



SOLDIER

D O N W U L F F S O N

Prologue

My name is Erik Brandt. I live near Seattle, Washington, in a small house in a wooded area overlooking a lake. I like the woods; they are quiet and make for a pleasant place to write. I also hate them. They bring back dark memories of battles fought long ago.

Most of my friends and acquaintances in the area call me Erik, or Professor, or Dr. Brandt. Though none of them know it, I prefer a different name. I prefer to be called X. It is simply a letter, but it has far more meaning to me than my real name.

I am no longer a young man. My once sharp blue eyes are now faded, and I need to wear reading glasses. My hair, once blond, is now steel gray, and I wear it long. My once boyish, peach-fuzz face is now bearded. The beard covers the scars on my face, put there when a machine-

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gun bullet went into my open mouth and out my left cheek. I walk with a bit of a limp, the result of being hit in the knee by a large piece of shrapnel when I was sixteen. I wear a prosthesis—an artificial arm and hand. I lost my left arm above the elbow—and received my other wounds and injuries—during the Second World War.

After the War, I became a history teacher. As a teacher, one of the first things my students always noticed was my prosthesis. I'd see fear and revulsion in their eyes, but also a great deal of curiosity. In answer to their unspoken question, and to put the matter to rest, I simply told my students that I lost my arm during the Second World War. "During the fighting in Germany I was hit by a machine-gun bullet just above the elbow," I would tell them. But though they clearly wanted me to, I would never tell them more.

"It must have been terrifying fighting the Nazis," I remember one of my students saying to me after class one day. "But the Nazis—the Germans—were out to conquer the world. Somebody had to stop them!"

The boy seemed to look up to me as some sort of hero. And like all of my students, he made an incorrect assumption about my role in the war. He assumed I had been an American GI fighting the Germans.

I never told him—or any of my students—that it was the other way around. During World War II, I was a German soldier.

Part One

In Dead Men's Clothes

March 21, 1944

I can still smell the stench of the troop train. I can still feel myself sway with the motion of it as it pounded eastward from Germany toward the battlefields of Russia.

The train was old, a relic that had been pressed into service because of the war. Once elegant, and used perhaps for wealthy people going on vacation, time had rendered it into something ornately decrepit. Filthy gold tassels hung from faded green velvet curtains; the windows were oval in shape, the glass yellowed by age; stuffing sprouted from seats upholstered in cracking, scaly-looking leather; and at the back of the car, behind a curtained-off alcove, was a toilet that emptied directly onto the tracks.

Like myself, most of those on the train were young boys—teenagers. Other than being soldiers in the German army, we had little in common. Fear, uncertainty, and homesickness—these were the only real bonds that united

us. We were also alike in that we wore dead men's clothes. By truck and rail, the boots and gray-green uniforms of those killed in battle had been returned to Germany for washing and mending. The sleeves of my jacket had jagged little rips that had been painstakingly sewn, and my shirt collar had dark bloodstains all the way around. I found myself wondering about the soldier who had died in the uniform. I wondered who he had been and how he had been killed. Would I, too, die in the uniform? Would it then be passed along to another boy, someone who would then wonder about me, about who I had been?

The train carrying us toward the front lines departed early that morning from Nuremberg, Germany. It was March 21, 1944, my sixteenth birthday. I told no one. The fact that it was my birthday was of no importance, except to me.

"You are nothing—your Volk are everything."

That was a motto of the Hitler *Jugend*, or HJ, the Hitler Youth. For five years the words had been drilled into my head; but not until sitting there on the troop train, amidst all the others, had I felt them so keenly: I was nothing; I did not matter. According to Adolf Hitler, only my country mattered.

"You were born to die for Germany."

In 1939, Hitler declared membership in the *Jugend* mandatory. Parents who objected were imprisoned; some were hanged. I had no choice. I volunteered for service. Only my father—who had died when I was a baby—was

German. My mother and grandparents were Russian; with forged papers, they had emigrated illegally to Germany in the late 1920s. They had learned to speak German fluently and without accent; they had renovated an old house, turning the downstairs into a restaurant, the upstairs into our living quarters; they paid taxes. In every way that really mattered, they had become good German citizens. Nevertheless, should the SS, the *Schutzstaffel*, discover their background, they would have been deported, perhaps killed.

