



Part Three

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Into the Void

We backtracked over scorched, blackened land, searching for Zoya. The hills looked like huge heaps of charcoal; the trees like fat, blackened poles. Now and then a previously untouched sprig, bush, or clump of grass would erupt in flame.

We found Zoya's body curled up in a ball near a rocky outcropping. With our hands, we dug a shallow grave, then covered it with stones. Tamara's eyes glistened with tears as she, Sergo, and I stood over Zoya's grave.

In the near distance we heard artillery. Nervous, on the lookout for danger, we headed in the opposite direction. No one spoke. The only sound was the shuffling of our feet as we plodded along through thick ash. We choked on thin, powdery clouds of the stuff constantly being kicked up as we walked. It got in our eyes, mouths, and noses. The whole earth, it seemed, stank of fire; and our bodies, too, were permeated with the stench. Overhead, a warm sun bore down. Black rivulets of sweat dribbled down our faces, necks, and arms. Tamara's hair was singed and

heat-curling. The back of my right hand was brown-red with cooked blood from a cut. We had no food or water, no supplies of any kind, and no equipment other than Sergo's rifle and a small pocketknife he carried.

We came upon a deer that had been killed by the fire. It may sound revolting, but the animal was already cooked and ready to eat, which we did. Sergo then butchered it as best he could with his small knife. We set off again, each of us carrying a leg of venison.

We crossed a grassy plateau, wary of any troops that might be in the area. A steep, pine-covered slope gave way to a broad valley and then to marshy flatland. A putrid odor rose from the muck through which we found ourselves slogging, foul water welling up underfoot and seeping into our shoes and boots. Clouds of mosquitoes and almost invisible mites stung us relentlessly.

Thirst began to drive us crazy. All around us was water—stagnant, slimy, and covered with yellow-green skins of algae.

"No, Sergo."

Sergo had dropped to his knees and was about to drink the wretched stuff.

"No," said Tamara again. "That water is like poison." She grabbed him gently by the collar and pulled him to his feet.

After crossing an especially large and rank-smelling bog, we found ourselves stopped by a dense thicket of

cane. We made a detour up a short, rocky incline, and were greeted by a soothing breeze whispering through a forest of tall, gray-barked oak trees. Shortly we came to a small stream. We drank thirstily and washed our hands and faces in the cool, clean water.

Feeling better, we got underway again. As I moved along, eyes fixed on my feet, I found myself studying small patches of sunlight on the ground. They changed shape, expanded and contracted each time the leaves stirred overhead. Sometimes a shaft of light would dart like a yellow arrow across the ground, then retract; golden specks would appear, grow in size, jump around, then suddenly vanish. I recalled a game I had played as a boy. On a hike through the woods, a friend of mine named Kurt Olsen and I had arranged a race in which we were not allowed to step on the spots of sunlight.

"What are you doing?"

I looked at Tamara and was suddenly embarrassed. Without realizing it, I had been stepping over spots of sunlight.

Unsmiling, Tamara arched a brow in question. "What was all that about?"

Blushing, I explained about the boyhood game. "I didn't even realize what I was doing," I said. "I forgot myself for a second."

"How does a person forget what they don't remember?" she mused, the comment tinged with sarcasm.

"It's a quickly acquired skill—under difficult circumstances," I replied.

The trees began to thin. Spindly saplings replaced the huge, old oaks and elms. We found ourselves picking our way down a hot, winding slope, grabbing hold of saplings and bushes for support. The sound of rushing water greeted our ears. Ahead, through the trees, we spotted a waterfall—several of them. A granite cliff had been worn away into what looked like four or five chimneys set close together. Water gushed over them and spilled down between them into a large, deep pond.

The three of us tossed our shoes and socks aside on the shore; then, in our filthy clothes, we waded right in until the wonderfully cool water was almost up to our necks. We bathed, letting the water wash away the grime and stink of smoke, and ease the itching from our mosquito bites.

Afterward, we sat and let the sun dry us.

"Where are we?" asked Tamara in a monotone.
"Where are we headed?"

"Southwest," I told her. "That's all I know."

"Perhaps toward German lines?"

