are the worst: they are hysterical and they overreact."[36]

There may have been some familial reasons for Karl to be suspicious of the Protestant severity that he saw in Bad Bramstedt. But he was also sensitive to what he saw as religious hypocrisy, in *The White Ribbon* and in the rural environment of his youth. "I remember the pastor, at a party in the village, being completely drunk," Karl later explained. "The dance floor was empty and he was dancing all alone, holding his mug of beer. He passed in front of his wife and shouted, '*Emma, try not to fall down!*' I said to myself, 'If this is the Protestant Church, no thanks.'"[37]

Karl always gave the impression that he had not been particularly worried about fitting in with the other children in Bad Bramstedt. At a time when other boys had short buzz cuts—it was, after all, the time of the Hitler Youth—Karl kept his dark hair glossy and long. While his classmates wore rough shorts and home-knit sweaters, he wore Tyrolian suits with big bow ties. He even had one for Sunday in black suede embroidered with gold.[38] In one class photo, Karl sat in the front row, his legs crossed, wearing a signet ring and a dark double-breasted jacket with peak lapels.[39] "Someone sent me a photo from when I was a child," he later explained in an interview on CNN. "They are all in little knit things and little shirts. And there is one person in a black jacket, tie, white shirt, tons of hair—it's me. I always like the idea of being different from other people. I don't know why—I was born this way."[40]

When he was four, he asked his mother for a valet for his birthday. "I wanted my clothes prepared so I could wear anything I wanted at any time of the day. I was mad for dressing differently, at least four times a day."[41] Whether or not he was that much of a child prodigy, he was clearly sensitive to style from a very early age. "I was always interested in fashion and I think in my heart that I more or less knew that I would one day design clothes," Karl explained four decades later. "As a child, I

loved clothes. I used to criticize the way people dressed and I was fascinated by the pictures in my history books. The costumes interested me far more than the battles."[42]

By the time he was six, he had gained some proficiency in English and French, and he was not shy about showing it off.[43] The French teacher at his school at Bad Bramstedt had horrible pronunciation. Karl corrected him in front of the class. And he engaged in plenty of activities that set him apart from the other boys. "We could choose between gym classes and dance classes, and I chose dance because it seemed more amusing to me," Karl later explained. "I rode my bike several miles to school, so that was enough for exercise. And I was always afraid with other sports that I was going to damage my hands. I didn't want to do anything that might endanger my drawing."[44]

From the youngest age, Karl was passionate about sketching and drawing. "I was born with a pencil in my hand," as he put it. "I drew all the time."[45] His mother's library was an excellent source of artistic inspiration. "My gods were Aubrey Beardsley, Toulouse-Lautrec, and the great caricaturists of the satiric review *Simplicissimus*, with such incredible artists as the Norwegian Gulbrandsen, Bruno Paul, Thomas Theodor Heine," Karl explained. In his parents' attic, he discovered large bound volumes of *Simplicissimus*, covering the best years of the magazine, from 1900 to 1918.[46] The review, based in Munich, published scathing cartoons on a host of targets, including the church, society, and politicians, both right and left. The publication's illustrators, many of whom also worked in advertising, produced work that was stripped down but very bold. Karl, who later built an important collection of posters and lithographs from these illustrators, felt that their work represented the birth of modern art. By integrating typography in their graphics, they were like Pop Artists, Karl believed, fifty years before that movement began.[47]

An art instructor at Bad Bramstedt, Heinz-Helmut Schulz, recognized Karl's skill at drawing and encouraged him. He drew caricatures of teachers, at least one of which was given pride of place on the wall of

the school's auditorium. For the girls in his class, at their request, he would sketch dresses.[48]

Although he was clearly interested in style, his earliest thoughts about his future involved art. "I wanted to become an illustrator or caricaturist," he later explained.[49] "I was always interested in paper and pencil, reading and learning languages—I did not care about the rest."[50]