When I joined the Hitler Youth, Austria and Czechoslovakia had already been annexed by Germany—to create what Hitler called *Lebensraum*, living space for the German people. On September 1, 1939, World War II began in earnest; on that day, we invaded Poland. It fell to us in sixteen short days. Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France—by 1940, all had fallen. Clearly, no longer was it *Lebensraum* that Hitler desired—it was all of Europe, and then the world.

Early in the war, one of our allies had been Russia—known then as the Soviet Union. The alliance had been an uneasy one: Russia, under the leadership of Stalin, was a Communist country; Hitler was anti-Communist, and it was well known that he did not trust Stalin any more than Stalin trusted him. On June 22, 1941, we attacked Russia as well.

A cloud of confusion settled over our home. My mother and grandparents now lived in terror of being found out. And I felt greatly torn. By birth, I was half

Russian. Yet Germany was my country, and I wore the uniform of the Hitler Youth—the black pants, brown shirt, and red armband.

Before the invasion of Russia, all had seemed so simple. I had enjoyed most of the activities of the *Jugend*—the sports, the camp-outs, the physical fitness programs, even the military training, which consisted mostly of target practice. Best of all were the dances and other get-togethers with the girls' branch of the *Jugend*, the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* (League of German Girls).

Upon entering the Hitler Youth, we were given a choice of entering different groups within the organization. Those interested in flying, for example, would apply for the *Flieger-HJ* (the flying youth). My choice was *Die Sprache-HJ*, in which we studied language; essentially, we were being prepared to become interrogators or spies. My French and English were passable; however, having been raised in a household where Russian was spoken with as much ease and facility as German, it was in Russian that I excelled. Our teacher, Herr Kraus, was quite good. Still, he sometimes made errors in his pronunciation, inflection, and use of idiomatic expression. I held my tongue. Correcting one's teacher was simply not done.

And one kept quiet about the torture and murder of Jews, foreigners, Communists—and everyone else the Nazis considered "undesirables." The inevitable consequence of criticizing the government was simply to become just one more undesirable. In my hometown of

Vilsburg, a man named Zoll spoke out against the invasion of Russia. His tongue was cut out; then he and three suspected communists were hanged. And then there was "the death bus." Painted a ghastly green—including its windows—it was in the woods, some twenty kilometers or so from Vilsburg. Cripples and mental defectives were taken to the thing and put to death, gassed. And thrown in with them was a Lutheran minister—who'd publicly protested the hideous practice.

To the horror of all Germans, in 1940 the bombing of our country began. Each year it got worse. By 1943 some of our cities lay in ruins. Food, gasoline, and numerous other goods were in short supply and strictly rationed. Our days of easy conquests were long since over; the British, Americans, and Russians held firm against our forces, then began to attack. Suddenly we were on the defensive, and very afraid.

From the battlefields, especially those of Russia, maimed and crippled German soldiers returned with blank, dead stares. Though the newspapers told only of "minor setbacks," the tales told by soldiers were very different. They spoke of horror, slaughter, and retreat on the Eastern Front. Minsk, Kiev, Kharkov, Donetz, Belgorod—in these places and others, tens of thousands of our men were killed. Whole companies of the *Wehrmacht*, our army, literally ceased to exist.

I was eleven when the war had started. With my friends, enthralled, the hair on the back of my neck stand-

ing up, I had watched parades as rank after rank of soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* passed in review, the cheers of the onlookers drowned out by the thundering footfalls of their hob-nailed jackboots. How powerful they had looked! How fearsome! How invincible!

At the time, I had felt cheated. I dreamed of being one of them. A hero. In my mind, I saw myself leading an attack on an enemy position. Single-handedly, I would destroy it. But then I would be wounded—most likely in the shoulder. Beautiful nurses would take care of me. Officers would pin medals on me, praise my courage, and thank me for what I had done for my country.

In April of 1944, males sixteen years of age were declared eligible to fight. I was sick with terror. That I was only fifteen did not matter. "By the date of your birth, I see," said a very fat little *Feldwebel*—sergeant—at the induction center, "you will be sixteen by the time you reach wherever it is you are to go." He studied my records. "And undoubtedly your command of the Russian language will land you a spot as an interrogator, or cause you to be used in some similar capacity." He banged the word ELIGIBLE on my papers with a rubber stamp, dismissed me, then gestured for the next boy in line to step forward.

