Kama

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To the real Adela

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1942. I decide to write in English.

I hope we're out of reach, now. The Germans are crazy, but not so crazy that they'd cross the desert and attack this godforsaken place. We're in the boondocks. What a strange word. As we say in Polish: beyond the other side of nowhere. If they do come, we'll flee to China.

Mama says the war could still last a long time. She enrolled me in the school here. I haven't gone to school for three years. I'll get bad marks, I'm sure!

They don't teach English in this school. Mama says I must force myself to read and write in English, otherwise I'll forget.

"She should also write in Polish," Tatus[1] says.

"Bah, English is more important."

"What are you talking about? Her mother tongue! When we go back to Warsaw, she'll go to University. She'll need to write in Polish."

"She'll go to Oxford or Cambridge. After that war, Warsaw won't exist anymore."

"I sometimes wonder whether you're not somewhat loony. Oxford will still exist?"

"Oxford will always exist."

"Take it easy, Tatus. You too, Mamusia![2] You can postpone this quarrel until it's time for me to go to University…"

I'm glad they're fighting again about me, as they used to in the good old days before the war. This means things are improving.

I decide to write in English anyway. I'll translate the notes I jotted down during these last three years. This will help me sort the memories that crowd my mind.

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[1] Daddy. This is pronounced "Tatoosh".

[2] Variant of Mama. Pron : "Mamooshia".

1939. Bombs upon Warsaw.

My name is Kamila, but everybody calls me Kama, or Kamunia, or Kamuniu. And also Kama little wasp, because I run and buzz around so much. I'll be ten years old on March 8th, 1939.

I live with my parents in Warsaw, on the third floor of a gray and pink building that belongs to my grandfather—Mama's father. Grandpa is rich. He has founded a trade company whose offices fill the building's first and second floor. He sells flour and salt all over Europe, and buys stuff abroad. He owns several ships on the Baltic sea.

My grandparents live on the sixth floor. The whole family eats together in the large dining-room of their apartment. Old-fashioned wooden panels cover the dining-room's walls. We eat in Dresden china with silver cutlery. A matronly cook prepares and serves the meals. There is also a cleaning-lady. We have bathrooms with warm water and even toilets in every apartment.

Mama, having spent a year in London, thinks that my education would be a complete failure if I didn't speak English. So I've learned the language of Shakespeare from my earliest age with *Miss*, who comes every day to take care of Rózia—Grandpa and Grandma's youngest daughter—and me. I think the last name of *Miss* is Ferguson or something. She calls us miss Rose and miss Camilla. A strange thing: Rose is my aunt, but she is only three years older than me.

Miss also teaches us the piano. She's as dry as a dry sausage:

"You shouldn't work without the metronome, miss Camilla… Here are some good exercises to muscle your fingers, miss Rose… Be careful to bend your thumb, miss Camilla… I told you to bend your thumb, not your back: sit straight!"

At the beginning of the year 1939, my aunt Yola (Mama's elder sister) comes to live on the fourth floor of the building with her husband Dolek and her daughter Elzbieta, whom everybody calls Elzunia. There are many girls in our family.

Rose and I, we speak English together to make fun of Elzunia, who doesn't understand anything.

"Elizabeth is bad-tempered again today. What do you think about her, my dear?"

"Oh, she's quite a spoiled child."

"Finicky."

"Wouldn't you say she looks like a baboon?"

"I would say a green frog!"

Elzunia begins to whine and calls her mother. She's two years younger than me, but she behaves like a baby. My dear Rose never whines. On the contrary, she's always joking and laughing. Her wide mouth seems designed for smiling.

Tatus is a biologist. He studies tropical illnesses. He keeps talking about malaria. Mama makes fun of him:

"With three feet of snow in the streets and water freezing in the pipes, you want to cure tropical fevers! You'd better find a vaccine against the flu."

"We Poles are afraid to look beyond our borders. We can take care of remote countries as well as the French and English!"

"Listen to the great world scientist Marek Silberberg, who's never gone abroad…"

"I'll go someday, I'll go!"

Tatus has no idea that the day is very close—and what's more, that he will catch this malaria he talks about so much.

When I was very young, we used to spend our summer vacations in Sopot, a beach on the Baltic sea near Dantzig. Grandpa let me visit one of his ships in Dantzig harbor. I have dim memories of a metallic and greasy smell, of gigantic half-naked seamen who invited me to sail with them beyond the seas. "You'll go later," Grandpa promised me.

Me, I don't want to sail on Grandpa's ships. Actually, when I remember this visit, a vague feeling of dread seizes me. I see flashes of a fat seaman showing me the ship's hold. Just thinking about it gives me shivers. Often I wake up screaming in the middle of the night. A nightmare torments me: I open a door and see a staircase leading down to a dark cave; I hear a rustling and whistling noise; I turn on the light and discover, at the bottom of the stairs, frightened rats rushing around—that's when I wake up.

We haven't spent the summer in Sopot for several years now. The province of Dantzig is an enclave belonging to Germany. It doesn't look like Poland, for the Germans are as stiff as wooden posts and never laugh. A nasty stiff dictator, named Adolf like aunt Yola's husband (Dolek is a Polish variant of Adolf), is leading Germany and jailing people who dare laugh. This bad Adolf pretends Poland has stolen the territory that separates Dantzig from the rest of Germany. The citizens of Dantzig approve him. They march in the streets with his swastika flag, sing bellicose hymns, break the windows of "Jewish" stores.

Grandpa has moved his offices and ships to Gdynia, a Polish harbor located north of the German enclave. He now rents a house in Orlowo, a beach close to Gdynia. We have spent the summer of 1936, 1937 and 1938 there. At first, Grandpa still went to Dantzig for his business. He left in the morning with his driver in his grand Vauxhall English car. Grandma worried, I could see that, but he always came back safe and sound.

In 1938, the cruel dictator annexed Austria and later, half of Czechoslovakia.

In 1939, my parents wonder whether we'll go to Orlowo like we used to. Everybody says the next German infamy will be to invade the "Dantzig corridor" so they can link the city to the rest of their country. This means annexing the northeast corner of Poland. Grandpa and Grandma decide to stay in Warsaw.

I notice I forgot to note that we're Jewish. We don't consider it very important. My parents compare religions to sleeping tablets or to the fairy tales told to children in the evening. Grandpa and Grandma aren't great believers either. They don't go to the synagogue, for example. They celebrate the feast of Pesach, which commemorates the liberation of the Jewish slaves by Moses, but I think they do it mostly to gather the whole family around a well-stocked table.

Me, I have a hard time understanding what it means to be Jewish.

"Tatus, if we do not go to the synagogue, can we still be Jewish?"

"We could try to forget we're Jewish, but the Germans and the Poles remember it for us."

"We don't have to tell them."

"They'll know anyway, because we have a Jewish name."

"Silberberg is a Jewish name?"

"Yes, and also Rosenthal, the name of your grandparents."

"It sounds like German names, doesn't it? A Jewish name would be more like Solomon or Abraham."

"You're right, little wasp. These names mean 'silver mountain' and 'rose valley' in German. See, the Jews came from Germany in the middle ages. The Yiddish language, which your grandparents use, is a kind of old German."

Grandpa and Granma speak Yiddish to each other, Polish to us. Grandpa was raised in a very pious and very poor family, who spoke only Yiddish. He left home at the age of fourteen and learned Polish by himself. He speaks without an accent. He also knows Russian and German. Grandma comes from a poor family too. She was only seven when she began to work—sewing and embroidering. Me, I understand Yiddish quite well, but I can't speak it.

My parents say the Jews are becoming like other people by and by, so that in the future Yiddish will be a dead language, like Greek and Latin.

In the end, we do go to Orlowo in July 1939. For one thing, we've already paid the rent for the house. Then my parents find me quite pale and think the sea air will do me good. Aunt Yola, uncle Dolek and Elzunia come with us. I'm sorry that my dear Rose stays with Grandma and Grandpa in their country house near Warsaw.

Rose is like an elder sister to me. She makes wonderful sand castles. She's a born artist. I couldn't build such sand castles by myself, that's for sure. Her castles feature high crenelated walls, deep moats, a keep, stables, stores, kitchens, a chapel. When she's fed up with castles, she builds oriental cities with mosques, minarets and palaces straight out of the Thousand and One Nights—or imaginary cities on planet Mars. Me, I do my best to help her, but I'm neither as skillful as she is, nor as patient. What I like is to trample the castle or the city at the end of the day.

She swims like a fish. If she trained a little, she could win medals in the Olympic games. Me, I love to swim with my head under the water. Aunt Yola and Mama can also swim. Tatus is the only person who doesn't swim in our family. While we jump over the waves, he sits under a parasol and reads his newspaper.

Towards the end of August, the air becomes tense with electricity, like before a thunderstorm. The people of Dantzig accuse the Poles and the Jews of various imaginary crimes and beg the great German Reich[3] to come and save them.

My parents decide to return to Warsaw right away. Usually, when Tatus says something, Mama says the contrary and vice versa. When I see that they agree and speak as if with a single voice, I understand that things are becoming serious. Tatus, who tends to hesitate, to weigh pros and cons, has become as firm and decisive as Mama. I hardly recognize him. My aunt Yola, who loves to waste her vacations napping, turns into an energetic and quite awake woman. These changes surprise me so much that I forget to be Kamunia little wasp, who flies and buzzes and stings her enemies… I become a sweet little girl, all of a sudden!

On August 28th, we close the summer home and take a taxi to the railway station. A huge crowd has invaded the platforms. In the middle of vacationers dressed in white cotton, loaded with tennis rackets and fishing rods, poor Gdynia folks carry bloated bundles topped by a pan or an old oil lamp. At times the crowd is quiet, then suddenly it swells and roars for no apparent reason.

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[3] Empire.

The railway employees have added two boxcars to the Warsaw train for luggage. There are so many people that nobody could enter a passenger car with a suitcase.

“It reminds me of the London tube at rush hour,” Mama says.

Now here’s something really amazing: Tatus doesn’t make fun of her, as he always does when she mentions the year she spent in London. Terrible events are coming our way, obviously.

The train rushes through the night. When we came to Gdynia, we slept in first-class berths. What a contrast! The passengers sit on wooden benches, on baggage-racks, on the floor. They are as rigid as statues and speak in low voices. My cousin Elzunia, who usually talks so much, seems to have lost her tongue. If only Tatus could joke a little, to reduce our anxiety…

In the Warsaw station, porters transfer the luggage from the boxcars to the platform. We don’t find our suitcases, our magnificent leather suitcases. Railroad employees probably stole them, thinking that if war starts tomorrow we won’t bother to claim them. They were right.

“It doesn’t matter,” Tatus says.

Is Mama going to protest? She lost her summer dresses, her silk blouses, her tortoiseshell toilet kit, a thick unfinished English novel and other treasures. Well, no. She holds my hand tight to avoid losing me.

“Hurry up, Kama.”

People run every which way like the rats in my nightmare. The station offers such a strange sight that Tatus pulls his camera out of his pocket to record it on film. Tatus loves to take photographs. Mama offered him an expensive Leica for their tenth anniversary. Suddenly, two policemen grab him, call him an enemy agent and threaten to throw him into jail. This is just because they want to take his brand new Leica. The war hasn’t begun yet, but bad people consider it’s already plundering time.

An even greater confusion reigns outside the station. People are fighting to catch taxis. Hey, we’re lucky that we lost our suitcases: we can just walk home.

On the next day, August 30th, Grandpa gathers the whole family in his sixth-floor apartment: my parents and I, aunt Yola with Dolek and Elzunia, Rose, and also uncle Itshak, who lives on the building’s fifth floor.

Grandpa says we shouldn’t panic. He is the head of the family, the director of a large company, so his voice carries the weight of his authority and experience. He just celebrated his sixtieth birthday, but he doesn't look like an old man. His hair is brown. Some gray bands do streak the triangular beard that grows on his chin, as if he needed them to match his striped necktie.

"If it comes to a war, soldiers will die on the front, in the trenches, but none of us, God be thanked, is a soldier. In the cities, life goes on. Not exactly as before, maybe, but it goes on."

"Do you really believe the Polish army will hold the Germans back?" Uncle Dolek asks. "Trenches? That was the last war. Maybe the Poles won't resist better than the Czechs and we'll have the Teutons in Warsaw next week."

"Of course not. France and England have promised they'd protect Poland. The war will last a long time. Besides, when the Germans entered Czechoslovakia, they didn't destroy Prague, did they? The worst that can happen is they'll divide Poland again and we'll be back to where we stood before the Great war."

"We should have sold everything and gone away long ago," Itshak mutters.

Uncle Itshak is a Zionist. He thinks the Jews should emigrate to Palestine, where the Hebrew people lived in the time of king David. While as a kid he was called Janek like everybody else, he changed his name to Itshak, which is Isaac in Hebrew. All the Zionists pick up quaint names in the Bible.

My parents despise him. They say people should suppress existing borders, not create new states. Moving to Palestine plays in the hands of our enemies, who pretend the Jews are not real Poles. Tatus considers that the Jewish question won't be solved by Zionism, but by a communist revolution. After the revolution, there will be no more rich and poor, no more catholic and Jew.

Mama rejects the revolution as well as Zionism.

"As soon as someone invented money or even barter, the world was full of poor people. This will never change. The communists promise equality. This means that after the revolution, everybody will be poor. What's more, your Russians, who pretend to be communist, have a dictator just like the Germans."

"You can't compare Hitler and Stalin," Tatus says.

"Well, they just signed a pact, didn't they? The only good system is a democracy like England."

Mama always refers to England for everything. At least my parents leave uncle Itshak alone, instead of quarrelling with him as they usually do. I feel they're as taut as violin strings.

On August 31st, Tatus goes to his lab. He returns soon afterwards: the door is closed. Nobody cares about tropical fevers anymore.

Mama and I, we take large shopping bags et we go down for errands. We want to buy sugar, oil, flour, rice, canned food. How naive! Crowds of shouting housewives have emptied most of the stores and are attacking the remaining ones. We come back home empty-handed.

What if the war doesn't start? I'll go to school like any other year. I get my stuff out of my desk drawer: my rulers, my protractor, my compasses, my Latin grammar, my English dictionary. If the school closes, like Tatus's lab, how will I be able to pass my final exams and learn a profession?

On September 1st at dawn, as in my sleep I feel compelled to open the door that leads to the rat cave, an awful explosion wakes me up. I understand right away what it is: war!

I jump out of my bed and run to the window. I hear strange whistling noises, then more explosions. Plumes of black smoke rise here and there above the roofs of Warsaw. I dress in a hurry. My parents, still wearing their night-gowns, are sitting near the radio set in the living-room. The announcer speaks very fast: "A cowardly aggression… our invincible troops… a forceful counterattack…" A general reads an official declaration: "The enemy will not tear off a single button from our uniforms!"

It would be nice if they replaced war by a hand fight between generals. The side that would tear off more buttons from the other one would be considered the winner.

While I'm imagining great button tear-offs, all the air-raid sirens in Warsaw begin a sudden death-howl. Tatus bursts out laughing—a bitter laugh, which freezes my blood.

"The sirens that were supposed to warn us of an air-raid! The bombs warned us! If the rest of our defense stammers in this way, we can expect the worst…"

"The people in charge of our defense may be stupid," Mama says, "but we're not much wiser. We've waited for the bombs like asses, too."

My parents get dressed and we run down to the street. All the members of our family, as well as most of our neighbors, are already there. People are asking what happens, as if they didn't know. They exchange snips of sentences as empty as the radio announcer's speech. Rumors spread through the crowd like a fire overtaking a dry field: the Germans will drop poison-gas bombs… We'll soon be given gas masks… Otherwise, you should breathe through a wet cloth…

Grandpa isn't the kind of man who'll wait for gas-bombs:

“Take a few clothes. I’m waiting for you in the garage. We’ll go to the country house. Sooner or later, these bombings will cease, then we’ll come back.”

He owns a large house eighty miles from Warsaw, with a watermill, horse stables, horses, a pond and acres of wheat fields.

When we enter the garage, Grandpa tells us he can’t find the driver. We’re lucky that Dolek knows how to drive an automobile. Even without the driver, there’s almost too many of us for the Vauxhall. Uncle Dolek and Grandpa sit in front, all the women in the back: Grandma, aunt Yola and Mama—each of them carrying her daughter (Rose, Elzunia and me) on her knees. Tatus is staying in Warsaw with his mother.

Uncle Itshak doesn’t want to go to the countryside either.

“This is a good time to leave Poland. I’ll find a way. I’ll walk if I have to. I’ll go to Palestine. Where else?”

Maybe we should have walked too. The Vauxhall barely crawls forward. All the means of transportation invented by human beings clutter the road: hand-drawn carts, horse-drawn carts, bicycles, motorbikes, trucks, automobiles. The citizens of Warsaw flee with the belongings they can carry. Some have piled up furniture on a cart, others have shoved their clothes into a fat pouch. Pathetic mothers carry a baby and hold the hands of several young children. What a terrible sight! Tears well in my eyes, but I hold them back with all my strength because I don’t want to look like Elzunia, who puts everyone on nerves with her cries and sobs.

We reach the country house at nightfall. I can’t sleep. The poor people we saw on the road march on in my mind. I guess I do doze off in the end: the same explosions as yesterday wake me up. Dolek says the Germans are bombing the nearby railway station.

Actually, we feel even less safe than in Warsaw. You can’t hide in the countryside, whereas in a city you can seek protection in a cellar.

“We made a mistake by coming here,” Grandpa says. “We’d better return to Warsaw.”

“We could go to Dantzig,” Rose suggests. “At least a city the Germans won’t destroy!”

The wide smile that lightens her face comforts me. She’s joking, of course. Serious suggestions should have been made last week. Now it’s too late.

So we hit the road in the Vauxhall again. We’re beginning to resemble the panicked rats in my nightmare, just like the crowd in the Warsaw railway station.

Elzunia is eight years old. She can’t take all this. She whines, falls asleep, wakes up screaming. We see car and truck skeletons on the side of the road. Now and then, we hear the dull thump of a remote bombing. Elzunia then becomes quite stiff. Rose speaks to her in a soft voice to hearten her. I'd like to shout a little, too, but Elzunia screams enough for everybody. Even the adults feel as weak and helpless as children when facing the horror of what's happening and what's going to happen.

As we approach Warsaw, we have to stop at a roadblock that some soldiers are guarding. An officer, gun in hand, orders us to step out of the Vauxhall:

"I requisition it. Headquarters' order!"

We understand that nobody ordered such a thing. In ordinary times, Grandpa would have protested, asked the officer's name and his regiment's number, threatened to inform some higher-up in the War ministry. We know that we're entering extraordinary times. Grandpa mumbles a few words in Yiddish:

"The angel of death deprives us of our earthly possessions before we move to the hereafter."

Grandma shrugs:

"What are you talking about? The officer wants to flee to Slovakia, that's all."

Although I've never met the angel of death, I notice that the bombs have turned the world upside down. The Vauxhall isn't a valuable and exclusive machine anymore, but a worthless thing that we can leave behind. Grandpa's power has melted like spring snow. There is no more law outside the rule of the gun.

We end this stupid trip on foot. Elzunia shivers as if she had a high fever, so that eventually uncle Dolek carries her on his back.

Being back in my bedroom brings me a kind of painful pleasure. My big doll house, my toy dinner set, my hobby horse… Well, when you grow up, you reach an age when you cease to play with your dolls. I decide I've just reached it. Instead of letting this awful Adolf take the decision in my place with his bombs, I make up my mind here and now. If Rose comes down to play with me, as she often does, I'll tell her: "I've stopped playing."

Mama is gone to see Tatus at Maminka's. This is what we call Tatus's mother, to distinguish her from Grandma. I hardly know her, because until 1938 she lived in Pinsk, near the Russian border. Then Tatus's father died, so she settled in Warsaw. As she speaks only Yiddish and Russian, I can't talk to her.

Rose comes down to visit me. She doesn't ask me to play. I give her the latest news:

"Mama says Tatus will go to Pinsk with Maminka to escape the bombings. If everything is fine over there, we'll go and join them."

"Mother (not my mother, but hers: Grandma) would like us to leave Warsaw, too. Father refuses. He says our expedition to the countryside proves we'd better stay here."

"What a pity: he lost his beautiful Vauxhall!"

"He says he doesn't care about the automobile, as long as we've all stayed alive. He thinks we should wait until the end of the bombing before taking a decision. He says the next days or weeks will be tough and we should pray the Eternal to spare us."

"Grandpa? He said we should pray?"

"Yeah, it surprised me too. I believe I had never heard him mention the Eternal before. Mother laughed at him. She said he should teach me a prayer first."

I sleep with one eye open. As soon as a murky gray light heralds dawn, I get up and dress. Soon, the first bombs explode. I am not hungry, but Mama says I must force myself to eat some bread. We listen to the radio in the living-room. Our invincible troops are resisting manfully and prepare a counter-strike. England and France, our allies, have declared war on Germany, so Hitler will capitulate before the end of the week.

While listening to the wireless, I look out of the window absent-mindedly. All of a sudden, the building across the street turns red and glows like a ruby. An abominable whistling sound bores into my ears. The deflagration that follows it is so loud that by comparison the bombs sound like crackers. Our living-room's window-panes add the noise of their breaking to the din. We're lucky to be standing in the middle of the room, otherwise glass shards would hurt us. I close my eyes for a few seconds because of the shock, but my face is still turned toward the window. When I open my eyes, I see a dust cloud that clears slowly, revealing a strip of blue sky. There is no more building across the street.

I think about my doll house. You could certainly destroy it in a few seconds… But a full-size building? Masons have spent months erecting its stone walls, and now only a smoking pile of debris is left, with a bunch of wooden beams burning like giant matches. One of my classmates lived in this building a few years ago. I'm relieved when I think she doesn't live there anymore. As if the death of unknown people didn't matter…

I climb the stairs quickly with Mama to check that Grandpa and Grandma haven't been hurt. Uncle Dolek, Aunt Yola and Elzunia are already up there. I see the blue sky again: the explosion removed part of our building' roof. A piece of ceiling fell on Grandpa's head. Grandma is applying a kind of compress upon his skull. He seems to be in a bad mood.

"All right, all right," he grumbles. "It's nothing. Let's go down."

We walk toward the Vistula.[4] Many bombs have fallen in our neighborhood. Flames shoot out of windows. Fire engines try to move ahead through the debris. Wounded people wrapped in bloody bandages walk slowly, helped by passers-by. For the first time in my life, I see corpses.

The heat is painful. The smoke becomes so thick at times that we can hardly breathe. We see nothing. We hold each other's hands to avoid getting lost. Until last week, Grandpa told us what to do. It was still an ordinary week, but we didn't know it… Grandpa stays silent. Aunt Yola and uncle Dolek lead our little troop. We reach a tall black door. Dolek opens it. A staircase is going down to the basement. Now that I'm writing about it, I remember my nightmare, but when I climbed down I didn't. Yola and Dolek loved to dance. They often went out at night, leaving Elzunia with us. So they brought us to the famous Adria dancing-hall.

Hundreds of people had the same idea as Yola and Dolek. We're protected against the bombs, but if the crowd panics it will crush us. We go out after an hour and look for another shelter. We try one more dancing hall, then a basement that a police sergeant tells us about. We're standing near a small window to breathe a little when a bomb falls in the building's courtyard. The window breaks and a glass shard opens a large gash in Mama's cheek. Mama stiffens and thrusts her nails into my hand, so that we both bleed.

A very strong smell spreads through the basement.

"This is sulfurous anhydride," Mama says. "The bomb contained sulfur. We must leave right away."

She didn't need to say it, as we can't breathe in the basement. The acid gas burns our eyes, so we close them and grope like blind people.

A deep hole has appeared in the courtyard, as if someone wanted to lay the foundations for a new building. Near the hole, an old man is holding his arm, which is almost completely torn away from his shoulder.

Uncle Dolek goes out on his own to try to get some news. After a while, the bombings become less frequent and we return home. Dolek soon joins us:

"The Germans have bombed the airfields to make it impossible for our airplanes to fly. Now that they control the sky, they can bomb at will. The planes come mostly at the end of the night and early morning. Then our guns adjust their aim and they fly away."

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[4] Warsaw's river.

Bombs rain for more than two weeks. We spend afternoons and evenings at home. Grandpa and Grandma live on the fifth floor, in the apartment of my uncle Itshak—who left southward, in the direction of Hungary, hoping to reach Palestine eventually. Around midnight, we go down to a basement uncle Dolek has found, where we stay until noon.

I've received Robinson Crusoe, David Copperfield and Jane Eyre for my tenth birthday. I hadn't opened them yet, as I was afraid to read such thick books in English. In the basement, I read them all!

Every day, uncle Dolek goes for news somewhere.

"The government gathered our invincible troops in the middle of the great Poznan plain, the favorite route of Poland's invaders. They figured the enemy wouldn't try to pass north, because of the swamps, nor south, because of the high mountains. Well, the Germans went north and south and encircled our troops. They don't send a whole army through the swamps or over the mountains, but only a tank column. They just need a narrow road. What really matters is that the tanks move ahead very fast and surprise our troops by appearing in their rear. It's a new way of making war, which the Germans call Blitzkrieg, or Flash war."

On September 15th, we learn that the Germans have already crossed Poland and reached the cities of Brest-Litovsk and L'vov. The government withdraws to Romania, but the elite regiments defending Warsaw refuse to surrender. Our dear French and English allies, who could have helped us by attacking Germany, didn't do it.

The Germans stop in Brest-Litovsk instead of going all the way to the Soviet border. Actually, they've offered the province east of Brest-Litovsk to Russia—in a secret clause of the pact between Hitler and Stalin. Thus, on September 17th, the Soviet army invades the east of Poland. The region of Pinsk, where Tatus and Maminka should be, is annexed to the Soviet Republic of Byelorussia. The region of L'vov becomes part of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine.

On September 27th, after resisting more than anybody thought possible, the troops defending Warsaw surrender and the German army enters our city. The war is over. It lasted less than a month.

Mama and I, we walk toward the center of town to see whether we might find fresh vegetables and fruit. During the bombings, we ate mostly out of tin cans.

A convoy of German military trucks is stopped in the middle of an avenue. The soldiers are giving bread to the people: fat rye loaves that look tasty enough. Mama and I don't need to exchange a single word: we won't eat that bread. A woman with a young boy is holding out her hand to get some bread. Someone shouts: *Jude, Jude*! ("Jew" in German). Then the crowd chases the woman and the child away. Mama tightens her grip on my hand. She's cut her nails so she won't hurt me like last time.

On the next day, I see a column of religious Jews guarded by German soldiers. They carry shovels and pickaxes. I guess the soldiers requisitioned them to clear away rubble. They may have dragged them out of bed quite brutally: some of them wear only their pajamas under their greatcoats. These religious Jews, who spend their life studying holy texts, seem rather clumsy with their shovels and pickaxes. Several soldiers hold huge black dogs on a leash. A Jew stoops to tie his laces. The nearest soldier gives him such a strong kick that the poor man falls flat on his face. At the same time, the soldier pets his dog's head. I think he pulled the leash in spite of himself when he kicked the Jew.

Mama says the Germans will find it easy to persecute the religious Jews: not only do they all live in the same neighborhood, but their full beard and long black coat give them away.

"But, Mama, why don't they shave their beard?"

"The Bible says they shouldn't put a sharp blade to their face, or something. They could still shave, I believe, because the Talmud, another holy book, authorizes them to transgress the law when a life is at stake."

"What about us, Mama? Will the Germans persecute us?"

"Don't worry, Kamunia. We won't wait for them to catch us."

On this same day, one of Tatus's colleagues at the Tropical Illnesses Institute brings us a message. Tatus managed to call the Institute by telephone. He didn't reach Pinsk, because the Russians don't let people go wherever they want, but settled with Maminka in Kobryn, thirty miles east of Brest-Litovsk. He's found a job in a lab already. The message ends with the following sentence: "You must, I repeat must, come join me as soon as possible."

Mama finds it strange that he insists so much.

"You know how he likes the Soviets… I guess he made friends in the communist party and they gave him secret information about the Germans' plans."

"Are we going to join him in Kobryn, Mama?"

"Let's say we shall try. This is an opportunity, that's for sure."

The whole family meets with Grandpa and Grandma in uncle Itshak's former apartment. Once more, I notice that Grandpa, who ordered people about before the war by raising an eyebrow, lost his authority. He is stooping slightly, so that Grandma now seems taller than he is. She leads the meeting, actually.

"You should go, both of you. You've got nothing to lose."

“We could consider this an exploratory trip. If we find things are okay over there, you’ll come too.”

“Your father can’t leave his business behind. There are employees, stocks, ships in Gdynia. Yola, Dolek and Elzunia could follow you at first, taking our Rose along Then we would see how things turn out.”

Grandpa stands up slowly. His face is wrinkled. This may not be new, but I had never noticed. A kind of sad veil covers his blue eyes. Even his voice changed: it is deeper. He seems to hesitate. He mumbles, he stops in the middle of a sentence:

“I won’t go… The communists consider me a capitalist… An enemy who exploits the people… They would send me to Siberia. In a camp… With the Germans, it is possible to… We can talk, reach an agreement. I have had them as customers… The Germans… During the great war, then in Dantzig.”

Uncle Dolek works in Grandpa’s company. He doesn’t like the communists either. He speaks with a quiet authority.

“It is too early to take a decision. Maybe we’ll find a way to negotiate with the Germans. I know that the Rothschild, in Germany, and other powerful Jewish company owners left part of their assets to the Nazis in exchange for a permission to emigrate to England or America.”

How can we join Tatus? We’ve lost the Vauxhall. Moreover, petrol is rationed. As the Germans bombed the railroad tracks, there are no more trains. Dolek knows a taxi owner, who accepts to drive us to the border. Grandpa has lots of money, thank God, so we buy three small jerry cans of petrol on the black market.

Grandma says a woman and a girl can’t cross Poland by themselves in war time. Uncle Dolek volunteers to come with us. Thus he’ll be able to make a report, when he returns to Warsaw, upon Byelorussia and the communists.

I say goodbye to Grandpa, Grandma, aunt Yola and my two playmates, Rose and Elzunia. I wonder whether we’ll meet again in a few weeks or several years—or ever. I give my toys to Elzunia. She’s delighted.

It took us two weeks to make up our minds, find the taxi and the petrol. We leave on October 15th.

The taxi driver grumbles. Each jerry can contains three gallons, so we have less than ten gallons altogether. This is enough to reach Brest-Litovsk, which lies 120 miles east of Warsaw, but then how will he come back? Dolek hopes rationing is less severe in the countryside. We’ll see.

Uncle Dolek sits in front with the driver, I in the back with Mama. When we move out of Warsaw and drive across the first fields, then the first forests, I feel as relieved as when I used to wake up from my nightmare. Real life takes over, normal life, where birches lose their leaves in autumn and wait for snow without complaining. I give Mama a hearty kiss. Fat tears roll down her cheek. One of them follows her scar.

By and by, as if to imitate the leaves falling from the trees, these past weeks' dark memories begin to recede… Days and nights spent in dirty basements, the building across the street glowing like a ruby and vanishing, the crowd shouting "Jude, Jude" to the mother and child, Grandpa's handsome face getting older under our very eyes. The engine's roar, similar to some magical music, dispels the noises that buzz in my ears: bombs exploding, glass crashing, Elzunia whining mournfully.

I feel so happy that I want to become crazy Kama again. Kamunia little wasp! I'm thirsty, I'm hungry, I want to pee. I sit at the driver's side. I ask him whether he has a wife and kids.

"I don't have any children, miss. As for my wife, she left me. She went to Cracow with an army sergeant."

"The Germans certainly killed the sergeant, so your wife will come back!"

"Let her stay in Cracow! I don't want her anymore."

I see that Mama throws a disapproving glance in my direction. I said something foolish again. To avoid any forbidden subject, I tell the driver about the Three Musketeers in great detail. He never heard of Cardinal de Richelieu. I must explain French history to him, or at least my own version of it.

"This cardinal Riszélié, did he really exist?"

"Of course. He was a contemporary of our king Sigismond II."

At the same time, I listen to what uncle Dolek and Mama say in a low voice on the back seat. I hear fragments of dialogue. Dolek talks about Grandpa's company.

"Too late… He should have… value…"

"… Possible?"

"… Five years ago… Even at half-price… Emigrate to Australia…"

I would love to emigrate to Australia. I would adopt a koala. Play hopscotch with kangaroos.

I think Mama asks uncle Dolek why he told this story of the Rothschild negotiating with the Germans.

"… Give hope… Your father… Morally broken…"

Dolek explains that the Germans do not plan to negotiate or trade with the Poles. They have already annexed the provinces of Poznan and Cracow, in the west of our country, which they occupied before the great war. The rest of Poland has become a colony, headed by a German governor, similar to the countries the English and French possess in Africa. The Germans will treat the Poles in the same manner the English and French treat the negroes.[5]

I often heard the negroes mentioned at home. When Mama praised England too much, Tatus said the English considered the negroes in Africa inferior citizens, little more than slaves. Only the communist system will bring the actual end of slavery.

While I'm describing the sweet Madame Bonacieux and the nasty Milady de Winter to the driver, I can't help interfering with the conversation I hear in my back.

"Say, are there Jewish negroes?"

The driver bursts out laughing. He finds the idea of Jewish negroes quite funny, but uncle Dolek's answer amazes him:

"Of course. There are black Jews in Ethiopia, brown Jews in India and even yellow Jews in China."

"You're really everywhere," the driver says.

Once more, I see that Mama frowns. Dolek says the Jews do not dominate the world.

"This is just a legend, made up by the anti-Semites. Just think about the Italians, who conquered Ethiopia. Do the Ethiopian Jews dominate them? You can be sure the Italians see these Jews as negroes and nothing more."

I feel this conversation is not going in the right direction. I pretend I want to pee again. Mama understands I want to talk to her. We hide in a thicket. I ask her whether the driver is not going to leave us in the middle of the forest, like Snow White, to keep the money Grandpa gave him.

"Don't worry, my love. He certainly wants things to go as smoothly as possible, since he'll receive much more money when he returns to Warsaw. Then he can hope to carry Yola, Elzunia and Rose and maybe, who knows, Grandma and Grandpa. The times are tough for him too. From our family he can expect guaranteed income for the next few months. Besides, people like him are prejudiced against Jews in general, but they often make exceptions for Jews they know personally."

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[5] When Kama wrote, the word "negro" was common and wasn't considered pejorative.

Soon afterwards, we come to a small town where we see German troops. We're not very far from Brest-Litovsk. The driver reminds us that he needs petrol for the return trip. Dolek says we must find the Kommandantur[6] and request petrol coupons.

We do not have to ask our way. Huge red flags with black swastikas hang from the Kommandantur's façade. Mama steps off the car. She takes me with her:

"Come with me, Kamuniu. I'd better look like a housewife and mother. We don't want them to think I'm a spy or something."

"Why doesn't uncle Dolek buy these petrol coupons?"

"The Germans might ask him why he isn't a soldier. He can't answer the truth: that the Poles didn't want him in their army because he's a Jew. Even worse: they might ask him to lower his pants…"

I do know that Jewish men have something special that you can see when they lower their pants, but I don't know what it is…

"What about us, Mama? Won't they guess we're Jewish?"

"They believe Jews have black curly hair, like Arabs. With our red hair, they'll never imagine…"

Mama begins to talk to an officer. I'm quite proud of her: she speaks German as if she had learned that language in her pram. Actually, she studied German in high school, but it was easy for her because she knew Yiddish. Me, I've never studied German but I understand Yiddish, so I understand what she says.

"I have to visit my sister. She suffered a sudden attack of uremia. She lives in a village near Brest-Litovsk."

"Do you see this map, on the wall? Show me the village."

I can see that Mama trembles very slightly. She doesn't hesitate. She approaches the wall and points near Brest-Litovsk.

"All right, I'll telephone!" the German officer says.

Mama grows pale, but nobody could notice it, as her skin is quite white already.

Whew! The officer didn't call the village that Mama pointed to, but the petrol store to ask them to bring some jerry cans.

When we're back in the car, Mama tells uncle Dolek and the driver what happened.

"I pointed to a village at random. The officer said, all right, I'll telephone… I thought we were done for. I was angry at myself for improvising the whole rigmarole without thinking.

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[6] German command post.

You see adventurers in movies, it seems easy, but it's a real profession. When he called the store for jerry cans, I was so glad I nearly kissed him!"

"But Mama, he couldn't telephone to the village."

"Why is that, little wasp?"

"They don't have phones in the villages!"

Dolek laughs.

"Next time, you should let your daughter take care of everything!"

Eventually, we come to the river Bug, which marks the new border between Poland and Byelorussia. The water is green and flows without haste. We can see the city of Brest-Litovsk on the other side. On this side, there are weeping willows and a few houses. People show us a wooden isba: a peasant who owns a boat lives there. We enter the isba…

"Hands up!"

Two German soldiers are pointing their guns at us. Whoever tries to leave Poland passes through this house. The soldiers just wait and seize riches hidden in pockets and suitcases.

Mama thought the winter could be harsh in Byelorussia, so she's wearing her warmest coat—which also happens to be her most beautiful, as it is entirely lined with fox-tail fur. Of course, the soldiers understand right away that they've caught big fish. A pleasant smile lightens their faces.

"Do you have dollars? Gold? Diamonds? You'd better give us everything, 'cause we'll get it anyway."

"I'm going to join my husband, who works in Kobryn, officers. We're not rich. We own neither gold nor diamonds."

"We'll see that."

They frisk us. They unstitch the lining of uncle Dolek's coat. They even unglue the heels of our shoes to check whether we haven't hidden diamonds there. In the end, they only find three pounds of sugar in Mama's suitcase. She's quite surprise to discover this sugar. Grandma probably put it in the suitcase without telling her. The two soldiers must content themselves with this meager loot.

We say goodbye to the taxi driver and cross the Bug in the peasant's boat. As soon as we land on the other shore, Russian soldiers arrest us. We have neither passports nor Soviet visas, of course. They take us to the Brest-Litovsk fortress, a vast red-brick building. I stay with Mama, thank God, but they separate us from uncle Dolek.

They lock us inside a cell, where we sleep on tiered bunks. Last night, I was still sleeping in my Warsaw bedroom… Actually, this cell is more comfortable than the basements where I spent so many nights, so I sleep quite soundly.

In the morning, a woman soldier asks us to follow her. We pass uncle Dolek in the corridor. The woman soldier isn't stern and frightening like the German soldiers I saw in Warsaw. She lets us chat with Dolek.

"They questioned me already," he says. "I told them I'm an accountant and that you're the daughter of a fisherman who owns a few boats."

We meet a Soviet officer who seems as careless as the woman soldier. He tells us he's Jewish, like us. He gives us a temporary pass and wishes us good luck.

We take the train to Kobryn—a very short trip. The Germans haven't bombed this province, since they had agreed to give it to their Russian allies, so the railroads operate normally.

I see Tatus on the platform of Kobryn station. I run toward him and jump into his arms with such energy that he falls on his bottom. He laughs and repeats: "Little wasp, little wasp…"

He carries Mama's suitcase and mine.

"I've been coming to the station every morning. Mercifully, there's only one train per day. Now I'm taking you to my palace."

He lives in a palace? This is not like him at all.

Actually, his palace is a single room that's not larger than my Warsaw bedroom. There's a bed, a tiny table, four stools, a chest of drawers and a small stove—which we use for heating and cooking. Maminka sleeps in the bed, Tatus on the floor. Uncle Dolek, Mama and I, we also sleep on the floor. Every evening, we push the stools under the table so we can lie down.

I've become used to sleeping on the floor in the basements. At first, it was difficult, because I slept on my belly and my knees hurt. Since the time of the basements, I've been sleeping on my side, even when I'm in a regular bed.

Tatus found a job in a cheese factory.

"Do you make cheese, Tatus?"

"I look at cheese samples under the microscope. I check that they contain only the good germs of fermentation, rather than bad germs. The Soviet army also sends me samples of the soldiers' blood. In blood too, little wasp, there are good and bad germs."

"It's like cheese, then?"

"Exactly."

As he earns little money, Mama also goes to work. While in Warsaw she took care of me and sometimes helped Grandpa, she has studied biology like Tatus and actually I think they met in university. Anyway, in Kobryn, Tatus finds a job for her in a botany lab. She works just like him, except she puts seeds under the microscope instead of cheese and looks for mold and mushrooms instead of germs. I know, because I often go with her. I'm afraid of being separated from her, as if I had become a girl Elzunia's age again.

After work, Mama studies Russian with an old lady whom we call Babushka, that is, Grandmother. I go with her and learn Russian too. Once you know the alphabet, it is not too hard, as Russian is a Slavic language like Polish.

If Maminka knew Russian better, she could teach me, but she speaks mostly Yiddish.

The people who rent the room to us, an old religious Jew and his three daughters, also speak Yiddish. The old Jew spends his days praying. Uncle Dolek says he's lucky: he lives outside our world and its horrors. The only thing that matters to him is to adore the Eternal.

Tatus says we do not live in the middle ages anymore. The world is changing. Communism is a great progress. It is better to act than to adore the Eternal.

The old Jew's daughters tell lots of stories about the communists, who've been in Kobryn for one month already.

"Old magpies," Tatus says. "They chatter and gossip so much, no man ever wanted to marry them."

Ah, but uncle Dolek loves to listen to their tales. After all, he must report about the situation when he returns to Warsaw and recommend whether aunt Yola and Elzunia, Rose, then Grandpa and Grandma should join us.

According to the three magpies, the Red Army soldiers just want to plunder everything. While Russian stores are empty, in this new province they're so full that you might think you've reached the land of milk and honey. They grab a roast chicken at the butcher's and eat it whole. They gulp a pound of butter as if it was a piece of cake. They drink twelve bottles of beer and fall dead drunk in the middle of the street. Not only do they steal automobiles, but also machines in workshops and factories, clothes in shops, shoes, watches, fountain pens. A soldier sees a nightgown in a store. He takes it, believing it is a ball gown!