From the time he was quite young, Karl had an active imagination. "Much of my youth was spent in the country, so I had to try to imagine the world," he once explained. "Without television, and practically without radio, with only a huge library, I had to dream about how life could be."[51] In 1980, when he was forty-six, Karl sat for an interview with *Le Monde*. "You want to shout 'bravo' as though you're at the theater or cry out in frustration," the newspaper noted. "Karl Lagerfeld pushes his personality to the limit of the most sophisticated kind of dandy. But he does it all with such art!" The journalist suggested that Karl's distinctive personality had not happened overnight and asked where he really came from. His answer: "From the idea that I made of myself when I was a child."[52]

Karl insisted that he was unconcerned about how other children reacted to him but there was another source of hostility in his youth: his mother. Elisabeth Lagerfeld was not particularly happy living in Bad Bramstedt. "His mother wanted to make it an intellectual household," Gerhard Steidl said. "She was dreaming of having literary salons like those in Weimar by Nietzsche, Harry Graf Kessler, Henry van de Velde, and so on. But it was, of course, impossible, because people in the country were not interested in that kind of high culture."[53]

Regardless, when it came to her children, his mother could be almost shockingly severe. "I had to fight to speak with her," Karl remembered. "She said, 'Look, you are six years old and I'm not. Make an effort or shut up.'"[54] He traced his rapid-fire delivery, which he had throughout his

life, to his mother. "She was not a fan of children talking a lot. I learned to be able to finish a story between where I was standing and the door. She said, 'We can't spend much time on all of the foolishness that you have to say—speak faster.'"[55]

His mother certainly had a strong personality and ran the household with a firm hand. As Karl said simply, "My mother told other people what to do."[56] She had long played the violin, and when Karl was a child, she practiced for several hours every morning.[57] She played on a nineteenth-century French violin by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, and she filled the house with the demanding compositions of Niccolò Paganini. "It was horrible, not to listen to her, but during her endless practice sessions, my sisters and I barely had the right to breathe," Karl later explained.[58] She did, though, encourage her children to follow her lead and take up an instrument. Once, when Karl was practicing the piano, she slammed the cover shut and said, "Stop playing—it makes too much noise. Why don't you draw—at least that will be quieter."[59]

Elisabeth Lagerfeld was dismissive of her son in a seemingly unlimited number of ways, and Karl was fond of recounting her observations. "My mother used to say to me, 'Your nose is like a potato,'" he recalled. "And, 'I think I should order curtains for those nostrils!' She would also say, 'You look like me, but not as good.' I heard that all of my life."[60] Karl described his mother's hair as raven colored and admitted that she was disappointed with his lighter shade. "My mother hated my mahogany-colored hair and used to call me an 'old chest of drawers.' She was right, plus it was said with a smile. All of that was traumatic, however, for my sister and my stepsister, from my father's first marriage, though I barely knew them—they were in boarding school and were married as soon as they graduated."[61]

Her son was not the only target of her scorn. "My mother was fun, witty—perhaps, even a little mean—but amusing," Karl said decades later. "She was a little offhand with my father, making funny remarks about him. We laughed at him when we shouldn't have. Sometimes, I have a bad feeling that I wasn't nice enough to him."[62]

Elisabeth Lagerfeld's harshness could also become corporal. Once, Karl tried to get out of going to school by pretending to have polio. He said that he hurt all over and couldn't move. To prove that he was faking it, his mother slapped him in the face.[63] "She wasn't exactly namby-pamby/wishy-washy," Karl said, in quite the understatement. "One day, an orthopedist said that my feet had a tendency to widen. She bought this fairly frightening piece of equipment on which I had to walk for a long time in order to have feet that were well muscled and narrow."[64]

There has been the sense that some of his mother's takes were a little too much like Karl's, that they were too good to be true. His stories about her seemed designed to grab the attention. Her severity, whether this was intended or not, also suggested adversity that Karl had to overcome. These tales also livened up his family story. But his accounts of maternal harshness were consistent over the decades and were confirmed by other witnesses.

