

A scenic photograph of a forest stream. The water flows over mossy rocks, creating small cascades. The ground is covered with fallen autumn leaves in shades of brown, orange, and yellow. The background is filled with lush green foliage and trees.

LUCY BECKETT

*The* LEAVES

*are* FALLING

A NOVEL

IGNATIUS





# THE LEAVES ARE FALLING



LUCY BECKETT

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*For my grandchildren  
Rufus, Joe, and Matilda Brooks  
Emily and Max Warrack  
Alfred Warrack*

## Herbst

Die Blätter fallen, fallen wie von weit,  
als welkten in den Himmeln ferne Gärten;  
sie fallen mit verneinender Gebärde.

Und in den Nächten fällt die schwere Erde  
aus allen Sternen in die Einsamkeit.

Wir alle fallen. Diese Hand da fällt.  
Und sieh dir andre an: es ist in allen.

Und doch ist Einer, welche dieses Fallen  
unendlich sanft in seinen Händen hält.

Rainer Maria Rilke

## Fall

The leaves are falling, falling as from far,  
as if in distant skies gardens were dying;  
they fall reluctantly, denying death.

And through the nights there falls the heavy earth  
from all the stars into forsakenness.

We all are falling. This hand here is falling.  
And look, the other: all that is, is falling.

And yet there's One who gently in his hands  
holds to eternity all things that fall.

## The Singular

The Prince of This World governs number.  
The singular is the hidden God's dominion,  
The Lord of rescues and exception's Father.

Czeslaw Milosz

## Prologue I

One day not long ago she received a letter which surprised her very much. The letter was written in a foreign hand, a little uneven but with no mistakes or corrections, and not difficult to read. It was perhaps a fair copy.

*Dear Madam,*

*(Or possibly Doctor or Professor—please forgive me. I do not know which is correct.)*

*I have yesterday finished reading your book. It has very much moved me, as you will imagine when I tell you that I am the son of Dr Jacob Halpern. I understand, naturally, that you have told only a story, a story which it must have cost you much labour to write, since so long a time has passed. Such things did happen, however. Not only such things but these things, so far as I know, which is not so far.*

*I would be most grateful to meet you, most grateful and also most privileged. I live, as you see, in west London, and I am sorry to say that I am too lame to travel because stairs in the Underground and in the station are difficult for me. If you should by chance be in London and could spare for me a short time, would you possibly be so kind as to visit me here one day? I could tell you of some later things that happened which would, I think, interest you. I remember much, which for many years I did not understand, which I do not altogether even now understand, and I have myself had many hours to read. My eyes, thanks be to God, as the old are still permitted to say, see well.*

*You will forgive this letter from a very old stranger, and you will perhaps visit me if you should have the opportunity.*

*With apology and many thanks,  
Joseph Halpern*

Five days after she read this letter, they were sitting in shabby, comfortable chairs that did not match, on either side of an ancient gas fire in a sitting

room lit by the evening sun. His flat was the ground floor of a house in a quiet street between the Uxbridge Road and the Goldhawk Road. The street had taken her some time to find; she had walked from the tube station with an old A to Z open in her hand. She liked the street, wide, peaceful, with brick and stucco houses, probably early Victorian, set back in pairs. There were roses, not out yet, shrubs, dead daffodils, and sometimes tulips in the small front gardens except where cars, instead, were squeezed into now-paved spaces. Outside the two windows of his sitting room, facing the street, there was no car but a lilac bush coming into bloom and a straggly forsythia, its flowers over, that no one had pruned for years. Then a low wall. Then the pavement. And the sunshine. His room—bookcases stacked with too many books, an upright piano with piles of music and a violin in its case—also had the basics of a small, tidy kitchen in one back corner. Did the door in the other lead to his bedroom, his bathroom, windows onto the garden? From trees she had seen from the street, she knew there were long gardens behind the houses.

The street was going up in the world. Most of the houses were still quite scruffy, like his, but a few were smartened up with newly painted stucco and security devices in their bright front doors. Several had skips on the road in front of them, full of debris from demolished walls and the odd ripped-out fireplace or dismantled cupboard. Builders, Poles perhaps, or Ukrainians, with power tools, lengths of flex winding out of windows, and strong lights here and there, were working, or not. It was the middle of the afternoon as she walked down the street looking at the house numbers. Three workmen, smoking as they lounged against a wall, had taken a break to watch the women, young and not-so-young, mothers or nannies, black, white, Asian, some with babies in pushchairs and three-year-olds on scooters, as they walked to wait for older children outside a primary school at the distant end of the street. She lived in a village a long way from London. She liked his street.

She liked him. Standing an hour ago at his front door, listening as someone—he—came slowly to let her in, she was reassured—was she a gullible fool to have believed in that letter?—by the label beside the lower of the two bells at the door: “Halpern”, typewritten on a yellowing piece of paper under slightly bulging cellophane in a small brass frame. It had been there for years, decades probably. When he opened the door, he was so exactly what she had expected, hoped, that she smiled, could not for a moment speak.

“Come in, please.”

“Thank you.”

Small, thin, an old, wrinkled face. Black, intelligent eyes, smiling, inquisitive. A black beret. White hair under the beret. An old, dark jumper. The collar of a checked shirt that looked too English for him. A stick.

“Come. Follow me, please. I am slow.”

He limped, his stick keeping him upright, a yard or two along a passage to an open door. His back was straight, his left leg obviously unreliable and probably painful.

“Here. I am sorry my house is not so tidy. Sit down, please. I will make coffee.”

Slowly, he did. She sat still until she saw him pour the coffee.

“Do you like sugar?”

“No, thank you. Let me carry the cups.”

“Thank you.”

They sat.

“It is kind of you to come. My letter surprised you?”

“Of course. And pleased me very much. I was so glad—I had thought—”

“You had thought that there was no one of my family alive. Very nearly there was no one. Why I was alive at the end of the war I did not know then. I do not know now. Chance, luck, providence, God—they become more favourable, you see, as one wonders—but chance, I think, colourless chance, is all I can be sure of.”

“But how very good that you were, alive at the end of the war. That you are alive now, and well. Are you reasonably well?”

He laughed. “That is an excellent English question. You mean to ask how old am I, and given that I am so old, how do I do? But you are too tactful to use such words.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. By no means. You must not apologize. It is the obvious question you should ask. I shall be eighty-two in September.”

He smiled as he watched her do the sum in her head.

“Yes. I was born in 1929, a year and a half or so after my father left Breslau. You did not know—or, if you allow me to say more exactly, you did not guess—that my father had a girl he loved in Breslau, a girlfriend, you would say. She was a nurse in his hospital. Doctors love

nurses, nurses love doctors—it is universal, I think, and why not? She was a Jewess of course, but German, not Russian or Polish or whatever my father thought he was by then, though always he was a Litvak, a Lithuanian Jew I should say, and she was not. She followed him to Vilna. It was easy for a well-trained German nurse to be given a job in the Jewish hospital there. So, soon they married, and one year later or so, I was born.”

“Was your grandfather still alive?”

“He was. I remember him. He died in 1936, thanks be to God. He simply died, as one does. As one should.”

“And how long have you lived in England?”

“More than sixty-five years.” He watched her do another sum. “Not long after the war I arrived. Again, chance, providence, et cetera, whichever it has been. There is here a story, a complicated story, which . . . May I offer you some more coffee?”

“No, thank you. Your coffee is very good.”

“One of my last indulgences. Another is . . . Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Of course not.”

“I smoke very little these days. I promised the doctor. She is a good girl. But now and then a cigarette is very good.”

He got to his feet with some difficulty, took a nearly full packet of Gauloises and a box of matches from the mantelpiece, sat back in his chair, and lit a cigarette.

“Yes. Very good.”

“Which—you were saying—a complicated story which?”

He looked at her with his bright, smiling eyes.

“Which I want you to tell.”

“What? But—”

“I know. You are busy. You have other books to write. You are not so young. Not so old as I am, naturally, but not so young either.”

“It’s not that, not at all. It’s just that—”

“I shall guess. Allow me. You do not know me, as you knew Max Hofmann, even though you were only a schoolgirl when he died, again simply died, like my grandfather, in his own bed. Many books you will have to read so as to understand a time and a place which are lost and which have never been interesting in England—not now, I fear, interesting to anyone, anywhere, except to a few very old people, like me. The time perhaps to historians is interesting. The place perhaps to those

who live there. But not both together. For example, a nice girl, whose name is Ona, comes twice a week for one hour to help me a little—to tidy me up, iron my shirts, and so forth. This girl is Lithuanian. She was born in Vilna—to her of course it is Vilnius—in the 1980s, I suppose, so in the USSR. She is happy now to be a citizen of the European Union so that she may work in London and send every month a little money home. But she has no idea, not the least little idea, of the past of her own city, the glorious, the terrible, past. Perhaps that is good. Why burden the young with knowledge when they live quite happily without it? She thinks I am English, more or less, like all the different people she might meet in London, in the streets, in the shops, and by now I admit I am even to myself English, more or less. Less, you think? You are right. I do not tell her I am a Jew. I think this is still not a word that is”—he paused—“welcome in Lithuania.

“As for the English themselves—I know from my grandchildren, who do well, who have been to English schools, who are as English as anyone else, as English as you, for example, that in school they have learned exactly nothing of the eastern Europe that there was. Of Hitler they learn a lot; of Stalin they learn a little; of Auschwitz they know; of Churchill and the Blitz and El Alamein and D-day of course. But of the fact that between Germany and Russia a world was destroyed—of that they learn nothing. They do not know even the map. And when I try to tell them, my grandchildren—who are grown up now so it is too late—only a very little of the old time, of how things were when I was a boy, it is to them as if I talk of ancient history, something in a book they are not interested to read. And yet I think that possibly—”

“You think that possibly in the story, your story, there is something not to be lost?”

He looked at her for some time before answering.

“Your question makes me ashamed. These different people in the streets and the shops in London—in every one of them, and most of all in the old, like me, is a story. The old Sikh in his turban whom I meet in the paper shop. The old black woman, with her beautiful Jamaican speech, who takes her three grandchildren every day to school along this street—the naughty boy who runs ahead is called Michael. The old Italian who has a stick, like me, not that he is so lame; he has flat feet. On a bench in the park one day he told me he was a waiter all his life, in the Savoy, so grand. From a village, from a back street, somewhere in the

world, they came once upon a time, these old people, and at last they are in London, where the tide has floated them to this beach, a beach which is not so bad. Often not so good, but always not so bad. Every one a story. So why does mine deserve to be told when theirs, most likely, will never be? I don't know."

"Maybe because it is yours? I think that is a good enough reason—as it would be for any of them. For anyone."

Another long look.

"All right. Yes. You have understood, I think—as you also understood once before. But there is something else. This story is not so much mine but the story of some others, better and braver than I. There is a line of Mickiewicz . . . Do you know Polish?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Let me think. Yes. 'If I forget about them, then you, God in heaven, forget about me.' His line, more or less. I know you understand. Yes?"

"I think so."

"So—"

"So will I try, again? Perhaps I will. But it must depend on you, on what you can tell me."

"Ah."

He lit another cigarette.

"This is against all my rules, this cigarette. But this is a highly exceptional day."

She waited, again.

