

Jean-Jacques Greif

Lonek



greif.jj@gmail.com

Lonek

1910 The innkeeper's son

"Where is Lonek?" my mother asks.

"On top of the stairs, where else?" one of my sisters answers. "Lonek, Mother wants you!"

"Lonek an't there. Gone to China!"

I sit on the highest step to listen to the inn. A hodge-podge of blurred words, roars and songs rises from the ground floor like a delicious smell above a simmering soup.

In summer, my father hires three or four musicians—fat fellows, owning several instruments each, who take as much room on their platform as a full-sized orchestra. "Someone who plays fiddle, oboe and big drum," I tell myself, "no wonder he's as fat as three regular guys." I enjoy their music more when I hear it in the dark staircase. I prefer the perfume of pine resin that oozes from the wooden floors to the sour smell of their sweat. I forget their reddish faces, their grins, their balloonish bellies. I try to recognize the instruments: the laughing trumpet and the crying violin, the cooing oboe and the chuckling accordion.

My father sometimes plays waltzes and polkas on the piano. The musicians praise him.

"Did you really learn by yourself, pan¹ Greif?"

"Bah, I play what I hear, that's all. I can't read music like you."

I'm quite proud of my father. He can do everything. Except read music, but it doesn't matter, since he can still play it.

On Thursday, which is market day, there is such a crowd down there that I can't distinguish any sound in the hubbub filling the staircase. My mother goes down to replace cousin Malcia as cashier.

"Go help Max," she tells the cousin.

Max Weintraub is the waiter. He's been waiting for a long time: his hair is quite gray. He wears a black suit and a long white apron. To call him, the customers say: *Herr Ober*². Nothing beats German for this kind of title.

I don't spend my whole day on the steps. Anything will attract me downstairs: a burst of laughter, a voice speaking in a strange language, the sound of a broken glass. Alas, when my mother is there, she forbids me to come down.

"This is no place for a child."

"Don't care. I'll eat magic apples, then I grow up and can come."

¹ Mister (in Polish).

² Literally "Mister Upper".

Lonek

Adults are lucky. They have as much fun as they like. Their mother doesn't scold them. They play cards, dice, billiards. They drink beer, dipping their nose into the foam. They eat white and pink cakes kept in a glass case like jewels. As soon as my mother is gone, I mingle with the beer drinkers and the billiard players. I watch them, I listen to them, I try to understand their jokes, I learn their swear-words.

I know all the regulars. My father teaches me mental computation tricks and exhibits me like a performing dog.

"Say, Lonek, could you tell me how much is 65 to the square?"

"Ahem... Let me think, Father... 65?"

"Yes, 65 multiplied by itself."

"Nun's ass and friar's balls, what a head-cruncher... 4225!"

"And now, 75 to the square."

"75? I'm thinking... It is even more difficult... 5625!"¹

The beer drinkers stare at me as if horns had just grown on my head.

"Your son is a genius," they tell my father. "How old is he?"

"Five."

"You'll make a *Herr Professor* out of him!"

Me, I have other plans.

"When I'm big, I shall be soldier captain."

Troops often stop in Sambor, our town, after maneuvering near the border. Soldiers and officers come drink the Greif inn's famous beer. I relish their visits. The hussars, the dragoons, the lancers! I recognize them by the design of their epaulets, of their golden buttons. I love especially the grand Hungarian horsemen called *Honveds*. I imagine them on the battlefield: they charge the enemy at full gallop, with raised saber, laughing wildly. To the attack! Go roast in hell, bloody miscreants! The loud belches they emit after emptying their beer mugs already sound like victory yells. They sing old barbarian airs that you can't listen to without shuddering, then pick me up with the greatest care and sit me on their knees. *Hop, hop, hop, Bubchen auf Pferdchen*, they hum while I hop—that is, "little boy on little horse..."

The honveds speak a soldiers' German, which they learn in the imperative mode: "Half-turn—Left! Forward—March! Present—Arms!" The inn regulars speak Polish, Ukrainian or Yiddish². The travelers and the soldiers speak Croatian, Czech, Hungarian, Rumanian. The empire officials and the Austrian officers stick to pure German.

My sisters laugh at my ambitions.

"Soldier, that's a worthless profession. It don't bring you no money."

¹ There's a trick. You must multiply the first digit by the one just above it and add 25. For 65, you multiply 6 by 7. Juxtaposing 42 and 25, you get 4225.

² The German dialect spoken by East European Jews. The word Yiddish just means "Jewish."

Lonek

“What you earn is get killed.”

“You come back from war all broken down.”

“You walk with a wooden leg. Kip kop kip kop!”

“You better do lawyer or doctor.”

I report these objections to my friends the officers.

“My sisters say doctor is better than soldier.”

“Well, why don’t you become a military doctor?”

“You’ll wear a fine uniform. You can become a doctor-colonel or a doctor-general.”

A cousin who has a printing store gives me a diploma with ornate lettering: “Dr Leon Greif, Doctor-General-in-Chief of the Austrian Imperial Army.” My father has it framed and hangs it above my bed.

My father, Moritz Greif, everybody knows him. I mean, all the people in Sambor and around. That’s because he runs our town’s main inn. In Lwów, the capital of Eastern Galicia, maybe they don’t know him, as it’s too far¹.

The capital of the whole empire is Vienna. Me, I speak Polish, but I am Austrian². One day, my mother notices I don’t look straight at her, so she decides to show me to a specialist.

“Provincial doctors are worthless. We’ll go to Vienna! The mayor’s wife told me of a good eye doctor.”

“I’ll ride the train! I’ll ride the train!”

We leave for the capital. After going over the Carpathian mountains, we reach Krakow, in Western Galicia. There we change trains. In Brno³, in Moravia, we turn south toward Vienna. What a trip: more than 600 miles! The specialist shows me some drawings and looks at my eyes with a magnifier. He says I suffer from astigmatism and he’s going to correct me. I’m afraid he’ll beat me, but he don’t. In the end, I come home with glasses. My sisters welcome me with guffaws.

“You look like a clown, with your goggles.”

“You’re jealous cause I’m stigmatic and you ain’t.”

“A girl in my class is that. It’s ‘astigmatic.’ It means you’re cockeyed. Nothing to brag about.”

“Yeah, but me, I went to Vienna!”

My mother always says we should look westwards, beyond the Carpathian mountains, where reason and progress reign in great cities. If we look eastwards, all

¹ 40 miles or so. See maps at the end of the book. Lwów is pronounced Lvoov.

² From 1815 (Vienna Congress) to 1918, Poland ceased to exist. It was split between Germany, the Austrian empire and Russia.

³ The Moravians perhaps pronounce it as written, but I say Borno.

we see it the great ocean of the steppe, which spreads to the end of the world: a barbaric and hostile vastness, peopled by ferocious Cossacks, wild Tartars and mysterious Chinamen.

Seen from the capital, Eastern Galicia lies farther than the mountains, closer to Tartar country than to the civilized world. The Vienna specialist looks at us as if we were exotic beasts:

“You live over there, in the Confines? One of my cousins, a schoolteacher, was a confineer when he began teaching. He came back long ago, thank God.”

As we live next to the ferocious Cossacks, we need the hussars, dragoons and honveds to protect us. My father himself spent three years in the 77th infantry regiment in Jaroslaw¹. He’s kept a soldier’s shaved head ever since. A thick blond mustache rises like a handlebar on both sides of his nose.

He’s as strong as a Turk. He’s not afraid of the honveds and the others. Often, I hear a racket in the street in the middle of the night:

“Broomstick in the devil’s ass!”

“I’ll feed you shitsauce!”

“Lick my ass!”

“Stop puking on me, you stinking dog!”

My father is throwing drunk customers out.

“Moritz” stands for *Mojzesz*.² People know we’re Jewish, but they don’t make a fuss about it. The empire is so old that its inhabitants got weary of fighting each other. In Sambor, doctors, lawyers and other leading citizens are Jewish. They speak Yiddish and Polish. There are also poor Jews who speak only Yiddish, and catholic Poles, barely more numerous than the Jews. Bona Sforza, a Polish queen born in Italy, founded our town in the sixteen century during a hunt. Sambor mean “stag” in Polish—and indeed, from my bedroom I can see a bronze stag that stands on top the City Hall belfry.

My paternal grandfather, Josef Greif, sometimes comes from his village, Wankowice³, to say hello. He clamps my hand in his large rugged paws. I would like to pull my hand free, but I dare not.

“Father, why are Grandfather’s hands so rough and dry? They feel like wood.”

“Because they’re his work tools. He’s a gardener. Did you notice how he stoops? He spent his whole life bent near the earth.”

My grandfather walks with the help of a cane that looks like a thick vine. He is more than ninety, for he was born around 1820. He wears a long white beard like

¹ In Polish, the letter v doesn’t exist, but w is pronounced v.

² Moses. Pronounced Moyses.

³ Pronounced Vankovitsé.

Jews in old books and speaks Yiddish. My father speaks a perfect Polish, without a trace of accent. My mother makes mistakes, sometimes, in declining names or conjugating verbs. My parents speak Yiddish together and Polish when they address us. My father talks to my mother in German when he doesn't want us to understand. He knows enough Hungarian to say things like "a bear raped your mother" to the honveds.