It was later discovered that Elisabeth Lagerfeld had been a member of the Nazi Party. The German journalist Alfons Kaiser, author of the biography *Karl Lagerfeld: A German in Paris*, has done more research than anyone on Karl's youth. He uncovered a family photo from March 1938, of a twenty-foot-tall pole in front of Bissenmoor, with the red-and-black swastika flying in the wind. A four-year-old Karl stood in the foreground facing the flag, while his six-year-old sister, Christel, stood behind the pole, looking up. The occasion was the Anschluss, when Germany annexed Austria. She noted the date on the back of the photo.[65]

Otto Lagerfeld, like most German professionals, gave the impression that he adhered to Nazi thinking. He was an official member of the party from May 1933 until May 1945, as his postwar de-Nazification file showed. As a representative of American interests, he was viewed with suspicion by party loyalists, and during the war he had to fight to make sure that his business was not overtaken by Nazi opportunists. After the war, it was determined that his party membership was not out of ideological support but rather commercial necessity.[66] Elisabeth made the choice to join. After the war, she wrote a five-page text, Kaiser discovered, that

did not gloss over the subject. It was entitled, "Why Did I Decide to Become a Member of the National Socialist German Workers Party?" She stressed her patriotic background, as "the daughter of a royal Prussian administrator," and her sensitivity to the exploitation of working people that she had seen in Berlin and Hamburg. She saw Hitler as a way to restore a sense of discipline to a country that was out of control and to hold off the communist menace from the Soviet Union. The 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 1938 annexation of Austria were, to her, examples of Hitler's vigor. But by the fall of 1938, and Kristallnacht, and 1941, when she saw that the Jewish population of Hamburg was being systematically rounded up, she was shocked by what the Nazis had shown themselves to be.[67] "What is striking about her written declaration," Alfons Kaiser wrote, "is how Elisabeth Lagerfeld is trying to make excuses while simultaneously asking herself some rather probing questions. In fact, she is probably more critical and scrutinizing than most other Germans who played their part in National Socialism."[68]

After Otto Lagerfeld retired in 1956, he and Karl's mother retired to the spa town of Baden-Baden. After he died, in 1967, Elisabeth Lagerfeld, rather incredibly, moved in with her son in his apartments in Paris. She first lived with him in his three-room flat at 35, rue de l'Université. Then, when he took over a floor of a grand apartment on the Place Saint-Sulpice, he made a room for her that was decorated with Biedermeier furniture, the classical, early nineteenth-century style that she preferred.

One of Karl's closest German friends, Florentine Pabst, who wrote stories about Karl for *Stern* beginning in the early '70s, knew his mother quite well. "Whenever I was in Paris for work and met Karl at his apartment on the Place Saint Sulpice, he always wanted to make sure that I kept an afternoon to have tea with his mother," Pabst remembered. "I spent time with her in her Biedermeier room at the end of the apartment. She may have been fond of me because I lived and worked in Hamburg, which gave her the chance to reminisce. She was an extraordinary woman . . . looking at her face was like looking into Karl's. She had the same mind and a similar wit."[69]

Silvia Venturini Fendi knew Karl since she was four years old, when he began working with her mother and her four aunts at Fendi. Over the years, she had heard Karl tell so many stories of his mother's harshness. "Oh my God, she was such a bitch," Venturini Fendi recalled. "That is the way that she showed her love to him. And I think that stayed with him."[70]

The Princess Diane de Beauvau-Craon was a close friend of Karl's beginning in the late 1970s. She first met his mother at Grand Champ, the eighteenth-century château in Brittany that he restored. Beauvau-Craon, who hails from one of the oldest families in France, always had a very strong personality and had certainly met her share of formidable people over the years. "Karl had a love for his mother that was absolute," she explained. "But I have to admit that when I met her, she reminded me of an ice pick! She was someone who was terribly cold. An ice pick is for breaking ice, of course, but also, unfortunately, for killing—that's the impression she gave me. I was terrified."[71]

Karl always implied that he appreciated his mother's stern lessons. "At the same time, she was very protective," he pointed out. "No one could touch me."[72] Once, a teacher from Bad Bramstedt told Elisabeth Lagerfeld that she should make Karl cut his hair. She grabbed him by the tie and said, "What, are you still a Nazi?" It was a startling story that Karl reenacted on German television in 2012, grabbing the presenter's tie and flinging it in his face.[73]

Her observations could be amusing. "When I wore a Tyrolian badger hat with a feather on top, my mother said, 'Don't wear that, you look like an old lesbian!' Is that something that should be said to a child?"[74] And there were other times when her input was reassuring. "When I was a child, I asked my mother what homosexuality was and she said, 'It's like hair color—it's nothing. There are people with blond hair and people with dark hair—it's not an issue.' I was lucky to have parents who were so open."[75]