Thus it was that I found myself on a troop train headed to war. As it screamed across the landscape, I kept thinking there must be some mistake, that this could not really be happening. I wanted to get off. I wanted to go home.

The train thundered onward.

Guided Tour

Sitting next to me was a freckle-faced boy named Jakob. He jabbered a lot, at first about his family and their business. His father, he told me, was an apple dealer and was often traveling. He would buy up orchards in the spring when the flowers were on the trees; then as the apples ripened, Jakob and his sisters would pick and pack them. "Our apples are shipped all over Germany," he told me proudly.

"My father died of influenza when I was a baby," I told Jakob. "I'm an only child, and I live with my mother and her parents—my grandparents—in an apartment above our restaurant in Vilsburg."

Jakob looked at me expectantly, as though I had more to tell. But there was really nothing of interest to say, and talking about my family only made me more homesick, especially for my mother. When she had seen me off at the train station in Nuremberg that morning, she had looked shrunken and shriveled, and wore dark clothes, like a mourner at a funeral—mine.

Jakob plucked an undersized booklet from the breast pocket of his jacket. In its pages, filled with maps and tourist information, he seemed to find a refuge from reality. Shortly, he began reading aloud from it as we traveled eastward, across Germany and into Czechoslovakia. The train slowed as it passed through Prague.

"Prague is the capital of Czechoslovakia," he told me. "We have now traveled 120 kilometers east from Nuremberg."

As he rattled on about the history and wonders of Prague, I looked out and saw a dreary city that had become a supply depot and garrison for our troops. I wished my self-appointed tour guide would be quiet.

I didn't feel very well. The train had become increasingly hot and stuffy; my face was wet with perspiration and my uniform clung damply to my body. My head ached, and the stench coming from the open toilet, only a few steps behind where I sat, was making me nauseous. At the moment, the history of Prague held very little interest for me.

Perhaps an hour and a half later, the train again slowed as it clacked through Kraków, Poland. Our bombing raids had gutted whole sections of the city. We passed one long street on which a blackened body hung from almost every streetlight.

"Partisans," I heard someone say.

Jakob—the "tour guide"—was too immersed in his booklet to see the horrid sight. "At the center of Kraków

is what is known as the Old City," he droned on, "a fortress, which, during the thirteenth century, was moated and walled." He glanced out the window for a moment, then returned his attention to his book. "Next, we should be passing Tarnów, Poland." He shrugged rounded shoulders. "But after that, well, it is anyone's guess."

Not even my travel guide knew exactly where we were headed. Our commanders kept us in the dark about our destination, so we simply sat—bored and scared—as the train raced across Poland toward the war.

As I have said, most of the forty or so soldiers in the car, like me, were new conscripts. We did not know each other, nor had we even trained together. Other than target practice in the *Jugend*, there had only been three short weeks of actual military training. During this time I learned how to march, salute, how to say "yes, sir" and "no, sir," and how not to question orders. Because ammunition was in short supply, I was taught how to assemble, load, and clean a Mauser rifle, but only rarely was I allowed to fire one. I tossed practice grenades at wooden cutouts of soldiers. That, then, was the extent of my preparation for war, as it was for the other boys on the train.

There was also a handful of veterans on the train, many of whom had been wounded, treated, and now were being sent back to battle. Most just sat quietly, grim expressions on their faces. But one, a man of about thirty or so, kept wandering around the car. When Jakob got up and

made his way to the curtained-off alcove, the toilet, the veteran decided to take his seat. He picked up the boy's pack and began going through it. When Jakob returned, it was to find the veteran enjoying a sandwich he had found in the pack.

"This is quite good," said the veteran. "Did your mamma make it for you?"

Stunned, my freckle-faced tour guide didn't know what to do or say.

Across the aisle I saw other boys looking on, their expressions both curious and apprehensive.

The veteran eating the sandwich was not an especially big man, but there was something terribly frightening about him, something murderous, and there was no question that he would have his way. He tossed Jakob his pack and rifle. Red-faced, humiliated, Jakob made his way down the aisle, in search of a place to sit.

Pickles and Knackwurst. That is what was in the sandwich the man was eating. He kept his eyes on me as he ate, sending chills down my spine. When he was done, he wiped his hands on my shirt, as though it was quite a natural thing to do. "I lost these at Stalingrad." He held up his left hand. The last three fingers were missing. "Now they are sending me back to Russia. I don't think that's fair, do you?"