We consider Eastern Galicia a Polish province, but people outside the cities are not Polish. Ruthenian peasants live around Sambor. While they speak Ukrainian, they're different from the orthodox Ukrainians who live behind the border, in Russia. The Ruthenians have their own religion, called greek-catholic¹. They consider the Pope in Rome their leader. These peasants are so poor that they pull their plough themselves. They hate the landowners, who are Polish.

The province next to ours, Bukovina, is Rumanian. Its capital, Czernowitz², lies 150 miles south of Sambor. My uncle Louis and my aunt Regina³ live there. Uncle Louis, my mother's brother, often comes visit us. I notice that one of his fingers is missing.

"Where is your finger, uncle Lou?"

"That's what I don't know. Your uncle Manès cut it."

"I never seen uncle Manès. He's a bad man?"

"You've never seen him because he went to America. He didn't cut my finger out of badness. I'll tell you how it happened. You like soldiers and your father spent three years in the army, but my brother and I, we were afraid of military service. Long ago, the army didn't want Jews. They said we preferred books to arms and made lousy soldiers. Then they began to enroll Jews too, in case there'd be a new war."

"So they rolled you?"

"No, that's the whole point. Except your father who's so strong, Jews can't fight. The other soldiers laugh at them and treat them bad. Manès and I, we didn't want to be beaten to pulp in the army, so we decided each of us would cut a finger of the other one. Do you understand? If you lack a finger, you can't become a soldier."

"Me, I want to become a general, so I be careful with my fingers!"

"Don't imitate your uncles... You see, Manès raised the axe and cut my finger, but it hurt so much that I fainted. I couldn't pick up the axe in my turn and chop his finger! When he saw how I reacted, Manès changed his mind: he decided to keep all his fingers. He fled to Hamburg, a big harbor in Germany, and there he found work on a ship sailing to America."

¹ Or "uniate". A Ruthenian kingdom existed in Ukraine in the middle ages.

² On the maps, I wrote the name as it is pronounced: "Chernovitz."

³ See the family tree at the end of the book.

Lonek

My father didn't skip military service. He doesn't resemble other Jews. He eats ham, drinks vodka, swears and jokes with the customers. On Saturday morning, he stays behind his counter while we go to the synagogue. He enters it only three times a year, that's the least a Jew can do: for New Year, Yom Kippur and Pessah¹.

When he was younger, he was a waiter, like Max, and now he has become the boss.

The inn spreads over the ground floor of our house. The bar and the dining-hall occupy the two rooms that open on the City Hall square. People eat ham, sausages, cold cuts, cheese, caviar. They drink vodka and the famous Greif inn's draught beer, which ascends from the cellar in gleaming copper pipes. When it's time to pierce a new barrel, my father goes down to the cellar. Nobody else is allowed to do it! The inn's rooms are nearly as dark as the cellar. They have tiny windows and thick walls—for the winter gets very cold on the slopes of the Carpathian mountains.

The other half of the ground floor, on the garden side, contains a great hall. That's where the fat musicians come every summer, as well as two or three merry young ladies. The billiard stands in a kind of nook in the great hall.

The young ladies' dresses sing when they walk: Froo-froo, froo-froo... Their faces are painted, as if they wanted to look like china dolls. Heady perfumes mix with the smell of their bodies. They know how to say "sweetie" in several languages. They ply a mysterious trade, I wonder whether there's a school for it: they're *bar girls*. They dance with the customers and suggest they buy more drinks. They entertain Ruthenian peasants who just sold vegetables in the market, console homesick Moravian or Slovenian soldiers.

The front part of the upper floor is where we live. Women reign over this domain: Maria, my mother; Rachel, my grandmother; Rózia et Salka², my two sisters. My mother comes from the village of Kornalowice. Over there, she was known as Marjem³. My grandmother, being a widow, followed her to Sambor. When a woman is pregnant, they say she is big with child. The more children she's given birth to, the bigger she is. "I've had three!" says my mother's shape. "Me, four!" says my grandmother's.

I was born on August 16, 1905. As my maternal grandfather was dead, they gave me his name: Arieh. This is Hebrew, it means "lion". This custom of giving a dead grandfather's name, my parents followed it to please my grandmother. They believe Jews should adapt to the new century—so they replace Mojzesz with Moritz, Marjem with Maria, Arieh with Leon⁴. Everybody prefers the nickname Lonek, me too.

¹ The Jewish year begins in September. Yom Kippur is celebrated one week after the New Year. Pessah commemorates the flight from Egypt.

² Short for Rosalie and Salomé.

³ Myriam. Pronounced Mariem.

⁴ Pronounced Len.

The windows of our apartment open on City Hall square. The City Hall building stands in the middle of its square. We hear the belfry clock's bell every fifteen minutes. Every hour, a fireman watching from the top of the belfry adds his whistle to the bell's peal. As the square isn't paved like the large avenues I saw in Vienna, it is snowy in winter, dusty in summer, muddy in-between.

A fat wood stove squats in a corner of our kitchen. When you open its door, you see crazy jumping flames. Smaller flames, locked in the glass globes of oil-lamps, reflect on the red pans hooked to one of the wall.

Every morning, a water carrier fills up the barrel outside the kitchen door. Someday, my father says, there will be running water in our town. Once a week or so, Malcia pours hot water in a zinc tub for the bath. The privy is hidden in the garden.

My mother guards our home and our morals. She covered the walls (except the part where the pans hang) with white cotton panels, on every one of which she embroidered a piece of moral advice in red thread. A panel for each of the ten commandments, plus some more recent commandments: "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today," "Haste makes waste," "A generous action is its own reward," "He that will not be counseled cannot be helped," "When angry, count ten before you speak," "The early bird gets the worm," etc. She thinks the walls should be dressed, like people: large tapestries showing hunting scenes hang in the dining-room and in the drawing-room.

To keep us from running in the apartment ("Go run in the garden!" she says), she puts obstacles in our way: glass cabinets filled with trinkets and silverware, tables covered with multi-hued shawls, chests of drawers, poufs, armchairs, vases and chandeliers standing on pedestals. A Bechstein¹ grand piano lords it over the drawing-room. I share a bedroom with my two sisters. Pink satin covers the walls in my parents' bedroom.

Malcia, my mother's poor cousin who works as cashier and servant, sleeps in a small alcove behind the kitchen.

The other half of the upper floor, on the garden side, is rented to pan Hammerman, an insurance salesman—except a room where the bar girls sleep in summer. When I sit on my steps, I always hope to see one of the lovely dancers and catch a whiff of her perfume. My sisters, on the contrary, are afraid these *women of loose morals* might bewitch or contaminate them. To avoid their polluting presence, they enter the kitchen in haste, run to the stove and pull out a timid tongue to taste the stew.

One day, I see Mr. Neuberg the jeweler, climbing slowly up the stairs.

¹ A German brand considered one of the best.

Lonek

“Where are you going, pan Neuberg?”

“To see pan Hammerman.”

“Oh no you don’t, me I know, you don’t want pan Hammerman, you’re going to the molls!”

Mr Neuberg bursts out laughing. He pats my head, shaven close like my father’s.

“Ha ha! You’re quite a funny one... Ha ha! Quite the son of pan Greif. You even look like him, with your round head!”

“Not true. I have no mustache!”

As his laugh rings in the corridor, my mother comes out of the kitchen to know what’s up. Mr Neuberg repeats my remark, laughing even more:

“You don’t want do see pan Hammerman, you’re going to the molls!”

My mother doesn’t laugh. She stretches me across her knees and gives me what’s known as a good spanking, although I don’t know whom it is good for. She thinks pan Neuberg feels offended and this torture is needed to appease his wrath.

The fox's tiny teeth.

Why does she punish me? I'm beginning to suspect a strange thing: upstairs and downstairs are separate. The beautiful bar girls belong to downstairs, so they shouldn't be mentioned upstairs. Ham is eaten downstairs, not upstairs. Downstairs, a plate can contain a piece of meat and a morsel of cheese, whereas upstairs we use different plates¹. Words like hooker, shit and dog's ass (or God's ass), which spice sentences downstairs, can't ascend the stairs! The power of my father is immense, since he reigns on both downstairs and upstairs.

I would like to survey the upper and lower realms carefully, compare them, try to understand their mysterious opposition. Alas, my mother deprives me of my wonderful freedom. The offense to pan Neuberger worries her. She's afraid I might soon resemble the inn's customers. She finds them gross. She confines me upstairs to guard me against perdition.

Instead of studying the beer drinkers, I study the Torah². My mother hires Schimelé Nussbaum, a learned professor. He comes twice a week, preceded by his huge gray beard and a strong smell of tobacco and onions.

"How are you, my boy?"

"Fine, sir."

"Well, thank the King of the Universe, who reigns on all things, for He keeps you in good health."

He reads a page in Hebrew and translates it into Polish. The next time, I must read the same page and translate it. I don't really try to learn the Hebrew language: I just trust my memory. My teacher seems happy, that's what matters.

"Thank the King of the Universe, who gave you good brains!"