"I'd prefer not, since technically I'm a deserter." The tension between us was hard, palpable. I tried to soften it.
"Perhaps somehow we can make it to Switzerland, or some neutral country."

"I want to go to America!" Sergo suddenly exclaimed.

Tamara and I exchanged glances, tacitly communicating our mutual reaction that the notion was absurd. She got to her feet. "Yes," she said, a sardonic edge to her voice. "Yes, let's go to America!"

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Sergo.

My Countrymen, My Enemy

For the next three days we traveled through forest followed by more forest. There were no towns or villages, nor any trace of civilization. We ate the last of our venison. We were tired and hungry. At night we shivered with the cold; during the day we were broiled by the sun.

Finally, late one afternoon, we found ourselves at the edge of a freshly plowed field. In the center a farmer worked slowly with a plow and a sway-backed horse. We eased back into the woods and discussed what to do, finally agreeing that Sergo and Tamara should wait for me while I went to talk to him.

The farmer did not see me until I was only a few meters from him. His head jerked in fear at my approach. At first he looked as though he was going to run away. But in the next instant he fumbled an old revolver from his waistband. "Who are you?" he demanded in oddly accented Russian.

"I'm a medical orderly," I told him. "I don't mean you any harm. I just need a little help."

My Countrymen, My Enemy

"I can't help anybody." The old man looked like a reptile. His skin was tough and weathered into little folds and scaly crisscrosses of wrinkles. His eyes bulged and, like a lizard's, seemed to move independently of each other. "Go away. Leave me alone!"

"I'm lost," I said. "At least tell me where I am."

"Only if you leave here—and quickly! These are dangerous times!"

I nodded.

After learning as much as I could from the strange-looking old man, I returned to Sergo and Tamara.

"We are in the Ukraine," I told them. "About eight kilometers from the Czechoslovakian border. There has been heavy fighting in the area for months."

We headed off. Not wanting the farmer to see us, we circled the field through the woods, eventually emerging on a dirt road. We hurried along it, nervous, wary.

At first I didn't know what I was seeing. We were passing an orchard. High up in leafless trees, items of clothing fluttered, as if they had been washed and hung out to dry. Then we saw shell craters—blasted-out circles in the orchard—and bodies. Many were naked, and I realized the people had literally been blown out of their clothes. I spotted a Russian soldier, his broken body twisted against a tree. Nearby lay two more. Sergo joined me. We went through backpacks, finding food, clothing, bedrolls, and other items. We also found two rifles—only one of which was still usable—and more ammunition than we could carry.

Perhaps an hour later we found ourselves approaching the ruins of a town, the roadway paved with bits of shrapnel. We passed abandoned trenches and machine-gun nests; and everywhere there was wrecked, rusting equipment—cannons, tanks, and vehicles of various kinds. Among these was a colossal, fire-blackened German troop carrier with several rows of seats for soldiers. The sides of the thing were pierced with thousands of bullet holes, giving the contraption the appearance of some sort of huge, wheeled sieve.

The houses and other structures in the town had been turned into one long, mountainous woodpile—all of them reduced to broken planks and boards piled every which way amidst other rubble. Near the end of town was a small hotel, a two-story affair of battered brick and plaster. A winding stairway led nowhere, abruptly ending in midair. Resting on a ragged-edged platform, once part of the flooring of an upstairs room, was a bed. Nearby was a closet in which clothes hung neatly.

A kilometer or more from the town, we came to a shell-pocked stone structure bearing a brass sign reading Pedagogical College.

"It's getting late," said Tamara. "We're tired."

"Yes, tired," said Sergo, a smile revealing decayed and missing teeth.

An oversize door squeaked on its hinges. We filed in through a small lobby and then into the silent ruins of an auditorium. Most of the wooden seats had been torn up,

probably for fuel. On a sagging stage, a huge scarlet curtain hung lopsided.

"This place was used by German soldiers," said Tamara.

"And just about everybody else," I added.

On the walls were comical drawings, mostly obscene but not badly drawn, and there were names and messages by the dozen—in German, Ukrainian, Czech, and Polish. Overall, the place gave the impression of a trash dump. Everywhere, there was litter—broken furniture, empty food tins, and wine bottles, and dank, rotting clothing. There were several large oil drums that had been used as makeshift heaters and stoves.