"No," I replied, keeping my voice as steady as I could.

"It is not just because of my fingers that I should not be sent back. It is because a man can endure only so

much! The bombing, the artillery—especially the artillery!" For a long moment he lapsed into silence. "Perhaps they are sending me back because they know that I will not die—because I have the power, the strength. I can take care of myself." He looked me squarely in the eye. "Do you sense my power, boy?"

"Yes."

He nodded, grinning with self-satisfaction. "You are going to love Russia!" He launched into a litany of horror stories. The worst was about partisans—men, women, and children who fought us in small, roving bands and who had sabotaged a troop train like ours on the way to the front. "There were bodies and parts of bodies everywhere," he told me with seeming glee. "Mostly they were just *kinder*—stupid children—like you. Never even got a chance to fire their rifles!"

With that, he got up, belched, and wandered off, probably in search of others to torment—leaving me scared to death and sure our train would blow up at any moment.

A while later, Jakob returned to his seat beside me. His booklet was in his pocket; he sat rigidly, in silence, staring out the window as foreign landscape flashed by. Much of it was serene, pretty. But then Jakob pointed, horror in his eyes. I turned in time to see a church that had been set up as a temporary hospital. A wooden cart was headed away from the place, in the direction of a deep trench. It was being pulled by men, not horses, and it was filled to overflowing with corpses.

Criminals?

The next afternoon we reached the town of Gryuskow, Poland, about thirty kilometers from the Russian border. Though seemingly undamaged, the town was strangely deserted.

Lugging our packs and rifles, we debarked the train. *Feldwebels*—sergeants—formed us into ranks and marched us—more than three hundred of us—across open fields. Thistle burrs caught in our pants; underbrush scraped our legs.

The sky was turning dark and a wind gusted as we approached a huge, defunct factory of some sort. It was out in the middle of nowhere, and I could only guess what had had once been made there. Perhaps lumber had been processed; the first shed we passed, a large, open-air affair of corrugated tin and wood supports, housed a large band saw. Farther on were several other sheds. In all of them were piles of warped boards, except for one in which there was a kind of dredging machine with a string of rusty scoops.

Criminals?

“Achtung! Stillgestanden!”

At the command of our *Feldwebels*, we stopped, then quickly snapped to attention in front of the enormous building. Seeming on the verge of collapse, it sagged in the middle and was tilted to one side; its tin roof was half eaten away by rust.

After a long wait, we were ordered forward into the building. Inside, the place was shadowy, freakish. Dead, monstrous machinery towered. Outside, the wind picked up. The roof rattled and banged. An electric generator whirred. Bare bulbs draped overhead gave everything a spooky quality, like some kind of badly lit nightmare. And there were nightmare people in there with us. Not far from where I put down my pack and bedroll was a crew of skeletons. Emaciated, heads shaven, wearing striped, pajama-like garments, they waited to serve us, standing behind steaming kettles set out on large wooden crates. Most had yellow Stars of David sewn onto their ragged, dirty clothes, marking them as Jews.

“Achtung!” The master sergeant called for attention. *“With your mess kits, lineup! Quickly! Schnell!”*

My God, this is what we are doing to our own countrymen? Is this the Germany we are fighting for?

I waited my turn in line, each step taking me closer to the people. Never before had I seen human beings in such condition.

Eyes downcast, an old man handed me a quarter loaf of black bread. A girl who could not have been more than

nine or ten ladled soup into my outstretched mess tin. I thanked her.

"Danke," I said.

Her response was an attempted grin so rigid it seemed it would crack her face open.

I returned to my place and ate without appetite. Jakob spotted me and asked if he could join me.

"Yes, of course," I said, glad for the company.

A moment later, a tall, gangly boy, who I would later learn was named Oskar, joined Jakob and me. The three of us ate in silence, as did most in that strange, cavernous building. Still there was an undertone of voices. Behind us was another group of boys. In a nasal voice, one was declaring that the Jews across the way were an "exception," that most Jews, as we had been told by the government, had simply been "relocated" to work camps and were well treated.

I wanted to believe this—perhaps we all did. But deep down I knew that those people were no exception.

"This bunch must be criminals," the nasal voice continued.

"Do you think that's true, that they're criminals?" Jakob asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "I don't think I know much of anything anymore."