I discover the holy Word, but I must grow up before I can expect to understand it. The greatest sages have been arguing its meaning for centuries, so me, a poor beginner, what can I say? I guess that Schimelé Nussbaum would laugh at me if I told him how much I hate this *Yahweh* who pulls all the strings. Why does He act in such a nasty way with Adam and Eve? He hasn't ordered "Thou shalt not steal" yet, so how could they know? Besides, they just stole an apple. Then He favors Abel unjustly and lets Cain kill his brother, although he could prevent him. The worst is Abraham's story. *Yahweh* orders him to kill his own son! Abraham could disobey, like Adam and Eve, but he accepts. What a fool! My father wouldn't behave like him, I'm sure... I tremble at the very thought.

¹ Religious Jews do not eat pork and avoid using the same plates and cutlery for meat and dairy products (because it is written: "Thou shalt not eat the kid in his mother's milk.")

² The first books of the Bible.

As I reach the end of the page without making any mistake, the lesson is over quite fast. To fill up the rest of the hour, Schimelé Nussbaum tells me a funny story:

A *shnorrer*¹ comes to a little town in Poland. He finds the house of the richest Jew and inquires about him with the neighbors.

“He’s Moses Rosenzweig. You’ve never heard the name? He belongs to the Rosenzweigs from Bialystok. He is stingy and hates shnorrers. He’ll invite you to dinner because he has to, but he’ll ask you so many questions that you won’t be able to eat.”

The shnorrer rings the door and asks after Mr Rosenzweig.

“I come from Bialystock,” he says.

The rich Jew seems delighted to see a townsman and invites him to dinner. Mrs Rosenzweig sits him at the head of the table. The servants bring a stuffed carp that looks and smells delicious. The shnorrer is getting ready to cut a piece and put it upon his plate, but his host questions him before he’s had time to make his move.

“So what’s new in Bialystock? What about Meyer, the lawyer?”

“Meyer the lawyer? He’s dead.”

Rosenzweig, flabbergasted by the news, becomes as white as his napkin and puts his fork down. He turns toward his wife:

“Do you hear, Leah? My good friend Meyer... He wasn’t that old. I wonder why his wife didn’t tell me. He left a huge inheritance to his children, I’ll say.”

Meanwhile, the shnorrer cuts a slice of stuffed carp and starts gobbling it up. Rosenzweig interrupts him again.

“And Getzel, how did he take it?”

“Which Getzel?”

“What do you mean, which Getzel? Meyer’s son, the draper.”

“Ah, Getzel the draper. He’s dead!”

The shnorrer takes a second serving of carp. His host doesn’t even seem to notice.

“Getzel dead too... Do you hear, Leah? What terrible news. He owed me a thousand rubles! Everything is not lost, though. His partner, Joseph Efrimovitch, will certainly honor his debts. He took over, didn’t he?”

“Joseph Efrimovitch? He’s dead”

“Dead? Leah, we’re ruined... *Oy weh*!”

The shnorrer dips a large chunk of white bread into the sauce. The master of the house seems quite nervous.

“My friend, do you know anything about Rachel, Meyer’s daughter? She’ll inherit his fortune, now. Maybe I can make a deal with her.”

¹ To obey Jewish law, you should perform charitable deeds. The shnorrer is a kind of beggar who exploits this compulsory charity. Pious Jews invite him for dinner, offer him old clothes, etc.

² O grief!

Lonek

“Rachel? I knew her well. She’s dead.”

“What are you saying? I wonder whether you’re serious. It seems everybody in Bialystock is dead.”

“Ah, my friend, when I eat such a marvelous stuffed carp, the whole world is dead for me! But I see you haven’t even tasted it yourself. Are you not hungry?”

The more I listen to Schimelé Nussbaum’s lessons and stories, the more Jewish I feel. I wear the fringed shawl of pious Jews. I eat the kosher meals that my grandmother cooks, after covering my head and reciting the proper prayers.

My grandmother follows all the traditions. She always wears a scarf that hides her hair. I ask my sister Salka why she doesn’t want to show her hair.

“If a pious Jew saw them, he might harbor impure thoughts that would keep him from studying the holy texts. You know what? So she can be sure she won’t tempt pious Jews, she is bald, like you.”

“I ain’t bald. Mother shaves my head.”

“Right. She shaves her head, like you!”

My grandmother insists on cutting my nails, so she can keep every nail clipping.

“When the Messiah comes (let the Master of the Universe hasten the day!), all the Jews will go to Jerusalem. Not only the living, but also the dead. With restored bodies, they’ll crawl underground to the Promised land. If you scatter your nail clippings everywhere, you’ll have to look for them.”

“I must keep them all my life and ask people to put them in my coffin?”

“That would be too difficult. I’ll burn them, then you won’t have to look for them underground.”

My fringed shawl doesn’t change my temper. I gallop in the corridors while imitating a bugle call. Charge! Let’s get them! Aye aye, sir! Take no prisoners! Bjeh, the cowards are running away! Dogs’ asses! Drown in your own shit in hell!

They call me “Little Hussar.” Don’t you dare oppose me or keep me waiting. I stamp my feet on the ground, I get as red as a tomato, I cry, I shout insults: “Mangy dog’s spit, Devil’s booger,” I sulk for hours. My mother spansks me and spansks me to teach me life. I’m lucky my sister Salka consoles me.

“Don’t cry, Lonek.”

“Tain’t right.”

“Adults are free to do what they like. That’s the way it is.”

“I hate her. I’ll kill her. Cut her into pieces and burn her in the stove. No, I know. I’ll take a slice of ham downstairs and throw it into the soup when she’s not looking!”

“Don’t forget she’s got eyes in the back of her head! Come on, you do like her after all, your sweet mom...”

Lonek

Salka is my favorite sister. She's only two years older than me. Rózia is four years older, she's too old. Salka keeps making fun of me, but I'm not afraid to answer her. We fight all the time about trifles.

"Who stole the piece of cake I left on the window sill? I bet it's you, Lonek!"

"You hadn't written your name on it, you mule's fart!"

"What good would it do to write my name, since you can't even read! Besides, you knew it was mine: you were there yesterday when I began to eat it."

"It ain't right that all the cakes belong to you."

"What are you talking about? Mother gave you a cake yesterday, but you gobbled it right away. You're nothing but a glutton."

"So what about you? Ain't you a glutton?"

"I hope not, Heaven be praised!"

"Then half a cake is enough for you."

She's sly. When she attacks me, I resist because I'm already quite strong, so she resorts to her secret weapon: she tickles me.

"Hey, who's going to beg his sister mercy pretty soon? It's the little hussar!"

"You shitty bitch! This ain't fair."

I find a parry: I decide not to be ticklish anymore. One just needs to think hard about something else. I imagine I am a honved on the battlefield, or Moses walking across the Red Sea on dry ground. The same method also works when my mother spans me. I imagine I'm giving *her* a spanking: "You fat hairy sow, you deserved it!" Instead of crying, I sneer inwardly. This unsettles her so much that she loses her stamina. She complains to my grandmother:

"This child has become so hardened that a spanking doesn't affect him anymore. I suffer more than he does!"

A year or two later, in school, the teacher tells us the story of a Spartan boy who let his fox eat his belly; he didn't want to reveal that he raised the animal secretly. This Spartan boy, what a man! Like him, I want to learn how to dominate my pain. I stick a finger between door and doorjamb and I close as tight as I can. I imagine the fox's tiny teeth. At first, they scratch and tickle my belly, it is nearly pleasant, then they sink into my flesh and I must resist an awful pain... Ah, dog's ass, it hurts! My finger turns red and blue, it begs me open the door, but I refuse to obey a stupid finger. If the enemy catches me on the battlefield and tortures me, I'll be able to laugh at him!

Seeing his son kidnapped by women doesn't worry my father. "Let them do what they want!" his ironic glance says. "I bet he escapes them sooner rather than later!" He doesn't know I try to imitate a young Spartan warrior, but he thinks a boy always becomes a man eventually. Now and then, he grabs me when I come back from school and teaches me some billiard or whist. He is quite proud to see how fast I

understand the rules and mechanics of whist. I'm still an ace at mental calculations: after all the training I received in the inn, I find it easy to impress pan Wierzbianski, my primary school teacher.

The billiard ball's trajectory obeys geometrical laws, but skillful people—like my father—can get round the law by putting a spin on the ball. I enjoy watching him play so much that could stay for hours. The special language the players use to comment billiard strokes puzzles me. They laugh, but I don't know why.

“Hey, Marek, you cue is quite limp today.”¹

“I show you whether my cue is limp. Mind your balls!”

My father's work doesn't leave him much free time. In summer, he can't come with us when we go take a dip in the Dniestr, which flows a few miles from Sambor². Everybody says he swims like a fish. They also say he used to be the 77th infantry regiment's bicycle champion. He never found a moment to teach me to swim and ride a bike, though.

Around 1911 or 1912, when I am six years old, I get into the habit of sitting under the piano when Miss B-flat (a nickname we found for her) gives lessons to my sisters. This is even better than the music in the staircase. The grand instrument whines and roars, whispers and thunders. It shakes me up so, I can hardly describe what I feel. A down of notes surrounds me, warms me up like a fluffy quilt, carries me away to the land of dreams.