When they find a modern bathroom in an apartment, they wash their head in the toilet bowl!

The sisters tell a joke. A mother and her son were separated after the great war: he in Poland, she in Russia. He sees her again now, after twenty years, and recognizes her by her coat… As I don’t understand the joke, they explain it to me: on the Russian side, stores are empty, so you can’t buy a new coat.

Speaking of coats… Mama hides her beautiful fur-lined coat under the mattress in our room. One of the sisters lends her an old threadbare coat. I’m not allowed to walk by myself in the street, lest a Russian soldier steal my shoes. We took good-quality clothes when we left Warsaw, because we do not know how many months or years we’ll need to wear them. Twenty years like in the joke? I hope not. We wear our heavy mountain shoes, with thick spiked soles, which had to tackle Warsaw’s snowy streets in winter.

Only the Red Army’s officers wear strong leather shoes and boots. The shoes of the ordinary soldiers are so pitiful that they wrap their feet in cotton bands or rags to avoid freezing. They wouldn’t steal our good shoes for themselves, maybe (they have gigantic feet!), but for their wives and daughters. So Mama is very careful to make our shoes dirty by applying layers of mud over them. Tatus doesn’t believe in the magpies’ rumors, so he doesn’t understand what she’s doing.

“Are you shining our shoes?”

“On the contrary!”

Uncle Dolek stays ten days in Kobryn, then goes back to Warsaw. He didn’t get into a real fight with Tatus and Mama, but it was obvious he didn’t agree with them. He seemed sorry:

“You, Marek, you’re in love with communism and you, Adela, you’re in love with Marek, so you both think you’ve reached paradise. But me, I think it’s even worse than I feared. I can’t tell the rest of the family to come here.”

“This isn’t paradise, Dolek, but Warsaw may turn into hell. You know I don’t share Marek’s blind love for communism. I’ve been raised in luxury, I’ve had servants, I don’t relish sleeping on the floor in a ten-feet wide room. I prefer luxury to poverty, but I prefer poverty to death.”

“You don’t have to be so dramatic. If things turn out bad in Warsaw, we’ll still be able to call our friend the taxi driver.”

Two or three weeks after Dolek’s departure, Tatus tells us he heard confidential news:

“If they decide to join us, they’ll find it difficult. Many Jews are trying to cross the Bug, like we did. The Soviets protest that this wasn’t part of their pact with the Germans, that they already have enough Jews as it is. So they locked the border.”

“Your Soviet friends, aren’t they slightly anti-Semitic?”

"Listen, Adela… I believe communism is a good system, but the Soviet Union may not be able to follow it properly yet. It is an ideal, a hard-to-reach goal. We'll need centuries, maybe…"

Mama says Tatus is unable to explain some strange events that everybody talks about. Part of the Polish army took refuge in Russia. Instead of welcoming these Polish fighters with open arms, the Soviets send them to camps in Siberia. The officers disappear. Nobody knows anything. Actually, people vanish easily in the Soviet Union. What's really amazing is that the Polish communists vanish, although the Soviets should consider them friends.

Tatus tries to defend his Soviet comrades:

"It is likely that spies hide in the middle of these Polish communists."

"So for one or two spies, they send thousands of good Polish communists in the Siberian salt mines?"

"You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs."

Tatus loves this saying, which irritates Mama highly. He says it's a pity if a few people die by mistake.

"We must sometimes sacrifice lives for the good of mankind and of future generations."

"As long as you don't plan to sacrifice your own life for the good of future generations…"

"Don't worry. I'm quite careful. I'm lucky I've never been a member of the communist party."

In Poland, the communist party was outlawed, so belonging to it exposed you to great danger. While Dolek said to Tatus: "You who are communist," Mama told me that Tatus was only a "sympathizer" in Poland, and that now he doesn't sympathize as much as he used to. You can't compare him to Dr. Widman, a medical doctor who works in Tatus's office. He admires the Soviet Union so blindly that when he arrived in Kobryn, he wrote a poem beginning with the verses:

This autumn is the first one
That for me resembles spring.

1940. From Kobryn to L’vov.

We’ve spent nearly nine months in Kobryn already. During all that time, Maminka, Tatus’s mother, never left our small room—except to go as far as the courtyard’s water pump or outhouse. When we arrived, she used to lie or sit on her bed all day without doing anything. Maybe she prayed the Eternal, like the old Jew. Mama brought her wool balls and knitting needles. The Russian soldiers aren’t very clever: they prefer to steal fountain pens than wool, because they can’t knit (it doesn’t mean they can write!), but wool has more value, obviously. Indeed, Mama bought her balls on the black market, spending almost her whole salary.

Thus Maminka doesn’t stay idle on her bed. After knitting warm thick sweaters for us, then socks and caps, she makes pullovers that Tatus and Mama sell to the other refugees.

After buying all the wool balls she could find in Kobryn, Mama buys old woolen rags. We pull them apart to get new balls.

Maminka sings old Yiddish songs when she knits. The three magpies often come and listen to her. Even the old Jew also listens sometimes, sitting on the floor in the corridor. I don’t go to the lab with Mama every day. I take my lessons of Russian language at Babushka’s, or I stay with Maminka and I read quietly in a corner. She’s tried to show me how to knit several times, but I always forget the precise moves—even though Mama promises me a share in the profits. I’m too clumsy. Rose would become a knitting champion in no time!

Not only does Babushka teach me the Russian alphabet and grammar, but she also reads books to me aloud, following the words on the page with her finger. She says I must be able to read by myself, for it is the only way to really learn a language. She lends me books of Russian fairy tales. There is always a prince, a princess to be saved, and the nasty witch Baba Yage, who lives in a wooden isba with chicken legs as pilings.

As there are still many Poles in Kobryn, Mama manages to find Polish books for me. I read *Quo Vadis*, by Sienkiewicz, and *In Desert and Wilderness*, a novel by the same author that tells the trek of two children in Sudan around 1885, during the war opposing the terrible “Mahdi” to the English general Kitchener.

The toughest thing is finding English books. To keep our luggage light, Mama only brought an anthology of English poetry, but I’ve read and reread it so much that I know all the poems by heart. My friends the three sisters eventually find a series of English and French history books somewhere. I discover that there are similarities between this war and past ones. For examples, the three sisters and Mama say women shouldn't go out at night because drunk soldiers might "rape" them.

"What does it mean, Mama, 'rape'?"

"Well, ahem… It means 'to marry forcibly.' Imagine one of these soldiers forces you to become his wife."

"But I'm too small!"

"This wouldn't stop him. You've seen how they behave when they drink."

"In that case, Mama, we should wear pants like Joan of Arc."

"Joan of Arc?"

"Yes, she lived with soldiers. She wore pants so they wouldn't rape her."

"Not a bad idea. A very good idea, actually."

"In the end, though, the bishop asked her to wear a skirt, because it was a sin for a woman to dress as a man. As she refused, they burned her at the stake."

"Okay, I'll find pants for you and me, but I hope no bishop will burn us."

Wearing pants is not enough. She also cuts my hair, so I really look like a boy. One day, as we are going together to Babushka's place, a Russian soldier hails us:

"Stop, comrade!"

I feel Mama's hand clench mine. I'm getting used to it. Actually, the soldier doesn't speak to Mama, but to me:

"How old are ye, my boy?"

"Nearly eleven, officer."

"I ain't no officer, but a plain soldier. At home, in Sverdlovsk, I have a nine-year old boy. He looks like ye."

"Where is this Sverdlovsk?"

"Very far from here, in the mountains of Ural."

Suddenly, he begins to cry. He's not weeping like a drunkard full of vodka, but like a father who thinks about his son. During the two last weeks I spent in Warsaw, I saw German soldiers as stiff as wooden poles and the terrible policemen called SS, whom you can't look at without trembling. Ah, this good Russian soldier is quite different from them! His rag-wrapped feet remind me of the chicken legs of Baba Yaga's isba, except they look more like elephant legs. He sniffs like a child, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

Mama puts her hand on his shoulder:

"Be brave, comrade! You'll see your child again…"

“May God hear thee, little mother! If I do see him again someday, I’m afraid he’ll have hair on his chin already. Today he’s still as sweet as honey. His voice will change, he’ll drink and smoke, then he’ll go to war… You’re lucky to have your son with you, little mother.”

Since the revolution, the Soviets must use the word “comrade” when they address each other (according to my history books, the French called each other “citizen” during their revolution), but actually people still say “little father” and “little mother” like in former times. Mama noticed something else:

“He mentioned God, although the communists are not supposed to believe in God.”

Refugees throng Kobryn. Most of them are Jews fleeing the Germans. The closing of the border doesn’t discourage them. It just makes the passage more expensive. While we gave the peasant a few zlotys to cross the Bug, people must now pay with dollars. The peasants living along the Bug, who know to cross the river in the middle of the night, have all become full-time ferrymen.

In April, 1940, the Soviet authorities declare that the situation is back to normal in Poland, under a new German-backed administration. Thus, if refugees want to go home, they can report to army headquarters and be repatriated.

Mama would like to return to Warsaw, but Tatus says we can’t.

“This is a dialectic trick. They hope that people partial to the Germans will drop their mask, then they’ll deport them to Siberia. There are too many refugees, you understand.”

“They suspect these poor Jews to be German spies too? Quite a pretty trick! I call it a dialectic lie, pure and simple. I thought that communism meant truth… I know you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs, but it seems to me your friends are really breaking many eggs.”

“It wouldn’t make sense to go back, anyway, now that we have passports.”

Having worked for the Red Army for months in his lab, Tatus has made friends with several influent officers, who got us Soviet passports. We aren’t refugees anymore, so they can’t expel or deport us.

Well, the information about the dialectic trick was first-grade. People who want to return to Poland have to report before a certain deadline. On the very night after the deadline, we hear awful noises and cries throughout our neighborhood. Soldiers are taking away all the people who volunteered to return. They deport more than a hundred thousand people to Siberia.

The screaming and neighing keeps us awake, but at least we feel safe. Me, twice safe, as I snuggle in Mama's arms… Suddenly, a bomb explodes inside our room. Well, not really, but that's what it sounds like to us: the door splits open under the kick of a Soviet officer's heavy boot. This man is not Russian, but maybe Tartar or Mongol. He has very high cheekbones, slit eyes, and seems quite cruel.

"Get your stuff. You're going to lake Baikal.[7]"

His tone is harsh, but I ain't complaining: ever since reading Jules Verne's *Michel Strogoff*, I've been dreaming of going to lake Baikal. At last I'll see the Angara river and the city of Irkutsk… Tatus has other plans, though:

"You can't deport us – we have passports."

"I know who you are… Bourgeois, capitalists, exploiters."

"Look around, comrade officer: have you ever seen capitalists who sleep on the floor?"

"Who gave you these passports?"

"This is none of your business. I deserved them by helping the Red Army. If you don't stop bothering us, you'll be in trouble."

The Mongol officer goes away at 4 AM or so. Now we are *really* awake! Tatus seems embarrassed:

"This mess is my fault."

"You knew this nasty fellow? He seemed to know you."

"Yes. I found typhus in his regiment. This means they have lice, so hygiene is probably wanting. They wash neither their clothes nor themselves. Typhus is more dangerous for an army than the enemy's bullets. I wrote a report…"

"You shouldn't feel guilty. You had to do it."

"No… I might have talked discreetly to his superior officers, or gone to his regiment and shown the soldiers how to kill lice. I should have thought more. When confusion and arbitrariness reign everywhere, offending someone in power is a bad idea. I've still got much to learn."

After the Mongol officer's nocturnal visit, we don't feel secure anymore. I distrust the night and dislike falling asleep. I hear shrieks in my dreams. The good Russian soldiers scare me.

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[7] One a the largest lakes in the world, located in Siberia.

Widman, the doctor who saw spring in autumn, has gone away to L'vov. Tatus decides to schedule a short exploratory trip there. This is risky, because of paragraph 11. My parents talk about this mysterious paragraph 11 all the time. While we aren't refugees anymore, we can't move to another city without a permit—actually this is true for most Soviet citizens. People don't do what they want in this country.

So Tatus leaves on foot in late May, without telling anyone, like Uncle Itshak when he decided to go to Palestine. L'vov is several hundred miles south of Kobryn. Tatus walks. When it rains, he climbs into a horse-drawn cart or a truck.

One month later, he's back.

"Everything is fine. I've got a job over there. Guess who I found? Yola, Dolek and Elzunia. I got rid of my paragraph 11. I'll get yours removed too."

"That's great! You're a genius. Kamuniu, you've got the most fantastic father in the world! But tell me, what kind of job?"

"The railroad company's hospital made me head of their lab. Here, in Kobryn, everybody speaks Russian, as this province belonged to Russia before the great war. In Pinsk, when I was a child, I spoke Russian. Over there in L'vov, people speak Polish: they've never been Russian. This makes me quite valuable. They pay me three times more than here. Without me, the hospital's new bosses, who just arrived from Moscow, can't communicate with their Polish employees. For my boss, removing paragraph 11 was nothing at all. I'll find work for you in my lab!"

"I'll be glad to leave this room. What do you think, little wasp?"

"I'd rather go to lake Baikal!"

They remove paragraph 11 from our passports, so we don't have to hitch a ride on horse-carts. We travel by train, what else?

Maminka stays in Kobryn, because Tatus hasn't found an apartment in L'vov yet.

"You'll see, L'vov is a large and handsome city. It will remind you of Warsaw. Much better than Kobryn. In such a small town, everybody knows you, so you must flatter this one and beware of that one to navigate the shoals… Now, nobody will break our door in the middle of the night."

"May God hear thee, little father!"

I say this in Russian. Tatus and Mama laugh. I speak Russian well enough. Not as well as English, but better than Mama! Tatus speaks Russian as well as Polish, without any accent.

In Russian trains, fat ladies brew tea for the passengers. They serve us with respect, calling Tatus “comrade.” Mama finds it very funny.

“I see you’re moving up the hierarchy, comrade.”

“It’s my new jacket. Everybody is equal, but the colonel and the director have a better jacket than the simple soldier or employee.”

During the trip, Tatus gives us the latest war news. While we were in Kobryn, the English and the French kept behind the Maginot line without ever attacking the Germans. At first, I heard, “imaginary line.” I thought it was a chalk line on the ground, like when you play hopscotch, and the allies had told the Germans: “If you step over this line, we’ll chop your head.” But actually, it was a series of fortifications planned by a man named Maginot. In May, 1940, the Germans entered Belgium. Tatus draws a map on a piece of paper:

“The Germans attacked in the north. Belgium had declared itself neutral, but it didn’t help. The Germans invaded it exactly as they have done during the great war. The king of Belgium renounced his neutrality, letting the English and French into his country, but it was too late already.”

Tatus draws lines on his map.

“Part of the French army holds the Maginot line. You see it, here in the east? The rest rushes north with the English to attack the Germans in Belgium. Now, look here… In this corner, in the northeast, lies the impenetrable Ardennes forest. Does it remind you of something?”

“Me, I know, Tatus: the swamps in the north of Poland and the mountains in the south.”

“That’s right, little wasp. The whole German army couldn’t go through the forest, but a single tank column could. Generals Guderian and Rommel, two tank specialists, moved ahead so fast that they reached the English Channel in a few days. You see, the armies in the north are encircled. The English and the French have lost the war, although they hardly fought.”

“But Marek, your story doesn’t make sense. The English and the French could see how the Germans proceeded in Poland.”

“You dear Englishmen are just like our Poles. They believe the tank is a defensive arm, a kind of mobile fortress, whereas the Germans use it as an attack weapon. Our Poles’ attack weapon is cavalry. They charged on their horses against tanks! If the English and French had understood the usefulness of tanks, they could have taken the German column into pincers: see, Guderian and Rommel moved too fast; you cut the rear of their column by attacking from north and east; their turn to be encircled.”

"A pity the English and French didn't enroll you in their general staff! With your advice, they would have vanquished Hitler long ago."

"You're joking, but they had young generals who understood the German strategy and knew what to do. Of course, the commanding officers were old generals, who stuck with conventional wisdom about the defensive use of tanks. It's like your father, who referred to the great war and the last time the Germans had occupied Poland."

"The Germans have no old generals?"

"Hitler and his hoodlums sent away all the old guys as soon as they came to power. It is the same thing in Russia, actually. These dictators are not very civilized."

"I'm glad to learn that you're becoming more lucid. But tell me, the Germans have captured Paris?"

"Hitler even marched down the Champs-Elysées and went to visit Napoléon's tomb."

"I hope Gerda is okay."

Gerda is a cousin of Mama who lives in Paris. Tatus heartens her:

"The Germans don't intend to colonize France the way they did Poland. Actually, the French government stayed in power. They signed a treaty with Hitler. Some troops followed the English across the Channel. One of the young generals set up a government in exile in London, like the Poles."

"We have a government in exile?"

"Of course—headed by general Sikorski."

In L'vov, we are reunited with aunt Yola, uncle Dolek and Elzunia. They arrived here at the end of 1939, when Dolek advised against going to Kobryn.

I guess that Dolek's report described the chaos in Kobryn, what with all the refugees and the Russian soldiers, and also our sleeping on a floor in a tiny room. Well, in L'vov it's even worse. There are 300,000 inhabitants and 700,000 refugees. Aunt Yola and Elzunia share a room with six other women. That's where I sleep with Mama! On the floor, of course. Tatus sleeps in the kitchen of another apartment with his pal Widman.

Tatus promised we wouldn't be awakened in the middle of the night anymore, and I said: "May God hear thee, little father." Yet a few days after our arrival, dreadful howlings wake us up at midnight. Aunt Yola is holding her belly and shouting:

"Help! Help! I'm dying!"

Elzunia yells in echo, a little less loudly and without holding her belly. Mama approaches her sister:

"Yola, what's wrong?"

"I've swallowed quinine to abort. I think I'm pregnant. It hurts… Oh, oh, oh!"

The two women who share Yola and Elzunia's bed mutter they'd like to sleep. The girl screams in her sleep every night, and now the mother too!

Mama asks Yola for a sample of her quinine, grabs my hand and takes me to Tatus. She wants to see Widman, actually, as he's a doctor.

When she discovers Tatus and Widman sleeping beside each other on the kitchen table, Mama bursts out laughing. While her experience of life lets her keep her sense of humor when worrisome events take place, I'm quite bewildered—also, awfully sleepy.

Dr. Widman dips his little finger in the white powder, then tastes it with the tip of his tongue.

"This is no quinine. Where did she buy this?"

"You know, people who sell stuff in the street."

The Russians have plundered L'vov like Kobryn, so the stores are empty. People sell all kinds of things on the sidewalks. There's a gathering, so everybody stops and inquires:

"What is it?"

"Sugar."

"Are you kidding? This is flour!"

Thus Yola bought a white powder in a paper bag, believing it was quinine.

Dr. Widman knits his brow.

"Maybe it's strychnine. She'll abort all right and then die, too."

"Can't we do anything? Is there no antidote?"

"Yes, potassium hypochlorite, but we've got to hurry."

(I make up the name of a product, because I wasn't taking notes!)

We're lucky that Tatus has a key to the hospital's pharmacy. We run to the hospital, take a bottle of potassium hypochlorite, rush home. Yola is quite blue already. Dr. Widman injects a dose of counter poison every fifteen minutes until dawn and saves her.

I still don't know for sure how people make children, but it seems to me that the father must sleep in the same bed as the mother. How could Yola become pregnant if she sleeps with Elzunia and two old women, whereas Dolek sleeps God knows where? I ask Mama. She answers she'll explain later.

"Mama?"

"Yes, little wasp."

"What does 'abort' mean?"

"Hmm… It means 'to prevent a baby from being born.'"

"But why doesn't Yola want a baby?"

"With this war on, you understand, it's not a good time to have a baby. You may need to flee in the middle of the night, or go to Siberia, where it's much too cold for a newborn child."

"It's sad, though, for the baby."

"Of course… But actually, Yola wasn't even sure she was pregnant."

We spend only one week with aunt Yola and Elzunia. Then Tatus finds two rooms inside an apartment, so we can all live together. Maminka comes from Kobryn to join us. She sleeps and knits in one room, we live in the other one. One evening, uncle Dolek comes say hello. Mama is pulling apart old sweaters in Maminka's room. I'm half asleep in the bed after a long day. I went with Mama to Tatus's lab, where an old Polish woman, Mrs. Kowalska, teaches her how to analyze blood. Then we visited a school that the railroad administration opened for the children of its managers. They teach in Russian rather than in Polish like in the other schools of L'vov. Mama thinks I could attend courses in this school after the summer vacations. Anyway, I walked all day and I'm tired.

Dolek speaks to Tatus in a low voice. He probably thinks I'm asleep. Maybe I've slept a little indeed, but I hear distinctly that he mentions Grandpa, whom he calls "the old one."

"The old one made a mistake…"

"Something happened?"

"Yes. I didn't tell Yola. Don't tell Adela. I even went back over there, but it was very difficult."

"You should have brought them here with you."

"He didn't want to. When I described Kobryn, it confirmed his fears. Yet we had to go. The Germans had already killed Jews near Poznan, before entering Warsaw even. I convinced him to sell part of his assets and half of his portfolio to buy our way out."

I know Grandpa sold salt and flour. With salt and flour, you can bake a cake. But I don't know what assets look like and what you can do with them. Stranger yet: Grandma had a portfolio full of pictures she painted in her country house of sailboats in the sea, but I didn't know they were so valuable.

Tatus asks Dolek what happened then.

"We gave the Teutons a fortune se they'd let us go—Yola, Elzunia and I. The old one had a representative in L'vov. I hoped I could fix up something here, but the Russians seized the representative's property. I should have insisted and told the old one, my mother-in-law and Rose to come nevertheless. It doesn't matter if he's ruined! He could have regained some assets later. For example, a ship was at sea when the war started and found its way to Rotterdam. So we own a shipload's value in Rotterdam. This means a lot of money."

"In the meantime, the Germans occupied Holland too."

"I'm talking to you about December, 1939. Everything was still possible. Alas, he was convinced this war would be good for business, like the last one, and he would earn more by staying in Warsaw. With the cash I had put aside to bribe his way out, he bought a stock of wool…"

"Which another Jew was selling to pay his own way out."

"You've figured it out precisely."

I think Grandpa is very clever. Wool is a real treasure, this is something I've learnt in Kobryn. But actually, when Dolek said "the old one made a mistake," he meant buying the wool:

"He hid the wool in the basement where we slept during the bombings. One of his employees denounced him to the Jerries."

"A catholic?"

"No, a Jewess. Maybe she didn't like him. Or she wanted something in exchange from the Germans. They locked him in the Paviak jail. They exulted, you bet: they had caught a Jew who trafficked and so to speak fleeced the people. My mother-in-law found a way to alert me. I rushed to Warsaw. There was plenty of money left, so I started buying protections…"

First they sell half a portfolio, then they buy protections. What a strange story! By and by, I understand that "protections" are people.

"Polish protections, to carry messages to jail, do not cost too much. German protections are something else altogether, of course. You have to climb a very expensive ladder to reach someone with enough clout to free him. This took me more than a month, then everything failed as I was very close to my goal—because of a London envoy."

"London?"

"You know, Sikorski's government in exile… A certain colonel Kot came to Warsaw to organize an underground network. The Germans arrested him, but his friends helped him escape. The Jerries were furious. They announced that if Kot didn't surrender on the very next day to the Gestapo, they would execute two thousand hostages."

I find it hard to stay awake. Their whispering is putting me to sleep. I don't remember the precise words Dolek used to tell the rest of the story, but I guess I heard something, for there are two scenes I often see in my dreams. In the first one, a long line of Jews is walking in the streets of Warsaw. They are carrying shovels and pick-axes like the ones I saw in October, 1939. In the middle of the line, I recognize Grandpa. What's strange is that his beard has grown so much that he looks like the old religious Jew in Kobryn—who prayed to the Eternal all day. In the second scene, the Jews are digging a large trench. The Germans told them it was a trench against tanks. Grandpa is digging with the others, although he isn't very strong. When the ditch is deep enough, the German black-uniformed cops thank the Jews and take back the shovels. Then they kill the Jews with their machine-guns and throw them into the trench. They use the shovels to close the trench.

A few days later, when I'm alone with Tatus, I ask him whether Grandpa is dead. He seems surprised, then says I shouldn't tell Mama. Even Grandma and Rose do not know about it. They stay in Warsaw because they hope he'll come out of the Paviak jail.

During the month of August, my life stays similar to what it was in Kobryn: I go with Mama to her lab or I stay at home with Maminka. I read a lot: Russian and Polish novels, biographies of Benjamin Franklin in Russian or Marie Curie in Polish, geography books, poems by Pushkin and Mayakovski.

In September, 1940, Mama takes me to the new school. I'm eleven and I should begin high school, but I just missed a whole year and I've never gone to a Russian school, so they put me in the last year of primary school.

The teacher begins the first day with a speech:

"My children, as you know, you're very lucky to be citizens of a great country. You must be proud. In our beautiful Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, everybody has a right to happiness. Nobody is exploited. Nobody is hungry. You know our comrade Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, hero of the great revolution of October 1917, who leads our country toward the ideal of communism. Your heart should fill with joy every time you think about him. Now listen well, my children. Some persons, as evil as poisonous snakes, refuse to admit the superiority of our socialist system and slander both the Communist Party, beacon of our country, and comrade Stalin, father of our people. If you know such persons, you must tell me about them, even if they are close to you, even if they are your own parents, so we can educate them, in the same manner we educate you, until they find the path leading to the truth. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, mistress!"

I do not know whether the children answer “yes, mistress” to be polite, or whether they’re really promising to denounce their parents.

I could raise my hand:

“Mistress, when we were in Warsaw, Mama always criticized the Soviet Union and Tatus defended it. Now that we live here, Tatus doesn’t defend the Soviet system anymore, so Mama doesn’t even waste her time attacking it…”

Actually, Tatus is studying the communist system as if he was a sociologist rather than a biologist. He says that the higher you climb in the Soviet society, the more people you find who defend the system in public and make fun of it in private. He also says these people distrust each other in proportion to their power. At the top, comrade Stalin trusts no one.

Tatus and Mama, like many Soviet citizens, play a very funny game, which consists in calling comrade Stalin by one of his official titles: the Peoples’ Little Father, the Sun of the Proletariat, the Flag Carrier of the Great October Revolution and even the Sciences’ Coryphaeus![8]

If I wanted to hide all that from the mistress, I would have to lie every day. When my parents hear about my first day in school, they laugh a lot. On the next day, they tell the school’s directress that I don’t understand Russian well, so they’re moving me to a Polish school.

In Warsaw, my aunt Yola worked with Dr. Korczak,[9] who opened a school for poor orphans that nobody cared about. In L’vov, she found a job as a teacher in a small Jewish school. This is convenient for Elzunia. She is nine now, but she still follows her mother everywhere like a puppy.

I get into the habit of going with Yola and Elzunia almost every morning. There are no secondary classes in the school and I’m a little too old for the last year of primary school in Polish, so I become aunt Yola’s assistant. Teaching arithmetic and grammar isn’t as easy as I thought. I make mistakes, or I can’t answer the pupils’ questions. I have to study very hard. Yola says this is very good for me.

Like Dr. Korczak, her master, Yola considers children should sing and draw. Thus, they can all discover their own personality and also, in these difficult times, express their fears.

Me, I don’t draw well, but I help the others. I take care of Elzunia. Yola is relieved not to have her daughter on her back all the time. Elzunia spends hours drawing on cross-ruled paper. She fills up alternate squares in red and blue, or she draws lines following the squares' sides. I show her how to draw a maze. Then she draws mazes for hours. I find her somewhat crazy and feel I'm wasting my time, but I can see that Yola is quite satisfied with me.

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[8] Leader of the chorus in the Greek theater.

[9] Pronounced : Korchak.

To move away from all these mazes, I tell Elzunia the story of Daedalus, who built the labyrinth for king Minos, then escaped with his son Icarus by gluing wings to their backs. Icarus was so happy to fly that he climbed too high. As he came close to the sun, the wax holding his wings melted. He fell to the sea and drowned.

After spending the morning with Elzunia, I go to a nearby Jewish high school. I'm studying French with the school's teacher, a fat French lady, wife of a rabbi. We exchange lessons: she teaches me French, I show her the Russian alphabet. Mama thinks I can learn one more language easily, since I know already three and a half (Polish, English, Russian and Yiddish partly).

When I see Elzunia again, she shows me a magnificent picture of Daedalus and Icarus wearing many-hued wings like the angels in the Bible. She's laughing with pleasure as she shows me the drawing. I haven't seen her laugh for a long time. Yola is laughing too. She kisses me, as if I had drawn the angels myself. I wish I could. I'm a little jealous, maybe.

The other pupils are commenting the picture. Some of them think we could fly like Daedalus and Icarus if we glued large enough wings; others think it is impossible. A little boy asks Yola in the wings of airplanes do not risk melting in the sun.

Elzunia doesn't complain at becoming the center of attention. Encouraged by the praise, she picks up a new sheet of paper. After several hours of hard work, she shows us a dreadful horned, clawed and fanged monster. It is the minotaur, who hides in a far corner of the labyrinth and gobbles up little children.

The awful creature fascinates the pupils. I don't know why kids like monsters so much. Me I'm really frightened. It does not resemble a bull, but rather a tank, and its head reminds me of the cold and cruel face of the SS policemen I saw in the streets of Warsaw. Aunt Yola says this drawing is much more interesting than the first one. I disagree:

"Daedalus and Icarus are more beautiful. They look like angels."

"Yes, but do you realize that my Elzunia carried this horrible monster in her mind? She must have been very unhappy. Now that she put it on a piece of paper, I hope she'll feel better."

"It isn't in her mind anymore?"

"Let's say she shares it with her classmates. With you and me. Maybe she'll be less anxious."

I repeat this conversation to my parents. Tatus says Dr. Korczak has fuzzy ideas and Yola mangled ones. Mama says that Tatus doesn’t understand psychology and there’s nothing to be proud about. They talk about a certain Dr. Freud, but I find their argument so boring that I fall asleep.

1941. The Astrakhan exiles.

Elzunia isn’t shy anymore. The other pupils admire her and take her as a model. She already plays piano better than me, she sings, she writes poems. One of her poems becomes the class’s anthem:

Fly off, sweet swallow
Hide in the reeds
Accept these seeds
Carry away my sorrow!

I adapt the music of one of Maminka’s lullabies to change the poem into a song. The children love to sing together. They perform all the school activities with great joy and enthusiasm. They complain that class ends too early. In the morning, they arrive sooner than we do and wait in front of the school. Yola says the success of this class confirms that Dr. Korczak’s ideas are right.

Every Friday, I tell the kids a story—usually a digest of an English novel I borrow from the school library. After reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, I tell them about the French revolution. Then we have a talk. Do differences between people always lead to conflict and war? Around L’vov, there are catholic Poles, Ukrainians who follow the orthodox religion, Ruthenians who speak Ukrainian but follow a religion called “Greek-catholic[10],” Jews, Russians, Romanians. In the beginning of the century, the city of L’vov was Austrian and was called Lemberg. Then it became Polish, then Ukrainian, then Polish again, at last Russian. Making sense of all these changes is tough, but this is no reason to fight.

On March 8th, 1941, I celebrate my twelfth birthday. On that day, the Soviets celebrate “Women’s day.” The school cook bakes a nice enough birthday cake, with a single egg. Tatus and Mama offer me a watch they bought on a sidewalk. It works just fine.

In early June, Tatus hears worrisome news: the Germans are preparing to attack the Soviet Union.

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[10] In this religion, also called “uniat,” priests marry, although they recognize the authority of the Pope in Rome.

According to his informers, spies warned Stalin in January already, but the Peoples' Little Father refused to believe them. In May, they showed the Sun of the Proletariat detailed plans of the invasion. Now the Brest-Litovsk border guards are seeing tank maneuvers with their binoculars.

Tatus imagines a phone call between Stalin and Hitler:

"Hello, Adolf? This is your comrade Stalin."

"My dear Joseph? What a pleasure to hear you! How are you?"

"I'm okay. Say, I'm calling you because some of my generals pretend you want to attack me."

"Attack you? My best friend? What a foolish idea."

"That's what I thought. They say you're massing troops in the east of Poland."

"Me, massing troops? Of course not. It's true we've scheduled some maneuvers. You know how it is: they need exercise, otherwise they tend to rust."

"Right. Well, you set my mind at ease. See you soon!"

"Yeah, see you soon!"

So Stalin tells his generals that Hitler won't attack and let's not discuss it anymore. His generals do not dare inform him that the Germans are going on with their preparations. You don't contradict comrade Stalin when you want to keep your head on your shoulders.

As a result of the blindness of the Sciences' Coryphaeus, bombs begin to fall on L'vov without any advance warning during the night of June 21st to June 22nd, just as they did on Warsaw nearly two years before.

On the morning of June 22nd, I go with my parents to the railroad hospital. We know that the bombings will increase, that confusion will spread. We must stay together. Mama has packed our suitcases in haste. We put them down in a corner of Tatus's office.

The hospital is full of wounded people. Several comrades belonging to management are already preparing to evacuate the hospital and retreat eastward. Tatus talks to the director:

"Comrade Director, if you evacuate the hospital, could you please take us along?"

"Take you along? But you're Polish, comrade. If we retreat because of the German invasion, this province will become Polish again. Why would you follow some Russians when you can simply stay home?"

"I'm not very fond of the Germans, comrade Director. Maybe you'll get to know them. I think you won't be so fond of them either."

We spend two nights in Tatus's office. A woman chemist also sleeps there. After two nights, she's fed up with sleeping on the floor and goes home. This means the poor woman is walking straight into the devil's mouth.

I'm twelve. War represents one sixth of my life. I know enough to understand that we're choosing between life and death. Tatus says they'll obviously evacuate by train, since the hospital belongs to the railroad administration. All we have to do is wait in the office until they evacuate, no doubt about it.

In the middle of the third night, a Polish friend of Tatus, the hospital's accountant, comes and wakes us up: "That's it. They're leaving." By warning us, he saves our lives. Tatus helped him for a hard-to-get blood test or something. When life becomes as frail as an egg-shell, you'd better make friends, like the accountant, than enemies, like the Mongol officer in Kobryn.

The dark shapes of two big trucks squat in the hospital's courtyard. Their lights are off. When we come close, we see they're quite overflowing with people. There are even wounded persons lying on stretchers. An officer says we must leave our luggage behind. Mama opens her suitcase. She ties two shirts into a kind of bag, which she fills up with underwear and toiletries. She's so skillful and nimble that it takes her less than a minute. Tatus is staring at her as is she was a circus magician or something. He's quite clumsy himself. When he says: "I'll clear the table," Mama says: "Why don't you go read your newspaper instead? I'll do it faster and we won't lose any more plates." So he just opens his suitcase. Mama finds two shirts and makes a bundle for him. Me, I carry a gray canvas backpack. The officer lets me keep it. I'm quite glad, as it contains my book of English poems and *In Desert and Wilderness*.

Mama pulls Maminka's thick sweaters out of the suitcases. We put them on, under our heavy winter coats. We wear our strong mountain shoes with their spiked soles. Mama tried to find lighter shoes in L'vov, but the Red Army soldiers had seized all the shoes in the city.

The trucks leave the courtyard. They move very slowly in the pitch-black night. The Polish accountant, who is sitting beside us, points to the sky.

"Maybe you think they turned off the lights to escape the bombs? This is too early for the bombings. Actually, the communists are afraid of Ukrainian underground fighters hiding on the roofs."

"Why would the Ukrainians shoot at wounded people, nurses and doctors?"

“They hate the Soviets, who prevented them from getting their own independent republic after the great war. Then Stalin sold their crops abroad to buy machines, so that millions starved to death.”

“When they’ll have the Nazis, they’ll regret the communists.”

We reach the railway station. I want to shout with joy when I see the long metallic snake that will carry us to safety. The night is not so dark after all, or my eyes adapt themselves to the faint light falling from the stars. I make out large white circles with red crosses on the roofs of the railway cars.

Alas, the train can’t start. Bombs have cut the tracks a few miles from L’vov. I admired Mama’s energy when she improvised bundles with shirts in the hospital’s courtyard, but now she seems quite downcast.

“It’s no use, Marek. We’ll never make it. They’ll stop the bombings, Galicia will become Polish again, then we’ll be able to return to Warsaw. My parents need us, maybe…”

“Are you crazy? The Nazis kill Jews or will kill them. Well-informed people told me the worst is to be feared.”

“I would see them one last time, I’d say goodbye, then we’d leave for good…”

“Listen, Adela: they may be dead already. Going and sacrificing ourselves wouldn’t help. Think about Kama.”

“What about your own mother, Marek? Maminka? If the Germans kill the Jews, they’ll kill her.”

“I hope she finds a hiding place. I don’t know. We can’t sacrifice ourselves for her either. Perhaps we’ll be the only survivors in our family. We’ll have other children, Kama will have children too; that’s how we’ll overcome death.”

I don’t remember their whole discussion, which lasts so long that the sky is beginning to turn gray. We are sitting on a bench. Suddenly, the train seems to wake up with a loud clang. The Soviets have repaired the tracks. Tatus grabs my hand and we run together toward the closest car. Mama forgets she wants to return to Warsaw: she’s running behind us. The summer morning is warm already. We wear mountain shoes, thick sweaters, winter coats, and we’re galloping like racehorses. We must really look ridiculous! Nurses standing at the car’s door lend a hand and help us jump aboard. We’re as red as cherries—especially Tatus: sweat runs down his face. The nurses laugh and so do we. Well, we didn’t need to make such fools of ourselves, since the train stops after about twenty seconds to wait for some communist dignitaries. Then it leaves without haste.

We pass through suburbs. We see small houses with blue shutters, vegetable gardens, rows of leeks and salads, apple trees, then fields and woods. Like two years ago, when I saw the first beech trees outside Warsaw, an exhilarating feeling of freedom tickles every fiber of my body. I am slightly ashamed to enjoy such happiness when thousands are dying or will soon die under the bombings—and my dear Elzunia will know fear and anxiety again. I think about all the people who will suffer: aunt Yola, uncle Dolek, Maminka, the rabbi's wife who taught me French, Mrs. Kowalska (Mama's boss in the lab) and many others.

Life is strange, actually. The sun rises over the dark ocean of the wheat fields like a huge light-filled balloon. Without the Germans, who are laying a veil of death and destruction over Europe, I wouldn't enjoy this wonderful sight. While I'm wondering whether to thank them, we hear a deafening noise, a combination of brakes squeaking and bombs whistling. Even before the train stops moving, passengers are jumping out the windows and running through the wheat. Nobody takes care of the poor wounded people lying on their stretchers.

It's not much of a bombing, really. It missed the train. While the steam-engine mechanics are inspecting the tracks to check that no bomb hit them, the passengers come back from the fields, none hurt. They begin to gather along the tracks in small groups and talk.

"What does it mean? They attack a sanitary train?"

"Maybe they didn't see the red crosses, from up there."

"You must be kidding, comrade. They're at least ten-feet wide!"

Tatus and Mama stay apart. They watch the people with some bitterness. Tatus finds his communist friends rather disappointing:

"They never tried to know how their German allies behaved when they gulped Poland or Belgium and now they're quite surprised…"

A man is standing all by himself. I can't help staring at him, for his face is shivering and quaking so much that he looks like several persons at once. Waves run over his skin as if it was liquid. I've never seen such a thing.

The steam-engine whistles. Everybody climbs back into the train. Mama and I are sitting cross-legged on a baggage-rack, Tatus on the rack across from us. Tatus and Mama burst out laughing.

"Did you see Ignatiev?"

"That was plain panic."

"His face just fell apart. And this terrible twitching!"

"Nervous spasms of a sort, I guess."

"These brutal people are often cowards, actually."

So this twitcher was the famous Ignatiev, whom I've heard mentioned so often. He was the hospital's political commissar, a man more powerful than the director: he represented the Communist Party's authority. Until today, actually, he didn't tremble but people shook in front of him. His words could kill:

"Comrade, I'm sorry, but the Party decided a little sojourn in Siberia would do you good."

"But… Comrade political commissar… Why? Have I done anything wrong?"

"If you hadn't, comrade, you wouldn't be here. The Party knows what it is doing."

Mama said his cold eyes gave her goose bumps. When he was around, harboring critical thoughts about communism or the peoples' little father was to be avoided, because he could guess your most secret musings.

I remember a discussion between my parents about this awful Ignatiev. He persecuted Mrs. Kowalska, Mama's boss.

"He called her a Polish bitch. She is twice his age; he could respect her! He is a sadist. I'm sure he tore the wings of flies and hit his schoolmates when he was a kid."

"On the contrary, my dear. His parents and his pals beat him. Now, with the backing of the Party's power, he is enjoying his revenge."

I don't know whether Ignatiev is still trembling. We haven't been bombed again anyway. The train rushes east for more than twenty-four hours without stopping. It doesn't even slow down when it crosses Kiev, the capital of Ukraine.

"Maybe it carries important personalities," Mama says. "They don't want the Germans to catch them."

Tatus disagrees:

"The communists don't care about people that much. The train goes as far as possible to save appliances, for example x-ray machines. For the Russians, the war is only beginning. They'll want to install new hospitals to treat wounded soldiers."

On both sides of the tracks, the plain lies as far as we can look. The wheat fields ripple in the wind like huge golden silk sheets. We sometimes see a peasant woman who leads geese to the pond or a boy, riding a tall horse bare back, who watches over a herd of cows like a cowboy in an American film. They perform their daily tasks without paying any attention to the war. When I told Elzunia the story of Daedalus and Icarus, she showed me a reproduction of an old painting: while a tiny Icarus is falling into the sea near the horizon, a peasant is tilling the soil in front without seeing anything.