"I hope they *are* criminals," said Oskar. Large eyes in a narrow face blinked. "Because if they are not, then we are."

Baptism of Fire

At dawn, after a meal of weak tea and hard rolls, we were issued additional ammunition and ordered outside. *Feldwebels* organized us into squads. Jakob, Oskar, and I were assigned to the 7th Platoon of the 14th Squad of the Fourth *Landser* (Infantry) Division. There were nineteen of us in the platoon: one medic, fifteen recruits, and three veterans. A man named Dobelmann, a *Feldwebel*, was our platoon leader. He sickened and terrified me.

War had turned his face into something grotesque, hideous. He looked as though he were wearing a fright mask. He was missing one ear, and only a small flap of the other remained. His entire face was an impossible jigsaw puzzle of scars.

As did most *Feldwebels*, he wore a whistle around his neck. He blew it. He ordered us into line and to attention, then commanded us to stand at "parade rest." We slammed our rifle butts to the ground; then, with a straight, rigid arm, each soldier held his rifle by the barrel at an angle to

his right leg. Dobelmann strode down our ranks, talking to us in turn.

"Do I frighten you, son?" he demanded of one recruit.

"No, sir!" came the shouted response.

"He's a liar, isn't he?" he yelled at the next boy.

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir! I mean, I don't know, sir!"

"Yes, you don't know what you mean," said Dobelmann evenly.

He strode past several more recruits, staring each in the eye. He stopped next to me, in front of Oskar. Oskar was so tall and skinny that Dobelmann had to look up at him; still, it was to him that he spoke directly, at the same time delivering a speech to the whole platoon. "I am not here to frighten you." His voice softened. "I am here to save your lives—and even your pretty faces." He attempted a smile. It came out crooked. "Do exactly as I tell you at all times. I cannot guarantee anything—except that I will increase your chances of surviving this war. You are going to be facing men who are going to try to kill you. You must kill them first—to save yourself and the men beside you." He stepped back a pace. He raised his voice. "And you are here to defend your country—for it is now *we* who are on the defensive. You are here to protect your parents, your brothers and sisters, your grandparents—your people, your *Volk*. They are depending on you. If the Bolsheviks—the Russian Communist pigs—break through, then they will win the war, and horror beyond imagining

will befall Germany, your homeland." He nodded. "That is all," he said. "Fall out."

More trucks and other vehicles arrived. We prepared to board, awaiting the order. Another whistle squealed; then the voice of an *Obergefreiter*, a lance corporal, belled.

"*Achtung!*"

Three hundred pairs of heels clicked together. Rifles clattered in unison as the entire company snapped to attention, ramrod straight.

In the black uniform of the SS, an overweight, bespectacled officer made his way to the forefront and addressed us, his voice loud and high-pitched: "You will be reinforcing and resupplying the 15th Rifle Corps of the Fourth Division at Tarnapol, in the Soviet Union. The Fourth Division has suffered heavy casualties, and battalion headquarters there remains under siege. For almost three months we have held firm and repelled the Russian assaults. But our men are malnourished and running low on munitions. It is your job to help reinforce our troops there and to bring in badly needed supplies. Be alert at all times. Contingents of the Russian army and partisans will undoubtedly be encountered on the road ahead. *Heil* Hitler!" He saluted rather indifferently, then, hands behind his back, ambled off as if he were suddenly going for a walk, deep in thought. He stopped, turned, and looked at all of us. Then he spoke loudly: "And may God be with you!"

Our platoon climbed aboard the trucks. The canvas sidings were rolled up and tied, and benches were secured to the bed of the vehicle with steel support rods. Wooden crates of supplies went under the seats and in a line down the aisle between the seats. Dobelmann and two other veterans climbed aboard, the three of them hefting a heavy-caliber machine gun and long belts of ammunition. Behind the cab of the truck, the two set the weapon onto a rotating mount. The other trucks in the column were being similarly equipped.

As they worked, arming and locking down the machine gun, I stared at the back of Dobelmann's head. On the back of his scalp was a saucer-size area where little hair grew. The skin was bright pink and wrinkled, and from the folds of the wrinkles sprouted a few black hairs and round, spongy-looking lumps of flesh.