"I will give you some names, some dates, some facts. Among these facts are some which for many years I did not discover—and one or two which are guesses only, and so will stay. I think it is better if I write them down. There are memories of which I have never spoken. Of them I could not now speak without . . . without difficulty."

"Your wife?"

A steady look.

"I am sorry . . . I shouldn't have . . ."

Then a smile.

"Do not apologize. My wife, yes. She died a long time ago, twenty years or so. She had cancer. It was a cruel death, but the cruelty was not the cruelty of people. There is a very great difference. The people were most kind. Only the disease was cruel. Yes, my wife knew me, loved me of course, as I was. She did not know me as I had been; nor in those days

did I know myself. I wished to forget. I did not discuss with her what I wished to forget. Also—how can I say?—she was so much an English woman, so beautiful also when she was young, and even she inherited some money that was her own. It was a miracle that she wanted me, married me. I did not wish her to pity me also. I was no longer the boy in the forest. I was not yet the old man who remembers the forest. Do you perhaps understand?”

“Perhaps. I think I may.” She hesitated. “The forest?”

“A real forest, very far from England. Also a forest of the mind. You will imagine.”

“And your children. Do they know the story? Have you . . . ?”

“I have not. My son—I have one son only. He has made much money in a business I do not understand. He belongs to the new world. In airports he talks to two people at the same time on different telephones. I know because occasionally one of them is me. Old Europe does not interest him. God, with his ways deep in mystery and grief, does not interest him. He has two children, grown up now; I said I have tried, when they were children, and intelligent children, to interest them a little in old Europe, but I could not. It is for them too far away, too long ago, too full of things they cannot understand and do not wish to learn. My granddaughter tells me I should buy a computer. Then she can e-mail me. Why? I prefer to see her if she has a little time. She is the one who will read your book.”

“But . . .”

“But you do not think you have agreed to write this book. I think you have.” He smiled, his winning smile. “Curiosity. Is not this the first step? You know, I met him, Max Hofmann.”

“You knew him? I had no idea. How did you find him?”

“He found me. It was chance again, luck, whatever you like. He came into the shop where I worked. It was not an ordinary shop but a shop for music, old music, old books about music, composers’ letters, all sorts of stuff.” He waved a hand at the crowded shelves. “And so not very surprising that he, a musician, should come in. He asked my name because he thought . . . well . . . you will see all this, and much more. So easily I might not have been myself. But I was. In its way another miracle.”

The doorbell.

He looked at his watch.

“Ah. This is Ona, the good Lithuanian child who will wash the cups and sweep the floor and iron two shirts today. Be so kind—will you open the door? Before Ona comes—a moment.”

She stood, and turned towards him. He looked at her with the full force of his eyes—his soul, she thought later.

“I thank you for your visit. And for what you will do. The much work, and the book. I will write to you these facts.”

She saw he looked very tired.

“Don’t get up. Good-bye. And it is for me to thank you. For your letter, for allowing me to come to see you, for asking me—thank you so very much.”

They shook hands.

The doorbell again.

“Good-bye.”

As she turned in the doorway for a last look, he smiled.

“No e-mails.” she said.

“No e-mails.”

## Chapter 1

Later, when he had for some time been living more or less alone in London, he was grateful—to what? to whom?—that for his first two years in England he had found himself in the north, in the country. One reason was that it was there—because it was quiet and the days and weeks and months went by in a safe pattern—that he did actually find himself. Not suddenly, not all at once, but bit by bit, with much left unfound for other times, other places. To find oneself: it was more than a turn of phrase, a spent metaphor. Much more—it was a verb, to find, with an object, oneself, to be found. Afterwards he thought he began to find himself the morning he woke in an unfamiliar place and slowly remembered how and why he was there, wherever it was—he hadn't heard the name properly and so couldn't remember it—and realized that he was neither cold nor afraid.

Keep still. Don't move. Can it last? If it lasts even for a few weeks, that will be very good.

That morning, in that warm bed, he came to. Another English phrase. Came to what? The day? The world? Himself, again? Anyway, he came to, and he discovered, tentatively and then surely, that what he had come to was warm, and it was quiet.

What a language. Which then, of course, he had very little of. Some words and phrases he had learned at the lake, from an old Jewish woman who had lived in England for many years. She came every day for three weeks and taught some useful bits of English to the children whose only language was Yiddish. He knew, more or less, four languages, but it didn't seem necessary or sensible to say so, and Yiddish was one of them so he joined the others. He learned how to greet people, thank people, ask people to explain slowly; the days of the week; how to count; about pounds, shillings, and pence. Not that they had seen any English money except for the coins and notes she showed them, passing them round among the children, who sat on chairs arranged in a circle three rows

deep in what seemed to be some kind of big classroom. The youngest children learned the fastest, and after a few days she could even get them to laugh. One little girl of five or six reminded him of his sister—but his sister would have been much older by then, ten years old if only she had lived. The little girl cried when the others laughed, so the old woman picked her up and sat her on her knee, took a handkerchief from her pocket, dried the child's eyes, and told her to blow her nose, which she did. The room was still. He and the other children watched. There was not one of them who had not lost his mother, her mother, somewhere, at some time in the war. The little girl sobbed, sniffed, stopped crying, sniffed once or twice more. Had there been someone to comfort his sister when she cried?

One day not long before they all left the lake, climbing into buses with their new clothes in bundles, the Jewish woman called over to her table the oldest of them, about a dozen boys and girls. He thought he might be the oldest of them all, though it was hard to guess. She told them that her friends in Manchester would like to give each of them a dictionary so that, wherever they were going in England, they could learn more of the language, look up words they didn't understand. "What language would you like?" she asked each of them. "Yiddish? Polish? French?" But when he said, "German", she shook her head, so he said, "Polish. Thank you." He didn't try to explain that German was the language of his home because it was his mother's, that Yiddish and Polish were the languages of his world and his city, and that everyone in his family had always known some Russian, for survival among enemies. Without each of these languages, suddenly necessary as each had happened to be now and then—and then again, in the forest—he would certainly have been dead.

Instead of alive, as he found himself this morning, this real morning, warm and comfortable as he kept his eyes open and pushed back sleep and its nightmares, which, in the few weeks since the aeroplane and the knowledge (which he didn't yet trust) that he was safe, still seemed more real than the day because they were memories, not dreams one could choose to end by awakening. But now, this morning, he could lie still—wait for the bell on the alarm clock to ring, as the woman had said, then get up—and feel and think nothing except that he was warm and comfortable. It was the eiderdown, not that he knew the word for it, that made the morning like a gift. The eiderdown was thinner than

the heavier quilt of his childhood, but he was comfortable because there were clean white sheets, and warm because there were blankets, thick woollen blankets, tucked in over him and then the eiderdown on top. He sat up in bed. The surface of the eiderdown, stitched in large squares, had a swirling pattern—blue and red, pink, dark blue, black and white, in curious shapes like large drops of water, which reminded him of the patterns on old shawls he had seen hanging outside certain little shops in the alleys of Vilna. The shawls had been dusty and soft. This quilt, whatever it was called, was bright and clean, smooth cotton under his hands. Who had given it to him? To this foreign boy who had arrived from so far away, who for such a long time had had no bed, no room to sleep in that was his own?

After his sister was born, his father had made half the attic of their house into a room for him, with his books, his violin, his music, the stool he sat on to practise. The attic had a small window from which he could look down into the narrow street, busy with old women with shawls over their heads and shopping bags; children playing; peasants from the country selling potatoes, apples, cabbages, beets from handcarts and baskets; carpenters, tailors, tinsmiths, shoemakers, and saddlers, all working outside their shops if it was fine.

At the lake each of the children had a narrow room, so at least he was alone at night, but they had said at the beginning that they would not be there for long. Under one worn blanket, though it was clean, he was cold on his bed. And the walls were thin, made of some kind of board. The girl in the next room cried every night. Through the wall he could hear her. On the first night he went to see if he could comfort her, but a woman in a uniform had seen him go into the girl's room, and she marched quickly down the corridor to send him back to his own. Each morning he woke to a clatter of plates and cups as a laden trolley, pushed by a stout woman in a flowered overall, rattled past his door, and to voices calling and doors banging as the children were woken.

And now he had been given this eiderdown and this warm bed, with its two pillows in ironed white pillowcases. And there was nothing to hear but quietness. He lay and looked. His bedroom—would he be allowed to stay here for more nights, for many nights?—was low and square, with dark wooden beams in the ceiling. Not too different from his bedroom at home. No books. No music. Of course no violin. A chest of drawers. A little table against the wall. Three hooks, for clothes

he didn't have, on the unpainted wooden door. In Prague someone had taken off him his torn and louse-infested sheepskin coat that had kept him from the worst of the cold through two freezing winters after its owner had been shot in the forest. As he stood in a line with other boys, they had taken all his clothes and shaved his head and puffed white powder all over him. DDT, they said, to kill the lice. They had given him some old clothes that didn't fit him and a thick greatcoat that had belonged to some soldier in some army, but he didn't feel that it was his as the sheepskin had been. The greatcoat was beside his bundle, on the floor—a wooden floor stained almost black, with a rag rug next to the bed.

This much he could see in the daylight, not yet sunshine, from a small window opposite his bed. The curtains, cotton, printed with small flowers quite different from the patterned eiderdown, were closed. He got out of bed and drew the curtains back.

Because it was dark the night before when he arrived, he had no idea what was outside his window. The kind woman had put a lit candle on the chest of drawers by his bed when she left him, and he was so tired that he blew it out and went to sleep almost at once, noticing only the deep quiet, the soothing weight of the covers on his bed, and an owl hooting not far away.

Now he saw that outside was a paddock with dry stone walls, at its far end a wide opening in the wall, with no gate. Beyond were another grassy field and more walls, and a small stone barn without a door or with its door open. There were sheep with black faces in the further field, and a stocky, strong black horse with feathered heels. Then a hillside with small, old oak trees, their leaves papery fawn, and above them on a long upward slope bracken turning tawny—it was the middle of October—then a line of young pines, dark green, almost black against a larch plantation high towards the flat moor, lit to pinkish gold at the very top, where the fading needles of the trees were catching the early sun. So his window faced west.

He opened the window, with some difficulty because it took him a few minutes to work out that half the window frame, with its small square panes, slid sideways across the other half, sticking a bit as it slid. He had never seen a window like it. He breathed in the fresh, chilly air, smelling of wet grass and faintly of smoke. There might have been a light frost. He could hear but not see water running over stones—was a small

stream somewhere nearby? He liked what he saw, because behind him was the eiderdown someone had thought to put on his bed, and because the larches near the top of the hill—how they had changed colour in the autumn cold, while the pines had not—reminded him of the country beyond the city at home, and family picnics because his mother loved to be in the country. At home there would have been birch trees instead of oaks, no stone walls, and in every valley a lake, big or small. He liked what he saw from the window also because, although he could see no people and no houses, the fields and the woods were cared for, the walls were mended, the animals were healthy. He shivered. He was wearing one of the three shirts they had given him when he queued for his bundle of new clothes that first day by the lake.

The bell on the alarm clock rang, making him jump. He picked the clock up and shook it, but it rang on until he saw a little lever on the bell to stop it. The time was seven thirty. Late. They got them up at the lake every day at seven.