"Mama, we escaped from the labyrinth like Daedalus and Icarus. We flee as fast as if we had wings."

“Yes, little wasp.”

“Do you know where we are going, Mama?”

“No, little wasp. We’ll see.”

“Are we in Siberia already? Maybe we’ll see lake Baikal soon.”

“We’re far from Siberia… We haven’t even left Ukraine yet.”

The immensity of the plain affects the mood of the passengers. A doctor pulls a mouth-organ out of his pocket and they begin to sing:

Poliuchka polié
Poliuchka chiroka polié…
Plain, my dear plain,
O my boundless plain!
The warriors ride on the plain,
The Red Army’s warriors.
The girls cry,
The girls are sad,
For their beloved
Have gone to the army.
The warriors ride
Across the countryside,
Across the villages,
But over there,
Behind the forest,
A large cloud:
This is the enemy waiting!
Don’t worry, villagers,
Go to work…
We stand guard,
We protect you.
Dry your tears, girls.
Listen to our song.
We’ll sing it again.
Plain, my dear plain,
O my boundless plain! Etc.

We're sailing across the boundless plain. We can imagine the enemy behind the forest, but I wonder where the red Army is hiding.

I want to sing, too. I sing *Fly off, Sweet Swallow* (after translating it into Russian). Our travel companions are surprised to learn that it is not a Polish folk song, but a creation of my cousin Elzunia. Soon, the whole car is singing together:

Fly off, sweet swallow
Hide in the reeds
Accept these seeds
Carry away my sorrow!

I'm thinking about Elzunia, whom we left in L'vov under a downpour of bombs. The Polish accountant is sitting on the same rack as Tatus. He notices the tears in my eyes.

"You're sad because your cousin stayed over there?"

"She's scared of bombs. She's only ten years old."

"My parents stayed too. Maybe I'll never see them again. I offered them a pass to take this train, but they declined. They remember the Austrians[11] with a certain fondness. They are convinced the Germans will treat the Jews as well as the Austrians did. They believe that all the Ukrainians and the Russians are as bad as the terrible Cossacks who killed the Jews in the nineteenth century pogroms."

Tatus and Mama seem surprised:

"Are you Jewish?"

"Of course. I didn't tell the hospital managers, since there are neither Catholics nor Jews under communism. Our Poles have a sixth sense that lets them recognize Jews, and anyway my father is a rabbi, so how could I hide it, but the Soviets never asked me anything. Maybe their sixth sense applies only to their own Jews."

"A rabbi? So he must know that the Germans burn synagogues and that today's Austrians do not resemble the citizens of Franz-Joseph's empire."

"You're right. I guess he knows, but he'd rather forget it. My parents say I can survive in Siberia, as I'm young and strong, but they're too old. They don't want to learn Russian. They see Siberia as a frozen continent with neither Jews nor synagogues…"

"My uncle Dolek says there are Jews everywhere."

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[11] L'vov and Galicia belonged to the Austrian empire until 1918.

“Your uncle is right, my pretty one. It is said that the Soviets gave the Jews a piece of Siberia called Birobijan, but I think the Jews prefer to live in Moscow or Leningrad. Anyway, my father wants to stay with his flock, even if it means dying with them.”

“What about you? Do you want to go to Siberia? Will you go to lake Baikal?”

“I don’t know where I’ll go, but I’ve always wanted to travel. I was supposed to go and study in Prague. When I was young, my father hoped I’d take his succession as a rabbi, but I didn’t feel like it, so I decided to study medicine. Do you know why the Jews chose medicine?”

“No, why?”

“Pious Jews have to obey so many laws that most activities are forbidden to them. Actually, they can’t do anything but study the Bible and the Talmud. Yet they’re allowed to ignore the laws to save human lives. A doctor is someone who saves lives.”

“Mama told me about it. She said religious Jews could shave their beard to save their own life.”

“Well, I can’t imagine my father shaving his beard!”

“But why aren’t you a doctor?”

“Wait, you’ll understand. As all the Jews wanted to become doctors, the medical school was full of Jews. They studied hard, instead of drinking vodka and dancing like the other students. They obtained better marks than the catholic Poles, who became quite angry and jealous. Then the Polish government said medical school would be open only to the Catholics, except for a tiny percentage of Jews. From that time on, the Jews went abroad to study.”

“You could have gone to Australia.”

“That’s a bit too far. I wanted to study in Prague’s German university, as I knew German. Meanwhile, my brother was studying law. In law school also, the Jews received better marks than the Catholics. There were fights. The Catholics fought with steel-tipped canes. The Jews tried to form defense squads. One day, some fascists threw my brother out the fifth-floor window and he died.”

“Was he your only brother?”

“Yes. You can imagine my parents’ grief. I gave up my Prague project to stay home and console them. I enrolled in a Jewish school and learned accounting.”

“Dolek, my aunt Yola’s husband, knows accounting. He worked with my grandfather in Warsaw. But then you must obey Jewish law, as you haven’t become a doctor…”

“I work in a hospital, so I help save lives. Anyway, I’ve met many doctors who know nothing of obeying the law and saving lives. That’s because their father isn’t a rabbi, I guess. They study medicine to be able to travel light.”

“As we do?”

“Just so. In the past, Jews who fled persecution carried gold or diamonds. They couldn’t carry their home or their furniture, you understand.”

“They hid diamonds in the heels of their shoes?”

“I see you know a lot already. They also hid them in the lining of a coat or of a hat, but when the evil ones really wanted to find them, they did. That’s why the Jews eventually replaced gold and diamonds by a thing more valuable, which nobody can steal. Can you guess what it is?”

“Not an automobile, because an officer stole my grandfather’s Vauxhall…”

“Knowledge! If you study for many years to become a doctor, you can go everywhere and earn money by practicing your profession. Nobody can take your knowledge away from you. Wherever this train stops in the end, your parents can find work in a lab.”

“And you’ll be an accountant?”

“Of course. Everywhere, stores and companies need accountants. But doctors earn more money!”

Mama is listening to our conversation. At the same time, she opens her bundle and gets her sewing kit. She unstitches the shirts she made into bags on the platform, cuts the sleeves and sews everything again so as to make small white backpacks. This will be more convenient if we have to run after a train again.

I’m very happy to be sitting next to Mama. I know I’m growing up, but I feel that during this trip I enjoy being a child once more, maybe for the last time. We’re rushing toward the unknown without stopping. It is as if time had gelled. The sun is setting over the wheat. The plain’s golden hair is turning red, like mine.

The accountant mentioned medical studies. I remember vaguely that Mama’s famous stay in London, which she mentions when she wants to annoy Tatus, had something to do with medicine. I snuggle against Mama and I ask her to tell me about her trip to London.

“Your grandfather and your grandmother sent me over there to prevent the police from arresting me.”

“The police?”

“They suspected me of communist activities.”

“You, Mama, a communist? But Tatus is the communist in our family, not you!”

“I’ve changed… You see, when I was your age, the great Soviet revolution of 1917 took place. It made the Jews quite enthusiastic and hopeful. The communists promised the dawn of a new era, when men wouldn’t persecute each other anymore. After the war, while I was studying for my final high school exams, I belonged to a group of progressive students. We admired communism, but we didn’t enroll in the Communist Party, which was outlawed. We mostly quarreled with the Zionists, actually.”

“The Zionists… Like uncle Itshak?”

“That’s right. We thought that the right attitude for the Jews was to help start the revolution that would change the world, rather than retire from the world by settling in Palestine. We printed leaflets on a clandestine press, hidden in a basement. Then we handed them discreetly to our schoolmates. We hoped our prose would convince them to join our group. I passed my final exams and entered university to study history. The communists think that great forces have been fighting each other for centuries. We need to study history so that we can understand these forces and hasten the coming of the revolution.”

“But you studied biology, Mama.”

“I’ll tell you what went wrong with my history studies. Towards the end of 1923, while I was talking on the phone to my friend Hanka, policemen came to her apartment and to mine at the same time. From my bedroom, across the half-open door, I could see my father talking to a policeman in uniform and a man in a plain suit. There was a thick pack of leaflets in my bedroom. I grabbed them, stepped noiselessly into the bathroom and threw them into the toilet bowl.”

“It didn’t clog it?”

“I was careful to throw only a few at a time. There was a large tub that we used for laundry. I would fill it with water and empty it into the toilet. This was faster than flushing and made less noise. In the meantime, the policemen began searching the apartment. They found one of my leaflets in Itshak’s briefcase. I had given it to him to show him how skillful we were at printing and also to make fun of him. The cops took Itshak to the police station.”

“They put him in jail?”

“No, they just kept him for a couple days. The Polish government liked the Zionists, who wanted to take all the Jews away from Poland. My poor friend Hanka was not so lucky: she spent two years in jail.”

“Just because they found leaflets in her home?”

“Yes, that’s the way it was. For me, it was a close escape. My parents were quite angry. They sent me to London right away to stay with my cousin Rysiu. He had gone there three years before with Basia, his wife, to study medicine. When I arrived at Victoria Station, I saw him on the platform. He was dressed like a British gentleman. He told me not to call him Rysiu anymore, but Richard. Basia had become Barbara, and he said I should replace Ada with Adela.”

“But Grandma calls you Ada!”

“For her, I’ll always be her little Ada… So Richard brought me to his home, on Adam and Eve mews.”

“A strange name for a street.”

“There are all kinds of quaint names and places in London. Lots of things there haven’t changed for centuries. England hasn’t been invaded and occupied by its neighbors… Someday, my love, I’ll take you to Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. I’ll show you the Tower Bridge and Big Ben… I was so glad to become a student in London. When I was still in Poland, I had thought of studying history, but my English was very poor. I wrote to Rysiu that I wanted to study medicine, like him. You know what? This British Richard whom I discovered, with his smart coat, his haughty or even scornful attitude, said he had enrolled me in pharmacy school. While it was already too late in the year to enter medical school, pharmacy studies began with a training period. ‘Actually, my dear Adela, it is well known that medical studies are too hard for women. Barbara tried, but she had to give up. We have a friend, Helen Feigenbaum, who studies pharmacy. She’ll help you.’”

“Was she English?”

“Oh no, she was Polish. Her real name was Hala. She was quite pretentious, like my cousin. She despised me because she had come to London earlier and spoke better English. I hardly saw her, though, because I began my training in a pharmacy right away.”

“Did you sell drugs?”

“I washed the floor and all kinds of bottles to learn “hygiene.” The pharmacist and his wife used me as a kind of unpaid maid. They were unpleasant people. They disliked foreigners and shouted at me when I didn’t understand what they said. I also attended courses in pharmacy school. As I didn’t understand the teachers any better than the pharmacists, I learned the written courses by heart and passed my exam quite easily. I was quite proud that they accepted me in second year. During the summer, Richard and Barbara went to Cornwall, but I had to wash the pharmacy every day. Eventually, my training ended. I still had one month before school began again.”

“Where is Cornwall?”

"In the southwest of England. As you may guess, I didn't want to spend my holidays with them. I saw an advertisement in a students' magazine: 'Portsmouth Young Ladies Hostel.' I had read *David Copperfield*—in Polish translation—and liked it, so I thought it would be nice to see the birthplace of Dickens. Well, the hostel didn't host any young ladies, but only old ones. They were very friendly and loved to talk, so actually I had found the perfect place to learn English. Besides, the hostel's library was full of Dickens novels. I chose a thick one, *Little Dorrit*, and read it to the last page. I looked up many words in the dictionary, of course. When I came back to London, I spoke a rough but serviceable version of English. Richard was stunned."

"You spoke better than he did?"

"Maybe not, but well enough for a stupid woman. I was far from happy in Richard and Barbara's home. They never laughed. They seemed old already, and as cold as cold herring. They reminded me of the pharmacist I slaved for. This was true of Hala Feigenbaum too, but then she did want to become a pharmacist, so you could expect her to look like one. I often thought of my parents, of my sister Yola. It made me sad. For the 1925 summer holidays, at the end of my second year, I went back to Poland. As I was sorry I had bothered my parents with that leaflet mess, I didn't tell them how unhappy I was in England. Yola guessed it, because she knows me well, and talked to them. My father wrote a letter to Richard: "Because of the crisis in Germany, I can't finance Ada's studies abroad. She'll study in Warsaw." He hadn't become poor all of a sudden, you understand, but he didn't want to offend Richard. Thus I stayed in Warsaw, after spending twenty months or so in London. I didn't want to become a pharmacist, but my two years of study weren't in vain: they accepted me directly as a senior student in bacteriology."

"And that's where you met Tatus?"

"I'll tell you another time. It's late. You should sleep now."

Night is falling. I kiss Mama, lay my head upon her knees and fall asleep right away. I wake up once or twice, I believe, just so I can enjoy floating in the dark above the limitless plain. Then I dream. I'm not an angel with rainbow wings, but I'm flying on the back of a wild goose. The fields look like carpets lying on the ground, the rivers like satiny ribbons, the houses and villages like bread crumbs.

Suddenly, I discover a little boy riding another goose. I know this boy, but can't remember his name. I can't talk to him unless I find his name. Oh, I feel his name is tickling the tip of my tongue… I sit up on the baggage-rack, shout: "Nils Holgersson"[12] and open my eyes.

The train has stopped in a railway station. The gray light of dawn seeps into the compartment. Mama smiles at my side.

"You were laughing in your sleep, my sweet wasp. Your dream was very pleasant, I guess."

"Where are we, Mama?"

"In Eastern Ukraine, more than six hundred miles from L'vov. The town's name is Kharkov. Tatus went out for news."

Our carriage is almost empty. The passengers are walking on the platform to stretch their legs. The sun will soon rise, I think. I see the dark shapes of large apartment buildings. They remind me of Warsaw. To flatten one of those, you only need one bomb.

The engine whistles as if to call the stray sheep. Everybody climbs back on board—except Tatus, who comes running as the train is already moving. The laughing nurses lean at the door and grab his arms, just like they did in L'vov.

Our friend the accountant comes back with a new companion, who sits on the baggage-rack with Tatus and him.

"Let me introduce Milek Roth, my high school classmate. I didn't know he was on this train. I was quite surprised to meet him on the platform."

This Milek is a strange man. If he belonged to the same class as the accountant, he should be the same age. He looks at least ten years older, though. His hair is sparse, his skin seems tired, his hands shake slightly. While people's eyes usually tell a lot, his gray stare says nothing, as if he had turned it off.

In the car, people aren't sleepy anymore. Everybody is talking at the same time. They're commenting the news they've gathered in Kharkov.

"They say our invincible troops are resisting heroically to the fascist invader."

"Meaningless propaganda."

"If we had beaten the fascists, they would broadcast glorious reports."

"They'd mention the Sun of the Proletariat to begin with: *Encouraged by the fearless example of Comrade Stalin, our great Red Army has inflicted a cruel defeat to the fascist dogs and kicked them back all the way to Berlin!*"

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[12] A Swedish Tom Thumb, hero of a novel by Selma Lagerlöf published in 1906.

They ask Maman and Tatus, who've been through a Nazi invasion already, what will happen. Tatus describes flash war.

"They don't declare war, but attack without warning. The first thing they do is bomb airports to destroy the enemy air force. Thus, their planes own the sky. Then they bomb the cities to terrorize the people and break down the defensive structures. Instead of rushing straight ahead at the enemy army, they send tank columns to surround it. They invaded Poland in a few days. They needed a few weeks to reach Paris."

"Russia is bigger than Poland or France."

"They won't reach Moscow that easily."

"If we hold until the fall, their tanks will get stuck in the mud."

"If the war lasts until winter, the fuel in their tanks and trucks will freeze."

"They'll die in the snow like Napoleon's soldiers."

I want to add my voice to the chorus too. Turning towards the fat doctor who uttered the last sentence, I shout:

"May God hear thee, little father!"

All the passengers laugh and repeat my wish. Even Milek, the accountant's somber friend, deigns a feeble smile.

Once more, the train chugs eastwards for a full day without stopping. We leave Ukraine and enter Russia. The landscape doesn't change when we cross the border. Unconcerned by the vain bustle of mankind, golden waves of wheat dance in the wind.

I'm immersed in Tolstoy's great novel *War and Peace*, which a nurse lent me. Just what the passengers were talking about: Napoleon's dream of conquering Russia, then his rout when the terrible Russian winter freezes the blood of men and horses. At the same time, I listen to the conversation of the hospital's nurses and doctors. They wonder how this war will affect their lives. Tatus tells them about the Mongolian officer and his lice.

"In war time, some illnesses recede or vanish. Others, like typhus, become mass killers."

Mama evokes Mrs. Kowalska, her boss in L'vov.

"Despite my top-rate diplomas, I was unable to distinguish a lymphocyte from a monocyte. She really taught me to identify typhus with the Vidal-Weil-Félix test."

An old nurse describes battlefield wounds, which she saw during the great war. She mentions broken or torn arms and legs, lacerated bellies, blown-up faces. I try to dive into my book's battles, sublimated by the magic of Tolstoy's style, to escape the nurse's bloody account. I can't. Reality fascinates me. According to the nurse, you could save many lives on the battlefield by treating wounds as soon as possible.

"You compress an artery, you tie a tourniquet, you pull out a living man stuck under a corpse. A pity we so seldom see a doctor there…"

"We're more useful at the back," the fat doctor whom I called Little Father says. "The nurses save the wounded soldiers on the battlefield by providing first care, then we save them in the operating room."

A young idealistic doctor seems ready to risk his life on the battlefield.

"The enemy won't shoot at us anyway, since we wear our red-cross armband."

"Are you kidding, comrade? Don't you remember the enemy bombed this very train, yesterday, in spite of the red crosses?"

The old nurse says she crawled in the mud to escape a hail of bullets.

"This was during the war against Petlioura's[13] Cossacks. We wore red-cross armbands, but they were so drunk that they shot at anything that moved. Our guys drank too, actually, to brace their guts."

"Comrade nurse, this isn't possible," the fat doctor says. The soldiers of our invincible Red Army do not need vodka anymore. They just have to think about the Flag Carrier of the Great October Revolution to forget fear!"

The passengers appreciate this sarcastic remark. They laugh silently—as if they were afraid Ignatiev might hear them from some other car. Or maybe they distrust each other. My parents also hide their glee. I guess they feel uneasy because of this Milek. What if he is a spy of the Party?

After one more night, our journey comes to an end. We've reached Saratov, a large city by the Volga. As the train crosses bleak muddy suburbs, we see the river. So wide! Milek Roth shows us a city on the far side. The houses seem cleaner, better lined up, than Russian isbas.

"City called Engels. Volga's German Republic. Germans came eighteenth century with czarina Catherine II[14]. I wouldn't like to be one of those Volga Germans today. Knowing comrade Stalin."

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[13] He led an independent Ukraine from 1918 to 1920. He performed large-scale pogroms that prefigured the nazi horrors.

[14] "Great Catherine" was a German princess married to a Russian czar.

This mysterious Milek may not be a Party spy, after all. Or he is a communist who considers comrade Stalin a legitimate target for jokes. We say goodbye to him, anyway, because we follow the doctors, nurses and wounded to the main Saratov hospital. Tatus and Mama carry their small white rucksacks. Tatus also carries a rectangular parcel, wrapped in gray paper, which the accountant gave him.

“What’s in this parcel, Tatus?”

“A surprise, Little Wasp.”

“Oh please tell me, Tatus darling.”

“If I tell you, it won’t be a surprise anymore.”

Tatus finds a director of the hospital. He asks him whether the contract linking him to the L’vov hospital is still valid now that the hospital has been transferred. The director doesn’t need a lab manager and a biologist. We’re free to go wherever we want, he says.

We sit down in the hospital’s waiting-room.

“We must go farther,” Tatus says. “We reached this place in two days, so the Germans can come pretty fast too.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I thought about Tashkent. If the jerries go that far, we cross the border and we’re in China.”

“Are you sure Tashkent is near China?”

“Or maybe Afghanistan. I’ll try to find a map.”

I feel like shouting: “Oh yes! Let’s go to China! To China!” Well, nobody’s going to consult me, I know that. I’d climb over the Great Wall of China, visit pagodas in a rickshaw, eat swallows’ nests with chopsticks. While I’m wondering whether I could learn the Chinese language, my parents are looking at our future in a rational and scientific manner.

“Thinking about Tashkent doesn’t make much sense, Marek, since we don’t even know where it is. We could ask a policeman: “Excuse me, comrade, to Tashkent, do we turn right or left?’ As we won’t cross the Volga to settle in the middle of these Catherine II Germans, we have a clear choice: either we follow the river northwards, or we go southwards.”

“Southwards, of course. It is hot today, in the South it will be even hotter, but if the war lasts until winter we’ll be glad we don’t have to look for coal and face snowstorms.”

“If we follow the Volga to its mouth, we’ll come to the city of Astrakhan, a harbor on the Caspian Sea. My father traded with merchants there before the great war. He bought Chinese silks, Bukhara carpets. He sold shoes. He said milk and honey flowed in the streets of Astrakhan."

"It must be slippery."

"This is an expression in the Bible, Little Wasp. It means the town is very rich. If the Germans draw too close for comfort, we'll cross the sea and go to Persia…"

"What about astrakhan fur? Does it come from this town?"

"Yes, my father imported some too. They tan the skins in Astrakhan, but they buy them farther east, in Asia. Do you know how they get this fur? There is a race of sheep called Karakul. To obtain an astrakhan fur, you must kill a newborn karakul lamb."

"Poor lamb!"

"Look at my coat's fur lining… Don't you say 'poor foxes'?"

"Poor foxes!"

We walk back to the train station and buy three tickets to Astrakhan (with the rubles Tatus earned in L'vov). As we are regular passengers now, we sit on wooden benches instead of baggage-racks. When the train leaves the station, the glow of the evening sun suddenly sets Mama's red hair on fire. She resumes her needle work. She sews laces onto our sweaters so that we can roll them and carry them around our waist like fat belts. I curl up close to her and beg her to go on with her story.

"You promised you'd tell me how you met Tatus."

"There's not much to tell, my little wasp. When I came back from England, I began to study biology."

"Yesterday, you said bacteriology."

"I studied bacteria. I specialized. Your father was studying biology too, but he was already in senior year, investigating tropical diseases. I still admired the Russian revolution and communism. Do you know what? Your father was considered a great hero in college."

"Tatus?"

"Because he had spent three weeks in jail."

Tatus, who seemed asleep, opens an eye.

"Three months, my dear."

"Three weeks, three months… I don't remember the exact details. What's for sure is that you were as famous as if you had spent three years there."

"Were you a great revolutionist, Tatus?"

"Well, no, but I would have loved to be one."

“Actually, your father wanted to gather students in order to prepare the revolution. As he couldn’t do it on the campus without attracting attention, he organized a trip to the Carpathian Mountains during the summer vacations. They camped in the woods and could talk about the revolution as much as they wanted. In those times, there were in Germany and elsewhere people who called themselves ‘naturists’ or nature-lovers. They thought that sunbathing and swimming without any clothes on was good for your health. Some of the students swam in a lake.”

“Not Tatus!”

“Of course not. You know he hates water. Anyway, some peasants saw them and denounced them to the police. They arrested him as leader of the group, for offending morals or something. I didn’t know anything about this. I would see him on campus and think: ‘Here is the famous communist hero, whom the reactionary bastards sent to jail.’ A common friend introduced us to each other.”

“I disliked redheads. She was a rich capitalist’s daughter. She had this ridiculous habit of inserting English words in the middle of her sentences. I still don’t understand how we became husband and wife.”

“It’s because there’s no sweeter person in the world than my Mama.”

“That must be it.”

“I wrote my thesis about the mutations of *bacillus coli* in 1928, then we got married. We wanted to sail to Stockholm on one of my father’s ships for our honeymoon, but they wouldn’t give a visa to someone who had offended morals. They told me to go alone.”

“Did you go?”

“What do you think? For a honeymoon, the bride and the groom must travel together. So we just went to Sopot. Nine months later, you were born, my pretty wasp.”

“But, Mama, how long did you stay a communist?”

“Until 1936. You were seven already. You may remember that we argued, your father and I, about the Moscow trials. They accused Zinoviev, Kameniev and other veterans of the Revolution of spying for England and America. They wanted to get rid of them. Who could believe that Lenin’s own friends had become traitors?”

“They confessed, my dear.”

“Yes, this was the worst thing. They convinced them that the best way to serve the people was to incriminate themselves and sign fake confessions. It this is communism, I prefer capitalism.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

"Hey, don't you begin to fight again!"

I'm sleepy and fall asleep. In the middle of the night, I wake up because the train has stopped in a station. I look outside: the city is called Stalingrad. They talk so much about Stalin all day that I'm making up a Stalin City in my dreams! I sleep again. At dawn, I wake up for good. I discover a gray-haired lady on the seat across from me. A pleasant smile lights her wrinkled face. I guess she came aboard in this mysterious Stalin City.

"What is your name, my sweet?" she asks me.

She speaks Russian with a mellow musical accent, as if she were singing.

"My name is Kamila, but everybody says Kama. I'm Polish."

"Polish? Are you coming from Poland?"

"The Germans bombed Warsaw, then we hid in basements. The building across the street became glowing red all of a sudden and fell down. They didn't want to give any bread to a mother and her baby because they were Jewish. Then we took a taxi to Brest-Litovsk with Dolek. There were two German soldiers who looked for diamonds in our heels. Then we lived in Kobryn with three sisters. A Russian soldier from Sverdlovsk said he had a son my age and began to cry. Babushka told me stories of the Baba-Yage who lived in an isba standing on hen legs. Maminka knitted thick sweaters. The Mongolian officer came in the middle of the night and he wanted to send us to Siberia because Tatus had found lice in his regiment, but he couldn't because we had passports. Then we went to L'vov and it so happened that aunt Yola was living there with Dolek and Elzunia. Aunt Yola tried to provoke an abortion with bad quinine so she nearly died, but Doctor Widman saved her life. He slept on a table in the kitchen with Tatus. I went to school with aunt Yola and Elzunia. I told Elzunia the story of the labyrinth, so then she drew Daedalus and Icarus and the minotaur and she wasn't afraid anymore and Yola was quite glad. Then Elzunia made up a song, *Fly Off Sweet Swallow*. But the German came and now I'm sad because I don't know where my cousin Elzunia is gone."

Although I'm not sure I've told my story as clearly as possible, the gray-haired lady seems quite moved.

"So far away from home… Poor child… I also left home, seven years ago. I lived in Leningrad… Do you know where it is? More than a thousand miles north of here. When I was your age, we still called my city Saint-Petersburg. In 1934, a communist leader named Kirov was murdered in Leningrad. The Soviet authorities then accused many people of plotting against the government and expelled them from the city. That's how they exiled me to Astrakhan…"

"This is where we are going, Astrakhan. What's your name?"

“Raissa Petrovna. If you do not know where to live in Astrakhan, I have a friend who has some extra rooms…”

Raissa Petrovna talks with Tatus et Mama. She says she’ll be able to find work for them in a lab.

Tamara, Raissa Petrovna’s friend, lives on the upper floor of an old wooden isba. We rent a small apartment on the ground floor from her. Servants or caretakers may have lived there long ago.

When Mama unpacks her things, we discover two magnificent silk nightgowns. Tatus seems somewhat surprised.

“We don’t know whether this trip will take us to Siberia or to China, we must limit our luggage to what’s strictly necessary, but you brought silk nightgowns?”

“I can sleep fully-dressed, as I did in the train! You remember the three sisters in Kobryn? They told us the Russian soldiers stole nightgowns in shop-windows, thinking they were ball gowns. I thought these two nightgowns were light and didn’t take much room. If we need money someday, we can sell them.”

Isn’t she clever, my Mama?

Tamara, our landlady, left Leningrad in 1934, like Raissa Petrovna. There’s a whole group of exiles in Astrakhan. They often meet in the large house that Raissa Petrovna shares with her brother. They long for their native city, they’re unhappy, but at least they’re alive. Many of their relatives and friends were sent to Siberia and never gave any news. An old woman belonging to one of the German families that came with Catherine II, Mrs. von Rosen, says she went to Siberia to look for her husband.

“I’m sure he’s still alive. There are dozens of labor camps over there in the North. I couldn’t visit them all. God be praised, the Germans will win this war and deliver him!”

Mrs. von Rosen’s husband was the boss of the Saint-Petersburg power plant before the revolution. Raissa Petrovna’s friends are doctors, engineers, architects. Mama tells me that the Russian aristocrats left the country when the communists came to power and some of them became taxi drivers in Paris or London, but the upper middle-class elites didn’t flee. Raissa Petrovna wishes she had emigrated like the aristocrats. She dreams of being young again and choosing another path.

“In 1917, we were forty or fifty years old. We could have begun a new life abroad. We wouldn’t have faced the same hurdles as all these princes and grand-dukes, who had never worked. We had valuable skills. In the end, we left Petersburg just like them, only twenty years later. We lost everything: our houses, our furniture, our paintings, our dignity. We became lowly office employees or cleaning ladies in this hole. I'd rather be a cleaning lady in Paris."

"Your city's name, was it Petersburg or Saint-Petersburg?"

"Saint-Petersburg, honey, but everybody shortened it to Petersburg."

"And now it's Leningrad?"

"Yes. It was also called Petrograd just after the revolution."

"Is there a city called Stalingrad?"

"Of course. That's where I got on the train and sat in your compartment!"

"I wonder whether many cities are named after a living person. Even in Germany, I don't think they have a Hitlerstadt. If they gave my name to a city, it would be Silberberggrad. A little too long, I think…"

"You know, his real name is not Stalin, but Djougashvili. He comes from Georgia, a country that's not so far from here, on the shore of the Black Sea."

"Djougashviligrad? I prefer Stalingrad, after all. Why did he change his name?"

"Before the revolution, when the communist party existed secretly, its members didn't use their real names. Lenin was born Oulianov, for example. And have you heard of Trotsky, who created the Red Army? His real name was Bronstein. He belonged to your people."

"A Jew who creates an army?"

"That's right. Pronouncing his name is forbidden today, because Stalin decided he was a traitor and sent someone to murder him, but the Soviets owe him their victories over the Czar's armies, then over the Ukrainians allied to the French, the Poles and the English."

"The Jews I know do not like arms and armies at all. And you know what? My grandfather's brother went to America to avoid military service. Now he lives in Chicago and he is a millionaire."

"Good for him."

"I certainly have cousins in Chicago, but I don't know them. One of Mama's cousins lives in London. He has a son named Andrew, another cousin I have never seen."

"A beautiful name. Like Prince Andrew in *War and Peace*."

"I began to read *War and Peace* in the train. A nurse lent it to me, but I gave it back to her."

"I'll lend it to you then so you can read it all."

While I like Raissa Petrovna, I like our upstairs neighbor Tamara even more. The walls of her rooms are covered with small pictures of the virgin with child called "icons," with painted china plates, with old engravings of Saint-Petersburg. Ivory and silver trinkets cram glass cabinets and table tops. Her apartment is much larger than our tiny servant quarters, but it seems smaller. In Saint-Petersburg, she was a pianist. In Astrakhan, she gives piano lessons. I become her pupil.

She owns an upright piano, which she despises.

"This is a worthless pianino. In Petersburg, I owned a real concert grand…"

"Don't you have a metronome?"

"A metronome? Tick-tack-tick-tack-tick-tack… What for?"

"*Miss*, who taught me the piano in Warsaw, said I was always to play with the metronome."

"Awful! You hear the metronome instead of hearing the music. What else did she say, your miss?"

"She said her cousin was a famous composer in London."

"That's possible. Tell me, how did she teach you music?"

"First, I learned solfege. Then I hit the notes one at a time to muscle my fingers. Then I practiced scales and arpeggios, then my Czerny exercises…"

"But there's no music in all this! Now hold my hand and grip tight, my love…"

"Like this?"

"Yes… Tighter! Ouch! Ouch! Your fingers are strong enough. We'll forget exercises and metronome. I'll show you how to play nice pieces that will gladden your heart."

I spend at least two hours a day playing music with Tamara. I study simple pieces by Bach and Mozart. I make good progress because Tamara is kind and encourages me. She explains how great composers begin with a theme and develop it, how they write variations, how they combine several voices to create a canon or a fugue.

She performs a piece by Johann Sebastian Bach every day.

"This is to remind you that life is worth living."

She plays some Chopin music especially for me, as he was a Polish composer. She plays Debussy because she likes France. Most of Raissa Petrovna's friends were raised by French governesses.

"Miss was like an English governess."

"Your parents chose wisely. English is better than French. The future belongs to America."

Tamara also plays Russian music, of course. She even sings, while accompanying herself on the piano, a series of droll songs by Mussorgsky, "Enfantines." It is the story of a naughty child who says foolish things to his nurse. She's rather plump, my good Tamara, she looks like the babushka who taught me Russian in Kobryn, but when she sings these songs I can really imagine I hear a bad little boy.

I wonder how she can stay plump, as food is quite scarce in Astrakhan. Raissa Petrovna and the others are beyond thin. “Gaunt” would be the right word, I guess. The fountains of milk and honey have turned dry long ago, obviously. The lab that employs Tatus and Mama gives them bread and oil rations, but they don’t amount to much. I often go to the market with Mama. The stalls are empty but for a few wrinkled tomatoes and herring heads. Mama says that the Party’s higher-ups eat the herrings’ bodies, leaving the heads to ordinary people. She buys what she finds and cooks it in a large pot. So we get a soup with a faint tomato and herring taste, into which we dip our bread…

My parents worry about me, because I should eat to grow up. One day, Tatus brings me to the lab with him. I’ve gone often already in Kobryn and L’vov. I’m beginning to know the rudiments of physics and chemistry. Tatus sets the mysterious gray parcel which the accountant gave him on his table. He allows me to open it.

“What is it, Tatus? It looks like a big lump of coal.”

“It is a sugar loaf soaked in petroleum by mistake. Twelve pounds. The accountant could pilfer it in L’vov because nobody knew what to do with it, but he didn’t know himself so he gave it to me. I’ve tried a little experiment with a small piece. I think I’ve found a way…”

He distils the sugar in ether or something. He explains what he is doing, or thinks he’s explaining it, but I can’t pretend I understand anything. If chemistry was summed in a thousand-page book, I would know the first five pages… What’s more, he’s so clumsy and messy that I burst out laughing every ten seconds. My eyes are full of tears, so I lose the thread of his demonstration. He looks for the ether that’s right under his nose, he is unable to light the burner for the distillation, he lets the reactions run away. So many spots and stains cover his lab coat that the original white color has all but vanished.

He does produce a gallon or so of syrup eventually, but he fails to get solid sugar, because the syrup refuses to crystallize.

“Come on,” he says. “Why don’t you lock hands, my sweet molecules! Be good boys, now… Aren’t you cold enough? Okay… Will you or won’t you? Hurry up, you bloody bastards… Shit!”

He swears in Polish and Russian, but I can’t translate his words because my English is too primitive.

“Grandma used to add this kind of syrup to her cookie dough, I remember.”

“So why don’t you find some flour and eggs? We’ll bake cookies… I’ll ask Adela what she thinks.”

Mama suggests we mix the syrup with milk.

“Then we boil the liquid for an hour or two to get sweet condensed milk.”

There is no stain on Mama’s lab coat. She knows where to find the necessary jars, she performs every step with the fast and precise gestures of a cook or seamstress.

Thus she obtains about two gallons of condensed milk. I drink two spoonsful a day for several weeks. Not only is it nourishing, but it tastes great. Every time I sip my potion, I thank Tatus and Mama.

“I’m sure that if you sold your petroleum milk, you’d become millionaires!”

When she sees the market’s empty stalls, Maman thinks about my growth first. Tatus has a wider outlook.

“If the country can’t feed its citizens, how will it resist the German army? he asks Raissa Petrovna’s brother.

“Russia is vast, and truly it is rich. If our enemies don’t win quickly, they’ll wear themselves out by and by and eventually we’ll vanquish them.”

“Adela told me her father, my father-in-law, sold shoes in Astrakhan before the Great War. Well, I see that today people go barefoot. Listen, there is a clear sign: these streetcars you have in town… the two cars are tied to each other by a rope! On the other side, they have airplanes, tanks, submarines, machine-guns.”

“The communists ceased to buy your shoes because they needed their foreign currencies to import machinery. They sold wheat and starved the peasants to buy machinery. I know, because I was an engineer in Leningrad. They wanted to change Russia, which was a backward agricultural country, into an industrial power similar to England and Germany. They built factories, railroads, locomotives, trucks, tractors. You know I don’t like the communists, and even less comrade Stalin, but maybe History will show he was right. Did you listen to the English radio recently?”

“English radio? In the lab, they broadcast the Soviet radio, with these ridiculous reports: our troops are holding out heroically and preparing to counter-attack…”

“We own a short-wave radio, so we can listen to the Russian-language news of the BBC. Do you know what? These ridiculous reports are telling the truth! At least part of it. The Germans bombed our airports and cities, they drove their tanks straight through our lines, but their regular infantry could not advance as fast as planned because our border guards in Brest-Litovsk did hold out heroically. Our armies surrounded in Byelorussia refused to surrender.

The Teutons inched forwards, but those among our soldiers who escaped capture hid in the forest and attacked their rear-guards."

"Me, in Kobryn, one day with Mama I met a very brave soldier who came from Sverdlovsk. I hope the Germans haven't killed him and he hides in the woods."

"Let's hope so, little Kama. The peasants have joined the brave soldiers in the forest. Our Russian peasant loves his land dearly. The guerilla groups lay an ambush, kill a few German soldiers, grab the enemy's arms. The Teuton doesn't feel safe anywhere! In Poland and France, they won in one or two months. Russia is so much bigger… I guess they hoped to reach Moscow before the fall. As the month of August is coming to an end, they're still far from their goal."

"So okay, the troops are holding out heroically… But do you really believe in a counter-attack? Barefoot? Without airplanes?"

"Wait a minute, my dear Marek… I haven't told you everything. While we were slowing the enemy's progress, our engineers were dismantling and moving our factories. All this heavy industry which the communists forced onto the people, we'll change it into a war machine. The locomotive and truck factories were set along the railroad tracks. Once dismantled, they were sent East by train. According to the BBC, our military leaders are prepared for the worst, including the fall of Moscow. Thus they transferred the factories to the Ural Mountains. Our country doesn't lack coal, petroleum and steel. The factories will make tanks and airplanes. Our universities have turned out engineers by the thousands, or even hundred thousand. We'll vanquish the Germans eventually, there's no doubt about that."

"May God hear thee, little father!"

I always get laughs and applause, like a successful actress, when I utter these words. The adults pat my head and kiss me. This clears the gloom somewhat. Except when Raissa Petrovna's brother, energized by his outburst of patriotism, dreams of victory, the old exiles spend their days regretting the years before the revolution and criticizing our decadent age.

Even during my piano lessons, my good Tamara deplores the decline of our civilization.

"Bach, the father of music, composed works that respected tradition and order. The monarchs in his times, say the great Friedrich of Prussia and our czarina Catherine, invited philosophers to their court and consulted them to take wise decisions. But then people decided to forget the past and just follow any foolish whim. For example, Napoleon in politics and Beethoven in music. At least these men had some culture. Today, uncouth ruffians lead countries like Germany, Italy, Russia. Composers write works that you can't listen to."

Tamara and her friends often meet in the evening to sigh and lament. They regret the czar, the czarina, the princes and princesses, the popes and their long beard, the grand religious holidays, and above all the former name of their city.

“People are so gross… Man is such a savage… Civilizing him is an endless task. These proletarians who control our country—dunces, stupid brutes… They haven’t read anything, they know nothing about painting or music…”

“What they lack most of all is morals.”

“The summer is so hot and humid here… Sticky like molasses… Ah, our Petersburg evenings! The air was so sweet… The sun didn’t want to retire. Its light a caress… The palaces of the Nevski perspective beamed with joy until late into the night.”

“Speak louder, my dear, you know I can’t hear so well.”

“We went to the theater, concerts, balls.”

“Time flies… Years… Oh Lord!”

“There is no going back…”

Munching the little tidbits called zakuskis would be nice, but of course there is nothing to eat on the table. We drink gallons of hot tea. I get used to drinking my tea without any sugar.

Even while she speaks and listens, Raissa Petrovna is embroidering our portraits on small squares of white cotton. Portraits of people she met cover most of a wall in her living-room. I don’t know about the others, but mine is quite a good likeness. My eyes are blue enough and my hair looks like grated carrots. Under my face she embroiders my name, *Kama Little Wasp*, in red letters.

Mama says these evenings remind her of Chekov plays.

“Someday, we’ll go and see these plays together. One is called *The Cherry Orchard*, another one *The Three Sisters*.”

“No thanks! It must be terribly boring, your Chekov, if it resembles Raissa Petrovna’s evenings.”

“These people are quite refined, though. As you don’t go to school, you can learn lots of things with them. They speak a perfect Russian, quite different from the coarse language of the babushka in Kobryn or the nurses in L’vov. Listen to them. An evening with them is worth all the lessons of Russian grammar and vocabulary.”

“Don’t forget the history lessons, Mama.”

“History lessons?”

“They keep talking about decadence, the fall of the Roman Empire, the barbarian tide. The dictators who lead Europe will annihilate centuries of civilization and so forth and so on…”

One evening, while embroidering a portrait of Tatus, Raissa Petrovna describes a dreadful apocalypse.

"I'm afraid these barbarians are more dangerous than their ancestors who destroyed the Roman empire, since they have bombs and poison gas. Millions of people will die. Cathedrals, palaces, museums will disappear, never to be rebuilt. It will be worse than the Middle Ages which followed Rome. We'll return to the Stone Age."

"God forbid, little mother!"