Miss B-flat asks a solfeggio question, but neither Rózia nor Salka knows the answer. They're just plain stupid! Will you let the poor miss go home in ignorance?

“A minor third!”

Miss B-flat is amazed.

“What are you doing down there, Lonek? How do you know it's a minor third?”

“He just took a chance.”

“Took a chance, ha ha! I ain't as dumb as you, that's all.”

She asks other questions. I know all the answers: fourths and fifths, tones and semi-tones, quavers and triplets. She reports my feat to my parents.

“This child should begin to study piano immediately. He's a genius, perhaps a new Mozart!”

My sisters doubt I'm a genius.

“Solfeggio is just another kind of calculation, so he finds it easy.”

“He computes like a trained dog.”

¹ The French word *queue* (tail), which became cue in English, is also a slang word for the male sex organ.

² While the border moved often, the Dniestr didn't. To find Sambor on a map, just find the Dniestr, east of the Carpatian mountains, and follow it with your finger. On recent maps, the spelling is *Dnister*.

In her great modesty, Miss B-flat insists she's not a good enough teacher for me. My mother enrolls me with the best teacher in Sambor, Miss Czwartacka. A few weeks before my eighth birthday, I play one of Mendelssohn's *Songs without words* during a students' concert. The audience applauds me warmly.

1914. War.

Uncle Leon, the husband of my aunt Regina, owns a carpentry with uncle Louis, my mother's brother. At the beginning of the 1914 summer, he travels to Berhometh, a town in the Carpathian mountains near Sambor, to buy some wood. He invites me to come back to Czernowitz with him and spend my vacations there. I rejoice at seeing his son, my cousin Markus. Although he is six years older than me, I like him a lot. I'll meet two new cousins: Sylvie and Rose, daughters of uncle Louis and aunt Anna.

"I'll celebrate my birthday at your place, uncle."

"How old will you be then?"

"Nine!"

Uncle Leon hires a horse-drawn carriage to go to Lwów, our province's capital. Every time I visit this big city, I admire its wide paved avenues, lined with high buildings.

"Look, uncle, this house has five stories... And this one, if I count the windows up the roof, four, five, six!"

The passers-by seem in a terrible hurry. Do they ever take time to enter one of the million stores?

In Lwów, we take a train to Czernowitz. Passengers in the railway car announce dreadful news: archduke Franz-Ferdinand was murdered in Sarajevo on June 28th.

"Where is this Srajenko?" uncle Leon asks.

"In Bosnia-Herzegovina, uncle, near the Adriatic sea. This country became part of the empire when we threw away the Turks. The Serbs pretend they should get Bosnia, since they also beat the Turks."

"You know a lot, my boy. Do you learn all this in school?"

"They don't teach you anything in school. I know it because I read my father's newspaper."

The passengers wonder where a mere child acquired so much knowledge. With my good memory, I remember everything I read. I became quite self-possessed in the company of the hussars and other inn customers. I mention Bosnia-Herzegovina as if I had come back from that country three days earlier.

We soon forget this attack on the other side of the Empire. I spend one month having fun with Markus and my new cousins. Sylvie is born in 1909, Rose in 1911. I

meet Max Wald, son of one of my mother's cousins. He is born one year after me and lives near Czernowitz.

On July 23rd, Austria sends an ultimatum to Serbia: "We suspect you ordered the attack and hide the murderer. Allow us to investigate in Belgrade." Serbia says no. On July 28th, the Empire declares war to Serbia. This throws lots of countries into the war: Russia, allied with Serbia; France and England, allied with Russia; Germany, allied with Austria; and also countries like Turkey and Japan.

Happily, my cousin Markus is too young to go to war, my father and my uncles are too old. All the trains are carrying soldiers, so I can't go home.

The Russian army quickly occupies Czernowitz and Lwów, as these cities belong to the great Ukrainian plain. Then it moves carefully towards the Carpathian mountains. A great military tide flows through Czernowitz day and night: regiments on foot and on horseback, supply trains, cannons pulled by ten or twelve horses. I see Cossacks! They wear fur caps in summer, and gleaming boots. As they speak the same language as the Ruthenian peasants, I can exchange a few sentences with them. They call me *malchik*¹ and give me sweets. War is fun, in a way.

In Sambor, my mother and grandmother do not consider that war is fun. They do not want to wait for the Cossacks and admire their uniforms. For them, the word *Cossack* carries the word *pogrom* piggyback. While the Austrian army still holds Sambor, they leave town and take refuge in Vienna with my sisters.

For my father, the word riding piggyback on *Cossack* is *vodka*. He worked hard for years, he saved money, he just got into debt to buy the inn from the owner. This is no time to flee. On the contrary! War is a godsend: he hopes to pay back the debt in no time.

Toward the end of the year, the Austrians recapture Czernowitz (but neither Lwów nor Sambor). Thus, the mailman can bring us a letter from Vienna: my mother invites my aunts to join her in the capital. Aunt Regina and Aunt Anna accept immediately. They fear a Cossack counter-strike. The fur-capped warriors might behave less politely than last time. My aunts worry not only about themselves, but also about Sylvie and Rose, the two daughters of Anna. They're only four and six years old, but the Cossack, those ferocious wolves, are known to relish tender meat.

The direct railway line, by way of Lwów, has not reopened yet. So we take a small train to Dorna-Vatra, at the bottom of the Carpathian mountains. Then we crowd in a covered wagon with our huge trunks and go over the Tihuca pass. The driver snarls at his four horses in Rumanian, but the noble steeds seem not to know this language and refuse to move faster.

¹ Boy.

“Are we soon there?” the two girls ask.

In Bistrica, we sleep in a dark and damp inn, more like a farm. Then we take a new train to Budapest, in Hungary. We reach Vienna after a whole week of travel—exhausted but relieved. The train’s soot turned us into coal-merchants, and I’m afraid we don’t smell nice.

My mother thinks too much instruction might spoil a girl, so she didn’t try to find a school in Vienna for Rózia and Salka. What about me? I ain’t a girl, am I? Bah, it’s too late already: the school year is more than half gone. Moreover, we’re confident the Empire will soon expel the Russians from Eastern Galicia. Then we’ll go home.

All these females—my grandmother, my mother, my aunts Regina and Anna, my two sisters and my two cousins—and me, sole man in the house, dwell in two large apartments near the Danube. Our days are well-filled. We stroll around, take a tram to a pastry-shop, listen to operettas. Carts pulled by some kind of electric engine chug along the streets. Whenever I see one, I ask: “Where is the horse? They forgot it!” After the horseless carriage, I discover the actorless theater. Jumping pictures are projected onto a white sheet hanging above the stage. They call it “moving-theater” or something.

The Vienna cafés and bear-halls are the biggest in the world. You could cram ten Greif inns in one of them!

We rent a piano, buy waltz and operetta scores by Johann Strauss and other Viennese composers. I play four hands with Salka. We sing and dance.

An old professor lives above us. Our music recitals and wild dances bother him. He knocks at our door to complain.

“I beg you to forgive us, esteemed Herr Doktor,” my mother says in a German that sounds like Yiddish. “My children study music. I tell them to practice their scales and their exercises, but you know young people, they like to have fun.”

“Let them have fun... Let them have fun... They shouldn’t go to bed too late, though: they need lots of sleep to grow up.”

“I understand you perfectly, Herr Doktor. Do you know what? Just under my home, in Eastern Galicia, I also hear music. A whole orchestra! My husband keeps an inn; he stayed over there, may the Master of the Universe protect him.”

“Innkeeper... Have you heard of Gustav Mahler, the former director of the Opera? He died a few years ago.”

“Well...”

“He composed horrible symphonies. His father was an innkeeper, too. I hope your children succeed as well as he did, dear Lady, but write more harmonious music.”

“You’re too kind, Herr Doktor. Thank our esteemed Herr Professor, Lonek.”

– *Jawohl, Mutter*¹.

I clap my heels and bow my head to salute my mother and the professor. I can follow their conversation easily: I studied German in school and now that I play with Viennese boys on the banks of the Danube I'm becoming quite fluent. I also speak German to my cousins Sylvie et Rose. Jews from Bukovina speak German rather than Rumanian, I don't know why.

I learn French with my sisters. A Czech *mademoiselle* who lived in Paris gives us lessons every other day. We perform the Fables by La Fontaine as small theater scenes for the benefit of our mother, aunts and cousins.

“Qu'est-cé là ?”

“Rien.”

“Quoi rien ?”

“Pé dé chose.”

“Mais encore ?”

“Lé collier dont jé suis attaché, dé cé qué vous voyez est pét-être la cause.”

“Attaché ? Vous né courez donc pas où vous voulez ?”

“Pas toujours ; mais qu'importe ?”

*“l'importé si bien, qué dé tous vos repas jé né veux en aucuné sorte, et né voudrais pas même à cé prix un trésor.”*²

Our public doesn't understand anything, but applauds politely nevertheless.

1915. Back to Sambor.

In August 1915, the Austrians come back into Sambor, and so do we. My father tells us sad news: my grandfather, old Josef, died in Wankowice.

“He had just celebrated his 97th birthday. His health was excellent. My uncle Chaïm was 104 when he died, the year Salka was born. He was born himself in 1799, in the 18th century!”

