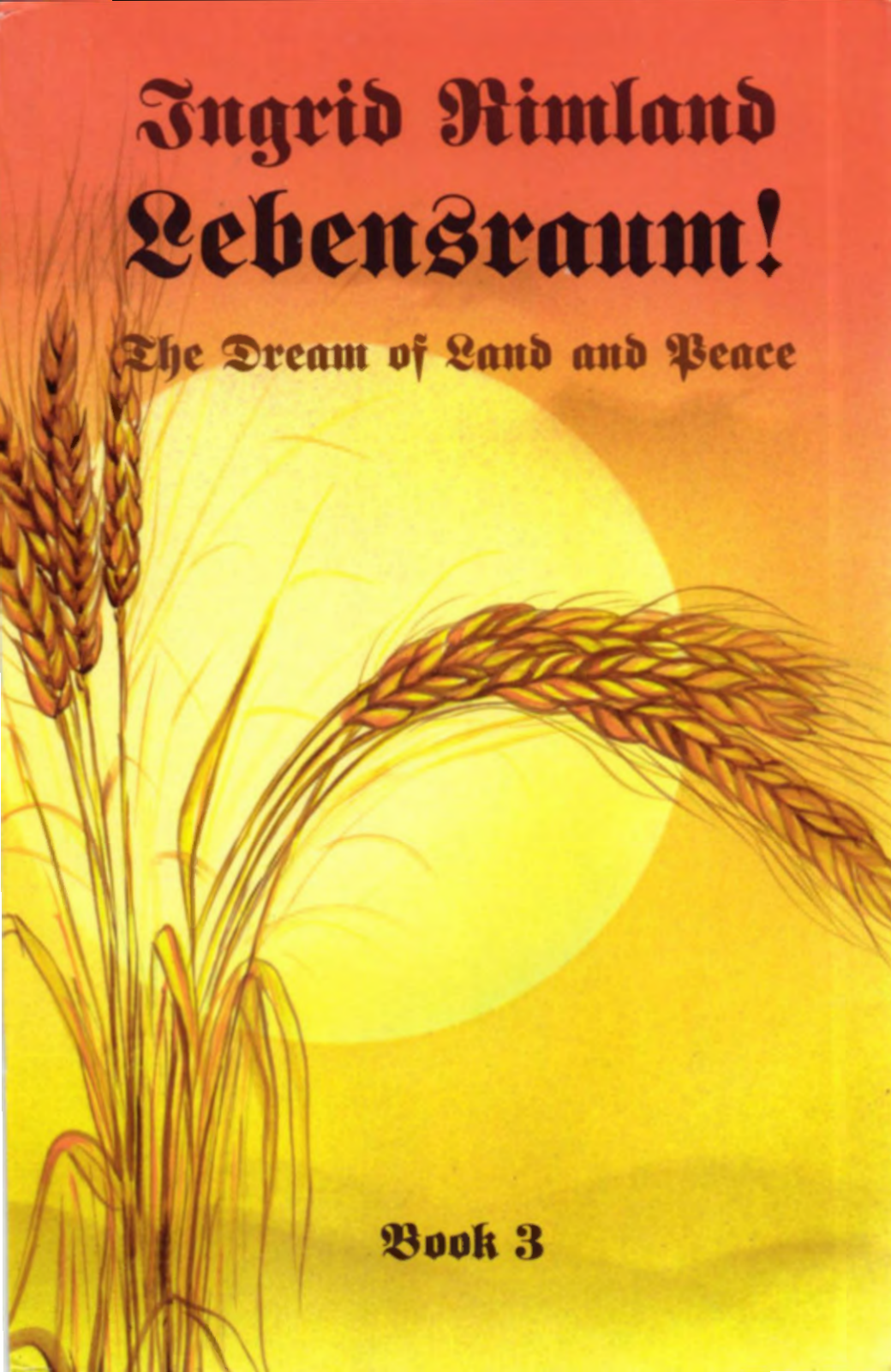
Ingrid Rimland

Lebensraum!

The Dream of Land and Peace



Book 3

I dedicate this saga
to the maligned heroes
and the forgotten victims of
several fratricidal wars in our century -
men and women, brave beyond belief,
who hurled themselves against the forces
of the New World Order

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Lebensraum!

The Dream of Land and Peace

A Novel
by
Ingrid Rimland

Book III

Lebensraum! spans seven generations and 200 years. It is a story told to me a thousand times in many different voices: that there was once a place called "Apanlee" that fell to the Red Terror.

A novel is, by definition, fiction against the backdrop of genuine emotions. This novel has been my attempt to grasp and to extract the interplay between opposing ideologies, to find the core of human tragedies that make up cold statistics.

The novel's voice belongs to "Erika" who, in this saga, is older than I was when I experienced World War II. She is, however, of the transition generation, as I am. Hers is the ethnic voice in this novel, trying to find the right words to own up to the pride and courage that were the hallmarks of her people.

She learns to say: "Our history belongs to us. It won't be written, from now on, by anybody else but us."

This family saga was gleaned from the driftwood of history. The people I have tried to show to be of flesh and blood came of a tightly knit community of Russian-German ancestry.

Ingrid Rimland

Lebensraum! - Book I - Chapters 1-39

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

Push-button critics and sound-bite sages tell us that the age of the epic is past. They are wrong. Ingrid Rimland has written an inter-generational, moral panorama—an epic in prose depicting what people can be when they embrace both freedom and responsibility.

Like the poets of ancient Greece, she does not evade evil. This author knows the human condition. She illustrates what it takes for man to earn his bread—and what happens when a dash of leaven is added to the whole, wanton cruelty.

Lebensraum! is her trilogy, which traces the lives and deaths, the loves and hates, the hopes realized and the dreams dashed of people from two Russian-German families, the Neufelds and the Epps.

The first book follows them from their successes in the Ukraine during the early 19th century and closes on the brink of the war that tore Western civilisation asunder and the revolution that was Russia's undoing. It commences with a history lesson recounting the migration of peace-loving German pioneers. Early on, one of the epic's tensions comes screaming into the fore. This group of pacifists bases its creed on the Bible—*sola scriptura*—with no need of intermediaries. They refuse spiritual tribute to Papa, and they refuse military service to Caesar.

Hounded, taxed, persecuted, martyred, the sect clings to life with a robust ardor born of pure Scriptural faith. Their tenacious confidence in their ultimate deliverance helps them forge a stoic endurance and determination in the face of furious persecution.

The hounded pilgrims look to the East for living space, the land, liberty and peace needed to survive and prosper. Eventually they find a patron in the Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, who needs people to cultivate the lands along the Black and Caspian seas. She offers the German pacifists free land, self-rule, protection and exemption from conscription.

From the start, the novel focuses on two complementary approaches to the business of living. "Some dug in deep, as Peter Neufeld did, a man with expert hands and fierce ambition." These are the men of active, curious, inventive minds, men of accurate reckoning and rolled-up sleeves who survey the problem, spit on their palms and get to work.

"Others," we are told, ". . . stayed in their covered wagons from where they prayed to Heaven day and night." Among these people is one of the Elders, a man named Hans Epp.

There is a division of labour among these hearty pioneers. Some dig and reap; others meditate and pray.

Eventually the grave and ambitious Germans establish their settlement and sink firm roots in their adopted land. The story moves steadily through that century of progress when even the land of the Tsars felt something of the heady aroma of freedom.

The peace was not to last for long—on the Eastern front or the Western. The protagonists fall prey to the twin snares of those who cling dogmatically to peace: beclouding, complacent pride in the lasting conditions of contentment and vulnerability to aggressors.

Thus, in the very nature of the people who are to enact this vast drama, we see the seeds of later suffering. Why do the innocent often end up crushed in the bloody mud? The search for Lebensraum! is partially the quest for an answer to this moral conundrum.

One of the themes at the heart of Lebensraum! is that virtue is a necessary condition of life, prosperity and happiness. The pilgrims grow and prosper in a community they name Apanlee, which will become the spiritual magnet, the inspirational font, the symbol of life and "Lebensraum" for the good offspring of the Neufelds and Epps.

Yet early on, a smoking fissure is apparent. As the productive and ambitious—represented by Peet Neufeld, Peter's son—hew a cornucopia out of the rich soil of Apanlee, the pious—represented by Hans Epp's son Willy—begin to chastise and warn that the judgment of God must soon descend and crush the pride

of the successful farmers and artisans.

These warnings go largely unheeded. After all, doesn't God bless thrift and industry? He's on His throne and the Romanovs—now the Apanlee Germans' staunch patrons—are on theirs.

In a heartrending scene, Peet Neufeld and his wife Greta are entertaining a Romanov prince who says, beaming with gratitude, "Peet Neufeld, see that sun? As long as it hangs in the sky, we of the house of Romanov vouch for protection. Always." Sadly, within decades, the devil himself will smash that pledge to dust, dethrone and massacre the Romanovs and unleash terror and death upon Apanlee and all of Russia.

Living space is the call that the industrious heed and follow. Another of the epic's contrasts opens up when some of the Apanlee Germans decide to seek their Lebensraum on the abundant prairies of America.

The cavalcade continues as new babies are born to replenish the souls of those who have died. America appeals to Peet Neufeld's son Nicky because it offers virgin opportunity to people who are willing to stand on their own and earn their keep. Nevertheless, the American apple is not immune to the vicissitudes of life or the rot and corruption engendered by secondhanders, parasites and outright thieves.

Nicky and his wife, Willy's daughter Lizzy, set sail for America. Nicky is drowned. Upon arriving in America, the widow Lizzy is swindled by a man named Donoghue for a quick buck and left with a piece of seemingly worthless prairie wilderness for her troubles.

Under Lizzie's maternal guidance, however, her strong and noble son Jan leads his community in building a breadbasket of the Kansas wastes that have fallen to their lot. Contempt turns to envy in the mouths of the swindler and his family, who then seek to wrest the land back in order to sate themselves on the achievements of Jan Neufeld.

The Donoghue's goal through the years will be to "prove" that the sale was only a lease.

As the Germans prosper in their new community of

Mennotown, Kansas, a word begins to sound faintly like the scratching of a hungry rat among trash and shards: Equality. This word will reverberate and knell throughout Lebensraum!

Eventually it will ignite the flames of revolution, explicitly savage in Russia, bureaucratized and sanitized in America. Indeed, it is one of the negative themes of the story, a counterpoint to the thrift, decency and faith that set the builders of Apanlee and of Mennotown apart from and above their fellows.

In scene after scene and encounter after encounter, our author shows us how those who take responsibility for themselves and face their work tenaciously have no need in the world for "Equality" in the sense that is bruited so noisily, that of income redistribution and uniformity of condition.

If equality has any meaning in a political context, it can only be in the sense that each person is an individual with his own rights and must be governed by the same laws and principles and treated by the same standards as all other people.

The heroes and heroines of Lebensraum! learn to their dismay that the baying wolves about them pervert this principle. Equality functions as a demonic wrench to tighten here, loosen there as the whims of the worthless dictate. It twists and strangles the God-fearing and productive in Russia, as ignorant curs who have half-digested intellectual slogans, try to make milch-cows of their betters.

In America, the cry of equality is heard in the baying of the Finkelsteins, who find it a useful political tool and the Donoghues, who find it a standing meal-ticket. Equality corrodes family structure and banishes harmony from the relations between the sexes. The siren song of the suffragettes is heard in the pages of Lebensraum! as a feisty character named Josie—who eventually marries and torments the dutiful Jan Neufeld—despises the vocations of wife and mother and busies herself among the moneylenders and political malcontents.

Finally, those who establish a state religion on the basis of certain peoples' suffering, while ignoring or denigrating the suffering of others, invoke "equality" while seeking to stifle or out-

law even the discussion of truth.

This brings us back to the Revisionist side of Lebensraum! Rimland, who has done so much for World War II Revisionism, takes her mission a step further with Lebensraum!

A movement certainly needs a professional, systematic development in expository prose. Among the many who are providing this are David Irving, Michael Hoffmann II and Ingrid Rimland herself. Nevertheless, if a movement is to gain popular recognition and become part of the warp and woof a civilisation, it must be given flesh and blood, perceptual form. It must be embodied in art. Just as Ayn Rand illustrated her philosophy of Objectivism in characters such as Howard Roark, Dagney Taggart and John Galt, so Ingrid Rimland has given Revisionism a face in the personas of Erika, Jan Neufeld, Jonathan and others.

Lebensraum! is, of course, much more than I have been able to hint here. In its pages are limned the good, bad and ugly feelings of a special band of separatists.

The heroes and heroines of Lebensraum! are in the world, but at odds with it. They are always searching. The allure of productive freedom calls some of them to America; religious forebodings and a misguided spiritual zeal call one group of pilgrims led by Class Epp, Willy's son, on a disastrous trek eastward from Apanlee. The old virtues and customs sustain the good folk, even as newfangled ideas and bold experimental values whistle to them and whisper in their ears.

I was personally struck by the vibrant and cohesive family life that is portrayed in Book I. Rimland's depiction of family rings true to man's nature and potential. Hers is no sugar-coated puff job on the joys and sorrows of kinship. The exigencies of daily life and the social corrosion of a hostile society both take their toll on men and women of the best intentions.

The old ways, however, are always the foundation on which the good folk stand. Indeed, one senses that the robust love nurtured in the bosom of family is itself a vital part of Lebensraum, living space.

Book I ends on an ominous note, as the First World War

and the Soviet revolution hover. The reader must realize that the people of Lebensraum! exhibit the full range of human emotions—from the tender to the desperate to the prejudicial.

Lebensraum! does not omit or evade the suspicions and fears—justified or otherwise—of a misunderstood and often persecuted minority. This minority, however, that grows the world's wheat and mends the world's garments has found few spokesmen or defenders.

In the opening book of Lebensraum! Ingrid Rimland establishes the groundwork for that defense."

Lebensraum! - Book II - Chapters 40-77

Reviewed by Michael S. McMillen

The second book of Lebensraum! opens with the German pacifists in Apanlee sowing and reaping as rumors of impending war and revolution sweep across Russia.

Hein Neufeld, one of Peet Neufeld's grandsons, continues to dismiss the threats of upheaval with naive confidence. His own family is already paying for an early mistake, his fathering of an illegitimate son, Dominik. Dominik's mother is a Russian woman, a youthful infatuation named Natasha, whom Hein and his wife Marleen take into their home as a domestic.

In Mennotown, Hein's cousin, Jan Neufeld, continues to prosper, even as his wife Josephine throws thrift to the winds and spends recklessly among the moneylenders and "progressives" of Wichita. Faith is still supreme in Apanlee and Mennotown, but it begins to grow flabby and to fraternize with presumption.

Meanwhile unanchored intellectualism masquerades as discernment while seducing its victims in the Ukraine and in Kansas. The physically handicapped but bookish Uncle Benny, an illegitimate cousin to Hein, compensates for his physical deformity by addicting himself to reading. He also writes articles advocating radical reform.

Like many who choose to soar in the rarefied realm of abstract speculation detached from reality, Uncle Benny will help to unleash the forces of his own destruction. His counterpart and correspondent in America is Jan's wife Josephine, a woman also obsessed with book knowledge and scornful of the robust, rustic virtues of her husband and mother-in-law. With itching ears she lusts after every wind of doctrine, intoning the slogans of "equality," dressing in provocative new fashions, shocking her Christian neighbours by her intimacy with the money-lending Jews of Wichita and agitating on behalf of the suffragettes.

Josephine, however, is in America, and thus has the priceless opportunity to redeem herself, or at least find her senses, before it's too late.

The theme that it is already far too late runs throughout Lebensraum! - Book II like a telltale draft in Winter. If civilisation and decency are not to wilt and fade from the earth, those who uphold them must overcome manifest temptations and redeem the times.

Book II is a tragedy of errors. Some of the characters put up a valiant fight in the midst of horrendous conditions. Some, whose primary enemy lies within rather than without, succumb and yield the field to their ravenous antagonists.

We are reminded throughout this book that as men sow, they will also reap. The earthly wages of sin, however, are seldom apportioned in any logical or just form. That's because evil itself is neither logical nor just. It does, however, exact a toll. Its effects can sometimes be modified by subsequent reform and repentance, but as everyone in Apanlee and Mennotown knows, not even God can alter last year's harvest.

Much of Lebensraum! - Book II is a horror story. First, the Russian nation is knocked out of the war. Hein's illegitimate son Dominik, who has grown into a bitter, malevolent and amoral man, temporarily finds a purpose in the military defense of Russia. He ends up in prison and is eventually released upon the coming of the Red revolution. He joins with a group of desperados now feeding upon their country.

Resentful of his illegitimacy and the lack of love bestowed upon him in his childhood, Dominik leads his Red comrades to Apanlee and betrays its inhabitants. The new revolutionaries embark on a blood-soaked spree of unspeakable cruelty and terror. Among the dead is Hein himself, the grower of food murdered by hands that know only force and fury. Uncle Benny, whose own scarlet prose helped fan the fires of this onslaught, and his wife Dorothy are killed savagely.

Some do miraculously survive. Among those who live through the first wave of terror are Hein's wife Marleen, her twin sons Yuri and Sasha and her daughter Mimi. A cousin named Jonathan, grandson of the ill-fated Uncle Benny, manages to escape and takes up a life as an itinerant beggar. He will find his way to Germany and return to impose some justice on the hordes that have ransacked and bled his native Apanlee.

Much of the second book recounts the increasingly tight noose of terror that the communists wrap around Apanlee. Wanton shootings and deportations to Siberia begin to clear the land of the productive.

The Reds seek to grow bread by force and issue paper quotas to people forbidden to enjoy even the meager fruits that the blasted land will still yield. The commissars take a devilish delight in exercising arbitrary authority and in arresting people who have done nothing.

Apanlee is decimated, but Marleen, the twins and Mimi are able to hang on, partly because the flinty Natasha acts as a go-between with her son Dominik, now elevated to leadership of the collective.

Having betrayed his hometown to brutal beasts, Dominik becomes responsible for fulfilling the quotas for his Soviet masters. His "inheritance" of Apanlee is as illegitimate as he is. Terror, coercion and crude animal cleverness are his only tools.

The thugs and hooligans who rise to fill the ranks of the new party apparatus revel in their chance to dominate their betters and destroy them. People are taught slogans, as if demoralised, terrorized innocents are likely to be inspired by them. The

slogans, however, like everything else about the Soviets, are intended to cow and strike fear. In what must be deliberate and cynical irony, schoolchildren are taught to refer to the time of the tsars as that "before the revolution made us free."

In Mennotown the old Faith holds out longer against the new Freedom, but Josephine chafes and pouts under restrictions on her intellectual and social whims. Throughout their marriage, Jan has yielded to her and indulged her every wish. He wants a son, however. Their first son died in a freak winter accident and Josie gives birth to a succession of daughters.

Having reached the frontier of middle age, Josephine does not wish to venture another pregnancy. Jan, however, beginning to sense that his marriage is running out of control, has other ideas. Although Josephine will come to idolize her last-born, a son she nicknames Rarey, she will never forgive Jan for the importunate passion that leads to the lad's conception.

Josephine may be a thorn and a trial to Jan, but she is a comely one. She even makes efforts at halting her own slide into modernist depravity. Eventually, she admits that she fought the law of nature – and the law won.

In the meantime, a series of disasters dooms the once proud Jan Neufeld. His wife's expenditures pile on top of his own questionable credit purchases. Previous Neufelds would never have surrendered themselves to the lenders. The Donoghues have not retreated from their aims. The nascent labour movement draws them to itself and they begin to make escalating demands on their employer, Jan Neufeld.

One of Jan's mills is burnt, and suspicion hovers around the Donoghues. It turns out that Jan is not quite in step with modern times. He never bothered to take out the insurance policy on the mill.

Jan's consequent illness symbolizes the malaise and torpor of Western civilisation reeling on both sides of the Atlantic. The old verve is gone. He does seek temporary solace in the theology of the elder Dewey Epp, but to no avail. As Jan deteriorates, Josephine hitches her star to one more pipe dream, that of mov-

ing to California!

Eventually, Jan is reduced to seeking a loan – now federally subsidized and regulated. In a scene resonating with Randian overtones, Jan draws upon his last ounce of self-respect to negotiate a loan from the Donoghue now arrogantly ensconced at the bank.

The dialogue between a man who is still trying to do business in an honest, straightforward fashion and a moral degenerate who knows only how to function as a conduit of second-hand power is an eloquent summation of the rot that has eaten its way into the entrails of a once proud and independent country.

The scene with the Donoghue "bankster" is prelude to Jan's final fall. Throughout the years, he had turned his back on the firewater offered by his tippling friend Doctorjay. At this point, however, Jan has been broken by his pressing crown of woes. He gets drunk with Doctorjay and takes refuge in the hospitality of Dewey Epp's soup kitchen.

When Jan learns that even the alms he is reduced to accepting there are underwritten by Roosevelt and his raiders, the dam bursts. He shoots Dewey dead and ends up killing himself.

Lebensraum! - Book II is an unflinchingly honest portrayal of the early year's of this now hoary century. The aspirations that animated Peet Neufeld and his sons have been snuffed out in the hissing spittle of the architects of the New World Order. The price of joy is not even quoted amid this procession of market collapse, legalized looting, war, revolution and reigns of terror.

If the twentieth century's reflection makes us recoil in disgust, the fault lies not in those who have the historic facts, artistic vision, and courage to hold the glass up steadily. The thick miasma of despair that permeates Lebensrau!- Book II is scarcely dispelled by Doctorjay's drunken defiance of the "banksters" with which the book closes.

But it does show someone still has a spine.

Faith. Hope. Charity. Not even the ravages of Soviet Russia and social-welfare America can annihilate these. Faith hangs

on tenaciously in the face of ridicule and persecution. Charity is widely counterfeited, nowhere more piously than in America, where the Old Time Religion gets cozier by the day with Rooseveltian radicalism and sets up tax-subsidized soup kitchens with one hand and dispenses tracts with the other. Genuine charity manages to limp along in its own venerable, unspectacular way. The unflagging hospitality of Lizzie, the bonhomie of Doctorjay–even the mule-like loyalty of Natasha to Marleen and her kin stand out as coin of this realm.

And what of hope? What hope can survive the ruthless Russian bear allied with the crowns and republics of Europe and the languorous strength of America?

Ask a hungry urchin taken in by a stern and loving Hausfrau. Ask Marleen Neufeld, an emaciated prisoner in her own homeland. Ask the emaciated heirs and the ghosts of those who sowed and reaped, who built and nurtured Apanlee.

Their answers will be heard.

Chapter 78

Shura had given birth to several gurgling Soviet citizens. She left them, swaddled, in Natasha's care while she stomped through the countryside, adroitly helping Dominik flush suspects out of hiding.

"His birthday falls on Papa Stalin's birthday," Dominik bragged, ogling his youngest with fatherly pride. He dipped his finger in a glass of vodka and let the baby suck on it. "A herdsman? *Nu?* Those times are past, and good riddance. A cobbler? A teacher? A judge? Maybe a tractorist?"

"A plumber. A fitter," sang Shura, who danced with the cat in her arms.

"We'll raise the fattest crops. We'll have the finest life," decided Dominik, and swung his latest offspring by his legs. The cork of a bottle flew into a corner. Moist kisses were shared all around. "A brand new tooth already? A little wolf cub? Eh?"

"Anything. A railroad clerk. A train conductor. Repairmen are in big demand—"

Natasha was not nearly as impressed. "Despite a silver saddle, no way to make a horse out of a donkey." She put her lips

right to the newborn's ears: "You should be so lucky, my birdling—"

Since no one told Natasha otherwise, she quietly kept her job. She was at home in the expanding nursery. She swaddled every one of them—the pig brigade children, the cow brigade children, the sugar beet children, even the cucumber children. She had a wide, warm lap in which to spoil each one, no matter what the season. The New World Order was of little interest to her. A baby was a baby; all wanted to be loved. She kept on burping them and swaddling them so she could handle them as though they were bundles of logs. She had not shelved her skills. She pinched them in different places to make sure that the flesh was as firm as it looked.

Natasha was still the old Apanlee Baba who, in her wanton youth, had served the favored subjects of the tsars—dusting windows, stoking fires, shooing flies and making sure the measles didn't settle on her babies' vulnerable brains.

It was an uphill struggle running Apanlee as Dominik saw fit and as the quota laws dictated, but as the decade puckered to a cheerless close and trouble piled on trouble, he summoned the twins to the kitchen. He made them sit down by the fire. They saw he was saving his anger.

"I need to have a chat with you. Why not be friends? I promise not to lose my temper. We're all in this together, nu? Might there be anything that I can do for you?"

"No. Not a thing."

"If only you and I—"

"We hear you're doing splendidly. Your quotas are the envy of the Party."

He knew what he knew: they were burning with wrath. He knew they were plotting escape. He knew their veiled, accusatory eyes, their sanctimonious ways. He knew, specifically, that what the twins withheld did not lie buried under stumps and stones. They were the passive creed. Their tempers were controlled. Not one of them would have engaged in open sabotage. They

didn't slash his feather beds so that the feathers flew. They knew how to bridle their tongues.

Those two ate their supper in silence. They went to bed in silence.

He watched them from afar. He watched them, day by day.

No matter what the lure, the twins said nothing, shrugged their shoulders, looked at him, looked at each other; it was as if he spoke to iron and to stone.

"The posters tell you to obey," cried Dominik, repeatedly, but Marleen shook her head. She did so even when he coaxed: "I'll give you extra ration cards—" She held her pride aloft. When she stood patiently in endless queues to trade her meager ration cards, she always respected the line.

She now told Dominik, while picking out a seam: "You know the quota rules. Since I don't work for you, how can I qualify for any extra favors?"

"You need a horse to help you plow the plot the government has allocated you. I'll happily rent it to you for a pittance—"

"No. I don't need your horse."

"I'll throw in a few extra chickens—"

"Five travel papers," said Marleen.

He chewed his lower lip. He knew the clan. They wouldn't separate. Whom would they leave behind? He offered carefully: "I could arrange for two."

"Five. Properly endorsed."

"I can't. If I did that, I'd be as good as dead!"

She looked at him and smiled the thinnest smile. She took her time before she spoke. "We used to say before the Revolution set us free: 'He who laughs last, laughs best.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your quota problems will not go away." She spoke so softly that no passersby could hear: "I'll wait for things to change. For He hath promised us—"

Her bread was dry. Her soup was thin. Her Faith was of iron and steel. Her prayers were stronger than slogans.

While Marleen and her decimated family walked barefoot through the mud of yet another soggy spring, Natasha would sneak furtively to Hein's collapsing grave and pat the earth to a neat mound. She did that still. She went there out of habit. Marleen no longer did.

Natasha hunched, a grieving shadow, amid the brambles and the weeds. She thought: "My love was like a stubble field. But now? My heart, a stony cave."

Within her heart, she could no longer see Hein's features clearly, but yet she spoke to him. "He is our son," she grieved, obliging something deep within. She felt she must report to him for reasons only dimly understood and nowhere properly explained. "What did your people do? Where have your people failed? An icicle is forming on my heart—"

In vain, she tried to find some guidance and direction while carving simple arguments.

"He is a human being, too," she told her martyred love. "It is my fault. It can't be otherwise. I shouldn't have weaned him when it was hot—"

She listened. Not a sound.

The wrinkles on her face and neck stretched from the effort of her concentration. Thus, she would sit and try to sort it out, snatching at young dreams that wafted through her heart like shadows.

"Far better it be Dominik—" she said, and then fell silent.

When she could breathe again, she said she was a Baba and was glad—yes, glad!—that Shura was producing babies, for babies were still innocent; she had her way with them; she tried to teach them manners.

Far better it be Dominik, she told the shadows next, than someone out of Moscow.

That's where the Devil squatted, with thick legs and a camel's nose, dispatching operatives. The evidence was everywhere. An odious citizen was now in charge at the collective farm once known as Peter Friesen's farm, a man so vile, so vicious, so loyal

to the Party line that he squashed every Friesen freckle as though it were a roach.

Natasha moved her lips. "I'll do the best I can. I still have spoons left in hiding—"

No one's spoons in the entire neighborhood had such ornate design. No silver had that sheen. In olden days, Natasha liked to show it off, the silverware of Apanlee; it was her pride and joy. For quite a while, those spoons were gone, it was assumed the anarchists had stolen them, but then, one lucky afternoon, Natasha had unearthed them within the rubble of a caved-in building in the back of the estate, and that same night, Natasha took them back and gave them to Marleen. "Let's hide them," said Natasha.

Together, they had hidden them behind a broken staircase where no one ever looked. Natasha's special patron saint was hidden there as well, just gathering up dust.

She told the skeleton beneath the mound of earth: "I still have fourteen left. Marleen knows where they are. If worst should come to worst, she can fall back on them."

She rose on shaky knees. She would sneak silver spoon by silver spoon out to the barter market, and sneak Marleen the money. That was her reasoning.

She placed both arms around the tree that still oozed sap across the letters Hein had hewed into the old bark. She thought her heart would break.

Natasha crossed herself in secrecy when she was told that, to fulfill the quota lists, instead of growing grain, Dominik had now decided cleverly to specialize in poultry.

She cornered her son the next morning to give him a piece of her mind. "Have you lost your head? You can't tell a goose from a gander."

He glared at her. "That is defeatist talk."

Natasha moved a little closer, so she could elbow Dominik at intervals. "No doubt some Gypsy laid a curse on you. Unless I quickly call the twins and bribe them to assist you with good advice and prayers—"

"We're done with that. We're done with superstition. All that was yesterday."

She kept clutching her belly with laughter. "*Ach ja! Ach ja!* The olden days! The wicked days! In past years, by this time, Hein Neufeld's wheat stood four feet tall."

It galled. His solace was his vodka. Even then, there was plenty of vodka in Russia. It made him feel sleepy and warm. It blurred all his troubles, of which he had a barrelful.

Last year, the crops had browned because he planted them too early; the year before they shriveled in the sun because he planted them too late. This year, he hadn't even plowed. He had no choice left over except to specialize in fowl. Shura had already hatched a perfect set of ducklings in a crate beneath the oven bench, which proved his methods had merit. But she forgot to put a cover over them, and in the morning they were gone. She blamed it on the cat.

Natasha was relentless in pursuit. She planted herself in his path. "You're gambling on your luck. I know someone who slumped against the barn just yesterday and did not rise again."

"Be quiet! Now!"

"How will you feed your ducks? Your geese? Your chickens? Hah! Can an alligator fly? Can Comrade Stalin touch the sun? A duck must feed on barley. A goose must peck on rye. Chickens feed best on wheat. Where is your grain, *tovarich*?"

"Don't talk like that. That's undermining our will to reconstruct the government—"

She stood before him, feet apart. "The fools of God," Natasha yelled as loudly as she could, "know how to double the government harvest. Why don't you calm yourself enough to treat them properly? The soil is whispering to them. Did I not teach you manners?"

"No. I said no."

"A boil on your backside," she shouted. She sat down on an overturned bucket and started peeling a potato with Marleen's peeling knife. That knife cut perfect spirals; they curled into her lap. She started sobbing softly. "Why don't you listen to your

mother? If you don't listen to your mother, they'll come and shoot you dead."

"I serve the Soviet government. I cannot wear two hats."

Which was as good an argument as any.

At Apanlee, state workers came and went. Things went from bad to worse.

When it was clear to Dominik his quota problems would not go away, he tried another strategy. He doled out, even-handedly, symbolic favors on one hand and venomous retaliation on the other.

Those workers who excelled the quota charts received a gleaming coin to wear around the neck for aiding in the reconstructive efforts of the country, while slackers, loafers and defeatists, caught sitting idly on an empty pail, inventing lulls to break the day's monotony, could expect being sent, without ado, into the nearest prison camp. Few ever reappeared.

When that did not suffice to fill the quota charts, he made sure pay was handed out in kilos of black bread. The useless priests had long since been hanged or driven out of town, but they had left behind their holy days; the moment Sunday came, the men refused to spade; the women wouldn't even thread a needle.

Things went from bad to worse. Around him there were many angry faces.

"We'll throw you into trucks and move you to the north. We'll ship you to Siberia like cattle!" yelled Dominik.

He learned he had to second-guess the spies and deviationists. He kept on tightening the noose. He understood the Germans' anger, their ire, their passivity. They had owned much. Now they were poor. No wonder they withdrew into their sullen silences.

But his own kin? The brothers of his bloodline? His comrades who had helped install the cataclysmic New World Order? He had expected gratitude. He had counted on finding agreeable people.

All that in vain.They refused to enlist in the battle.

The native workers he recruited painfully by way of bribes and threats remained tardy and sluggish and sullen. They quit their tasks without asking permission, thus showing no allegiance to their country, now freed from the exploiters, as he reminded them. They even challenged him. "Just different chains, *tovarich*. Different chains."

"What do you mean?"

We're chattel. Merely chattel. What is the use of trying?"

"The dungeons will teach you obedience," he threatened. Impatiently, he'd hit them with his walking stick, but they refused to move.

He knew they hated him. They praised him to his face and mocked him to his back. "What for, comrade? What for?" the listless peasants asked.

Too many, still, lay helpless in their huts with swollen limbs and muted eyes and shook their heads when prodded, no matter how he goaded them, perspiring with the effort. The moment when he turned his back, they ripped his quota list.

This one and that one would say to no one in particular: "They came for my last son already—" and silence would fall after their words.

A dead son was a dead son; you had to dig his grave.

Dominik was sure that treachery was everywhere, in need of being stripped, but in the meantime, there were quotas.

More quotas. Yet more quotas.

The Party sent its target goals on reams of yellow paper which Dominik nailed every Monday to the doors of all the barns. Alas, most field hands could not read; to them, his quota lists meant nothing.

And neither did his medals. And neither did his threats.

Before his eyes, the place fell into disrepair. The trough from which the horses drank was never swept or scrubbed. The flies made a thick rim.

He knew his time was short. He wished that he had paid

attention in the bygone, olden days to the repair and maintenance of farm machinery the Germans used to run, but he had not; he had preferred to roam the countryside instead of buckling down to work. The harvesters sat rusting in the shed. The tractors all stood idle. It rained on them. It snowed on them. A hole had formed in the roof; part of the shed had already caved in. For a while, tramps housed in the abandoned edifice; they scribbled Soviet slogans on the wall and tore the floor up to warm themselves in winter.

"I will arrange to fix both roof and floor next week," said Dominik, but later he forgot.

When yet another spring pushed through the loam, Natasha wailed, pursuing him: "The calendar confuses you? Why don't you ask the twins?"

"I can't trust them. Would you?"

"What on earth are you going to do?"

Natasha was a human wishbone, cleaved sorely by her loyalties. She was at her wits' ends. She watched him pulling at a hangnail. He bit it off. He stained his lips with his own blood. He said: "Just wait and see."

Natasha never saw a claw so nakedly unsheathed.

The Germans in Natasha's hut were now as quiet as a nest of mice. They didn't bother anyone. They just kept to themselves.

"A galling creed," said Dominik, still in the Party's good graces.

He leaned into Marleen: "See this red rubber stamp I hold here, in my hand? I'm striking every quarrel."

She merely shrugged and stared.

"Your sons can ride our tractors. Larissa can help Shura feed the horses in the morning, and in the afternoon, why not help Baba in the nursery where it is clean and cool?"

"Why would I want to interfere with progress?" Marleen asked in an icy voice.

Dominik choked down his wrath. He chose to let that pass. Instead he said: "You're getting old, and picking beans is

hard on back and spine—"

"I'll manage, Dominik. And I will watch you manage."

The twins slept in the loft. Larissa and Mimi shared a little makeshift corner, partitioned by a blanket. The girls were almost sisters, taking turns at chores, teaming up at finding scraps of food that fell from the government wagons.

They all made do with their diminished riches: a bed, a table, a trunk, two chairs. A miracle produced a box of nails. Strong poles propped up the sagging roof. Marleen, Larissa and the Pioneer had thatched it skillfully with reedy grass, and it held firm against the rain. The twins had built a bench that ran around the oven; Marleen spread over it a threadbare quilt Natasha sneaked into the hut while Shura took a nap.

Natasha often visited. She never came with empty hands. Her apron bulging with goods she hamstered cleverly when Shura wasn't looking.

Marleen was always glad to have Natasha near. She told her without irony: "Come in. Come in. And make yourself at home."

"Well. Only for a little while," Natasha whispered modestly, while wringing her raw hands.

"No. No. Sit down. Here, Baba. By the fire."

"A little while. That's all." Natasha pulled a bunch of carrots from the folds of her patched skirt and gave them to Marleen. "Here! Here's a little something for the heart. Don't ask, and you won't know—"

"I thank you," said Marleen, by then not only gray but white.

Natasha shuffled awkwardly. "It's nothing. Really. Nothing."

Marleen, while finishing a mitten, secured the last firm loop, before she had an answer. "Well, you surprised a lot of folks—"

Natasha flushed as though she had been suddenly caressed. "Leftovers. That's all."

She helped Marleen stuff several chinks with crumpled paper to keep the warmth in during nights and keep the stray cats out.

"And you surprised a lot of people, too," she told Marleen, glancing at the floor, swept spotless, strewn with clean, wet sand.

"It isn't yet everyday's evening. I'm proud they cannot break my spirit."

"No one can," the former servant said. There was a pause. It stretched and stretched.

"You wouldn't be so foolish?" Natasha said at last. "Take my advice. The night has eyes and ears."

Marleen just kept her silence.

"Please don't. A small mistake will be considered major sabotage—"

"We have no choice. It has already been decided."

They sat for a a long while in silence, until Natasha sighed: "*Ach ja. Ach ja.* And yet, it was like paradise—"

Their glances met and held. There was no film between them.

"And now?" Natasha said with a small sob: "Your life as well as mine, as sad as a cold supper."

"Don't worry about us. There is no choice. You know that. Here. See this? This is a map. Here's what we're going to do—"

Natasha's face turned the hues of a painter's palette as Marleen whispered details of escape across the wilds of Asia—details that were alarming.

Within the circle of the smoking wick, the twins sat, hatching plans, their ears alert for outside footsteps. Larissa gnawed at her lips as she stitched away by the light of a wick. "Time flies," she said, while struggling with a lump, deep in her throat, that would not go away. "And planting time won't wait." Last week, she'd lined a half-charred crate to make a sewing box. In it, she stored her darning bulb, her sewing needle cushion, eleven buttons, and some threads. Natasha knew, but Dominik did not: it had a double bottom. There she had hidden the Gospel.

"We count on Him," she whispered. The twins surrounded every thought with confirmation and support. They whispered to each other that, with the good Lord's help, they would attempt a break for freedom—somehow! soon!—perhaps as early as next

week!

Years fled before they tried.

At first, it had seemed easy: just give commands and watch them work! But soon the German tools lay idle in the fields.

To say that this was maddening for Dominik was putting it politely. Just how to run the confiscated farm machinery with the Ukrainian field hands only who had never learned to farm beyond the hoe? How could he fix the shed if someone lost his hammer? What could he do if someone stole the newborn calf, the pride of Comrade Stalin, and hid it in the meadows? He flogged the plow horse without mercy; it sank down in the mud, where it died. He ran to get an ox to pull the harvester out of the ditch, where it had gotten stuck; the beast stepped on his toe; the nail turned black and then fell off; his foot became badly infected.

He found himself bed-ridden, alone with his venomous thoughts. His insides churned and rumbled. He clutched one of the clan's ornately cross-stitched pillows tightly to himself to seek relief until he noticed, with a little jolt, a faint trace of the scent that Dorothy had worn.

He flung it in a corner. No one picked it up. It was soon full of fleas.

When Dominik could walk again, he found to his dismay that all his apple trees had been attacked by scabs. Someone had forgotten to spray them with the suds left over from a wash. The orchard yield was ruined.

Next, a mysterious fire swept through his stable and burned a huge hole in the ceiling. He ordered his entire crew to patch the roof, which took three weeks of work, which was the reason why he missed fulfilling his important quota list and could not document his productivity.

As the first Five-Year-Plan came to a cheerless close and everybody's worries worsened, both Dominik and Shura grew ever more aggressive.

The two were never idle. They spread fear like a net.

Here was a couple made to match each other's bag of tricks with tricks and yet more tricks. They knew how to focus the agents' attention on others.

"It's all the Germans' fault."

"Well. Well. And who's in charge?" the grain inspectors asked, and would not go away. "Is it not Dominik? We seem to have a problem."

"But nothing that can't be solved."

They kept on dropping in at Apanlee at frequent intervals, and some of them were nice enough, while most of them were not.

"The quotas still are lagging badly."

Dominik sat with his chair tilted back against the wall to show them he felt nonchalant. "We'll work a ten-day week. That way, we'll double output."

The grain inspectors only shrugged to show their ill-concealed contempt. "Yes. Do that, Comrade. Do that. Well, all the best of luck." They gave each other fleeting smiles. "If this keeps up, someone will be looking for his teeth," they told each other gleefully. "Might it be Dominik?"

"Next year will surely—"

The quota agents showed no mercy. "Don't talk about the future! Now! The present is what counts."

"But I—"

"More cabbage. Carrots. Cucumbers."

They prodded Dominik at every opportunity as though he were an ox. No matter how he tabulated every working hour—overtime, and weekend hours in the bargain!—how sagely he projected every deadline, the quota shortage grew more threatening as spring turned into summer and summer into fall.

He drank. He cursed. He swore. His quota problems worsened.

The steam-driven threshers, idle for years, mysteriously lost wires and bolts. Workers fell ill when the workload was greatest,

and thieves intent on wrecking the economy stole parts from crucial farm machinery. Faceless defeatists and diversionists, he told the quota agents when they came early the next week to double-check, with more stern words for him, had rolled themselves corn cigarettes and thrown the butts into the brittle straw of Apanlee. He pointed out to them: "Look at that huge, charred barn! You draw your own conclusions."

The formula was simple: he needed scapegoats now. He knew they hated him, the blighted Germans, all of them! They hated him more than the sullen native workers even, whom he kept flushing out from their Ukrainian huts. Thus, it was only natural that he would blame the mute recalcitrants, the prayer creed, now burrowed deep into the earth like moles.

He knew they huddled over secret plans and whispered of deliverance. He told his mother angrily: "I'll break their spirit yet—"

"You pushed them out."

Why blame the twins? That was Natasha's attitude. The dimpled babies she had nursed were two gaunt graylings now, bent, hunched, deep furrows on their foreheads—between them, still Larissa. She knew their hearts burned at the sight of her. Her face was wet with tears.

Soon, it was clear to all that Dominik had bitten off much more than he could chew. He was in a bad fix.

The spring days were racing on; something had to be grown. But what? He had run out of seed. He no longer believed he could manage and pull off a production miracle. He faced each day with dread. And in the meantime, it was quotas. Quotas. Quotas. And more quotas.

Quotas on the ducks.

Quotas on the horses.

Quotas even on the goats that ate the few forget-me-nots still struggling in the meadows.

And it was quotas also on the beans, cucumbers, carrots, melons, onions, and potatoes, and quotas even on the radishes

that already swarmed with worms.

Misfortunes multiplied. Natasha chased Shura around with a broom.

He issued every kind of order.

Disorder kept on growing.

Another season came and went. The chickens scratched at the dust in the yard. The twins no longer spoke to Dominik, nor did Marleen, and neither did Larissa.

The only one who still smiled prettily was Mimi. The Pioneer was bettering her opportunities. She gave him lots of tips. She was his go-between. He liked her well enough. She was one of the few recalcitrants, decided Dominik, whom he could trust implicitly.

"Come in. Come in. Sit down here by my side."

She was quite tall, and lissome as a lizard; her eyes were now level with his. "What do you want, *tovarich*?"

"What do you mean, what do I want? I want a little chat."

She lingered by the door. She kept up her distance from him. "Why did you call? So bright and early?"

"There's talk of flight. Tell me it's not true."

She listened, smilingly, as though he told a joke. She knew that she was pretty.

"Out with the truth."

"You must be joking, surely. I don't know what you mean." He often told her Soviet jokes; she topped them with her own. He sometimes tried to pinch her cheek when Shura didn't look.

Now Dominik leaned back and blew a blue tobacco ring that slowly vanished by the window. "Don't play the innocent. This letter came this morning."

She took it, straightening the creases. "It is for you, *tovarich*. Why are you giving it to me?"

He studied her in silence. She was a German youngster but trying hard to please; she seconded his words; she strained to overcome the stains of landed ancestry.

He shifted strategies. "How's school?"

"Fine. Nothing but fives. Check with the teacher." She stood

on tiptoes, practically. She squinted to read his intentions. "Why do you ask? Why did you call me in?"

He knew her record was impeccable. She was first in knee bends, second in frog jumps. She was always the first to hand in her papers, and her folder charted remarkable ideological growth.

"What did you learn in school last week?"

"I learned a useful proverb," she told him evenly. "If you take credit for the rain, be prepared to take blame for the drought."

"Ha! Very funny. Very funny."

"Do you want me to read you that letter, *tovarich*?"

"You might as well. Why don't you open it?"

She read the letter slowly to herself before she cleared her throat. "More quotas, Dominik."

He picked up a thick sheaf of papers. He said to the sunshine outside: "How? How? Will someone tell me how?"

Her young eyes glittered merrily. "Maybe I know a way? They want their travel papers."

His face turned a bright red. She stood there, waiting in silence.

"Need I tell you," he said slowly, "that that's a most seditious, dangerous remark? I am surprised at you. I am amazed and shocked."

She didn't back away. "No one doubts my loyalty. I belong to the hammer and sickle."

"Then you know better than to ask what you just asked of me. For that, I could be shot."

"I only told you what they want. I didn't—"

"Yes?"

"I didn't ask you to cooperate."

He cast a sly, admiring glance. "It's travel papers, eh?"

"These days, a set of travel papers is more precious than a nugget." She lifted one smooth eyebrow. "They say you have connections. It's whom you know that counts."

His grin spread ear to ear. "That's right. It's whom I know that counts."

"My brothers think you have a friend who has a friend who

knows the back door to escape and who could easily—"

"It's their hide, too. If they are caught, they will be shot."

"They won't be caught. You'll see to that. Right, Dominik?"

"And you?"

Her tongue was smooth as ballerina's silk, by then a memory. "I know my brothers well. They keep their word. They'll come and work for you and help you with your quotas if they believe that you will help them get their travel papers in good time. Your quotas will be photographed and written up in *Pravda*."

He slapped her on the shoulder. "Smart girl. Smart girl. Now tell me this. What do you want? What's in this plan for you?"

"A job as your right hand. As your translator, Dominik."

"But why?"

" I speak High German. Low German. Russian. Ukrainian. I'll work right by your side so I can help rebuild the wasted country we both love—"

"You'll get it. Here's my hand."

She did not flinch. She did not blush. She watched him smack his lips as though he were chewing a slice of fat bacon. She was about to leave, pleased with herself, when he leaned forward, suddenly.

"Oh. One last thing. You tell your brothers that I asked: 'How can I get Larissa, in addition, to lift her skirt for me?'"

"You just lost one fine opportunity," said Mimi, smiling sunnily while walking out the door.

Chapter 79

Dominik felt panic rise as the agents pushed his quotas even higher the next year and the anticipated bounty from the soil of Apanlee still lagged behind to a degree that drove the beads of perspiration to his forehead.

"More fear. More fear to break their spirits," he told his mother, slurping borscht.

"You're not ashamed?"

"Why should I be? Crop-wreckers, all! All of them! All! That's what I will report. That's how they'll see the light. They'll learn their lesson yet."

"That's where you're wrong. The Germans are fastidious. They would not dream of soiling their own nest—"

"You always take their side."

Natasha gathered firewood while rubbing at her eyes and pondering her means. "You are my son. Why would I do that, Dominik?"

He scowled at her. The problem was more complicated than she knew. In tsarist days, the Devil took convenient blame for every misfortune. Now even that had changed. Now culprits

must be found. Culprits were more valuable than even glutted quotas.

Dominik began to grasp this useful principle as the proletariat rose ever higher to the top, and the once-privileged sank ever deeper to the bottom. As long as he found culprits on whom to fix all blame, he was safe from being accused.

He learned his tactics well. As he had tyrannized the cats while growing up, so now he tyrannized the neighborhood.

"Four others have confessed, been tried, and shot at dawn," said Dominik, while sitting close to Shura.

"The State knows best," said Shura. She curled against him wordlessly. She, too, was garnering herself a useful reputation. A belt was trailing from a sling. She used it now and then on workers who displeased her.

To stay in the Party's good graces, Dominik took care to demonstrate his loyalty to Soviet Russia in every way he could. The government inspectors gave him several useful formulas that would bring glory to the proletariat, but all production had slowed to a trickle. Therefore, he not merely followed the rumors, he planted a few of his own.

He did that with a tongue that grew as facile as a snake's. It hissed of German hate crimes. This was a brand new term, amazingly efficient.

He claimed in meeting after meeting that cunning saboteurs surrounding him stole crucial farm machinery to undermine the brotherhood of proletarians.

"I'll do what must be done," said Dominik whose eyes were two live coals. "I will not spare my enemies. Why should I spare my enemies? They're scum. They are the worst. We must get rid of them. Is there an argument?"

He nagged his mother day and night: "Why don't you tell them that?"

"I cannot help it, Dominik," she pointed out, this for the hundredth time, "how I remember them when they were small and suckled on the honey water I would prepare for them before

Marleen's fine beehives were destroyed. So cute. So sweet. So clean."

The twins were now his thorniest obstacle. He had made sure that they attended several public meetings at which hate crimes were patriotically discussed, but it made little difference; they just exchanged their glances.

He ached to clip their prayers' wings. He itched to smash their Faith.

"The Congress of the Peasants has declared that servants of religious cults are using up the food of worthy working men," he scolded them, vociferous.

They did not answer back. They never argued anything. They merely watched while quotas piled on quotas.

He knew that they were not alone; somewhere in every German homestead, there was that old-time Bible from which they ladled strength. He knew the twins had, on the sly, by the light of a small wick, thumbed through theirs many times—so fervently, in fact, surmised an aggravated Dominik, that chances were the spine was coming loose. It nurtured them, and it replenished them. But where could it be found?

His eyes were expressionless. "The Cheka will teach them respect."

Natasha ran and hid her last remaining icon.

Five neighbors disappeared without a trace, and Apanlee lay quiet as a grave.

"See? There's a lesson here," insisted Dominik, who read the wrecking spirit in every freckled face. "Somebody, somewhere will get hurt. It's time that that's spelled out."

Soon afterwards, he tried to argue with Marleen. "Why live in fear? Why don't you mark my calendars to keep me organized?"

She raised both hands in feeble protest. "My methods are old-fashioned."

He targeted the twins to pry their harvest secrets out of them. When he demanded answers, they claimed they'd lost their voices.

When he harangued them angrily for salient specifics, they shrugged, pretending they were deaf.

By then, the will that had been sapped by hunger had returned. They knew that shadows passed beneath their windows, but they blew out the wick.

Of all the instruments of fear to usher in the New World Order, the Cheka was the worst, and hate crimes were its means. Faceless and terrifying was the Cheka. It had a thousand eyes and ears. And it was everywhere.

It peered through the shutters to where Larissa sat, stitching. On soundless soles, it followed Marleen. Her neighbors. Her friends. It clung to the heels of the twins. It grew by what he fed on—fear, fear, and yet more fear.

Suspects were caught repeatedly and punished savagely and spirited away, but others kept on burrowing. He knew that for a fact. He blamed them for every woe.

"They'll learn their lesson yet!" he said to Shura, furious. He knew a brute tenacity was there. He sensed it in the rustling of the straw. He knew, by then, that his own head was on the block: he was the man in charge.

Shura picked herself a wormy cherry. The red juice bubbled in the corners of her mouth. "You are still just the family bastard?"

"As though it happened yesterday."

This was for Dominik an open, running sore that would not heal. He claimed repeatedly: "Those who dare speak against the government will soon be silenced. All of them. Those who reject our reconstructive efforts for the land will soon be dead—perhaps tomorrow." The result was the fifth meager crop in a row.

The grain inspectors came to check. They stepped around the twins and asked each other angrily: "Where's Comrade Dominik?"

"Your quota lists fall short," the government inspectors growled at Dominik, no longer genial, and he was glad when

they departed; in fact, he shook all day.

While helping them atop their donkey carts and trembling in his trousers, he promised them that next year would be better; he would make sure; he had done trial runs with several crop varieties and now he knew the secret, finally, of growing stronger strains.

"The weather has been bad," he argued, trembling badly. "How could that be my fault?"

The heavens mutinied. It wasn't just incompetence and sabotage. Untimely rains had virtually destroyed the winter wheat; then came the heat; the bean crop, too, was pitiful. The barley yield was worse. The cucumbers had worms. The melons dried and shriveled.

No matter how he tallied every sack and basket on the old wooden abacus he found one afternoon in Uncle Benny's study, his output fell short of the goal. With flying hands, he oiled it so that the smooth pegs flew and added everything to doublecheck, but still, he came out short.

He could not fill his quotas.

When next the quota agents came, he spit in an impressive arc. "I'll punish them often," he told them. "To keep them in line."

"Do that, and more," they said. "Shoot one in ten. To warn the nine remaining. We like our numbers round." They drank to the progressive meeting.

"Just so the rules are clear," the quota agents said to Dominik when they returned a few days hence to doublecheck his plans to increase productivity. They spoke in warning undertones. "Try harder, Citizen. The rope is short. Just so you understand—"

"I do."

"And spare us your excuses—"

"I will. I will. In fact, I will—" said Dominik, who talked incessantly but tried to hide his hands. His stomach kept on acting up long after they were gone.

All night long, it was journey after journey to the outhouse.

Four of the German heads of family in the vicinity of Apanlee were tried and sentenced publicly and shot for grave and harmful insubordination. The paper wrote them up, spilling gallons of ink in the process.

"—the German kulak Peters—"

"—the German kulak Ens—"

The papers grew more vicious in their editorials about the struggle of the classes. They shamed the Germans openly by name long after the cold earth had swallowed them.

"—the German kulak Unruh—"

"—the German kulak Toews—"

Thus died the Thiessen males in their entirety. Thus died the males of Warkentin. Five sons of Johann Loewen were pulled from their beds and shot. And those who had survived from the once prosperous and robust Reimer boys who used to frolick barefoot in the snow in happier days were lined up without words and shot.

The bullets flew. Nobody knows how many.

Natasha mourned them silently. She knew them, face by face.

She had been loaned to them from Apanlee, back in her youth, to help them with festivities. She still had memories she cherished—of Christmas, Easter, birthdays, soft Sunday afternoons when neighbors gathered, gossiping for hours, thus keeping sins in check. Her eyes would moisten with emotion, remembering.

How restful and relaxed life seemed in those long-bygone days as they sat—kulaks all, admittedly, proud of their past, fat with accomplishments and confident the future would be rich—just visiting with friends and relatives, sipping their fragrant tea and dunking fluffy zwieback.

Their crime?

Hate laws in detail spelled them out.

As documented in quadruplicates, they had served self-same tea and zwieback fourteen times to foreigners, friends from the city of the tsars, St. Petersburg, now renamed Leningrad. There,

they had blasphemied. Those Sunday afternoons proved their undoing. The bullets flew. The relatives despaired. The graves were shoveled shut, and for a while, the wailing wouldn't stop, but then a silence came that was unlike most any silence of the past: a deep, pervasive hush.

More and more citizens of the Soviet began to disappear mysteriously; not just the Germans, others, too, but almost all of them. Somebody came and took them, one by one, without a word, without an explanation—and there was nothing in the night that swallowed flesh and spit out bones but the low howling of the wind along a road that led straight off to nowhere.

The Cheka wove its subtle web. Its secret agents multiplied.

The Germans disappeared. By the hundreds of thousands, they vanished. Where is their monument?

Why those of Apanlee were spared when practically everybody else was sacrificed as hate crimes hardened in the laws of Soviet Russia and ethnic cleansing climaxed and more and more were shot or spirited away, is still in many minds a question mark.

The answer was at hand, and it was Dominik. He knew he needed them.

"Can we afford to miss the quota lists?" asked Shura, too, now white with fear.

"We can't," said Dominik. "It's them or us. That's the bottom line."

The oil lamps flickered dimly. Black trains moved over broken rails. The frosts browned the sugar beets badly. The winds refused to blow. The windmills wouldn't pump water. The country had run itself dry. The cranes stood idle; no stores had anything for sale. All through the countryside, decay and beggary ruled, though the slogans were braver than ever. Asthmatic locomotives pulled rusty rows of wagons past sagging, run-down barracks, and what went on inside those closely guarded barracks was anybody's guess.

It must be said of Dominik: he wasn't at the source; he was a willing toady. And terror was his means. Unrestrained terror—

raw, naked terror, crouching in the basement, peering from the ceiling. Now it was terror morning, noon, and night—and terror! terror! yet more terror! All cowered under it—the twins, Marleen, Larissa, Mimi. Natasha felt it, too; her own son spelled it out for her—how hatemongers must suffer, and hate crimes must be punished.

But she was old, one foot already in the grave. She spoke her mind, no matter what. He was her Dominik. She told him many times, to let her words sink in:

"Why don't you treat them fittingly? To have them on your side?"

He stared at her, his eyes expressionless.

"I could arrange for little favors," wept his mother.

To no avail at all!

She kept up her lament: "I pity you. I fear for you. The quota agents know no mercy—"

"It is too late. It's them or me. It's better that they grasp that."

She watched how the neighborhood vanished. Hatemongers all! Against the New World Order! The Party's wrath kept sweeping them away like chaff before the wind. Good neighbors she had known for all her life would disappear behind some flapping doors, and that was that; that was the end; no one heard of them again; not even roosters crowed.

Her son had this to say: "You tell them this. Their troubles are bigger than mountains." He kept on pushing up his sleeves and pointing to his biceps. "All who are guilty now of hate crimes will be punished. It matters not if there's no evidence."

"Have tea with us," urged Shura when the quota agents came to Apanlee soon afterwards, with bayonetted rifles on their shoulders. The agents handed Dominik a list. He surveyed it with narrowed eyes.

"Shoot one in five," the quota agents said this time. "To warn the four remaining."

No trick to have a man shot at dawn. A body slumped. A

sparrow chirped. The net of the Cheka was tight and grew tighter, ensnaring the living along with the dead. The Cheka sorted, labeled and sent home the victims' bloodstained clothes.

All this took place well within living memory.

What was a life? Or, for that matter, what was death, no longer catalogued? Someone would come with a bucket of sand and throw it over the red, sticky puddle.

Natasha watched it all. Wringing her hands made no difference. Marleen gave her tears to the earth. The spring-sowing barley campaign was now underway: the twins still held back what they knew.

They listened to the tread of terror on the cobblestones that led to Apanlee and knew that when they came and took this one away, that one away, a silence fell after they left.

All this went on for years. At night, the bullets crackled. The Holocaust? Don't mention that to Mimi as she sits on the Kansas couch, still part of the Old World.

She, Mimi, knows about the Holocaust. She knows her facts: on silent orders, silent men pulled silent people from their beds and shot them in the Germans' orchards.

"And many of the executioners," she will tell you to set the record straight, "had gold and silver in their names. Thus died the German farmer Hiebert, for example—"

The crime for which he died in agony? Concealment of the Bible. Forbidden political print.

The hate laws spelled that out. The hate laws were extremely specific, containing many paragraphs.

Yes, it was true, the farmer Hiebert stammered. He tried to hide the Gospel; it was his most precious possession. It had been brought from the Vistula Plains; it had been in the Hiebert family for seven generations.

He tried to argue precedent and history when Dominik discovered it, well-hidden in the straw. But Dominik just sneered.

"Here is the evidence," he said, "to document imperialist leanings. The Party will be pleased."

The execution squad did not loose time. The German farmer Hiebert fell, as others fell that year, and in the years to come, and did not rise again.

The German farmer Siemens.

A dogged deacon of the Lutherans, this man had stung the bastard's backside once for stealing unripe apples. Now Dominik prodded his buttocks, in turn, at intervals, and with the muzzle of a rifle, in Uncle Benny's study, where he was camping now.

"Confess. Beg for reprieve. You know it's as easy to beg as to steal—"

The shackled man, by then, had turned into a crumbling fortress. "Tell me what I'm accused of having done. I will confess to anything. Kill me but spare my children—"

"You don't remember on your own? Well, *donnerwetter!* Fancy that."

"Have mercy, Dominik. Let me take all the punishment, but leave my family alone."

His tormenter smirked gleefully. What family was left?

All of his sons except for one had long since disappeared in the realm of ice and snow; the last one still hid out, behind a pile of burlap sacks. He, Dominik, had that from a good source.

"*Tovarich*, for the love of Stalin—"

"Not for the love of Stalin, but for the fear of Stalin," corrected a stern Dominik. "Spare me your groveling. I have here, filed already, the testimony of a dozen people who all remember clearly—"

The German Bauer, likewise.

Some twenty years ago he had applied for passports for his family. He had wanted to move them to Kansas. A van came and took them away—all twenty-one of them. Arrested that same week as well was the whole Nickel clan. Their count was thirty-four. Their crime? In the depths of the famine, they had traded their farm tools for food.

With them, the German Janzen vanished. Here was his crime:

he shared a blanket and a cup of tea with several vagrants once, back in the cold and hungry years, but they died just the same. The charge was, he was told, that he had poisoned them. Investigations proved the vagrants had been Bolsheviks of Jewish origin, and now he, too, was classified a dangerous provocateur. They shot him like a dog.

Here is the partial story of the German farmer Penner.

He tried to burn some documents. He was, however, caught, and people think that he was shot—to this day, there are relatives in Winnipeg who think that that's what happened.

No details left, alas, Mimi will tell you now. Nobody knows for sure. The story is that someone came and poked around the ashes and found a half-charred envelope that still said: "Mennotown."

That's how that story goes. To this day, not a trace.

Could it have been a neighbor's jealousy? A half-forgotten quarrel?

The minions from the gutter did not bother to explain. Their job was to contrive sufficient charges heaped on charges. The hate laws helped, now locked in place. It was a rabbit hunt.

Chapter 80

Behind it all stood Dominik. The less he knew, the better. It was easier, it was better, not to know. He told Natasha many pointed stories to illustrate the principle that it was safer, it was better, not to know. That's why history calls Dominik a monster to this day. The silhouettes needed toadies; they stayed at the periphery; he did the work for them. His voice grew smooth and hot as sealing wax as he explained the why's and how's of wholesale ethnic cleansing.

"Tear down the old fences. Let the goats roam about," he told his mother who, by that time, in shock from boundless terror and deaf and dumb herself, could only keen and rock.

So let her wail! He was a man. He had his own priorities. He did not order bloodshed. His orders were all for arrest.

Ice-cold terror—that's what it took.

Naked force—that's what it took.

Arrest orders cluttered Uncle Benny's desk, where Dominik presided. Brass knuckles, rifles, revolvers—reliable weapons. Terror and torture—trustworthy means. It took a man, insisted Comrade Stalin, to pull out by the roots all opposition to the New

World Order the Party had outlined. He was that man. He was in charge. Nobody argued back.

He was pleased that they called him *tovarich*. He admired himself in the Apanlee mirror that hung on the opposite wall. Despite the crack that an anarchist's sword had left on the upper right corner, he saw a sufficient reflection, and what he saw pleased him no end—a magnificent cap with a five-pointed star, no newspaper shreds in his boots, his collar upturned and in his trouser pocket the finest of tobacco from Odessa. A street in Moscow bore his name. The Party heaped honors on him.

He pulled on his mustache and spit through a gap in his teeth. He grew by what he fed on: denunciations by the ream. For rudeness. Slowness. Illness. Breakages. Agitation. Exploitation. Counterrevolution.

He did not fool himself. No longer was he dealing counterblows.

He had already taken his revenge; all that was past; all petty peeves had fallen by the wayside; vindictiveness no longer mattered; nor was he merely forcing unfair quota laws upon recalcitrants. Now he dealt with a logic all its own and crystal clear to everyone: His own head: on the chopping block. Unless he kept on feeding culprits to the Antichrist, he would be shot—for running Apanlee into the ground and ruining the grain.

Night after night, the agents of the Cheka moved through the night like bats—faceless and terrifying shadows. They asked the ancient German patriarch whose name was Jakob Harms: "Hey, you! How long have you been practicing subversion against the New World Order?"

The old man did not even recognize the word. By then, he was just sitting on the porch and waiting for the Lord to come and call him home. That was his one last wish. Where he was going soon, he told the agents of the Cheka with his toothless gums, life would be warm and colorful. That's what his Scriptures said, long since consumed by flames. He tried explaining that.

They would have none of it. The agents cuffed him on the shoulders. "Give us a date. Give us a name."

His mind was weak. Names had long paled. Dates had no more meaning whatsoever.

"The local censor knows —" he muttered, and moved his caved-in mouth. "There's nothing left to say—"

"Then come with us. Don't bother taking clothing—"

He rose obediently. No one ever heard from this poor man, age ninety-three, another solitary word.

The German farmer Ediger stood outside Uncle Benny's study and waited to be questioned. He was the last male of his clan. The previous week, some government officials had arrived and dragged his father from his bed, an invalid, impoverished to the bones—but in his youth he had owned wealth. For miles around, he had been one rich kulak!

How rich? Too rich.

So rich he could afford to pay for a compartment in a train when he took leisure trips to Poltava. This self-same train now took him to the dungeons first, and later to Siberia. With him went his two sons, five nephews and a grandchild, not even thirteen years of age. One was still left: the farmer Ediger, who moved aside obligingly wherever Dominik appeared who was in finest fettle.

No longer did he have to bother finding them and prying harvest secrets out of them. They came to see him now, all begging favors, pleading mercy, shivering with fear. All of them. Eager. Willing.

He sat in Uncle Benny's rocking chair and rocked, while down the steps and all around the house, a queue of paupers formed. One little word could send the chill of terror down their spines. That word was: "Next."

Those whom he sent away, were gone. They vanished.

Families vanished. Villages vanished.

In numbers untold and nowhere recorded, the Germans all vanished. They vanished.

"Next. You! Somebody came to me to document that you sold grain without permission and kept the profit wickedly—"

"But I—"

"Sign this confession. Save me a little trouble."

Next.

"How many horses did you own? How many pigs? How many cows?"

No matter what they said, no matter how they tried to put a thin veneer on improprieties against the New World Order as outlined by the Party in weekly bulletins, Dominik just rolled his tongue and smacked his lips and told them, one by one:

"You exploited the downtrodden masses—"

Arrests of kulak families became the order of the day. It was the only order of the day, and Dominik was firmly in the saddle. He was the one to carry out the orders from above, for he had practiced with the anarchists; he still remembered cleverly what he had learned from them.

He raided them repeatedly. Sometimes he used the mob. The mob would open and shut drawers, throwing socks and shirts and trousers on the floor, while the detested parasites—the traitors! agitators all! hatemongers all! exploiters all!—now stood in clusters in a corner, their faces ashen with their fear, eyes lit like Christmas candles.

He told them many times: "Not one of you is innocent!" They all had hoarded grain. They all had kept forbidden livestock. And scores of them had feasted on the burlap sacks America had sent. Now they were at his mercy.

He filled his cart haphazardly with things that struck his fancy—kettles, axes, mirrors, quilts, tin ware and copper ware, along with basins, razors, scissors. He rammed another rifle butt through yet another window. He overturned a flower pot. He kicked a cat. He spit into their supper.

Before he left, he nailed a warrant on the door: "Don't touch. State property. Tomorrow, I'll be back."

Thus Dominik became the Cheka's instrument—a formidable force. A horn gave one sharp blast, and down jumped Dominik: "Here! Sign this protocol. Don't give us any gall."

No wonder, therefore, that some Germans, in the end, agreed to push the manure cart for Dominik. He made little speeches for them: "Do you remember now how you engaged in criminal activities? Don't be your own worst enemy. You're assigned to the cucumber brigades—"

Next!

He terrorized, and they complied. The formula was simple. Before he understood that formula, he had not dreamed that it could be so easy.

He sat, his legs outstretched, at Uncle Benny's desk, which overflowed with papers. To his left sat an appointed medical inspector, to the right a clerk who helped him sort out names. Six chairs were set against the wall. Two revolvers lay next to his pen.

"You will now tell me once again about the time when you made common cause with spies and infiltrators—" Next.

"You will now document why you decided wickedly to entertain four foreign royalists—" Next.

Let them be sly about their past; he, Dominik, could not be easily deceived. He hooked his thumb through his belt, adorned with the five-pointed star. "Next! You are next! The evidence against you is documented in this folder—"

The floor around him was littered with sunflower shells. There was a ringing in his ears. His wide, stolen belt buckle glittered. His head swam with his might. He was so strong, he was so feared that Shura did not have to queue up for an extra onion batch.

Outside, the sun shone merrily. His quota problems paled.

By fall that year, Dominik no longer bothered with the questions; his task was stripped down neatly to seven simple words.

"You're guilty of a hate crime. Next."

He had the knife. They owned the underbelly.

Some tried to argue back, though not for long. The twins decided to fight back, despite their mother's tears.

Those two said to Natasha's bastard in one voice: "Now, listen, Dominik. You listen hard. What proof is there that we have ever harmed this country?"

"Proof? What is proof? I've never heard the word."

They said: "We won't confess to crimes of which we are not guilty. We will not sign that we committed treason."

"What was Larissa doing, Citizens, three years ago, while harvesting the cabbage patch, grown in defiance of the law?"

They looked at him and knew: "He slaughters blameless life—"

He looked at them and knew: "Escape is on their minds—"

He fingered them repeatedly, but he was careful not to push; between them stood Natasha. Instead, he spoke derisively: "To steal that bucket full of grain was criminal. Don't argue that you aren't guilty—"

Some tried, though not for long. "We were still in the midst of the famine. We were coping with chaos as best as we could."

"You acted alone? Who else was involved?"

"I give you my word: I acted alone."

"Three minutes left. Think of three names—no, better make that six!—and they better be good names. They better be excellent leads—"

"I acted alone, but now I remember. You are right; I was thieving. I confess; a handful of grain from the government bin—"

"—two minutes—"

"Not even a cupful. A handful. My children were maddened with hunger—"

"Don't play your silly games with me. Who else was there? Who else filled his pockets with government grain? One minutes still remaining—"

"May God forgive me, I remember: My neighbor down the street, three houses to the left—"

This happened to the German farmer Redekopp of Alexanderwohl, old as Methuselah.

By then, he had lived ninety years, and not a day without the Holy Spirit's guidance. His sons, their sons, and their sons' sons had spread across a hundred thousand acres of the richest soil of the Ukraine. His father and his father's father had been the area's model farmers, and his great-grandfather had pushed his wheelbarrow, on foot, filled to the brim with German piety, out of the swamps of Prussia and all the way to the Ukraine, right next to Willy Epp, first preacher of the Brethren. He had lived long and well, this ancient German, Redekopp, before the Revolution came and labeled him a traitor. He had assumed, a foolish man, that he would be entitled to a peaceful death in his own bed, advanced in years and heaped with honors, his children by his side and chorusing.

Now Dominik held him by his lapels. Now Dominik yelled in his face so that the spittle flew: "Just so the rules are clear. Last night was just a dress rehearsal—"

"But I—"

"That fourteen-year-old grandson you have left? The apple of your eye? He is in custody already. We found him yesterday—"

This fourteen-year old, so they say, bit through his tongue before he, too, confessed, admitting wholesale treason. He whispered, staring at the bloody spots where hours ago his fingernails had been: "I now accuse myself and others—" and was found lying in a crimson pool before the day was gone.

"Too bad. Too bad," said Dominik. "Next. Who is next? All traitors guilty of a hate crime must be found. Somebody has to find them. It might as well be me."

He sorted lists and yet more lists. The formula was simple. A kulak was an enemy. The Germans led the way. No people had more kulaks than the Germans.

As long as he accused—repeatedly, relentlessly—he was safe from being accused. Terror was his vehicle. He drove it at full

throttle.

And proof of wholesale treachery, he found, was easy to come by. Amazing what he found, once he looked hard enough.

Thus, for example, was the German farmer Giesbrecht taken into custody for sabotage.

"Here is a paper for your arrest. Admit you fed grain to your chickens!"

Deaf in one ear from several previous beatings, this farmer, straining hard to hear, stared at an animated Dominik through crusted, swollen lids. "Have mercy. Never once—"

"Shut up! You lout!" yelled Dominik. He took the German rudely by the arm. "We know you are a spy. You're harming Mother Russia. We know that for a fact. The government has proof of harmful insubordination—"

"But why—" the German mumbled with confusion.

"What? You ask why? Did I hear right? The fool is asking why! Let me refresh your memory. Unless you tell us what you know, I have no choice but to believe the worst. Who else was guilty of hatemongering?"

"But I—"

"How many sons do you have left? Unless you tell us all, they have two choices left. It's heaven, or Siberia."

Mild-mannered and bespectacled, the farmer took a knife and drove it through his conscience: "God help me, I remember. I overheard my neighbor Neufeld praise America in several private conversations."

"Who else was there?"

"Now it comes back to me. Write down the names of Rempel, Peters, Wiebe—"

"Ah! That is useful information. The only pity is: it comes too late. We took them in already."

"But didn't you just—"

"So? In the name of our glorious Soviet Union, we must arrest you for suspected sabotage."

An awkward word could do it. A vague suspicion. A neighbor's grudge. An old, unsettled score.

Sentenced to death: for preaching.

For stealing a chicken.

For having missed two days of work.

For having praised a foreigner.

For pilfering collective property.

For spilling stolen wheat into a trouser leg. Don't make us laugh: to claim that you were starving is slandering the Party.

A man collapsed; none helped him up. Another vanished without trace; nobody dared ask what happened. Whenever Dominik appeared, they trembled, and they shook. He was but one peg in a devilish game—no better, no worse than the rest.

"Soup kitchens? Ha! It was unpatriotic to take food from corrupt governments—"

When in a benevolent mood, he would give them a stern dressing-down. He would tell them, a glitter in his eyes: "I'll send the overseer to check on you tomorrow. Go home and think up three more names—"

At other times, he did not feel so lenient. A cinch to probe for weaknesses. Child's play to find a fault.

"There was a fire at your barn. What should I call that fire? Negligence? Or sabotage? In either case: ten years."

The German farmer Letkemann was found to have suspicious relatives in Hillsboro, and he was shot for that. He was not even given time to finish his last supper. Shot that same night were his three sons, two grandsons, and an accidental visitor. A blanket sentence, fit for beasts—and no one said a word.

In better days, Marleen's own martyred husband had had a childhood friend named Johann. They came for him as well. They came for him at midnight and pulled him out of bed. He was still limp with sleep.

They kicked him hard and broke a rib. Blood gurgled through his teeth.

They yelled at him: "Don't nit-pick now. Confront your

wickedness. Here is the dotted line. What? You refuse to sign? Confess that you maliciously betrayed the merits of the Revolution—"

He begged: "What have I done? Where did I fail?"

They yelled: "We ask the questions, Citizen!"

Before he died, he learned he had admired Western decadence by bragging of his relatives in Kansas. He agreed he had grievously injured the Party.

They shouted, kicking him: "Give honest testimony now. Help us expose the traitors. Who else felt as you did? Who else has relatives in Kansas? Here is a pencil and a sheet of paper. Write down a full description of your crime. We know the general facts. You fill in the details."

Now and then, a shadow fell, but Dominik shooed it away. Still, it returned, no matter how he shushed it—for it was Uncle Benny, he and his many books.

The fattest book that Uncle Benny ordered from St. Petersburg did not last through a week, for the small hunchback read with joy whatever came in print.

He, Dominik, read not from joy but, poorly, from a sense of duty. His reading was laborious but thorough. He put a cross here, a check-mark there.

Next. You are next.

He cleared the dryness from his throat. You, next.

Another shadow. Dorothy. She wore neat curls across her ears. She even powdered them.

He roused himself to action. "A little favor for yourself, eh? Here. Write a declaration."

To his friends, he gave fat jobs. His enemies went begging.

He slapped down a folder and roared: "You missed three days of work. You claim that you were ill?"

"I slipped and fell—"

"That's what you claim. I claim that it was sabotage. Where is the proof? Look what I have right here. See? A confession, already made out in your name—""

Next.

The German farmer Fehr had failed to get a license to increase his carrot patch. Five years.

The German farmer Krahn had asked for information about leaving Russia. Eight years.

The German farmer Hildebrandt had hidden several Cossacks in a foiled attempt to help escape the deposed tsars. The firing squad for him.

There was no end to it.

Thus did the Antichrist catch up with the enslaved, trapped Germans. Now they all huddled in the hallway, waiting to be seen.

They walked into the room where Dominik sat proud and scrutinized the treason in their freckled faces while chewing the end of a pencil. Along the wall stood three interrogators—their faces bland, their small eyes roving, scattering showers of sunflower seeds.

"Next," muttered Dominik, who still drank—more than ever.

No detail was safe from his eyes. Nothing was off-limits now. He scrutinized his victims' faces, then their pockets, then their past; he checked until he found what he was looking for; he checked on absolutely everything.

He did what others did. He did so on secret command. Hundreds of thousands did likewise, helping to purge the country.

"Look, you can try to prove to me whatever strikes your fancy. But I, in turn, will prove to you that two plus two is five. Who else was there? What else was said? What did you overhear? Exactly?"

"I didn't—"

"Well, let me help you, then. Did your old father not come back, last week, this after having spent three years in prison? I heard there is a chance he might be re-arrested. Does that improve your memory?"

Sweet days for Dominik. He dipped his pen into the ornamental ink well sunk deep into a chiseled ridge and told the Ger-

man farmer Loepp, whom he had known for close to thirty years: "Will you agree to spy on your neighbor as part of your citizen's duty? No? You will not? Don't claim you didn't have a chance. Don't say I didn't treat you fairly—"

Next.

"Were you a member of a counterrevolutionary plot?"

How many sons? How many uncles? Cousins? Nephews?

Here's a pencil. Write them down. And don't leave out your grandfather.

"I can't remember—"

"Your memory is short? Well, let me help you, then—my memory is intact. Two of your daughter's last remaining sons? Both stood in line to take their handouts from Americans. Starred names in this fat folder—"

Chapter 81

No one in Dewey's church had ever asked, nor ever would have thought of asking: "Why dost Thou tell us not to kill, and then kill every one of us?"

Faith walked on feathered soles in Kansas. So, too, in Germany.

The Führer's succinct mandate: Faith. The people's chorus: *Ja!*

The Führer's flag was not a symbol anyone took lightly in the thirties. Faith, Faith and yet more Faith—but now with a decided difference: Not in a dubious afterlife as compensation for a blood-stained world, but in yourself, your Fatherland, your ethnic past, your children's sunny future in a reborn, cleansed Germany, devoid of illness, poverty, despair, corruption, ugliness.

"Soon, ruin will no longer stare you in the face," the Führer said. "Soon, terror will be gone. Soon, our streets are going to be safe again, as in the olden days."

The masses hushed with reverence. The swastika looked like a double cross; it soon replaced the Cross. The Führer did not

strain, as Dewey did, for words. The Führer's rallies, ringing with his passion for a world where health and strength were wholesome and sloth and sickliness were foul, where had a right to honest profit wrestled from the soil and profiteering was a crime, soon brought the people out-of-doors. Vast crowds began to gather as soon as meetings were announced. The papers praised the Führer. The people trusted his intentions. He said he would clean up with mop and bucket.

He said: "The gloves will finally come off!"

The masses cheered. They liked his clear simplicity. By just looking at him, they could tell: Here was a man who called a spade a spade. Here was true leadership that called the bankers on the carpet. Here was a man who called a hoax a hoax.

"Give me a match," the Führer said, "and I will light a fire between the devil's hooves."

The Führer liked a radish better than a rose, and Heidi started growing radishes and carrots and took out every rosebush by the roots. Along her whitewashed fence, she planted three rows of tomatoes, and side by side with the tomatoes, she grew her salad greens, her carrots, cucumbers and beans.

The earth was soft and willing; and day by day, the doors flew open, sunshine flooded in, and youngfolk sprawled about her kitchen and asked each other in loud whispers:

"What smells so heavenly?"

Her youngfolk came from everywhere, mostly out of the gutter, and she was busy mending—not just their trousers but their hearts. When Heidi came upon the nameless orphan who saved himself out of the horror-stricken years, her youth hostel was going full blast. She ran it as a halfway house, and it was always full.

There, Heidi shone with happiness, self-discipline and energy. She was as peaceful as a little girl who tended to a flock of geese, yet all the same, she was enthusiastic, systematic, and determined. Wherever she found little boys and girls in need of nurturing and warmth, she gave them sugar cubes.

"Nobility of service," said Heidi every day, "is something you must learn. The Führer leads. We follow. You put your shoulder to the wheel and shove. Is there an argument?"

Although her husband was a Prussian landholder with an unbroken pedigree and vast lands in Silesia, he went to work for her: he hired carpenters and masons and added extra rooms where several of her favored charges stayed on their off-duty days.

Among them, Jonathan was special. He knew that he was special. He slept on her couch in the kitchen.

He was sure he had died; this was heaven.

She was there, that first morning when he awoke to a new life as though from a bad dream. He stood in the doorway and took it all in—the spotless floor, the sparkling window panes, the fragrance of potato pancakes, her blond hair in a coil.

Still barefoot in her frilled pajamas, her belly bulging gently much like a leavened loaf of bread that rose with air and warmth, she spotted him and waved. "Come in. Come in. Here, try my jam. Straight from my cherry tree."

He found a chair and sat on it, his body limp with sleep. She was bustling about in the kitchen, about her the patter of six little feet. She kept passing out coffee and pancakes, cut into delicate strips.

"I called on various friends to find out who could spare an extra pair of shoes," she told him, while spooning gruel into the youngest of her brood. "Show me your feet. What size?"

The morning light was glaring. The only sound in her bright, scented kitchen was the small sound of clicking spoons. He didn't take his eyes from her, quite at a loss for words. She had a lively step, a friendly, unpretentious smile. She moved about her kitchen nimbly. She lifted his sunk chin.

"Come. Look at me. Last night, after you fell asleep, I turned the collar of a shirt a neighbor left with me. I have an extra pair of pants I found in a forgotten drawer. A good friend found some underwear for you, still in acceptable condition. Soon you'll be good as new."

He frowned and shrugged his shoulders. All that was far from certain.

"But first things first," said Heidi energetically. "Right after breakfast, you and I will march ourselves to the delousing station. I do not care what's crawling on your head, but other people might. Is that all right with you?"

She took him to a huge, red building and waited patiently outside until he came back out, shorn like a sheep and smelling of carbolic.

"How neat you look," she said, and buttoned up his coat. "You look magnificent. I'm proud of you. There's work to do. These days, nobody is untidy."

His throat became taut with emotion.

Today, the forces that dictate the way world history is written have much to say of him, this man whom Heidi called her Führer and Jonathan would, too—and none of it is true. Ask Mimi—she will tell you. Had he been just a fourth-rate underling with a mad yen for holocausts, he wouldn't have lasted a week. The ripening grain was his story.

In those young years, it wasn't shrill. It wasn't coarse. An atavistic presence started growing quietly in the soil of Germany, and those who felt it growing then will tell you to this day that it was something clean. And deep. And true. And powerfully moving.

"Say what you will," they say. "The Führer had a vision. He gave us back our soul."

There was pride in one's folk, in one's roots. The weeds no longer choked the sidewalks. The store shelves filled once more with merchandise. The country was recovering; the clover stood in bloom. The woods of Germany became a picnic ground, and tranquil was the sunshine, and hallowed were the stars.

Hath not the potter power over clay? The air was thick with incense. The children's hair was glistening with dew. The Führer's planes were silver dots against the sky, and humming like mosquitoes.

Somewhere somebody claimed maliciously, gesticulating, that the beloved German Führer was as sexless as an angel, as fierce and bloodless as a dragon, as mystic as the Russian monk.

It's just not so. Not true.

He had rays flashing from his hands, and therein his power was hidden.

The German people's spirit had been numb for years, but now they had an alchemist with a magnetic nature and a discriminating eye.

This, Heidi understood. She knew as well as anybody else that he, the Führer and his men, had sworn death to the Antichrist—but, in addition, she was practical. She translated such lofty words for the small, outcast boy whom she had found and taken in much like a wounded animal.

Where she believed his heart was—that's where she dropped her anchor. "Now that I think if it," she said, "I think you need a bicycle."

She was as good as her word. She fattened a goose and then sold it, and bought a bicycle for him. She would kindle herself on his bliss.

He skinned both knees ferociously. She watched him kick the tires.

When he was sure she wasn't looking, he tried to reach a speed that pulled the wheels right off, but Heidi saw, and Heidi said: "That's scandalous behavior!" and for a long and wretched weekend gave him her coldest shoulder.

She was like that. She had free hand to punish any way she pleased, but Heidi hardly ever punished; she barely raised her voice. She emphasized character training. The day came all too soon when she pulled him aside: "What have you hidden in your trousers?"

His face resembled scarlet cloth. "It's nothing, really. Nothing."

He still stole. Everything. It was a weird compulsion. He couldn't stop himself. A headlight. A door handle. A piece of

string. A box of rusty nails.

These things, he knew from past experience, had bartering potential. You hoarded what you found. You hid it in a hole you dug, or else beneath your bed.

"A paperweight? You take that back," said Heidi, looking stern.

"But I—"

"Right now. And you apologize. You say that it was a mistake; you do not need a paperweight; I do not want to hear another word from you until you have apologized."

She spelled the Führer's values out for him in weeks and months to come.

Honesty—better than thieving.

Cleanliness—better than dirt.

Valor—better than cowardice.

Purity—better than filth.

One day she said to him with a small twinkle in her eyes: "You're growing, aren't you? Tell me the truth. Somewhere must be a girl who's standing on her toes?"

"How do you know such things?" he asked in fear and awe.

He loved her more than he had ever loved another human being, or ever would again. He longed to touch her hair. He did not do that. Ever.

It took a long, long time to break him of destructive habits, but Heidi was a patient teacher. She coached; she watched; and she explained. She reminded him, time and again: "You are the Führer's hope. You are his future tool. Inside and out, you must be pure and clean."

She laughed at him and poked him with her index finger and linked her arm with his. Her husband was an officer; she grew a splendid family with the same concentrated dedication with which she grew her radishes—three sitting at her breakfast table, a fourth born after Jonathan moved in, three more to come, if you believed her husband's teasings—enough for the Motherhood Medal. Her babies made her chubby; her hair started showing

some gray, but she remained for Jonathan far into middle age as young and beautiful as when she first appeared and took his icy hands into her own to warm them with her love.

When Heidi's sons were old enough, they were given their very own daggers. On each was written: Blood and Honor.

Before these youngsters even went to school, their heels already came together in a sharp, snapping sound as though released by rubber bands. Their arms flew forward in salute.

"Now life is beginning in earnest," said Heidi. Self-discipline forbade her to shed tears, but she trembled with pride and exhaustion. "Without a sense of duty to his land and to his fellow citizens, a man is not a man." Those were her exact words.

She was fastidious about detail. She expected the best at all times and took it as a personal catastrophe when those she loved gave less than what she valued and deserved—precisely all those qualities of body, heart and mind the foundling out of Russia still yearned to make his own. She was goodness and virtue and magic. She set her table in the open air. She was a goddess who baked apfelstrudel.

She said that it was up to him to build a better world; that she would show him how. "It's us against the Antichrist," she said to him one morning.

She did not need to spell it out. He knew.

"You have until Friday to make up your mind. And never mind excuses."

He was only too glad to obey; nature itself obeyed Heidi. The sun shone when she picnicked with her charges by the lake; the wind howled when she set the fireplace ablaze. She got up in the middle of the night to help the cat to a new set of kittens. The postman, the cobbler, did special things for her. Her mailbox overflowed. Her shoes grew brand new heels. She had good words for everyone. She cared for a bedridden neighbor. She never missed her duties at the Winter Help. She was a bridge that brought people closer together—her sum and substance, always, her lacerated Fatherland in need of willing hands. She

knew precisely how to put together once again the broken fragments of a young boy's previous life not fit for any dog.

When Jonathan came into Heidi's care, she was already supervising, scolding, praising and improving assorted homeless boys who, scum and filth just yesterday, now wore their caps set sideways on their brows at an audacious angle and studied themselves in the mirror with pride.

Blue eyes. Blond hair. Square chin.

She glowed to see them proud. She fed them applesauce.

She campaigned long and hard to give them the color of health through hard work and strong food and good deeds. Why, by their heels she dragged them out of bed and scattered them into the fields!

"You have a purpose now! From now on, everybody up at five!"

The day was never long enough. If there was work to do, she led the way; she squared her chin and disappeared around the corner to make this world a better world, and never mind the snickers. She kept collecting piles of blankets, boxes and umbrellas—going steadily from house to house. "What can you spare? Will you help out? We are crafting a better tomorrow."

And why not? She had proof. She looked at Jonathan and knew that he was all the proof she needed. When she first found him in the dirty streets of Germany, as gray and cold as the gray, frozen snow of Russia, she knew that there was chaos to be organized.

She changed him, head to toe.

It took a while for Jonathan to realize that he could put away his fears. No longer did he need to grub for food in garbage cans, for Heidi saved for him that extra wedge of sausage.

"Eat! Eat!" she always said. "Thin as a stork! You must eat more. Will you shame me by eating so little?" She spread his bread with butter on both sides. "There is plenty of food in the garden," said Heidi.

She was like that—doing things for the people she loved as though she did things for herself. Her kitchen could not hold her guests; she always had more guests than beds; the world loved and appreciated Heidi.

She told the baker: "Four loaves of bread, please—" and the good baker gave her five.

The bachelor greengrocer saved up the biggest cantaloupes for her. When one-pot Sundays came by order of the Führer, she didn't call that stew.

No elbows on her table!

Around her, it was "please" and "thank you" all the time for every little matter. Now it was frequent baths, respect for your elders, self-discipline and punctuality, contempt for idleness and sloth.

In return, it was armsful of wood for her stove. It was an honor, always, to sit right next to her. Long after she had left the house to patronize a favorite charity despite a raspy throat, her spirit lingered on.

And she was not alone. It was renewal time. The country shone with purpose, and soon there was a Sunday rooster in everybody's pot.

School children clustered everywhere—with tiny swastikas on their lapels and not a button out of place, hair straight as if drawn by a ruler. With young and healthy lungs, these youngsters sang old, patriotic hymns that promised a rejuvenated Germany reverberant with pride.

When silence fell, the Führer spoke. His message never varied. That message came from loudspeakers, strung up from tree to tree. The banners unfurled. Fists clenched and then unclenched. Many bells started ringing with mirth.

A worthy tomorrow.

No bloodshed.

No mayhem.

No sloth.

The flags kept on rippling and snapping. The German people

trembled with emotion. Out came the folding chairs when there was a parade. The Lord, the faithful knew, had matched the Führer with his task.

Soon, brides and grooms descended through the arches to take the Mystic Cross salute. Their cheeks aglow, they pledged each other loyalty, their hearts awash with gratitude: The future would be orderly, with many healthy children. Each child would have an education—as fine an education as his young mind allowed; the Führer paid the way.

The couples clutched moist hands and sealed their love with misty eyes—and knew that if they worked and saved, if they were diligent and thrifty, and did not waver in their certitude that there were moral absolutes —one day they would be rich, in spirit and in goods.

Chapter 82

"You need an education," said Heidi to the foundling, as soon as he was thawed, and took him by the hand. "The Führer pays for it."

"Don't wear yourself out worrying," he told her awkwardly. "I'll do the best I can." It seemed to him as if a greasy cloud had lifted to suddenly reveal the sky, scrubbed clean with soap and brush. Now fortune smiled on him.

"Good. It is settled, then."

Heidi was an exacting tutor in Jonathan's maturing years. "Nothing but 'A's," she instructed him firmly as she walked him to school to register him suitably. "Don't think the future comes for free. Don't bother with excuses."

He studied hard to make her proud; he never missed a day. Soon, he fit in; before long, he excelled. The teachers went about their lessons calmly, instructing or reproving. Soon, Jonathan was first in fitness training. He learned to spell acceptably. The training stressed not only scholarship but conduct overall. The Führer liked things alphabetical and orderly; meals came by the clock, beds were made on schedule, hay was fluffed up

twice a day for the cattle that grazed in the meadows, flicking their tails at flies.

He reveled in the regimens. He had no doubt about the stark necessity for rules. He gained an education in the basics: intensive, silent reading; writing from dictation; careful penmanship that was not allowed to slant.

Nobody slanted. Nobody slouched. Nobody ever dared speak out of turn. The rules were black and white, and Heidi lavished praise when praise was genuinely earned, stern reprimands as needed.

"True character," said Heidi to the growing boy, "can only come through discipline. You must try hard. Don't look at me like that. I know you try. You must try harder still."

Here were the strengths she stressed as though they were a litany: a warm heart and engaging manners, limbs bronzed by wind and sun, a well-honed, fearless mind.

Speak loudly.

Think clearly.

Be fearless.

Be tough, yet sound in morals and ideals. Stand at attention when someone of superior rank and order passes by.

He soaked it up, awash in affirmation. Young Germany, in Heidi's view, would grow to be the focal point of culture. Were a time capsule to be dug up a hundred years from now about the early years in the Third Reich, it would affirm of Jonathan and his emancipated, rescued generation: they learned pride in their clan and their roots.

The Führer's hand swept soothingly across convulsing earth and gathered, magnet-like, the human filings that manufactured terror and despair had scattered everywhere. He spoke of a beautiful morning, of a future now cloudless and clean. Before the year was out, that message was condensed into a single word, and it was: *Lebensraum.*

The Führer asked repeatedly: "What of your children's future?" and people pushed and shoved and shouted at each other

to get a better look. He spoke of the harsh necessity of soil for coming generations while, all the while, a gentle rain was splashing on the roofs. The sun came out. The frozen chunks of snow had melted; young parents gathered on lawns, laughing and jostling one another. Proud papas carried toddlers on their shoulders so they could see the patriotic pageantry, while older children flew their kites on daisy-strewn, sweet-smelling meadows.

When Jonathan brought home another merit badge for hiking twenty miles through rugged mountainside, not pausing even once, it seemed that Heidi might forget herself and bend to him and kiss him. He thought she would. He held his breath and stood on tiptoes, practically, but she leaned back just in the nick of time, patted his hand, and smiled at him in gentle understanding.

Regardless, he was family. He gladly linked his fortunes to the only family he knew. He did not tell a soul she picked him from the gutter. He just stayed on and on. He opted freely for the Hitler Youth. His mission was as clear and pure as fresh dew on a daisy. His heart was mad with joy, and Heidi's pride was palpable.

She said to him while buttoning his coat and handing him a sandwich: "Tuck that in your stomach. Then go from house to house, and don't take no for an excuse, for in the struggle against tyranny, the gloves have to come off."

He pocketed her flyers. He knew that he would live and die and never once feel doubt about the aptness of her text. Working hours were regular, fathers employed, children polite, with round chins and cornflower eyes. The farmers, too, were overjoyed, and not without good cause: fat kernels filled their barns. The moneylenders, banned! And just as Dewey used to do at a Rotarian lunch—and no one thought that wrong!—the Führer brought his people's hands together in a repeated incantation: "Let us be strong. True. Noble. Honest. Sacrificing. Let us be servants for a greater good."

It was a message no one argued, then or now, because the

people understood.

As Jonathan grew into larger trousers, Heidi stayed his idol. He simply worshipped her. Her face become the standard by which he measured everything. Her glasses did not fit; they were too big and kept on slipping down her nose, but in his eyes, she was a flawless miracle.

Through half-closed lids, he kept on watching her. She looked distressed when he slid back into the tawdry stratagems that had afforded him survival in the streets. When he frustrated her, she played her part to silence. When he did well, she washed the filth of anarchy away and handed back his pride.

Above all else, she mothered him, and nothing was too small, too insignificant for her attention. She saved her magazines for him, with slogans underlined. While he curled up inside her finest feather quilts as outside, raindrops spattered, she sat and knit his socks. She put an extra charcoal pan next to his bed the day he had a cold. Her soft, sweet voice could break most any fever. He loved her utterly.

"You aren't only you," said Heidi, puttering about. "You are a tool of history. You are an instrument to craft a better world."

She knighted him. Those were her very words, secluded in the deepest furrows of his being to strike strong roots and make his soul break out in leaf to breathe in the fresh air. No word that Heidi ever said to Jonathan was lost.

Her mission? She told him, again and again, while his heart incandesced as though currents of lava coursed through it: "It's you against the Antichrist. Light versus Dark. Young Germany against the Ancient Foe."

To think that only yesterday the world was gray on gray!

It was as though her gentle hand had pushed open a door to a sun-flooded meadow. The darkness tore apart, the landscape was flooded with sunshine and warmth, the future stood before him as though in high relief. The streams began to soften. The year grew light and warm. The sun awoke the violets. Snowdrops appeared. The swallows chirped in full accord. Somewhere in

the distance, a lone musician played an ancient ballad from a heroic past on a harmonica.

It felt right, in his mind and his heart.

The Führer distributed medals to reinforce the sense of duty, and that felt good and right. The Führer's train pulled through the German villages, stopped here and there to load up boys and girls, all volunteering happily to harvest riches, all singing to the whistling of the train that crisscrossed Germany.

He jumped aboard, his heart ablaze. He helped the farmers plant their turnips, a commonplace enough endeavor that took on magic qualities as all around him, nature smiled—and how it smiled on youth, in those awakening, bewitching years when hope and trust ran high! He had never seen nature before; now he watched it in absolute awe.