We opened the tins of food we had found in the Russians' packs, and ate hungrily. We pulled shirts, jackets, socks, and blankets from the packs. We put the clothing on; we covered ourselves with the thin blankets, and were soon fast asleep.

Early the next morning we were off again. Tinged orange by a rising sun, a cool fog blotted out the world. From somewhere far off we heard artillery fire, and from behind suddenly came the sound of heavy footsteps. We hurried off the road; moments later we watched as a long, stretched-out column of weary-looking German soldiers tramped past. In the eerie haze, they looked spectral, like a troop of ghosts.

My palms were wet with perspiration, my mouth dry. I was scared to death of them. I wore a Russian shirt, had a Russian pack on my back, and carried a Russian Simonova rifle. My own countrymen had become my enemy.

Their footsteps faded.

Then they were gone.

I breathed easier. We headed off, past the burnt ruins of a church, and then across fields of dead grass. Ahead, through the mist, I saw a dark-haired little girl sitting on the stoop of a farmhouse. In her lap was a kitten. Smiling, the little girl picked up one of the animal's tiny paws and waved it at us.

"*Dobraye utro. Guten Morgen.*" Good morning, she said to us, first in Russian, then in German.

"*Dobraye utro,*" said Tamara with a smile.

Around midmorning, the fog finally burned off; a spectacular day opened before us. All was quiet and serene, the sky an electric blue spotted with puffy, stationary-looking clouds. The artillery fire we had heard earlier had stopped. As we waded through knee-high grass down a long, winding slope, everything seemed almost too tranquil and beautiful to be true. Several large areas of the slope were covered with colorful sweeps of wild flowers in bloom. Reds, whites, pinks, and purples mingled, quietly ruffled by a soft breeze.

"It's so pretty, isn't it?" mused Tamara, wandering a bit ahead of Sergo and me.

I was about to agree; my eyes happened to fall on a sight that sickens me to this day. Amidst the flowers, sticking out from a grassy mound, were two skeletonized arms from which bits of rotten cloth were hanging. The arms looked as though they were reaching out from the ground for help.

"So beautiful," said Tamara, having walked right past them without noticing.

A pleasantly warm morning became an unbearably hot afternoon. The pack and heavy Simonova rifle began weighing on me. My bad knee ached; I began to lag. Tamara, the Russian army jacket tied around her waist, offered to carry the pack for a while.

I declined her offer.

"Don't be a fool." Stopping me, she quietly slipped the straps off and took the pack.

"Thank you," I said, and then helped her on with the thing.

For the rest of the day we traded the pack back and forth.

The afternoon waned. Finally, the heat began to abate as we found ourselves on a trail leading down through acres upon acres of dead, unharvested corn. Sergo, who

had been ahead of us, stopped; he waited for us to catch up, and then fell in stride.

"When do we get to America?" There was a pouting tone to his voice. He turned his dented head toward me. "How much farther is it to America?" he asked.

"Quite a ways ahead," I said, not wanting to tell him it was thousands of kilometers away, and across the sea. "We have a lot of walking ahead of us. We have to keep pushing on. The faster we go, the sooner we'll get there."

"Oh, okay," he said like a child. "I'll make it. I'm a good walker." He strode ahead, as if to prove he was a good walker and was going to get to his magical destination as fast as possible.

We were making our way down the trail through a cornfield—the dead, head-high cornstalks creating sort of a walled-in walkway. Ahead, at the bottom of the slope, was an open area, and beyond that a dark, cool-looking forest.

"Wait up, X." Tamara had stopped. She pulled off the backpack and, sitting on it, was taking off a shoe.

I made my way back to her and waited as she shook a pebble out of her shoe.

"Are we getting closer?" called out Sergo from a dozen meters or so ahead of us. He had stepped up onto a rocky hummock in the middle of the trail. His rifle yoked across his shoulders, he was squinting, looking off into the distance as though trying to spot America.

A gunshot ruptured the quiet. Sergo staggered back-

ward as his rifle went flying. He landed on his side; his rifle, its stock smashed by a bullet, lay several meters away. Dazed, he was looking at a bloodied hand and trying to get up when a German soldier rose into view in the cornfield. Crunching out from it, he moved slowly toward Sergo. Grinning, he was aiming his rifle at the helpless man.