Karl was always extremely sensitive, a quality that was essential to his success as a designer, and an aspect of his personality that he hid behind

his bravado and his ever-present pair of dark sunglasses. So, her words, even if they were said in jest, had to have stung. But Karl discounted any damage that may have come from his mother's behavior, refusing to do any self-analysis about the subject. "Today, we like to give the impression that those kinds of things hurt but they didn't," he explained. "I was very comfortable with that—I was very comfortable with myself. And I think that this attitude gave me a kind of armor that still serves me today. It has not contributed to any kind of suffering or anything."[76]

That may be, but Karl was very eager to leave his early years behind. "My childhood desire was to no longer be a child," he quipped seven decades later. "Now, there is all of this talk about the paradise of childhood—I felt that it was humiliating. Horrible. It was being a second-class citizen."[77] He was eager to grow up and to be somewhere more compelling than Bad Bramstedt. "I didn't dislike being a child because I was unhappy, that was not at all the case, but because I found it boring. I wanted to be in big cities, ideally in another country, where I thought that everything was impeccable."[78]

And he always gave his mother credit for one comment that would be essential to the direction of his life. She encouraged his desire to leave Germany. "Hamburg is supposed to be the gate to the world," Karl was fond of quoting his mother.[79] "But it's only a gate, so get out!"[80]

3

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

I had an image, grandiose and idealized, of France. It had dimensions that my childhood did not have, and I felt that, ideally, life should be something like this.[1]

IN THE FINAL YEARS of World War II, much of Hamburg was obliterated by Allied bombing. Beginning on July 24, 1943, a series of joint missions by English and American forces, called Operation Gomorrah, was a fierce firebombing campaign, the most severe of the war, at that point. As the largest German port, Hamburg was an obvious military target. But the intensity of the effort was thought to be retaliation for the ferocious aerial attacks by the Nazis on London, Warsaw, and Rotterdam. An official Allied document, "Bomber Command Operation Order No. 173," was clear about the objective, "Intention: to destroy Hamburg."[2] The campaign, which lasted for eight days and seven nights, leveled over 60 percent of the city's housing. It created a tornado of fire estimated to be over fifteen hundred feet tall. More than thirty-five thousand residents were killed, and hundreds of thousands were injured.

"Biggest RAF-U.S. Raids on Reich Blast Hamburg, Hit Baltic Cities," was the front-page headline of the *New York Times*. "United States heavy bombers struck deep and hard into Germany by daylight yesterday, hammering aircraft factories at the Baltic port of Warnemuende and showering hundreds of high explosives into the smoking ruins of Ham-

burg, gutted by the British Royal Air Force's night bombers twelve hours earlier in the greatest bombing assault of the war," wrote the *Times*. The Allied raids began at night, with the Royal Air Force dropping twenty-three hundred tons of explosives and incendiary bombs on the city, far more than had ever been deployed in a single operation. Then came the American planes. "Large formations of American Flying Fortresses staged the follow-up daylight raid on Hamburg, raining hundreds of 500-pound bombs in mid-afternoon through great clouds of smoke rising thousands of feet from the fires started by the RAF armada."[3]

In the first week after the bombings, it was estimated that around one million people evacuated the city. Of course, Karl, who was just about to turn ten years old, would have seen the destruction only twenty-five miles away. But he preferred not to speak of what he had witnessed. He always insisted, in dozens of interviews over the decades, that he had seen nothing of the war. But in the summer of 2018, the year before he died, he discussed the bombing of Hamburg with a journalist from *Le Monde*. "We saw the red sky and the planes," Karl admitted. "We went to a high point in a field to watch the fire from far away."[4] By the time the war was over, in 1945, Karl was turning twelve. He experienced not only the war but much of its aftermath.