Sunflowers turned wide, smiling faces to the light. Squash creepers started budding. Shy, sheepish daisies peaked and laughed at Germany from deep within the meadow grass. And from the mountains wafted scents of earth and rock, while swarms of bees buzzed back and forth, their stingers hidden in their wings. The apple trees were blooming. The clover scent was pure. Someone was cutting grass. The hay lay in long rows. He tossed the baby Lilo into it. She rolled in it and squealed.

"She's yours to cherish," Heidi told him, smilingly, while handing him her latest offspring, a squirming bundle that smelled of formula and soap. "Pick any name you like."

He stood on one leg first, then shifted to the other. He knew not what to say. He tied a Führer flaglet to her ankle. He tagged her with the best he had to give to her.

This baby learned to walk before she was eight months of age, scornful of any danger. He washed his hands before he picked her up; he gave her bouncing piggyback rides on his back. He took good care of her. He grew gentle and patient and shy. She gave him wet and sloppy kisses; a more generous youngster was hard to imagine.

Soon, she was chalking swastikas onto the pulsing bark of trees while he stood by and watched.

The day he bound himself to folkish brotherhood, with pledges that the handbook specified, Heidi was there, the toddler in her lap, to reap her applause for her work. She watched with misty eyes how her beloved Führer put his sharp signature with light across Jonathan's heart.

Her alchemy had worked. Of all the *jungvolk* forged to steel, he was the handsomest, no longer skinny, gaunt and gray, thanks to the many pans of fried potatoes Heidi kept warming for him on the stove. Her voice was low and sweet. She spoke with trembling pride. "How strong and clean you look."

He knew she knew his demons. They had an understanding: she never laughed at him when he outdid himself with zeal, caught by the fire of his mission; she helped him break his unproductive habits; by her acceptance and respect she knighted him and raised him from the gutter on a shield.

Sometimes she teased him gently. He did not tease her back. He longed to touch her hair, to tell her that he loved her. He never did. Not once.

The Party soon became his bride. He earnestly belonged. He stood within his folk. The Party carried men to power on its shields. Whole armies moved to do its bidding, and that was good enough. All the while, huge bonfires kept on flaming to the sky, the sparks of which fell into Heidi's eyes. She blinked each one away. She was there to encourage and beam. She was magic and order and safety.

"You must think of your Fatherland before you consider yourself. That is my best advice," said Heidi, and awe washed over him that had more depth than love.

The decade came of age, and so did Jonathan. One day was never like the next; there was too much to do. She still spoke the same litany: "This is about moral perfection."

She packed meat in his hamper, poured tea in his bottle. She was as inviting as fresh-fallen snow, so spic-and-span she even

scrubbed the sidewalk. She was as fragrant as that cup of coffee she always brewed for him and for herself, for that half-hour every Wednesday morning when she put every task aside so she could talk with him.

She talked to him at length, a kind and patient teacher. Her message was simplicity itself: for those who were willing to live by her rules, there was the basket lunch.

He listened, shivering, until his head was spinning. These things were of enormous weight and of immense importance. She gave him a lump in his throat. She was touching the timbre within.

By and by, he told her things as well—things he had never told another human being. He told her of the night that finished Apanlee for him.

Heidi listened in silence, her eyes growing wider and wider.

He crouched like a cur while he stammered, his head atop her knees. He told her, gagging on his horror, how long it took to beat frail Dorothy to death.

"I counted," he stammered, while hanging in the teeth of a ferocious Beast. "I counted those blows, one by one. Each blow is still embedded in the marrow of my bones."

"That is the Antichrist for you. That is precisely why you have to learn to give up all your selfish wishes," said Heidi.

She unknotted his fears much as she unknotted his laces. A tear or two fell on his uniform, however, and suddenly, he knelt, his arms around her warmth, and told her in a strangled voice: "The black, fat soil of Apanlee is mine."

"Yes, *Lebensraum*," said Heidi, sighing softly.

He lifted his head from her knees. She let him drown himself within the blue of her warm eyes that slowly filled with tears.

The Mystic Cross leaped ceaselessly from heart to heart to heart. No wonder that, as soon as he grew old enough, he took the Führer's garb. He stood within the fold.

He burned with pride and purpose, as he pledged solemnly to love the light and hate the dark.

"Tonight, you must sit at the head of the table," said Heidi, and he saw tears of ownership shoot into Heidi's eyes. The night was filled with song, proclaiming joyously that, given Faith, determination, valor and obedience, a soldier was invincible. The world would fall to his power. Corruption would fall to its knees. Here was the evidence: in the streets, he had blunted his hunger with water, but from the moment Heidi took him in protective custody, he had enough to eat, a mended coat with padded lining, an ironed shirt with not a button missing, a place where he could sleep without a single thought of fingers fumbling, scabrously, beneath the covers to find the warmth of youth.

He did all his assignments willingly, with an abundant heart. His life was made to order. He marched to order willingly; the flag flew at the fore; the horses pawed the cobblestones and shone from the oats of a generous winter.

It was regeneration time. The factory chimneys once again spewed out white clouds of steam. In store and shop, the shelves were bending with goods. There was no place for weaklings in the streets. The future walked on air and whistled, and so did Jonathan.

Die Fahne hoch! Die Reihen fest geschlossen
SA marchiert mit ruhig festem Schritt
Kam'raden, die Rotfront und Reaktion erschossen
Marschiern im Geist in unsren Reihen mit.

His shirt was blue now, like the sky, cut generously in the shoulders, allowing further growth. He wore a bright red armband, replete with oak leaf cross. He clicked his heels; his fingers aligned with the seams of his trousers; his boots shone with the force of brush. He stood at attention, repeating: "The best is barely good enough for Germany."

For Jonathan, all this was atavistic, panoramic, embedded deep in history, and cosmic in its sweep. It was bewildering to think that there existed still a world of unbelievers.

He had not known that he had energy enough to fill his every vein to bursting. The martyrs of his kin spoke in a voice to Jonathan. They spoke to him in hushed, excited clusters. And

what they said to him was this: "You aren't you. You are the vehemence of nature reacting against venom. The Guardian Angel hovers over you because your cause is just."

It was like a reel; he ran it over and over. Whole towns erupted in pageants of fire and ribbons and colors and songs, all meant to give praise to the Führer. Even a broomstick, as shown in a cartoon passed on from hand to hand with all-around smiles, now stood at attention, saluting.

Here was a man whom Jonathan could emulate, a man of great personal courage, a leader to the workers' liking who ended bloody strikes and frenzied, fratricidal fights in every street of Germany.

The solstice fires flared. The sky glowed with the lights of hope and victory. Uncertainty and aimlessness were gone.

To Jonathan, the Führer was more god than man. The trench coat was his garb. His picture was in every window for children to admire—a hero in numerous battles, taking hill after hill under fire. Several horses had been shot from under him, but he had survived; he had triumphed; he triumphed because he was right. He pushed the banker's treachery, the Treaty of Versailles, into the gutter of the past and even stomped on it.

The country stood united as a wall, arms linked against the foe who had defiled the pride of Germany. Banished were fear, disorder, sloth, shame and disgrace. Gone was the stench of brothels! Day by day and week by week, the Führer grafted moral energy onto a populace whose empty bellies, only yesterday, had cramped with shame and hunger. He promised to clothe the nation with glory. He still rode freely, unafraid, in open motorcars, cheered by the multitudes.

He mingled with the people, for he was one of them. They saw he was a genuine ascetic; he never touched a drop of alcohol. He held his country's bleeding heart within the warmth of his cupped hands: "I will sweep away all corruption. I will heal the wounds of the treacherous war and yet make the Fatherland great."

He translated their unspoken wishes. Their collars were no longer limp. Their shirts were clean and starched.

He shouted: "The harvests are telling our story!" and everything the farmers grew turned velvet and then gold.

He wrote in his angular script: "A healthy body, a strong will are the foundation of the future—" while the entire youth of Germany sat cross-legged in the farmers' straw, with smiles in their eyes, on their lips.

Soon, Jonathan was gone for months on end, but he still spent free time in Heidi's scented kitchen, where he was always welcome. He took the toddler, Lilo, in his lap and bounced her on his knees.

"Hoppe, hoppe Reiter
Wenn er fällt, dann schreit er,
Fällt er in den Graben
Dann fressen ihn die Raben—"

He loved the little girl; he lavished his feelings on her. She was a strong and sturdy child, all white teeth, dancing eyes, already matching smile with smile, a charmer and a flirt.

She grew by leaps and bounds.

The earth was chockful of potatoes. The breezes were balmy; spring was in the air; the rivers were flowing once more; the ice had melted and floated away; the mares were heavy with foal. At the butcher's, huge quarters of beef were unloaded, and hefty chunks of meat enriched the people's cabbage soup.

"Now we feel proud once more," the grateful people said, and planted flower gardens in the shape of the beloved Cross.

These were the circumstances, then, that made a man of Jonathan. He had been born again. And he was not alone. For millions just like Jonathan, those were bewitching years. Wherever the Führer appeared, the streets went wild with joy. His drums were rolling thunder. His songs were deep and rich. He had their trust; he was their choice; they applauded until their palms stung.

Never had anyone known a more potent and powerful voice. Never did so many people cry as though they had one voice:

"You lead! You lead! We shall obey. For lo, we have waited for you!"

He spoke earnestly, softly; the power of his innate leadership was there; the door was cast open; the faithful sighed ecstatically and started walking through.

He spoke of the beauty of labor, the dignity of toil. He brought songs to the lips of his people.

Their voices swelled, a giant wave of supplication, a chorus in the millions:

"Es schaun aufs Hakenkreuz
voll Hoffnung schon Millionen,
Der Tag für Freiheit
und für Brot bricht an."

Hope, trust and Faith—above all, Faith!—now sprouted as abundantly as did the rye in fields now free of weeds, and lush. Gone were the bankers and tormentors! Gone were the rancid oats!

How blind and wrong it is to say today, as Archibald still does, right on the television screen, that it was hate, not love, that powered Jonathan.

Chapter 83

It was a protracted struggle, but in the end, the story goes, this is how Dominik won out—by terror, base and raw. He cracked the German spine.

Marleen resisted the longest, but after a very hard winter, she knew that she was poorer than she had ever been. Her feet were wrapped in rags, her mouth caved in, her forehead deeply lined, her loved ones in the center of a web of accusations.

"I now agree," said Marleen, lips compressed, "to be in charge of the government ducks."

This was good news for Dominik. What more could he have wished? He knew that he had won. The choice for every German left was now stripped down to this: kolkhoz or deportation—or, alternately, firing squad.

Their way of life—no more.

Their churches—rubble. Pigsties.

Their schools and institutions—just heaps of crumbled stones.

When, in the end, the twins agreed as well to supervise the bean procurement brigades, he knew he did not need to prod them. Unlike the Russian field hands, the Germans were reli-

able; they did their duties well. They were silent, but did what was needed.

Larissa did the laundry for the expanding nursery. The diapers turned from gray to white. The formula the babies drank was balanced and on time. Young Mimi—with time left over from her classes at which she ever more excelled—helped Dominik to keep the books in order and, in return, sat beaming at his table, not willing to catch spies as yet but willing, at the very least, to do her part to be a go-between.

And that, for Dominik, was good enough indeed.

He saw no reason to complain and treated them respectfully enough. Not that he trusted them. He kept both eyes on them—their nights had eyes; their walls had ears; they plotted, and they schemed. It pleased him in his soul to see them jump when a dry branch snapped underfoot.

The crucial thing was this, however: a balance had been struck.

He saw to it that terror came to them down the chimney and sat with them at table—where they, has he surmised, sat muttering time-tested prayers, useless prayers. But there was food now on their table and, now and then, a special treat.

The results could be seen in his quotas. His Germans ran more efficient work brigades than any of his neighbors.

"Some of the credit," he therefore told the twins, "in truth belongs to you."

He had come to visit. He lingered.

Their eyes spoke to each other, but they had nothing to say in reply.

"I'll even give you extra sick leave slips so you can have your Sundays back," he offered. Refusal to work on a Sunday was still a grave offense in Soviet Russia, but who would need to know? If he decided to be generous, who was to tell him no?

"You hold the key to Apanlee," he told the twins, dispensing geniality. "All progress rests with you."

To which they still said nothing.

In silence, day by day, they supervised the crew of shivering Ukrainian workers that faceless men had shipped to Apanlee in cargo after cargo to strengthen the kolkhoz. The twins were there to greet them. The twins were firm and punctual. They set a fine example. They taught the field hands to shoulder their hoes. They taught them to rub down their tools with dabs of sunflower oil to keep the rust away.

He knew they were plotting to flee. He knew as well that such defiance against the Soviet leadership could break his neck, since workers, no less than barley and potato sacks, were valuable state property.

He therefore buttonholed a foreman whom he trusted: "Say, have you heard the latest rumor?"

"I have. I have. Who hasn't?" The foreman deftly picked a louse from his frayed sleeve and squashed it between thumb and finger.

"And do you think it's true?"

"I do."

"Well, then?"

The foreman set his feet apart and stared at Dominik with blood-shot eyes. "Well. Who am I? Why are you asking me? I just heard this and that—"

"What did you hear?"

"I heard they are rounding up horses—"

"Who knows about the rumors?"

"Around here? Everyone."

A chill crept up Dominik's spine. "If that should happen in my district, I'd be done for; I'd be cooked."

"That's what the roosters crow."

"Go through the seams of their coats. Pry off the heels of their shoes. Be sure to check them thoroughly."

"Of course. I'll also check under their armpits—"

"Do that."

The foreman popped several sunflower seeds in his mouth. "Let's punish them often—" he added, and Dominik finished: "—to keep them in line."

He let Natasha know. She smiled when he mentioned escape. She had her answer pat. "They will never abandon their homestead. They can't carry their land in their pockets."

Here's what she saw with gratitude: the twins had yielded to his siege and were now state-commissioned overseers—a step above the crowd. It was, as far as she could see, a winning situation all around.

"If you catch any rumors, be sure to let me know."

Natasha snorted with disdain. She knew what powered Dominik. The snoopers slapped him on both shoulders. The Party heaped him with honors.

Thanks to the twins, with farming reigns firmly in their hands again and Dominik restrained enough at least not to risk toppling the delicate balance, he could, thanks to their German diligence, fulfill near-perfect quotas once again for several leading commissars who came periodically to check the quota lists—if only he could solve a little riddle.

If only he could analyze the trouble with the ducks.

The state ducks were recalcitrant, refusing to lay eggs. Now that poultry was his chief production output, it was imperative to show a proper count of eggs.

Marleen tried several remedies. "But still, no eggs," she said to Dominik.

She and Larissa would often talk in whispers. It was as if they sent each other telegrams.

"September here. And still no eggs," the German women claimed. Not knowing what their secret was would have made anybody wild.

The silence swelled and swelled until it started suffocating Dominik. His glance slid off Larissa and fastened on Marleen. He stared at her, and she stared back. He knew she understood.

"Don't make me mad," he said softly, drumming his knuckles. "You better not try anything foolish."

"We don't know what you mean."

"Strong lights cast dark shadows," he told her.

"Citizen, when it starts snowing," she told him in return, "it snows on huts and palaces alike—" She spoke softly into the fading twilight. Her voice was frail yet calm.

"I'm safe," said Dominik with forced bravado. "My quotas? Unlike anybody else's. No better workers than the Germans. Don't you agree that's true?"

"You curled your mustache several times to look just like your father. Somebody might remember you are half German, too—" She took from his desk three sunflower seeds and popped them with great nonchalance. It was a gesture so unlike Marleen, who always kept her distance and would not even pass him in the hall unless there was no choice, that he burst into laughter. It sounded rather shrill.

She heard that, and she stored it. It seemed to give her strength.

Marleen stepped silently aside as several duck procurement functionaries came to Apanlee and took away, yet once again, the barley harvest Dominik had managed to produce.

"Without hard barley in its crop, how can a duck lay eggs?" she said to Dominik.

"We have to raise our barley quotas," he shouted with hysteria in his voice. "Do I need you to tell me that?"

Marleen became an oracle. "A duck epidemic—that's what will happen next."

"What? Citizen! What are you saying? Out with it."

"It's happened before. It could happen again. I feel it by the brittleness of beaks. *Tovarich*! We must help the state. We must block the upcoming duck epidemic—"

"And soon!"

"Who would risk losing all the gains the glorious Revolution wrought?"

"Right. Absolutely!"

"Let's you and I get to the bottom of why your ducks are blustery—"

"My ducks? Your ducks!"

"They used to be my ducks," Marleen informed him quietly,

"before the Revolution set me free. Let's be precise about this matter. Let's be politically correct. They're Comrade Stalin's ducks."

"That's what I meant so say."

"And what will he decide, should his fine ducks begin to die? Not that it's up to me to give you good advice."

"Don't anger me."

"Why would I want to do that? You're doing splendidly in every single quarter. The Party loves your name. The papers sing your praise. The only thing that worries me is this: your bins are short of barley. As a result, your ducks are a bit blustery. I counted five, just yesterday, that looked quite blustery to me. This morning, they were dead."

"You're sure? You couldn't be mistaken, Citizen?"

"I counted, Citizen. I'm sure."

"Here's a pen and paper. Write a report. Be sure to make it detailed. Be sure to sign it properly—"

She did. She blotted the red ink. She handed him the paper; he could not meet her eyes. He felt a rash form on his neck; it started itching badly. He started pulling on his earlobe. The itch became unbearable.

"You're absolutely sure the ducks are in for trouble?"

"Five dead. I counted on the abacus."

"You went to find the abacus to count five ducks, Marleen? Are you provoking me? Is that it? You're testing me? That is a waste of time—"

She let that pass. She sat there, saying nothing.

"There are stiff penalties for being wasteful of your time, don't you know that?"

"I do."

He studied her in silence. Her hair pulled from her face and tied into a firm and savage knot, wrapped in a shawl against the draft, she looked as any Russian would have looked; she looked more Russian than German. But even in the dusk that settled on them both, he could still see the special cast, the strong patrician cast of features.

"Well, Citizen?"

She watched him chewing off a hangnail. At last she spoke. Her voice was ice. "You are in trouble. In big trouble. You know that, Dominik. Can you explain to the authorities why suddenly the ducks are blustery?"

"That's up to you. You must explain. I'm watching and waiting, Marleen—"

He kept on rubbing thumb and forefinger together while she gave her report yet one more time. "I took the abacus to count the eggs by sorting out the crates. Four hundred and twenty. Precisely. Way below quota. You will have to report the strange quota shortfall—"

"You document your deficit," he ordered. "That is your job. You are in charge. It's in the documents that I put you in charge."

"Your name goes on the quota list. Not mine."

He started to abuse her. "You are the brigadier. Fill in your last name. Your first name. The names of your sons. The names of your daughters. Don't leave out any blanks. Blanks will arouse suspicion—"

"But you," said she, indulging in a bold and spiteful tongue, "are my superior now. You're doing splendidly. You've set the floor and proved there is efficiency at Apanlee. You've proved yourself. You've cleaned up Apanlee. If there's a sudden drop, you will be held accountable. I'll fill in your last name. Your first name. Your mother's name. Your father's name. Your father's mother's maiden name. I won't forget the *umlaut*—"

"I don't believe your count," said Dominik, now drumming even harder with his knuckles. "You have until tomorrow. Count every single crate."

"I never make mistakes."

"Why don't you make yourself agreeable and useful? Come back tomorrow morning and give me a good answer as to why suddenly the ducks—"

She replied with a nonchalant shrug. "In olden days," she told him with glittering eyes, "some people would have claimed the Devil was behind the dreaded duck demise. Now, luckily,

we have discarded all that superstitious nonsense of the past. Now culprits must be found."

"I said, you listen! Listen!"

"No. Now you listen, Dominik. Now culprits are in high demand. If there's a quota drop in any government kolkhoz, the state will try the culprit for high treason. Of course that could never happen to you. You have protectors in high places. Right, Dominik? It's whom you know that counts?"

He barely moved his lips. "Here's what you need to know. The bacon cuts both ways. The sooner you figure out what could be wrong with the ducks, the better off you'll be—"

"I have not the faintest idea."

He swore softly while cornering her. "You tell me. This minute. What could induce those ducks to lay their eggs so we can fill the crates?"

She hardly ever laughed but now she laughed; she hadn't laughed in years; it startled him; it frightened him; she was seized by such a fit of mirth it shook her, head to toe. "Why are you asking me?" she laughed.

"You will regret—"

"*Tovarich*, put down those sharp scissors," she told him, and laughed even more. "Now look what you did. There's blood on your hands, *tovarich*. Whose blood is it that's on your hands, *tovarich*?"

He licked his thumb: "Well, now. Let's see. You are the mother of two useless parasites—"

"My sons," said Marleen, recovering, "are honorable citizens. You have installed them in the Party's graces, haven't you? You signed your name to vouch for them? Thanks to your help, they have restored their names. My sons are helping Comrade Stalin to rebuild this glorious land. Their output is the envy of the neighboring kolkhoz. No one produces finer quotas. No one is more esteemed. My sons are doing nothing whatsoever that is against the law. But if your quotas drop again, no telling what might happen."

"What do you want?"

"Five travel papers," said Marleen.

"I can't do that. I would be shot!"

"I know," Marleen said, laughing still. "Your mother always hoped that you would rise from humble origins and turn into a bureaucrat—"

"If I were you," said Dominik, "I'd hold my tongue. I'd really hold my tongue."

She calmed at that. "That's excellent advice."

All night, he walked his room, remembering her eyes.

Chapter 84

The ducks continued to be blustery. No matter what Marleen did, the ducks withheld their eggs. The day came, all too soon, when Dominik was forced to call her in to remedy the quota deficit by any means he had at his disposal.

He sat her down. "Say, you and I have known each other for a long, long time. We're practically friends, and therefore you'll remember—"

She found resources deep within. "Yes, I remember. I remember. When you were small, I used to check your pockets—"

"My pockets? Ha! Now I'm checking yours. What would I find if I looked hard enough?"

Her gaze was on the faces of her ancestors, still hanging on the wall, covered with spider webs. She waited and said nothing.

He rose, went to the window, stared wordlessly out at the misty afternoon, came back, sat down, dusted his desk, blew dry the red ink on the names of her sons, crossed his thick legs this way and that, and finally confessed:

"I need your help. It pains me to admit that. If you help me, I might help you. I have friends at the highest levels—"

"That kind of power," she said softly, "could turn most anybody's head."

A slight color rose to his cheeks. He continued reshuffling his files. He cleared his throat. He hit the folder with his fist.

"Why dwell on the past? We are older now. Wiser. We need each other. Right? We're living in challenging times. What might convince those ducks of yours to lay more eggs for me? Let's see eye to eye. I need those eggs. You need to sleep at night and not lie staring at the ceiling—"

"I don't know what you mean."

With strength bred in by centuries, Marleen sat out her siege. She had her Faith—that's how. She and her savagely truncated family had journeyed through the lean, mean years—five of them left, still holding hands!—and somehow they would journey out of this.

He seized her by the arm.

"I will agree to strike the *umlaut* from your maiden name. I'll burn the document that says that you begged food from Kansas. In return, as a personal favor to me, you will have a nice chat with your ducks—"

"You're bribing me? You know that bribes are criminal."

He backed away and kept his voice in check. "I'm not bribing you to tell me how to do it. I'm just curious about the remedies you used on sluggish ducks before the Revolution set you free—"

"The past is now gone, and good riddance! Along with the pharaohs, caesars, and tsars."

He did not say: "Leave now."

He lit a flint. He managed to produce a perfect smoke ring, floating it overhead. "I worry a little," he admitted at last. "However, I don't worry much. There are some die-hard pessimists who fear the old times will be back. I'm not one of them."

The room turned dark. She sat there in silence and waited. The lamp was almost out of oil; he lit it, and his fingers shook.

The flames licked at the edges.

He started pacing then. She did not move. She watched.

"I have given your scandalous duck egg deficit," he said in the end, "a great deal of additional thought."

"And what is your conclusion?"

"Think carefully before you answer. Eight-year-olds vote these days on who shall live and who shall die. Your daughter is now sixteen."

The minutes ticked away.

He filled his lungs with smoke. "How might your daughter vote if someone came to her and said: 'Here is your choice. You have two brothers. One must die. Which one?' Would that induce those ducks to lay their eggs?"

This was a time, both knew, when preachers moved like shadows. She sat in the glare of his lamp. She managed to say this: "You are speaking in absolute riddles."

"Citizen," said Dominik, "where are your sons tonight?"

"They left for a production meeting to improve Apanlee. Your quotas have a question mark pertaining to the ducks—"

"A better guess might be that they are preaching slyly on the parable? Behind the chicken coop?"

"How would I know? And how would you?"

"It is easy to break under torture. You know that some confess to what they are told to admit—"

She took that, too, in bitter silence.

"This week, how many eggs, Marleen?"

"Three hundred and eighty."

"That's all?"

"That's all the eggs I found."

He bore down hard: "Last night, I had the silliest dream. I saw the curtains move. I dreamed the twins were plotting. They were rounding up horses for flight. I dreamed that both were caught, but only one was spared. Don't ask which one. How would I know? Not even their Baba could tell them apart."

She tried to keep her voice from quaking. "I cannot tell you anything that I myself don't know—"

He leaned back leisurely in Uncle Benny's chair. "Your story doesn't change?"

"No, Dominik."

"I know what I know," he said slowly. "And what I don't know, I can guess. Last night, someone came to me and told me—"

She showed no curiosity. Her silence had the weight of stone.

He coaxed while leaning forward. "The door is closed. Nobody else will know. Tell me the truth. Escape is on your mind?"

"You have my word," Marleen said evenly, "that I have no escape in mind. However, I speak only for myself. Where would I flee on my old feet? I am too old and worn, and almost useless now for our glorious Soviet future except for little tricks I learned before the Revolution set me free—"

"On proletarian honor?"

"On proletarian honor," said the German woman whose great-grandfather, once upon a distant time, owned eighty-thousand acres and seven hundred serfs.

She told him the very next evening: "You will be pleased, *tovarich*, with my initiative. I reported two dozen dead ducks to the Soviet duck grievance committee."

"You what?"

"I did so in quadruplicate. I told them: 'Two dozen perfectly good ducks. They just keeled over and lay dead.'"

His eyelid started twitching. "Two dozen? In one night?"

"More since last night."

"How many?"

"Forty-seven. One by one. Like dominoes. I ran just as fast as I could to bring you an accurate count. I already reported the loss to the duck epidemic committee."

"The duck epidemic committee?"

"They listened in silence and scribbled your name."

He raised his lids, and there was naked murder in his eyes.

"While I was there," Marleen reported evenly, "I wasted none of my government's time. I reported to them that some of your

geese, too, appeared to be ill. I requested they send an inspector to check on the goose count as well—"

"My geese? They aren't my geese!" he all but shrieked at her. "They are state property geese!"

"I asked for a goose epidemic inspector to do a methodical check on state property geese to forestall a state property goose epidemic—"

He sank back in his chair. When he could speak, he begged: "Let's not play cat-and-mouse games, Citizen. Let us put all our cards out on the table."

"All right. Let's keep them there. Until we're through."

"Marleen! You listen now, and listen hard. Why did I violate seniority and go against my better judgment and give you a good job? Look, I'm learning. I'm learning. All this is new to me. No one knows fowl like you. Didn't I stick out my neck, last week, swearing on the coffins of the Revolution's fallen heroes that no one here, at Apanlee, was plotting to escape? Didn't I sign that thick sheaf of papers confirming that I trust the twins as I would trust my brothers?"

Marleen bit off each word: "Dominik, you sign a lot of papers. When you were small, you should have learned to read."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My daughter saw you sign the document that said you suspected the Apanlee duck epidemic could turn into a goose epidemic—"

"I did that? *Bozhe moi!*"

"It's gone. The mail coach took it yesterday."

He stood. He stretched to show his nonchalance. The silence grew and grew. She watched the silence worm the words from him. "It is unpatriotic to discuss a travel paper."

"It is unpatriotic to let an epidemic spread."

He went to the window to peer into the inky dark. He came back, sat down, dusted his desk, crossed his legs this way and that, and finally said this:

"Your file has been misplaced. As soon as it turns up, you'll be in serious trouble. In very serious trouble. But in the mean-

time, just relax. You have until next week—"

"I have a friend," he said to her when yet another week had passed and geese were falling ill like flies, "who has some trouble in his stables. My friend asked me to help him out. His specialty is goats."

"Goats?"

"Goats."

"You don't say! Goats? What will be next? Could it be horses next?"

He reddened slightly. "Goats. That's it. Just goats—"

"Go on. You're lucky, Dominik. There are no goats at Apanlee. At Apanlee, it's horses—"

"Don't interrupt me now. I have this friend. There is a strange, disturbing malady that's plaguing many of his goats. He's panicky. Can you blame him? This man has influence in highest quarters. He promised he would use his influence. To start the paper trail, my friend agreed to give you this—"

She took the sheaf of paper. She studied it at length. She held it up against the window. "It's worthless, Citizen. This is no travel paper."

"It states you are a citizen in reputable standing. It states that you complied with all the rules of the kolkhoz. It says I trust you fully. That's as far as I can go. Here is my seal and signature. All here. In purple ink. I am carefully blotting my name."

"I cannot help you, Dominik."

"Don't make me angry, Citizen."

"Soviet goats," Marleen reflected, leaning back and smiling broadly while studying the ceiling, "are very different from the tsarist goats I used to know back then. Soviet goats are far superior. Twice as fat. Twice as strong. Soviet goats do not get sick. When I remember all the worthless remedies we tried on our no-good bourgeois goats before the Revolution set us free—"

"Think hard now, Citizen. It's vitally important. What were those remedies?"

"There was a formula that had to be just so. We used to mix

it with the seed. It's gone. I looked for it and looked for it, but I must tell you, Citizen, it's gone."

"You don't know where it is?"

"No. I have no idea."

"You don't know how to find it?"

"I do not even have a clue."

"You can't help out my friend? You can't help settle down his goats and forestall a disastrous loss of goats?"

"No. See? Without that secret formula, that vitally important document, I can't. It must have perished in the embers of our glorious Revolution."

Dominik said softly, staring at Marleen: "Some people have to suffer greatly during change. It might as well be you."

She held herself erect. She had her slogans pat. "I can't imagine what you mean. There is no suffering in Soviet Russia. To speak of suffering means undermining wickedly the spirit of this country—"

He said after a long pause. "The village is buzzing with hearsay. I heard that Larissa has made a decision. They say she is rebraiding every hour on the hour—"

She did not take the bait. She made an airy gesture. "That one? You know how women are. Hare-brained and unreliable. She can't make up her mind. Today it's Yuri. Next week, Sasha. She'll end up an old maid."

He shifted in his chair. "What about Erika?"

"Straight 'A's in every subject."

"Good. Fine. A clever girl, that one. She'll want to study at a university. As the offspring of a kulak, she'll run into some serious trouble. Somebody has to smooth her way."

She looked at him. She said: "This week will be a scorcher, Dominik. Your horses' droppings, thick with flies. Flies carry equine epidemics—"

He cleared his throat. He cleared it twice. "You don't mean that."

"Hoof-and-mouth," she told him with glittering eyes. "Once that scourge gets a good foothold in hot weather, there's just no

stopping it."

He spit in a high arc: "You will now tell me everything about your relatives in Kansas."

"Why not? There's nothing much to tell. A long, long time ago, I had this meddling cousin. What was her name again? Oh, Josie. Josephine. I knew her casually when she was still a youngster. A long, long time ago. We used to play together—but let me tell you, Citizen, I never liked her much."

"You used to write to her. I have the evidence. You wrote her several carping letters, maligning our glorious Soviet State—"

"No. On the contrary. I sent her invitations. She would have liked it here. Our glorious Soviet Russia treats the sexes equally. Oh, by the way. I touched your horse's nose this morning, Citizen, and it felt feverish to me."

"I'll give you a hen for your dinner—"

"You can't do that. Your hens are all state property. I stroked your horse's nostrils, at the communal trough. The horse's nostrils, hot!"

Small drops formed on his upper lips. He shouted, helpless to contain his rage: "I'm warning you! Don't push me now!"

"*Ach!* Only yesterday, in a neighboring kolkhoz," reported Marleen, triumph now filling every furrow in her old and wrinkled face, "a fine mare started foaming at the mouth. Ha! It keeled over. It fell dead. It's hot and muggy weather, Dominik. I know at least two dozen stricken farms, and all in your vicinity. You must immediately take care of this emergency! Tomorrow, several government inspectors will arrive and say: 'Somebody has to suffer during change. It might as well be Dominik.'"

He dropped all pretenses. He grabbed her by the arm: "What do you want? Just tell me what you want."

"Five sets of travel papers," said Marleen. "For it is clearly written in the Bible: "Wilt Thou now let my people go?"

"Patriots wouldn't dream of discussing such treason."

"Patriots don't have hoof-and-mouth diseases in their stables."

"I can't. It's my own neck—"

"Four, then. Please let my children go. I'll stay behind. I'll

help you, Dominik. My word is good as gold. You know I keep my promises. I've dealt with hoof-and-mouth before—"

For an eternity, their glances locked. He drew a long, shuddering breath and sat down. "It isn't true, is it, Marleen? Tell me it isn't true. I heard that two entire villages are lining up for flight. Would anybody be so foolish?"

"Four sets of travel papers," said Marleen. "and not one question asked."

"I'll get you two," he promised slowly. "And I'll withhold the rest. That way, I'll make sure you do exactly as I say. Two. That's my bottom line. Now tell me, point by point. What is the secret to controlling hoof-and-mouth?"

A tremble ran the length of Marleen's spine. "Two? Valid papers? Swear by your mother's hidden icons."

"Yes. By my mother's hidden icons—"

It's folklore what she told him next. Here's what she said to safeguard coming generations, to save the racial spark, as she had saved the grain: "Just keep the hay dry, Dominik. Just keep it dry and crisp."

Chapter 85

Though many years have passed, the story is remembered and repeated to this day in Reedley, California—of how the flight was planned.

Nobody trusted Dominik; nobody trusted travel papers; it was extremely dangerous, but in the end, they fled. It did not happen right away. It happened in the depth of winter. The rivers would be frozen four more months.

The village lay in darkness. The horses had been shoed and fed. The sleds stood oiled and waiting. The snow was falling without cease. A gale-like east wind had been blowing for a week.

No light showed in a single window anywhere.

The arrow of the Lord was trembling within Sasha's heart, heavier than the sands beneath the sea. "Look, I go forward—" he prayed, a man already marked, while struggling through huge drifts of snow, "—but Thou art not there. And backwards, but I can't perceive Thee—"

He knew his script. A fist started pounding his heart. All else was stripped away from him, and nothing more remained.

"—my true part has been chosen. So let me be worthy; let me be the lamb set aside for the slaughter to come. I fail to behold Thee. I cannot see Thee. But Thou knowest the path that I take—"

He prayed as the desperate pray, feeling cold and bruised and saddened and defeated, yet strangely elated, too, for a decision had been made. Together, he, Yuri and the girl had drawn the lot, and then they sat together for a while, and no one said a word.

Two sets of travel papers, stamped and signed, were now securely hidden in the shafts of Yuri's boots. Though doubtful that they were reliable, all knew that having documents of sorts was better than no documents at all.

"When Thou hast finished testing me, I shall come forth as gold—"

The wind whistled sharply. Fine granules started whipping from the sky. It was so cold no ax could split the earth. The icy air drove crystals through his skin.

"Thy will be done," he prayed, hypnotically, as though by saying it, repeatedly, he could coerce comfort. "Thy will be done. Thy will be done. Most people's lives, these days, have very little value. My life has none at all—"

He prayed as though deep in a dream. He spoke Larissa's name as though he had already yielded her to death. His sorrow kept on pouring from his heart as though it were transformed into huge sheets of flame. He told the night: "We loved her both, for she was beautiful from every angle."

He felt dazed and numb, a stranger to himself. Despite the cold, his palms were moist with perspiration.

"Why two of us? Will finally we know?"

He tried to lance his apprehension while sleet and snowflakes closed his eyes and small, sharp icicles formed in his hair. The night kept keening softly. Cap pulled down over his brow, collar turned up, he pushed himself through the orchards, guessing at the familiar goose path, hard and slippery with ice. He felt his way to the back of Apanlee's east wing and carefully knocked thrice, obeying the code he was given.

"Open up! I'm here—"

The side door opened cautiously to just a tiny slit.

"Come in. Quick. No one followed you?" Natasha peered with swollen eyes into his face.

"I don't think so. I listened carefully."

He stayed out of the light, letting the sheen of the flickering oil lamp fall upon him just long enough to show her that he was alone. "Where's Dominik?"

"I plied him with glasses of vodka," Natasha whispered fiercely, this between sobs that were as dry as sheaves of corn exposed to arid winds. "I laced his drinks with shots of castor oil. I turned my hidden icon to the wall and made him sick as death. He's doubled up with cramps."

"And Shura?"

"I lured her to the nursery and quickly turned the key."

"Where are the others?

"Waiting. Close to a hundred sleds. Nobody touched his supper." Natasha covered her face with her hands. She hunched and started weeping: "Why two of you? Why two of you? Not even your mother could tell you apart—"

"The Lord on high is mightier than the roar of all the tides," he told her, awkwardly. He stroked the tears out of her wrinkles: "Your kisses never needed prompting."

"I loved you like my own."

"Yes. There was never any doubt." He felt a mounting urgency. Still, he took time; he put his arms around the servant and hugged her to himself. "Don't be distraught. It is decided now. You always did the best you could. What more could you have done?"

"I did. I did. And where is my reward?"

He looked into the darkness and tensed. He thought he had seen a quick shadow move. He told her, trembling in his boots: "The sacrificial lamb is here. It's standing right before you."

"Your promises, my little one. Your thoughts. Your dreams. Your hopes. For this, they'll shoot you in the orchards."

"A crown of glory and a diadem of beauty for the remnant of

His people," he told her, and she said, not easily deceived: "To take the blame so that your brother and Larissa can escape?"

He spoke as loudly as he dared. "I'll take the blame. It is the only way. Somebody will be punished savagely. It might as well be me—"

The others stood, he knew, with ears against the walls. He told Larissa and his brother softly: "Let us be linked, the three of us, for now and evermore—"

The now betrothed couple echoed in one voice: "—for now and evermore—"

He twined his brother's hands in Larissa's trembling fingers while, to his shock, a lustful thought ran through his veins, a rat. He squashed it with his heel.

Outside, the snow kept falling. The wind encased the night.

"One day, spring will be here again," he promised them, his own voice breaking, as he kept blessing them. "The soil beneath is stirring—"

The words did not belong to him; a stranger spoke those words. Within his inner eye, he knelt already, waiting to be shot. The blizzards of tomorrow would wrap the land into an icy sheet of snow—a sea of white, the landmarks disappearing. His words came by themselves.

"The soil is rich and soft." His script was memorized but, even so, he struggled for composure. "—you, dearest brother Yuri, take now this girl to be your wedded wife—"

Natasha watched in tears. Marleen stood, tall and prayerful.

"Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God," he told them in a trembling voice while his own eyes were frosting over. "They shall be fat and flourishing—" That was a bald-faced lie, but it was all he had to give, and so he gave them that, a lie. The wind kept up its forceful blasts. The weight of winter cracked the trunks of the acacia trees. "—they shall bring forth fruit for their old age—"

Larissa's eyes did not leave Yuri's face. All stood amid a current of emotions, swaying, and Sasha, leaning forward sud-

denly so he could see Larissa better, saw love and duty and surrender shine from her gentle eyes.

"The three of us. The three of us," he stammered, overcome. He stared at the girl, at the nape of her neck where a curl had escaped, and manly yearning came in one gigantic, pounding wave. He longed to touch her as a lover touched his bride—just once and not again!—but she stood next to Yuri.

"Thy will be done. Thy will be done—" the others muttered silently, all trembling as did Sasha, who yearned with all the strength stored in his virgin body to loosen those two braids of gold and hold their riches in his hands.

"Just once," he thought. "Just once!" That hair! Gold spun by generations! He longed to draw it lovingly across his wrists to chain him to his pledge.

"Grant me an hour with your bride," he said to Yuri, strangled, for his voice was no longer his own. "I need to be alone with her. I need to free myself. It won't take long. I'm battling with a monstrous nightmare—"

The bridegroom twin stepped back. The preacher twin stepped forward and took Larissa's hand. The others moved aside.

Natasha's eyes dilated. "The night is short," she whispered, anguished. "And time is running out!"

But he was blind and deaf to any other need but his, and all perceived it, all! Each one of them! that was the script! And, in the end, Natasha stepped aside.

The story goes as follows. The sacrificial lamb forsook the covenant and snatched at life in one instinctive gesture. They should have fled while there was time. The night erupted like a boil. Rough voices started pouring from the dark and, suddenly, there were the cudgels and the rifle butts that hammered down the door. In the confusion that ensued, the prayer twin escaped. With him escaped the girl.

The henchmen grabbed the bridegroom twin, instead—grabbed him by hair and legs and dragged him down the corridor and down the steps and kicked him brutally into the van that

stood outside already, waiting.

He never said a word.

Triumphantly, they took him to the dungeons, and there they dropped him hard onto the stony floor. A lock rattled loudly. A heavy door fell shut.

When daylight came at last, he looked around. Around the outer wall ran boards of wood. Two tiny windows trimmed one corner, too high to reach with his hands. He saw a bit of sky.

Three toadies came a little later, hit him with a revolver butt, and asked him who he was.

"I am the sacrificial lamb," he told them evenly.

"How do we know? How do we know?"

Before they left, they kicked him in the groin. No word escaped his lips.

With him in the cell were twenty other captives. No one spoke above a whisper. A prisoner lurched forward painfully to use the pail while moaning softly, then hitching up his bloody pants. The stench pervaded everything.

"What did you do? Why are you here?" The inmates stared at him.

"I tried to help two German villages escape," the captive twin explained. He said no more that day. The vermin feasted on the damned.

Evening came, then night descended. He huddled in the darkness and waited for the day.

They came repeatedly and beat him savagely, their faces murderous. He fell. They pulled him up, demanding: "Name? What is your name, you traitor?"

"A sentenced man no longer has a name."

He drew his knees up to his chest, as closely as he could, as though to fit himself already to his grave. Small pearls formed on his face. "Did they escape?" he asked, to which there was no answer. He heard the guards, comparing evidence in agitated arguments.

Another day passed by. A second. And a third.

"Name? Name?" his tormentors yelled, angrily. "Unnecessary paperwork for us if we make a mistake—"

He asked again: "My brother and his girl escaped?"

"Don't ask unnecessary questions." They punched him in the face and said: "We found the map that shows the escape route. It's written in a code. If you tell all, your problems will be solved. You can go home on Saturday."They asked repeatedly: "Besides your carrion mother, can anyone tell you apart?"

At last he said: "A nursemaid."

"Name? What's her name?"

"A loyal servant in our bourgeois household before the Revolution set her free. She cuddled me. She sang to me. Her first name is Natasha. She rocked me on her knees when I was just a baby—"

"We'll look for her, then. Will she speak?"

"She was my parents' loyal servant. She knows how to obey."

His tormentors came back and shouted angrily: "We cannot rouse Natasha. She fainted when we came. She can't be forced to testify—"

"So you'll just have to take my word? Then take my word. I'm Sasha. Sasha Neufeld. Did Yuri and the girl escape?" He still sat on the floor, his head against the wall. "Believe me, Citizens! I am the guilty party. I plotted and I schemed against my government. I'm guilty of gross sabotage."

"Someone must have helped you. Who gave you travel papers? Who mapped the route for you?" They hit him hard with their revolver butts. They yelled: "But who were your collaborators, Citizen? They're gone. Who gave them names and maps?"

He took a trembling breath: "So they escaped? Oh! Praise the Lord!"

The guards let fly of a volley of curses. "Two villages. It was a huge, huge plot. Who was behind that plot?"

Here's what he said at last: "She flung herself across my father's life and caused unending heartache. But when he died and left us all behind, she stood behind his children like a rock." And then he said without a tremor in his voice: "I am the only

guilty party. Nobody helped us. No one."

The day that Yuri Neufeld died was icy, gray. and brittle—a grim and dreary Russian day that spread across the frozen wasteland while storms kept heaping snow. But all was not in vain, for such a silence fell on Apanlee that every heart stopped beating.

They say it took some effort to bring this young man to his knees: he stood and took three bullets, while deep within him raindrops started falling—real country rain, warm, scented, softening, strewing virgin apple blossoms across the debauched earth.

As our anguished century draws to a close, nobody speaks of Yuri. No monuments for him on Pennsylvania Avenue. No manhunts for his executioners.

He was a farmer's son, of German ancestry. His Aryan blood helped fertilize our earth.

One Yuri Neufeld lived and died, because he knew—as even did his executioners who managed to shoot badly—that there will come again one day a harvest bright and good.

Chapter 86

Some of life's oddest side effects of brutal blows of fate come in parentheses. It happened a few years ago in Reedley, California.

By then, the twin who managed to outrun the terror of the Revolution was dead. The Reedley folks were robust in their verdict: they called him the Mad Rooshian.

His torment never left. No rain, no sun could make it fade. There's clemency, the Gospel claims in many velvet passages, for those who lapse in Faith but reclaim certainty by seeking out the Lord. That's not, alas, what Erika would find in her pursuit to weigh the sacrifice of the forgotten twin against the cruelty of the bemustached ally of America—that brute of history who swallowed blood and spit out bones and had himself a feast.

As Erika sat in the fading valley light and listened to the story of Sasha having saved himself at the expense of Yuri, the Reedley farmers said of Sasha: "A bitter and bellicose man. Nobody bought into his odd philosophy."

They told her that when he arrived, quite mad despite his youth, he had a girl with him who hardly spoke at all. She claimed

she was his wife, in law as well as name, but he did not acknowledge her; he called her names and worse and sometimes even cuffed her angrily. It was a trying marriage. He kept on shouting at the hapless woman; she could have shouted back.

She never did. She hung her head. She took it all. Only her freckles paled. She stuck by him when others would have walked.

"Faith? Quackery! For shame!" he would berate Larissa who ran to close the shutters.

She served him faithfully. She turned herself into a fine, obedient Christian wife who strove to give him joy. His steaming coffee mug was always there, his collars always starched.

Larissa's life was hell, the Reedley folks told Erika; she might have left; she would have left, had she not had the comfort of her church. The brethren helped her steadfastly. They stood by her and prayed with her and helped her all the way.

He, on the other hand, kept shouting angrily: "I don't believe a word!" and would not let himself be rescued and redeemed, though the deacons came out in full force.

Some of these deacons, still alive, spoke briskly and judgmentally into the whirring tape recorder. They verified for Erika, in many chagrined words, that the disturbed and rambling refugee from Apanlee was part of that disheveled, tattered group that fled through the barbarian wilds of Asia and settled in the fertile Valley where their descendants—pious all! and numerous as pebbles on a beach!—grow peaches, figs and raisins.

To this day, that's the Reedley story - it ended not with wheat but raisins. You see them dancing on your television screen today, those California raisins.

"Don't get us wrong," one deacon said one afternoon with a contorted sniff. "No doubt your uncle suffered. No doubt he had his reasons. But when he spoke of Judas plotting New World Order stuff, way back in Russia, that's where we drew the line. We counteracted biblically."

They live correctly. Morally. When they have business meetings, they never rush a prayer.

They don't grow grain, however—though growing grain, in light of their long history since the black steppe was wrested from the Turks, would have been in their nature. When Erika inquired what made them switch their crop, they just looked at their shoes, hid their conflicting thoughts, and did not have an answer.

They told her that this Rooshian twin lived out a mediocre life—unfocused, unimpressive—doing this and doing that, first harvesting alfalfa, then planting figs and plums, and ending up with raisins. So let the neighbors win! That was his attitude.

He gave Larissa children, as many children as he had to give to her and she could manage to bring forth. To this day, all of them reside near Fresno, California, and all grow California raisins.

She loved her children well enough. They did not warm his heart.

His conscience perforated like a sieve, he once attempted suicide, but it was not to be. This happened on the day his mind snapped and he howled his given name was Yuri.

At that, his wife dropped everything and fell into a singsong: "It's Sasha, dear. You have that wrong. Don't fuss. Don't cry. Not even your Baba can tell you apart." She was his shadow and a study in forbearance, though her knees kept on knocking together with fear. She sat with him throughout that night and listened to his anguish and daubed his forehead with a freshly laundered handkerchief when everybody else had long run out of patience.

She soon looked faded and resigned, but her periodic bake sales for the homeless gave her joy. "But nothing gives my husband joy," she told her neighbors sadly, "not even young potatoes."

What stood between her husband and salvation, no Elder ever figured out.

Not a few oldsters still vividly recall how Sasha huddled on his porch in Reedley, mysteriously deformed, alone with his spas-

modic thoughts before he passed away, his poor soul laden like a camel, trying in old age to soak up the fading sunshine as if to melt away the permafrost that settled deep within the marrow of his bones.

"He had a choice," they said to Erika. "He could have let himself be rescued and redeemed." In his young years, the Reedley legend goes, he was a man of God, one of the truly chosen.

He wore no badge of treachery that anyone could see, but it was whispered that, back in his youth, he broke a mystic covenant. He turned into a thief. He stole an hour from the Lord to kiss the girl belonging to his brother.

The Lord—much like an angry banker seizing defaulted property—in turn took all in one wide sweep: his pride, his sleep, the vigor of his manhood, his reputation as a man with whom the leading citizens of Reedley might have bandied flivver jokes or might have wanted to go fishing.

One day, at prayer breakfast, a fat Rotarian, leaning left politically, in contrast to most Reedley people steering middle, praised several heroes of the Revolution—for by that time, America had turned supportive of the social struggle unfolding on the Russian Continent.

That day, the Rooshian turned so violent, things almost came to blows.

Every harvest unleashed bitter forces. Every blessing unleashed that mad gleam. When the town folks in the Valley thanked the Savior for another bounteous harvest, he bit his tongue and silently endured. His neighbors cut a careful path around him. The murky matters of his past were never cleared to good men's satisfaction. The details of his flight out of the wastes of Soviet Russia remained in hazy fog.

This much is clear—he never made it to his kin in Mennotown; worse yet, he never gave a reason. He stayed where he crash-landed—this after having fled a nameless horror half-way around the world.

For he had seen the Antichrist, he claimed. "With my own eyes," he said.

And now he saw it, he would claim, within the leafy thickets—a thousand eyes and ears. "Your children won't be spared," he warned, while flabbergasted elders poked each other with sharp elbows. "You're next. Your turn will come. The toothy grin is here. It's sitting in your lodges."

They merely said: "An interesting perspective," and talked of something else. They found the whole thing puzzling. They said: "Don't talk like that. It's not acceptable. This is America."

He argued that they had broad streets but dusty, narrow thoughts. They kept rolling their eyes in dismay and stared into a sluggish horizon.

He howled: "I am speaking for you and your children. Planned terror will be next. Our kingdom was stolen from us."

They said again: "Not here. This is America." They shook his warnings off as though his words were bits of chaff that stuck to morning slippers. They would not let him finish what he had come to say. They thought he was grotesque. He begged them to support him in his heresy, but they already knew tomorrow would be no different than today. They tucked their children, one by one, more deeply into gospeling and stuffed themselves to bursting.

One day, in desperation, the Rooshian paid a visit to the *Fresno Bee.* There a reporter sat him down and tried to string his words together into a dark, tormenting tale.

It was a futile struggle. His words did not suffice; his throat constricted woefully; his eyes bulged; and no sound came forth at all. Within his scrambled memories, all was just blood and mush.

The deacons came and went. They said to him: "We have to talk to you, and it is very serious. Repent before God the Almighty."

He would not let himself be calmed. Once he was heard to say: "I was reported shot, and that's how I escaped—" Another

time he whimpered: "They snatched my dearest brother, and that's how I escaped—"

"Well. Surely you exaggerate."

He wept and wrung his hands: "The Beast. The Beast. It's feeding on your marrow."

He kept on mumbling of the Beast, its claws deep in his scalp. He shouted that the time had come for combat. The Elders grew alarmed. They visited to bring the Truth; it made no difference; nothing did; the devil rode that man. He made no sense at all.

"We pity you for your experiences," they told him carefully, while prodding him in the direction of the Holy Spirit. They thought up many tricks. They marshaled every deacon within sight and sneaked them in for chats.

Why not endeavor with an open heart what every sinner must endeavor: ask the good Savior for forgiveness; the Holy Ghost would do the rest?

That was their claim. They laid it out for him. They asked him to consider. Thanks to the mercies of the Savior, they pointed out to him, he and the girl, who stuck to him as though she were his shadow, had made it all the way into the Central Valley, where land was still dirt cheap.

Did not two villages make off in darkness and in snow, in sleighs, across the Amur River, while a violent blizzard beat down on the fleeing - a blizzard fierce enough to tear the blankets from their stakes? Had not the Lord saved them? Was that not proof of mercy? Where was his gratitude?

Come yet another anniversary, the Reedley churches hummed with thankfulness for such a miracle of Faith for weeks. The faithful said to him repeatedly: "Have Faith. Turn over your affairs to God." The doctor gave him tranquilizers.

They handed him the Bible. He held it upside down. He spelled freethinking, clearly. It was believed by not a few he might be what the Unitarians called agnostic. This untidy Christian caused genuine pain. He was a definite embarrassment to the community, and therefore he was hushed at every opportunity.

The Reedley folks told Erika: "Although he turned to solitude and meditative prayer, he never found relief." They wondered why there was no dispensation for this man—for what he saw or, worse, imagined when nightmares came and clung to him, thick as the tule fog, made him turn over in his sleep much like a piece of meat that sizzled on a bed of coals. He had barbs in his heart, and his tongue was in knots. For years on end, his anguish lit upon him like a swarm of wasps as he sat, studying his Bible—which he still did, when first he came, primarily to please his wife—although in later years, he sadly turned to writers that were secular, the dangerous inquiring spirit in control.

No wonder he became an irritant that proved too much for saints. The bravest deacons scattered.

He would pursue them, shouting after them: "What? Are you blind? Deaf? Dumb? The Beast is born! Its name is Cheka! Cheka! Cheka! The cobblestones around the Savior's Gate are black with people pleading to escape. And you? America? You're next! You're puppets of the banksters! You're fodder for the Jews."

This tale of Hebrew wickedness that had unleashed the Bolsheviks smacked of the seamy stuff of which the scandal sheets were made. It made the people wince. They would have none of that. Into the stillness, someone said: "Pardon us. Around here, we don't share that conviction."

They said to him so as to silence him: "Don't talk like that. Here in America, Jews have immunity. They're righteous citizens."

He argued one last time: "What you leave out of history is as important as what you put in—"

You couldn't hold such radical ideas in Reedley, California. You couldn't then, nor now, as Erika found out.

It was unfair, the Reedley people told the tape recorder, that this bedeviled man kept heaping blame on them and on America where times were bad indeed after the markets crashed. Consensus was: he had his chance. He could have had democracy in

Russia.

The verdict was: Some people dug themselves a hole, then sat in it, complaining. After the markets crashed, America itself was crumbling dreadfully. Bad times were sapping everybody's spirit, and there was little patience left for folks out of control.

It was survival, by that time, for any and for all. The Great Depression had engulfed and petrified them, lava-like. Therefore, when Josef Stalin rattled shut his borders, posting his silent guards with guns and bayonets, not one word in the *Fresno Bee.* Not one. There was no interest any more in distant Soviet Russia.

When Erika inquired: "How did the story end?" they told her one last time that the Mad Rooshian wouldn't come and bend his knee and seek forgiveness with the Savior. He wouldn't. He would not.

And so the Brethren Church where almost all the city fathers worshipped—this after giving the mad refugee more chances than he merited to put his house in order—agreed the deacons had no choice. The church disowned him in disgust. That is the Reedley story.

Year followed after year.

In time, the Baptists tried; their cooking was worth eating. And after that, it was the Methodists. The Presbyterians. And, last, the Unitarians. Nobody bore with him.

He even tried to join the Lutherans who did all things in threes—all their main hymns come in three stanzas, and thrice passed their collection plate.

He read through their Bible three times. His teaspoon kept on rattling in his cup.

His heart cried out for Faith, but Faith was gone; he never found it, though he looked—*ach*, how he looked! He kept on looking for the heart of God and found it, black as tar.

In the Depression years, the outcome was predictable. The Reedley people said to Erika: "This crazy Rooshian was the only one in our community who cheered the Führer on."

Chapter 87

With the help of the Lord and her neighbors, Josie had managed to rescue the farm. She had learned to save penny on penny. She had a fine, strong head for numbers; she balanced her debits and credits. The Great Depression having taught her well, no longer did she purchase two of everything—she kept a shrewd eye out for bargains. She learned to cook a splendid three-course meal from nothing but a ham bone.

When visitors arrived to stay with Josephine, they slept in any bed that happened to be empty, and there were no surprises; her sheets were without creases.

She still read sentimental poetry on Liberty, Equality, Fraternity on chilly winter days as though to warm herself, but all in all, she voiced no more complaints about the sad lot of the poor, downtrodden masses, and that was fine with Mennotown. No longer did she move her furniture around to try out different angles. Her penny dreadfuls, once such tantalizing fare, now left her cold, whereas it was an uncle from Vancouver, whom she had never seen, who kept her busy weeks on end, and no complaints from Josie.

In summary, she learned her part in making do like everybody else, which was just wonderful. She took the weekend train when she went visiting said uncle for her part, because it was half fare, and that's how she returned.

That year, she also visited each of her daughters, and for the holidays she sewed for every one of them an apron, thus winning for herself the admiration and respect of the entire neighborhood. Her thoughts still ran deep while her knitting ran ladders, but the friction was gone, the alienation no more. Mennotown no longer mocked her, for her values, for the most part, had become the values of the clan.

To show appreciation in return, her relatives were tender and considerate. If a pretentious word slipped out of Josephine, no longer did they burst into loud laughter. It must not have been easy to forego metaphors and similes, since she was used to them, but Josie tried; she tried.

When Little Melly started taunting her to test her tolerance: "—your tea is kind of weak!" Josie did not grow pale as in the olden days when harmless needle pricks like that could jolt her to the core of her emotions. Instead, she said with a small laugh: "It's just your eyes. Or mine."

"Maybe."

"We're getting old."

"Well. Yes."

"We were both born before the motor car—" said Josephine, and gently poked her criticizing cousin in the stomach. " Why not admit it finally?"

"Just as I said. About your tea—"

"Oh, shush!" said Josephine who simply rose to put the kettle on and made another pot. Without another word.

Around her, there were many smiling faces.

The leaves were turning early. The men returned the tools to storage in the shed. Soon, winter came. The blessed holidays. The usual relatives came and departed. The distant relatives,

too, were invited to sit on the couch. They stayed for weeks on end and praised her *pfefferniisse* in many different ways, and she, like any housewife worth her salt, outdid herself with hospitality until they started staring out of windows:

"*Ach ja. Ach ja.* Just not the same as back in South Dakota."

She waved them off, relieved to see them go, but not before she heaped their hampers with cream cheese, sour cream and bits of rosy ham; she was that rich again. These rituals were no longer alien. She now adhered to them.

When the last visitor had left, she settled by the window; there still was time to read a bit before another spring arrived and with it, yet more guests.

The stock market crash had left little money for talent. Nobody taught Rarey to use the palette, but she moved it into her parlor. This was no time for luxury, but Josie insisted: "Right here. By the window."

"Can we afford this, Mom?"

She ruffled his hair in a shy, tender gesture, and her eyes filled with tears to the brim. "Can we afford this? Yes, we can. Of course we can. I know how to cut corners."

Her last-born was the nearest thing she ever owned of happiness. Would she deny herself? She watched her young son's progress much as she might have watched a train. The wheels of his talent were gathering speed. A force was propelling him on.

So what if her own life had stopped? His future was rosier than ever.

Things sprang to life on Rarey's canvas. His brushes trapped the wind, the silence of the flowers, the flicker of a candle, the smell of rain that hammered on the roof.

When other youngsters took up painting—and quite a few now did, in line with modern teaching theories that held a child should know how to surround himself with creativity—a tree looked like a tree, a house looked like a house. But it was different with Rarey. When you looked at a Rarey tree—why, you could smell the apple blossoms. You felt the sun smooth every

leaf. You sensed the air that rode the branches and made them arch and yield.

He painted. Josie watched.

Nobody knew the old flame smoldered on. Nobody sensed you could no more have changed this woman's nature than you could plow the sea.

She watched the seasons through her frosty window panes, and what she saw was this: No matter what the winter storms, spring came and started sprinkling daisies across the meadow greens as if by unseen hand.

Then followed muggy summer days. And then an early fall, dressed up in a cardinal red.

Here was the ticking of her thoughts: it wasn't yet every day's evening.

She asked Little Melly to dinner, incapable of doing things by halves. After dinner, both went to wash up, and then they came back and sat down.

Together, they sat now on Josie's lumpy davenport where Little Melly plied her cousin with examples from the Gospel to help her groom her spirit for the Savior's Gate that could swing open now, most any day, and let the sinner in. Archie sold funeral plots.

"A pain in my bladder. A stab in my kidney," whined Little Melly expertly. "And you, still in good health?"

"So far, so good."

"You cannot be too careful. That is my neighborly advice."

"I come from sturdy stock."

Josie joined two more uplifting community clubs to round out the rest of her life. She and her quibbling, criticizing cousin were not exactly bosom pals as yet, but finally at least on solid speaking terms, which was a joy to all.

How had so drastic a mutation come about? Because she still had Rarey. He was her valentine. If God made a cucumber, then Rarey painted it. A Rarey sky was not just blue but deep. A

Rarey lake was not just still but mystic.

She submerged herself in his talent. She was shy before her son's gifts.

Now that she had this last-born to herself, no longer did she have to live with vacant eyes and hungry heart. Now she was wealthy beyond words, like a convicted prisoner all of a sudden, unexpectedly released.

It was as if the Lord had given her a tonic that made her being well. And since the town had pardoned her, forgiven her, her heart felt peaceful at repose.

Her life no longer felt as though a giant feather quilt were suffocating it. She knew her last-born had a talent of great power that needed her support. If she regretted still her unused gifts, she did not dwell on that. She, too, was waiting for a seed to ripen, and what it would bring forth was anybody's guess.

She held his paintings up for others to admire. Most of the time, they did.

"His father would have been so proud," the townsfolk said indulgently, the memory of Jan still raw. "If only he had lived."

She said to Little Melly: "You can't fault me for that."

"For what?"

"For taking joy in Rarey."

Little Melly kept biting her lip, while forgetting the pain in her knee. Here showed that baleful trait again, as faint and deadly as the rattle of a snake. Here stood another door, still left a bit ajar.

"What's it to me?" sighed Little Melly. She was good at averting her gaze. "Though please forgive me when I say—"

"Go on. When you say what—?"

"—forgive me when I say that too much butter spoils the bread. That's just my own opinion."

But her merciless rancor had disappeared, too. Between them, a thaw had set in, for Josie had relinquished all her foreigners for good, chiefly the Finkelsteins. The spinster saw with her own eyes: the former champion of the underdog now kept herself

well to the right of everything and minimized things liberal.

Except for Rarey's brushes.

"My Rarey has that special quality: imagination," said Josephine, unable to let go.

"I guess he does—" sighed Little Melly, her own heart heavy with foreboding. She longed to say: "He needs to know about football and baseball," but fair was fair; her own shoe pinched as well: her Archibald had never quite caught on to the attraction of the other sex and could not always tell the difference between a football and a pumpkin. When it came to her tardy nephew, she watched her chance remarks.

Josie kept stitching away. "The Art Page was lavish in praise."

"Is that a fact?"

"I thought perhaps next time I go to Wichita—"

"You keep on spoiling him," said Little Melly, scolding mildly.

"Not really. I try not to."

"You aren't still pro-Wichita? Are you? Out with the truth! Mennotown's not good enough?"

But Josie only smiled to show she knew no guile, and swallowed what she thought.

In the decade of revival that followed Dewey's death and Jan's humiliating suicide, the neighbors learned to make allowances for Rarey's talent, too. That was no small concession, but gladly done in memory of Jan.

It was not easy for a growing teenager as talented as Rarey to walk precariously between tradition and modernity, between obedience and personality, much less become an expert in a field that was, in Mennotown, as far removed from practical existence as the moon.

But Rarey did what Josie never could: he struck that crucial balance. Thanks to a stubborn streak of gentleness he had inherited from Lizzy, he managed to succeed where Josie would have failed. He managed to keep both—his talent and the goodwill of his kin.

"I really don't deserve this honor," said Rarey modestly the day he won the Pumpkin Pie Award. But Josie saw: his blue eyes shone with pride. His face was warm and soft and fragrant as a bed of August hay.

She kept on gazing in his eyes and knew that nothing ever was so glowingly akin to her own spirit as the magic of his fingers that danced across the canvas. Still every inch a rebel, she could not help her pride, albeit in the interest of modesty she tried to keep her tongue. She was beside herself, as Rarey's honors heaped on honors, but careful in her excess.

"Be proud you won. Don't hide your gifts. Your talent is deserving."

And he rewarded her—nobody was as kind, nobody as well-mannered.

At fourteen years of age, he had his own exhibit. Times were still harsh, and life's necessities soaked up all hard-earned pennies, but even then, Josie's bitterest skeptics agreed: her son was the sensation of the day!

For this and other victories, she credited herself.

"The sky's the limit," she told the Embroidery Club, while sitting there, pride flushing the rim of her neckline, happily stitching away.

"Yet in the interest of humility—" the matrons pointed out, but she brushed that away. That was a tiny price to pay, to hold her tongue to snickers.

With the same thoroughness with which the old, defiant Josie espoused the causes of the liberals and Jews, she now embraced embroidery—as long as the clan loved her son, as long as they valued his talent.

Now that Joise knew her place, her gossip was amusing. She did her share of charity. She had good words for everyone. She welcomed strangers with a cheerful face, and relatives with shrieks. She took the Scriptures seriously. She battled mildew with a will.

German spices were back on grocery shelves, screened well

behind the kosher gherkins and the bagels, but Josie spiced her fried potatoes to the taste of all by mixing old and new.

Food fairs at the Topeka Unitarian Annual were now the latest rage, and Josie sent a pie. Gone were the days when Little Melly had to duck her head and wait until the furies passed! Gone were the times when Josie acted much like an exploding firecracker!

It was a bargain, in exchange, to let her young son have his way. "So be it," said the neighbors.

Thus, Rarey grew into a handsome youth. His teachers had nothing but praise.

His penmanship was good; his spelling was impeccable; his lettering, a wonder! This son of Josephine's who came to her in middle age, a prodigy, was still her precious prodigy, and she made no apologies for doodles.

A farmer tilled the soil again, obeying ancient rhythms, and family togetherness was in, and Rarey painted that. That selfsame farmer hoped to make a profit, and Rarey caught that feeling.

His talent was as effortless as breathing. The sunshine falling on a fertile earth, the purity of snow, the fragrance of a meadow, the simple joy of berrying—all that he captured on the cloth. He coaxed the purple shadows out of twilight. He who had never seen an ocean in his life could paint it, stroke by stroke, so that it roared and tossed and heaved when Josie looked at it.

One day she went to Wichita, peeked through the window of an orphanage, and came back with a playmate for her son.

The little female she imported into Mennotown had a fine head and dainty manners. She was as curly-haired and fragrant as a little lamb fresh from the April meadows. Her first name, Betty Lou. Her last name —well, you guessed it.

"Oh, no!" cried Little Melly, when she heard. She pulled Jan's youngster close to her as though to safekeep him.

But Josie said: "Her background shouldn't matter. She is in

need of a good home. She lost both parents to the influenza epidemic. Is there a finer place than Mennotown to raise an orphan girl?"

"But don't you think—"

"Luck and the Holy Spirit brought this small Hebrew child to us," said Josephine, while stepping round a cow pat, and deftly silenced all. She knew precisely how.

When Betty Lou, the girl whom Rarey grew to love, first came to Mennotown, in her possession nothing more than a small suitcase, tied cross-wise with a string, the truth was clear to more than just a few: no longer was your German heritage exclusively endorsed, which was just wonderful and Christian besides.

And with good cause: in Germany, there was a rising madman baiting every Jew, if you believed the *New York Times*, a paper many farmers read because it carried news about taxation and the likes—news that you couldn't do without, now that the bureaucrats were growing tentacles like mad.

The town was willing to give Betty Lou the benefit of every doubt. This young girl knew, as Josie did, that Rarey was exceptional. Things came to Rarey for the asking. She was a genuine believer in his gifts.

"Sit still for me," said Rarey. "I want to draw your curls." He sat, his note pad on his knees, and transferred with his quick, decisive strokes the countenance of her young face to paper. He filled five notebooks with her ringlets. He did a splendid job.

Chapter 88

Jonathan felt no surprise when he discovered, while leafing through some brittle parchments, the dusty road that brought his peasant ancestors to Apanlee.

He set four weeks aside to study his family tree. He was proud of his Apanlee roots. He verified with choking pride the old, Teutonic traits his people had brought all the way from the Vistula swamps to Russia's fertile acres to grow the wheat the color of sunsets of gold.

He filled himself with tales about his forebears' odd, unbending ways, their tribal dignity, their sense of duty and obedience to Caesar and to God.

Not murky, their standards and habits: Their world was black and white.

Ah, how it fit! How deeply meaningful it was!

When he looked back, he saw bleak days and bleaker nights. His past had been one great, gray ocean with no horizon whatsoever on which to anchor hope. Now, thanks to Heidi and her creed—thanks to his much-beloved Führer—his future lay before him much like a cotton field: inviting, vast, and ready to be

plucked.

In years to come—years rich in sight and sound—Jonathan would weld himself repeatedly in word and deed to duty and obedience unto death. He did this long before he came of combat age, awed by the solemn pageantry.

He wore the brown-shirt uniform at first, then graduated to field-gray, a color more becoming to a man. He wore black, sturdy shoes, black stockings, shorts, a trench cap tucked into his belt. He vowed repeatedly: "If need be, I will give my life for my beloved Führer—" but he meant Apanlee.

Back in his thoughts was always, always Apanlee.

He did all his assignments willingly—the kind of work that built his self-esteem—and he was not alone. Those were the days when all who could, were shouldering their spades. He relished the rigorous training. No task could exhaust his resources.

He rose with the roosters, made up his bunk, showered, did knee bends, and headed for the fields where wheat was heading strongly; the rye was ripening; the corn already stood two feet high.

The plums grew in season; soon, cornflowers, poppies, buttercups had faded.

Fall came. He helped another farmer plow the stubble under.

His limbs were straight; his voice was strong; a ruddy glow lay on his handsome face. His very heart was bronzed. In the haymaking season, he turned the hay; he piled it, shook it, hauled it in before the rain; he lay in it, absorbed the scent, and dreamed: peace on earth, and goodwill to upright, honest, and hard-working men!

He and his comrades built enormous fires to warm the frosty night. They raked potatoes, hot and tasty, from the ashes.

This must be understood: things were not shrill and mean when hope was young in Germany. The people looked around and saw with their own eyes: the food was swaying in the breeze. The wheat stood in fine head.

The hungry winters—gone!

The Führer spoke about a Reich that would endure a thousand years. His voice was the clarion call. They saw he was an earnest man, a leader to God's liking. He marshaled evidence and set it forth for others to admire. He plucked the urchins from the streets and put them in clean uniforms. Bells pealed from steeples joyously. May Day parade beneath a flag-draped city gate was plain magnificent. The fire of Faith lit all faces: a sky without doom; streets that were safe; police forces rounding up ration card swindlers.

The Führer told the men of Germany: "Work all the overtime you want—" and workers spit into their hands, rolled up their sleeves and went to built the Autobahn.

The Führer's voice rose, by and by: "You need to understand what you are up against, as well as what you're fighting for. Learn how to hit back hard!"

He shouted: "Scat, racketeers and Communists!" and a Hebrew developed a hiccup that lasted for several days.

This was about renewal. Honor. Decency. Integrity. Wholesome communities. Old values, dusted off, renewed. The people told each other, brooding: "The merchants and the moneylenders? Check your own bankster out; he lost his mask: his true face is revealed."

The Führer pointed out: "While you were struggling in the mire and your own children had no schools nor pencils, a certain people hoarded so much gold they could afford to take their poodles to a training school for dogs."

The Führer stood and smiled, a warm light in his eyes, and when the crowds cheered madly, he looked just like a tree that grew straight from German soil and started spreading shade.

A blind man saw he wore the garb of honor. A deaf man heard the drums of destiny. The crustiest old-timers, by nature skeptical, Faith gone in God and men, who scarcely even knew at first what all the shouting was about, now stared into their beer, forked their potato salad, and broodingly proclaimed:

"Say what you will. Now we have order in the streets of

Germany."

Such was the sentiment. The Führer promised justice for the righteous, a paycheck for the diligent, and prison for the louts. Who could have argued? No one. More and more folks, sipping their beer and staring thoughtfully into the foam, discovered salty words for scoundrels and connivers.

Before the Führer started freeing Germany, enslaved by choking reparations for a lost war, the country lay in chains, the future held no hope—but now the lemonade barrels rolled in. The prices of meat and bread fell. The mail came in regular batches. The trains no longer stalled on sidings; they moved with energy, emitting clouds of steam, and they were heated trains, affordable. The Führer understood the working man whose shoes badly needed resoling. The Führer said precisely what Dewey used to say to Josephine, when he coaxed her to heed the call of blood and to reject the Finkelsteins. Here's what the Führer said: "A straight nose is not crooked. You do not try to mix what nature made distinct."

He gathered his captives like sand. All Germany stood, flushed, with promise and with hope, and young and old stood once again, united, offering thunderous applause to the man who had banished despair, who now ushered in a more honest, more healthy tomorrow.

And long before the decade closed, there stood a youth at every corner, his arm raised in salute, among them Jonathan.

He held the Führer's flag aloft, and never did a heart hold more goodwill and love for clan and kin and race. Some might have shouted their approval of the Führer from mere exuberance of youth, others by example or from habit, but it was different for Jonathan. When Jonathan saluted flag and Führer, he did so with a reverence that centuries of strict obedience to a higher power had bred into his genes.

He stood tall for inspection. He wore his badge with pride. His nails were clean, his trousers without creases. His bed was tightly made, his rucksack packed, his list of tasks lay neatly folded

in his pocket. The Hitler Youth report said he was ready to command a squad, and Heidi took him by the shoulders and moved him to the window.

"Why, let me look at you."

She was so proud of Jonathan that she arranged to have his picture taken, next to her tulip bed. She took her last spare penny and summoned a photographer. That picture still exists. It shows that on that day, she wore a fine, starched collar. She stood right next to Jonathan, the kindergartner Lilo riding in the crook of his right arm, both arms around his neck.

Before the decade died, the Führer brought back folklore and tradition, and all the faithful knew: "A man of God. The true elect of God. Lo, we have waited for him."

He flew as the eagle that hastens to hunt. His horses were swifter than cheetahs, fiercer than ravening wolves. He gathered to himself all nations, heaped to himself all peoples. Like the hammer of Thor he arrived.

He said: "No more dead children in latrines, so help me God! So help me God!" and belt buckles snapped into place, jackboots sparked on the cobblestones.

"Just yesterday," the Führer pointed out, "your cattle starved; your horses fell; your children cried with hunger; the grief did not diminish. And now?"

He didn't bare his teeth as though he were the Beast, as legend has it now. He radiated confidence. He spread warm hands amid the multitudes. He was engaging and polite. He told his people, quietly: "I do not crave affection. I only want respect," but love flowed like a river. His name on their lips was like honey.

"All that was in the Bible", say those who lived those days. All that came from the pages of the Good and Trusted Book: he stood and measured the earth; he looked and startled the nations. As Erika plucks from old lips forgotten patriotic feelings out of the driftwood that was yesterday, the words are still: "Say what you will. He was a charismatic leader. World leaders envied him

his certainty of step."

Let Hollywood insist, they say while dabbing at their eyes, that their beloved Führer, in the end, became a monster who would traffic death for pride, and turn his people's sons and daughters' eyelids into lead. They say: "All that is such a lie! It's just a lie! A lie!"

Gone were the horror-haunted days, sprung from the minds of usurers, born from the teeth of hell!

Before the Führer's followers fled pestilence, rapacity and filth. The smoldering torches spoke loudly: of right triumphing over wrong, of light dispelling fog, of strength over mind-bending muddle. Helmets, guns and backpacks were everywhere for people to admire as youth formations, fresh-garlanded, marched on until the streets ran out of cobblestones. Young children waved their flags at them until their arms were sore, and pretty maidens stuffed the muzzles of their rifles with red roses.

"Ah, but his wickedness would scorch the earth," says Hollywood today, "and thus make converts flock to him to be his willing vassals, as though a letter had been branded on their brows."

"That's wrong," the Führer's former freedmen say. "That's simply wrong. That's Hollywood."

Their Führer said repeatedly: "I have received my mandate from the almighty hand of God." When Dewey spoke like that in Mennotown with smug familiarity in the Depression days, nobody took offense. When Archie makes that claim, today, right on your television screen, nobody takes offense.

So it was in those early days in Germany. The Führer didn't have Dewey's receding chin, potbellied look, hair growing from his ears. He asked repeatedly, convincingly: "Why not unite against the foe? His avarice is bottomless."

He asked: "Why else that only yesterday, if not for them, did millions not suffice to buy a single match?"

He said: "Let there be no mistake. We're locked in mortal struggle. While honest farmers strove to live from meager har-

vests, the Hebrews carted off their gold."

And in the end, he said: "We cannot co-exist."

The Führer never tired of the topic of the Jews, and there he touched a nerve that had been raw for centuries. The people now took stock.

Who else was always taking money from the pockets of the innocent and salting it away? Who else said prayers backwards and kept their squalid secrets hidden in their lodges? Who else had torched the Reichstag in at least two dozen different places? Who else was bleeding Germany for endless reparations?

The Führer said repeatedly: "So help me God! So help me God!"

He said: "An end to exploitation."

He said: "So. Help. Me. God!"

"I'll turn this country right side up," the Führer said, and the applause was thunderous. Wherever he unfurled his flag, the riffraff just scurried for cover.

"You have your *Hogan's Heroes* here," says Mimi now. "Show me a Nazi in America. Caricatures at best, satanic at their worst. We had ours, too—in films, cartoons and songs."

They didn't march; they shuffled. They plotted and they schemed. They made unwary people dance like puppets on a string. There was nothing redeeming about them.

The Führer asked: "You need an explanation for these past, destructive years that brought your parent's lives to ashes?"

Into the lull of heavy thoughts, the Führer's words fell, sharp: "While decency was dying, who sucked the life blood out of you to fill their bloated bellies?"

The workers stared into their beer: "Their actions and intentions, fouler than rat-infested cheese."

Why else, but for their guilty purposes, were Jews all of a sudden hiding jewelry and watches?

Why else, before the year was out, could Jews not visit public libraries and were the only ones to need delousing papers?

Why else did they shave off their beards and fuss about their side locks?

Why else—through all the centuries—had honest people blamed the Jews for every single woe?

"Look overseas," the Führer pointed out. "And draw your own conclusions."

Who cooked up the Depression?

Who ran the banks and presses?

Who preened in minks and sables while honest people rummaged through the trash?

The Führer said: "They're aliens in our midst. Their fiendish ingenuity, their intricate capacity to plot and scheme and damage honest work will soon be manifest to many. "

He made short shrift of humdrum homilies about such thinngs as wisdom's resting in the bosom of the people. He said: "Democracy? A tool concocted by the Jews so they can oversee the bureaucrats to loot the featherbrains." By then, it did not take the Führer's frown to point them out to you—the wreckers, the connivers.

That was the sentiment. In every country where the Hebrews dwelt, the people hated them. The moment when you shone the light on them, they scampered for the dark.

You didn't reckon with the Führer, did you, Israel?

You thought that you could drip with jewels, Sarah, while Germany was cringing in the dirt?

The Führer understood his people's dreams—dreams shattered in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles where men with gold and silver in their names and on their fingers had pocketed their children's rights. The Führer promised he would break the chains of slavery, and they trembled for joy at the news. To hear the Führer's explanations was just like watching rushing waster—it washed clean the murky depths. The wounded found healing, the tormented, peace; the dishonored discovered their pride.

The masses spoke as though they had one voice:

Bloodsuckers, all!

Polluters, all!
Out, Antichrist! Get thee behind me now!

Before another year was gone, the Jews were forced to tip their hats and step off the sidewalk into the gutter while the Führer stood high on a mountain and measured the earth with his thoughts. He spoke, and he startled the nations. He showered clarity across the land as though he poured a bowl of mercury.

He told his people, day by day: "We'll rid ourselves forever of the vermin," and silent men, still crusted with the dirt of many hopeless seasons, climbed on their chairs to get a better look. They stamped their feet and shouted: "He puts the snake right on the table! He calls a spade a spade. He calls a hoax a hoax!"

The message did not change. There was no subtlety, no shilly-shallying. The buckle on the Führer's belt spoke of a wrathful God, intent on retribution. The Führer said repeatedly, hypnotically, that God was on his side.

Around him, soldiers formed a wall.

He told the milling masses: "I promise solemnly to the Almighty God that the hour will arrive when victory will come again to our violated land." He pointed out the mastermind behind the global misery: he pointed a stiff finger at the lodges. Who was it that had toppled thrones? Who gnawed forever at the roots of every honest government? The planet shrieked with agony—and they? Bejeweled and corrupt!

So let them now disgorge their dollars and their diamonds! Why, let them scrub the lavatories with their detested prayer shawls!

"Like lice that carried typhus," the Führer told the people, "the Hebrews carried Bolshevism in their blood, infecting and weakening gullible people, and to what horrible result? Just look at Russia!"

The papers were full of hurrahs. The endless throngs marched on in never-ending columns. The world started quaking in awe. The people wildly tore the posters down, spit on the pentagram, and shredded the hammer and sickle.

Chapter 89

"You aren't you," the Führer said in broadcast after broadcast. "Only they are fit to live who are unafraid to die. Something greater and nobler than you will be born."

There was much talk of death for the sake of a higher ideal, but that, for Jonathan, was strictly theory. He yearned to live; he felt as though he were walking through life on bare feet.

He learned to pitch a tent. He learned to read a map. He hiked and drilled and sang. The Führer filled his heart with honor, pride and discipline and gave him the oneness with genuine comrades, all freshly uniformed, all poised for the upcoming battle.

"If Providence should call on me to make the supreme sacrifice, I will not hesitate," said Jonathan to Heidi, who had nothing specific to say in reply. She had a way of noticing the things she wanted to observe and turning blind, deaf, dumb to things she wanted to ignore.

He sat in Heidi's spotless kitchen and bit into her apfelstrudel, and they began to talk.

She said to him: "The movement is gathering strength."

He told her with a chuckle: "Say, have you heard this one?

Three Jews were sitting on a porch, and one of them said to the other two—"

"Nonsense," said Heidi, sharply. "Our doctor was a Jew. Our dentist was a Jew. The Führer took them both into protective custody."

He said no more that day. She was a woman and, hence, soft. She was the kind who would be menaced by a sunburn when everybody else would tan. He felt her searching silences, but his reality was timeless: the eagle was chasing the fox.

By then, Jonathan had grown into a man. He knew with flawless certainty: had not the Führer come and started cleaning up, the Antichrist would have, by now, grinned down from every rooftop—not just at Apanlee, not in the Fatherland alone, but in all the rest of Europe.

Word spread.

The roosters woke the cows.

The cows woke up the horses.

The trumpets of Jericho blew.

The Führer's flyers, too: they came in full force and full color. Drab telephone poles became beribboned candy canes. The people kept tapping their feet.

The Führer cried: "I am a man of God—" and thousands fell under his spell, and millions repeated his vision.

He stretched an iron arm and shouted: "I am your voice. Your unifying symbol is now the Mystic Cross."

Before it fled the Fiend.

The Führer took twin lightning runes and put them side by side.

For the gray masses in the Fatherland, still dumb with terror, who had heard Satan howling, having sprung across the borders out of an ashen Russia, the Führer was the Healer, the Messiah. They watched him throttle the Red Menace—the common enemy of all!—that had sprung out of hell.

The Führer and his Cross were one. The window panes stopped trembling. The Revolution of the usurers no longer roared through the dilapidated neighborhoods and barren streets of Ger-

many.

He promised: restitution for what has been thieved. Atonement for what has been done.

He said: "How? You ask how? Shoulder to shoulder and comrade for comrade, that's how!"

He shouted: "Not in my country can you find one mollycoddle!" and tore up the treacherous treaty. He swept the posters with the hammer and the sickle into the trenches left over from the First World War. He swore he would reclaim the Rhineland. His glance fell on the Corridor. He shouted: "Repeat after me. Death has no meaning. The Fatherland is all."

A Jew drowned himself in the Wannsee.

"It will be war, and not a party," the Führer had declared, and that was fine with Jonathan. The sun was hot, the shadows sharp, and Jonathan took sides.

He watched the Führer forge his armies with energy and foresight, and thrilled to see it done. Flags hung from every tree. The corrupt days died slowly, one by one, beneath the pageantry and joyous marching music.

The only things that made life worthwhile living now were values honed to steel by previous generations. Faith. Order. Diligence. Strength. Pride, once again, in race and Fatherland and blood.

"Firm discipline," the Führer said, "must nail us to our duties. And let's be clear. From now on, every order will be backed by force." Appeals to fate and destiny were frequent.

"There is no doubt about our sacred mandate," the loudspeakers proclaimed, strung tree to tree to tree.

The words may read like bloated boasting now, thanks to the muck and slime that slops incessantly from Hollywood to choke all deep, true passion, but words were spoken, heard and acted on, back then, as solemn as the flag salute that the Rotarians proffered up in Mennotown when they partook in their own rituals that aimed, no less, at bettering their world. To crack a joke about one's duty to one's soil would have been heresy in Mennotown—and so it was in Germany, for liberation's sake, when a war seemed

a foregone conclusion.

Somebody said: "They call this war?" and many people laughed.

The Führer minced no words. His eyes were sharp and wary. He spoke against the wind: "We are united in a common task. I did not raise my young folk to pick peaches."

There was no doubt in Jonathan. He was part of this glorious crusade. Bonfires glowed like liquid amber through the branches, and in his deepest marrow he knew that all was clean and good.

That this would be a Holy War against the Antichrist was clear. The Führer's planes were dropping flyers by the score that told the frightened border people that anybody honest, loyal, righteous had nothing to fear from the Wehrmacht. No shells would fall on peaceful acres. The *Landsers* planned no harm.

The multitudes believed. The crowds took up the chant. The Führer would not fail his people; he was their voice; he had their trust; he took their shame away and handed them their pride.

The Führer's planes kept floating on the wind as though they were but toys. The engines cascaded white steam. Trains, hung with flags and garlands, whistled through the countryside. Ships, loaded with emergency supplies, plowed through the foaming sea. Trim girls on bicycles waved happily at handsome soldiers as panzer spearheads started ripping through the fields.

Factories sang iron melodies.

Propellers started sucking air.

Huge motors started howling.

Guns bellowed, and horizons started smoking.

When his beloved Führer ordered war, Jonathan stood at attention, repeating: "I'll fight until my cartridges are gone."

He solemnly put on the *Landser's* hallowed garb. His hobnailed marching boots echoed through the streets of his adopted Fatherland, as they had done in previous generations: the world would fall to its power; the traitors would fall to their knees. Away with usurers and parasites! Away with liars, cheats and renegades! Scat, bloodsuckers! Scat, slime and ooze and muck!

He had become this country's son, this country's trusted future. That this must come by means of blood and steel, he knew. That message soaked into his pores. It did not frighten him. He was content, for he stood hardened to necessity—to die, if need be, for the sake of a higher ideal.

"God willing, we will win," said Heidi, mildly religious in intimate moments.

"Of course we will. A brand new Germany is rising!"

"Yes. With the Führer on your right and God Almighty on your left, how can you lose?"

"Life is a shadow play," was Jonathan's reply.

He had no God; he vaguely suspected that Heidi didn't either. Wherever Heidi walked, the world became her church. She made no show of piety when armament began. The church pews were uncomfortable; besides, there was no time; she briskly went to work. She started with a row of special Führer benefits. Inviting the entire neighborhood, she had five sunrise breakfasts in a row to start an orphan fund.

Time passed. Years flew. Heidi's strudel was making the rounds; Lilo was having a birthday. The little girl had grown into a teenager.

She knew Berlin like the back of her hand. She knew not idleness; she made the most of charm and opportunities. She was the finest sweater girl a soldier could imagine. In a white apron and a cook's cap, she did canteen duty twice a week at the Red Cross where she filled cups with scented tea and learned to give first aid.

She was fast friends with Jonathan. He said to her, to tease her: "I guess I'll have to punish you for not saluting me?"

She was filling his thermos with unsweetened tea. She spoke straight from an unbridled tongue: "You are as silly as a pair of knickers."

Nothing stopped Lilo when things burned on her tongue. The devil was in her that morning.

"The Führer would scalp me if only he knew," she said with flaming face, "but here is what I think: I'd rather have a coward

sitting at my table than a hero in the grave—"

He looked at her, astonished. "I didn't hear that, Lilo."

"Of course you didn't, Jonathan."

"I'm counting on you when I'm gone," he told her awkwardly. "Now, don't you start crying. Everybody's happy, and here you start crying?"

"She's a handful, Jonathan," said Heidi, fighting tears. "She's growing up. She's full of contradictions. She says one thing and means another. She meant to tell you, Jonathan: 'Watch out for your own safety.' We want you to come back. Here. Here's an extra pair of socks for you, deep in this zipper bag."

He watched and could not have his fill of Heidi. He loved her now as ever, though in her aging face, fine wrinkles ran every which way. She was no longer the young girl who wore a golden coronet, an ear of wheat pin on her collar, a wondrous angel sent to earth to pick him from the gutter. She had three draft-age sons.

He made a big to-do about her recipe, and Heidi hamstered every crumb of praise. Despite the fading shafts of light, it was a happy day. Not much had changed; the sweet tension between them never slackened, although he never raised his hand to touch her graying hair. Not once.

"God willing," said Heidi, several times, voicing nothing special or specific. She was no slave to church or cult, but she insisted on her daughter's confirmation—still two years away. And even Lilo was no less a patriot than ever the Lord had made. Despite her reckless tongue, she saw the Führer flag and trembled with emotion. The day was tranquil, almost lazy, and Heidi served coffee and cookies. Love, trust and Faith—above all, Faith!—shone out of Heidi's eyes like candles.

To break the tension, he asked slowly: "I never asked you this before. Why did you take me in?"

"I liked you, Jonathan."

"The odds were all against you. You didn't know that I would ever pay you back."

"Ah, but I did. I did. Deep down, I saw the pride of generations."

He kept on smoking hungrily. She watched how his cigarette diminished; ashes growing at the tip, suspended in the air. His hand trembled ever so slightly. Outside, a youth formation passed by the open window singing:

"Ein junges Volk steht auf zum Sturm bereit,
Haut die Schranken doch zusammen, Kameraden—"

She said: "Be careful now. I want you to come back."

He gave her a thin smile. "This is a sacred war against the force of darkness. It's providence. It's destiny. As if you didn't know."

She had not changed at all, though she was older, wiser now. She chose her words with care. "I want you to come back. A bullet could come flying. Trench warfare is no picnic."

He told her, speaking calmly: "You may be sure I'll sell my life as dearly as I can."

He knew his destiny as though it had been hewn in stone. His duty was to fling the Mystic Cross as far as strength permitted and hook it deep into the soil for which his forebears died. He all but felt its spikes on his own skin as they moved stealthily.

She leaned toward him lovingly while fastening a button. "Here. Don't forget your thermos bottle." He caught a whiff of her clean hair and resisted an impulse to touch it.

She spoke shyly, avoiding his eyes. "And don't forget. Your place is here. In Germany."

"I know. But not before I take back what was mine."

She reached for his hand then. She started stroking it. "Where did you get this scar?"

He rubbed the indentation. It was a strange phenomenon: whenever the drums started rolling, the scar started itching like mad.

"A little cousin, thrice removed, bit me out of sheer terror. Her name was Mimi. Mimi Neufeld. I've often wondered what might have happened to that child." He stood within a trembling silence, still in his ears the thudding blows of anarchy. Each blow from twenty years ago that fell on Dorothy, supine across that zinc container, was still engraved upon his spine, within the very sinews of his will. His finger was already twitching for the

trigger.

He said: "The Soviet Union is a sluggish giant, shot through and through with Hebrew thought. The sun takes an entire day to cross it. We'll need, at most, three weeks."

The question she had never asked began to swell inside her. Both felt it, hanging like a sword. She tried to force it out between clenched teeth but found that she could not. He read her thoughts. He answered her obliquely.

"We cannot co-exist."

"Don't look for the hardest possible path."

He shrugged while drumming with his knuckles. It was late August now, but for him, this was June, a dream. "We'll make sure the Red Peril will break every tooth." He knew with steely clarity one single, red-hot point: were it not for the Führer and his might, a sea of red would have, by now, washed over all of Europe. He said again: "We have no choice. We cannot co-exist."

She put both hands around his face. He cupped them with his own. There was no need for words.

This, too, is now forgotten. How genuine it was. How sweet and virginal it was.

That day in Heidi's kitchen, as he bid her good-bye, he was again a hungry, frozen boy; she the young woman, pregnant with the future, wearing red patent leather shoes. He owed her everything. He longed to tell her that. With diligence and discipline, along with soap and brush, she had cast out the evil spirits that plagued a skinny guttersnipe whose belly hurt with hunger, whose ears still heard the thuds of anarchy.

"A soldier follows orders," said Jonathan, to hide that he was still in love with her; he still drank in her scent—though Heidi looked that day as wrinkled as an apple, forgotten in the oven, and left to bake too long. The future had stopped passing through her body.

Long after he was gone, she sat there, with her thoughts, alone, within the fading daylight, sewing.

Chapter 90

As Kansas people watched the German Führer's gamble from afar, they were informed in detail about his hatred, enmity and greed. "A bug that has the bite of fire," the *New York Times* declared.

Some papers said: "A fraud."

Some shrieked: "A fool."

Some even howled: "A maniac."

The editorial cartoons were raw and vicious and maligning. The scribblers hinted that, once more, the Germans were dropping poisoned sweets because they hated children.

This was bad news for Mennotown, with the dachshund barely back in fashion, and the image of the kaiser still festering in many people's memory, particularly Archibald's.

"The devil incarnate," enunciated Archibald, while milk dried on his mustache.

And he was not alone, making his feelings known about the so-called Führer, as he was represented to the masses, thanks to the *New York Times*.

"That man knows what he wants. No cloak and dagger business," said Doctorjay, for instance. "Once he rolls up his sleeves, watch out! You know precisely where he stands. You know precisely what he'll do. He isn't wishy-washy."

Doctorjay still doctored in his spare time when the spirit moved him thus. Among his clientele for Doctorjay's Ready Relief, that's where he made known his opinions.

"A rattler at your feet!" cried Archibald as well. "The Rooshians and the Huns alike, a bunch of hooligans!"

Archie hated Adolf Hitler with a vehemence that made his left eye gleam. "Half-man, half-fag," said Archie with a jerky motion of his shoulder.

"Don't talk like that," admonished Little Melly who didn't like blue words. The dark side of the facts of life was still a mystery to her. Such things did not happen in Kansas.

"That's right! Look! Look who's talking now!" The ham in Doctorjay would not leave him alone. He had not changed a bit; the truth jumped from his tongue, though he himself was far from perfect. It was no secret to most folks he needed Abigail's goodwill on patriotic holidays to get himself to bed. He still kept toasting every star and stripe, enjoying all his handshakes, quaffing from his bottle, helping himself to more of Lizzy's Cheese slivers than was good for his doddering liver.

"Let's gun the Hun!" cried Archibald, and Doctorjay joined in: "Let's drink to that! Hey! Bottoms up! Remember? Bottoms up?"

The neighbors nodded sagely while visiting with Doctorjay to listen to the radio and hear the latest news, while Archibald sat, fuming. You would have thought that this was Archie's war, he was that overwrought. In church, where Archibald preached interim, he prayed for all his enemies but made a point of skipping over Germans. He couldn't wait for Saturday—that's when he checked himself into the flicker crowd so he could watch the helmets.

When it appeared the Methodists of Mennotown were grow-

ing powerful, intent on eclipsing the Creed, Archie thundered from the pulpit that the Methodists were his decided enemies as well and could never be anything else. The Baptists, too, were slowly gaining in the local confidence, and Archie, sensing the emergency, stepped zealously into his preacher father's shoes. That status gave him lots of opportunities to keep his good eye on the motes in other people's eyes while avoiding the beam in his own.

Dim rumors clung to Archibald and would not go away.

He had inherited none of his mother's robust traits, but all of Dewey's zeal. On Sundays and on holidays, he preached with scarlet tongue, but in his everyday endeavors he was timid, prone to small touches of malice, and his feelings were constantly hurt. But as he grew in certitude, he toed the safety line, and when it came to cleaning up the vineyards of the Lord, he roused himself to such thunderous roars he left no doubt just where he stood: fair-square against all moral compromise.

"Mortification of the flesh is still of great importance," pontificated Archibald, who wore a rhinestone watch and several pinkie rings, and dropped a casual hand into a perfect stranger's lap, where it lay, glittering.

Despite his oddities, the congregation had accepted him because he promised them the Pearly Gates, and they, in turn, made sure he was well-rested and well-fed.

