Rocket Man

The Life and Times of Dr. Wernher Von Braun

by Karen Baxter

"I HAVE LEARNED TO USE THE WORD IMPOSSIBLE WITH THE GREATEST CAUTION."

As a child, Wernher von Braun dreamed of exploring space. The young German, born in 1912, could never have imagined though that one day he would play a key role in America's space flight program.

Von Braun was born in Wirsitz, Prussia, the second child of Baron Magnus von Braun and Baroness Emmy von Quistorp. According to a biography from the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala., von Braun's early years were indicative of his life's path with a visionary interest in helping to "turn the wheel of time." Von Braun composed music and salvaged used auto parts to build a new car—a project that he says he found more interesting than school, and which led to his status as a less than "star pupil."

Von Braun conducted his first rocket experiment when he was 12. He rigged a half-dozen of the biggest skyrockets he could find to an unmanned wagon and lit them.

He later wrote about the incident: "It performed beyond my wildest dreams. The wagon careened crazily about, trailing a tail of fire like a comet. When the rockets burned out, ending their sparkling performance with a magnificent thunderclap, the wagon rolled majestically to a halt.

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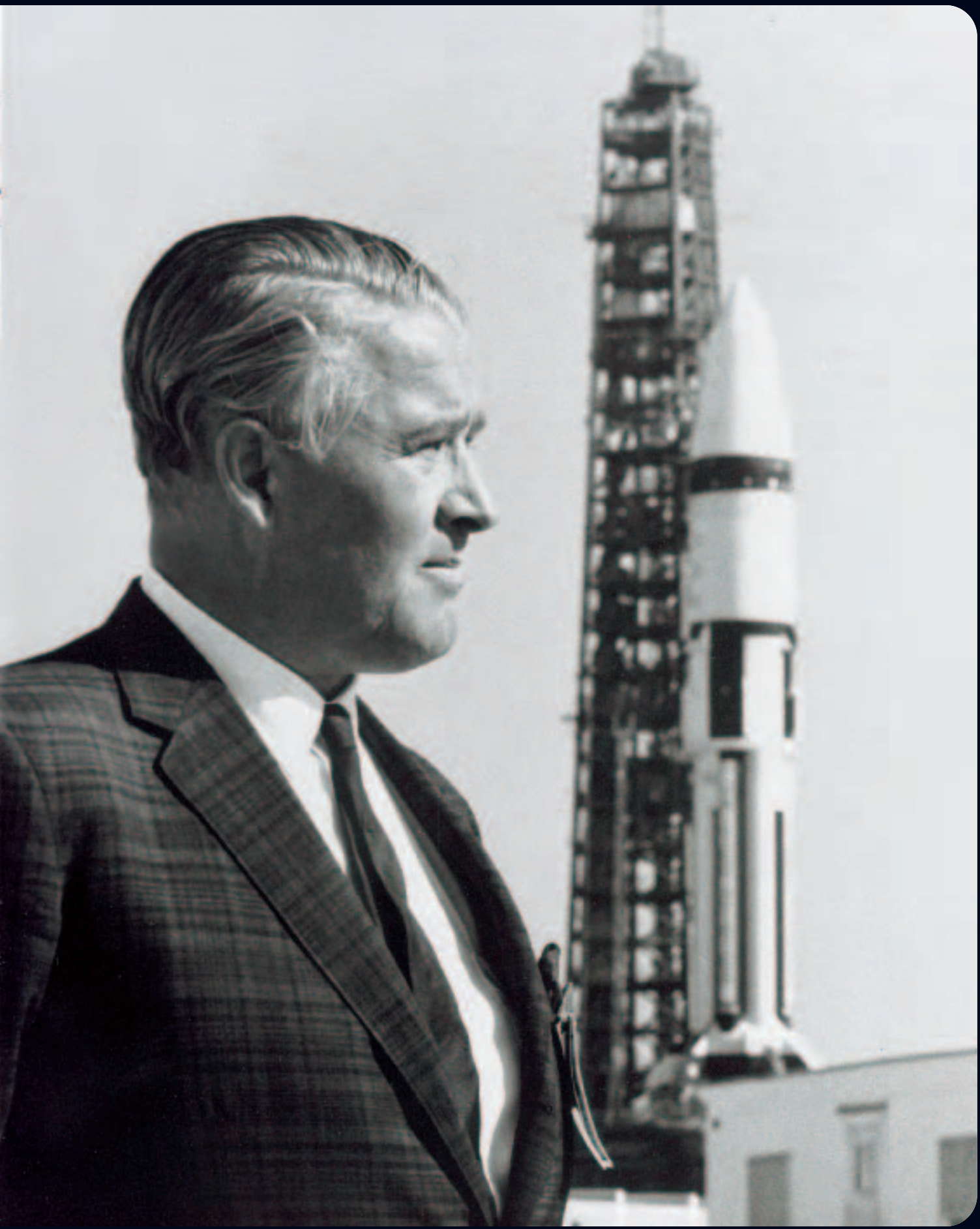
The police, who arrived late for the beginning of my experiment, but in time for the grand finale, were unappreciative. They quickly took me into custody. Fortunately, no one was injured and I was released to the minister of agriculture [my father]."

