CHAPTER XXIX

VON JAGOW, ZIMMERMANN, AND GERMAN-AMERICANS

Our train drew into the Berlin station on the evening of February 2, 1916. The date is worth mentioning, for that marked an important crisis in German-American relations. Almost the first man I met. was my old friend and colleague, Ambassador James W. Gerard. Mr. Gerard told me that he was packing up and expected to leave Berlin at any moment, for he believed that a break between Germany and the United States was a matter only of days, perhaps of hours. At that time Germany and the United States were discussing the settlement of the *Lusitania* outrage. The negotiations had reached a point where the Imperial Government had expressed a willingness to express her regrets, pay an indemnity, and promise not to do it again. But the President and Mr. Lansing insisted that Germany should declare that the sinking of the *Lusitania* had been an illegal act. This meant that Germany at no time in the future could resume submarine warfare without stultifying herself and doing something which her own government had denounced as contrary to international law. But our government would accept nothing less and the two nations were, therefore, at loggerheads.

"I can do nothing more," said Mr. Gerard. "I want to have you talk with Zimmermann and Von Jagow, and perhaps you can give them a new point of view."

I soon discovered, from my many callers, that the atmosphere in Berlin was tense and exceedingly anti-American. Our country was regarded everywhere as practically an ally of the Entente, and I found that the most absurd ideas prevailed concerning the closeness of our relations with England. Thus it was generally believed that Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, the British Ambassador in Washington, met regularly with President Wilson's Cabinet and was consulted on all our national policies.

At three o'clock Mr. Gerard took me to Von Jagow's house and we spent more than an hour there with the Foreign Minister. Von Jagow was a small, slight man of nervous disposition. He lighted cigarette after cigarette during our interview. He was apparently greatly worried over the American situation. Let us not suppose that the German Government regarded lightly a break with the United States. At that time their newspapers were ridiculing and insulting us, and making fun of the idea that Uncle Sam would go to war. The contrast between these journalistic vapourings and the anxiety, even the fear, which this high German official displayed, much impressed me. The prospect of having our men and our resources thrown on the side of the Entente he did not regard indifferently, whatever the Berlin press might say.

"It seems to us a shame that Mr. Lansing should insist that we declare the *Lusitania* sinking illegal," Von Jagow began. "He is acting like a technical lawyer."

"If you want the real truth," I replied, "I do not think that the United States is particular or technical about the precise terms that you use. But you must give definite assurances that you are sorry for the act, say that you regard it as an improper one, and that it will not occur again. Unless you do this, the United States will not be satisfied."

"We cannot do that," he answered. "Public opinion in Germany would not permit it. If we should make a declaration such as you outline, the present Cabinet would fall."

"But I thought that you had public opinion here well under control?" I answered. "It may take a little time but certainly you can change public sentiment so that it would approve such a settlement."

"As far as the newspapers are concerned," said Von Jagow, "that is true. We can absolutely control them. However, that will take some time. The newspapers cannot reverse themselves immediately; they will have to do it gradually, taking two or three weeks. We can manage them. But there are members of Parliament whom we can't control and they would make so much trouble that we would all have to resign."

"Yet it seems to me," I rejoined, "that you could get these members together, explain to them the necessity of keeping the United States out of the war, and that they would be convinced. The trouble is that you Germans

don't understand conditions in my country. You don't think that the United States will fight. You don't understand President Wilson; you think that he is an idealist and a peace man, and that, under no circumstances, will he take up arms. You are making the greatest and most costly mistake that any nation could make. The President has two sides to his nature. Do not forget that he has Scotch-Irish blood in him. Up to the present you have seen only the Scotch side of him. That makes him very cautious, makes him weigh every move, makes him patient and long-suffering. But he has also all the fire and combativeness of the Irish. Let him once set his jaws and it takes a crowbar to open them again. If he once decides to fight, he will fight with all his soul and to the bitter end. You can go just so far with your provocations but no farther. You are also greatly deceived because certain important members of Congress, perhaps even a member of the Cabinet, have been for peace. But there is one man who is going to settle this matter---that is the President. He will settle it as he thinks right and just, irrespective of what other people may say or do."

Von Jagow said that I had given him a new impression of the President. But he still had one more reason to believe that the United States would not go to war.

"How about the German-Americans?" he asked.