He dressed, put on the new working boots that were his only shoes, and opened his door, which had no handle but a latch, like doors at home. As he clicked the latch, he hoped it would be his door, his own, for a long time. A narrow passage lay straight ahead, with more doors. On his left, dimly lit by a skylight, one straight flight of wooden stairs led down. It was impossible not to make a noise, treading with his boots on the bare wood, but did it matter, here? He had no idea whether it mattered, but he was so used to making as little noise as possible that he tried to tread gently. At the bottom of the stairs he listened. Nothing. Two doors. What had the kind woman told him the night before that he should do in the morning? He had only partly understood. He opened the door to his right. A long, high, dark stable. On his left the top half of a door was open to the early sunlight. He breathed in a good smell of horses, hay, dung, soaked straw, and the warmth of horses' breath. The flagstone stable floor was crossed by sloping sunken channels with drains set in them. He looked for a tap. There it was, on the wall, with a hose coiled beneath it. On his right was a row of loose boxes, one with an open door, straw on the flags, three with half doors closed, horses inside: a big bay gelding, which turned its head to look at him calmly in the shadows; a smaller grey mare, sharing her box with a tabby cat, the latter curled up asleep on a heap of dry straw in a corner; and a young chestnut gelding with a fine head, startled by him and pawing the straw,

whinnying. This was why he was here. But there was no time to get to know the horses. At least ten minutes had gone by since the alarm rang. He went back, closed the door, opened the other, which was straight ahead at the bottom of the stairs, and went outside into the morning.

Where to go? There was no one about. He walked to his right across the stable yard, a wide cobbled yard with flagstone paths, a stone mounting block, brown hens jerking their heads as they pecked about, half a dozen pigeons. The long back of a large stone house faced him—windows, a couple of closed doors, and yes, one open door. He hesitated. Then she appeared in the doorway, the kind woman, a tea cloth in her hand.

“Come in, lad. You’ll be wanting your breakfast.”

By the door a chained sheepdog lying on the flags growled as he approached. He held out his hand gently, palm upwards, as the woman said, “Don’t mind Jess. She won’t bite.” The dog, still without getting up, wagged its tail. The woman led him through an untidy passage that had boots on the floor and work clothes hanging on pegs, then past a pantry with shelves, then by a scullery with a big rectangular stone sink and a wooden draining board, and finally into a wide, warm kitchen with a scrubbed table at which four men were sitting. One was the man who had fetched him from the station. They stopped eating. Another of the men put down a cup. They looked at him.

“Well, if it isn’t the DP boy from Cumberland. A dab hand with horses, so we’re told. Sit down, lad. What do they call you? Sit down, here. Cat got your tongue?”

He didn’t understand, except that he was being told, not harshly, where to sit. He sat.

“What is your name?”

A German voice. How was this possible? He grasped the edge of the table in front of him with both hands to stop himself jumping to his feet and running from the kitchen, back to the horses. He made himself look at the man who had spoken: a young, fair-haired German, but his eyes, his expression, were friendly. He made himself speak.

“My name is Josef Halpern.” At the lake they had told him to pronounce his name in English, “Joseph” with a *J* instead of “Yosef”, but now, he realized, he had forgotten to.

“That’s all right, lad. We’ll call you Joe. That’s a good Yorkshire name, like mine. I’m Ted. Eat your breakfast.”

The woman had put a plate in front of him: bacon, a slice of bread fried brown, two halves of a fried tomato. When the children had arrived in their bus at the lake, kind women in cardigans behind trestle tables had given them tomato sandwiches, slices of tomato in white bread, and lemonade. He had never eaten anything so good.

He looked down at his breakfast. He was both hungry and too frightened to eat.

“No bacon for him. He is a Jew.”

Another German voice, less friendly. Was this still real, or a dream? Would he wake up? How could this farm kitchen in England be full of Germans? It took him longer to make himself look at this man. He was a little older than the other, though still young, with rimless glasses, a thin face, a disapproving expression.

He pushed his plate away, not because of the bacon.

“Nay, what’s the difference? The lad wants his breakfast if he’s to get any work done in this weather. Eat up, Joe. Do you good, it will.” This was Ted again.

He understood the tone of voice, not the words, and after a few seconds of forcing himself to decide, moved the plate back, picked up his knife and fork, and cut a bit of fried bread, then a bit of bacon. Both were very good. There had been too many years of hunger, too many years of eating anything that anyone could beg for or dig up or steal, for him to turn down food someone had given him.

“Where do you come from, then?”

He looked at Ted, who had asked the question. He thought he understood it, but there were too many answers.

“What is your country?”

The friendly German, translating. The question was simple. The answer was not, so he pretended to be still chewing a mouthful.

“Leave him be”, the woman said, putting a cup of tea beside his plate. “Plenty of time for questions when he’s made himself at home. You eat your breakfast, Joe. Keep you warm, it will. Put some sugar in that tea.”

“Thank you”, he said, adding a spoonful of sugar to his tea and picking up his cup. At the lake he had got used to tea with milk in it, which to begin with had made him feel sick.

Two or three weeks later, having prepared the question carefully, he asked Ted, who was showing him how to clean saddles and bridles in

the tack room at the far end of the stable, "What is the reason Germans are here, on the farm?"

Ted looked up from the bucket of soapy water in which he was washing bits and stirrup irons.

"Fritz and Werner?" Ted pronounced the latter with an English *w*, as in "winter". "They're prisoners. Been here nearly a year, they have. To begin with they were in the camp. They were sent to work on the farm—we were shorthanded, see, on account of the war—and it was a lot easier to put them up here than to have them fetched and carried every day, what with the army lorry, guards, and whatnot."

Ted put the bit he was holding onto his lap. "They frighten you, don't they? Not surprising, where you've come from. You don't need to worry. They can't hurt you here, and Fritz—he's got some fancy German name, but we call him Fritz—is a right softie. Nothing about him to frighten anybody. A farmer's boy like I was, used to hard work, used to cattle, sheep, and suchlike. The other lad—well, he's different, I grant you. Reads books and that, does our Werner. Take no notice. As I say, he has to do as he's told here, and he does, I'll say that for him."

He understood more now, not all the words, but roughly what Ted was saying. He dried the stirrups Ted handed him.

"That's the polish there. And this is called a shammy, to get a shine on them."

"I do not understand how they are prisoners here."

"You mean why they're still here, with the war over and all? I daresay nobody's got round to sending them home. Not much home to go to, by all accounts."

"No. This is not prison. Good food. Warm. Good people. Not prison."

"They're prisoners of war. That's different. Soldiers, they were. Have to be treated right, as long as they do what they're told—which these two do—and as long as they don't run away, which there's not much chance of here. The rules say they have to wear those patches on their clothes. But there's no need in a place like this. Stick out like a sore thumb, they would, anywhere round here, patches or no patches. Understand?"

He understood enough of this to think of Vanya. In the forest one of the dogs had found Vanya one day, under a pile of branches, soaking wet, shivering, terror in his eyes as the dog barked and two of the partisans pulled him out. He remembered the man's toes, bleeding and blue with cold, sticking out of his shredded felt boots. "He's a Russian. Let

the Russians take care of him.” Vanya collapsed to his knees and pressed his forehead, creased with dirt, into the snow and sobbed. He had no gun—anyone hiding in the forest was welcome if he had a gun—but the decision was made to take him back to the camp, just for a day or two, to give him some food, even to find him some boots. Later, in one of the dugouts, when they stripped the rags off him, someone said, “But he’s a Jew!” He looked from face to face, more terrified than ever. Someone else asked him a question in Yiddish. He didn’t understand, or didn’t want to show that he understood. They let him stay on after all, not only because he was a Jew—although he was a Jew who knew no Yiddish and nothing at all about Jewish religion or Jewish life—but also because he turned out to be a good craftsman, a blacksmith who could mend or put together something useful from any scrap of iron, any metal object, however broken or rusty, that anyone came across. He stayed almost till the end, but when they all knew the Red Army was not far away, he disappeared one night. Probably he was dead.

Vanya had been a prisoner of war.

That first night, in the Russian most of them could understand, he told them, holding a bowl of hot soup in his torn hands for the warmth before he drank it, that he was a soldier from a village near Smolensk. The Germans had taken him prisoner the summer before in Belorussia, with hundreds, thousands, of others. The Germans had left them to die, herded into a harvested rye field, nothing left in it to eat after the first day, barbed wire round the field. There was no water except what a few peasant women from the nearby village brought in cans at night and pushed through the wire. Some of them brought milk. Milk can keep you alive. Three of the women had been caught and shot. The next night the Germans set fire to the village the women had come from; the peasants were burned in their houses or in the church, or were shot as they ran away. The prisoners could see the blaze from the field. The night after, with some of them beginning to die of thirst, Vanya and two others crawled under the wire and ran. Shots rapped behind them, but it was dark and none of them was hit. He had lost the others in a marsh in the forest. They might be still alive, but probably they had drowned. He had been hiding in the forest, hiding and running, for months. If Germans or Russians or any partisans loyal to Moscow had found him, he would have been shot. Stalin had said all Russian prisoners of the Germans were deserters.

“Prisoners of war. Do you understand, Joe?”

He shook his head to banish the memory of Vanya, who became his friend and who was most likely dead now, to return to the tack room and the hot coals shifting in the little black range. “No. Yes. I think it is England. England is different.”

“Very likely it is. Now look. In this tin, saddle soap. It’s for leather. You put it on with this, and take it off with this. Try putting it on. That’s right. How you came to be so canny with a horse when you haven’t the first principles of tack, I’ll never know. England is different from what?”

He couldn’t answer.

“Joe?”

“Yes?”

“Where is it you come from? Which country? You can tell Ted.”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? There’s nobody doesn’t know where they was born.”

“I was born in Vilna.”

“Where’s that? That’s not a country. You’re putting too much soap on them reins. Give it here. Look. That’s all you need. Countries are places like England, France, Germany. What country’s this Vilna in?”

He concentrated and said, “Vilna was in Poland. Before, Vilna was in Russia. Now not in Poland. Now is in Litva, Letuva. Also it is again in Russia.”

When he looked up to see if Ted understood, he saw only that Ted realized it had been an effort for him to get his answer put together.

“Oh, never mind for now, lad. I can’t follow all that. We’ll find a school atlas one of these days, and you can show it to us on a map. Like that.” Ted pointed to a large estate map pinned to the inside of the tack room door. “Map. You see?”

“I understand ‘map’. But . . .” He gave up. There probably wasn’t a map in England that had the frontiers of Kresy, the borderlands, drawn as they were now—if anyone, which would be the Russians, had agreed with anyone else where they were to go. Which most likely they hadn’t.

That night, though he was very sleepy, he sat on his bed, his candle alight still on his chest of drawers, and tried to think through what he had learned so far of this new place. He was wearing flannel pyjamas

too big for him, an old pair Ted had given him, and he had had a bath. He was becoming used to feeling clean. For years he had been sure he would never again feel properly clean, as he had felt every night at home, so he still enjoyed the sensation.