“Was he the one who saw emperor Napoléon, Father?”

“Yes, Lonek. He saw him in 1812, in Warsaw. He often talked about it. He said he was the liberator of European Jews, a new Moses!”

“Me, I saw emperor Franz-Josef in Vienna, in a golden coach. He has a white mustache that reaches to his hair. He looks old and sad.”

¹ Yes, Mother.

² “What is this?” “Nothing.” “What do you mean, nothing?” “Oh, not much. Maybe my collar left a mark...” “Are you tied? Don't you run wherever you want?” “Not always, but what does it matter?” “It matters so much that I don't want any of your free meals—and wouldn't even want a treasure if I had to pay it with my liberty!” From *The wolf and the dog*, a well-known text in France, pronounced here with a strong Polish accent.

“He’s eleven years younger than your grandfather, but he is sad because he lost many members of his family. The Mexicans shot his brother, his wife was murdered, his son committed suicide and his nephew was killed in Sarajevo.”

“Did the Cossacks kill Grandfather?”

“The war killed him. We still have potatoes and flour, because Cossacks do not harvest, but they steal cows and chickens. Meat has become scarce, as well as eggs and milk. There is no more fruit in the market. This is bad for children and old people: they fall sick, and sometimes they die.”

“But you, Father, have eaten lots of potatoes and flour: your belly has ballooned!”

“I did it on purpose, my dear Lonek. Now they’re calling up reservists even older than forty, but when they saw this paunch, they considered me unfit.”

“I would have loved to see you wearing a military uniform, Father,” Salka says with a touch of irony in her voice. “With soldiers like you, we would have beaten these awful Cossacks long ago!”

“So who would take care of the inn, if I had gone to the front? I see you bought new dresses in Vienna, young ladies. I bet these garbs cost a pretty penny, don’t they?”

“No need to get angry, Father. I was just kidding.”

“I see you haven’t lost your taste for mischief, my Salka. How shall we find a husband for you? He’ll be afraid you make fun of him!”

My mother doesn’t seem to enjoy my father’s jolly mood. Salka knows the story behind her red eyes.

“It’s incredible... While we were in Vienna, Father lived with cousin Malcia! He pretends this was the only way to protect her from the Cossacks, but he failed to convince Mother. He refuses to send Malcia away, and you know what? She’s engaged, now, to the son the coal merchant on Batory street.

Having missed a full year of school, I should begin my last year of primary school in September 1915. Meanwhile, my comrades have moved one year ahead of me, so they’re entering high school. I find this very annoying. Why, no, I won’t accept it! I go to the high school by myself and I ask the principal to let me pass the entrance exam.

“Bah, it was nothing at all,” I tell my astonished parents.

My father buys hens, ducks and geese to replace what the Cossacks stole. The inn’s garden gives us enough apples and plums. Our red winter apples, bitter and full of flavor, taste much better than the bland apples we ate in Vienna!

The inn really needs butter and cheese. My father buys two russet cows from a peasant. These cows fascinate me nearly as much as the cannons that roll across town. My own cows! Me, a certified milk lover! We name them Hare and Turtle. “Look,”

Sambor's citizens say, "the son of the innkeeper drives his cows." I take them to a meadow near the Dniestr, threatening them with a long wand.

Then the army calls up my father after all. He's a non-commissioned officer in charge of a company that digs up the dead. Poor dead! They've been buried every which way, with all these battles; they must be regrouped in a military graveyard. I go visit him during the summer vacations, in 1916. He lives in the house of a Ruthenian priest. The priest's children show me how to harvest wheat. In the Greek-catholic religion, only married men can become priests. I wonder what the Pope in Rome thinks about it.

Dig up the dead... What a loathsome task!

"How do you know where they're buried, father?"

"If they're buried quite deep, we don't know and we leave them alone. We walk across the battlefield. Often, an arm or a leg sticks out of the ground. I mean, a bone with some cloth around it. Sometimes, we find corpses that haven't been buried at all. Wild beasts ate the flesh."

"Do you also bury the enemies?"

"What's left of the uniforms isn't much, so we don't know whether the skeletons are Austrian or Russian. We treat everybody in the same manner."

My cousin Markus escapes mobilization by wounding his hand. I do have a cousin in the army: Benjamin—Malcia's brother. During a few days' leave in Sambor, he tells me about far-away lands. He went across Turkey, an ally of the Empire, to fight the Russians in Armenia. He saw Istanbul's *red-light district*.

"Listen to this, old boy: they leave the street doors ajar, so you get glimpses of naked women in the darkness. Ha, we didn't mind stepping inside! We didn't mind!"

Our old fossil of an emperor, Franz-Josef, dies in 1916. Karl, his successor, seems ready to start necessary reforms, but it is too late: the weakened Empire is decaying visibly.

Towards the end of 1917, taking advantage of the confusion that overwhelms Russia after the October revolution, Ukraine declares itself independent. The troops of *hetman*¹ Petlioura invade Galicia so fast that we don't even have time to flee to Vienna. I'm in third year of high school. Bahriak, the son of the school's caretaker, is a fifth-year student. Having enrolled in a Polish militia, he dies in a battle.

Until then, high school courses were taught in German. This was true all over the Empire. Now Ukrainian replaces German; Greek (a language that plays a part in Orthodox religious services) replaces Latin.

¹ Cossack leader.

In March 1918, the Germans sign a peace treaty with the Soviets in Brest-Litovsk. They drive away hetman Petlioura and bring in their own puppet, Skoropadski, the better to control Ukraine. Petlioura returns after the 1918 German defeat, but he must fight the white Russians, Makhno's anarchists, the Red army. I see many soldiers! France even sends troops to help Petlioura. The new independent Poland also sides with the hetman. In the end, the Soviets beat him and get Ukraine back. Poland keeps Eastern Galicia.

The Galicians rejoice at being Polish, but the Jews grieve. In 1919 and 1920, the Cossacks of the vanquished hetman take revenge on their traditional victims. Using the Great War's modern arms, they carry out terrible pogroms—the last ones in the century, everybody hopes.

1919. To arms, brothers!

Playing hundreds of waltzes everyday improved my piano skills. Salka and I now study with miss Zielonczanka, delegate teacher with the Lwów Conservatory. Once a year, she takes us to Lwów, where we pass an exam to move one grade up. Until 1922, Salka is miss Zielonczanka's best pupil; this gives her the privilege to conclude the yearly concert of the class. In 1923, I'm the one who plays last. Although I'm as vain as a rooster in a poultry-yard, I admit that my sister's natural talent for music beats mine. If only she wasn't so languid... I try to rouse her.

"Got to work! Note after note! To the end! To perfection! With some willpower, everything is possible."

"Willpower is precisely what I lack, but I don't know where to buy it."

"Got to work it up, like everything else. Take me, for instance..."

"Yes, I know your story. So to become a better pianist, I should crush my fingers with the door. I sometimes wonder whether your brain is working properly, little hussar!"

Salka and I, we oppose the troika made up of our grandmother, our mother and our elder sister. Rózia, round and placid, already as fat as a mother, would never question the red-thread maxims. She's eager to reign upon her own kitchen and decorate it in the same manner. My grandmother quotes a Yiddish sentence: *A tishelah, a benkele, a baleboosteh bei sich zu sein!* A small table, a small bench—Oh, to be a homemaker by myself!

This Rózia is a hypocrite, I can't stand it.

"Prayers here and prayers there, kosher this and kosher that, but look how you treat the maid. Obviously, you wish she was a slave, but she isn't!"

"I treat her any way I want to treat her. I am the mistress and she is the maid."

“Oh yeah? So you think maybe Yahweh decided you’d be the boss? You’re lucky, that’s all. It’s just a matter of chance. You could as well be in her place, and she in yours.”

I’ve lost my childish religious faith long ago. My mother protests:

“This is no way to speak to your elder sister. You should apologize. You sound like a *Bolshevik!*”

As we’re at war with the Soviets, this is the worst possible insult. My father finds the whole scene quite funny.

In 1919, I fall ill. Dr Klauber, an excellent physician who studied in Vienna, diagnoses a scarlet fever.

“We should be careful. Kidney complications are to be feared. You’d better isolate the young man, for his illness is extremely contagious.”

My grandmother is so desperate that she consults a wonder rabbi, famous for the miracles he performs. She comes back from her visit to the holy man with a wide smile on her face.

“He told me to add *Chaim* to your first name.”

“My great uncle’s name?”

“It means *life* in Hebrew. With such a name, you’ll certainly live more than a hundred years, like your great uncle.”

“Who needs doctors? Just name everybody Chaim. I wonder why some people still die young.”

I don’t know about wonder rabbis, but Dr Klauber’s prediction does come true: my kidneys hurt.

“It is a nephritis,” he says. “A kidney inflammation. You must restrict the number of visitors to the strict necessary.”

The man speaks with a kind of German stiffness. Everything he says sounds imperative. What sounds like an absolute prohibition might be some kind of timorous advice. Salka just can’t stay away. She pops in to say hello and catches my germs: first scarlet fever, then nephritis. Alas, whereas my nephritis vanishes totally, hers turns into a chronic one.