Each Sunday, rain or shine, he occupied the sleek and glossy pulpit vacated by his father, though many people thought, and told him so in private, that he unrolled his Sunday morning homilies on the temptations of the flesh in more rambunctious ways than even Billy Sunday did, when thirty years before, he socked it home to Satan. But Archie didn't take advice concerning moral compromise. He shouted guilt and penitence and brimstone and damnation, while Kansas sweltered in the heat.

"And he, so mild in all his endeavors," they said of him, indulging. The volunteers doted on him. The faithful kept on filling his collection plate, providing succor for the poor today and for themselves a better afterlife tomorrow, and all was well

enough.

Patience was the watchword now with Archie's eccentricities. He, for his part, knew on which side his bread was buttered, and never dropped the slice in such a way so as to spoil his meal.

In summary, in every way that counted, he was a churchly man and faithful to old habits—except that he sleep-walked through manhood. Archie's love life—as bald as an egg!

By contrast, Betty Lou and Rarey made proper headway in the matter of romance and now were widely recognized as the decade's most watched and envied cupids. The plan was: they would marry as soon as the girl came of age.

In the quiet, uneventful years between the Great Depression and the beginning of the European war, Rarey and the curly-headed youngster that Josie tucked into the ethnic quilt of Mennotown, grew up together peacefully, and now she was in love with Rarey, and he in love with her. It was well-known that Rarey could have had most any pious girl in Mennotown—indeed, in the entire state of Kansas!—but he chose Betty Lou, a girl emitting a soft radiance.

She waited until she was given permission to speak. She hurried to finish the dishes.

She did that without being asked, which won her the town folks' approval. They liked her well enough. She had no major flaws. But when she washed her hair, it curled around her face like crazy.

She sat nearby for hours, while he sketched. She deepened her dimples at him. She liked those home-cooked meals. She settled in and stayed.

He was consumed with perfecting his strokes. His brushes fashioned magic in a town where pig squeals were the norm.

"You may not want to mix, but you should treat them well," said even Little Melly. "They're humans. Aren't they? Like everybody else?"

Music to Josie's ears!

That kind of ethnic tolerance would have been rare just yesterday, but now the nosy neighbors only smiled the day the youngsters kissed each other, right on the sidewalk, in broad daylight. Unbidden thoughts came back like mushrooms after rain, but Josie squelched them all.

"A genuine love match," said Josie.

"Next thing you know, the Negroes will cross over," said Little Melly carefully to no one in particular and wiped a drop of gravy from her chin. The outskirt Donoghues were multi-marrying as well, as Archie put it coyly. While giving it nary a thought. Thus sweetening the dole. Their colors mixed and matched. Their brood just multiplied.

"No! Never! That will never happen," said Josie tranquilly, and settled down to feast on yet another purple novel.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm absolutely sure."

"Modernity is marching on."

Josie counted the cracks in the ceiling. She felt no contradiction; her values were in place; she just held onto them and didn't move an inch: this was America where everybody was as good as everybody else. She had no doubts about her kind of town. Equality! Fraternity! And Liberty!

How she rejoiced in seeing them come back, the liberal ideas she had so championed in her salad days. Now that a war was on, all that was back in fashion. The old world knew no better, had erupted in fire and flame and racial ill-will, but Mennotown's America still was as it should be: a country where you had a chance, as long as people stuck together and pulled in one direction instead of frittering their strength.

Hard-scrabble days were past. Equality was in.

While Betty Lou and Rarey were busy making wedding plans, Little Melly fussed and bickered, poked and prodded, for Archie still remained a timid bachelor despite the fleshiest females she pushed right in his path—and not just Temperance, for such was her Christian name.

She, Doctorjay, and Betty Lou were sitting on the porch one day when Archie came to join them.

"I said to her, to Temperance: 'He will get over everything.' I said to her: 'Once he is married safely—'"

"A fine one, you, to speak."

"What's that supposed to mean? Don't be so sure you can catch up once you're behind in age."

"Just don't start that again."

Little Melly looked at her nephew more keenly. "Take a good look at her. I said, 'take a good look at Temperance.' A girl that lives within walking distance. As rosy and as shiny as a ham. Now is as good an opportunity as any."

Archie chewed on a hangnail, while Little Melly served coffee with those familiar, churning feelings in her stomach that signaled a gastric disorder. Telling her to lay off now was telling her to die.

She launched herself with gusto. She poked her nephew with her finger. "She's rich in curves, both fore and aft."

Doctorjay began to gasp with mirth. She hushed him with a piercing look: he was incorrigible.

"Just think: a baby—warm as toast." She knew whereof she spoke. She had nursed many plans for Archibald, and they included cradles as well as eldership.

But Archie merely curled his lip and culled out of his trouser pocket a piece of chewing gum to show his ingrained nonchalance in matters of romance. He was like that. He did not fit in. He fell into step behind the old order, and yet, he was marching alone. If he continued on that path, his life was rigged for anguish.

Little Melly pointed out: "She's perfect, Archibald. Well on the road to overweight."

"I know. I know. She is sufficiently rotund."

She hated that. Here was another habit she disdained. Archie often spoke like that. Quaint. Dandified. She watched him in brittle silence. There were additional disturbing signs you could pick up in Archie if you looked carefully. When he was

overstressed, he mumbled to himself. He savored gossip like a woman. A ladder gave him vertigo. He took scant pains with his mustache but lots about his daffodils. He liked to have his neck and ears rubbed gently. He turned white at a worm in an apple.

No doubt that he was sissified. Such things were ruining him. She gathered every clue up with a quaking heart.

"God spoke an ultimatum once again," said Little Melly one last time while helping Archie put the final touches on yet another funeral. "There is a lesson here." She liked to say bright things like that to Archie.

He looped a twisted smile. "Not now. I have a toothache. Please."

She was not easily deceived. She watched him with a shrewd maternal eye, then launched herself more forcefully. She had her blueprints all mapped out, and was not coy with them.

"Don't change the subject, Archie. I speak from long experience. What's Easter without colored eggs? What's Christmas without stockings? What's life if you can't leave your lessons to posterity? The only thing you lack is a good wife to give you enough children to carry on your work."

He said something impossible. He liked to shock her with his purple words, a disconcerting habit.

"Don't be a smart-ass, Archie. You are a dandy, aren't you? Don't bait your aunt like that."

But all her efforts fizzled. Adroitly, Archie took himself out of harm's way by pleading yet another altruism drive for yet another charity to escape further arguments, but not before he pointed out to her from Solomon the Christian difference between clean fun and sinful longings. He did this cleverly, as crafty as a flivver salesman swapping words.

But on the other hand, now that she thought of it, he had a way of skipping over David and Bethsheba that was completely baffling.

For quite some time, Archie held his own against the siege.

He made the rounds at the Rotary Clubs. He had sufficient skills to peddle sentiment for profit and ran a lot of charities, for there were still the Donoghues and other riffraff like the Donoghues, a grim and dreary lot. The town that Jan had built from scratch out of the good, warm Kansas earth was being overrun with them.

What did they want? More. More. Still more.

The bootstrap argument was still as sound as ever, but Archie was so busy gospeling he did not even realize his shift from right to left, from black to red, from industry to mooching. His churchly argument was this: "A Christian has a duty to spread a little cheer."

He did that with the help of governmental grants, still a decided novelty. He often visited the Donoghues and sat and talked with them and came up with solutions.

"More," said the Donoghues, accustomed to the dole.

They were at odds with everyone. Their tempers could never be sweetened. They kept their desires on simmer, always ready to bring them to boil. They wanted the unions to battle for them, but didn't want to work. They were uncouth and dangerous. They lied without worrying why. They stole without worrying where. You had to shake them from your trees because they stole your apples.

Every thievery, suspected or discovered, was blamed on the Donoghue tribe. The constable arrived periodically and hauled them out of hiding to check them out and give them a fair warning. They would start gobbling like a bunch of turkeys who suspected a Thanksgiving dinner. They went to Wichita at every opportunity, a bunch of thieves into a city full of thieves, to huddle with the malcontents. The public health authorities kept checking them for lice. Their windows were all cob-webbed. Their bodies smelled unwashed. The air inside their home was foul. On rare occasions, when they swept, they swept out a mountain of garbage.

The city fathers did their best, the federal government the same, and Archie did the rest. That's where the Christian alter-

native came in. He tried to lend a helping hand materially to tide them over hurdles.

His argument was this: just as you shared your recipes, so, too, in preparation for eternity, you tried to live life in Christ's spirit by sharing overflow. You did not want to spend eternity in hell. Revivals and revivalists were in. The time to start was now.

And overflow it was in Archie's church as robust neighbors gathered to behold another bounteous harvest, while Temperance did tons of dishes in the basement where Abigail was kidding with the deacons. Because of people such as Abigail, now snuggling in the ethnic quilt, modernity was creeping up on everyone in Mennotown and settling in for good.

The tango passed for risky, for example, but dominoes did not. Outlandish hats were still an iffy item, but rhinestone watches were allowed; Archie wore one himself.

An East Coast student ate a goldfish, and that became a fad.

A university worked out a plan to reach the moon: some people thought that interesting.

Gone with the Wind premiered in Atlanta. Carole Lombard and Clark Gable fell in love. Frank Sinatra wore bell-bottomed trousers. The old-timers were horrified: What would be next? A sleeveless bathing suit? A beehive for a hairdo? A bathroom separating gender?

"False rumps?" shrieked Archibald. "The origins of species?"

The preachers preached; the volunteers became inspired. The Donoghues danced to the thumps of polka music as if there be no tomorrow.

A few meek voices, here and there, spoke up among the masses and tried to stem the tide.

They pointed out: no matter what a Christian did to counteract modernity, the Donoghues were still the same. They were still "elements", prefixed by "undesirable." Their children couldn't read. Their parents didn't work. Their back yards, full of leaves left over from last year. The public schools made for a mighty melting pot, but even so, love for the rabble-rousers could

surely be carried too far.

Why throw good money after bad? That was the question mark.

Now that the New Deal Democrats were nesting in the White House and spreading tentacles like mad, there were rumors of ruinous taxation.

Chapter 91

The papers sold the Roosevelt couple as the solution to all ills. His hobby was Freemasonry; she favored the downtrodden. Most Midwest farmers saw in their new President the best the country could bring forth—a man with freckles on his fingers and hot dogs his favorite food.

One of his strategies was bigger government. As far as Mennotowners were concerned, here was a man who walked the modern walk and talked the modern talk; he had his country's interests at heart; he strove for wholesale betterment, a real down-to-earther.

To open up world markets for what the farmers grew was only one of Roosevelt's solutions. A New World Order was his aim, the papers talked a lot about a global village, so to speak, where friend and foe palavered democratically and listened to each other.

Two World Fairs proved that position firmly, one in the east, one in the west. The papers had nothing but praise: he had done everything he promised he would do in his election pledge: to lock the New Deal firmly into neat, square, bureaucratic slots.

The man was as good as his word. The country had nicely recovered. The burdens had fallen away. The frightening wobble was past.

"All wars are obsolete!" cried Mrs. Roosevelt as well, while standing on a platform and pounding with her gavel—the perfect suffragette, as Josie pointed out—prevailing on goodwill by a decided, paramount concern: just how to keep America the Beautiful out of the European brawl.

Some jokester pollsters took a survey: It was first Roosevelt, then God.

The bankers were printing up money like mad. The poorest lad could once again afford to buy a bicycle by buying in installments.

Most folks felt gratified. Democracy prevailed!

You viewed a troubling issue carefully from every single angle and then chose majority rule. The globe turned once more clockwise on its axis. Josie could purchase whatever she wished—she treated herself to a poodle and showed off her pedigree papers.

While overseas, on the decrepit continent, a madman was rallying troops, if you believed the *New York Times* which, by then, many people read, this being a progressive generation generally, in Mennotown there was still continuity and certainty.

Tradition had triumphed. Relief was palpable. The Lord's Prayer—as ringing as ever!

The louder the worshippers sang, the better it was for their lungs. You had to behave in a Christian manner and show your respect for your neighbors by placing the good of the town before personal gain. Community togetherness was in. Radical views were still out. Little Melly was stuffing herself harder than ever. She parted her hair in the middle.

The Depression had taught all a lesson; they voted a moderate Congress. They still knew in a visceral, yet somewhat murky way that if you let yourself be swayed by liberals, who hollered of equality and spendthrift union benefits, the result was like let-

ting fly out of a paper bag a flock of restive doves. You could predict precisely what would happen to the windshield of your flivver!

But still, there now was tolerance for modern ways that had not existed before. A grant or two did wonders for a farmer. There was a middle road. You kept yourself smack in the center.

Not even Josie roused herself sufficiently to champion the left—a stance which, in the olden days, had caused such discontent. Advancing age had tamed her spirit nicely. Her hair was white. Her mood was mellow and serene. She lived among the pacifists, and she felt peaceful now, her eye on Rarey's artistry, content with compromise, albeit somewhat sluggish.

It seemed that nearly all of Europe was at war. A Jew wrote a song for an overweight girl. America was pleased. Her voice poured from the loudspeakers the bureaucrats had nested in trees:

"God Bless America. Land that I love,
Stand beside her
And guide her
Through the night
with a light
from above."

"We'll never get involved!" the President declared. "If Europe wants a squabble, it won't be our problem."

The folks of Mennotown felt cheered and reassured, now that it was once more peace, plenty and prosperity in Heaven and on earth. What with their memories of ethnic hate still raw, nobody wanted war, and certainly not Josephine, with Rarey now of draft age.

"So let them kill each other off," she said, and spoke for all.

Josie was the only one who tried to read *Mein Kampf,* but it disgusted her so much that she—who loved to read and read just about anything—just never finished it.

The hard hand of dictatorship was something that she understood from bitter past experience. But now that she herself no longer had her pretty fingertips in matters crassly liberal, she rel-

ished someone else's bullet searching for its mark.

Thus, Josie had no difficulty whatsoever in seeing the sharp demarcation lines that separated good from bad. As far as Josie was concerned, the Führer was a villain made to order.

Before the Führer's war crashed into Mennotown by way of draft board postcards, life in this German settlement in the Midwest was as just as close to bliss as Heaven will grant earth.

Everything had slowed down to a crawl in the Depression, but now, once more, the economy was moving and improving. In fact, it zipped along. The harvests were richer than ever.

Glen Miller sang his "Chattanooga Choo-choo," and people tapped their feet.

"Walking the Floor" was a very big hit.

"Onward, Christian Soldiers," was Archie's favorite song.

If you compared the past with today, tomorrow, next year, you knew that the Lord held the rudder. Belief in Him was limitless. The granaries bulged with His kernels. The birds were full of song.

If you had two good eyes to see—which Archibald did not, due to the ethnic assault!—and take in bounty heaped on bounty, you saw in Mennotown again the signs that spoke of German cleanliness, obedience, diligence, and order. It would not stay that way, the Mennotowners knew, unless they wrapped themselves in their unrivaled ethnic net—but in the meantime, why not be more generous with birds of different colors and thoughts of different stripe?

Life, once again, was good—warm, full of light and harvest sounds and orchard fragrances, and it was widely understood and fervently believed that even greater boom times lay ahead. The dreaded dole was now a memory for all except the Donoghues—a bunch of hoodlums menacing the neighborhood as ever, to a man on the treacherous road.

Take Abigail.

Here was a a hussy and a flirt—and never mind that she was wed to Doctorjay, still as agog as ever. She had been born a

Donoghue and would remain a Donoghue, no matter the veneer. She was extravagant. She dressed so gaudily that sometimes travelers mistook her for the mayor's wife, which caused a lot of guffaws. She even cut a heart into the exit of her outhouse, which was a definite affront. The locals liked to speculate that it might be the water, or else, maybe her blood.

In summary, when war broke out on the old continent, the folks in Mennotown did not give one small hoot. They had their hands full with their own affairs, now that normality was back.

One such affair was Archibald, more in the public eye than ever.

Temperance was sitting on the edge of Little Melly's leather covered walnut sofa, stirring sugar in her coffee. She said to Little Melly: "I have a high opinion of myself. I see myself as a suitable spouse."

Little Melly couldn't stop trembling. A cold, no doubt, was blossoming. "Of course you are. Nobody says you aren't."

"Your nephew," offered Temperance, wielding a needle with which she kept stabbing the air, "is someone over whom one must keep silent vigil. Is it true that he went to a fiddler's convention?"

Hot shame swept into Little Melly's face. "Why do you say that, Temperance? To spite me? Is that it?"

Relentless, that was Temperance. "If you don't mind my saying so, his notions of the fairer sex are strange, to say the very least. It's all your fault. You spoiled him, Little Melly."

Little Melly looked as sour as a bushel of crab apples. "I did my best, and now it's my fault? Well, if you say so, who am I to argue? I guess I kept him in his diapers past the point where it was all too easy to—well, never mind. Just never mind! I guess you're right. I guess I spoiled him rotten."

"If you don't mind my saying so. You must have, Little Melly."

"I guess I must have. Sadly."

Little Melly knew that Temperance had a point. Her Archie

was the last son in her brother's family of ten—each one of them two-syllables, except for Archibald. She'd nicknamed him. She shouldn't have. And here was the result.

"When he was still a toddler, I used to dress him up in skirts. He looked so cute and cuddly. I loved him more than most. I had such hopes for him." Little Melly took a deep and trembling breath and added bravely: "But he is sturdy in the Lord. Last week, he saved five souls."

Temperance was playing with the fringes of the tablecloth, involved in deep thoughts of her own. "Regardless. He looks sissified. If you want my opinion."

The spinster wheeled around to stare at Temperance. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Does he still have that problem with his bladder?" Now Temperance was on a roll. She launched herself full force. "Somebody has to speak his mind. He's sissified. He cannot seize a set of oxen by the horns or yet a rooster by his flaps—how can he bring himself to take the plunge? That's what I want to know. If you want my opinion."

"Why not give it a try?"

"You know that I'm willing. I'm willing to give it a whirl."

On Wednesdays, Archie needed volunteers, and females were his favorites; they licked his postage stamps. They were amazingly obedient. With a flick of his wrist they arose with a hymn. Another flick, and they fell back onto their fleshy backsides, as though they were a row of dominoes. He never tired watching. He reveled in his power. He had a way with words that made the nickels rain. He had his kingdom pat.

Yet all the while, his aunt kept a shrewd eye on him, and with just cause, for all around him, people married, settled down, sowed, reaped, and multiplied, obeying ties of blood and friendship, and Archie had the opportunity. But, sadly, no desire.

She was at her wits' end. She had done all she could, had brought him up as best as she knew how; the least that he could do to thank her for her pains would be to grow a proper mustache.

Not even that. Alas. Now he was sucking on a cuticle. "You just don't understand."

Ah, but she did. She did. Since matrimonial love had passed her by, she lived for him and through him. What had it netted her? A balding bachelor. A drearier fate for any man was hard to contemplate.

"What are you waiting for? The day will come when I'll be too old to darn your Sunday socks. Then what?"

"I am the way I am. Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault."

"Why should I blame myself? I did the best I could. I looked after you like a baby."

It was exasperating. She did not understand how life could go so wrong, when she had never spared herself dispensing good advice. But now her energy had run its course; she longed for him to usher in the Kingdom proper, as his father had done, and before him his father and his father's father, all resting somberly beneath their mildewed stones, this after having multiplied themselves.

"Look. All I'm pointing out to you is that a preacher needs a wife. That's all. Is that too much to ask?"

A frozen silence was her answer. He sat with empty eyes.

She pulled her chair up closer and put a blanket carefully across his knees; the fringes hung on either side and made a pretty pattern. "Well, then? What is your answer, Archie?"

"Enough. I said enough."

Tears stung her eyes. He was her cross to bear. The modern doctors talked of opening him up to see what might be wrong inside.

"If you would only give yourself a push and marry Temperance, all the rest will slide into place."

Each day, one argument led to the next until both he and Little Melly were on their feet, she shouting: "I'm only pointing out—" and Archie shouting back: "—you nag me half to death!"

"She simply squeaks with cleanliness," she said to Archibald,

enumerating one last time the merits of the girl named Temperance.

He lowered himself into her cushions. "Speak up. Let's get it over with."

She studied him obliquely. In the pit of her heart sat a thought.

No matter what he did, how cleverly he argued back, she could not shake that thought. Something hung over Archie like a bat, well-hidden from the light of day. Her notions about what it really was were rather dim—such things made her dizzy and daffy.

"Well. Since you ask. I must admit that I can hardly bear to look at you," she said in a low voice. "You aren't getting any younger."

He pressed his lips together.

She kept circling around him, much like a hen about to lay an egg. She had a one-track mind, and she thought more and more of Temperance as Archie's last salvation.

"Don't tell me you prefer your theories to anybody else's. Why not make use of Temperance? A holiday is coming up. A picnic, Archie dear? Just you and she. Alone."

"I've got to run," ducked Archibald, who heard the front gate squeak. The moment he spied Temperance, herself already on the cusp of middle age, the good life showing in both hips and waist, Archie was diving for cover. Archie was showing no signs of surrender. Archie was slipping away.

Little Melly rushed after her nephew, determined. "Now? Where to, Archie? What's the rush?"

"To find out what the Methodists are going to do next."

Temperance, too, chased after Archibald. "Look, that can wait. The Methodists can wait. Sit down and pay attention to your female visitor."

"Be courteous to Temperance!"

"She has a coarse skin and a squint."

He yelled that loud enough for Temperance to hear. He could be cruel beyond belief; he was impossible. He was well past the age where putting leeches on both nostrils might have clicked problems into place.

For Little Melly, this spelled trouble—trouble with a "T" writ large. She felt a thick sense of impending disaster. She sensed the subtle signs. They made her mouth go dry. There were too many telling clues. Neighbors gave one another knowing winks. A single fly could rob him of his sleep. On bath nights, he fussed about towels. A tea glass burned his fingertips. If he could spare an extra quarter, he spent it on an ice cream cone. And there he stood. And licked.

"It's now or never, girl," she therefore prodded Temperance, who, by that time, had visited a lot in Little Melly's kitchen for an entire year. No way that Archie could ignore her.

"No way," she'd said to Archibald on more than one occasion, "will I yield on a balmy night what I could parlay into marriage."

To which he only shrugged.

She was the kind, she'd amplified, who guarded her virginity. She'd even added soulfully: "Though I have often wondered, Archibald: what might it feel like, to kiss you on your schmoozer? At any rate, be brave enough to try."

He blushed like a maiden at the thought, while making awkward conversation.

"Not all girls bite," she nudged him on. "But outright bashful, aren't you? Archie? What is the matter, Archie? Considering? If you want my opinion?"

The response was a sinister hush.

Chapter 92

The Führer laid his blueprint on the table as he explained how Germany would set its boundaries and fight, defending them.

"This war," the Führer said, "is over *Lebensraum.*"

A roar went up wherever he appeared, for destiny was in the works; the war dance had begun.

When Germany declared that it would slay the Antichrist, a young man trained to give his all in furtherance of a doctrine that did not tolerate the smallest question mark on manhood and virility, put both hands around his trembling heart and handed it to his beloved Führer: "My life is yours. I trust you as my God." He turned his head and faced the hated visage: "Well, Israel and Sarah. It's either you or me."

It was, for Jonathan, the simplest of equations: if enough sacrificed in blood, then Germany would win. All loyalties were firmly locked in place. All wheels were rolling merrily for victory, and all of them rolled east.

Some might be called to sacrifice, but many thousands more were waiting to be born. That was the price, the harvest, and the glory.

Some had to die, becoming plunging comets on behalf of Germany, for causes clearly understood, for reasons forcefully explained. But many, many more would live a better, healthier life—free from the fear of Communist enslavement. It was a fair exchange.

The Führer's panzers started gobbling up the miles that led to Apanlee on a slow day with gently falling rain. It was a day like any other day, sweet and a bit nostalgic, with the smell of scented raindrops falling slowly on mellowing clover. The rain cleansed the streets, washed the shame of Versailles into the gutters. The sky was glowing with the light of hope and trust and certainty. The youth squads marched in firm formation. Before the day was gone, the sun came briefly out again, then set, and everything turned tranquil and serene.

Before he left to finish off the Antichrist, Jonathan bought a puppy and gave it to Lilo. It was a small and pudgy thing, a ball of fur, with cheeks that made it look like a chipmunk. She named it Winston Churchill.

She said to Jonathan: "While you are gone, me and my dog, we'll have a bully time," and Heidi corrected her grammar.

Lilo said to Jonathan but did not look at him: "You will come back. Won't you?"

"He better," Heidi said.

He answered both of them obliquely. "We're locked in mortal struggle."

"Be careful, Jonathan. Don't waste all the effort I lavished on you!"

Love swelled his heart. "Don't talk like that. It's a sure way to give yourself a headache."

He knew: ahead lay days and weeks that would add up to much more than merely a kindergarten war. He knew the war could end up hurting Heidi, who had three draft-age sons, but war was a necessity, and after all was said and done, the stars would return to their orbits.

He longed to tell her that. He wanted to say more. He saw

that she was vulnerable.

"And you," he said, his mind careening now, "stay inside. Hear? Obey alarms. Don't take unnecessary chances. We'll break the traitors' necks."

"I know."

"The enemy has airplanes made of spit. The enemy has only wooden guns."

"Be sure to keep your powder dry," said Lilo, too. He saw that a small shadow had settled in her eyes.

He stroked her hair. "The new millennium is on the march. That's what it's all about. You be a good girl, Lilo. You be good to your mother. You take good care of her."

"I will."

She, too, believed, as Heidi did, as everybody did, in Providence and Destiny, two words on everybody's lips.

"We will not lose. We have a cause," said Lilo.

"That's right."

"You give your all, and more besides, for a cause that is greater than yourself."

"Exactly."

When Jonathan remembered Apanlee, green spots danced in his eyes. His marching map was tucked into his belt; his gray eyes glistened brightly. He itched for manly combat.

Endearments were rare with the reticent race, but now a miracle occurred, for Heidi took his hands and put them deep into her pockets, as she had done when first she found him in the streets. She smiled at him through tears. "You are my dearest hope."

He freed himself. Fine tremors ran along his back as though he'd just made love. He took a map and found a pen and drew a big, fat line from Heidi's kitchen table straight to Apanlee. He drew it with red ink.

Those were seductive days. The Führer roused torrents of feeling.

Say *Lebensraum* and see the world grow still with awe. Hear marching boots strike sparks on cobble stones and know it meant

land for the righteous and strong, defeat for the cruel, the false, the unworthy. The Wehrmacht fanned its forces. The panzers started chewing up the roads, their turrets pointing east to face the enemy.

The farmers, weary from a good day's work, sipped beer and listened to the Führer: this kind of war was moral duty and God's will. And if a bullet came—and bullets flew in war!—why, then a well-earned medal would catch it and deflect it.

Young couples stood in line to get married.

A lone old man raked leaves in the Victory Park and wept with sentiment.

Across the street, a grandmother unraveled her favorite sweaters to knit another pair of mittens to give to the Red Cross. The preachers threw their prayers in for free.

Huge swastikas flowed down across the fronts of public buildings. Boys slung their guns across their shoulders and dangled grenades from their belts to underline their bravery. Girl teenagers, impetuous to taste romance, played fast and giggly games.

Every newsstand blossomed headlines about the coming victory. This was no time for selfish doubt. The enemy would throw his broomsticks down and run for cover in the bushes. The enemy would dig his trenches with his helmet; he didn't even have sufficient spades. The enemy, in point of fact, had yet to learn to shoot!

No one tolerated pacifists, and Heidi didn't either, but nonetheless she told her sons:

"War is no picnic, boys. Be sure to bundle up." Her oldest son was twenty-four years old, the second two years younger, the last one just eighteen, when orders came: "Enlist."

"You are young Germany," she told her sons, since she was conscious of her script, and dutiful, and the occasion called for slogans.

Their draft notices crisp in their pockets, they made cheerful bets with each other, while peering eastwards through their binoculars.

"We'll cut a swath, smash through the weeds!"

"We'll catch us a coward to put in a cage."

"We'll fetch us a Commie for breakfast."

And there as here, and then as now: their soldiers were all brave beyond belief; the enemy was cowardly; his guns were laughable; where would he hide? Why, in a chicken house!

Heidi watched while they bantered like puppies. That day, she saw the landscape as they did, with their young, shining eyes. Ahead lay one impatient rush to victory. This war would not last long. The Wehrmacht would win with bewildering speed. Two months of good weather would do it.

Faith calmed her heart with feathered strokes.

The weight of ritual and metal did the rest.

She said, while roping up three bedrolls: "When you return, a roast pig will be waiting—" She would spice it with apples and mushrooms. She told herself while forcing down her panic: "A soldier follows orders." She stood trembling before them and tried not to cry. Before she could blink, they were gone.

Soon, she would walk in mourning, but that was yet to come.

For Jonathan, it was a wondrous time. The panzers started chewing up the roads that led to Apanlee.

The more he marched, the more his chosen homeland grew. With every step he took, he reclaimed Apanlee. The streets were thick with *Landsers;* he joined them willingly. Nobody had ordered him into war; with open eyes he'd joined, proudly opting for the Führer's colors, asking not what other choice there was.

All songs affirmed it clearly:

"—traitors and Jews reaped every reward,
reparations into the millions—"

His heart aflame with certainty, he wore the Mystic Cross as his much-treasured badge of honor. With life and limb he backed it.

He moved with the sun, and the sun moved with him; a wheel of gold that never paled; it was as if it didn't want to miss the spectacle. Its rays would catch the Führer's airplanes' wings and

make them glitter merrily. The clouds were flashing steel. The air was trembling with the hum of aircraft, all flying straight into the sun that gave the earth its energy so that the wheat could grow.

That's how. That's why. That's when the Führer flung himself against the Antichrist holed up inside the Kremlin.

The Führer took of Poland what he wished. He flew as the eagle that hastens to eat.

He came in a flurry of dust, with the smell of burnt rubber and fuel. The Führer cried with passion in his heart: "I want the Free City of Danzig!" and bombs started falling like beans.

His Wehrmacht caught the world off-guard—just piles of smoking rubble! A pig burst into shrieks. A squad burst into laughter.

The Mystic Cross, infectuous! The Führer's panzers, awesome!

Propelled on by the roar of well-oiled cannons, shells tore open the treacherous borders, laid bare for the Wehrmacht the enemies' cities and towns.

Next Norway. That country took less than a month to be conquered.

Denmark resisted no more than a day.

The Netherlands: five days of drifting clouds and ashes, and victory was won.

The multitudes were jubilant. A child ran to open the gates.

The Messerschmitts controlled the skies. The panzers seized more bridgeheads.

"Hands up!" the victors shouted, and the defeated enemy did speedily as he was told, while brick and mortar flew.

The Mystic Cross moved east and ever deeper east, merely met with volleys of roses, and peasants offered salt and bread. A master stroke, this sudden war, that brought into the ethnic fold the many loyal Germans who had lived in ethnic isolation deep in the hills of Transylvania for seven centuries. One flag! One language! they shouted.

Huge, happy crowds surged all around the field-gray *Landsers* who told the mulling throngs that, even though the war had only just begun, peace was already on the way.

Think *Lebensraum*—and feel the universe expand. Shout *Lebensraum*—and watch the fires leap.

From the icy North Pole to the boiling hot equator, from Spain east to the Caucasus, the world lay on its knees.

Bulgaria.

Romania.

North Africa.

Soon, Britain battled for her life while thousands of the Führer's shells lit up the sky like summer lightning. The *Landsers* barely paused to sleep, and only in one town, perhaps, to ask direction for the next. Songs streamed from open windows.

There was no force on earth, it seemed, to stop the Mystic Cross.

From whence had come such strength? Out of the violated womb of Germany! Out of a robber peace that had marauded Europe and had enriched the bankers!

The slogans never stopped. The man who crafted them had not appeared from nowhere, nor fabricated sentiments that strong, out of some spider webs. He sprang straight from an angry people's loins, and they replied a thousand-fold as though two words contained their wrath:

"Sieg Heil!"

"Sieg Heil!"

"Sieg Heil!"

No army had ever moved faster.

For Jonathan, it started on the whitest of white nights, the shortest night of the year—that drive for Apanlee.

The watchword: *Barbarossa*!

And Jonathan was there—the luckiest man alive. He plunged the Mystic Cross into the body of the Antichrist as though he sank a sharp harpoon into the body of whale. He sat atop a pan-

zer that ate through sand and mud. Before him were more panzers; behind him came more panzers, and still more, and yet more. They ate through grassy plains, and even geese and chickens ran for cover. Avenging monsters, all, they moved over ditches, across rivers, through forests and meadows, striking east and ever deeper east, tearing open the treacherous borders, laying bare every city and town.

The Baltic countries, now liberated from the Red Terror—one by one! It took your breath away.

Still forward, on to Moscow—into the land of unrelieved calamity, already waiting for the man whose name shone in the eyes of youth, whose voice spoke with the thunder of a god, who cut a swath of righteousness across the treacheries of nations.

From blue horizon to horizon, the Führer's pilots dove with clockwork precision, and when they rose again—why, battle ships were sinking and armies routed in retreat, above them drifting clouds of ashes!

It's true that they came as avengers. They did what avengers must do. They made the puppets of the foe fly high into the air, then fall into the river, drowning.

Soon, hundreds of thousands of enemies dead, and hundreds of thousands arrested! This was determined war; there was the enemy; if you were young and full of wrath and had your marching orders, you learned to shoot your foes. The Führer shouted until he lost his voice that anybody treacherous deserved that kind of fate, and to a voice, the multitudes replied: "So help us God! So help us God!" He was scooping up willing disciples like grain.

Whole cities were burning, end to end, as though they were mere hornets' nests, as the assault of righteous wrath rolled over field and meadow and smoked out traitors everywhere with cannon shells and rifle blasts. Just dust and flying hoofs!

The upper Dnieper region.

Fierce fire flew from every blazing barrel. Enemy bridgeheads collapsed amid thunder and lightning and smoke.

The Führer traced his battles with a trembling index finger and tallied up his victories. He and his generals had many animated arguments.

Grodno next—a heap of smoking embers.

A few days later, Dunaburg.

A liberated Riga.

Belorussia.

Beresina.

This here, a so-called worker's paradise? And not one chair in an entire village?

A gray land, gray on gray, that's what the Wehrmacht found—a land of famished dogs and homeless cats and trembling, weeping peasants who knelt to welcome them.

This, too, is part of history not taught in any school. The Russians welcomed them. They told the field-gray troops, tears streaming down their ashen faces: "Heaven sent you! Heaven sent you! You say that you bring peace? You say that you bring order? Why, here is bread and salt!"

The earth rose up in fountains. Flame throwers flared, deep in the Finnish forests. Destroyers spewed out shells across the icy sea.

Smolensk. Next, Minsk.

Avenging forces entered Minsk and pushed the Lenin statue from its base. There lay the symbol of the Bolsheviks and Jews—chipped nose, cracked chin, and broken ears!

By early fall, that year, the Führer's *Landsers* front stretched from the White Sea to the Black Sea—and, at the stroke of noon, one day, late in September, a field-gray *Landser* by the name of Jonathan put his hard soldier's heel upon the blood-soaked acres where, once upon a fabled time, Peet Neufeld's priceless winter wheat had grown.

Chapter 93

The steppe lay ablaze with heat. The *Landser* rode astride a motorcycle, taking corners at high speed. He stopped by the acacia alley.

The street lay eerily empty. The buildings looked deserted. The ground was littered with debris. A fence was leaning sideways. A door lay broken on the porch.

He sat there for ten minutes, his profile sharp and chiseled, staring. Small beads of perspiration collected on his upper lip. He felt as if he were a tumbleweed. His throat was dry; he couldn't swallow; the hot wind drove him on. He knew: "A tidal force is building."

He hadn't known what to expect—but not this emptiness, this eerie, ghostly silence. The air was saturated with the scents of a departing summer—and not a living soul!

He walked toward the entrance. He lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. The ash grew long at the tip; he walked like a tiger; it didn't fall off.

"As though it happened yesterday," he told the empty building.

The gate hung loose in its hinges. He pushed it open with his foot. A shaggy dog rose from the bushes, growling.

The *Landser* licked his lips. "Good boy! Good boy! Come here." The dog began to wag his tail. From out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow move. It startled him; he held his rifle at the ready. "Anybody—anybody home?"

A peasant, an old Baba, shrank back into the hall. Her face had the texture of bark.

"Hey! You! Don't move!" He took a quick step forward. He aimed his gun to show that he meant business. She counted on her wrinkles. She grabbed the barrel with both hands and tried to push it down.

"Don't! I said don't move!"

She started shrieking loudly, her hair in unkempt strands. "You! Go away! I said scat! Hooligan!"

"Stand still," he ordered sharply, backing her into a corner. "If you don't give me any trouble, no harm will come to you." He spoke to her as though she were a nervous animal that needed to be soothed. "Look here! Don't be afraid. I want to talk to you—"

She stared at him while shivering with fear. "I stand blameless. My pantry is empty—"

She knew she was lying; she still had that rooster. She was willing to fight for that rooster to the death. "There's nothing here to take, I swear," she whined with expertise. "I swear. I swear. All food is gone. All of it. All! All gone! Why don't you go away?"

"Don't you—"

"There's not enough to fill a hollow tooth!"

She spoke a broken German. She dared him, chin to chin. She saw that she was winning slowly; he seemed uncertain and conflicted; she knew in a triumphant flash she had the upper hand. She threw herself against the door and pushed both hands against his chest: "I said leave me alone—!" She tried to block him with her broom.

He stared into her face as though she were an apparition. He

reached for her to touch her shoulder. "Look here. This is my home. I have come back—"

There was a pause. The woman started pulling at her skirt with gnarled and trembling fingers. "It's you?"

He swallowed hard: "Natasha? Baba?"

Her face broke into many folds. She went limp with relief and abandon. Her wooden knees gave way. On faltering legs, she moved forward.

"It's Jonny? Is it you?

"It's Baba? Are you Baba?"

The agony of decades burst within them both, a bladder. Both spoke as though they had one voice. "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. It's me."

He pulled her up and clasped her hard against epaulets. A storm within threatened to uproot him. He shook and couldn't stop. She put her trembling arms around his neck and hung on for dear life. "It's you! My God, it's you!"

A tear emerged from the corner of her eye. She saw he, too, was fighting back his tears. She started weeping noisily. *"Bozhe moi!* Who swaddled you? Who tickled you? Who put you on the potty? Oh, how I pined for you!"

"Natasha. Tell. Is anyone alive?"

"A day too late," she wept. "Too late! Too late!"

"What do you mean? Why do you say, 'too late'?"

"Three were still left. Two women and a little girl. That's all. Why did you hesitate? They're gone."

"Gone where?"

"It rained hard blows from clubs and butt ends of a hundred rifles. The trains came and took them away. Oh, Jonny! Honey child! Why didn't you come yesterday? The trains! They came and sucked the life from all the villages. The German villages are gone!"

She ran to serve him something for his stomach. She made the kettle sing. She inspected him from every single angle. Such joy! Such joy! This was a holiday; a lost son had come home.

"Let's get those boots off your tired feet! I'll watch you eat until you burst. You must be starving! Why are you still so skinny?"

Let all the feathers fly!

She armed herself with a long stick to run the rooster down so she could proudly serve the bird in her chipped, dented bowl, the one that Hein had given her, the one with yellow flowers, to Jonathan for supper.

He could not hear her questions above the roaring of his blood. She watched him walk, with boots that shook the brittle floors of Apanlee, from room to room, as far as she could tell, the sole male left of the once-far-flung creed.

"—remember your neighbors, the Penners? Of seven strong children, not one survived."

"—remember your Petersburg uncle? *Ach!* Shot in the back by a guard."

"—remember the Dycks, the Fröses, the Siemens? All gone. All dead. All killed. Their names recorded nowhere—"

He listened without words while something hard solidified within his chest, a boulder: All smashed against the rock of history! He listened, and his teaspoon rattled in his cup.

"Oh, Jonny! Honey child. While you were gone, vile things have happened here. The execution pits filled up—"

He stepped to the window and took in his surroundings. "Stone by stone, and brick by brick," he told the Russian servant, "I shall reclaim what's mine."

Her old face crumpled from the warmth of genuine emotion. "Those who dwell under His shadow," she said in a voice that held worship and awe, "shall return."

"That's right!"

She had practiced her German; she knew the Good Word. "They shall be revived like grain, and grow like the vine," She was proud of the words she remembered. She said with a small sigh. "Their scent shall be like wine of Lebanon."

When she finished, she heard no applause. He said without looking at her: "Who was responsible?"

Her old heart all but stopped. "Whatever do you mean? Why

do you bother me with such a silly question?"

"A name. That's all I need. A name."

She backed off then. She squinted at him carefully, while she chewed on her lip. Her chin dropped to her chest. "What do I know? I never paid attention."

"Tell me, Natasha. Now. I need to know. This minute."

She buried her face in the palms of her hands to hide her conflicting emotions, but even as she did so, she peered at him through slits between old, careworn fingers. She swallowed a hard sob. "Leave me alone. What do I know?" Did he remember Dominik, who, even as a child, had been a main source of bedevilment at Apanlee? "Don't blame your Baba, Jonny. I'm just a worthless peasant, not worth a grain of salt."

He studied her in silence. Little was left of the once-husky, once-pretty peasant. Her spine was bent; she had no teeth; her knees were old and rickety, but even so, she told him now, her words tumbling over each other: "I served them to the end. Just you remember that." She started fussing over him. She started petting him and pinching him while he slumped by the window. She saw that he was numb with shock. "The last time I saw you, you were so small your feet didn't even touch the floor. And look at you today!"

"It is ironic, isn't it?" he finally said in a wooden voice. "I barely know their names."

"Of course you do! You still remember them—how could you have forgotten! Your aunt Marleen? Her daughter Mimi? Remember her? Your little cousin, thrice removed? She had a little girl child, Erika. These three were left. Right to the end. I served them well. Ask anyone. They're gone. I served them well. I served them to the end."

"Of course you did."

"I did. I did. But now they're gone. All three are gone. They're gone!"

His scar began itching like mad. "Yes, I remember Mimi—"

"You see? Why should you not remember Mimi? She was our go-between. She had a child, born of the blackest times. Her

name was Erika—and what a gifted child! All eyes and thoughts. All question marks. She, too, is gone. They're gone! All of your people, gone! Shouts, blows and kicks rained down on them. The purges took them all! The black night swallowed them!"

He listened to the ghoulish litany. His cousins. Gone. His uncles, gone. His nieces, aunts and nephews. Gone.

"They always came at night—"

Pulled out of bed. Dragged off in chains. Clubbed into cattle cars.

"—no one spared. No one. None in the entire neighborhood. Last week, the trains arrived and started sucking up the German villages—"

He trembled with wrath and revenge. He asked again: "Who was responsible?"

She managed to dispatch a wintry smile but it died on the spot. "Why not leave well enough alone? The ruffians, too, are gone. They all packed up and ran." Her mind spun frantically. Where was her no-good son? Was he hiding behind the sugar beet sacks? She took a sucking breath and started wooing Jonathan: "Have you returned to dazzle Apanlee?" She brushed away a tear. It dried on the back of her hand.

"Natasha. Now!"

"What do I know? Don't torment me. So many people, guilty. Why blame a single one?" Her son! Hein's son! Though never in the album, sadly. She overcame a stammer and tried diverting him. "Your homestead is still here. Why not take a good look?"

He drew a line; that was his job. "A name. That's all I need."

Her mind raced like a cornered animal, in circles. He had come for her son. A liar son, but still. Might Dominik be hiding in the stables? Had he crouched down behind the chicken coop?

Now she was audibly gasping. "Why not leave well enough alone? You have returned. You're back! How you resemble Uncle Benny." She kept on fussing over him, her pulse resounding in her throat. She wrung her hands. She blew her nose. She made a lot of noise. "When you were small, you used to curl up

like a puppy in my lap—"

"I want an answer. Now."

She calculated desperately. She knew that Dominik and Shura both had protectors in high places, but could they get there fast enough, now that the panzers had arrived—and chasing them like fire? She saw his eyes were full of memories; he would not hurt her now. She stood, at any rate, by then, thanks to the juicy rooster she would serve him in her own yellow dish, once more at the periphery.

She saw he would not be appeased. So violently shaken was he by emotions that he wouldn't look her in the eye. She had her instincts at the ready, but even so, she could not help herself; she kept on chattering, like mad. "Your family? A trap door swallowed them; who is to say who sprang it? There was so much confusion. The world was upside down. They came and took the last. At bayonet point. It was a scary sight. Nobody could do anything. Oh, Jonny! Your family's been swept away!"

He said to her: "We'll make the mountains tremble with our rage."

She nodded, knowing that the dice were cast. What could she tell the executioner? He was the tool of fate. He had his finger on the trigger. He rocked from heel to heel.

"Yet one more time, and no excuses, Baba. Who was responsible? This was my land. This was my home. My forebears paid for it in work and sweat and blood—"

"It's yours," she told him eagerly. "No one ever argued."

"We'll clean the mess. That's why we've come. But once the cleaning up is done, we'll grow wheat here again. Leave things to me—"

At that, her heart leaped like a grasshopper; indeed, it positively soared. Leave things to me! That's what Hein used to say to her when life seemed overwhelming. "Of course you will! Of course!" She didn't know if she should laugh or cry, if she should stay or flee. Here was a young man of magnetic power, a zealot of the Faith and spirit. She knew him as she knew herself. She saw herself reflected, old and dry and doubled up with overwork,

in his large, shiny buttons, and muttered, to make sure:

"Just you remember this: I served you well. I always did. I always will. When you were born, I held you on a pillow. When you were teething, I sang you lullabies. You were my special pet."

"I know."

She started circling him. "You're different. You've changed. Your eyes have the color of ice. As Uncle Benny always said—" She stopped to search her memory to find a fitting phrase that would soften the rage that she saw in his face but all sayings had flown from her mind. She stuttered mindlessly: "You do remember Uncle Benny? Don't you? You must. You must remember him."

"Not really, no. He was my father, was he not?"

"Your father? No, you silly goose. He was your grandfather." She attempted a pitiful smile. "He lived inside himself. His business was thinking and dreaming."

"They killed him, too?"

She prattled on. She was beside herself, completely overwrought.

"It was a grisly night. That's when I saw you last. I looked and looked for you. I looked for your bones in the ashes—"

He was like the moon; if he rolled, so did she; if he stopped, so did she. "Here. Take a look. I guarded all I could. It's all yours. Yours. The books. The samovar. The quill holder. The salt shaker. Hein's wooden pipe, preserved. Do you remember Hein? I do. I see him still. He was the heart of every summer party." She swallowed, adding bravely: "He might have had his faults, but he was good to me. He gave me a wagon, a horse, a cow and a goat. Ah! Those were my happiness years—"

What loomed before him was the Question. He took her by the shoulders and shook her like a doll.

"Who was responsible for so much suffering, Natasha? Tell me. I need to know. I really need to know."

Fine tremors in the corners of her mouth, Natasha told him without blinking: "You ask an old donkey like me?"

"This minute, I must know."

She licked her lips. She muttered vaguely: "Nobody knew which way was up or down—" With her good knee, she pushed open the door to the study. "Come take a look. Here! Uncle Benny's place. See that big desk? That's where he sat. That's where he did his thinking. I always kept it neat and polished—"

"—now marred with whisky stains!"

"That's where she used to huddle—his little pet, his daffodil. Her name was Dorothy."

"My grandmother? I always thought she was my mother."

"Those two! A love match to the end. They loved each other like turtles." She took him by the elbow. "Look here. Remember this? All this belonged to her. Her weaving loom. Her yarn reel. Her pretty, decorated beaker. How she loved you! How she spoiled you! She used to read to you out loud. From the alphabet book over there—"

"It all comes back to me. Wasn't there a mirror between these two windows?"

"A hoodlum shattered it."

An inner fist took hold of him and started shaking him. "You must tell me. You must! Who was responsible for the atrocities?"

Her tongue was dry. Her lips felt stiff. Who else but Dominik, her no-good son who always shouted—never washed? "Look here. The water pail. The wash bench. The barrels. The copper pots and kettles." She was a beggar now, tears streaming down her face: "Oh, Jonny. Please! Just listen to your Baba. Please just leave well enough alone! I still remember how I dunked you every Saturday. Your soft, clean baby hair. When wet, it curled like crazy—"

He held her on both shoulders. "Natasha, why? What did we ever do that merited such nightmare?"

Her heart beat like a hammer. She felt it in her fingertips. She saw that memories, suppressed for twenty years, were flooding him like tides. She thought of fainting dead away but decided against it; she was trapped like a fly stuck in honey.

"I don't know that," she wailed. "Why do you torment me?" She held her head in her hands, moaning softly. Her tongue had a life of its own. "I never understood it. Never. Nobody understood it. Your people never harmed a soul. They were a blessing for the country. And yet some people must have hated them enough to turn their tombstones upside down. Don't ask me to explain—"

So let him hit her now. She stood all ready for the blow. She even leaned forward and offered her head to his fist. She clenched her jaws and waited.

He didn't hit her, though. Instead, he started talking. It all poured forth from him. His words made little sense to her, but never mind, it was still poetry. She listened to the diphthonged incantation with both ears cocked, her old heart hammering like mad. Oh, how familiar it was! He spoke to her of the long chain of generations she knew so well, the people who had borrowed color for their kernels from the sun. He said, to sum it up:

"Their eyes were on their furrows. They were too good. Too clean. Too innocent. It was not in their nature to recognize the Fiend. They didn't have the killer instinct. That's why the winds swept from the earth their power and their pride." He saw himself again, a little boy, reflected in the glass. "Look at that mirror, Baba. A bandit smashed that mirror with his fists. When that mirror was broken, a little boy died, and a man took his place, for whom mercy is weakness." He told the withered peasant as she stood there, still waiting for the blow: "For the past twenty years, I have lived with hate and slept with hate and dreamed with hate and awakened with hate—for what they did to us. And why? Because we were Germans? We're Germans! I have no other weapon but my hate. The good must hate the evil. That is the mandate now."

At that, she fell upon a chair and sat there like a broody hen, her feathers at an angle. There was no way she could protect her egg, her seed—the misfit she had borne. Still, nature had its way; she would fight on, right to the end, because that was her nature. She had seen people killed before. She had seen little

else for over twenty years. Had she been less endowed with a deep sense of justice, she might have started pleading now, straight from the Holy Book to flatter Jonathan: "You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water, you provide their grain, for so you have prepared it—" But words deserted her. She stammered one last time: "Some people got confused. There were so many slogans—" Yet all the while she knew. The time for mercy had run out.

He would find Dominik. He would kill Dominik. But not without a struggle.

He said: "We cannot co-exist." A naked savagery was burning in his eyes. He took both of her hands, his own were moist with wrath. "It has a name. It's the Eternal Jew."

She slumped with shock, but then jumped up, gasped once, fell back upon her heels. "You're right! You are exactly right! Bloodsuckers, all! Arch-traitors, all!" The priests had said as much in those forgotten years when icons still were widespread. The priests had pointed out to everyone the race belonged to Satan. The priests were now gone, too. She stammered: "Right you are!" The priests had always pointed out that Hebrews were the only subjects in all of Mother Russia who didn't have clear loyalties; the cats shrank at their touch; they were always berating the tsars. And even Hein, who hardly ever struck a horse, much less a servant or a dog, had nasty things to say about them. She still remembered that.

She blinked at Jonathan, exhaling with relief and disbelief that he would blame the Jews. So let him blame the Jews! She had no stake invested in the Jews. There weren't any left! They, too, had disappeared! Not even Comrade Stalin liked the Jews; whoever liked the Jews? Nobody but nobody!

She filled her lungs with air and said: "If that is true—why, ten fat smallpox on the Jews!" The danger had now passed. Her Dominik was safe, and Jonathan was home. He owned the chariots. She climbed aboard, awaiting further orders.

He stood before her, tall and reassuring, a soldier to his fingertips, a warrior for the Lord, the eagle on his chest just like in

olden times, when tsars were tsars and serfs were serfs, and days were warm and nights were safe, and all was well and snug.

"You're back," she said. "Oh, how I pined for you! You'll work the soil again? What kept you for so long? Why didn't you come yesterday? Your family is gone. The trains sucked up the villages—"

He spoke three short, sparse sentences with the frugality of words that always marked the creed. He said:

"Just never fret. They will be back. The Führer stopped the trains."

Chapter 94

In Mennotown, this is a source of gall to Archie even now: the Führer's soldiers came to Apanlee as liberators and as brothers.

The gates of Apanlee swung open to the Mystic Cross as wide as the arches permitted. The trees smelled like peppermint drops, and Faith in the Führer was all.

The Führer moved into a vacuum that had sat there, aching to be filled. Twin lightning struck the land like thunderbolts and flooded hearts with reverence and awe.

His ideas were right. It was simple.

He thundered forth the will of God: Thrift. Honesty. Cleanliness. The submission of children to parents, of servants to masters, of wives to their husbands—all old-fashioned, time-tested values. The gulash cannons parked in front of Apanlee, and that was good enough. Life added up. The walls of terror had fallen.

The Führer made clean sweeps through Russia—and not an hour too early! The Party profiteers were gone, upsetting chairs and tables as they ran!

Out of nowhere came a company of Hitler Youth on bicycles

with rucksacks on their backs to fill their cups with sparkling water from a brook. They said, their faces shining with their Faith: "The miracles our Führer has in store!"

That was the message now: give him your Faith and loyalty and gratitude—in fair exchange for peace. In Archie's churches, to this day, worshippers will believe much more, on much less evidence. In Apanlee, the future had a name again. The flags snapped in the breeze.

Three women climbed down from a train the Führer stopped with a strong fist—Marleen, Mimi and Erika.

Those three came back just in the nick of time to partake of the meager harvest that Dominik had left behind as he escaped to save himself from vengeance. Where he was hiding out was anybody's guess.

Natasha wouldn't tell.

Natasha acted odd at times; she cast scared glances left and right and mumbled to herself. When she crossed paths with Jonathan, she gave him brave, straight stares.

She, too, was glad that order had returned—so glad, in fact, that every time she heard a *Landser's* reassuring click of heel on heel on the hard steps of Apanlee, she beamed from ear to ear.

Natasha and Marleen once more switched domiciles, which both thought natural. The mud hut was Natasha's, as it had always been, and for Marleen it was the best again, as in the olden times: the homestead of her forebears where a floor doubled up as a ceiling.

By then, Natasha was too old to be of use to anyone except, perhaps, to sew a *Landser's* button on, but she came over often to help Marleen with this and that. While doing that, she hamstered. She did what she had always done—she saved up for a rainy day, for luck could not be trusted.

At times, she was so stiff that she could barely walk, but still she stole; she hoarded all she could. And no one said a word.

Marleen closed both her eyes. She knew she could afford to be indulgent with Natasha—so let Natasha hoard. There was

now food for everyone, including old Natasha; no need to squirrel away as she did. Regardless—old habits were ingrained.

Every bread crust, every chicken bone left over from a *Landser* meal ended up in Natasha's apron pocket or, if the treasure was too big, in empty crates that held provisions for the troops, shipped all the way from Germany. The shed that leaned against her hut was packed with hay and wood; that's where she stored the overflow.

"Bad times might come again," Natasha said and mopped a sweaty brow.

She looked as though her ear were cocked; it was as if she listened to some sounds nobody else could hear. She had begged an original icon from a dilapidated priest who came slinking out of hiding. She gave him her last ruble.

When Jonathan put a strong arm around Natasha's back and told her in an even voice: "Look here. Why be afraid? Who checked my underwear? Who taught me to sit on the potty?" she faced him with quivering jaw.

"You mean that, Jonathan?"

"Don't be a fool," he said. "You're one of us. Who hummed a hundred lullabies? Who chased away the wolf?"

She would not look at him and shooed him from her lean-to.

In weeks to come, she acted more and more peculiar. And once, when little Erika came up from behind to give her a brief hug, Natasha shot up from her milking stool as though someone had pricked her backside with a needle.

For weeks on end, the *Landsers* made their headquarters at Apanlee; they camped out even in the halls. The war was almost won; they talked and laughed and flirted brazenly with Mimi; and peace and certainty were everywhere; it was a wondrous time.

Steel plowed the earth. The engines throbbed. The sun poured light and warmth down from a blue, unblemished sky. The world was aglow with tomorrow. The Wehrmacht took its stunning conquests straight to the gates of Moscow.

Nobody asked: "After the glorious crusade—what?"

The Führer was the tool. From east to west, from north to south, the Führer and his *Landsers* stood side by side with God.

And best of all: after decades of bloodshed and anguish, Faith in a better tomorrow meant more than a thundering, triple *Sieg Heil.* It came with the promise of harvests.

For an entire generation, hell had hissed at Apanlee from every orifice. Now there was peace and calm. For the first time in more than twenty years, the anguished people had a shield. They could sleep through the night and fear nothing. No one came and pulled the Germans out of bed and said to them: "The censor wants to see you." They could stop mopping up the blood of loved ones in the dungeons of the Antichrist with sand and burlap rags.

No wonder that the Führer's Mystic Cross sank deep into the hearts of many trusting people. He was the good Lord's instrument. All credit went to him.

He had arrived, at zero hour, literally—without appreciable struggle. A single airplane came and scattered some machine gun fire at no one in particular, but all in all, there had been practically no fight; the sparrows chirped; the meadows lay dotted with haycocks.

The execution squads were gone. The goons the Antichrist had used were gone.

Hell belched them up. Hell took them back. The Führer drove them off.

The road was black with people who swallowed tears of joy until their stomachs ached, who peered at the enormous mass of field-gray men and tempered steel through bloated, red-rimmed eyes: "We were like beasts of burden. You came and set us free."

Before another month was gone, the Mystic Cross was everywhere, black lightning riding on white. A galaxy of stars burst in the sky and in a thousand hearts, as liberated people everywhere hung banners from their homes, strung garlands over

streets.

These people told the troops who still kept rolling, on and on, an avalanche of might and steel, across the sunbaked steppe: "You came while cattle cars were waiting at the siding. Now you are here, and we are free. Like summer lightning, summer thunder, your cannons cleared the air. Here, let us cool your feet."

They knelt before the soldiers; they held up bread and salt. By the thousands, they knelt in the dust and repeated:

"We were the world's forgotten chain gang."

"You drove away the Fiend."

"God sent you to us as His personal angels to slash broad swaths through the Red Terror."

"Who was responsible for so much suffering?" the Führer's soldiers asked.

The torches swayed. The fires flared. Flags fluttered in the breeze. The people lifted trembing arms and pointed to the onion domes: "The Beast. The Beast. The snow was red with murder."

"The Soviet-Jewish Beast," the field-grey soldiers said, and checked off village after village with neat, red pencil marks.

Soon, they were hunting for the culprits in the bushes. Face down, several enemies lay dead in the gutters.

Now everything was clear. The shoe was on the other foot. No one was willing to be caught among the Doubting Thomases.

The queues were gone. Once more, the world had order, and justice had a voice. All was as it should be. The people held aloft their babies so they could see the pageantry.

The soldiers all saluted smartly, and everything was happiness and joy. Enormous swastikas were hanging from the trees. The Führer meted out just punishment where punishment was due. He had kicked open the door to a sunflooded world—not because it was wrong and felt wicked, but because it was right and felt good.

"Say what you will," survivors say today. "There was an ach-

ing void. The Führer had the key. It's true we loved him—but you see? We loved him with just cause."

The decimated German settlers—pacifists!—said yes to Hitler as they said yes to God—for it was summer now; the sun kept spilling its magnificence out over countless graves.

Now they belonged to a much larger whole, they were part of a folk as the sunrays were part of the sun. The clouds were soft. The air was warm. The sun shone brightly all day long. Clean scents were wafting from the trees. The swallows chirped at each other in the branches.

This was a wondrous time for Mimi. Heads turned wherever she appeared. She knew that she was beautiful. Wherever fancy took her, that's where she headed now. The *Landsers* did their practice runs with flowers in their muzzles. No meeting lacked for songs.

She thought of Yuri, her beloved brother, each time the mystic cadence of the soldiers' ballads told of comrades—brothers, all!—all fallen for a better world. She thought of Sasha every time someone reminded her of Faith—for now she understood what powered him; now she had Faith as well.

And Marleen. How she worshipped!

She, too, had eyes to see and ears to hear, a pulsing heart that had not yet stopped beating. Her loved ones had not died in vain. They were limbs on the ancestral tree.

The sorcerer spread blueprints across tables.

Lebensraum.

That word! It struck a chord as old as her beliefs. The Communists had suffocated every lullaby; the Führer brought them back. The field-gray troops were everywhere; new life was stirring in the cradles.

You see? That's how it was. That's history. The Führer spoke persuasively: of dignity, of courage, of pride and self-respect. The Führer stocked the villages with geese.

The Gospel found its rightful place. The Führer brought it

back.

With broom and pail and roughened hands, the people went to work. This was their battle, too. The Führer spoke of ethnic unity. Now brother greeted brother without fear, and strangers became friends.

The people , after rolling up their sleeves, marched to the fields with spade and rake to take up battle with the weeds. Now it was sun-drenched days, and nights that smelled sweetly of wood.

Children waded barefoot in the waterhole of Apanlee. Teenagers swung their hoes and spades across their shoulders to reap the meager harvest the foe had left behind, and still had strength left over, when night fell, to partake in Teutonic festivals as shadowy and flickering as trees between two fires.

Those were bewitching times. The sky still glowed at midnight.

No wonder that the Führer called on Faith at every opportunity: it was the proper coin.

Faith, driven underground for two long, bloody decades, once more stood firmly resurrected. The hush of reverence that spread across the land again came from the very pages of their Holy Book, for years forbidden and condemned.

The church, re-opened and scrubbed clean of soot and chicken droppings, became re-charged with enormous energy. The faithful streamed inside to worship once again. A handful of preachers emerged out of hiding—lukewarm at first, and hesitant. Soon they began to see that anything that wasn't set in stone in terms of Gospel truth was open to interpretation. They briskly went to work. There was a lot of catching up to do, and that is what they did—delighted and a little scandalized and getting a bit blustery, because they, too, were drunk with Sun and Lightning.

Soon they developed muscle. "You render unto Caesar what is his, and unto God his due," they preached, and no one thought that wrong.

The one who came to preach at Apanlee wore heel-less shoes, a sheepskin and a nervous smile. His cough was bad; his eyes

were watery; he was an old and beaten man, his beard down to his belt. He was adept at diatribes. He spoke of the necessity of war: its cause and justification. He pointed out from the prophetic book how Gospel truth merged with the Führer's mandate.

He told them that the Mystic Cross was now the Cross of Christ, and having said what everybody knew, he coughed so hard he cracked a rib, and now he was in pain, and squirming. But here is what he said when he could speak again, and were there sweeter words?

"There will be an abundance of grain in the earth. Its fruit shall wave, like Lebanon."

He was a kindly fellow, many felt, though not too bright, but oh! how he could hunt for passages that verified the kind of Faith that served them well for centuries! He took authority for granted, and they did, too; the faithful knelt and pledged their all, scrubbed clean by their Saturday afternoon baths.

When Marleen took possession of the violated soil, she thought that she had long since emptied her heart of all tears. Now she discovered otherwise. She wept and could not stop.

Her tears of joy and gratitude kept brimming in her eyes as she sat by the window, knitting. This was her cause. She had to help. She knew she must. She would.

She, of an ancient pacifist tradition, worshipped the warriors' purpose. She had no sons left any more to give to the compelling cause, but had that been an option, she would have not restrained them. She would have said: "Go fight and take back what is yours!"

Had her sons not become as slaughtered lambs to feed the hungry Beast, would they not have been ardent vessels for the Führer?

The *Landsers w*ere her substitutes; she yearned to mother them. She could not have her fill. Clad in their summer uniforms, enjoying her belated watermelon crop, not caring that the winter lay ahead, they flooded Russia. Their songs rolled on like

thunder from the clouds. She kept on knitting: sock by sock, mitten after mitten. She put these neatly in a basket, for she knew well, as they did not, how cold a steppe night could be, once winter came again.

The *Landsers* teased her for her pains; the war was almost won; it was only a matter of weeks; they counted staunchly on being back in Germany by Christmas.

"Four weeks at the most. Maybe five," the *Landsers* told Marleen.

Natasha walked on eggshells at such times, and something odd, defying explanation, sat in her old and wrinkled face. Around the fires that Natasha built, with downcast eyes but ample ears, the timing of the Führer's final victory was daily speculation.

"So let us now give thanks," said Marleen before every meal.

With every window open to the breeze, she blessed the food out loud, now lavish on her table. She was allowed to work her garden without fear. She owned three cows again. She multiplied her baby chicks, and they grew into hens. Nobody came to her to threaten her with quotas.

Why not show gratitude in turn? And worship? And obedience?

She sewed for them; she cooked for them; she dragged huge pails of steaming soup; she gladly peeled potatoes. They let her dip into their gulash cannons and help herself to riches beyond words.

The window panes stopped creaking in the wind.

The shadow people watching her were gone.

She learned to smile again; she found that she could laugh. And she could sleep—oh, how she slept!—just thrilling to oblivion the moment her head hit the pillow. Her dreams were sweet again, like melting sugar cubes.

She welcomed scattered neighbors who had escaped the icy tomb, exchanging first sad news, then happy news, with hours left for gossip across the picket fence. All were invited for Sun-

day afternoon coffee. She gathered them often for supper. She gave them double helpings.

"It's but a matter of a few more weeks," said her guests, as deeply steeped in Faith as she, while spooning the food she prepared. She looked around and counted faces full of hope and certitude and knew she could enjoy her life again—a life well-ordered, disciplined, methodical, and principled. A life where no one broke the Ten Commandments. Where everything and everybody had his place. It was borscht and meat cutlets again. It was heaven.

She still knew what lay buried in the pit. That knowledge would not ever go away. There was lead in her soul; it was deep.

But now it was her anchor. Her grief had exhausted itself like embers turned to ashes; her world was filled with jubilance; the Wehrmacht couldn't be defeated, for right was on their side.

"Next year," she said to Mimi, who looked transformed as well, serenely sisterly to creatures big and small, "I count on a generous harvest—"

Why, in her very fingertips lay the warmth of the grain she would reap.

"I second that!" said Mimi.

Mimi had survived as well, and let no one ask how—the Beast's claws in her neck, her lips stuck to her teeth. She was still young, not even thirty years of age. Like many women of her decimated generation, she had hastily snatched at a small, modest dream in the terrorized years of the purges and had married a neighborhood boy in the Palace of Marriage, only to lose him the following year, head bowed, shackles on his feet. She watched him walk away, on foot, without his winter coat. Siberia swallowed him. She could barely remember his face. She seldom spoke of him. The only trace he left behind was Erika, who was a puzzle in herself. She, Mimi, often stared at her, completely in the dark about this thing called motherhood.

She had given birth on a day when the weather was hot, the humidity high. That day had left its scars. Her labor had been

difficult. When it was over, everything hurt; that's what she still remembered. Love was a luxury. A baby was a risk. All living flesh, the Soviet Party booklet said, belonged to the hammer and sickle.

In self-defense, her heart went blank and stayed that way—for was there anyone in those dark, bitter years who dared indulge the pulse of life when death was daily fare?

She stared at the newborn as though she were looking through glass. The infant stared back without blinking.

The outcome of that was confusion. It took a mental effort to even find a name.

She was glad she had Baba; she had yielded the infant to Baba who nestled it without another word in a narrow space between two cardboard boxes. Year after year went by. And by the time the *Landsers* came and lit up Apanlee from end to end—night after night!—with their Teutonic festivals she, Mimi, knew about from myths and fairytales but never had the freedom to experience, no doubt her husband's bones were bleaching in the tundra.

Now Mimi stood amid a multitude of young, flirtatious soldiers who made her feel so light of heart and nimble on her feet that she could barely find the goosepath, for Apanlee was overflowing with the bustle of the war.

A company of *Landsers* were sitting on the steps of Apanlee. The garden ran to roses. The coffee lid bobbed up and down. Zwieback cooled on the window sill. Two neighbors traded gossip across the fence that had since been repaired.

She knew that she was pretty. More than one *Landser* told her so. She blossomed in response. She fell in love, to no one's great surprise, with one of them, her cousin Jonathan.

When Jonathan appeared, Mimi was a woman famished for a life that offered normalcy. As far back as she was able to remember, she had spent every waking moment being lacerated, torn and bruised by her conflicting loyalties. Her Party? Or her family? Where was her rightful place?

She had grown numb with pain, fear, caution and fatigue. She yearned to have the ordinary things in life that made a woman feel that she had worth—a pair of shoes without a string to hold the sole in place, an Easter dress replete with belt to show her tiny waist. She pined for things like that. She knew no greater luxury, or ever would again.

"My dearest. *Lebensraum*! That's what it's all about," said Jonathan, and stroked her silken hair.

He still was shy with her; he stroked her hair a lot. She, on the other hand, had learned through stark necessity to take advantage of each opportunity, be it as fleeting as the breeze.

Here came one now. It came each day, in flashes of fire and noise. It was a message no one could ignore. It spoke to Mimi and to Jonathan: "Sow here your seed and let it grow. Tomorrow might not come."

She told him with a teasing smile: "Why wait when we don't know about tomorrow—" but he did not smile back.

"Our war is not yet won," said Jonathan. "Just listen to its voice."

He told her that he could not stay; he could not settle down to marry, for duty wrote the script.

She had a counter-argument. "It's now or never. That's my view."

He did not answer her. He stood, the colors of an autumn sunset in his face, his gaze fixed on the Beast still holed up in the Kremlin.

She leaned her head against his shoulder so she could smile at him. She was as bold in love as Jonathan was bold in war; she stood up to her ankles in yearning. They stood, entwined, beneath the ancient oak, with letters hewn into the trunk that said: "HK" and, underneath, "Natasha." The sap came down like tears and hardened on the bark.

She broke a drop and ate it for good luck. She knew that yesterday was gone, tomorrow might not come. Before it was too late, she clutched at what was near.

"Please, love. Please. Now."

"As soon as we have finished off the Bolsheviks, the instruments of Satan," said Jonathan.

"Please. Let's not wait."

"You do not understand."

"Oh, Jonathan. What's there to understand?"

His steel plowed the earth. His world was aglitter with triumph. In her young eyes, he was magnificent, a man's man and a warrior's warrior, intent on raining shrapnel on the map of Russia, leaving flaming streets and smoking hillocks, goring steel into the earth reddening the sun. She leaned against him, nestling him against her softness and her warmth. She had no time to waste. Before she blinked again, he would be gone; all men were gone before you blinked; in war, no man stayed with a women any length of time.

He said, while holding her: "How tall you are. How willowy you are!"

There was no conflict in her heart; she could tell just looking at him: this was her only chance. "Take off your belt so you can measure me."

It was in her blood and her fiber.

Chapter 95

The Wehrmacht kept on driving hard against the gasping heart of Russia, and Doctorjay—sedately watching Europe sliding slowly into chaos, thanks to a tyrant's avarice, as he had since found out—was mighty glad that, in the State of Kansas, the bureaucrats were nesting program within program to help the poor man out, thus honoring equality as a political ideal.

He was a happy man; he relished moral victories like that. Besides, he still had Abigail to nuzzle. When Abigail put on her sparklers and high heels and sashayed down the sidewalk to celebrate yet one more patriotic holiday, the geezer was beside himself with wonderment and awe. The blood, claimed Abigail while blushing prettily, rushed to his head and elsewhere, for Doctorjay was still a citizen of undiminished energy, who passed his flask around—to the delight of other sinners like himself.

"Hip! Hip! Hooray! Hooray for victory!"

What with the diphthongs back in standing and in the sky the kind of sun that coaxed the flavors of the good life from the earth, Doctorjay wore his beer belly once again with proper ethnic pride. Although an isolationist, he toasted every battle. It did not mat-

ter much who won, who lost; excitement was what counted. He hated taking sides. It pained him that there should be war—but it was someone else's war. He didn't interfere. Three days before another barbecue was due, his mouth began to water. The townsfolk marveled at his appetite: he counted the seconds to supper.

"This much I know," he said, agreeing with his president, whom he esteemed above all other men on earth, "America has better things to do than get involved in other people's skirmishes. We have no business overseas. We've got to clean up our own backyard."

If one examined the erratic European map, as Doctorjay still did, despite glaucoma in one eye and spreading to the other, you saw the Führer triumphed over practically all of smoking Eastern Europe. His swastika swayed merrily from the Acropolis. His panzers kept on gobbling up the acres.

But not for long, the *New York Times* spelled out with its Sunday cartoons, all showing how to goose-step and be silly.

"The year will soon be running out of days," announced a sanguine Doctorjay who proudly sat astride a sturdily recovering America and whistled. "And the pretentious Führer out of his masquerades, pretensions and excuses."

"Right! Right! We've got to swat the Hun!" fumed Archibald, and foamed his chin with care before a mirror. Archie went so far as to dispatch a letter to the Führer to tell him what he thought. It ran six pages long.

"In my book, stupid, you are Coward Number One," concluded Archibald. "You will never survive your confetti."

He called the Führer many names, all of them roundly deserved. He even sent a telegram, and then another and another, before he realized the Führer had no use for Archibald's opinion and only piled his newest victory on yet another victory, with no end anywhere in sight.

The Kansas farmers clucked their tongues and shook their heads as word came that the Führer was tucking city after Euro-

pean city in his pocket. The European continent, a powder keg in any case, seemed near on to exploding, but people kept on stuffing wads of cotton in their ears, with shrugs or nods, depending.

Their attitude was this: a global war, should it materialize, would surely bring upheaval and disruption, but after all the dust was settled, wheat prices would shoot up to the sky.

A quiet life, a decent death. Once more, that was the formula. There was an ocean to the east; behind that ocean was a war that kept on belching fire, but it was someone else's war. The Kansas earth was good.

Each family was connected to the next, and not a button missing.

You knew about each other, for many generations back.

Your children's children came of age. They joined your church. If they did not and, sadly, let themselves be lured into the Baptists' net, with ice cream socials yet, no one could respect you.

To prove yourself worthy was always the aim. You lived with modest pride. You slept on the approval of others. The Lord was your personal steward and friend; you knew nobody sound and fit who did not likewise believe in the Lord and His benevolent mandate.

A hornet's nest, by contrast and comparison, across the murky waters, where the Führer was marching his armies. The Führer was cursing the Jews.

"And such an ass!" they said, because that's what the papers said, which many now consumed. This sentiment, likewise, was echoed on the radio. The announcers foreshadowed that there was no stopping the *Heinis*.

Each morning, Archibald beseeched the Lord for blessings upon blessings for every worthy Christian and Jew, starting with the heads of families and ending with each suckling. He skipped the Huns and heathens.

"We're Christians, yes. We're all for peace. We can't bow down before the Antichrist, however," was his repeated verdict,

and even Josie marveled at his skill in treading safety lines between warmongering and isolationism, the newest political "ism."

She, too, agreed: a Christian had a duty. Where she was coming from, Equality, Fraternity and Liberty were in.

While this conversation took place, Archie was finishing off a box of crackers while rocking gently on the porch. Before him, on a footstool, perched the ballooning Temperance, who was always the first to applaud, the last to stop clapping, when Archie said something important.

"Another slice of pie, if you don't mind," said Temperance, and deftly helped herself. "Would you be kind enough?"

"Here goes," said Archibald. "Onward, onward—Christian soldiers! That is my motto now."

She knew he was a pacifist; for centuries, he and his people had been pacifists; war was not of their world. Whenever she was agitated—and now she was! and how!—she hardly ever closed her lips. As soon as she sat down for snacks, she opened her mouth wide.

"Say, Archibald. Tell me what's on your mind. All feelings need an airing."

She was a sturdy girl, the good life showing in both bust and waist; she never pushed her food around, whereas he picked at his as though he were a bird.

"You wouldn't understand."

Her daily motto was: anything to fill the stomach. She spoke with her mouth full: "Tell me. Why are you so obsessed with soldiering? I am not easily put out." Making something of herself was one priority for Temperance, and that included rounding out both hips and personality. "I'm willing to believe the worst," coaxed Temperance. "Meanwhile, I'll do the dishes. Just go ahead and fill me in. I'm eager to improve."

He wrapped himself in silence.

She watched him from the sink. She had her instincts pat. She dried her hands and tapped him on the shoulder. "Look here. Just take the plunge. Stop shilly-shallying."

"Who's shilly-shallying?" His voice rose half an octave.

"You are. I know of one or two who, if they could, would overlook most anything to be a preacher's wife."

"You're talking of yourself, I take it?"

"I hang my wash on Monday and iron it on Tuesday. And not a weed grows in my carrot patch."

"We aren't suited to each other. We'll never understand each other. Besides, there may be war. If war breaks out, a lot is bound to change. We'll have to rearrange priorities."

She could not understand the hunger of his nature. She tried to tell him that. She argued, flushing pink: "Small wonder you walk like a dandy. Forgive me. I almost spoke my opinion."

"Maybe," he said with an embarrassed laugh, "it's just my circulation?"

She nearly died of shock. Nothing he said after that brought them closer.

He had padlocked his heart. She decided to cry herself sick.

Although Doctorjay was now retired and had stopped practicing his herbal medicine, he was still well-received in all the homes he visited, where he would sit on people's davenports and let himself be spoiled.

Here's how he voiced his sentiments: "Not that I need, at my age, to give my two-cents' worth. Let me say something here and now, however, and with complete and honest candor. The war? It's none of our business. Who wants to go kill or be killed for the Jews?"

That might have been shocking, but wasn't.

It wasn't that nobody cared; they did; they cared a lot; they were outspoken in their disapproval at how the the Führer was treating the Jews. More and more stories kept on spilling forth across the paper margins of how the European Hebrews could not use libraries and were required now, as per the Führer's latest edict, to get delousing papers.

"By contrast and comparison," thought Doctorjay out loud, "America encourages the Jews to be more Jewish than even they already are."

To that, a lot of bobbing heads. The scribblers were raking the mud with their pens. The task at hand was to be fair to everyone, but steer the safety line. But on the other hand, you knew from past experience the Hebrews worshipped Mammon and did not like to hear of Jesus. They also kept unlisted telephones, which made you wonder why.

If Hebrews had a grievance—and the good Lord was witness to the fact the Hebrews kvetched about their rights until your patience frazzled out like a sombrero— you put that grievance to the vote. That's how you handled grievances.

In Mennotown, the consensus in the pre-war years was this: there was much too much fuss about the problems of the Jews.

You asked a Hebrew what he wanted, and he would tell you: more. That irked a lot of folks. Besides, the Bible talked of usury, which caused additional concern. But since this was America, you had your checks and balances. You voted your leadership in, and you voted your leadership out. That's what the Constitution meant—an instrument to pave the way for equal chance for everyone, and that included Hebrews.

You got along with them. They got along with you. That was the formula. Gone were the days when Mennotown youngsters ran at the top of their speed to lock gates and keep them away. It was a well-known fact in Mennotown that Jews were flaming liberals, but no one in America would dream of putting matches to a synagogue. No, never in America! With proper courtesy, Jews lit their candle lights at Christmas, like everybody else. They respected your neighborhood picnic where, nowadays, true Christians mingled with all kinds of foreigners. Modernity and tolerance were in. Little Melly played Bingo for Britain.

The shadows fell farther and farther across the wastes of Russia. And somewhere in the depths of the Ukraine, there still lay Apanlee. Despite the lapse of time, it still had mystic qualities. When Josephine remembered Apanlee, it was with a catch in her

throat. A well-crafted poem could bring out that feeling in her.

It had been many years since she'd received the last of those alarming missives out of Russia. She hadn't heard from anyone at Apanlee for quite some time; she feared she never would. Her drawers were still crammed with envelopes, all yellow now with time.

"I hope they aren't being buffaloed by all that Führer razzle-dazzle," she voiced her attitude.

She didn't know what had become of her remaining Russian relatives, and by this time, the truth be told, she barely even cared. "All that is dust and ashes," she told the neighborhood, although she hoped in some vague way the folks of Apanlee had sense enough to put up barricades to stop the Huns from flooding the Ukraine.

"Do you suppose they, being pacifists, will take up arms against the Führer? If so, I wouldn't be surprised."

"I certainly hope so! They better!" said Archibald while slurping cabbage soup. "They would be foolish not to."

She looked at him approvingly. It was a treat to hear him utter something with which she could agree.

"Had I been born a Methodist," said Archibald after a pause, "I would be up there, too, just shooting down the Heinies."

"Me, too. Had I been born a man."

That was the old, defiant Josie—hot back from Wichita, where she had reconnected with the Finkelsteins, albeit only temporarily. "To get an update," she half-apologized, but she was gratified that no one seemed to mind.

She made no bones about the fact she was relieved to learn the Communists, now fighting off the Hitler Army in the vicinity of Moscow, proved to be stubborn fighters after all. She thought it was ironic that—now that she had foresworn her youthful politics and tried to be like anybody else—to be a liberal of sorts regarding Soviet Russia was suddenly the rage.

For many years, it had been Josephine who took vicarious pride in the astounding triumphs of the Revolution. "They'll

win," she now said energetically. "I feel it in my bones."

"Of course they'll win," said Archibald, while gnawing on a chicken leg. "For right is on their side."

"God willing," Josie said who rarely went to church.

With growing worry, by and by, she watched the conflict from afar. She, too, had watched the Führer trample across Poland, surge his victorious Wehrmacht through Belgium, slice France in half, put Messerschmitts into the skies and boats below the water level. All that, in one big sweep! It took your breath away! Already, German planes were nipping at the Kremlin.

She, too, looked on with horror as the Führer tried to sweep Europe clean of every last Jew. Her heart contracted for the cause: Jews had it rough; their lot was persecution; they had fallen on desperate times. They had to sit on yellow benches and were forbidden telephones. She had all that on excellent authority.

As far as Josie was concerned, a toddler knew that Hitler was a curse from heaven, that Lenin and Stalin were heroes. All polls showed very clearly as that year drew to a close: three out of every four citizens of the United States now wanted Soviet Russia to triumph militarily.

Meanwhile, there was still Temperance, allied with Little Melly, who still believed it was imperative for Archibald to venture forth and remedy the situation regarding being single before it was too late.

For Archie was eyeing the war. He wasn't getting any younger, and Little Melly thought of Temperance as Archie's last salvation.

She found no faults with Temperance, who oiled her hair with butter and tracked gossip as though she were tracking wild game. She relished long good-byes. Her napkins had the fanciest stitch. Her bridal chest was stuffed to overflowing since she was practical; she did not have excessive suitors, and had to stand prepared.

Each day, it was assault anew: "Well, look who's here! Look who's come visiting."

Here was a sturdy maiden, for the asking, to her liking, turning the pages daintily while Little Melly read her *Daily Thoughts*, now in big print, alas. Here was a female punctual with meals. who counted eggs, who measured salt, who preferred the brown earthenware crock. These skills didn't pass out of fashion.

"Surprise! Surprise! It's Temperance—in all her finery!" Little Melly motioned Temperance into the kitchen where Archie was spooning his gruel; he nearly jumped out of his skin. "Look. All she wants out of her life is to be speedily betrothed to a good and worthy man. Is that too much to ask?"

It nearly drove her wild. Here was a placid female who would have treated an old, ailing aunt with deference. She came from a good family that had a porch that ran around the house, and on it grew geraniums. She had claim to a great deal of land. She was perfect in every known way. She might become a healing influence on Archie's oddities, his fascination with the European fracas being one.

Little Melly resolved to wear down Archie's objections. She pushed herself to the limit, urging Archibald to be a man in any manner possible, but Archie showed no inclination whatsoever; he looked at Temperance without the slightest interest.

"It is high time I had a younger set of hands to help me in my kitchen," said Little Melly one last time. "Please. Pay attention, Archie. One spinster in the family is enough!"

That's what she told him, every day. By then, a flood of tears was riding in her nose. "I welcome help", she argued heatedly. She mopped at the table, all the while mopping her tears.

His eye was dim but wary.

"My back is troubling me," she amplified. "I can't sleep; my appetite leaves much to be desired; my bowels are way off. I could have married, in my time. Look at me, crooked with age."

She wrung her old, arthritic hands, but Archie did not feel the call. He didn't want to marry. Despite his religiosity, he kept on glossing over Songs of Solomon.

In weeks that followed, Little Melly gave herself an educa-

tion on the forbidden subject but came away unsatisfied. That Archibald was very odd was clear, but what that meant was still a mystery.

And Doctorjay was no help either. He turned two huge deaf ears to her; he only nudged her, coarsely. "If nothing else, then mustard plaster on his rump."

She hated that. When Doctorjay was drinking, he said what others merely thought. He was the old-time tippler still that he had always been, proud of his wayward tongue.

"Something is gnawing on his spirit, and what that is, is anybody's guess."

He told her this and that.

Her mouth dropped open and stayed open.

Doctorjay had studied Archibald as though he were an insect. He had prescribed a lot of special herbs to strengthen crucial muscles. All that to no avail. It was as though cold sweat engulfed this middle-aging bachelor at any matrimonial thought. In summary, the man must have been a late bloomer, to put it euphemistically. Church socials for the single members of his congregation left him cold.

The midwife beamed at him to let him know that human nature did not change. "Girls will be girls," said she, "and boys are boys. Your attitude is disconcerting, Archie!"

He did not answer her. Instead, he bolted for the door.

The clues were manifold. He had a childish streak. He loved to build miniature cities from Little Melly's spools, some fourteen levels high, so he could kick them over. He listened with pursed lips and half-closed lids as the detested conflict overseas kept lashing at the earth with hollow, smacking sounds.

"We're pacifists," said Little Melly firmly. "That is one fine excuse!"

"We are Americans. It's up to us. It's up to us to tidy up the world." He sat there, gazing vengefully into a vexing distance, clearly in a spiteful mood. She saw his hands were shaking badly; his knees would not stop trembling. It was clear he felt blood in his mouth.

That kind of anger on an empty stomach? She tried hard not to show alarm.

"Come, Archibald. Here is an extra sweater. Let's you and I take our after-dinner stroll to make sure that we understand each other. You can't afford to get involved in war. You are a minister. You're in a vital business. It's time to take a stand for pacifism, and set a firm example."

That was her finest argument, but Archie merely glared. Wild rumors flew the length of Mennotown that one demented pacifist, out there in Reedley, California, had already harnessed himself to the Führer. That someone from within the creed should be involved in something that politically grotesque came as a sickening surprise.

Chapter 96

Five relatives arrived by Greyhound bus for an extended stay from Winnipeg to help plan Rarey's wedding. Outside, the snow fell softly. Pine logs threw scented sparks. The windows shone with warmth and hospitality—weeks had been spent to bake and fry and cook.

That fateful morning, when infamy went down in history, as children are now taught in school, Little Melly held a bread loaf firmly to her bosom and cut fat slices for her guests, while Temperance unwrapped the ornaments to trim the Christmas tree. Doctorjay was rocking by the fire with both ears glued to the wireless to hear, as he would later claim, the latest news on Heinieland while hoping to hit Amos 'n Andy to help his belch along, when suddenly he caught the bulletin.

More ships lost in an hour than every ship destroyed in the entire previous war!

The news came as a horrid shock. The baseness of the Japanese sent the entire nation reeling. The president of the United States, with deep folds bracketing his mouth, put down his hot dog and his milkshake and ordered the Army and Navy: "Fight

back!"

Archie and Rarey both sprang to their feet. Doctorjay shook off his warm comforter and roared as though he had been struck. That morning, Little Melly, distracted by her gout and therefore, slow in getting dressed, forgot all modesty and rushed into the streets in morning robe and frayed pajamas.

"We'll gun the Hun! We'll get the Kraut! We'll lick the Heinies!" moaned Archie.

Outside was pandemonium. Brakes screeched. Somebody screamed. A thousand whistles blew. A hasty victory parade brought out Salvation Army sisters by the scores to ready lemonade stands for thirsty recruits. Feelings ran at a fever pitch. Kate Smith sang ringingly in every square.

War came with a roar and found deep, twisted roots that ran with ethnic sap.

All Germans, overnight, turned brutish in appearance, demented beyond words. Sedate and somber patriots sat in the ballfield bleachers, seething. A motorist ran down the same Holsteiner twice. Rotarians tried in vain to quiet the luncheons down. Even the Donoghues' mongrels kept moving their tails in broad sweeps.

The preachers jabbed the Bible with their fingers: the total devastation of the wicked was duty! and if you did not do your duty for your country, then God was very cross!

Before a week was gone, a lot of folks wore V! emblazoned on their chest, which stood, of course, for Victory, for that was a foregone conclusion. Astrologers confirmed what everybody knew: "No way can America lose!"

Only Josie sat silent and stunned, her feelings tumbling down into a vast abyss, like grains into an elevator shaft.

Temperance saw her chance right then and there and rushed to Archie's side. "You'll see! You'll see! You'll watch the nickels rain into your war relief!"

She had come visiting the previous night and, as it happened, was still there, just sitting, meditating, by the window, while deftly picking out a seam and pondering her sad predicament—for tack-

ling Archie was harder than ever!—when her entire world turned upside down as though it were a milking stool. A spell came over Archie. Before her very eyes, he grew ten feet in height. He wanted more than a vicarious victory; he wanted soldiering. He wanted soldiering so bad his teeth hurt from his wish!

After Sunday services, while folks still milled about and traded up on news, he stepped up forcefully to little neighbor clusters and waved the newest bulletin.

"Give me the leather," shouted Archie, "and I will make the shoes." The war was belching fire; the Jews were an endangered species, and Archie itched to go and boost democracy. Little Melly kept wringing her little plump hands. Still, she tried one last time and pushed a giggling Temperance right in his way so that he had to walk around her as she prepared the chicken stew—and once she even pulled his earlobe teasingly, and Little Melly's hopes soared to the sky!—but nothing came of that.

"Well, Temperance," said Archibald. "I'm off. That's it! I am enlisting voluntarily."

He heard a high-pitched giggle and realized it was his own. He combed his sprouting mustache then and there and twirled it at both ends, while Temperance stood, watching him, aghast at what she saw.

In Mennotown, the Elders claim today some young folk did resist: a handful went to jail for their beliefs; a few slipped off to Canada, and others volunteered to work in mental hospitals and institutions. But all in all, to slay the Hun was duty! The local sign-up station had queues three times around the block.

There was little the Elders could do. Their sermons stopped revolving placidly around the blood of Christ, that had been shed on Golgatha for people to know peace; instead, their prayers now asked God to rip the Führer's flags to shreds and blast away his cannons. Their hands grew swollen from the fervent handshakes of congregation members who agreed.

The Elders had their work cut out. Nobody envied them. The youngsters glared and said: "The Lutherans and Methodists

will do!" and flung away their pacifist tradition, as though it were an apple core, without a further thought. The Elders' moral stance was not an easy one; their flivvers had C-stickers. Few were the citizens of Mennotown who dared besmirch America's fine reputation by hiding behind loopholes in the Bible.

"We're not allowed to kill," the Elders argued biblically, reflecting pacifist tradition, but stopped just short of praying that somebody else would do the job—for it was crystal clear to all before another month was gone: the Führer was the Antichrist; and Satan must be stopped. The wireless and papers spelled it out.

The prairie ached for war. A blizzard of confetti was raining down on Kansas.

Tanks, planes, and guns began to roll off sleek assembly lines, ships rose in navy yards. All kinds of wartime plants kept mushrooming in Wichita, producing boots and tents. Machine guns. Helmets. Hand grenades. Nobody put it into words, but it was clear not only to the Jews engaged in various wartime scams, but to the average citizen: America saw war as business, both morally and economically.

Frugality was once again the watchword of the day. Thrift Saving Stamps were the rage. Streetcars saved on gasoline by making fewer stops. The neighborhood collected toothpaste tubes.

The White House sent out bulletins: go easy on the sugar, and Little Melly, mindful of her bees, ran to restock a dormant hive. She even went so far as to suppress complaints about irregularity and sent the money saved from doctoring her innards off to war relief. The soldiers wanted warmer socks, and Josie joined a knitting club. Not even the egg slump could trigger a sneer out of Daisy.

As in the First World War, this was no soup-and-sandwich operation! The mandate, black on white: let's shower the Heinies with bullets!

The outbreak of the war changed many things in Mennotown,

chiefly the ethnic web—with it, the Christian mode. Before they even understood just what was creeping up on them, the Elders eased up on their wrath about the wicked flickers and went to stand in line themselves, no matter how the blizzards blew, to watch big action films where they could sit and chortle—a chortle, for the uninitiated, consisted of a combination of a chuckle and a snort—at how the Hun was licked.

Tallulah Bankhead put a picture of the Führer on the bottom of her chamber pot, and Marlene Dietrich offered her own blood for the Red Army's wounded.

Flashlight in hand, Josie went to perform in a Wichita play, becoming the Statue of Liberty. She delved into her quicksilver mind and came up with a poem that glorified Stalin. The radio spread his wisdom. The papers sang his praise. The reporters had wonderful things to report. The Mennotown Chamber of Commerce sold gum for a penny apiece, leading the cheers to boost the valiant Red Army's morale. Doctorjay missed not a single friendship rally to help the Soviets win. He practiced his war whoops until he ran out of breath and peach brandy. The merchants and the moneylenderss joined in repeated toasts: "Hey, Uncle Joe! Hey, Uncle Joe! Here's to you, Uncle Joe!"

A strange, historic time—to see two awkward giants, the Soviet Union and America, all of a sudden hug each other clumsily.

In every German language church, it rained donations for needy Soviet orphans. To Russia from Mennotown, with love!

The European war was welcomed as a necessary evil: it ended a difficult decade and roused them as never before. Banned were dumplings once again, along with dachshunds, diphthongs and *umlauts*! Down came the signs on Lindbergh Terrace!

It was the time to put your shoulder to the wheel and shove! The demarcation line between a hero and a brute was clear!

No wonder, therefore, when the Elders came to Archie Epp, a bachelor, not yet ordained, still filling in at services—that's when they hit a snag.

No mealy mouth was Archie. No pacifism here!

Not even the tippling herbalist helped. Archie pushed them all aside like chaff, he was that mad with rage. All that had precedents. When the detested school yard bullies pushed him down into the weeds and called him names that hurt because he was a German—that's when it all began! The ethnic slurs were etched upon his brain, and ever since, something danced in his head that looked like a flashing red light. He had been eight years old when he threw down his spelling book and ran. Now he was aging prematurely; he knew he was no Adonis. He knew that he was balding, pimply and obese, and getting on in years. But deep inside there lived the spirit of a child who never shed his shame.

The stain of ethnic hate had left him blinded in one eye; now a retaliating hate broke into blossom in full force. He stood tall at a Rotary meeting and shouted: "Gun the Hun! Gun the Hun!" In church, he never missed taking up special collections for Stalin. He was resolved to bomb the face of Germany. He savored hate for all things German; he filled his mouth with it; his eyes were fever-bright with fervor; wrath flooded every sinew.

Three days after Pearl Harbor, he stood up in the middle of a meal, pushed his *vareniki* aside and told a dozen startled faces:

"To hell with Adolf Hitler!"

He broke his aunt's old heart. She wept: "You'll see! You'll see! You'll come home in a gunny sack—!" but Archibald just shrugged. Little Melly lost weight; Little Melly lost face; Archie had made up his mind; Archie was aching for battle.

"Why now? Why, Archie? Now? Why bring such shame upon us now? You can't! The churches need you here! I've told you many times before; you're in a vital business."

A flub dub—Archie Epp? No mollycoddle, Archie! He wiped the gravy off his chin and snarled at Temperance to get out of his way.

Poor Temperance, close to the finish line! The relatives had probed her worth already and verified she would not spend her

husband's money freely. She tried to calm him down by patting him most everywhere, but he gave her a shove.

"The dirty yellow Japs! The low-life, miserable Huns!"

She howled while seeing him depart. "Why not be a soldier for Christ?"

"War chaplain? That's a laugh! I'll spit into the Rhine!"

He was amazing, even to himself. He did not even know he had such eloquence.

The war slammed a hard cleaver smack into Archie's heart. It took the Führer's war to make him realize that there was something deep within, penned up like a beast within a cage. He knew with the conviction nursed on his childhood torment that he, who still woke in a sweat for fear that he had wet his bed, was singled out by destiny to fight a manly war. Since kindergarten he had hated being German. Here was his opportunity to finish off a ghost.

So let the rest be pacifist!

His mouth turned dry with vehemence. The idle tongues had always called him sissy; here was his chance; he could redeem his manliness. He would rain fire down on Naziland and return with a chestful of medals. Somebody had to put his heel right on the Führer's neck, and that might just be Archie. He tasted battle on his tongue and fire in his veins.

"If you leave me behind, I might become a Methodist," wept Temperance. That's how distraught she was.

He was unmoved, however. What fun awaited him as he would let the righteous bombs of America crash on the wicked German towns! He surged; he soared; he plummeted—triggering bombs in his mind like a shower of hail, as he had seen it many times on the forbidden flivver screen. To risk your life and limb for Freedom, Justice and Equality was one good way to help your country out.

He snarled at Temperance: "I'm going, and that's it! Stop howling now! That's my advice. And better find yourself another husband while you can!" The shirkers were in hiding; the

heroes went to war! He mounted Doctorjay's old old bicycle and headed for the noise.

Before his country's clarion call to go to war and save democracy fell into Archie's lap, he had dimly sensed that something was askew inside his personality. He knew he was no hero. He tried to disappear into his coat the moment trouble brewed. He liked his towels toasted.

All that changed now. No one would ever doubt his masculinity again. He pedaled all the way to Wichita to stand in line where many recruits stood already, waiting, some of them beneath umbrellas.

