

The Munich Massacre

Munich, Germany

Munich Olympic Headquarters

September 4, 1972

7:00 pm

Sunlight glittered on the West German flag, causing the bottom gold strip to shine almost as bright as the stars. Kathrin glanced up at the beauty of her country's flag and said a silent prayer in her head. Nine days ago the Olympic games had started and gone forward without a hitch. She and the rest of the Federal Republic of Germany could not help but feel a swell of proudness in their hearts as the games continued. For so long the world had gazed at them through the eyes of the deeds their parents and grandparents had committed more than 30 years ago.

These games marked an opportunity to show the world that they were no longer the blood stricken country they had been in the past. They were a new Germany. Kathrin let her eyes roam the flag once more and the smile waivered on her face. The games were not over yet. She knew well enough the potential that destruction had and she refused to give it a foothold.

Entering the Olympic Headquarter building, she brisked her way through security and into her office, where her appointment was already there waiting.

“Good evening, Shmuel.” Kathrin said in a warm voice, that filled the room. She smiled and shook his hand. Earlier that day he had asked to meet with her, and by the tone of his voice Kathrin knew that this was not just another friendly visit. She expressed an attitude in which any hostess should have when the head of the Olympic Israeli delegation should ask to meet.

“Please have a seat.” She ushered him to a chair and took her own behind the desk.

“It would be ideal if we excused the formalities and get straight to the point,” Shmuel voice was simple and direct.

“Of course.” Kathrin shuffled a few papers on her desk. She knew well the importance behind the Israeli participation in the Munich Olympic games. 36 years ago Adolf Hitler had used the Summer Olympic games in Berlin as a show of military power. The Israeli participation in these games was a pivotal point in both countries history that was now on the world stage.

“What can I help you with?” Again, she smiled trying to ease any tension that might have wafted in.

“I have expressed concern on the security in the Olympic village before.” Shmuel started. Kathrin inwardly sighed, this again. “Yes, you certainly have. And once more I can assure you that all the athletes are safe. We have taken great security measures to make sure it remains that way.”

The measure of security that West Germany had taken with these games had been brought up before. Kathrin herself had sat through endless meetings on the data. Her country did not want to uphold the reputation of militaristic Germany and the measure of security had been greatly argued over.

“You and your athletes are of top priority, there is no need to worry.” She stood up, “Please trust us to do our job and enjoy the games.”

Hesitantly Shmuel stood up, and shook her hand once more. “Thank you Madam Fischer.” Giving a farewell head bow, he exited.

Kathrin slumped down in her chair. She would be grateful when the games were over.

September 5, 1972

5:00 am

She had already been up, when the call came.

“Headquarters, now.” The line went dead. It only took her twenty minutes before she was at the building in a room with the other West German Olympic officers.

“It’s bad Kate, really bad.” Stefan pulled her aside, after she had been briefed in. The situation they now found themselves was indeed grave. She didn’t want to believe it, when they told her.

A terrorist attack at the Olympic village. The words didn’t register in her brain until the last part clicked in.

“-taken nine Israeli hostages.”

“We have already sent in the police force.” Stefan continued to explain the details of the situation. “Two Israeli have already been reported dead.”

Kathrin placed her hand on the table for support. “What is the press saying?” Everything had been going fine, the games only had a few days left. Her vision started to sway.

“Nothing good, the police have been commanded to block any cameras or reporters, but the story is already out.” Stefan put a hand on her shoulder, “Pull yourself together Kate, this is no time to lose your nerve.”

She nodded her head tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Do we have any more information on the terrorists?”

“Palestinians.” The name didn’t come as a surprise, they had been tipped off weeks before the games had started that “something” might happen. But no one could have predicted this.

“They call themselves, Black September.” Before she could ask any more questions, the door swung open.

“I have their demands.” An intelligence officer ran in placing a piece of paper on the table in the middle of the room.

Stefan was the first to pick it up and his eyes quickly roamed the paper then scoffed. He read aloud, “They want 234 Palestinian prisoners and 2 former German Red army soldiers, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, released.”

“They might have as well asked for the moon and starts with it.” One official drummed his fingers nervously on the table, “There is no way the Israeli will agree to that.”

“Yes, we all agree that their demands are absurd,” Stefan snapped, “What I need is a deal they will agree to, before the whole damn world remembers these games as a bloody massacre.” He crumpled the paper and threw it on the ground.