Sergo's terrified eyes swiveled in our direction.

The German's gaze followed Sergo's. He saw us, but his rifle was still pointed down.

Mine was pointed at him. I fired.

A small, red stain appeared on the soldier's shirt. An expression of surprise on his face, he looked down, then brushed at the stain as though he had just spilled something on himself and was trying to get it off. He dropped his gun, raised his hands, said "don't shoot" in German, then crumpled in a heap.

"X!" Tamara was standing, pointing.

A second German pushed out from the tall corn. I fired. His helmet flew off. He fell and lay there stunned, half-conscious.

"Wo seid ihr zwei?"

Far off, an anxious voice was asking, "Where are you two?" in German.

I looked around, but saw nothing. I looked to where Sergo had been, and then saw his feet disappear as he crawled into the corn and vanished.

"Was ist passiert?"

A German had yelled, "What's happening?" I heard

several more voices, and then the sound of rustling, crackling movement. Through grass and spindly cornstalks, perhaps two hundred meters away, German soldiers were hurrying in our direction. The grass and corn there were shoulder-high, and I could see little of the soldiers except for their bobbing helmets. And if I could not see them very well, I realized, then they probably could not see us or what had happened in the high-walled pathway through the cornfield. Still, they had heard the gunshots and it would only be moments before they were on us. I had to do something—*think* of something—or we would be dead.

“Stay back!” I yelled to them in German. “*Anhalten!* It’s a trap!”

Tamara was staring at me, terror and confusion in her eyes.

“*Deckung! Es ist ein Trick!*” I shouted. Get down!
“*Alle zurückbleiben!*”

Helmets sank from view.

“Follow me!” I hissed at Tamara in Russian.

We raced past the two fallen Germans. And for a time the cornstalks of our walled-in pathway were high enough to hide us. We had almost made it to the forest when the pathway abruptly ended. We stopped. Between the forest and us was now a long stretch of open ground. Tamara looked toward the forest, then to me, with her eyes asking me what we should do.

“We’ll have to run for it!” I panted. I glanced back at a grassy patch of hillside. I saw a helmet; then, like some sort of surrealistic garden, scores of German soldiers suddenly sprouted on the grassy slope.

“There!” yelled one of them. “*Da drüben!* Down there!”

A single gunshot popped.

“Run!” I yelled, and then we were racing across the stretch of open ground.

From behind us came the *brrrrp* of an automatic weapon. Bullets snapped past. There were shouts in German, the sound of fast, noisy footfalls coming down the hill, and then a flurry of rifle fire. Tamara and I stumbled into the forest as bullets punched into trees and kicked up little sprays of dirt and gravel. “Get them!” screamed a voice not far behind us.

Tamara and I were now racing through the forest. Bullets lashed at the vegetation overhead, showering us with shredded leaves. We zigzagged, then scrambled off in a different direction, along a dry streambed. There was another burst of automatic weapons fire, but it was behind us and far off to our right.

The Germans, it seemed, had lost our trail.

Gasping for breath, we slowed our pace. We left the streambed and found ourselves picking our way through tangles of briar and heavy brush. I realized I no longer had my rifle, and wondered vaguely where I’d left it. The pack,

too, was gone—left back on the pathway through the cornfield.

The ground became muddy and soft. We hopped over a tiny, brackish pond, pushed our way through reedlike vegetation, then moved quickly along a narrow pathway—perhaps an animal trail.

We seemed to be alone.

But then the hair suddenly stood up on the back of my neck.

"*Welchen weg?*" "Which way?" an out-of-breath voice huffed.

Terrified, Tamara and I stood riveted in place. The voice was in front of us and only a few meters away.

"*Ich weiss nicht.*" "I don't know," responded another soldier.

"Forget it," said the first voice.

Neither Tamara nor I moved. We stared. No more than ten meters away, two German soldiers stepped into view. If they had turned around, they would have seen us. Instead, they continued on, headed back the way they had come. Crunching away noisily through brush, they disappeared into the woods.

To this day, I do not know how the two got ahead of us. I do not know how they could have missed seeing us. But that is what happened.