I adapt my formula to the context. When I break in on their conversation, Raissa Petrovna and her friends notice my presence. They try to sound more hopeful for my sake.

"Maybe we won't see the end of this war, but you, my dove, you'll know peace someday."

"Today's children will want to avoid a new war. They'll create a single government for the whole planet. They'll abolish borders. People won't fight anymore."

"I'll tell you what they'll do: they'll ask women to lead the world government. Thus they won't make war."

"Aren't you excessively idealistic, my dear Tamara Petrovna? Czarina Catherine, whom you admire so much, made war on the Turks, if I'm not mistaken."

"She annexed Poland, too."

"You're right, my dear Marek."

"I may sound foolish… I can't help it… I do think there is a difference between our Great Catherine and this Hitler."

Around eleven at night, my parents say they must put me to bed and we go home. I'm sure our friends go on talking all night while drinking their bitter tea.

I sometimes visit Raissa Petrovna on my own. She likes to see me, because I remind her of her son, who vanished.

"They took my husband and my son away… During the first year, I kept crying day and night… My son, who was so young… A child, really… What became of him in Siberia? God bless his soul! Although I have friends here, I always feel lonely… There's nothing to eat, but I'm not hungry. Every morning, a kind of sharp fright wakes me up. A foreboding of terrible events… Nothing happens, however. My poor Kama, you're so young, you do not know life yet, but already you discover its worst features!"

Despite the heroic resistance of the Red Army, the Germans creep towards Moscow. Tatus and Mama worry. Raissa Petrovna's brother says the Russians intend to leave Moscow, as they did when Napoleon came with his Great Army. They may build tanks and airplanes to counter-attack, but it will take them years. Tatus found a map of the Soviet Union. Tashkent is very far. If we want to go there, we'd better start as soon as possible. My parents won't lose much, as the lab that employs them gives them very boring tasks and pays them next to nothing. Tatus spends less and less time there. He prefers to go to the harbor. He asks the sailors about the various possible destinations. He knows that a ship sails to Krasnovodsk every Thursday, another one to Makhatchkala every other Monday, and so on. There are also fishermen who own small sailboats. They'll leave anytime and take you anywhere—provided you show your money first. Being pals with fishermen leads to an unexpected benefit: Tatus brings back two whole fish eventually… We feel so rich that we throw away the heads!

Me, I spend my days studying piano with Tamara and reading. I've finished *War and Peace* long ago. Tamara lent me Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, then books by Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev. She also owns many books in English and French. I still have enough free time to roam around the harbor with Tatus. I vaguely remember the busy Dantzig harbor, with its myriads boats and sailors. Compared to it, Astrakhan seems quite sleepy. Ships are scarce. I don't see, on the wharves, the mountains of merchandise that lively trade would raise. The cranes are rusting, the warehouse doors never open. Even the seagulls seem to shout sadder quarks than their Dantzig cousins.

One day, we hear our names.

"Marek! Wasp!"

"Milek Roth! What a pleasant surprise…"

"Forget Milek Roth. My name is Maksymilian Kusniewicz. You can call me Max."

Well, this Milek, I mean Max, who shared our compartment in the sanitary train from Kharkov to Saratov, remains rather mysterious.

Tatus seems to find his change of name perfectly normal.

"Max Kuswieticz?"

"Kusniewicz. The name of a classmate. Could be his cousin. I'll explain. Soon. You too, maybe, someday."

"We too?"

"Change name.

"Change name? Why would we?"

"You'll see. Right now, meet my new friends… Come, I'll introduce you."

A bunch of Poles is camping in one of the empty warehouses. I count about ten families—men, women and some kids. Twenty-five people altogether or so. Most of them were deported from Byelorussia to Siberia on the night when the Mongol officer paid us a visit.

Raissa Petrovna's brother listens to the BBC's Russian news, but his radio stays hidden somewhere. Otherwise, we could listen to the Polish news. Milek-Max tells us what's happening in our country.

"Stalin was Hitler's friend, yes? Thus enemy of the English and General Sikorski. Polish regiments escape the Germans. He sends them to camps in Siberia. Now he is fighting Hitler. Allied with the English. He needs the Poles. Frees them. Amnesty for all Polish prisoners. Too late for the officers."

"What officers?"

"In a camp in Byelorussia, in Katyn. Ten thousand Polish officers. Vanished. The soldiers freed in Siberia ask about their officers. The Soviets say the Germans took them. They advanced so fast that we couldn't evacuate the camp, they say. Maybe the Germans put them in some other camp. New officers are drawn from the ranks. A new general, Anders. A new army."

"Where is it, this army?"

"Who knows? My friends are looking for it. Want to enroll. Gone south, maybe. Sikorski's troops already fighting alongside the English. In Africa, in Syria? The Anders army will join them. It might be in Armenia already. Or Persia."

"But tell me, hmm… Max. Would General Anders take Jews in his army?"

"Judicious question. Me, Kusniewicz, a catholic name, fine. The others… I advise them to change name."

The next day, Mama comes with us to see these Polish Jews in their warehouse. They resemble the tramps you see sometimes on the roads in summer, except they're even thinner.

They went south because the Soviet authorities suggested they join Anders's army, but they're not all eager to become soldiers. Grandfather used to say that as soon as you put two Jews in a room, they begin to squabble, argue, complain and redo the world. So then twenty-five Jews in a warehouse… Should we go to Armenia? To Persia? Look for Anders? Change our names?

Tears fill Mama's eyes when she hears people speaking Polish. As if this wasn't enough, one of these Poles is a university pal of hers, Sacha Hilberg.

On that evening, in our tiny rooms, we also squabble. Should we follow the Poles? Go to Armenia? Change our name? Tatus is born in Pinsk, in a province that was more Russian than Polish. Me, I spent a large part of my life in the Soviet Union and I tend to say "our troops" and "our tanks," like Raissa Petrovna's brother, when I mention the Red Army. But Mama still feels Polish. She speaks Russian with a strong accent, she makes mistakes when she declines the words. She wants to go with the group.

At the beginning of December, 1941, just when the Poles decide at last to go to Armenia, Raissa Petrovna's brother says the BBC is reporting lots of new developments.

"I've got good news and bad news. First, the Germans gave up their goal of taking Moscow. Gasoline is beginning to freeze. The gas tanks are bursting. According to the BBC, the German army is losing one hundred and fifty thousand men every month—dead, wounded or sick—but can't enroll more than one hundred thousand new recruits per month to replace them."

"One hundred thousand a month? That's quite a number already."

"They find them throughout their empire, my dear Marek. I was rather sorry to learn that French and Belgian soldiers have joined the Teutons to fight us… They won't progress on the northern front before spring, anyway. Another great piece of news is that the Japanese have attacked the Americans. They bombed their fleet in Hawaii on December, 7."

"You call this good news?"

"Indeed. Germany declared war on the United States, in the name of solidarity with their Japanese ally. This is what I call waking up the sleeping giant!"

"I guess you're right. But you announced bad news."

"The Germans are moving forward on the southern front. They have taken Kiev and reached Odessa. The BBC thinks they've changed their goal: instead of Moscow, the oil of the Caucasus. Baku[15]!"

I can check the veracity of the BBC's news by looking at the harbor: If the Soviets didn't expect a German attack nearby, why would the dozing harbor suddenly wake up? Military trains unload tanks, canons, armored trucks on the military wharves. Processions of steel caterpillars crawl on the ramps leading to gray navy transports. Huge cranes swing vehicles in the air like so many toys. Tatus's informers (he knows every other harbor worker by now) tell him that the ships go to Makhachkala, north of Baku.

This means that our Polish friends, who are following the sea's western coast southwards, may fail to reach Baku. It would be foolish to go after them. We can't wait for the Germans either. The Volga's estuary will soon freeze and it will become impossible to leave. We can already see the first sleds in the streets.

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[15] Port on the Caspian sea, in the center of a region that has been producing oil since the time of the Russian empire.

Thus, one week before Christmas, Tatus says:

“We’re sailing tomorrow morning. I found a ferry going to Krasnovodsk, on the Asiatic shore of the Caspian Sea. We’ll settle there like we did here. Even if the Germans reach Baku, we’ll be safe, as there is no oil on the other side. If it comes to the worst, we can go to Tashkent.”

We’ve spent the last two or three weeks in great uncertainty, so that Tatus’s decision brings us a kind of deliverance. We prepare our bags, which doesn’t take long!

I found the company of Raissa Petrovna and her friends slightly boring, but I learned lots of things with them—especially with my dear Tamara. We say: “Goodbye—we never know—maybe we’ll meet again,” but we know we’re parting forever. Even if we wanted to see them again, this wouldn’t be possible until the end of the war. We can’t decide anything. Hitler and Stalin decide for us. Fate throws us around as in a kind of meaningless game. I hope the war will end someday, but who knows where we’ll be then, and where we’ll go next?

Tamara holds me in her arms for a long time.

“If you go on practicing, my dove, the piano will become your best friend and console you for life’s cruelty… Don’t forget: one Bach piece every day! And think about me when you play it…”

We walk to the harbor. We’re glad we own thick woolen sweaters and strong spiked shoes—even if my feet are beginning to outgrow mine. Mama improved and restitched her little white backpack, as well as Tatus’s. Beside my anthology of English poets, I’m carrying a book of Russian poetry that Tamara gave me.

Refugees are pouring into Astrakhan. Some have been freed from Siberia, more have fled Kiev and Odessa before the Germans seized these cities. A large and nervous crowd is thronging the harbor’s gate. The police and hygiene services have set up a barrier to check the wads of documents people are supposed to travel with in the Soviet Union.

We’re lucky that Tatus has been working on our departure for weeks.

“I know another way. Follow me!”

We climb a wall and cross some railroad tracks. We’re just behind the warehouse where our Polish friends used to camp. Through the open door, we see a lonely man sitting in the middle of the empty shed. Mama recognizes him right away.

“Sacha! Didn’t you leave with the others?”

"Oy… Stefa, my wife… You knew her? You didn't see her the other day, she was in the hospital already… I didn't want to leave her behind. She died the day before yesterday. Measles…"

I had measles when I was a small kid and it didn't kill me, but Mama says that's it's a dangerous illness for an adult, especially if you don't treat it early. That's war: when you're escaping Siberia, you don't notice the first symptoms of measles.

"Why don't you come with us?" my parents ask Sacha.

"Oh, thanks, thanks!"

He's so grateful that he begins to cry. As if we were saving his life. Or maybe he cries because Stefa won't come with us.

Tatus takes us to the Krasnovodsk ferry. He bought only three tickets, but he seems to know all the sailors and officers, so that they don't seem to mind—or even notice—the extra passenger. What do they care about one more person, anyway… Tatus seems to be as chummy with the captain-in-second, or whatever, as if they had gone to elementary school together.

"You know," this fellow says, "our ferry is supposed to carry eight trucks and six hundred passengers. Catch the Devil's tail *(I'm trying to translate his Russian oath),* it is filled with more than two thousand people!"

The ship moves away slowly form the quay. I think the word that describes the situation best is pandemonium. Until the very last second, people try to embark. Mothers stay on the shore while their children are already aboard, or vice-versa. They lament these forced partings with terrifying screams.

Refugees who failed to catch the ferry are crammed in fishing boats. Dozens of them surround us, their white sails flapping in the wind.

I don't know whether the excess of passengers makes it tough for the captain to steer our ship, but it jumps and shakes several times as it runs into huge ice blocks floating down the Volga. The sailors hold long poles to shove the ice aside. I shiver when I think about the Titanic hitting an iceberg and going under.

We're sleeping on the deck, or I should say trying to sleep without freezing. I snuggle against Mama under her fur-lined coat. In the morning, the captain-in-second says we're running late.

"The engine can't handle the overload, you know. We've already stopped and repaired several times, by the she-wolf's shit! If we do reach Krasnovodsk in two days, I'll cut my stem *(or something)* and give it to the bear."

There’s no doubt we’re slowing down. We spend a second night on the deck, then a third one. As we had brought food for two days, we’re beginning to feel hungry. The sailors say we’ll probably stopover in Makhatchkala.

Things look bad, but they can get even worse. The sea begins to swell and surge. The old ferry rolls, pitches, rises above the waves and falls heavily. Sprays of foam spout upwards, then rain upon us. Tatus and Sacha s are lying in a corner, as pallid as plaster statues. Lots of passengers are doubled over the bulwark and throwing up—although I hope the result of this process goes down rather than up (English is a strange language). Having read adventure novels with awful shipwrecks, I can imagine a conversation with one of the sailors.

“Is this a storm?”

“A storm? Oh, no, miss. This is just a mere squall. Now let me tell you about a real storm I survived by sheer luck in the Gulf of Biscayne…”

Well, I’ll call it a storm if I want to. The wind is howling a gloomy tune, carrying muffled echoes of wails and cries. Passengers are pointing towards the sea. We see several overturned or sinking fishing boats. Tiny black dots bob on top of the waves. Everybody understands what they are: poor people drowning in the icy waters.

“Don’t look, Little Wasp!” Mama says.

Suddenly, I feel a warm liquid running between my legs. A brown spot appears and spreads slowly inside my trouser legs. Blood! A hemorrhage! I’ll die like the unlucky wailers… I remember the old nurse who described battlefield wounds somewhere near Kharkov. We must tie a tourniquet right away. A tourniquet? Where should we tie it? A very tight belt?

“Mama, oh Mama, I’m bleeding!”

“Where, my love? Show me…”

Her tone is anxious, but when she sees the blood she bursts out laughing!

“My wasp, my sweet wasp… You really pick up the best time…”

“Why are you laughing, Mama? What is it?”

“Your first period, Kamuniu. You’re becoming a woman.”

“What was I before? A man?”

“You were a girl. You couldn’t have children.”

“Now I can?”

“Well, maybe not before a little while. But your body prepares the food for an embryo every month. As there is no embryo, the food is expelled. It looks like blood, but it is not really blood. I’ll show it to you through a microscope someday. It is very interesting.”

"You must be kidding, Mama. Blood will soak my pants every month? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're right. I should have explained all this long ago, but with this war… I had planned on giving you a certain education, but then nothing is turning out as planned… Come with me."

"Where?"

"We'll find a place to wash your trousers."

Mama is looking for the captain-in-second, Tatus's friend. She whispers something into his ear. He smiles and asks us to follow him. We descend below deck. I don't feel well at all. Tatus is as white as a corpse, black dots are drowning, I've been wounded on the battlefield, and now I have to go down into the ship's belly like in my old nightmare. Thank God I'm not seasick on top of all this.

There are no rats in the hold, but a noisy crowd of refugees lying on the ground or sitting on bags and bales. The captain-in-second takes us to the officers' private quarters and opens a small shower-room. After washing me, Mama pulls some square cotton pads out of her backpack and puts them between my legs. I recognize pieces of dressing from the L'vov hospital.

"Did you take them for me, Mama? You thought I was old enough for my first, er, period?"

"I am a woman too, my sweet…"

"Oh… Of course."

"Actually, I don't need them. My periods have stopped. You see, Little Wasp, Mother Nature prevents us from becoming pregnant when we're underfed or facing great danger. You remember your aunt Yola, in L'vov, who swallowed fake quinine to abort?"

"I certainly remember. Tatus and Widman were sleeping on the kitchen table. They were so funny!"

"Her periods stopped, so she thought she was pregnant. In fact, the scare of the bombings and the emotion of fleeing Warsaw probably stopped them."

"It stops when you're pregnant?"

"Yes. The food stays inside for the fetus, so it isn't expelled at the end of the month."

"I get it. When the periods stop, it means either that you're pregnant, or that you can't be pregnant. Mother Nature is quirky, I think."

“Well, it is a complex system. We don’t understand it fully, I must say. Various glands secrete chemicals that trigger off the ovulation and the period, but basically the brain controls the whole thing. There’s plenty of research ahead for biologists…”

While we’re talking, Mama washes my woolen underpants and my trousers. I’ve been dressed like a boy since Kobryn. Now I put on clean underpants and one of Mama’s silken nightgowns. I still wear Maminka’s thick sweater and my heavy spiked shoes. Nobody should notice my strange outfit, as many refugees wear whatever clothes they’ve found and look like scarecrows.

When we come out of the shower-room, the captain-in-second meets us in the corridor.

“So how is that girl?” he asks.

“Weak,” Mama says. “She hasn’t eaten anything for two days.”

Even if I’m not seasick, I guess I’m as white as Tatus. The captain-in-second smiles. He smiles easily. He’s a gruff but pleasant man. I hadn’t noticed he was hiding one of his hands behind his back. He shows his hand, which contains a piece of bread and a small brown lump.

“Here, little mother!”

“What is it? Sugar dipped in petroleum?”

“What are you talking about? We have petroleum near here, but we don’t dip sugar into it, by the Devil’s claws! This is chocolate.”

I have neither seen nor tasted chocolate for so long that I didn’t recognize it! I thank the brave captain-in-second. Mama kisses him on both cheeks. He tells us he has three daughters and a son.

“I spend my bloody life at sea, so I’m never at their side when they reach one of the stages of life. I don’t hear their first words, I don’t help them with their first steps, I’m not there when my daughters become women, skunk’s ass!”

“Even if you were around, comrade, you wouldn’t know about that. It is the mother’s domain, not the father’s!”

The old ferry rolls and pitches for eight days before it reaches Krasnovodsk. When Tatus and Sacha stand up to disembark, they don’t seem very steady on their legs! Mama looks a little better, although she hasn’t eaten much after the first two days. The captain-in-second gave me a thick slice of bread every morning, but I feel rather weak too.

We sit on the ground, leaning our backs against the wall of a harbor building. The air is not as cold as in Astrakhan. Tatus, Mama and Sacha begin to talk things over. How will we find a place to stay and a lab where Tatus and Mama can work? What about Sacha? He's an architect… People do not build that many houses during a war.

At first, members of the crew and passengers crowd the wharf.

"Goodbye, young lady!" the captain-in-second says. "Don't let the ogress chew you alive!"

After a while, the passengers are all gone.

"They go the train station," Tatus says. "They'll try their fortune farther east."

"In Tashkent?"

"Or elsewhere. What's for sure is that they won't remain here. This town is very small and the desert surrounds it, as we could see when the ship approached the shore."

Sacha doesn't want to go east.

"I'd rather stay here for the time being. If the German army reaches Baku, we hit the road or the railroad. Otherwise, we cross the sea again and try to find the other Poles. They promised me they'd leave messages in the Makhatchkala and Baku Post Offices to tell me where they've gone."

Mama would like to wait a little, like Sacha. I think she still nurses a secret desire of joining those Poles.

Talking of Poles… Hearing us, a fat woman wearing a beaver coat and a cap of the same fur approaches us.

"Are you Polish? Me too! I haven't seen a compatriot for years… Are you coming from Warsaw?"

"If only we did! We left Warsaw two years ago, when the Germans took the city. We come from Astrakhan."

"Oh, you just can't imagine how happy I am to meet compatriots and speak my mother tongue. What a pretty little boy! What is your name, my childnik?"

"My name is Kama, and I am a girl."

My trousers have dried, so I'm wearing them instead of Mama's nightgown.

The fur-capped Polish woman invites us for dinner. Her husband is even stouter than her. He is a Russian high official, who talks in a loud voice, using much coarser words than Raissa Petrovna and her friends.

Our hostess serves us a cabbage and potato soup, a fresh Caspian Sea sturgeon, then a mutton stew. No wonder she looks like a cow and her husband like an ox. I'm not complaining. After our forced fast on the ship, this banquet is welcome!

"Such an occasion… This don't happen every day," the husband says. "Let's drink to it!"

He pours vodka to everybody. While we dip our lips into it politely, he downs glass after glass. He toasts the brave Polish Nation, which will certainly rise out of its ashes, then the Russian Empire. He does say "Russian Empire" rather than "Soviet Union." Of course he raises his glass, as he must, to the Peoples' Little Father—whom he calls "Russia's Defender."

Actually, with the country plunging ever deeper into war, Stalin himself mentions Russia and the Russian people all the time, hoping to awaken the old patriotic spirit that helped repel all the invaders in the past. He doesn't mention the Soviet Union anymore. He's forgotten that he used to preach the union of the workers of the world and the abolition of the borders.

When the dinner is over, after toasting the ladies' health and the Caspian sturgeons, our host raises his glass one more time.

"Down with the Jews and God save Russia!"

Tatus and Sacha laugh and drink. Mama doesn't laugh. Tatus tells me this is a toast from the time of the Czars.

We sleep on the floor in a small room used as an office. On the next day, the Polish woman introduces us to a neighbor whose large house is nearly empty, because her sons are gone to Moscow. The neighbor's husband is the boss of the Polish woman's husband, thus even more powerful. He also likes vodka. When he drinks, he promises miracles.

"Ha, my wonda-wondaful friends, my sweet li'l ponies, I mean peoples, no, Poles. You, Marek, you're a bye–bye–byelegist, and you too, my dear Adushka. I'll find work for you in a labradory, er, la–bo–ra–try. You, Sacha, I'll find work for you too. They need good artichokes, arch–archtexts, here. I know everybody in this town. Of course I'll find work for you."

"Thanks a lot. Long life to Russia!"

"Long life to Russia and her great reader, leader, Jo–Jo–Joseph Vissa–Vissa–Vissariono–novitch Stalin! Work I'll find, yes, find for you. My pretty Kaminka, I'll give you a do–do–dolly. In the meantime, my lambs, my polambs, you're at home here. Your home this is, yes. Whatever belongs to me belongs to me… er, belongs to you!"

But on the next morning he's forgotten everything.

"Who are these people? Who let you into my house? This is not a shelter for tramps, mare's piss!"

Mama says the same thing happens in a Charlie Chaplin film.

“A millionaire takes Charlie to a nightclub, then he brings him into his home for a few more drinks. Then when he wakes up in the morning with a terrible hangover, he doesn’t recognize Charlie and he asks his servant to throw him out.”

We move again. Another neighbor, whose husband has vanished, accepts to give us shelter for a few rubles per night. Her apartment is quite smaller than yesterday’s house. Besides, it is rather full, as she has eight children. We sleep on the floor once more, in the kitchen.

Not only do we have to pay rent, but food is so expensive, in Krasnovodsk, that Mama must sell her silk nightgowns. As the city stands in the desert, they import all the food from Baku, on the other side of the sea. I think that Krasnovodsk is a kind of Russian outpost in the middle of a republic called Turkmenistan. We sometimes see Turkmens in the street. The women cover their head with a fringed scarf. The men wear tall astrakhan fur hats. These Turkmens live in a desert oasis, far from Krasnovodsk.

The nightgowns brought very little money. When people are hungry, silk is worth less than bread. Mama buys two seagulls, which she plucks and plunges into a pot of boiling water. These birds seem quite tough, so she thinks she’d better cook them for at least one hour. Tatus and Sacha are away looking for work.

“Let’s go out, my seagull,” she says.

“Seagull?”

“I mean wasp. We’ll walk on the beach and forget the war.”

This is the hour when the sun, as red as a tomato, dives into the Caspian Sea. We don’t know what the future has in store for us, but at least we can enjoy the fiery show of the sun’s crimson rays jumping over the waves. Mama seems quite affected.

“See how beautiful it is, my Kamunia. Last time I saw the sun set over the sea was on one of Brighton’s piers.”

Oh, but I can’t forget the poor people who sailed on fishing boats, full of hope, and who now lie at the bottom of the sea. I look for black dots on the waves. I imagine them drowning at the very moment when the setting sun is painting the clouds pink and purple. Would they admire Nature’s glory once more before dying?

I’m careful not to reveal these strange thought to Mama, lest she say the war is making me crazy.

When we come back to the house, the pot is empty. Our lodger pretends she saw a large black cat pilfer the two seagulls. Her poor kids are so thin that we can’t be angry at her. I do miss the nightgowns, though. I remember what Grandpa said when the officer seized the

Vauxhall: “The angel of death deprives us of our earthly possessions before we move to the hereafter.”

1942. North and South of the Caucasus.

Tatus, Mama and Sacha are offered some work in a leper colony on an island near Krasnovodsk. This doesn't sound like fun. We don't go right away, since the secret police has to check our identities first. Tatus has made friends with someone in the police headquarters already.

"They find it strange, it seems, that three Soviet citizens, meaning us, associate with a Jew, meaning Sacha."

This checking business can take quite a while. Weeks, months, years? They're consulting the central file in Moscow or something. In the meantime, we're getting hungrier every day. Tatus and Mama end up selling their Swiss watches. Mama received hers for her sixteenth birthday. It was a Jaeger-leCoultre automatic, which a mysterious system wound up every time she moved her wrist. Tatus wore a Longines, his bar-mitzvah present. My parents often argued jokingly about their watches. Mama pretended that Jaeger-leCoultre was the best brand in the world, Tatus praised Longines… We still have a watch, though: the present for my twelfth birthday, bought on a L'vov sidewalk!

After one month, we're fed up with Krasnovodsk, the more so as the city is full of Germans. They are pitiful Volga Germans, whom the police exiled to the desert so they wouldn't spy for their Nazi brothers.

Well, their brothers aren't moving as fast as feared. They're far from the Caspian Sea: on the shore of another sea, the Black one, somewhere near Crimea. The sorry state of the Russian roads slows their progression. The trucks break down, the tanks too, and they need weeks to bring new parts from Germany. Considering the odds, Sacha decides to cross the sea and look for the Polish group. As Tatus fails to convince Mama that we shouldn't do the same thing, we do.

The crossing lasts a single night. In the morning, we discover the city of Baku. After Krasnovodsk, with its dusty streets leading to the desert, we're glad to see wide avenues bordered by green trees, stone or iron flowers blooming on the façades of high buildings, delicately chiseled marble mosques, well-dressed crowds. The origin of this opulence lies underground—it is called petroleum.

We go to the main post office. The Poles have sent Sacha a message: they stopped north of here, in Makhachkala. Tatus suggests we stay in Baku.

“The city is wealthy. It should be easy to find work in a lab.”

“Did you notice how the people are dressed?”

“Well, er, no.”

“The men wear baggy trousers. They look nice, actually.”

“So what’s your point?”

“They’re not Russian. We’re in a republic called Azerbaijan. This isn’t Astrakhan, or even Krasnovodsk. If they don’t speak Russian, in your lab, what will you do? That our Poles settled near Makhachkala means they found a suitable place. I think we should go and take a look.”

“Do they speak Russian over there?”

“I don’t know. At least it’s closer to Russia.”

“Okay, let’s go to Makhachkala. If we don’t like it, we can still come back here.”

We take a train that follows the coast, then in Makhachkala one that goes inland, westwards, for twenty or thirty miles. We reach a small town called Bujnaksk. We don’t really know where we are, as Tatus’s map of the Soviet Union isn’t precise enough. We have left the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan and have entered Russia again, but this is an “autonomous” region called Daghestan. The houses have nothing in common with the thousands of blue-shuttered wooden isbas I have seen since L’vov. They are built of strong stone walls covered with slate roofs and remind me of the house that Grandpa and Grandma rented in the Carpathian Mountains for the winter holidays. I guess that similar houses are to be found on all the mountains of the world—wherever you can find plenty of stones to protect you against a harsh weather and a biting wind.

Our Poles have settled in Bujnaksk to gather some strength before looking for the mythical army of General Anders. Our friend Max (I must be careful not to call him Milek) already knows many people here, so he finds jobs for Tatus as a bacteriologist in a canned food factory and for Mama as a hematologist in a lab. He also finds a room for us.

“Not big, but you’ll see. Nice lodgers. A rabbi’s widows. He vanished in Siberia.”

“Widows?”

“Yes, bigamous rabbi. All kinds of strange people in the Caucasus. This rabbi was a so-called ‘mountain Jew.’ Maybe one of the lost tribes of Israel. They speak Persian. Take a second wife when the first one is sterile.”

He’s right: the two widows are charming. They are wrinkled like dry apples and always speak at the same time. They speak Persian to each other, Russian to us. They teach me Russian handwriting. I speak without an accent, I read Gogol and Tolstoy, but until now I could only write printed characters.

I often go with Mama to her lab.

“Do you remember Mrs. Kowalska?” she asks me.

“In the L’vov hospital?”

“Yes. She taught me how to distinguish a lymphocyte from a monocyte. Well, my new boss, Nicolas Iegorich, knows even more than her about hematology.”

He is an old man, with a goatee that reminds me of Grandpa. He shows me white blood cells and red blood cells under the microscope.

“Mama talks about lymphocytes and monocytes all the time.”

“Oh, they are special types of white cells. The general type is called leukocyte. Let me show you…”

He shows me cells with a nucleus and without one, harmless bacteria and nasty ones. At the same time, he tells me about his youth.

“We wanted to make a revolution. This was before the beginning of the century. We weren’t as well organized as the communists, so it came to nothing. Eventually they toppled the czar, but today we have a new czar who has a right of life and death over his subjects like the old one.”

He is such a good hematologist, Mama says, that he can criticize Stalin as much as he wants. He is also very old, so they don’t bother about his ramblings.

Mama spends her time testing blood to detect the malaria parasite. It would make more sense for Tatus, the great tropical-illnesses specialist, to work in this lab. There are many swamps near the sea, where the mosquitoes that transmit malaria can breed. Mama also bleeds sheep—without killing them, I’m glad to report. She needs their blood to look for another illness, syphilis, by performing a “Wassermann reaction.” Tatus finds this ridiculous.

“The Wassermann reaction? This is really an antique method. What a backwards country!”

“I can introduce you to Nicolas Iegorich. You’ll tell him how he can modernize his lab.”

“No thanks. Giving unwelcome advice can send you to Siberia…”

Tatus is lucky. He is responsible of hygiene for a factory that cans meat and fruit, so he can bring a little food home now and then. This is forbidden, and they even search employees when they leave the factory, but Tatus is clever: he hides a piece of meat or some jam inside a loaf of bread.

Nobody notices his pilfering. They appreciate his work so much, actually, that they give him a bottle containing half a gallon of oil. The Eternal decrees he does deserve to be chastised: the bottle breaks. I guess Tatus helped the Eternal with his remarkable clumsiness.

He comes home looking absolutely crestfallen. His one pair of trousers is soaked up in oil! Mama and I find this rather funny. Mama washes the trousers in a tub again and again, then lays them on the widows' stove to dry them. Meanwhile, Tatus curls up inside his bed, as there is no stove in our room. He can't wait for his trousers bare-legged in the widows' living room!

Mama and I remember the day when she washed my trousers on the ferry. She winks at me.

"What a pity I lost my nightgowns, Marek, otherwise I would have lent you one!"

Tatus tends to worry about Mama being overworked and underfed. Ever since she was a baby, she's been considered quite frail. When she was eight months old, she was thought dead. While they were preparing the shroud to wrap her in, her sister Yola noticed she was still breathing. She does work a lot. She even brings glass plates home to inspect smears and look for the malaria parasite. As Tatus thinks she should rest a little, he suggests she call a doctor and show him a positive smear, passing it for her own. Thus, she'll get a few days off for malaria. The real doctors are all gone to the front. A young medical assistant, who only studied medicine for four years, comes and examines Mama. She gives her four days off.

"A real doctor would have felt my spleen and seen it was not swollen. If that's how it is, I could be a doctor too!"

Daghestan being in the south of Russia, spring replaces winter as soon as early March. The fruit trees that dot the hills around the jam factory begin to blossom. First the plum trees, then the apple trees and the apricot trees.

Our friend Max is employed as a driver by an inspector of agriculture. When his boss doesn't need him, he takes me as a passenger to explore the district. We never go very far, lest the boss notice how much gas the car is guzzling. Actually, the southbound road leads very soon to the first slopes of the snow-capped Caucasus mountains.

"The Carpathian Mountains, in Poland, you saw them?"

"Yes, Grandpa and Grandma rented a house there. I even learned to ski."

"Well, the Caucasus mountains are twice higher. Snow stays on all year."

He shows me how to drive the car.

"You never know. May need to. Considering your parents don't drive—or do they?"

He's very sharp. So sharp that I wonder, sometimes. I know him well and I'm not afraid of him, but I still find him quite mysterious.

As he spends hours in the car, waiting while his boss is visiting a collective farm, he reads lots of books, which he borrows from the public library. He scribbles notes in a small copybook.

"The list of the Daghestan people. Listen: the Avars, the Dargins, the Lesgins, the Kumyks."

"The women we live with mentioned the Cherkesses, the other day."

"Farther west. Neighbors of the Chechens, who in their turn are cousins of the Ingush. Also the Abkhaz, the Adyghe, the Kabardian. All speak Caucasus languages. Then the Karashaï and the Balkar, speak Turkish. The Ossetis, speak Persian."

"This is not simple."

"The Russians can't make head nor tail. Set borders anywhere. Did you see any Kurds?"

"Where?"

"In the street. Riding horses. Cotton cap."

"Yes, I think so."

"A people without a land. Live in Turkey, in Persia, here. The borders bother them. Borders should be abolished. Would make things easier."

"Tatus thinks so too, but Mama laughs at him. She calls it utopia."

"The utopia will be realized. Sooner or later."

"May God hear thee, little father."

One day, as I'm coming back from the lab with Mama, she bursts out laughing, runs towards a man who is laughing as well, then throws herself into his arms. As if this wasn't strange enough, the man is wearing a Red Army uniform.

"Comrade Ignatiev!"

"Ada Silberberg!"

"Long time no see! So what's up?"

"Well, you know, the army… I'm captain Ignatiev now. What about you?"

"I work in a lab here, my husband in a factory. I don't think you've met my daughter, Kama."

Me, I don't know this man. I stare at him stupidly, I guess. He smiles.

"You told me about a child, not about a beautiful young lady…"

As his smile raises part of his cheek, I suddenly imagine his face quivering with nervous spasms… I recognize the terrible political commissar of the L'vov hospital. He lost his power with the first German bombing, like the party he represented, and now he is reborn as a defender of holy Russia.

Mama tells him about our wanderings: Astrakhan, Krasnovodsk, Baku. Ignatiev gives us the latest war news. The Germans have taken Kiev, then Kharkov. In the South, they control Crimea. Our heroic troops resist in Rostov-on-the-Don.

"They'll never reach the Caspian Sea. Petroleum is a strategic asset. We won't let them get it. I'm inspecting our artillery north of the Caucasus: we have enough canons to push them back. Our engineers build the best tank in the world, the T-34."

When we see Tatus, Mama is still in a good mood.

"We met someone in the street. I bet you can't guess who it is!"

"How could I guess? The emperor of China?"

"There is no more emperor in China. We saw Ignatiev!"

"The political commissar? Gosh, the man was a real son of a bitch…"

"So do you know what? I was glad to see him, actually. My own feelings surprised me. Everything is topsy-turvy with this war."

Later, Mama tells Max about the meeting. He doesn't seem about to jump with joy, like her. I can understand why: when we were leaving L'vov in the sanitary train, his name was still Milek Roth.

"Don't worry," Mama says. "He's gone. He inspects artillery along the Caucasus. He's an army captain. He is confident the Germans won't come here, because we have the best tanks in the world."

"Artillery and tanks, yes. But what about men? Stalin beheaded the Red Army. In 1937. Shot thirty thousand officers. Or sent them to Siberia. Two field-officers out of three. Not enough officers now. Have to promote fools like Ignatiev."

"What do you think? Will the Germans come here?"

"Wait and see. The battle in Rostov-on-the-Don decides everything."

The German army does cross the Don after a while. In July, 1942, our Polish friends decide to go look for the Anders army in Turkey and Persia. I'm still wondering whether they really want to find Anders or would just like to escape the war's perimeter once and for all.

Mama, who doesn't feel Russian, is ready to join them. As for Tatus, he doesn't believe in the Soviet power anymore. While more than a year has elapsed since the German attack, the Red Army keeps being defeated and beating a retreat.

We say goodbye to the rabbi's widows. We owe them several months' rent. As my parents prefer to keep the little money they've earned, mama gives them her beautiful fur-lined coat.

Nicolas Iegorich, Mama's boss, is quite sad to see us go.

"I guess we'll never meet again… Good luck, my dear Adechka, my dove. Be careful! My little Kamuchka, my pretty wasp, you understand things fast. You'll make a good student. Instead of killing each other, men should fight germs and illnesses. I hope you become a new Pasteur or Madame Curie."

"May God hear thee, little father…"

We climb aboard the small train that goes from Bujnaksk to Makhachkala with the other Poles. That is, everybody settles in the train except Tatus, who is buying fruit for the journey somewhere on the platform.

Suddenly, a fat man enters our car and walks briskly toward us. I recognize him: he is the canning factory's boss. Two uniformed policemen follow him.

"Where is your husband? I didn't authorize him to leave. We requisitioned him."

"Er… Well, I don't know where he is…"

"So we'll see!"

They explore the car, looking under the nose of all the passengers. As the train begins to move, they step off the railroad car's front door at the very moment when Tatus, who waited until the last second or he wouldn't be Tatus, is jumping in through the back door.

"Did you see? Your boss! With two policemen…"

"Are you kidding? I didn't see anybody."

"He says you didn't request his permission for leaving."

"If we had always asked for permission and obeyed orders, we'd been dead long ago."

When we reach Makhachkala, two other policemen step into the car.

"Is comrade Silberbeg in this train?"

Tatus keeps mum. Either the Bujnaksk police failed to send Tatus's description, or the Makhachkala cops just don't care. They let us go, anyway. Mama's hand is hot and moist, mine is very cold. When I was a child in Warsaw, I dreamt of living extraordinary adventures—like Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg, who travels around the world in eighty days. Now I'm not so sure.

We change train. While we're following the coast of the Caspian Sea between Makhachkala and Baku, Max tells us his story, as he promised to long ago.

"I belonged to the underground communist party. In L'vov. Police took me. Ten years in jail. 1928-1938. For me, like ten years in university. Learned everything: French, English, Russian, mathematics; how to print leaflets, make a bomb, convince workers to go on strike, prepare the revolution. In 1938, the Party sends me to France. Organize the Poles: coal miners in the North of France, medical students in Paris. In 1939, war. The French gather a battalion of Polish exiles. Fought in Lorraine. Too late. Dreadful defeat. Then I'm back in Paris. Do you remember the German-Soviet pact? They call me to Moscow. Give me a special pass to cross Germany and Poland by train. In Brest-Litovsk, a telegram from my sister: "Come to L'vov before Moscow. Mother very ill." Well, my mother died twenty years ago. Strange, isn't it? I walk from Brest-Litovsk to L'vov. Careful to avoid cities and main roads."

"Me too. It may have been around the same time. Except I started from Kobryn. Sometimes I rode in a truck or a horse-cart, but I walked a lot."

"In L'vov, the mystery explained. Foreign communists called to Moscow vanish. My sister heard about it. The Party suspects them of having fraternized with the Nazis. Since the Nazis were our allies."

"They're still waiting for you in Moscow, so you changed your name."

"This was later. In the train, I was still Milek Roth. Many people knew me in L'vov, so I couldn't change my name. I had to take a chance. Now I hope I'm safe with the Poles. I could have remained in Bujnaksk. Good pay as a driver. Easy job. The Germans still far. But risk being the only Pole in town? Too conspicuous. Better to stick with the group."

In Baku, we take yet another train. Westwards, but south of the Caucasus this time. After twenty hours, we arrive in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. We're not that far from Bujnaksk as the crow flies. The crow must fly over a seventeen thousand feet mountain, though.

Nobody consults me, otherwise I'd suggest we stay a few weeks in Tbilisi. Of all the cities I've seen in the last three years, it is the first one that seems totally free from care, as if its citizens hadn't heard about the war on the other side of the Caucasus.

Tatus says the citizens are basking in the light emitted by the Sun of the Revolution: a son of Georgia, Joseph Vissarionovich Dugashvili, reigns on the vast Soviet empire! They're proud and happy, they sing and dance until midnight every evening. The markets overflow with eggplants, cucumbers, cabbages, grapes, melons. In the streets, there's a constant traffic of donkeys carrying heavy bales, horse-drawn carts, old trucks, crowded buses. We drink tea and eat mutton kabob, pickled chicken, ewe-milk cheese, in huge outdoor restaurants that never seem to close. Strange perfumes and threads of music float in the sweet night air.

Alas, our Poles refuse to surrender to the delights of Tbilisi. If the Germans have already reached Rostov, they could be here soon enough. They don't have to climb over the Caucasus, since they can enter Georgia by following the eastern shore of the Black sea. I wonder about Tatus and Mama. Why don't they argue and decide? The group seems to have swallowed them. The group secretes its own logic, and more to the point its own anxiety, which is the sum of our own personal anxieties.

Thus we head south, toward Turkey. We stop in Yerevan, in Armenia, to inquire about the different means, legal or not, of crossing the border.

We camp in a public garden near the railway station. Mama and I, we go for a walk. We need to stretch our legs after the days in the train. We want to explore our surroundings and see the city. My feet have grown up so much that I left my winter boots in Bujnaksk. I wear canvas sandals that Mama tried to brace with string, as they do not seem very strong.

Strangely, during this stroll, I think about Tatus's camera. It was an expensive German camera, a Leica. Where is it? I rack my brain and I remember a policeman seizing it in the Warsaw train station. Yeah, we were coming back from Gdynia. What a pity… If we had kept it, I would have photographed the landscapes and cities that have been rushing in front of my eyes since October, 1939. I find Yerevan especially beautiful and photogenic. The houses are built of a kind of pinkish sandstone which the evening sun's golden light warms up tenderly. The city lies at an altitude of three thousand feet, astride a singing stream called Azat. In the direction of the South, beyond the Turkish border, we can see the snowy cone that tops Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark ran aground (or so it is said).

I feel wonderfully happy for no special reason, just like when the taxi left Warsaw and also in the sanitary train. I want to kiss Mama.

"This city is stunning, don't you think, Mamusia?"

"I can see it is pretty, but I don't feel as impressed as when I discovered London or Brighton. It is as if beauty was laughing at me: "I'm here, but not for you."