Looking at the man made me ill. I sat down on one of the hard wooden benches, averting my gaze from him. Jakob and I and some of the other boys exchanged glances, silently communicating our revulsion. I did not know it, of course, nor did any of us, that we would soon be seeing things a thousand times worse.

The convoy snaked across the landscape on rutted dirt roads. In the truck, we sat stiffly. All of us were about the same age, except for Dobelmann, who was manning the machine gun behind the cab, and the other two veterans.

Sick with fear, we just sat there, rifles clamped between our knees, rocking with the motion of the truck. Rather than soldiers, we looked like prisoners condemned to death.

The only one of our platoon who seemed unafraid was an athletic-looking boy named Meyer Fassnacht. I heard him say repeatedly that he looked forward to battle. To him, it was all just a grand adventure. He seemed genuinely unafraid.

Our truck carried crated supplies, as did many others. Some trucks carried no passengers, only munitions, piled high under heavy tarpaulins. At the front, rear, and middle of the convoy were armored vehicles, all equipped with fifty-millimeter cannon. Our highest ranking officers rode in Steiners, Jeeplike vehicles. Traveling alongside the trucks and armored cars were two motorcycles, both of which had a sidecar for a passenger, usually a veteran soldier with a sub-machine gun.

Though we saw no sign of the enemy, we did begin to see evidence of war—of battles and bombings. We passed through several small towns, most of them in ruins. Wrecked vehicles, both civilian and military, lay alongside the road. The oddest of these was a Mercedes-Benz convertible. It lay sort of sideways in a pool created by a bomb crater, its back seat filled with brown water in which a quacking duck paddled around.

The few road signs changed from Polish to Cyrillic; we had entered Russia. Off to our right were low, hump-

backed mountains; all else was unbroken flatland, much of it charred black. The air smelled of burned wheat—almost like overdone toast.

A platter-faced young soldier sitting near the front of the truck got up the nerve to ask Dobelmann about what we were seeing—and smelling. He turned his jigsaw puzzle of a face in our direction.

“Before they retreat, the Ivans burn their fields, all their farms and crops, and butcher whatever livestock they cannot take with them. They leave nothing.”

“What’s an Ivan?” a boy with rosy cheeks next to me asked.

“A Russian,” I told him.

“But why do they call them Ivans?”

I explained that Ivan was a common first name in Russia. But by the perplexed expression on the boy’s face I could see he was struggling with the concept. I tried again to explain. Again, he did not get it. His thick-wittedness annoyed me, and I did not explain further. But Rosy Cheeks was not done with me yet. “They also call them Soviets. How come?” he asked.

I explained that Russia was part of the Soviet Union. “The Soviet Union is a Communist country. Russia is one of the so-called republics.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rosy Cheeks.

“Yes, I can see that,” I said sarcastically, and leaned back and closed my eyes.

A moment later Rosy Cheeks asked another question.

I did not answer. My face uplited to the sun, I feigned sleep. The annoying questions finally stopped. I was dozing, thinking about home, when I became aware of a strange droning noise. It sounded like it was overhead, and seemed to be getting closer. At the sudden eruption of yelling and the chatter of machine-gun fire my eyes flipped open.

“*Polikarpovs!*” someone yelled.

Small Russian fighter planes were plummeting toward us. I could see the pilots in the open-cockpit planes and the red-orange blasts of gunfire as they strafed our convoy. With resounding *bangs*, holes were punched in the metal of the trucks; powder-puffs of dust popped up from the road; the rosy-cheeked boy screamed and grabbed his face as hot liquid exploded from the back of his head, drenching me.

“What do I do?”

It was me that screamed this, as I frantically wiped at the gore on me.

A munitions truck ahead of us ruptured and disintegrated in flames.

Our truck veered wildly to the right. A tire blew.

“Out!” screamed jigsaw-puzzle face. Gripping the machine gun mounted behind the cab, Dobelmann’s entire body was vibrating as he fired at the planes. “Get out of the truck, boys!” he yelled again as the heavy vehicle cracked through saplings and slammed to an abrupt stop in a culvert.

It seemed to take a century to get out of that truck.

A few soldiers scrambled over the sides. I tried to go

with them, but Jakob was pushing me from behind. I stumbled over the crates between the seats, then found myself in a logjam of bodies, a tangled crush of scared kids all trying to get out the back of the truck at the same time.

“Move!”