Beginning in 1943, refugees had begun pouring into Bad Bramstedt, which was also the site of bombings, gunfire, and blackouts. In the spring of 1945, the school was closed, in order to house refugees. By July, Bissenmoor was requisitioned by British forces, with dozens of soldiers living in the house. The Lagerfelds were confined to the barn and cooked their meals over an open fire in the courtyard.[5]

Much of Hamburg, for many years after, was in ruins. Paris writer Julien Green visited Germany in the summer of 1952 and, even then, was shocked by the destruction. "This city, filled with marvelous memories for me, is sown with ruins," Green wrote about Munich. "It reminds

me of the fading memory of a man who is getting old. Here there was a palace, there was a church, now it is nothing but rubble. I turn my head to find what remained of the Residenz Theatre and see nothing but a few columns from the portico." Green remembered that Cocteau had once suggested that Paris would make beautiful ruins, but he felt that this kind of destruction had nothing to do with the poetic remains of ancient Greek or Roman civilizations. "Cities that are instantly transformed into ruins are simply hideous: Hamburg, Bremen, Le Havre. Old stones need to fall one by one over time, with grasses growing over them, while the sun gilds all of that. There is nothing beautiful in this great black rubble that now covers Europe."[6]

Karl and his family were fortunate, of course. Unlike millions of victims of the Nazi regime, they survived the war. And, postwar, Otto Lagerfeld was able to continue to build the family fortune. But they were also surrounded by tremendous destruction and hardship. It is not surprising, then, that distant lands, other cultures would become attractive.

In the fall of 1945, Karl was in Hamburg, passing by one of the city's art galleries, and saw a painting of a historical scene that fired his imagination. "It was love at first sight," he later recalled.[7] The canvas was a copy of a work by nineteenth-century German artist Adolph Menzel, *König Friedrichs II. Tafelrunde in Sanssouci 1750* (1850). It depicted the eighteenth-century Prussian king Frederick the Great, at a round table, a *tafelrunde*, in the palace that he had built, the Sanssouci in Potsdam, known as the Prussian Versailles. King Frederick was depicted with a host of European intellectuals and artists, including the great French philosopher Voltaire.

The original was a massive canvas, over six and a half feet in width and just under six feet in height. Since 1873, it had belonged to the German National Museum in Berlin. At the start of World War II, the Menzel painting had been stored with a priceless collection of the museum's holdings—Botticelli, Caravaggio, Goya, Rubens, Tintoretto, Titian, Van Dyck—in massive "Flak Towers" at Berlin's Flakturm Zoo. The bunkers had been bombed by the Allies but never sustained serious

damage. Earlier that year, however, in May 1945, once Berlin had fallen, fires broke out in the massive structures. Along with over four hundred important paintings, *Tafelrunde in Sanssouci 1750* was destroyed.[8]

The modestly scaled copy that Karl saw, likely late nineteenth century, was painted when *Tafelrunde* was hanging in the museum. The scene showed the Prussian king and his guests, most with white wigs, wearing dark waistcoats and engaged in spirited conversation. The setting was the *Marmorsaal*, or Marble Hall, a high-ceilinged oval reception hall, with marble floors, gilded Corinthian columns along the walls, and a tall Palladian window over French doors that opened outside onto a garden. "The beautiful table, sumptuously set, suggested a world that was so different from the strict, 19th century, neoclassical, style that I was surrounded by," Karl later explained.[9] "I immediately decided that this refined scene represented life as it deserved to be lived. I saw it as a sort of ideal that, ever since, I have always tried to attain."[10]

This aristocratic, intellectual scene offered Karl his first glimpse of a world, the eighteenth century, which would fascinate him for the rest of his life. "I didn't even know if this was French or not," he said of the painting. "But Sans Souci was inspired by Versailles, as were all of the German princes of the 18th century."[11] After seeing the painting, he asked his parents for books on the artist, Menzel, on the life of Frederick II, and on Voltaire. He shut himself up in the family library and went upstairs into the attic to do more research. "My mother's side of the family was made up of functionaries and *geheimräte*, government advisors, for generations," Karl explained. "It was because of this that I found in our attic, a 12-volume edition illustrated by Menzel on the life and work of Frederick II offered by the emperor to my great grandfather."[12]

The English writer Lytton Strachey took an ironic view of the evenings at Sanssouci, when Frederick would entertain his guests with a concert where he played the flute, followed by dinner in the oval hall. "The royal master poured out his skill in some long and elaborate cadenzas and the adagio came, the marvelous adagio, and the conqueror of