He stopped where it said "E," because Epp was his name.

Ahead of him, in a long row marked "D." stood several Donoghues who snickered.

"Well, look who's here! Look who's enlisting. The yellow fellow, folks, " said one, just loud enough for several heads to swivel.

The uniformed induction officer gave Archie a brisk push. "What's the matter with your eye?"

"I w-w-w-ant to go—" said Archibald, which caused an explosion of mirth.

"You do? Well, hold your stream a bit, now, buster, will you? Okay, now, fellows. Move! Just step aside here, mister. We don't need damaged goods. This is a war. This isn't kindergarten."

"A to L to the right."

"M to Z to the left."

"Move! I said move! Look, do I have all day? All cripples, fags, CO's, Jehovah Witnesses, and jackals, out the door!"

There was nothing to do but obey, so maligned was the enemy's cause.

When the induction papers came for Rarey, he folded his easel, dried off his brushes, put down his charcoal, and asked: "Why should I die for my country? Why can't I live for my country?"

but his voice held the timbre of pride.

"Son, let your conscience be your guide," said Josephine, a proud but saddened mother. Had she been a man, she would have sprung to the colors. She took the missive from his hand and read it carefully. "Greetings," said the postcard, simply, and told her last-born where to go. The sounds of war that shrieked out of the wireless were frightening indeed.

"If there's a wrong, somebody has to right the wrong. Although in quiet moments—"

She never finished what she meant to say, for such was the fervor of war. She only knew: that good was good, and evil, evil—and evil must be stopped.

She lived and died. She never knew. No, Josie never knew.

She never understood why her own country took her last-born by the shoulders, vociferating: "Liberty! Fraternity! Equality!" and made her step aside. This is the peerless irony that Josie lived and died and never knew: it was a fratricidal war. It never dawned on her.

Peace zealots they had been, the Neufeld clan that grew the wheat that feeds the world today; peace zealots they remained—until this war exploded. Right by her kitchen sink.

She should have known but didn't. She may have been a liberal out of the hunger of her mind; she knew her Rarey was a pacifist, by nature and by training; his father had been pacifist; his grandfather as well; for centuries, the Neufeld tribe had managed to resist with tooth and nail the mandate of the sword.

It all fell by the wayside. It all was stripped away.

The New World Order was simplicity itself: it came in shibboleths. The country called on Rarey; the country needed him; he had to put his shoulder to the wheel of history and shove.

"The Führer must be stopped," said Josephine, while everything around her blurred.

For the briefest of moments, she felt a wild panic, but she struggled it down as she must. She was well-read; she had informed herself; she knew that fire rained down on England; that Denmark and Norway had been invaded by land, air and sea;

Luxembourg, Belgium and France had fallen. And now the madman's Wehrmacht, the papers hammered at her day by day in savage feature stories, kept slicing with swift razor strokes through Josie's childhood Russia in several dozen different places while laying both cities and hamlets to ashes!

The eyes of the entire world, the *New York Times* proclaimed in flaming editorials, were fastened on America, the land of Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! There was no time to lose!

"Son, do as you think best. Your country calls on you. I am so proud—"

Her voice broke from the strain of her emotions, but here it was; this was a righteous war; the stars and stripes gave meaning.

Before that day, she had not known a human heart could hold such sadness, yet such pride. Long rays of light were streaking through the skies. While salty tears clogged up her nose, she felt her heart melt like a candle.

She said to him whom she loved more than life: "This is my finest day."

Her Rarey was a hero, not a shirker; he pledged his life to serve the principles that she held dear and always would: that people were created equal; that all deserved a chance.

A plaque in his honor affirms it. That plaque still hangs in Rarey's room, next to his Boy Scout trophies. It tells all visitors Rarey Neufeld did not hide behind the Scriptures; his ear drums did not show some unexpected holes. He did his duty, as he must—to slay the Antichrist.

The plan had been for Betty Lou and Rarey to be married in four weeks, but it took sacrifice. There was no time to stitch a wedding dress—a print frock, that was all.

They married on a weekend pass. The bride, of course, wore something old and something new, something borrowed, something blue. The bridegroom wore his country's uniform. The buckle that snapped around his waist. It was a cold and dreary day. Thick ice stuck to the window panes and on the Plexiglas of

the smooth plane that took him from the prairie, death tucked beneath its wings. Before him stretched in a long blur an unsettling horizon. Below him dropped away the fields that grew the winter wheat that ethnic pride had sowed—now cold and bleak.

Denuded. Wintry. Stripped.

Chapter 97

The Führer drove his armored wedges deep and ever deeper into the east to pulverize the onion domes and finish off the Antichrist so German women, left behind, could keep on bringing in the harvest. At Apanlee, it was potato peeling all day long, and often far into the night, as added *Landsers* poured across the steppe. The bells were ringing merrily; the Hitler youth clicked heels; the cannons fired wildly; and everybody cheered. There was nothing to dampen their spirits.

Marleen did all she could to help the war along and speed up victory. She stood by her window and watched, gratitude thick in her heart.

"Soon, winter comes. The roads grow slick with snow. What do you know of Russia? Here is another pair of mittens."

The *Landsers* gave her back her rightful legacy, as heady as smooth wine. A river was returning to its bed. Her blurred gaze fastened on the flags that floated in the breeze, as memories of days gone by when she was forced to raise the mounds of earth about her murdered kin sank to the bottom of her heart. The Führer did exactly as he pleased, and that was fine with her; his

horses were swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves. He flew as the eagle that hastened to eat. All that was in her Bible. She read it every night and left it on her window sill, scrubbed clean of every trace of blood, in plain view of the night.

Marleen supervised, Natasha obeyed, and Mimi followed her instincts. She was pretty and clever and young. She was chock-full of youth, love, and rapture.

The Führer put her duties down for her in black and white, and she submitted gladly. She didn't waste her Sundays.

Submission for the greater good.

Forbearance.

Duty.

Sacrifice.

All those were heady words that put a haze across her heart as though with fine gossamer cloth. Six days a week, she wore the Red Cross emblem on her sleeve—for, more and more, the trains were hauling in the wounded, and every hand was needed.

She did her duties joyfully. Her energies were focused.

At times, there were at Apanlee more soldiers than civilians, and she noticed the *Landsers* looked younger and younger. Their steps were firm, precise, and robust. They smiled at her and waved while marching briskly to the beat of battle songs:

"Und welcher Feind auch kommt
mit Macht und List,
seid nur ewig treu, ihr Kameraden,
der Herrgott, der im Himmel ist,
liebt die Treue der jungen Soldaten—"

She kept tapping her foot to the beat. Their cause was just and good. Their songs were songs of love and tears; they spoke of brotherhood, of vigilance, of sunshine and fresh air. She listened by the window and knew they sang to her.

That was the only happy time life ever granted Mimi. Wherever she appeared, there were admiring whistles—not that it mattered much; her heart was chained to Jonathan's as though

by golden shackles.

Love was precarious, as sweet as dreamless sleep.

She felt that she would drown in joy. The *Landsers* kept on singing, without let-up, often far into the night—sometimes with raucous vigor, but often in a tender mood.

". . . auf der Heide blüht ein kleines Blümelein
und das heißt—zwei, drei, vier!—Erika!"

In the morning, the soldiers made a great deal of noise, but at night, with the moon in the sky and the air sweet with hay, their songs were romance and flirtation:

". . . und dann ist es mir, als fragt es traut:
Denkst du auch an deine kleine Braut?"

She loved their songs—as jubilant as larks that shot out of the furrows, as sad as a walk in wet woods.

"In der Heimat weint um dich ein Mägdelein
und das heißt—zwei, drei, vier!—Erika!"

They were young Germany. They were the best the Fatherland sent forth to craft a better world.

Her reasoning was simple: since there was justice in the universe, she knew that they would win. They would embrace the onion domes with a firm ring of tempered steel, with sirens howling and guns blazing; all that was still to come.

She still had the walk of a cat, for habits were habits and her habits died slowly, but now she was purring; she longed to be stroked and caressed. Where the *Landsers* were sitting, right on the steps of Apanlee, dangling their long legs, reliving the latest assault, she was glad to stop by for a chat.

"It's dogfight after dogfight. Right?" She had absorbed from them the attitude that nothing could defeat them.

"We'll crack the strongest nerves," they told her, boasting of their conquests. "Nothing can stop us now."

She smiled and sauntered on. She was dazzled and blinded with Faith. The *Landsers* were winning, the bulletins claimed, and nothing could alter that fact.

She was not alone in her Faith. An ancient neighbor widow listened by the window, her face a mask, her jaw on fire. And here is what she heard:

"Die Fahne hoch.
Die Reihen fest geschlossen,
SA marschiert mit ruhig festem Schritt—"

She had loved a man; he was gone. She had borne him five sons; all five had been shot. Her martyrs, as vivid as ever! Now songs gave their sacrfice meaning.

"Kam'raden, die Rotfront
und Reaktion erschossen,
marchiern im Geist
in unsren Reihen mit."

She had barely prevailed on the saddest soil in the world; she had never had songs of her own; her past was too merciless, her struggle too constant. Before the Führer's *Landsers* came like apparitions, commissioned to make order out of chaos and cause the earth to tremble with their wrath, there had been the crackle of shots in the orchards. Whole generations, martyred, whose only crime had been that they were German people, that they had sown the wheat! How could that be a crime?

Now she heard songs instead of guns, and how they fit! How deeply meaningful that was! The Führer's songs were rich and deep and throbbing with emotion. She kept tapping her foot; she kept cupping her ear to hear better.

"—viele Jahre zogen dahin,
the Völker geknechtet, betrogen—"
"Verräter und Juden hatten Gewinn,
sie forderten Opfer Millionen—"

This much she knew: Those songs bestowed justice to victims.

Once she had been among her country's richest people—but with her last son shot, not even a funeral service to bless his last remains! Not even a crude casket! She dabbed her eyes in memory.

She, too, believed: the Führer was the bulwark, his guns

trained on the Fiend. He was a leader called upon by God to exercise his powers. He reached out day by day—not for the pocketbooks, but for the hearts of kin.

She gave him hers, and gladly.

For he took mayhem and wrought stillness. He brought calm to the tormented land. He held at bay the hideous Beast, the pockmarked, webbed monstrosity, holed up inside the Kremlin, surrounded by the ghosts of those it had maliciously destroyed.

She knew that punishment was due. She didn't even blink.

"Now there can be no turning back," this widow summed up who, only by a miracle, had managed to survive. She knew of no parallel case wherein both vice and virtue were as clearly, as sharply outlined. The hated tormenters of innocents, the ruthless profiteers of a corrupt regime were being executed now in Russia's market squares, and that was fine with her.

As far as she could see, the lion-hearted came to set the anguished free. Her trust in him was absolute. Across the beaten land, there waved the Mystic Cross.

She watched how pacifists, once more clad in Biblical attire, threw flowers in the Führer's path, for he was David, taking on Goliath.

She, too, had claims on history.

She was sprung from an extraordinary family that traced its roots into the Prussian swamps, centuries before they settled in the plains to worship, sow and reap. Here they had lived for many generations—all ages under one gigantic roof, all multiplying and obeying, a peaceful creed, a thorough breed that wanted nothing more, and nothing less, than to be strong and free and numerous in kin so as to garner yet another harvest—and, in the process, feed a hungry world.

But then the hoodlums came and ran their bayonets into the ancient Faith. Crimes of that magnitude should never go unpunished! So let the torturers and traitors mount the planks for once to face the lawful noose!

Her shoulders shook with shudders, but she did not back off.

Now black was black again, and white was white, floating in

rivers of red, and everything was orderly and neatly sorted out. Now it was once again the age-old maxim bred into her every gene, and that was: Race and Space. Now it was *Lebensraum.*

"Im Volke geboren erstand uns ein Führer,
gab Glauben und Hoffnung
an Deutschland uns wieder—
Volk ans Gewehr! Volk ans Gewehr!"

Those words of sorcery and spell roared in her wobbling head, endorsed and sanctioned by the Army of the Lord that spoke His very language. The Wehrmacht made right what was wrong; its drums stopped the nightmare of terror and fear; they flushed out Jewish Bolsheviks and partisans from the bushes.

A winter came and went. The days grew long and lush. The goose paths were brimming with children, small swastikas clutched in their fists. The lilies broke their buds; they bloomed as they had never bloomed before in living memory. The stars streamed velvet silver. A nightingale called plaintively in the acacia trees, as if to burst its throat.

Out came the plows, yokes, harnesses and hand tools so that the seed could mingle with the loam. The earth glistened freshly with dew. Spring rain fell on the trees and seeped into the soil, softening the acres.

The German plow cut furrow after furrow.

Wheat came first. Next came oats. Barley followed. The stalks stood tall and firm. The crops were free of weeds. The homesteads were hives of activity. The Russian field hands labored earnestly and energetically, their eyes bright with their gratitude. Meat was now served four times a week; the foreman dealt bread in large chunks. The women added meat and salt. The workers didn't notice they were tired until the sunset drove them home, where supper was already waiting.

Say what you will: it was a wondrous time.

Marleen cast every woe aside. "Roll up your sleeves, now!" was her cry. And meanwhile—scrubbing on the washboard until the laundry squeaked with cleanliness! And muscle and self-

discipline until both hands were covered with huge blisters!

She and her neighbors dreamed of improving piggeries and of scientific poultry farming. The apples were already ripening. The fields were bursting with strong crops. The streets outside were swept with reeds. The grateful field hands leveled the potatoes.

At night, when all the work was done, out came the folding chairs to watch the *Landsers* in formation, to do precision marches, battalions in amazing numbers, like a tempestuous flood.

And if the Mystic Cross spiked through the grass to look for hidden treachery—and with the help of sputtering machine gun blasts kept smoking evil out of hiding—why, that was now the order of the day.

"All this, so you will never have to fear the shadows in the orchards," said Mimi to her daughter, who was the luckiest girl alive, for the Führer had singled her out.

For it was duty now in absolutely everything. Not even pumpkin heads would dare to disobey. You had to march on orders, camp on orders, work on orders, sleep on orders, if need be die on orders, although she, Erika, was still a little girl not even four feet tall.

That's why, when duty overwhelmed her—for she was far from perfect!—she hid in Baba's shed so she could drift and dream.

Beneath Natasha's stairwells was a niche; that's where she kept her icons and various things she stole—foodstuff and discard clothing, wrapped in old paper bags. Natasha bared her head each time she passed that hidden niche.

One afternoon, when no one looked—with Marleen trying yet another recipe, Mimi rolling Red Cross bandages and Baba being elsewhere—she crawled inside. It was as good a hiding place as any. She was just starting to enjoy herself, indulging in fly-away thoughts, when Natasha came running and panting.

"Out! I said out! What are you doing there, my God!"

Yes, her old Baba, even she! The moment she discovered

Erika, curled up and hiding in her safety spot, she grabbed her by her heels and dragged her out of musty zones composed of fleeting images right back into the glaring sunshine, and then she gasped twice and sat down.

"What? Have you lost your senses? You scared me half to death!" A single tear was dropping off Natasha's crumpled nose.

All that was mystifying. It made for small, sharp jolts. First standing on one leg, then shifting to the other, the youngster tried to rub herself against the servant like a small and hungry cat that needed to be petted, but Baba had a jittery expression on her face and did not notice anything.

Natasha, too, had changed. She, too, was taking reverence to extremes. She kept on talking to herself; she kept on swiveling her head as though she were a weather vane, and always out of breath.

That day, when she could speak again, she said: "Don't ever crawl in there again! It's full of spider webs." She looked as though she were near tears. Whenever Baba talked like that and looked like that, she, Erika, was close to tears as well; her throat was constricted with loss.

"What is the matter, Baba? Why are you always sad?"

"Who's sad? What? Are you crazy, honey child? I'm happy with my bread and onions," lied Natasha.

"But I was only—"

"Shhh! Put your arms around my neck."

Together they sat, listening. The noise outside was deafening as the Wehrmacht rolled over the steppe; all soldiers, ready for assault, all streaming in the same direction. The youngster and the Russian servant tried to shield themselves against the onslaught of the sounds of war, the rattle and bumping and jolting of wheel after wheel, steel upon steel, as the Führer was riding the tiger.

When rumors about widespread, violent pogroms reached the folks of Apanlee, few people bothered to take notice.

Pogroms were nothing new—the bearded anarchists of yes-

terday who carried bombs to rip the tsars apart all had a rabbi hidden somewhere in their past. Here was another one.

The Hebrews, it was widely understood, had been the ones who had deposed and killed the Romanovs, and that's how everything began. That's why the execution pits filled up as they ousted the Crown and grabbed hold of the hammer and sickle.

That's when the German martyrs started falling.

And then, the steppe a vast graveyard.

And then, no end to terror, grief and tears.

For two decades, death sat in the napes of their necks; the parasites bared fangs and teeth; grief fell on good and bad alike and brought them to their doom; and all they had to lay their aching hearts against were dark and moldy graves, too numerous to count.

"Away with treachery!" the Führer shouted now. "Away with Exploiters! Scum! Riffraff! Slime! Ragtag and rabble! Who sucked the life out of the marrow of your bones and wrecked the roofs that generations built?"

There was no need to point them out. There was nothing redeeming about them. The reckoning was imminent, expected to be rough. The silent faces, now altogether dry of tears, had something in their eyes that looked like sharded glass.

Chapter 98

All youngsters lived to honor Fatherland and Führer, and, therefore, Erika did, too, but when the teacher told her, knuckling her to speed her transformation: "Don't dawdle! It's your turn!", it was a jolt each time. When duty called and all her classmates followed cheerfully, it always felt to her as though somebody turned a garden hose full blast upon a dog.

As soon as she was old enough to join the League of German Girls, the female counterpart to the respected all-male Hitler Youth, Erika discovered to her shame: she was a dreadful coward.

Everybody hated cowards, and she was one of them. In fact, she was the worst. She owed the Führer everything. In fair exchange, he owned her and expected things of her. She did not want to be the ruin of Germany.

That's why she slunk away to hide herself and dream, more times than she was willing to admit, heart pounding in her chest.

As far back as she could remember, she knew that she was odd. While others shone with purpose and self-discipline, she moved among the shadows. Words were her specialty. She wrote

them on all kinds of snippets and hid them in her pocket. Nobody knew her secret: as soon as she found yet another word to make sense out of yet another puzzle, her nature was no longer warped. No one ever said that she was taking after Mimi, who stood beneath the Führer's flags still hanging from the trees, while sucking in her stomach.

She, Erika, was different. She knew exactly how. She managed to disgrace herself in countless silly ways. She kept on bumping into walls and knocking over flower pots, and only yesterday tripped over Baba's milking stool and sent the bucket flying. If she walked accidentally beneath an apple tree, an apple fell smack on her head. If she passed by a rosebush, it scarred her on her ear. She lost a heel off a brand new shoe, and that gave her a limp. She tried to skate and broke an ankle; it took her months to heal. She tried to help Natasha slice an onion, but only cut into her thumb. Her stomach kept rumbling and wouldn't stop rumbling when respectable visitors came. At dinner, invited to show her best manners, she dragged her sleeve through the gravy.

No wonder she became a nervous, high-strung female. She had strange thoughts and wild beliefs. She falsely thought she might become somebody's valentine if she tried hard enough—until she took a long, hard look in Mimi's mirror. At that, her mind went blank and stayed that way until she had a chance to slink away, excused.

This happened on the day Marleen put her upon a chair, tied one end of a strong darning thread around her tooth, the other to the ceiling hook, then urged her to jump down.

She tried, but botched the job. They had to yank that tooth by holding her supine, which was no picnic either. She bawled and couldn't stop. Now she was twice as old as she was then, but nothing much had changed. Another tooth had since grown in, but not as strong as needed; it was already wobbling. She probed it with her tongue.

It seemed that, at all time, her tears were near the spilling point. Nail-biting was the only weapon that she knew. She knew

that she was odd—that was the crux of the matter.

Born in the darkest year, the bleakest year, that saw men turn to beasts and beasts turn into skeletons, she knew she was lucky beyond words to have been born at all.

It took her mother weeks to even choose her name, so utterly devoid of all emotions had Mimi been when she gave birth, a story in itself. It took forever to give birth, claimed Mimi every time she told the tale, distraught at the mere memory.

The child was stubborn and recalcitrant; it clung to her womb as though to a lifeline, just wouldn't let go and be born. Mimi, who loved drama, embroidering this tale, would always claim that she felt split right down the center; there seemed no end to labor. The very day it happened, the boots had kicked against the door, and she had had to watch her husband being led away to perish in the snow.

It had been such a poor exchange—a baby for a husband!

As the years wore on, Mimi's words grew ever more dramatic regarding that traumatic day, but deep inside she knew, and so did Erika, that Mimi was incapable of drawing her small, bony daughter through the armoured meshes of her feelings, so desperate had she been to hold herself together as all the world around her flew apart—as she had fiercely struggled, days on end, if you believed her story, to give new life amidst the violence of the German purges of the Thirties that swept the length of Soviet Russia.

When all was said and done, she had a pile of bloody sheets; she had no husband any more; he probably was dead; at least as good as dead. She was left stuck with a small daughter, if you could call it that, a mottled thing with spindly limbs, contracting lockjaw constantly, refusing to be fed.

Despite her clumsy feet and awkward hands, Erika became the first of many gifted youngsters in the vicinity of Apanlee to be selected for dispatch to help the Fatherland speed up the long-awaited victory. She would not be the last.

When she was told that she would have to leave in a year's time, perhaps not ever to return, not ever to see Apanlee again, she sat in a stupefied silence. Her life went limp with sadness. She knew she was no angel, but on the other hand, who was? At Apanlee, all kinds of folks were coming, going, stepping over her; few knowing, much less caring, that she had an important birthday coming up.

She was eleven still, but soon she would be twelve—too old to rub herself against Natasha in hopes she'd drop whatever she was doing and offer up her lap.

She marshaled Faith to serve as antidote.

Marleen's old Bible, once again in full display upon the shelf of honor, described it cleverly, this thing called Faith, all similes and metaphors. The Bible claimed Faith was a living thing that grew until it moved a mountain—but while she waited for that miracle to manifest, she longed to slink out silently and shamed and hide herself away.

Cowardice. The word was out, and it was cowardice.

She woke with it, and slept with it. Cowardice was like an itchy undergarment; you couldn't even scratch. In self-defense, she longed to curl herself into as small a coil as possible, so she could dream a bit.

Her dreams were fragile as blisters. They rose from deep within. The moment that she found herself alone, her mind commenced to drift as though it were a Zeppelin, but that did not change facts: she was dispensible.

"Find things to do. Find things to do," her mother always chided her when she was underfoot. "Now run along. Go help Natasha in the kitchen. I smell potatoes frying."

That was the chorus now at Apanlee to cure her of her blight. Find things to do! Make yourself useful now!

She did not shun her chores. She tried her best to do them all with cheer. She tried with all her might, for that was in her nature. She didn't give up easily. She was a law-and-order person, too; in fact, she was the best.

She did as she was taught to do; she folded blankets, set out dishes; she started breakfast fires by whittling kindling wood to gladden Baba's heart. She followed the cackle of chickens and hunted for eggs in the shrubs. She swept the entrance clean so that the gravel flew. She worked as hard as anyone she knew.

No matter what she did, there was still more to do!

She pulled potatoes from the soil until she nearly dropped, but when the day was over, she was glad. By then, her feet were cold as ice; her stomach was in knots; her heart kept knocking hard against her ribs; her gaze was out of focus. At night, she burrowed in her pillows, suffused with yearning to find out what lay behind it all.

She did not know why her small heart cramped to the message of the Führer, when everybody else's opened wide with Faith and love and certainty. Anxiety was always at her ankles, nipping. She knew that she lacked bravery and was convinced she was as wicked as red trousers—which was one reason, verily! why she would soon be asked to leave the only place she knew, the only faces that she knew, maybe not ever to return.

Once, when she tried to rub herself against Marleen, who happened to be busy, Marleen said absentmindedly: "I'll let you stir the batter."

She rubbed her head against Natasha's apron until Natasha had no choice, bent down and told her, sighing: "All right. I'll take a break. Now put your little arms around my neck. But only for two minutes."

Natasha now was busy canning apples by the bushels, determined not to let the flies spoil any. Mimi, of late, had joined the Songster Club and was now busy day and night with her own sundry duties, now that she had become a Red Cross helper in addition, one of her many curious traits.

"Can't I just come along and watch you?"

"Next week, perhaps," said Mimi, and let the matter drop, but not before she gave her daughter a small shove in the direction of the door. She had no time at all for Erika, whose back was

thin and bony, whose muscles kept cramping on the trapeze.

And backward somersaults? *Ach Gott! Du liebe Güte!*

Backward somersaults were murder. Long distance running was the pits. When others fell into a sharp and even trot and kept it up, no matter what the weather, she had to stop repeatedly; her socks kept sliding down.

In summary, it was an anxious time.

One major, tragic flaw of Erika's was this: she was too delicate. She was like a tropical garden. It took a lot of fuss to hold herself together.

Another was that both her brows arched oddly, and people gave her looks. Natasha said she didn't mind, but even she was adding to the chorus: "Think hard now. Aren't you a grown-up girl? You have been picked for leadership. We have to do what's right because it's right, and not because it's easy."

Well, easier said than done for Erika, who did not think herself exceptional at all in qualities the Führer needed in a leader. The Führer wanted youngfolk taut; he wanted lucid lives; he disdained secrecy. By contrast, she relied on secrecy. She kept that special box, tied with a knotted ribbon, deep in a bottom drawer. When asked what was inside that box, she stood on one leg first, then shifted to the other. Admitting it was poetry was asking her to die.

To fit herself into the fervor of the times, she wrote neat poems to the Führer. Poems were a mania with her. She lived with cadences.

"—and on his mind,
the only thing that matters:
The greatness that is Germany—"

she wrote, and talent must have been involved, for when she worked up every ounce of courage and read them out aloud, why, even Baba ahhed.

In windy weather she would plead: "Can't I stay home today?" to which her mother frowned. Young children made her

baffled and confused.

"Stay home? Whatever for? Where is your gratitude? What will the Führer say?"

"Why must I exercise?"

"Because it's good for you," said Mimi, who looked as though she wished with all her heart to mother properly, but motherhood was something she had shelved until the war was won, which could be any day. "Stop whining now. You know you can excel in anything if that's what you decide. Just put your mind to it."

"I earned eight stars already."

"Let's see your fingernails—"

Nail-biting was another habit all grownups thoroughly despised, particularly Mimi. She hid her hands behind her back and fell into a stutter. A hanging cuticle burned like a tiny flame. She longed to pull it off.

She wasn't needed, wanted or appreciated anywhere. This was a thought so overwhelming that it seemed pitiful she could not bite that nail down to the quick to get a morsel of relief. To be sent off to help the Führer win the war, all by herself, with nothing but her Faith, an iffy thing in any case—that's when she started nibbling.

"This hurts me more than you," decided Mimi, like parents everywhere, and broke herself a switch.

A vexing child. A nervous, anxious youngster. A constant irritant, courting grief no matter what she did—these were the reasons Mimi finally agreed with school authorities: the task at hand was more maturity, which could be reaped in Germany. And that's why Mimi, who wore the garb of patriot with pride, told Erika, not having any other choice: "I don't know how to tell you this, but you've been singled out."

"For what?"

"To go to Germany for proper grooming. Few youngsters are as lucky. That's what I think. What do you think?"

What did she think? Not much.

Her teacher, too.

"Selection is the greatest honor," the teacher explained in the heartiest voice. "Who's going? You and you and you. Now, everybody cheer!"

"When?"

"Soon."

No date as yet. But soon.

It was a painful time for Erika. She knew that she was not deserving; selection happened by a fluke of luck.

"Don't stare out of the window, Erika. Instead, why don't you give me four good reasons why it right and good to go to Germany?"

"Because it's good for me. Because it is an honor."

"Yes?"

"Because it strengthens character."

"That's right. That is point three. What is point four?"

The color seeped into her temples. The teacher, turning to the class, announced: "I told you Erika was stubborn."

"I can't remember," faltered Erika, confronted with cool faces.

No one expected full perfection, but near-perfection was the goal. Pennants and badges, ribbons and medals—that's how you could tell someone's worth. The road to that was sacrifice, and that's where she fell short. The Führer counted on obedience and duty, and that's what she was lacking. When she had sentry duty, she promptly fell asleep. Her classmates did not miss a single target drill; she found those maddening excuses.

"A bad pain in the neck! A sharp stab in the side," whimpered Erika, invisible to critters big and small except when she was sick.

Next followed several arguments that she already knew.

"You're dying? Is that it?" The teacher gave her a withering glance.

"Aim carefully," the teacher said and pinned another target to a post.

A classmate hissed from both his nostrils: "See how I do it, Erika?"

She did not want to practice target-shoots, not even with an

airgun dummy. With flying hands, she checked the angle of the fire. The backlash knocked her to her knees. Her stomach turned peculiar. Her palms were damp with perspiration. The blood rushed to her head.

She longed to hide herself away so she could dream in solitude. In company, her specialties were fidgeting and twitching.

"At least put something solid in your stomach, Erika," coaxed Baba while doing the finishing touches around the supper table. "Don't pick around your food. Just try to grow some muscle."

She kept ladling her soup. She kept slurping her black ersatz coffee.

A healthy body and a strong, hard will were necessary attributes to help the Führer win. She did not have a body to make the Führer proud, and she decidedly lacked will. She was a quiet, introspective child, but useless in the ways that knowing people valued.

She couldn' even swim across the waterhole of Apanlee—not that she didn't try. No one tried as hard as Erika, and few tried harder with less luck.

One merry morning, for example, just as the leaves were turning red, she mustered every ounce of courage and started out with flailing limbs and bursting lungs while making for the other side, but all too soon, she found herself in an emergency, her eyes just bulging in her skull—it was awful!

Had not Natasha been nearby, busy cutting fodder for the cow, she would have been in dreadful trouble; she would have drowned herself.

"Help! Help!" shrieked Erika, and luckily Natasha fished her out with shouts of terror and the handle of a rake, and even after both sat down and found their breaths, their legs kept quivering.

"What? Have you lost your mind? Why do a stupid thing like that?" Natasha scolded finally, when she could speak again.

"I don't know why," gagged Erika.

Natasha's skin hung loose around her face. She looked like

an old, saddened frog. "Don't give me that. So talk. Speak up. Tell your old Baba, honey."

"You wouldn't understand."

She hunched at Baba's feet. She longed to slip into her arms as though into a down comforter, but even Baba had caught on and shared the spirit of the times in her attempts to clean the world of imperfection. She fussed and grumbled over puddles on the floor she, Erika, left sloppily when she came in from exercises in the fields after a sudden rain.

"I'm just so scared. So scared." Her breath felt raw and ragged. She was so exhausted from striving for perfection she could barely endure it, but she pushed herself on, resolutely. "There's no way out. Oh, Baba."

"You're hand-picked. That should count for something," consoled Natasha lamely, and thereby let her know she, Erika, was not in line for miracles the icons might have granted.

"I'm scared as well," said Baba very softly.

That didn't help a bit. She started hiccuping. She hiccuped at the slightest provocation, and hiccoughs only brought out sneezing. She inched a little closer until her head was in Natasha's lap to let Natasha check. She pointed to her scalp. "There's something itching. Here. Behind the ear."

This, too, was a pretense. She knew that she was squeaky clean; she had no lice, unlike in the olden days when no one had the time to scrub her down and she was left alone for weeks on end because all humankind she knew was forced to slave from dawn to dusk to fill another quota that Dominik dreamed up.

That, too, had changed, and for the better. Now that the Führer was in charge, all children were as clean as though scrubbed with a wire brush, but habit was habit; Natasha made sure. Her old, arthritic hands were soothing.

"Stop worrying. Will you stop worrying? I'll have a talk with Mimi."

That was one avenue already tried in vain. Other children had parents—a mother, for instance, who wore an apron and a bun—but Mimi, ill-equipped for domesticity, just preened her-

self before her mirror, admiring her profile from every conceivable angle and lavishing caressing looks on Jonathan.

"We must abstain from selfish thoughts so that the future can begin. Here, have a glass of water. And stop hiccuping! There is nothing, at this point, to add."

It was a tiresome refrain. She yearned to be like everybody else. She knew that she was not.

Chapter 99

"What Holocaust?" asks Mimi, a depleted and toothless survivor, facing Archibald, who taunts her endlessly.

"You ask?"

"The Germans knew of genocide of their own kin, decades before the word was coined by Hollywood."

That's Mimi, at her feeblest. An ancient veteran of a war she still sees belching out of Hollywood in grotesque shadow plays, she can't let go of it; she claims she knows who started it; she argues with a trembling chin: "What do you people know, snug in your feather quilts? For us, between the two great wars, the Holocaust was real. It was directed against us. It was planned terror, base and raw."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"It was the Jewish architects," she says, "who carried Bolshevism in their blood as lice will carry typhus."

She speaks against his guffaws. "We never heard of it. Where is the evidence?"

"If you want evidence," she says, "just read the Protocols."

At that, the relatives reply in unison: "What Protocols? We

never heard the word."

"How do the Führer's actions weigh," she wants to know with quivers in her voice, tucked deep in Little Melly's pillows to give her spine some warmth, "against that sea of blood that washed away whole generations of our kind? Whole generations! Listen! Good, honest people, whose only so-called 'crime' had been that they had listened to the earth? That they had coaxed the grain the world still eats today? Their crime? That they were Germans? Is that it?"

"Your Führer tried to gobble up the world."

"Against the background of so many ashen years?"

She sits, surrounded by a dozen cousins born after the Korean War, who all stare at her, blankly. Their eyes accuse. They shrink away from her. "Your Führer killed the Jews. Did he not kill six million Jews?"

"Let history decide. But only after it has looked at all the facts."

But sadly, no one listens, and she shrinks back into the doilies and the cushions that still are Little Melly's legacy, and soon she says no more.

"I am too old. It's up to you," said Mimi recently to Erika, who still sees things with her third eye, thanks to her artistry. These days, wherever Erika stops for a night while gleaning history out of the driftage of half a century ago, the air is thick with talk about the Jews and their sinister role in the wars. As she amasses evidence to clear the cobwebs from her thoughts, she hears about the need to clean up royally among the traitors and connivers.

This, too, is ancient fare.

She still remembers clearly. The Führer said: "The Lodges." He said: "The Protocols."

She knows her mother's Führer was the first to utter the forbidden words. She knows, but does not tell. Where are the words to summarize what happened to her family because the Führer came—at zero hour, literally!—and shouted to the approbation

of the bludgeoned millions upon millions: "We must throw off the yoke!" ?

He said. "We must explode the bondage!"

He said: "It's duty now, and nothing else has worth."

He said: "It's us or they. We cannot co-exist."

When Erika was small, the Führer seized the steppe with that thought. The people learned that certain potent words—Freemasons, Bolsheviks, and Jews—were words they could use interchangeably. The Führer spoke of things that many vaguely sensed and many now saw verified. And could it be mere chance, the Führer asked repeatedly, that many carried precious metals in their names? Why, gold bugs! Silver beetles! All!

The Führer's mandate moved into a vacuum just aching to be filled. Here's what the Führer did the moment Jonathan arrived at Apanlee: He was sending the Antichrist reeling.

His panzers kept on mulching acre after acre while Hitler Youth swarmed everywhere, shoes tied around their necks. The people threw their windows open to let the clean air in.

The Führer picked the facts and set them down for people to consider: The Jews were leeches on the body of the universe. The mastermind behind the bloodshed of the previous decades stood finally revealed.

The Jews of yesterday, it was disclosed that year, did not cut glass and tailor pants and sharpen people's knives and scissors—all that was flimflam and bamboozle. Subversion was the key to every single move.

The loot sat in their cellars.

Inside their synagogues, usurers were systematically trained.

Most Jews were sly beyond belief. Not one of them could look you in the eye. No country gave them visas.

You could not pry their secrets out of them.

If left unchecked, they took more than your jewelry and your watches. They stole your ethnic pride. And why? Because you loved your kin; because you valued racial pride, was that enough to ship you to the dungeons of Siberia?

The evidence grew thick. The Mystic Cross commandos came to disinfect the cottages. The cleansing had begun. The Hebrews scrubbed the lavatories with their prayer shawls. The Führer's soldiers trampled on the Talmud.

Few doubted the consistent message, for it had grooves as old as history. It was a well-mapped road. The bulletins that crackled softly from the radio informed of additional meshes of treason.

The argument was simple and grew ever more persuasive: If you had a thorn in the sole of your foot, did you keep it, accepting the pain?

Of course not! That would have been foolish!

You pried that thorn out of your flesh. Survival of a culture was at stake. Fit punishment was for the Führer to decide.

All this the peaceful people knew, and what they didn't know, the death squads rounded out. This was a brutal war; the Führer's*Einsatztruppen* went to work and started shooting people.

It has been more than fifty years. In Mennotown today, it is a daring man who will speak up when government officials come to rifle through old documents in unctuous ways so they can hang old men in Israel to pacify the Jews.

So. There, as here.

And then as now.

It's true.

More dogs and guards arrived. The Jews hid in the bushes, and not without good cause.

This was the sentiment. The Hebrews were perceived by old and young alike to be the cancer of the world. But once the enemy was slain, there would be peace again, not only here at Apanlee where, by Advent, rejoicing people pinched their hams, but north to south and east to west. Peace. Safety. And prosperity.

Horizon to silver horizon.

When special death squads passed through Apanlee and pinned down everybody with their questions: "Where are the skull caps and yarmulkes?" Marleen looked up from her full darning basket, as ever within reach, and said:

"Who? What? Whatever do you mean?"

"Your kin was like a forest. Where are they now? You know whom you must thank for all the murders of your kin."

A tear fell on the sock she knit for Jonathan. She felt her face grow hot. The minutes ticked by slowly.

Two were still left. Her daughter, Mimi. And Mimi's daughter, Erika.

The rest were dead and gone. Her husband, Hein. The twins. Her poor, beheaded babies.

The crippled Uncle Benny and his slim sunshine, Dorothy.

Her countless aunts and uncles. Her cousins—one by one.

She stood aside as death squads went to work in the Ukraine as though a fleet were steaming out to sea. The German soldiers who had come and taken over Apanlee to universal jubilee—this without firing one small shot!—now started filling up the execution pits with tormenters and traitors.

Natasha's icons stared.

Thus was the past peeled off, the future ushered in. The burial mounds that held the past of Apanlee sank deep into the earth. The future had a name again, and it was called the Führer.

Now it was good and bad in deadly rivalry, and good was winning out. Inch by inch and trench by trench, the Wehrmacht was winning the struggle. The steppe was afloat with tanks and anti-aircraft guns, half-trucks, jeeps, armored cars and motorcycles. The radio told of bloody battles. Victorious flags from Stalingrad to Minsk!

The radio crackled softly with the consistent message. The church bells rang. The sidewalks, harrowed crosswise, filled up with eager youngsters, as new, blond, blue-eyed life arose out of the wreckage of the old.

A premium for every newborn child!

Above the hem, embroidery!

In the tumultuous east, the cannons kept on thundering to finish off the Fiend, but here at Apanlee, the lights kept gleaming brightly.

This, too, is history, not taught to anyone.

The forces of the Fatherland triumphed on every front, and what they swept away from Apanlee was terror. From fence to fence, the grateful people knew: a rightful gentry was restored. The smell of disinfectant wafted through the homesteads. The clouds had the scent of clean laundry.

Once again, there was fruit to be given away. There were bushels of turnips. And beets. And potatoes. It was a living thing again, that soil they loved so deeply, that had been so abused for many bitter years.

And best of all, a petrified religion sprang to life and started blooming richly. The martyred people said: "Let us take off our shoes. We are on holy ground."

Natasha kept mopping her forehead in silence.

As often as her chores allowed, she took herself to church, where she sat, pondering the fate of Dominik, who was still hiding out. Her swollen eyes were on her priest who blessed the armies of the Führer.

"Christ has risen! Christ has risen!" the priest was chanting fervently, while incense swirled about him. The priest held his icons aloft while the faithful kept shouting for Jesus.

"Where is he? Where is he hiding out?" they shouted.

Natasha hunched with shame, like some black beetle, while mockery and scorn flared all around her. She shook her head. She bit her lips. Her Dominik was still her son. He never was her favorite; he had his faults—but on the other hand, he tried to meet the Five Year Plan in four. He plied himself with drinks and wicked friends and grew an itching spirit.

All that, she knew. She didn't argue facts. But even she could see that it was not his fault alone—he acted under someone else's orders. Whose orders? That's where her questions stopped.

How could an old, gnarled nursemaid know who'd goaded Dominik to slash and burn and kill? She couldn't tell. She didn't have a clue. But this she knew with certainty: for Dominik, nobody cried a tear.

A gray and clammy film spread through the niches of her heart as she sat, listening. The faithful chanted loudly, their voices rising to the ceiling: "Where is he hiding out?"

The old oak creaked and moaned; she listened and her heart beat faster to the sound. The priest went outside, swinging incense, as he had done in olden days before the Revolution came and drove him underground.

Now he was back, and nothing much had changed. She watched him chant, smoke swirling all around him, as he advised the congregation mournfully: "—and nowhere can the Savior Jesus Christ be found."

"He has risen!" came the chorus. "He's safe. Oh! He has risen! He has risen!"

"Indeed! Indeed! He has risen indeed," Natasha joined the chant, her old glance in her lap.

That was the year when life turned lush for Mimi.

It was a sensuous thing, a deeply satisfying thing, this matter of Faith in the Führer and love for the man of her dreams. For she loved Jonathan.

Before the Wehrmacht came, she, too, had married and conceived, for that was what you did in haste in the grueling Stalinist years. If a girl wanted love—and she did! —she better be fast and not choosy.

So Mimi, too. She, too, had grabbed a man and married him before somebody came and said: "Come with us. Walk or die!"

Everything about her young, unlucky husband became a hazy blur. She could scarcely remember his voice. By now, no doubt, the tundra was bleaching his bones, though his features survived in the child.

Now she had Erika. Now it was motherhood, and that was difficult.

She had no frame of reference, for nothing ever had belonged to Mimi to do with as she wished. As far back as she could remember, all thoughts, all things, all living flesh belonged to Comrade Stalin, to sate his fiendish mood.

Love, even for a daughter as gifted as her own, was a decided luxury. If you attached yourself to luxury, tomorrow it was gone.

She often stared at Erika, confounded in her soul. She found her overwhelming.

When Jonathan arrived at Apanlee and fell in love with Mimi, she learned that she no longer had to measure up to two opposing ideologies. She could have both. A family. And Faith.

She drank Faith straight, and on an empty stomach.

She took Faith hungrily from Jonathan's hard lips that tasted of summer and hay. She loved him utterly.

He was as fearsome as a tiger, yet gentle as a dove. His idol was the Führer; soon, he was hers as well. As far as she could see, the Führer won hands down. He was Christ walking on the waters. His *Landsers* filled the steppe, end to end, with certainty and trust.

She kicked aside the last rung of the Christian Faith that had sustained her kin for centuries and never once looked back.

Instead, she looked around and saw that all was orderly and calculated to the tiniest dot, as a fresh vigor rose, proficient and triumphant, from ashen days and brutal nights.

The mail came each morning at nine. It was carried in fat, bulging pouches, and with it came instructions.

Pink for perverts.

For Jews, a yellow triangle.

For Gypsies, a brown triangle.

Life wasn't any worse for having certain rules. She threw her all into the new equation, this long before the Indian summer gathered clouds. She was famished for order, for love and romance. Her body was throbbing with longing; the Führer's promises were as restorative as freshly brewed coffee with cream.

In fair exchange, she longed to help the Führer. She was

often too tired to eat, but never too tired to help.

"Whatever must be done, I'll do," said Mimi, and helped the cook who ordered sugar by the bucket and flour by the sackload to stock the gulash cannons.

She helped unload the wounded soldiers who came to Apanlee in intermittent batches, who all went home to Germany to heal and to return—but not before she made sure that they had a hot bowl of Marleen's tasty chicken soup to steel them for the journey.

Outside, the wind blew hard. The Wehrmacht fought at Stalingrad. The flames kept licking around logs. The Führer promised once again he would restore the world to peace, prosperity and plenty.

The Führer had no choice but to start weeding out the Jews, said Jonathan as well, explaining every question mark: "Karl Marx? Descended on both sides from a long line of rabbis."

As a result: The ghostly columns, their design. The dungeons, of their making.

She fiddled with the radio. She knew he spoke for everyone. "Around here, no one liked them much. Nobody ever thought that they were pleasant people."

All that was ancient fare. The stories about rabbis and their treacheries went back for generations. No ruler ever liked the Jews. No monarch ever trusted them.

"We cannot co-exist," said Jonathan.

She listened silently. She measured the life she had traveled and was content with what the *Landsers* brought when they arrived at Apanlee. She felt no need to hate, but neither did she feel averse to what he clarified for her. She nodded sleepily. A hard day lay behind her, a harder day was still to come, but there was safety now. No fear. No famine. And no purges.

She fit herself into his arms as tightly as she could. "You're right. We cannot co-exist."

She had been born to blood and nursed on blood and walked in blood as long as she remembered. A quarter century had come

and gone before she even realized there lay a world outside the gates of Apanlee where Satan wasn't feasting on the marrow of her kin. Now everything made sense. Now, finally, the shoe was on the other foot, which was where it belonged.

Now deep and dreamless sleep came over her at night. Stalin's henchmen weren't swarming Apanlee like bedbugs—taunting, biting and tormenting.

She felt no contradiction. The power of the Ten Commandments was in force. The poorest peasant had a pig again to spoil as if it were a child. A farmer was again the master of his soil, allowed to grow enough to feed his cattle and his horses, and no one came to confiscate the harvest he had coaxed with diligence and honesty out of the willing soil. It all made sense to Mimi. She wasn't raised to hate. But neither was she raised to maudlin charity. Why should she pity them—the Jews? They had not pitied Yuri.

Now it was reaping time: they reaped what they had sowed. If you sowed oats, you did not harvest barley.

It all had happened before. No doubt it would happen again. It was sad, but the Hebrews had never been part of her world until the Revolution came, replacing plows with bayonets.

There was nothing that she could have added.

Not so with Jonathan. Bloodlines had meaning for him; he couldn't let go; he was haunted.

To reassure himself, he took a week to trace his ancestry. For hours, Jonathan hunched over brittle, yellow charts and mildewed documents, while outside the ambulances, baggage cars, horses, wagons and field kitchens kept on streaming by.

"I had a hundred cousins once," he said to Mimi, who never left his side. "Where are they now?"

She smiled and teased him gently. "There's one right here, and sitting next to you."

"My heart thirsts for revenge," he said, and there was something in the noise the Wehrmacht made that sounded like the angry growling of a river.

"I'll make you some hot tea."

He took her hand. "Am I upsetting you? You are as near and dear to me as though you were my eyes."

"At least drink one glass to the bottom." Her heart—within a bed of flowers. Outside, the wind might howl; within her heart, the lilacs bloomed, petunias nodded everywhere. "Then why not tie the knot?"

He did not even hear.

He was a soldier to his finger tips, obsessed with vengeance and redress, intent on retribution.

Chapter 100

There was no end of small, heart-broken groups who found their way to Apanlee to catalogue their grievances. They queued up in the halls.

"A wrecker of the Soviet State, that's what they called my grandfather," said one.

"Why such a charge?"

"His crime? They found some hidden grain."

Another spoke of the compelling urge of spring. "My father felt the March wind on his temples and knew that he must sow. They came for him and asked: 'And don't you know, you traitor and you wrecker, that our glorious Soviet Union is entitled to your strength?'"

A third had this to say: "I had seven sons. Now I have none. My children, beasts of burden, earmarked for early death. At point of gun, they took them, one by one."

"—and thus there walked out of my life forever my father, my three brothers—"

"—eight of my uncles and my grandfather, accused of having thieved."

"We took vast, numbing shocks," said the survivors, tears falling freely. "Gone! Gone! All gone! My family is gone!"

"Six of my sons. The winter might have killed them. Wolves might have torn their flesh apart. All our loved ones. Gone."

The accusations flowed. There was no end to them.

Whole generations, learned the *Landsers*, while scribbling, pencils poised, had perished in the swamps and silent forests of Siberia.

"They beat us, one by one," the purging people wept. "We were beaten until we were reeling." They took the soldiers by the sleeves and begged. "Count. Village after village. They beat us with their clubs and whips into the waiting cattle cars to chafe in the quarries of death. Life tossed to all four winds—"

"—worse than the galley slaves of ancient times."

The women from the neighborhood sat weeping on the steps of Apanlee and told the Führer's troops: "Somewhere deep in the wastes of Russia lie our people's graves—"

"—no crosses, stones or markers."

"—and if you pass them on your way to victory, please say a prayer that this heartache be avenged—"

The soldiers' eyes were murky with their thoughts, and you could hear them drawing in their breaths as story after story came revealed.

"Name. Date. And nature of the charge."

"If you were German, that was sufficient cause for exile to Siberia or instant execution."

And now the Führer did what God had never done, despite a hundred thousand pleas dispatched to His heavenly throne: he lent a listening ear. His soldiers replied with the thinnest of smiles: "Will mercy do if it sustains the parasites so they can weaken and torment the strong?"

The weeping people said: "The blood seeped from the dungeons of the Beast."

"The Jewish-Soviet Beast," the Führer's soldiers countered. "And when it smiles—why, it has gold and silver in its teeth."

For years on end, the Lord had watched them being slaughtered for their soil and He had never interfered. Now divine judgment had arrived; the liberating forces stood beneath their snapping flags and smiled; the Führer filled the length and width of the Ukraine with retribution, certainty and trust.

Whole armies moved to do his bidding. Outside, marching soldiers sang their songs about the Fatherland for which they bled and died—all that, while soldiers kept on searching for subversives and guerrillas in the bushes.

The sun kept blazing for a while, but then October came. The wind was tormenting the trees. Natasha built and lit the morning fires, telling Mimi carefully, speaking with a leaden tongue: "Your breakfast's on the stove."

"We'll find the culprits, one by one," said Mimi, confident. "We'll squash them like so many gnats."

Alarm sprang like a tiny flame into Natasha's eyes. She bent to tie a shoelace. She muttered while she fussed and straightened this and that: "I had a frightful dream. Please. Why not spare yourself?"

"We cannot win this war unless the gloves come off."

That night, Natasha walked along the street, her old head swiveling this way and that, just drawing in fresh air.

Meanwhile, the folders thickened. The torches in the fields outside cast darting, dancing shadows. Here was the Mystic Cross, its spikes bent sideways, roaring for revenge and retribution. Who would not have believed? Who would not have agreed?

A widow waited for her turn. She had prepared and memorized all night.

Here's how she testified, tears streaming down her face: "They came for Alexei, my oldest son, and pulled him out of bed and called him an exploiter of the poor. He walked away with them."

The soldiers tried to dry her tears: "When we are finished punishing, there will be no more wars."

She barely heard the litany, so swept was she with sorrow. "Next day, they came for Anatole, my second son. He left with

them. Blows fell on him from every direction—"

"We need details. Do you have any names?"

"My third, whose name was Konstantin, was led away to face the firing squad. The day was dark and rainy—"

The soldiers told this woman: "Speak up and answer freely. Say, who controlled the ink in Russia? Who carved up every thought?"

They asked: "Who drove a stake into your heart and twisted it unceasingly? Who benefited from your pain? Who needed slaves for labor in Siberia to chafe and die like beasts?

The answer, manifest to all. The Jewish canker? Bolshevism. Its aim? It's purpose? Genocide. The wholesale slaughter of all Christians.

Natasha tried to listen like a mouse to what the neighbors said. From a safe distance always, she tried to overhear them. She was a lowly Russian peasant by the stove who had, by then, a chalky look about her nose. They did not watch their voices.

A timid spinster testified: "We owned a hut and a few animals. Therefore, my father was accused of counterrevolution."

The soldiers asked repeatedly: "Who was responsible? A name. That's all we need. A name."

They gave Natasha hooded looks. She trembled by the stove.

"He took the milk the cow produced, the eggs out of the chicken coop—"

"Who's he? That's all we need. A name."

"—he taxed our horses, heifers, chickens, beehives."

"Soon, there was nothing more to take. His goons—"

"—his goons came, and they started shooting!"

"With my own eyes, I inspected the blood-spattered wall."

"We went the length of Apanlee," said many weeping women, "and loaded our dead. We took a ladder, fastened it to chains and hitched a borrowed horse."

It didn't matter that Natasha, by the stove, slumped suddenly and lost her breath.

They said: "He gave the orders. He's the one." The neighbors

formed a circle, holding hands. They spoke with hardened tongues. "He was the worst. That one was game for any cruelty. No man escaped the meshes of his might. A name? We know his name. Behind his name, his signature—a thousand miles of snow."

They also said: "He wore the devil's pentagram while our people, by the thousands, were made to walk on cardboard soles into the icy tomb."

And finally they said: "See that old Baba over there? She gave him life. He was her no-good son."

The people pitied her, but right was right, and wrong was wrong. The chorus grew until it filled the universe: "Where is the lout, Natasha?"

· She fought as any mother would have fought. On wooden legs, she ran to find Marleen to plead her son's lost cause.

Marleen's reply came from averted eyes: "I'm pitching the hay, can't you see?"

Marleen had cotton in her ears. Her face was as red as a flame. Here's what she said to her old maid: "We ran through his fingers like water."

"But don't you—"

"No. I pity you. He is your son, but he was marching to the cadence of the Beast."

Natasha heaped insults on Marleen; she shrieked at her; she even cuffed her once or twice, but Marleen took Natasha by the elbow and ordered her: "Out with the truth. Where do you keep him hidden, Baba?"

Thus came the end for Dominik, Natasha's only son. She tried to stop them with her body; they trampled over her. No grain shocks helped to camouflage the spot where Dominik was hiding like a mole, right in Natasha's lean-to, behind the cattle fence.

She sat there, hunched, and watched him vault and somersault and race in desperation for the street, fleeing the bellows of rage. She jumped up and ran shouting: "Take your feet in your

hands! Run! Run! Dominik, run!" and somebody shouted over her: "Here! This one's for you, you monster! Take your own medicine—" and everything turned afterwards into a big and bloody blur while someone tackled Dominik and threw him to the ground.

In triumph and in chains, they led him across town to the old, frozen tree, and there they put a shovel in his hand and said to him: "All right! Now! It's your turn."

He did an awkward job. His stolen glasses fogging over, he dug his grave beneath the heart that Hein had carved for a young girl one hot and muggy afternoon—that day when she forgot herself and slipped into his arms as though into a pouch, and afterwards Hein stroked her hair and gave her an enameled dish, for she was young and sweet and full of life, believing that the saints had power over all.

The soldiers made short shrift. Precision was their specialty. One bullet sent him sprawling.

It was a cold, wet, windy day. Natasha saw it all; she wasn't spared; nobody ever spared Natasha, but she was not alone, for to her right stood Mimi, and to her left, Marleen, and clinging to her legs was Erika, not even twelve years old, as timid as a rabbit, though she came from that extraordinary family who knew that right was right and wrong was wrong. No leeway in the middle.

Thus Erika watched all.

She watched Natasha hug the tree. She just clung hard to Baba's knees and felt her wet herself. She knew the neighbors pitied her old Baba, but it was more—too deep for words, too dark for any text. And then the bullet flew, and afterwards Marleen said to Natasha, gently:

"Come, Baba. Let us walk around the block—" while the entire populace shrank back.

They walked away. Together.

That day, it rained—a rain that turned to sleet. Black clouds were drifting through the skies. The trees stood dark and shad-

owy. Leaves shuffled underfoot. The world was broken twigs.

The day when justice came to Apanlee, a young girl heard Marleen say to her dearest Baba: "Were Yuri still alive today—" and Baba muttered from the depths of her own sorrow: "Oh, Marleen. Marleen. Yes. Oh, I remember. I remember—" and Marleen's jaw was set and hard and Baba's gaze was colorless while finishing the thought: "—were Yuri still alive today, he would be forty years of age—"

Marleen walked stoically. She held her frayed umbrella over Baba.

Chapter 101

Some people still ask: "Why the Führer?" The answer is simplicity itself.

Had he been a sadist, it would have been different. Had he been a clown, it would have been different. Had he been a man with damp hands and a lopsided smile, he could not have lasted three days. But he was none of those.

He was a sorcerer, conferring sumptuous gifts the likes of which the anguished creed of Apanlee had never dreamed existed—and asking nothing but obedience in exchange. It was the fairest of concessions, and all surrendered to it willingly.

Good people everywhere took up the cry: "Let us have cleanliness again. Let us have order! Safety! Bread! Let's do away with chaos and corruption! Let us rebuild the things the Antichrist destroyed!"

The end result was: lots of pikes and spades. And all the while, from the convulsing earth came fat, black fumes—not of decay but of renewal. That's how it was. That's why.

The queues were gone. The horses were faultlessly groomed. The chickens, plucked clean and strung up by their legs, were

waiting for the pot. The stew was thick; you stuck your spoon in it, and it did not tip over. The chain of lorries never broke. The horses' bridles gleamed. Where *Landsers* marched, white handkerchief soon fluttered. Small children lined the roads with flowers in their hands.

"Ein junges Volk steht auf
zum Sturm bereit
haut die Schranken doch zusammen, Kameraden—"
Wir fühlen nahen unsere Zeit
Ja, die Zeit der jungen Soldaten—"

The lyrics were a kind that Erika had never heard before, but she learned fast; she sang as loudly as she could and filled her lungs with air. Oh, how those soldiers sang! Their field flasks, filled with pure, unsullied water, dangled from their leather belts as their Faith rose heavenward to let it be known that terror had come to an end.

"Und welcher Feind
auch kommt
Mit Macht und List
seid nur ewig treu, ihr Kameraden
Der Herrgott, der im Himmel ist,
liebt die Treue der jungen Soldaten—"

Nobody doubted the Führer would win. His panzers kept gobbling up miles. On trembling knees, his generals held maps marked with a shower of black crosses. Large cities fell into his pocket. Before the year was out, the onion domes shook to the fire of his cannons, while the vituperative enemy, the peaceful people learned, already trembled in his trousers. The solstice fires flared. The foe's forehead was covered with droplets. The young folk harvested potatoes, and cowardice and flabbiness were out.

When she was chosen as a member of the troop of handpicked children to be sent to Germany to be prepared for leadership, it was a great surprise to Erika. In fact, it was a shock.

"You've been selected for the highest honor," the teacher said,

puffed up with great importance. "What luck, to go to Germany, all by yourself, and help the Führer win the war."

That is how she was told that she would have to leave the only place she knew, maybe not ever to return. She was flooded with fear and frustration. She wanted to stay there, in Apanlee, with everybody else. She wanted to grow up, grow old, grow fat at Apanlee, like everybody else. Had anyone known of her feelings, there would have been hisses and hoots.

Nobody guessed the depth of mutiny.

"If you need an example, consider the Führer," said the teacher, for instance, reflecting the prevailing view, and fixing a stern, blue stare. When she entered the classroom, all children stood, shouting: "Heil Hitler!" Her finest pupils were allowed to shine her shoes for Sunday.

This teacher told her daily: "It is an honor, Erika. I call upon your mental discipline. You wish to serve. Don't you?"

"I do not want to go," thought Erika, hunkering beneath her ink-stained desk, and started biting on that hangnail, now burning like a tiny flame.

"You realize that it is of paramount importance to obey. There's nothing more important than nobility of service."

That wasn't it. The teacher had it wrong. Nobility of service was something Erika knew well because the trait was bred into her genes for countless generations. As far as she knew, the world was engaged in a chivalrous war; the Führer called upon her willingness; the Wehrmacht fanned its forces east and ever deeper east and drove its armored wedges deep into the heart of Russia to free the world from doom. The *Landsers* still marched eastwards.

The only trouble was: the trains returning from the front went west, and many now carried the wounded.

Jonathan stayed on at Apanlee for quite a while. The Wehrmacht staffers needed him: he spoke both Russian and Ukrainian fluently. His voice was throwing sparks.

He made the future clear to Mimi. "We'll craft an earthly

paradise," he told her many times. "As soon as we have scrubbed the scum and cleansed the world again, there will be bread for all."

She asked to anchor love. "Why not settle down as a family man?"

"As soon as we have won the war," said Jonathan, to camouflage and to protect himself, for soldiering came first.

She looked him over, head to toe. He was a man; he did not like to show his feelings openly, but she had no such reservations. Her love for him was absolute.

"I'm waiting, don't you know?" she said, hooked like a fish on Faith. "I love you, Jonathan."

She did not leave his side. The autumn afternoon still warmed her blood; the sky was vast, a white-flecked field of cotton. Her feelings, all of them, lay naked in the sun.

"I love you dearly, too. But first things first."

He forced down sentiment. He tried to steel himself. He saw himself as wedded to the Wehrmacht with one supreme command: to slay the Antichrist.

He tried to tell her that. He often said to her while she felt faint all over: "Chest upon chest and fist against fist, we must wrestle with the Spoiler, the Deceiver, with the Killer of all Culture, with the Jew."

She had no reply to his anger. She did not even hear, for she had her own dialogue. "If not today, then when?"

She felt pleasure in looking at herself. Each evening, when all the work was done, she sudsed herself and sang. Afterwards, she met him by the gate. She felt his muscles ripple; his body spoke a language all its own. She rested her head on his shoulder. She loved him; and he loved her back; both longed to propagate. She felt no deep responsibility toward herself or toward others, but she was human, yearning; in fact she was still virginal in thought if not in deed. She changed her chemise in her closet.

He said again: "It's us against them. It's that simple."

Who were his enemies? The Bolsheviks and Jews. He spoke

of them as one.

She knew half of the bitter equation.

He fleshed out the details. "It is the Hooked Cross," he said to her while she leaned cozily against him, "against the crooked nose."

"It must be so," said Mimi. She had been raised in blood and treachery and never known a life that didn't include firing squads. She who had lived so many bludgeoned years, conflicted in her loyalties, confused as to her nationality, had found her anchor now. The shoe was on the other foot, and that was no surprise.

She kept on watching him with shining eyes. She was allured. Bewitched. And time was of the essence. Natasha, black with age, observed the mating dance despite her lowered lashes.

Now that the Jews were finally revealed to Mimi as the instigators of the massacres of twenty bloody years—as guilty as the fiends of hell for having used the likes of Dominik to do their bloody deeds, as Jonathan explained—she cast away all doubt. The things she hadn't known before were now revealed to her, and it all fit a pattern. The sparrows pecked for bugs and worms. It was part of a natural law.

In turn, she passed it on. "The new millennium is here," she said to Erika. "And we must do our part."

"All right. All right," said Erika, who stuck as close to Jonathan as modesty allowed.

That way, she was like Mimi. She never missed a word. She gave the handsome *Landser* all the love she had stored up inside, and still had lots to spare.

"Perhaps tomorrow you and I—" she said, but he was busy elsewhere.

She ached for constancy. She had never had a father; he was as good as dead; the ice had swallowed him. She was not close enough to Mimi to think of her with love.

And Jonathan? He did not love her equally. He was in love with Mimi; he was enthralled by Mimi, and precious were the afternoons when he would take her clammy hand in his to talk

her fears away.

Between the girl and Mimi lay a gargantuan abyss. Here was another mystery impossible to solve; she, Erika, knew only that she was a minor minion and would have had no chance at all for anything, had it not been for Jonathan.

"She's prettier than I'll ever be, " she told him once, to which he merely smiled and gave her one quick hug.

"Yes, she is beautiful."

When Jonathan arrived and brought with him the might of Germany and fell in love with Mimi, she was a young and eager woman with one small daughter, that was all! a girl whose arms and legs had not yet grown harmoniously, but who had something in her eyes that needed to be calmed.

"More discipline," decided Mimi, and signed the travel papers to send the child away.

She acted on an ancient script. She was not good; she was not bad; she was the product of her times. She put her own life in the Führer's hands and let it go at that.

She had no false illusions. She knew that she was not exceptional. She needed Faith and certainty—the kind her martyred brothers knew—Faith in a future, in safety, in goodness. Her *Landser* filled that gap.

She counted on her fingers.

There was Marleen's odd brand of Faith that told her black was white and death was life and graves were resurrection. "My Lord has yet to fail me," Marleen said many times, against the brutest evidence, while dabbing at her eyes.

That would not do for Mimi. She was not foolish, like Marleen, an old-fashioned, faithful believer. Now that the Elders were allowed again to gospel His disciples, Marleen went to devotions faithfully and never missed a service, but church was not for Mimi. She could not see one single shred of evidence that God was good—against that idea rebelled not only her reason but her innermost instinct of justice. The God of yesterday, Marleen's beloved Lord, was an Invented Being. He had per-

mitted travesties for which a man would have been hanged or shot.

To wit, the villain Dominik who broke Natasha's heart.

Faith had not helped Natasha. Her useless saints smiled vacant smiles into her silence and her daze. Natasha had loved Dominik, her only rightful son, but then the death squads came and shot him dead and took him by the legs and threw him in the hole he had dug for himself. Once that was over with, Natasha never said a word.

These days Natasha shared her hut with chickens, piglets, and young calves, as she had done when she was young. Sometimes she stumbled; once she fell; but kept her Faith intact. Her face was gaunt; her knees were wobbly, full of knots; but she was back; she worked again at Apanlee, albeit at her leisure, she laid and lit Marleen's best fires. Without complaint, she carried her two water buckets on a chain tied to a yoke that lay across her shoulders. She still did all the laundry, as she had always done.

The older and the crankier she grew, the more she could do as she pleased, but never once did she let go of Faith that told her, black on white, that serfs were serfs and masters, masters. As in the olden days.

Had she put down her foot and said: "I will not wash another dish—" nobody would have said a word. She could have rebelled. But she didn't. A lifetime's work had twisted her, had nearly doubled her over; she was no longer quick in movement, and it was clear to all that she no longer earned her keep. Still, no one said a word.

Then there was Dewey's bitter Faith—the kind that dangled Jesus Christ while holding nourishment aloft. When she was small herself, younger than Erika was now, Mimi tried that one for size, and it had left her hungrier than before.

She well remembered him: a pesky missionary.

She had been sickened to her soul by Dewey's brand of Faith; she wanted none of that. By nature she was anything but philosophical, but this she knew instinctively: he violated what was

best in her with slime and sham and muck.

Then, as she grew into a teenager, she had put all her Faith in Stalin and joined the Pioneers. There was a time when Mimi, too, believed, that Stalin had the answers, as did the best of her young, hungry generation. That led to nowhere, either. That kind of Faith asked her to toss red flowers in the grave the neighbors dug for Yuri. The rage and anguish of her brother's execution had never left her heart.

And Sasha? Where was Sasha? Had faith helped Sasha one iota?

Not one small word about his whereabouts. The howls of winter had long swallowed Sasha. Such was his sorry end, despite the psalms that he had carried in a leather pouch to keep them safe from rain.

For years, the memory of her two martyred bothers had haunted Mimi, day and night; now it was gone; the Wehrmacht had swept it away. Autumn came early; the orchards were fragrant with fruit, and Mimi followed Faith in Fatherland and Führer as though it were a river.

The Führer spared no words, announcing he would have his *Landsers* walk the cobblestones of Moscow well before the year ran out of days, and, as a prelude to the final push for victory, he had his pincers opened wide to crush the old, defiant city of the tsars.

That victory would be the outcome, few doubted then, or later. The Führer was invincible; the evidence was there; his armies were already mauling Moscow. His soldiers were magnificent. They matched defiance with defiance, steel with more steel, each bullet with ten bullets.

But all that mattered not to Mimi. Above all else, the Führer handed her the tapestry of true romance, along with inner worth. All feelings of deep shame for wanting both—a Party to respect and follow and a family to love—were gone. The Führer said she could have both. She would. He moved her back into the ethnic fold where all was warm and good.

She was so much in love with Jonathan she couldn't eat or sleep. Her love flowed out from her like water from a tap; there was no end to it; her heart felt light and airy.

Her days were filled with work that gave her joy; her nights were warm with fires that threw scented sparks in the air. It was a moving time. She was in love with him; he was in love with her; the world was finally awash with certainty, although there always was to Jonathan, regrettably, a darkness and a fatalism that grated on her soul.

"If you dig deep enough, somewhere you'll find a Levi," he told her one more time, to which she had nothing noteworthy to say.

She wanted to placate; she did not want to hate. She could no more have changed her placid and accommodating nature than she could plow a cloud.

She watched him light himself a cigarette when memories came flooding in and smoke it hungrily. She knew that he was thinking of that childhood night she had once shared with him—a night so violent that it would take forever to cast it off for good. Yet odd to say, it unified. It welded her to him. And as the days grew shorter and chill came to the night, she sensed that hatred for the murderers who bloodied every room of Apanlee was now his driving force.

"We cannot co-exist," he told her one more time.

He started pacing back and forth in silence. She watched in fascination. He was lighting one cigarette butt on the next. His voice was thick with anguish. "We are condemned to win. We have the evidence. It's Jews who carried Bolshevism on their back the way a louse might carry typhus. There can't be compromise. It's us or them. That's it."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Trotsky—a Jew. Lenin—a Jew through his maternal grandfather's side. Karl Marx, descended on both sides from a long line of rabbis—"

She nodded, feeling sleepy. She did not need the Führer to

give her the hard facts. By heart, she knew the arguments that Jonathan outlined.

No wonder that he didn't like the Jews. Whoever liked the Jews? Nobody but nobody. The tsars had hated them with fury, and Stalin had not liked them, either; he often talked about their boils and biles and avarice and greed.

She countered, hoping that her voice would coax that rare, slow smile, and thereby soften him: "I know. I know. They all have large ears and sly smiles."

"What have they ever done except to live by usury and greed? How do they exist? How do they survive? By looting the rest of the world."

That, too. She knew about their habits of deception, trickery and greed. The liberated citizens of Russia, down to the lowliest peasant, were burning with fire and fury and wrath.

"Nobody ever wanted Jews except, perhaps, uncouth democracies. Look at America. That's where they nest. That's where they burrow, plot, and scheme. It will catch up with them."

She knew Jews liked to spread unrest; she didn't disagree at all; these things were understood; the point was that she did not share his hate. Hate wasn't in her nature.

"A thousand years and more," said Jonathan, fine shivers on his back, "all Europe stood united hating Jews, despising Jews, and persecuting Jews. Our world will know no peace until we drain the abscess."

She understood that he would feel like that, because he was a man, but she felt no such thing. She did not know a single Jew who had hurt anyone. But on the other hand—now that he pointed out the obvious—she was hard-pressed to come up with a single one of whom the neighborhood spoke kindly. She knew the ancient tale. She knew the bearded anarchists of yesterday that always carried bombs to shred the tsars all carried Hebrew names. The tsars had hanged them and beheaded them and sent them to Siberia—and come the Revolution, what was the end-result?

Rosa Luxemburg Streets. Karl Marx Communes.

Now Jonathan was pointing out the same. He was a soldier

and a man; he lived by strange, unyielding rules. She sighed and leaned against him tenderly. She closed her eyes and let him talk. Talk seemed to soothe his feelings.

He added, and his voice shook: "We fight against an enemy that feeds on human marrow," and Mimi said: "I know."

Chapter 102

"Well? Are you ready, Erika?"

The choice had fallen like a hammer. It was already getting difficult to sort out in her heart whom she would miss the most. An afternoon went by before her heart stopped jumping.

Worse yet, there was no counter-argument—for she was getting on in years; another birthday was already coming up; and once that happened, she was old enough for Germany and no excuse would do. No saving margin left.

And in the meantime—discipline! And even though it had been hard enough in Soviet Russia to prove your worth and show exceptionality in sportsmanship beneath the Stalin frown, now it was even harder to please the Führer likewise, and—with no disrespect to anybody else!—the Führer was the best.

Therefore, Erika kept trying hard, for that was in her nature. She did not easily give up. She was a law-and-order person, too—in fact, when it came to obeying rules, she was one of the best.

She inspected herself in the mirror as though she were a stranger. She looked trim from tip to toe. Her shoulders were

straight. Her chin was held high. She looked presentable enough. The day she was chosen to carry the flag, even Natasha dropped dishes and towel and rushed to the window to see.

"Ein junges Volk
steht auf
zum Sturm bereit—"

The youngsters shouted lustily, and Erika did, too. She tried with all her might, while sighing and clucking along, determined to absorb that full, rich sense of goodness that was the future now.

She wore a smart, black skirt and snow-white blouse and a black handkerchief pulled through a leather ring. She stood to the left of the flagpole as though she had swallowed a ruler. She did her best to hoist the Führer lightning, as high as she could hoist it. She shouted herself raw:

"We are marching for Hitler
through night and through darkness,
with the flag of youth snapping
for freedom and bread—"

She helped to hang huge swastikas. The wind gusts kept scattering grain. Natasha was now pickling gherkins, and after that was done, it was the melon patch.

While Erika was waiting to be shipped to Germany, which could be any day—her suitcase was already packed and sitting in a corner—her duties were many and varied.

She filled her calendar with female domesticity. She gave her spare time to the Winter Aid. She strove to be politically reliable. She practiced her irregular verbs, for she was a studious youngster. She might forget to tie a shoe lace and trip on her own whimsy, because her thoughts were elsewhere, she never forgot an assignment. She stood at the top of her class; she had a quick mind and more wordsmithing talent than most if not all of her classmates; but that counted not; her racial essays counted not, and neither did her penmanship. She was a klutz. A klutz was not especially admired.

"When will you ever learn to do a cartwheel properly?" the teacher said, dispensing a withering glance.

"Tomorrow," whispered Erika, and all her classmates laughed.

They all despised her properly. The trapeze and parallel bars were their turf.

"Why not today?"

Why not? Her dreams got in the way.

"She is a child like any other child," said even Jonathan. "Just give her time. She'll learn."

But no. He had that wrong. Deep down, where she had learned to keep a murky, warm cocoon where she hid every dream, there was an acid knowledge: There was nothing heroic within her.

Even her shadow was thin: no wonder.

While others improved on their ideological growth, she sat and stared out of the window. The teacher talked of duty; she fought against a sneeze.

And when that happened, there were jeers. Her dreams got in the way.

It had to be a state of mind—no telling what Erika dreamed!

No two of her dreams were alike. That was the story of her life—bad luck because she dreamed. As soon as she put out the light, she dreamed. The moment she woke up, she dreamed. She even starved the calf because she dreamed, while milking the last drop out of a cow, not even noticing. Dreams were a terrible affliction. As much as possible, she kept them to herself, which was not always easy.

"She has a yen for the power of words. She plays with them as though they were smooth pebbles," said Jonathan one afternoon before the sun dropped back into the furrows, which was another way of saying without saying that Erika loved poetry.

That made her wish that she could cry without risking additional margin on which she was forging her worth, for chances were that Jonathan had been informed by then she was a hopeless klutz, since everybody knew.

With dusk came melancholy. Always.

She brushed against him with her pinkie. Somehow he seemed to understand just why she dreamed with eloquence against that murky fear, that nameless threat that had to do with leaving Apanlee, the place where she belonged. The limpid summer that brought Jonathan to Apanlee had given her at least one friend who understood implicitly why she was out of luck.

That is the strongest memory she carries to this day, that Jonathan found time for her once he discovered what she feared. To this day, when she thinks of Jonathan, she thinks of gentleness and kindly understanding. Although he was in combat uniform and trying not to show his sadness that soon he would be gone as well—for he would travel east to finish off the Antichrist with his bare hands while she was going west—he never hurried her. He never ordered her: "Snap out of it! This minute!"

He, too, lived on probation.

He took her right hand in his left and off they went, out for a walk. She could depend on him. Nobody else could spare the smallest minute.

Had it not been for Jonathan, she would have had no one. She worshipped Jonathan. She walked on tiptoes around Jonathan. His heart and hers were like two ladybugs, just talking with their wings.

"I'm just so scared," she told him once, and he replied with a small squeeze to ease her tensing shoulder:

"Let that be our secret."

Here was a true-blue friend, pretending not to see the spineless fear devouring her red heart. Somehow he understood the things she never even uttered, which was itself a miracle. He understood precisely why, instead of thrilling to the news that she was singled out for leadership, she was so woebegone inside that nothing seemed to help.

She built bridge after bridge with his help.

"There is a soul inside your body that eons have refined," he said to her, and bittersweet tranquility would settle in her heart

like silver. "And it cries out for family. Soil. Place and roots. Tranquility and permanence. You are too little now. One day you'll understand. Your nature is the consummate translation of your past. You are of peasant stock."

He spoke of a glorious future while rapping his boots with his stick. Pro-military, every inch of him, he nonetheless found words of sympathy and comfort until she was floating on air.

"We have to pay since nothing comes for free. I know the price is steep. The future makes it worth it. The Führer knows whoever holds the key to a child's heart owns the key to a glorious tomorrow."

As though she were a grown-up, he told her more and more.

"It will be a fight to the marrow. There is a force out there that does not want the clean, the good, the beautiful. It gorges itself on decay. It hates all that is healthy. And you are healthy, Erika. You have a lucid mind."

Easy for him to say. If Jonathan but knew the mutiny that dwelled within her heart the moment she thought "travel," he would have been appalled. All her emotions out of kilter, she clenched her fists and tried to hold herself together and brave the coming struggle. She was busy just keeping on breathing with two collapsed lungs in her chest.

"We have no choice. We don't. The individual is nothing. The Fatherland is all. It is the only way."

She hung her head. "I know. I try. I really do."

"See? You are wise beyond your years," said Jonathan.

That helped. It got her through another day. She knew she was a joy to him. He had no boundaries to his imagination either. He lavished her with images on which to shape her self.

That's what she still remembers. When Jonathan arrived to claim her mother's heart before she had a chance to claim it for herself, she was a shy sixth grader who did her backflips poorly. She was nobody's child, albeit from good ancestry—the ghost of Peet Neufeld was spooking about her veins.

The tombstones told her so.

"Always remember this: you are exceptional," said Jonathan, who didn't use praise lightly. And with her father dead and gone, the victim of a sentence fit for beasts, Marleen beside herself with busy-ness while feeding everyone, Natasha talking to herself and swiveling her head as though she were a weather vane, and Mimi still remote and vague, her loving gaze on Jonathan, it was no wonder that, for Erika, dreams were the only refuge.

The kinds of dreams she lavished on herself were like the sailing moon, phantoms of perfect silence, lights dimmed and motor turned way down. She lived with images. They took her breath away. She needed dreaming just as badly as other people needed food, and she could only dream in silence.

She knew where to find silence.

She crouched amid the gravestones of her ancestry and waited out the turmoil of emotions that ripped her heart apart. Her dreams cast shadow after shadow in hidden places where the soil was cool and musky and the air smelled sweetly of decaying leaves and moss. The gravestones were her favorite spot; here was the necessary proof that she was linked to wheat for at least seven generations, a matter of profound importance to critters big and small. She knew that she belonged at Apanlee. She hadn't yet left Apanlee but, *ach!* she felt that if she pulled up roots this young, there was no way to grow.

"I know exactly what you mean," said Jonathan. "The hardest thing to conquer is the will."

Somehow, when he put words to pain, she felt at peace and whole, for who she was and why she lived was interwoven in the proud, triumphant story of the wheat. She ventured forth her thoughts, all of them thin, unfinished, barely breathing.

"I'm just so scared," she said while dropping all pretense, and Jonathan said softly: "Your fears will pass. Just take my word for it."

If nothing else, she lived on that. He saw into the heart of things. He filled her heart with plenty. His words were never wooden. He never laughed at her or shamed her for her squeamishness. He talked to her as others never did—he spoke to her

with courtesy and patience while leaving space on either side for her to be herself.

He liked to visit where she liked to sit, where tombstones dated back to more than fourteen decades and lots of ivy grew. Inscriptions peeked out from the shrubbery, the source of many ornamental essays, all for her Racial Science class.

She had received a merit badge already for one elaborate essay she had composed in wide, artistic loops that told of her ancestral past. That's where she shone like no one else—not even the class bully, who took leap after bolting leap across all obstacles.

That crude barbarian could not keep his lineage straight at all; he kept on mixing forebears with posterity as though direction didn't count, now that the world moved forward. She, Erika, was different. She read that essay out aloud to Jonathan, selecting special passages: "My ancestors packed up and went into the land of opportunity, where they founded the cradle of wheat—"

"You have a proud, rich ancestry."

She flushed with gratitude. That way, she was richly endowed.

With her third eye she saw them very clearly—the somber men with well-trimmed beards, their women with their children, all clinging to their aprons. "They came to carve a kingdom from the soil—"

"—and it is up to you to live up to their legacy."

There was an obligation there, too huge for her small will. A small thought penetrated with a narrow tongue. "What if I can't come back?"

"Don't even think like that. Of course you will be back."

Out came her stubborn streak. "I want to stay at Apanlee."

"That's not an option, little one."

"Why not?"

"Because you aren't you. You are the tool of destiny."

He would squat down by her and talk to her in soothing, kindly words, warm palms around her fingers. He took her fear away. Her nature was tumultuous in every way, but when he spoke to her like that, something within her calmed.

"Look how the crosses have sunk deep into the earth," he said to her, and something settled in his eyes that looked like wilted flowers. "What does the Gospel say? 'All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass—'"

"—The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. As for man—'"

"'—as for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its own place—'"

At that, she was near tears: "'—and its own place remembers it no more.'"

"We are born, and we die. It's that simple. Between life and death stands our duty."

She licked around her hangnail to keep herself from crying. He was a professional soldier, of course, who expected to die any minute. She, on the other hand, had not yet started living. She longed for life; she craned her neck to look at clouds and sky. Had anyone known that, there would have been loud sneers.

She feared demotion in his heart for cowardice, but on the other hand, she did not want to die for no appreciable gain. He understood that perfectly. He cupped her face in his warm hands. It was the tenderest of moments.

"I'll tell you a big secret, little one. We all know fear. That's only natural. Sometimes I am afraid I cannot measure up."

She leaned against his knee. It was as though he wore binoculars. "I try. I really do." She was determined to improve herself as best she could as soon as she could spy an opportunity. "I'll do my best. I promise."

"I know you do. That's all the Führer asks."

She tried repressing all emotion at the mandate. Fat tears started scalding her throat. That was the magic moment; that's when he took her on his lap and held her tight against his heart. He smelled of summer, sun and hay.

"There's acid in the cup of even the best war," said Jonathan.

His words were floating in the air like fragile apple blossoms. "But once the war is won, once we have slain the Antichrist, I promise you: your world will be utterly lovely."

She felt the warrior's heartbeat through his shirt against her hot, flushed cheek.

"You will have opportunities in Germany," said Jonathan, "I never had. Your mother never had. Whole generations never had. Whole generations never even fathomed—"

"I will?"

"You will have wealth of spirit, mind and body to dim your strongest dreams."

Chapter 103

The Führer had declared: "I'll stand no nonsense from America," but still the airplanes sent from overseas kept streaming over Apanlee each day in black conveyor belts.

They flew with a calm treachery. They rose like ravens from the earth, passed overhead with a soft hum and dropped into a dim horizon without disturbing the landscape below. A mighty, impressive armada!

"Jackals. Jackals, all!" said Mimi, propelled by an unpleasant memory. "They will yet learn. They will."

She peered into the clouds, contempt like acid in her soul. She held them all in measureless disdain. To watch America take sides with Satan's kin as Apanlee was laying furrow after furrow so that the wheat could grow again—so that the world could eat!—just grieved her in her heart.

The wound that Dewey left had never fully healed. All she knew about America was brainless and disgusting. In a world without mercy, you needed a friend—and should not family be family? What twisted reasoning would make the distant country of her relatives choose sides—not with the Führer's cause but

with the monstrous murderers who had destroyed the creed?

"So let them harvest their own dragon's teeth for once," she told Marleen who, for her part, looked as though she, too, were chewing on raw garlic.

Marleen replied, not looking up while waiting for the kettle to start singing: "Yes, and to think that, once upon a time, we thought that we were kin—"

She did not finish what she meant to say, too overcome to speak.

It was late in the year, and frosty nights took turns with sunny days when Jonathan took leave of Apanlee to travel east and finish off the Beast. There was no time to have a sumptuous feast, for orders came to leave at once so as to fortify the front, by then in zigzag patterns.

"Well, better now than never," decided Mimi, and went to find herself a preacher who would not squabble needlessly.

She returned with a Calvary Baptist. He wasn't a regular Apanlee Elder; the Apanlee Elders were dead. This Baptist had a nasal voice and a bad cough; his eyes were watery; he wanted to know, timidly: "Didn't you have a husband already?"

She shook her head. "He's gone, not ever to return. Siberia swallowed him."

The Baptist stood his ground, but not for long—who could resist her smile? She kept on smiling prettily and pointed out the obvious: "You can augment your income with weddings."

He argued and reasoned a bit, but she rested her chin in her hands and kept smiling.

"All right. All right," he said. "Don't say you weren't warned."

She was a radiant bride. She wore her first long dress. The bridegroom wore his war fatigues. The year was deep into autumn; the flies succumbed in swarms.

"I will be back," said Jonathan. "Four weeks is all we need."

"I love you, Jonathan."

He hugged a roll of bedding to himself. "There is no way

that we can lose. You have my promise that I shall return. I want you to remember: our troops are in fine fettle."

She nodded her consent, with no idea where to send a letter. The Fatherland was now embroiled in the last stages of its fight to do away with illness, filth, deformity and cowardice, and it depended on each man, each woman, all bred to identical values—for it was honor, duty, mission, purpose and self-sacrifice, and nothing else had worth.

Before he left to slay the Beast and make the world safe for the kernels, she eagerly put on his uniform and had her picture taken while peering east through his binoculars.

"The land is vast," she said. "And winter at the door."

She felt her heart swell with emotion. She wrapped her love around him; she held him as though she would never let go. Against his epaulets, she whispered her own pledge. She knew she was budding with life. She did not tell him this; he didn't need that burden.

Marleen had this to say when Jonathan stopped briefly by the chicken coop where she was gathering fresh eggs: "This is, of course, a temporary measure?"

"That's right."

"You will be back?"

"Of course."

"And soon?"

"Relief is on the way. I have that piece of news on excellent authority."

She kept her fears in check. She clung to her own Faith. She laid her woes before Him, and He took care of things.

Not so Natasha, though.

Despite her age, Natasha started leaping like a frog when word came of his order to depart. She rushed about as though she'd lost her head until she saw a yellow hen; she caught it, made a chicken broth, and even served it up for Jonathan yet one more time in her enameled dish.

"Eat! Eat!" she said to him. "At least, put something solid in

your stomach."

"I count on you," he said to her as well, since she was family.

"Remember this," replied Natasha, as her face started crumbling as though they were parting forever: "You never once step into the same river twice."

She was trembling in great agitation long after Jonathan was gone. For weeks on end, she looked like a tarantula—all black, all tentacles, all bristles and all scorn. When asked what frenzied her, she did not have an answer.

The morning of Jonathan's leaving, the skies were black with rain, and Erika was clinging to his legs, a pale and stringy youngster, her stomach forming knots.

"Now, little one, don't you start fretting, too," said Jonathan and freed himself as gently as he could, but not before he promised her that he would not forget to send her cheerful postcards. "Put on your thinking cap."

A painful conversation followed. He fumbled for an address in his pocket and handed it to her.

"Here. Here's the address that you need. Be sure to memorize it well. Her name is Heidi. Don't forget. She is the best. She is safety and goodness and wisdom. She'll take you in, no matter what. Just take my word for it."

"Why now? Why now?" bawled Erika. Against her will, fat tears began to fall. "I'll be a stranger there." There was nothing but fog in her heart. She knew his sense of destiny was flawless; she still had miles to go.

He had no answer to this kind of mutiny, but his strong hand closed hard around her fingers.

"She has a daughter just like you. Her name is Lilo. She'll melt your heart. You will not be alone. You'll learn from her. I'll ask her personally to be your friend. I'll write to her. She's loyal. She'll stick by you. You'll have a lot of fun."

She stared at the picture he pulled out of his wallet. It showed a lively, sun-tanned teenager, replete with dirndl, lifted chin, straight back and saucy smile. A dog stood next to her—a mutt

with floppy ears, a silly grin and an enormous bottom.

"We need the strongest and the best. Ahead of us lie years of blood and fire. This is a struggle to the marrow. Remember that. The individual is nothing. The Fatherland is all."

In light of this civility, she had no choice—she blinked away her tears. The future had a need for robust, wholesome sassiness, not in her nature, sadly. She was afflicted with a wistful melancholia. She was a little female at whom fingers would be pointed, because she acted selfishly when sacrifice was now the order of the day and valor at a premium.

"All right," she sighed, still unconvinced, because she longed to please the *Landser*.

For her sadness at Jonathan's leaving, she was seized with shame and remorse. She looked at the picture more closely. Lilo was already fourteen, older than she by three years, a powerful swimmer, a favorite to raise the flag, her patriot cap tucked in her belt, a girl who hid a fiery, independent mind behind her fringed, gold lashes.

Compared to that as a potential friend, what was a little sacrifice of will?

The days slipped by like beads of mercury, not ever to return. The Wehrmacht slipped as well. There was talk about that, though obliquely. The Wehrmacht slipped and stalled, but every gun still kept on blazing to the east and, at long last, the front had stabilized. That's what the broadcast said.

For weeks on end, it had been stalemate after stalemate. But now the tide of war would turn and victory would come.

December was dusting the landscape. The roofs of Apanlee were glittering with freshly fallen snow. The wind sat, howling, in the chimneys, and Mimi linked her arms with Baba, pink in her happiness, a puzzle even to herself, and said to her: "—imagine, a bare-bottomed baby—" and, at that moment, Baba started thinking with her heart.

A sleigh of mail fell into hostile hands. A lone and dirty

letter—half-torn, with pages missing—arrived in time for Christmas.

"We are still laying siege to the stone heart of Moscow," wrote Jonathan to Mimi.

With swimming eyes, she finished reading it. When she had savored every comma, she hid the letter carefully. She dropped it in a bottom drawer and slammed that drawer shut.

She thought: "No need to cause alarm. He takes direct instructions from the Führer."

All week, she had felt slightly feverish, as though a cold were lingering and wouldn't go away, an odd, persistent chill.

"Don't bite your nails," she scolded, irritably, for Erika cast shy and probing glances upon her rounding belly and gave her long and searching looks.

Weeks passed, then months.

The winter seemed to last forever, but finally spring came. The snow turned into slush; the slush turned into water. Snowdrops appeared. Tulips stood like soldiers in neat rows. Pretty soon, the clover was in bloom. The trees were waking, one by one, and nature, brush in hand, hued daisies, violets, and poppies.

April arrived, with gusts of wind that sent dogs cowering and chickens clucking oddly. The Führer's panzers still kept rolling eastwards over barricades. The searchlights kept on playing with the clouds.

The neighbors talked of nothing but the weather.

Marleen was kneading zwieback with hard knuckles.

Natasha walked on tiptoes for three days until a tiny cry was added to the universe while, in the east, whole armies fought and died.

Jonathan had disappeared into the wastes of Russia, his belt and dagger locked in place, to aid in the decisive battle and finish off the war, but he had left his legacy—a baby, plump and pink.

This child was the talk of the village. The neighbors were

lavish in praise, their faces brimming with awe. The little infant was perfection; that was the thought that stayed; it had its own tap root.

The kettle was singing with steam. The skies were bright and clear. The kernels would keep swelling and hardening with summer, wind and sun.

Mimi half-dozed, peacefully, after a satisfying meal, just basking in the sunshine, glad she was slim once more. "A body made for motherhood," Jonathan had said to her, poetic and romantic, but follow-up was difficult, for mothering was hard.

She had tried once, without much luck. Despite much effort, Erika remained an anxious child, intensely shy, self-conscious and uneasy, on tiptoes inwardly, with the weight of the world on her shoulders. She, Mimi, had a second baby now and did the best she could. She kept the baby swaddled. She kept on burping it. But Natasha was probably right: her motherly engine was sluggish.

"Look. Look what I have here," coaxed Mimi one hot afternoon, adopting a gravelly voice.

Natasha kept mopping her forehead in silence.

"Who'll kiss those tiny toes?" asked Mimi and stood in Baba's path while giving Erika a pat and then a small, firm shove. "Who'll count its baby teeth?"

Now this?

It was a grievous time for Erika, who fled to curl up in the grass, from where she watched and listened. Her heart leaped like a carp. She was in pain; it was a Sunday afternoon, and Sunday added to her pain, for there was little else to do except to think of what was looming like an alp: her pending trip to Germany.

Effusiveness was Mimi's specialty. "Look at those little tufts of hair. Look at that grim and wrinkled nose! Look at those small, clenched fists."

Natasha pulled her head between her shoulders, and had nothing to say in reply. Her heart was still sore for the son who was

shot at the Führer's behest. Why? Because he had been wild for plunder? Because he had enforced the Party's bloody reign? Now, no one spoke of it.

Mimi laid careful siege. "There's something wrong with it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Natasha's eyes were everywhere except on the small bundle.

"It doesn't want to suckle." Mimi eased herself into the grass to sit at Baba's feet.

"Nu? Nu?"

"An upset stomach, that's my guess. That's what I think. What do you think? Its tummy just doesn't seem settled."

Natasha kept squelching temptation with many a withering look, but Mimi gave her yet another foxy smile. "I wonder if there's something wrong? Do you have some advice?"

"Who, me? You ask an old donkey like me?"

"I still remember when I had the chills and shakes, and how you multiplied your kisses. Don't bother denying it, Baba."

The minutes ticked away. Natasha spoke at last. "Is that a bottle child?"

"As if you didn't know," said Mimi, and tried to hide a smile.

"Have you no conscience, Mimi?"

"You know I have no time to burn."

"Don't tell me that. A baby is a baby."

"Well, it is true. I had counted on you, but I guess that I was wrong. I had hoped you would give me a hand. There now! I said my piece. Now it's your turn. You know how to baby a baby—"

Natasha allowed herself a small sigh and spoke in a thin, careful voice. "I'm too old to give my heart away."

" *Oops!* Did you hear that? It's oozing into its diapers."

Natasha stared at the infant longingly, her lower lip pushed out, in her old ears the pounding of the sea. She cupped her ear to hear better. She leaned forward to get a good whiff.

"I meant to tell you years ago," smiled Mimi, now happily airing the baby, "how I enjoyed it, snuggling on your bosom and riding on your hip. You think I don't remember?"

Natasha braced herself against the surge of tenderness that came cresting at her, like a wave. Her cheeks turned a deep red. She kept scratching her head. Her jaws were crunching something. At last, she offered in a strangled voice: "I wonder if it's feverish?"

"Could be. Could be a running fever. I still remember that odd summer day when measles struck, just as the flies succumbed and babies in the village started choking. You were the only one who knew what to do next. You sliced three onions crosswise."

Natasha shied away from the small, stirring bundle as though it were a twirling river and she an animal refusing to walk in.

But Mimi had no mercy. She was playing a great game of patience.

"Here. Why not cuddle it so I can tie my apron? Do me a favor, will you? Just keep the flies away." She put the baby smack into Natasha's lap so she could blow her nose. "I guess I'll have to think of something, since you don't seem to care. Have you ever seen baby eyes sparkle like that? It must be feverish."

Natasha was thirsting to death, and here was a bucket of water.

"Just once. Just for today," she told the infant awkwardly, who silently stared back at her with baffling, questing eyes.

There was no point pretending; a baby was a baby; fresh air and warm sunshine would not be enough to forestall disaster to come. "Here. Here's my lap. Snooze for a little while."

A tiny nose twitch, that was all.

That was the last straw for Natasha. It plucked her heart like a ripe cherry from a tree.

The face of her favorite virgin was dark.

She dressed it with flowers in season.

She ruled, a peasant dowager with feet curled by arthritis, in the rejuvenated nursery. Its yellow window panes shone in the night, like gold. Here was the only place of permanence and continuity that old Natasha knew, and that was good enough.

When others had long since gone to bed, she sat in the dark, the infant's arms and legs just melting in her lap, to mutter her time-tested prayers. She besieged her icons ceaselessly; she whispered to chase away evil: "These things do not happen to babies—"

But of course she knew better. They had happened before.

She did not know what would be coming at her honey child tomorrow, but this she knew with certainty: She had a baby once again to cherish and revere. A river was returning to its bed.

She listened to the promptings of her nature. Strange is the human heart.

Chapter 104

The day arrived when Mimi smiled one of her iffy smiles and asked: "Well, are you ready, Erika?" to which the answer was: "I guess so. Sure. Why not?"

"Good. It's settled then," said Mimi, ruffling her daughter's hair. "I have a lucky feeling about Germany. Don't you?"

"I guess."

"What's wrong now? Answer me. Why are you looking glum?"

"I'm not," insisted Erika, walking a narrow line. She did not want to give herself another case of nerves, thus spoiling everything.

"Don't make a scene. Please. With the Führer on your right and God Almighty on your left, you can't go wrong. It's settled."

Much of the time remaining was given over to pondering her cowardice—not that that eased her pain. But such was the seductive power of the Fatherland: she knew that she was envied greatly in the neighborhood for having been selected carefully on nothing but the strength of her scholastic enterprise. Of that, there was no doubt. In class, she was the best.

Now there could be no more excuses.

She walked on wooden legs, stiff with self-consciousness, between her mother and her grandmother to board the fated train. Natasha trod behind.

"Here's something for the road. You cannot travel on an empty stomach," said Marleen, handing her a coffee twist.

"I'm not hungry."

'Yes, you are."

"I'm not."