I screamed the word in terror, pushing and punching, frantic to save myself, insane with anger at those in my way. Warmth spread down my legs; I realized I had wet my pants. An instant later, I was knocked sprawling from the truck, and landed heavily, face-first on the hard ground.

Its guns blazing upward, an armored vehicle rumbled past, spewing me with dust. I rolled away to where a number of infantrymen, all kneeling, fired their rifles again and again at the planes. The aircraft, which were quite small and clumsy looking, streaked away, then made long, looping turns.

“Here they come again!” a soldier wearing a mask of dirt yelled. He turned to me and in a confidential tone, as though he were telling me a secret, repeated, “Here they come.”

The Russian aircraft—I counted four of them—were diving at us with their guns blazing. I aimed my rifle skyward, excited at the prospect of firing at the enemy. I pulled the trigger. To my astonishment, nothing happened.

“You’ve got the safety on, idiot!” someone sneered.

By the time I had fumbled the safety off, the planes,

one of them trailing smoke, had already zipped past and were now headed away. The battle, as quickly as it had begun, was over.

I was so filled with disappointment at not having gotten off a single shot that it was a long moment before I turned my attention to the destruction the planes had left in their wake. A peculiar silence had settled over everything; even the cries of men in pain sounded muted and unreal. I stood up, and realized my legs were shaking. I turned in a circle, then leaned against a tree to keep from falling. Numbly, I stared. A small fire had broken out in some brush across the way. One wounded man was crawling away from it; others lay unmoving, singly and in clusters. Most of the trucks were scattered alongside the road, many of them damaged. One truck was continuing on alone, rolling slowly away down the sloping road. Driverless, fully engulfed in flames, its burning tires going round and round like huge pinwheels, it continued on. Nearing the bottom of the hill, it turned on its own, flopped onto its side, then all but disintegrated in a single, monstrous explosion.

“That was really something, wasn’t it!” a soldier near me whooped excitedly.

“Yes,” I said in a monotone, then wandered off amidst other survivors, feeling very strange and confused.

Medics were taking care of the seriously injured, while those with minor wounds just sat in a daze, waiting their turn. I noticed one boy sitting beside the road, blood from

a gashed scalp making it appear as though he were wearing a bright red wig. He was looking around. His eyes met mine, and I made my way to him.

"My name is Erik," I told him, not sure why I was introducing myself.

"Hals Kessler," he said pleasantly, not sounding at all pained or concerned about his wound.

"This is going to hurt a bit, Hals," I said, continuing to wonder at my oddly professional and authoritative tone. I gripped the splinter. I yanked, and a bit of metal about the size of a pencil stub slid free easily. "A little souvenir for you, Hals," I said superciliously, handing him the bloody splinter.

After bandaging Hals's head, I wandered off, feeling very self-satisfied, as if I were some great doctor who had just completed a very complicated bit of surgery. Glass crunched underfoot. I found myself headed down the road, examining bits of burning debris and oversize red pancakes of dirt and blood. Surprising me, a veteran shoved a spade into my hands.

"Get to work." He gestured with his head toward a shallow ravine a short distance from the road.

Spade in hand, I made my way to where a detail of soldiers was working about the lip of the ravine, shoveling dirt onto a bloody jumble of bodies on the bottom. Among them was a boy I had known only as Rosy Cheeks.

Stupid Children

Three trucks had been lost in the air attack. Eleven soldiers had been killed, nine of them conscripts.

"Stupid children. Never even got a chance to fire their rifles."

The words, spoken long ago—by the seemingly deranged man on the troop train—kept going round and round in my head, as did images of Rosy Cheeks and the other boys, now underground, tangled together in death.

There were fewer wounded than it had seemed at first, less than twenty, but seven of these were serious. Shortly after getting underway again, we entered Ovruck, a town where a medical station had been set up in a church. The truck carrying the seven badly injured soldiers pulled off the road and stopped in front of the small church-turned-hospital. As our convoy continued on, headed away from the place, I looked back; I saw something I will never forget. A nurse wearing a blood-smearred rubber apron was making her way toward a smoke-belching incinerator. In her arms was a human leg.

Because of the losses we sustained in the air attack, platoons were reorganized. At his request, Hals Kessler joined ours, the Seventh, and sat next to me on the truck as the convoy wound its way eastward. Head wrapped turban-style with bandaging, he repeatedly thanked me for coming to help him out after he had been wounded. The way he made it sound, I was the greatest person in the world and he owed his life to me.