We sleep in the public garden. In the middle of the night, while a drunken soldier is breaking the door of my railway car and grabbing me because the school principal didn't allow me to leave, a slap on my face wakes me up.

"Forgive me, Kamounia. I killed a mosquito who had landed on your cheek. We must be very careful."

"But Mamusia, why don't you sleep?"

"Tatus will replace me soon. Then I'll sleep."

In the morning, Tatus goes and knocks on doors.

"Would you have a room that travelers could rent, by any chance? We intend to spend a few weeks in Yerevan. We're waiting for a Turkish visa."

He finds a room in a photographer's house. Maybe he'll lend me a camera so I can photograph Yerevan. As soon as we've unpacked our worldly possessions, Tatus begins to shiver, then a few minutes later Mama too. Malaria! Oh, my poor parents… Last night, they were staying awake to keep these awful mosquitoes away from me… One of the bloody monsters actually stung them in Bujnaksk. They pretend the same one stung both of them. I have to believe them, as Tatus was already a malaria specialist in Warsaw and Mama became one in Bujnaksk.

The photographer comes in to ask whether we're satisfied with the room. When he sees Tatus and Mama shaking and shivering, he looks terrified.

"But you have typhus! I can't let you into my home. Go away at once!"

"This is not typhus, comrade, but malaria. It is not catching. You don't risk anything."

"That's what *you* say, of course, but why should I believe you? Either you go or I call the police…"

We go back to the public garden. Tatus and Mama lie on the grass for several days. They try to allay my fears.

"Don't worry, Kamunia. The parasite infecting us is not plasmodium falciparum…"

"…which provokes crises every twenty-four hours…"

"…until death…"

"…but plasmodium vivax…"

"…crises every forty-eight hours…"

"…not as dangerous…"

"…but need to rebuild our stock of red blood cells…"

"…if only we had a little quinine…"

Mama brought some drugs from the L'vov hospital, but no quinine. She didn't imagine she could catch one of these tropical diseases that Tatus was studying. If she had known, I guess she wouldn't have *faked* malaria to get a few days off in Bujnaksk.

While my parents are shaking in the public garden, our Poles are trying to negotiate with the police, which has been watching us ever since we arrived. They want to go to the Turkish consulate, but in the Soviet Union ordinary citizens aren't allowed to come near consulates or embassies. The policemen are not friendly. General Anders? Who is Anders? We haven't seen any army here. Who told you that you could enter Turkey? Do you have visas? Do you have relatives in Istanbul or Ankara?

Mount Ararat seems so close! I could touch it, I'm sure, if my arm was just a little longer. Well, I guess I'll never come any closer to it.

I'm beginning to know Max. I see that the policemen's attitude doesn't surprise him. He kept with the Poles to vanish into the group, but he knew we wouldn't cross the border. He had a plan all along.

"Heard about official Polish delegation. Endorsed by Sikorski. Acknowledged by Moscow. In Samarkand. Uzbekistan. They know where Anders is. Tell us how to go to Persia."

So the Poles decide to double back on their tracks: from Yerevan to Tbilisi, from Tbilisi to Baku.

We spend one last night in the park. I worry because my parents haven't eaten anything since the beginning of their fever. How will they rebuild their red cells? Nicolas Iegorich showed me red blood cells in Bujnaksk. I imagine that Tatus's and Mama's are shriveled and need nourishment or something. Me, I eat an Armenian bread called *lavas*. It looks like a tough waffle. My parents can't swallow such solid food. If they don't eat anything, where will they find the strength to catch the train?

Despite the heat, I wear winter mittens, thick socks and a scarf to protect my skin from the mosquitoes. I don't feel sleepy. I walk in the garden. I see a woman and her daughter sleeping on a bench. They wear the long shawl and flowered skirt of Armenian peasants. There's a bucket under the bench. I guess it might contain milk, or the fermented milk they call "yokhourt." I pull the bucket noiselessly. It is full of a clear liquid. I taste it: melted butter.

I bring the bucket to my parents. I wake them up and I feed them with our spoon. They've sold their watches but kept a spoon—a thing we really can't do without. They eat about a third of the butter, then I cross the garden, as silent as a prowling cat, and put the bucket back under the two sleepers.

Melted butter is precisely what my parents' red cells needed, or so it seems. They're strong enough to take the train, first to Tbilisi, then to Baku. I guess that if I could draw a fever chart, the next malaria crisis wouldn't look like a sharp peak, but more like a gentle hill. In Baku, we board the very ship we sailed on six months ago and we go back to Krasnovodsk.

I think about my old nightmare, with its panicked rats running around and around. There are no more rats in my nightmares, but soldiers and policemen.

I don’t enjoy being back in Krasnovodsk. Our first stay there was a complete failure. If we had followed the Poles from Astrakhan to Bujnaksk, like Max, we would be just where we are today, but my parents would still wear the Longines and Jaeger-LeCoultre watches on their wrists.

Or we could have remained in Astrakhan until the last moment. We must escape the Germans, of course, but it doesn’t make sense to move ahead too fast. This is like a game. We’ve started too early. If the wolf isn’t running after us, it ain’t much fun, so we go back and tease him: “Hey, wolf, are you coming at us or what?”

Max says he can smell the wolf’s breath in the wind.

“Soviet engineers are sabotaging oil wells near Baku. Don’t want the Jerries to get them.”

We don’t stay in this awful Krasnovodsk, but rush to the station and get on the first eastward train.

Six months ago, we walked to the outskirts of the town and looked at the desert. Now we really discover the vastness of these empty landscapes. For hours, we see nothing but Sahara-type sand dunes, then large flat plains covered with stones and rocks. Now and then, some houses are gathered along the tracks as if they wanted to watch the trains. It is easy to miss them, because they’re half-buried in the ground and made of the brownish earth that surrounds them. We see men wearing their high astrakhan fur caps and women wrapped in several layers of flowered dresses, shawls and scarves.

Sacha Hilberg and the other Poles seem happy and even merry.

“If you want Lebensraum, look at this!” Sacha says.

“For the Germans or for us? They wouldn’t mind sending all the Jews here, I’m sure.”

I love to be in a train with my parents.

“Mama, what is Lebensraum?”

“It means ‘vital space’ in German. You know, Hitler and his crazies want every German mother to have ten children at least, in order for the so-called Aryan race to dominate the world. But then Germany would be too small, so they plan to expel the Poles and Russians from their lands and install German colonies there.”

Sacha draws some of the half-buried houses in a small notebook. That’s what architects do, I guess.

“Hey, Sacha, if you want to live in a desert, you could as well go join the Zionists in Palestine!”

"The Zionists may be right, after all. Actually, if we crossed Persia, then, er… Transjordan…"

My heart beats faster when I discover a thin green line that thickens as the train moves closer and becomes a tree-lined brook, which is to say an oasis in the desert. I see my first curly-fleeced karakul sheep.

The train stops in Ashkabad, the small town that pretends to be the capital of Turkmenistan. Policemen check our papers and take Tatus away. I feel terribly feverish, all of a sudden, as if one of these stupid mosquitoes had stung me. Foolish sentences crisscross my mind: "We haven't given you permission… A woman whose husband has vanished… A daughter whose father… An enemy of the People…"

Mama takes me into her arms and strokes my hair. The steam engine whistles to announce the train's departure. Should we get off? If we do, we risk being deported to Siberia with Tatus… We can't leave him in the middle of this desert, though. I'm sure anybody would consider this a very ugly way to behave… Ah yes, but I remember what Tatus himself said when we left Maminka behind in L'vov: we must try to survive; it doesn't make sense to stay with people and die with them… No, I refuse to follow such a line of reasoning… Tatus, my Tatus!

We look outside. He's running after the train, in the same exact manner as usual. He jumps onto the footboard like a real champion. He's had plenty of practice, of course.

"They haven't received a telegram telling them to arrest the famous outlaw Marek Silberberg! They just wanted to know why a Soviet citizen is travelling with Jewish refugees.

The train puffs along for a full day, a night and yet another day. It is very hot.

"Do you know the story of the thirsty old woman in the train?" Sacha asks.

Everybody knows it except me, so Sacha tells it to me in a low voice.

"It takes place in the Trans Siberian railway. A passenger can't sleep, because an old Jewish woman, lying in the berth just above him, doesn't cease complaining and moaning: 'Oy, oy, oy ! What a heat! I've never been so thirsty! Nu[16], I'm really thirsty, terribly thirsty!' The passenger tries to soothe her: 'Whining doesn't help, Babushka. We'll soon come to a station and we'll be able to drink.' But she goes on: 'Oy! My throat is so parched… I'm so very thirsty! Can't stand this awful heat. I bet Hell ain't worse (but I hope never to know, please God). Nobody can imagine how thirsty I am!' The passenger grumbles. 'We're all thirsty, Babushka, but we don’t make such a rumpus—we try not to disturb our neighbors. You should control yourself.’ She doesn’t heed his advice. ‘Nu, such a thirst isn’t just any ordinary thirst. I’m thirsty! Thirsty!’ The train reaches a station eventually. The passenger jumps onto the platform, finds a tap and fills a bottle he had in his bag. Back in the car, he offers water to the old woman, who drinks greedily. The train starts again. The passenger lies down in his berth. He hopes to sleep at last. But then the old woman shouts: ‘Oy, oy, oy ! I was really thirsty! Nobody has ever known such a thirst, I’m sure! Thirsty was indeed the word for it! Nu?’”

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[16] Common Yiddish interjection, which can mean: "Ah," "oh," "well" and many other things, as for example at the end of the story: "Isn't it right?" or "What do you say?"

I don’t know about the Trans Siberian, but in our train there is a woman in Turkmen costume who sells tea for a few kopecks, so nobody will die of thirst. It is quite warm, actually. The sun doesn’t seem eager to go down, as if its own heat had made it lazy. To fight the sticky boredom that thickens the air in the car, the Poles follow Sacha’s example and tell jokes. Do you know about the Jew in the restaurant? someone asks. He ordered some fish. The waiter is quite surprised to see him whisper to the fish.

“Are you talking to the fish?”

“Just so. I’ve learnt fish language in university.”

“But what do you tell him?”

“I ask him where he’s coming from. ‘From the Baltic Sea,’ he says. So I ask him the latest news from the Baltic Sea. ‘If you really want fresh news,’ he answers, ‘ask some other fish. I haven’t been there for months.’”

As for me, years…

In the middle of the night, we leave Turkmenistan and enter Uzbekistan. We stop for a few minutes in the city of Karakul, which gives its name to the sheep. I barely see the black shapes of houses and mosques, as there are no street lights. It looks like some kind of ghost city.

At dawn, the train halts in Bukhara. Mama seems sad.

“My father used to buy carpets and embroidered fabrics from Bukhara, before the Great War. I hope they’re all in good health over there…”

We get off the train in Samarkand. If we stayed aboard, we would soon reach Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. I remember that two years ago, in Saratov, Tatus talked of going there. We’re not that far from China either. On Tatus’s map, a few millimeters, or a few hundred miles, separate Tashkent from the border. We’ll stop in Samarkand, though, because we hope the Polish delegation can help us.

We camp near the station again, in a kind of empty lot. Tatus and Mama still tremble every forty-eight hours, but faintly. They haven't eaten anything since the melted butter. I don't know how to help them.

I remember characters suffering from malaria in Sienkiewicz's novel *In Desert and Wilderness*. Not only did they tremble, but they also raved. Now I'm wondering whether my parents aren't out of their mind. They want to get rid of our Soviet passports and replace them with fake Siberia-stamped certificates stating we are Polish Jews, similar to those our companions are carrying. Max tries to convince them not to.

"Your Soviet passports… Wonderful! Without paragraph eleven. Pure treasures!"

"You saw how they controlled Marek's identity in Ashkabad. They find it fishy that a Soviet citizen travels with Jews."

"Besides, they're looking for me because I left the Bujnaksk factory without asking for permission."

"They won't find you. Too far from Moscow. Their bureaucracy is not efficient. Even in peace time. So with a war on…"

"You say their bureaucracy is not efficient, Max, but you changed your name to escape them and you hide in this group of Jews. We want to do the same thing, that's all."

"Change your names?"

"Maybe not, but hide in the group, yes."

Max fails to convince them. They've spent most of the Bujnaksk money to buy the train and boat tickets. With their last rubles, they buy the certificate of a poor woman who belonged to the group of Polish Jews and died of illness in Tbilisi. Tatus wants to scratch the name and birthdate with his spoon, but he trembles too much so I have to do it. I replace them with Mama's name and birthdate. Then I make up two other certificates by imitating the first one. I take great care to draw a realistic Siberian stamp. For the round line that encloses it, I follow the tip of the spoon with my pencil. I find some grease under the axle of a truck stationed near our camp, I mix it with earth and I soil the certificates to make believe they've traveled all the way from Siberia. They look like they've covered thousands of miles!

Tatus can hardly wait until I'm done. He wants to explore Samarkand and find the official Polish delegation. I go with him. Mama stays in the camp to guard our bags and rest. Near the station, we see big buildings in the Soviet style, but when we walk towards the center of town the streets become narrower and the houses lower.

We enter the "bazaar," a network of covered streets lined by hundreds of tiny shops, swarming with a colorful and noisy crowd. Men and women wear a kind of square cotton cap, embroidered with bright threads, called “tiubeteika.” The women plait their long hair into a dozen thin braids that frame their face and fall down their back. People speak a language that sounds like Turkish. I recognize some words I heard among the Turkmen in Krasnovodsk and the Azeri in Baku, who are also related to the Turks.

The bazaar is such a maze that the Polish delegation could hide here for centuries—we’d never find it.

Leaving the bazaar behind, we let our feet guide us and we come to a huge square, bordered on three sides by buildings that look like mosques. China tiles in various shades of blue cover their façades and the domes topping them. In my whole life I have never seen anything so beautiful.

“What are these?” Tatus asks a passer-by.

“Have you never heard of the famous Samarkand Koranic schools?”

We walk back toward the camp. I can read Tatus’s mood in his clenched fists and set jaws.

“What’s wrong, Tatus? Don’t you like it here?”

“I wish we had found this damn delegation.”

“I love this place! The bazaar! These blue schools! We’ve landed in the middle of a Thousand and One Nights tale, as if we had flown on a magic carpet!”

Soon after we enter the avenue leading to the station, two policemen ask us for our papers. I guess Tatus seems suspect to them because he is still young and doesn’t wear a soldier’s uniform. We show our fake certificates. Tatus is trembling slightly, I’ll say because of his fever. I’m not sure I’d recognize fear. I pretend to read him like a book, but some chapters have escaped me so far. As for myself, I feel that my hair is standing on end… The policemen hand us our certificates without saying a word. Just graduated as a first-class forger!

Tatus is tired and wants to rest. Mama, on the other hand, would enjoy a walk.

“I’ll go again, Mama. I’ll show you. You’ve never seen anything like it!”

Outside, night is falling, but inside the bazaar there is neither day nor night. A thousand oil lamps’ flickering lights spread a soft uneven glow everywhere. Whereas Tatus sliced through the crowd as fast as possible, Mama stops in front of every stall and looks at the goods on sale. She has always liked fabrics: Chinese silks, Madras cotton, Java batiks. The ceaseless haggling between seller and buyer seems to fascinate her.

All of a sudden, unexpectedly, amazingly, she pulls a pair of Tatus’s socks out of her bag and shows them to a merchant. Socks! It doesn’t make sense. The fever is making her delirious again, I’m afraid.

Well, she doesn't really seem out of her mind and haggles with her usual vigor. I'm trying to understand. They've spent all their money, but we must eat. It's not as crazy at it looks, after all. We're in August, the heat is so intense that it feels painful. Tatus can go barefoot inside his mountain shoes, I guess. While I'm beginning to follow the transaction with interest, Mama throws the socks into her bag as suddenly as she had pulled them out, grabs my arm and pushes me through the crowd.

"Be careful! Two policemen there…"

They remind me of the two fellows I saw with Tatus, but I wouldn't bet a million rubles they're the very same guys. When we're back in camp and report our venture, they all laugh.

"I can imagine the judge: 'You tried to sell your socks? This is a crime against the people! I'll send you to a camp in Siberia so you can meditate about it.'"

"Or: 'I'll send you to an insane asylum!'"

They're laughing, but I feel like crying. We have no more money, nothing to eat, and my parents—even if they may not deserve a sojourn in an asylum—do act quite strangely, or at least rather feverishly. What will happen to us? We moved from the heart of Europe to the heart of Asia. We left on the way some suitcases, a Leica, a Vauxhall automobile, other suitcases, two silk nightgowns, two Swiss watches, a fox-lined coat. We've reached the end of our tether. Only a miracle could save us.

"Adela!"

"Hala!"

Mama stands up and falls into the arms of a woman who's visiting our camp. Looks like a repetition of her meeting with Ignatiev in Bujnaksk. Mama's friend is very well-dressed. I mean, at least, compared to us… We've been wearing the same clothes for three years, so that we're the only people still able to consider them or remember them as "clothes." Anybody else has to call them "rags."

"Marek! Kamunia! I've told you about Helen…"

As we gawk without saying a word, Mama tries to refresh our memories.

"Helen Feigenbaum! In London, in pharmacy school!"

Oh yeah. Helen Feigenbaum, whom Mama hated because she was pretentious and despised her. And now she kisses her as if they had become the best friends in the world. This is not exactly the same comedy as with Ignatiev. Mama's and Helen's eyes are shining and I'm sure that Mama's fever has nothing to do with it. They remember the happy days in London.

"Adela! Incredible! How long ago?"

"Well… 1924… Eighteen years!"

"You loved Kensington and Hyde Park, but disliked pharmacy. What happened to you?"

"I've become a biologist. I work in labs."

"Really? Me too! So if you had gone on and studied pharmacy, you would have reached the same stage…"

"Except I would live in a nice home in Kensington instead of shaking with fever in a Samarkand empty lot."

"German bombs might destroy your nice home in Kensington, you know…"

"But what about you? You were engaged to an Englishman, weren't you? He had one of these strange English names, Archibald or something…"

"You mean Harold. That was so long ago… I'm married now. I'm not Helen Feigenbaum anymore, but Helen Zakrjewska.

"Zakrjewska? You're married to Zakrjewski? The Radio-Warsaw journalist?"

"Just so. He's the delegate of our London government for Central Asia. I'm in charge of health questions, you know."

Mama says this Zakrjewski took a catholic name and converted so he could work for Radio-Warsaw. His real name was Zaks. In Samarkand, he is a very powerful man. The Americans send food and clothes, which he distributes to the Polish refugees. Helen gives us coupons for seven pounds of rice, one pound of sugar, a dozen cans of meat, two dresses (for Mama and me) and two coats. Ten minutes before this good fairy appeared out of nowhere, I was wondering whether hunger would kill us! I can't help laughing on my own like a fool when I remember Mama trying to sell Tatus's socks.

We spend a few days in Samarkand, in a corner of the warehouse where the Polish delegation keeps the American supplies. Helen thinks she may have found work for Mama and Tatus.

"There are few labs in Uzbekistan. I know of two in Tashkent and one here in Samarkand, but they're already fully staffed. Now we have a group of Poles in Zirabulak, fifty miles west of Samarkand, in the valley of the Zerafchan river. A Tatar[17] woman is head of a clinic there. Three doctors, two Soviets and a Pole, work with her, but they have no lab. If you could create one, it would help the city of Zirabulak.

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[17] There were two branches of the Tatar people, one in Crimea and one in Central Asia.

We leave Samarkand in September, 1942, and we settle in Zirabulak. Tatus and Mama create a lab in the clinic. This is not easy. They have to order microscopes and other instruments in Moscow. The clinic's boss is a huge and brutal woman, who terrifies my parents and everybody else. As this includes the Moscow bureaucrats, the instruments are delivered soon enough.

One of the two Soviet doctors, a woman named Lyudmila Andreievna, who takes care of births and babies, is an exile like us: she comes from Ukraine.

The Polish doctor, Wosniak, works a lot. On top of his job in the clinic, he has a private doctor's practice.

"He can do it because he is not a State servant like the Soviet doctors," Tatus says.

Mama knew him in Warsaw. She doesn't hold him in great esteem.

"I bet it's not really lawful. He asks his patients for ridiculous amounts of money. He pretends he practices a special *Western medicine*. If they don't have enough money, he says 'you can certainly bring a chicken', or 'don't you have a nice carpet somewhere?'"

Dr. Wosniak lives in a proud house with his wife, Mrs. Wosniakova, who is twenty years younger than him and does nothing all day long. They have a maid, a young Uzbek who takes care of cleaning and cooking.

We know plenty about them because we're staying for the time being in their big house—or rather, in a kind of sheep shed next to it.

1943. A school for boys and girls.

I began to write in this notebook soon after we arrived in Zirabulak. I needed three months to tell about the three eventful years that followed our departure from Gdynia. Now I've caught up with the present …

On the first page of the notebook, I wrote I'd soon go back to school. I was wondering what class I would attend, but actually there is only one class and one teacher in the Zirabulak school.

Nikita Grigorievich, our teacher, is Russian. His straw-colored hair falls over his brow. He wears thick glasses with cheap brown frames. Most of the pupils are Uzbeks, but there are also a few Kazakhs, Tadjik and Turkmens. Some live in a tent and go away to follow their flock of sheep, others help their parents harvest cotton, so that the number of children in the class fluctuates between thirty and sixty. Nikita Grigorievich has divided the children in "brigades" according to their knowledge of Russian and other subjects. The most advanced pupils lead the brigades and help their comrades.

I'm one of the eldest, since I'll soon be fourteen. Here, children leave school early to work in the fields or help their parents sell produce in the market. Thus, while I'm not a brigade head, I do help the kiddies learn Russian. Aged six to eight, they belong to the largest and most assiduous group in the class.

As Nikita Grigorievich can't supervise the work of every pupil in all the subjects, he gives what amounts to private lessons in a pupil's weakest subject. This means he teaches me geometry and algebra. When I went to school in Warsaw, I learned multiplication and long division. Nikita Grigorievich tells me about the bisector and the perpendicular height, the addition and multiplication of fractions. Drawing a circle with compasses isn't as easy as with a spoon! I have a hard time understanding why you need a mysterious "unknown" letter, x, to solve equations.

Timur, one of the brigade heads, helps me when Nikita Grigorievich is busy with somebody else.

"Look, Kama, it's quite simple: $x + 2 = 7$ means that by adding 2 to x you get 7. When you know that, you can find x."

"I know *x* already. It's worth eighteen."

"Eighteen? How to you find eighteen?"

"You just said it yourself."

"Oh, of course. That was another exercise. Now *x* changed and you must find it."

"This is unfair: you change *x* without telling me. How can I guess that it's a new one?"

"In every exercise, *x* takes a new value. If *x* was worth eighteen once and for all, we wouldn't call it the unknown quantity."

"It's plain crazy. I'll never make it."

"Of course you will."

Timur is quite patient. He has black eyes and black hair, I guess—he shaves it, like all the boys, to keep lice away. Nikita Grigorievich asked him to tell me about his namesake, the great king Timur Lang.

"He lived in the fourteenth century. In Europe, you call him Tamerlane. Did you see the Koranic schools in Samarkand?"

"Around the big square? Yes, I saw them."

"Well, his dynasty, the Timurids, built them. Timur was a great conqueror. He went all the way to Turkey, Syria, India. The Timurids reigned on Persia and Afghanistan for a long time. If you go there, you'll see blue mosques that look like Samarkand's Koranic schools. Then the Timurids founded the Moghul dynasty in India. A Moghul built the Taj Mahal."

"You seem to admire him."

"In those times, Samarkand was the capital of a huge empire."

"If we admire Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Timur Lang and other conquerors, then we should also admire Hitler, who is founding a huge empire called the Third Reich."

"This Hitler, I don't know much about him. They tell us he is the enemy of the Soviet Union, but is he the enemy of Uzbekistan?"

Wow! That's a touchy subject. Several pupils hope for Hitler's victory. While the communists promise a golden age but fail to deliver, these pupils believe that the defeat of communism will improve their lot. Uzbekistan will become a free country and Samarkand the capital of Asia like in Timur Lang's times! This reminds me of old Mrs. von Rosen, Raissa Petrovna's friend in Astrakhan, who was convinced that the Germans would bring back all the people who had vanished in Siberia.

Nikita Grigorievich doesn't know where to stand. He is a Russian patriot, a good communist, but he doesn't want the elder pupils to consider him a propagandist for the Party or a kind of colonial administrator. He wants to respect their opinion, even if he doesn't agree with it.

At least he has found an ally now: me! He asks me to describe the bombing of Warsaw, so the pupils know how the Germans behave. I even tell them about Grandpa's death. As it is a secret, I don't say "my grandfather," but "an old man I knew well."

We pin tiny flags on a map of the Soviet Union to follow the front's evolution. The Germans have stopped progressing since the end of 1942. They haven't been able to take Leningrad, which they've been laying siege to for more than a year. They're stuck sixty miles from Moscow.

When we left Bujnaksk, in July 1942, they had reached the Cherek river, at the foot of the Caucasus, one hundred and fifty miles from Bujnaksk. They're still there.

While my parents trembled with fever in Yerevan, a great battle was beginning in Stalingrad, on the Volga river. In September, when we arrived in Zirabulak, the battle was raging. Nikita Grigorievich also trembled when he told us what was at stake.

"If the Germans win, we don't have any other army to stop them. They can follow the Volga toward the North, take Saratov and surround Moscow. Or go southwards and help the Caucasus army seize the Baku oil fields."

His eyes filled with tears when he described the battle.

"They thought they'd take the city of Stalingrad in a few days, but our brave soldiers chose to die rather than surrender. A few thousands are left. Elite soldiers, improvised militiamen, factory workers and peasant without any training resist together in torn down buildings. As they move between the houses though caves and sewers, the Germans believe them more numerous than they are. Women cross the Volga at night to bring food and ammunition to the heroic defenders of Stalingrad. Night is also when our glorious fighters push the Germans back from the positions they've gained in the daytime. Mine-carrying dogs blow up the enemy's tanks."

Several pupils protest.

"The Russians sacrifice poor innocent dogs, Nikita Grigorievich?"

"To save hundreds of human lives! What else can you do?"

Around mid-November, the first ice floats appeared on the Volga. Nikita Grigorievich seemed full of hope.

"Winter is our best ally! The Germans will find it tougher to bring over food and ammunition."

Towards the end of the month, he announced great news.

"On the 19th, we broke through their lines! Since the 22nd, their general von Paulus is surrounded in Stalingrad! Reinforcements are coming from all over to help our troops!"

On December, he worried and hoped.

"The Germans are trying to counter-attack, but our boys are holding firm! My children, victory is at hand!"

During the first week of February, 1943, Nikita Grigorievich rushes into the class one morning, beaming with joy.

"Victory! Von Paulus has surrendered! The German armies are retreating from the Caucasus! This is a momentous victory for Russia, communism and comrade Stalin! The war will soon be over."

My parents do not dare rejoice as much as he does. You can't trust everything you hear in a country where news are filtered by propaganda. It seems that the Germans suffered a set-back, but it doesn't mean they've lost the war.

Me, I have my own idea. The Germans have wandered too far from home. I ask Nikita Grigorievich for a water basin and a bottle of oil. I perform for the pupils an experiment Tatus showed me long ago, in his Astrakhan lab. I pour a drop of oil into the basin. It spreads over the surface of the water. It spreads and spreads, but after a while it stops growing.

"You see, oil is made of tiny beads called molecules. In one drop of oil, there are thousands of them. They glide over each other and spread over the water. When the thickness of the oil patch falls down to one molecule, it can't grow anymore. Now look carefully… The patch is very fragile—I can break it easily with a knife. That's what happened to the Germans: they spread out so much that they reached the limits of their expansion. Look at the map… They occupy France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and even Norway. They went as far as Tunisia and Libya. They reached the Caucasus, several thousand miles away from Berlin. As their empire grows bigger, their army becomes weaker."

I can say my demonstration strikes the pupils dumb. Nobody says a word! After a while, Timur, who acts as their spokesman because he is older and knows Russian, thinks of an objection.

"How do you explain that the Russians, who are only twice as numerous as the Germans, have spread all over Asia? Their empire reaches your country in the West, the Pacific Ocean in the East, the North Pole, the Pamir mountains in the South. This represents much more than twice what the Germans conquered."

"Well… Er, near the North Pole there are only polar bears, so it doesn't count…"

Seeing me at loss for a good answer, Nikita Grigorievich comes to my help.

“To conquered people, the Germans bring humiliation and servitude. Everywhere, patriots resist them, that’s why they need powerful armies and police forces. Whereas the Soviet Union frees people and brings them happiness. Our great country didn’t grow through conquest, like Hitler’s Third Reich, but through the free agreement of all its citizens. Nazism is like your oil that doesn’t mix with water: it can’t spread because it excludes the so-called inferior races. On the contrary, communism is a universal system, which erases differences and welcomes everybody.”

I don’t know whether Nikita Grigorievich’s speech convinced his audience. I mean, I know it didn’t. As for me, with my drop of oil, I’ve grown in their esteem as if I was suddenly walking on stilts. I seem to deserve top honors: Timur invites me to comes with him after class.

“I must introduce you to the Birdman.”

I’ve often heard them talk about this Birdman. I follow Timur and his bunch—a dozen boys, aged seven to sixteen. We reach the outskirts of Zirabulak, which doesn’t take us long, and enter a small house made of dried mud bricks. There’s so little light inside that I see nothing for the first few seconds. By and by my eyes get used to the darkness. The first thing I turn to is a large cage, and actually I hear its inmates chirp and peep before I see them. Then I distinguish a shape sitting on the earth platform called *Kang*, which can be found in most houses. A boy or young man… He wears a kind of padded jacket. None of the school pupils wears such a jacket.

“Are you Kama, known as the Wasp? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I’ve also heard a lot about you, Chen known as the Birdman. Why don’t you ever come to school? Do you know so many things that you don’t need to learn more?”

Gosh, I just said something foolish. The shadow of a smile appearing on the faces of Timur and his friends tells me so. They take care not to laugh at me openly. People here are very polite and respectful. I guess the reason why Birdman doesn’t go to school is quite obvious, so that Timur’s troop is wondering whether I have a brain… I look better and I discover, leaning against the wall in a corner, two crutches made with plain branches. The Birdman’s legs are folded under him. They’re obviously very thin, unable to carry a human body, useless.

“The birds teach me what I need to learn, Wasp. They’ve seen the whole world. They know many things.”

Right then, a miracle takes place. A ray of light flashes and hits the cage. The birds stop chirping and begin to whistle and sing. I haven't heard such a beautiful concert for a long time. Being curious but rational, I suppose there must be a natural explanation for the sudden division of light from darkness… Chen the Birdman holds a cord in his hand. It opens a curtain that hides a small window near the roof. This doesn't let in much light, but several mirrors, hanging here and there from the ceiling, send it toward the cage. Mirror is too good a word, maybe, for pieces of glass found in some junkyard. The system works because their angles are artfully set to light the cage.

"This is pretty clever. With several small mirror, you get the same result as with the kind of concave mirror used in telescopes."

"You see, even without going to school, I can know how light travels."

"The birds taught it to you?"

"No. I've read in books that Archimedes the Greek used the shields of some soldiers in this manner to set fire to the Roman fleet during the siege of Syracuse."

"Have you got many books?"

"My friends bring me books from the school library. Thus I don't go over there, but the school comes here. Even your teacher, Nikita Grigorievich, visits me now and then."

"You know what Archimedes found? I'll show you."

Timur just brought a basin of water, as he wants me to perform the oil drop trick again. I plunge a pencil to the bottom of the basin, then I release it. It floats to the surface, of course.

"The water pushes the pencil upwards. Archimedes discovered that the vertical force equals the weight of water that the pencil displaces. This means the weight of the water occupying exactly the same volume as the pencil. If I put a stone in the basin, it stays at the bottom, because it weighs more than the weight of the water it displaces."

"You come from a country where schools are better than here, Wasp."

"I was away from school for the last three years. My parents try to teach me things whenever they can. One day, when I went with my father to the lab he worked in, he explained the law of Archimedes to me. This law is the reason boats can float. Their volume must be big enough, to displace lots of water, but they shouldn't be too heavy."

"Our boats are made of wood. I've heard that the Russians build huge iron ships that cross the seas. Iron is heavy."

"While the ship's hull is made of iron, it contains mostly air, so it's light. Now I'll deposit a drop of oil on the water. That's what I did in class."

Chen the Birdman finds the experiment very interesting.

“I’ve read something in a book about a ship’s captain in a terrible storm. He threw oil overboard to appease the waves.”

“I saw a storm in the Caspian Sea. The ship’s captain didn’t throw any oil… Poor people were drowning right under my eyes.”

“I’ve never seen the sea. I wonder whether I’ll see it someday. I’ve never been any farther than Samarkand. My friends carried me to the train. I’ve seen the great square and the Koranic schools and also Timur Lang’s tomb. Do you know what ‘Timur Lang’ means?”

“No.”

“Timur the Lame. I guess he did walk better than I do, otherwise he couldn’t have conquered Asia.”

Tatus and Mama are happy I’m meeting other children. I spent the last three years in the company of adults and was becoming too serious.

I often visit Chen the Birdman with Timur and his gang. I need to consult my parents and Nikita Grigorievich, to read books in the school’s small library, because Chen the Birdman is full of curiosity. He wants to know how automobiles and airplanes can move and fly. He asks me to describe a telephone, a radio set, an electric washing machine and other gadgets.

I tell him about my travels. He can imagine European cities because he’s seen the modern section of Samarkand, which the Russians built at the end of the nineteenth century. I evoke far away countries I’ve heard about: Germany, France, England, Italy, America.

Chen the Birdman belongs to the Kyrgyz people. His country is located several hundred miles toward the North-East, near China—on highlands ten thousand feet above sea level, surrounded by mountains almost as high as the Himalayas. He complains the Soviets have named the main peaks “Mount Communism” and “Mount Lenin,” as if they owned them.

Actually, he doesn’t distrust the communists as much as Timur. The Uzbeks are quite angry. The Moscow government has just ordered them to write their language with Cyrillic characters, like the Russians, whereas until now they were using Latin letters like the Turks. They find it somewhat unfair that the Tadjik, their eastern neighbors, who speak Persian rather than Turkish, are still allowed to use the Arabic alphabet. I’m sure that Timur and the others have become my friends only because I’m not Russian. I teach them the Latin alphabet in secret, too.

Mama finds eggs and flour and cooks a glorious birthday cake for me on March 8. I’m fourteen. I seem to be entering a normal phase of my life, sort of.

Another amazing event takes place today. To celebrate women's day, Timur brings his sister in class! Her name is Aslihan, but everybody calls her Asli. She's eight years old. When I look at her, I think about my cousin Elzunia and tears fill my eyes.

Nikita Grigorievich didn't expect this new pupil. He's been pestering the parents for years, asking them to send their daughters to school so they could learn to speak Russian—or at least to read and write their own language. Timur doesn't need to explain what's happening, as it is quite clear to us: Asli could not come as long as the only teacher was a man. My presence changes everything.

I wonder how I'll manage, since we don't speak the same language. I know a few Turkish words. For example, the father of Timur and Asli (and six other children) is an important man or "aksakal," which means "white beard." "Ak" means white.

What's for sure is that Asli wants to read and write. Without wasting any time, she grabs a pencil and begins to copy the letters she sees on the blackboard. She is very skillful. She draws arabesques and friezes on a piece of paper better than I could. Timur tells me girls learn embroidering very early.

"See, Asli embroidered my 'tiubeteika'…"

Timur's cap is embroidered with silver threads. Asli's tiubeteika is embroidered with golden threads. For her first day in school, she wears a vest with red and blue embroidery over her long tunic.

Men wears a dress with baggy trousers called "khalat," made of a striped silk and cotton fabric. Women wear beautiful tunics made of pure silk printed with flowers or a geometric pattern called "cloud." Mama sometimes goes to Samarkand to buy lab instruments and chemicals. She always spends at least an hour visiting the bazaar and admiring the fabrics. She took me twice with her. She bought me some Uzbek-style felt boots. Samarkand is less than sixty miles away, but the trip lasts more than three hours, as the train stops in every station.

When we go to Samarkand, we never fail to say hello to Helen Zakrjewski, Max and our other friends. Helen tells us about rivalries inside the Polish delegation, a new office she intends to move to, a party to celebrate Poland's national day.

Max tells us about the world.

"Polish Jews came last week. Confirmed some rumors. The Germans are expelling the Jews from their homes. Gather them in Lodz, in Warsaw. In closed wards. Ghettos. Living conditions are tough. Children and oldsters die. Illness. Hunger even. The Germans have taken the island of Madagascar from the French. Wanted to deport the Jews there. But England and America hold the seas. The Germans send the Jews elsewhere. Nobody knows where. Camps, possibly."

"Work camps?"

"Nobody knows."

In the train going back, I see Mama is dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. She worries for our family in Poland. She doesn't know Grandpa is dead, but I do. Maybe the others are dead too.

We've heard so often about people deported in Siberian work camps never coming back that we tend to believe the word "camp" is another word for "death," in the same manner as "poison" or "cancer." Towards the end of April, 1943, Max tells us an awful camp story.

"A camp for Polish officers, do you remember? In Byelorussia. At the time of the pact between Hitler and Stalin."

"Yes, the officers have vanished. General Anders had to find new officers for his army."

"The Germans have found corpses. Officers in their uniforms. Ten thousand. Buried in the Katyn forest, near Smolensk. The Germans accuse the Russians. The Russians accuse the Germans."

"Both could have done it. To be killed by one or the other… What does it matter?"

"It matters, Marek. Listen. Sikorski accuses the communists. Stalin falls out with Sikorski. Bad for us. Especially for Zakrewski…

"Who is the delegate for the London exiles' government. I understand."

"Your Soviet passports. Did you keep them?"

"They're hidden, but I can find them."

"All our refugees want to become Soviet citizens. Me too. For you, it is easy. As you already have passports."

Become Soviet citizens again? Like Max, Tatus considers that nothing would be easier. Mama is furious.

"I'd rather walk all the way to China! When the war began, when we got these passports, what did we know about the Soviet Union? The passports saved our lives, actually. Now, we know. Even you, Marek, you understand that this country is a huge jail. You want us to lock ourselves inside its walls or barbed wires until the end of our days?"

"You're always dramatizing so much…"

"Oh yeah? What about these Russians who tremble when they hear the word Siberia and who cry for their loved ones? Are they dramatizing, too?"

Max says we have a clear choice.

“With Soviet passports, Siberia is possible, that’s true. Some day. Tomorrow. If you stay Polish, Siberia is now.”

So we become Soviet citizens again. Tatus and Mama now work for the ministry of Health as regular civil servants, like Lyudmila Andreievna and the other clinic employees.

Lyudmila Andreievna likes to spend an evening in our tiny home. She yearns for Europe, but she’s not allowed to go back there. She tells us her story. She spent time in these mysterious Siberians camps.

“I was a gynecologist and obstetrician in Kharkov. During a few years, after the Revolution, abortion was authorized. Then, suddenly, it was forbidden. Poor women came to me: ‘Yesterday we could, today we can’t anymore. I have six children already, my husband is a drunkard. What do you want me to do?’ I took pity, I kept doing it, I helped the poorest of the poor.”

“Did you give them quinine?”

“Quinine? Why, no, my pretty Kama, quinine is for malaria. You’ll ask your mother, she’ll tell you how it’s done… Anyway, one of my patients begged me to abort her. She had been unfaithful to her husband while he was abroad and now she was pregnant. As her husband had been away for more than nine months, he would find the birth of a child rather strange. So I aborted this woman. She was resting in my consulting room. She had told me her brother would come and fetch her. There was a knock at the door. It wasn’t her brother, but her husband, who belonged to the militia. He arrested me. They had made up this whole story so she could abort without spending a kopeck.”

Mama is so moved she can barely speak.

“To save—a little money—they send you—to Siberia?”

“Well, that’s the way it is. I had four children, whom I left with my sister. My husband had already been deported before me for being a ‘bourgeois.’ I spent ten years in a camp near a coal mine. The climate was terrible. I don’t know how human beings could survive the winter, it was so cold. It lasted eight months, too. Food was scarce. The prisoners fell ill and died. What saved me is that they needed a doctor in the camp. They wanted to keep the prisoners alive to work in the mine. I spent my days in the so-called hospital. It wasn’t really warm, but at least not as cold as other places. They gave me bigger rations of food. When too many prisoners died, they arrested people under whatever pretext, in Moscow or elsewhere, and sent them to the mine.”

"Maybe you've been arrested in this manner. I can imagine the militiaman received a bonus for every person he denounced."

"I see you understand the Soviet system, my dear Adela. Yes, in our beautiful land, everything is possible. I left the camp after ten years, but they didn't let me go back to Kharkov. They 'relegated' me to Uzbekistan."

"They needed doctors in Uzbekistan."

"Not only doctors. They want to russify this country. You know they're trying to force the Russian alphabet on the people. They're prohibiting the traditional customs."

Timur and Chen the Birdman often talk about the old customs. Timur is convinced that things went better when boys, instead of going to school, studied the Koran in the mosque with the mullah[18]. Chen disagrees.

"School is a progress. The train that goes to Samarkand and Tashkent is useful and convenient. Without schools, there wouldn't be engineers who make new machines like trains and airplanes. In the old times, they treated sick children with magic and they died. Doctors who studied in school, like Lyudmila Andreievna, save children's lives. Have you seen women in *chachvan*, Wasp?"

"You mean the big black veil that looks like a tent?"

"You don't see many of them now, because the communists have outlawed it. They're right. It is a kind of prison, like the cages of my birds. My mother wore it when she was young. The chachvan is made with horsehair. The weaving is a little less tight in front of the eyes, but you don't see much. As if you were living in the night all the time."