He usually went up to his room after supper, after he had dried the dishes for Mrs Thwaites, the kind woman whose name he couldn't pronounce, and when the news on the wireless was over. He had taken to drying the dishes because it allowed him to leave the table, where the two Germans and the man who had fetched him from the station, whose name was Bill, talked to each other and laughed. Ted, who lived alone in a cottage beyond the vegetable garden—"My wife died three years back, and our boy's still in the forces. Somewhere in Germany"—went home straight after supper every day. "Have to get my fire going in time for the news." Mrs Thwaites made sure the supper things were washed, dried, and put away before nine o'clock, when she would switch on the big wireless in its polished wooden box, which sat on a table covered with a plush cloth, in a corner of the kitchen. She and Werner listened to the news with great attention, Werner sometimes taking out a tiny notebook he always had in his back pocket and scribbling something down with a pencil stub. Joe at first understood very little, but he thought it was good for his English to try hard to gather some of what was said. The voice from the wireless spoke very differently from Ted and Mrs Thwaites. Night after night the ritual of the news in the peaceful kitchen, with the kettle on for Mrs Thwaites' last cup of tea, took him back to the forest, to the frantic struggle in the icy dark of a dugout to find the crackly wavelength of the BBC while outside extra lookouts crouched in the snowy undergrowth watching and listening for Germans or a single Russian partisan with a gun.

Bill and Fritz seemed not to be interested in the news and usually played a silent game of draughts while it was on.

Bill was the cowman. There were a dozen little golden cows in the big field to the east of the farm. When the sun was shining, Joe liked to lean over the gate and look at this field because it was so beautiful: a long gentle slope, grass like silk, and three old oak trees for shade, the pretty, gentle cows quietly munching. By the gate was a water trough for the cattle which filled a little as if by magic when a device he had never seen before, a floating ball held by a metal arm, sank to a certain level. Vanya would have loved this.

Bill brought the cows in to the byre twice a day, milked them, fed each of them a few handfuls of something called calf nuts—so good to eat that Joe knew he could have lived on nothing but them in the forest—and sent them back to their field through the muddy gateway, slapping their rumps if they dawdled—“Gid on with ye”—and fastening the gate with twine. Every morning he loaded the wagon with three tall milk cans, hitched up the black horse, whose name was Robin—which sounded to Joe vaguely Russian—and disappeared down the white farm road, returning a couple of hours later with empty cans. Once a week he took Mrs Thwaites with him, to market. She came back with a heavy shopping basket, complaining about rationing and the price of everything. “And me with four working men to feed, five now with you, Joe. It’s all right, love; it’s not your fault. Not your problem neither. It’s just as well Ted’s such a dab hand with the veg, or I don’t know how we’d keep body and soul together.” Ted grew potatoes, onions, carrots, leeks, beetroot, and other things Joe didn’t recognize in the vegetable garden to the side of the house. It had a high stone wall at its back, facing south, with plum trees growing against it. There had still been plums to eat when Joe first came, and on the pear trees trained neatly with their horizontal branches tied to wires, fat juicy pears were still ripening. They had eaten all of them now, except the plums and pears Mrs Thwaites had bottled in tall glass jars with glass lids screwed on with metal rings.

“No,” Joe said to Mrs Thwaites, “we have good, good food.”

“You look the better for it, my lad, in the few weeks you’ve been here, I will say that. You didn’t half need a bit of building up when you got here. But it’s not like it was prewar, this kitchen, and I daresay it never will be again. Once upon a time I had a kitchen maid in here, and a dairy maid to do the butter and that.”

On another day of the week, in the round dairy with cool slate shelves at the end of the yard, Mrs Thwaites made butter. “Come on, Joe. Your arms are younger than mine. You can turn this handle till you hear the butter coming.” Later she would shape the butter between wooden bats, the top one carved with a pattern that came out on the butter. “Lovely, isn’t it? Shame we have to part with so much of it.”

He could usually grasp more or less what Mrs Thwaites was saying. What Bill said he could scarcely understand at all. The cowman, perhaps a year or two younger than Ted, had an odd, hoarse voice, spoke very indistinctly, and sometimes stopped whatever he was doing, even eating,

and sat or stood staring with his eyes fixed as if he had seen something no one else could see. Ted must have noticed that Bill made Joe uneasy—Joe thought the cowman might suddenly lash out at him—because he said one day, “Joe, don’t you worry about Bill. He was gassed on the Somme, mustard gas, in the Great War, poison, you understand?” Ted illustrated with an imitation of someone choking. “He’s not been a well man since, but he’d never hurt you, or anyone.”

Bill and the Germans had a bedroom each in the attic of the stable, as Joe did. At the far end of the passage, over the tack room, was a room with a sink and a tin bath. There was a cold tap. If he got to the stable soon after supper and the news, he could boil the big black kettle on the tack room range before it lost too much heat and, before the others left the kitchen, have a quick bath that was at least warm. He liked very much the tarry smell of the bar of red, nearly transparent soap on the sink in the bathroom. There was another on the sink in the scullery where Mrs Thwaites washed the dishes and scrubbed the pans.

“What is this soap?” He had looked up the word in his dictionary. “It is very good.”

“Bless you, Joe, that’s carbolic. It’s only soap, you know.”

On Mondays she did the washing, sheets and towels and tea cloths and all their shirts and underwear, in the washhouse in the yard, lighting the fire for the big copper before breakfast. On Tuesdays she ironed their shirts.

On Sundays Ted and Mrs Thwaites set off in the trap for chapel after tea, Ted in a dark blue suit and tie under his warm coat and Mrs Thwaites in a heavy brown coat that never appeared on any other day of the week, and a very peculiar hat that she fixed to her head—it must have been only to her hair—with a terrifying long pin as she frowned into the little mirror on the wall by the scullery sink. On market days she wore a scarf tied under her chin. Joe’s mother, going shopping, always wore a scarf, but she tied it at the back of her neck. “To tell you the truth, Joe,” Mrs Thwaites said to him one Sunday as she put on her hat, “I’m church, not chapel—always have been since a child—but Ted is old chapel and wouldn’t miss it. And how could I get to Sunday morning service with no one here I’d trust to mind the dinner?” Of this he understood not a word except that the Sunday dinner needed her.

On his bed, warm, dry, and clean, he sat and thought. He was beginning not to be afraid that he would soon, one day, any day, be sent

away. Ted needed him to look after the horses, and no one had said anything about him being sent anywhere else. He reached for his dictionary, thinking as he always did when he picked it up of the kindness of the old woman at the lake who had brought it for him from Manchester. He kept it by his bed and tried to look up new words he had heard during the day before he went to sleep. Often he couldn't find them; English spelling was very mysterious. He also set himself every night to learn, from the list of phrases on pink paper in the middle of the dictionary, a new set of words that might be useful. Most of them were about traveling on trains and shopping, so not at present useful at all. He kept himself awake with his dictionary as long as he could because he was afraid of sleep. Nearly every night he was back in the forest, or back in the hayloft with the rats in the dark where the peasant's wife had hidden him, or back listening for German voices, Russian voices, commands, shots, and cries, or back in the frozen fields last winter, not daring to go near the roads, stumbling over ruts, looking for something, anything, to eat.

Tonight he found "mustard" and "gas", to make sure they were, as he guessed, the same as in Polish. They were. So, after Bill had been poisoned by Germans and would suffer the effects for the rest of his life, how could he make friends with the German prisoners? Because they were so much younger? Or perhaps because they were soldiers, as he had been? Or just because it was impossible not to like Fritz?

Would Fritz have stood at attention at the killing pits and over and over again shouted the command to the Lithuanians to shoot? Would he have laughed as the lines of people crumpled and fell into the pits? How would Fritz have behaved in Belorussia, in the forest? With the Jews, with the wretched peasants? Would he have been one of those who, in their tidy uniforms, had ordered all the women and children and old people in a village into the church, locked the door, and burned the church to ash?

He thought that once his English was better he might try to talk to Fritz, to see if he could discover a little about how, why, it had been as it had been. He wasn't going to let Fritz, still less Werner, find out that he could speak German. That would be too complicated. Nor did he want even Ted to know. "My mother was German. The Russians took her away. If she had been there when the Germans came, the Germans would have killed her." He suspected that if Werner, though perhaps not Fritz, found out that his mother was German, Werner would dislike

him more, not less. And all of it was certainly too complicated for Ted. If Joe's mother was German, shouldn't Joe too be a prisoner of war? And weren't the Russians friends of the English because of how the war had gone? He had heard Ted talk about "Uncle Joe"—he had looked up "uncle" in his dictionary—as if Stalin were a kind relation and perhaps a bit of a joke.

He liked the work he was here to do.

"Anyone know how to look after horses?" The question had been called out, in the big room that was like a classroom, by a man in uniform who had arrived at the lake after they had been there about three weeks. The man had in his left hand sheets of paper with lists typed on them, in his right hand a pen. He stood behind the table at which the Jewish grandmother—so, now, they all thought of her—sat to teach them English. He was there to match the children in front of him to homes or jobs or schools that had offered to take one or two of them. The serious girl with spectacles who had been the chief interpreter since the night they arrived translated the question into Yiddish.

He put his hand up and looked round. No one else had responded except a boy of eleven or twelve who, in a row behind him, had stood up.

"You're too young", said the man, waving to the boy to sit down. "School for you, my boy." The serious girl translated the response, but into less blunt Yiddish.

"And you. How old are you?"

"Sixteen, sir." He didn't need a translator for this.

"How's your English?"

"I have a little English, sir."

"Good, good. Looks like we've got you sorted out, then. A fellow in Yorkshire wants a stable lad. What's your name?"

"Halpern, sir."

"What's your Christian name?"

"I am not—Josef, sir."

He saw the man scribble something on one piece of paper, cross out a line on another. And that was that. A few days later the bus; a railway station in a town whose name he did not know; another train, another station; and then, in the dark, Bill—"You the lad from Windermere?" in his hoarse voice—and the wagon taking him and his bundle of clothes to the farm, without another word.

His work wasn't difficult, and mostly he enjoyed it. Every day he mucked out, fed, and watered the three horses in the stable and took out each of them in turn for exercise. He had got used to the heavy saddles and the complicated double bridles. The big bay horse and the mare, whose name was Grey Dawn, were easy to ride, easy to hold. He liked the mare best of the three because she was the most like Renia, the little mare he had ridden away into the forest the night the Germans came, as the farmer's wife who had hidden him had told him he must if the Germans arrived to search the farm. "They always come at night, so they all say. You can jump from the loft. You'll be away in the dark before they've worked out how to find the ladder. They'll never catch you. They'll see I've been hiding someone, but if I say it's my son dodging being called up, they can't shoot me for hiding a Jew. They don't want more boys fighting for the Russians, do they? You'll be off in the forest by then, so quick that pony is. Jan always said he'd not had a quicker. And I could never manage her after Jan went." Little Renia. In the years since the shooting pits, he had loved her most.

The chestnut gelding, four years old, Ted said, was trickier. "Flighty, he is. Not been ridden enough since the summer. You come with me to the far paddock and we'll see how you do. We don't want you breaking your neck when you've come all this way for a bit of peace and quiet." Three times the young horse bucked him off in the paddock that morning, but after that he came off only once, when a pheasant clattered up in front of them as they were cantering along a track through the larch wood and the horse reared up and threw him onto his back. That was only two days ago. The horse by now was used to him, and so, after cantering off into the trees with the empty stirrups flying, the gelding simply stopped and was grazing quietly when Joe caught up with him.