"I can tell you all about them," I answered, "because I am one of them myself. I was born in Germany and spent the first nine years of my life here. I have always loved many things German, such as its music and its literature. But my parents left this country because they were dissatisfied and unhappy here. The United States gave us a friendly reception and a home, and made us prosperous and happy. There are many millions just like us; there is no business opportunity and no social position that is not open to us. I do not believe that there is a more contented people in the world than the German-Americans." I could not reveal to him my own state of mind, as I was still ambassador, but I could and did say:

"Take my own children. Their sympathies all through this war have been with England and her allies. My son is here with me; he tells me that, if the United States goes to war, he will enlist immediately. Do you suppose, in case we should go to war with Germany, that they would side with you? The idea is simply preposterous. And the overwhelming mass of German-Americans feel precisely the same way."

"But I am told," said Von Jagow, "that there will be an insurrection of German-Americans if your country makes war on us."

"Dismiss any such idea from your mind," I replied.

The first one who attempts it will be punished so promptly and so drastically that such a movement will not go far. And I think that the loyal German-Americans themselves will be the first to administer such punishment."

"We wish to avoid a rupture with the United States," said Von Jagow. "But we must have time to change public sentiment here. There are two parties here, holding diametrically opposed views on submarine warfare. One believes in pushing it to the limit, irrespective of consequences to the United States or any other power. The present Cabinet takes the contrary view; we wish to meet the contentions of your President., But the militaristic faction is pushing us hard. They will force us out of office if we declare the *Lusitania* sinking illegal or improper. I think that President Wilson should understand this. We are working with him, but we must go cautiously. I should suppose that Mr. Wilson, since he wishes to avoid a break, would prefer to have us in power. Why should he take a stand that will drive us out of office and put in here men who will make war inevitable between Germany and the United States?"

"Do you wish Washington to understand," I asked, ,"that your tenure of office depends on your not making this declaration?"

"We certainly do," replied Von Jagow. "I wish that you would telegraph Washington to that effect. Tell the President that, if we are displaced now, we shall be succeeded by men who advocate unlimited submarine warfare."

He expressed himself as amazed at my description of President Wilson and his willingness to fight. "We regard him," said Von Jagow, "as absolutely a man of peace. Nor do we believe that the American people will fight. They are far from the scene of action, and, what, after all, have they to fight for? Your material interests are not affected."

"But there is one thing that we will fight for," I replied, "and that is moral principle. It is quite apparent that you do not understand the American spirit. You do not realize that. we are holding off, not because we have no desire to fight, but because we wish to be absolutely fair. We first wish to have all the evidence in. I admit that we are reluctant to mix in foreign disputes, but we shall insist upon our right to use the ocean as we see fit and we don't propose to have Germany constantly interfering with that right and murdering our citizens. The American is still perhaps a great powerful youth, but once he gets his mind made up that he is going to defend his rights, he will do so irrespective of consequences. You seem to think that Americans will not fight for a principle; you apparently have forgotten that all our wars have been over matters of principle. Take the greatest of them all ---the Civil War, from 1861 to '65. We in the North fought to emancipate the slaves; that was purely a matter of principle; our material interests were not involved. And we fought that to the end, although we had to fight our own brothers."

"We don't want to be on bad terms with the United States," Von Jagow replied. "There are three nations on whom the peace of the world depends---England, the United States, and Germany. We three should get together, establish peace, and maintain it. I thank you for your explanation; I understand the situation much better now. But I still don't see why your Government is so hard on Germany and so easy with England." I made the usual explanation that we regarded our problem with each nation as a distinct matter and could not make our treatment of Germany in any way conditional on our treatment of England.

"Oh, yes," replied Von Jagow, rather plaintively.

"It reminds me of two boys playing in a yard. One is to be punished first and the other is waiting for his turn. Wilson is going to spank the German boy first, and, after he gets through, then he proposes to take up England."

"However," he concluded, "I wish you would cable the President that you have gone over the matter with me and now understand the German point of view. Won't you please ask him to do nothing until you have reached the other side and explained the whole thing personally?

I made this promise, and Mr. Gerard and I cabled immediately.