"It is a pity to hide the face of women, and also their clothes, which are so beautiful. There's a pattern I like a lot, called 'cloud', for tunics."

"I'm glad you teach the girls. They're as smart as the boys…"

"Or even smarter!"

"Why not? So it's a good thing they learn to read and write."

Other girls have followed Asli's example. I have about ten pupils now. One of them is Chen's own sister, Nuray, but she never mentions her brother.

Chen the Birdman doesn't live with his parents. I find him, let me think of the right word, somewhat enigmatic. It this due to his being paralyzed? One day, I ask him why he lives alone in his house.

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[18] A teacher of religion.

“Alone? How can you say I’m alone? Look at my friends and listen to them!”

He pulls his rope to open the curtain. A ray of light hits the cage and the birds begin to sing. Outside the main cage, he owns several smaller ones—some full of birds, some empty—that he keeps on the house’s flat roof. Boys belonging to Timur’s gang climb a ladder onto the roof to feed the birds and clean the cages. Chen may ask them to bring down the red cage, or the cage with a silver ball.

Now that we are old friends, Chen lets me attend his music lessons. He teaches the birds how to sing.

“Some races of birds can sing at birth,” he tells me. “Others have to learn by imitating their parents. I need fledglings of the second kind, as young as possible.”

The first time I see and hear Chen whistle and coo, I’m totally astounded. I don’t understand how he creates the sounds. He twists and folds his tongue as if it was made of rubber. He also uses small blades of reed and various plants and leaves. What’s even more amazing is that the birds imitate him perfectly—except they don’t need the accessories.

Chen works as much as Nikita Ivanovich, actually. He always has two or three assistants in the house, boys belonging to Timur’s group, who go fetch a cage on the terrace, bring water from the well, prepare meals for the birds and for him.

When I see the fledglings learning music with Master Chen, I remember the piano lessons that Tamara gave me in Astrakhan and I’m quite sad. I haven’t played my daily Bach for a year and a half…

In the spring, bright flowers embroider the enchanted valley of the Zerafchan river. The earth is so rich and so well irrigated that it yields two crops per year. The Russians planted cotton as soon as the nineteenth century, but the Uzbeks also grow rice, vegetables, fruit, tea. Their favorite dish, called “plof,” is made with rice, carrots and mutton. The rice has thinner and better-tasting grains than what we called rice in Poland. The tea also tastes different. Chen says it is green tea, whereas ours is roasted. They drink it without any sugar.

We also eat a kind of pie stuffed with onions and spices called “manty,” meat pies, honey cakes.

I even find in the Zirabulak market small white balls made with condensed milk. The recipe is centuries old, they say: Genghis Khan and his Mongols used them as food supplies when they crossed the steppe. It doesn’t taste bad, but I prefer Mama’s petroleum milk!

Mrs. Wosniakova, the wife of our lodger the Polish doctor, visits us now and then. She's looking for diversion or entertainment, as she's bored to death in her big house. If only Zirabulak had movie theaters and cafés, like Warsaw! The town does count a few tea houses, called "chaïkana," but I have never seen a woman enter one of them.

While smoking cigarettes languidly, Mrs. Wosniakova tells us a silly story, whose unfortunate hero is her husband.

Among the Polish refugees in Zirabulak, some haven't found a job. Maybe they're not really trying to find one. They earn a life by trading on the black market, peddling, trafficking or worse. They steal flour bags in the goods trains that stop in the station. One thing my friend Chen does reproach the Russians is that they developed cotton cultivation too much. Thus, even though the valley is wonderfully fertile, they have to import food. There is enough rice, but the flour for the flat bread comes from Russia.

Anyway, these hoodlums steal whatever they find in the trains or elsewhere. Some are Polish and Jewish, others just Polish. Like all the robbers, they are interested in rich people. And who is richer, here, than Dr. Wosniak? Everybody knows he earns huge amounts of money with his private "western" practice.

One day, an unknown man rings the doctor's bell, saying he's a friend of Karol (one of the hoodlums).

"Karol suggested I come to you. He says you're a person who recognizes a good deal when he sees one."

"So you're going to tell me about a good deal…"

"Exactly. I think you should call your charming wife. I saw her when I passed the living-room. She'll like this business, believe me."

Dr. Wosniak calls his young wife. She's glad that something is happening at last in this house, oh she's so bored!

"Look, my dear Doctor, my very dear Mrs. Wosniakova: in this small pink bag, there are golden rubles made before the Revolution. Sixty-two coins. Please admire them… This is the effigy of czar Nicolas II, whom the Bolsheviks murdered. The bag's fabric is a special canvas called rep. Being sophisticated people, you know there is no better fabric for keeping gold. Hey, what is this? I hear a noise…"

"Don't worry. Our maid is cleaning the living-room, that's all."

"Because, you see, this treasure… Don't ask me how it came into my hands. I can't keep it. Better I get rid of it as soon as possible. How much would you say they're worth, these sixty-two gold coins?"

“Well, quite a lot, I guess…”

“At least fifty thousand of today’s rubles! I’ve made inquiries: this is a serious evaluation, rather on the conservative side. I’d like to give you a few days so you could check the value, but I can’t. As I’m in a hurry (don’t ask me why), I’ll let you have the coins for twenty thousand rubles. The maid can’t hear us?”

“No no. Besides, she doesn’t understand Polish.”

“Twenty thousand rubles. This is a small amount for you, my dear Doctor. You’re wearing quite a pretty ruby on your finger, dear Mrs. Wosniakova.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you think about my proposition, Doctor?”

“I’ll admit they’re worth fifty thousand rubles, or maybe even more. I won’t be able to sell them, however. I would attract attention. You end up in Siberia for less than that.”

“The war is soon over. You’ll take them with you to Poland. Consider them a capital that will help you start a new medical practice in Warsaw.”

“Well, I’m not the kind of man who hesitates and beats about the bush… I accept.”

“You won’t regret your decision. Since I’m going to receive twenty thousand rubles, I have a proposition for you, dear Mrs. Wosniakova: how about selling me your ruby?”

“This is not possible, Sir, because my dear mother gave it to me. A family heirloom, you understand.”

“I understand. Let’s turn back to our deal. Are you sure the maid is not peeping through the keyhole?”

“I can check.”

“Please, don’t take the trouble… Listen, er, Doctor, better safe than sorry. Come with me to the bus stop. We’ll do the transaction outside. There won’t be any witness…”

Dr. Wosniak gets twenty thousand rubles from his safe or wherever. The two men go out together. The doctor hands the money and pockets the pink bag. He comes home, a wide grin on his face. He wants to look at his treasure. Alas, when he opens the bag, what a disaster, what an awful surprise! It contains iron coins…

When she reaches this stage of her story (which we have heard several times), Mrs. Wosniakova adds that the crook used two different pink canvas bags—as if it wasn’t perfectly obvious.

A few days later, Dr. Wosniak sees Karol the hoodlum in the street.

“Ah, Doctor, I’ve had a strange dream. I saw a woman who wore a gorgeous little ruby on her finger!”

In the beginning, I thought the pupils who stopped coming to school for a month or two were helping their parents plant out rice or were leading sheep to the summer pastures. Now that I meet the children outside school, I understand that they just want to stay free. For instance, two members of Timur's bunch have vanished, together with half of Chen's birds. I guess the boys have gone somewhere to sell the birds. Maybe the Caliph in Baghdad bought bird virtuosos at the time of the Thousand and One Nights, but I wonder who would be interested nowadays.

New fledglings must be recruited to replace the sold singers. Timur tells me I can attend the capture, tomorrow at dawn. I'll miss school, like the others.

For the first time, I see Chen leave his home. Timur and his companions carry him on their back, each in turn. One of the smaller children carries the crutches. We cross a melon field, a large vineyard, then stop at the edge of a low jungle of shrubs, thorny bushes and twisted trees. Timur and his friends pick up some branches. Adding them to the crutches, they build a kind of platform for Chen to sit upon. They can't enter the jungle, but they examine the nearest trees. I don't understand what they do. They seem to stroke them. I guess this is a traditional custom or rite when you go bird-hunting.

Now Chen begins to coo and whistle with the help of his reeds and grasses, as when he gives the fledglings their lesson. The tones and tunes seem slightly different to me. I'm not sure, though. I got used to Chen's music, I even find its repetition kind of mesmerizing, but it doesn't sound like what we call music. Maybe the pied piper of Hamelin played such a music to catch the rats.

Why does the pied piper come to my mind? Because Chen's whistling attracts fledglings after a while. They are born in the spring and can barely fly. With their short ruffled feathers, they remind me of Tatus when he wakes up and hasn't combed his hair yet. They're bashful, they come and go, they hesitate. Curiosity takes over: they land on the branches of the low trees to enjoy the concert.

Poor little ones! I wonder how Chen will capture them. Will they land on his arms? Timur and the others should have brought butterfly nets…

I pity these innocent fledglings who'll soon be locked in iron cages. I remember Elzunia's song.

Fly off, sweet swallow
Hide in the reeds
Accept these seeds

Carry away my sorrow!

The little feather balls keep landing on the branches. Where is Elzunia? Have the Germans captured her and locked her in a camp?

I am so moved by the fate of the fledglings that I can't help whispering the song. Timur and his companions are absolutely silent, as only Chen should be heard. Thus, everybody can hear my song, including the birds… Frightened by the awful noise, they beat their tiny wings. Wait a minute, now what's this? They can't fly anymore! The companions walk to the trees, seize the birds and throw them into big canvas bags. I understand… When I thought the boys were stroking the branches, they were actually smearing them with bird-lime.

Well, I guess my interference hastened the harvest slightly. I feel stupid. I just wanted to sing inside my head…

Hey, but Chen, Timur and the others want to hear my song again. They all learn it right away. Quite a fitting song for bird hunting, they say. It shouldn't be sung any sooner than I did, though…

Chen tells me that he addresses a prayer to the birds in his head when he whistles and coos, asking them to forgive his cruelty.

"I can't replace my prayer with your song, because the tunes would clash, but Timur and the small ones could try… Tell me, Wasp, is it a song from your country?"

"No, my cousin Elzunia made up the words. The music is a Jewish lullaby."

"Oh yes? I wanted to tell you it sounds like our Jewish musicians' melodies."

"You have Jewish musicians?"

"They play for celebrations and weddings. They've lived in this land for a long time. It is said they were already here when Iskandar came—You call him Alexander the Great."

"All the Jews are musicians?"

"But no. If you go to the Samarkand bazaar, you'll see many Jews. They're goldsmiths and jewelers, silk dyers, tea merchants."

I've often visited the Samarkand bazaar, but I haven't noticed these Jews. If they've been living here for two thousand years, they probably have slit-like eyes and high cheekbones like the Uzbeks and the Tadjik.

I haven't told Chen I'm Jewish. The people in Zirabulak see the Polish refugees as non-Russian foreigners. What's for sure is that we look more like Russians or Western Europeans than like the Jews in the bazaar.

The summer is quite hot. The boys swim in the river, but it is obvious I can’t imitate them, being a girl.

In June, mountains of apricots appear in the market. “Uriuk,” the apricot, is the Uzbeks’ favorite fruit. When you look at the hills south of the river, you see apricot orchards everywhere. As soon as you enter a home, they offer you “uriuk”! When we’ve had enough apricots, we buy apples, peaches and cherries in the market.

July is the month for melons and watermelons. People hang them from their ceilings in special nets and keep them until winter.

Then comes the time for grapes and blackberries. There are blackberry bushes along all the cotton fields and roads. Well, they’re not exactly the same blackberries we have in Poland. According to Mama, we should call them mulberry. Their leaves are harvested to feed the silkworms.

Nikita Ivanovich says the Germans have received reinforcements. The Russian winter defeated them, they retreated in Stalingrad and in the Caucasus, but with the return of the warm weather they’re holding firm. The Russians are taking their time and preparing a great offensive. The Ural factories are making thousands of tanks and airplanes. The Red Army has reached the city of Kharkov, in Ukraine.

My parents’ malaria is waning by and by. They still tremble now and then, but they laugh about it, so I guess it doesn’t bother them too much.

Towards the end of summer, Mama nibbles unwashed grapes in the Zirabulak market. Bacteria settle in her bowels. She stays in bed for three weeks and loses twenty pounds. I have to take care of our poor hovel and cook meals. I try to make some “plof”—rice with carrots and mutton—for Tatus and me, because Dr. Wosniak says the best medicine for Mama is the water in which rice has been cooked. Plof looks like a simple dish, but mine doesn’t taste half as good as what you can buy for a few kopecks in some Zirabulak shacks.

The clinic’s boss, the fat Tatar woman, is so satisfied with my parents’ efficiency in creating the lab that she gives Tatus a whole gram of a very rare and expensive drug called sulfanilamide. This cures Mama’s illness.

The Russians push back the German army that was threatening Moscow. In September, they recapture the cities of Smolensk and Kharkov.

Most of Samarkand’s Polish refugees have become Soviet citizens. As Stalin doesn’t recognize the Polish government in London anymore, the official Samarkand delegation ceases to exist. Zakrewski, who kept his Polish nationality because he believed his status as delegate protected him, has been deported to Siberia. Helen Zakrewska is hiding somewhere.

Max says goodbye to us.

"I'm going to Moscow. Big maneuvers. Sikorski is history. The Russians are pulling the strings. General Anders is wandering in the Libyan sands. They talk about Berling. Another general will lead a so-called Polish Liberation Army. With Soviet backing. Do you understand? They found Poles in Siberia, and here and there. They also need future administrators and managers. Like me, like you. We'll see each other again…"

The two boys who had gone away to sell birds are back. When they vanished, I suspected some kind of mystery. I felt I wasn't supposed to ask questions—who bought the birds and where. But they seem to enjoy speaking about their trip, actually. They went to China, no less.

I ask them whether they've seen mandarins, rickshaws, the Great Wall. They stare at me. What am I talking about? What wall? I try to draw a rickshaw and a mandarin wearing a conical hat. Never seen such a strange vehicle or such a strange guy… They describe China: it is exactly like here! The Chinese are Uzbek, Tadjik and Kyrgyz. They eat rice with mutton. They build their houses with raw bricks. In the bazaar, you find china plates and silk shawls. The peasants come sell their melons in the market. The city is called Kashgar.

Chen the Birdman, who is quite a scholar, especially when you consider he stays at home most of the time, knows the various Chinas.

"The Great Wall is very far from here. The Chinese people mentioned in books live beyond the Great Wall. They call themselves "Han." If you want to compare China and the Soviet Union, the Han are like the Russians. They have vanquished and conquered the other nations."

"Don't the boys find it difficult to cross the border?"

"To reach Samarkand, they hop on a goods train or they walk on the road until a truck lets them sit on its rear platform. When they come to the mountains of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, they follow narrow paths, far from the border barriers. The road that links Samarkand to Kashgar is very old. The books call it "the silk road." Already in the time of the Roman Empire, caravans brought rolls of silk to Turkey. The Roman emperors wore dresses made of Chinese silk."

"The boys sell the birds in the bazaar of this city, how do you call it, Kashgar?"

"They sell them to my cousins. The desert cities are similar to ours. They have a mosque, because the people are Muslims, like us. Around the old neighborhoods, where the Uzbeks, Tadjik and Kyrgyz live, the Han built newer suburbs. In school, Han masters teach Chinese, just as here Nikita Ivanovich teaches Russian. The Han do not believe in communism, that's the only difference. They don't prohibit religion. They follow their own religion. They worship their ancestors and a god named Buddha."

"Your Kashgar cousins, what do they do with the birds?"

"They sell them to the Han, who send them beyond the Great Wall."

"I'd love to follow the silk road, get over the mountains, cross the desert, then climb the great Wall and go to Peking. I'll wait until the war is over. Then I hope to go to the United States and see cowboys and Indians, then to South America. Did you hear about Patagonia?"

"Patagonia? Is that a country?"

"It is a province of Argentina, near the southern tip of South America. I've read a book by the French writer Jules Verne, "The Children of Captain Grant," whose heroes go to Patagonia. I want to go everywhere. Don't you?"

"Maybe I'll spend all my life in this room."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Chen, I forgot… Excuse me…"

"I'm not unhappy, Wasp. I don't travel, but I can imagine those remote countries. Perhaps I would be disappointed if I saw them for real. I'll tell you a story that comes from China. There was a monkey with magical powers. He could swim in the sea, fly in the sky, become a giant or a dwarf at will. He liked to play tricks on the small gods who live between heaven and earth, and even on the terrible mountain devils, for he feared no one. When he was asked his name, he used to answer: 'The Monkey Equal to Heaven'! One day, as he's sitting in Buddha's hand, he begins to boast as usual: 'Under the pretext that all creatures obey your will, you pretend that you own the world and that nothing happening there can escape your knowledge. But me, the Monkey Equal to Heaven, I can reach the other side of the world in three jumps and come back so fast that you won't have time to blink!' Buddha smiles when he hears this bragging: 'Why don't you do it, little monkey, if you feel like it.' At once the monkey jumps so far that he vanishes beyond the horizon. In three jumps, he reaches the other side of the world. He sees nothing but a vast brown desert, with a huge tree standing in the middle of it. 'Here I am!' the monkey shouts joyfully. Before going back, though, he scratches his head. 'This Buddha's bad faith is a well-known fact. He might refuse to believe I've come to this place. I'd better leave a trace of my presence…' The saucy little monkey pees at the bottom of the tree, then jumps back all the way to Buddha's hand. 'So what do you think of this? I went to the other side of the world in three jumps and came back just as fast. Do you know anybody else who could perform such a feat?' Buddha, still smiling leniently at the monkey sitting on his hand, shows him a tiny hair near his thumb. The monkey comes closer. From the root of the hair emanates a faint smell of pee."

"Have you ever seen hair growing in the palm of a hand? Maybe he was sitting on the back of Buddha's hand."

"Whether it be the palm of the back, you can travel all over Europe and Asia, you don't leave Buddha's hand. Here we would rather say Allah's hand, but it makes no difference. I don't know how you call your God…"

"I think we can't know the Master of the Universe's name, because his nature escapes our limited minds, but I'm willing to admit I'm sitting in his hand. You should ask Nikita Ivanovich what he thinks. In what hand do the communists sit when they travel?"

"In the hand of Karl Marx[19], I suppose…"

Back home, I find in my pocket the piece of paper with my drawing of a rickshaw. This picture gives me an idea… On the next day, I go with Timur to the empty lot that runs along the goods train station. Some of these jobless Poles who make a living by unlawful means are to be found there. I brought Timur, because it would be neither safe nor proper for a girl to visit the thugs by herself. I ask them whether the famous Karol is anywhere around.

Although I see no telephone, news travel fast. Less than five minutes after our arrival, we see Karol coming in our direction. He doesn't seem in any kind of hurry, as if he was enjoying his usual morning walk and exploring this neighborhood by sheer luck.

"Are you looking for me? May I help you in any way, my dear Miss?"

"Yes, Mr. Karol. We need two bicycle wheels. I believe they have a kind of flea market in Samarkand, where maybe I could find such objects. I don't go to Samarkand often. Neither do I know where to find this market. I thought you would certainly know, and might even buy the wheels for us."

"I can find two bicycle wheels, my dear Miss, in Samarkand or some other place. I guess you don't insist on their coming from the flea market."

"Well… I wouldn't like you to steal them from some poor man who needs his bike to go to work."

"May I steal them from a rich man?"

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[19] Nineteenth century German philosopher, considered the inventor of communism.

"Er… I'd rather not… We have money…"

"You'll pay me when I'll bring them. Concerning their origin, I won't tell you anything. This is none of your business, after all."

A few days later, a messenger sent by Karol stops me as I come out of school: they've got the wheels. I tell Timur. We buy them. One of the smaller pupils is the son of a blacksmith and repairman who lets us use his workshop. With the bicycle wheels, wooden planks and a few pieces of iron, we make a rickshaw.

I'm ready to admit that our strange vehicle doesn't look like a real rickshaw. I mean, my clumsy drawing was closer. What does it matter? It moves! I try it, with Timur playing the part of the coolie. It works!

When Chen the Birdman told me the story of the monkey, I thought he looked like a smiling and serene Buddha himself, with his close-shaved head, round cheeks and slit-like eyes. I've never seen him angry. Even when he laughs, he controls his features. He isn't twenty years old yet, but he seems as wise as an *aksakal*, a white-bearded oldster. Ah, but when we bring the rickshaw, I read surprise on his face for the first time. Tears shine in his eyes, then some of them roll down his cheeks. He doesn't look like an impassive Buddha anymore.

We go for a trial run along the cotton fields. Next Sunday, we'll spend a day on the river's shore.

We meet at Chen's house soon after sunrise. We carry bags full of meat cakes, *manty* onion cakes, bread patties, honey cakes. I'm trying to remember whether I've ever seen such a jolly and happy group of kids… We add to our supplies by gathering blackberries on the road. We sing *Fly off, sweet swallow*. The boys fight for the honor of pulling the rickshaw.

The summer is coming to its end. The air is still very hot, but a pleasant southern breeze called "Afghani" cools it now and then. The river's water is a pale gray or dirty white color. The boys take off their dress and "khalat" baggy trousers. Their underwear looks like a kind of long scarf twisted around their waist and between their legs. I guess they use a different scarf when they wear a turban. They're diving into the river already and swimming a joyous dog paddle.

They stop and open saucer-sized eyes when they see I'm undressing too. I'm a strange stranger, that's a well-known fact, but this is unprecedented and really amazing…

It's not as if I had brought a swimming-suit from Poland. Neither could I buy one here. They certainly don't sell such a thing in the bazaar of Samarkand! I'm wearing a body-shirt and my winter long johns. I look like the women bathers in silent movies or on old seaside postcards.

I dive into the warm water and swim the crawl-stroke as I used to do in Orlowo. A day to be marked and remembered: The Birdman rides his new rickshaw! The Wasp swims like a fish!

Ouch… I still know how to swim, after four years, but I bet my arm and leg muscles will hurt like hell tomorrow.

For once, I appreciate the fiery midday sun, as my bathing costume is in no hurry to dry! The boys light a fire to heat the food. After lunch, they try to teach me an Uzbek song. I recognize some words: *arvat* (woman), *kuzul* (red, or beautiful), *aïdin* (light).

“The song is about women washing clothes in the river,” Chen tells me. “They laugh and the waterfall also laughs.”

While we sing, we dance a slow round and clap our hands. If I had remained in Poland, I would go to the ball and dance the mazurka…

To show off even more, I sing *There was a Jolly Miller Once*, a song that *Miss* taught me long ago. My friends consider it appropriate that I chose a song with a river, but they find the music strange and the sounds of the English language quite comical. We compare languages: I say a few words in German, then in French. One of the small boys, who is Tadjik, gives us a few sentences in his Persian-like language. The fellows who just came back from Kashgar say Good Morning in the Han language: *Ni Hao!* They draw some Chinese characters in the sand: the middle (which also means China), the man, the river, the mountain.

We all enjoy swimming, running, singing and dancing. Although he can neither swim nor run, Chen the Birdman seems even happier than us. The bliss that lights his face is so moving that I feel I could begin to cry any minute. I try not to, because I would look very silly.

I already look very silly, anyway, having caught nasty sunburns on my nose and cheeks. This is the third amazing event of the day. The sun has browned the boys’ skin since the spring, and it was already the color of the earth to begin with. They’ve never seen anyone become as red as a tomato in a single day, which is what I just did… They suggest I wear a great chachvan veil next time!

Nikita Ivanovich is delighted, too. The Red Army’s brave warriors are defeating the Germans. On the wall map of the Soviet Union, the tiny flags that mark the front are moving slowly towards the left. The tiny flag that was pinned on Kharkov is approaching Kiev. Alas, the Leningrad flag doesn’t budge.

With Max gone, we have lost our best source of fresh news, but Tatus and Mama know someone in the clinic who has a good radio and gets the BBC broadcasts. Things are looking good in Africa. The Anders army has joined the English and helped them expel the Germans from Libya and Tunisia. A little before the end of 1942, the Americans have landed in Morocco and Algeria. After a few months, there wasn't a German left in North Africa. The English, the Americans and the Anders Poles then landed in Sicily. They crawled northwards. On October 1st, they took Naples.

On November 6th, 1943, the Red Army recaptures Kiev.

While the Anders army is fighting in Italy, several Poles leave Samarkand to enroll in the new army Max told us about: Birling's army, in Moscow. Tatus is tempted, Mama isn't.

"Do you want to fight, all of a sudden? Do you know how to hold a gun?"

"This may not be the toughest thing in the world. Seems to me that poor fools who can't read nor write do learn to use a gun quite well. I don't want to do that anyway. It's not a game for forty-year old men, but for young kids. What I know is that an army needs many people beside fighters. We could work in the sanitary services. Fight typhus, as I did in Kobryn."

"This is a communist army, though, fully controlled by Stalin."

"Of course. But that's the only way we can hope to see Poland again. Now we know these communists, let's not forget it. They are our classmates, our university pals. People like Max. They're not in love with the Russians. In Moscow, they can't escape Stalin's control. Later, in Poland, they'll free themselves from his influence."

"May God hear thee, little father!"

"Would you rather stay here, Kamunia?"

"Oh, I'd love to spend months sleeping on the ground again without washing and changing my clothes. Gosh, can't we wait here until the war is over, then go directly to Warsaw? I'm wondering about my bedroom: I'm afraid it may seem smaller than in my memory…"

"This is a little wasp with lots of common sense. Do you hear, Marek? Your daughter isn't a dreamer like you. Except you won't stay in Warsaw, Kamuniu, especially if there is a communist government. You'll study in Cambridge."

"Yes, Mama."

I try to imagine myself in Cambridge with my felt boots. This wouldn't do at all. I'm sure the English girl students wear nice leather shoes with high heels. Would I be able to walk with high heels? Bah, this is like using a gun: plenty of fools learn to do it well enough.

Tatus convinces Mama eventually. I don’t know how he’s done it. I don’t participate to all their conversations! Well, he writes to Sacha Hilberg, our traveling companion when we went to Krasnovodsk the first time, who’s gone to Moscow. Max is also living in Moscow, we suppose, but he didn’t give us any address.

Tatus writes he wishes to enroll in the sanitary services of Birling’s army. Mama too. What about me? I’ll soon be fifteen—not old enough yet. I could teach Russian, like I do here, but these Poles who have spent five or six years in Russia do not need lessons of Russian.

I hate to imagine Poland as a Soviet republic like Uzbekistan, with everybody having to speak Russian. I hope not! So would they force us to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet to write Polish? Me, I’ll be in Cambridge anyway, on my high heels.

Sacha doesn’t answer. We don’t worry. The new Polish army must certainly show all the requests to the Soviet secret police so that they can check them. “A slight delay is to be expected,” as they say here. Let’s hope they don’t discover that Marek Silberberg left the Bujnaksk canning factory without a permit!

1944. Farewell to Zirabulak.

My pupils are so eager to learn that they progress fast. I remember the day when Asli came to school: it was women's day, March 8, 1943, which is also my birthday. One year later, as I'm turning fifteen, she speaks Russian fluently, even though her accent is stronger than Timur's. She reads slowly, writes with the help of a dictionary. As few Uzbek books written in the Cyrillic script have been published yet, she has learnt both alphabets: Russian and Latin.

Nobody is surprised, of course, when Nikita Ivanovich says she'll become head of the girls' brigade after I'm gone.

Taking care of the girls isn't easy. Some can't read and write at all. Their parents don't really admit that girls should study like boys. They fail to encourage them, keep them away from class to shear the sheep or reel off silk cocoons, pretend that no man will ever marry a girl who knows too much.

Nikita Ivanovich doesn't worry.

"Building Moscow took more than one day," he says.

Chen the Birdman tells me that in his country, Kyrgyzstan, they hunt gazelles with trained eagles. It takes years to train an eagle.

"So instead of training big birds, you're teaching small birds to sing."

"It is such hard work that people stopped doing it and hunted with guns. But now they're using eagles again, my cousin tells me, because of the war. Food is so hard to get, you understand. A family who owns a good eagle will never go hungry."

The Kyrgyz live in tents and raise large herds of horses. They eat horse meat. They drink "kumis," a kind of sour mare's milk.

Two new boys leave in the spring to sell birds in China. With his rickshaw, Chen can explore new places, so we catch many more fledglings than last year. This time, I take part like the boys: I smear the branches with birdlime, I grab the poor panicked fledglings. We sing *Fly off, sweet swallow* on the way back.

Amazing: having studied with me for one full year, the girls are beginning to consider I am a girl and not a boy. As a consequence, they invite me in their homes. So far, I had seen only

Chen’s bare room. I discover larger houses. The rooms are as empty of furniture as Chen’s place. People sit and sleep on the platform called kang. In the daytime, they roll away the bedding, which consists in a thick mat and a quilt. They embroider the quilts with fascinating patterns. They also embroider large cotton panels that they hang in their rooms like paintings.

The brick oven for cooking is built outside the house, against one of the walls. They stick the meat cakes on the oven’s inner walls to cook them. The oven doubles as a heater: pipes bring hot air under the kang.

Babies do not wear anything on the lower half of their bodies. When they need to go to the toilet, they go wherever they are. Adults also behave differently from us about this. They squat on the roadside without any embarrassment, hidden inside their coat or tunic.

I witness the birth of a poor karakul lamb. I don’t stay until they kill it and skin it to get its fur.

Sacha Hilberg answers my parents. The Berling army is willing to enroll Tatus as a sanitary officer, but it doesn’t need Mama. The letter contains an official “travel order,” which allows Tatus to get a free train ride to Moscow.

Tatus refuses to leave us alone, two weak defenseless women in a Moslem country. Me, I don’t see where the danger lies. I guess he’s afraid to go to Moscow without Mama. He needs her common sense to avoid making the kind of blunder that sends you to Siberia. So he writes back to Sacha that he wants a sanitary officer position for him, one for Mama, and three travel orders. They wouldn’t leave me behind, would they?

In the beginning of the year 1944, the Russians at last loosen the vise that gripped Leningrad. They recapture Odessa, on the Black Sea, and the Crimea peninsula. They move towards Minsk in Byelorussia, L’vov in Ukraine. We hear that the Americans and their allies take Rome on June 4, 1944. Then, two days later, these fantastic news: they land in Normandy! I’m afraid Mama will soon have deep wrinkles on her cheeks: she keeps smiling all the time, she’s so happy.

Cambridge, here I come!

The stifling summer heat is back. We go swim in the river at least once a week. I hope I won’t go to jail me for offending morals, like Tatus in Poland twenty years ago, but I convince Asli and several other girls (including Nuray, Chen’s sister) to come with us. After teaching them Russian and arithmetic’s, I become their swimming teacher. Actually, I also show the boys how to swim the crawl-stroke and the breast-stroke.

I bet the old river hasn't heard that much shouting and laughter, seen that much splashing, since the time of Iskandar…

The girls gather stones and build an oven. It seems easy enough. They brought a pan and cook a real exquisite plof!

The first few times we go to the river, I take care to stay in the shade as much as possible, to tan in a pleasant progressive manner.

Chen the Birdman asks me whether I would like to move to the other side of the world in three jumps. No, definitely not. I'm perfectly happy on the river shore with Chen, Timur, Asli and my other friends. I don't remember enjoying life that much in Poland. Maybe I was too young to sing and dance like a lunatic, which is what I'm doing now. With girls around, the songs and dances are even more fun than last year, of course.

I'd better appreciate this happiness, I tell myself, as I don't know what the future holds in store for me. One thing I know for sure: I'll never be fifteen again!

Sacha sends us a new letter in the fall. Birling's army accepts our conditions. This time, the letter contains three travel orders. A moment I longed for but dreaded too has come to pass: I'm leaving Zirabulak and returning to Warsaw.

The clinic's Tatar boss is sorry to see Tatus and Mama go away. She isn't as ferocious as her reputation, after all. Maybe she only looks ferocious because she is tall and broad. The new lab made the clinic famous in the whole valley. The other clinics and doctors send their stuff here for analysis.

A Tatar biologist will replace Tatus and Mama. When we arrived, the clinic's boss was the only Tatar around. This is certainly not true anymore. Stalin has deported all the Crimean Tatars to punish them for collaborating with the Germans, so swarms of them have been coming here. Last year he deported the Chechen, the Ingush, the Kalmuk and other people of the Caucasus and Caspian Sea countries to *prevent* them from collaborating with the enemy. These Tatar and Kalmuk speak a kind of Turkish dialect and look like the Uzbeks, but the Kalmuk are Buddhists like the Chinese.

Well, the Germans never reached the territory of the Chechen and Kalmuk. We could have spent the whole war quietly in Astrakhan or Bujnaksk.

Mama saved the life of an Uzbek fellow by finding in his blood some illness his doctor hadn't thought about. To show his gratitude, he offers her an astrakhan skin jacket. Since astrakhan fur is very valuable and brings dollars to the Soviet Union, the whole production is considered State property. So the gift is illegal, but the Zirabulak secret police commissar lets us know he'll close his eyes, as a way of thanking Tatus and Mama for the services they rendered the town.

Me, I receive perfectly legal gifts: a vest embroidered by Asli and a matching tiubeteika cap embroidered by Chen's sister.

Mama sews new backpacks for Tatus and her, using mine as a model. They're made of gray canvas, bigger and stronger than the old ones. Thus she can hide her clandestine jacket in hers. As for Tatus, he is carrying two paper bags full of raisins, a Zerafchan valley specialty.

"People in Moscow love them," he says. "This is better than Dr. Wozniak's gold coins!"

Here we are, on the train station's platform. A mellow October sun shines in the sky. Nikita Ivanovich has come to say goodbye—or rather, alas, farewell—with all the pupils of the school. There are more than sixty children! Chen the Birdman is there too, of course, sitting proudly on his rickshaw. I don't know whether the birds also wanted to say goodbye, but he's brought the big cage, which he holds in his lap.

I kiss the kids one by one. That's quite a job! Nikita Ivanovich embraces me.

"Our school owes you a lot, Kama the wasp. I won't bore you with a long speech, as you know what I think. If you wanted, you'd make a good teacher, over there in your country!"

"I don't know what country to call mine, Nikita Ivanovich… Wherever I spend my adult life, Uzbekistan will remain my fatherland in a way, and Russian my mother language."

I raise myself on my toes to kiss Timur, who's grown quite tall of late.

"I thank you for being so patient with me, Timur, when you helped me understand triangles and equations, and also for introducing me to Chen."

"Ah, Wasp, if all the Russians were like you, we Uzbeks wouldn't feel like they were trying to subdue us. I wish you good luck for your future life. Let Allah protect you!"

I try to comfort Asli and the other girls, who are quite sad to lose their teacher.

"Be brave, girls! Come on, you don't have to imitate these crybaby boys.

I kiss my friend Chen the Birdman very tenderly. I have a complex feeling that he's been my teacher, in a certain manner, like Nikita Ivanovich. At the same time, he is a close friend. We used to talk for hours about our strange universe or about a book one of us was reading. I feel our parting will dig a hole deep inside me. Is this what people call love?

"Perhaps I'll come again someday, Birdman."

"If you don't come back, Wasp, I may decide to travel at last. Timur will pull me all the way to your country! Even if I stay here, I'll think about you every time I ride this marvelous vehicle you gave me."

The train enters the station and stops with a great show of hissing and braking. Just then, Nikita Ivanovich raises his arms and something amazing takes place: the sixty children begin to sing *Fly off, sweet swallow*. Nikita Ivanovich has harmonized the song for three voices. It sounds like the Bach pieces that Tamara analyzed for me in Astrakhan. Some pupils sing the melody, others a kind of transposition. The small ones repeat an accompaniment: "Bam-bam-bam…" I guess they have practiced secretly, outside class, for weeks.

When the song ends, I see, through my tears, tiny fuzzy colored balls rise above Chen. He's opened the cage and freed the birds!

Fly off, sweet swallow
Hide in the reeds
Accept these seeds
Carry away my sorrow!

I rush at Chen and kiss him again. Then I also kiss Timur, the girls, Nikita Ivanovich… I could go on until nightfall, but a man covered with soot interferes.

"Are you the so-called wasp? I'm the train's stoker, if you please, comrade Wasp. I've delayed departure ten minutes for you, but I'll run into trouble if I wait yet more…"

Now if someday I have children and grandchildren, this is something I'll tell them again and again: the train waited ten minutes just for me!

Although we want to go to Moscow and Warsaw, which are located west of here, we travel eastwards at first. We cross Samarkand and stay in the train all the way to Tashkent.

"Say, Tatus, you wanted to go to Tashkent. Well, here we are!"

"When did I want to go to Tashkent?"

"Three years ago, in Saratov. Don't you remember?"

Without even leaving the station, we take a new train, going toward the north. A few miles from Tashkent, we enter another Soviet republic: Kazakhstan. At first, the landscape is somewhat hilly, but soon it becomes so flat that I find it almost frightening. This is the boundless steppe, which seems to lie all over the surface of the earth. I have the same strange feeling of time dissolving into nothingness as three years ago, when another train was floating upon the vast wheat fields of Ukraine. When I look out of the window, I always see the same thing: a carpet of short grass that rushes past all day long, as if some untiring weaver was making it to order just for us.

Now and then, a flock of sheep grazes the carpet. The shepherd is riding a horse. His round felt tent, called a *yurt*, usually comes into the picture after a while. The first time I saw such a tent near Zirabulak, I was told it belonged to some Kazakhs. I thought they came from Kazakhstan, but actually the word “Kazak” means “nomad.” Kazakhstan is the country of nomads, that’s all.

I once visited a yurt with some pupils who lived in it. I found it much bigger inside than I would have thought, and also more comfortable, with lots of carpets and fur skins and blankets. The carpet is really a great invention; this is something I understood in a nomad’s tent. I’m sure that in the future I’ll take another look at the carpets covering the floors of our Warsaw apartment. The yurt’s inhabitants sleep under quilts that they roll—and use as seats—in the daytime.

The train gobbles miles like so many fruit drops, as if there was no limit to its hunger. It does stop in two or three places that nobody would call stations. Why did anyone build a shack in this particular spot rather than elsewhere?

I renew with the pleasant custom of talking to Mama in a train.

“All these children singing for you, Kamuniu… It was wonderful. Then your friend Chen freed his birds. This was quite a sacrifice for him.”

“A sacrifice?”

“You told me he sells them in China. He lost a great amount of money by releasing them. It was as if he was offering you a very beautiful gift.”

“I may be mistaken, but I bet the birds went home faster than he did. It’s their nest, you know.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you’re thinking of homing pigeons.”

“I’ve seen them go home in this manner. Timur takes them outside, then they fly as fast as they can towards their cage. We’re also flying home as fast as we can, Mamuniu!”

We leave Kazakhstan eventually. Tatus has forgotten to take his map of the Soviet Union (or rather, has lost his map long ago), so we don’t really know where we are. In Russia, that’s for sure, but where?

After two days and two nights in the train, we reach Moscow at last. We go to Hotel Moskva, where our friend Sacha Hilberg is staying. Although he left Samarkand only six months ago, I barely recognize him: he is wearing a Polish army uniform—quite fitting, I must say—with a strange cap on his head.

"Er, I'm a colonel," he says.

He seems to find it embarrassing, or even shameful. Another surprise: whereas we knew him as a disconsolate widower, he now lives with someone we know, Mama's remote cousin, another biologist, who spent the war in Siberia.

This colonel is still our good old Sacha. He invites us to sleep in his room to save a little money. In the morning, Tatus and Mama go to the Berling Army headquarters to get their new travel orders. As they're both university graduates, they become sanitary officers—Tatus a major and Mama a lieutenant! I'd love to see them in uniform, but there is no time to visit the tailor: we leave the day after tomorrow on a train to Lublin, in the East of Poland.

The Red Army has recaptured Byelorussia, Ukraine and Eastern Poland. The city of Lublin is the temporary capital of a new Poland controlled by Birling's army—that is, by the communists.

While Tatus and Mama enroll in the army, I visit Moscow with Sacha's wife. She shows me the Red Square with Lenin's mausoleum, the Kremlin palace and the church of the blessed Basil. This isn't the best time of the year to walk around. It snows and an icy wind sweeps the Red Square. I regret Zirabulak, where the weather was still quite warm, at least in the daytime. Last week, I was singing and dancing with my friends…

Here we are now in Moscow station. We'll travel on a special train with the dignitaries of the new Poland. Gentlemen wearing dark suits and ties are walking back and forth on the platform. They're the members of the new government. The train is entirely composed of sleeping-cars. Wonderful!

"My dear Adela! Kama the wasp! I knew it. That you'd join us eventually."

"Max! But say… This uniform… Are you a colonel, like Sacha?"

"General. Where is Marek?"

"He'll come at the last minute. He can't help it, you know. He went to an address that someone gave him… He brought bags of raisins from Uzbekistan He wants to sell them."

This famous Birling's army is so small that poor Jews who have never done any military service are its captains, colonels, generals even. Where are the simple soldiers? If they do exist, I guess they travel in plainer trains.

I'm sitting on my berth already. The train is supposed to leave at 9 PM. Gosh, such a soft bed! In the trains we took between Tashkent and Moscow, we sat on wooden benches. In Hotel Moskva, I slept on the floor.

Something is amiss, though: no Tatus! Five minutes before nine. He'll run along the train, jump lightly onto the footboard… Mama is beginning to worry, I can see that. Well, he never replaced his faithful Longines watch, which was so precise. At one minute before nine, he's still not there. I look at Mama. She sighs and nods. I tumble down from my delightful berth, grab my backpack and follow her back to the platform.

The steam engine emits a willful whistle, as if it was trying to sway us: "Are you sure? Won't you change your mind?" Having to give up a trip on this beautiful train is oh so painful, especially as it was to take us back to our dear Poland. Mama and I, we stare as it recedes slowly in the distance. The tail car seems to blink mockingly at us with its red light… We hear someone running behind us: Tatus, quite red in the face and out of breath! For the first time, he failed his great last-minute train-catcher trick.