The farrier had come one day, in an old van, to replace a shoe Robin had cast. While the man was there he checked the shoes on the three riding horses. Joe couldn't understand the few words he grunted in a thick accent, but because of Vanya, and because the horses trusted him, he helped. Even the young gelding stood quietly while Joe held its halter, his other hand on its neck. Ted watched. "Bye, will you look at that? Bloody marvellous, what he's done with that rascalion."

"The lad can ride. I will say that for him", he heard Ted tell Mrs Thwaites when she asked him how Joe was doing. "And he's got a way

with horses. When they come for the hunting, the colonel'll be fair capped with him."

Joe gathered this was praise and was pleased. But who was coming? He didn't want anyone to come. And who was the colonel? He couldn't find this word in his dictionary. When he asked Fritz, and Fritz said, "Colonel. That is *Oberst* in German. It means an important soldier. He is a good man, I think", he liked the prospect even less. He had hoped he was done with soldiers.

A few days later, on the first really cold morning of the winter, the young horse, whose name was Tiger Rag—"They call him Tiger for short"—reared and threw Joe on the icy cobbles of the yard as soon as he was in the saddle. He kept hold of the reins, calmed the horse, remounted though his right arm and his right side were bruised, and walked him round the far paddock until he stopped prancing and sweating in the frost. Joe rode back to the yard. Ted, who had been watching from the other side of the stable, helped him dismount.

"Champion. That's the style, Joe. Let him know who's in charge. When you've got his tack off you'll be wanting a cup of tea, with plenty of sugar. That was a bit of a bump on the cobbles. You'll know about it tomorrow."

"Ted?" he said later, over the tin mugs of tea.

"What is it, lad?"

"Who is the colonel?"

"Lord's sakes, don't you know that? Well, why would you if nobody's thought to tell you. The colonel's the boss, the master. This is his house, his farm, his land, as far as the eye can see. Who did you think the big house was for? Not for the likes of us. They're mostly in London, of course. The colonel's been in the War Office all through the war. But they come up here Christmas, Easter, and summer, and for the shooting. They'll be here more next year, I wouldn't be surprised, now that the war's over, though madam isn't what I'd call a country person. Happier in London, she's always been. It was the colonel told us we was to have a DP for stable lad, told us when to fetch you from the station and that. We didn't know what to expect, I don't mind telling you, with the POWs here already." Ted laughed. "All this talking in letters these days—POWs, DPs—when what you get is Fritz and Werner and young Joe. A mixed bag, I grant you, but definitely not letters."

“He will—” He corrected himself. “Will he come alone, the colonel?” He wanted to find out about the “they”.

“What? Nay, why would he come by himself? They all come when it’s holidays. The colonel, you’ll like him. A real gentleman. Mrs Robertson, that’s his wife. A bit hoity-toity, she is, stuck-up like—the Honourable Mrs Robertson, and don’t you forget it. Then there’s the younger son, James, but he’s still in the forces like my lad. James is in the Canal Zone, last I heard. The older boy, Philip, was killed last summer in Normandy—that’s in France—a week or two after D-day. His mother took it very hard. Then there’s the daughter, Sarah—Sally, they call her—a pretty girl, about your age. Loves her riding, so you’ll be seeing a bit of her. She’s at boarding school somewhere in the south, so she won’t be here till the Christmas holidays.”

He understood some of this. He had no idea what was meant by “D-day”, but he knew that the English and the Americans had fought the Germans in France. So the colonel’s son was killed where Fritz and Werner had been taken prisoner. How must it be to have enemy soldiers in your house when their friends had killed your son? But there was Bill and the gas. Then he saw that battles were different from what had happened to his father, his mother, his sister, his aunt Anna, and the little boys. Soldiers fighting soldiers. That was different. He knew the difference was important. Perhaps one day he would be able to sort out why.

Later, remembering carefully, as he tried to every day, what Ted had told him, he was struck by the oddness of an English gentry family—a family like a prosperous *szlachta* family at home, as far as he could make out, with its manor house and much land—having a daughter called Sarah. He would never understand England. He remembered his mother telling him that Hitler had ordered every Jewess in Germany to be called Sarah, to abolish them as people along with their names.

“Have some more tea, Joe. Plenty in the pot.” Ted put milk, then very strong tea, then sugar in Joe’s mug and stirred it with the tack room’s only spoon.

“Then there’s Mr Ward, the chauffeur. He drives them up in the car. He’s only a local fellow in actual fact, but he was the colonel’s batman in the war, the first war, when he was a slip of a lad, and he’s learned about motors and engines since and got himself into a fancy uniform. He valets the colonel too, looks after his hunting clothes and that. Waits at table if there’s company. He can be a bit high and mighty. Wouldn’t

eat in the kitchen with the POWs when the family came in the summer. We had to open up the old servants' hall for him and Miss March. She's Mrs Robertson's maid, and she's a perisher: hasn't a good word to say for anything round here. Comes from London. But don't you fret. You won't have to be bothered with either of them. They don't lower themselves to come in the back."

When the family arrived, everything was immediately different, so that Joe looked back at the weeks he had spent on the farm before they came as a time of peace and safety that he might never again be allowed.

There was more work to do. That he liked, and it made him so tired at the end of the day that sometimes he slept all through the night with not a single dream waking him in terror. When he slept this soundly, he woke gently, feeling above all lucky—lucky to be alive, to be here, to be warm, to have breakfast ahead across the yard in the kitchen, to have his horses waiting for him. So he lay in bed for an extra minute or two, his arms in Ted's pyjama top lying straight at his sides outside the covers so that he could stretch his palms and his fingers on the smooth cotton of his eiderdown. He even prayed. Blessed be God. He thought of his father. On those happy mornings he dashed in bare feet down the freezing passage with its wooden floor to the sink and the carbolic soap to wash his hands under the cold tap before breakfast because that was a Jewish thing to do.

Mrs Thwaites was much busier because she had to cook for the house as well as for the farm. A girl called Mary now came early every day on a bicycle to help in the kitchen and with the washing. Her friend, whose name was Doris, bicycled up the farm road with her but then disappeared into the front part of the house, where she made fires and then cleaned and polished all day. She came into the kitchen for a cup of tea at ten o'clock; for lunch; and for another cup of tea in the afternoon. At the kitchen table the two girls talked to each other, too frightened of the Germans and of Joe even to look at them.

Mrs Thwaites gave Joe the chickens to look after. In the morning and the evening he scattered corn for them in the yard; at night he shut them in the henhouse to keep them safe from foxes. After a few days he had learned the different places where they laid their eggs. Collecting the brown eggs, often still warm, and putting them carefully into the shallow basket in the larder cheered him every day—with the hens

laying and the larder cool and safe, there would always be something to eat, although most of the eggs had to go to the village with most of the butter and milk. This was because of rationing, which he didn't understand and couldn't find in his dictionary but which Mrs Thwaites grumbled about every day. "Now that the war's over, you'd think they could get things organized so we could eat what the good Lord sends. They even want most of Ted's honey." Ted had three hives at the edge of the cow pasture, which he occasionally did mysterious things to in a wide hat with a veil. The honey that sometimes appeared on the kitchen table to spread on slices of bread was delicious. "Feeding the ruddy Germans, that's what it is. If they are hungry in Germany, let them get on with it, I say. It was them that wanted the war in the first place. Both wars."

His work with the horses had changed. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, he had to get the big bay ready for the colonel to go out hunting. He had little idea what this meant. By nine or ten in the morning, depending on how far the colonel, in red hunting coat, white breeches, had to ride to the meet, the horse had to be gleaming, saddled and bridled in equally gleaming tack. The horse's mane had to be plaited in neat knots along his neck; this was really difficult to do, and Ted had had to give him several lessons. "It's a lot easier with white of egg instead of just water, but we can't waste eggs while rationing's on."

While the colonel was out hunting, Joe was left to exercise the mare and then Tiger, to take hay out to the barn for Robin now that the weather was cold and the grass not growing, to do odd jobs for Mrs Thwaites and Ted, and to wait for the colonel to come back, usually towards dark, with the horse muddy and tired, needing rubbing down, water, and corn. And the tack was to be cleaned again next morning.

On a Wednesday morning when there was no hunting because the ground was frozen hard, the colonel came to the yard and called him out of the loose box he was mucking out.

"Joe—I wanted a word."

"Sir?"

Out in the icy sunshine on the cobbles, the colonel looked at him carefully for the first time. On hunting mornings he had taken the reins from Joe as if from someone he had always known, had ridden away, and had thrown the reins back after stiffly dismounting at the end of the day.

The colonel was a tall, thin man with sparse grey hair, a moustache, a keen glance, an air of authority.

“Ted tells me you’re doing well here. He says you’re an obedient and sensible boy and very good with horses. Wonders you’ve done, apparently, with Tiger Rag. You know we’re keeping him for when our son James gets home from the war. James rides well. He’ll be grateful for your hard work.” Then he said, carefully to be sure Joe understood the question, “I hope you’re happy here?”

“Very good, sir.” He had heard Ted say this often to the colonel. Perhaps it wasn’t quite right as an answer. He tried again. “Thank you, sir. Yes, it is good here.”

“Good. Capital. Now, I wanted to ask you a few questions. Nothing to be alarmed about, but your answers might be helpful to us—in London, you know—and to you. Come to my study after tea, will you? About five thirty. You’d better get out of those clothes first. I’ll get Hebel to come along. He can interpret. I hear you understand German.”

“Yes, sir.”

He bitterly regretted that they had discovered he could speak German.

One night a week ago, after he and the Germans and Bill and some other men and boys he didn’t know had spent the day beating with sticks through brushwood and bracken to send a few pheasants towards the colonel and five of his friends, who were waiting with shotguns in a succession of places on the edge of the woods, he had woken sobbing and damp with sweat to find Fritz sitting on his bed with an arm round him. “It’s all right now. You are awake. There is nothing wrong. You were shouting here. So I would come to see you are OK.”

Through his sobs he said, “The guns and the line of men—to go through the forest towards them when what you must do is run, run. I have to go forward, forward, when I know I must run. The shots and all the shouting. And the pile of bodies higher and higher . . .” He said all this in German.

Fritz, sitting on the side of his bed, moved away from him a little, took hold of Joe’s shoulders in his hands, shook him gently, and looked into his eyes as Joe woke up properly.

“What is this?” Fritz said in German. “So you are a German after all? Why didn’t you tell us?”

Joe pulled away, hid his face in his hands, and wept. Because of his nightmare, he had betrayed his secret. He had nothing but his secret that

was his own. He didn't want any of them to find out that his mother was German. He couldn't remember why it was so important that nobody discovered this—not the Germans, not Mrs Thwaites or Ted—but he knew it was. He wept bitterly for his lost secret.

“No”, he said, after enough time for him to stop crying and pull himself together, as Fritz sat, not touching him anymore, waiting for him to answer. “No. I am a Jew. You know that.”

“It's OK, Joe. It doesn't matter. Go back to sleep now. The shooting, it was only a game, sport, for fun, as they say. These English gentlemen, they enjoy killing foxes, pheasants, all sorts of creatures. Like the Junkers, you know. Like Göring. He loved his hunting. I expect that's all finished in Germany now.” Fritz said all this in German, and it was good to hear.