“Sir I have the Israeli Prime Minister on the phone.” A central intelligence worker on the telephone spoke.

“Tell her we have the situation handled.” Stefan’s hands combed through his hair.

The worker conveyed the message, then said, “She says she needs to speak to someone now.”

“You take this Kathrin.” Stefan marched out of the room, “I’m going to check what the press is reporting. The rest of you, find something the terrorist will agree to and is actually plausible.”

He stopped at the door way and turned around, “And don’t be fooled, if anyone else dies, the whole world will place the blood on our hands.” The words lingered in the air long after he had left the room.

September 5, 1972

5:55 am

This was not a phone call Kathrin wanted to be having right now. She placed a hand on her forehead and took a deep breath and picked up the receiver.

“This is Kathrin Fisher from the-”

The Israeli Prime Minister cut her off, “Yes, we have meet each other.” Her voice sound urgent and Kathrin knew that she was not going to be able to handle this conversation as she had yesterday with Shmuel.

Golda Meir had been the Prime Minister of Israel for three years, and Kathrin knew that she was not going to waste any time. “I do not feel that I am incorrect to say that the Federal Republic of Germany wants this situation dismantled just as swiftly as the Israeli government does. The Israeli army is willing to send over troops-”

Golda started and her voice sounding so clear that Kathrin for an instant had to look behind her and make sure that the woman wasn’t standing right behind her.

. “I can assure you that will not be necessary.” Though she hadn’t had much time to be briefed in, Kathrin knew that accepting the Israeli help was not an option.

“We have received the terrorists demands.” She paused waiting for Golda to respond, when she didn’t Kathrin went on, “234 Palestinian and 2 Red Army prisoners released.” She said the terms plainly, as if reciting a grocery list.

“Now we are aware that this is an absurd request, but if we could form a trade that would satisfy-”

Again the Prime Minister cut her off, “The Israeli government does not negotiate with terrorist Ms. Fischer, and let me remind you, this is not the first time Israel has had to deal with terrorist and our policies were created for a reason, we will refrain from changing them.” The Prime Minister's voice was steady and Kathrin knew her decision was unchangeable .

“I will trust that the West German police will do their best to dismantle this situation and we will do everything we can on this side. I hope to speak with you again soon Ms. Fischer, in better circumstances.”

“I can assure you Prime Minister, our officers have this situation under control.” Kathrin countered reassuringly, but the receiver was filled with static.

September 5, 1972

Munich Hospital

2:30 pm

Stefan had trusted Kathrin to go visit the hospital were a few of the Israeli athletes that had escaped were being kept.

“The press is sure to have found out that they are there, and I want you there keeping watch over the interviews.”

She hadn't had much of a choice. Negotiations were going on and the police force was now in charge of the situation, there wasn't much she could do back at the headquarters. So she had complied, without protest.

“Hi, I'm Kim from the New York Times.” Kathrin was instantly brought to the reporter and a camera was shoved in her face.

“I am Kathrin Fischer from West German international affairs. Can we please put the camera away.” The words she spoke were a question but she stated them not waiting for a response.

The athlete that had escaped was Tuvia Sokolovsky. Kathrin entered the room and looked at the man laying down on the bed. She smiled and introduced herself. His leg was freshly bandaged up and as far as she could tell the worst of the attack for Tuvia at least, was a few scratches.

Kim directed the photographer to take photos and then began asking her questions. “So tell me Tuvia, what were the events leading up to the attack?”

“Well, like anyone else in the Olympic Village, we were all asleep. No one fully understood what was happening until Yossef Gutfreund woke us up, telling us to get out.” He paused waiting for Kim to copy down everything he was saying, when she gave him a nod, Tuvia continued.

“He threw himself in front of the door, he was the wrestling coach you see, 300 pounds, so he thought he had the best chance at holding them off.” Tuvia grew silent once again and

started murmuring to himself. "He hadn't even really wanted to come, you see his mother's family had been in the Holocaust. Gassed not too far from Munich...now he will be murdered soon on this land, just like his mother."

Kathrin was quick to answer, interrupting Kim's next question. "I can assure you Mr. Sokolovsky that West Germany is doing everything they can to get ahold of the hostages and bring them back to safety. We expect this to all be over in a few hours and your friend rescued shortly."