For what seemed an eternity, Tamara and I continued to stand stock-still. Then it was as though we came out of a state of paralysis, and together we crawled into an

umbrella-like enclosure of green shrubbery and stumpy, drooping willows. We knelt on moist, springy ground. We waited. We listened. Now and then we could hear voices and footsteps—headed away from us.

Finally, all was quiet. Still, we were afraid. We remained in our hiding place, not speaking, not moving.

The air became cooler. Shadows began to lengthen. Night fell. In silence, Tamara untied the jacket from around her waist and spread it on the ground. We curled up together against the cold. A bat—or perhaps some sort of night bird—flapped by overhead. My head pillowed on my hand, I looked at Tamara. Her eyes were on me; then they closed.

Strangers

Tamara was gone when I awoke. I was in a panic, a thousand thoughts going through my head—until I spotted her a short distance off. Below, in a narrow cleft between low ridges, was a stream—a series of small ponds, really, connected by a snaking, little waterway.

“Good morning,” I said when I had made my way down to her.

“Good morning,” she said quietly, her eyes on the pond beside which she sat.

“When I woke up and didn’t find you,” I said, “I was afraid you’d left. I thought you’d headed for home, or something.”

“What home?” she said flatly. She looked up. “You were worried that I was gone? Why would that matter to you?”

“Because it would,” I said, suddenly angry. “It would matter a lot.”

She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then returned her gaze to the water.

I knelt by the pond. I cleaned up cuts and scrapes,

Strangers

washed my hands and face, and drank my fill of water—my breakfast. I flicked water off my hands, then I dried my face and hands on the Russian tunic I was wearing.

“You were very smart, very brave, yesterday,” said Tamara.

I said nothing in response.

“Sergo got away safely because of you, and so did we.” Looking at the water, she moved a finger across the surface as though drawing a design on it.

“I hope Sergo made it,” I said.

“The first German, the one that shot Sergo, is dead, isn’t he?”

“I think so.”

“What did you yell in German to them?” she asked without looking up. “How would you know what to say?”

I wondered how much she really knew, how much she had already figured out. Then I exhaled the truth. “I’m a German. I was wounded and ended up behind Russian lines. I am—I *was*—a German soldier.”

She grimaced, then slowly nodded in understanding.

“After that morning, when I burned myself . . .” My words trailed off.

“I knew then,” she said, her voice hard. “But I didn’t know for sure *what* I knew—only that you were German.”

“Why didn’t you turn me in?”

I didn’t know what to do.” She was scrutinizing me. “I still don’t.”

“Do what you have to.”

"What's that?"

"Survive."

A cool morning wind whispered through the culvert, tossing and rustling the leaves of bank-side trees. Most of the trees were leaning inward, as if trying to hear what we were saying.

"You fooled me for a long time. You fooled everyone."

I looked at her but said nothing.

"Who are you?"

"I'm really not sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That I'm a little confused—about who I am, I mean."

I smiled broadly, offensively so.

She slapped her hands against her knees, then got to her feet. "Your amnesia—that was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And your grandparents," she scoffed. "Your *Russian* grandparents. That was a lie, too!"

"No, that part *was* true," I said, fighting my own welling anger "They *are* Russian, and I happen to love them very much! They emigrated to Germany."

"You had started to remember, you said. You told me so many things. The restaurant. You lived above a restaurant."

"We did—we *do*. Our apartment is above our restaurant—the *Küche Apfelsine*, the Orange Kitchen." I shrugged. "But the restaurant is in Germany, in the town of Vilsburg."

Anger flaring in her eyes, she put a hand to her long hair and flipped it to one side. "Start over," she said demanding. "Who are you?"

I looked down at my identity number, stenciled in blue ink on the top of my orderly's smock. "I am," I said, "Aleksandr Dukhanov, medical orderly—temporary, Fifth Service Regiment, Southwest Sector."

Tamara glowered. "Tell me!"

"Is that an order?"

Her tone softened. "*Please* tell me."

I started at the beginning. I told her everything. I told her my name. I told her about my family, about Vilsburg, about being in the *Jugend*, about being drafted as a so-called interpreter, and ending up on the front lines. I told her about killing Russians at the battle of Tarnapol, and about the Russians executing German soldiers. I described things I had seen, awful things.