“They're practising for killing people. Practising for killing us.”

“No, Joe. War is fighting. War is not the same.”

“But ...” Somewhere here was the difference between fighting and killing that he had recognized weeks ago after a conversation with Ted. But he couldn't explain it to Fritz even in German, certainly not in English.

Completely awake now, Joe took his handkerchief from beside his dictionary and blew his nose. He looked into Fritz's candid eyes.

“Where did you fight, Fritz?”

Fritz laughed. “Everywhere. First in Africa, in the desert. The Afrika Korps—you've heard of it?”

Joe shook his head.

“The English beat us in the end, but only just. There are a lot of our prisoners still there, but I was lucky. Then I fought in Italy. Then in France, where they took us prisoner.”

“Not in Poland? In Russia?”

“No. My Panzer division—”

“Then you know nothing.”

Fritz looked puzzled. “Nothing? I was in many battles, in my tank in Africa, in the heat and the cold, in the sand and the mud. Italy was horrible. And in France twice the nearest tank to ours was blown up. Everybody killed. That isn't nothing, I can tell you. Pieces of your friends—no, sorry, Joe. That's enough about fighting.”

“You know nothing. In the east there was fighting, of course, which I didn't see much of. But there was also killing, which, as you just said

yourself, is not the same as fighting. Hundreds and hundreds, probably thousands, of people, ordered out of the city, pushed and bullied, lined up by the pits in the forest and shot. Piles of bodies like the birds heaped up from hunting today. And I know there were other places, places called camps but they were not camps. They were places where thousands of people were taken to be killed, just to be killed.”

“I don’t believe there were such places. How do you know? What people do you think were taken there? Bolsheviks? Jews? Enemies of the Reich?”

“Just people. The ones I saw being shot by the pits in the forest were all sorts of people—old people, children with their mothers, babies. Yes, they were Jews. Harmless people, chased and shot like the birds. Later the few that were left, hiding in the forest like the birds, were chased by lines of men to be shot. I was one of them.”

“Don’t cry again, Joe. You are safe here. Nobody is shooting any people here.”

He sniffed, blew his nose again.

“But did you know, Fritz? Did you know what the Germans were doing in the east? What they persuaded the people of the east to do to each other? The Lithuanians who wanted to stay on the right side of the Germans and who had always lived in Vilna, or in the country round about, and had always known the Jews and were used to them—they discovered when the Germans came that they, the Lithuanians, had always hated the Jews too, so they stood and shot them, hundreds of them in a day. Did you know this?”

“I was never in the east. Before the war, I heard the Führer on the wireless, going on and on about the Jews, the filthy Jews, vermin, like rats. Also how powerful they were, wanting to take over the whole world. My grandmother loved to listen to him. But I didn’t understand, didn’t take much notice. I didn’t know any Jews. There were no Jews in my school, no Jews at all in our village in Swabia, except the good old doctor, and he left when I was a child. They went to America, I think, he and his wife. He certainly wasn’t filthy or like a rat, or wanting to be powerful either. He was a kind gentleman, and he looked after the poor people for no money. My grandmother loved him. She cried when he left.”

“Where is Swabia?”

“Swabia is in the south. The southwest. It is part of Bavaria.”

“Are your parents still alive?”

“Yes. They are well. They write to me every week.” Joe had noticed that Fritz got regular letters, on the kitchen table by his plate when they had their tea at ten o’clock, and that Werner got none. “My father was ordered to fight, at the very end of the war, though he is a farmer and he is lame because he was wounded in the other war. They put him in uniform and gave him a gun, but there was no fighting—only surrender to the Americans. He was a prisoner, but after three weeks he was allowed to go home. My grandmother is well too.”

“You are lucky. What is this luck?”

“Perhaps you are lucky also. You are alive, Joe. That’s good. Now lie down and go back to sleep. It’s two o’clock in the morning, and there’s work to be done tomorrow.”

Fritz took his candle, waved from the door, and left him in the dark.

He lay quiet, warm, safe. There was too much he didn’t understand. He didn’t understand anything. Very soon he fell asleep, and was woken by his alarm clock. No more nightmares, that night.

That evening at supper, Werner put down his knife and fork in the middle of eating and said in German: “Well, Joe, how is it that you speak German and you never told us?”

Joe answered in English. “In my city many people speak two or perhaps three languages.”

“Hark at him”, said Ted. “His talking’s coming on a treat. And we won’t have any German in this kitchen, Werner, if you don’t mind. It’s not considered manners hereabouts to talk so as not everybody can understand.”

Werner questioned him again the next morning when he was scattering corn for the hens and Werner was on his way to feed the pigs, a bucket of kitchen scraps in each hand. Joe shook his head and said nothing.

And now he had to go to see the colonel. He had put on a clean shirt, clean trousers, and a dark blue sweater belonging to Ted’s absent son. “It’s a bit big for you”, Ted had said. “Never mind. Best to be neat and tidy like, when you go in their side of the house. And you don’t want to look like a run-of-the-mill stable lad, which you’re not, are you, Joe?”

“Come along, Joe. It is almost the correct time”, said Werner, in a jacket, a clean shirt, and a tie. No encouragement in his cold eyes. Joe was suddenly very afraid.

“What are the colonel’s questions for?”

“I don’t know.”

Joe and Werner left the kitchen by a door Joe had never been through. A cold passage with a red carpet on the flagstones. An open, panelled door on the left, a sunny room with two tall windows, a long polished table, chairs with tapestry seats. A hall with a wide staircase and more sunshine. Another open door, a beautiful room with more tall windows, a piano, sofas, paintings on the walls, a big fireplace with a log fire burning. Werner, looking at his watch, let him take all this in for a moment. Then Werner nodded him towards a closed door at the back of the hall, opposite the door into the dining room. Werner looked at his watch again and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Werner clicked his heels, stood at attention. “Josef Halpern, sir. Five thirty.”

“Yes. Good. Thank you, Hebbel. Sit there, would you. And Joe, sit in this chair so I can see you properly.”

The colonel was sitting behind a large old desk with his back to the window. Outside were the familiar fields, stone walls, and sheep that Joe could see from his bedroom. They helped calm him a bit. On the desk were untidy piles of paper, mostly typewritten as far as Joe could see, and some framed photographs. He could see only the backs of the frames.

The colonel took a sheet of paper with some typed lines on it from one of the piles and then a fountain pen from an inside pocket of his tweed coat. He snapped open a small case on the desk, took out a pair of spectacles, and put them on. He wasn’t wearing a tie like Werner’s but a silk cravat of a kind Joe had never seen before. Joe knew he was noticing all these things in order to become a little less afraid. The colonel unscrewed the top of his pen, fixed it to the other end, and then, ready to write, looked across the desk at Joe.

“Now, Joe, there’s no need to worry. I have some questions to ask you. If you don’t understand anything, Hebbel there will translate into German and translate your answers for me. All right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Splendid. Let’s start with the easy stuff. Your name is Josef Halpern.” The colonel pronounced this as if in Polish, or German.

“Yes, sir.”

“It says here you were born on the fourteenth of September 1929. Is that right?” Joe nodded. “So you are sixteen now.” Across the desk, the colonel—his pen, with which he had not yet written anything, poised in his hand—fixed Joe with a stare. “I must say, you look quite a bit older. Are you sure you didn’t chop off a year or two to get on that plane?”

Joe looked at Werner, who was looking back at him with expressionless eyes. Werner translated.

Joe said in English, “No, sir. I am sixteen since September only.” He saw the colonel put a question mark on the paper.

“Yes. Well, I daresay you’ve been through a good deal. Don’t let’s worry about that for the moment. Now, this is important. Of which country are you a citizen?”

Werner translated, with a cold smile.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“How do you mean, you don’t know? Everyone knows the country he belongs to. Let’s start again. Where were you born”—he looked down at the paper—“on the fourteenth of September 1929, if it was 1929?”

“In Vilna, sir.”

The colonel looked at Werner.

“Vilnius, sir. The capital city of Lithuania.”

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere.” The colonel shuffled some papers, pulled out what looked like a list, and for a couple of minutes studied it. “Lithuania is a Soviet Socialist Republic, is it not?”

Joe said nothing. Werner translated, and added, “It is, sir.”

“I see. So you’re a Soviet citizen. That means that in due course you’ll be returned to your own country. According to the agreement that has been made between the Allied powers, citizens of the Soviet Union are to be returned to the Soviet Union. And now that you are sixteen, you no longer—”

“Please, sir . . .”

“Translate what I just said, would you, Hebbel?”

He did.

“I was born in Poland, sir”, Joe said in English.

“I thought you said you were born in Vilnius.”

“Yes. I tell the truth. May I speak in German?”

“Of course. That’s what we’ve got Hebbel here for. Go ahead.”

“When I was born, and until after the Red Army defeated the Polish army in 1939, Vilna was in Poland. Vilna is a Polish city, Wilno, nearly

the same name. For hundreds of years Poland and Lithuania were not separate countries. They were called the Commonwealth. Later, for a long time, most of the Commonwealth was in the Russian empire—until the end of the Great War. So my father and my grandfather were born in Russia. But Vilna, when I was born, was in the new Poland.”

“Hold on a minute, Joe. Let Hebbel translate all that.”

When Werner, Joe could tell, had summarized rather than translated his explanation, the colonel said, “I’m sure all this is very interesting. But what we need to know”—he looked down at the paper in front of him—“is the nationality to which you belong.”

Werner translated, giving Joe a peremptory look which meant “Don’t waste the colonel’s time.”

“I am sorry, sir. I was born in Vilna. My father was a Polish citizen. I am a Jew. Vilna was a Polish city and always also a Jewish city. Now it is a Lithuanian city.”

“Well, there you are, then. Vilnius is your home. You are a Lithuanian.”

“No, sir. I am a Jew.”

“We don’t want to pick the Jews out and call them different, do we? That’s exactly what the Nazis did.”

He pronounced the word “Narzi” as Mr Churchill did. During the short time when they had had a wireless set in the forest, he had once or twice heard Mr Churchill’s voice when they had managed to tune the set to the BBC. The wireless had got soaked in a marsh when there was a manhunt in the forest and everyone had had to move quickly, and the set never worked again.

Joe came back to trying to understand what the colonel was saying.

“Lots of German Jews thought they were German. Then the Nazis told them they were only Jews and chucked them out—or worse. We don’t want to do anything like that. We—that’s to say, the Allies, and specially the British—have decided that we are not going to deal with Jews as a special category.”

While Werner translated, with approval obvious to Joe, the colonel found a document among the papers on his desk. He held it in both hands and read:

“‘All Jewish displaced persons are to be treated as citizens of their countries of origin.’ That’s a government ruling. We have to do what we’re told, you know.”

In the silence that followed Werner's translation of this statement, Joe thought, and remembered. Then he said in English:

"Please, may I say another thing, sir?"

"Of course you may. If it's difficult, say it in German."

Frightened both by the colonel's expectant attention and by Werner's cold eyes, he looked from one to the other, swallowed, thought again, and managed to say:

"When I was for a short time outside Prague with other Jews from the east, before they took us to the aeroplane, the Jews were saying we should all go to Palestine, where there will be a home for the Jews. They said the English have promised."