Von Braun's grades improved after his father transferred him to a boarding school near Weimar. There, he was greatly influenced by Hermann Oberth's book *By Rocket to Space*. Following his graduation, von Braun joined other members of the German Society for Space Travel as one of the professor's assistants on the proving grounds of the Chemical and Technical Institute, the German equivalent of the U.S. Bureau of Standards.

Von Braun received his bachelor's degree in mechanical

Dr. Wernher von Braun stands in front of a Saturn IB launch vehicle at Kennedy Space Flight Center.



engineering from the Berlin Institute of Technology in 1932 at the age of 20 and his Ph.D. in physics two years later from the University of Berlin, where he studied liquid-fueled rocket engines. Around that time, he became involved in the Verein fur Raumschiffarht (rocket society), according to a biography by the NASA History Division.

Also in 1932, he began building rockets for the German army. He was a part of what was dubbed the "rocket team," which operated at a secret laboratory at Peenemünde on the Baltic coast, and was responsible for developing the V-2 ballistic missile—which flew at speeds in excess of 3,500 miles per hour—for the Germans during World War II.

Making him somewhat of a controversial figure, von Braun joined the Nazi party in 1937. He says he was pressured to do so.

"I was officially demanded to join the National Socialist Party. At this time [1937] I was already technical director of the Army Rocket Center at Peenemünde ... My refusal to join the party would have meant that I would have to abandon the work of my life. Therefore, I decided to join. My membership in the party did not involve any political activities …"

In a letter to author R.W. Reid, he also said:

"With the tight press censorship imposed by Hitler, the abuses of his regime were not nearly as visible to the average German … I never realized the depth of the abyss of Hitler's régime until very late. … While right from the beginning I deeply deplored the war and the misery and suffering it spread all over the world, I found myself caught in a maelstrom in which I simply felt that, like it or not, it was my duty to work for my country at war."

After being arrested by the SS for "crimes against the state" (for reportedly saying the war was not going well) in 1944, and then released, von Braun led the surrender of 500 of his top rocket scientists to the Americans before the Allied capture of the rocket complex. A team of American scientists was dispatched to the complex to collect documentation and missile components. Von Braun and his men were brought to the United States in a transfer known as "Project Paper Clip."

The men were transferred to Fort Bliss, Texas, where they were not allowed to leave the installation except with a military escort. They sometimes referred to themselves as "PoPs," Prisoners of Peace, according to the Marshall Space Center biography. Nearby, in White Sands Proving Grounds, in New Mexico, they worked with American associates to refurbish and launch some of the V-2s that had been shipped in from Germany.

During this time, von Braun mailed a marriage proposal to his first cousin, Maria von Quistorp. In March 1947, they married in a Lutheran church in Germany. Their first child, Iris, was born at Fort Bliss Army hospital in December 1948, later to be followed by Margit and Peter.

Dr. von Braun surrenders to U.S. Army Counterintelligence personnel of the 44th Infantry Division in Ruette, Bavaria on May 2, 1945. Left to right are Charles Stewart, CIC agent; Dr. Herbert Axster; Dieter Huzel; Dr. von Braun (arm in cast); Magnus von Braun (brother); and Hans Lindenberg.

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Dr. von Braun (center) explains the Saturn Launch System to President John F. Kennedy. NASA Deputy Administrator Robert Seamans is to the left of von Braun.

In 1950, the team moved to the Redstone Arsenal near Huntsville. Five years later, von Braun became a U.S. citizen. It was in Huntsville that his team built the Jupiter ballistic missile, which successfully launched the Western Hemisphere's first satellite, *Explorer 1*, in 1958. America's space program had been born.

"He was an instant hero," writes author Diana Semler, who in a biographical article describes von Braun as "a social charmer who hated to get up early and got his best ideas at midnight." Semler goes on to say, "This tall, blond genius not only had an unquenchable enthusiasm for space flight but also played the cello and piano. His favorite foods were spaghetti, steak, fish and Chinese food."

NASA opened the Marshall Space Flight Center in 1958 and transferred von Braun and his team there to work for the newly created NASA. Von Braun served as director of the center from 1960 to 1970.

In 1969, von Braun's dreams were realized when a Saturn V rocket developed at Marshall launched the *Apollo 11* crew. Six teams of astronauts explored the moon's surface as part of the Apollo program.

Von Braun moved to Washington, D.C., in 1970 to serve as NASA's deputy administrator of planning. Less than two years later, he retired from NASA to become vice president of engineering and development for Fairchild Industries, a defense company in Germantown, Md., where he helped establish the National Space Institute, a precursor of today's National Space Society.

In addition to his work at NASA, von Braun left his mark on popular culture, by serving as a technical consultant on three space-related Disney television movies in the 1950s, including "Man in Space." He even appeared on camera in the "science-factual" films, as they were dubbed.

Von Braun died of cancer in 1977 at the age of 65 in Alexandria, Va., leaving behind a great legacy.

"There have been ups and downs, feasts and famines, and stop-and-go progress," von Braun wrote of his more than 30-year career. "But through the years there has always been a singleness of purpose, a certain consistency, that has guided my efforts and those of my teammates. And while for many years, and on two continents, the more immediate task … was to build rockets as weapons of war, our long-range objective has remained unchanged to this very day—the continuous evolution of space flight."