In May 1923, I pass my baccalaureate¹. One month later, Salka and I get the diploma marking the end of our studies at the Lwów Conservatory.

I can put a multiple of five to the square, but I don’t like mathematics and physics that much. I have a good memory, but I hate to learn history and geography lessons by rote. I’m in love with literature. As I know German as well as Polish, I read

¹ In Poland (and France), this is the final exam in high school. You need a baccalaureate to enter university.

German translations of the greatest English, French and Italian writers. I revere poets: Mickiewicz, Goethe, Schiller, Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Byron, Shelley, Lamartine, Pushkin. In the last year of high school, I discover the philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Spinoza, Descartes, Auguste Comte. I even know the Polish philosophers, whom I have to write an essay about for the baccalaureate.

I don't attend a "Jewish" school, but a public high school open to the three communities. Everybody knows who is what, since the class is divided in three groups for the religious courses: Catholics, Jews, Greek-Catholics. I have catholic friends, and why not?¹ Their number diminishes by and by, though: the new Poland doesn't like Jews. They say we supported the Empire and the Emperor and never clamored for independence. Since we loved the Austrians so much, they say, we should have followed them when they left. Poland to the Poles, etc. Sambor's mayor is not the lawyer Steuermann (whose son is a pianist and piano teacher in Vienna²), as under the Empire, but a rich catholic tradesman.

I find it difficult to follow these changes of perspective. I don't feel especially Jewish. I resemble neither the snobbish Jews who speak German and dream of moving to Vienna nor the bearded Talmudists who seem to live in the remote past. Nobody is more Polish than I am! I always get the first prize in Polish. I play the leading part, the Cadet School prefect, when the seventh and eighth year students give a performance of *Warszawianka*³ in the school theater. This play, written by our great poet and painter Stanislas Wyspianski, describes the 1830 insurrection against the Russians. I jump onto the stage, raise my shining sword and shout: "To arms, brothers, to arms!" with a voice so fiery that it could move all the brothers in the world.

What moves the brothers doesn't impress the sisters. Salka laughs at me.

"Poland is one century behind our times, and you too."

"You can criticize me, but not Poland!"

"Open your eyes. Poland woke up after one hundred years of slumber, like the Sleeping Beauty in the fairy tale. The poor girl is awfully out of fashion, but she doesn't even notice. Your honor, your heroism, all this medieval rubbish... Other European countries got rid of it long ago, or the last remnants vanished during the

¹ One of them, Andrew Kuzniewicz, became a well-known writer. In one of his books, *Volte*, he tells about his friendship with Lonek (renamed Rudek), as well as about the fragile harmony that still linked the various communities in Sambor between 1920 and 1925.

² Eduard Steuermann was the official pianist of Schoenberg and his group. Later, he became a teacher in Juilliard school in New York. Many famous American pianists were his pupils. His sister, Salka Viertel, was an actress in Berlin, a friend of Greta Garbo. She moved to Hollywood and wrote several of her films, for example *Queen Christine*.

³ The lady from Warsaw.

war. You know something? If you considered Poland a kind of museum of manners, it might become quite interesting...”

When a whiff of cool air comes down from the mountains and mellows the long summer evenings, the right thing to do is walk along avenues AB and CD, which make two sides of Sambor’s City Hall square and meet in front of the Greif inn. Some crazy geometer named the avenues without noticing that a square’s AB and CD sides don’t usually intersect. We don’t actually use their rightful names when we mention these elegant avenues, lined with the city’s finest stores, but we say “the Corso” as if we were in Rome or Milan.

We steal flowers in the public gardens to offer them to the young ladies. We eighth year students court four seventh-year beauties: Frydka, Zozia, Hanka and Anda. As they always stay together, we call them *the quadruplet*. Frydka is the most stunning one, with her thin body and her large black eyes.

I dress up to go to the baccaalaureate ball: tail coat, silk tie, patent leather pumps. I enter my name in the young ladies’ ball cards. They blush when they look at me: they remember the Cadet School’s prefect. The ball always begins with the polonaise. Then come waltz, quadrille, minuet, mazurka. For the polonaise, I choose the beautiful Frydka. The queen of the Corso dances with me! My schoolmates are quite jealous.

I fall in love with Frydka. Or maybe I think that I fall in love with her. In any case, I am quite proud to become her knight-servant.

Whereas I’m as punctual as a railway-station clock, she can’t help being late. I stamp my feet on frozen snow, I look at my watch, I decide to grant her five more minutes—and then five more again... When she comes at last, she laughs as if she had played a good trick on me.

“My poor puppy! Have you been waiting for a long time? The tip of your nose is quite red... Let me kiss it to warm it up.”

As soon as I hear her silken voice, my anger dissolves like a lump of sugar in a cup of hot tea.

During the summer vacations, I often visit her. My mother complains I come home too late.

“This is improper: one doesn’t stay at a young lady’s house until midnight.”

“Don’t worry, Mother...”

As my sister noticed, I believe in honor, virtue and other obsolete ideas. I consider that young ladies, and young men too, should stay pure until they marry. I could embroider a few red maxims for my mother’s collection: “Faithfulness begins before marriage,” “A young man should hold himself to the same standard as his bride,” “Chastity magnifies love.”

Women who lose their virtue end up as bar girls. Why do I think of the bar girls, all of a sudden? The fact is, they pop up in my dreams and steal into my bed without asking for my permission. I thought I had forgotten the bewitching smell of their hair, the lucent whiteness of their skin, the froo-froo of their dress.

Murky forces fight secretly in the depth of my soul, heart and body. I wonder about the purpose of life. I resemble Goethe's Werther, who suffered from *Weltschmerz*.¹ I decide to complete my year of military service without waiting for the army to call me. I send my request in June 1923, just after the baccalaureate, and I leave six months later, in December. This is a well-known cure for *Weltschmerz*. Put some order into one's mind and life... I also want to show the Poles that Jews do not shirk military service, as they pretend.

I spend three months in a regiment of light artillery in Lwów, then six months in Krakow's reserve-officer academy. I play piano with an orchestra for the year end's ball. I return to my Lwów regiment for the last three months as a cadet.

During his military service, my father learned to ride a bike and to swim. I become a horseman. Tanks couldn't replace horses in the Polish army. Nobody would want to be an officer anymore! I can soon perform on horseback the kind of acrobatics that people gawk at in a circus. I jump down from a galloping horse, then I jump back into the saddle. Our instructor is severe.

"How do you sit on your saddle? Look where your knees are!"

Bubchen auf Pferdchen ! Hop, hop, hop !

As I've grown up in a small town, so to speak in the countryside, I've always been fond of animals. Two dogs who live in our garden: a watch-dog and a white fox terrier called Bubi, whom I love to hold in my arms and kiss. My father sometimes borrows a horse-cart to visit a supplier. Around 1910, he bought a phaeton and a beautiful black horse. I was five or six. He took me along and let me hold the reins... I couldn't imagine a greater pleasure. During the war, the two cows replaced the horse, "requisitioned" by the Cossacks.

1925. Weddings.

In December 1924, after my year of military service, I become a student in the Lwów Conservatory. I attend a concerto course. I study Beethoven's third concerto, Anton Rubinstein's fourth, Tchaikovsky's first.

I rent a small room with no piano. Like other Conservatory students, I find a nice (Jewish) family looking for a piano teacher. Not only do I earn money by giving lessons to their three daughters, but I can practice on their piano at certain hours. The

¹ "Worldpain". A kind of vague anxiety about life, death and everything. Werther commits suicide in the end.

eldest daughter, who is in eighth year of high school, often studies with a friend, Minka. She has blond fluffy hair surrounding an oval face. Her features are well-balanced but somewhat delicate—almost frail. Whereas Frydka is firmly in control of her life, Minka seems to need help and protection. She often sits near the piano when I study my concertos. Her comments reveal that she knows and loves these masterpieces. She’s an artist herself: she draws and wants to become a painter.

A sweet friendship soon binds us. I talk to her in music. My fingers whisper tender words as they pat the keys. She listens and understands. She’s in love with me, I think. I could fall in love too—but I must not, since I am engaged to dark-haired Frydka.

I receive my concerto prize in June 1925. Steuermann, the mayor’s son, who came especially from Vienna to head to jury, compliments me.

“Greif? From Sambor? Are you the inn-keeper’s son?”

“Yes, Herr Professor.”

“Do you know that I buried the dead with him during the war?”

“Of course, Herr Professor.”

“You’re a remarkable virtuoso. I’m sure that Alfred Cortot, in Paris, would be glad to take you in his class at *École Normale de Musique*. If you want, I can write a letter of recommendation to him.”

“Thank you, Herr Professor. I hope I’ll be worthy of the great honor you’re bestowing on me.”

The great Cortot! The best teacher in the world! Paris! I already see myself playing in Salle Pleyel and bowing in front of a cheering public. I imagine my name on posters. I could even record my performances on gramophone discs.

I write to professeur Cortot, without forgetting to include Herr Professor Steuermann’s recommendation in the envelope. The professeur’s assistant answers that he’ll welcome me in the class, on condition I pass a small entrance exam.

Before leaving my country, I return to Sambor for the summer vacations. Hectic preparations are taking place in the Greif inn: my two sisters are getting married.