Though all of Hals's praise and gratitude were undeserved, the two of us soon became fast friends. Jakob and Oskar made it a foursome. As the convoy growled along, Hals worked with the point of his field knife to make a hole in the piece of shrapnel I had removed from his head, then used a boot lace to hang the thing around his neck. He wore it until the day he died.

Our next taste of battle came a few hours after leaving Ovruck, and the church-hospital there. A rocket, fired from a *Panzerfaust*, a bazooka-like weapon, hissed past, no more than a meter above the truck in front of us in the convoy.

Fifty-caliber machine guns erupted all along the convoy, and from the trucks we began firing our Mausers as well. A breathtaking barrage pounded at a cluster of trees in a field off to our right. Again and again I pulled the trig-

ger of my rifle. The trees were shredded by gunfire—as was a man, a partisan, who had been hiding in them. Hit by countless bullets, he did a wild death dance; it was comically hideous, and despite myself, I laughed—ashamed, embarrassed, and puzzled by my strange, inappropriate reaction. Two other figures were suddenly racing across the field. One carried a *Panzerfaust*; the other, a child of about eight or nine, lugged a shell for the weapon. Almost instantly, they met the same fate as the first man, and fell heavily together under the barrage we laid down on them.

“Cease fire!” Dobelmann yelled.

The smell of burned gunpowder and cordite was redolent in the air. The Mauser was hot in my hand. I checked the breech, to make sure the action was clear. I reloaded, wondering if any of my shots had hit anyone.

“That was just a kid that we killed,” intoned Oskar.

“A kid that was trying to kill you,” said Dobelmann, his horrid face half-turned toward us.

Our ultimate destination was battalion headquarters at Tarnapol. Our first glimpse of the place came at night and when we were still some twenty-five kilometers from it. Suddenly ahead, and far to the east, there was a series of false sunrises. What we were seeing was a distant artillery barrage. First came multicolored flashes of light; then faint rumbling sounds, like rolling peals of thunder, fol-

lowed. Nervous eyes, hooded by helmets, exchanged glances. I held my Mauser tightly. Though the night was cool, my hands were sweating terribly. I felt like I was wearing wet gloves.

Later that night we reached a supply dump in a densely wooded area. The place, under heavy guard, consisted of hundreds of boxes stacked to different heights, and looked like a scale model of a small city. Dobelmann ordered us off the truck, and then began talking with a master sergeant, a tough-looking little man who seemed to be in charge of the place.

"Gilburt," said Dobelmann. "You do not recognize me, do you?"

"Rolf!" said the man, peering closer in the dark. "Is that you?"

"Yes—what a grenade made of me." The two began talking about old times, the master sergeant keeping his eyes averted from Dobelmann's face.

In a shack, lit by a single yellow-glaring kerosene lamp, I could see men, soldiers. One was sound asleep, curled up in a corner; another was trying to read something by the yellow light; most just sat, their arms clasped around their legs and their heads resting on their knees. One of them looked up; his glance seemed to fix on me. I looked away.

More of the trucks from our convoy arrived at the sup-

ply dump, most of them piled high with munitions. Our drivers joined those in the shed. Some of the trucks were already fully loaded with supplies; others, just vacated by us, were relatively empty. On orders from Dobelmann and other *Felds*, we loaded all the trucks with as many crates as they could carry. Some of the crates contained food, clothing, and medical supplies. Most contained munitions—bullets, mortars, mines, and artillery shells—and weighed a ton.

As soon as a truck was completely loaded, the master sergeant called out a name, and a soldier emerged from the yellow glow of the shed. Their expressions varying from grim to terrified, they climbed behind the wheel and drove off, headed for various units of the Fourth Division in and around Tarnapol.

I talked to one of the drivers as he awaited his turn to leave. I do not remember his name. His voice quivering with nerves, he told me that he and the other drivers were from a "punishment brigade." Men in such units, for some infraction of the rules, were denied leave and mail from home, ate last, and were given the most hazardous duty. In this case, they were being made to drive trucks containing large amounts of explosives, often almost straight through enemy lines. No more than half of them were expected to make it.

We finished up at about three in the morning. All of the trucks had departed. We undid our bedrolls, lay down wherever we could, and soon fell into an exhausted sleep.