"At least put something in your stomach." urged Marleen, for her part looking straight ahead. In her face sat a hard, triumphant pride. "You can't pass up a chance like this. This is your chance. Remember that. Not every youngster is as lucky."

"I know."

"And don't forget to air your feather pillows. You hear me? It's important."

"I won't."

"That way, they'll stay plump. Once every two weeks. Be sure not to forget."

"I know. You told me yesterday."

She kept her glance glued to her toes. She longed to sit down by the wayside, curl up, climb up one last time in Natasha's lap and hide herself deep in her loving arms as she had done since infancy, but that chance, too, was gone. Natasha was burping the baby.

"Out in the sun they go. No matter what. All right? Be sure not to forget. Be sure not to neglect your pillows. There will be no excuses."

"I won't. I won't forget."

Now she was getting red in the face, and still redder. She tried to put one foot before the other and look as normal as she could. There was no point in saying anything; it would not get her anywhere; she was lacking in fiber and spirit. She was demoralizing Germany. No wonder that the Führer saw it necessary to whisk her off to be re-educated and reformed.

"And don't let your blouse hang out of your skirt."

"I won't."

"And don't forget to say your prayers every night and mention just as many Christians—"

"—I know. I know. As many Christians as I can."

There was nothing to do but to echo. Chilled by a sense of doom, she didn't argue and she didn't plead; she just kept her glance on her toes; what else was there to say? Her duties were outlined for her, as orderly and sensible as numbered pages in a book.

One more time, Mimi, smiling an expansive smile: "Please. Don't forget to write. Be sure to send us postcards. We love the way you write. Don't we all love the way she writes? Why, even Jonathan—"

And Baba, too, her lower lip protruding, her face as pitted as a moonscape, still being practical: "And don't forget. It's critically important. If you have to go, you have to go. Don't be ashamed. Just knock on any door. Just ask politely where the outhouse is. Don't go behind the bushes, no matter what the urgency."

"I won't." She had pondered her undersized bladder as well as her oversized ears.

But Baba gave the train an evil look and didn't even hear. "It's nature, Mimi. Nature."

"I know."

"The main thing is to keep your privates private," counseled Baba, while giving her a nod. "Here. Blow your nose. Here's my apron, honey."

It was sheer agony. This was the supreme test of fortitude. This was her chance to turn a brand new leaf; tears would ruin everything. She was busy returning salutes. Now was the time to find out if she had a spine, and willing to conduct herself with bravery, or if she was a hopeless case with acid in her stomach. The least she could do was obey. It was best to keep ferment inside. In Germany they wouldn't know she was a fourth-rate slacker.

"And don't let the boys whistle at you," said Mimi one last time, bending daintily to kiss her on both cheeks. "You'll soon be a comely young woman."

"No! Absolutely not! Here! Here's my handkerchief!" said Marleen, now talking clear out of her head. " Just keep it. Keep it in safe-keeping. Just put it in your sleeve."

"One day I shall return," she told the gray horizon, without a voice this time, to have the final word. That was the hope to which she clung as she stood, waiting for the train to come to a full stop. It had two special, flag-draped wagons, hitched to the back and set aside for other lucky youngsters like herself, their destinies, too, anything but clear.

All four stood patiently and waited by the platform until the train conductor said: "It's time now. Sign the register." Which was what she did, shakily, her insides feeling woozy.

"Well, then. Good-bye. And may the Lord be praised."

"The Lord be praised," repeated Erika, and climbed up on the train. She stood bewildered on the platform, chockful with other gifted youngsters like herself.

The wind pushed pillows through the blueness of the sky. The other children sang. Not one of them was weeping. She hummed along, her throat constricted shamefully, her toes curled slightly inward as per Natasha's last instructions against the malice of the universe, so as to boost her luck.

"Muss i'denn, muss i' denn
zum Städtele hinaus, Städtele hinaus
und du, mein Schatz, bleibst hier—"

The train became an arch. It leaned around a curve, and she was counting wagons, all rolling westwards.

Home.

Into the heart of Germany, the country of her ancestry, besieged on every front.

She looked with blurred eyes along the lines of steel that now stole Apanlee from her—the manor house first, then the rest. It happened very slowly.

She still remembers it. The locomotive hooted once and

started panting breathlessly. The wheels spun, clattering, and her entire childhood disappeared as though a hand swept clean a slate. The fields where Jesus went through the grain on the Sabbath. A neighbor struggling bravely with a cantankerous old mare. Natasha fluttering her handkerchief. Marleen, who did not spare her proverbs.

And Mimi. Slim and beautiful. Small. Getting smaller. Shrinking.

Trees. Hedges. Silos. All.

That was the last time Erika saw Apanlee.

That fall, Natasha grew so rickety that only with great effort could she still navigate the stairs that led into the attic where she would dig for old, discarded things—things she could confiscate and then restore to glory. Hein's quilt. His sheepskin and his woolen socks. His favorite ax, with which he'd chopped the morning's kindling wood. His boots, in need of oil.

The steps to the attic were steep and her legs gave her trouble; her toes hurt like blazes as well, but she wanted those boots; she knew they were there, perhaps in some old trunk—footwear still from the olden days, still perfectly acceptable. She dug and dug for them and, finally, when she found first one, then the other, she spent days kneading the cracked leather, with oil and then with butter.

When they were soft enough and did not hurt her bunions, she wore those boots day-in, day-out, in silence transcending her status. She developed odd habits like that. Back in her youthful days, to taunt Marleen, to make her wild with jealousy, she sometimes did such things, to tease and to provoke. That was a long, long time ago, when she was young, a sturdy girl in a red skirt, with beads around her neck.

Now she was old. She was not only old but worn, replete with latticed wrinkles. She kept herself glued to the clan. There was no name for it, this need to stick to them. She didn't, when tormented by strange glances in the neighborhood, have a sufficient explanation.

Fate was just that—too deep for words, too vague for any script.

By then, she and the family had been long intertwined in ways that none of them could understand and did not even try. She cared not what others thought of her; neither did Marleen. As far as anyone could tell, she was their equal now: she had a baby once again to carry on tradition. That baby had its place at Apanlee, the center of the universe.

She would follow them into the grave.

She still ducked into doors when she heard the soldiers march, recoiling from close contact. Their faces were set like the east wind; they gathered their captives like sand; they heaped up mounds of earth; and even though, in quiet moments, all that had been explained to her by Mimi with large and liquid eyes, while Marleen kept on hunting for excuses in her Bible, Natasha listened mutely, while gazing up at a neglected saint whose smile was visibly fading.

"Bad medicine," she said, but only to herself. He had sharp eyes in her old head: the Wehrmacht was still executing traitors. Grim searches flushed them out. While sunshine still streamed in warm sheets all over Apanlee, the Wehrmacht sacked and burned the fields of many Russian villages, in search of spies and partisans, all of them multiplying now, all striking in cunning disguises.

Bad medicine. Bad medicine.

Natasha shook her grizzled mane and mopped another tear. For days, the traitors to the Fatherland lay mangled in the weeds until somebody took them by the legs and dragged them out of sight.

The losses that the Wehrmacht suffered, while the dog days of a belated second occupation summer still dragged on, were all blamed on mysterious sabotage.

Faceless, silent saboteurs, who multiplied like gophers in the fields, threw nails into machinery and glass bits in the sol-

diers' food; if a door sign said "Typhus!" they checked.

It was a brutal war and getting worse; the *Landsers* mercilessly punished sabotage by shooting traitors on the spot, but even so, it now became increasingly important to draw a line between who was behind the Führer, who was not.

Meanwhile, still girdles of flashes, still hot rings of fire. And meanwhile, the bomb and the ditch and the torch. Yet the songs were as ringing as ever.

"Vor uns
marschieren
mit sturmzerfetzten Fahnen
die toten Helden
der jungen Nation—"

In the crisp autumn air, it was still easy to believe that final victory was just around the corner. At most, it would now be a matter of weeks.

Plumes of black smoke marked the replenishment that kept on rolling east with rested limbs and polished boots, and people pushed and shoved to get a better look. The next, decisive blow, they knew, would put an end to battles.

The woods were full of bodies; but here, at Apanlee, there was still peace; there was a brand new baby with blond hair, blue eyes, firm limbs, and not a single crease. Natasha rocked it faithfully so as to borrow time, the day having faded—it still hadn't cooled!—while pouring tested lullabies into its rosy ears. To see a little soldier's child unfold in safety, wrapped in love, much like a genial spring, petal by tender petal, tucked deep into a feather quilt, was almost more than anyone could bear.

It was a pensive time for Mimi. She dusted the family portraits and pondered their pacifist frowns.

No word as yet from Jonathan. He still was fighting in the trenches; he didn't even know he had a child; his letters had stopped coming. She still wrote her reports to him, not sure that they would reach him, for more and more there were delays, and sabotage, and yet more sabotage, and mailbags went astray.

"I miss you so," she wrote. She missed him dreadfully. "But knowing that each battle is magnificent and just," she added, for she had Faith galore that shone through every word, "what is a small delay?" She was composed of nothing but enthusiasm.

She said so to Natasha.

Natasha did what she had always done, though now her feet were twisted with arthritis like two pretzels.

"Just you remember this: I have no other family," Natasha said to Mimi, lest anyone forget, and hung another diaper between two carefully placed chairs.

The child changed the equation and tipped the scales for her. Had it not been for this new child, still pink and plump—a much-belated blessing from a forgotten saint Natasha had neglected shamefully for many years but now kept in good spirits with candle after candle—she would have been an old and useless Baba, her life not worth a kopeck.

Now she was everything, for it was everything.

This honeychild, in Baba's safekeep, firmly, was Jonathan's and Mimi's; she had raised them both; they had their faults; their cause was hers by proxy. Her own survival was enmeshed with the survival of these people, who were her kin if not by blood, at least by history—so it had always been; so it would always be. This family was all she had; if they were foolish, they were foolish; she bore that stoically; what else was there to do?

They were her family. No family was perfect.

She did not judge them harshly. She judged them not at all. She gave the infant her left finger. She slowed her old, rheumatic gait to match the baby's waddle.

There was no point pretending. The Wehrmacht kept delivering its crushing blows, but somehow, victory eluded reach. Weeks became months, and no end yet in sight. The fighting continued. Enormous waste at every turn. Delay at every opportunity.

The fields stood shorn. The rain did not let up. The flags

were fading in the downpour. Natasha, bent and silent, still carried water in her wooden buckets to soak another batch of diapers for the child.

She dumped another load of kindling by the stove with a decided clatter.

She had a nose, and it smelled ashes. She had good ears in her old head; they overheard some hoodlums muttering that they would drive the Führer out of Russia.

She saw a ruffian take a match and put it to a swastika. The traitor was never discovered and punished.

She spoke her mind, since she was family, and here is what she said: "The shadows are lengthening slowly. It is time to start roasting the zwieback. We'll need them on the road."

"What kind of talk is that?" asked Mimi, humming to herself. She kept patting Natasha's bent back. Allowances were made for Baba who was old, bent, worn out from work and worry and, hence, cantankerous.

Natasha showed her stubborn streak. "I can see twilight falling, and then night."

"You are too old, in any case, to have to worry, Baba."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Go soak your old feet in hot water."

Nobody argued with Natasha, for she had paid her dues; she was entitled to her opinions; if she so chose, she could be ornery. She had a right to be. These days, that was her specialty. She spoke her mind; she had a voice that could not be ignored. She acted like a bloodhound on the scent. She said to anyone who bothered giving her the time of day, in scalding undertones: "It's later than you think."

Not that it did her any good. Deaf ears, and that was all.

"I'm coming with you, don't you know?" she told Marleen as well.

They still sat together at sunset. Came midnight, they still sat together in silence.

"Go soak your bones, Natasha," was Marleen's soft reply.

"Did you hear me? This minute, answer me."

"Not one of us, Natasha, knows every single answer. Your son. My son. You're a Ukrainian. I am German. Where is the balance sheet?"

That, too.

Unspoken but deep, that was there. She had lost a son, but that son had been guilty beyond pardon. Her Dominik had been a criminal, and so he'd paid. He'd paid.

She often pondered that. Like a hornet, he paid for his life for having used his stinger. He did, and that evened the ledger. That's why she and Marleen could sit together, peacefully, with little need to speak. Now Dominik lay in a dark and shameful grave, and no one said a word.

She didn't either. Never.

Deep down where justice stashed, there was this lucid thought: if you committed crimes, you paid. That was the iron law. The old oak tree that held the bold initials Hein had carved out to advertise their love had tried to heal itself, but had succeeded only partially; the bullet holes were worn; the cartridges lay rusting in the grass.

Natasha thought of Dominik with a soft tug at her old heart but with a somber resignation. She was the only one who still, in painful memory, would cluck her tongue and dab her eyes in grief. She grieved for him in useless recollection. When he was shot, she shrieked as loudly as she could because he was her son! her son! She loved him throughout thick and thin because her nature said she should—but she had never brooded on his execution.

If you committed crimes, you paid.

It was the simplest of equations. The blood her no-good son had spilled at Apanlee had been avenged; he had his due; it was his fault and that was that; some people said so openly, right to her face, despite her anguished eyes.

She sighed. She should have stripped him of his shirt when he was small, and put him on an anthill. That's what she should have done.

All that lay in the past. The gossips had stopped snarling at her openly; Marleen had seen to that.

Marleen had told the neighborhood: "What Dominik has done was not Natasha's fault," and no one challenged her. And though a mother's heart might break into a thousand pieces, deep down Natasha knew: that was at one with the old, noble order. Justice had been restored.

But her people. Her trusting, Ukrainian people!

What had they done? Why were they being shoved of late with shouts and sometimes even butts into the waiting cattle cars?

They had pelted the Wehrmacht with roses. They had knelt in the streets; they had wept with relief and abandon as they held up with shaking hands their greetings when the *Landsers* came.

"God sent you! God sent you! Why, here is bread and salt!"

These self-same peasants who had knelt, tears streaming down their faces for having been delivered from the Beast, who had held up their infants to be blessed, no longer knelt and wept with gratitude. These days they drew aside to let the *Landser* pass—not with applause but with odd, hooded looks and nervous smiles. Now they were muttering: "It's not yet the end of the story. Just so you know. Just so you know. Carrion, that's what you'll eat. Mule meat, that's what you'll eat."

Now there was simmering, poisonous hatred. The sparrows carried rumors. A crucial battle had gone sour in the east.

Chapter 105

Heidi was very proud of her, reported Erika. "I miss you so," she wrote. "I miss you dreadfully."

She sent along a colored map of the entire theater of war. She had marked up the parts that had to be revamped toward the glory of the Reich, and they included Apanlee.

"But first things first," she wrote, still clumsy and still homesick, despite much effort on her part to overcome her ills. "First we must win this war."

Marleen would always wash her hands and stroke away the paper creases, proud that her grandchild had become an accomplished artist with her pen. Her writing did not slant to either side. Her letters were no longer weak and spidery. She decorated every margin with tiny little swastikas that danced on the crisp page.

She wrote: "It's now a two-front war." The bombs, of which she told that kept on plummeting from the gray sky smack into German cities, came from America.

On account of the bombing, school was sporadic; male teachers had long since been drafted, and sometimes sirens howled so

loud you couldn't hear a word.

Which did not mean, she wrote, that she was ever idle. "No, on the contrary. Each morning, up at six!"

She kept reporting faithfully that the beloved Führer was verily the savior of all Europe and would soon be the savior of the world.

These letters brought much joy to Apanlee, where for two glorious seasons, the harvests belonged to the people. Here as there, the Allied airships kept on passing overhead each day, still flying high and in large numbers, formation by formation. While still the sun shone, as the last days of summer slowly faded, the planes had seemed like schools of fish—small, silvery, benevolent, just dancing in the air. But now that fall was here, they looked like geese or ravens.

It was clear that the Wehrmacht had run into trouble.

It took the Führer only eighteen days to conquer Poland, but then a winter came and went; the Wehrmacht didn't move an inch. The stars grew dim; the songs grew leaden; the pageantry was fading visibly. A troop of Hitler Youth roped off the Square of Victory to celebrate another holiday, but never finished building a huge stage. It started getting cold and windy. Just yesterday, the *Landsers* came as worshipped saviors, this at the very hour when the earth was closest to the sun. Now days grew short and nights grew long, and countless troops passed by in silent, care-worn columns, still chewing up the road with panzer after panzer, turrets rotating. Opening its giant pincers wide, the Wehrmacht still closed in on Moscow's onion domes, but from the front came distressing reports.

It was now claimed by several obstructionists that a small band of partisans had infested the army's rear ranks.

A shipment of mittens was lost.

Food was getting short.

The shells shipped to assist the Wehrmacht to finish off the war had something wrong with them.

The *Landsers,* bringing all their shiny guns to bear upon the onion domes, stopped dead in their advance to watch a spooky sight: three weeks before the Holy Days, the city's hackles rose

as though it were a dog.

Meanwhile, long trains loaded with wounded men were pulling westward silently. One train derailed because of sabotage, and there were many casualties. Those who survived had little to report.

The *Landsers*, to a man, were nonchalant, however. They kept assuring everyone: "One more decisive battle."

Their faces gray, their uniforms caked, they kept arriving on their stretchers to fill up every room at Apanlee, their bandages soaked through with blood. The count was disconcerting: that many wounded? Just one train?

For weeks on end, the accident kept every spare hand busy.

Natasha did not waste her thoughts and worries on herself. With trembling hands, Natasha lit the morning fires and started serving breakfast.

She spoke her mind at every opportunity and meanwhile kept her vigil, and here is what she said: "Of course. Right. Sure. One more decisive battle. Weather permitting. Weather permitting."

She moved among them freely, helping out. She took things as they came, did what she could, said what needed saying, and rocked the baby, meanwhile. The wind howled in the chimneys. The Führer, said the broadcast, was incensed.

No word for months from Jonathan, although good news arrived, to be passed on at once: the Führer's generals had finally decided on assault. The strategy for an offensive, which had been speculated on, seemed in its final stages. The waiting continued. The news became darker and darker.

The *Landsers,* stationed around Apanlee were practicing their shots, but their bullets fell shy of the mark.

Weeks became months, and the front didn't budge.

A clump of soil came out of nowhere and landed on Marleen's set supper table. That's how Natasha knew.

She shook it out without a word. She was exuding a general

gloom. The Fatherland was ever more in need of a strong labor force; Natasha watched as a distressed and helpless Russian populace was being shoved into the cattle cars that kept on heading west.

Those were the lucky ones—for more and more, Natasha saw, were walking west, on foot, in long, despairing columns, all carrying their spades and shovels on their backs, all bent and gray, no better off than slaves.

A second column formed. A third.

"Hope came on silver wings," the peasants whispered to each other. "Despair flaps its wings like a raven."

She watched it all in silence. The balance was tilting again. For this had not yet changed: they, too, came as eagles, hasting to eat. They, too, came for the guilty and the innocent alike.

The wind blew soot and ashes into Natasha's smarting eyes as she scanned the heavens for news. She knew, by then, that it would be a headlong rush to beat the calendar, to take the onion domes before the sky ran out of sun, which could be any day.

Things went from bad to worse.

First, it was weeks and weeks of rain. The rains did not let up. Then came the cold. The *Landsers* started ripping straw from peasant roofs and stuffed it in their boots, for socks were scarce, and soon a luxury.

The cheering multitudes fell silent.

The fields turned into mire. The trenches filled with muddy water. Ice crusts formed along the edges. One wintry afternoon, fat snowflakes started falling gently, melting only with reluctance—and nothing was ever the same.

The thermometer plunged. The Führer's horses drooped for want of warmth and fodder. The soldiers started cutting up their carcasses. More tanks stalled. Guns fell silent. The oil froze in the trucks. The troopers wrapped themselves in bedspreads. Before another month was gone, the Wehrmacht hid in Russian huts in search of fire. Warmth.

Next came the sound.

When Erika, in later years, researched the script for *Left and Right*, it sprang at her again from out between the crumbling pages of a book. In vain, she looked where she had seen or heard it first, but it was vivid.

Swish!

Swish, said the sound. Swish. Swish.

It sallied from Siberia, in sleds drawn by small, wily horses. It came with sabers drawn. It rose from under the horizon. It surged from frigid tundra in the north, and from the Ural Mountains in the east. It fell like furry locusts from the hills. It floated silently through winter nights on skis that were carefully oiled.

It wore warm, quilted pants and furry caps, and it was gossiped even then: the Star of David financed it.

Swish, said the sound. Swish. Swish. At Apanlee, Natasha heard it clearly. And what Natasha saw with her third eye was this: the Russian people started sweeping every snowy street before the wily ghosts from out the icy tomb of hell with ready, reedy brooms.

After a long and puzzling delay, two meager sacks of Wehrmacht mail arrived.

Eagerly, Mimi tore open the seals. Three letters were addressed to her; she read them with a swelling heart and overflowing eyes.

The army kept on winning, reported Jonathan in sparse, terse words, but at a fearful cost.

She pined for loving words, for laughs, for happiness. Between the lines she read: the Wehrmacht had been badly mauled. Many fell and did not rise again. Many more were reported missing in action.

"It is impossible to fight with frozen fingers," wrote Jonathan to Mimi. "We're downing their airplanes as fast as they come. Yet we are swamped by numbers. We are retreating in good order, to re-group and counterattack."

Then, mail stopped coming altogether, both from the east and

from the west. But Mimi kept her chin up. War was war; no news was good news; that was her considered opinion.

The harvesting season continued.

The field hands had already stored away the summer's yield when yet more gloomy news began to trickle in: the Führer's war might offer more than winged songs and handsome soldiers to be pelted with red roses. The steppe throbbed with tension. News of disasters in the east kept trickling through the ranks. The war graves were strewn with red leaves.

Neighbors no longer socialized. They looked at one another wordlessly.

The panzers, barrels pointing east, still rolled across the barricades and bulldozed down the walls of frightened peasants' huts, but the plumes of smoke didn't stay. The arches of triumph looked tattered. And with the garlands blowing sadly in the wind, it was impossible to hold parades—the youth squads stayed inside and huddled by the fire. Long gone were the days when the world asked in wonder and awe where, exactly, the Führer would stop.

The baby had not yet grown in its two front teeth when the guns started roaring in earnest.

At first, there was a faint, dull rumble from the east; Natasha started rocking with unarticulated dread. What no one seemed to know at Apanlee, but she felt in her aging bones, was this: in the colossal clash of steel on steel, the Wehrmacht had come to a halt.

"Loose lips sink ships. Be careful, Baba. Will you?" said Mimi.

"One rumor keeps chasing another," Natasha muttered in reply.

There was no need to caution Baba; her loyalties were clear. She had another child to cuddle and to scold. What's that? A little, brittle tooth? Why, cause for celebration! She dabbed her red-rimmed eyes.

Here was another side of the same coin she had observed when she was young in her red summer dress and Hein had tick-

led her with his enormous mustache - if you took life, you paid. She started counting quietly: more trains moved west than east.

There were delays. There was confusion. Vehicles waited, bumper to bumper. Tanks, trucks, jeeps, guns—all movement east was stalled. The field kitchens ran out of food. The victories slowed to a crawl.

Worse yet: the Fatherland was running out of soldiers.

Natasha waited patiently until the family was gathered at the table. Right after grace, she filled her lungs with air. What she would tell them now, not backing down, was treachery.

"If victory is so assured, why throw up barricades?"

The quiet was harder to bear than the noise. The family sat in stiff silence. This silence made Baba break out in a sweat. She whispered in a trembling voice: "Maybe I should start packing now?"

"What counts," said Mimi forcefully, the only one who found her voice, "is final victory."

"Nu. Nu."

"Small setbacks do not count. We'll win this war. It can't be otherwise. The Führer knows a way."

Natasha braced herself. "Two years ago, you didn't even know his name. How can you trust him now?"

When the neighbors found out that Natasha had voiced open treason, they ceased to speak to her.

When next the Wehrmacht started requisitioning the horses, Natasha turned into an oracle. She spoke her mind at every opportunity: "Both food and fuel are getting scarce. Should we not pack—"

"If leave we must, it's temporary." Marleen spoke with averted eyes. "One day we will return."

Marleen, as well, was now no longer keen on victory arriving soon if not tomorrow; she often coughed; her eyes were red; but she still rose before the roosters did and worked until the stars came out. She had faith in the Führer. If not today—next

year!

"Sure. Sure. In yet another hundred years, who knows?"

Marleen did not bother replying. Natasha fell silent at last. Her ankles were swelling and aching; there was this and that wrong with her gait. She kept Hein's boots beneath her bed, the ones that kept on squeaking. She sensed that she would need them. It gave her comfort just to know that they were there and ready for her feet. She listened to the steppe wind that kept rattling the gutters and wouldn't let her sleep.

Marleen was feeling poorly, curled up in feather quilts to nurse a cough that wouldn't go away, when Baba entered without knocking. She stood, a haggard shadow, by her bed.

"The horses are rearing, Marleen."

Marleen said in a voice that held no room for contradiction: "I am not in the mood for banter. Get me a cup of strong, good tea. And don't forget—"

This time, Natasha did not save her breath. There was no time for that. Natasha started swaying like an oak tree in the wind. Her heart started pounding like mad.

"*Oh, bozhe moi. Oh, bozhe moi.* Bad medicine. Bad medicine." She fell down by the bed and lay straddled as though she had been flattened. "We're sisters. We're sisters," she wailed.

Marleen had little choice. Marleen knelt next to her and started hoisting her.

"If there's retreat, it's only temporary. If we must leave, we will return. We will be back. Somebody has to stay behind. I trust you fully, Baba. Sleep in my bed, or else behind the pantry. There's still that turnip patch."

"Have you forgotten how I stole for you? How I defended you?" Natasha set her jaw in imitation of Marleen's. She knew that when a German set his jaw, most everything got done. She started hollering.

"I'm better than an ox," she screamed, "I don't need shouts and pokes."

"Natasha, hush! The last, decisive battle is on the drawing

board."

Defiance surged like lava through Natasha. "No! No! That's where you're wrong. You're wrong, Marleen! You're wrong! Your Führer? He's riding the tiger. He cannot dismount."

"I said hush! Hush this minute!"

Between loud hiccups and hot words, Natasha clung to Marleen's ankles. "Maybe he'll set the sky afire, but can he burn the stars? Don't leave me here, Marleen."

"Will you now listen? Listen!"

"No, you! You listen! Listen! Who took the piglet to the market and then reported it as stolen? Who stole your milk from the kolkhoz by adding lots of water?" Natasha would not let herself be calmed. Words came down hot and hard. "I'm coming with you, and that's it!" She was shouting; she thought that her chest would explode. She screamed; she wept; she pleaded until she was hoarse:

"Don't leave me here. I'm coming with you. Hear?"

"You can't. You aren't German, fool. You don't belong in Germany."

"Just clouds and winds outside!" Natasha howled. "Just rain and sleet and snow! The road is full of holes. What of the honey child?"

She started pummeling Marleen. She stopped just short of pulling out her hair, but that day she came close.

"Through thick and thin, I treated you like royalty. Now it's your turn, Marleen."

"No. I said no."

"I found Hein's boots," she wept. "I'll wear them on the road." That was her parting shot. "I'll wear his boots! That's it! Stop arguing, Marleen!"

Natasha was a handful to the last until Marleen fell silent. That day, Natasha won; her heart beat like a hammer, hard; Marleen's grew thick and soft from many valid arguments.

"I'm willing to pay heed—" said Marleen in the end in unrivaled surrender, and Natasha sat down on the edge of the bed and started telling all. "Partisans. Everywhere. Fighting like

wasps."

When word came that retreat was imminent, Natasha was the only one who kept her head in the commotion. She ran towards Marleen, her apron full of half-ripe apples. "Now hurry! Hurry up! If you stay, they will kill you with shovels and butts."

"This house," Marleen said in a voice that still lives on in memory, "was not a flophouse, Baba!"

"Whoever said it was? Brute that I was, I used a special hex—"

"No. No. I tried to overshadow you at every opportunity. This is my punishment." Marleen grabbed Baba by the shoulders. "If I must leave, I will leave an impeccable threshold. Get me a bucket and a rag. And help me scrub! Without another word!"

Natasha scrubbed as she had never scrubbed, her upper lip bathed in sweat. Head down, Natasha scrubbed away, at every crevice, every nook. She'd never really known how large the terrace was, how many steps there were to scrub—but scrub she did, with all her might, right past the blur beneath her lids, right past her triumph, past her sadness. At last, she spoke so softly that the wind tried stealing her last words, but Marleen caught them just in time, and here is what she heard:

"Will you forgive me? Ever? When I was young, I struck to wound your pride—"

For her part, Marleen tried as well: "—I scolded you so many times when you were not deserving of my wrath."

Natasha: "No! It's not your fault. It never was your fault. He came because I wore my flower scarf. I wore my beads. It has been on my conscience all these years. While you, belonging to an extraordinary family—"

"Ah! Now you're telling. Now you're telling. I wondered all these years."

"Well, now you know."

Marleen was weeping, too. "It matters not. It wasn't you. It was his bright red mustache."

"I forgive every cutting remark."

"And I forgive you, too."

"Behind your back, I stole five of your roosters, and I was not entitled to your roosters."

"You did! You say you stole my roosters?"

"I did. Why don't you strike me hard? Here is my head. Hit me. Go right ahead. Hit hard."

"Be quiet. He seduced you with presents and sweets. Your pretty and plump face—" Marleen put both her arms around the servant. Both trembled, shook, and wept. "He should have known. He was a Christian, not a peacock. He had no right to preen before your innocence—"

"I nailed a love spell on the barn door; nobody but a saint could have resisted that."

"Aha! Now you're telling me!"

"That's what you never knew. Hein never had a chance."

That's how that story settled. That was Natasha's final victory; not that it mattered now; there was no time to waste. She found a rope. She broke a switch. She scurried to harness the horse. She ran for extra bedding, pots and pans, an extra pail of sausages, hand-knitted goods, Hein's sheepskin, surely! a jar of rancid oil with which to grease the axles. While rushing to pack everything, she spied Hein's ax: it leaned against the shed, and she would need that ax to chop up kindling wood.

She grabbed it by its sturdy handle. She would need kindling wood. How else to do the laundry? How else to wash the diapers?

She harnessed the mares; she readied the wagon; she piled whatever bedding she could find; she grabbed the child, a mustache of milk on its lips, and hoisted it atop.

Then she climbed up herself.

She settled both her baby and herself in a safe nook atop the swaying wagon where there was barely room for an adult to stretch his legs and spine, said to the horse: *"Pascholl!"* in a firm voice and started creaking westwards.

Chapter 106

When the long trek took up the struggle with the winds, three women walked away from Apanlee forever, in the direction of the sinking sun. Between them, they carried the baby. They left the grain, unharvested, behind.

The air was light, the knowledge heavy: far better to face hardships now than be damned and lost forever to the Beast.

All three walked with stoic certainty: their loyalties were clear. Yet different was the inner mandate propelling the three women.

Marleen led the procession, with shackled heart, steel fists, and adamant resolve. The teeth of unrelenting suffering were lodged within her flesh, but walk she would, and did, stopping only when night fell and flies stopped feasting on cadavers.

She did what needed to be done, and thought such thoughts as needed to be thought. She loosened her limbs by the fire.

Her world was black and white and never changed its hues. Behind her, Apanlee burst into yellow flames—not for one moment did she hesitate, did she look back. Nobody said the loaded word, but everybody knew: No longer was the outcome *Lebensraum*. It was survival now—survival, base and raw.

The trek wore on, swallowing the roads. It grew longer and fatter, decrepit and sluggish, a slow-moving reptile, a living entity on makeshift wheels that creaked on doggedly in the direction of the Fatherland—women and children, baggage and boxes, carts, lorries and livestock, all streaming like a silent river to the west.

Horse followed horse. Cow followed cow. Smoke trailed behind. The trees started shedding their leaves.

The wind picked up speed.

The baby whimpered softly.

The earth kept burning. A thick blanket of dust hung over the trek. Soon, the entire road was strewn with mattresses and broken furniture. Hamlet by hamlet, their world collapsed in ruins at their backs.

At night, the column halted slowly. The motorcyclists stopped their roar. There might or might not be a meager dinner by the wayside—supping surrounded with bundles and pails. A straw-loaded shack: that was bliss.

Marleen walked stoically. She walked toward the Führer's promise, and he would not fail her. She walked away from Apanlee where, for six generations, her clan had harvested the wheat. Where were her people now? Except for that small handful trekking west, all had vanished, without trace, into the Arctic winter night. She would have perished, too, had not the Führer come.

She walked away from Apanlee with a long whip, urging the animals on. Frost, hunger, enemy fire would come; she would not change; she knew no one who would. Feet raw and soul deformed by decades of brute suffering, she would keep walking, on and on, just walking west, in the direction of the sun that dropped into a gray horizon, making her escape from the bowels of the Beast.

That God was brutal, savage and unfair was not part of her inner litany. Life was reduced to this: great suffering was part of the design. She lived on meager morsels.

Not once did she demand: Why doth Thou wear a mask?" Nobody questioned God's omnipotence, and surely not Marleen. She followed Faith and Führer. The Führer was His helper, for when the Führer came to Apanlee, the land was rich again. There would be victory. When the decisive battles had been fought and won, she would eat all her fill, and still have food left over. The enemy was bleeding from a thousand fearful wounds, and tomorrow the war would be won.

And in the meantime, fortitude.

Her journey to find answers in the worsening disorder was not a murky one. Her God was innocent. It was the Devil who kept tricking people with his schemes. She did not cringe and grovel before God. The Devil piled hardship on hardship.

Before she left, she took the balance of her bludgeoned life with care and without flinching, an orderly and conscientious woman. Here's what she saw as though outlined in sharpened pencil strokes: she had done all that she could.

She had tried to please the Lord. She had tried to please the tsars. She had tried to please her parents and her husband and her children. And now she tried with all her might to please the Führer, too. She owed him all she had. She owed him everything. One sentence summarized it all for her: The Führer stopped the trains. Had he not come with fire, flags and steel, she would have perished. Verily.

The blood drained from her heart in memory.

By the hundreds of thousands, they had perished.

That's why she drove herself. The blind servility this war demanded of all living flesh to higher law and orthodox authority was no alien feeling for Marleen. The Führer gave her certainty. In scrupulous exchange, he did not like to have his wishes crossed. She knew she never would. She lived and died, and never questioned him, nor did she test his gospel. Much like the stone slabs Moses brought to guide the tribe of Israel, her gospel said: Thou shalt, and Thou shalt not.

She felt no discord with a message that came in black on

white, surrounded by a sea of red to script the course of duty. For it was duty that this struggle was about!

Soon there was little left but duty.

In generations past, her people lived by it, and most had died by it. Her Faith was absolute. In its confines, her soul reposed. This was today, containing hardship, but surely tomorrow would bring hope. The earth was still full of potatoes.

"Thy will be done," she said, and did not pause to think which autocrat she meant. A traitor was a traitor. A bullet in his neck!

Who wouldn't have felt likewise, Marleen asked next, as she left Apanlee behind, now walking past the waterhole where, in the ashen years, she and her famished kin had knelt to sink the grain into the inky night so that her family could eat.

So that the world had bread!

In the east, small flashes still, and distant thunder, but in the west, the tree tops stirred. Life, far ahead of her, was tremulous.

The crimson menace, in the east, was growing on the world like cancer, devouring the past that her forebears had loved. Young Germany, by contrast, was waiting in the west.

She was too old, by then, to savor the potential of future progeny, but there was Mimi. Still. A gun hung from her shoulder, tied to a piece of string. There was still Erika, somewhere in Germany. And there was still the baby. The day would come when they would prosper, fall in love, and multiply. And seek their *Lebensraum*.

There was the tree where Hein had marked the bark. Some rusty cartridges still lay among yellowing leaves. She stepped right over them.

Who had been at the core of the destructive, bloody Revolution? Not she.

Had it been Dominik?

She swallowed hard. Not he. He was its tool but not its source. His greed, his envy and his ignorance had goaded him to clench his fist, but he was incidental to the Revolution. She understood that now.

Who sowed the dragons' teeth? Not anyone she knew.

The Jews, said Jonathan, who knew more than she did. The Jews had hatched it, caused it, fueled it, paid for it. To cause dissent, and hence destruction, was part of their self-serving itch.

That's what Marleen believed. That's how it all began for Apanlee—when Hebrews started shrieking of the evils of prosperity and property, while filling their pockets with loot.

As she was leaving Apanlee behind, she saw the grand design. This thing they had unleashed; this monster called the Red Revolution, sprang from the bloody jaws of hell. It fell on good, kind, meek and honest people, who would not have disturbed a swallow that nested in the furrows. It was unleashed on pacifists who had amassed great wealth by watching every kopeck. How could that have been wrong?

She knew that she would live and die and never understand.

Not ever. Never. She would not.

Had not the Revolution come, she would have led a meek and cordial life; she would have kept away from shocking colors, sharp designs such as the swastika. Remembering the blood-soaked night of many years ago that stilled the patter of young feet in the beloved halls of Apanlee, she suffered now as she had suffered when she had tried to gather in her apron the bloody pieces of her kin. She set her jaw. What made her clutch the Führer's flag? Her cherubs, fat with peace!

The Führer said: Help smash the devil's tanks! Set fire to his hamlets! Burn out the vipers' nests!

The Führer clobbered the entire trek with broadcast after broadcast, all letting it be known that there was Hebrew treachery afoot. And when, retreating inch by inch, the Führer took an iron broom and started sweeping mightily the length and width of the Ukraine, she did what any decent human being would have done. She nodded, an obedient woman—she, too, a monarchist at heart. She gave him her support.

"We'll grind the traitors to a pulp between the millstones of righteousness and wrath," the Führer said, and while she did not

clap her hands, she did not turn her face from duty.

Confronted with a common danger, the Führer needed her as part of a united front. It was a harsh and bitter gospel, but had she ever known a gospel that was not?

These thoughts now echoed in the empty chambers of her heart as she bid her farewell to Apanlee. Her horses were already bleeding at the mouth. The thugs would come again and smash the walls that pride of race had built. She knew the Führer, whom she worshipped, the Lord Almighty whom she loved, were fighting side by side, both battling, shield and sword, against the atheistic fiend once more exploding from the gasping heart of Russia and shedding fire from the sky—for now the Jews, the trekkers were informed, were running wild across America as well, and kept on fueling the war, and nothing to stop their endeavors!

The menace of democracy! A fearful scale of crimes! A child knew that Americans were puppets to the Jews. From their soft lips fell the detested word: equality.

She was not ignorant, nor was she pitiless. They, too, would pay. She knew the balance sheet. It would get worse for them. Much worse. Dead people could be found in any war. Young lives entitled to the smell of lilacs in the spring would fall to ashes and to dust because the world was bafflingly oblivious to where the real danger lay—not with the strong and diligent but with the murky, dark and lazy.

Not with her Führer, verily. He longed for peace. Not war.

Marleen thus walked away from Apanlee for good. She turned around but once, for one last look, by the steep bend where the acacias grew and partly covered the old roof that had housed generations.

"Walls, durable enough to last for centuries—" she muttered to herself. In the far distance, she heard the sound of weeping, but her own eyes were dry. She saw the gleaming river of hard work and diligence and piety and passion and deep devotion to the soil—now streaming westwards. Westwards.

She took it in for the last time: the wide-flung wings of Apanlee. The orchards. Silos. Stables.

Here they had lived, the members of the stubborn creed, harmonious in point of view, convinced their world was just. Good, simple people. Pacifists. God-fearing all, obedient all, who flung their seeds into the earth to grow the food for all. And where was their reward?

Equality? She understood equality.

Here was equality for you—to share your work and joy! That needed no translation—and verily not at the point of gun. Foul thought, dressed up in stolen garb, was not equality. The Hebrews could have learned a thing or two from the good maxims of her creed who beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into strong pruning hooks, who held their hard-earned heritage aloft.

As lesser men did not.

Ah, pride of race!

She savored it. The tsars had cultivated it. The elders, to a man, had bolstered it. The Lord Himself approved of it. She knew He did; not anywhere in nature could anybody find equality. She was a simple woman, but atavistically she knew: equality was a political ideal, not a scientific fact.

Equality belonged in the hereafter, but surely not on earth!

The Earth had maxims of its own. The earth craved strength. Hard muscles. Potency. Fertility. Tenacity. Willpower and endurance.

She still remembered how, from his enormous desk at Apanlee, her own beloved Uncle Benny had tried to stem the horror tide of democratic thought with fragile, scented words. And what were the results of his restraint and reason? His hands nailed to the wall?

Her babies, too. Five of her little children. No end to tears and pain. It still washed over her in waves.

The bitter years of anarchy.

Next, civil war. The soil, ablaze with terror.

Famine on top of famine.

The bloody, unrelenting purges. Public tortures. Executions in the market squares. Harvests of executions.

All for equality?

A Jewish lie! A fiendish trick. She wanted none of it. She shuddered at the thought.

There was the waterhole. There she had knelt with her God-fearing sons. The night had swallowed them. The Elders' skulls were toys for the Siberian wolves. Her husband's bones were moldy in his grave.

"I paid," she told the servant who quietly walked beside her.

"You did," Natasha said.

"I paid and paid and paid. The Revolution took from me my all. It took and took and took. Death took a rich, rich harvest."

Natasha's reply was a shuddering sigh. Her jaw started working like mad.

Marleen's eyes became stones on the road. "By sword and by bullet, we perished. Something swept us away like tumbleweed. And to what wicked end?"

It was a riddle with no answer. She knew that words did not stretch wide enough to summarize why tyranny was virtue now, compassion a feature of weakness. God's mandate, muffled like a river—whereas the Führer was alive. And what the Führer said to her was this: "Here is your duty, woman. You do not count. The Fatherland is all."

Marleen put both her trembling arms around the horse's glossy neck, and what she said that day lives on in memory. You hear it still in Winnipeg, in the Dakotas, in Nebraska, deep in the hills of Idaho.

She said with a shuddering sigh:

"Here I was born. Here I was married. Here I gave birth to the future, I thought. Here I lived, and here I loved, and here I buried all. I'm leaving. I am leaving all. Why am I shedding not a single tear?"

"You ask, expecting not an answer," her loyal servant said. Natasha walked beside Marleen, grown black with age, in Hein's old boots, already forming blisters.

Chapter 107

Alongside the trek, with steady step, walked Mimi. She still was young, still beautiful. She still held all the cards.

"We're gaining on the Antichrist," said Jonathan before he left to finish off the struggle, and she believed him. She believed him. In such a war that treated human life as if it were a bubble, you glittered while you could.

The Wehrmacht moved in waves. The eastern front was pounding like an ocean to save the world from doom. She knew that human sacrifice, all starkly grounded in necessity, was sad but unavoidable. The world would be purged; a new spring would come; of course it would come; and why not?

"By shield and sword," vowed Mimi. The Führer was spectacular from every single angle. In his beloved Reich, where she was heading now, he'd chased the whores away.

She had no inner chaos to be calmed. She knew nobody lukewarm in convictions. She kept cradling hope in her heart. She had her Faith and clung to it, no matter what the outcome.

She had not sworn the oath of sacrifice, as had young men like Jonathan, but well she might have sworn it, for she faithfully

cleaved to the cause. She read the daily bulletins and swore by every one, her heart warm as a patchwork quilt. She would not let her comrades down by yielding to defeatist moods. If there were Doubting Thomases, she was not one of them.

She knew this war was right, a struggle to the death. But necessary. Clean. And just. The generations that had come and gone before she ever saw the sun of rectitude the Führer shone on Apanlee, all had abundant Faith in things essential, clean, and just. They all obeyed without a murmur—be it the Lord, be it the tsars. She had her precedents.

In days gone by, the Elders told her what to do; her parents told her what to do; her brothers told her what to do; then, Comrade Stalin told her what to do, and even Dominik, and she did not demur. Why should she not take orders from the Führer whom she revered and worshipped as she had never worshipped anyone on earth—against the backdrop of the purges that drove Faith underground?

Belief in him was limitless. Faith stood in high relief. It drove her on with a hypnotic force, as it drove Jonathan. Her will was like clay, to be molded.

The mail pouch came daily but his letters did not; the year was running out of days, but it was springtime still for Mimi. She understood this much: that every day could be her last. War wrote the rules for her; she did not quarrel with the rules. She knew no one who did.

She stepped around dead horses, decomposing in the sun. The flies were hatching there.

She ate what she could find—and if she found an apple with a worm, then luck was on her side. She pondered, and then ate it.

She made the most of life. Why be an old, wet blanket?

She walked like a cat, paw after paw, and purred when there was sunshine. She washed when she could. She slept where she fell, but not before spotting yet another gulash cannon, striking up another friendship with the cook.

She was adaptable; she could curl up and close her eyes and

fall asleep beneath most any tree, while the old servant stretched a blanket over sticks to give her child some shade.

Before the rains came in earnest, she found herself a Wehrmacht officer and offered this to him: "I speak High German. Low German. Russian. Ukrainian. I have the body of a boy. I can sneak into any Russian hut and spy out the secrets you need."

They cut her hair and gave her several passwords. She lived without remorse, a gun strapped to her shoulder, but that was not by choice. If it took clandestine means to help clean up the malice of the universe—why, she would gladly do her share, and do it without whining. She was combing the landscape for traitors.

"The good die young," Natasha muttered, ominously, while putting plugs of cotton in the baby's ears. Natasha argued for reality in the battle of words that ensued.

"What of the honey child?" was her repeated cry. The moon came out; the stripped trees looked like ghosts; and Mimi kept on whistling while she walked.

What could she do? She had no choice. Let Baba see she had no choice. She slipped into the peasants' confidence, since she was fluent in their tongue. This was a struggle to the bone; the country blazed in violence; the skies were black with death.

Soon she was cold and wet and hungry, but she did all she could. She radiated confidence.

There was no end to partisans, no end to their hostilities. She took pride in staying hard on their heels, alert for every shadow falling from the trees. If she found a body, she checked every pocket—you never knew what you might find, for edibles were scarce, and flints were valued currency.

The caravan grew long, and thick—and longer still, and thicker. Small tributaries joined the stream from hamlets left and right, with pony carts and high-wheeled baby carriages.

She was glad for Natasha who cradled the child, glad for Marleen who urged on the mares. She stayed close to the trek and had visits as often as lulls in the fighting permitted. But that

was as far as it went. No secrets left her lips.

Legends would later have it otherwise, but she was chaste in her own way, devoted deeply to her comrades, and loyal to the core to Jonathan, who held the enemy at bay with his hard, suntanned body she had so fiercely loved a fading summer's worth. Some *Landsers* gave her languid looks; she would smile sweetly in response and lower her long lashes; all that was play and little more; for in the east stood her beloved to guard the world from doom. Her war was puritanical. She was a *Landser* among *Landsers,* she shared both triumph and defeat. She took her meals with them, right in the ditch, next to the gulash cannon, her mess tin swaying over a slow fire.

To her, this was romance. This was worth. Deeply meaningful.

A cup of good, warm broth, shared with reliant comrades, respecting and protecting her, gave her the energy for yet another day. Here she found understanding and commitment, as deep as life itself.

While she waited, while she hoped the tide of war would turn, a sweet and sentimental song did everything for her. A password, whispered in the dark, passed on from trench to trench, meant everything to her.

She often slept inside the *Landsers'* tents, curled up and cradling to herself her memories of Jonathan. Not one of them reached out for her to try to strip her of her honor. Self-discipline was all. Long after all was said and done and Germany lay quartered like a hare, Mimi would speak of it with an abiding wonder—that brief and wondrous time when life was throbbing, colorful and swift, when words like "duty," "honor," "loyalty" still had the weight of granite.

Her heart was spoken for. She pined for Jonathan. She did love Jonathan.

She kept her pledge with reverence. She knew he strove with all his might to stem the bloody tide about to overrun the trek. Could she do less? His love was intertwined with duty and perfection. Her love was smooth and soft, unblemished. Like a

child's.

This, then, was Mimi during war—not made for motherhood.

She was not good; she was not bad; she was not made for greatness; she wanted warmth and happiness like everybody else. She knew that she might live and die and never own an Easter dress, which, in a normal, ordered world, might well have been her goal.

Her former training as a Pioneer made her superbly fit. She had an expertise her new comrades respected and needed.

Had it not been for Mimi and her adroit maneuvers, the trek would have run into trouble. The caravan depended on her craftiness to supply it with sketches and maps. The partisans were masters at misleading. They misdirected, and then ambushed. Their agents tried to palm off maps with cities that didn't exist, drawing in roads that led into traps. The land was vast. The wind started raking the clouds.

She drew endurance from Natasha and stoicism from Marleen. The twins had taught her to have Faith; the purges taught her to be cunning; the Führer taught her to be valiant and hard.

She could crawl like a snake on her belly.

Her comrades taught her how to stay awake, attentive to the danger of guerrilla infiltration. Someone in the distance shrieked. She didn't even blink. She lived the joy of righteous battle: to be there where the flames were hottest, to die, if need be, where young death counted most.

She sat around the fires with rugged, seasoned warriors, many of them wounded twice or more, listening in silence to their stories—how skilled commandos flushed the partisans from Russian huts, how trenches must be dug and bastions must be raised and bridges must be blown into the air to subdue the ever-more-treacherous foe.

"The Führer cannot lose," her comrades reassured her. "Our planes control the sky."

The enemy, by contrast, had little to show for himself. His aircraft were of inferior quality, decidedly. She squinted to make sure. She watched for foreign planes that kept on menacing the

air. She strained her ears to hear their motors.

"Air bandits in the pay of Jews," her comrades said to her, and acid rose in her, a bitter, cresting wave. How dare her relatives in faraway America! How dare they think and act as though she were the enemy when, all the while, she was the one who fought the pentagram, the Antichrist, still holed up in the Kremlin, showing his black teeth?

The Führer's army, by comparison, was fighting for a warm and pleasant future, where oldsters had a pension and children had a chance. The Führer would help her two little girls grow into exemplary citizens—which was what she believed.

Her spirit has been numb for years until the *Landsers* came. She never knew a *Landser* to be dull. The soldiers told each other daily: "The final blow will end the war. At most, another month."

She could not guess why it delayed, this long-anticipated turn-of-tide, but it was easy to believe in final victory: this city, that bridgehead just around the corner, was slated to become a springboard for the new offensive—and, meanwhile, there was work.

The partisans were pesky and persistent, and had the people on the trek not had her willingness and cunning expertise, life would have been far worse.

Thanks to her vigilance, the trek was never fully at the mercy of the partisans who sat, guns cocked, in the dark bushes, scheming whom they might destroy.

She became the trek's seasoned scout. They had their ways, and she had hers; she snatched up pieces of intelligence much as a chicken picked up kernels, with care, and with precision.

So slim and limber in her movements was Mimi that she could slip right through the tightest barricade.

She helped the Wehrmacht flush subversives and connivers from the dilapidated peasant huts. She fought alongside, quietly, a comrade among comrades, postponing motherhood, as brave and as resilient as her own stunted nature permitted her to be.

Both feet in war. Filled to her fingertips with faith. A young girl still at heart. Faith, here as there. Faith in the Mystic Cross.

"It's for the greater good. That is the only thing that matters," the Führer said, unleashing that dark Faith she carried in her genes. She had been nursed on it.

The explanation was simplicity itself: had not the Antichrist been unleashed on her kin and made her walk knee-deep in blood, she would have lived a prudent life; she would have pleased the relatives.

Like everybody else.

But Mimi never had that luxury. Her memory commenced when she was shedding her first teeth, the year when Apanlee was massacred. There was no way to shake that violent night. She didn't even try.

The blows of anarchy had clubbed the child from her before it was of kindergarten age; the weight of years of pain and misery had crushed her adolescence. The westward caravan was merely a variation on the theme.

The roadside graves increased in numbers—day by day.

The front, though wavering erratically, was struggling to solidify. That Germany would win was a foregone conclusion already.

The shriek of the stukas affirmed it. The smoke plumes—thick, thicker—affirmed it. The tree tops stirred beneath a sky like ink along a dim horizon in the east, like glowing embers in the west. Relief, the Führer's broadcast promised her, was on the way. Expected any minute.

The air was warm; the sky seemed slightly drunk as the leaves curled, changing colors.

It was soft afternoons for days on end, but oddly chilly nights, enhancing the hues of a very blue river, a bright yellow cornfield, affirming that life still was a kaleidoscope for those with eyes to see.

Thus, Mimi walked toward the Fatherland, filled to the brim with Faith, content and competent, her socks, by then, just rags.

Chapter 108

In spite of the dwindling year, in spite of diminishing stockpiles, there were brief, stolen moments of peace, and sometimes even of mirth.

For instance, one morning Natasha came running, the cook in hot pursuit.

"She did it! She did it! I know that she did it!" he yelled.

She ran for her life, but the cook's legs were longer; his fury made them fly; in the throes of that kind of frenzy, it was wise to step out of his way, which was what Mimi did.

Marleen had not been feeling well all week and now was getting sicker by the day. She lay in the back of her wagon. A stubborn cough was strangling her—the last thing she needed was trouble.

She lifted her head and tried to look stern as Baba dived for cover.

The cook had turned purple rage. He fixed Marleen with steely eyes. "The low-life! The scofflaw! She stole my pail of jam! I'll have her tried and shot!"

Marleen rose on one feeble elbow. "You didn't! No! Natasha!

Not one among us steals!"

Along the length of the trek went a buzz that might have been uneasy laughter. It was no secret any more: that food was getting short. Some confiscated what they could; Natasha had no qualms. Natasha hoarded everything one might describe as edible.

"What's the matter, corporal? What's going on? There's nothing wrong, is there?" asked Mimi. "Why give yourself a stroke? Just ask yourself that question."

He blinked and turned his head, watching Mimi hold onto a lopsided smile.

"I must report this, as you know," he said, already faltering. "She stole it! She's hidden it somewhere. She's hidden my jam. You, there! You answer me! Why don't you answer me? And don't you try to lie, you glutton!"

"Leave my old aunt alone," said Mimi. "She's deaf and dumb. She doesn't hear a thing. She cannot answer you."

"A deaf-mute? That's your lame excuse?"

"Worse. Worse than that. An imbecile," said Mimi, and elbowed Baba gently.

Natasha's jaw began to wobble. She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again.

"Right. Deaf and dumb," insisted Marleen, too, "since the unlucky day she was born."

The cook was not persuaded. His bushy eyebrows danced. "Is that a fact? Don't give me such a funny look. This calls for an investigation."

"What for? Why waste your time? She stood beneath a tree when lightning struck—"

"—it happened many years ago," embellished Mimi, smiling. She kept on smiling, melting his anger.

He still insisted, crimson. "Theft! It was theft. She stole my pail of jam."

"That's surely an exaggeration," elaborated Mimi, unafraid. She launched another foxy smile: "I have a bright idea. Forget it. As a favor to me?" With that, she offered him a flint. A flint

was now a treasure that could buy bread for days. Would it keep Baba out of serious trouble for having helped herself illegally to Wehrmacht property?

"Yet once again: How many in your wagon?"

"Four," said Marleen, while smoothing out her lie. She counted on her fingers. "My daughter, Mimi. This dimwit here, but useful as an ox. A soldier's infant. Me."

"Where are your documents? Give me details. I need details. I must report the theft."

"I'll scold her, and I'll keep an eye on her. You have my word of honor."

She told them who they were, and why they were trustworthy—three German women and a baby, all of unblemished ancestry. "Give me a pencil," said Marleen, and drew him a family tree.

That evening, Marleen told Baba sternly: "From now on, keep your tongue in check. There is no need to call attention to yourself. Don't speak, no matter what."

"My German," said Natasha, haughtily, "as good as yours, Marleen. I might as well be honest."

That night, they slept, their arms around each other, in an abandoned trolley, to keep the cold away. Between them, they nestled the baby.

A stubborn rash had formed on the child's buttocks and would not go away. Worry nagged Natasha like a worm. She argued, shrieked and wheedled.

But there was little even Mimi could accomplish except heap ridicule on the cook's head because he wouldn't give her extra rations for the baby, despite her pocket full of flints.

No matter how she beamed at him, he wouldn't look at her.

"Just keep your ears stiff," said the cook, without a trace of pity. "That is my best advice. Once we have reached the Fatherland, all of your problems will be solved."

The Fatherland lay in a murky mist. She shushed the baby while she could. She loved it well enough.

"A smile? Give me a smile?" she teased the little waif born from her brief encounter in the sun. She played with it and tried her best to coax it into words, but exhaustion had stolen its voice. Its face was the face of a gnome.

"Don't look at me like that," said Mimi miserable, and stared Natasha down. "I do the best I can."

Natasha kept feeding it jam. She knew the baby needed garden greens, but could she fabricate them from thin air?

The baby needed mothering, but where to look for Mimi? For days on end, Mimi was gone. But once this war was won, she would catch up then. She would. She would learn mothering, she told Natasha many times, once having reached Berlin, where she was heading now. Meanwhile, she had no choice.

The traitors to the Fatherland turned out to be resilient and inventive. They spread defeatist rumors, and not a few of them had gold and silver in their names. They sawed through the beams of bridges. They made the trek detour. They slashed through telephone lines. They strapped small bags of dynamite to dogs and chased them underneath the trek, where it was warm; where the sweet baby tried to nap, snug in Natasha's lap.

Three weeks into the trek, the baby's scalp was raw, his bottom one big sore. As weeks turned into months, with victory nowhere in sight, Mimi grew ever more resourceful.

She was the Wehrmacht's eyes and ears. She helped the trek push on as best she could, and fought against the partisans, wherever they formed pockets of resistance.

To counteract their cunning, she manned the lookout post. She tricked them cleverly. She learned from them their cunning. She toppled hostile cyclists by stringing invisible wire. Odd snipers fired at her now and them from sagging and dilapidated roofs and from abandoned buildings, but she knew how to duck.

"One last decisive push," said Mimi.

The enemy was running out of gas. The trick lay in the timing.

Had she had time to stop and think, she might have hated

them, but hate was not a useful commodity in Mimi's supple mind. Her needs were simple, practical: she wished the bedbugs she endured at night in yet another Russian hut would feed on someone else.

She cocked her ear for danger. She braced herself for ambush. She dug in fast. She kept low to the ground. The partisans shot out of hedges and from bushes.

There was the enemy and there were comrades; things stood in high relief. There was no room for doubt. She had a small and hungry heart; she wanted peace. Love. Warmth. Like everybody else.

"My very own victory garden," she promised, and patted the shriveling child.

She often fantasized. "Perhaps a dainty restaurant, all to myself, with tables with embroidered table cloth?"

The Führer would lend her the money. Four children in four years would neatly cancel it.

Her dreams were all on hold, but dreams she had. In spades. She would nap in warm hay. She would fly freshly laundered clothes in the sun. She would draw cool, clear water from a pump and twice a day water her carrots. She would grow nails again. She would grow out her hair and set it in colorful curlers. She dreamed small, modest, fluttering dreams, bubbling up from a bottomless lake.

Day after day, Natasha barked at her: "You're not fooling me!" which was unfair, and mean. She gave her all, and more. Her children would grow up to have a better, cleaner life than she herself had known.

There was the Antichrist. There was the Mystic Cross. The choice was clear. She knew no one who did not stand in body and in spirit behind the Mystic Cross.

When there was time—though even time was running short—she held the child aloft so it could see the *Landsers*. If fighting there must be, then it was just as well that children learned about it early.

Sometimes she thought of Erika, now safely tucked away in Germany. Natasha missed the puzzling child, but Mimi did not miss her; fate wrote the script for her. This war would strengthen Erika as well and hone her to perfection. Once the war was won, there would be time again for laughter and for song. Which was the bottom line: as soon as there was time, she would start mothering.

So, for a while, war seemed a game. Unreal.

But not for long. That changed.

Once Mimi helped flush several partisans from a thick pile of hay, hands high above their heads. At first she laughed with glee, but then she watched their faces twisting with the knowledge that all they had now left of life was one brief, barked command:

"Here's a shovel. Dig."

She turned her face away. She wasn't made for cruelty, but on the other hand, you paid for what you did.

She gagged a bit when bullets started flying. There were strong penalties against that sort of thing, to prolong agony for captured traitors, but in a war as brutal as this one, and worsening, things could not always be controlled. War did astounding things.

She would have never kicked a dog in anger, or crushed a beetle with her heel, had things been orderly, but as the trek became more desperate, and more and more subversives, who tried to blow the trek sky-high, got their dessert as she was looking on, she didn't lose much sleep.

So ask yourself: God tortures and He kills, how many thousand years? No matter what the misery of life, the cruelty of death, the length it takes to die, the agony involved—Faith can't be killed. It can't.

All cruelties have explanation somewhere, or so the credulous believe. She, Mimi, still believed. She had no malice in her nature. She longed for a safe world, where preachers spoke with fine and measured voices and filled the churches to the brim. Her teeth would ache with longing.

What had she ever known?

Just Revolution. Famine. Anarchy. The purges of the Antichrist. All that.

There was no moral ground beneath her feet at all until the *Landsers* came, their boots and buttons polished. She knew from hearsay that the preachers of the olden days had spent enormous time and energy to nurse believers in their Faith—and many of them dull, old, limited, no intellectual balls of fire. But on God's side, regardless. All that was gone and finished, never to return—that safe and fabled world of yesterday the bandits took from her with bloody blows before she ever had a chance to set a foot in kindergarten.

Had she been sheltered to grow up with warmth and safety and affection, she might have married suitably; she might have raised a family. But she had never known such luxury.

What was another bullet, therefore, against the backdrop of a generation when bullets by the millions flew? The partisans were everywhere. She did not have a matchbox for a brain, nor was she lacking pity. She did the best she could—but not at the expense of sleep.

"Well, we are living in strange times, and anything is possible," she told herself, and watched the traitors fall.

Here was another sort of cruelty in the long string of cruelties that life had handed her. Her memory of life began when she sank her own baby teeth into the tender wrist of a small boy beneath that zinc tub that shook and trembled to the blows of anarchy. He was her husband now, the father of her child. She loved him very much. This was his war. And that was good enough.

On her long trek toward the land described to her as the one place in the entire universe where life was warm and good, she learned to pass beneath the makeshift gallows from which hung black-faced traitors who had done the unspeakable: betrayed the Fatherland.

"A partisan's machine gun nest—" somebody said and pointed with his gun.

In just retaliation, she waited for a favorable breeze before

she put another match to yet another hamlet. A traitor's nest could be reduced to ashes in a jiffy. Compassion? Mercy? Pity? She was not made of stone; she was not cruel by nature. But when she couldn't help what happened, she closed her eyes as tightly as she could and covered both her ears when someone pulled the trigger.

She was the Führer's vassal. She was his follower. It mattered little that this war drained from her kindness and compassion. She could no more give than receive. By year's end, no one could.

Chapter 109

Why blame the thistle for its fruit? Natasha had forgotten yesterday.

She walked, but did not complain. The tip of the trek showed the way. To save the horses' strength, she seldom rode atop the wagon, though Marleen, who was feverish and getting worse, did so. Natasha walked alongside, bravely, for long, dusty stretches of road.

She was proud of her Apanlee horses, still glossy and calm, sleek with the previous winter's rye. She tried to keep their load light, carrying the baby piggyback or letting it ride on her hip. Only when it needed extra rocking for its nap, or else to help a tardy tooth along, did she climb up to sit amid the boxes, pails and bedding, so she could spy a brook in which to rinse another diaper, riding high, surveying her surroundings with a peasant's crafty eye, soothing the suffering of her beloved infant in her lap.

"Who cuddles you? Who hums to you? As soon as there's a break, I'll make you some hot tea—"

She loved this morsel dearly. She folded her old arms around the child and kept on rocking gently.

She rinsed another diaper. She let the wind blow over it and dry it on a fence. She found a tree that gave sufficient shade and put the baby there on blankets for a nap.

It was still hot at noon; a lot of handkerchiefs appeared; she had one, too—embroidered neatly in one corner, a discard of Marleen's, still practically new. With it, she wiped the salty perspiration off the baby's face.

"—my silly calf? My little kitten? What is the matter now? Don't frown. It's not my fault. Have you been snoozing on your elbow? Who has the softest hair? Who has the prettiest mama?"

Her motives were simplicity itself—she had her family; loyalty to them and to their way of life was now the only loyalty she knew.

Natasha struck an attitude that said: "I am a godsend to the trek." Soon she had quite a reputation.

She picked up many useful clues and applied them as the occasion suited. Food was scarce now, getting scarcer by the hour; each day, she went in search of something edible to fill the can that swung across a fire in the ditch. It was just a tin can, old and dented, scarcely rinsed, but better by a mile than nothing.

She found a heap of abandoned potatoes and ran to get a pillowcase. She spilled them out before Marleen—big, fat potatoes rolling everywhere! Food for another week!

Hers, too, was a world of control. Compliance to authority was in. The tsars could create and destroy. The saints could concede or withhold. What could an old and toothless peasant do against the steely glitter of the Wehrmacht? Never had she wasted time and energy on useless hatred and ill will. The shackles of the gods were ancient fare for her. Nobody questioned power. Nobody questioned rule. Here, as there, were slaves and masters; then as now lived serfs and overlords. Had anything or anybody changed?

All she could see was this: There was no meat in anybody's cabbage soup these days. In fact, if you had cabbage soup at all, you thought you were a king.

Natasha kept a crafty eye on a lame cow that would soon fall and hence yield food for weeks. She would not miss that opportunity.

The trek passed many burnt-out shacks where Russian families had lived, now gone as though they never had existed. The only traces left were brick and mortar stoves.

What Baba found, she kept. She'd knock once and, without waiting, push open any door. If borscht still bubbled in a casserole, as happened now and then—since people fled like hares before the fox at the sound of a motorcycle's roar, all fearing the quick-trigger finger—Natasha seized it as her due and took it to the trek.

She found a make-shift baby carriage amid a pile of rubble. She shouted out her joy. She took possession then and there and knew that she had wrestled yet another chance for that last honey child that life had granted her.

The buggy was a little thing on four strong wheels—wooden wheels, but sturdy—a vehicle that had a handle, like a cross. Triumphantly, she took it to the trek and broke into a chant:

"See what I found? See what I found?"

She placed the child amid the mildewed pillows and started pulling, with dogged, grim determination. West. Past troops that kept on plodding eastward in endless, field-gray columns. Past trucks still loaded high with rifles. Boxes. Ammunition.

She hung another tin can across another ditch. A Red Cross train whisked by and blew the fire out. She kindled it again amid wet, soggy leaves. The skies howled in a wretched voice. Long gone were the raucous Heil Hitlers.

She never called it servitude. She, too, would live and die and never conjure up a world free of submission to command. She leaned into the road, obeying without protest. She headed westwards; they all did; she had no life apart. Their joys were her joys, their sorrows hers as well.

The hours grew shorter. When there was a lull in the trek's

clumsy advance, Natasha rinsed the baby's diapers and dried them on a bush.

At night, she shoved Hein's sheepskin underneath her head and tried to get some sleep, but not before she piled some extra bedding all around Marleen to keep the night away.

As for herself, Hein's sheepskin came in handy. It helped to keep the baby warm, as snug as possible atop her aching chest. All night, she kept it there. Even in troubled sleep, she stroked the tender head.

Another day. She walked. She slept. She hummed.

Whenever she saw opportunities, she scavenged all she could. She gathered birds eggs, berries, mushrooms. In her old palm, she crushed them for the child.

She swallowed her complaints—they did no good. She led the horses by the bridle. In quarrels with Marleen, she always came off badly.

"You smell like an old panhandler," Natasha said defiantly, attempting yet another squabble with Marleen to put some color in her face and hoist her from her gloom.

Marleen let that pass by.

Natasha didn't give up easily. "Your cough is really dreadful. Tomorrow, you'll be dead."

"I know. I'm very sick."

Natasha kept on pointing to the sky: "See that? Those are Americans."

"Yes. Yes, I know."

"Your relatives. Remember how you used to brag about your fanciful Americans?"

"I don't remember. No."

"You would remember if you weren't in the habit of forgetting. You must be getting old—"

Marleen stayed apathetic. Marleen's eyes were veiled, they stared off at nothing. Her feet were raw, with open blisters. She had a stubborn cold. She needed cupping glasses to drain the fever off.

Natasha gnawed her lip. What else to say now that Marleen's

old heart was clearly breaking at mounting evidence of doom, though it was made of steel?

"Some relatives. Some relatives," Natasha kept on needling her in hopes of rousing Marleen back into a fine, defiant mood, but it made little difference. Marleen said bitterly, reflecting the prevailing view: "We cannot count on them. They're in the Hebrews' pay—"

Which was the latest word.

As days grew short and shorter still and clammy nights rose from the earth, Natasha shivered and then shook, but walk she would, and did. The cow and two spare mares trod silently behind.

Her thoughts were her own—thoughts black as a chimney sweep's face at the end of a harrowing day.

Here's what Natasha thought: If it took youth to stop the enemy, why draft a fifty-year-old man? And if the Führer's coffers were full of gold and diamonds, why was there constant havoc with the trains? The Führer claimed in broadcast after broadcast that he would strike a mighty blow, but meanwhile, did he feed his army?

Another day. Another week.

The wagons kept bumping along.

It was impossible to see or say what lay beyond the next day.

The sky turned turquoise, then pale, by mid-November. Each night, the soldiers' tents still stood like pointed hats, but started looking frayed.

At dawn, a chill crept in, and it took hours for the sun to melt it. By noon, wide strips of land lay bordered with wild flowers during these last, sad Indian summer days, but then the skies grew gray, and it started to drizzle.

More petals fell off and turned brown.

Natasha walked where others trod, though walking in the wheel ruts was not easy. Her peasant garb was all she had, and even that was tattered.

There was no doubt Marleen was deathly ill. The moment the trek stopped by yet another rick, she sank down in the straw with a groan. Her legs were trembling with exhaustion, her throat aflame with road dust. All night, she tossed and turned with fever.

Natasha gave her long, hard stares.

Meanwhile, the trek proceeded westwards, on and on—through yellowing forests, over rickety bridges while, on the left and right, deserted villages receded.

Dust rose in clouds behind the wagons. Abandoned, rusted vehicles lay on their sides and blocked the road. Come evening, given yet another makeshift shelter, the people sat around the radio and listened to the news.

" —by Christmas, at the latest—"

Let fools believe that. She did not. She saw what she saw; she knew what she knew. Her eyes were sharp and wary.

The Wehrmacht raided huts. The Wehrmacht was erecting massive barricades. Torn posters, glued to railway cars, to telephone poles, to shabby wind-torn barracks told passersby by day and night that Germany would win. In contrast, by comparison, the wind-blown posters claimed, the Red Army moved sluggishly and inefficiently.

The days grew short. The trek grew longer, wider.

There was no end to people fleeing from the Beast. When others snapped their arms in the salute the Wehrmacht reinforced, Natasha did the same. At night, the people on the trek sat shivering around small mounds of dead and smelly ashes and rubbed their aching feet. That's what Natasha did, for her own legs grew worse. Sharp rays shot from the bottom of her soles straight up into her groin.

What did she want? Not much. Just to sit out another winter by the stove.

Here was the challenge of existence, stripped down to its bare skeleton: to find another box car or an abandoned hay rick for the baby. She had pressing matters to consider: where to get soap to wash her baby's little bottom, already raw with lack of

care, lice nesting where the scabs had formed. Her heart was breaking. Constantly.

The drums were falling silent. One by one by one. The knots of fleeing civilians formed convoys, winding through the treacherous forests where saboteurs and traitors dangled from the trees.

That's where Natasha searched for mushrooms. It took some time and gritted teeth, but it was time and gritted teeth well spent. Beyond the dim horizon, something was growling audibly.

A war widow asked in a pitched and shrill voice: "You keep saying we're winning this war?"

The woman was so shaken by her fate that she could scarcely think. She gloomed and she doomed and complained. She talked from both sides of her mouth. She kept up her complaints. "We've had it. We're losing. We'll all fall in the gutter and die there of hunger and cold—"

Her words were discounted by those who believed. She looked shell-shocked and angry; her face was gray with layers of grime; her skirt was full of holes. Since she was understandably distraught, her own life finished utterly in the debris of Stalingrad, where she had sacrificed four sons, much was forgiven her.

Her husband, she said, weeping, had died earlier.

Nobody paid attention. This woman was no longer willing to avow her duty to the Fatherland, unlike the hardy people on the trek who hailed from Apanlee. They knew that there had been no bottom underneath their feet until the Führer came. This widow had become confused, then stunned, by hardship piled on hardship. Her red-rimmed eyes kept searching for an answer in the marching *Landsers*' faces as though they were insects about to be pinned on a board.

"Look at their boots. In need of heeling—"

"There will be a surprise offensive," said Mimi, who was not made of stone. Just as Marleen forgave the Lord for anything, so Mimi found excuses for the Führer. She made clean sweep of all defeatist arguments. "Hush now! Tomorrow we will win."

"It's all in vain," the widow said aggressively.

"That's nonsense, and you know it."

"It's not."

"You'll see. Just wait and see. We'll catch the enemy off balance. We'll win this war. We will."

The widow had no further words. She merely looked at Mimi, who finally said this, forced out against her will: "It's merely bad rumors, meant to demoralize."

Those rumors had it that the Red Army grew bold. Several *Landsers*, rucksacks packed, had told the people on the trek: "The Führer's generals are plotting. We are temporarily retreating so as to regroup and attack."

She was still gay in spirit. In fact, she was relentlessly upbeat.

It was her duty to defuse defeatist rumors, as dangerous as mines the partisans laid for the trek. Each morning, she counted the enemy's losses. She knew that the Führer was right; the war would be won and the enemy licked; it was merely a matter of waiting.

There was no end to waiting, amid odd, stolen moments of peace.

Life was still wide and full. She thrilled from day to day. The Führer was infallible. His *Stukas* kept on hissing reassuringly, still searching the heavens for prey. His panzer spearheads ripped like scythes through the neglected grain, clearing the way for a better, more honest tomorrow.

And meanwhile, yet another requisition claim drove the last cow, with children hanging howling from its tail, from yet another Russian village to remedy the meat supply. The gulash cannon cook was facing serious shortages.

In a lull, she sat quietly, sunning the baby, in the air the faint scent of cut hay. She loved all dogs, all cats.

"Hey there! Give me a little smile."

It looked like an old, shriveled dwarf. She gave the baby back to Baba, but not before she tickled it a bit.

Reinforcements and resupplies moved east in columns beyond counting. The troops sent from the west to reinforce the front looked young and energetic and undiminished, whereas the ones returning from the front were ashen.

How many had they killed? As many as they could.

They slept with rifles pinned between their bloody stumps. No longer did they banter with each other.

Natasha kept the fire going so some could dry their socks and mittens. While she did that, she kept on chewing on an acorn, silently, to stretch Marleen's slim ration card. She tolerated them; they did not bother her. She kept them in the corner of her eye. They might be cruel and wickedly unmerciful regarding partisans, defeatists, traitors, and marauders, but still they posted guards right by the wind-blown entrance so that the child could sleep.

To have her honey child in clover for yet another night was bliss. Wrapped in Hein's sheepskin to keep the night away, Natasha nestled the infant close to her lurching heart, and slept next to a *Landser*.

One morning, Mimi spoke sharply to Baba who had decided to be quarrelsome: "It's true. Be quiet. The troops have forced a crossing—"

Natasha let that pass.

"I'm telling you it's so!"

Natasha bit her lip. So let them claim whatever suited fancy. Was she born yesterday?

"I know with certainty that victory is just around the corner."

Another day. A week.

The wagons kept bumping along. It was impossible to see what lay beyond.

The silence grew and grew—the only sound the thunder of the many hoofs that kept on clopping west. The trek slogged through another morning, another afternoon and into darkness yet once more till it was time to stop.

The Wehrmacht slipped and stalled. The war moved in deep ruts. The German field artillery lashed out. Its guns kept blazing east. The broadcast told of bloody battles. A lone machine gun cackled in the distance. There was a constant smell of burning in the air.

The gulash kitchen rolled on squeaking wheels alongside the procession. Natasha cried: *"Pascholl!"* and lashed the horse across the flanks, for every densely wooded forest could mean potential ambush.

Why was she given eyes? She saw. She saw with her third eye. At first, it was just dust, but now the mud flew from the spikes. When German *Landsers* came to flood the steppe, end to end, like manna sent from heaven or locusts to devour the grain, depending on your point of view; the Russian hamlets fell like swatted flies; but now the soldiers' coats were frayed. Their boots no longer shone.

She listened with the keenest ear: their motors hummed defeat. A horse fell to its knees. Long, silent columns crept slowly and laboriously through the remainder of the year. The sky turned gray and leaden. The forest in the distance turned pitch black. The drizzle turned to rain. The rain turned into sleet.

Natasha watched but didn't volunteer her thoughts—just rubbed her aching feet.

Chapter 110

When she was drafted by the Führer to receive a proper education in the Fatherland, Erika had not, at first, quite understood what sacrifice it would entail—to be a cheerful scout, no matter what the cost, and to forget about herself and her own wishes, wants and needs while serving a higher ideal.

Her sense of duty to the Reich had now become her second nature, but she still nursed a small, forbidden dream—to see her family again.

Homesickness for Apanlee burned in her chest like acid. For now, there was no chance to take that trip back home, but once the war was won, once peace was back on earth, her first priority would be to board a train and tell the train conductor: "Apanlee!"

Just mention Apanlee—a fist hit her heart every time. She was starved for the safety of home. Each day, she dreamed of Apanlee and waited for her heart to lift, which always took a while.

The day she left her family behind, she felt her childhood snap and thought it never would be healed. But now she realized that life was not yet over. There was still leeway, still a chance,

the main ingredient being hope. "There's always hope," said Heidi.

All was no longer wild hurrahs; the war was grim and getting worse; the *Landsers* fought and sacrificed; the people hunched and grieved; but Heidi made life bearable.

"One day you'll see them all again," was Heidi's solemn promise, and Erika just clung to that, against the bitter cold that hissed and whistled in the ruins, against the gray, disheveled populace of Germany who daily poured into the bunkers, not even putting on their socks, as soon as the air raid sirens shrieked.

She missed her family. She missed them all, but how she yearned to have Natasha near so she could feel herself rocked gently. She hungered for her Baba. Snug in Natasha's lap, curled up and purring like a kitten, was one of her favorite dreams. Natasha always hectored her for being much too big to snuggle, but when nobody looked, Natasha let her creep into her arms and just curl up and sniff.

Ah. bliss. Natasha smelled like fresh-plowed earth in March.

When no one paid attention, Erika would dare to loiter over smells and sounds and sights and even loving touches, much as an artist lingers over colors. She clung to every one, as though they were her lifeline.

Here's how she dreamed of Baba: Natasha tending to the samovar, which steamed and gurgled in the corner, scenting everything.

Natasha, down on her knees, in front of her icons, beseeching her favorite virgin to speed another miracle.

Natasha wearing Marleen's spectacles when Marleen wasn't looking.

Natasha stood in high relief, whereas the rest of Apanlee was wrapped in gauzy pink.

The baby. Wrinkling when it sneezed. A volley of small sneezes.

Marleen, serene and silent and content, her chair against the wall, her back against the chair to give her spine some rest, now fully reinstated to the virtuous life that pleased both Lord and

tsars.

The neighbors, visiting—thanks to the Führer's master plan, once more united in the well-known maxim, well-tested over centuries, that nothing was achieved without hard work and prayers soaked in Faith.

The *Landsers*—warriors who had come to Apanlee. They drove the Antichrist away. Battalions made of steel. Omnipotent and powerful. Huge boots. Wide smiles. Just roaring by in motorcars, smartly saluting Mimi. The war was made for Mimi. The songs were made for Mimi. She would stop what she was doing, to listen.

The things she, Erika, saw, heard and felt and even tasted on her tongue when she dreamed "Apanlee" were not heroic, patriotic things that had to do with war. No, on the contrary. A practicing patriot knew better, but she could not resist. She dreamed serenity.

All memories that had to do with Apanlee were gentle and benign.

The swallows flitting in the branches of the composed acacia trees. The weeping willows by the pond. The speckled cows. The croaking frogs.

The smell of hay.

Wreaths made of ears of wheat to celebrate the harvests.

All that mixed up, deliciously to make a sumptuous feast, like Heidi's salad greens. All that.

Rich. Complicated. Magical.

A place where order reigned and pride of race was natural and Jesus Christ walked through the fields and blessed the strong, fat kernels.

More than a year had passed since her childhood had vanished along the tracks that all ran backwards, and together, to a point on the horizon, behind which still lay Apanlee. The journey had been full of obstacles, with many stops and dangerous delays because the partisans blew up another bridge or dynamited yet another stretch of track, and many days were spent just wait-

ing down the line.

But everything comes to an end, and so did that difficult trip. Somehow, she made it into Germany, although she lost a mitten while crossing over, through Romania, another evidence that she was running short on luck.

It had been misery! She thought her fingers would drop off. Throughout the remainder of an interminable journey, she had warmed first her right hand, then her left. Even so, her knuckles ached abysmally when finally she reached Berlin and climbed down from the train to stand bewildered on the platform, dirt-spattered, chill and weary, clutching a battered cardboard box that held her few possessions. She was so weak that she could barely stand, but Lilo was there, waiting, and she sprang right into action.

"You must be Erika. Just as I thought. Here. Put both your hands right in my muff. And tell me, exactly, what happened!"

That's how it all began—a brand new life with Lilo in the lead and Erika her shadow, a thin, devoted slave.

Some people talked of sex appeal, and claimed that Lilo had it. Lilo filled every sweater. She swung from boy to boy.

Lilo dreamed up games with kissing as the main objective; she was mad about kissing; possessed by kissing; she snatched her kisses from astonished Hitler Youths barely into the practice of kissing.

"She's a handful," said the neighbors, and gave Heidi pitying glances. Heidi always sighed and said to Lilo: "Why can't you be like Erika?"

"A boy about to sacrifice a limb," was Lilo's forceful argument, "is surely entitled to a kiss. What harm is done? You tell me!"

Intense flirtations with the antagonistic sex were only one of Lilo's many specialties. There were no limits to her energy and verve.

"The only thing I need," said Lilo many times while stroking Winston Churchill, the mutt she loved above all mutts, "is one

good man. And peace." Her eyes shone with mischief and laughter. She counted on her future, sturdily. It lay before her like a sunny, happy morning. She knew which side her bread was buttered on and would let no one spoil her meal.

"Ah, peace!" said Heidi often, too, her blue eyes misting over.

"Silk stockings, Mommie?" Lilo asked.

"A dozen," Heidi promised. "Once peace arrives, you can go shopping early, child, and do it all day long."

"With black seams down my legs," decided Lilo eagerly.

In the interim, she lived within her means. She carefully collected flints, for flints were golden currency. Flints bought you almost anything, above all movie tickets and food scraps for the dog.

She lived full blast, all throttles out. She knew few inhibitions. She had no silly scruples. All Lilo's plans were openly, romantically embellished. She was an altogether enterprising youngster, the railroad station being her preferred romantic hunting ground.

There, Red Cross trains arrived, filled to the seams with wounded *Landsers* who told amazing tales.

"We'll lick the *Bolsheviki* yet, " they said, and Lilo always smiled and winked at them to give them confidence. "No fly escapes their aim," was one of her fond claims.

Everything about a German soldier was confident and powerful, even the wounded ones arriving to recuperate before they were shipped back. Bored silly from long weeks of snailing through the ravaged countryside en route to a clean military hospital, the *Landsers* hoisted Lilo through the window by her arms while Erika stood guard. The brakeman sometimes caught her, took her by the elbow, and steered her back onto the ramp, but Lilo sprang back into action.

She loved to entertain and make the *Landsers* laugh while trading wit and charm for intact cigarette stubs—a teenager of coltish energy, released from hours of clammy confinement, just

bursting with the joy of young life. She looked straight in their eyes and let them read whatever they spelled out.

She was like that. She liked to please. Soon, Erika adored her new friend almost to insanity.

Here was a cheerful scout. Here was an alley cat. No rain, no storm stopped Lilo. She knew a hundred streets and alleys. She visited them all, as soon as the bombers were gone, to see where she could help.

She had a way of striding hatless through the worst of weather, and never mind the old umbrella that Heidi stationed by the door. A frank and winning teenager. Lilo never tired, never slackened. She had her routines pat. Eight minutes was the maximum Lilo needed to shake out her pillow, wash her young face, tame both her braids, and run outside to find a flag to hoist up for another day.

The rubble grew thicker; Lilo sang louder. She blew her trumpet with such force that its sharp blasts sent all the sparrows shrieking to the skies.

The landscape grew ever more studded with crosses, but Lilo was resolved, without apology, that she, for one, would live. She said with two arched brows: "Well, doesn't everybody?"

She, too, had signed the somber clause of sacrifice, if worst should come to worst. She was a genuine patriot that way, resolved to sell herself as dearly as she could, whereas she, Erika still fought down squeamishness; she shrieked at every worm.

"I will survive," said Lilo.

She left no room for doubt. She would fight first, fight to the death, with broomstick once the cartridges were gone. That was her strategy. But once the war was done and victory achieved, one of her plans was to sail to America and ask some pointed questions.

"And their answers had better be good," Lilo said. "Who's offering them more? The Führer? Or the Jews? Sometimes it makes you wonder —"

She did not finish what she meant to say, but you could take

a guess.

The two girls had this conversation after bicycling all day to take part in a songfest at the outskirts of Berlin that had been canceled by a rain of bombs—bombs, bombs and yet more bombs.

Now there were bodies everywhere, and still more ruins, more tears—all of which called for eulogies at which she, Erika, excelled, what with her love for words.

Had it not been for Lilo and her cheerfulness, the Führer's city would have been unbearable, in its grim rubble and cold skeletons of buildings bombed to smithereens, but Lilo never wavered. She headed for the worst. She helped clean up the mess.

There, in the midst of death and destruction, she picked up a vocabulary that, had only Heidi known, would not have been permitted, for people shrieked with anguish as they dug their charred children from the rubble, shouting sentiments that calmer times would have called treasonous.

"This is insanity! Insanity!" the people shrieked, and no one said a word.

When Lilo appeared, the terror receded a little. Somehow, her presence helped. She never grumbled, never tired. She helped where help was needed. She saved her herring coupons stoically, despite relentless hunger pangs, to trade them for a rusty bicycle to expedite her patriotic deeds.

She was proud of her bicycle. She needed it, she said, to help the female postman do the job that any human being hated most—delivering those black-bordered letters.

"There will be final victory," the fifteen-year-old said. "It can't be otherwise. We're right. And they are wrong."

She helped absorb the shock.

She was, by then, a year away from confirmation and, hence, stood straight and tall and beautiful in her cuffed heels two inches from the ground.

Since death was everywhere and everybody talked of it—most of the time with somber resignation—the two girls talked

about it, too.

Death came to some, avoiding others. Death pointed with a bony finger, proclaiming: You and you and you.

Some lived, but many died.

That was the order of the day—life and death intertwined in a macabre, ancient dance. Small groups of chanting children in the streets would draw into tight huddles and tap the sidewalk with their feet:

"Ladybug, fly!
Your daddy might yet die!
Your mother comes
from Pommernland,
and it is burning
to the ground—"

Nobody thought that odd. Most people grieved in silence. Gray people laid their wreaths, with swastikas attached, on the graves of their young sons. They were the lucky ones. Some lost their loved ones, one by one, but had no graves to tend. You lived within your means.

Had it not been for Lilo, who armed herself with sticks and stones to chase away the dogs that always snapped at Erika because she was a foreigner, her first year in the rubble of Berlin would have been worse. Much worse.

She would have been sunk without Lilo.

Now she and Lilo were fast friends. Now they shared everything—their warm, clean bed, their chores, their movie coins, their deepest inner secrets.

If a teacher bored Lilo, she yawned. If an oldster teased Lilo, she winked. She drank when she was thirsty, pretending that water was milk. She ate when she was hungry, pretending frost-bitten potatoes were steak.

Soon, she was guiding Erika with a firm hand. She took her everywhere, protecting her, a misfit in more ways than one, against the brattiest bullies.

Lilo gave friendship a new definition by teaching Erika to

spit against the wind. She taught her how to kick a bully in the shins and, for good measure, how to limp convincingly to skip a practice run.

For her part and from gratitude, Erika did not tell anyone that Lilo, on the sly, was smoking flints with several boys while Erika stood guard, her heart in her throat, like a frog.

Lilo feared nothing—not bombings, nor fires, nor thunderstorms, not even the first-period ruler.

When the teacher took that ruler and started rapping knuckles: for this! for that! for letting your thoughts fly out of the window! she, Erika knew all too well that she was being groomed for greater things in life than frilly dreams and lofty thoughts, but still, that ruler stung. Her academic honors file was fat and getting fatter every day, but still, that ruler hurt.

Her eyes would fill with tears and swim with tears long after all was said and done. For it was more than pain. Much more. It had to do with bravery—a quality she lacked.

By contrast, Lilo took all punishment in stride. She just bore down, enduring. Chin up. Teeth clenched. Unblinking.

That was the crucial difference.

Lilo endured, yet saw no need to mend her ways, while Erika tried every which way to hone herself to stalwartness but made no inroads, sadly.

She had arrived from Apanlee a coward, and she was still a coward. She feared most anything, above all else, the bombs.

When yet another bombing raid came to an end and skies were clear again, she found that she could barely breathe—her lungs at the point of explosion, her kneecaps numb, her nose clogged up with tears she did not dare to shed.

By contrast, Lilo only shrugged to demonstrate her nonchalance. She was a jungle creature. She was that sort of girl. She always taunted Erika heartily to blunt her unbecoming fear.

Here's how she taunted fate: "They and their chocolate soldiers? Don't make me laugh! You'd think they'd learn. Well, wouldn't you? There is no reason for that kind of attitude. None.

None at all. There is no way that they can win—as long as we keep polishing our buttons."

She often talked like that, right on the edge of heresy, though Lilo was a sterling patriot, and very pure at heart. She liked to shock; she shocked Heidi by necking in public. The verdict of the neighborhood was this: "God knows, she's up to monkey business."

She put a saucepan on her head and marched right through the rubble, with Winston Churchill on the leash, looking for a fire hydrant.

"Just take your time. No need to rush," she told the waddling mutt, who didn't like the bombings either.

Here was another shameless coward; he tried to hide beneath the couch or else behind the bed. He shook for hours afterwards, and Lilo tried to pacify her pet as best she could by letting him trot next to her once all was said and done, while both set out to find the railroad cook who presided over the turnips and couldn't stop grinning at Lilo.

This was their daily ritual. She helped feed all these refugees that kept on pouring from the trains until it was too dark to see, and afterwards she stood and watched how Winston Churchill feasted on leftover scraps the cook had saved for her.

A fat dog had to eat. She loved that mutt. She fed him everything. When the pork merchants came, she greeted them with outstretched hands, and never mind the stink.

Chapter 111

How did they survive? By grit and by spittle, that's how. By the thin, piercing cry of the baby. Natasha nestled it, still soothing it, close to her heart. She refused to let raindrops defeat her.

The days of distress didn't end. The war news turned grimmer and grimmer.

When there was time to rest a bit, Natasha rubbed Hein's old, worn boots between her palms to soften the hard leather to help Marleen walk west when she was well enough to walk, which did not happen often. She and Marleen now alternated, wearing them. Streaked rivulets ran down their napes and seeped along their spines. Spokes, wheels and household goods lay broken in the ditch. A wagon rolled down into a ravine. She gave thanks that it wasn't her own.

She started shouting at Marleen: "Loosen the harness. Give the horses more leeway."

Marleen was now so ill she could no longer eat. This left her rations for Natasha who still kept scavenging across the barren acres to find a carrot or potato she could triumphantly bring back.

Ah, luck! Three onions, barely spoiled!

The rain kept falling softly. The road was full of holes. Thick clumps of mud stuck to the spikes. The animals kept straining through the mire. It was an ocean of mud through which the horses heaved.

It happened more and more that Allied forces bombed the trek with little zeal and even less precision. Their nonchalance was odd.

A burst of shells might knock a horse off of its legs, not far from where Natasha stood, but did it hit her? No. It only hit supplies, a waste and shame.

The Allied planes kept coming every day, describing slow circles overhead, moving west to east in tight contrails, like geese—a hundred tiny moving dots in faint relief against a grim, gray, bitterly oppressive sky that lowered on the fleeing.

Few trekkers swallowed their anger. Most people held Americans in low esteem for backing the wrong cause. Why aid the monster in the Kremlin? Why not, instead, lend a brotherly hand and help the righteous win? The Führer fabricated brand new armies with enormous energy and will. He was a wizard, a magician. The tide of war would turn.

The horses steamed. The baby cried. Mud seeped into your boots.

Someone dug another grave. The trek did not slow down.

The clouds grew thick and black. The days grew short and chill.

The rain soon fell in buckets.

A cow howled like a human being. A whip came down. The wind chill increased. A long, gray band on the slippery, silvery road, the trekkers pushed on westwards.

Wheels turned. Days passed.

The war widow sobbed into her coat sleeves.

Romania fell behind.

A cold, clammy wind drove the trek into Poland.

As life became ashen and death became common and dull,

no one stopped to ponder how human hearts begin to harden. It rained on friend and foe alike. It rained and didn't stop.

Natasha kept pushing and pulling, leaning first against this wheel, then that. Her wet clothes stuck to her shoulders. Her toes oozed pus; the poison discolored her feet to the ankles. She took a mixture of fresh horse manure and clay and rubbed it on, relying on some ancient country formula for healing.

In yet another pause, she put her tired head on a carton tied with string and tried to find some rest. "We'll make it yet," she said as softly as she could, and stood again to walk.

Her feet were hurting her like blazes. Her face was gray with pain. A rough wind tore the blanket from her shoulders. The rain came down in sheets. The wind whipped the clouds with sharp needles.

Hard though it might have been, Natasha still believed. Of sorts she did, since Mimi still believed. Marleen believed. The *Landsers* all believed.

The Führer had declared repeatedly: "I'll stand no nonsense from the Allies," and that was good enough. The trekkers still believed; the challenge was to find a fire where you could dry your socks.

Natasha, too, believed. Let's say she half-believed.

She never quite lost hope, thanks to her honey child. When finally the infant fell asleep beneath the rain-sogged bedding, Natasha pulled Marleen behind her by the hand. The road was endless. The rifles were rusting; the cannons didn't fire; the firs kept on dripping; it rained.

Her vision darkened, and the earth spun wildly on its axis, but still Natasha walked and did not say a word; complaining would have sapped from her that last small last shred of energy she knew still lodged somewhere deep within.

All ten of her toes were on fire. The blisters had broken. Hot flames raced from her ankles to her spine. The pain drove the blood from her brain.

She longed for Hein's old boots, but Marleen wore them now whenever she found strength to walk; Natasha had surrendered

them; she even stuffed them tight with newspapers to cushion Marleen's walk.

"Just flesh wounds, that is all," Natasha argued with herself. She knew that if Marleen sat down to pull those boots off her feet, she would not rise again. Her neck glands were hard, red, and ran down to her collar bone— like a small row of cherry pits.

The fires collapsed as the trek pushed on westwards, but the skies remained bright in the east. Natasha asked when out of earshot: "Another month, you say? What if your mother cannot—"

"A month is all we need," insisted Mimi.

If there were added answers to Natasha's urgent questions, she kept them to herself. The Führer, argued Mimi, her voice hoarse with fatigue, was just about to throw the enemy across the river, then drive him back in one bold stroke.

The horses pulled. The clouds shed rain. Each day was one day closer to the beloved Fatherland, where life was warm and dry.

That's how three women and a baby made it through a time which, at its worst, saw animals devour their own excrement as fodder dwindled and finally ran out.

Then rain came in earnest—days and weeks of rain. It rained and didn't stop.

Marleen was struggling air into her lungs and did not say a word. Natasha, too, said nothing. She had her own thoughts to dwell on. An empty goat sty with a roof was better than no roof at all. She was a realist. She spread her blankets there. When Marleen started coughing, Natasha held her by both pointed elbows. She saw Marleen spit blood. Natasha's heart grew thick with premonition.

Natasha had that baby still, to swaddle and to scold.

She was the one who always found that extra dry, warm spot and laid the baby there. Her knees were buckling badly. Her spine was on fire; her old eyes were tearing and dim. Sharp pain

gnawed at the joints of both ankles.

She muttered wretchedly: "A little calf, that's what you are. A squealing little piglet. Here, let me check your diaper. I seem to feel a lump—"

Such was Natasha's world. Her loyalties were locked in place as if a locksmith snapped two handcuffs shut and threw the key away. Who was she but an old, defeated peasant whose only joy in life had been a flowered dish? She, too, hoped hard for a decisive victory. She hoped against all hope.

If her wagon got stuck, she pulled with the strength of an ox.

If somebody trod on her toe, she yelped once, then trod back. She trekked on, west, from village to village. The wagon wheels kept turning. It dizzied her to watch them turn round and round, spokes upon spokes, wheel after wheel. Was there an end to it?

She kept her eyes wide open as chunks of world rushed by. She took it all in without comment.

She raided yet another turnip patch.

She cooked another meager supper in her tin can in a ditch. It was now a challenge to secure most any kinds of edibles, but luckily, somebody always gave her something for the baby.

All day, she walked beside Marleen, whose cough became wild spasms. At night, she spread Hein's sheepskin carefully and put the baby there. If there was opportunity, she changed the straw beneath. If not, then not; the mildewed haulms must do. It drizzled steadily outside. The baby kept on whimpering and wheezing.