The colonel's expression changed. A coldness appeared in his eyes too, and he bent his head and gathered his papers together, picking them up, shaking them, tapping them on the desk into a uniform pile, and putting them down again as if he were about to end the conversation. Then, not looking at Joe, he said:

"Yes. Well. That's as may be. There are more than enough Jews in Palestine already. Other people live there, you know, and they have to be considered too."

"Sir, I do not want to go to Palestine. My uncle, a rabbi in Vilna—he is dead of course—told me that if the Jews made Zion a country of this world, they would lose Zion as a belief, a memory, a hope. They would instead have guns and kill people to defend their land, as Jews have never done."

Scorn was back in Werner's voice as he translated this.

"Did he? Did he indeed? Did you say this to the Jews you met in Prague?"

"No. I was afraid of them."

"Well, there you are, then. You don't want to go to Palestine. And we would agree, I'm sure, that we must never concede that the Nazis were right to deny Jews their place in Europe. So you must go home to begin to build a new Europe after the terrible destruction of the war. You're young, and you're fit. You've been properly fed here, and you're working in the fresh air. When things have settled down a bit over there, you must go back to your own country and start a new life, a new Jewish life in an old Jewish place. Makes sense, wouldn't you say? A challenge that ought to appeal to a bright boy like you. Translate, please, Hebbel."

He did.

“No.”

“How do you mean, no?”

“Jewish Vilna is dead. The Russians and the Germans have killed it. First the Russians—they took many people away, many, many people.” He stopped, looked at the grass and the stone walls and the sheep beyond the window, and was grateful that Werner had to translate what he had just said.

He remembered what he had meant to say. “The Russians ordered the Jews not to be Jews anymore. The synagogues were closed. The Jewish schools were closed. A few rabbis taught children in secret. My uncle did. It was very dangerous. The Russians took my uncle away. Then the Germans came. They killed Jews. They wanted all of them to be dead, and there were very many in Vilna. They killed them in the streets, in the pits at Ponary, in the ghetto, later wherever they took them. The Lithuanians killed Jews for the Germans. They were ordered to, or allowed to. All this I know myself. I saw it. I cannot be a Lithuanian.”

As Werner translated this into English that Joe could understand most of, he watched Werner’s face for any reaction of any kind to what he was having to say about the Germans. There was none. Then he noticed that the colonel had taken another sheet of paper from his pile, had picked up his pen, and was writing fast.

“When was all this, Joe?”

He could answer this in English.

“In the summer of 1941, when the Germans came. I was almost twelve years old.”

“Which months?” The colonel’s pen was waiting to write down Joe’s answer. He struggled to remember the English words.

“July, August. In August they killed . . . in August I ran away. Then . . .” He looked at Werner and went on in German. “They went on killing until there were no Jews left. All the months—1941, 1942, 1943.”

The colonel was writing as Werner translated. He underlined some words and said, to himself, so that Werner didn’t translate, “Yes. It’s a pity he’s too young to be a witness.” He stopped writing and looked up at Joe, more kindly again.

“Did you say how you managed to run away?”

“I was in the last row at the pits. They missed me with the bullets. They had been shooting all day. They were drunk—the Germans gave them vodka every time they stopped shooting. I pretended to be shot. I

fell in the pit on top of the bodies and lay still. When it was dark, I ran away.”

Werner translated this, no less calmly. The colonel’s expression had changed again. He looked shocked, perhaps a little impressed as well.

After a short silence, he said, “Joe, you must understand that all of that—the shootings, and everything—it’s all over now. Finished and done with. The Nazis have been thoroughly beaten. Hitler is dead, and the most powerful Nazis are being tried, now, as I’m telling you this, by the Allies in a court of law. They will be properly punished. There is no need to be frightened anymore. Latvia, I’m sorry . . .” He looked down at his list. “Lithuania. Lithuania will be a peaceful country again, and you, a bright boy like you—and brave with it, I must say—should be making your contribution to its future.”

Werner translated this, his version shorter than what the colonel had said. Joe had picked up the colonel’s tone, if not the meaning of every word. Before he answered he thought carefully what he would try to get the colonel to understand.

“Vilna as it is now I do not know because I am in England, but I know the Russians will decide everything there, and they shot everyone hiding in the forest who did not obey orders from Moscow.”

Werner translated. At the end of the sentence he nodded, in what looked like approval. Approval of what Joe had said? Of his own cleverness at translating? Of the Russians shooting the partisans in the forest? There was no telling. The colonel, who was looking at Joe, had probably not seen the nod.

“Now listen to me, Joe. Isn’t it time for Jews to live in their countries as ordinary citizens of those countries? They do in England, you know. If you were in a big city, in London, say, or in York—well, perhaps not York, let’s say Leeds—you would find English Jews living quite happily, free to go to their synagogue or whatever they want, just as anyone is free to go to church or chapel here.” He paused for Werner’s translation. “I’m sure it will be the same in your own country, in Lithuania, once they have got themselves back on their feet. It takes time, you know, after a war. It’s taking time even in England, with rationing and so on, and plenty of soldiers not home yet.”

“No.”

“You must learn to stop saying no, Joe. You know nothing about England yet.”

This was not said unkindly, and Joe, after looking at Werner, whose expression remained blank, nevertheless felt safe enough to try to explain.

“It is not about England I say no. It is about what you call—excuse me, what you think to be—my own country. Lithuanians are the people who speak Lithuanian, a language I don’t know, although I know Polish and some Russian as well as German, and Yiddish of course. Lithuanians care only not to be Polish. Lithuania must be a nation. Lithuania must have Vilna, however Polish and also Jewish it has always been.”

He stopped and, while Werner translated, wondered if he should go on. He very much wanted to—the colonel seemed to be listening with interest and had written something else on one of his papers—so he did.

“I have heard, in my family, all this talked about, with fear, even before 1939, when I was only a child. My father was always afraid that Poland would disappear again if there were another war, that it would be divided as it used to be between Germany and Russia. The Lithuanians were happy when the Russians came because the Russians said Vilna was not any longer to be in Poland. They were not happy for long when they found they were to be in the Russian empire again, only now it was the Bolshevik empire, and of course they thought the Bolsheviks were all Jews. So they were even happier when the Germans came. They gave the soldiers flowers, eggs, butter, all the good things. The Lithuanians had always resented the Jews, and now they were told it was good to hate the Jews. It was Lithuanians who shot us at Ponary. The Germans gave the orders, gave the permission, but it was the Lithuanians who shot, and shot, and shot, all day.”

Still expressionless, as if he were a machine, Werner translated, giving Joe time to pull a clean handkerchief, ironed by Mrs Thwaites, from his pocket and blow his nose.

“Don’t upset yourself, my boy”, the colonel said, glancing at Werner. “Nobody’s going to hurt you here.”

The colonel took the cap from the end of his fountain pen and screwed it over the nib. Then he put the pen down on the paper in front of him, took off his spectacles, and laid them on the desk.

“There are a few more questions I would like to ask you. Are you all right to go on, or shall we try another day?”

Werner opened his mouth to translate. Before he said anything, Joe answered in English, in a phrase the grandmother at the lake had taught the class, “I am very well, thank you. Ask the questions, please, sir.”

“As you wish. You have plenty of spirit, I’ll say that for you. Now . . .”

He fiddled for a moment with his pen and then put it down again.

“Was it at that place—Ponary, did you call it?—that they shot . . . that you lost your parents?”

Joe looked to Werner to translate. He wanted to be sure exactly what he was being asked.

“No. It was at Ponary that I lost my aunt and my cousins. I was with them when they were shot, in the same line, the last line. Hundreds and hundreds of other people were shot—the lines in front of us were all shot—that same day. I fell with them, but I was not even injured. It was there that I was supposed to die.”

“And that was in August 1941?”

“Yes. Early in August. It was very hot. There were many, many flies. The Red Army had dug the pits before the Germans came, to store oil, I think. The Germans used the pits for the bodies of Jews to fall into. But they didn’t cover them with enough earth.”

The pen unscrewed, the spectacles put on again. A sentence written on a new sheet of paper.

“If that was not how your parents died, when did the Germans find them?”

“My parents and my sister died before. More than a year before. We—that is, my aunt and I—were never told that they had died. But they are dead. I am sure.”

“But that would have been 1940. Surely the Germans were nowhere near in 1940?”

“The Russians killed my father. I do not know, but I am sure. The Russians took away my mother and my sister. They would have taken me if I had been at home when they came. My mother and my sister also are dead. I do not know, but I am sure.”

“Hold on a minute, Joe. Did you say the Russians? That can’t be right. Why would the Russians kill your parents? The Russians have nothing against the Jews now, surely? Haven’t the Bolsheviks—the Soviet government, that is—always been pro-Jewish? I thought a lot of them were Jews themselves.”

Werner translated this into German and then said, in English, to the colonel, “This is not true, sir. Or let us say it is no longer true.”

“All the same, I see no reason why the Russians should be killing Joe’s family. Do you have any idea why they should, Hebbel?”

“No, sir.”

“Is it possible, Joe, that in what we call the fog of war, you may be wrong about this? Perhaps one or both of your parents may yet turn out to be alive. We’re told many families are being reunited in the countries the Germans occupied, families who had quite given up hope. Let’s see. What is your father’s name?”

“Jacob Halpern. In Russian, Yakov Halperin.”

The colonel pulled out several sheets of paper clipped together, turned the pages till he found the right one, and studied it. He shook his head and looked up at Joe.

“Nothing on your father here. What does he do? What is his job?”

“My father was a doctor, a surgeon. He would have been the next professor of surgery at the Jewish hospital in Vilna. He was trained in Germany, in Breslau at the university hospital. That is where he met my mother. She was a nurse.”

“So your mother is German.”

“My mother was also Jewish.”

“Of course. But I still don’t understand why you think the Russians are to blame for your parents’ disappearance. Surely doctors and nurses are valuable people everywhere?”

Werner translated this with an odd expression, the suggestion of a scornful smile.

“My father was also a soldier.”

“A soldier? Was he? Why didn’t you say so before? How very odd. I would have thought that a Jew of a certain age, and a senior doctor, would have been well able to stay out of the war. A soldier fighting for whom, may I ask?”

“He was a reserve officer in the Polish Army Medical Corps. He always said . . . I’m sorry, sir.” Joe took out his handkerchief and blew his nose.

“No. Go on, go on by all means. This is most interesting. Take your time.”

Joe blew his nose again. He shook his head and straightened his back.

“He always said that although many Polish people disliked Jews, Poland had long ago given a home to the Jews and had for hundreds of years allowed them to live as Jews, and that if there were a war—he thought Hitler was sure to attack and that there was sure to be a war—anyone who could help the Polish army defend Poland must do that.

The Germans did attack, and then, when the Russians attacked two weeks later, he told us . . . he told us . . .”

He saw his father, in his uniform—he had never before seen him in uniform—standing on that last morning in the sitting room of their narrow house in Vilna, holding his little sister, Rivka, in his arms, and saying to him and his mother, “This is right. I know it’s right. I have to go to help Polish soldiers. That’s why I joined the reserve. Poland must defend itself against Russia as it did twenty years ago, or we shall all find ourselves in the Russian empire again. The Soviets are more cruel than the tsars. Thousands of people the Soviets killed in the famine. Thousands more they have executed. Many of all these were Poles. So it is right for me to go, to do what I can, to patch up the wounded and help the dying. Every army needs doctors. Be a good boy and look after your mother, Josef. I will be back as soon as the fighting is over. Don’t forget to practise your violin every day. These things matter most of all when there is a war.”