"I'm sorry… har… the subway… bloody subway… har… Waited for twenty minutes… The buyer lived far from, har, the subway station… Walked at least one hour altogether… har… then had to wait for subway again…"

"So what are we going to do now?"

"Well, back to… har… Hotel Moskva."

"Are you out of your mind? Do you have no shame? Sacha worked so hard to put us on this train! There were only generals and high officials of the new government, you should have seen them. And we, who are nothing, in the middle of all these people…"

"It was a beautiful train, Tatus. Sleeping-cars only. I even tried my berth. It was quite comfortable!"

"Okay, then what do you suggest?"

Even while Tatus is asking this question, Fate sends us an answer—trotting on high heels from the end of the platform.

"Ada!"

"Eva!"

"Is this your husband? Your daughter? Such a big girl already!"

"Eva was in school with me…"

"Did you see someone off? I had to accompany a vice-minister…"

"We missed this stupid train. I mean, my stupid husband made us miss the train…"

Eva invites us to stay with her. I think she's very happy to see Mama and be able to exchange memories. Poor Tatus has to wait on a subway platform again. Me, I'm delighted. Such a beautiful station! Marble everywhere! The subway comes in no time. We can't resist the temptation to make fun of Tatus.

"You said you had to wait for twenty minutes, but the subway came in less than two minutes!"

"You should have run along the corridors, Tatus!"

Eva shares an apartment with some Russians in a distant suburb. Once more, we sleep on the floor.

The Polish government's special train was really special. Military trains are the only ones running on the direct track from Moscow to Best-Litovsk. So now we must take a train that goes to L'vov by way of Kiev, then we'll have to find another train or a truck to reach Lublin. Even for the L'vov train we need a permit. We show our travel orders to a bureaucrat in the Transportation Ministry.

"Why don't you come day after tomorrow?" he asks. "I can't promise I'll have your passes, comrades, but it doesn't hurt to come and inquire… You might be lucky. You never know…"

We visit Moscow on foot. My parents' old mountain shoes are still going strong. I'm wearing my felt boots, as well as a kind of quilted coat we also bought in the Samarkand bazaar. Mama should rejoice at being able to scorn the cold in her new astrakhan jacket, but the train mishap soured her mood. She quarrels with a poor babushka who sells ice-cream in the street.

"It's snowing and you sell ice-cream! What a ridiculous country! You always find things when you don't need them, and never when you do."

"How do you want me to earn a living, little mother? I couldn't sell ice-cream in summer, could I?"

"And why not?"

"With the heat, it would melt."

Well, here we are again in the railway station. I don't know whether I should laugh or cry when I see the difference between the well-dressed gentlemen who stepped onto the special train last week and the thousands of mujiks[20] who camp in this part of the station. They sit on their bundle or lie on the ground. They eat dried sausage, they drink a clear liquid. *Voda* (water) or vodka? A rumor spreads suddenly: the goods train over there on the far platform is going to Kharkov. The poor people stand up at once, rush and race… Hey, no. The train is going to the Ural Mountains. They come back and sit down again. An old man tells us he's waited here for three weeks already.

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[20] Russian peasants.

"I'd like to go to Bryansk, see. That's my hometown. Seems the Red Army liberated the city one year ago already. How could I know about it? I was in Kazan, see."

A passenger train rolls along the platform and stops. Everybody stands up again. Panels on the side of the cars say Smolensk. The old man picks up his bundle.

"I'll take it to Viazma. There I'll turn south and get to Bryansk."

This is easier said than done. Human swarms are trying to storm the doors of the cars. Female railroad employees stand on the footboards to guard the doors. In the ministries, in the streets, we've seen mainly women, as the men are gone to the front. They look at the passes without any haste. They've obviously been chosen for their strength, their girth and their knowledge of the juicier swear-words of the Russian language. Now and then, when the mob becomes too wild, they send a few kicks downwards to quieten it.

It seems to me that several thousand people board the Smolensk train and as many stay on the platform. What's for sure is that our old fellow fails to make it. He considers the future with a wise man's equanimity.

"They won't let me in 'cause I don't have a pass, see. By Christmas, the trains won't be so full, see, so then I'll go home."

Our own pass being stamped with the magical word "priority," we climb aboard the Kiev train without having to fight anyone. Ah, we can't compare it to the special train. Instead of lying on luxurious sleeping berths, we sit on good old wooden benches, which we share with people who haven't washed for a long time.

The train leaves around eleven at night. I drop my head on Mama's shoulder and fall asleep. I dream that I want to swim in the Zerafchan river but can't find it. I wander through vineyards and cotton fields in my bathing costume. I find neither the river nor my way back. When I wake up, I see a large clock that marks six o'clock, but it is still night. We're stopped in a station.

"Where are we, Mama?"

"In that very Bryansk, you know, where yesterday's old man wanted to go."

"Poor old man! He spent one more night sleeping on the platform, I guess. I hope he'll go home someday. Tatus is gone?"

"Yes, but I bet he won't return at the last second, this time!"

Here he comes indeed, at least ten seconds before the train starts. He seems angry.

"What a hole! I haven't found anything to eat in the whole station."

"You know what I would like to eat, Tatus? Sweet golden Zirabulak raisins! What a pity you sold them all in Moscow…"

As the sun rises in the sky, we leave the Soviet Republic of Russia and enter Ukraine. All the cities have been occupied by the Germans, then bombed. Often, I see heaps of blackened stones and burned timber and wonder whether this was ever a real city. I remember what was left or Rosa's sand towns after I had trampled them. Other cities look good, as if they had been spared, except for a crumpled house here and there. I hate to see a row of building with one of them missing. It reminds me of Russian peasants who laugh and show their teeth as if they didn't notice that quite a few have fallen or have been pulled.

We reach Kiev at night, so that we can't see what Ukraine's capital looks like. I think I can make out the shapes of churches and palaces, high above flattened ruins. Seems to me the Germans respected monuments with historical value. Tatus refuses to credit the Germans with anything.

"If it's not German, they won't respect it. These old churches and palaces are very strong, that's all. When the city burned, they resisted better than recent buildings."

We get off the train in the morning when it stops in L'vov. I have vague memories of bombings when we left the city three and a half years ago. I see no trace of them. The baroque churches, the eighteen century palaces with their pastel-colored façades, the theaters, everything escaped destruction.

In the L'vov I remember, dense crowds thronged the streets. Gaunt faces, plain clothes and heavy shoes gave away the refugees, who had invaded the town and seemed to outnumber the local well-fed and well-dressed people at least two to one. Now I see empty streets and squares. As we do not know where to go, we try the railway hospital. A pleasant surprise : we find Mrs. Kowalska just where we left her. She recognizes Tatus and Mama, who were her boss and her student. She says I've changed a lot—I have become a beautiful young lady and so on.

She explains why the streets are empty.

"They took the Jews away, both L'vov citizens and refugees, to camps where they just vanished. Did they die of hunger of cold? Nobody knows. According to some rumors, the Germans murdered them all."

The same thing happened everywhere. All the cities, even a big one like L'vov, now look like ghost towns. Before the war, the Ukrainians tilled the earth, the Poles worked in public and private offices, the Jews were merchants and craftsmen. Today the towns have no more tailors, tinkers, druggists, cobblers, booksellers, doctors. In some cities, one person out of three was Jewish. In some others, it was one out of two or even two out of three.

Mama doesn't feel well when she hears that all the Jews have disappeared. Mrs. Kowalska lets her smell some ammonia salts to revive her, then brings us to her home. While I stay with Mama, who is as white as a bedsheet, Tatus goes out to look for more news.

He comes back around sunset, several hours later.

"There's no hope for my mother, you know, but Yola, Dolek and Elzunia may still be alive, as they've returned to Warsaw after the Germans came here."

Mrs. Kowalska says the L'vov Poles worry about the future.

"It's quite obvious that the Soviet Union won't ever give the city back to Poland. Now that the Jews are gone and Galicia is part of Ukraine, they're afraid they'll become the persecuted minority."

After spending a day and a night in L'vov, we go to the railway station again. We show our travel orders to a Russian woman wearing a railway company uniform, one of these women who replace men. She shows us a military train going to Przemysl[21]. Being experienced travelers by now, we nose about and find a compartment where five Soviet officers are spreading their legs and bags so as to make believe all the seats are taken. Three free seats for us, no doubt about it!

Once we sit on our wooden bench, we move about as much as if we were also made of wood. Tatus doesn't dare take his usual walk on the platform, although the train doesn't seem ready to leave yet. Jolly noisy soldiers roam in the corridor, but they won't enter an officers' compartment. Officers are a different matter. They're looking for seats. They open the door and stare at us. Who are the damn civilians? they wonder. Nobody knows when the train will leave. We spend hours waiting, looking at each other, shivering because the compartment's window is broken and there is no heating.

Soon after nightfall, a colonel opens the door of our compartment. He wears an air force uniform covered with as much tinsel as a Christmas tree. He grins like the Cheshire Cat when he sees us. Civilians! He walks towards Tatus.

"Comrade, I requisition this seat."

To show he means business, he draws a pistol and aims it at Tatus's chest. Just then, Mama stands up. Is it really Mama? Her face seems even whiter than yesterday, and so strangely contorted that I wonder whether she's having a seizure or something. She grabs the lapels of the colonel's jacket and seems ready to throw him through the broken window.

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[21] Pronounced : Pzhemishl

"Comrade, we're sanitary officers. You go out NOW!"

Where does her harsh husky voice come from? Nobody could disobey such a voice. The air force colonel certainly fears her to be a baba-yaga, ready to change him into a toad. He leaves without saying a word.

The compartment's five officers wipe their brows, laugh and swear, compliment Mama.

"This brute is a certified madman!"

"A hero of the Soviet Union who lost his mind because of the war."

"This very morning he killed someone on the station's platform with his gun."

"Nobody will blame him or deprive him of his pistol, considering he shot several German planes."

"Stalin himself congratulated him."

The train leaves around midnight. Two hours later, it reaches Przemysl. This is the border. We must change trains to go to Lublin, because the tracks are narrower in Europe than in the Soviet Union.

The new train has only cattle cars. You need to be an athlete to climb onto a car: the floor is about four feet from the ground and there is neither platform nor footboard. Tatus has strong arms and climbs first, then he pulls me aboard. Mama removes her heavy backpack and gives it to a soldier. Tatus pulls her while another soldier pushes her upwards. Okay, she's on board. Now let's have the bag. She reaches to get it. Hey, what's up? Where is the soldier? He's gone… He didn't know he was acquiring a well-stocked medicine chest. As the Tatar boss of the Zirabulak clinic owed money to my parents, she gave them drugs instead. Mama doesn't complain about losing the drugs, although they were quite valuable, but two precious mementoes are gone too: a small towel she had been able to keep for five years and a photograph of her parents. She's kept her astrakhan jacket on her back, which is a good thing in this freezing weather.

We are now in Lublin, the temporary capital of new Poland. Most buildings here are still standing, like in L'vov. How strange: people speak Polish in the streets!

The new government is creating ministries that camp in Lublin's city hall and some neighboring houses. When we get out of the station, we walk quite naturally towards the center of town. As soon as we reach this improvised government district, we meet people we know, who belonged to the Polish group in Bujnaksk or to the Samarkand delegation. Or people whom my parents knew in University and who spent most of the war in Siberia.

A lawyer who worked for the Samarkand delegation tells us that Max is Minister for Social Affairs. As he doesn't have a proper office yet, we go visit him in his apartment.

All the people we've met in the street wore a visible veil of sadness on their face. I know what it is, for I've seen it appear on my dear Mama's face when we learned that all the Jews in L'vov had vanished. Max's expression was already gloomy after all his years in jail, so it hasn't changed much. Actually, when he sees us, the corners of his lips rise slightly, which is as close as he gets to what people call a smile. He's our friend Max. A mysterious and secret man, but a real friend nevertheless.

"Welcome to Poland! Look how a Minister is living. Luxury, no? They gave me two rooms and a kitchen. Do I need two rooms? One for you, if you want, until you find a lodging."

Our dear Max likes to look at the big picture and doesn't bother about small details, so he forgets to mention the most important room. Yes, there are more than two rooms and a kitchen in his apartment. Oh yes, a bathroom, a real Minister's bathroom! After sleeping for five years in various garrets and shacks, including many nights outside, I can enjoy the divine pleasure of taking a hot bath, in a tub, and of rubbing my skin with this most precious object, a soap bar!

I soak in a bitter happiness. I'm taking a bath in the middle of a cemetery. The Germans murdered the men, women and children who made my people. They may have spared the cities of L'vov and Lublin, but they totally destroyed my hometown, Warsaw, in August, 1944.

Max says he has a small surprise in store for us.

"You're sanitary officers. What ministry? Armed Forces? Health? This government is new. There is some leeway. Let me take you to see the Health Minister."

We cross the street and enter a small house similar to Max's. He was right to talk of a surprise: the Health Minister is none other than Helen Zakrewska, Mama's enemy in London and friend in Samarkand.

"Adela! Marek! Camilla! What a pleasure! Please come in! So what's new? Do you belong to the government?"

"Well, er, no. We're sanitary officers. Marek is a captain, I'm a lieutenant."

“Sanitary officers. We already have plenty of those. The army doesn’t need two more officers, whereas I do need health specialists for my Ministry. I’ll tell them to demobilize you. Do you know professor Goldmann?”

“The hematologist? Of course. He was my thesis supervisor. Adela also attended his courses.”

“I asked him to create a biology school inside the new university. You could help him. Founding a school is a tough job. He isn’t young anymore.”

We go to the building that houses the new university. Professor Goldmann recognizes my parents. He seems quite moved to see them again, and quite satisfied to have two young and strong assistants.

“I just have to mention a small matter, my friends. You know that I converted to the catholic faith, when I was a student, otherwise the university of Warsaw wouldn’t have allowed me to teach. They still consider me a Jew, though, because of my name. Now about this new biology school… People would find it strange that it be founded by Goldmann and Silberberg, I think. As everybody knows me, I can’t change my name, but you could…”

My parents repeat this conversation to Max.

“I told you. Have to change your name, sooner or later. Like me.”

“Well, suppose we decide to change. How do we go about it?”

“You tell me your new name and leave it to me. I’m a Minister, ain’t I? I’ll use my great powers…”

This is a wonderful adventure. I’ve never had a chance to choose a new name! Copperfield, like David Copperfield, would be nice. Or Crusoe, like Robinson. Why not D’Artagnan?

Mama deplores that we must pretend not to be Jewish.

“We deny our roots, we betray our ancestors, just when the Jews suffered so much… This is vile and cowardly.”

“We escaped death through sheer luck. Our name didn’t help, obviously. Now we have a chance to remove that handicap, so I say, let’s grab it.”

“I shouldn’t even care about that name, as it is not my family’s, but I’m surprised you give it up so easily. You’ve always told me your grandfather was a famous rabbi.”

“Yes, rabbi Silberberg, of Minsk. It’s true, but, well, times have changed. Since we’re entering a new era, let’s get a new name.”

Mama chooses to sulk and Tatus chooses the name. He thanks me for my suggestions.

"We can't be named D'Artagnan, my dear wasp. Everybody would know it's a fake name."

"What about Copperfield, Tatus?"

"It is a foreign name. Poles with a foreign name? People would find that suspect and say we're Jewish. I figured I'd base our name on my birthplace, Pinsk. So we would be Pinski. Nice, don't you think?"

"Bah… Marek Pinski, Adela Pinska, Kama Pinska… It sounds too much like pee. Why don't you choose the city of your grandfather, Minsk? Then we would become Minski and Minska."

"Not bad. I guess you're right."

With this war, anything can happen. So now I'll become Kama Minska… Why not?

High officials working for the Health Ministry can't sleep in the street. Helen Zakrewska finds two rooms for us in the apartment of some Polish aristocrats.

I'm sure we could have gone there by ourselves. Do we really need a whole troop of militiamen? They knock loudly on the door and show a "requisition order." We feel ashamed for this brutal intrusion. Our hosts, a count and countess, are refined enough to imagine our embarrassment. After the militia is gone, they ease off and become rather friendly. I tell them about us. Our adventures in Asia seem to fascinate them—and I'm sure they're not just being polite.

The countess reminds me of Raissa Petrovna, our friend in Astrakhan. She's a very thin old lady, whose blue eyes convey gentleness and briskness at the same time. The count sports a gigantic mustache, like Polish nobles in old story books.

Just after settling in our rooms, Mama and I go to City Hall, where we're supposed to get our new identity papers. Actually the count and countess already know us as the Minski family.

There, on the stone steps in front of City Hall, we meet a journalist who was our neighbor in Warsaw.

"My dear Mrs. Silberberg, I'm so very sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"For your father and mother."

"My father? My mother?"

"Don't you know? The Germans executed your father at the very beginning, in 39. Your mother vanished in the Warsaw ghetto, in April, 43. The Germans also caught Dolek, your brother-in-law, when he came back from L'vov, in 41. I don't have recent news of your two sisters and your niece, but they may still be alive."

When I walk with Mama, I hold her arm. Thus I can feel the weight of every word the journalist hurls at us: Mama's arm is getting heavier and heavier. Soon, I need to gather all my strength to prop up my poor Mama. At the same time, strangely, I notice that I've become taller than she is.

I would hold her in my arms and let her cry on my shoulder, but I know her well. It's obvious that she doesn't want the journalist to see her despair. Since he doesn't realize how terribly he hurt her, she'd rather pretend to be unmoved. I do see two fat shiny tears slide down on her cheeks.

Back home, she still seems composed.

"I'll rest a little," she says.

For three days, she lies in bed without moving. She doesn't speak. She refuses food with a gesture of her hand. Her eyes are closed, but she doesn't sleep. Tatus says we should leave her alone. Me, I still visit her several times every day. I hold her hand, I stroke her cheek. She doesn't react, but I think my gestures bring her some consolation.

Tatus tells the count and countess what this is all about—including our being Jewish and named Silberberg. They seemed quite moved, especially the countess.

Here too, there is a bathroom, albeit with cold water only. I've become finicky since our stay in Max's palace! On the fourth day, as I'm coming back from the bathroom after washing my hair, I want to sit near Mama and hold her hand. When I enter her room, I find my seat already taken… The countess is talking in a low voice to Mama, who's leaning her head against the old lady's shoulder and crying noisily.

Mama gets up and drinks some tea. She kisses me, brushes my hair with her hand, checks the length of my nails. I guess the countess said: "You should think about your daughter and go on living for her…" or something along that line.

The home of Polish nobles can't fail to contain a piano. The countess plays some Chopin, but her stiff-jointed hands refuse to obey her will. I'm sure she played much better when she was younger. I hesitate to sit at the piano. Last time I touched a keyboard was in Astrakhan, which means three years ago. The countess encourages me.

"All you have to do is begin with easy pieces. Do you know Anna Magdalena Bach' little book?"

"Of course."

“Why don’t you try? It will come back by and by. The secret word is work!”

We’re lucky we’ve met the count and countess. They consider themselves lucky too. They worried about this new government, but now they’ve met us they feel a little better. They do not think much good about the communists and the Soviets. This government can’t be all that bad if it includes honest people like Tatus and Mama. Besides, Mama is not communist. Tatus? Maybe he is, maybe he ain’t.

Last summer, we were still in Zirabulak and received scant news about Poland. The count tells us how Warsaw was destroyed.

“The Red Army reaches the suburb of Praga, on the right bank of the Vistula. Now they have to cross the river, enter the city and kick the butts of the Germans. Just then, our patriots of the A.K.[22] network decide to rise against the Teutons. They want Warsaw to be liberated by its own people, not by the Russians. The Germans know they’ve lost the war, but they still despise the Poles. So the slaves pretend to fight their masters? This reminds them of the donkey in Aesop kicking the dying lion. The last thing we’ll do before we go, the masters say, is drown the slaves in their own blood. They bomb the city day and night. The patriots fight in the streets, in the houses, in the sewers. On one side you have tanks and machine-guns. On the other side, pistols and old carbines. The battle lasts for two months. Three hundred thousand brave Poles perish.”

“Didn’t the red Army help them?”

“Ah, my child, if only… The Red Army remains at rest on the other bank of the Vistula. So the Polish patriots want to liberate themselves without our help? Let them try! Actually, there is a Polish troop on the Russian side…”

“This is Birling’s army.”

“Right. These people want to cross the river and help their brothers, but their Soviet masters say: ‘Oh no you don’t… You let the Germans take care of these Sikorski Poles… When they’re gone, nobody will contest your power.’”

The count and countess distrust these Poles who arrive from the Soviet Union in special trains. Moscow puppets! As the countess needs to eat, she earns a living as a seamstress. For example, Helen Zakrewska brought her several feet of a high quality flannel, which she found in a secret government store. The countess took Helen’s measures and sewed a Minister’s dress. She doesn’t find Helen as nice as Mama. At least Helen picked up some rudiments of culture in London. Several Ministers have frightfully ignorant and vulgar wives.

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[22] “Secret Army” financed by Sikorski.’s government in exile.

“My dear Adela,” the countess says, “this rabble will govern our Poland!”

1945. Granny Gun.

In the first few days of 1945, the Berling Polish troops and the Red Army at last cross the Vistula. In the South of our country, the Soviets liberate Cracow. Near this city, they discover a huge concentration camp in the village of Ozwiecim—which the Germans called Auschwitz.

On January 27, we say goodbye to the count and countess. We're going to Warsaw. The Ministry has asked Tatus and Mama to report on the sanitary situation in the city.

What city? We only find a sea of ruins. The snow barely hides the blackened remnants of walls, the charred skeletons of churches and palaces. Carcasses of automobiles, trucks, tramcars, tanks, lie around. People who look like ghost rummage in the debris, dig out broken pieces of furniture and other mementoes of human life, throw them into hand-drawn carts.

We wallow in a thick mud that doesn't have the usual earthy texture of mud. It is a mixture of melted snow and ashes, I guess, with fragments of beams or bones. We do not even try to look for our house.

The only spared neighborhood is Praga, on the other side of the river, where the Red Army waited while the Germans destroyed Warsaw. Groups of refugees huddle in the Praga houses. We discover a "Jewish committee" that tries to register surviving Jews. We give our names, as well as our temporary address in Praga. Somebody we know may be looking for us.

Despite dark misgivings, Mama browses the list.

"Yola!" she shouts. "My sister is alive! The address she gives is three blocks from here! Let's go!"

"You two go without me," Tatus says. "I do have to gather information about the health of people here and the quality of water and so on. I'll see you later."

Mama runs so fast I can hardly follow her. We knock on a door. An old woman opens it. Mama and the old woman rush into each other's arms… This old woman is aunt Yola!

I may not remember her perfectly, but I'm quite sure her hair was brown, not gray. Her face was smooth, not wrinkled. She was young like Mama, not old like Grandma. While I'm at it, I kinda look at Mama sideways, with half-closed eyes, to check whether she might not have aged suddenly too. I don't know… She seems very tired. Maybe she'd look younger if she just rested a little.

During the next hours and days, Yola tells us what happened.

"When we all lived in L'vov, in 1940, Father was dead already. A neighbor denounced him for stocking some wool… The Germans sent him to jail, then murdered him with other hostages."

"This is awful! Mother must have been devastated."

"She didn't know. After failing to save him, Dolek decided not to tell us about it. When we came back from L'vov, Mother still thought he was languishing in jail."

"Why did you go back to Warsaw?"

"The Germans occupied L'vov, so we didn't feel safer there than in Warsaw. We went home."

"We were lucky. We left with the Russians. We spent the war in Asia. It's a long story."

"We wondered whether you were dead or alive, but we told Mother you had followed the Soviets and were safe. In Warsaw, the situation of the Jews quickly became critical… Dolek thought he could earn a little money by selling some of Father's companies. This was risky. There were spies everywhere. People denounced their friends for a loaf of bread. The Germans arrested him before he even sold anything… When they took someone away, he never came back. It seems they shot him because of his name. A Jew who dared call himself Adolf, like the Führer! This was a sacrilege that deserved the death penalty."

"We changed our name. We're not Silberberg anymore, but Minski."

"Me, I'm still Kama the wasp."

"Why Minski?"

"Marek chose the name because his grandfather was born in Minsk."

"If his grandfather had been born in Saint-Petersburg, our new name would be Saint-Petersburgski."

"I see you haven't lost your quick tongue, Kama the wasp."

"Or Brest-Litovski would be nice too."

"This is no time for joking. Let your aunt tell the story, Kamunia."

"When we came back to Warsaw, in August, 1941, the Jews had already spent one year in the ghetto where the Germans had confined them. Everybody said 'the ghetto,' but the official name of the place was 'the Jewish district' or something. The Germans always made up names to disguise things. For example, instead of 'murder', they said 'relocate East.'"

"Our house was inside the ghetto?"

“You remember we lived in a mixed Jewish and catholic neighborhood. They included it in their Jewish district, but we called it ‘the small ghetto.’ That’s where they sent the converted Jews.”

“The converted Jews lived in the ghetto?”

“Of course, since the Germans believe in a Jewish race. Converting doesn’t change your race. Actually, you remember the church across the street, on Grzybowski square? That’s where the catholic Jews went to pray. Even the priests were converted Jews. The wall surrounding the ghetto ran just behind the church.”

“So you lived in our house.”

“Yes, but we had to share it with eighty people. They emptied the small towns and the countryside of their Jews. Everybody had to live in the big cities. There were maybe four hundred thousand people in the Warsaw ghetto. The apartments cracked at the seams. Ten people slept in one room. The crowds overwhelmed our bathrooms and toilets. Besides, there was no water most of the time. Lice invaded the ghetto. People caught typhus and died in a few days, as underfeeding made them too weak to resist the illness. They couldn’t even resist a mere bout of flu… We carried the corpses down and left them in the street, after covering them with a few sheets of newspaper.”

“Gosh!”

“The kids and oldsters died first. It was pathetic.”

“How did Mother take all this?”

“She was fantastic. The strongest of us all. Rose didn’t flinch either, but Elzunia became as anxious as when the war began. You helped her a lot in L’vov, Kama, you really changed her, but then you went away and Dolek died. She slept fitfully, she shook and whined. I was terribly worried. I saw all these small corpses in the street under the newspapers…”

“She was a big girl already, wasn’t she?”

“She turned back into a child at times. Mother saved her life, saved all our lives. There were secret passages. You went down into a basement, moved a chest of drawers, removed some bricks and entered the basement of a building that stood on the other side of the wall. Mother often left the ghetto. This was very dangerous. An identity control meant death… She found money on the other side, I know neither where nor how. The Germans wanted to starve us, but she brought back some food… She sent Elzunia out. When the time came, Elzunia ceased to tremble and cry. She kissed us, said goodbye and went away all alone in the middle of the night. Mother had explained to her how to reach a certain address. She told her to hug the walls because of the curfew. The people who welcomed her took her to a convent in the country, following Mother's instructions. I guess Mother spent a great amount of money. Elzunia is still with the nuns. I went and saw her when the Germans left, but I'm waiting until I'm settled somewhere to take her with me."

"I'd like to see her."

"She'll also be happy to see you, Kama. We need to find a truck that goes there. We can't walk that far."

"What about Rose?"

"Mother got her out a few days after Elzunia, but we lost her trace. I hope she'll come here someday, like you. I was the last to escape. Life in the ghetto became tougher and tougher. They suppressed the small ghetto… We had to leave the house and move to the big ghetto. Then they began to deport people 'east,' while reducing the size of the ghetto by and by. The deportation began a year or so after our arrival, around July, 1942. My master, Dr. Korczak, left with the children of his orphanage. He had a special pass as a former colonel in the Polish army during the Great War, and besides he was known all over the world, so he could have crossed to the other side, but he preferred staying with the kids until the end."

"They killed them?"

"What else? Nobody ever saw them again, anyway. It became obvious that the Germans were going to murder all the Jews, in Warsaw and elsewhere… In the ghetto, some brave people decided they'd rather die fighting. One of these people, this may surprise you, was Mother."

"Mother?"

"Grandma?"

"I think it all started when she bought arms outside, on the black market, for the underground fighters. Arms were the first requirement, of course, and they were costly. I've never been able to guess how she found the money. Maybe she knew where Father had hidden gold or jewels. Our young men, and also some girls, trained in deep basements. They hadn't gone to military service, they knew nothing about guns. One of them told me that Mother was learning to shoot."

"This is amazing. She hated violence so much… When I think about her, I see her embroidering a doily of watering her flowers… Now I'll have to imagine Mother holding a pistol!"

"I left the ghetto in January, 1943. A few days later, the Germans decided to deport the last Jews. Three hundred thousand had already vanished, fifty or maybe sixty thousand were left. Hunger or illness had killed one hundred thousand or so… That's when the underground forces began to fight the Germans. As they didn't expect these despised Jews to shoot at them, the Teutons quickly retreated. Mother came outside in February for a short visit. She told me she was known as Granny Gun."

"Granny Gun?"

"She had become a sharpshooter. She killed several Nazi police officers. She told me how she proceeded. You shot from inside a building, but you had to avoid being seen at a window, so you cut a hole in the floor and shot from the upper story. Thus the SS couldn't see you and the floor protected you if they sent a hand-grenade through the window the shots came from. Mother shot so well that the underground bosses gave her a rifle. There were only about twelve of them in the ghetto."

"What about pistols?"

"They had maybe one hundred. Our guys also made rough bombs and grenades. Mother told me she didn't tremble when she aimed at a SS in his black uniform. She thought about Father and Dolek."

"You were hidden at that time?"

"In the home of a Polish actor I knew before the war. Mother came several times. The ghetto insurgents knew the Germans were preparing the final attack. They tried to get arms from the A.K. network, but these people didn't believe the Jews could fight. The last battle began on April 19, during the Pesach holiday. Mother came for a farewell visit the day before, April 18. She was usually well informed: she knew the attack would come any day now. She could have stayed with me, but she preferred to return to the ghetto and fight. She told me she had lived a long time and been happy, that she had nothing to lose. She was proud to take part in the heroic resistance of the ghetto's last Jews. Soon, the whole world would know that Jews can die bravely, like human beings… I was proud too to be Granny Gun's daughter. She spoke so well that I felt like joining the fight. She forbade it. She was fighting for the honor of the Jewish people, she said, but I was to fight for its survival by raising Elzunia…"

"You don't know how she died?"

"The Germans intended to liquidate the ghetto in three days. They tore down the buildings with their tanks and their flame-throwers. The Jews were hiding in the basements and the sewers. They held for more than a month… I'm sure Mother fought until the end."

On the next days, we find a truck that takes us to Elzunia's convent. There are three of us: aunt Yola, Mama and me.

Elzunia is taller, but the same scared look I saw when she whined in Grandpa's Vauxhall distorts her face. Does she recognize me? She seems to hesitate.

"You remember me? Your cousin, Kama the wasp."

"You changed. You're like an adult."

"Well, you haven't changed. I recognized you right away."

I may look different, but deep inside I'm the same old Kama. For Elzunia, it's the other way around. While her twelve-year old body hasn't begun its mutation yet, her mind, or should I say her soul, has changed in an unexpected manner: my cousin Elzunia has become a catholic!

Aunt Yola seems perplexed. She told us she'd take Elzunia back when she would be somewhat settled, but actually her daughter refuses to leave the convent. She fell in love with the church's stained glass windows and gildings, with the grand ceremony of the Mass, with Jesus, and especially with the Virgin Mary, protector of Poland. I think that aunt Yola would like me to use my influence on Elzunia and perform a miracle, like I did in L'vov when I helped her discover her talent for drawing.

I ask my cousin why she doesn't come and stay with her mother.

"She lives in sin. The Jews refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, that's why God punished them."

"The nuns taught you that?"

"They showed me the truth. If you won't admit Jesus was the son of God and died on the cross for us, you'll never go to paradise."

"I don't see why your nuns should decide whether I go to paradise or not. But tell me, Elzunia, do you obey the ten commandments?"

"Of course."

"Then you should honor your father and mother. Your father is dead, but you may still honor your mother and obey her. You know what? If you come back home, you can try to convert her. Otherwise she'll go on living in sin. Listen to me: if you can save a soul but fail to do it, you commit a terrible sin yourself. Believe me! Your nuns would agree, I'm sure."

I ask her to describe and explain her catholic faith. I tell her about my trip to the heart of Asia. I remind her she drew Daedalus and Icarus in L'vov. I sing *Fly off, sweet swallow*, which she doesn't remember at all.

I try to revive our relationship. I think she's scared of the outside world and may accept to leave the convent's haven if I offer her my protection. I promise I'll read the Gospels and she'll get a chance at converting me too.

I don’t like these nuns. They seem quite happy and even proud that they’ve gained one poor soul for their Jesus. Well, even though life in the convent is more pleasant then amidst the ruins of Warsaw, we can’t leave her here. Suppose we say: “Okay, you can keep her for the time being; we’ll come again in three months.” I’m pretty sure that in three months they’ll have convinced her to say her novice’s vows! Then we’ll never be able to get her out.

I tell Elzunia how Grandma changed into Granny Gun. She blushes and begins to cry. I hold her in my arms and comfort her. We talk together and, by and by, I understand what happened. Aunt Yola was so shocked by Dolek’s death that she stopped taking care of her daughter, letting Grandma give her the affection she needed. When Elzunia left the ghetto in the middle of the night and took refuge in the convent, she realized she’d probably never see her beloved Grandma anymore. My telling her how Grandma sacrificed her life for the honor of the Jewish people releases pent-up emotions. Her tears have modified or repaired something deep inside her, I guess. She accepts to follow us.

“I’ll pray for Grandma’s soul,” she says. “I’ll ask Jesus to welcome her at his side as if she had been baptized.”

The Ministry of Health (that is, our dear Mrs. Zakrewska) asks Tatus to find a building in Praga and set up a temporary delegation there. As for Mama, she’s supposed to stop a typhus outbreak near Dantzig.

The Dantzig region isn’t German anymore. The Americans, the English and the Russians met in Yalta, in Crimea, to draw new borders in Europe. The Soviets keep the territories they’ve grabbed when the war began, for example the city of Pinsk where Tatus was born and the province around L’vov. Germany gives Poland the city of Dantzig and a slice of Silesia.

I go with Mama, who is so pale and weak that we’re afraid to leave her alone. As the main Warsaw train station has become rubble, we take the train in a small Praga station. A short detour brings us to the main line. How many times have we traveled on these very rails on the way to Sopot and Orlowo! Until the last trip, coming back from Gdynia in August, 1939…

We were happy to spend our holidays by the sea. The summer landscape, with its golden wheat fields and fruit-laden trees, seemed to smile at us. Today, the landscape is bleak. Winter is not over yet and Nature hasn’t awakened after her long slumber. Poland hasn’t awakened either. The war made it so poor… In the villages that glide along the tracks, there are no more chickens or pigs. We do not see any automobiles on the roads, but only a military vehicle now and then.

Five and a half years have elapsed since our return from Gdynia. I was ten years old. I have just celebrated (in the ruins of Warsaw—what a celebration!) my sixteenth birthday. Gosh, I feel so strange… This country I have returned to should be five years older, but actually I discover another country. Another aunt, another cousin.

"You've been wonderful with Elzunia," Mama says. "You know, you might consider becoming a psychologist…"

I remember my cousin Elzunia, whom I loved like a sister during a few months in L'vov. This other Elzunia, the girl I saw in the convent, is a poor pitiful kid. Yes, I talked to her as if I had been a psychologist who gets paid to help people… Aunt Yola is an old lady whom I barely recognize. Mama is changing under my very eyes. In Lublin, when the journalist told Mama her parents were dead, I felt a vague emotion and discovered I didn't remember them. Or maybe I should say my memory reduced my grandparents to meaningless tidbits. I see Grandpa's goatee. I tried to pull it, laughing to tears, when I was a little girl. I see Grandma playing bridge with her friends.

"While I'm the dummy, I'll go and brew some tea," she said.

"Why do you say you're a dummy, Grandma?"

"This is a special word in bridge, my lovely wasp. When you grow up, I'll teach you how to play."

We spend one month in a Dantzig hotel. We shouldn't say Dantzig anymore, but Gdansk. Typhus is attacking German prisoners in a camp. A tent contains a makeshift hospital. The head doctor is Russian. There are two other doctors, one Polish and one German. Mama is their only interpreter. She also analyzes the prisoners blood to detect the virus with the Vidal and Weil-Felix test. Being a veteran lab worker, I can help her test the blood.

The German prisoners are haughty and arrogant. They don't know we are Jewish, but they consider we belong to the inferior Slavic race, which justifies their scorn. We're doubly inferior, since we are women. We shouldn't have left our kitchen. The tone of their voice is hostile. They use dirty and demeaning words. Often, Mama weighs heavy on my arm, like she did in Lublin. It hurts her to see these murderers who seem so satisfied after exterminating our people. Me, I think about Granny Gun. I imagine I'm hidden in a building and I aim through a hole in the floor. I aim at this one… Bang! Now this awful fellow… Bang! Bang!

It would be easy to let them die of the typhus, but we can't, because the Hippocratic oath compels doctors to save their patients. The three doctors often talk about it in the evening, when we all eat in the hotel dining-room. I mean, the Russian and the Pole seem ready to forget the Hippocratic oath for the time being. The German doctor sides with Hippocrates, of course. The Russian glares at him. I wonder whether he's going to spit in his face.

"What about the experiments some of you guys performed on human guinea pigs in your concentration camps? Does Hippocrates authorize them?"

Mama finds the conversation painful. She jumbles her words when she has to translate the acid remarks flying across the table. After a while, she gets up and begs the three doctors to excuse her. I help her go back to our room.

In April, 1945, we learn that part of the temporary government, including the Ministry of health, moved from Lublin to Lodz, a larger city somewhat closer to Warsaw. Tatus lives in the best hotel of Lodz. We're allowed to join him.

The Germans went away from Lodz without fighting when the Russians came. They never bombed the city. The Ministry requisitions a magnificent four-room apartment for us. I bet some Germans lived there. We have a bathroom, warm water for at least one hour a day and even private toilets.

Tatus and Mama work in the Public Health Institute, which the Ministry opened in one of the university buildings. As in Dantzig, I help Mama set up her lab. We eat in the cafeteria. None of the Institute's researchers and biologists sits at our table. Although we changed our name, they know we're Jewish.

In June, we receive a letter from aunt Yola: Rose is back! We jump into the first train to Warsaw.

The last time I saw Rose, she was thirteen. A beautiful nineteen-year old girl opens the door and kisses us.

"Adela! Kama the wasp! How tall you've become… Now you also have a wasp-waist!"

"Stop being foolish or I'll sting you!"

"Adela, you look tired. I'm sure you're working too much. You should take a few days off and loll in the sun…"

"We were living very far from here. We didn't know what was happening… I've learned everything all of a sudden when I came back. I just can't get over it… I'm not sure a few days off would really help… But what about you? Where were you hiding?"

"In Germany."

"Really? In Germany?"

“When Mother got me out of the ghetto, I found a job in a bar. The other barmaids were rough and ignorant. The manager was surprised that someone like me worked in his joint. He made passes at me, you understand. ‘Either you’re a countess or you’re Jewish,’ he said. He was becoming obnoxious. He let me understand that if I resisted him, he would denounce me as a Jew. ‘Maybe you’ll be able to convince the police that you’re a countess or maybe you won’t.’ He laughed as if this was a good joke.”

“Bad luck.”

“Guys like him were all over the place. That’s why I decided to escape them for good by getting a German uniform.”

“The German army recruited Polish girls?”

“I joined the Todt organization, which built defense works and bridges and stuff. They gave me a brand new uniform that protected me as well as a knight’s armor. Even with their famous sixth sense, the Poles looked at me with awe. They couldn’t imagine a Jew in a German uniform! Nobody ever said: ‘Either you’re a countess or you’re Jewish’ anymore. Kama, do you remember how I built sandcastles in Orlowo?”

“Of course. My job was to tear them down.”

“I entertained a dim hope that I would learn things by working in construction. I’ve always thought I’d study architecture someday. Actually, I repaired airport runways in Bavaria. The English and the Americans bombed them every day and we repaired them all the time. I poured tons of concrete. I even drove a steamroller! The American army liberated us last month, and here I am!”

“Don’t you have your uniform anymore? I’d love to see you in German gray! While Grandma was aiming her rifle at the Teutons, you were raising your arm and shouting ‘Heil Hitler!’ Quite a contrast.”

“This is not funny, Kama.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mama… But say, Rose, how’s Elzunia? Does she still pray the Virgin Mary every five minutes? Where is she?”

“Didn’t Yola tell you? She wanted to send her to Palestine. Elzunia understands that her conversion doesn’t protect her against the stupidity of the anti-Semites. She knows that the Jews who prayed in the Little Ghetto’s church, as well as the church’s priest, were gassed like the others. Yola hopes that Elzunia will reconcile herself to her real identity and renounce Christianity after a few months in Palestine. Elzunia looks forward to seeing Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem.”

“Hasn’t she gone yet? Will she live with uncle Itshak?”

“We don’t know whether Itshak ever reached Palestine, or even whether he’s alive. Elzunia was supposed to leave with other young people and settle in a collective farm to till the earth. They were to meet in Cracow with militants of the Mapam Zionist party, who would take them across Slovakia, Hungary, Rumania and so on. Yola took Elzunia to Cracow. She left her with the other youths and the Zionists and came back here. She has a job with some government people who try to take a census of the surviving Jews. When the census is complete, she intends to move to Palestine too. Well, a Cracow hospital called: anti-Semites have attacked the young Jews in the street—Elzunia is hurt. So Yola returned to Cracow. She’ll be back in a few days, I guess.”

“What a silly idea to go join a group of Jews… The German uniform is safer, obviously. Hey, Mama, don’t stare at me like this. Did I say something wrong again? Please don’t send me to Palestine! You’ve always said you hated the Zionists.”

