



PHILIP D. GIBSON / Bowler

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel is buried in Herrlingen, Germany, under a marker shaped like a large iron cross and carved out of wood. Rommel committed suicide after he was implicated in an unsuccessful plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler in 1944.

and a secret door on the first floor of the building.

She left me to the solitude and exhibits detailing the life of one of the most prominent military figures in European history.

The museum consists of two large rooms containing numerous framed maps, photographs, newspaper articles and paintings. Glass cases contain the general's decorations and uniforms. One features the Iron Cross, cap and uniform worn during the French campaign of 1940. There is a plaster life mask and sand-colored Afrika Korps uniform and pith helmet. Another case contains Rommel's *Pour le Mérite*, the German equivalent of the Medal of Honor; Rommel earned it as a company commander in World War I, when his unit captured 8,000 Italian troops in a single day.

There is also an extensive archive of rare books about the war in North Africa and Europe and volumes on other topics and about individuals from Rommel's time period. Judging from the guest book, the museum doesn't receive many visitors, perhaps a couple a month, seemingly of the academic or military variety. I signed the book and picked up a roughly micrographed biography, chronology and map of Herrlingen with additional points of interest. I locked up the building and returned the key to city hall.

Unfortunately, the map was

in German. Down the same road as the Rommel villa seemed to be something else of interest, marked Rommel Gedenkstein. Had I brought a German-English dictionary I would have understood that *gedenkstein* means memorial stone.

Hitler makes his move

In early October 1944, Wilhelm Keitel, Hitler's chief of staff, summoned Rommel to Berlin. Assuming the worst, Rommel begged off, explaining that his wounds did not allow for travel. A week later, on Oct. 14, Gen. Wilhelm Burgdorf and Ernst Maissel, along with an SS escort, arrived at Rommel's home in Herrlingen. The generals conferred privately with Rommel for a few minutes and then gave him some time alone with his family. Rommel told family members that interrogations had established that Rommel probably knew an attempt on Hitler's life was imminent, his son recalled. Rommel then requested his options, and added, "In fifteen minutes, I will be dead. Be brave and help your mother."

He left in the generals' staff car, which proceeded two miles down the very road that I was walking on. In that place is now a giant boulevard, surrounded by several large trees. A simple marble plaque is inscribed General Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel — 14-10-1944.

Surrounded by farmlands, the location probably was chosen for its isolation from witnesses. The car stopped, Maissel and Burgdorf got out, and in the time that it took for them to walk a judicious distance and smoke a cigarette, Erwin Rommel was dead. He consumed the contents of a cyanide capsule provided for the occasion.

Four days later Hitler would declare a national day of mourning. A state funeral attended by Lucie and Manfred Rommel at the cathedral in Ulm would reinforce this charade. Rommel's death would be ascribed to the head wounds suffered in the July car crash. The regime could not afford to identify one of its respected generals as a member of the conspiracy, a prospect that would have fueled even greater disillusionment with Hitler. It was not until after the war that the circumstances of Rommel's death were revealed.

The long walk back to the station was certainly introspective. It is quite understandable that contemporary Germans would be reluctant to emphasize links to Rommel or other Nazi military leaders and that Herrlingen is today virtually unknown. I left grateful to find a historic spot that is off the beaten tourist path. I'll leave the analysis to the historians.

It's like an
alluring island