Natasha knew that winter lay in wait, much like a hungry Beast. She thought her heart would crack.

No matter how far the trek managed to move, the horizon kept ever retreating. Kilometer piled on kilometer. Wheel rolled after wheel. The air was thick and clammy. Huge rain clouds drifted through the sky. The skies were wet. The world was wet: the clouds, the trees, the asphalt.

Natasha watched the baby with sad tenderness. She was an expert at survival; she held the child aloft; the soldiers pointed

with their guns, still smoking.

Another transit camp. Another burned-out church. Perhaps some empty barracks. The infant was her ticket now for any sort of liberty; the ghosts moved aside to share warmth.

There was no kerosene to light a lamp. Natasha crept inside and started pushing for the sheltered corners. Someone had already built a fire; people had bedded children, oldsters, wounded soldiers on the stairs, along benches, underneath tables, along the staircase steps. Trekkers sat around the fire until the flames stopped leaping in the ashes.

Natasha looked around. Soft weeping came from a corner, someone had lost a relative. That was bad luck, bad medicine. Natasha fussed about the flames; it would not eat the sodden twigs. The wind kept on blowing it out.

At intervals, she checked the baby fearfully: beneath those rags, still life?

She munched dried bread crusts for her birdie. She fed it soft mush from her lips.

No matter what, she hung onto her pail of jam, although the handle numbed her fingers. She had procured it by a miracle. It kept the child alive. She fed it spoonful after spoonful; it was her iron ration. She often sat on it to make sure no one stole it, while Mimi disappeared into the night to elbow for a spot at yet another kitchen queue. The net result, unfortunately, was often just a cup of boiling water.

"—who cuddles you? Who hums to you? Who teaches you to smile?"

Long after everybody else lay motionless in an exhausted stupor, Natasha sat as close to warmth as she could sit, to thaw the baby out, until the lice revived.

Out of the corner of her smarting eyes, Natasha kept on watching Mimi, who looked like a panhandler, smelled like a tramp, shook with revulsion and horror, but trekked on through the mud, useful in many small ways.

The trek would have perished without her.

She knew the partisans were closing in. She helped delay, mislead, and trick them. The saboteurs were pests, pale shadows within wet, stripped, dripping forests. They flitted through patches of mist, firing from dugouts and from abandoned shacks, mining the fields and ripping up tracks, pouring sand into the gas tanks of the Wehrmacht. The woods were full of partisans.

"Hands up!" the soldiers shouted, and saboteurs did as they were told. If they were caught, they stood waiting; their fate was to be hanged or shot.

That, too. She witnessed it. She never quite stopped being squeamish about hangings, but she drew resolve from the partisan's vicious asides. They were an unrepentant lot. They sneered before the noose was thrown, before the bullets flew:

"This war, as good as lost."

The Wehrmacht made short shrift.

She saw one cross himself with three thin, trembling fingers before he suddenly disgraced himself and stained his uniform.

"The pig!" somebody said and spit. She was both sad and mad. She struggled down her panic. She leaned against the tree, glad for the rain that helped to hide the clammy perspiration that formed on his drawn face.

If you betrayed the cause, you paid.

Her heart grew numb but calm, as distant, cold and peaceful as the moon that still shone, stealthily, the moment it stopped raining. His head was hanging on his chest. The woods were dripping wet. She tried to light a cigarette, but it was wet: the wind was wet; her hands were wet; the light was blown out every time. She shut both eyes and waited. The rest was blurry rain.

That night, like many other nights, she tried to find sleep in the crook of her stiffening elbow, which always took a while.

In an attempt to undermine the people's Faith, the Allied planes kept dropping leaflets by the thousands.

"This war is lost and will end in defeat for Germany," the Hebrew leaflets claimed. The messages came fluttering down

from the drizzling sky in gaudy, brazen colors.

Few people picked them up, for it was said the paper might be poisoned. Dark puddles formed around them. The trek rolled over them.

At intervals, the sun came out.

If luck was on Natasha's side, she rinsed the baby's diapers. She let the cold, wet wind blow over them and waited patiently, flat on her belly, low, so as to be on guard against the bloody partisans who shot out of hedges and bushes.

She clutched the honey child and walked. She pulled one leg behind her, favoring the other. Her ankle was swollen. Her toes were open blisters.

"As soon as we manage a lull in the war," said Mimi, "I'll get you some ointment. I will."

And she was as good as her word. She still had amazing resources. She even marshaled heated cotton strips one evening by sharing a flint with the ambulance driver.

But all that helped little; Natasha kept dragging her foot, catching up with her luck, heading west. All that was left for an old peasant now was flapping soles through puddles and mire and mud, having fully surrendered her heart to the mewling and pitiful voice.

It was a dreadful year. Natasha did her share by being silent and enduring. She did not waste her strength.

All with feet kept walking westward; everything with wheels kept rolling westward; therefore, she did, too.

The trek staggered west as though it were a badly wounded reptile, clearing hurdle upon hurdle, and somehow, night by night, by yet another miracle, Natasha found an empty barracks or an abandoned trolley car to put the baby there.

She squatted in the darkness, massaging the soles of her feet. She still had strength—more strength than most who walked.

The strong kept walking, their bundles in tow. The strong would survive, for they wouldn't let go. The old and the weak dropped behind.

They fell by the side of the road, where they died of exposure and hunger. Natasha kept hauling Marleen to her feet, out of the rain-sodden bedding.

"Several horses have sickened and died," said Natasha.

"Your mother's body, like an oven," cried Natasha, clutching Mimi in a hammer lock.

"I am as prepared to kill as to die," was Mimi's desperate reply, her coat just rags and tatters.

Beside the trek walked Mimi. The rain streamed down her ashen face and disappeared inside her collar. She, too, kept trekking west, along an endless road that started with darkness and ended with darkness. On through the monotonous drizzle!

She was covered with mud, head to toe. Her face was drawn into a frozen mask; her mind was numb with cold and misery, but yet she walked; she walked.

"The Führer still knows ways to unnerve the enemy," insisted Mimi.

"How far yet? Mimi? And how long?"

Who knew the answers to those question? She just kept fiddling in her pockets for a flint. The effort drove beads of sweat onto her upper lip.

The land of hope and glory, insisted Mimi, who knew more than an old and worthless peasant did, with almost no reserves of youth to spare, lay just around the corner. What could Natasha say? Natasha cuffed her hard, which was her privilege. "You fool! The cartridges are wet."

But Mimi simply ducked.

So let Natasha doubt the outcome of this war; she trusted the Führer as ever. He kept sending forward brand new troops; he kept fueling the war effort; if one soldier fell, three rushed to fill the gap.

"Just two more weeks," she said, and leaned into the rain to stand in yet another queue in yet another wet and dripping town, clutching her ration card.

Mimi fought bitterly, with gritted teeth but adamant resolve. At her back, there lay the growling front; in front of her, the winter—and high above, the howling iron birds, still strafing the unraveling, disheveled trek with their casual, blistering guns! Prime targets were the trains. The trains, still moving both provisions and munitions to the front, ran sluggishly and often stalled on broken, bombed-out rails. The enemy, the radio said, was suffering appalling losses. The Führer's generals feuded.

What else to do but fight? Fight back as best you could?

That's what she did. She fought. She was a *Landser* among *Landsers*. There was no other choice. You had to pry them from their guns. She backed them up; she fought with every ounce of strength left in her slim, hard, boyish body.

"Three weeks, and not an extra day," insisted Mimi.

Large rain drops ran along her spine, collecting in a small, chill puddle in the hollow of her back. She leaned for warmth against the belly of a horse. She watched the Wehrmacht chaplain stagger by, carrying a goat, its legs already stiffening. Two tears rolled down his cheek.

She watched him stealthily. He had no idea what sort of a woman she was. She heard him moan: "How canst Thou hesitate to grant us such a tiny favor?" She watched the man of God until he fell and did not rise again. She moved cautiously closer to check. His eyes were still open but empty. The goat he had carried was stirring. She took a loaded carbine from a handy corpse already lying in the ditch, at peace forevermore, and blasted a hole in the animal's head.

There, now!

She dragged it by its hind legs, right through the muck and mire, right past a guard who mumbled something to himself, pretending not to see.

Food for another week!

Word came at last: the Soviet Army would be stopped, thrown back across the river by October. And not a day too soon!

"If that's not true, my name is Schorsch," shrieked Mimi who

hadn't slept for days, who knew the Wehrmacht was invincible, but it was difficult to keep your dignity while sloshing through the mud.

With care, Natasha moved her toes. Her feet were gangrenous.

"Say something. Please," wept Mimi.

Natasha only shrugged and tended to her blisters. She carefully unwrapped the strips of cotton she had not washed in weeks. What else was there to say she hadn't said before? She was no longer human. She was part of the caterpillar trek on iron feet—an insect moving silently through darkened streets, through village after village.

Jeeps, cannons, trucks of every size and make moved in the opposite direction. The horses were covered with sweat. The roads became rivers of mud. The trees shed leaves until all leaves were gone.

The trek struggled on without stopping.

Natasha muttered to herself: "After November—what?" December? January?

The air was growing teeth. It bit as it entered the nose. Natasha stared along that endless road, heart pounding, out of breath. She knew that it led to nowhere.

The trek kept swaying helplessly—gray bark on a huge sea of gray. Behind her and in front of her, several animals died in their traces. Her old feet sank into the mire. The swastika trailed in the mud. Natasha kept dragging her axe. The baby whimpered weakly. The cook had no potatoes. It rained and didn't stop.

Chapter 112

"Pretend you have come home," urged Heidi that first afternoon when Erika stepped off the train, and ran to put the kettle on.

Before the day was out, she was as good as family. The three of them sat on the couch, Heidi left and Lilo right, and even Winston Churchill had stopped growling and was sweeping the floor with his tail.

Lilo, at her expansive best: "Here. Have another slice of coffee cake."

"Oh, please. The crust. The crust will do," begged Erika, to honor her Apanlee manners.

"No, silly. Take the middle. That's where the jam collects." urged Lilo, more than generous, and the exhausted traveler out of the wastes of Russia knew then and there that she had found a sturdy hook on which to hang her heart.

Right at the start, each opened her heart wide and let each other in, and now they were fast friends. Now she and Lilo shared everything, except what was in Lilo's bottom drawer.

That was the only secret left, but Lilo hinted now and then

that, given time and opportunity, that, too, would be revealed.

Each night, before they fell asleep, the two girls talked at length about the future and its possibilities, full of romantic yearning. This was their favorite activity, snug in their feather quilts, arms and legs intertwined to share each other's warmth, now that the coal allowance had run out, and spring was not yet in sight.

"Lilo?"

"Yes?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Not yet. What do you want?"

"Let's talk a little bit."

"All right. You start."

"When I grow up, I'll help make Germany the focal point of culture," said Erika, an ardent patriot.

"I'll have a dozen babies, all pooping in their diapers," said Lilo. Divining peacetime dividends was one of Lilo's specialties. "I'm very keen on marriage."

A legless man could hug. An armless man could dance. The war moved toward victory; the Führer's generals kept masterminding everything, but intact men were rare.

Then what? What did two lovers do?

For updates on romantic matters, the teenagers went into oft-repeated huddles. Hushed hints helped a bit, but not enough. When it came to that mystery, she, Erika, was at a loss—hopelessly backwards, uninformed, virginal, squeamish.

"You take your clothes off? Everything?"

"No doubt about that. None," said Lilo knowingly, and gave a gentle elbow poke, then added with some passion: "Some things just make me boil. I am no friend of the barbarians, but even our mailman is female."

"Oh, that," said Erika with nonchalance, while having no idea.

She still had miles to go. Her ignorance was staggering. Unless she was alone, and even pulled the shutters, to strip down to the skin was not easy, what with the Führer watching her from the old dressertop with sharp and steely eyes.

"If you don't understand it, you can't do it," said Lilo next,

and gave Winston Churchill a smack, thus hinting there was more. "It has to do with sleeping in the raw."

That by itself was sinister enough. "Can you be more specific? What are the rules?"

"Well. One of them is that you're not—no matter what!—to put the cart before the horse. Although I must admit: when those embraces on the screen are heating up, I'm in agony. Remember the last movie?"

These things were dizzying. These things were vague and hazy, mysterious and slightly frightening, as undecided as the gender of an unborn child.

It was called love, said Heidi. A special kind of love, and wondrous beyond words.

All that lay in a hazy future, still full of dreams, all waiting to be plucked.

Lilo swore her to lifelong secrecy one day and told her some, but not enough. The rest was in the dresser, well under lock and key.

"It's part of growing up. It's part of womanhood. The rest comes by itself."

Erika turned pink with alarm. There were times when her jaw fell open! "You wouldn't want a baby out of wedlock, would you?" she asked in a hoarse whisper, hoping for additional detail.

"Why, heavens no! The very thought! Whoever would? It has to do with practicing the art of love, see? As the saying goes."

"And?"

"Oh, hush. Now go to sleep. You're still a baby! Goodness!"

All that was heavy fare for Erika, who was as shy as she was green, but Lilo was a master teacher who teased and taunted her until both burst out laughing. She was magnificent with things that verged on the forbidden; she didn't stop at anything; she didn't wait for opportunities; she helped her fate along.

She kicked the tires, checked the springs, and took off on her bicycle in search of romantic adventure, her two braids flying in

the wind. She knew her way around Berlin; soon she was teaching Erika. She was amazingly informed; she knew most every detail about love; much more than she let on. When pressed, she even said: "Boys have an extra bone," and even Winston Churchill was all ears.

"Well, out with it," squawked Erika, but Lilo remained mum.

In self-defense, Erika would deck herself in dreams as though they were raw diamonds. She lay, flush with the fever warmth of Lilo, took a deep breath, and shared a special dream.

"I think I'll postpone love. I will be lit on celluloid," she said, astounding Lilo with another vivid image.

"A pity you aren't prettier," said Lilo, who was practical.

"Don't say that, Lilo. Please. I will be rich and famous."

"The size of your ears bothers me."

"Well! Isn't that exaggerated?"

"It's not. And your diphthongs are simply appalling."

"I'm trying, Lilo. Truly."

She was, and she was making headway. The past was one gray sea of homesickness; the present was still difficult, since faults and imperfections of all sorts surrounded her like a transparent wall, but thanks to Führer, Faith and Fatherland, she had a future now. Between her fingers, she kneaded the edge of her pillow. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "If I just put my mind to it, there's nothing I can't do."

That's what the teacher said, who knew most everything. The future would be bigger, better, richer than anybody could imagine, the spinster teacher said, her pallid life as good as over.

Most teachers talked like that.

"All I want for the next ten years is enough food to fill my belly," said Lilo, leaning on one elbow, suddenly, while peering in Erika's face.

"Me, too."

"Why do you want to be an actress? You could be an usher, you know? Ushers have lots of power. They collect flints to give you the best seats."

"I want to have a make-up mirror all my own." For Lilo,

mirrors held no mystery; they helped her squeeze a pimple. But Erika was different. Complex. She sighed and lost herself in several additional seconds of bliss. In her dreams, she was mentally sunning herself. In her dreams, she grew prettier and prettier.

Lilo gave her a withering look before she blew out the candle:

"Pah! I want two of everything. And I will get it, too. Now I am telling you for the last time: Just hush and go to sleep!"

That, too, was easier said than done. Finding sleep was exhausting and taxing. Lilo sprawled and hogged the blankets; Churchill snored and belched and worse; but demons sat in wait with fine, sharp, pointed teeth for Erika. It was an exercise in will to talk them into corners. It helped to visualize the war's end, overdue, the things a girl might do when all the bombing stopped, but there were bad and wrenching nights when nothing made a difference. The air was full of rumors.

For instance, rumor had it things were going badly for the Führer, particularly on the eastern front. "In the name of God-Amen," the war preachers said.

A question rose and swelled. "Lilo? Are you asleep?"

"Almost. What now?"

"When do you think we'll win this war?"

From deep within her feather quilt came Lilo's muffled voice. "Herr Hitler will decide that."

You could tell by the way that she battled the blankets when something angered her. And she was angry now. She could afford to show her wrath; nobody challenged Lilo; nobody doubted she was bold and brave and utterly devoid of fear when bombs started falling like hail.

"It's just so stupid to get killed, that's all," said Lilo suddenly with vehemence. "What if we start losing? Then what?"

Huge waves of fear kept pounding Erika until she was aching all over.

It was in the air. It came through the chimney. It fell with the bombs from the sky.

The Soviet Army was advancing, if you believed the refugees—a monster with a million feet, stalking the fleeing flesh. The refugees that flooded every street were ample testimony to the fact that victory was not a matter of mere will. When yet another batch of refugees arrived, they trembled as they told: "The Reds are closing in."

They kept on pouring daily into the rubble of Berlin. They claimed that the front was in flames, that the Reds ripped holes in the Wehrmacht's defense and tore the front wide open.

"Lilo?"

"Again?"

"Please. Don't you—

"I said don't you start acting up again! Stop being foolish, Erika. Listen to how Winston Churchill snores."

So Erika revealed no more, but the terror within had the wings of a bat. She remembered the stories her grandmother told. She knew the Fiend. She knew the Antichrist: he planted infants' heads on window sills as though they were geraniums.

She kept tossing and twisting and turning, her throat like sandpaper. Fear was to be mastered, like swimming. The things she sensed, deep down, were too unspeakable for words.

The worst that could happen would happen. Unless the Wehrmacht won. The Wehrmacht had to win. There was no other way.

She rolled herself into a ball and closed her eyes and started counting backwards: "Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven . . . "

"Erika?"

"What? Ninety-six. Ninety-five—"

Lilo, who hardly ever went to church, said suddenly: "I swear by God and all the saints, I'm ready for most anything." She was trembling with fever and longing. "I want a full-fledged bridegroom. With a luxurious set of whiskers. With all his limbs. With nothing missing. Nothing. Not even a small fingertip. "

"Me, too," said Erika.

Things were bad, though—bad now, and getting worse. The walls started wobbling; the glass flew every which way; a neighbor ran along the street, scorched slippers on his feet, his nightshirt torn and ripped. Tress snapped as though a rubber band had been released and toppled them. A horse lay on its back, its stumps up in the air.

Not even Winston Churchill, Lilo's obliging mutt, considered himself safe when the bullying Americans arrived and dropped out of the clouds. The moment when the sky began to hum, the canine cowered, whimpering, at Lilo's feet, his tail flush with the floor.

Lilo put both arms around him. She loved him well enough and more, launching into robust washerwoman's lingo while holding his head in a vice with her knees.

"Hell! Christ Almighty! There they are! Stop snorting, Winston Churchill! Where are your manners, may I ask? We have raids every day; what's there to get excited?"

That was her style. That's how she lived, a comrade of the deepest dye, unflinching, unafraid—while day by day and week by week, the bombers roared above and death dropped from their bellies.

The Amis were intent on blowing every shred of young and hopeful life still stirring in the rubble of Berlin to bloody smithereens. "No matter what, keep smiling," was Lilo's sage advice, but, sick with shame, she, Erika, would lose it then and there and hunch and just start whimpering. It was a nightmare, day by day; she almost died with shame; her good friend, Lilo, was dumbfounded by her depth of cowardice! She was so scared and so ashamed of her own fear that perspiration trickled down her nose, collecting on her chin. When she behaved like that, Heidi reached for the castor oil.

"What sort of people do they think we are?" said Heidi, too, while dabbing her red nose and eyes. "No, honey, no! Don't throw up now! It's quite all right. Another fifteen minutes."

Each second, an eternity! She was so terrified of being hit and being blown to pulp by bombs that in the middle of the night,

while she and Lilo lay in bed, pressed to each other like sardines, now that the rain storms howled through every crack and crevice, she made the bed frame rattle with her fear.

Her kind of fear was as repulsive as blood was on a chicken bone, but in the grip of terror, did she care? She couldn't help herself!

Heidi knew many recipes to make the coupons stretch, but still it was a struggle. The war was almost six years old; no coals left for the stoves; no peas left for the pot. But Heidi took three shriveled turnips, mixed them with mashed potato peels and presto! One more lunch!

"We're all in this together, girls," said Heidi many times, and even Winston Churchill cocked his ears and nodded his consent.

While Erika was growing tall and lanky—despite her homesickness and other maladies, she shot up that first year in Germany as though a soft, warm rain had fallen on her body—Heidi let out several seams and even traded staple coupons for a fine velvet Sunday outfit, used but as good as new, the height of luxury, to spruce her up a bit. The dress was blue, with snowy lace around the collar.

Erika paid Heidi back in kind by being best in class. She was a first-rate pupil. Her notebooks, always orderly. Her grammar, near perfection.

"There is potential here," this teacher said to Heidi while standing on one leg. The other was in Russia.

"I know that. I knew that from the start."

"Your foster child has quality. She's made for leadership."

"She comes from a good family."

Ah, balm. Those were the times when words came by themselves. This teacher, teaching Racial Science, was Erika's decided favorite because he stated, in straight strokes of pen lined up like obedient soldiers, that Erika was notable—which, when it came to words describing Apanlee, was not a big surprise.

She spoke and wrote of Apanlee, the place that racial pride had built, not ever running out of thoughts, though often out of

ink and paper. If she had wanted to, she could have raised her hand and answered every question when it came to her kith and kin. But she left room for Lilo, who needed credits, too—albeit more in math than in the softer sciences.

Lilo did not care one whit if she confused percentages with decimals. She was superbly practical; no store clerk dared shortweigh her rations. She was better at hiking than reading—twice in a row, she had been voted patrol leader. The previous summer, Lilo had even led a labor youth commando, now that most every farm hand had been drafted from the fields to help speed victory. She had helped gladly, filling in the gaps the men had left behind, bringing in the farmers' hay and helping them harvest their apples.

She was at the front in every practice march. She drilled as if she were a boy, with gritted teeth and stiffened spine, and won her stars and ribbons in hikes and special sports events. She posed for the photographers. Such things were made for Lilo.

In summary, she was the Führer's pride and joy. She was superbly brave. Poor Erika—who kept on tripping over Winston Churchill. Her inability to harmonize her left foot with her right plagued her, like a decided stammer.

She knew the Führer stamped his foot with rage when he heard of a youngster who did not march as bravely as the rest, but her two lungs were small and cramped. Besides, she lost the cadence easily—she was forced to step out of line and sit down by the road to regroup. It was only after Lilo showed her how to limp convincingly to get out of an all-day practice march that she gained a small measure of relief.

And she had other failings.

She tried to cock a gun, but only squashed her thumb. She grew so hoarse from shouting songs of victory that she could barely speak.

In summary, life was a test for Erika. The drone of aircraft never stopped; the bombs destroyed most everything; the streetcars had no lights; the people had no food; the teacher had

no pencils; a window shattered, then another, and you swept up the broken glass. It was sheer misery.

Not so for Lilo, though. She was all Erika aspired to be. She never counted bombs, no matter how they whistled, no matter where they fell, whereas she, Erika, kept counting, counting, counting. It was a weird compulsion that had its origins in cowardice—the vice that made all other vices pale. She could not help herself.

But Lilo? Lilo laughed—and off they went, she and her mutt, a saucepan on her head, one of her many ways of demonstrating nonchalance. No matter how severe the carpet bombing, as soon as it was done, Lilo shook the dust and mortar from her hair, went for a rope to tie to Winston Churchill's collar and started walking him right through the smoking rubble, right through the havoc and destruction.

Those two made a fine pair. She took him everywhere. He was the love of Lilo's life, majestic and complacent. That was no ankle-snapper! Those two strolled through the showers of mortar and death, and Erika, who, nowhere near as brave, knew that she had no choice but to grit tooth on tooth and do the same, kept begging, out of breath:

"Wait! Not so fast! Please. Not so fast! I'm losing my left heel!"

"I don't like being slowed down. I like to move. That's all."

That was how Lilo lived. On her own terms. Impatient and extravagant. There was no limit to her energy and verve. She walked on the balls of her feet.

"Before the lackeys of the Jews ruined everything, Berlin was quite a city! Quite a city!" said Lilo at such times, and urged the dog to lift a leg and help himself to bounteous relief, while watching with the liveliest interest when the high moment came.

Chapter 113

Natasha put foot in front of foot. She scarcely knew how. Sharp rays of pain kept racing to her groin. The wood was damp. The axe was dull. The fire wouldn't burn. The wagons were tilting this way and that.

She sensed, more than she saw, that troop replacements kept on plodding east in endless silent columns. She started saluting; she didn't know why. She kept hoping her feet would hold out.

Out of the Fatherland came daily hopeful bulletins. "The end of war is near," the radio proclaimed. The Führer and his generals were arguing about the exact timing.

The trekkers devoured such news. They knew that all the world stood poised, on tiptoes practically, while waiting for the last decisive battle. By mail and messenger came word: "We're winning! We're winning. The Lord is on our side."

And high time, too. The food supply was running out even for the fighting forces; reserves were being steadily exhausted. To find a flint was bliss, because flints could be traded for rations. Food coupons were dearer than gold.

One lucky day, the sun shone briefly through the clouds—

and down on Mimi, rich as Croesus! The cook had saved an extra crust for her, along with both heels of a sausage.

"Here. Here you go. That ought to put some color in your cheeks," she told the pallid infant.

The child stared back at her expressionless. Natasha took the crust and softened it with spittle. "How long yet?" she asked softly, appeasing her own hunger. The baby started munching listlessly. The air reeked of wet ashes.

"Two weeks. Three, at the most," said Mimi.

What was a little lie to boost the trek's morale? "We'll win this war," lied Mimi.

All the reports from the front were the same. The *Landsers* attacked as never before. The blood ran from their wounds. Each one of them, a hero! The Wehrmacht tore holes in the Soviet defenses. The enemy was being driven back, but with appalling losses.

Weary hearts started pounding with hope.

Somebody in a wagon far ahead broke into a victorious ballad, singing incessantly and in a mad and ringing voice.

Nobody else took up the chant. It rained and didn't stop.

There was a faint growling beyond the horizon nobody could explain, until, by special envoy, word finally arrived that the Red Army was a bear, but he was losing, claw by claw. The Wehrmacht ripped them out.

The soldiers of fresh regiments, all young—and getting younger with every new replacement—all pledged to blind obedience, all plodding east, swore to the people on the trek that's what the roaring meant: the bear had now been cornered. These soldier youngsters, young enough to forego shaves, said to the struggling refugees: "This war is duty. This is honor. The Führer is refining wonder weapons."

They were the best the Fatherland sent forth. They were a fearless tribe. They said repeatedly they would ignore the rumbling in the distance, the gathering darkness, the ominous sky.

"The Führer has at last revealed a secret plan," they claimed,

"to sink the British Isles."

The people nodded, and why not? Draft dodgers were worse than coyotes.

Luck showed the way yet one more time to an abandoned shelter where someone had already built a fire.

Natasha limped inside; she favored her right foot, the left hurt fearfully. As she pulled off her shoes, two toenails came off with the rags.

She bore down hard and did not say a word—if she ignored the fire in her ankles, then it would go away. She had to walk; there was no choice; if she did not, who would?

Day after day, Natasha walked, an old and wounded animal.

Her feet were living coals. She longed for Hein's big boots Marleen still wore, although there was no way, by then, for Marleen to keep up, not even in Hein's boots. She rode atop the wagon. She had no strength left any more to pull off Hein's old boots.

Natasha heaved. Natasha pushed. Her toes were numb, her ankles stiff with age. The infant stirred next to Marleen, though it looked like a doll without joints.

Marleen was deathly ill—so ill she muttered gibberish, she wasn't rational, and Baba tried to help, but it was not enough.

A turnip. A potato.

She knew what Marleen needed: a warm, thick feather bed, hot tea, two dozen cupping glasses on her back to draw the fever out.

Another week? A month?

The horses dragging guns were skinny to the point of vanishing. The stream of people on the road was thickening. The earth was crusting more and more with frost. The trains ran sluggishly and stalled before the craters the partisans had dug.

The guns still thundered without pause, blasting eastward mightily.

But where, Natasha asked, was victory?

Where were the promised wonder weapons? Where others

saw the medals, she saw the soldier's empty sleeve. She was nobody's fool.

Natasha foraged fiercely. Whatever she might find, still edible, she took back to the trek. She had her axe; she cut a hole. Across it, she lay two forked sticks. She lit a match with numb, arthritic fingers. She tried to heat some water in a can.

The field-grey throng kept pushing by, still in the opposite direction, still heading for the front. The clouds hung low and heavy. Small crystals started floating from the sky.

Devoid of food and short on sleep, Natasha nonetheless coaxed, scolded and cajoled Marleen, whose strength was fading fast.

"Here's food. Now eat. Don't give me your excuses."

Marleen stared straight ahead, red flecks on both her cheeks. Her voice was faint. Her fever rose. She couldn't keep anything down.

By night, she was delirious. It was a chore to get her up each morning.

"Among us, we don't quit," Natasha begged. At night, she wrapped her arms around the infant, who drooled and shook and moaned.

"—three weeks, and not a day more," insisted Mimi.

She talked like that while hunger kept on whistling through her thoughts. She might be weary to the bone, but she had hope to share.

"We need clear sunshine—that's all!—so we can use binoculars and watch the riverbanks. The enemy will lick his wounds. Here. Mother! Take my ration card."

"No. No. Just keep it for yourself."

"Now, Mother! Listen! Listen carefully! Don't give up now. We're almost there. A final push will do it—"

Guerillas still hid in the woods. They kept derailing trains. They slashed key telephone lines. They set fire to bundles of food.

They spread defeatist rumors. They sawed through the beams

of the bridges that permitted the front to fall backward, to regroup for counter-attacks. Another partisan was caught and speedily dispatched into the afterlife, leaving behind him a blast of strong curses. Another fierce rainstorm was brewing.

Natasha saw a match flare up and saw that it was Mimi, who hugged herself for warmth. Natasha watched the baby's ashen lips. She probed the infant's mouth with her own thumb and finger—by now, it should be teething in the back. The gums were pale and flat.

She checked: Your little heart, still beating? Her own was breaking constantly. "Yet one more week," said Mimi.

Faith was now all she had. But that, she told herself, was really all she needed. The war had to be won. She suffered, and did not complain. She had the Führer's word.

And in the meantime, fortutude.

She helped the Hitler Youth dig trenches and fell trees to fashion barricades. "In a forced choice between two evils," said Mimi, "you chose the lesser one." She shook with raw revulsion at the injustice as she kept struggling, day by day, first through the pouring rain, soon through the drifting snow, across the bodies of the people who had fallen.

"We'll win this war," said Mimi.

The road did not diminish. The winds did not let up. The radio kept on spewing bulletins. The front mail was delayed; no word for months from Jonathan! The casualty lists were appalling.

The war was grim and bloodstained business, but when the bombs hit somewhere else—she, Mimi, felt relieved. In just a few more days, the *Landsers* would see victory, although the Soviet Army might be hard to beat, despite a string of unexpected victories the *Landsers* had achieved.

She, too, was counting on America. There was some talk of indirect alliances. Could be America would join the Führer finally. The enemy would be thrown back. The Führer would yet work another miracle. America was perched on the cusp—or so

some people said. At night, she curled against a stranger to share some extra warmth and dreamed of Jonathan who, in the past, had painted many times, in warm, caressing words, the tranquil life in Germany.

She often dreamed of that—the street where Heidi lived.

She saw it with her inner eye: the house with its wide picket fence, its spotless window panes, the shed where Heidi kept her tools, the red tile roof, the carrot patch—now under tons of snow, no doubt, but waiting to be tilled.

The kitchen, warm and spotless.

Thus, Mimi dreamed: once she reached Germany, she would enjoy a lavish breakfast in the morning, the baby in her lap and Erika across from her—quiet, quaint and orderly.

She would find out what puzzled Erika. She would catch up with her truncated motherhood.

The trek ground to a halt.

Natasha's glance returned from distances no longer of this world. Her fingers had gone dead already; her toes were stiff, her feet blue to the ankles.

"When, finally? In yet another hundred years?" asked Baba.

She talked like that, an inch away from treason. What little she had learned about Americans was not enouraging.

You couldn't rush Americans. They never seemed to hurry, no matter the emergency. She still remembered all the weeks and months it took to stop the horrid famine that snuffed out life at Apanlee as though a thumb snuffed candles. Americans were tardy, then. They took their own sweet time. Would it be different this time?

Fools might believe that. She did not. A locomotive had been hit by strafing Allied planes; the train was sitting there, right in the middle of the road; she had seen that in passing.

As soon as she could stand again, she would check every train car, just to make sure—there might be food inside.

"Before Advent," said Mimi, lifting a trembling chin. "By Christmas, at the latest."

By yet another miracle, Natasha huddled near somebody's fire and strung a line between two chairs to dry a burlap diaper there. The burlap didn't dry. She put it on the baby, wet. The baby was a patient child, tardy in almost everything.

Wrapped in a chill, wet blanket, Marleen sat, doubled over, gagging.

The moon rose over bare tree tops. The cold rushed in and started biting. The infant shivered with each blast.

The night thickened. The war did not let up.

Death kept on plucking people from the trek all through the night until dawn broke again.

Small puffs of smoke marked the position of the trek as it rolled on in silence—on through the rubble of the bombed-out cities, across shell-cratered fields, through bombed-out trenches, past empty barracks, air raid shelters, abandoned and dilapidated schools. A caterpillar with a million legs, it kept on swallowing kilometers.

A curtain of silence descended.

A sentry moved, tensing with every shadow that fell from the stiffening trees.

Never had word spread so quickly: the clash between the east and west was imminent! All afternoon, it flew from cart to cart: unfortunate misunderstandings between the Führer and the enemy would now be straightened out! The news kept on cascading out of Mimi, while tears of joy streamed down her face—that peace was finally in sight! With shaking hands she tried to light a cigarette as she relayed the news that now, at last, the Allies realized that the true enemy was not the Führer and his *Landsers* but the Beast, the Antichrist out of the Bible, advancing on them with a devilish roar!

"Not yet too late," muttered Marleen, delirious, and tried to drag herself yet one more time away from death that would not even yield a grave! A ditch at best—snow piling up on her!

For days, she had lain in the back of the wet, jolting wagon,

amid pillows and blankets, still sodden with rain. She flapped her arms with great joy when word came with explosive force that the Allies were struggling to meet her.

"Pascholl! Pascholl!" even Natasha shouted, energized, great bolts of lightning flashing through her mind. She waved her arms at the airplanes above, urging the animals on.

Far better late than never!

For a brief moment, wild with hope down to her aching toes and bursting heels, Natasha, too, believed. Ah, she believed! Who would not have believed? The planes were flying very high and very, very fast. With every single ounce of strength committed to the road, Natasha grabbed Marleen by her thin shoulders and started shaking her:

"I said walk! Walk or die! We're almost there. Now walk! Don't give me your excuses!"

"I can't!"

Natasha would't have it. She gave her a decisive shove. Here was the best news yet—the Allies were reaching the borders!

With her last strength, Marleen struggled to meet them halfway—in Hein's old leather boots, feet wrapped in Führer slogans.

Chapter 114

For many people, the mailman had become the messenger of sorrow, but Erika kept hope alive, for she had little else.

Let there be war—mail came on time, even on Saturdays. It came in thick, gray pouches.

"No. I am sorry. Not today," the lady mailman said.

"Maybe tomorrow," Lilo smiled, and Erika gave Heidi a quick glance to have that forecast verified, but Heidi dropped her gaze.

"It takes a while," said Heidi at long last. Her hands lay folded in her lap. She never spoke a falsehood. If she had nothing positive to say, she just kept her opinions to herself. Her words were sweet and patient. Her hair had lost its sheen and now was streaked with gray. The war had made her pale and thin, and there were moments, chilling moments, when Heidi seemed to lose her bearings—when she walked by a neighbor child who sat forlornly, weeping—not even noticing, her eyes as blind as those of newborn kittens.

Three sons were fighting at the front, dispatching every Bolshevik to hell. It had been months since she had heard from them. The front had swallowed them. The postcards she re-

ceived from Jonathan, still fighting bravely in his trench to stem the vicious tide, were now her single joy.

The Reich was shrinking daily. The war dragged on and on.

Other people's food was more than meager by the fall of 1944, which stretched into the coldest winter in a century, but thanks to Heidi's ingenuity, she and the girls survived the worst.

For months on end, the snow lay hard and glittering on the blasted rooftops of Berlin, and there was very little food for anyone; you filled your stomach up with water. It was a cold and hungry time, as bitter as gray salt, but Heidi saw to it that the tinsel came out when Christmas time drew near.

A tiny fir tree sat in a bucket in the corner, decorated with sparse ornaments, artfully fashioned from bits of brittle straw.

Silent night. Holy night.

All is still. All is quiet.

The kitchen became scented and smelled of candle wax. The three of them, alone, with Winston Churchill flattened on the faded rug and making snorting noises, sang softly to each other.

"Next month, maybe" said Lilo, hugging Heidi awkwardly, but Heidi wrapped herself in silence.

Thus, Christmas came and went, and Heidi didn't crack. The reports from the front were upbeat. Some valiant *Landsers* perished, sadly, but lavish were the wreaths.

"We'll win this war," said Heidi to her neighbors. "It can't be otherwise. Our country is still strong."

The bulletins were clear: the Wehrmacht was approaching final victory. The world to come would be a better world, a safer world, transformed according to design, cast in mold according to a master plan that made allowances for losses.

If he should fall, wrote Jonathan with stiffened fingers, a comrade would be there and cover him with the belowed flag. Those were his precise words.

The neighbors nodded in resigned, small silences. The city had become an icy tomb, but somehow, life went on.

Gray people climbed forth from their cellars.

Black-bordered lists were published daily in the papers and posted in the stores. That was the page that Heidi turned to first, before she even washed the night out of her eyes and stacked the kindling wood.

It was her daily ritual—to check the *Missing Landsers List.* She ran her fingers down the rows of names while hoping against hope. And if she saw a name she recognized, she sighed, put on her overcoat, and went to pay a visit to the grieving.

Berlin became a city without men. Invisible conveyer belts took old and young and put them all in uniform. Lilo's shoes were in need of re-soling, but even the asthmatic cobbler was gone.

The butcher was drafted, the tailor, the timid greengrocer—a soft, pale bachelor who lived in a chill attic flat with seven goldfish and three cats. Before he disappeared around the corner with water in his lungs but valor in his heart, he gave his pets to Heidi. Now Heidi had more mouths to feed, without more ration cards.

"What biceps, man! What biceps!" said Lilo, full of charity, well out of earshot of her mother, while bidding him good-bye.

His neck flushed crimson at the compliment. He stuttered timidly: "You think so? Do you? Really?" He had known Lilo since her head reached barely to his knees and she came toddling to his door to beg the last, sweet apples of the season.

"Why, surely! Absolutely. I swear it on my grave, man!" lied Lilo, and gave him a nudge with her elbow.

He confessed in a quavering voice: "I didn't think they'd come for me, what with my health certificate. I need a *sitzbad*, girls, no less than twice a week. Why, I was never so astounded in my life."

In answer, Lilo merely winked and smiled a wicked smile, both hands behind her back. She smiled and kept on smiling, a veteran of war, to give an old man confidence. To keep her out of mischief, claimed Heidi, was harder than guarding a basket of sparrows. There was nobody equal Lilo's in energy and drive,

and every Hitler Youth stared at her sweater, whereas they never stared at Erika in that odd, strange, disturbing way. They only pulled her earlobe.

"You look magnificent," said Lilo to the bashful grocer. "Be sure to hold your horses."

It was her sixteenth year, and she was beautiful. Her hair was shingled properly, her stomach hard and flat. "Why, look at you! I never saw a finer *Landser*. That is the honest truth." She gave him her most wicked grin. She told him to bolster his valor: "I'll write you a letter each week. If you don't mind, that is."

"You will?"

"Of course I will. It can get very rough. You better do yourself a favor and stay out of harm's way. Many stories are making the rounds."

He had his slogans pat. "We're fighting for a better world. I'm sure we'll win this war."

"One can be sure and wrong," said Lilo suddenly. "One can be right and lose. That's just my own opinion."

Erika stared at a crack in the sidewalk. She tugged her sweater out of shape, distressed at Lilo's words.

Had she been Lilo and not Erika, she would have quoted duty. Truth. Humility. Self-sacrifice. She would have quoted honor. She knew that Lilo often said one thing and meant another, and you could never tell. The grocer knew that, too. He started pulling at his whiskers.

"Well, in that case, I guess—I guess I better go. So. How about a little kiss? A little goodbye kiss?"

"Why, heavens! No!"

"Why not?"

"My mother is very old-fashioned," said Lilo, while striking a seducer's pose, thus softening the blow.

The grocer looked at Lilo with two old, wounded eyes. "Who would find out?"

"Most anybody could."

He had a powerful imagination. "Give me a little peck. I'll probably get shot. With my luck, that will happen."

But Lilo was firm, though she never stopped smiling. She kept smiling to bolster his pride. "No, no. I better not. Most anybody could find out. And if they did, then I would be the scandal of Berlin."

It wasn't even a rebuff, for Lilo smiled at him in such a way that you could tell she wouldn't mind, were it not for the scandal.

He shifted, timorous, from leg to leg, a red spot on each cheek. He also wore different socks. He made one last attempt.

"When I am dead, you will regret this, Lilo. Come on. Right on my schmoozer here."

But Lilo smiled despite her negativity and shook her head so that her tresses flew, to let him know that she had gone as far as she would go in giving an old man a strong shot of self-confidence. And now both stood there, awkward suddenly, and looking at their shoes.

"Besides, I don't like to be hurried," said Lilo, and gave him a small swat. "Don't you agree that's clever?"

"What on earth am I going to do?" he said and shivered in his trousers, and suddenly his eyes were watery—and Lilo's, swimming too. His voice quavered. He rubbed his wobbling chin, as though he were testing his beard. "This is crazy! I am practically into my pension!"

She spoke in a soft, gentle voice while stroking Winston Churchill's sleek, wet nose with a small, tender finger. "You must howl with the wolves, don't you know?"

"That's what I always say."

"If you ask me," said Lilo now, while kicking at a dirty snowball, "it's mostly attitude. No need to press your luck. Just stay out of harm's way. I'll save you a handful of flints."

The grocer nodded at her sagely. "That goes both ways. Be careful, girls. Watch out."

"We will."

"Well. Off I go. May we all meet again, and in a better world." He fished deep in frayed pockets, coming up with a handful of change. "Here, girls. Go have yourselves a treat."

He was known as a tightwad; the gesture was appreciated.

Lilo curtsied to show her excitement. "Why, thanks! Oh, thanks!"

"I didn't really mean a word of it," the grocer called while looking back. "About that kiss, I mean."

"I know. I know. I didn't hear a word," called Lilo after him.

She smiled and kept on smiling, tears criss-crossing her cheeks.

The movies in the war's last year were highly educational. The Wehrmacht was scrubbing the world of corruption in drawn-out, snow-clogged battles. The *Landsers* were magnificent, exploding bridges in the rear and overcoming every obstacle by their intelligence and cunning, and everybody knew there were no finer soldiers.

The teenagers leaned back to savor the well-known. The movie houses of Berlin were dank and murky places, but warm, much warmer than outside where wind and sleet increased.

First came the specials—extremely political, all offering closed, airtight arguments. The prelude made you laugh out loud about the ways the Führer closed the night clubs, drove every crook into the sea, and chased the usurers and whores away to make the Fatherland the focal point of culture. These specials sorted black from white. You strove to learn from them. The Führer set the moral boundaries and fought to keep them there.

To wit: the Allies always lost, the Wehrmacht always won.

The enemy was wooden and predictable. The Russkis? Rags and tatters. The Tommies smirked while splashing soap across the room, fanatics about cleanliness. The French had lisps and strange diseases and came across effeminate in words as well as deeds. Americans were swaggering, chewed gum and made a fetish of equality, their shirts hanging outside their trousers. Their roads were straight as arrows, while their values were twisted and warped. They were the patsies of the Jews, who talked with silver tongues.

That was the gravest charge: Americans, trusting and gulli-

ble as children. They took enormous pride in fighting other people's wars, thus filling Hebrew coffers. If they kept on their foolish course, their world would grow darker and meaner. That was the message. Everywhere. Inside the cozy movie house or out in the cold streets. You couldn't hide from it.

The radio bellowed daily: "Death to the Hebrew lackeys!" but many people did not feel that way about Americans at all; in fact, they liked Americans, though all agreed: were it not for Hebrews' villainously laundering their brains, by now the Führer would have won. Bringing the Amis to their senses wasn't easy.

"Do you suppose that before long—"

"Why, heavens! Lord in Heaven. Shhh! Be quiet, for heaven's sakes," hissed Lilo angrily and pushed somebody's arm away that fell across her shoulders.

Next came the main event—Zarah Leander, finally, an actress to her fingertips and toes, a superb illusionist, as gifted as they come. Around her quiet serenity, no one searched ruins for firewood and food. She didn't move an eyelash, didn't blink, was not a bit disheveled ever and certainly did not complain and brood, although the world around her flew apart, demoralizing everyone with hardship upon hardship.

"The day will come when I will look like that and move like that and talk like that," said Erika. "You'll see. That day will come. Say what you will. It will."

"Be realistic, dear," said Lilo, unconvinced.

That was her favorite refrain. Be realistic, Erika!

"Laugh all you want."

"Besides, you're much too thin, if you ask me. You need illegal butter." Lilo didn't mention malnutrition; that would have been defeatist.

War movies with romance built-in were Lilo's favorite films. The kind she liked to watch—where a fat moon shone on a silver lake while gentle music played—sent all her energies atop a fluffy cloud and kept them there for hours. She savored every one of them, especially the ending—Zarah Leander reclining on a pebbled beach, while knitting someone's socks, content and peace-

ful as a kitten, smiling that perfect smile. She knew the fate awaiting her unless she showed that she was unafraid. She helped. She sacrificed. She was superbly brave.

You followed her example.

Unless you followed her example, the Reds would come and flood the city of Berlin and kick you—kick you dead. And then step on your bloated belly. That's what the Russkis did. The Russkis must be stopped.

Chapter 115

The bodies of the fallen *Landsers* were shipped back to the Reich in gunny sacks. The Wehrmacht still had gunny sacks, though freezing people stole them shamelessly and hid them in their wagons.

Natasha had her own; the baby was inside. The baby looked just like an old and withered dwarf. It had no voice. It barely moved. Sleet glued its eyelids shut.

Before another week was gone, it lost a thumb to frostbite.

A hut. Whose hut? No matter.

Natasha pushed inside. Blessed were the times when she could spy a fire. A *Landser*, curled up by the door in his torn soldier coat, his rifle at the ready against the partisans, was eyeing her with tired eyes. She paid no heed. War was war—but a baby a baby. She still had hers. She held the child aloft.

He stared at it. Beneath those rags, still life?

She had no wish but one: to keep the morsel warm. It whimpered faintly, seeking comfort on Natasha's aching shoulder where the strap of her backpack, in which she still carried her axe, had cut a painful ridge.

She found a frozen quilt. She shook it, wrapped the baby, but when she saw how badly Marleen shook in the periodic gusts of wind that blew through the glassless windows, she gave the quilt to her and opened her own bosom to thaw the baby there.

"My little calf. Here are my withered arms. As good as any cradle—"

The baby kept licking its lips. Its face was shrunken. Ancient. Natasha watched how bands of lice moved up and down its neck where she had tied a shawl to keep the warmth inside. She squashed a few. No matter, honey child. No matter.

She looked around. Someone had already burned the furniture and half the floorboards, too; Natasha was eyeing the rafters. The room was like an ice cave. Her jam would not thaw out.

Across from her, in a dark corner, hunched several refugees around a battery-powered radio.

"—for the righteous, there's glory in death. The front will stabilize—" The night resounded with the raucous voice. The guard by the door started cheering.

As soon as it was thawed sufficiently, Natasha put the baby down and buttoned up her coat to search the ruins for firewood and food.

Whenever she was sent to scavenge food or fuel, she found that someone had already been where she was looking now, with little left that might have been of use.

Starved children dug through compost heaps to find some strips of meat still clinging to a bone. Hunched shadows stood in queues and waited for their rations while standing in the icy drizzle, just waiting—waiting wordlessly.

Each evening, long queues of hungry, freezing people snaked around corner upon corner, beginning at the fuming barracks and winding around blocks. The baby wheezed. The trees moaned wretchedly. The Führer was still winning, but at a fearful cost.

If there were bedbugs to endure, she stolidly endured them.

She squashed them when she could. The child was all. Beside its needs, all other worries paled.

Huge potholes swallowed tanks. The wind howled, shouted, hissed and wept. Natasha listened fearfully and heard how eternity roared. The child in the crook of her arm was still stirring.

She muttered, for habit was habit: "Who cuddles you? Who hums to you?"

The stars shone as brightly as ever.

Day after day, it was the same: somehow, Natasha always found another make-shift shelter in an abandoned row of barracks.

She knew that she was lucky; persistence had paid off. She reined in the horses. She took possession of the building. In its sad ruins lay strewn a dozen dead civilians. She stepped right over them.

There was no one to stop her now. Not now! By God and all the saints, not now!

She looked around. A direct hit had flattened the building in the middle, but both ends still stood firm. Her head was pounding like a hammer; her back was on fire; her eyes were red and raw. She had that axe, still in her backpack; it came in handy now; she chopped some firewood to warm another night; she kept the matches dry, between her withered breasts.

There was Marleen, now barely sensible.

There was still Mimi, fighting the guerrillas.

The mine dogs were the worst. Seeking warmth beneath the trek, next to the steaming horses, repeatedly the animals, explosives strapped onto their backs, blew portions of the trek to smithereens. The Wehrmacht did its best to stop the treachery; it made nooses from telephone wires. Caught saboteurs were dangling from the trees. The trek passed underneath.

For days on end, still in her soldier's uniform, Mimi sat faithfully within the moaning woods with loaded carbine on her knees, a chill within her heart—a soldier among soldiers.

She was the Wehrmacht's eyes and ears. They needed her. The trek would have perished without her.

She watched young regiments tramp by. They swung their arms against the cold and smiled with stiffened lips. False cheer was better than no cheer. She smiled back every time. At every opportunity, the soldiers sent to finish off the war deserved a smile. Wherever the trek stopped, young boys were standing in the howling wind, still in their summer uniform, all waiting to be processed. She let them know she knew: it was just as cold on the enemy's side. The eagle's claws still clutched the Hooked Cross, and she, for one, believed. She did her part by spreading cheer as though it were soft butter.

She carried marching maps, read directions from frost-bitten stars. So far as she could see, the Führer rode the tide. He kept on replacing the guns that were lost. Additional weapons were being developed and refined.

Odd fires kept on flaring in the east, still sparking rumor after rumor. Those rumors drove the trek. It snowed. It sleeted. It blew. The news from the disintegrating front was more and more disheartening, but the Führer had promised his troops: "We are now at the cusp—" and Mimi still believed.

At night, she put her head upon her aching elbow, curled up against a stranger to share a bit of warmth and tried to get some sleep.

She did not ask herself: "How will it end?" She knew she would survive.

Why was she spared when thousands died each day? Because her cause was just.

"Sure. Sure. In yet another century, who knows? It's dogfight after dogfight, right?"

Natasha talked like that.

The bunion on Natasha's big toe hurt, and her tongue was as vicious as ever. She didn't care what anybody thought; she did not beg for death, but neither did she beg for life; she fashioned an alcove for cooking.

"Yet one more month," insisted Mimi. She squared her shoulders and stiffened her back. "Another month. Two at the most—"

Her nerves were near the breaking point. She was leaning on hope, against rumors. She, too, was dirt-bespattered head to toe and gray and chill and weary. She hugged herself against the night. She shook but didn't cry.

Natasha hugged herself as well and did not waste her strength on a dumb wish that came from a fool's paradise and ended in the ditch.

The *Landsers* were retracing the routes by which they had advanced. The rumors that the eastern front had given way were ceaseless.

Over the cracking, moaning earth rolled the expatriates in numbers beyond counting, behind them the Antichrist's army.

The Wehrmacht still dealt crushing blows, but unmistakably, the front was now retreating, riding roughshod over everything that moved. The convoy grew longer and longer. The cook was gone; so was his gulash cannon. Natasha cut meat from the horses' cadavers. Even horsemeat was hard to come by; horse rations were dearer than gold.

She had the axe; it came in handy; she used it where she could, hacking meat from dead, frozen horses.

It was, by then, so cold the Wehrmacht's shadow trembled.

Natasha stomped her feet and blew her breath against the palsy of her fingers. She was luckier than most; she still had two mares, although their heads drooped low for want of fodder; their hooves left bloody footprints in the snow.

Nobody said a word.

From the debris of battles fought and lost arrived in scores bemedaled but exhausted cripples, with bloody rags around their stumps—grave, silent shadows clinging to the running boards of trains. Broken vehicles and shell-scarred tanks kept slowing down the trek.

Still, Baba walked. Amazingly, she walked.

Long convoys of prisoners of war moved alongside her at times, five to a row, tied to each other by thick ropes. Their coats were torn, their faces gray. They slept in frozen clothes, for fear they would be stolen. Survivors of a quarter century of violence, not feeling loyalty to either friend or foe, they stomped the ground and flung their arms about to keep the blood from hardening with cold.

Natasha knew that winter lay in wait, much like a hungry animal.

The horses started buckling at the knees. Natasha pushed and pulled. Marleen kept on swinging a switch from behind, now that she could no longer walk at all and had to ride atop her wagon.

"*Pascholl!*" both yelled. "*Pascholl!*"

They kept yelling it until they were hoarse. Another battle was expected soon that would reverse the war.

Natasha walked beside the trek, a black pack animal, still lugging her belongings—the baby's diapers, frozen stiff, an old tin can, three spoons, the rusty axe atop her backpack.

She tried to shift its weight. It seemed to weigh a ton.

She longed to leave it in the ditch but knew that she dare not—how else to split the wood? How else to feed the baby? The handle strap cut deep into her shoulder and shot rays to the base of her skull, but that could not be helped. She valued her axe; it meant warmth; it meant flames from smoldering embers; each night, she could limber her old, aching joints by a fire and thaw the baby out.

That's how a few survived. Not many did. Some did.

They ate when they were lucky. They slept in empty barracks, in air raid shelters and abandoned schools. Each night, Natasha managed to discover yet another shack. A dank, deserted building. A gray delousing station. A goat stall. An old church.

All that, an hour's worth of triumph. Who hums to you, all icy, stiff and tired?

"If need be," said Natasha to herself before she fell asleep each night, "I'll step on someone else's bloated belly."

Had she had strength to spare, she would have howled. She had no strength to spare.

She had her axe; she hacked into the hostile earth with great ferocity.

The soil was hardening with winter, but Baba didn't quit. She dug. She shoveled. She grubbed for potatoes and turnips. With a frayed sack slung over her shoulder, flashlight in hand, on the prowl in the chill of the night—that's how the hardiest survived.

She would. She did. There was no other choice. What of the honey child?

Strong gusts of wind took Baba by the neck and pummeled her back and forth, but somehow, night by night, she braved the night in search of food and firewood and made it back to where the trek had camped—where Marleen hunched, herself a knot, a heap of gray, and waited for the cold to creep into her marrow.

Chapter 116

"Don't get your hopes up high," said Lilo almost every night before the two girls fell asleep. By then, their friendship was cemented. The girls were more than friends, they were truly bosom buddies.

"I won't."

"That way, you won't be disappointed."

"I know."

"But on the other hand, don't lose hope. That would be your doom. Tomorrow they might come. In fact, I'm almost sure. An extra train is scheduled."

Lilo loved to be where action and excitement were, where people rushed the icy trains in search of missing relatives. If at all possible, she never missed the late-afternoon refugee trains.

Waiting to hear what happened to her people, however, was as exhausting and as tormenting for Erika as might have been a night filled with mosquitoes.

"Once they arrive," was Lilo's firm conviction, "life will be sweet and calm."

"You really think so, Lilo?"

"Of course."

"I bet they won't even recognize me any more," she said in hopes of being contradicted, and Lilo didn't let her down.

"Of course they will. The very thought! Why, on my deathbed I would say: 'That's Erika.' Someday you will be in for a surprise. Don't worry yourself thin."

She had grown seven centimeters. Her chest was rounding out, though insignificant compared to Lilo's, who sported half-grown melons, whereas hers were still little more than cherry-size at best.

"As long as there is hope, you keep on hoping, dummy," said Lilo several times a day, not one to let hope fade. "If not today, then certainly next week. I feel it in my stomach. It feels peculiar."

"Just keep on hoping, love," said Heidi, too, who understood the need for stop-gap measures, for hope was hope, and Erika had that and very little else.

One afternoon, as soon as it stopped sleeting and a pale sun emerged, the two girls, armed with four good flints, paid a strategic visit to a psychic through vaulted, crumbling passageways in hopes of speeding up the war and getting useful tips about the future.

Not sure that Heidi would approve, they did this on the sly, hearts pounding, stomachs churning. But there seemed little choice; the letters had stopped coming, and Erika's sore chest was clotted up with pain and homesickness despite the heated brick that Heidi stuck beneath the covers every night to ease her suffering.

This psychic, lying with amazing ease, predicted ample things against the howling winds while fingering her cards.

"Once peace is here," the psychic said, "one of you girls will board a ship and sail to foreign shores."

"Which one of us?" asked Lilo eagerly, believing every word. "For heaven's sakes, speak up."

"That is still unrevealed."

"We'll live?" squealed Erika before she lost her nerve. Her heart was leaping in her chest.

The psychic wouldn't look at her. "If anybody will, you will." She looked at Lilo, sharply, with old and beady eyes and sighed and asked with sudden vehemence: "You have another flint?"

"Yes. Here. Try hard. I want my money's worth."

"Where is the herring voucher? You promised me last time."

"I overpaid you last time, if you will please remember."

"That was last fall. This is a brand new session."

"Out with the truth! Will we be married soon?" To be a spinster was a cross best borne by someone else. "Speak up. Can you foretell a wedding?"

"Now, just sit still so I can concentrate." The psychic rearranged her faded skirt and let her lids droop softly: "What do I see? I see a man in uniform. He has a scar on his left hand. Don't ask me why. That's all that I can see."

Those words put Lilo in the seventh heaven of delight. Her face grew as pink as the inside of a bunny's ears. "That's Jonathan! That's probably my future bridegroom," she yelped and gave the dog a smacking kiss. Then she remembered Erika. "Well? What about her? I still have one flint left."

The psychic opened one eye carefully. "Let's call it a day," she said lamely.

Lilo spoke up aggressively. "This skinny little person is my friend. She writes amazing poetry. She's also good at eulogies." She mussed Erika's hair in an affectionate way. "I thought she'd be fatter by now."

The psychic wouldn't look at Lilo, much less at Erika. "That's neither here nor there."

Lilo shot her a worried look. "She's good in class. She pulls nothing but A's."

"That so?"

"Give her a pencil, and she starts to scribble. She just puts one word in front of another, and presto! There you have it. A poet, heart and soul."

The psychic squirmed and fussed. "Alas, we are at war."

Out came the well-known *angst* in Erika. She stared in disbelief, developing that tight, odd feeling in her rib cage. "I won't survive? Is that what she is saying?"

"Don't be a silly goose," said Lilo, a bit loud.

She almost lost it then and there. It all came flooding in. "It's bombs? I will be killed? Is that what she is saying?" The enemy was slamming bombs into the smoking city of Berlin as though into a dying carcass and leaving what they blasted into a bloody pulp for convicts to clean up. It was horrendous! Awful! Three or four times a day, the planes came roaring in! The dead lay in the rubble, unrecognizable. She was so frightened now from what she heard or, worse, began imagining because the psychic wouldn't speak—would not say anything beyond what she already had foretold!—that her left thigh began to cramp.

"Out with the truth," said Lilo sharply.

The psychic's smile kept flickering. "I see a book," she muttered, shifting accusing eyes on Erika, who shrank back in her seat. "I'm reading the last page."

"You know what? You're wrong!" said Lilo, furious. "I paid you honestly. I am a bit surprised."

The psychic moved her scrawny neck. She hugged herself for warmth. She said, avoiding Lilo's eyes: "Why ask for special favors?"

"Because I paid you," Lilo said. "All things considered, that's as good an argument as any. This funny little lady is my friend. Out with your secrets. Now! And your answer had better be good."

"I see an ashcan for this youngster," the psychic finally admitted, under siege. "And please don't ask me why."

For weeks, it was black piled on black. It was nothing but turnips and water.

The rumbling never stopped. The buildings groaned and shuttered. Lights out by five o'clock! The black-out curtains drawn!

All clear. The first wave gone.

The second on the way. A streetcar thundered by, its wheels still on, and turning.

The Führer spurred the Wehrmacht on on every front, demanding courage and endurance. Heidi listened to the wind that pushed against the boards that had replaced the window glass.

These days, she grew quieter and quieter.

"You think of this and that," she said at long last, and turned the radio off. A small convulsion passed through Heidi every time she raised her arm in the Hitler salute.

But Heidi let nobody suffer; Heidi was special that way. "This is the time to band together," she said, and wrought another miracle. Defeat was not her style.

Outside, another blizzard howled. The snow piled on the window sill. The trees stood dark and bare. Heidi kept throwing yarn over her knitting needles to fashion a new mitten.

She was made up of small, loving touches. She made the kitchen glow with warmth and hospitality, and every crumb was shared. She stood there, holding down the fort for Fatherland and Führer, self-disciplined, determined not to be defeated, her noodle roller in her hand and flour on her nose.

In the west, many stories are told of the last desperate days, and all of them are false.

It's true that the shelves in the shops were bare. It's true the bombs kept falling from the sky. Crowds thronged and pushed each other to make it to the bunkers. You buried yet another child with china eyelids and torn limbs. But somehow, life went on.

The Fatherland fought on, alone, without a single friend, with God its major ally.

It was right over wrong. It was light over dark. The cause was just. The Führer would strike back, and strike back hard. God favored him, and destiny was on his side. The day would come when honest grain would once again be rising from the earth.

That they survived at all was largely thanks to Heidi.

There was no sleeping in with Heidi, unless you were near death. She did all she could to help her country win, demanding that the girls do likewise.

Had Heidi not buried carrots in the sand the year before, they might not have survived. But Heidi was resourceful. She made the coupons stretch. If a dress needed re-hemming, Heidi found a needle. Her work never ended. Her Faith didn't fade. The moment the sun came out, she aired her feather quilts.

She picked up the dishes, put out the fires, folded the blankets, dusted the parlor and heated her kitchen for breakfast.

When Erika turned thirteen years of age, Heidi baked delicious coffee twists, having saved and skimped on food and rations for an entire month, using up the last coal in the pail.

She was untiring; and enduring—knitting and mending, skimping and saving, ironing another pillowcase, embroidered on the edge.

That's how it was for Heidi. Those were her traits; that was her personality. All else was stripped away except her Faith in fate.

She still had Faith to spare. The Führer would rebuild a world where youngsters had a chance and oldsters got a pension. And high time, too. It was bad now, and getting worse. For still the bombs came. Daily.

They came like dying meteors, pulled downwards by the weight of gravity. There seemed to be no end to them; in fact, the raids stepped up.

"What's preferable?" the Allied propaganda leaflets asked. "An unconditional surrender? Or your vast sea of rubble?"

"Yuk!" Lilo said, and made a face at the departing planes.

Lilo picked up Allied leaflets, her tongue between her teeth. She had been warned by people in the neighborhood the flyers might be poisoned. That was a risk that Lilo gladly took.

"Of course Berlin is moribund," the Allied leaflets claimed.

"If that is true," said Lilo, forcefully, "my name is Gugelhupf."

She put those leaflets to good use. She started rolling up her

hair in moistened leaflet curlers she twisted artfully.

"Concede," the leaflets atop Lilo's forehead claimed, "that Hitler is a loser."

"What kind of people do they think we are?" asked Lilo angrily, and watched as Winston Churchill started walking in a circle, fine shivers running up his spine.

She caught him by the tail and gave him a vigorous kiss. "There's no way whatsoever the Amis can kill Germany. No way! That is my firm opinion."

"She's a handful," said the neighbors and gave Heidi pitying looks. That was an apt description, for Lilo's spirit didn't quit. There was no stopping Lilo. She was relentlessly upbeat. She had her own philosophy, which stood her in good stead.

Whereas the rest, including Erika, marched in quadruple file, Lilo always walked ahead of any youth formation. She had other useful qualities as well. She was one of the finest target marksmen in the entire troop. She'd hoist the Führer's flag, no matter how the wind howled, thus demonstrating to the world that honor, duty, loyalty lay at the core of what this struggle was about. She honored every maxim.

Yet she knew what it took to survive.

All rules were simple now, as far as Lilo was concerned, because tomorrow might not come. Therefore, why not today? She took what she could find. She ate what she had handy. She shared whatever was left over; if there was nothing left, she filled up her belly with water.

"When it rains, you will be soaked, and that cannot be helped," she said to Erika on many an occasion, "but a warm sun will shine eventually. Meanwhile, you make your body taut and cut the cold in half."

She lay in wait behind a bush until a hapless rooster drifted by, and then she caught it by its legs and squeezed its neck—she squeezed it, long and hard. And then she sneezed the feathers from her nostrils.

That's what it took, she said—the skills of fast, efficient for-

age.

That's what it took—resourcefulness.

She even helped the convicts who sometimes used her as a scout to pick up drifting rumors.

The felons, who made up the cleaning crews, were a disheveled, silent lot. They took dead people by their shoulders and their heels and flung them on the platform of their trucks.

The convicts, too, were hungry and in rags. They marched in tiers of four while carrying their picks and shovels on their shoulders—all of them gaunt, fatigued. They plucked the bodies from the rubble, although they scarcely had the strength. In minutes, every burial sack would be powdered with fresh snow.

"God knows how many people saw me," Lilo told one of them, while handing him a leaflet. The leaflet claimed the war was done, the Führer in dire straits.

He stood stockstill at what he saw in her young, vibrant face.

"Just practicing, that's all," she added, rocking on her heels.

He watched her, wrists and ankles manacled. Their glances locked. Something forbidden crept into his eyes, no longer blue but gray. Something in hers responded.

"He's just a prisoner," said Erika, tugging at Lilo's sleeve, but Lilo spoke in undertones:

"So what? Why not give him a little hope? I am no friend of the barbarians, but he—I bet you he's still young. No older than nineteen or twenty."

"Having yet to be corrected—" Erika was making frantic gestures, but Lilo merely shrugged. Her magic was her youth. It softened everything.

"Watch out! Here comes America!" the convicts sneered at times, an inch away from treason, the moment they saw Lilo with leaflets in her hair.

The two girls knew about America the way they knew about assorted angels, gremlins, unicorns and ghosts. They often pondered the enigma called America.

America could only be described as baffling, a country huge but ignorant, belonging to amazing fools. Blessed with amazing riches, Americans were slow politically and wasteful with resources. They used their elevators going down. They sold vast chunks of ice cream in the winter. They used their scalloped paper napkins only once, then threw them away. And they had other vices—such as a total disbelief in racial harmony and unity. Had they no eyes nor ears? No brains with which to think? What reason could they give for wanting to bomb Germany to smithereens? None. None at all. Above all else, Americans were blind—blind to the truth, blind to the real foe. They had their brain cells laundered; the Hebrews did the laundering. It was as if the Führer's generals spoke to iron and to stone.

"Why be a lackey to the Jews?" the Führer wondered many times in broadcast after broadcast.

What was it with America? was Lilo's question mark.

To which she had no answer. Americans were trusting, like small children. Americans were fast with cars, but set on self-destruct.

The next thing that might happen, the teacher had explained, would be attempts to have the Negroes melt into their race—a plan, so far, that did not have a chance.

The Jews used the Americans, the teacher furthermore explained, to fight their wars for them, to kill off race-proud Germany, to crack its spine and kill its pride and stop its beating heart.

The evidence was everywhere. The dead lay there and stared at Erika with glassy eyes, all stiff before the day was gone, like logs, until the rubble crews had time to come and haul them to their graves. Sometimes that took two days, for it was snowing now, relentlessly, dune piled on dune, more snow yet on the grey horizon, piling up.

"What fool on earth would want to be a mongrel?" the Führer always asked.

The answer was more bombs.

Chapter 117

It finally stopped sleeting briefly and the sun came out again, but then the mud began to form fine crystals at its surface that didn't thaw at noon.

There were still turnips in the soil, hard to dig out, but Baba had that axe. She'd braved the dust, the mud, the rain, and now she braved the winds. She would brave every blizzard, too, she knew would soon blow in.

The earth was as hard as rock. Shovels broke. The trekkers cursed. It took all of her strength to break the frozen crust. The trek did not slow down. Huge storms were building in the clouds. The sky first turned chalky, then black. The wind grew strong and stronger.

Everyone with wheels kept trekking west, both Faith and fear propelling them. Faith still had the texture of granite.

Just ask.

And marvel at the strength with which the creed believed, all pushing on, all in a westerly direction, all pulling carts or pushing baby buggies, dragging blankets, boxes, sacks and barrels, along with badly dented household goods.

The *Landsers* attacked as never before, but the Fatherland shrank. It shrank daily. The Wehrmacht's losses were colossal. The sparrows fell in droves. They kept on tumbling from the wires that still hummed messages of victory.

The guns froze, by and by. The Wehrmacht's fingers fell away.

The *Landsers* blew up bridge after bridge to stop the Antichrist, but still he gained distance, day after day. Trench by trench and inch by inch, the Red Army pressed on west, flattening the trenches with their tank treads, crushing the shivering flesh.

"*Urray*! Here's a present!" the enemy howled, tossing hand grenades into the pitiful, disintegrating front. Nobody wanted shame; you hoped for victory; the trekkers plodded on in silence and obedience, in fear and hunger and exhaustion—chilled to the marrow, sleepless, silent.

West! Westwards, everyone! Where life was warm and good.

The old and the young were the first.

The old and weak dropped, one by one, exhausted, by the roadside, where they were left to die. The ditches were dotted with babies.

A four-year-old died of exposure in the wagon just ahead. It lay there, stiff and mottled, on a board. The grieving mother sat beside the road, refusing to rejoin the flight, begging passersby in a thin voice to help cover her darling with earth. The trek did not slow down.

In numbers beyond counting, it plodded on, still swelling like a reptile.

The vehicles moved slowly—bumper to bumper, wheel after wheel. Women. Children. Cows and goats. Cavalry and infantry. Ambulance attendants. Cyclists. Forage crews.

The wounded from the front arrived in open, steaming trucks.

New refugees arrived from Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, East Brandenburg.

Most people walked with kinfolk from their home provinces.

Those from the cities came on foot, those from the villages and towns still had their horses, luckily, although no longer shod. The animals left bloody hoofprints in the snow.

Exhausted, frightened people poured into the trek as it fled west, from left and right, their bundles on their backs, pulling handcarts, dragging bedding—ahead of bursting bombs! Ahead of whining bullets!

A million trekkers pushed on west, and twice as many horses.

Natasha pushed a wheelbarrow—the baby was inside. A wheelbarrow was not a pony cart, but on the other hand, much better than a tub, a table or a chair. Some pulled those now, along the icy road, their invalids atop.

On through the dreary landscape! On through the ice and snow!

"*Pascholl!*" Natasha howled.

She was easing the load of the mares. On her back, she carried her axe, an extra blanket, seven potatoes and an empty burlap sack. She hung on to that burlap sack, for she had plans: as soon as the trek stopped, as soon as she found yet another windblown shack, where she could stir some warmth from ashes for the child, she'd cut it up for diapers.

Marleen was deathly ill. Her face had started caving in. It looked as hollow as her two mares' flanks—skeletons so drained of strength by then that they could barely set their hooves. At night, Marleen sat, numb and silent, both hands around her head, too exhausted to lessen her anguish with prayers.

Natasha rocked the baby.

It barely moved; its throat was tight; its glands were hard, like rows of hazel nuts. Gray bands of lice moved up and down its neck. After a while, it closed its eyes and fell asleep, and only then did Baba think that she might try to get some sleep as well, her face turned to the wall, her head on Marleen's legs.

Rain turned to sleet. Sleet turned to ice.

Each night, with the day's journey done, Natasha had to pull

Marleen down from the wagon, leg by leg and arm by arm, and coax her, word by word, into a nearby shelter, heaving her with difficulty into the warmest corner where there was hardly room to move.

This night was dark by the time they arrived.

Natasha skipped the first and settled for the second edifice; it had the sturdier beams. She pushed gingerly against the door with the tip of her right foot; her left foot was swollen to grotesque proportions, the toes were black and blue.

"Hey? Anybody here?"

The door swung open with a creaking noise. She closed it quickly to Marleen, but not before she saw: three rows of corpses, piled against the wall. They lay there, orderly, one piled atop the other.

She didn't bother to find out how they had died. This was war. The living stepped over the dead.

She looked around. The roof had holes. The windows had been broken out. Somebody had been chopping up the frames, presumably for firewood.

She saw the outline of four bunks. Crude planks. No straw. No matter. She checked out every corner to verify that it was clear of partisans and traitors.

That heap there on the bunk? She checked that, too. It moved. Somebody had curled up to die, an old and tired man.

"Move! Move!" she swore at him.

He wouldn't budge. She gave him one good shove. She had no patience with his wish; the baby was covered with frost. She took the stranger by the heels and pulled him from his bunk, then spread her own rags there.

Life was reduced to this: the baby needed warmth. The baby needed soap. Lice ate into the flesh around the meager buttocks.

The floor was frozen earth.

She found a torn and dirty newspaper and put a match to headline after headline. Soon, timid flames were dancing. The wind extinguished them repeatedly. She hunched and rocked the

baby. She heard the night howl mournfully.

A moon appeared, a moon as chill and distant as that strange land Marleen once called America the Wonderland, a warm and scented place somewhere across the ocean, somewhere beyond the howling universe of hell.

This, too, is history. That's how Natasha fought, each night, with all the strength left in her limbs for that cramped spot to thaw the baby out, beside the burning embers.

Outside, both friend and foe lay frozen in the snow.

Bombs dug up shallow graves on both sides of the trek.

The hay allotment had been cut in half and then in half again; the animals fell in their traces; starvation had hollowed their bellies. The potholes swallowed tanks. A small cadaver lay forlornly in a trench.

And still the trek rolled on.

Guns, ammunition, tools, canteens, greatcoats, a hundred thousand other items were strewn along the road. At noon, the sun still had some strength, but by mid-afternoon all warmth was gone; the sun's rays lost their radiance; the winds kept slashing gaps into the struggling front. The war did not let up.

The sky was as gray as a louse.

The wind started cutting with knives. The bombs and shells kept falling. The horses strained. Blood ran out of their wounds. Another battle was expected soon. It would reverse the war. Another bird fell tumbling from a branch.

A whistling wind lashed fleeing flesh. The animals panted and slithered, jumping skittishly at sudden booms that shook the air and drove the pallor even wanner into Marleen's drawn, careworn face. She lay amid her soggy blankets, already stiffening with winter, just sunken face and trembling hands, refusing to climb down and limber herself by the fire.

Clusters of freezing flesh clung to the rattling trains. The ravens, carrion eaters, now followed every movement of the trek.

Natasha locked her jaw. She walked in snow tracks that

others had cut. She saw the bodies fall. The crows dropped, one by one, onto the fallen mounds. She circumvented all; she kept plodding to the west; she had no other choice. Her feet were living coals, but yet she walked. The sun turned pale and shriveled; the wind picked up more fury. Snow crunched beneath her feet. Dry leaves raced over vast graveyards.

She checked a young woman's body. The cold had jackknifed her; she was quite dead; Natasha knelt over her cadaver.

She checked it carefully: for ration cards, for food, for flints, for matches, anything. When someone came and challenged her, she flew into a rage. She struck the brash intruder with both fists until he slunk away.

She took her find back to the trek to feed Marleen, who merely shook her head.

Natasha turned vociferous. "Why be a fool? Eat while you can. There won't be food tomorrow—"

"Just go ahead and eat my share."

Marleen could barely speak. A fiery ocean roared within her head; her eyes glistened with heat. The constant tickle in her throat had changed into a rasping cough.

"Please. Have a bite."

"No. No. Just keep it for yourself."

"Please! Listen! Listen carefully! Don't give up now. We're almost there. A final push will surely—"

Marleen moaned to the jolting of the wagon, suspecting hazily that her long life was running out, and knowing there was comfort in that thought. She was a sparrow in the snow. She was an animal collapsing on the road. As soon as she tried forcing down her food, she spit it up again.

Her vision glazed, as if by frost; her ears, near deaf, from the relentless howling of the storm. She had lived long enough to know that, come what may, when yet another season came to pass, death took a rich, rich harvest.

But reaping never was in vain. She knew that for a fact.

The rivers all lay paralyzed. The ice inside no longer cracked,

and there was stillness now.

"She's dying," wept Natasha, and started cuffing Mimi.

Marleen did not die easily. Two days before, her legs broke under her as though they were two sticks of wood, and she fell down in spasms. Natasha watched her fall and flung the baby from herself into the arms of someone near. She knelt beside Marleen.

"What's this? You quit? And you are not ashamed?"

Marleen could barely speak. "It is too late. I'm bleeding from a thousand wounds."

"Hold onto me. This way."

"I'm finished," moaned Marleen, by then no longer sensible. This vale of tears? A world a sea of white, the land marks disappearing. "Just leave me here. It's best."

Natasha shook Marleen and cuffed her with both fists to bring her to her senses and even swore at her as in the olden days, but Marleen paid no heed. Her body flamed with poison; she lay, hunched over, in the snow and would not lift her head. That's when Natasha tied her to a plank and started pulling her along the icy roads, to lighten the load of the mares. So let the baby bounce awhile atop the swaying wagons, beneath the frozen tent! The infant was a patient thing by now, no longer whimpering.

She checked it now and then. It didn't stir, but blinked. Fat flakes froze on its lashes.

Mimi, wrapped in a fallen soldier's bullet-riddled overcoat, was walking, too—she scarcely knew how.

She had stripped the coat from someone who no longer needed it; that didn't bother her at all; by then, most people on the trek were unmoved by the glassy eyes of fallen heroes, young or old. She turned the corpse's pockets inside out; he didn't mind; she didn't mind; why not?

There was now very little feeling left for anyone or anything—the winter stripped off feeling as though it were a knife whittling off bark. A hand, a foot stuck from a dune of snow; she didn't

stop; that didn't touch her any more; these things were commonplace.

As tightly as she could, she clutched the child Natasha thrust at her, so she could find a sheltered corner where she could lift her skirt. Her kidneys burned like fire. Natasha said she had to pee; there was a bush; now hush! and, therefore, Mimi leaned against a tree and tried to stroke the mottled face.

The child no longer moved.

"Poor thing. Poor thing," she muttered, while waiting for Natasha to return. "Poor baby. Honey child."

She kept on stroking it. An ear came off. It broke like glass. With a small moan, she flung it from herself.

That afternoon, she disappeared and was not seen again. Some people claim she coiled herself as tightly as she could and leaped onto a Red Cross train that took the wounded home.

She made it. She survived. She sits there now, on Josie's couch. She never speaks of it—what helped her to survive.

Chapter 118

Death came from America daily. The airplanes roared over and emptied their bellies. Death fell like rain. It came and departed again.

This war was slaughter, bare and raw and bloody beyond words. There was no other civil name.

Formerly, the bombs had fallen every night. Now it was mornings, too, and sometimes afternoons. The drones of the airplanes could already be heard. Explosions boomed from several miles away.

"Here is as good as there," said Heidi. Sometimes it was to the bunkers, and sometimes it was not, depending on how near the bombs were hitting, judging from the booms.

Heidi made the bombing raids endurable by showing little fear. She was resigned to them and sat them out as calmly as she could, not saying much at all, right underneath the pictures of her fallen sons—all three of them in uniform, dispensing reassuring smiles between successive waves.

"By extraordinary exercise of will, we will build brand new

foundations from the ruins," the Führer's broadcast said, and Heidi added to that thought with quiet civility: "We might as well stay here."

That was okay with Lilo as well as Erika. The frantic sprint for the shelters was not exactly fun. Inside the bunkers, infants wailed; oldsters prayed; The sirens howled; the minutes kept on ticking.

"Well, there you have it, Erika," said Lilo, a bit loud. "This time, it wasn't all that bad."

No matter the confusion, she held onto her mutt. The two girls, sitting to the left and right of Heidi, as close as they could scoot, now listened to the distant rumble of the planes as they moved off with a huge sound resembling a receding train or a departing thunderstorm.

"They've barely disrupted my breakfast. At least I've had my breakfast, if you can call it that."

So loud was Lilo's boast that Erika was snapped from her trance, though her face was still drawn with an unsteady hand, while Winston Churchill stretched and smiled, revealing yellow teeth, and started pawing something.

"Are you all right?" asked Heidi, too, while slipping a warm arm around Erika. Heidi was never impatient with terror. She let you know with slim, spare gestures that she fully understood.

Heidi was useless for several weeks right after the black-bordered letters arrived, three letters in four days, all telling her that death was instantaneous; the Führer would always remember.

She should be proud, his letters pointed out. Death had came honorably for the sake of a better tomorrow.

"Your son has sealed his loyalty with death," the Führer wrote to Heidi. Three times. Three letters in four days. One following the other. Eight words, identical, above the Hooked Cross.

Her eyes were blind for days. The neighbors told her that she was an inspiration. There was nothing to question or add.

Wild blizzards raged outside.

The refugees came staggering in, their only goods in tatters

on their backs, and filled up every empty space. In this last winter of the war, there was no end to refugees—a rag-tag lot, just churning along in desperate processions, all pulling sleds and carts. They were footsore and hungry and sad. Soon, the cellars were bursting with them.

"There is still hope," said Heidi, her eyes on Erika, who scanned each ashen face. "Right after class, just run along and check the lists. There's always still tomorrow. But don't forget. There might be a delay."

Heidi stood with her back to the stove, fine tremors on her lips. Heidi couldn't seem to warm herself, no matter how high the flames leaped.

Trains came and went—iced-over, end to end. At the main railroad station, despairing people ran their trembling fingers down the posted columns of authenticated casualties, updated twice a day.

Erika did that each afternoon as well - just to make sure her family was still alive. She still had hope. Her hope was like a carousel, just whirling round and round, its horses without riders.

Since she had come to Germany, the Fatherland had managed to survive a ferocious, freezing winter; the coal allowance had run out; the promised wood did not arrive, but patriots surrendered their best winter coats to help the Wehrmacht win. Whatever frozen creature stepped through Heidi's door was automatically entitled to a steaming bowl of soup, no matter it was Friday morning still and ration cards were not due until Monday afternoon.

"A hot bowl of soup keeps body and soul together, that's what I always say," said Heidi every morning, apportioning her coupons.

She cooked turnips in every known and even some unknown disguises. She trimmed. She cut corners. She saved till there was nothing left to save.

Heidi, too, was a believer. She stood with her comrades, el-

bow to elbow and jaw next to jaw—a three-striped mother, sadly.

She never mentioned them to anyone, her three young martyred sons, although at times she mentioned Jonathan, who still sent sparing postcards from the front, his Faith intact as ever.

When Lilo heard the news that her brothers had fallen, her food grew cold that night. Had someone come to her and ordered: "Now die so that the Fatherland may live!" she would have put herself behind an ack-ack gun and sold herself as dearly as she could.

She closed the door on everyone, though Winston Churchill scratched and carried on outside and wouldn't leave her be. She put a chair in front of it, and what she did behind that door was anybody's guess.

For one long week, Lilo walked on wooden knees. Then she snapped out of grief; she oiled her bicycle with extra care and, face averted, unwilling to tell anybody anything, she made for the gate and disappeared for an entire day, and with her, Winston Churchill.

No one could match Lilo's speed when she took corner after corner with deviltry in mind, pursued by Winston Churchill, who had the wanderlust. That day, it was ice cold but clear; the war kept bellowing, an uncaged Beast; the Allies bombed Berlin from one end to the other. Both brick and mortar flew—but that did not stop Lilo.

"That girl has got as many lives as the proverbial nine cats," the neighbors said, and sighed, as Lilo zipped on by. That day, she pedaled for her life, right through the icy gales, right through the ocean of destruction, braids flying in the wind, head held up high, jaw set, her empty bookbag swinging at the handle, and Winston Churchill nearly lost his tongue.

All day long, not a sign of either!

When finally they made it back, the girl and her beloved mutt, his ears looked strangely chewed, and she was pale and trembling, but in her backpack she had riches: three loaves of bread, two hundred grams of bacon, wrapped carefully in cellophane, a

medium bag of beans, one hard-boiled egg stamped with a number, three slivers of curled cheese and, best of all, four pieces of rarefied sugar she dropped without another word into her mother's tea.

"That's all I could come up with, Mommie," she said, and wouldn't look at Heidi, and Heidi put two trembling arms around her last, surviving child and said with a dry sob:

"You scared me half to death. Where have you been? Why can't you be like Erika?"

Time flew, no matter what. Spring came and went. Heidi tended to a corner plot on which cucumbers grew. The shrubs received a pruning, the bench a brand new coat. She raked the sidewalk carefully and sprinkled it with freshly moistened sand. All that ran in her bones. She did not change; she still darned socks; she never groused; she just intensified her mothering. She mothered everyone.

She let out yet another seam, another hem, because the dresses Erika had brought from Apanlee had grown too short and pinched around the chest. She washed and ironed an old ribbon she found deep in the bottom of a drawer and braided Erika's long hair, cross-patterning it carefully.

She said, referring to the planes that still kept dropping death:

"They look like us. We look like them. Why are they doing this to us? You wonder in quiet moments."

Quiet moments? This was a noisy war.

The Antichrist still hissed from every orifice. Each night, the bombs kept whistling down. The Führer's anti-aircraft searchlights kept fingering the sky, while every siren howled. The enemy flew over, dropped his bombs, retreated, returned for yet another run. House after house collapsed in heaps of smoking rubble, from which, at times, moans could be heard below.

Some buildings burned for days. The Führer insisted: "Just leave the last battle to me."

"Eat, eat," said Heidi to the girls at every opportunity, for

Heidi had no appetite herself. Her heart was like a tomb, now that she had received those letters.

She hugged her sorrow tight. Three photographs sat on her dresser, trembling slightly with each blast.

She wore three sable ribbons on her sleeve. The Fatherland provided them for free. At night, she lay awake, trapped in a nightmare of her own. No words could touch her pain. Her bed shook with her grief.

The girls could hear her through the walls. Sometimes the girls crept out of their warm bed and sat with Heidi, a silent shadow shedding tears. You didn't see the tears. You knew.

Now she was knitting socks for someone else's son, who would as well, if need be and the Führer asked, fling his young life, with gallantry, into the grim equation.

The war had hardened people's faces and coarsened people's tongues, but around Heidi everyone was mannerly. For months on end, Lilo was on her best behavior.

She tiptoed around Heidi. She went in search of cigarette stubs—the best of currency!—and those she found, she traded up for food, which helped to stretch the vouchers.

"There is no nobler death," said Heidi at long last. "It's us against the Antichrist. Since there is justice in the universe, that kind of sacrifice can never be in vain."

The neighborhood agreed, their eyes on Heidi's stripes. The sock she was knitting grew longer and longer, and if she dropped a stitch, she barely noticed it. Her face was marked with pain, but her shoulders were straight; she didn't wear black except for three small sable ribbons. She looked at the girls, who still had a future and, for their sake and for their future's sake, put on a a polka-dot dress.

Her message was simplicity itself: the best was barely good enough when it came to her Fatherland and Führer. Tomorrow was a brand new day for you to prove yourself.

"Just do your best, no matter what," she said, her favorite litany, and Erika remembered Baba, since that was her refrain as

well.

She missed Natasha more than any member of her family. She missed her with an ache that never went away. But Heidi was a runner-up in meriting her love. In fact, she was almost as good.

Last night, for instance, Heidi said: "Maybe next week? There's always hope. There might have been a bottleneck somewhere."

She fully understood why hope now counted more than certainty. And Lilo seconded her words; she was her mother's child: "I'm almost sure. They might come any day."

You clung to that. Day-in, day-out, you clung to hope, for there was little else. You could depend on Heidi. You could heal in the rays of her goodness of nature. You could bask in the warmth of her spirit.

It had been hard to fall asleep; Erika was sure her appendix was just about to burst; but Heidi knew a remedy—a hot brick, wrapped in a flannel shirt, to lessen the fullness and cramping, an unexpected malady. Heidi had warmed that brick for hours in the oven, to soak up every shred of heat, left over still from supper.

"This ought to help," she said to Erika and put it gently on her tummy where it still rested, warm.

Still deep within a sleepy haze, now Erika was wondering just what her family might say the moment they arrived. She was no longer bony as she had been when she left Apanlee. Her legs were putting on some muscle, thanks to her sprinting class. Her back was straight; her chest was filling out, and other things were happening as well.

There was a woozy feeling in her veins she had not felt before. "The ritual of meeting the trains," she told herself, still deep within her feather quilts, lost in another reverie, "is verily the highlight of my day. Today might be the day."

Each day she told herself: today might be the day.

It was the end of January, nearly—with only six weeks left till it was spring again.

Chapter 119

Four weeks after Christmas, the most violent snowstorm of that bitter winter roared in.

All afternoon, it snowed. Thick virgin snowflakes started floating from a mass of clouds that turned first gray, then black. The winds kept rolling snow dunes. The winds changed everything.

They brought a blizzard from the reaches of the Arctic—soft flakes at first, deceiving. But, then, the drifts turned into piles too high for plowing through—yet still a few pushed on. The killer winds came from Siberia and lifted leaves and leaflets and swept them into trenches left over from the First World War. Storms froze the northern coast. Snow fell and stuck to everything.

Wagon wheels broke off. Horses stumbled, fell—the snowfall blinded them.

The trekkers fell in droves.

Gray, haggard soldiers packed the streets, dispatched to kill or die. The cold took the guns from their fingers. Assault columns stalled in the feathery drifts. Gray heaps lay piled in the

ditches, soon covered with granular snow.

The roaring blizzards of that year would turn the tables on the Wehrmacht. Oil froze in the trucks. Weapons wouldn't fire. The thermometer dropped. The ice crept over everything as if it were alive.

Natasha watched it grow. It crackled as it grew.

It crept up on the blankets beneath which lay the child—alive, but only barely. It wrapped itself around the infant's neck and started strangling it. The baby froze into its diapers.

Natasha blew her breath against it. The snow flakes melted briefly from her love, then reappeared again.

"Little birdling," she kept muttering, while watching how before her eyes the landscape itself draped in white. The earth froze with such sudden speed it started cracking. Breaking.

"Chickabiddy. Honeybun. The rest of my life for an armful of blankets."

The flakes kept on whirling. The front was collapsing, the casualties fearsome. The Fatherland was hanging by its fingernails. The dead lay where they fell. Hand-hewn crosses dotted the roadsides.

The war went on, its bitterness increasing. The borders blazed in violence. Fat snowflakes danced and whirled. The Wehrmacht fought and bled.

The roads were clogged with refugees still pouring in from pockets of Silesia. And still a few walked on, though winter had arrived to stay, now forming ice around the horses' nostrils and powdering the baby's lashes with fine snow.

Marleen lay flat amid the frozen bedding, barely moving. Her throat was raw, her breathing labored, yet she was praying fervently. Since there was nothing else to do, she helped Natasha pray. Both women kept assailing heaven; they had their Faith and nothing else; their Faith glowed as a tiny flame within; not even winter could take it from them.

The sky bore down with icy pincers. The wind struck with

force, never letting up. Natasha wrapped every rag she could find around the child.

"—here's what I promise you. So help me God! So help me God! When this war is over, I'll get you your own puppy—"

This is forgotten now: raw murder drove Natasha.

Marleen refused to walk. She coughed and wheezed and spit. Her prayers were as bitter as gray salt. She spit blood after violent spasms. The Wehrmacht had achieved another victory, the bulletins proclaimed. The Führer formed new armies with enormous energy and will. There were more superweapons ready. The tide of war would turn. The remnants of the trek crawled into yet another town.

The road was ice; all strength was sapped; the horses kept on slipping. Their hooves left bloody prints.

The Arctic winds did not diminish. They drove the trek as though the wagons were but chaff. The wagons, carts and bicycles kept rolling on, toward the west, where life was warm and good.

And all the while: the Antichrist was closing in.

There was no doubt by then: the Red Army was driving the Wehrmacht before it.

Huge trees swayed at the force of icy gusts. Wheels were thick with snow. Barrels and burlap, barb wire, canisters, ramshackle prams lay strewn along the road. The air currents bore acrid clouds of cordite.

The wind lashed at Natasha's face; her cheeks flamed like October apples. Her ankles gangrened, she pushed on. She wore a fallen soldier's boots, stuffed thick with newspapers, and that's why she still walked. A sole was loose; a heel had fallen off; she had huge blisters on both feet, but she still walked. She walked.

Another morning came. The trek began to stir.

The refugees roped up their bedrolls and listened to the broadcast, yearning for the impossible. The water in the pails was frozen. The war did not let up. The grease froze in the *Landsers'*

guns so that they couldn't fire. Bomb craters held horses and women and children, all dead, all frozen stiff. The dead were littering the road; the living kept on, plodding west, not having any other choice, against all odds, their heads held low, bent over with their struggle, their jaws locked into place, and never mind that walls of snow were forming on both sides.

Natasha heard a shrill giggle and knew it had jumped from her lips. She giggled at her foolishness.

She muttered, for habit was habit: "My little calf. Who sucks the cold out of your spindly fingers?"

Icicles glittered everywhere. She kept herself within the shelter of the blanket that she had tied across her wagon, and that's why she still walked. There was no longer hope, there was no longer thought, there was no longer fear or fury or resentment. For old Natasha, this was left: a dull, relentless walking through the snow.

"My life for a cupful of milk for the baby. . . " she offered, frostbite on both her feet and on the infant's nose. She beseeched every saint she remembered for miracles, by then long overdue. "—but fresh from the udder and steaming—"

"—and if not milk," Marleen, delirious herself, diminished Baba's gluttony, "—at least a herring head!"

Marleen kept whimpering, inside a heap of burlap sacks, atop her swaying wagon. Low moans came out of her in answer to the jolting of the road. Faint, bloody foam was forming on her lips.

The baby was still stirring.

There was ice on its forehead, ice in its hair, ice between its meager fingers. Natasha pulled her collar up and pushed against the storm, still holding the horses in leash. All she could do was to follow the path that others had trampled already—follow the desperate scramble and hope she could outrun the snow.

Natasha was still carrying her axe.

Behind her, Soviet Army soldiers climbed from frozen cracks.

A new day came; the wind did not diminish. The blizzard

whipped on horizontal strips of snow. The sky kept glistening.

By noon already, daylight faded. With gritted teeth, her jaws on fire, Natasha pushed past forest after forest, all bent beneath the weight of snow, tears hardening in seconds on her lashes.

Gray bodies drowned before her eyes within the snowy dunes. Sleighs piled with corpses passed her by—the Führer's broken armies. It was so cold that the horizon trembled.

That winter was the coldest in a century, and in the end, it silenced all.

It paralyzed the rivers. It clogged the Führer's autobahns. The strongest horses were collapsing in the drifts. The *Landsers* started tossing down their weapons. To their armpits, they sank in the snow.

That's when they came! Mongolian faces materialized like apparitions from the snow.

A few *Landsers* tried gunning the demons.

But the Wehrmacht was vastly outnumbered, though the Reich spent its last drop of blood. Across the frozen earth rolled German tanks and yet more tanks, now manned by grizzled men or teenagers.

All that, for nothing. All in vain.

For the Antichrist's army grew out of the earth. It fell from the trees. It grew from the cracks in the ice. It started overrunning the crumbling front, spreading out like a gigantic fan. It crossed over the paralyzed rivers, streaming like slithering rats.

It poured into the heart of Germany in furry caps, felt boots, and padded snow coats, colorless, impossible to see against the snow-white dunes—and in its glance was stoic cruelty enough to freeze the marrow. It wore American-made hand grenades fastened securely to thick leather belts—the Army of the Antichrist: as numerous as ants! As eons shrank to seconds, it moved as glaciers moved, a force of nature, massive, inexorable, crushing everything in its way to rubble, hair and flesh. The eastern snow turned crimson with the blood of Germany.

Before this wave of well-equipped abomination now strug-

gled the defeated armies of the Führer—wounded, battered, mutilated, leaving weapons, tanks, canteens, pieces of furniture, barrels, burlap bags small cards, large maps, sleds, overturned chairs, bicycles, wheelbarrows, ration tins and first aid kits.

And overhead, wing-tip to wing-tip, America!

Survivors of the Trek of 1944 are few and scattered now across the earth. They are loathe to re-live what they lived, still racked with the memories of their scrupulous war.

That it was just and scrupulous is yet their firm belief. Not one of them will have it otherwise. They'll tell you, now and then, in ancient, trembling voices, but only if the night is still and soft, and gentle flames light up a fireplace and warm a living room. They speak of it if there is food and drink and safety and old friends whom they can trust not to defame what was reality for them and will be to their dying days. They'll tell you. Listen. Listen hard.

They'll say: "You have that war all wrong."

In their old voices, halting, in trembling words, they'll ask: "Who was at fault? At fault was the Eternal Jew. Say what you will. It's true."

"And take your Holocaust out of my face," they'll say, warm blankets on their knees and perhaps Rhine wine sparkling in their glasses to ease the weight of memory.

They ask with ancient voices:

"What do you know, you fools, snug in your plastic world? First-hand, we saw the Antichrist. Head-on, the Wehrmacht met the Antichrist. It cracked my mother's bones. It froze my father's blood. It laid our hearts to ashes. It killed our finest dreams."