He saw his father and listened again to what he said as he sat at the colonel’s desk. So he couldn’t go on.

“Hebbel,” the colonel said, “fetch a glass of water, would you?” Werner stood up and bent his head briefly. “Thank you.”

While they heard Werner’s steps cross the hall and then vanish into the carpeted passage, the colonel laid down his pen, took off his spectacles, and leaned forward over the desk.

“I’m sorry to put you through all this, old chap. We need to know as much as we can about the behaviour of the Nazis in the east.”

Joe nodded his head, without raising his eyes from the worn green leather on the desktop, to show he was willing to answer more questions, or because there was more to describe than what the Nazis had done. He wasn’t sure which. Maybe both.

After a couple of minutes, Werner came back with a glass of water. Joe didn’t think he wanted it, but he drank some. It made him feel a good deal better. “Thank you, sir.”

“All right to go on? Splendid. Now, what happened to your father as a medic in the Polish army?”

Expressionless, Werner translated.

“The Polish army was quickly defeated. My father, with very many others, was taken prisoner by the Red Army. They were sent to Russia. The ordinary soldiers were soon set free. Many came back to Vilna, so we knew; the officers were kept in prison in Russia.”

“That’s perfectly normal, you know, in war. Prisoners of war on farms, like Hebbel here, and Boblingen, are lucky. Plenty of prisoners are in camps still, all over the place.”

“My father was in a prison called Kozelsk, with many other officers. We knew because letters came, one every month, and to some other families in Vilna too. My mother sent parcels to Kozelsk, and from a letter of my father’s we knew that at least one parcel reached him. We had five letters, one every month from November to March. He said the prison was very cold and the prisoners had no winter clothes. My mother sent my father’s fur hat and warm boots. We never heard that he got them. Five letters. Then on the thirteenth of April, NKVD soldiers came to our house and took my mother and sister away to a train. They also took the families of two other officers in prison in Russia. I have not seen my mother or my sister since then. I know they are dead.”

“What makes you think that? If they were taken to Siberia, they may well still be there, alive and well. They may soon be allowed to come back to your country. You should be there, you know, in case they come back.”

“They will not come back. Some letters came, quite soon, from other mothers. Nothing for me. My mother and my sister are dead. Like my grandmother and my uncle when he was a baby. They died on a Russian train in the first war.”

“How did you manage not to be taken with your mother and your sister to the train? Let’s see. April 1940. You were only eleven.”

“I was ten. I was staying with my aunt Anna and my uncle the rabbi. Before my father went away, he said he wanted me to learn enough about being a Jew never to forget, no matter what happened to any of us in the future. We went to my uncle’s house for Passover. And I loved my aunt, so I stayed longer. She helped me with my violin practice. My mother did not play and my teacher had gone, I don’t know where. Also I loved my cousins, three boys, all younger than me, three naughty boys, clever and funny.”

“And where are they now?”

“Dead. They are all dead. I told you—”

“This was the shooting, when the Germans came?”

“Yes.”

“I am very sorry to be asking you to remember all these things. It must be extremely painful for you.”

Now Joe looked straight across the desk at the colonel, meeting his eyes.

“No”, he said in English. “I remember every day, everything, every day. It is good to say . . . to speak . . .”

He drank the rest of the water in the glass.

“You are a brave young man.” The colonel looked down, and then again looked across at him.

“And your father. Did any more letters come from your father—after they took your mother and sister?”

“No. Because by then they had shot him.”

“Who had shot him?”

“The NKVD. The Russians. They shot all the officers in the prison at Kozelsk.”

Werner translated this and at once added, in a harsh voice, “This is not true. Excuse me, sir. What he has just said, it is not true. When the Nazis invaded Russia, all the detained Polish soldiers were permitted to join the army of General Anders to fight against the Nazis elsewhere.”

In English Joe said, “No. What I have said I know. The prisoners at Kozelsk were shot at the same time as they took their families from Vilna—in the spring of 1940. The Russians shot them. We knew, in the forest. Much later. But we knew.”

“It is not true”, Werner said.

“Hebbel”—the colonel put both his hands flat on the desk and leaned forward towards Werner—“what do you mean, it’s not true?”

“This is a Nazi lie.”

“Wait a minute, the pair of you. Hebbel, is this by any chance what’s called”—the colonel put on his spectacles and spent some time going through his papers until he found the right one—“the Katyn massacre?”

“Yes, sir. The Nazis killed the Polish officers and later pretended that the Russians had killed them, to discredit the Soviet system.”

The colonel was reading the typewritten paper in his hand. He put it down on the desk.

“Hebbel, according to the information I have here—prepared for the trial I was telling you about, Joe—you seem to be right. But surely you would prefer . . . after all, aren’t you a Nazi yourself?”

“I am a German, sir. Hitler is dead. The Nazis have failed, totally failed. There are no more Nazis.”

“But what has that to do with what happened to Polish prisoners in—what was the name of the prison, Joe?”

They were speaking English, and Joe was understanding all of it.

“Kozelsk, sir.”

“Kozelsk. That’s right. That’s not Katyn, is it? Perhaps we aren’t talking about the same thing. Can you explain, Hebbel? What do you think happened to these prisoners, and how do you know?”

“On the eastern front, everybody knew. The Wehrmacht found mass graves in the forest near Smolensk in the spring of 1943. They dug up bodies. The bodies were Polish officers in their uniforms with their papers. Germany was by now losing the war. To blacken the Soviet government in all of Europe, Goebbels announced to the world that the massacre was a Soviet crime—and not only that but a Jewish crime, another Jewish crime. But this was a lie; it was Nazi propaganda. No one believed it. This was Nazi murder, committed in 1941 when the German army was successful, invading Russia with great speed and much death. They came to prisons full of Polish officers and shot them. One of the prisons was Kozelsk.”

“Why would they do that? I don’t understand. These were Polish officers. Not Jews.”

Joe said, “Some of them were Jews.”

Neither the colonel nor Werner looked at him.

Werner said, “Hitler had been ruling most of Poland since 1939. Now he had conquered the rest and was conquering as much of Russia as he could. After the war he would want to rule a Poland in which no officer class would make trouble for him. The Poles were *Untermenschen*, Slavs, second-class people. They could not be officers in the greater Reich. So they had to die.”

“That sounds like Hitler, doesn’t it, Joe?”

Joe shook his head. He hadn’t understood everything Werner had said, but he knew it was wrong.

“Then, later in the war,” Werner went on, paying no attention to Joe, “it was useful to the Nazis, who were committing great crimes everywhere in the east, to pretend to the world that this one crime was a Soviet crime.”

“I see”, the colonel said. “Thank you, Hebbel, you’ve explained that very clearly.” He scribbled a sentence on the piece of paper he had found, and shuffled all the papers together again. Then he turned to face Werner at the end of the desk.

“Tell me, Hebbel, what do you intend doing when you are allowed to go back to Germany?”

“I shall return home. My home is in the east of Germany. Near to Frankfurt on the Oder.”

“I thought Frankfurt was further west.”

“That is Frankfurt am Main, a different city.”

“I’m sorry. Go on.”

“I shall work to restore the freedom and the prosperity of my people.”

“I think you’ll find that the east of Germany will be under Russian control.”

“Exactly so.”

The colonel looked hard at Werner for a few seconds.

“Ah, yes, I see”, he said, while Joe stared at Werner with a new understanding. “Well, in any case, thank you, Hebbel, for your help with this interview. I think we’ve got as far as we can today. You’d better go back to the farm now, both of you.”

Werner stood up, clicked his heels with a little bow of his head, and left the study. Joe also stood up but leaned towards the colonel with both hands on the desk.

“Sir?” he said.

“What is it, Joe?”

“You will not send me to Lithuania?”

“Not my decision, I’m afraid. I’ll do what I can, but we’ll have to see.”

“And sir—”

“Now, Joe, no more questions. Isn’t it time for your tea?”

But he had prepared some sentences.

“I listened to Werner. I understood his words. It is not true. The Russians also did not want the officer class in Poland. So they shot the officers who were prisoners at Kozelsk. In Poland, everyone knows.”

“Well, we may never be sure what happened—the fog of war, as I said before. But it sounds like the sort of thing the Nazis went in for. Now, run along, Joe, there’s a good fellow. I’ve got other things to do.”

Joe got up to go. At the door he turned and said, “Sir, one day I may be an English Jew, as you said?”

“I can’t make any promises, Joe. Now, off you go.”

That night, sitting on his bed, he looked up one word, “witness”, in his English–Polish dictionary. When he found the word, he wondered what

the colonel had meant by saying he was too young to be a witness. He had seen what he had seen. So had plenty of children younger than he. But they were dead.

As soon as he got into bed, he went to sleep.

He dreamed he was searching for mushrooms in the forest. The air was warm and damp. His head was bent down as he pushed branches and leaves and ferns aside, but there were no mushrooms. The ground was spongy under his feet. Then he stood up. The colonel, in his silk cravat, was facing him across a few yards of brushwood, his head bent sideways, one eye shut behind his spectacles as he aimed his shotgun at Joe. Werner Hebbel, in Einsatzkommando uniform, was standing beside the colonel with one finger raised, about to give the order to shoot.

Sally came home from her school in the south on the day the first snow fell.

He didn't see her arrive. Mr Ward, who fetched her from the station, drove to the front of the house as he always did. But Joe knew she was coming because Mrs Thwaites had saved eggs to make a chocolate cake for Sally's tea. "There'll be a slice or two left for us in the kitchen, don't you fret."

It was getting dark, and the snow outside was thickening when Mr Ward appeared at the kitchen door that led into the house.

"Ted here? I need some help with Miss Sally's school trunk."

"They're out foddering the beasts", Mrs Thwaites said. "Joe's done the horses. He'll give you a hand. Jump to it, Joe. And leave them boots in the kitchen—you can't go tramping upstairs in boots."

"I suppose he'll have to do, then", Mr Ward said.

So Joe, in his socks, took the other end of the heavy trunk, which had "S. L. Robertson 76" in white paint on the top, and he and the chauffeur carried it up the wide, red-carpeted stairs, along the red-carpeted passage, and into a white bedroom with long chintz curtains drawn over the windows and a fire crackling in the grate. A pretty girl in a dark blue tunic and a white shirt was kneeling by the fire unpacking a small suitcase. She looked up.

"Could you put it over there, by the window? Thanks awfully. Hello. Who are you?"

Joe opened his mouth, but Mr Ward answered.

"He's the stable lad, miss. DP from God knows where."

“You must be Joe. Daddy wrote to say how well you’ve been looking after Dawn. She’s lovely, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She is very good.” A look from Mr Ward. “Miss.”

“Bother the snow. I was hoping to ride tomorrow.”

“Come along,” said Mr Ward, “back to the kitchen with you, my lad.”

Later he thought that the arrival on the same day of Sally and the quiet snow which reminded him of home, because not since home had he been warm in a house with the snow outside, was a gift from God.