Rózia and Salka left school without completing their studies. In vain did a neighbor, Michel Eizenberg, give math lessons to Rózia. This Michel Eizenberg then went away to Vienna to study medicine, because a system called *numerus clausus* restricts the number of Jews in university to a handful. He didn’t fail to come and say hello every summer. My mother baked her best *Torte* for him; she expected a marriage proposal, of course. Here he comes indeed, in tail coat, and asks for the hand of... Salka. What a blockhead! Why doesn’t he propose to his former pupil? He knows perfectly well that a decent family won’t give away a younger daughter before an elder one. To add to the confusion, Salka, whom everybody thought attracted to

the pianist she plays four hands with, accepts Michel Eizenberg's demand. I guess she wants to become a homemaker too. She's grown quite stout since my last visit, anyway.

My poor mother... What can she do but beg a *shadchen*, a matchmaker, to find a suitable groom—meaning a doctor—for Rózia... The shadchen recommends Benek Bernfeld. Like Michel Eizenberg, he studied in Vienna. He is already bald and paunchy, but this is no time to be picky¹. Besides, Rózia is even plumper than he is.

My father promises he'll help Benek Bernfeld settle in Sambor as a doctor. I don't feel much sympathy for this future brother-in-law who marries out of interest.

Uncle Manès comes from America with his elder son, Leo. He works in the steel industry in Pittsburgh. I thought most Americans were millionaires, but he isn't, otherwise he would have brought over his wife and his two younger children, Aaron and Cecile. The wedding lets him be reunited with his mother (Rachel, my maternal grandmother) and his brother and sisters (Louis, Regina and Maria), whom he hasn't seen for more than twenty years. Rachel is seventy-five now. She discovers an American grandson, named after his grandfather Arie like me. These Americans eat steak three times a day or something: my cousin Leo is a giant. I can't communicate with him, as he knows neither Polish nor German. When he speaks English with his father, he sounds like a braying donkey. As a fact, even if you take his height into account, his ears are much too big. He is a law student.

Manès is sorry he must go. He'll probably never see his mother again.

"Believe me, I'd love to come every summer, but it's really quite a long trip. If only you could all move to America! A pity they don't welcome immigrants as generously as twenty years ago. The steel industry does lack workers, though."

My grandmother laughs.

"At my age! You want me to work in your steel industry?"

Louis and Leon (Regina's husband), who are more than fifty already, don't intend to switch to another continent and profession either.

"Actually, we'll certainly leave Czernowitz. We might settle in Berhometh, near the sawmills."

"When we founded and developed our carpentry, we were Austrian citizens living in one of the Empire's provinces. Now that we are Polish Jews in an independent Rumania, our business has ceased to expand. Orders are getting scarce."

"If I had known what was to come, I would have gone to America with you."

Uncle Leon, who is pudgy and prone to heart attacks, works very little. My cousin Markus replaces him. He is twenty-six.

¹ Literary note: in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the awful Jonas also chooses the younger Pecksniff sister, surprising everybody, but the groom who is expected to console the elder one succeeds in escaping to New Zealand at the end of the novel.

Lonek

My father also celebrated his fiftieth birthday recently. He explains to Leon that my mother has been worrying for the last few years: isn't it time he stop going to bed at four in the morning?

"I have decided to yield to her. Not because I feel tired, mind you, but because the dancing hall, without the honveds and the others... My other customers were the Jews who used to be the leading citizens in our town. These people don't feel like dancing anymore."

"Are you selling the inn?"

"No, but I'm renovating it. See, on the ground floor, I replace the dance hall with a fine restaurant. On the upper floor, I don't renew pan Hammerman's lease and I send away the, ahem, bar girls. This is so the newlyweds can have an apartment and Benek his doctor's office. I promised, you understand... Another thing: I enter into a partnership with my brother Favek, who distills and bottles liquors in Wankowice. Do you remember cousin Malcia? She'll sell liquors and cigarettes in the billiard room with her husband—he's the son of Batory Street's coal merchant, you know."

The wedding gives me an opportunity to see my cousins Sylvia and Rose, the daughters of uncle Louis and aunt Anna, and my cousin Max Wald.

The two little girls I knew in Vienna have become handsome teenagers. They speak German, Rumanian and French.

"When you live in Berhometh, you'll learn Polish."

"We'll take you as a teacher, Lonek."

"I wish I could oblige, but I'm going to Paris next month."

"In that case, we should teach you French real quick!"

"I studied it a little in Vienna. A *demoiselle* came three times a week."

"Really?"

"You can't remember. You were very young."

Max Wald's parents returned from Bukovina to Galicia at the end of the war. They settled in a small town. Max was a boarder in Sambor's high school, one year behind me. He was a tall boy, rather shy, who found it difficult to learn Polish. After his baccalaureate, he studied in a commerce school in Vienna and now he works in an import and export firm in Prague.

"Your import and export, is any of it with America?" Sylvia asks him.

"Yes, we do have some clients in the United States."

"Then you know English. You should discuss international trade with cousin Leo!"

"I read mail in English and I answer with the help of a dictionary. When he talks to his father, I don't understand a single word."

I ask him whether he learns Czech in Prague.

"This is just the opposite of English. I can speak a little, but neither read nor write. My colleagues and other people I know all speak German."

As for myself, I haven't spoken German for a long time. Since independence, the Poles scorn the language of Goethe, which reminds them of the Empire. I notice that uncle Manès speaks German (and Polish too, amazingly) with a slight English accent.

My uncle Manès must pick up return visas in the American consulate in Warsaw. I offer to go in his place.

"You can stay a few more days in Sambor, Uncle, then take a more direct route to Cherbourg by way of Krakow and Prague."

I rejoice at discovering Warsaw. On the one hand, my country's new capital lacks the prestige of the former one. How could you compare the murky Vistula to the beautiful blue Danube? On the other hand, a patriot who played the leading role in *Warszawianka* has to know the glorious city that, more than any other, exalts the Polish soul.

I take enough money to buy the visas and pay a night in the hotel, but the visas cost more than expected because the zloty's rate has changed. How shall I give the hotel keeper what I owe him? I send a telegram to Sambor, but I forget to include my address in the text. I know poets, philosophers and great composers, but nobody ever taught me how to write a telegram. Day after day, waiting for a money order that fails to arrive, I walk along the avenues, I crisscross Warsaw without daring to talk to anyone. I return to the hotel every two hours and ask whether a messenger brought an express letter for me. The hotel keeper is beginning to stare at me in an unpleasant way. On the fourth day, I think of going back to the American consulate, where my father did send the money. I can eat at last (after surviving on a diet of milk), pay the hotel keeper and go home.

The switch.

I know Vienna and Warsaw already. Now I'll discover Paris! I prepare my suitcases. I choose my favorite scores and books. I fold the shirts and suits that the best Jewish tailor in Sambor made to my measures. I check my passport and my train tickets carefully.

I promise Frydka to write every other day.

"I'll find an apartment or hotel in Paris. Next summer, I'll come spend my vacations here, then we'll go to France together."

One week before my departure, she declares that she must talk to me. Her voice is excessively solemn, as if she was playing some kind of dramatic part on the stage.

"If you really want to marry me, my love, you must give up your music. Where would it lead you? Being an artist may be fun, but you can't make a life of it. Nobody's an artist. We must plan for the future. If we want to found a family and

raise children, we'll need money. You must choose a real profession! Or you give *me* up. We break our engagement. A handsome man like you—I'm sure you'll find somebody else in no time."

"But, my dear—I need to think—I'll give you an answer—Tomorrow..."

I am dumbfounded. I blush, I mumble, I don't know what to say.

Without Frydka's knowledge, I've seen Minka, the ethereal young lady who loved to listen to me when I studied my concertos in Lwów. She came to Sambor. We walked together along the Dniestr. Ah, she wouldn't ask me to renounce my career as a pianist!

Yeah, but I'm engaged to Frydka, not to Minka. At night in my bed, I analyze the situation with the powerful tools of my mind. Reading the philosophers taught me that human beings, possessing reason and free will, can decide by themselves what path they'll follow in life. In the past, the rabbi's son became a rabbi and the baker's son a baker, according to the supposed will of God. Our century swept away such silly superstitions. One will does lead me: my own! I must first define the data, then exclude, compare, deduct, i.e. solve the problem as if it belonged to the field of algebra or logic.

Firstly, I am engaged. Whoever takes his word back loses his honor. What is honor? A man's most sacred possession. What will they say, in Sambor, if I reject my betrothed? That once more, the scion of a rich family played a cruel joke on a poor maiden. Disgusting!

Secondly, Frydka wants to found a family. Is there anything unusual about this? I'll be the family head. We'll have children. I'll buy an automobile. I'll proceed like my father: borrow, invest, repay; all you need is regular revenues.

Thirdly, artistic life is unpredictable. If everything goes well, you can become a Paderewski, who receives huge fees for his recitals. If things turn out wrong, I'll end up like the pianist uncle Manès told me about, on the ocean steamer: a Pole, former graduate of the Warsaw Conservatory...