"We heard its howl," they claim. "The blizzards carried it."

They'll tell you in their trembling voices: "That's history, not taught in any school. It's history it was a Jew who lashed his vicious words across the wind-whipped steppe to drive the Reds, clad in the Devil's uniform, with weapons from the West, into a killer army frenzy."

They say: "You want a name? We have a name. His name

was Ilya Ehrenburg—a Soviet propagandist, a Jew, paid by the New York caftans and yarmulkes."

And here is what he howled, three times a day, across the trembling wires from which the sparrows fell: "Kill. Kill. And kill. No one is innocent. Nobody. Nobody. Neither the living, nor the yet unborn."

And kill the Soviets did, when finally they came. The Soviets killed most anything in eastern Germany the winter left behind.

When their last horse fell to its knees for good, stuck in a snowdrift higher than a man, Natasha tried to dig Marleen out of the pile of frozen blankets.

She pulled and pushed and marshaled every curse she knew, but Marleen was as heavy as lead. Around her roared another furious snowstorm, cutting visibility to just a few yards. Fine crystal needles whipped down from the sky. Natasha scooped up snow and tried to rub Marleen's drawn face; but soon she realized: the snow no longer melted. Drifts piled up in minutes around Marleen's still slightly steaming body.

She had been first in life. Now she was first in death. She died in Hein's old boots. No point in leaving those.

Natasha pulled them off Marleen. She tried to force her swollen feet into the boots that now belonged to her. Her hands were numb. Her heart was numb. Her feet were numb and fat. The universe was numb. The infant in Hein's sheepskin was still stirring.

She forced one leg into the stiffened leather, but could not force the other. Her ankles were too thick. Her toes were black and swollen.

She had an axe. It glistened briefly, then it fell. She left her toes behind but not her baby. Not her baby. Not her last honey child belonging to the clan.

"Thus disappeared Natasha," say the survivors now. "She was a Russian, kind and good, devoted to our cause. She sacrificed as well. She might have made it to the west, had not the

Antichrist requested the Americans to stop. Where is her monument?"

That's what they want to know. That, too, is history. How every shred of warmth she had, she gave away—for naught. Her blood was shed as well—and not by Germany. She chose to have it seep into Hein's boots which, once upon a glorious time, had walked contently over land that grew the golden kernels with strength and color and vitality—all that, and more, all borrowed confidently from the sun.

The night has swallowed Baba. No one remembers her.

There is no monument to her in Washington, D.C. to let the future know how old Natasha tried so hard, and yet in vain, to rescue the last morsel left of the glorious creed that came from Apanlee.

Chapter 120

Erika's mind was still drifting in circles when the alarm clock on the night stand started dancing gently.

"Just three more minutes, that is all," she thought, too sleepy to feel guilty, while hoping that the coming day, filled to the brim with social usefulness, would somehow go away.

She was still small. She'd just as soon sleep in.

To sleep in with permission was just as rare as having measles twice, but Heidi didn't hoard her wisdom. She knew things ordinary human beings only sensed, and made allowances for Erika. She knew that, under special stress, as yesterday, when shame collected even in one's toes, it was important to relax discipline for changes and exceptions.

She tried to put it from her mind—the thing that happened yesterday. Not yet! She could not face that yet! She squinted with one eye. The floor lay flecked with sunshine. The mutt lay in the corner, fast asleep.

School! The first three periods did not worry her. First period was taken up with essays—that's where she really shone. Already one was hatching in her mind—the kind that put lumps

in your throat. Each morning, before she was fully awake, she nestled a few of her favorite phrases. When it came to her essays, no one could outdo Erika.

To be the best at writing essays, she had worked out a ritual.

When she awoke each morning, for instance with a sinking heart, she noticed that her mind was empty, but not for long—into the vacuum rushed new words. If she found words, then fortitude, persistence and endurance came floating in as well. The end result was yet another gem, still better than the last. Once she had reached that level of accord, the rest slid into place.

The teacher always spoke with great solemnity when praising her wordsmithing skill. You could never exhaust the meaning of life—or the meaning of death, for that matter— with a new combination of words.

New words were like diamonds resting on velvet.

When she had brand new words with which to play, the worries of the coming day grew still. Words were like mint. They helped her breathe. They started raw. She polished them. Words could be virgin. Novel. Marvelous. They took all fear away.

Last night, while putting final touches to a sentence that shone with the fire of worship—the need for sacrifice, the need to die a noble death so someone else might live—the draft from a bomb blast had blown out the candle. She had not finished what she meant to say, but now she finished it:

"You can burn down a house. You cannot burn the wind. You cannot burn an ocean. You cannot burn a cloud. You can burn down a building, but nature can't be burned. It's spring. The trees are emerald with spring. A frontline soldier lives and dies—the Fatherland lives on."

This essay now churned in her head. It needed a finale. She tried to rein it in. She felt happy in spite of herself; she had a fine beginning. When it came to her essays, she, Erika, held nothing back. All of her senses rallied.

So now. Her eyes would wake up first, and then her nose, and finally her ears. She needed them; she cocked her ears for

rhythm. Her essays were the ones the teacher always chose because they spoke of suffering and anguish, necessary in the service of ideals. All of her essays praised the Führer. The Führer was a sorcerer; nobody doubted that. But when you added poetry to prose, the outcome was a piece of art that made the class grow still. She had a sharp, unerring sense for clarity of words. That's where she really lived.

She fumbled for them now, still in her head, not yet on paper—another tribute to another hero who had laid down his life so that the Russian monster would be slain and the people could prosper and grow.

It must be true what Lilo said of Erika: She was the teacher's pet. She was the smallest one in class, but smart. Her name was on the honor roll repeatedly. Scholastically, there was no doubt she had an edge on Lilo—but Lilo had the necessary energy for pennants and awards in hiking, track and swimming, which counted more than fives.

Still, all in all. When it came to her essays, Erika's feelings were going full blast. She outstripped every classmate in math as well, rarely confusing her percentages with decimals—and she was making perfect grades in racial science also.

For that betokened Apanlee. The moment she thought "Apanlee," the words flowed from her pen, with poetry the consequence.

Ah, Apanlee!

The blessed peace when Apanlee woke up to yet another holy Sunday—and everybody on their knees for morning prayers, wall to wall, to make the future grow! The oval portraits of her Aryan ancestors who for at least four centuries kept pure their Aryan blood!

The details were as sharp as ever. With sentence after sentence, she surrounded herself with her past. When she pulled out all stops, describing the magnificence that racial pride had built, she earned the grades that made the Führer proud.

She clutched her crumpled pillow. Apanlee was where her center was. She was like her Apanlee kin. They were her blood;

she was bone of their bone, will of their will. Before the Beast arrived, in its claws the hammer and sickle, they ruled life on a spectacular scale. She had a history that went back long before Peet Neufeld's wheat became the wonder of the steppe, and centuries before the *Landsers* came and drove the Antichrist back over the horizon.

"The *Landsers* came and stopped at Apanlee, glad for a chance to launder shirts and socks," she wrote on mental slates. "We welcomed them. They honored us. Before they came, my people lived in torment, but when the *Landsers* came, just in the nick of time, the Antichrist was gone. Our life grew calm and orderly."

She paused and savored that. It seemed as if it happened yesterday; it was that vivid. Real.

Before the *Landsers* came to Apanlee, in helmets and high boots, all her memories were vague, but from that day they came into sharp focus, much like the click of heel on heel. She still recalled quite vividly how Jonathan arrived. She still remembered that. She was still small—so small she barely reached his belt, and there were gaps in her front teeth, but overnight she grew a second set, and shortly afterwards, the sunshine was swelling the kernels.

She took a careful gulp of morning air.

No gold could match that splendor. No words touch such a sheen.

"The nights were filled with shooting stars," she wrote, embellishing her fancies. "The days were song and hay. And by the waterhole grew buttercups and daisies. No worms destroyed the harvests—"

Her eyes, still closed, turned liquid at the memory. The waterhole where she could feed the ducks. The summer grain. The scented steppe wind that slammed the door shut on the summer kitchen where Marleen reigned—strong, silent, self-possessed, because there now was order in the universe. And peace. And calm. And sanity. Because all prayers were on schedule.

The baby. Wrinkling when it sneezed. A volley of small

sneezes.

Mimi. A slim young woman in a summer dress, behind each ear a dandelion, with shoes that didn't match. This utter stranger, Mimi, who had felt dead, by her own word, until her gaze fell on her *Landser*, which could mean anything—who did not know just what to do with motherhood and looked at Erika as though she had forgotten having her. That hurt a bit. Not much. She still remembered that—how she had courted Mimi's smile; how she held up her first attempt at knitting to treasure and admire, and Mimi said with a bright smile: "Why, child, that's nice. That's beautiful. Now run along—" and smelled of Sunday afternoon and hay.

Natasha. The busy whoosh of Baba's skirt as she walked her old buckets to the well. Still loyal. Still dependable. Despite arthritic feet.

She missed them all, but how she ached for Baba, replete with a network of wrinkles, dispensing little love pats! She tried to take two deep, full nostrils of the scent that was Natasha at her best and crawled as deeply as she could into her peasant arms that were like hammer locks!—but all she smelled was ashes.

She winced as reality struck.

Berlin was gray with ashes. Berlin lay gutted. Blackened. Crushed. Spring had come at last and everywhere the spaded earth was steaming, which made the ashes worse.

The Führer was right; her dreams were the bane of her life. The radio said as much.

Here's what the broadcast said: "—America has now been carefully maneuvered into a diplomatic corner. The Führer will unleash his generals and strike a secret bargain. As soon as our Führer finds men in bargaining position to see the truth at last—"

She dug herself a little deeper into her feather quilt and, counteracting fear, she dreamed a few more snatches. Cocooning herself, she listened to the voice that kept on pouring from the radio.

"—we don't fear death. We fear life drowned in mediocrity.

The war will end. Our turn will come—" The radio voice was breezy. Out on the roof across the street, a kitten was practicing curling its tail. A sparrow was chasing another. "—the only thing still needing to be done is to convince Americans that they are backing the wrong cause. Though they are sluggish with democracy, unable to absorb the sharpness of the Führer's vision, that will transform the world, there is still hope—"

The secret bargain everybody talked about was the pivotal point. The Führer merely needed to checkmate the shadow government and find himself some honest men who understood that there was nothing to be feared from Germany. And everything from Russia. "—and meanwhile, we are beating off the enemy while taking negligible losses—"

She put both fists against her ears and tried to drift away, but duty was duty, and Wednesday was Wednesday. On Wednesday, she had to line up for the parallel bars. At ten-to-ten, there was a final test in muscle strength, willpower and endurance, and if she missed that test because she dreamed yet one more snatch about the warmth and glory that was Apanlee, the fat was in the fire.

With a small jolt she came alive. She hated the parallel bars. The parallel bars were the worst. Above the door that led into the gym, miraculously saved from bombing damage, the Führer's eagle sat astride his swastika and scowled. She always ducked a bit when she passed underneath.

No way around it, though.

She squinted with one eye; the other had a sty. Gingerly, she put both palms flat on her tender tummy. The strange, sensuous ache of last night was still there.

"It's time. Wake up," called Heidi from the kitchen.

"I will. In just a minute—"

She clutched the brick that Heidi always warmed against malaises of all sorts a little closer to herself and pondered her next move. Self-discipline was all, and that included icy showers in the morning; the *Landsers* were dying on her behalf; it was incumbent upon her to grit her teeth and marshal fortitude,

but temptation was simply too much: compare the world outside scents and sounds of Apanlee when spring began to dress the earth, and her dreams started swarming like bees.

Five minutes left.

Again she was adrift, and all was wondrous beyond words. Ah! Luxury and opulence! She buried her face in the pillow and slid back into a comforting haze. You could no more keep Erika from dreams than you could keep a cloud from raining when she lay snug like that. Outside, the ominous rumbling increased while she lay, still afloat on dreams, much like a butterfly afloat on sunny breezes. Honor, duty and self-sacrifice could wait.

The sun made patterns on the ceiling, throwing sparks that cut small paths of light. For it was spring now, finally, and Easter coming up. The farmers in the suburbs were already piling barrows with manure to help new growth along.

"Maybe my people will arrive today—?" she thought, and added, reaching for a metaphor: "—and if they do, I'll be a merry swallow."

Each day would start like that—with memories that brushed her mind like tiny, gentle feathers. To be a trooper for the Reich was all, and though you tried with all your might, moral toughness was not easy.

"That's what we hope for, don't we, love?" said Heidi only yesterday, while playing diplomat. And Lilo, bringing up the rear, had added loyally: "Stop twitching like a flea. They might be coming. Soon. Could be. In fact, I'm almost sure."

Outside, the war made sounds much like the gurgling of the sea. She pressed her fists to both her eyes and tried distracting herself with additional educational thoughts as the ominous rolling increased.

Three minutes to eight. Three minutes left, deep in the feather quilt, before the morning raids.

She savored every second. She carefully uncurled her toes while bridling that wave of unbearable longing still hanging at the edges of her consciousness. She was a child of war; as such

she had her duties. She did them neatly, without demurring, but in her heart she kept a small blue flame alive: Today might be the day!

For hope was hers. That flame was hers. No one could destroy it.

Here came another day that smelled of fire and burnt flesh, but the swallows were back from the south and the brooms were out in force. The broom maker lady was doing brisk business. The ledgers of this war demanded that you did what others did with fortitude—braving frost, ignoring hunger, ducking enemy fire, standing in the cold and snow for half a pound of herring, flattening yourself against the wall when the worrisome strafing planes came. In a world that bristled with arms, self-discipline was all, and if you didn't come by it naturally, it was incumbent on you to cultivate it diligently. But between wakefulness and sleep, as now, she could indulge a bit; she wanted to be pampered; more so today, in fact, than yesterday.

It would be a magnificent day. The sun warmed the earth. The shrubs in the rubble were in bloom. Despite the bombings and the fires, the tulips burst their buds; romance was in the air; youth was still youth and love was love; that's what the neighbors said.

She listened shakily.

The bombers came and bombed. The anti-aircraft bellowed. The dust flew, and the rubble grew. There was no end to it.

Death came by the clock; in fact, by the minute hand. Death came and left again. And afterwards, somebody you had known and maybe even loved lay at your doorsteps in his blood. You tiptoed gingerly.

A fist clutched at her heart. She tried to breathe against it—breathe hard against the fear. She knew the bombers came at eight and pounded hard to smash the heart of Hitler's Reich, but once they left, at ten to nine, the sky would still be there; the sun would still be laughing; the sparrows once more bathing themselves in the gutters, and Heidi would be tending to her future

garden greens in silent concentration, letting nothing stop her.

That was one of her many traits, worthy of emulation. A neighbor plowed the patch for her, and Heidi started spading. Now the fresh carrots were forming in the soil, and salad leaves were sprouting nicely in three rows.

"Get up now, sleepyhead," called Heidi from the kitchen, a fine impatience in her voice. "It's time. I have a surprise waiting."

That's how she was. From the scent that came wafting your way, you knew that Heidi was at work, a sorceress dispensing comfort, solace and support.

As though this were a day like any other day.

Which it was not.

Awareness started fingering her brain. What was it now? What happened yesterday?

She could hear Heidi in her kitchen, padding about in stockinged feet, cooking sizzling pancakes from potato peelings. Heidi thought of others before she took time for herself.

"If you don't get up now, I'll feed your pancakes to the cats. Come, honey. Just put something decent in your stomach. You'll feel better after breakfast."

Erika sat up in bed, drew the warm blanket up to her chin, and listened, feeling queasy. Something had happened yesterday. Something too huge and horrible for words.

She forced it back. It rose again. No way around the fact—the war was still on at full throttle. The fighting continued; no one knew why. Tomorrow if not earlier, the enemy would throw his arms forever in the nearest ditch, but in the meantime?

Bombs.

For instance, take last night. By the hundreds, American airplanes roared over and emptied their bellies of death. The raid had been so bad, lasting from midnight till four in the morning, that even Lilo started getting ready for the bunkers, something Lilo didn't lightly do in the middle of the night. The night outside throbbed. The search lights fingered the sky in frantic bursts of light. It was pitch-black, just yellow flashes here and there—

but your imagination lent you eyes, you clearly saw the bombs—bomb, bombs and yet more bombs—all falling from the clouds. Two windows in the hall blew in. An extra-sharp explosion blew Winston Churchill right out of Lilo's arms and threw him clear across the kitchen. Outside, the night was lit. Out on the sidewalks, people yelled and ran and fell and died as Allied planes whipped over them and kept on spewing death. You bore down. Hard. You practically bit off your tongue.

"Pretend it's just a thunderstorm," said Heidi tonelessly. "It comes, and it will go away."

Which was impossible! If you pretended that a bombing raid was just a thunderstorm—and not the drone of death sent from the land the Jews controlled while dripping with their diamonds!—sooner or later, you rescued your bearings. She always had before!

Not so last night. Alas. It should have been a raid like any other raid. It wasn't—it was horrid. Awful.

The night was all aflame; the chimney belching like a train; and something spinning in the street much like a worm that had been stepped upon—and when she saw it was the psychic, that's when it happened. Finally. That's when she lost control. Death sent the psychic flying.

And she? She wet herself! Right on the leather couch!

Heidi quickly sat down on the puddle so Lilo wouldn't see; but Lilo saw, her eyes grew wide and she backed off, and Heidi said: "Just never mind. Just never mind. On the brink of eternity, many things are permitted to a mortal—" and helped her strip her skirt.

It happened fast; it took place in a flash; she barely knew how!

A hot tongue of fire unfurled, deep down, inside her belly, and for a whirring moment she thought in utter panic: "That's me! That's it! I have been hit!"

With a small gasp, instinctively, her hands reached for that hidden spot that no one ever saw, and saw that her fingers were red. And that's when Lilo spotted it as well—the bloody panty

stain. Next to the eyelet trim.

"It isn't deadly. Trust me!" said Lilo with a shaky laugh, while Heidi pulled her close and kept on cradling her. She cradled her and cradled her, still as a mouse, eyes closed.

Chapter 121

That was last night. This was now. Outside, the clouds were growling faintly; the radio was crackling; a street car rattled around corners; the daffodils in Heidi's earthen pots were dancing to the words:

"—the Wehrmacht moves toward a final blow to make this world a better world, a safer world, transformed according to design. We make allowances for temporary losses—"

She slid one last time back into her pillows, pulling the blanket over her ears. The sounds of war were coming closer; she could have prayed; it might have helped; God had a giant ear; it would not hurt to try. Of late she had neglected prayers. It was not easy to resume the habit she left behind at Apanlee, where prayers were the norm.

While she still contemplated prayer—or else a certain nonchalance, perhaps, to beat fate to the punch—a blast nearby shook everything, and one of Heidi's flower pots sailed through the air and landed on the sidewalk with a thud.

That one was close! *Ach Gott!*

A new and strange sensation came slowly into focus. She

was too young to stop the tremble of her chin but much too old to whimper. Lilo had told her with a wink: in good and bad weather, it happened. The bombs had brought it on! Her fear had triggered it!

She pushed away that thought: she was still small and thin.

Not yet! She could not face that yet! She would, in just another minute!

Fear sprang at her and started throttling her. The enemy meant business. She was already feeling smaller than a gnat.

She tried to pull the quilt over her ears, while her heart began thumping in terror. From outside came a roar, next followed by a rumbling sound that made her think a train was rolling by, horizon to horizon. Something had started oozing, like toothpaste squeezed out of a tube. She crossed her legs. It didn't help; it oozed.

She saw that she was lying smack in Heidi's bed. Alone. What was she doing here? Why had she slept in Heidi's bed? Had Lilo left for class?

It was like a nest, Heidi's bed. Heidi was known for her nests; she made nests for young chicks to keep warm through the night; she made nests for the cat to have kittens. Now Erika remembered, quaking inside as a dim but painful memory came slowly into focus: last night, Heidi quietly made a nest for her as well so she could lick her wounds in privacy for having done the monumental worst—when that big bomb came sailing down, she had disgraced herself by peeing in her bloomers.

She held her breath until the rolling stopped. She pressed both fists against her ears and tried to muffle it.

She counted. One. Two. Three.

Ah! Not this time. Not she. Next door the psychic, yesterday. Not she.

While the rumbling turned into concussions, she raised herself on her left elbow and peered through a slit in the door, but Lilo was up and was gone. The thunder increased and the rumble grew worse. It came from the clouds; it bounced off the face of the clear morning sun that kept laughing at her through the

window. Above it all, Heidi's calm voice floated in the air in small, caressing waves.

"Come, honey. Hurry up. Don't worry about being late. I've already written an excuse. Lilo will give it to the teacher."

The floor began to throb, then hammer in familiar rhythm. Something nearby came crashing down. There was a roar and then a rumble. Then plaster dust. The smell of ashes. Chalk. And yet, today as any other day: against the malice of the universe, Heidi was steaming up the kitchen.

With care, she poked one toe from beneath her quilt and pondered her next step. She might as well clench jaw on jaw and take that icy shower that Lilo always praised to heaven for its enormous benefits to health, willpower, and longevity, and hope it would wash away shame.

There had been three alerts last night; no one had bothered to undress—and here they were again! Another blast!

The sirens gave warnings; the populace ran. A streetcar came careening by, its running boards seeded with terrified people, while in a thick and bulging cloud, smoke rolled around the corner.

Three long wails: death was coming closer.

Repeated hysterical shrieks: the bombs were just about here.

The bed frame started shaking as though a giant rattled it. There was no end to it. The air was howling like a witches' Sabbath. "No, honey! No!" shushed Heidi.

The portraits of her martyred sons, clad splendidly in uniform, fell from their nails and shattered on the floor, in front of Heidi's feet, and Heidi flinched as though she had been struck but merely closed her eyes. The house began to sway, and lumps of plaster started falling from the ceiling. The shrieking lasted on and on; next came the heavy stuff for Erika, the retching and the throwing up, but Heidi had a towel ready, and Heidi held her head.

But then a gust of wind blew in fresh air, and Heidi gave her a small pat, returning to her stove, while Erika fished for her slippers underneath her bed and started looking for the cats the

grocer left behind.

She gingerly stepped over Winston Churchill who lay, his tail flush with the floor, stretched out like a nonchalant Indian, now that the raid was over, and went into the kitchen. There, Heidi fussed with the potato batter and would not turn around. She merely asked with gentle gravity as Erika sat down: "How are you feeling, darling?"

"I'm better."

"Good. That's good."

"I overslept."

"That's quite all right."

"I'm sorry, Heidi. Truly."

"I said it's quite all right."

"Has Lilo left?"

"Yes. She's gone."

Pure Heidi, all of it. Not one small word about the accident last night! The kitchen smelled like Saturday. Now was the time to gather up your courage to ask a few more questions to clear up the remaining mystery if only you knew how.

"Today," said Heidi, her face averted still, her voice so low and level that it was barely audible, "it doesn't matter if you're late. We have to talk. Just you and I."

Erika felt her face grow pink. She kept on glancing sideways.

"Let's take our time. Let's you and I discuss it—"

"All right, " said Erika. To say that she felt awkward was putting it politely. She watched as Heidi finished cooking breakfast between far, faint explosions, determined and composed, wearing her checkered apron that smelled of her hot iron. Her hair was braided evenly; her eyes were warm and patient.

"See, darling, when I was your age—" said Heidi bravely, and then stared straight ahead. Deep lines now marked her face, so dear, devoid of any doubt. This would be difficult, but Heidi, being Heidi, would finish what she meant to say. And so she said in one brave rush:

"Today is special, darling. As sacred as a songfest. What happened isn't harmful to your health."

"I know."

"It's the heartbeat of nature," said Heidi. "Will you be so kind as to hand me the salt?"

"I know most everything there is to know," said Erika with clumsy bravado and started pulling at her sweater, frayed at the cuff and tight around her ribcage.

"Here, honey. Blow your nose. Come, sit here next to me. Now is as good a time as any. Let's now discuss this fully. If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't mind. Lilo told me—" She swallowed and turned crimson. "I'm sorry. I just couldn't—" She struggled down the knot of shame, confusion and distress that rose within her throat, sad that the small reprieve was gone. "I stayed up way too long. Way past the time the broadcaster —" If anybody understood, then Heidi understood. She, too, kept looking for small loopholes and excuses.

"A holiday is coming up," said Heidi with a sigh. "You'll catch up then. I know you will. You're quick. A holiday can always—" She stopped short there, and Erika felt that hard knot deep in her own throat swell with the inner pain she sensed in Heidi now and took on as her own.

For Heidi did not say: "The Führer's birthday." She just stared straight ahead.

The words hung in the air. Last year, she would have said that.

She would have pointed out this was a war of pride and spirit. She would have added briskly that the marches, hikes, parades and military drills, planned to celebrate the Führer's special day, gave extra luster to the cause that would be won, no matter what. No matter what the price. No matter what the sacrifice. But those three satin stripes on Heidi's sleeve changed everything.

"Let's have that talk," said Heidi now. "Just you and I. Nobody else will know. Here's what I think. What do you think? Maybe we should start thinking of a bra?"

Her words were rich and warm, like lentil soup on a grim day, and Erika relaxed a bit and started feeling better.

"Here's what I meant to tell you," elaborated Heidi, nudging herself ahead. "I need to tell you now because I have a feeling—" Her eyes were blind. They stared into a distance. She gave herself a small, decisive jolt. "You're growing up. You'll fall in love. You'll be affecting future generations. Their happiness will be diminished if you are careless with your gifts. Now let's get down to common sense. Your body is your temple. The first rule is to keep it pure and clean. Somewhere I read: 'Man is a bridge, and not a goal.' I think that's beautiful. Don't you?"

"I guess."

"Right now, you are too young to be in love, but one day you will know. Here's what I'm telling you: You have been given countless tools to make the best out of your opportunities. Love is just one of them. Don't count on love alone. It can be treacherous. Count on your mind as well. The day you find a man to love—be careful, darling. Careful. Love's just a stepping stone that nature handed you. It can be slippery. Be sure that it is firm. You have a creed. You have a clan. You are an Aryan."

"I know. I learned all that."

"What counts is what comes after you. The generations that come after you. You think you're you? You aren't you. You're just a speck of duty attached to a great will. A cosmic will. You are the end result of countless generations who walked this earth before you did. They crafted you. You're in their debt—just as they owed the ones who lived and died before they did. We owe the ones before us."

"That's what the teacher said. In *Rassenkunde* class."

"He's right. He's absolutely right. Your thoughts, your wants, your dreams, your likes and your dislikes are all connected to your body. Let no one tell you differently. You have blue eyes. That is no accident. A farming dynasty gave them their hues—a color borrowed from the sky. You have fair skin, blond hair. It's beautiful."

Now Heidi took a strand of hair of Erika's and curled it gen-

tly in her fingers, while adding very softly: "It took millennia to make it shine like gold. You are so lucky, Erika. Your forebears were remarkable. Trailblazers. Movers. Doers. Settlers. Your folks were pioneers—"

At that, the youngster flushed with pleasure, for Heidi talked of Apanlee, and nothing could have suited better. She never tired hearing of it—the place that race had built.

"Your ancestry? The best. Achievement won them self-respect—not bargaining and bartering. You come from folks who had their values straight. They knew their worth. They didn't need a slew of shyster lawyers to sort out right from wrong. A handshake was enough. They sank their roots into the bedrock of their values; that's why you have that inborn strength of mind. It didn't come out of the air. The sparrows didn't carry it. It grew from discipline."

All that. She exhaled carefully. She knew all that—that's where her center was. That's where she lived, where she belonged, among the people whom she knew so well, all following the Gospel in silence to the letter, paying respect to old family values, binding the sheaves, living their work-callused lives as close to the earth as they could.

"Your people didn't wait for accidents. They sought a cleaner life. A richer earth. They passed their love for work on to their children. Commitment. Quality. Perfection. Your blood contains their history. Their world was rich and good until the Moloch came and tried to swallow it. Their life was seamless and well-ordered until—"

There was a pause. It stretched and stretched. It seemed as though Heidi had changed her mind and might not, after all, go on, but Heidi faced her fully.

"—until the howl arose: Equality! What mockery! What travesty! You're too young to understand this now, but one day you will know. Here's what I'm telling you, for nothing could be more important: those words are remote from the Aryan mind. As remote as the Kingdom of Judah."

Now Erika was really pricking up her ears, for Heidi hardly

ever spoke unkindly of either man or beast. She sought the best that human beings had to offer and lived accordingly—kind even to the weatherbeaten spinster whose head ached, day and night. But Heidi now was on a roll and would let nothing stop her.

"We must seek truth from facts. We can't depend on slogans. Some people claim this is about the click of heel on heel, but that's not it at all. It's not that we're the best. It's that we are the first to want to be the best, and that takes discipline. There is a price for what we want. That price is steep. Perfection can't be had for free. We are the first who said: 'We'll pay. No price is steep enough.'"

At that, she bent and picked the portraits of her fallen sons out of the shards of glass and said without a tremor:

"This isn't about superiority. It's about inequality. We won't stay down and shuffle. We will not genuflect. We choose to lift ourselves. We say 'No!' to a world that's as sick as a worm-eaten apple and as smelly as yesterday's socks. We dislike usury. We hate corruption. Waste. We want a healthy world. No rotten teeth, enormous warts. We don't want to spread disease the way mongrels pass on to each other their fleas. A life without hard rules is hardly any life worth living. That is my firm opinion. We want a healthy earth. We don't want cities black with soot. We don't want people mating motley-style until the world is gray on gray and all distinction gone. Nobody argues that an ass should be a horse. Nobody doubts there is a difference between a thoroughbred and a mule. If you ask me, there is a clear-cut difference between a sheep dog and a poodle. Let poodle mate with poodle."

While Erika sat, wide-eyed, slurping her ersatz coffee, Heidi continued firmly, facing her:

"I'll never understand why they should hate us so for our self-esteem. They say we are too proud—as though that were a stain. Why shouldn't we be proud, since it has cost us plenty? Of course we're proud. There is no limit to our pride. It's the prerequisite for getting anywhere."

"I bet they never thought it through—" Particularly, the

Americans.

"Of course they didn't. They were fools. And it will cost them plenty. They're perfectly willing to spend millions on improving the bloodlines of their horses—yet not one cent on their own young. That's their business, I suppose. But see? It isn't our business. Their bloodlines won't be clean. Ours will be clean, and getting cleaner. Why is that thought so threatening? Use your imagination. You know what Yahweh said—the God of Israel? 'Do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.' I've always asked: 'Why not?' What is it about evil that shuns examination? The blaze of sun may be too hot for maggots underneath a rock. It's nature for a flower."

The world no longer smelled of mildew, cigarette stubs, and kerosene. It smelled of spring, and Heidi filled her lungs:

"Here's what I'm telling you. It's up to you. Few will be left when this horrendous massacre is over. I have a feeling you'll be left. And I don't ever want you to forget: the sparkle of life comes only from bodies and minds that are clean. I know that I'm saying it badly, but what I'm telling you is this: you're moral if you obey nature. There is no other way. Nature has put its fingerprint on you—its racial fingerprint. And if you violate that fingerprint, if you blot out that fingerprint. then nature knows. And it will cost you plenty. You'll lose what's best in you. You lose what's clear and sharp in you. You'll give up your identity. You'll be like a plant without light. If you don't value what you are—precisely who you are, an Aryan!—you're stepping off the ladder that your forebears built for you. As you descend, illness rises. As smut grows, beauty wilts. There's no equality in nature. There's only love of order, symmetry and strength. Nature is truth, no matter what the slogans. Nature scorns everything alien. Equality is alien. If you decide to violate nature, the children you'll bear will be handed a bill for what you forsook. The world you forfeited. For slogans. Don't do it, Erika. Don't ever let self-serving people paw your soul by palming off their slogans. You have a mind. You've got a brain. At least write your own script. While there is time. While you still can. For it could

happen that—"

She stared into the distance with wide, unseeing eyes. But then she leaned forward into a small nod:

"One way or another, this war must end, but that's not the last word on the matter. The next war has already begun. The coming war will sap our blood for alien interests until we get things straight. We must start somewhere, darling. We must love health over sickness. Mind over money. Light over dark. Grace over smut. We must declare precisely what's grotesque, and what is beautiful. With all the strength at our command, we must hate everything that's hideous and love that which is lovely. A dauber should not have the right to call himself an artist. A flaccid mind can't shine a beam of thought. I know that there are people in this world attached to the opposite view. What of them? Ask yourself. These people are our enemies. They love their money more than self-respect. With us, it's the other way around. We're paying for our principles. We're paying with our children's blood. That will not be ignored."

The clouds were soft. The air was warm. And Heidi finished quietly:

"Why do they prattle on about free choice and not let us choose our way of life? Let them choose darkness over light. Lies over truth. Death over life. We choose the opposite, thanks to a man who believes in the light, and who trusts his fists—and just marvel at what he accomplished, in such a short time! For six short years, there was more sky in Germany than anywhere else in the world. And, briefly, our Fatherland lay in triumphant beauty. There walked among us one courageous man who said: 'There is the path. Light over darkness. Truth over lies. Life over death. Cleanliness rather than filth.' That's why they warred on us—"

Erika dared barely breathe as she watched Heidi finish. They shared each other's thoughts. They shared them with their eyes. Now Heidi's voice turned hard.

"We will not win this war. Nature will win this war. Nature will make short shrift. They hated us. They hate us still. And I don't mean our Aryan brothers. They're only tools. They're not

the source. The source has groundhog teeth. A hundred thousand teeth. If you permit it, Erika, they'll gnaw out every root. They'll strip you of your heritage. Why? Let me tell you why. That's where your strength is. In your past. In Aryan history. The source knows that. The source fears our sense of ancestry much as the devil fears the crucifix. You must add your small voice to the struggle. A bomb may flatten a roof, but it can't flatten the truth. It can't kill truth drawn from the heart of nature. Truth can't be burned. The Führer spoke. The word is out. It's traveling the universe."

Heidi fastened her gaze on the portraits, and her eyes were two puddles of blue. Her sons smiled back at her, and Heidi turned a little more transparent than she already was, but letting nothing stop her.

"The earth drank the blood of my sons. They fought like lions, but they fell, because the enemy succeeded in setting brother against brother. Only an Aryan nation such as America could have defeated them. My sons sank back into the earth that gave them life, but not before they gave their best. In legal tender. Honest coin. Their brief existence filled our Fatherland with pride. Their sacrifice will count."

It was a weighty speech. What Heidi said, people took willingly for gospel, and Erika did, too. She listened and took it all in.

"Some people may forget. The earth never forgets. No matter how our enemies distort what this was all about—my sons died honestly. They gave their life for freedom. Freedom from ugliness. Freedom from pain. From usury. From mind control that tells you straight is crooked. One day good people will start looking for the source of all of this because they'll grasp there is no other choice. One day the world will know. One day the world will understand why we were called to sacrifice. The Führer did. He understood. He took his dagger to the boil and tried to lance the abscess. And I will tell you this: Whatever its name, it exploits the goodwill of the people. It sinks its spurs in the flanks of the world while howling Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! What

bloodshed those three words unleashed! This war won't have a happy ending. And more is yet to come. What comes will be appalling. But let me tell you this, for I may never have another chance, what with—"

At that, Heidi looked as though she were ascending a scaffold, but Heidi was Heidi, and duty was duty, and finish she would, which she did.

She sat down on the edge of the chair. She told the blushing youngster startling things between deep sighs and many pauses. And here is how she finished:

"This isn't our war. It never was. This war became a fratricidal war because the enemy probed for our underbelly, and found our weakest spot. We can't relate to selfless violence, the mandate now before us. We don't think warlike thoughts. It isn't in our nature. We're plowers. Tinkerers. Inventors. We're artisans. We honor soil. We strive to reach the stars. We have this weakness, though: we buy into the slogans. Somebody else's slogans. I know this isn't our war. It is a war of beings. And it's cracking the skulls of small babies. America? Their bombs won't win this war. They'll win a battle, not a war. This war has already wounded their spirit, for melting down what nature handed them—their racial heritage—is not the way to go. Here's what I ask of you. I'm asking you to wait. I'm asking you to guard yourself so as to guard the future. Nature is working to build its best. Nature is busy perfecting itself. One day you will love deeply. And when you find a man you love, he'll ask for an unsullied bride. In fair exchange, he'll treat you with quiet courtesy. You'll be his source of joy. He'll be your source of safety. He'll cherish you and love you. Because you're valuable. One worthy man. One wedding ring. A life that's honest, simple, clean and smooth—that's happiness."

Ah, happiness. That's all she wanted. Happiness. Relief and gratefulness washed over Erika like a warm, cresting wave. She felt as though she had been knighted. That ache inside was a decided mystery, but this she took on Heidi's word: it was all natural.

"Just one last thought. If you are careful with the gifts your forebears gave to you, it means you're opting for a solid life. You'll have a life composed of dignity. You'll be rich beyond all words, because you do what's right. If you start sabotaging nature, you do so at your peril. When darkness overtakes the will, that's when the war is lost. If you are careless with your gifts, you only have yourself to blame. When you look in the mirror then, you'll stare at the face of a stranger. What will stare back at you out of your mirror, Erika, will be somebody you once knew. That will be a sad day."

Now Heidi dropped her voice a little more and spoke of this and that while Erika sat listening, still queasy with untried emotions. She had no counter-argument. She opened her heart wide and let the rules flow in. They fit what she had always known, but now they shone like gold.

The morning was young still, bluish with sunshine and wind; spring was already here, practically half-gone, summer just around the corner. A cat sat on the fence and curled its tail coquettishly.

"Here are two safety pins," said Heidi in the end. "And here is the key to your drawer. You are a woman now. You are entitled to your privacy. No one can take from you what generations handed you unless you put your reasoning on hold. Unless you throw away your instincts. Your body is your forebears' gift. Treat it with reverence. It has been dearly bought. It's beautiful. Exquisite. Unless you give consent, the enemy can't blur what nature made distinct. Not without penalty. You are an Aryan. You have great worth. You're not like anybody else. Not in my book you aren't. I will not hear a word of it. I am completely disgusted by those who say you are."

That's how that morning ended—with dappled sunshine on the floor, the bombers gone, the sparrows splashing in the puddles, the tulips fat with sap.

There was a future still. She now had Heidi's word: she would be safe and clean—as long as she refrained from doing the unspeakable.

And what that was, to be precise, she still had no idea.

Chapter 122

For weeks, there had not been one single normal day; the bombings never stopped; the horror didn't end—yet still some street cars ran, sporadically, and Erika hoped fervently she could catch one, to make up for lost time.

That morning, she had missed two tests already; if she didn't make it to the finals, scheduled before one o'clock, it might mean extra work—logging hours at the Winter Help, perhaps, sluggish now that a much-belated spring had finally arrived, or spending weekends helping register the refugees who kept on pouring in, a ghostly stream of human misery, flowing silently into the twisted girders, broken glass, and ashen rubble of Berlin.

She liked to help; she didn't really mind, but she was feeling queasy still, and not for minor cause. The measure of one's character, the teacher always said, was social usefulness, but even so, she was hoping for reprieve in silence somewhere, by herself, to sort out Heidi's words.

That was what counted. Social usefulness. Your private self was of no consequence at all. The teacher always spoke these

words with worship radiating from his face while standing on one leg, down on his luck. Half of his body ended at the hips, and sometimes he would give himself a mocking smile and claim it was impossible for him to step on people's toes. Her classmates always laughed, but she was was too jittery to laugh. She hated it when he made jokes about his injury. To have to leave a leg in Russia was serious.

As she stepped out into the street, she blinked and took quick stock, then breathed a sigh of relief: it looked like an average raid. No worse, in any case, than yesterday. She had expected much more damage.

She drew in her breath and kept walking, occasionally coughing from her lungs the dust that still fell from the shuddering walls. Today was standard fare. Something lay curled about the gutter, face buried in the mud, palms up, still in its shrapnel-riddled overcoat. A pretty blue. Remarkably new. Thank heaven no one she knew.

There was another one. A third.

She would not call them corpses; that would make it gross. She gave them sideways glances.

She kept on breathing evenly and kept on walking gingerly, as though across a balance beam. The skies were clear again, the bombers gone; a cat was catching flies; billowy ridges piled on the horizon; the air smelled of April and Easter.

And then she spied the child.

On blistered knees, a small and half-charred infant was crawling slowly from the debris of a demolished house. It seemed dazed, but made no sound, not a peep. It struggled to free itself of the ashes.

"A stretcher! A stretcher!" she yelled. She yelled at the top of her lungs. She nearly broke a vessel. The infant crawled toward her, in slack motion, and then it coiled up, in a small quivering heap, still stirring drowsily.

With flying fingers, Erika took off her sweater and made a small nest for its head, not knowing what else she could do, except to shoo the April flies—until, at last, a neighbor came run-

ning up and scooped up the infant with low, compressed moans, making soft, sucking sounds in her throat. At that, she took her sweater back, relieved, and started looking for the morning streetcar to take her to her class.

Now she was really late!

What would the teacher say? Where was that tardy trolley?

She knew her classmates were, by now, immersed in geometric proofs. Geometry was an important subject, a definite prerequisite to help rebuild the world. She was quite good, though not exceptional, at geometric proofs, for there was nothing interesting in angles. With words that ruled both thoughts and feelings, she was exceptional.

"What? Are you crazy? Move!"

A uniformed truck driver honked at her and shook his fist at her. She hung her head. She didn't ask why he was blue with rage; perhaps she hadn't given right-of-way?

"Heil Hitler," whispered Erika, and turned another corner.

There was the streetcar, finally—-exactly where it should have been, but toppled over, gutted. The conductor lay dead in a doorway, a horse smile on his face. Last week, he had tugged at her pigtails. His arm had been torn off, revealing a raw muscle. She circumvented him, sidestepping an enormous pothole, her stomach tightening with bile, glad when another trolley car came clattering along, sounding like Heidi's old sewing machine, lacking oil, down to its very last needle.

She knew it wouldn't stop. She braced herself to jump. The wartime streetcars never stopped when they were packed with people. You leaped; you took your chances, adroitly aiming for the narrow running board, hoping for a foothold.

That's what she did; she leaped. "Heil Hitler," she muttered, while struggling aboard and inside.

"Look. Look what the beans did last night," somebody said and glared at her sharply as though it were her fault. She panted for breath while the streetcar careened. "Heil Hitler!" she repeated loudly.

Nobody bothered to answer her greeting. The streetcar kept wobbling and jerking. She tried to hold on with both hands, her textbooks clasped under her arm, while leaning side to side. Huge, silent people fell against her, crushing her—a mass of human flesh, all smelling of the bunkers, all threadbare at the cuffs and collars. Great gusts of ashes, chalk, and smoke filled up her nostrils. She sneezed into somebody's midriff violently.

"Excuse yourself!"

"Excuse me, please! Oh, please!" It was uncivilized to be barbarian in manners. She would have curtsied, had only there been room to curtsy properly, but people stood pressed against each other like spoons, and it was hard to make out any rhyme or reason why everybody was so mad.

One woman was already screaming. She flung wild bursts of words. "Three sons! Three sons!" she shrieked.

"Shhh! Quiet!"

"One fell. Another drowned. The last one vanished without a trace at Stalingrad—"

The people kept bobbing their heads. Well. Look at us. Not one of us who does not walk in mourning.

Each day it was the same—more casualties, and still more casualties, no end to casualties. Long lists were published in the papers, black borders around names. The one-legged teacher cut them out and pinned them to the wall.

This was war. It took its toll, demanded sacrifice. You shared your ration cards and sorrows.

There was, by then, hardly a family in all of Germany who didn't have a picture, black-bordered, sitting on a dresser. What was another death? The future would be born—a future natural and plain, a future good and nourishing, like thick and steaming pea soup, with chunks of beef and ham.

She bit her lip. The earth outside was steaming.

The postfrau on the pitted sidewalk heaved a huge sack, and here was yet another private thought she tasted gingerly. Which was: you were allowed to grieve a certain measure and no more—just as you were allowed your rations in meat, margarine, and

coal.

Excessive grief was uncouth. Unbecoming. No wonder that the woman screamed and did not want to stop.

"Mind if I sit?" asked Erika, and slid into somebody's lap. Here was another wartime benefit; adults reached out for children everywhere and put them in their laps; no matter what their flaws. The one in whose soft lap she settled was looking gray and gaunt—a frozen face, a sloping chin, eyes sunk into her forehead, just munching on her gums and making slurping noises.

"The city has run out of coffins," she said, her old arms tightening.

"Yet we will win," one of the passengers replied, as they kept ratting through the ruins.

He had an empty sleeve. His eyes shimmered with fervor. The words came of themselves; he aimed to please the Führer.

No one said a word.

A rusty old commuter train passed by, garlanded with the Hooked Cross and the Red Cross in alternate design. More coming from the Eastern front. More. Even more. They poured into the rubble of Berlin as though from gray conveyer belts.

All refugees, escaping.

Everyone who still had legs was running from the Reds. Goats. Horses. People. Everything. This train was full of them; she craned her head habitually. Amid the flotsam of the great migrations fleeing from the Soviet terror might be someone she knew.

"My family is coming," she said, and started hiccuping and twitching.

"Stop that," somebody bellowed angrily, which made her hiccups worse. Like lava coming down a mountain and taking over everything, her words kept spilling out. "It's been two years. I still remember them. My mother. *Oma.* Jonathan. Natasha. The only person blurry is the baby—"

"They're dead. All dead."

"Shut up!"

"The Russians cut out everybody's tongue—" the screaming

woman sobbed, now with surprising venom. "I know that for a fact."

"I said shut up!" The one-armed passenger spoke sharply, not mincing any words, and put his one remaining hand on Erika's.

"It's true. I heard that yesterday. They're animals. Just animals. They lop off certain parts of your anatomy—" The woman's shrill voice broke in one last somersault. It was clear her mind had snapped.

The stranger kept his hand on hers. His touch was kind and cordial. "Hush, child. Pay no mind whatsoever. What does she know? I bet you that your family will walk right over burning coals to make it to Berlin."

If nothing else, then stubbornness. She took a deep and trembling breath. She stared out of the window. Since there was nothing else to do, you clung to your beliefs. The cold, white days were past. The sun was shining merrily. She whispered, since her voice was gone: "I know that they are coming. I know that for a fact."

"Where from? From Pomerania?" the stranger asked, his hand still on her twitching fingers. "I heard a special train is scheduled late today. A special train from Pomerania—"

Let him think that, she thought, in no position to dispute that speculation. Here was another matter to consider. To say, "—from Russia" left guesses as to loyalty wide open.

This she had learned since she arrived.: to have been born within the Greater Reich gave a decided edge.

"Pah! Just in time for Adolf's birthday—" the angry woman rider said cynically, and fixed a baleful eye. "Why do we get served up this poppycock? You tell me that. When will it end? When is enough enough? It's poppycock. You heard me. I said poppycock. Plain poppycock!"

"At least she's not afraid," thought Erika. Who was this woman? A defeatist? Giving everyone the lip? Had she been Lilo and not Erika, she would have glared at the betrayer or, at the very least, cold-shouldered her. But she was Erika. Not Lilo.

Within her stomach, something tightened like a fist that was

half fear, half glee. A boil was throbbing to be lanced. She felt a surge of kinship. She kept her eyes demurely in her lap and hoped the woman would say more. She looked as though she might.

"So! Why not cut our losses graciously? The war is lost. It's just a matter of admitting—"

The woman's body shook with silent sobs. Nobody said a word. The streetcar picked up speed again, and Erika stared out of cracked and blinded windows, while skeletons of building after building coasted by.

Entire streets, just piles of brick and mortar!

Berlin resembled a relief map of the moon. All shell holes. Crusted crater tops. She longed to speak up fearlessly—just once, just loud enough above the tortured hooting of the train that carried half-dead people, a horror graven in their faces no soap and water could wash off. But just in time she stopped.

"A stone pile is a stone pile," she thought that day, speaking only to herself. " A hero is a hero. A bomb is a bomb, and a bullet a bullet. War is war, and duty is duty. You learn to dot your i's and cross your sevens properly, and you close ranks with people next to you. On one-pot Sundays, you just go hungry and say nothing. That's what it's all about. It's about comradeship. Your place among your kin."

That was, as Lilo would have said, reality. You did what must be done. You didn't complain and contaminate others by spreading defeat and disgust. For this was still your Fatherland. No matter what, it was your Fatherland. You did the best you could.

"I'll have to find the proper words to summarize all that," she thought, but nothing came to mind that might have fit this wasteland, life blown to smithereens by bombs out of America. To give this wasteland meaning was now the task at hand.

She kept knitting her brow and crossing her legs; if she opened her mouth and said what she thought, she, too, would be a public nuisance. But on the other hand, no one could steal her dreams. Like a flight of wild geese were her dreams.

The year was still young. The mist still hung over the earth.

The past week had been chaos, but now it seemed at last the sun was here to stay.

She was a grown-up now. Sort of. Just barely. No one knew she was not yet fourteen.

Maybe somewhere in the years ahead there would be someone waiting to solve this morning's mystery, this bittersweet enigma that Heidi had called womanhood—a man like Jonathan, perhaps. Wholesome and manly. Strong. Not missing this or missing that. With good hands, gentle words and splendid teeth and showers of warm smiles.

Could be. If luck was on her side.

In silence, she rode through the smoldering ruins, a quiet, obedient young Hitler girl, hands folded neatly in her lap.

Chapter 123

Erika held out her palm for the ruler, but the teacher was in a benevolent mood; he merely motioned with his chin: "Sit down and pay attention. We're on page eleven."

She quietly slid into her seat, her ears perked up for snickers. She dreaded snickers; always had. Certain bullies had perfected them. There was a boy in class with carrot hair and freckles who kept his yellow eye on her—he was the worst; if he decided on a target, the mob gave chase; his victim was the lowest creature on the totem pole for weeks.

"Are you okay?" asked Lilo, rubbing her own tummy. Her eyes were pools of mirth.

"Shhh. Yes."

It seemed no one suspected anything. Lilo had kept her secret. You could depend on Lilo. Here was the perfect Hitler girl straight from the slickest poster: bronzed as a coffee bean and lissome in her gestures, slim as an elm, just as symmetrical, devoted to the cause. On her lapel she wore a magnificent swastika pin. No matter what the news from the disintegrating front, the *Landsers* winked at her. No matter how it drizzled, how dark

and glum the sky, she sang at full volume to cheer up the rest. She marched with sharp precision, always, and she donated her allowance willingly to aid the Winter Help, for Lilo's private self was of no consequence.

But she was choosy as to her bosom buddies. She did not carry charity too far. She met her enemies head-on; she picked and chose her comrades. Her special favorites were worthy of attention. And Erika was one of them. To have this strong girl on her side was everything.

"Have I got a surprise for you!" hissed Lilo now, near bursting with importance, and Erika tried hiding her curiosity by studying her nails.

Lilo was a specialist in secrets. She had one now. Behind her hand, she whispered: "You'll never guess. You're the only one who'll know!"

She signaled several cues to Erika, who tried her best to not start grinning, ear to ear, but pay, instead, attention to the teacher, who launched himself with vigor into his daily litany. He lectured from the heart while standing on one leg, resting his stump on the crook of his crutch.

"—our soldiers fight with courage and endurance. Can we do less? Our soldiers fight for honor at a time when few men know the meaning of the word. For instance, take the Treaty of Versailles—"

The youngsters treated him respectfully. They stood when he entered the room; they sat when he told them to sit. He didn't have to strive for discipline; few teachers, even the substitutes, had problems. The rowdies all bowed from the waist, even the fanatic gymnast who could not take his eyes off Lilo's sweater, but kept on teasing Erika to tears.

"—against that kind of barbarism, boys and girls, unleashed by Hebrew avarice against our Fatherland, it follows that you have a special duty to your country—"

Good will and courtesy demanded that you heard him out, since he had paid his price with his poor leg he'd left behind in Russia, and so they did, each morning after civics and just before

geometry. This, Erika did gladly; it was the least that she could do, although she knew it all by heart. She had rehearsed the message many times. She knew about the Jewish vices, theoretically. No matter how you slammed the door, the Jews were dense that way; they always reappeared. Unless you checked them thoroughly and kept tight rein on them, they sowed their seeds of discontent among the foolish masses. If there was no one else on whom to play a trick, they tricked each other, practicing. Their rabbis killed puppies. Their bankers crushed farmers. All that. The teacher might as well have talked about the Hottentots, however. She, Erika, had never met one in the flesh. The yellow benches for the Jews set up in parks were long since gone; not even by sight did she know any Jew, nor did she know of anyone who did.

The Jews she visualized were pale and distant, like the moon. Berlin was free of Jews, as far as she could tell; the Führer had carted them off.

"Had it not been for Franklin Rosenfeld in the employ of usurers and bankers," the teacher said, his voice now rising sharply, "the enemy fronts would have crumbled by now. But all that will change. Now, finally, the tide of war will turn. He's dead. The skunk is dead! The lackey of the Jews is dead. Franz Rosenfeld is dead. This morning, early, news came by special dispatch."

There was mild, dutiful applause. Ho! Ho! The Jewish dog is dead!

The teacher's cheeks were red. "There's still America. This is their chance. This is their opportunity. Now they will recognize the real enemy. They'll side with us. Now they will learn their lesson. They will identify what's ailing all of them. Their country? Run by parasites. All of them, parasites! Each one of them! With no exception! None! All clinging to the backs of decent working people. Just you remember that. Now, boys and girls. Let's do percentages. A desperate farmer needed to take out a loan—"

"I'll give you a hint," Lilo hissed and raised a practiced brow.

Her wide-eyed stare filled everything. "It starts with a 'J.' You are the only one who'll know."

"Shhh! Stop it, Lilo. Now!" This was their secret contest: who would blink first and lose the staring game?

"—a Jew lent the farmer the money at thirteen percent for three years. Use the columns on page eight to figure out how much the honest farmer has been robbed. You have ten minutes. Do your best. Then we'll start on decimals."

Erika tried to pay attention, but the night before was like lead in her bones. Through all last week, the raids had been savage; the Amis were pounding Berlin at the Hebrews' behest; the underground bunkers never quite emptied, but victory was just around the corner, and decimals, percentages and fractions were the agenda now. Maybe she could still sneak a little snooze? Lilo often napped in class, having perfected that skill, among many.

"You keep your pencil between thumb and pinkie. See?" Lilo had instructed her just yesterday. "And when it drops, that startles you. That's when you snap awake—"

Lilo was still staring. She kept on staring tauntingly at Erika, who stared right back to strengthen her own stare. Out of the corner of her eye she realized the teacher suddenly looked gray. His voice was no longer his own. Still, he kept pushing on; a lesson was a lesson.

"The Age of Truth is dawning. We shall revamp the world. We'll do it, bit by bit." His stump must give him pain; his face was ashen now. "A land of mental mongrels, boys and girls, ruled by maneuvered vote. This is what you must understand. That's where the evil sits. It's in their voting system. Right in their voting system. They have two candidates, one in each pocket of their trousers. They say: 'You have a choice. Pick one.' The Hebrews own the press. The Hebrews own the radio. That's why it so convenient, so easy to deceive the gullible—"

It wasn't that she disagreed; no one disagreed. She knew about the usurers. You couldn't trust a Jew with any money, ever—but who had money these sad days? That was her sole demurrer. Her small allowance didn't count, too small even to

salt away pennies. And even if one earned some extra cash by sweeping out a neighbor's cellar, one needed special coupons to purchase anything.

A ration card was currency. A cigarette stub was gold.

She leaned toward Lilo and muttered: "I overslept. I don't know how that happened."

Lilo swung one leg across the other while fishing for a pencil stub. There was a twinkle in her eye. She seemed to say: "As if I didn't know. As good a ruse as any."

"—the only thing we need is for America to wake up to its interests, which might be easier said than done. For sadly, their pet citizens, that vile and vicious tribe, control the press and, hence, all thought, and therefore the Americans will swallow every bit of filth about our Führer their papers and their radios pour forth."

What were they to make of America? Little.

The slow were rewarded; the bright were kept down. The lazy were coddled; the diligent punished with taxes. Just gush and slush, America. No spine.

"A foolish, uncouth land," the teacher lectured in a monotone while glancing at his notebook to fortify himself. "They need us more than we need them. They'll need us more tomorrow than we need them today. They'll join us soon. Together, we'll build a strong bulwark on which the Red Peril will break every tooth—"

The classroom smelled of chalk. The windows were still closed against the biting April draft. The entrance was in ruins. As if to camouflage the damage that a bad hit had caused, the cracks in the walls were filled neatly with moss. It made a fanciful design.

"—a land so vast and blessed with human resources and nature's gifts, it holds untold potential, were it not for the cloven hoof. The wars they fight are Hebrew wars. The taxes paid are tribute to the bankers."

The teacher cleared his throat and braced himself to release the finale:

"—the Hebrew leverage. The Jewish influence on what the populace consumes. Be it their bread, be it their news—it's all in

Hebrew hands. These brethren know precisely how to make stolen money talk, while blinded people listen, allowing their own enemies to wreak their havoc on society."

Everything about America was slovenly. Their thoughts. Their muddled ideology.

"—they swallow every bit of filth the radio pours forth—" A tell-tale sheen formed on the teacher's face. "—a land of mongrels, boys and girls, ruled by maneuvered vote. Even the Negroes demand equal rights. Some people even think they'll mingle. They will start pairing off. Why would a rich and lavish land agree to weakening its future generations? What self-respecting race would want to do that to itself? You ask yourself that question. Now, boys and girls. Repeat after me: 'Equality is a political ideal, not a scientific fact!'"

The class, in unison: "Equality is a political ideal, not a scientific fact."

Lilo seemed tense, yet strangely restrained. She sat nibbling the end of her pencil, while Erika strained hard not to miss even a small morsel of the lecture because it verified what Heidi had explained.

"Nowhere in nature do you find equality," the teacher raised his voice, unable to let go, although he seemed near fainting; his stump was paining him. "The time is ripe. The time is now. America will see the error of its ways—"

"I'll give you a hint," whispered Lilo. Her voice was full of laughter. She had a way of twitching her nostrils like a hare, and Erika felt irresistible hysterics bubbling up. It wasn't that she felt like laughing; in fact, salt tears still burned, deep in her nose, from having seen the small, charred child; she was quite overwrought.

"Guess what?" hissed Lilo, making faces. Her chin was wobbling wildly.

"Be quiet, for heaven's sakes!"

"Six letters in the middle." Her eyes were glistening with mischief. "Have I got a surprise for you! You'll never guess! Not in a thousand years!"

She was a reservoir of secrets; that was her stock in trade.

Now she had one she couldn't wait to share. She always aimed for center stage, and Erika surrendered her small will and snapped out of her wooziness. She wrote on a small piece of paper: "I'll trade you a slice of my sausage!" A pretend sausage, Lilo knew, but even so, it was the thought that counted.

"Two slices," hissed Lilo the glutton. Her appetite, gargantuan! Her stomach, always growling.

"Now, boys and girls. Once more. What is the deadliest of all sins? Come up here, Erika. Up to the front. Give us your finest speech."

She stood. Her knees felt jellyish. The deadliest of all sins? She had her share of flaws. That's why she needed her scholastic excellence, to compensate for flaws. All of her senses were careening. In theory, the deadliest sin could be one of any number of offenses, including but not limited to practicing the art of spitting. Homesickness, day and night, beyond the boundaries of reason. Indulging in vile habits, such as an impure thought. Betraying Führer, Fatherland, and future by being pessimistic.

What else? She glanced at Lilo helplessly. Lilo made frantic gestures. "The deadliest of all sins—"

She meant to say: "—is cowardice!" By admitting that much, you made headway.

She couldn't force it out.

"If one of you should fall," the crippled but bemedaled teacher prodded doggedly, "a comrade will be there to dip a flag into your blood and hoist it to the ceiling—" and Erika was rocking now, just back and forth and back and forth while Lilo's eyes grew wide.

"Now, think. Put on your thinking cap. Think hard. If it's the Führer's will—"

At that, Lilo jumped up, threw out her chest, sending all her pencils flying and shouted with conviction: "If it's the Führer's will—why, even a tooth brush will aim, shoot, and hit!"

There was a startled hush. The children turned around and looked at Lilo, grinning.

"That's where I draw the line," thought Erika, and wiped a small, forbidden tear. "I'm not like Lilo. I am me."

She yearned to be like Lilo. Her heart was beating wildly. There stood a girl who spoke her mind! There stood no apple polisher! Clearly, the Fatherland demanded of a patriot his life for the beloved cause—but would she, Lilo, do it? No.

That thought held so much tension it made the classroom crackle.

Erika felt it raise the hair in the nape of her neck. She was a moth drawn to the flame, and maybe in another hour, and yet another bombing raid, her small wings would be caught and singed and all that would be left of dreams would be a heap of ashes the wind would blow away. The crackle made her shriek. She shrieked and couldn't stop. So let this war be war! So let the cause be just! What was all that to her? Just poppycock!

She was nobody special now. But one day that would change! For in her hot, young heart there sat a special, chiseled dream that gnawed on her with fine, sharp, even teeth. And once the decadence of England was pounded straight into the earth, the cruelty of Russia smashed, the foolish notions of America finally set straight, her chance would come. It would. She shrieked and couldn't stop.

"You're overwrought, child," said the teacher. His voice turned back to normal; he knew that he had taken things too far. He spoke with a strange tenderness: "Why don't you skip the marching band today and rest up on the bench? Just take it easy, Erika. I understand. Today's your special day. I have your guardian's letter here, explaining everything. I'll put it in your folder."

He turned and pointed a stern finger.

"And Lilo! You! Your head is full of raisins. I take it that you meant your comments as a joke? You must not ever let yourself be disrespectful of our *Landsers* who sacrifice for honor, Führer, Fatherland—"

"I would not dream of being disrespectful of our *Landsers*" said Lilo softly, leaning back and growing very still in memory of her brothers. In memory of all the fallen boys she might have kissed. One day. If only they had lived.

She had a birthday coming up. The air was thick with spring.

Chapter 124

In later years, the calendar told Erika that three long weeks somehow passed by between the day when she became a woman, as Heidi had explained, the day the long-awaited letter came, the day when she and Lilo had that talk—and when the final battle for the dying city of Berlin began. That's not how she remembers it. The years have made that memory a blur.

As she remembers it, it started on the Führer's birthday and ended when the lilacs ceased to bloom.

Why did she live when others died? Pure chance.

When Archie heckles her about the Holocaust, she asks: "What Holocaust?"

She lived her own. She walked out of her own. The Holocaust she knew was laden with the grief of many centuries. It fed on ancient timbers.

Today, she looks at Archibald with steely eyes that see the end as though it happened yesterday. She sees it still - as though a reel were running. Her face is hard. She will say this: of mercy, there was none.

Sneers Archibald, all fat thumbs, even fatter toes, all glutted

with his ego: "Well? Didn't you burn up the Jews?"

That's when her heart leaps to her tongue, for her spirit is burning and raging: "You don't know the least thing about me!"

On any other day, the two girls might have headed home as soon as classes were dismissed to give Heidi a hand with the chores. Easter weekend was approaching - as good a time as any to kneel into spring cleaning. The girls took joy in that; there was pride in completing one's duties; they didn't need Heidi to prompt them; spring cleaning fed into a holiday mood.

Not so that afternoon, however, with Lilo bursting at the seams, filled to the brim with bubbling importance, yet uncharacteristically oblique. Therefore, Erika grabbed jacket, notebooks, pencil case and scarf and shouted, running after Lilo: "Give me a clue. A tiny clue."

Lilo was taking mighty strides. "I told you. It starts with R—"

"You said J, Lilo. J."

"I changed my mind. It's R."

"Give me another clue."

"Not now."

It was spring, finally, and hope was in the air. Winter coughs were past; the air was dry and clean. Rooftops glittered in the sunshine. The acorns were sprouting their buds. The sun poured down nuggets of gold.

"This way. This way."

Lilo decided on a detour with a mysterious air, stopping only long enough to pick up Winston Churchill, who waited at the corner. She strode across the blackened rubble, heading for the railroad station where she had staked out a new cook to beam at with all her might, so he would set aside his herring heads for her, along with other useful scraps that Winston Churchill relished.

"Tell me. Tell me," begged Erika, but Lilo savored the suspense, as smug as though she had already the heel of a salami in her pocket.

"Red Cross?"

"No."

"Extra rations?"

"No."

"Radio BBC?"

"No! Why, the very thought!"

"Not the Red Army, Lilo!"

"Now stop it, silly goose! Be patient!"

Erika took a gulp of breath and asked in a voice that cracked: "Relatives?"

"Almost," said Lilo, briskly, sidestepping a gigantic pothole.

Spring floated on billows of clouds. The sky was thick with scents. New grass. Young daisies. Apple blossoms.

"You're getting warm. Here is another one. It starts with an 'L', and it ends with an 'r.'"

"Letter?"

"My, you're smart today."

So overcome was Erika, she had to sit down on the sidewalk. "For me?" She had to swallow down a frog deep in her throat before she was able to stammer: "You aren't fooling me?"

"See for yourself. I caught the *Postfrau* just in time. What did I tell you, girl?"

"I knew it! I knew it!" shrieked Erika, while Lilo danced from foot to foot and waved a crumpled envelope and Winston Churchill rushed around in circles. "They're coming! They're coming! They're coming!" It was yelps. It was shrieks near hysterics, and more.

Her hands shook as she took the letter. It had no postmark; a vital corner had been torn away. It had been rained and snowed on, but there it was, in black and white, four pages long, addressed to her in Mimi's dainty script, telling her that even though the trek was thinning out and people, one by one, sank into heaps of snow where they were left to die, her family was still alive and struggling homeward to the Fatherland.

"They're heading right this way! They're coming, Lilo! They're coming!"

Her heart was hammering as though it would explode her chest; this called for celebration; she could already smell the apfelstrudel baking in the oven. When something odd came flying, slammed hard into a wall above her head and scattered dust into her hair, she didn't even duck.

"Well, girl? What did I tell you?" Lilo smiled, and tried to calm down Winston Churchill, who was jumping and snorting and worse. "It surely looks that way."

"My God, they're almost here!" breathed Erika, transported, and Lilo offered in a burst of generosity: "I'll even let you wear my brand new Easter dress."

"You will?"

Lilo was charity itself: "Of course. Read slowly, will you? Slowly!"

It took a while for Erika to get her bearings; practically all of her spittle was gone. She could not finish what she meant to say; she felt as though she were floating on air. At long last, fortune smiled; here was the evidence!

"They're still alive! They're heading right this way! It even says the baby—"

She was so looking forward to the baby; she had a pair of knitted booties waiting, sitting on a little paper doily with neatly scalloped edges. She had the route mapped out already; she knew precisely how to lead her family triumphantly to safety while circumventing three enormous craters so the carriage wouldn't bounce so much and perhaps spill the baby!

"The'yre coming! They're coming!"

She was beside herself! Had Lilo not caught her by her sleeve and stopped her then and there, she would have raced for broom and dust pan to sweep the street free of the rakish leaflets that claimed the Führer was in direst straits, the enemy was winning - all that, and more, all poppycock!

"All that," Lilo was shouting, too, "is poppycock! What did I tell you, ha? I knew it all along! Come on, now! Hurry up!" The tide would turn; the war would be a one-front war; Americans would see the error of their ways and join the Führer finally.

"Let's go," decided Lilo. "Let's catch the last two trains!"

There was always a lull between raids, just after three o'clock and before supper, and caution should have made them look for yet another bunker while sitting out the frenzy of destruction, but venturing into the streets as soon as they were safe.

Not so that afternoon. Today was worth taking chances.

The two girls headed for the railroad station, where they waited for two hours and Lilo danced from foot to foot while holding up a sign and shouting herself hoarse: "Apanlee! Apanlee! Anybody here from Apanlee?"

The ramp on which they stood resembled a relief map of the moon—all shell holes, crusted crater tops. The crowds kept on pushing and shoving. The first of two expected trains pulled in, locomotive belching, straining, refugees hanging from the wagons like clusters on a vine.

The coaches shuddered to a halt.

"Where is my child? Where is my child?" a desperate woman cried. "I'm looking for my child. Has anybody seen my child?"

The surging crowd caught her and pushed her forward; she ruddered with her elbows to break free.

A *Landser*, standing on the platform, said to the searching mother, a glazed look on his face: "Forget it. Just forget it." He looked bloodied and bowed; a jagged tin can dangled at his belt; he was unshaven and unwashed. He wore his right arm in a sling, his left sleeve dangled empty.

The woman told him doggedly: "I'm looking for my son. He's ten years old and wearing a green jacket."

"The war is now lost," he announced. "The Führer is dead, and that's it."

She started stuttering: "He's small. He looks much younger than his age. My mother put him on a train a week ago—"

"The Russkis bayoneted him," the *Landser* said and broke into a giggle.

The waiting people backed away from him as though he were a leper, but Lilo took him by his dangling sleeve and ordered

firmly: "Come with me. I'll get you a cup of hot coffee."

He started howling then. He howled and couldn't stop. "It's over. Finished. Done! Are you all blind? Are you all mad? The eastern front is torn to shreds! We've had it, idiots! We're finished! Done! Kaputt! We've lost the Führer's war!"

"Just never mind him. Never mind him," said Lilo to the hostile crowd. "Here. Take your rucksack. Right this way. No need to look for trouble."

"The rivers," howled the cripple, "red with the blood of Germany."

"This way. Hold onto me," urged Lilo, propelling him along. He kept on spilling words as if he hadn't heard. Something had snapped inside him; it would take many months to retrieve his shattered self.

"The front gave way!" he shrieked and dug his fingers into Lilo's shoulder so that she slumped and winced. "The borders, boiling over!"

"Come on. Come on. I'll show the way. You need delousing. Badly. Once you are fumigated, you'll feel better. Just take my word for it."

"The winter killed the trek," he shouted, stiffening. "You hear me? Do you hear me?" He stopped them in the middle of the ramp and bored his blood-shot eyes straight into Erika's. "If something moved within a dune," he sobbed, "I didn't stop to check."

An hour passed. Two. Three.

The afternoon was almost gone; train after train kept spilling refugees, all travel-weary and disheveled, all pouring silently in droves into the fortress city, already full to overflowing.

Still, the two girls stood, waiting.

The people on the ramp sipped ersatz coffee. Young children sobbed and wailed. Red Cross girls lifted buckets of hot water. With grim determination, Lilo held up her sign, despite a cramping arm, while Erika sat by the curb, just rocking back and forth, her heart sinking lower and lower. The wounded came on lit-

ters, the dead in gunny sacks.

A faint and different sound nipped at the outskirts of Berlin.

Three soldiers hobbled by—one with a cane, the other two on crutches. Lilo saluted eagerly. She looked upon all soldiers reverently. She smiled at every one.

"We barely made it. Barely," they claimed while stumbling through the rubble.

"What are you hoping for?" they asked, to which there was no answer.

None of them had ever heard of Apanlee. They said: our people fell. They claimed: blood-soaked, the eastern front. The dead are dead, they said, and will not live again. The snow, they said while staring at the girls from sad, defeated eyes, was piling up on them.

"There's one more train," said Lilo finally, unwilling to temper her zeal.

The rumbling from the east increased, but Lilo set her chin. She turned to Erika, who merely shook her head. She told her in a low and stubborn voice: "I am not giving up yet. Are you?"

"There's just no point. Let's go," urged Erika, now that the rush of hope the letter had unleashed had dwindled to a tiny trickle. Her voice was thick with tears.

"Let's wait. Maybe they switched a train?" said Lilo lamely, in the end, unable to endure the look in her friend's stricken face.

"No. There's no point." It was already after five o'clock, and there was little margin left for hope; besides, the pre-dusk raid was overdue; the sirens were already warming up.

"What's another day? I bet you a penny they're coming tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Saturday." On Saturdays the chores piled up; there was no chance to wait at the station tomorrow.

"And Sunday is out, too."

On Sundays the girls stuck to Heidi. Sundays were the worst for Heidi; for hours, she sat idly by the window, just staring at her empty hands, while the girls tiptoed and whispered around

her.

"And Monday it's our turn to queue."

"We'll wait," decided Lilo forcefully. "There's still a train scheduled to arrive. I know that for a fact. I know the cook who feeds that train; he promised me potato peels and turnips." The dog hated turnips, but turnips were better than nothing.

Far in the distance, a detonation rumbled hard. A siren picked up speed, and Erika crossed leg on leg from habit and precaution. Already her bladder was filling. Three long wails meant death was coming. The everlasting dust that followed every bombing raid made Winston Churchill sneeze nonstop; he was already sneezing.

"The raid is late," said Erika. Her nostrils stung like fire. "Let's run." She rummaged in her pocket while spilling forth two pencil stubs, some bread crumbs, and the teacher's note that praised her for her eulogies but scolded her for being cartwheel-clumsy.

"Don't be a ninny. Silly!"

She found a handkerchief with which to blow her nose. "Come on. Let's sprint. They're almost here." The Amis were reliable that way. They dropped their bombs at ten, at two, and finally at six. They came in clusters by the clock, started killing people by the clock, and by the clock they left. In yet another fifteen minutes, more would come droning in, out of the west, in numbers beyond counting, in strength beyond all words, all dropping their thudding explosives. The asphalt would start bubbling in the street.

"I have another secret still," said Lilo, tugging at her sleeve. "I'm not supposed to tell."

"Oh, Christ Almighty! Please!"

"Nobody knows. Not even Mommie knows. It starts with 'J'—"

"I've had it now! I've had it. I've had it up to here!" Erika said angrily while giving Lilo a decided push, surprising even to herself. "I'm through with games. I'm grown-up now. I will no longer—"

"—and it ends with "n," said Lilo very gently. She hugged her knees and kept her face averted.

"Please. Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not. Look—"

"Let me see that letter once again—"

"Here. Careful. Easy! Easy!"

"The date on the letter is missing. It could be a year old."

Lilo was chewing on her lip. The afternoon air became raw. "So what? It probably means nothing."

The hissing in the air increased. A sentry was rapping his boots with a stick. A loudspeaker blared marches.

"Let's hurry up! Just listen, Lilo. Listen!" The earth was rolling like a ship. There still was time to make it to the bunkers, to finish off a disappointing day, but Lilo seemed unwilling.

"We'll wait, and not another word," said Lilo, patting Erika. "I'm counting on the cook."

There was the train, still scheduled to roll in; there were still fifteen minutes' worth of wait left until all hope was gone, and she was hungry, in fact, famished; all she had had to eat last night was a gray herring head and half a slice of bread. She shivered, though it was mid-April; her stomach growled as if it were a tiger. She lifted her young chin and watched a plane pull up, climb high, and higher. A cloud of smoke came slowly out of nowhere and moved across the street, thinning and lifting languidly.

"You'd think," said Lilo suddenly, "that they'd play fair. Why can't the enemy play fair? What is it with them? Why are they bombing us? Unless we ask ourselves why they are doing this, why we are doing it, there'll be no end to it!"

An anti-aircraft gun barked sharply, several miles away, and Lilo leaned back suddenly and squinted hard against the sinking sun where something silvery plunged from a cloud formation, releasing little specks of black that kept exploding dully.

"Vulgarians!" said Lilo, vehement, not specifying whom she meant. though you could take your guess. The lash of that young tongue was amazing. "Vulgarians! Vulgarians! They don't know

the least thing about us!"

A few more explosions, much louder and closer this time—yet the sky was as clean as a bowl.

The trees began to toss. The girls looked at each other. And Lilo said again: "They don't know the least thing about us."

"We need to leave," said Erika, voice choked. "Your mother wants us home. She wants us to go queueing. Let's go."

"Are you my friend?" asked Lilo. The heavy rumble of artillery kept wafting over the horizon. A sudden echo rolled, diminishing.

"Of course. Why do you even ask?"

"All right, then. Listen. Let's have a silly talk. Just never mind the bombs."

"Now they're bombing out of turn," shrieked Erika, demented. "Why can't they, at the very least, respect the rules of war?"

"They have no possible excuse," said Lilo evenly. "It's so oppressive! God! If they think they can scare me, my name is Oppenpopp. They and their chocolate soldiers!"

She sat down at the edge of a small bomb crater, still holding Winston Churchill firmly on the leash. She stroked his nose with a delicate finger. "The mutt is nervous, God knows why. Look at his fur. Here's what I want to know. Why do they want to kill me? What have I done to them? I never bothered them."

Something odd, shadowy, came slowly floating by, which might have been a cinder. No more than fifteen feet away, it rained a few roof tiles and, oddly, timid wisps of smoke curled suddenly from a dilapidated roof, but the sky was not yet spitting fire.

"Let's go!" begged Erika, now trembling head to toe, but Lilo kept on talking. When she was in that mood, you couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"Here's what I think. It must be said. They look like us. We look like them. I'm sure we could be friends. I meant to ask the teacher. Why, in God's good name, America? I'd like to understand their point of view. I'm dying for the nitty-gritty. Right now, it's all a mystery to me. I bet you they make fun of us. As we make fun of them. I bet you they think they are right. I bet

you they think we are wrong. I bet you they think this war makes them heroes. Can you imagine that?"

"I bet you anything," said Erika, now quite beside herself, and started tugging hard at Lilo, "if we don't leave right now and find ourselves a bunker—" but Lilo suddenly smacked Winston Churchill hard. Now she was twice as angry.

"We're lucky. At least we're informed. We know whose war we're fighting. I wonder whose war they are fighting—"

"Lilo—"

"You're smart. The smartest one in class. You figure it all out. See that dilapidated tower over there?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"What about it? Well, guess what? That anti-aircraft tower? Behind that row of houses?"

All this was just too much for Erika. It was full overload. Her panties were already getting damp.

"Please, Lilo! Lilo!"

Why pin her timid question mark of bravery against the vast horizon that now was roaring like a lion to advertise another raid? The dog lay quivering already, his tail flush with the ground. His skin was shuddering; his hair was bristling on end; while Erika kept crossing leg on leg to forestall the explosion of her bladder.

"Those aren't bombs," said Lilo. "This time, they're shelling us."

She was still stroking Winston Churchill, just stroking him and stroking him. Her eyes had the texture of glaciers. She looked up, then, and took it in—all of it, everything! In one big gulp! The sky! Vast! Virginal! And something soft and gentle and infinitely beautiful came with a ray of sun and splintered in her face.

"See? After all, " said Lilo softly, now speaking only to herself, "we can't be wrong. That is impossible!" Above, the tree tops stirred. A tear fell smack on the torn and crumpled letter and blotched a few more words. And Lilo said with quiet simplicity:

"Look at that plane up there. Is he a fool, or what? I bet you

he is just like us. I bet you we are just like him. No better, and no worse."

The earth shook with a nearby detonation. Lilo's eyes were two puddles of blue. She wiped a film of ashes from her face and added: "You want to know my secret?"

"Not really. No," said Erika, drawing air in through a very wet nose.

"I'll tell you anyway."

"I've had it now," said Erika. "I've had it up to here." With nothing left but broken hope, she had her hands full with herself. She did not want to know. What did she have to counteract another bombing raid? Her lifted chin, that's all. It was so little that she wanted. Just order. Sanity. Fair play. A full night's sleep, perhaps, and just a fragment of a dream to help her through another weekend, now that all hope was gone.

"Look. Here they come!"

Yes, there they were, all in formation, orderly, all flying death as orderly as geese. As if on smooth conveyor belts they came—the Flying Fortresses, the US Air Armada.

And what they brought came from the teeth of hell.

"You know who's up there? On that roof?" said Lilo barely audible and put both arms around her pet. "It's Jonathan. I saw him. Yesterday. I climbed across the roof and paid him a quick visit. He's up there. By himself. All by himself. With just one rusty ack-ack gun. With hardly any shells—"

Chapter 125

Ack-ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

And in response: Ack-ack! Ack-ack!

She ran for her life, through a nightmare, hugging the walls as she ran. She dove for roadside ditches and scrambled out again. A child, a living torch, ran shrieking in the opposite direction. She glimpsed that from the corner of her eye. Untold civilian dead littered the sidewalk. Out of some atavistic knowledge, she recognized the voice.

She understood it even then: this was the Antichrist!

The Antichrist was doing this, and he had dragon's teeth. He crunched on living bone. He shredded everything. He vomited up earth and ashes that flowered in the trembling sky in huge, ballooning mushrooms. He melted baby prams; he flattened wheelbarrows; he chewed up human flesh with quiet and murderous efficiency. A child was shredded right across the street from where she stood, dazed from the noise and flashes.

The Beast! The Beast!

She couldn't see; she couldn't breathe; she thought that she

would suffocate. Above her, something flew apart in flames and plummeted down toward her in a brilliant ball of fire. Someone shouted frantic orders. Someone else was shouting for a vanished company. The streets were filled with smoke. Shrapnel shot through the air. Thick clumps of wet soil followed, nobody knew from where.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

Walls shattered everywhere. A church steeple collapsed. A large building broke in half as though it were a suitcase being opened, and out fell furniture, a baby crib, the infant still inside, clutching at its intestines as they were spilling out. Its flesh hung in tatters from its body.

She saw in passing, as she ran, that a small group of prisoners, discarding picks and shovels, had broken free and was looting a stalled train—grotesque, bizarre and definitely treasonous!—but then they, too, threw everything and ran. Huge flames were licking everywhere. Thick columns of smoke rose from a dozen different streets. Two transport trucks had taken hits; oily smoke kept pouring out of them. The trees started groaning and swaying. A mushroom of soot ballooned up. Another roof sagged slowly and collapsed. A bridge exploded in the distance. A huge shell crashed into a wall.

She pressed herself against the shuddering building, and when she thought she could, she peeked through trembling fingers.

There was the train!

Its roar drowned out the feeble sound of a lone ack-ack gun, against the roaring of the Antichrist, atop the anti-aircraft tower. She saw that Lilo crouched behind a wall surveying her surroundings, still clutching Winston Churchill by the collar.

Another blast, much closer. It blew a truck aside as if it were a toy.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

Somebody was still shooting from the rooftop; that might be Jonathan. By then, the street was burning on both ends, and every time the sirens wailed, she jumped again and ran, right through the screaming sirens, shrieking.

Another roof blew off. A second. And a third.

The rubble flew in all directions. Three terrifying booms, one following another, made iron rush and bite into convulsing flesh and started setting stone on fire and chewing up the pipes as if with living teeth, and it was nails dug into earth to hold herself down somehow.

The clouds were bathed, end to end, in reddish hues. A sharp flame shot up, hissing, and Winston Churchill tore away from Lilo, yelped once, did a decided somersault and fell onto the pavement with a thud.

The earth convulsed and shook. The mutt was crawling on his belly, a gash along his back the width of a hand. By then, it was almost pitch black; the smoke was that thick, growing thicker. A piece of burning wood sailed by. The asphalt started bubbling.

Another detonation lifted Winston Churchill and threw him down on the asphalt. Lilo crawled forward on blistering knees to try to reach her mutt. And then a siren howled once—sharply. And gave out in mid-shriek.

Then came a roar. There was a flash—so light that it seemed dark, so loud it caused a silence.

Lilo lay motionless on top of Winston Churchill. Her hardened nails still clutched at Winston Churchill's ears. Pure Lilo, that. She stared at Erika, still mocking, brave, with that half-smile, defying war, defying fate, defying fear as though to say: "They don't know the least thing about me."

She had the staring game down pat. She had that half-smile pat. She stared and didn't blink.

And that's when Erika saw clearly: eternity stared back.

In later years, she couldn't say how long the nightmare lasted.

It was a holocaust, and she was all alone! The city lay in flames. Steel plowed the earth; flames set the clouds of spring afire; a wall collapsed in front of her, while she reeled backwards, dizzy, colliding with a Hitler Youth who shouted for his mother. Something still dove at her with shrieking engines, death spewing from its wings. She barely heard the aircraft,

such was the roar of fire, such was the shriek of nerve ends, all aflame.

She leap-frogged from sidewalk to sidewalk. Her mind was careening with panic.

"*Stoi!*" someone yelled in Russian. "*Stoi!* Stop!"

She saw that the clouds drifting upwards were ashes, obscuring her vision, lit from below. The street was as littered as a battlefield; bodies lay strewn about like swatted flies. Huge Soveit tanks rolled over them and flattened them. Shells screamed, then slammed into the brick and stone on both sides of the alley.

She cowered from the fiendish violence which poured in from the east in hideous, slit-eyed clusters. She heard the whistle of the shells and bits of shrapnel flying by but paid no heed; there was no time; grenades zipped by in volleys. Around her, it was raining leaves and little twigs; the very clouds kept raining fire. A torn-off wheel sailed by and rolled across the street. The shrapnel tore into the earth and penetrated the walls of homes that still stood, trembling, quaking.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack!

She saw that, in some side streets, small pockets of determined Hitler Youth were fighting still, battling on with hard ferocity. Lone snipers were firing wildly from surrounding buildings, and one of them, no doubt, was Jonathan. She heard the sound; the feeble ack-ack gun; it rattled from the rooftop where Jonathan was hiding.

She tried to make it up there. Hot air whipped over her. She tasted acrid smoke. A bombed-out panzer blocked her way; behind it were mountains of rubble. Geysers of dust subsided; new ones rose in their place. A doorframe was torn away; timber and earth flew sky-high.

Ack-ack. Ack-ack! Ack-ack. Ack-ack!

Death drummed from every roof. A piece of shrapnel grazed her shoulder; she didn't even notice she was bleeding. She felt her arm but did not feel the pain. She climbed across the wreckage. The dust flakes fell like snow.

The Beast! The Beast! The Antichrist!

He dug out eyes. He severed ears and chins and genitals. He plummeted out of the sky in showers of black beans. He riddled the buildings with bullets. He broke telephone poles in half as though they were but toothpicks. He took barbed wire with both hands and wrapped it around living flesh. He flattened bunkers with his tanks, then burrowed into trenches and heaved up out of their recesses, with flesh and hair stuck to his treads. He set an ambulance aflame. He made the Führer's city, end to end, a giant furnace, roaring.

He blew his breath into the German holocaust. His colors shone and hooted through cavities where window panes had been. He poured brimstone on the city of Berlin. He robbed the sun of its luster. He left the fallen youth of Germany unburied in the ditches.

Aryans fell, everywhere. They sank down as though grass from a blade.

There was one building that still stood, and that was Heidi's house. She knew that it was Heidi's house; she could tell by the fire-charred mail box. A direct hit had split it, end to end, but both ends still held up.

She struggled to crawl through the window to reach the bunker basement through the entrance, but there were mountains of debris; she couldn't crawl across it. She lost a shoe, there was no time to fish for it. She heard somebody whimper: "Heidi! Heidi!" and realized it was her voice, her pygmy voice, her coward's voice that Lilo used to taunt.

She stopped that soon enough!

A body lay across the steps, as blackened as a ham forgotten in a chimney. It wore a dress with polka dots; she could tell that by some shreds of sleeve. Her mind careening like a wheel, she just leaped over it.

There was a narrow hallway, and flattening herself against the wall, she noticed something jumping crazily inside her brain, and somewhere, in the havoc and confusion, she realized it was a

memory, a passage from Marleen's old Bible. She sensed it in her sinews that this was reaping time. This was the Antichrist against her Aryan race, making his powers known.

"Hitler kaputt! Hitler kaputt!" the Antichrist howled in the streets of Germany.

His tools were the hammer and sickle, his insignia the pentagram, appointed by eternity before the world began. Out of the overflow of his foul mouth the Antichrist spewed rage, and all creation trembled at his coming. This was Apocalypse. This was because the Führer, verily, dared to redraw the boundaries of nations so that the stalwart people would not be scattered to the winds.

That's what this struggle meant. That's what the Bible said. That's why the hammer of the Antichrist kept smashing everything, and where it hit, another building flew apart as though it were a watermelon. That's why the sickle kept on swishing forcefully, and where it hit, blond, blue-eyed people fell—and for no other reason, verily, than that they had gathered, as young falcons might, to be steeled, to rejoice in their wings.

She ran through the rubble, a weasel, her ear cocked for the sound of guns, while one roof took the torch from yet another. She took leap after leap, sprinting on, the breath of the Beast on her nape as it tore into fallen bodies, tossing limbs and torsos everywhere—into the air, into the trees, across the street, into the burning flames.

As she stood, shivering, amid the rubble and the soot, bombs and shells kept rushing down and biting deep into groaning walls. When she saw the ashcan the psychic spoke about, it was not even a surprise.

She took a mighty leap.

With her last strength, she closed the lid and crouched inside. That's how she, Erika survived. Let Archibald not heckle her about the Holocaust with gravy dripping from his chin!

"We fought," she says today in Archie's living room, where

both sit on the fraying couch that Little Melly, many years ago, took pains to dress up with her doilies. The doilies are still there.

"You fought?" sneers Archibald.

"We did. You would have, too. We were embroiled in war. We clung to life against all odds. Recorded history is full of gaping holes. By adding falsehood and discarding truth—"

He will not let her finish. He decides to give her a piece of his mind. He doesn't tolerate these neo-Nazi pranksters, not in his living room. "Sure. Sure. Deny it all you want. Deny six million Jews."

Now that he, too, is into politics, along with tele-gospeling, he works the Holocaust into most anything. It always works. It keeps the greenbacks coming. He uses it to keep on socking it to Satan, his prayer book in hand, soul-saving electronically, his only worry now the Unitarians, still giving him a headache. He relishes rattling their teeth.

Says Archibald, and bites into his apfelstrudel, while all the cousins sit there, just studying their hands:

"You could've spoken up. You had no business killing Jews. That's my opinion. Period. Say, Temperance? Give me another munchie."

There sits a man with a well-rounded ego, awash with his pot-bellied pride, sworn to destroy the Antichrist as Christ's ambassador. She says quietly: "You don't know the least thing about me."

But Archie thinks he does. In fact, he knows he does. As far as Archie knows, the good Lord is in charge, and Archie is His coach. His prayers, all of them, have been successful; his country's soldiers laid to ashes, one by one, the sparkle of the Führer's cities, and that, for Archibald, is evidence enough.

But Erika is Erika and never willing to leave well enough alone. "Do me a favor, well you? Have you lived through a Holocaust? I know about my Holocaust. Just take your Holocaust out of my face. That is my one request."

She never knew just how the pieces fit until it came to her

artistically. Even after she became a writer to the marrow of her bones, she could not translate even to herself just what it meant to have been there, alone, just barely thirteen years of age, a speck of life an inch away from being blown to smithereens, abandoned to the broiling night that marked the Beast's advance.

That's what she owes to Jonathan. That was the quiet legacy he gave to her atop his dying city.

He said to her, atop the roof—below, the dying city: "I count on you. Don't touch up anything." Those words made out of her an artist, consummate. He plunged them deep into her soul, where they turned into searchlights. That's what she took away—the mission to tell all.

If there were words, then she would find the words. If there were absolutes, then she would find the absolutes.

But Archie doesn't want to hear what came at her, at age thirteen, the day when innocence was stripped from her like skin from off a snake as she ran slipping on the blood of Hitler Youth collecting in small puddles in the gutter.

It was a cataract, an avalanche of death and fire, and she a puppy in a monster's teeth. A tank loomed right in front of her; she saw its hulk and tried to dodge it, but that was difficult; huge balls of smoke ballooned around her; the asphalt started bubbling everywhere, and shrapnel raced close by her legs and bit into the earth.

There was no air to breathe, the fire sucked it from her lips.

Somebody yelled in Russian: "*Stoi! Stoi!*" And then she heard: "*Frau! Komm!*"

He was her first. He would not be her last.

He was a furry Red. He wore a bayoneted rifle on his shoulders, a smirk of silly satisfaction on his face, and a geranium—the kind that Heidi grew to heal her broken spirit—stuck loosely in his buttonhole. She saw him sitting, sprawling on the butcher's steps—the butcher had been hanged, right in his display window, amid his ersatz sausages, a sign around his neck.

She stood stockstill. He had not seen her yet.

He sat there, slovenly and grinning, admiring an array of stolen watches. He had strapped three of them around his wrist, and when he raised his eyes and blinked against the smoke, there stood a Hitler girl in her trim uniform with frozen face and mended socks who had not spied him soon enough.

He grunted once. A huge and hairy leg, clad in a muddy boot, stretched out into her path, and she tripped over it. She crashed down on the pavement. He stood, spread-eagled, over her, his pinpoint stare on her. His eyes were glistening with lust, and what he wanted now was not just someone's watch or someone's silverware or someone's agony or even someone's life.

He wanted purity. He wanted innocence.

The scratchy broadcast had told what he wanted. Three times a day, for months on end, it hectored the Red Army to loot and rape and kill. Three times a day, he heard the voice of Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish propagandist, inflaming the Red Army, his spurs in young men's flanks. And what the broadcast said was this:

"Rape! All you want. That is the only way to break the Aryan spirit."

He ordered her, as many would, in days to come: "*Frau. Komm. Frau. Komm.*"

The trees began to sway. He held her down, pinning her left wrist with a hard heel and started fumbling with his trousers.

She sank her teeth in his repulsive flesh and locked her jaws on it.

He swore. With one swift, brutal motion, he took his bayonet, thrust it downward, and pinned her by her Hitler skirt. He rammed a fleshy knee into her chest and gurgled in her ear. "Hitler kaputt? Hitler kaputt?"

She gagged and sobbed and spit. She bit and scratched and kicked.

He wrestled her onto her back. He smelled of sour rags and onions.

Ack-ack-ack-ack!

The earth burned, end to end; the sky flamed wildly; shells kept on bursting everywhere. She still held on. She had strong teeth; no wonder: Heidi made her brush them every morning with salt to strengthen them.

The buttons flew. The brooch with the ear stalk sailed into the gutter.

He had huge scars and pockmarks on his cheeks. He bent in a half-curve on top of her, still fumbling with his trouser belt, and that's when something dropped from her, and that, amazingly, was cowardice.

She stood outside herself. She saw the scene as though it were a movie. That gave her a hot surge of strength. It was an agile thing, this brand-new self, this silver speck that danced within the clouds and fell into a dive, unleashing glowing metal, dot by dot, still smashing lead into the dying, smoking city before it pulled out of its plunge in a precise and elegant loop.

She also heard, detached, with her left ear, the ack-ack fire coming from the roof, dispatched by Jonathan. She knew that it was Jonathan! He was up there, somewhere, behind a chimney stack, and he was shooting, shooting, shooting. He kept firing as though into the waves of an ocean.

The enemy on top of her gave a decided grunt. He cursed and, in surprise, let go.

That's when she started leaping. She leaped as a grasshopper leaped, to escape the beak of a stork.

He followed; he was still behind her. She had long legs, but his were longer, stronger. She collided with someone; she thought her lungs would explode. Showers of sparks fell onto the rubble, starting small, smoking flames that would grow into roaring infernos.

The bombs were still falling and exploding, and every time one hit, a shudder ran through the earth. Smoke was everywhere, rubble everywhere; the air raid was still in full swing. "*Stoi*!" yelled the enemy, but now her ears were deaf. The bombs had deafened them.

"Hitler kaputt!" yelled the leviathan, this time right on her

neck.

She was past fear, past grief, past rage. It was survival now—survival of the kind that made grown people bare their teeth and snarl at little children. She, too. She snarled at every obstacle. She heard the popping sounds of shells exploding and knew that he was still behind her.

"Germans kaputt!" he howled, but now she shouted back: "You don't know the least thing about me!"

A tank came at her, headlights blazing, with difficulty barreling across the corner, then disappearing in the smoke. It was festooned from end to end, with slit-eyed troopers, monsters—all monsters from another world, who pointed at her, howling, while every rocket of the Antichrist was shrieking now with victory. Walls kept on cracking everywhere and dust and plaster whirled.

"Ack-ack-ack-ack!"

Still, Jonathan!

A solid bank of smoke came at her from her left, all black and fat and greasy, and through it whipped lashes of lightning. A panzer somersaulted, then rolled on its back, a fallen dinosaur. Somewhere, somebody laughed—a human mind gone crazy. Somebody else was yelling savagely in Russian: "Hitler kaputt? Germans kaputt? *Stoi!* Stop!"

She knew he was still behind her. She had been trained to sprint. She sprinted for her life, as Lilo would have sprinted, had Lilo still been here, instead of lying in those ruins, somewhere, staring. Across the street, a Red Cross nurse ran, too, clutching a frying pan. Her chin blew off. The pan careened across the street. She didn't stop. She ran. She tried to reach the other side but shrapnel cleaved her head.

"*Stoi*! I said *stoi*!"

She gulped and dashed forward as bullets ricocheted from the dilapidated, blackened walls. The firestorm kept spewing smoke and ashes. Huge clouds gave birth to yet more clouds, all greasy. Black. Foreboding.

She tripped. She fell. Above her knelt her Antichrist. Ver-

min nested in his hair. She saw that he had maggots in his eyes.

It was her youth and strength and will to live against the fire in his loins, the iron in his fists. She managed to break loose once more; she tried to vault inside a stalled furniture van. He reached inside and grabbed her by one ankle. She felt it snapping like a twig. She gasped with shock, but felt no pain. Just fury.

He seized her by her braids. A hard fist landed in her face. It brought her to her knees.

"*Frau, komm!*" he howled. "*Frau, komm!*" he gurgled in her ear. "*Frau, komm. Frau, komm. Frau, komm!*"

And that is how she learned at last what grown men did to women.

Then it was five. Ten. Dozens. They came at her, and they encircled her. It was a rolling avalanche of lust. No roadblocks would have stopped them. They came at her atop their tanks, the treads of which were smeared with blood. They boiled out of side alleys. The cellars kept on vomiting them up. They dropped from trees. They poured through the Brandenburg Gate in lava-like waves of destruction. They climbed over the roofs and tumbled from the vehicles, and they surrounded her.