“The situation is changed. Palestine may be preferable to Poland. Marek says he hears nasty stories. Poles are killing Jewish survivors who think they can get their homes back.”

Aunt Yola and Elzunia return from Cracow a few days later. Elzunia’s face looks like a pumpkin, but I pretend not to notice. She wears a bandage over her left eye. When she removes her woolen cap, we can see that the doctors have shaved part of her head to sew a large wound.

She throws herself into my arms and I do my best to console her. Some Russian soldiers saved her life.

“They intervened and brought us to the hospital. Without them, the Poles would have beaten us to death.”

“This Jesus you love so much, didn’t he say: ‘Love thy neighbor like thyself’?”

“Don’t you think it’s a good formula?”

“Yes, it’s a good formula. Did you forgive your attackers?”

“Of course.”

“They hit your right cheek and you turned the other one towards them? I wonder what Granny Gun would have thought about it.”

“I turned the other cheek, so then they broke my brow ridge.”

When she says this, a witty light shines in her right eye. Wow! She hasn’t become a complete fool…

Leaving Elzunia under the protection of Yola and Rose, we take the train back to Lodz.

The door of our compartment is open. Some people walk along the corridor, speaking Yiddish quite loudly. A man sitting in our compartment sneers and talks to his wife in such a manner that everybody can hear him.

"Look, the soap is traveling!"

The Red Army found concentration camps everywhere in Poland before stumbling on the huge Auschwitz camp in January. Commissions of inquiry have questioned survivors and witnesses, so we know what happened. The Germans killed the Jews in gas chambers disguised as shower-rooms. After pulling out their golden teeth, they burned the corpses in crematoriums. A rumor says they used the corpses' melted fat to make soap, but the Polish, American and Russian investigators haven't found the beginning of a proof confirming the rumor. Tatus is well informed, having many friends in the government. This is an old rumor, he says. When the Germans occupied Poland, they distributed a low-quality green soap which the Poles already called "Jews' fat." Now, these same Poles pretend they didn't know what became of the Jews whom the Germans took away, but obviously they suspected something.

Whether the rumor is true or not, calling the Jews soap in front of Mama isn't a good idea. She stands up, grabs the man by the lapels of his jacket just like the Soviet airman in L'vov and, in the same raucous voice, orders him out of the compartment.

"If you don't get out right now, you and your shitty wife, I'll kill you! Do you hear me? I'll kill you with my own hands!"

"Hey, are you crazy or what? I was joking, that's all…"

"I'll kill you!"

"All right, all right, we're going…"

The man and his wife grumble and leave. The train is half-empty, so they'll find other seats. Mama is as jittery as if she had gulped ten cups of coffee.

"The swine! The swine! I'm sure they rejoiced when the Jerries took the Jews."

"Take it easy, Mama. You're trembling like a wet kitty. Breathe long and deep. Think about Grandma: sharpshooters shouldn't tremble!"

"We can't stay in this country. We're leaving tomorrow!"

"To Palestine?"

"What are you talking about? We go to London. We'll ask my cousin Rysiu to help us."

"You mean Richard?"

"Yes, Richard. I don't like him, but I hope he survived the war anyway."

"I'll study in Oxford, Mamusia!"

As could be expected, Tatus vetoes this plan.

“We have a fine apartment, good jobs in the Ministry and the Public Health Institute. In London, we’ll have nothing. We’ll have to start from naught once more, even though we’re already forty years old.”

“They tried to kill Elzunia. They’ll kill us!”

“A great uncertainty reigns in the country, that’s true. What with the end of the war, the arrival of the Soviets… People are troubled. They yield to old anti-Semitic reflexes. Bah… The new government will control the situation eventually. Things will settle down and stabilize. We’ll educate them. Violence will decrease and disappear.”

“Do you believe in what you say? You shouldn’t belong to the Ministry of Health, but to the Propaganda one.”

“There is no Ministry of Propaganda… Listen, before the war, the Jews held stores in the cities. They were quite visible. People could hate them if they wanted to. Now that nine Jews out of ten have vanished, antisemitism is deprived of its targets and will disappear slowly.”

“In that case, people will find other targets. They’ll hate the communists, for example, and you’ll still be on the wrong side. What’s more, the two targets tend to coincide. People say that the Jews have seized power. That the Germans haven’t killed enough of them. That the Russians kept them out of danger in Moscow so they could bring them back today and use them as tools to grab Poland.”

“We’ll explain it isn’t true.”

“How will you do that? Before the war, no Jew ever became a Minister in the government, and now there are Jewish ministers all over the place.”

“One Minister out of ten at most. A reasonable proportion.”

“You pretend you’ll convince the people that the Jews control only ten per cent of the power?”

“Of course.”

“You, if you were the government’s spokesman, you would make a speech on this subject?”

“Why not?”

“Are you blind? Or maybe you should wipe your glasses… People would say: ‘There are ten per cent declared Jews in this government, but you, Mr. Minski, weren’t you Mr. Silberberg before the war? How many other hidden Jews does this government count?’”

This discussion lasts for weeks. In the end, Tatus accepts to let us go. He asks one of his friends in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prepare two passports, for Mama and me. Tatus himself wants to stay in Poland. He is helping create a grand system of public health. It is an exciting endeavor! I also think that London frightens him, because he doesn't speak English.

When are we going to receive our passports? Maybe they lack the paper to print them. Or Tatus asked his Foreign Affairs friend not to hurry, because he hopes he'll convince Mama to change her mind.

He talks about joining the Communist Party. This is a necessary condition to succeed in the new Poland. My dear Tatus has become ambitious, all of a sudden.

"Do you remember Dr. Wosniak?" he asks us.

"Our neighbor in Zirabulak?"

"Right. His wife wore a nice ruby on her finger. Well, they just named him ambassador to Yugoslavia."

"That fool? In that case, you could become our ambassador in New York."

"The ambassador doesn't live in New York, Mama, but in Washington."

"I'll be the ambassador and you'll be the ambassador's wife. Everything is possible. But only if I become a Party member first."

"If you become a Party member, Tatus, ask them to hurry up with our passports."

We do get our passports towards the end of September. Once more, I throw all my earthly belongings into my backpack. I spent five months in Lodz. Neither did I become fond of this city, nor of our large apartment. I'll leave the country of my ancestors and my childhood forever, I guess.

Actually, I left that country four years ago. This new Poland isn't the country of my childhood.

I just have to go back to the first page of this copybook to see that Mama mentioned Oxford and Cambridge in 1942. When she did, I became convinced I would live in England someday. If I don't like it there, I'll go to America.

We have seats in a sanitary train carrying sick people to France—French soldiers who were prisoners of war, deported Jews who survived the horrors of Auschwitz. They were treated in the Lodz hospital for typhus and other illnesses. The train also includes a prison-car full of Frenchmen who fought with the Germans against the Russians. They come from Alsace, an Eastern province annexed by Germany. "The Nazis forced us to do it," they say.

Tatus promised he would come say goodbye on the platform. He's late, as usual. The train will leave in a minute. We're leaning out the compartment's window… Here he comes running! He's so funny that Mama, who's been wearing a kind of a sad veil on her face ever since we came back to Poland, can't help smiling. But what is this? Tatus jumps lightly into the car, as if he couldn't help it. He carries his backpack!

"I'm coming with you. I convinced them to send me to the conference."

"What conference?"

"In London, about the new miracle medicine the English have discovered. I told you about it: penicillin, which cures infections. I represent Poland."

Most railroad tracks haven't been repaired yet. Mama says she needed three days to reach London in 1923. She went through Berlin, Hannover, Cologne and Brussels. She took a boat near Ostend in Belgium. We follow a southern route, going through Prague, Munich and Strasbourg. We'll cross the channel in Calais, a French harbor. The journey lasts ten days. The train sometimes stops for half a day in the middle of nowhere. They never tell us why. I'm lucky I found *Dombey and Son* in English in Lodz, so I'm not bored.

The train stops in Prague. According to a schedule chalked on a blackboard, we're leaving in four hours. We could visit the town, but we consider it safer to stay near the station and check the blackboard now and then… This city seems to have escaped the war completely. Lublin and Lodz haven't been destroyed, but have lost their wealth and many of their inhabitants. Here, there are buses and taxis. People are well-dressed. The pastry shop windows overflow with pastries!

Soon, the train enters Germany. The passengers become nervous. Some small towns are still standing and seem to sneer at us, but bigger cities look like Rose's sand castles after I had trampled them. None is as fully flattened as Warsaw, though. Nobody sheds a tear over the Germans, of course.

Long lines of American trucks crawl on the roads. Soldiers drive strange boxlike topless cars. A nurse tells us they call them "Jeeps."

One morning, I wake up at dawn as the train is slowing down.

"Where are we, Mama?"

"We just crossed the French border. This is the city of Strasbourg. Look outside. You can see the spire of the cathedral."

Later on that day, we see vineyards in Alsace, then in Champagne. The train ends its journey in Paris in the middle of the afternoon. Mama shows our tickets to a railroad employee. He speaks French very fast, moving his arms like a semaphore. I've studied French in school long ago.

“I think he says we’re in *Gare de l’Est*, the Eastern station, but we must catch our train to London in *Gare du Nord*, the Northern station. It’s a five-minute walk, he says.”

Tall gray buildings stand on both sides of the street. Even their roof is made of gray metal plates. The people in the street wear gray clothes. This is supposed to be the most beautiful city in the world, but Prague seemed livelier and more fun to me. But wait…

“Look, Mama, Tatus, an outdoor café!”

“Well, we’re in Paris. What do you expect?”

Suddenly, Tatus turns right as if he wanted to enter the café.

“We have a couple of hours in front of us. Let’s have a coffee and some croissants.”

“What are you talking about? How are you going to pay? We don’t have any French money.”

“I’ve got money. Look…”

“Dollars! The Ministry gave you dollars?”

“This is a personal gift from Max. You sit there and order coffee… I’ll find a bank and change some money.”

“Come on. You can pay in dollars. I bet they’ll give you a double-serving of coffee if you do!”

In Gare du Nord, we find our train easily, as a panel saying Londres/London stands in front of the platform. I fall asleep as soon as we leave Paris. I wake up because I feel strange.

“Are we moving, Mama? I don’t hear the noise of the wheels…”

“We’re on the ferry, Kamuniu.”

“How could we be on the ferry? We’re in the train.”

“The ferry is carrying the train. In Calais, we went into its belly as if into a station or a tunnel. I guess there are rails inside.”

“I wish I had seen it. You should have woken me up, Mama.”

“You were sleeping so soundly… You’ll be able to see the train crawl out in Dover!”

“When I saw those ‘London’ plates on the train, I thought that it was a manner of speaking, that we would step off the train and into the boat. I didn’t imagine the train itself was going all the way to London.”

In France, there were large fields, meadows and woods. The English landscape I discover at dawn looks as if the constant rain has shrunk it: small pastures bordered by hedges, small houses, small gardens. We reach London’s suburbs quite soon, but then we see identical houses and gardens for more than an hour before we enter Victoria Station.

“Let’s take the tube,” Mama says. “The Circle line goes straight to High Street Kensington.”

“This time, I’ll find a bank and get some pounds first. I doubt you could buy tube tickets with dollars.”

“Hey, Tatus, right here: Change Bureau!”

As we’re waiting for the underground train on the platform, I can’t help laughing.

“What’s so funny, my wasp?”

“Everybody speaks English, Mama!”

This tube is so noisy that I’m glad to get out.

“Look, Mama, they drive on the wrong side of the road!”

“Yes, in England they drive on the left.”

“Oh, a double-decker bus! Can we ride it? Do you have enough money, Tatus? I want to sit on the upper-floor!”

“We’ll walk. It’s not far. You’ll have plenty of occasions to ride the bus…”

Adam and Eve Mews is a tiny side-street that seems to belong to a small village rather than to the biggest city in Europe. We climb to the third floor of a slightly musty house. Mama knocks on a door. A woman holding a two- or three-year old boy in her arms opens the door. Tatus doesn’t say anything because he doesn’t speak English. I say nothing because I look at the woman, at the child, at the apartment. Mama says nothing because she is too flustered to speak. I feel that the woman is staring at our old shoes and tattered clothes. She seems to wonder who these three tramps are. A man enters the room and comes towards the door.

“What is it? Are you looking for someone?”

“Rysiu…”

The man looks at Mama, knits his brows…

“Adela? Is it you? Now this is really… Barbara, it is Adela! And here is your daughter Camilla, I suppose. Are you Marek? You’ll have to find an English name.”

“He doesn’t understand you if you don’t speak Polish. He isn’t staying in London anyway, but going back over there.”

Indeed, Tatus goes back two weeks later. Ah, but he likes London. He promises to come again.

“I want to finish my work in the Ministry. It is important. By creating a good public health system, I help men, women and children—even unborn children. I admit that today the Poles don’t like the Jews. Maybe you’re right, Ada, and they won’t like them tomorrow either. On the other hands, if they take the Jews as scapegoats because their own life is tough, then it is worth trying to build a new Poland where life will be easier."

"Communism doesn't make life easier. You saw it in Russia."

"The Russians have a crazy dictator. Besides, they're Russian. Centuries of tyranny weigh on their backs. One hundred years ago, their peasants were still slaves. The Poles are willing to start anew after this war. I think that socialism is a good tool that will help us build a better society."

"May God hear thee, little father!"

In Poland, Tatus expands the notes he wrote at the London conference into a book about penicillin. He sends us his royalties, as well as part of his salary. This is tricky, because the English consider the Polish money—called zlotys—worthless. Polish Jews living in London who want to help their family in Warsaw give us pounds, and Tatus gives zlotys to their relatives. I remember something Grandpa used to say: "Where there's a Jew, there's a way."

With these pounds we rent a room in Islington, a district located in the northern part of London, somewhat closer to the center of the city than Kensington. This room reminds me of our shack in Zirabulak, except it's smaller and we have to climb six stories to reach it. We climb them up and down often, as the toilets (called "privy" here) are in the building's courtyard. We do have running water in our room: a tiny sink, cold water only. To wash, we heat water in a pan and pour it into a wash-basin.

It's our home. We prefer it to Richard's princely apartment, where we didn't feel really welcome. We're the first people who came from "over there" after the war. This seems to bother Richard. He had the nerve to tell Mama he thought her dead.

"I received a letter from Yola saying you had followed the Russians and had probably taken refuge somewhere in Siberia. As you were always sickly as a child, I thought you wouldn't survive a Siberian winter…"

Many people died when the Germans bombed London, but Richard and Barbara went to Cardiff, where Richard found a job as a doctor. That's where their second boy, whom we saw when we arrived, was born. His name is George. This kid is a nuisance, really, always whining and complaining. The people I knew in Lodz or the Polish Jews I meet in London stopped having children during the war. This brat doesn't appreciate how lucky he is just to be born. Andrew, my other cousin, is also a grumbler. I would become one, too, if I had to suffer such parents.

After a while, we quarrel with them and cease to go to Kensington. I should say: "I quarrel," because Mama is about as spineless as a jellyfish (although I sometimes see a spark in her eyes when Richard tries to sound like an English gentleman). What provoked my anger is that Richard pretends the Americans won the war.

"I've sworn I'd open a bottle of champagne every June 6 until the end of my life to commemorate D-Day, June 6, 1944, when the Americans and English landed in Normandy. The most beautiful day in my life!"

"This is ridiculous. The Germans lost the war in Stalingrad, one and a half year before. Ten million Soviets died to defend their homeland. They made airplanes and tanks by the thousands. Actually, experts consider their T-34 the best tank in the world. The Americans beat the Japanese, that's a fact, but they spoiled their victory by launching the atom bomb. A ghastly invention, that kills a hundred thousand women and children in a second… This isn't much better than what the Nazis did!"

He makes me so angry, with his scorn of the Soviet Union, that I'm ready to become a communist! Let him glorify Roosevelt and Truman… The People's Little Father may be a tyrant, but he is a giant compared to these dwarves, I say.

There's a good high school (or "grammar school") near my home, but for boys only, so I have to take the tube every day to Camden. In this country, they separate the boys from the girls, as they did in Zirabulak before my arrival.

I don't want them to call me Camilla. On my passport I'm Kamila Minski, but in school I say my name is Kama. I tell my story to the headmistress, who seems moved and wishes me good luck.

"You won't be our only unusual pupil, you know. Some girls missed a few years because the Japanese kept them in camps in Malaya or somewhere. Others went into the army as hospital orderlies. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Well, the ages of the girls in your class range from fourteen to twenty… You know, I think perhaps you might want to attend our special evening classes. We opened them for the pupils who need to catch up in English or mathematics."

"Oh, I'll certainly do that. Just what I need!"

During all these years, I spoke English only with Mama, so I caught a tinge of an accent. It vanishes quickly when I speak with my new comrades. My written English is good enough, as I've been practicing for four years by keeping this diary. The special courses won't hurt, though.

In my grammar school class (which is the equivalent of sophomore year in an American senior high school), pupils are getting physics and chemistry courses for the first time. There I shine, of course, especially in chemistry, thanks to the hours I spent in labs helping my parents.

I have pleasant talks with my classmates, but none of them becomes a real friend. Even when they are twenty, they seem very young to me.

I go to school, I come back from school, I borrow books from the public library, I walk and explore London. Winter is coming, so I don't feel too ridiculous with my felt boots.

Meanwhile, Mama stays in the room. She goes down to buy food now and then. She sometimes reads a few pages of a book I bring. I can see that she's still under the shock she suffered on the steps of Lublin's town hall. I don't know how to help her. I talk to her about the school, about Oxford street and Hyde Park, about the world outside.

"Do you know what you could do?" I ask her. "You could work as a seamstress. The small girls I see in my school often wear skirts or pinafores that are much too big. I guess that mothers give the clothes of their elder daughters to the younger ones, or buy clothes that the girls will grow into. Anyway, Mama, you sew so well, you could adjust the clothes to the good size. I've seen you do it. You alter a hem, tighten a waist. Then, when the child grows up, you release the hem and the skirt also grows up."

I explain my idea to the storekeepers in our neighborhood. They talk to their customers. A few women give work to Mama, so to speak on trial. No children's clothes! It seems the people have starved during the war and now they're eating sausages and steak and kidney pie and fish and chips, so they need to increase the belt size of their skirts and pants all the time. Besides, there is a frenzy of new fashions. Every other month, women discover in the newspapers that their dresses are the wrong length.

As the first customers are satisfied, they bring their friends. Mama doesn't earn much money, but she keeps busy. I buy a radio set for her, hoping it will turn her mind away from the war.

She reminds me of Maminka, who knitted all day, sitting on her bed, in Kobryn and in L'vov.

1946. Rose goes to America.

Aunt Yola and Elzunia sent us a letter from Palestine. They didn't have to part a sea and spend forty years in the desert before they reached the Promised Land, but it was still quite a trip: "We climbed the Carpathian Mountains on foot with Zionist militants who knew secret paths. We had neither passports nor visas, of course. Then we went across Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Rumania. Sometimes we took trains and buses, but mostly we walked. We didn't have any unpleasant encounter with the police or border guards. Our main problem was blisters on our poor feet. When we reached the Black Sea, we waited for the night. A small launch came and took us to an old ship that went to Haifa. There too, we had to wait for the night to disembark. The Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians and Rumanians look elsewhere when we cross their country, because they're happy to be rid of the Jews. On the contrary, the English who control Palestine want to limit the number of Jews coming in, so they're quite watchful. They're afraid that if they let in too many Jews the Arabs of Palestine will consider their country colonized and protest. Then the other Arabs might turn against England. Well, at least they didn't catch us. We're in Tel Aviv! We found uncle Itshak. He's very busy. He says hello."

They forget to say what uncle Itshak is doing. I guess he's too busy to write himself.

Summer holidays begin. I don't go to school anymore, but I still have a lot of catching up to do, so I study books at home. I also help Mama with her sewing. One afternoon in July, someone knocks on our door. We suppose it's a client needing a seamstress. What a surprise: Rose! Even prettier and stronger than last year.

"Hello, girls! I arrived in London this morning. I'm staying at Richard's place. The fellow ain't turning funnier with age! And his Barbara is as stern as a prison gate… I needed to breathe some, so I came for a visit."

"A good idea. I was wondering about you… Didn't I mention her yesterday, Mama? Tatus wrote that you passed your final exam in high school. Are you staying a long time here? When are you going back to Poland?"

"Poland is over."

"You're going to Palestine?"

“To become a peasant? No thanks! I’m going to America. The Chicago cousins sent me an immigrant visa. This usually takes a long time, but Aaron, Father’s brother, must be an influent man.”

“So you changed your mind. You said you wanted to remain in Poland.”

“Haven’t you heard of what happened in Kielce ?

“In Kielce ?”

“Richard didn’t know about it either. I bet the Polish government isn’t eager to advertise the thing. A pogrom took place on July 4.”

“Are you kidding? A pogrom? After what the Nazis did?”

Mama hasn’t been talking much since we’ve come to England. She doesn’t take part in our conversation, but her eyes seem to gleam darkly all of a sudden. I guess these news don’t improve her opinion of the Poles. I take her hand into mine to comfort her.

“Look, Rose, I have the cleverest Mamusia! She understood that the Jews would still suffer in Poland, so we left before anybody else. Our passports are numbered ten and eleven.”

“I didn’t wait for the Kielce pogrom to ask for a passport, but I wanted to pass my final exam before going. You father helped me find a ‘protection.’ A minister, no less!”

“That’s Max.”

“Yes, Max. Your father will leave too, I think. As he visits the hospitals, he can see the wounded Jews.”

“People have been killed?”

“Forty-two dead and fifty wounded, out of one hundred and fifty Jews who came back to Kielce. A girl I know was lucky: three broken ribs only. She told me what happened. Before the war, there were twenty thousand Jews in Kielce. One fourth of the total population. Less than one percent came back. The Poles attacked them. My friend says they didn’t want to give them their homes and shops back. They had taken them over, you understand. Instead of helping the Jews, the police seized the arms of those who tried to resist. According to your friend Max, one hundred thousand Jews returned from Siberia or Central Asia, like you. A few survived by hiding, like me. Thousands already left for Palestine. Now all the others will probably go. The news of the Kielce pogrom scared everybody. Nobody expected such a thing.”

“I’m glad that Tatus will join us at last. He believed the Poles were going to reform. Maybe he changed his mind.”

Rose spends ten days in London. On the eve of her departure, she comes for a last visit.

“Gosh, I wish you had staid longer…”

“I’ve got to show you something.”

She takes off one of her shoes, then removes a kind of interior sole and seems to scratch the leather. Hey, what’s this? A diamond shines in her hand.

“When Dolek came back from L’vov, he earned a good amount of money by selling several companies that Father hadn’t registered to his name. The Germans didn’t know they were ‘Jewish properties,’ so they failed to steal them. Instead of buying a stock of wool, like Father, Dolek found about twenty beautiful diamonds like this one. It isn’t big, but very pure and well cut. Dolek hoped we would all be able to flee Poland, but the Germans caught him soon afterwards. Mother hid the diamonds somewhere in the apartment. Later she used them to buy arms for the ghetto’s revolt. Before she returned to the ghetto to die, she came to see me in the bar and gave me the last diamond. She explained where to hide it in my shoe. Under the heel was the wrong place, because everybody hid their diamonds under the heel.”

“So show me, in case I need to do it some day!”

“See, in the stiffening, here… I hope I never have to sell it. I’ll keep it as a memento of Granny Gun.”

In September, Tatus comes to London again. The Kielce pogrom didn’t convince him to leave Poland for good. With cousin Richard’s help, he obtained an invitation to spend a year in a Cambridge lab, where he’ll do advanced research about tropical illnesses. Then he’s supposed to return to Poland.

As a foreign guest, he doesn’t receive any salary. We must keep our tiny room. Since Tatus doesn’t send us money from Poland anymore, he has to earn some. He writes scientific and medical articles for a Polish magazine published in London. He works day and night, my poor Tatus…

We get a lucky break: a rain of dollars (a drizzle, actually) pours on us! Rose has described our pitiful situation to the Chicago cousins. These good people send us money and clothes right away. I buy shoes and hide my old boots under the sink!

1995. Fifty years later.

Elizabeth, my fifteen-year old granddaughter, asked me to write the story of my life. She wants to type it on her mother's computer, then bring it to school for a historical show-and-tell.

"The Germans didn't catch you during the war, Kama? How did you escape them?"

"I went to Uzbekistan, in Central Asia, with my parents."

"Uzbekistan? Wow! I don't even know where it is. You must write it, oh please…"

"But I have written everything already. I just need to find my old copy-book."

I found it, she read it, and now she wants to know what happened after the war.

"Come on, Kama. There are lots of things in life beside war!"

"Of course, but after the war my life became quite ordinary. I married, I had a daughter who also married and had three marvelous children…"

"Fifty years condensed into one sentence! This won't do. I'm sure you can tell me more."

Okay. In July, 1948, after three years in grammar-school, I passed my final exams and went to study medicine in London University. I had planned to study in Oxford or Cambridge, but I forgot all about it.

Do you remember the Jewish accountant in the sanitary train between L'vov and Saratov? He set me thinking when he said that it was easier to carry a doctor's diploma than diamonds. Later, when I saw my poor paralyzed friend, Chen the Birdman, I felt I would like to work at preventing children from becoming cripples.

There was also Mama's depression. She kept to her room for five years or so, as if she had lost her will to live. She sewed or peeled vegetables while listening to the radio. She didn't laugh. When Tatus said something foolish, she sometimes muttered a sardonic remark, but if he replied to start a good old-fashioned quarrel, she became silent. She didn't seem to care what happened in the outside world. When a letter came from Israel or Poland, she let it lie about for months without opening it, so that in the end I replied for her. I thought that if I studied medicine, and especially psychiatry, I would be able to help depressed people.

After one year, the Cambridge lab offered Tatus a permanent job with a good salary. He accepted, which means he gave up the idea of returning to Poland. Actually, he acquired the

British nationality—and gave it to me, since I was still a minor. He told people his name was Mark rather than Marek.

The war had dispirited Mama, but not Tatus. It looked like the opposite, actually. He was full of zest and zeal, as if he wanted to catch up after six years of holidays.

During the first few months, he spoke English with a comical accent, but he learned fast. He always carried an English language manual or some other book and a dictionary when he took the train to Cambridge. Once there, he never ceased talking to his colleagues while he counted his leucocytes.

Aunt Yola and Elzunia lived in a kibbutz. Yola took care of the kindergarten. Elzunia worked in the fields and orchards. She considered she was Jewish and Catholic at the same time.

In 1948, the Jews of Palestine founded the new State of Israel, which the Arab countries attacked at once. My uncle Itshak, whom I barely remembered, died in that war. According to Yola, he had never explained clearly what his job was. She guessed he belonged to one of the underground groups that blew up English barracks and so on. He may have died during a daring commando mission behind Arab lines.

Mama thought it was a stupid way to die.

"He survives the war and gets killed by the Arabs! What's more, he pretends to be a Jew but he blows up bombs and innocent people die. These Zionists are dangerous fools."

In America, Rose studied architecture. She lived with our Chicago cousins. "You should come here," she wrote to me. "You could study medicine in Chicago as well as in London." It was impossible. I didn't want to leave Mama, who needed me. Tatus enjoyed his work in Cambridge so much that he preferred to spend his evenings with his colleagues than with her.

After a few years, we both understood (Mama may have guessed it before me, but she didn't say anything) that when he phoned and said: "I'm having dinner with my colleagues," it meant: "with a (female) colleague."

As I had worked with Tatus myself in Bujnaksk and elsewhere, I knew he needed an assistant, otherwise he misplaced his things, picked up the wrong vial, forgot to record the results in his notebook, and so on.

His (male) colleagues told him how to proceed:

“There’s a school for lab assistants in London. You go there on graduation day, in June. You’ll see plenty of good-looking lasses. You talk to them until you find one you like, then you offer her to assist you.”

Tatus was a handsome man. He picked up a new assistant every year in this manner. He used to make fun of Mama’s infatuation with England. Now he found something to like in this country: its easy-going girls.

I think the first few assistants were only assistants. The third or fourth, I don’t remember, became more than an assistant. I didn’t really want to know what was happening, because I was studying hard at the time. I now lived in a separate room that my parents had rented for me in the same building.

In summer, we went to Cornwall and stayed in small affordable seaside hotels. My university comrades asked me why I spent my holidays with my parents. I answered that my mother was in poor health. Actually, I didn’t have any close friends. I remembered my young Uzbek pals fondly. I compared them to their beloved apricots—tough inside but tender outside. The English people were more like walnuts. I could never crack their thick shells. The boys scared me. If I fell in love with a good Christian Englishman, would I dare tell him about my being Jewish? I couldn’t marry in a church, could I? I was afraid a Christian husband would hurl anti-Semitic insults at me, sooner or later.

We rented a telephone line. This was quite a luxury at the time. We had to wait for six months before we could give our first phone call! We received strange calls sometimes.

“Hello, my name is Minski. I live in Buenos Aires (or Pittsburgh, etc.). As I’m spending a few days in London, I looked in the phonebook out of curiosity. Are you relatives of rabbi Minski, from Brest-Litovsk?”

“Not at all. We’re the Minski from Pinsk!”

We found it quite funny that Tatus had thought he was trading his Jewish name for a catholic one.

In 1950, I spent my holidays in Israel with Mama. Meanwhile, Tatus went to Cornwall with his dear lab assistant.

Aunt Yola hadn’t changed at all. Elzunia had become a tall nineteen-year old young woman. She didn’t work in the fields anymore, but in the kibbutz’s hospital. I worked with her, actually. While the patients in London hospitals talked to the doctor with respect and awe, as to some kind of wizard, the kibbutz patients joked with the nurses and doctors. I understood very little Hebrew, but Elzunia told me nobody used any "polite" formulas in Israel.

She studied in Haifa four afternoons a week to get a nurse's diploma. She went to Nazareth every Sunday to attend morning mass.

Yola already knew (I guess that Richard's wife, Barbara, who loved gossip, had written to her about it) that Tatus preferred his twenty-two-year old lab assistant to Mama. We went to Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and everywhere Mama met childhood friends or classmates who knew about Tatus and the lab assistant. Israel is a very small country, sort of a big village actually.

One of Mama's friends convinced her to work in a Haifa lab. Thus, I returned to England alone. Mama came back from Israel six months later. Richard recommended her to a lab manager, who gave her a job as a hematologist. She didn't need Richard's recommendation, because the Haifa lab had written a very laudatory report. She opened a bank account, where she put her salary. She was happy. She was my sweet lively Mama again.

Two years or so after her Israel stay, she left home. This was rather surprising, as we had just moved into a pleasant three-room apartment in the same neighborhood. She didn't vanish, but rented a studio near Covent Garden.

Tatus was puzzled. We went to visit her in her new home.

"This is just a student's room… Do you want to become a forty-five-year-old student?"

"No, but I want to have fun like a student. I'll look at the store windows, go to the movies, sit in Hyde Park and read a book. Besides, from here I can walk to work."

What's amazing is that Tatus ended his affair with the lab girl and began to court Mama! He went to the theater with her, invited her for dinner in the best restaurants. He took her as an assistant when he was invited to a conference abroad. He had become a well-known specialist of tropical illnesses and earned good money.

But Mama never lived with him again.

I only saw the beginning of this second honeymoon, because I studied in Chicago University for one year. Now that my medical studies were nearly over, I knew that if I really wanted "portable property," I'd better get diamonds than a doctor's diploma. The Americans didn't accept an English doctorate. I needed to study in an American university for one year to validate my English diploma and be allowed to perform medical acts on both sides of the ocean.

My great-uncle Aaron, the patriarch of our family's American branch, had died a few years before. Rose lived in the house of Leo, one of Aaron's sons. I lived there too during the first few weeks. Then we both moved to a small apartment near the lake. I met many cousins. Aaron's sons (two of them) and daughter (one) could pass for Europeans, although they were born in America. Their children (three boys and two daughters altogether) looked and sounded like true Americans, huge and noisy. Even when the boys studied philosophy or international law, they reminded me of the football players who flickered on the TV screen. The girls were as pretty—and bland—as movie actresses.

In the Chicago medical school, I took part in research upon poliomyelitis. Several teams were experimenting with promising vaccines. It was a time of great progress in medicine. We hoped we would soon be able to cure all the illnesses.

I took driving lessons and got my license in Chicago. Rose had done it as soon as she had arrived in the States and actually she already owned a car. During the summer vacations, we drove across the United States. We wanted to see the Mississippi river, the Rockies, the Grand Canyon, California. Mama had given me addresses of people who had gone to America after the war. Thus I saw Helen Zakrewska again in Los Angeles. The Kielce pogrom had convinced her that she'd rather be a plain American citizen than the new Poland's Health minister. On the ship taking her across the ocean, she had met a Polish veterinarian. They had married and now her name was Helen Greenfield. She had convinced her husband to change his name, Grünfeld, as soon as they had landed on the new continent. He had become the Hollywood stars' favorite animal doctor. They owned a magnificent house in Pacific Palisades, a few blocks from the ocean. We spent a week there. We swam in the Pacific Ocean every day. Rose even built several sand castles for me!

Strange as it may seem, I also met my husband on the ship—sailing back from New York City to Southampton. It's a pity that these beautiful ocean-crossing vessels don't exist anymore… In the fifties, European people didn't travel much, so most of the passengers were American. I'm sure the headwaiter (officially known as Maître d'hôtel) hadn't gone to college and studied psychology, but he knew as much about it as the Jewish *shadchen* or matchmakers. Seeing a young single English girl and a young single Frenchman on his list, he found it appropriate to sit them next to each other at a table with two American couples. The young man's name was Jacques. We soon became friends. A kind of sympathy or connivance arose between us when we had to answer the naive questions of the Americans, who knew very little about Europe and not much more about the war.

Jacques hadn't spent a full year in the States, like me, but only a summer.

“I went to visit a French friend. Her name is Marie-Claire. She moved to America after the war because her parents are dead. She lives with her cousins.

“Did you know her in France?”

“We spent the whole war together in a kind of children’s home in the South of France. My parents had fled very far: to Spain, then to Portugal and Brazil. Marie-Claire became a kind of older sister to me.”

“Why did your parents flee?”

I could guess his answer…

“Because we’re Jewish. I was born in France, but my parents came from Poland in 1925.”

“I’m Jewish too. I was born in Warsaw.”

We were both quite moved to discover that the other one was Jewish. It seemed to us that Fate was trying to tell us something. A few weeks after our return to Europe, Jacques crossed the Channel and came to see me in London. He made several such trips and eventually took a job tinkering with the BBC’s new toy, television. He was not an actor or a cameraman, but an engineer. We married less than a year after meeting on the ship. We went to Brighton for our honeymoon.

Our daughter was born in 1958. I would have liked to call her Alina, for it was my heroic grandmother’s first name, but my cousin Elzunia had already given that name to her own daughter. So I called my daughter Tamara, to honor my piano teacher in Astrakhan. I bought a piano, actually, hoping I’d be able to play again and teach my daughter. Well, I never found the time to practice as much as needed, so that I haven’t even caught up with my Astrakhan level. My little Tamara didn’t learn piano with me, but with excellent teachers. She didn’t become a professional pianist, though, like her Astrakhan namesake. After visiting the TV studios many times with Jacques, she decided to study film-making.

I went to Israel twice with Jacques and Tamara. I saw aunt Yola and Elzunia. Tamara became friends with her cousin Alina.

Max Kusniewicz came to London every other year or so. He attended a conference as a Polish minister and delegate, or he stopped there on the way to Caracas, where he had been named ambassador. He couldn’t help admiring the capitalistic system, which had made Tatus and Mama so rich that they each owned an apartment.

In 1968, “troubles” struck Poland, as well as many other countries in the world. The communists had promised paradise on earth, but the Poles didn’t feel they were moving towards it. The students demonstrated in the streets, the factory workers threatened to go on strike. While the working class was supposed to lead the country, it couldn't expect any rewards for its toil as long as the stores were empty. The government, feeling under attack, remembered how such crises were handled before the war: all you have to do is accuse these old scapegoats, the Jews! Thus the press revealed a "Zionist plot." Jews had infiltrated the innermost organs of the State by hiding their real identity…

Secret Police thugs called on Max.

"We know your real name isn't Max Kusniewicz, but Milek Roth. This stolen identity proves you had a hand in the Zionist plot. We could have you condemned and thrown into jail for the rest of your life, which is what you and your accomplices deserve. We have decided to be lenient, however, considering you were a dedicated member of the Party before you chose the wrong track. Thus, we authorize you to move abroad."

"May I go to France? To America?"

"Are you kidding? Granting you this privilege would be unfair to the other Poles, who aren't allowed to emigrate. You can only join your people in Israel."

Max and several of his friends moved to Israel. Polish propaganda made lots of noise around the event. What better proof that there was indeed a Zionist plot? As soon as the Jews holding the levers of the government are unmasked, they flee to their secret homeland, Israel.

Having spent most of his youth fighting against the Zionists, Max just hated it in Israel. After two years there, he moved to Sweden, where he has been living for twenty-five years.

Mama loved this story.

"You see," she told Tatus, "if we had followed your advice and remained over there, you might have become minister and ambassador, but in the end they would have called you a dirty Jew. Mr. Minski, we know that you're Silberberg, actually!"

Tatus made important discoveries in Cambridge about cholera and children's dysentery. Some of his colleagues thought he would receive the Nobel prize. He retired in 1971 (without getting the Nobel prize). He died in 1976 of a heart attack. He was seventy-three.

His death affected Mama, of course, although they had lived separately for more than twenty-five years. Once she became a widow, she began a new life with a man she had known for a while… Let's say this is another story.

Today, Mama is ninety-two and in perfect health.

My daughter Tamara married a journalist who writes about scientific subjects. They have three children: Roland, Elizabeth and Anthony.

Tamara was quite successful as a director of TV commercials, but she often quarreled with her clients. For example, she'd refuse to redo the editing when the client asked her to show the product for a longer time or whatever. She has a strong character (I'm sure she'll get angry when she reads these lines!), like her great-aunt Rose and her great-grandmother Granny Gun. Another family heirloom: she draws quite well.

She shot many commercials for beauty products and clothes. She met many people in the world of fashion. Eventually she quit the movie business and began to design hats. I was rather surprised at first, but when I saw her hats I knew she was right. They're amazing—they look like sculptures. She sells them to famous couturiers in England and in France. They can also be found in some stores in London, Paris and even Tokyo.

When I married Jacques, we found an apartment in the Marylebone neighborhood and we never moved again. I can walk to the Webster children's hospital, where I used to go several times a week, having specialized in pediatrics. I also opened a medical practice at home. The main BBC studios weren't far either.

I retired last year, but I still go to the hospital now and then.

Ten years ago or so, I went to Los Angeles for a pediatrics conference. I looked for the Greenfield veterinarian hospital, but it was gone. Greenfield, who was older than Helen, had certainly died long ago. The Hollywood stars have found other doctors for their pets.

The conference began with a get-acquainted cocktail in a UCLA hall. I haven't gone to that many medical conference—this was my fifth or sixth. I like to see delegates coming from all over the world and try to guess their nationality. A sixtyish woman who may have been Colombian or Peruvian (I thought) was staring at me intently. She moved towards me. She seemed quite troubled. Although I don't know anybody in Peru or Colombia, she seemed vaguely familiar. In these conferences, everybody speaks English, but she talked to me in Russian.

"Wasp?"

"Asli!"

My favorite Zirabulak pupil! We fell into each other's arms, crying like babies. The other delegates found the scene rather funny and laughed good-heartedly.

I am not Polish anymore and my name isn't Silberberg, but Asli didn't need to look at the delegates' list to recognize me.

"Your red hair! In my whole life, I have never seen anything like it."

"I can thank my hairdresser. Without her help, I think there would be plenty of white stripes amidst the red."

"Have you had a difficult life?"

"No, I can't complain. My hair is white because I'm an old babushka, that's all."

"I've been a grandmother since last year too. I don't live in Zirabulak anymore. I work as a pediatrician in a Tashkent hospital."

"Well, I'm a pediatrician in London."

"Are you English? That's why you're wearing such a magnificent hat. Just like your queen."

"My daughter designed it. Do you know what? I still have the tiubeteika cap that Chen's sister gave me, and also the vest you embroidered for me. My daughter took the tiubeteika as inspiration for some hats. Is Chen's sister in good health? And Chen the birdman? And Timur?"

"Chen's sister became a theater and cinema actress. She's well-known in our country. Timur is the director of the Zirabulak school. He replaced Nikita Ivanovich when he retired. Chen the birdman is dead, I'm sorry to say."

"Did he die long ago?"

"Yes, ten or twelve years after you went away. He suffered from some kind of heart-defect. The doctors tried an operation, but it failed."

"A heart-defect caused his paralysis? I had always thought it was the consequence of childhood poliomyelitis. I even studied poliomyelitis in the States, thinking about him."

"I've been told there was a problem at birth. I don't know the precise details. Maybe he was a premature baby. In those times, in our country, they lost many kids, and those who survived were often in bad shape. Today we have modern medicine. Not as modern as here, obviously. That's why they sent me to Los Angeles."

"It's a long trip from Tashkent."

"I've flown over the North Pole. I landed in Moscow and in Alaska. I've had time to embroider a jacket for my grandson!"

"I am sad about Chen… Do you remember when we went and swam in the river?"

"You taught me to swim. And to read, of course. I can tell you that many people in Zirabulak still remember Kama the wasp."

"As for me, I'll never forget Zirabulak."

"Do you know what lullaby I sing to my grandson?"

"Yes."

Having left the hall, we were walking under tall California palm trees. We sang together.

Fly off, sweet swallow
Hide in the reeds
Accept these seeds
Carry away my sorrow!