At four-thirty o'clock I had an engagement to take tea with Dr. Alexander and his wife at their home. I had been there about fifteen minutes when Zimmermann was announced! He was a different kind of man from Von Jagow. He impressed me as much stronger, mentally and physically. He was tall, even stately in his bearing, masterful in his manner, direct and searching in his questions, but extremely pleasing and insinuating.

Zimmermann, discussing the German-American situation, began with a statement which I presume he thought would be gratifying to me. He told me how splendidly the Jews had behaved in Germany during the war and how deeply under obligations the Germans felt to them.

"After the war," he said, "they are going to be much better treated in Germany than they have been."

Zimmermann told me that Von Jagow had told him about our talk and asked me to repeat part of it. He was particularly interested, he said, in my statements about the German-Americans, and he wished to learn from me himself the facts upon which I based my conclusions. Like most Germans, he regarded the Germanic elements in our population as almost a part of Germany.

"Are you sure that the mass of German-Americans would be loyal to the United States in case of war?" he asked. "Aren't their feelings for the Fatherland really dominant? "

"You evidently regard those German-Americans as a. distinct part of the population," I replied, "living apart from the rest of the people and having very little to do with American life as a whole. You could not make a

greater mistake. You can purchase a few here and there who will make a big noise and shout for Germany, but I am talking about the millions of Americans of German ancestry. These people regard themselves as Americans and nothing else. The second generation particularly resent being looked upon as Germans. It is practically impossible to make them talk German; they refuse to speak anything but English. They do not read German newspapers and will not go to German schools. They even resent going to Lutheran churches where the language is German. We have more than a million German-Americans in New York City, but it has been a great struggle to keep alive one German theatre; the reason is that these people prefer the theatres where English is the language. We have a few German clubs, but their membership is very small. The German-Americans prefer to belong to the clubs of general membership and there is not a single one in New York, even the finest, where they are not received upon their merits. In the political and social life of New York there are few German-Americans who, as such, have acquired any prominent position, though there are plenty of men of distinguished position who are German in origin. If the United States and Germany go to war, you will not only be surprised at the loyalty of our German people, but the whole world will be. Another point; if the United States goes in, we shall fight to the end, and it will be a very long and a very determined struggle."

After three years I have no reason to be ashamed of either of these prophecies. I sometimes wonder what Zimmermann now think of my statements.

After the explanation Zimmermann began to talk about Turkey. He seemed interested to find out whether the Turks were likely to make a separate, peace. I bluntly told him that the Turks felt themselves to be under no obligations to the Germans. This gave me another opportunity.

"I have learned a good deal about German methods in Turkey," I said. "I think it would be a great mistake to attempt similar tactics in the United States. I speak of this because there has been a good deal of sabotage there already. This in itself is solidifying the German-Americans against you and is more than anything else driving the United States into the arms of England."

"But the German Government is not responsible," said Zimmermann. "We know nothing about it."

Of course I could not accept that statement on its face value---recent developments have shown how mendacious it was---but we passed to other topics. The matter of the submarine came up again.

"We have voluntarily interned our navy," said Zimmermann. "We can do nothing at sea except with our submarines. It seems to me that the United States is making a serious mistake in so strongly opposing the submarine. You have a long coast line and you may need the U-boat yourself some day. Suppose one of the European Powers, or particularly Japan, should attack you. You could use the submarine to good purpose then. Besides, if you insist on this proposed declaration in the *Lusitania* matter, you will simply force our government into the hands of the Tirpitz party."

Zimmermann now returned again to the situation in Turkey. His questions showed that he was much displeased with the new German Ambassador, Graf Wolf-Metternich. Metternich, it seemed, had failed in his attempt to win the good will of the ruling powers in Turkey and had been a trial to the German Foreign Office. Metternich had shown a different attitude toward the Armenians from Wangenheim, and he had made sincere attempts with Talaat and Enver to stop the massacres. Zimmermann now told me that Metternich had made a great mistake in doing this and had destroyed his influence at Constantinople. Zimmermann made no effort to conceal his displeasure over Metternich's manifestation of a humanitarian spirit. I now saw that Wangenheim had really represented the attitude of official Berlin, and I thus had confirmation, from the highest German authority, of my conviction that Germany had acquiesced in those deportations.

In a few days we had taken the steamer at Copenhagen, and, on February 22, 1916, I found myself once more sailing into New York harbour---and home.

THE END