

Ahead of his Time

Richard L. Neuberger • 1912–1960

By Steve Forrester

Two years out of Lincoln High School, Richard Neuberger and his uncle, Dr. Julius Neuberger, stepped onto an eastbound train at Portland's Union Station. In New York City, they boarded an ocean liner headed to France and then to Germany, where Adolf Hitler had seized power. The year was 1933. Neuberger was on his way to visit relatives, and he had heard about the violence of the Sturmabteilung, known in America as the Nazi Brownshirts.

Neuberger possessed an extraordinary reportorial instinct, and after a month-long stay in Germany he returned to New York with a story to tell. He sought out the offices of *The Nation*, a weekly investigative magazine founded in 1865, and talked with one of the editors. Ernest Gruening listened to the young writer and decided to commission him to write what he would later describe as an "epoch-making article." When "The New Germany" appeared in the October 4, 1933, issue, "it was the first realistic firsthand revelation in any American magazine of what was taking place in Nazi Germany."¹ The article is bracing reportage, with sickening details of violence inflicted on Jews, young and old. The historical significance of "The New Germany" has been largely forgotten, and in large part so has Neuberger. But his story is still relevant, as the times he lived through were no less perilous to democracy than those of the early twenty-first century.

Richard Neuberger inhabited three eras. Born in 1912, he was seventeen years old on Black Monday in 1929, and within four years he was immersed in prewar Nazi Germany. In 1945, as an aide to U.S. Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, he was present at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco, an event that would define the postwar world. Finally, his election to the United States Senate in 1954 was pivotal in making Texas Senator Lyndon B. Johnson majority leader, a prelude to an era of landmark liberal legislation that would peak in the 1960s. Looking back at that life, six decades after his death at age forty-seven, we can see that he lived at a fast pace and took big risks. He was like a meteor, a brilliant light streaking through the night sky and suddenly gone