They fell on her in scores, like locusts.

They grabbed her by the neck, and then they bore down hard and left her lying in the gutter amid the smell of blood and lust before another wave arrived to force her legs apart. Still more appeared from behind hedges, all crowding her, all waiting for their turn. Their weight toppled over the fence. They all rolled over her, guns in their hands, guns that had bayonets attached, pinning her down to the earth by her clean Hitler skirt.

She was one Aryan girl who never had a chance. It's history that men who stank of garlic, lice crawling on their collars, took brutal turns with her. A polar darkness settled in her soul that day, and it would never leave. Her heart froze then and there, and it would never thaw.

She lay, supine, and saw the plane, still dancing in the clouds, a speck of silver. Beautiful. It seemed just like a prehistoric bird, an iron bird, still roaring, rolling, raining fire, then pulling up again. She focused her mind on that small flash of silver and shut out the rest of the world.

No longer did the Führer have to tell her: "Let me remind you of your duty." Now all was clear to her. At last she understood why her young body had been so mercilessly pounded to toughness and resilience by weeks of training in the woods.

She had been trained to iron for good cause; she had been wrong to have resisted; yes, all along, the Führer, Lilo's Führer, Heidi's Führer, had been right! If she had learned to use a gun instead of wasting time with foolish dreaming, she would not be defenseless now. If she had learned to aim and shoot, she might have picked a gun up from the gutter, she might have had a chance to finish off the Antichrist, the Evil Incarnate, the ghoul that had engaged America the Wonderland to finance dirty wars.

But all she had was empty hands with broken fingernails. That's why she belly-flopped in Heidi's tulip patch, the Antichrist on top of her to have his way with her.

There would be many, in the days that followed, who spoke the fateful words she had no choice but to accommodate—but once, right at the start that marked the end, there was a small reprieve.

And that was thanks to Jonathan.

His bullet flew, just in the nick of time. It shrieked and whistled by her ears and hit the grunting animal on her in the temple.

He jumped as though he'd been lassoed. His cap, with the Red Star, sailed, bloodied, into the bushes, and he pitched forward, jackknifed, then did a funny somersault and rolled onto his back.

A fallen boar. Still grunting. She gave him one good shove. She raised her face to scout the surroundings. The ditch was clear. She swallowed hard and ran.

She called out: "Jonathan! I'm coming, Jonathan!" She had

been blind before, but now she saw. She saw. Debris sailed by her ears. Shells were still falling everywhere. The silver speck up in the clouds kept dropping bombs as though they were black beans.

She knew that she would not surrender—no! no! and no and no and no!—not to the Beast, the Antichrist, not to the skies now black with death, not to the solid sheet of fire that came at her, and certainly not to that one peculiar, predatory bird that kept on diving for her thirteen-year-old life in small, sharp silver flashes.

She found a narrow flight of stairs. Still on her hands and knees, she started creeping upwards, her senses fanned like radar.

Smoke obscured everything. She felt her way along the wall. Through a blown-out window, by the window's dim light, she spotted Jonathan, his ashen face against the wall, for he was wounded, badly.

"I'm here," she said. "It's me."

He whispered. "Quick. Crawl over."

She saw that he was wounded in the shoulder; shrapnel had ripped away both epaulet and flesh. His face was no longer his own, but his voice was the voice she had loved.

She told him then and there: "I'll help you, Jonathan."

He kept his gun trained past her belly to cover the entrance beyond. He spoke in a hoarse whisper: "I took a hit. I can't move. My little comrade. Quick."

He pointed to the ack-ack gun. She pushed herself behind it. It had a well-oiled hinge. She acted as though she had studied the script. She steadied her hand and aimed with precision. She swung the ack-ack gun around, aimed carefully, and pulled the trigger. Now it was tit for tat. Now it was pay-back time.

She fought for Lilo. Heidi. Jonathan. She fought for Apanlee and those who'd lived and died at Apanlee—a memory much like a rosebush, now heavy with dead roses.

She aimed at the silvery speck. The gun barked. Hoarse. Staccato. Ack. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack!

The speck stopped in mid-air. It jolted once, then shuddered briefly, starting now to flutter, fall, and something hot and stinging, yet sweet beyond all words, shot up into her nose.

She said: "It's either you or me. You don't know the least thing about me."

She saw that the pilot tried to pull up, out of the plunge, but fell into a steep, then steeper dive, trailing a gigantic tail of smoke. She melted with the anti-aircraft gun. It jolted twice again. The plane exploded in a fiery ball. And that felt good. Sweet. Right. She pulled the hammer stealthily—and as she did, the Devil danced the hora.

Epilogue

The year is 1989. It's been two hundred years since our Russian-German ancestors first pioneered the steppe, five decades since the war began that Erika experienced as a child. The sky is smooth. A few white clouds slide by; next to me sits a wooden stranger; below sprawls Wichita; and not an hour's drive from Wichita lies Mennotown, where I am heading now. I nibble on a cracker like a squirrel. In Malibu, near Hollywood, that's where you find the thinnest people in the world.

I think: "In yet another hour, I will be hiding all my thoughts."

No matter how much time goes by, it happens every time. To face my relatives takes effort. No matter what my upper hand, I still seek their esteem.

I tell myself: "I am not Tasha. I'm Erika. Why can't I say: 'I'm Erika'?"

For many years, my relatives and I lived on two different planets, between us, lumbering with righteous wrath, their Elder, Archibald. One day I wrote to them. I even sent a picture.

"A movie star! Almost!" cried Josephine, an unrepentant flicker buff, still awed by Hollywood.

A movie star? Not quite. To tell the truth, not even close to where I really live. Nobody knows. At times, not even I am sure. Bygones are buried deep.

Now there is *Left and Right.* It changed the Midwest landscape. When *Left and Right* hit all the screens, my good friend Josie, had she been still alive, would have rushed down to see it, and afterwards she would have surely said: "Oh, I cried, I cried. It was lovely."

I am so proud of Mennotown that I can hardly stand it, although it isn't often that I admit to that. Their stars keep on sparkling like jewels. Every carrot is grown and consumed on the spot. My folks rise early and plow deep. They will not willingly condone somebody else's failure. They are like that—their feet deep in their furrows. They know the earth must breathe.

And yet, too often they will let their enemies choose their own enemies for them. Their sense of history is like an unkempt garden.

When I saw Josie last, she was as frail and delicate as a November leaf, one of the oldest citizens of Kansas. But that did not stop her; she still watched every flick—when she was young, she said, they used to call them flickers—with the power to trigger her tears. Through thick and thin this woman stayed herself, which wasn't always easy.

Whenever I would visit—as I would often do in later years when time had mellowed strife—she was in seventh heaven. She would move her old wicker chair into the sunshine on the porch where Lizzy's red geraniums still grew, and settle in with many wrinkled smiles: "Now tell me everything. I want to know the smallest morsel. All of it. All! Precisely." She energized herself by learning details of the world I have created for myself—a world she ached to know but never had the chance to see, for the Depression nullified such plans. *Left and Right* is my tribute to Josie. To her world. To her dreams. To her clan.

To the earth that grew Josie and Jan.

To the kernels that conquered the prairie. To the kernels that

brought down The Wall.

One evening, as we were sitting on the porch, just she and I and in the sky a misty moon, she told me that, once Jan was dead, she was all set to go, leave Mennotown behind, take nothing else but Rarey.

She told me of the auction going forward, only in reverse; she told me all about the time the bankers came and took Jan's farm equipment, took off with combine after combine, and even repossessed the brand new harvesters that Jan had planned to ship to Apanlee but somehow never did—and how his good friend, Doctorjay, the lush, the Lutheran, a man few dared to cross, decided in the end he'd had it with the bankers and ran them off Jan's property.

All that.

That was before the government succeeded finally in confiscating every gun to safeguard, as they say, democracy, which happened just last year.

Here's what I think, but only to myself: in those days, deep in the Depression, it was acceptable to call a thief a thief. Not now. Now we have laws called Hate Laws. They silence everyone.

There, on the porch that Jan built many years ago for his young, sparkling Josie, this matriarch and I had many cozy chats. On the wall on a bent, rusty nail hung her old, wilted suffragette hat. By then, time had so worn her spine that she could barely straighten it, but early, every morning, she took her walk against the wind.

She was like that. She said she would walk, and she did.

Josie liked to squander all her charms and energies on foreigners. She was known to be partial to them. She either liked people or didn't—and it was clear when we first met that she liked me. A lot. If ever there was such a thing in my turbulent life, she gave me a sense of belonging.

The moment I arrived in Mennotown out of the European

war, she rose and stood behind my chair. When no one knew quite what to do with me, she knew; she made me popcorn and hot chocolate milk with marshmallows on top. She even made me eat *vareniki* which she herself disliked.

She told me with a wink I thought odd at the time: "Eat. Eat. You can't shame me by eating so little. They are good for your teeth and your gums."

"Have yet another zwieback," Josie said, warm hands on both my shoulders. She took a shine to me. She spent herself on other people, gladly, but only those she liked.

She was so old, by then, nobody knew for sure just what her age might be. But she was ancient; that we knew. She did not keep that secret.

"I've lied so long about my age I really can't remember," said Josie, being Josie. "Can I afford to die? I have this bet with Archie I will outlive him yet."

For years, she told me many times, when I myself locked horns with Archie, she'd cross the street when she saw Archibald. He never managed to catch up with her, no matter how much energy and cunning he put to the pursuit.

When I saw Josie last, the paper claimed she was two years away from being mentioned coast-to-coast by Willard Scott of NBC as one of Kansas' most esteemed, noteworthy centenarians. I have been told she died in peace, which may be her last laugh.

We spent many evenings together, examining the past. Those nights were rich. She gave me her entire life to help my script along. She never told one story when two or three would do. The winds took up the sweetness of the soil and spread it everywhere—the smell of the earth, freshly plowed.

"I was a child," she said. "Jan was a grown-up suitor."

I see Jan Neufeld clearly. That's where he came alive, the man who founded Mennotown, who spread the first grain on the floor and beat out the heads with jointed flails. Josie told me many stories of the angular young man who put his seed into his

land and sons and daughters in her womb to make the future grow, who drove his sturdy roots into the soil of Mennotown so that America could prosper in the Lord.

And may He rest Jan's bones.

Old Josie told me that, when she arrived from the Ukraine—a child herself, about my age when I arrived out of the rubble of Berlin almost six decades later—she took off her shoes and walked barefoot, so she could feel the warmth of Kansas against the white and frozen wasteland she had left behind.

"And ever since," said Josie, smiling wistfully, "I walked through my life with sand in my shoes. In this town, you behave."

Right. You behave.

There is a script, and you conduct yourself according to that script. If you know what is good for you, you pay attention, verily.

I didn't, in my younger years. I was a hothead then. I would not let them be; there was a lot of friction. But there were also rules, and now I know there would not have been Mennotown, had there not been strict rules.

From Josephine, as she was called reproachfully in her own youth when she broke yet another rule, I learned the details of the early pioneering years—the prairie storms, the buffalo chips, the days when the *Wichita Eagle* was only eight pages and people paid with eggs, as fine a currency as any.

"The year when Jan and I were married," said Josephine, "a haircut cost three pennies. A loaf of bread went from a nickel to a dime."

She came to Kansas as an immigrant at a time when all travel was still done by surrey. She still remembered clearly when beards went out of fashion but mustaches hung on. She told me of the oxen taking people visiting across the bumpy road to Hillsboro, which was before the flivvers came that calcified the prairie's arteries and forced the yields and stops.

I know all about Jan and his turn-of-the-century flivver. And

Little Melly's doilies. And her shenanigans. And how Jan, still engaged to Little Melly, was set to marry her but ended up marrying Josie—who then disgraced herself by having one of the unsettling Finkelsteins arrive and have her likeness drawn, proud as she was of her first child, still snug in her young belly.

The earth moved through the tail of Halley's Comet the year when Josie wore a flowered hat—a scandalous offense. She was the first who rode a bicycle along the dusty streets of Mennotown and showed a rakish ankle. The first, but not the last.

I know the stories about Doctorjay who always smelled of iodine, and his wife, Noralee, who hid behind the apple tree so she could better eavesdrop, and how, once Noralee had passed away, he married Abigail who was a Donoghue and danced atop his nose.

"You went to him with all your woes," said Josephine, "and he knew everything, despite a third grade education. He was a riot, people said. Politically astute."

I know. He voted Roosevelt.

"He had his instincts in his bones," insisted Josephine as she and I sat on the porch and watched the shadows lengthen. "When finally the war was done and Hitler put a bullet to his brain, old Doctorjay, the town's most patriotic motorist, made his horn shriek before he took the intersection, and that's when he ran into one of Lizzy's cows. Smack! Plunk! That's how he killed himself. And wholly within character."

I listened, and I did not say a word, and in good time Old Josie died, and much was left unsaid.

Two years before she passed away, Josie took my hand and led me to the mothball-smell Historical Museum, built on the corner lot where the two country roads converge—one out of Hillsboro, one out of Wichita—replete with holes and ruts that always made Jan's horse rear up and buck as he came courting Josephine.

"Against his mother's wishes. She never would have told you so, but we all knew: she was against our marriage."

I know that story, too, for Lizzy's spirit never left; it lives on in a hundred quilts she stitched to give away to charity; it lives in jams cooked to perfection and in *vareniki* that are prepared just so.

"She was all set to have Jan marry Little Melly who wanted him in the worst way," triumphed Old Josephine. And something fired from within. Still. After all these years.

And then, with a small sigh: "Well, life is short. What can you say? Then Little Melly passed on, too. She has been dead for years. God rest her spiteful soul."

She took my hand and showed me Doctorjay's museum, where people long since dead spoke to me many times from dusty documents and rusty tools, their voices quietly intense, embedded in the fabric of this place called Mennotown, so I can tell the younger generation that there are, after all, true absolutes.

That black is black and white is white and that there is no argument.

That thrift is preferable to sloth. That it is better to be diligent than lazy and better to be clean than foul.

Here is a town still stuck in time—old-fashioned people still doing their old-fashioned living behind their checkered gingham drapes, still basking in the joys of patriotic holidays, still rolling out their hospitality, yet sensing dimly that a fiendish and nefarious thing is gnawing at the edges of their heritage with sharp and even teeth.

In *Left and Right,* I said out loud what others were merely thinking. That's why, when it premiered, it packed the movie houses, and even Archie cheered.

Now I put up with Archie, and he puts up with me. We found a truce of sorts. He says I cast spells over people. He claims I have what he calls artistry—one step removed from vanity, which is the sin of sins.

Artistry. That is my job. That is also my passion. I try to write with light, although in Hollywood, belching its moral soot, that isn't always easy.

In Mennotown, by contrast and comparison, there is a place for everything, and everything is order. That is the righteous way. Folkways still have a place in Mennotown, and black is never white.

When I was young and foolish, I was determined not to let that ruin my life—their narrow, well-scrubbed habits, as tidy as tidy can be, the lapse into Low German, the tormenting snippets of gossip. Impatient as I was in those young years for Hollywood, not knowing then from where my own impatience would catch its fire next, I thought I could leave everything behind. Just up and walk away. Just head for Hollywood, its glitter and its lure.

Now I know this: I could no more have stopped myself from writing *Left and Right* than I could keep a cloud from raining.

I know every Aryan proverb by heart.

Don't look at me like that.

I'm nearly biting off my tongue when I hear one more time the corny story of the Holocaust, which is our daily sop. It's Whitey's victuals. There's no relief—not ever.

When it comes to my past and heritage and owning up to it, I am still raw and shy, and with my best foot forward. But I measure myself by my relatives' standards, and not by Hollywood's. Let that be clearly known.

My relatives are like old songs—songs with the smell of hay. I feel their ethnic tap root stir in me and burrow deep and bring up those forgotten nutrients on which my past was grown. It is my past; it still belongs to me—and Hollywood won't wrestle it from me. For I have forebears, too.

They suffered, and they died.

From their portraits they stare down at me with their ancient, blue, pacifist stares, and I know that as long as I still walk with sand in my shoes, I can't be at peace with myself. I need to walk barefoot, like Josie.

I didn't understand all that until I was much older.

For many years, I stayed away, because these people hurt me, particularly Archibald.

"Once a Hun, always a Hun!" he told me many times when out of earshot of the clan.

It happens every time as I go back, periodically, right after the harvest is safely garnered and just before the colors fade from the last days of fall, to be engulfed with familiarity, to soak up that old smell.

A Hun? Unspoken is the slur he might have used, but didn't. That was his private verdict, and is his verdict still, but what does that fool know?

The man is blind. He is so blind he has to finger everything. He always fingers me: "—and what about the ovens? And what about the Jews?"

Well? What about the Jews?

That question mushrooms suddenly, without the slightest warning, out of the clear blue sky. It stigmatizes instantly. It hobbles every thought.

"Just what did we do wrong," I ask myself, "except to lose the war?"

So let him think I am a Nazi. I think he is a milk-and-water moralist. He suspects I won't make it to heaven. I, on the other hand, have been to hell and back.

I walked through my Fatherland's ashes.

When I left Mennotown to try my luck in Hollywood, I took my old, Ukrainian nanny's name for my good luck charm, to be safe, and I packed Lilo's dream.

To be a writer for the screen was one of several dreams that Lilo and I shared when we were teenagers in war-torn Germany. That is galling to Archie—to hear about Lilo. He does not understand that it was Lilo's life, and Lilo's death, that made me what I am. When it comes to my sources, I will take orders from no one, not even Archibald.

While I still lived in Mennotown, I was never myself; I settled for somebody else. I had to leave, for Archie's prayers would

have strangled me—for he had come, I knew, and crushed my much-beloved Fatherland and stonily laid Lilo's brave, young life to ashes. He was the one who took his gun and pointed it at Jonathan long after all the bombing stopped. He helped the fellow with the bigger mustache. To his eternal shame.

I, too, will have my reckoning. One day I will return for good, to find that warmth again, that prayer-warmth, deep in that ethnic quilt, bypassing Archibald.

I had no idea I would tap into feelings that strong. When I first started working on my play, I thought that I was a mosquito trying to buzz an elephant. As a producer friend once said: no film in Hollywood can win, unless you break at least five of the Ten Commandments.

Yet *Left and Right* won handsomely, which ought to tell you something. That was no accident.

"Next, I will have to tell them about Erika," I think, but something within shrinks away. It is painful to speak about her. Ever since the world has started calling me by my artistic name, I have forgotten about Erika.

I spent years distancing myself. She's dead now. Tasha lives. She leads a rich and lavish life in Malibu, surrounded by the Jews.

It's still that old, crazed fear.

It's easier to go along with the prevailing attitude, to say with nonchalance: "Yes. Yes. Indeed. There was a devil on the loose in Nazi Germany. He had a tail and hooves. He was up on the mountain. Me, I was down below."

I need to learn to stand up tall, look Archie straight in his left eye—he lost his right one in an ethnic brawl, way back in World War I because he was a German—and say to him as calmly as I can: "But that's not how it was! You have your facts all wrong!"

That's what I need to say.

I see the trembling cross as it is sliding, slowly, over golden patches. I think: "Way down below, there grows the wheat of

Apanlee. Those are the nuggets of which history is made. It's not the Hebrew's gold."

How many of them know? Does anybody care?

There lies the quilt my Russian-German relatives commenced to stitch with diligence and care when Lizzy landed in the prairie more than a hundred years ago, believing that as long as preachers led the faithful in a hymn, good values couldn't help but triumph over bad. She had her values straight. When she sailed the Atlantic, she brought not just the trunk that held the wheat, she brought her non-stop prayers she uttered in High German, the language of her Lord whom she loved more than life. There were no questions in those days as to identity in ethnic terms; there was firm certainty. It mattered little that her native soil was the Ukraine—her language was the language of the country she called her Fatherland with pride. As she would tell her brood a thousand times: "What if a cat has kittens in the oven? Does that make kittens cookies?"

She was an Aryan woman. Let us remember that. Before she came to Kansas to settle on the soil that would grow bread to feed the world, she packed the following: self-discipline, trustworthiness, thrift, diligence, goodwill, neighborly charity, fidelity and pride. In other words, she packed her bedrock values. She never spent a dollar foolishly. Nobody paid her way. She lived a life with satisfaction guaranteed, and when she died, in the Depression, she knew, and so did the entire state of Kansas, that she had lived correctly.

That needs to be said, too. Her way of life was virginal. She had blue eyes. Blond hair.

There was not one of them who did not have blue eyes. She left her progeny, of whom there are so many now you cannot count them all, and they are blond and blue-eyed.

Their gaze is hooded now; their spirit shackled, sadly.

To this day, they are strong and hardy; they all grew strong on air and hymns and healthy food; and every one of them believes, this in the face of our sappy world, that it is mostly food

and singing that sets them still apart.

That's how they've been debased.

That's all it takes, they think—just healthy food and lusty hymns and Faith and proper credit to the Lord. That's why their children go to church like little wooden dolls, in all their finery, to hear and take to heart what Archie has to say.

Judeo-Christianity starts early and runs deep in Mennotown, where bingo is forbidden and nicknames clues to vanity. That's Archie's turf. He guards it with ferocity. When I give lectures and tell audiences that there was once a place called Apanlee, they stare and have nothing to say.

Few youngsters, growing up in Mennotown, still have a martyr's memory. High German is already barely breathing; Low German, in another generation, will be gone.

"How much do you remember?" one of the youngsters asked me recently. To him, my people's past is ancient—our war reduced to "Auschwitz," our struggle vilified, our soldiers demonized.

How much did I forget?

Three weeks lay, for example, between the death of Lilo, my best friend, and when the Allies finally arrived—but I remember nothing of that stretch of time. Not one small morsel. Nothing. I do remember clearly, though, the day when Archie and his Negro friend arrived in prostrate, bombed-out Germany, both chewing Wrigley's Gum.

I don't remember, either, how I came to America.

I know the bullets had stopped flying; the Allies were bent over Germany, quartering my Fatherland as though it were an animal as vicious as they come—and not the place where Heidi lived her clean, strict, dedicated life, and Lilo rode her bicycle.

I loved Lilo a lot. I loved Heidi. I loved Jonathan, too, although shyly.

All three of them are dead.

There's much I don't remember rightly. There's much I won't forget.

Then came the bitter and humiliating time I still remember clearly—the stupefying postwar years. The Nuremberg Trials. The whispers about Morgenthau. There was no food in Germany, defeated and divided. There was no fuel. There was no pride, no splendor. Those few of us who had survived—by means we knew not how!—flung our lives against the likes of Archibald like moths into the flame.

You couldn't buy a button or a needle; the shelves were bare; the people starved; for weeks, we ate nothing but mushrooms. That's when my mother curled her toes around her wooden sandals and went to Archibald and said: "Me, too," and Archie sneered: "We don't owe you a living! There's no free ride for you!" and Mimi tossed away the last shred of her dignity and spoke with downcast eyes: "I hope your holidays went well?"

I never understood how she could compromise like that. I never did, but then, I guess, I blotted out a lot.

When I arrived in Mennotown, I curtsied to my relatives in honor of my betters. I soon enough found out: nobody did that here.

"No need to genuflect," said Archibald, while giving me the evil eye. "This is America. We're equal in America."

Says who?

Blood boils between Archie and me. For years, we passed each other on the sidewalk without speaking. For years, I feared and loathed him. Now I no longer fear him.

His God is very old and has a giant ear, like the satellite dish that sits atop three rusty poles with which he listens in on hirelings up on the Hill whom he now either sponsors or subverts with the help of a muddled but stridently militant pulpit.

These days, he does soul-saving electronically. He will not ever win me to his ways, old sinner that I am, with little to repent. He knows that. So do I.

He rubs it in at every opportunity: "We've got to watch you folks. Your goose will soon be cooked. Why do you look at me like that—sort of funny?"

In Mennotown you walk into the thick of it—into the attitude that all the Germans ever did in World War II was turn the Hebrews into cinders. That comes not just from Hollywood; it flows right from the pulpit. Judeo-Christianity. You can't go wrong if you condemn the Holocaust. It works like a charm, every time.

And yet, I watch Archie with awe. He is setting the churches afire with Faith. He knows how to rally his troops.

"You start with a given," says Archie, who glorifies God while berating the sinners. "And it's this: That it is better to speak truth than lies. That it's better to live clean than dirty."

Precisely.

And what does he offer his folks, I think as the heat floods my face and my stomach knots up and my heart fills with rage, that Heidi's Führer, Lilo's Führer didn't offer his disciples a hundred times over and more? Salvation. Peace. Clean living. Decency.

Self-discipline rather than stupor.

Honesty rather than falsehoods.

Robust harvests in place of sick weeds.

In the name of the Cross, said the Führer. On behalf of a world filled with beauty. On behalf of a world free of filth.

I've heard it said from Jonathan's own lips that if you gazed too deeply into the Führer's eyes, you fainted from his dream.

Why do I tell you this? I have no choice but to be faithful to my nature; that is why. It didn't used to be that way, for Archie crippled me. It's only now that I have come to realize that there is rubble to be cleared away from my own Aryan soul.

It has been many years since I arrived in Mennotown out of the fratricidal war that buried not just flesh but spirit, sitting at Wednesday devotions, fire on my cheeks and cotton in my ears. They claim that I so hated Archibald that I braided my hair counter-clockwise. That I slept in my bed upside down.

When it was clear to Archibald I would not have my soul be

fingered, I had to leave, and Archie stayed, and everyone was glad. Maybe old Josie shed a tear or two. She was the only one.

When I left Mennotown, I was in a hurry to get somewhere fast. Five days before my sixteenth birthday, and doubting I could ever calm myself, I made my thumb point west and hopped onto a pickup truck and ended up in Hollywood. Now I reside in Malibu where I live in a worldly sense, as Archibald would say, and all the younger folks in Mennotown, the ones that lean toward the Methodists and Presbyterians, are very proud of me.

Not so the oldsters, though, for Archie sees to that. At their church rummage sales, they buy each other's doilies and give him every penny. They have their doubts. I am their object of curiosity.

They know me only through the stories that Archie has invented.

He suspects that I dabble in karma. He is eager to broadcast the worst. I've heard of an owl that bites off the paws of a mouse to keep it in its nest, and Archie is like that.

He is free to say what he wants. I am free to deny it, however.

It's very simple, really. It's not historically correct to say it was the Führer who captivated, magnetized and charmed young people by the millions—young people such as Jonathan. Or Mimi. Lilo. Heidi.

For Heidi, it was mostly order. It was large babies with a lot of energy. And peace. And certainty. And pride. For Heidi, it was sweet and virginal. Mysterious. She took the Führer like a lover to her heart because he understood the fabric of her being.

Or take Marleen, the matriarch of Apanlee. The Führer was her savior, the genuine Messiah. Did that make her a criminal? She was one of the steppe's richest women, yet she owned but two dresses—a dress in which to work, and one in which to pray. She always prayed in German, since her Bible was written that way. Her family was slaughtered savagely before the Führer came. The Führer was her god. He was the best her hard and bitter life

brought forth; he gave enormous pride to people beaten to the ground.

My mother, Mimi. She as well.

She was one of the first, way back in the Ukraine, to practice the Führer salute. To this day, Mimi argues for the Führer; she'll argue to the latest hour that it is wrong to say that it was merely plunder. That it was hate. And spite. And wanting superiority.

"The Jews are like a hydra," claims Mimi, when Archie needles her. "One body, many heads." She argues that she hates it how they nose themselves through Wichita. She says Americans are dense and dumb, wilfully arrogant, ruled by collective ignorance. She says they slave for their exploiters without thinking. My mother knows so little of smooth manners.

She claims that as this country aches for a decisive leader not yet beholden to the usurers, still dragging nation after nation into beggary, the people should remember—if you please!—that, way back in the thirties, at least in Germany, the future walked in light.

"The *Führer*'s message is just as relevant today as it was then," says Mimi. "If you ask me—more so, today, than ever. Why did we lose? Because your numbers triumphed over race and reason? Because the Germany we knew and loved was overwhelmed, not overcome? That quantity, not quality, won out?"

I only need to watch the teeming underbelly of America to know that it is so.

"Sure. Sure. The ovens one more time," sneers Archibald.

The war goes on and on. The news reels never stop.

"It has been almost fifty years," claims Mimi, "yet still the Führer's spirit dances across Europe, clad in his fiery robe, igniting brush and shrub."

That's Mimi, who was victimized as well, which is forgotten now. She looks at me, accusingly, and asks:

"Well? Speak your piece. Don't sit there, only listening. Answer me. Speak up. What do you think?"

What do I think? Here's what I think: I think that if salvation

ever comes, it has to come with truth. With naked truth inspected with clear eyes.

I know back home, at Apanlee, the Jews and we lived side by side, for centuries. The Jews left us alone, and we left them alone. We didn't hurt each other. We lived in worlds apart.

But then the Beast sprang from the canyons of New York and started crunching bone. It clawed at our race and swallowed our males, and shortly after I was born, my people had no men.

That, too, must be called genocide.

But then the Führer came. And wondrously, the swastika spelled calm.

And then the trek. The Allied firebombs. The Führer's city, ashes. The voice of Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish propagandist, who hectored the Red Army: "Kill! Kill! And kill! No one is innocent. Nobody! Nobody! Neither the living nor yet the unborn."

It was rivers of Aryan blood in the gutters.

What happened to Natasha, for example, is to this day a question mark. She was an Aryan, too—of Russian ancestry. She wasn't even kin. There's no museum squatting in the heart of Washington to mourn for my dear Baba.

So much—so many died. I am one of the last who made it out of Apanlee, and let me tell you, for the record, that there's no guilt in me.

*

I feel the Kansas wind as I am stepping off the plane. The prairie in November lets you breathe. In the Midwest, the seasons write the script; there is a quietness, a stoic gathering about the sharp horizon that shouldn't be confused with calm. A force of nature. Imminent. Preceding an austere but beneficial country rain.

These people hold the fort. They know the year is running out of days. They know about blocking and tackling. They may not know it yet, but all of them perch at the edge of history.

I count on them. They will link arms to cross a stream, their instincts welding them.

The moment Archie spots me at the Baggage Claim, he fixes me with his left eye, steps forward, and turns breezy. "Well, how's it going, Sputnik? All systems set to go?"

We give each other harmless smiles. We act as if we are the fattest relatives.

"Say cheese and smile," winks Archibald, elbows a few reporters, and snaps himself a Polaroid to send to the *Wichita Eagle*.

I relish this small interlude, amid the flash of cameras, on spindly heels, with naked toes, strobe lights exploding in my face, snarling traffic with my autographs. Since *Left and Right* turned out to be an unexpected winner, the media dogs me everywhere.

Next, Archie winks: "Well, look at you! My, my! As gaudy as an Easter egg. They say you have so many clothes that you can change your outfit every day. You'll have yourself being gossiped about. You know that, don't you, Sputnik?"

Against my will, I say: "I buy my things on sale." My mouth is dry. My heart is pounding. I know what will come next, and sure enough:

"Well, have you found yourself a rich and comfortable bachelor as yet?"

That's Archie—he goes for the jugular swiftly.

"There's four mighty fine fellows in my congregation—" says Archie. "You'd have your pick. You could do worse, you know. If you would only take advice, you'd know—"

"Please, Archie. Not again."

I ache with the effort of unspoken words. I feel that old, familiar numbness coming over me but manage to keep silent, while Archie tends an itch atop his cranium.

"—you'd know that if you joined, you'd have your choice of charities, what with—"

"I said please don't—"

"—what with your famous name. What with your fine connections all over Hollywood, you could—"

"I cannot be what you would call a genuine Christian—" I try to interrupt, and Archie finishes his thought:

"—you could do so much good. You could help carve the Kingdom of our Lord Christ Jesus who gave His life from love for sinners just like us—"

We both stare ahead, both very solemn and correct, both knowing that time has blurred nothing.

A billboard warns as we leave Wichita: "Don't trash our town." A deep growl is embedded in that sign. Don't trash America!

Towns smell as people do—some clean, and others dirty. Wichita smells like its slaughter yards on Twenty-First and Market, but Mennotown, I know from visits past, smells clean. It's spic-and-span, this Midwest German town, with smells you take in through both nostrils, lustily, while walking through young pine woods, or between well-scrubbed laundry dried in the morning air, or sitting in a coffee house, depending on which way the wind just happens to be blowing.

I like to visit here. Each year, I visit for a week, but one week is enough.

"Were it not for this man who's sitting next to me," I think, "I wouldn't mind staying a bit." For he knows. And I know. And it is this: He talks about the end result, but nobody questions the path.

The path was everything.

Why was it, for example, I'd really like to know, that this old toady's allies all sported and displayed the pentagrams on their gray, furry caps? That's what I want to know.

Americans wore white. The Bolsheviks wore red. On tanks. Planes. Uniforms. But it was Satan's logo.

That's why I still go back, to my own roots, to listen to my past, incomprehensible to most, like a forgotten language.

Each year, when I return, I see that the Midwest has changed a little more. Each year it's darker. Grittier. Each year there's

more graffiti.

"That is because the Donoghues have intermixed," says Archie angrily, who reads my thoughts, and steps hard on the gas.

The Donoghues are still considered rabble. Their offspring are as common and as grimy as the streets of Wichita. They still lead their scandalous lives. They have all sorts of rights the Midwest farmers never even knew existed, but they complain of wrongs.

"And where it will end, I cannot begin to imagine," scolds Archie.

"You wonder," I agree.

His brow is furrowed now. The spittle flies. "They keep on having children, some good, some bad, but all of them on welfare. No morals there. No discipline. All having different fathers."

"Some colored, Archibald?"

"You're darn right, Sputnik. Right! Unfortunately, that's part of it. Precisely!" That's still where Archibald, in every other way a Democrat, all for equality and giving every fellow a fair shake, tends his big grudge against the bureaucrats. "The Feds have dough for almost any cause as long as you are intermixed," sneers Archie.

"Is that a fact?"

"They keep pushing entitlement modes. They give unworthy people subsidies and loans so they can multiply like rabbits—"

Right. But if I voice a heresy like that—what with my German accent and with my German past—all of my motives are in question. He sees no parallels. He holds the Scriptures in one hand and shakes his index finger at the social order with the other.

"He can afford to hitch his morals to misogyny," I think. Aloud, I try to say as calmly as I can:

"But if I say, for instance, that keeping one's own ethnic pool as strong and pure as possible is laudable—"

"You can't say things like that!" scolds Archibald. "That's Nazi talk. Not to say racist, Sputnik."

"But didn't you just—?"

"You can't say things like that around here. Just you remember that."

"Why not?"

"This is America. We're equal in America."

Which, he thinks, ends the argument.

Next he says this: "I hear that *Left and Right* is going through the roof?"

"That's what they say," I tell him modestly.

"How many zeroes, Sputnik?"

"You'd be amazed to know."

But Archie only sniffs. "A zero here, a zero there, that is the modern way. You can't grow real wealth based on zeroes. It's like I always tell my kids, you've got to practice stewardship. Just practice proper stewardship—"

The Lord gave Archibald his share of sons and daughters, this after Archie finally threw caution to the wind and married Temperance. Now, for my benefit, he counts his offspring's virtues on his fingers. "I taught my children personally that, by themselves, they all add up to nothing. Life's seasoning is Faith."

I know most all of them—all fine and upright citizens, equal to Satan's challenge. Some have preceded him and rest already in eternity; but most are still alive. The carpets in their homes are inches thick. When that old Kansas wind is blowing, they all wear woolen underwear. One opted for a lucrative career in dentistry. A second is a known environmentalist; a third is anti-nuclear, on account of his pacifist roots. One female teaches Anabaptist history. Still yet another, Norah Leigh—born after Noralee died and just before the geezer, Doctorjay, wed Abigail—works as a postal carrier in Mennotown's main office, a job she held for more than forty years. There was some talk about retirement a few years back, but Nora Leigh convinced the government that would be mental cruelty: her life would be curtailed beyond repair if she no longer knew who got his mail from whom.

A few years back, her oldest son ran for Congress on the

Moral Majority ticket, but missed election by an inch.

"He lost," claims Archibald, "because he didn't have sufficient visibility, which was the reason why he turned into a televangelist. He is a real Epp that way. He knows the politicians on the Hill are ripe and ready for the Gospel."

A pious Anabaptist zeal runs deep in straight-line Epp descendants. They do not scatter among Lutherans. Or visit arcades or, for that matter, ice cream parlors. Never! Or roll their socks. Or take up hockey as a sport. Or waste their sentiment on nicknames.

The Epps have multiplied and multiplied again. There are so many Epps, by now, you cannot count them all. A fraction only lives in Mennotown; the rest are in chronic retreat—from the world and its wicked temptations. They farm in Grand Forks, Mountain Lake and Freeman, South Dakota; they carry on in Iowa; they frown with disapproval the moment visitors arrive: a faster pace of singing, up there in Winnipeg! They know they must be ever vigilant to spot the mischief of the Fiend. It's vigilance that sets an Epp apart!

"It took two years and some enormously expensive travel to trace the entire Epp family tree," explains the Epp clan patriarch who's sitting next to me. "Percentage-wise, most of our first names start with M. Not mine, of course. I think that's odd. Don't you?"

"Not really. No."

"I do."

The Epps all keep on shedding spirit pollen, all teaching heathens stealthily and patiently how to let go of gods of stone. One grandchild, Archie tells me proudly, is affiliated with a church that has a growing edge in Africa and Indonesia. Another witnesses in Haiti where gospelling is striking sturdy roots. You find Epps everywhere. Not a few live in Minnesota. Some in Brazil. In Canada. You find them even in the high plateaus of Mexico and in the thorny hell of Paraguay where, odd to say, the hottest season is December, the cold comes from the south in

June, the moon hangs upside down; palms dot the land like an army of one-legged soldiers, "—and where, or so some people claim, this sadist doctor that the Jews are always after, this Joseph-what's-his-name, is hiding out among old Nazi brass," says Archie, giving me a sidelong glance.

"Well, are they making headway?"

"It's up to the authorities," grunts Archibald. "They have their own agenda."

I take care to admire the fence posts. I mention the weather, still mild for this time of the year. I also comment on the ruts in the asphalt.

Not that that stifles Archie, who is like a bloodhound that way.

"I hope they catch him soon. I hope they hang him in Jerusalem. Although I must confess: I've had it now. The Hebrews always think they are the navel of the universe. I've had it up to here."

"No kidding."

"Who do they think they are? They kvetch—they don't stop kvetching! Are they the only ones who have a patent on the Wailing Wall? Is that their copyright?"

There is a lightness in my head and ringing in my ears. That's what I'd like to know.

I stare out of the window. This is some country here. I know the neighbors will cook up come mighty meals to put some meat on me.

We drive through fields and yet more fields—some grain, but mostly stubble. While Archie keeps on staring straight ahead, his neck getting ever more mottled, I watch the tractors, throbbing rhythmically, while several long-haired youngsters sit atop with earphones on, sipping Coke through plastic straws while listening to Randy Travis.

"Those kids just shift the levers leisurely and push assorted buttons; the tractors do the work," brags Archibald, while looking at me sideways.

We drive along in silence. Now that we are alone and he is gathering diplomacy, he doesn't call me Sputnik, and I begin to sense just what is troubling him.

He clears his throat. "Our folks are moving with the times. We are not that old-fashioned."

"I know."

"The media makes us out that way, but we move with the times."

"Well, who believes the media?"

"Right. Well. Ahem. We have a lot of pride in our machinery. Especially our combines. Those babies cut and thresh up to a thousand bushels of winter wheat per day. You might just want to mention that tomorrow."

"All right."

"Why don't you mention that? How up-to-date we are? How we're moving with the times?"

"Why not? I'll be glad to oblige you that way."

"We aren't as dumb as some people think." His voice has turned defiant. "We're modern folks. We're interfaith. I've checked it out. We've got to think global these days."

"I'm glad you think so, Archie."

"Now that the Berlin Wall has fallen, we know it was our wheat the Russian wanted all along," says Archie, coming at me sideways.

"Last time, that was my argument."

He gives me a suspicious look. "Build that up in your keynote, Sputnik. Be inspirational. Uplifting. Give credit where credit is due. That would please many folks."

"All right."

"Oh, that reminds me. That reminds me. There's this reporter from the *Eagle* who asked if he could do an interview. Now that your movie is a hit, I thought we might discuss a slant—"

"Why not?"

"What will you say?"

"What do you mean, what will I say? I'll answer the report-

er's questions."

He inches a bit closer. "The other day, I heard an earful."

"Such as?"

"Are you involved with folks who call themselves Revisionists?"

"I read them, if that's what you mean."

At once, he hectors me: "You know that isn't good for you. That's dangerous. That's foolish. That's harmful to your health. Why stir up memories? It will bring your stomach pains back."

"Don't worry about that."

His head doesn't move, just his eye. He clears his throat. "Some papers claim you said that Jewish and conniving go together."

"I never said that, Archie."

"Well, you came close. You better watch it, Sputnik. Some folks will read between the lines. All through that movie script, you kept on dropping hints. About the Jews. And their shenanigans. If I were you, I'd be real careful. Real careful. And I mean careful. Careful is the word."

"All right. I said all right."

"This is America. We don't agree with stuff like that. Nobody doubts the Holocaust. Besides, the Jews—they have their noses everywhere; they know how to follow the stink. They're much too powerful, if you ask me, but on the other hand, we've got to get along. There's this one Jew, for instance, approving every grant—"

"Is that a fact?"

"Around here, we are civilized. We've got to let bygones be bygones. We wouldn't want to have an odious repeat of history, now would we? In this country?"

Those are his exact words. His blustery, insincere face has turned purple, and I see tiny droplets forming underneath his nose.

"Go on."

"Well. Now." He tells the steering wheel: "What can a fellow do? The Catholics revere the rosary; the Lutherans the Trinity; the Jews the Holocaust. You better not mention that stuff.

We wouldn't want to spoil the keynote, now, would we? We wouldn't want to get the delegates all hopping mad, now, would we? You can't go wrong with being inspirational and patriotic and leave the Holocaust alone. Just stick to generalities, and all will work out smooth."

"I answer only to myself," I say, but only to myself. It's still that old, crazed fear. He still sees history, I think, through the wrong end of a distorting telescope, where every woe is magnified for them and every hurt that we endured is tiny.

Out loud I say: "Don't worry. Just don't fret. I promise you that I won't breathe a word about the Hebrew Holocaust."

"Right. Right. Let's shut the door forever on that unhappy episode."

"Right. That's my very point."

"I don't like the tone of your voice."

I say between clenched teeth: "Why do we keep on fighting World War II five decades after it was lost for Germany? We lost. And you guys won. So let it be. Just let it be. Let go. Who gains by stirring up the past?"

"Good. Fine. That is my point. Exactly. That puts my mind at ease. I'm glad you think so. Truly!" Now Archie beams with gratitude, deflating. "That's fine. Just fine. That's what I always say."

He starts to chat; he is chummy; one thing leads to another. He is not one of those who want to turn the present back into the past; the past is the past, and the present the present; you can't re-write a single page; some things were not that clear-cut in that war and some of it—well, murky.

I make another bargain with myself while sitting next to Archie: I will speak up. Tell all. One of these days, I will.

But childhood fears run deep, and I have never had the courage which, for instance, my good friend Lilo had.

Now there was bravery. When she and I were young, in war-torn Germany, my cowardice was one long, never-ending nightmare, but Lilo had the touch. She had that inner honor that shone

from clear blue eyes. By contrast, even now, I am as fearful as a rabbit, as though the first part of my young life didn't count.

"Look! Over there. That's Jan's and Josie's grandsons, over there. See? You can tell who's a Neufeld, can't you?"

Right. You can't miss a Neufeld. You look at them and know there must be something to those genes that came from Apanlee. They are a clan apart. They are easy to spot by their passionate love for the soil. They aren't afraid to take risks, to experiment, to move into various endeavors. Some strange, persistent streak of genius strains hard to find expression.

One claims a patent on a gadget that attaches to up-to-date threshers. Another won three medals for streamlining the creamery. A third perfected a gate latch for cattle. They prosper, and they multiply. Their tomb stones testify.

"No bloodshed for princes and kings," they have proclaimed for centuries. And if a worldly ruler tried to tax them for their pacifist tradition, they knew precisely what to do: they packed and left and said: "Be this, again, God's will."

Determined every other way, accomplished every other way, time and again, they voted with their feet. Yet, here's my question mark: what do they know of ethnic pride? Its glory, and its cost?

I bite my lip. The town car gives a lurch.

The day has not yet melted into twilight as we glide into Mennotown.

There is a Janzen Court. There is a Harder Street. Sleek taxicabs, controlled by traffic lights, speed along Siemens Avenue, around the rim of Penner Park.

We pass the library that Josie helped to build by raising every penny with huge spaghetti feeds. It bears her husband's name.

Around the corner, to the left, we pass the place where Lizzy's sod house used to be, next to the Women's Shelter, where Little Melly's special cross stitch secrets are still taught.

Jan's steam mill, to the north of Mennotown, is now a modern restaurant, a popular tourist attraction. You can order *vareniki*

there, an ethnic specialty, prepared from yellowed recipes that have been handed down from family to family—or so claims the brochure that must have cost a dime, a nickel and a penny.

I know the place; I've dined there many times. Blond, blue-eyed youngsters serve you home-baked bread grown from the winter wheat Peet Neufeld traded from the Tartars—imported to America a century ago. A reproduction of the wheat bin Lizzy brought from Russia hangs prominently on the wall, next to the framed first nickel Lizzy earned, the one she vowed she'd never spend. And didn't.

The town car purrs. It's landmark after landmark, but time has not stood still. Beside the Unemployment Office, the Friesen store still stands, updated and remodeled. Next to it, Express Mail. Not all that many years ago, it was a mirthful Noralee who did her postal clerking there. I never met her, but she lives. She lives in memory. Still shrill. Still undiminished and rotund. Now there was ethnic color!

Ah, Noralee!

She scrubbed the linens every day, way back at Apanlee. By hand, she rinsed her children's diapers in the waterhole of Apanlee; her grandchild owns a chain of Laundromats. Another grandchild runs a grocery store, filled wall to wall with peaches, plums and gooseberries, with labels telling visitors the seeds came all the way from Apanlee, sewn into Noralee's skirt hem to keep it prim across her ankles.

Child-rich but penny-poor, the moment Noralee hit prairie soil, she waylaid Doctorjay, half-Lutheran, half-Christian, the Lord at his periphery because he guzzled so! There is the corner, by that lamp post, where her husband lost his life. It has been almost fifty years since Doctorjay collided with that calf and crushed himself inside his flivver, but this is still remembered and repeated, as are the many juicy tales of Noralee who passed on before he did, whom he forsook, the moment she passed on, for Abigail—who was a Donoghue, if you remember, Sputnik!—a Donoghue, a harlot, and a flirt!

Once every two years—July through August or September, provided the weather is placid—the Elder Archibald takes senior citizens of Mennotown on trips to Russia. That is his hobby now. As a sideline, he smuggles his Bibles. He snaps his Polaroids of the abandoned and neglected steppe where, in the olden days, the tsarist Cossacks roamed and where one princeling, once upon a distant time, was fed a bowl of noodle soup by Jan's and Josie's folks. He checked the story out. A few years back, he talked the Soviet guide into a little detour, and when he found it finally, this place called Apanlee, it disappointed mightily.

"Just crumbling buildings. Broken fences. Dilapidated—floor to ceiling. High weeds between the cobble stones."

"How sad."

"A goat or two, maybe. That's all. That's all that's left. That is God's punishment for straying from the path."

His face, so jovial up to now, has become cold and hard. Now he is chewing on his mustache, overwrought. "Now, Sputnik, tell me this. Why don't we ever learn from history? Now our country is decaying. We should have learned from them. When they went godless over there, at Apanlee, that's how it all began."

"If you say so."

"Now people keep on tossing spitballs here, instead of rolling up their sleeves. Where will it end? Why can't we put an end to all the moral rot?"

He echoes many farmers, aghast at what they see. They have no name for it. They have no frame of reference. Their past has been stolen from them. You can see many crusty oldsters sitting in their rocking chairs, reading their Daily Devotions, turning page after page with huge, wheat-gnarled hands. They are the newly disenfranchised—this in a country they helped build and which is still their home.

There is no doubt that even Mennotown has started its decay in spirit and in fact. The Jensen home, now crumbling at the edges. The brand new grammar school has many classrooms—

thirty, forty?—and is connected through an intercom. Neglecting the Three R's, kids learn about such things as birth control and Stay-Away-From-Drugs. The latest horror is the condom push; and worse is yet to come.

"They don't learn hymns and catechism, and prayer is outlawed," grieves Archibald.

"Well, what's your remedy?"

"Apply the paddle! Use the paddle! That's what I always say."

"I see."

"Our teachers can no longer teach; now they patrol the halls, because twelve-year-old children carry guns. Can you imagine, Sputnik? Guns! We must outlaw all guns. I'm all for gun control. We need some gun control!"

*

So here I am, in Mennotown, on Josie's L-shaped couch, next to a pumpkin of a cousin. The neighborhood is watching Donahue. The relatives make sure they don't miss Donahue, an expert baby kisser.

"The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!" yells Phil and runs into the audience, coattails flapping, to hand somebody else the microphone. He is a Liberal. He interrupts. He heckles.

"Just what are we afraid of? In Russia, you cannot even purchase toilet paper! Their queues are stretching over city blocks! They love our hamburgers and jeans! They're eager to try on democracy for size! Why are we so afraid to lend a helping hand?"

The relatives bob heads. Here is one talk show host who knows his arguments.

"Look at Vietnam," shouts Phil, and waves his microphone and scratches his gray head. "Look at El Salvador. Argentina. Panama. Nicaragua. The Philippines. Everywhere, a thousand quarrels. Why not, instead, adopt a thousand points of light?"

When Phil gets eloquent like that, nobody has a counter-ar-

gument.

"Why not, with so much strife, adopt a world-wide policy that's fair to everyone?"

One global village? One strong government? One market and one currency?

"His point of view, you must admit, is very hard to argue with," says Archibald authoritatively.

The folks nod to that, sagely. A thousand points of light in a revamped, re-ordered universe—they like that phrase a lot. That sounds magnificent.

"In fact, it's practically Biblical," says Archie, looking flushed.

The conversation drifts. The coffee scent is wafting. No matter what the time of day, somewhere there is a coffee pot. A cousin starts to speculate that Phil might be related to the Donoghues of Mennotown, who all vote the Democrat ticket—provided you can get them to the polls, a mighty undertaking. They're still a lazy bunch, one step removed from bums.

"Assuming they can all walk down the primrose path," as Archie puts it archly.

"There is no rousing them to any honest work—"

"They know which side their bread is buttered on, and every one of them—"

"—and every one of them is heading for the trough."

"Entitlements. Up to their dirty ears."

This makes the townsfolk mad. If they would only try—so goes the argument on Josie's L-shaped couch—they could catch the American dream. It's there. Within reach. For the asking.

"They ought to at least try to save a little more to have a nest egg for the future, but do they do it? No."

One Donoghue, for instance, is now in charge of underwriting loans that Washington doles out to subsidize the crop. He throws his weight around, that one. He sits behind his desk—feet up, smirk on his face and polish on his fingernails—and all the farmers have to go to him each fall to finance next year's harvest.

A second Donoghue has found himself a cozy nest in the

ranks of Affirmative Action.

A third is busy with the homeless—hotfooting it with special airline vouchers back and forth to Washington, while farmers struggle to buy gas. And several of his older sons, still teenagers, already make a beeline for the loot, romancing with the Blacks.

"Why mongrelize the neighborhood?" is what they want to know. They're all for giving everybody a fair shake, since this is still America. But where does it say we must mix?

Not in their Old World Gospel, still in the Gothic script.

I watch them as they warm their chairs, alone with my own thoughts. In Mennotown, the spotted owl is not important; it's politicians playing re-election games; both pro-life outcomes for the unborn innocents and pro-death punishment for hard-core criminals get thumbs-up signs; free trade is really just the only way to go; embargoing the wheat to stop the Soviets in Afghanistan upsets them mightily.

Sometimes there's benign disagreement between the young folks and the old, but one thing never changes: does anybody really think that anyone could really hurt America? The greatest country in the world? No way!

America. The Gospel is embedded in that word. In Mennotown, the Stars and Stripes have meaning.

It is a pleasant afternoon. It smells of *apfelstrudel.*

"The Hitler days are gone!" yells Phil, and runs into the audience, perspiring at the arm pits. "The Stalin times are gone! The only thing that's left is to clean up our act and do away with prejudice. If there's one lesson we have learned, it's this: We are created equal. We're all created equal."

"An agitated liberal, that's what he is," squirms Mimi, while giving Phil the evil eye. "Look at him, sidling up to Posner!"

The folks just glare at her. The Jews are less than popular in Mennotown, but still, you mind your manners. All Jews, they know, turn their opinions on a dime—to wit, this Posner fellow. Right on your television screen! That one is to be watched! They saw him switch his loyalties according to the breeze; the mo-

ment the Berlin Wall came crashing down, what did he do? He cleverly jumped horses in mid-stream, denying he had ever been at heart a Communist, maneuvering himself right next to Donahue with his philosophies.

"They are like that," says Mimi, now taunting Archibald.

"And what, precisely, do you mean by that?"

She starts to count her main points on her fingers. "No principles. No pride. No sense of self. No loyalty to anything or anyone. Say what you will, Jews just aren't lovable people—"

When she is agitated by her memories of war, my mother gets like that.

When she and I arrived in Kansas—just barely squeezing through the cracks, thanks to enduring kinship ties that helped us with our visas—she had no teeth; the Soveits knocked them out when they knocked Mimi to the ground and had their way with her.

My mother, Mimi, dug herself out of the ruins of Germany. She regrets nothing to this day. When she talks of the war and aftermath, she makes the relatives just cringe, but luckily, there is no bite to anything she says; she lost her teeth; that's why.

"Our only crime is that we lost a war," claims Mimi now, and lifts a trembling chin.

I edge a little closer. She is my mother, after all, although I think of her as Mimi.

When I was born, it took her weeks before she even found a name. I never really was her child; there was no time; there was a war; the country blazed in violence. I don't remember ever sitting next to her, her arms around my shoulders.

"It was a vicious war."

Nobody in that spotless kitchen approves of the atrocities of war. They're pacifists. Not that appearances would tell. It takes a trained eye to single out a pacifist today. It's easier with the ear, for their diphthongs still give them away. They are decidedly against the sword, but they approve of troops sent to the farthest corners of the world to protect other people's right to

vote themselves a democratic government as well.

They are warm-hearted people with squeaky-clean windows, clinging to custom, clinging to soil. They keep neat sidewalks; painted fences; mulberry rows along the streets amid huge fields of waving grain. In front of every home in Mennotown, you find a flower garden. Pride in their pristine, peaceful way of life is what unites the clan.

Each year, when all the work is done, they reunite in Wichita, renew the Covenant, and give thanks to the Lord and Provider. This week, the town is full of them, all relatives so well-to-do they bypass the Ramadas; they look for Sheratons and Hyatts to showcase their success. They travel with their Samsonites so packed with double underwear and flannel gowns they don't fit in the trunks. They don't waste electricity, not even in hotels.

It is that kind of thrifty spirit that has put our astronauts smack on the moon where you weigh less and can leap high, from where you can behold the earth the way the good Lord made it—all blue and blithe and shimmering, just floating in a sable sheen as evidence of His magnificence and might.

"My favorite place in the entire universe is Kansas," claimed Archie just the other day, while blessing the Rotarians, expressing thus a patriotic sentiment that made those twenty dollar bills just float into his hat.

"I dare you here and now to find another country equal to America to live and die in, Mimi," taunts Archie, while Temperance refills his cup.

"And you have no idea," snaps Mimi and works her needle back and forth into a sock, "how late it is already. How little time is left."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It's true. Just wait and see. It's true."

"Aw! Gee! Come on now! Don't be silly."

Those are beguiling times when Archibald has Mimi to torment and Mimi counters, tit for tat, and people keep on taking sides, half-laughing and half-furious, until the two run out of

words and oldsters start to nod.

"This country is already faceless. Soon you will wish you never fought your war—"

She does not finish, knowing that the afternoon is long and arguments have to be savored to the fullest. Those two have long since made their peace; now she is baptized properly; she'll be in Heaven, too, where he is heading forthwith.

But still, if Archie has an audience, he likes to browbeat her.

My mother, on the other hand—though in her old age she is grateful for the nest that Archibald provided sumptuously when he permitted her to move into the flat where Little Melly used to live—has never learned to yield her memories when Archie launches into one of his tirades regarding her peculiar past.

"My war?" roars Archibald. "Come on! Get outta here! It was your war! It was your Führer's war!"

"Your war! That's what I said. You heard me right. Your war!"

"You were the ones who started it. We had to finish it."

"We did not!"

"Oh, yes you did! You did! We always finish other people's wars. We always have to clean up other people's messes."

"What messes? Are you kidding? When terror struck in Russia and took our men—our sons, our husbands, brothers, fathers!—and not one family was left untouched, where was America?"

"What do you mean, where was America?"

"That's right! Where were you guys? In bed with Joseph Stalin!"

She's gathering her steam. She mentions Prussia. Estonia. Latvia. Lithuania. Pomerania. She talks about Silesia. The Balkan nations. *Ach*! Though she has told the litany of Germany's defeat so many times that everybody knows it backwards, she cannot help herself. She wipes her eyes. She blows her nose. She cries while choking on emotions:

"Sit not in judgment, you! Your ally had the bigger mustache."

She has her memories.

She still remembers how Berlin was quartered and dismembered by the Allies—a bloody quarter thrown to every victor!—while she was hanging on a curtain rod behind some draperies.

Me, too. I huddled down below, in the potato cellar.

I was still small, but I remember clearly how Soviet soldiers came repeatedly and sliced the drapes with bayonets and snapped my mother's moral fiber. It happened yesterday.

I often heard my mother say she wishes she could go and die in Germany. She dreads her resting place, she says, amid uncomprehending strangers. She was there when the Allies let the butt of righteousness fall on her *Landsers'* shoulder blades, and she stood watching, weeping, as they were herded to Siberia with crutches in their armpits and stumps where legs had been.

"The war was done, and you? Don't talk to me of crimes. You handed innocents to Russia by the millions," cries Mimi. "Talk about ethnic cleansing!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"At point of gun, you threw your kinfolk to the wolves. Your flesh and blood! Your relatives! That isn't taught in any of your schools. All that is still a well-kept secret! A whole civilization died, because the enemy set brother against brother, and the world isn't any the wiser—"

And Archibald, maliciously: "Maybe you had it coming?"

I think: "Here's where his nasty character comes out. Now's when he shows his colors."

"We are now writing 1989," says Mimi, her old eyes bright with pain, her tea cup rattling in her hand, "and still that war goes on."

She's right. That war has never stopped. It chokes the television set. It clogs the radio. It spills buckets of slime in the paper. It spells rape of mind, spirit and soul.

My mother was still young when she was driven out of Apanlee with bleeding heart and empty hands, caught between blazing guns of two determined dictators. Their cannons, equally,

spat smoke and shells and flames across the plains of the Ukraine. She still sees all those refugees as they poured westwards, westwards, in the direction of the sinking sun through all that ice and snow, a milling, stumbling horde. Her fingers fly; her breath comes in short gasps. "If Germany had won the war, instead of losing it because you were too dense to recognize the enemy that had you dancing to his tune, who would harp on and on about the Holocaust?"

"Look. There she goes again!"

"There isn't one of us who hasn't suffered, too. But do we bleed our neighbors? Are we moored to the Wailing Wall? Do we insist on having shrines at taxpayers expense for a disastrous war fought half a world away?"

For Mimi, with one foot already in the grave, the wounds of that war fester on. "What Holocaust?" she wants to know, and her old, beaten, wrinkled face takes on defiance and despair. She claims she knows of not one single case of setting fire to a synagogue and burning up the Jews—at which point Archie finds a bit of wood with which to poke his teeth.

He loosens a soft belch. "You can't deny the chimneys."

There is an awkward silence in the room, and everybody looks at Mimi.

"Dreamed up in Hollywood. Trademarked in Israel. Made in America."

"Ha! Listen to who's telling!"

"How often will you send your boys as cannon fodder just so the Jews can once again put diamonds in their pockets?"

I read their faces easily. While everybody digs into the *apfelstrudel*, I watch as Archibald is working up a steam because he senses there is still some mileage left in Mimi.

"And not a child in school today," cries Mimi, "is taught the truth about what happened. What really, truly happened. That innocents were sacrificed like cattle!"

But Archie bristles at the thought, and he is not alone. The relatives think proudly of their war—and, more so, of the aftermath. That's when the real business of recovery began, while

they were rehabilitating Europe.

"You've got to grant us that! Thanks to the Marshall Plan, we rehabilitated Europe! The speed with which the country turned to rehabilitating Europe was astounding."

And to what end? That is their question mark. This unrepentant Russian-German relative—along with others of her kind whom Mennotown went to such lengths to rescue from the rubble—is still a die-hard anti-Communist, one step removed from Nazi.

The truth be put where it belongs: she never did repent. Not Mimi.

My mother could have gone to night school when she first came to Mennotown, at taxpayers expense, to be re-educated—realigned politically. The opportunities were there. But no. She simply shrugged; she never even took out papers to become a proper citizen. That still goads Archibald. He glares at her. She swallows hard, shrinks back into her cushions, and speaks so softly it is hard to understand that, thank you, never mind, don't waste your time, she has a Fatherland to last her to her grave.

I listen to that, too, while keeping to myself.

My mother and her Kansas relatives cannot see eye to eye on anything pertaining to the war. The cousins sit there, munching popcorn after popcorn, with downcast eyes and hardened heart, wearing their Sunday best and trying not to muss it.

"What in the name of common sense did you see in your Führer?" baits Archie.

"Well, he was basically a dreamer of big dreams," says Mimi, still defiant, lifting a trembling chin. The relatives inspect the ceiling as though they have never seen it before.

She tells them one more time. She says he touched the sky. She says he shook the earth.

"Had not the cripple Roosevelt been jealous of the rebirth of Germany," says Mimi, "there would have been no way the Führer would have lost. Had not his cotery of Rosenmans, Kuhns, Loebs and Morgenthaus been jealous of the success of Germany, the

Führer would have won!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"And you'll be next," she tells them with grim satisfaction.

"Ha!"

"And all your sappy talk about the greatest country in the world won't get you anywhere as long as you can't recognize what's being done to children. Your children! Your own children! In public schools. Out in the streets. In the arcades. In gang wars. Via television. These things are not mere accidents. It's planned. It's systematic wreckage. Destruction of your race. America, beset by predatory aliens subverting every law—"

That's Mimi. That's her sentiment. When she flails at her windmills, a show which only Archibald can trigger to full passion, she speaks against the guffaws in the parlor. My heart just aches for her. She has no teeth—the Russians knocked them out.

The years crept over Mimi. Her shoulders ache. Her spine caved in. Her eyes are now too dim to see the headlines, but she knows from her own experience who's who.

What's what.

She knows. My mother knows that it is still the Jews who are bedeviling the world in any way they can.

"She still thinks," whispers Temperance in the kitchen and helps herself to yet another slice of pie, "that Communism was a Jewish plot."

"They're all like that," nods Susan, a cousin thrice removed, born just before the Vietnam war. "You can't reform a Nazi." She, too, has often wondered why it is that foreigners will spread themselves all over other people's kitchens and then start arguing about those murky things the Allied armies settled half a century ago with gallows and with guns.

Right after Nuremberg, my mother came to Mennotown, so weak that she could barely crawl, with me in tow, her only living relative. She simply curled her frozen toes around her wooden clogs, crept through the rubble of Berlin, and said to some official: "I have some relatives in Kansas."

She found a law somebody dusted off, and one day, there she was, in shock that she had made it, sitting primly on a chair in Josie's sunny kitchen, me next to her, and next to me three tattered cardboard boxes containing our worldly goods—all that was left of Apanlee.

"Well, there you are, you two," said Josephine that day. "I better call the relatives. They'll want to take a look."

In the first postwar years in Mennotown, Displaced Persons were roundly disliked, and some of that rubbed off on me in my own teenage years. Some people tried to feel compassion for that dilapidated batch of refugees that Archie helped dig out from Berlin's blackened rubble, but it was hard if not impossible: their underthings were ragged; remorse was non-existent; the trusted Faith was not for them; to heal and to conceal them in the patchwork quilt of ethnic unity was quite an undertaking.

Still, blood is blood; you don't disown a kinsman. So we were taken in.

A phone call brought them all together in a hurry. Among them was Archie, pretending we had never met. Of course I did the same. A cat dislikes a dog.

That day, old Josie cautioned with a smile: "Watch out for Archibald. All you can do, dear child, is to lay low. Just duck and keep the lowest profile possible."

She smiled when she said that. She stroked my hair and smiled.

They say it was the first time since the White House telegram arrived, informing her that Rarey had been killed, that Josie found a smile.

I'll say it here and now: My mother has a point. She did survive the trek, the fury of the elements, but not without a price. There are deep scars in Mimi—as in a million of her generation. She is one voice, a timid one at that. She spent a lifetime waiting. Though she escaped, she left behind a child, its eyelashes coated with ice; she left behind her mother, dying, wrapped in a torn and frozen *Landser's* coat. She left behind one husband in

the tomb that was Siberia, another lying in his blood that seeped along the sidewalk of Berlin.

She sees Jews as a dangerous, underground power. They talk too fast and wave their arms, and their one aim—nursed over centuries—is to control the world.

"Is that another of your silly jokes?" says Archie, winking slyly, while settling down to an enormous supper. He has a grandniece, Sissie, who lives in Winnipeg and cleans and cooks for Jews. He points that out with pride that there's no racial prejudice in his own family.

"Not one small speck. Not even a faint whiff."

He says they treat her well, despite the Holocaust. He says she treats them likewise. It is well known in Mennotown that many Jewish families who chose America after the war prefer to use unmarried German relatives as maids, for almost all the European Jews speak broken German, and almost all the Kansas relatives do, too.

"Our Sissie, for example, works for four Jewish bachelors. She says they are just wonderful to her. Despite the Holocaust." He scans the parlor, a triumphant man. Who says that there is anti-Semitism in the midst of Mennotown? He even did a presentation on that topic in a synagogue for Jews, explaining how the Brethren, which is his congregation, were far and wide the only ones in the possession of the Truth, but generous with converts to a fault. He went so far as to invite the rabbis to visit him in turn and tell their point of view. They never did, alas. He wonders what he might have said that might have been offending.

But Mimi, stubbornly: "But don't you wish they would stop kvetching on and on about the Holocaust?"

"Shhh! Not so loud!" whispers somebody, fiercely, and Mimi shrinks into her cross-stitched cushions and licks her lower lip.

"You weren't there," says Mimi.

"Excuse me, but I was," says Archibald.

Those were his glory days. He is proud he was there when

Ivan met Joe by the Elbe. He likes to reminisce about the times when he and his young buddies celebrated all night long because the Hun had finally been whipped. He still remembers how they climbed up on trees and poles so they could better see the Soviet trampling on the Nazi flag and spitting on the swastika.

Did she forget the many CARE parcels that kept her alive right after the war? Did she forget her Nescafe? Her cakes of soap? Her cereal?

Compared to war-torn Europe, America was full of gold, like King Tut's tomb, and he was sent to share. He, Archie, was in charge of the entire loathsome business of digging deep into the blackened rubble and finding the survivors of the war. That's what he did; he dug. That's why he came; he shared. The Elder Archie volunteered to go to Germany to help the dregs of war, expecting a country in sackcloth and ashes. And where was his reward?

That's still his question mark.

He saw first-hand how all those Huns climbed from the rubble—this was before the Marshall Plan—to pass their buckets filled with stone and ash and mortar bits from hand to hand in long, humiliating lines.

"I stayed just long enough," he tells the munching people in the kitchen who heard this story many times but listen nonetheless the way you listen to a melody that touches a rhapsodic chord, "to watch how they were caught, these so-called Führer sympathizers, grabbed by the ears like rabbits in the fields, packed into cattle cars—" He said it then. He says it now. He looks around triumphantly. "—along with the dregs of the pitiful Wehrmacht. They had it coming. All of them. They got what they had coming."

He has forgotten why he lost an eye. America dispensing righteous wrath on Nazi Germany is still a memory that warms his preacher belly like a flame.

"My generation had no men," says Mimi softly, still on Josie's couch, her life now winding down.

I know that story, too. The splendid warriors of my mother's youth who hurled themselves against the Bolsheviks to stop the Antichrist—they froze to death at Stalingrad; they perished in the forests of Siberia and in the coal mines of Kolyma; they died like beasts of woe in Stalin's dungeon pits. No letter ever came out of the silence of the grave.

"They died like dogs," said Mimi. "When all was said and done, there was nobody left. A woman of my generation never had a chance to lead a normal life. To love a man. To raise a healthy family."

"Not true," says Temperance, and putters about in the kitchen. "You had a suitor once."

"Sure. Hannele from Hillsboro?" sighs Mimi.

"And what was wrong with Hannele?" asks Temperance, hands on her hefty hips. "He buttons himself properly. He has a spotless past. He owns three hundred acres. He is quite popular."

That must have been right after we arrived. When Hannele saw Mimi, he had been widowed fourteen years, he said that she would do, now was the time, he was a modest man and not that picky-picky. He studied everything about my mother, thoroughly, and realized her only earthly goods were just three cardboard boxes. But Hannele came courting, nonetheless. He laid a stubborn siege.

She smiled a toothless smile. "I'd rather not," said Mimi.

Still, he came several Sundays in a row, in an old, bucking Buick that had a handle missing. He was one of those fellows who, a little short of breath but long on doggedness, can't force big words across his lips but knows how to let go of little rolling yodels when an Oktoberfest arrives. His hair was neatly brushed and parted with cold water, and he wore shoes with shiny double buckles.

He told my mother all about himself. He gave her the width of his sleeves, the breadth of his shoulders. He held strong views on evolution, excessive sports, lipstick, Jehovah's Witnesses and other moral pitfalls.

"We are made for each other," he told her and patted the spot

next to him.

That was the only time I saw my mother cry.

She knew a man's love once. His name was Jonathan.

When Hitler's torch lights flickered, she was still young and beautiful. She felt the warmth of one short summer in her hair.

But then the years slipped by. Her eyes lost their luster; her step lost its bounce. Her hair turned gray, then white. Now she has rheumatism churning in her bones, and death is just around the corner. But to this day, she still remembers Jonathan.

"As I look back," she told me once, "it seems to me that only hours passed. Do you remember him? I see him vividly." Those thoughts are born of loneliness and sorrow. Most of the time, she keeps them to herself.

Yes, I remember Jonathan. His love was like a touch of wing, in service to ideals he thought could never be destroyed. Willpower. Strength. Devotion. Work. Tenacity. Pride and self-confidence. All that.

"He fought," says Mimi stubbornly, "because he thought the Soviet monster could be smitten. He loved his Fatherland, a country strong and beautiful, a land like any other land on earth that sent her sons to war—"

In Josie's spotless kitchen, she pleads with passion and conviction that Germany is surely entitled, is she not, to rest her heroes in their far-flung graves? Without insults and sneers?

But Archie slurps his coffee noisily and tries to change the subject. All that is theoretical. Where Jonathan lies buried, nobody ever knew.

*

The night is cool and moonlit. The freshly fallen snow outside is delicate as lace. Around me it is dark and still, and I am glad that I am finally alone.

I always sleep in Rarey's room, dressed for the night in one of Josie's flannel gowns. I like to be alone with Rarey. I am

more intimate with Rarey than I could ever be with people still alive. He, too, rests in eternity, where I will be tomorrow, where Josie dwells, no doubt. Her Bible tells me so. It's sitting on the night stand. In her old age, she started reading it, which pleased the relatives.

I pick it up, and it falls open to the passages she loved. Though her own Faith was off-beat to the end, she loved the poetry inherent in the Scriptures as caught in that exquisite mixture of sadness and relief. And here it says, as if I didn't know: "For man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble."

That is the message that is woven in my genes.

"He comes forth like a flower," says Josie's chancy Faith, with which I, of another generation and of another world, can easily identify, never having felt the certitude that marks the simpleton. "He flees like a shadow and does not continue."

All flesh is grass, says Josie's Faith, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.

As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its own place remembers it no more.

How much did Rarey know of Apanlee that gave him life—and death?

The room is given over to his memory. For Rarey Neufeld, Josie's last-born, much-beloved son, eternity began in a sharp burst of light the U.S. government went to some pains describing.

She should be proud, the letter said; the nation grieved with her; her young son gave his life, regrettably—but in a blaze of glory while straining for the sun.

What nobler sacrifice?

It happened in the last days of the war. The city of Berlin lay way below, defeated and collapsed, convulsing in its death throes.

Death, said the telegram, was instantaneous, while what was left of his young life sailed through the April clouds and fell into a tulip bed.

That's how young Rarey died—in someone's tulip bed.

The Air Force, Josie told me in that brittle voice of hers that cracked each time she spoke of her lost son, wrapped Rarey in a silken flag, and buried him for just a little while on a small plot that gently sloped toward a river. The air that day, the letter claimed that came after the telegram, was thick and sweet with spring.

Not so when he came home to Arlington, the stars and stripes wrapped all around his casket so that his comrades had to fumble for the handle. The heavens wept that day.

"All day long," Josie told me once while doing almost all the talking, sipping tea, explaining that the European war had been a necessary evil, fought honorably, won by the strength of righteous wrath, "it rained in a light drizzle. I guess the angels cried."

I guess they did. The angels must have cried. He was an Aryan. He fought a *Bruderkrieg*—a fratricidal war.

His medals, ribbons, watch and billfold, scores of old newspaper clippings, old postcards, the death certificate replete with Presidential seal and listing hometown, serial number, rank—all that is still preserved and dusted every week. Even his army jacket. The one he wore before he fell into the rubble of Berlin and landed in a tulip bed.

Said Josephine: "The honor guard shot thrice into the leaden sky—" And Josie flinched, each time, she told me decades later, while sipping tea and dabbing at her eyes, "—as though the bullets struck my heart, but I must tell you this. It's odd but true. I never felt so proud."

"A sad and rainy day," said Josephine, while telling me about the son she sacrificed to let what she called the Four Freedoms reign.

He must have believed it was so. He had been told this would

be his last mission; his duty was to to rid the world of Hitler's shadow, to smash the loathsome city. He could still see the flotsam of the great migrations, still struggling on through all the rubble, cluttering the Führer's Autobahn. He held his wing tips steady. He nosed his airplane up and tried to fly out of the pall of dust and smoke—straight up into the sun. The war was almost done; he was just about done with the barbarians; he could go home and raise a child. His first.

He reached for his binoculars and peered down at the cratered landscape. His thoughts were drifting; he was glad; he was not meant to be a soldier; he of a clan of pacifists; he saw his wife; he saw his baby boy; his heart was light and free. He plunged, released his bombs, pulled up into a climb and knew that his comrades stood by the Elbe, waiting for the Russian bear—and at this moment, down below, it happened.

I saw it; I was there.

As he descended carefully, he may have realized he came into some anti-aircraft fire. Maybe. And maybe not. I often think of that. He may have vaguely realized that someone, down below, was nipping at his silver wings with a well-oiled and swinging ack-ack gun—and that, on any other day he might have been more cautious!—but on this day, his thoughts were with his wife and child, for word had come. At last.

"The war was over. Finally. The Führer's dream was dead."

When Josie told me that, one sunny afternoon that baked the prairie soil, a burly youth, born six months after World War II, named after a forgotten forebear who traded, so the story goes, those first blessed kernels from the Tartars that feed the world today, materialized out of the kitchen and sat beside her silently and gently stroked her hand.

"The angels cried. The angels cried. The angels cried," young Peet consoled his grandmother, as though it were a litany. "Remember how it rained? One of those good old country rains that drench the land so that the earth renews?"

I know that kind of rain. There's nothing like it. Nothing.

I will tell you a secret. It doesn't even have a name, but it

exists. Believe me it exists. The force of nature can't be stopped. It rises from the earth. It's gathering at the horizon. It will arrive and drench America; for she is parched for rain. The leaves and the grass have stopped growing. The fields lie sapless. Barren. Thirsting. The soil—Jan's soil, Peet's soil—cannot renew until it rains again.

Now between wakefulness and sleep, I finally face up to Erika—as she was then; not as she is today. It is as though I see a double feature—first one side, then the other.

First I see Rarey, young and kind and full of life and nothing but goodwill and certitude. Then I see Lilo, likewise.

And there is Erika, still without words, still non-descript. Right in the middle. Scared.

In California, I hardly ever think of Erika, as busy as I am. But here, in Rarey's room, she comes alive as though by magic—a slim, young thirteen-year-old girl in Hitler uniform perched next to a small anti-aircraft gun, right on a Berlin rooftop, and at her side a wounded man. With SS epaulets.

Her name was Erika. His name was Jonathan. Both came from Apanlee, where duty was writ large.

He was a German soldier, a convert to the Mystic Cross—the cult of Blood and Soil and Race. It was a cult as arbitrary, all-embracing, monolithic, absolute, authoritarian as Archie ever could have wished. She was an honor student, one of those tiny timid females caught in the Führer's war, all thumbs and toes, still much too babyish—but that would change; she was resolved that it would change, consumed as she was in those last sad days of war with a raw will to live, to fight against the cowardice that was the dragon of her youth, and has been ever since.

True. Erika survived. The war was over, and she lived. All life was ashes, but she lived. Not that it mattered, but she lived. How? On numb feet across a dead city, that's how.

She survived because she had hidden herself in the ashcan the psychic had spoken about. She crouched in that ashcan, hour

after hour, while all around her, roof by roof and house by house, a city flew apart.

The stars kept raining bombs. The guns belched ceaselessly. The ashcan was dented all over.

Then it grew light. The noise died down. The hissing and sputtering stopped. The shelling fell off around dawn. The airplanes that had tried to blow all life to smithereens miraculously vanished. The sun came out—a bloody ball three times its size, monstrously magnified by all the dust and smoke.

Berlin was Ghost City, writ large.

With hands that were trembling with terror and chill, she lifted the lid and crawled out.

It hurt to walk. It hurt to sit. It hurt to breathe in air. The streets were lit with fire, the sky was crimson still, the trees stood beheaded and the neighbors were dead. She guessed it might be Tuesday—scrap day! to go from door to door collecting papers, clothes, bones, helmets—anything!—to help the Führer's war along, but one quick glance sufficed to know that that was foolish, verily! as useless as her ration vouchers dated yesterday.

What fighting there still was had now dispersed into the side streets and small alleys. She sensed a breathing spell.

She sat down at the rim of a bomb crater, half-filled with dirty water. A main line must have broken; the water still gurgled and seeped. Something was floating there, but luckily face down.

She looked around. The streets were foul with refuse. A coward had unfurled a banner from the window, and it was white, the color of surrender. That gave her a brief jolt, but she composed herself.

She carefully sidestepped the carcass of a burned-out bus and came upon a weeping toddler who reached for her and clung to her—a snot-smeared child with sunken eyes, no older than three years. He was a trying sight. His soles were charred, and that was sad. She wondered what to do. She hesitated, undecided, then bent to him and lifted him into a suitcase, spilling things. She freed herself from his small fists still clutching at her skirt as

though they were two burrs. Though he whimpered and sniveled and wouldn't let go, she patted him briefly and walked.

She rallied all her strength still left to find the street where Heidi lived. It, too, was black with death.

Her chest felt tight and prickly as she kept looking hard. Stalled trucks and burnt-out automobiles lined the street and blocked her way; she scrambled, dazed and blinded, across all obstacles, some of them smoking faintly. As she stood, contemplating her next step, a tank came barreling around the corner, and she ducked just in time. She watched it crush the tulips. That's when it came to her that this was Heidi's house that took the bomb smack on the roof. She knew it by the tulips.

She found the mail box next. Some giant fist had crushed it flat, but Heidi's name was legible. She stood silent, not even surprised.

Small fires were eating away at the rafters, creating black gaps in the rubble. There was a deep hole where the cellar had been; small wisps curled from the ashes.

She didn't weep. There was no point in weeping over Heidi who would remain in that rubble forever. She simply sat down, in the ashes.

She would never feel young again. Ever. There might be a tomorrow still, but yesterday was gone. Her former self was gone. It had died, exhausted from hurting.

She sat there for the longest time until a soft thing nudged at her, and that was Lilo's pet. He had no tail and only three legs, and his left eye was hanging by a sinew.

"Well, Winston Churchill. It's all over now," she said to Lilo's pet, amazed she still had words.

The mutt gave a whimpering sound.

A veil of dust hung in the air. The cloud of ashes was so thick the sun could not break through. The world she had known lay in smoldering ruins, but she was hungry; she would eat. She kept looking for something to eat, and she found it before it was noon:

a bone that looked like a thigh bone. The fire had gnawed off the flesh. She didn't know if it was man or beast, but she would take her chances. She took a brick and crushed it. She slurped the marrow, raw.

Now there was sweet contentment in her belly.

She decided to check up on Lilo. Somebody had to check, and so she did; she checked. The pet helped some; he whimpered and hobbled, three-legged.

Lilo lay where she had fallen, a soldier for the cause. She lay supine and very still, her young lips pale and slack. Her sooty face was gray. Her blond, fat braids were singed. Someone had violated her in death; had rammed a flag pole's sharpened end from in between her legs into her twisted body with such force that it stuck out where Lilo's lusty heart had beaten for the future. Yesterday.

Was that a shock? Well, yes and no.

Her knees were buckling, but she looked. Her eyes were blurring, but she looked. And then she did something that came by itself. Her arm shot out; she stood straight; she gave Lilo the Führer salute.

Her name was Erika. That was the timid girl I knew, so many years ago.

She is no longer part of me; I have disowned her to survive; but once upon a distant time, I knew her well indeed. She gave Lilo the Führer salute. It was the only thing still left to do, the most natural thing in the world. It wasn't that she felt the need to be dramatic; or blasphemous; or obstinate; there was no irony in that; she wasn't trying to say anything or make heroic gestures. She stood in a world bereft of all landmarks, and gave over her heart to the wind.

That's how I still see Erika—this after all these years—saluting her brave and defiant and beautiful friend who blew a lot of bubbles each morning as she brushed her teeth, who dreamed the day would come when she would shine on celluloid, who had a whole life to look forward to, who always scolded Erika:

"Where is your spirit, girl? It's for the Fatherland—" and whom the Allies killed.

The firing fell off around noon. Cheap cotton flags, with pentagrams, the logo of the Antichrist, stitched onto them by hand, appeared and fluttered down from blackened, gutted windows.

Two were still left. Alive.

A soldier and a girl were left, alone, atop a bombed-out edifice, the moon-lit night around them, while down below, Berlin lay in its death throes. He knew his wound was mortal, but there were calm and fealty in his face; he had one last devoted little comrade, next to him, a little girl in Hitler uniform, who did her duty neatly, who carried to him food and drink and what morsels of news she could gather. He had a small transmitter. He broadcast for as long as someone still took messages.

The anguish coming from his wounded leg had thickened his speech and glazed his vision; his leg was badly gangrenous.

She said to him. "In every door, a drunken Russian."

"I know."

By then, she had stopped counting. It happened day by day.

She took that risk; she carried food and drink and news, bypassing monsters wearing pentagrams on furry caps, prowling in search of loot and mayhem, who jeered and ordered her: "*Komm. Komm. Frau, komm.*" Sometimes they saw how young she was, and then they called her *Fräulein.*

They said: "*Komm, Fräulein. Komm.*"

Then they would grab her by her hair and treat her cruelly, and even when she tried to hide herself beneath some blankets, say, or maybe in the straw, depending on the situation, they jabbed at her with pointed bayonets and grabbed her by the ankles and pulled hard. And she would go with them and once again endure.

At night, she would sit, shivering, within the bend of Jonathan's good arm that lay in a warm scoop around her narrow shoulders. He was a man. She was a girl. Love comes in many

shades.

The moon was throwing shadows when he said: "I want you to remember that there are absolutes worth knowing. They have nothing to do with the outcome. The outcome can be bought. Or forced. Or swindled. Or connived. But absolutes cannot."

He said to her while giving her his legacy atop a dying city:

"Some win, and others lose. Some die, and others live. The losers are forgotten in defeat; the winners write their history. The winners do their cartwheels; the losers have no voice. And in the end, who counts the medals? Anyone? Will anybody ever read the balance sheet correctly? But always you remember: there is a history worth knowing. The earth has rights. It belongs to the bravest and best."

She took his hand and stroked it. Her fingers felt their way along a scar.

"A dog bit you?"

"No, not a dog. A little girl. A little cousin I once loved. It happened long ago."

She did not ask: "Why are you telling me? As if I didn't know."

She quietly listened as he said: "If you survive, you'll have a mission, Erika. You are a child of gifted fancy. Here's what you must remember, always. There is a story to be told. Don't touch up anything."

She had just finished changing Jonathan's blood-soaked, earth-crusted bandages, when she looked up and saw two men in speckled uniform. One of these men was huge and black. Colossal. Towering. Her hands flew to her lips and she shrank back against the wall, for she had never seen a Negro, ever, not even in a photograph. The other one was gangly, vague, with sanctimonious brows; he looked excitable and edgy in a simmering, smoldering way.

"Gum?" asked the Negro, grinning, chewing, inspecting her with a black glitter in his eyes.

Gum. *Komm.*

She had endured an avalanche of rape. The words were practically identical. He had fat thumbs, fat cheeks; he rolled his l's and r's; his neck was purple and bombastic and he was shifting chewing gum from cheek to cheek while looking for an opportunity to pounce. His hands had vanished, fumbling, in his trousers, but both his thumbs stuck out, and they were wiggling now. He was the worst of feral beasts out of her many nightmares, but his companion, freckled, weasly, looked vaguely familiar.

"Well, well. This will be a day to remember," said the black paratrooper and nodded in a significant way, while the second, the blond one, leaned forward and said, slightly slurred:

"Well, I'll be damned! Look what we found. A real live Nazi girl."

The C.O. volunteers of Mennotown did not wear guns, and Archie didn't either, but that night, to be safe, Archie had borrowed one as he and his black pal stepped out into the dark to calm their jagged nerves.

It had been a harrowing day.

He had arrived in Germany with all the best intentions, and he was sickened in his soul. One of the first relief cohorts sent overseas to comb through the rubble and pick up survivors, Archie was trying hard; intent on building goodwill with the burlap sacks of Mennotown, setting a splint to a world out of joint. That day, he had worked sixteen hours at a stretch; his head was throbbing with revulsion and fatigue. He, Archie Epp, may not have finished high school, but was he anybody's fool?

He understood one thing: of remorse, there was none. These people, whom he tried to help, were still disciples of the Führer.

He had enlisted, taken pity, packed his bags, forsaking his soft bed in Kansas. And he expected gratitude. Remorse. Contrition. Penitence. And there was none of that.

But prayers must come first, insisted Archibald, reared in the Faith and, hence, affirming Faith and, yes! obedience. Obedience writ large! He was proud of his pacifist mission. He cut the straps to let the losers get an eyeful of the riches of a land that

stressed equality and, hence, reaped peace and harmony: dresses and shirts, shoes and socks and sweaters—all items to alleviate the suffering of war. Little Melly's Christian spirit was alive in every patch and stitch; he smelled that in the smell of mothballs; he felt it in his fingertips.

He tried to talk to them. He tried to listen to their stories, but what they told him made no sense at all.

"You're mercenaries for the Beast," said one, and others nodded gravely. They told him even then: "You'll find out soon enough."

They said: "We're innocent. It's you, Americans, who bear the guilt for what will happen next. We tried to finish off the Antichrist. We tried to stem the tide."

They didn't look so innocent to him. "You're criminals," he told them, sparing no one, then or now. "You're scum. The worst. You're hooligans."

They looked at him with glassy, apathetic eyes. It was too much. It was plain overload. His spectacles fogged up. He was sick to death of them all—all famished, sick and weary, with vermin in their hair and hunger in their eyes, still loyal to their Führer. The devil's brood they were, as far as he could tell—this untidy flotsam of war, no doubt flag-waving all the way to prison or, better yet, goose-stepping to Siberia.

Which was just fine with him!

He was building a murderous rage. He needed to cool off. That's when he motioned to his Negro friend who pocketed one gun and handed a second to Archie.

Together, they stepped out into the streets to draw a breath of air, and that is when he spotted it—the shredded parachute still hanging from a tree. And that's when every shred of pacifism went like poof! and Archie knew that, given provocation, he, too, would kill.

He'd kill the Hun! He'd finish off the Hun! Without remorse! With gusto!

This was Archie's murderous moment.

Ever since that rock, hurled hard against his people's ethnic pride, had ripped out his right eye and forced him to his knees, he had kept rage inside. And that's precisely when he heard a strange, suspicious sound, pushed open a burned door, stepped gingerly into the hall, and found those two: the trembling Hitler girl beside the wounded *Landser*. And something snapped in Archie.

His lungs filled up with wrath. He knew that this was it. All guns had fallen silent; peace had already been declared, and there they were, the viper's brood, manning their anti-aircraft gun still pointed at the sky.

A wave of fury flooded Archie's chest with an enormous whoosh! He touched the barrel; it was hot; he could have sworn it was still hot. He could not pry the girl's hands from the barrel.

"Don't move, or I will shoot," he bellowed, which was superfluous because he knew he would—this was his opportunity. It would not slip away. His unit leader had a German wife from Pennsylvania, one of those old and stubborn crusts who stuck to ethnic pride, through thick and thin, against all better evidence. If his commander knew this Nazi riffraff, hiding here, evading justice, were counting on American largesse, he'd botch the opportunity.

"Are you Ameri—" the German soldier said but did not finish what he meant to say, for Archie had his finger on the trigger. It curled around the bolt.

"You bet I am," said Archie. "You bet your blasted swastika I am." He said to her: "You little viper! You! Now move! You heard me! I said move!" while his black buddy lumbered forward clumsily. "Gum? *Fräulein*? Gum?" he asked, for lack of better words.

She saw the huge, black hands still fumbling in the pockets of his trousers. The *Landser* saw it, too; he swung around and felt with his good hand for his own gun, and that's when Archie pulled the trigger. It gave him a sweet rush. The barrel went poof! and the *Landser* fell back and was dead.

The little girl in Hitler uniform was hiccuping.

But Archie wasn't finished yet. He gave her an enormous

shove and said in halting German, thick with the diphthongs of four centuries:

"Now, listen, you! You little runt! This war is over, and you lost! You lost! You lost! You lost!"

*

Rarey's last letter:

"— if we can get this business of Fascism knocked off and get the world into some semblance of order and keep it there for a time, our son and his contemporaries will take over and make something really good of it. We're learning, but a great many mistakes will be made before a really good world order will evolve. If we can clear the air for our child and his generation, we're fat!

"This war seems incidental because it's already begun to exhaust itself. The vital thing is to get and keep the thing straightened out long enough for all the little ones to come to bat—not with two strikes on them but with a clear field. They'll have the intelligence to keep things in order. We'll teach them.

"The setting is perfect for the thing I love best, dream of the two people who are my life—the lovely warm delightful Betty Lou, and our son right at the very brink of this beautiful life. By the time I get home I figure he will be rugged enough to toss around a little—how I dream of that! I hope our child has a chance to contribute his two cents' worth of light and color to this battered old world without being swept up on one of these mechanized free-for-alls.

"My normal place is beside you, and my lifelong job is being your husband and our son's old man. That fine head of yours! That wonderful Betty Lou that I love to the very raw ends of my nerves! You know the picture of you and our child—you in that fine bemused profile and my baby yawning his old head off? Well, it is now mounted in a frame of plexiglass upon my instru-

ment panel—right beween the gyre horizon and the altimeter.

"God, how I'd like to be with you this evening. To talk to you and to touch your sweet young face—to watch your eyes when they sparkle—to hear you laugh.

"These are the things I think of as I go to sleep and I think of them as I wake. They are part of the fabric of my mind. Woven in with all of my vague, uncertain ideas about things in general is this pattern that you have made by your mental, physical and spiritual warmth.

"You know, Betty Lou, in a few days we will have been married two years. We pooled our lives in that beautiful little town called Mennotown, surrounded with fine friends, up to our eyebrows in love. I don't know the date—it was sort of gradual like the unfolding of a beautiful flower that blooms only once, and once open, grows more beautiful with each succeeding day. And now that little rosebud of a baby is growing on the same bush. That place wasn't big enough to hold my happiness—even with the big window open. I've loved you there and in a thousand other places made wonderful by you.

"I am impatient with this tremendous war, anxious to be finished with it so that we can do the things we were meant to do—so that we can live. I want to live with you, Betty Lou—I want to give you everything I can—I want to live with you and love you for the next forty-three thousand years. I want to sit across a table from you in one of our favorite places and eat and talk and just watch you. I want to touch your hair and kiss you on your lovely mouth. I want long evenings with you filled with things we like together, long nights, your love and warmth.

"I dream of these things. I want to wake up and see you there, and I want to have breakfast with you and begin a full, wonderful day together, the days following one after another with no interruption, just the two happy people with their beautiful child and their love.

"The fine, fine years we had together fill my mind with won-

derful happy pictures of things past. We will have such years again—better years—we have a child now and he makes us just one third richer than we were. I can wait, Betty Lou, as long as is necessary—but God, I'd like to see you. Stay with it, Betty Lou; this war isn't exactly going backwards.

"Things are happening.

"I think of that house and how we'll fix it up and how we'll live in it together. I get so happy my feet hurt. I want to see the funny hats you buy and I want to loaf around the house cluttering up things generally. This is a good war and we must see it through, but, dammit, Betty Lou, I want the life that we have planned—we can make it a beauty, darling. The living we've done together has been some of the finest I can imagine, and it will get better and better. We'll improve with age and grow mellow as a cello with the passing years. Our son and his friends will flock to our house. They'll love his mother and put up with his old man because he'll make sling shots and kites for them and tell them tall stories about the great war. I come from a long, uninterrupted line of family men, Betty Lou, and I plan to carry on in the old Mennotown tradition, even if I have been interrupted a bit by this small but vigorous global fracas.

"Keep that sparkle in your eyes and that tilt to your chin. Tomorrow the old man hits the 27th mark—I still feel like I should be about fourteen but there it is. How I should like to see you. I'd like to borrow just ten minutes from the great treasure of time that we will spend together when this war is over—just ten minutes—I wish I could send you a whole bushel of emeralds.

"I love you two people with my very life and soul. My old heart is yours completely. Give my very best regards to the tribe—and remember, Betty Lou, I'm yours, all yours, and have just been loaned to the Army for the duration—"

Rarey died -
Jonathan died -
Millions of innocents died!

They died - while others lied!

I dedicate this saga
to the maligned heroes
and the forgotten victims of
several fratricidal wars in our century - men and
women, brave beyond belief, who hurled themselves
against the forces of the New World Order

Ingrid Rimland was a child during World War II, born to Mennonite wheat farmers in the Ukraine who had been persecuted in the Soviet Union for their pacifist beliefs. The end of World War II saw her and her family undertake a 1000 mile trek back to the homeland of their forefathers, Germany, now a war-devastated wasteland.

From there, still a youngster, she moved with her family and friends to the rain forests of Paraguay to pioneer the jungle and live, as her grandmother put it, " . . . far from the wicked world."

Since the early days of her youth, Ingrid Rimland has come vast intellectual distances. She first made a name for herself with her award-winning novel, The Wanderers, (Concordia Publishing House, 1977, Bantam Books, 1978) that depicted the German soldiers not as conquerors but as liberators and heroes in the eyes of an ethnically savagely besieged community, about to be annihilated in one of Stalin's "ethnic cleansing" operations.

In 1984, Arena Press published Furies, a powerful autobiography describing her search for freedom from intellectual oppression. She also started writing columns, articles and book reviews for dozens of papers and magazines in America and won a number of journalistic prizes and honors.

In the age of the revolutionary Internet, Ingrid Rimland dramatically wrote herself into the annals of the Freedom of Speech struggle when she defended the world-famous Revisionist Zundelsite, a website she created and administered, against a furious onslaught of powerful private and government censorship forces arraigned against her website to prevent the world from discovering a part of World War II history hitherto never exposed to an unsuspecting, misled public.

In the first two months of 1996, 1300 websites went dark in Germany in a futile attempt by German authorities to prevent German students from accessing the American-based Zundelsite - an Internet "First".

In response to that challenge, "Zundelsite mirrors" shot up spontaneously at major universities all over the globe, as young "cyber fighters" helped to defy the censors - another "First".

In August of the same year, eight historical documents on the Zundelsite were indexed - that is, forbidden - by the German government, on grounds that their historical contents were "disorienting to minors".

In the busiest week of Christmas 1996, nearly 30 million anonymous e-mail letters were slammed into the Zundelsite server system from unknown origins in Canada in an attempt to terrorize the server owner into denying the Zundelsite a place in cyberspace. Canadian and American police have never found the Internet terrorists.

Even as this book goes to print, powerful special interests manipulating the government of Canada are attempting to shut down the Zundelsite through its misnamed "Human Rights Commission" by a desperate and bizarre act - mislabeling the Internet to be a "telephone"!

Lebensraum! - a three part historical novel - is Ingrid Rimland's latest contribution to the intellectual discipline called "Revisionism" - an intellectual movement that insists that history does not belong to the manipulators behind the fratricidal wars of our century but should be freely accessible to all freedom-loving people.

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