She sat quietly.

I told her about the Jewish people, and about the deaths of Rosy Checks, Hals, Oskar, and of others whose names I never knew. There were tears in my eyes. Embarrassed, I brushed them away.

"A Nazi crying," she said, her tone noncommittal. "Something I never expected to see."

"Yes, I *am* crying," I said, biting my words, trying to control a sudden surge of fury. "I admit that I am capable of crying. But I am *not* a Nazi—a member of the *National*

Socialist party! Most Germans aren't, including my family and I!"

"Oh," said Tamara, a genuine look of surprise on her face.

"The Nazis control our bloody government and even bloodier military. They give the orders. We do what we are told—mostly because we are weak." I picked up a stone and flipped it into the stream.

"Yesterday you killed a German."

"I'm not proud of it."

"You killed him to protect me and Sergo, two Russians."

"And to protect me—a German." I held out my hands in two claws of futility. "I don't want to kill *anybody!*"

"I don't even know you, do I?"

"Then we are both confused on the same subject!"

"You were good. You were so good with the patients. You cared, or seemed to."

"I *did* care!"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "But they were Russians."

"So what?" I snapped.

Her dark eyes blinked.

"So they were Russians. Russians, Germans—what's the difference!"

She looked at me. The only sound was the soft, redundant music of the stream.

Skeletons in the Forest

We followed the stream, expecting it to feed into a river. Instead, it ended in a brackish, dead-looking pond. We backtracked; we took what we thought was a shortcut and found ourselves entering a deepening forest. Sun sparkled through the green canopy high overhead, like stars on huge Christmas trees.

"Where are we?" asked Tamara.

"Lost, I'm afraid."

A formation of planes droned somewhere far above. I looked up through towering trees. Striped by long, thin shadows, I felt like a bird in a cage. I looked back at Tamara. The shadow of a plane flickered over her.

The terrain was rugged. Hour after hour, day after day, we plowed through desolate woods, picked our way along rocky gorges, scaled steep, craggy slopes. Our bodies grew increasingly stiff and weary; our feet were blistered and bleeding from stumbling through briars and over

sharp stones in our worn-out, ratty shoes. As we traveled, we searched for something—anything—to eat, now and then finding wild blackberries, dandelion roots, and mushrooms in the undergrowth. We slept under the boughs of fir trees, under jutting rocks, in rocky cul-de-sacs—once in a small cave.

The hunger, cold, and exhaustion—because of them, our minds began to wander. Sometimes Tamara and I had to hold hands just to make sure we didn't separate. Sometimes I saw things, and heard things: "Just come home alive, boy." That is what my grandpa had said to me at the station in Nuremberg when I'd left for the front. In my mind, I could see his face, and those of all my family.

In a valley we came upon the site of a small, long-forgotten battle, one that probably had taken place many months before. There had been, it seemed, no survivors—no one to bury the dead. Here and there, amidst the rocks and trees, lay skulls and whole soldiers of bone in ragged uniforms. Animals and insects had feasted on them; the weather had faded and rotted the uniforms white, indistinguishable. Broken and rusted weapons were scattered about, none of which were usable. In the moldering backpack of one of the skeletons, we found matches and tins of food. Bullets had pierced two containing what appeared to have once been plums; the contents were rotten. One tin was untouched. And upon opening it we found spiced ham. I immediately cut it in half, and we ate—gobbled it. I

burped and immediately excused myself. "You have such fine manners—especially under the circumstances!" She laughed, then her eyes traveled the field of skeletons.

The boots of the dead were a little better than our own footwear. We threw away our worthless shoes and put on the best of the boots, stuffing them with rags to ease the pain in our feet and, because they were too large, to make them fit a little better.

I picked up the skull. "Thank you for the boots, friend. *Mein Freund!* Or are you Russian, *Karoshi druk?*"

Tamara, eyes sunken, laughed giddily.

I patted the uniformed skeleton on the back. "Thank you, Ivan! Or is it Heinrik?" I looked at his boots on my feet. "Good *German* boots, I see, Heinrik! Jackboots—hobnailed! The finest boots in the world!"