The words seemed hollow, even to Kathrin. She was aware of the two deaths that had already occurred and she had memorized them, Yossef Romano and Moshe Weinberg. Both died trying to protect and help their fellow Israeli athletes to escape.

Tuvia didn't give her a glance, "I can't help but think that was the last time I saw him."

September 5, 1972

Olympic Headquarters

6:00 pm

The rest of the interviews went by quickly as Kathrin's mind had been somewhere else for the remainder of them following Tuvia's.

"He hadn't even wanted to come." The words played over and over in her mind, as if someone was playing a broken record. These Olympics were meant to show the world that Germany had changed since the war. Kathrin and the rest of the West German citizens' dreams for the "Games of Peace and Joy" had disintegrated before her eyes.

“We have their new request.” The words snapped Kathrin from her thoughts. The people in the room surrounded the table and waited on the edge of their seats.

“They want a plane to Egypt, for them and the hostages.”

What happened next was a blur. Plans were made, and calls were taken. Kathrin did her best help in any way she could. By the time the helicopters had picked up the terrorist and the hostages to bring them to the plane the rescue operation was put into place.

Updates were few and short. Multiple times Kathrin left the conference room to get away from the tension.

After the interview she had taken it upon herself to find out the names and gain access of the photos of the hostages. She held them in her hand now, all nine. She flipped through their faces and read through the information she had collected on them. Mark Slavin, was the youngest, only 18.

As the night continued, the updates came more frequent. The rescue mission had started and shots had been confirmed. She didn't know who had died until it was all over. For a brief period of time, the press had been mistakenly informed that all the hostages had been rescued and were all safely in custody. But as the truth found its way to the surface, the world realized that that was not the case.

September 6, 1972

Olympic Headquarters

3:30 Am

The five West German snipers had tried their best to take down the terrorist but by 3:42 AM anyone with watching with a television was informed by Jim McKay that, "Our worst fears have been realized tonight. There were 11 hostages, 2 were killed in their rooms yesterday morning and 9 were killed at the airport tonight. They're all gone."

Kathrin dismissed herself from the room without waiting for a response. She remembered the words she had spoken to Shmuel Lalkin, only a day ago. "I can assure you that all the athletes are safe." She placed her head in her hands. How many people had she told that to?

"They're all gone." She placed her hand on the cool wall to steady herself, but her body crumpled to the ground anyway. Her mind flashed through the 9 pictures she had looked at a few hours ago and she began to cry. She hadn't even realized she was until the tears came down so fast and many she had to wipe them away. Once again she had failed them. Once again Germany had failed the Jews.

September 7, 1972

10:00 AM

Olympic Stadium

The events that happened next were more than just protocol for Kathrin. She stood now in the main Olympic Stadium with most of the athletes. Shmuel Lalkin approached her during the memorial service. Whatever words she wanted to say, got stuck on her tongue.

Shmuel wiped away some tears with his handkerchief. Finally Kathrin found her words, "I cannot begin to express our deepest condolences to this massacre."

“Yes, it is a massacre.” Shmuel looked to her, “But this is not the first time we have been massacred in this country and I doubt this will be the last.”

The words broke Kathrin and she felt the tears crawl down her face once again.

“Shmuel, I cannot imagine how much this must hurt for you and your fellow Israeli.”

“You are correct, you cannot. But you look just as sorrowed filled as us.” He handed her his handkerchief and she took it, grateful.

“I cannot fathom how you will go on from this,” Kathrin continued to wipe her tears away.

“Ms. Fischer need I remind you again, this is not the first attack that has been against the Israeli nation, and it will not be the last. We must learn and grow from these deaths to keep living, without fear.”

She nodded her head, “I am just sorry we could not give you justice for them. All eleven of them.”

Shmuel was a hesitant, then spoke, “Your country did not give us justice when they murnederd us by the millions nor have they given us justice here. I have learned, that if Israel seeks justice for the deaths that have taken place against them, it must seek it themselves.”

“And is that what you plan to do, Mr. Lalkin?”

“Oh assuredly, and we will succeed in finding out the ones responsible for this.” He put his hand on her shoulder, “In the meantime, do not live in the past or blame yourself for what has taken place. You must keep moving forward.”

She thanked him and he disappeared into the crowd. After the service was done, Kathrin remained, staring at the tomb stone with the 11 engraved names. Not only were the names engraved on the stone, but also in her heart.

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