"I think we're going to end up as just two more piles of bones in this forest," said Tamara that night as we huddled by a small fire. She coughed raggedly.

It was with quiet surprise the next morning that we emerged from the trees to see rolling fields and farmhouses stretching far into the distance. One moment we were in one world; then, without warning, only half-believing it, we were in another. It seemed like a fantasy.

Near the tree line was a white, tidy farmhouse and a huge barn. A white fence surrounded a large pasture where cows and horses grazed.

A rising sun bathed the fields and farms in pinks and yellows.

A fantasy world—that is what it was. A pretty picture in my mind. Not until my hand pounded on a door did I hear and feel the reality.

The door opened a crack.

“Yes, what do you want?” demanded a middle-aged man in German, standing in the doorway, peering out at us. Behind him, a tall teenage girl looked at us over his shoulder.

“We’ve come a long way,” I replied in German. “We are hurt, ill, and very hungry. We need help.”

The man looked at us suspiciously. Our clothes were in tatters, blood had soaked through from our many cuts and scratches, and our hair was greasy and matted with dirt. I had a scraggly beard, and my throat was so dry and my lips so chapped it was difficult to speak.

“You are Russian,” he said. “You wear Soviet army tunics!”

“*Wir sind Deutsch.*” I told him that we were German, and tried to explain how we had come to be wearing Russian military shirts.

“I don’t know who you are,” he huffed. “Go away!”

The door slammed in our faces.

Behind the walls, the man and the girl began to argue. The girl wanted to help; the man, who seemed to be her father, wanted no part of us. “Either the boy’s a deserter, or the two of them are Jews—who escaped from one of the camps. They can only bring trouble!”

Tamara and I were headed away when suddenly we heard a side door open. The girl rushed over and shoved an apple and half a loaf of bread in our hands.

“Thank you,” Tamara said feebly.

“Where are we? What country?” I asked.

“Czechoslovakia, near Nachod,” she said, and hurried back inside.

Eating the bread, we continued across a field, stumbling wearily over fresh-plowed earth. Not far from the first farm, we found a barn. No one seemed to be around. We made our way in, then up a ladder, and climbed far back into a cozy loft. Covering ourselves with hay, we fell into a deep sleep. When we awoke, it was to the sound of men’s voices below. It was dark; faint light from a lantern moved along gray wooden walls. Terrified of being discovered, we scarcely breathed, let alone moved. Finally, the men left. When we were sure they were gone, we stole away into the night.

This became a pattern for us. We traveled at night, avoiding roads. From fields and gardens we took onions, strawberries, and potatoes. During the day we slept in barns, patches of woods, and haystacks—and once in a

was a large town. And nearby, up the road, was a very large, impressive-looking house surrounded by a high stonewall. Tamara and I sat down on a curbing. How long we sat there, I don't know. But I began to feel better and my mind seemed to clear.

"What do we do now, X?" Tamara asked.

"We'll go into town." I got to my feet.

Tamara looked up at me but continued just to sit there.

Puttering up the roadway came a strange-looking car. The thing was small, humpbacked in shape, the body domed in corrugated metal. At the wheel was a heavysset old woman. She brought the odd vehicle to a stop in front of a wrought-iron gate in the wall surrounding the house. She glanced my way.

"Could you please open the gate for me?" she asked in German, then repeated herself in a language I didn't know.

"Yes, ma'am," I answered, and then with considerable difficulty managed to open the twin halves of the heavy gate.

Tamara got to her feet. She was bone-thin, pale, and wheezing.

"You're ill," said the woman in her sort of lilting German.

Tamara, not understanding, looked to me.

I leaned forward, down to the open window. "Please help us," I said. "We are so tired and hungry and we can't think straight anymore."

"Who are you?"

"We are from a medical unit," I answered. "I don't know where any of the others are. I think most of them are dead."

Little blue eyes in a big pink face looked us over. Gears shifted raggedly. "Well, we can't have you dead, too!" she said. "Come, come. Get in the car."

We got in. The funny-looking car growled up the steep driveway, navigated a sharp turn, and then pulled to a stop in a pretty courtyard in front of a large, pinkish-looking stuccoed house.