Fourthly, it may be supposed that a talented pianist has a better chance of success than an untalented one. My playing style is more accurate and sturdy than Salka's, but she often plays doleful pieces, like Chopin's mazurkas or nocturnes, in a more moving manner. Maybe I try to compensate for my inferior talent by a kind of relentlessness. I'm not even sure that my natural talent is up to my father's. He comes from the countryside, he never studied music, but he plays Verdi and Offenbach arias in a very lively manner on the dance hall's upright piano.

To sum it up: I can't break my engagement unless I'm ready to forfeit my honor. What if I tried to temporize? Without deserting Frydka, I ask her for one year of reprieve and I try to earn a living with music. If I fail, then I can still learn another profession. Or else I find a way of becoming at the same time a pianist and insurance

salesman. Yes, but without any talent, I'll never make enough money to feed a family and buy an automobile. Frydka is right, I have to admit it. But wait! I'm not yielding to her ultimatum: my decision is the result of a careful analysis, leading to a free objective choice.

I toss and turn in my bed. Did I check all the options rationally and scientifically? If Salka hadn't gone to the Baltic sea for her honeymoon, I could consult her. Bah, I know what she'd say:

"You worked hard for years, you're ready to begin your career as an artist, and now you'll give it up? If you lacked talent, Steurmann wouldn't have recommended you to the best teacher in the world. This woman cast a spell on you! I know why you refuse to break your engagement: because you won't admit that you were wrong, mistaking a vague attraction for love. You pretend never to fail! Instead of trying to pass for a hussar or for the cadet school's prefect, you'd better acknowledge you're just a poor Jew like all the others. Let me tell you something: you're not as brave as you think. You're afraid of the future. You're ready to exchange your uncertain musical vocation for any ordinary safe profession. Your Frydka offers you a way out: by obeying her in the name of honor, you avoid revealing your weakness!"

I need to think some more. I'll see when I'm in Paris... By the way, what does Paris look like? A bigger Warsaw? When I returned from Warsaw with my uncle's passport, a passenger in my compartment told me he was coming from France. He was quite a rough man. He had seen none of the famous monuments of the world's capital, but he had spent most of his time chasing the *Petites femmes de Paris*. I try to remember: where did this passenger get off? I see myself in the compartment. The train is stopped in a station. The loudspeakers blare meaningless sounds—they always choose voices that are too low and besides this voice speaks English. As the train begins to move again, I find that I did understand what the voice said: *Lwów, five minutes' stop, Lwów, five minutes' stop*. Hey, I'll miss my transfer! I pick up my suitcase from the baggage rack. If I run to the end of the car, I can still jump onto the platform before the train moves too fast. I must first put my clothes back into the suitcase, because they're spread over the seat. Now the suitcase won't open... The train has left Lwów station already. Leaning out the window, I see the Sambor track receding in the distance. I'll never see my family anymore. I decide to go to the steam engine and ask the stoker to forge a key so I can open my suitcase. I walk across the vestibule that separates the cars. As I've already reached the middle of the next car, I discover that it is a dancing-car. Strange I didn't notice before, considering the din produced by the crowd of dancers. Bunches of *Petites femmes de Paris* raise their legs together to a frenetic piano rendition of Offenbach's French Cancan from *La vie parisienne*. I know this pianist—This pianist—So my father was in the train and I didn't even know! A dancer is sitting on his knees and jumping in rhythm.

“If you want to become a real pianist, you must be able to play with a girl on your knees,” he says in Yiddish.

“Yes, Father. I’ll try.”

I must dress first, because I’m lying in my bed and wearing a nightgown.

During my last days at home, I wonder what profession to choose. Jews who haven’t gone to high school become tailors or leather workers. Most others study medicine. Many go to Paris. That suits me fine: I just have to follow them along this well-trodden path.

I arrive in Paris on September 10, 1925. As soon as I’m there, I write to my parents to tell them about the change in my plans. I find a cheap hotel on the corner of rue Geoffroy Saint Hilaire and rue Lacépède, fifty yards away from the PCN¹ building on rue Cuvier. After a few weeks, I rent a room at 18 rue Linné, in the apartment of madame Gomez—a middle-aged woman whom her husband deserted.

“He was a trav’lin’ sal’sman, y’know. One day, d’ring the war, m’sieur writes fr’m Marseille, say’ng he met ’noth’r w’man on th’ Can’bière, their big av’nue ’v’there, so I don’t need t’wait f’r h’m. I’ve decid’d t’forg’t h’m, b’lieve me!”

She doesn’t forget him, but tells me this story again and again, as well as the rest of her life. In the beginning, I barely understand her, because she speaks fast and swallows half of her vowels. I studied French grammar and read French novels in Lwów, as a preparation for my stay in Paris, but spoken French differs from the written language. Madame Gomez is a good teacher. If I learn to understand her, I’ll be able to jot down the PCN courses more easily. I encourage her to speak. She’s delighted that someone is willing to listen to her.

“D’ye th’nk he s’nds me money, maybe? Not a c’nt! While he goes s’nbath’ng with h’s harl’t, I h’ve t’rent rooms and take knitt’ng jobs. I had a maid, now got to do my hous’w’rk mys’lf. Y’re quite a clean fella, though. Wish all the ten’nts were like ye!”

“What ees his harlut?²”

“H’s slut, h’s whore, h’s floozy, h’s tart, h’s hussy, h’s strump’t, h’s tramp, h’s w’nch, h’s marie-couche-toi-là³...”

I build up my stock of French words.

¹ Physics, Chemistry and Natural sciences. A kind of freshman course for medicine.

² In French, it is easy to indicate a Polish accent: you just replace “e” with “é.” As it is more difficult in English, I won’t really try to do it.

³ Mary-lie-down-there. I left this French one for local color.

1927. Jealousy.

During the first months of my year in Paris, I don't lay hands on a keyboard. Then someone tells me they're looking for pianists to play in movie theaters¹. Thus I add some pocket money to the stipend my parents send me.

I play Rachmaninov's loud romantic music to go along with *Les Misérables* in the big rue Monge² theater. I see the film many times. Hey, the wheel breaks again and the poor guy is stuck under the heavy wooden cart. He's lucky that monsieur Madeleine, a.k.a. Jean Valjean, is walking by and will save him. While staring at the screen, I think about Frydka and my future happiness. Sometimes, the magic of the moving pictures grabs me in spite of myself. Whereas I've seen Jean Valjean raise the cart at the previous showing, I feel a terrible anguish all of a sudden: what if he fails this time? Nightmares wake me up at night. I flee into a dark forest or into the sewers. The whole world accuses me of a crime I haven't committed, to the sound of Rachmaninov's preludes.

The distance to the year end's exams diminishes fast. I know the science well, but I'm afraid I'll make spelling and grammar mistakes in the written exam, then fail to understand the examiner in the oral session. I'm eager to face the obstacle and get it over with.

My success, easily obtained, brings me a kind of dull relief. It does make one person happy: madame Gomez! She cooks a celebratory cake and opens a bottle of champagne. You'd think she was the future doctor. I say *au revoir* to her and return to Sambor for the summer vacations.

In September 1926, I marry Frydka. My parents consider me somewhat too young: I am twenty-one. Actually, I'm ready to wait one more year—to live with my betrothed in Paris without sleeping with her. Frydka's mother doesn't believe it's possible, though. She doesn't trust human nature. We beat about the bush and hesitate so much that there is not enough time left to prepare a big feast. According to custom, the bride's family takes care of the wedding. We go to Lwów, where Frydka's aunt has a large apartment. A rabbi marries us by giving his nuptial blessing. I've forsaken the Jewish religion long ago, but we need a rabbi because there is no civil marriage in Poland.

We stop in Vienna for our wedding night. In our haste, we have forgotten to inquire about the so-called facts of life, so that neither one of us knows what a man and a woman do in a bed. We try this and that timidly, but without any significant result.

¹ Until 1929, movies were silent. Pianists played in the theaters.

² A supermarket replaced this theater long ago. See map at the end of the book for rue Monge.

Later, in Paris, we find how to proceed. I wonder whether all marriages begin in this manner.

I must now attend courses on rue de l'École de médecine, so I've reserved a room in a small hotel on rue Grégoire de Tours.

After our first night in Paris, we eat our first *croissants* for breakfast in a café. Then I show Frydka the Latin Quarter: boulevard Saint-Germain, boulevard Saint-Michel, the Luxembourg gardens. As we're strolling on rue Soufflot, I meet a Polish student I know.

"Bonjour, Lonek. How are you? What's new?"

"What's new? Well, I got married in Poland. Let me introduce my wife, Frydka!"

He kisses Frydka's hand in the Polish manner. Then we exchange other news. He recommends a film he saw recently.

"Do you remember this Charlie Chaplin movie we went to in June?"

"Gold Rush? Of course I remember. That was fun."

We laugh. We're happy. We're only twenty-one. As soon as he's gone, Frydka turns toward me. She's quite red.

"Why didn't you mention this Chaplin film in your letters? You promised to tell me everything."

"Didn't I mention it? Listen, I did write to you every other day, as promised. I sometimes had so much work that I may have neglected a few unimportant things."

"So what else did you fail to mention?"

This terrible suspicion bores like a devilish worm into the fruit of our union. Frydka discovers she enjoys acting the part of a police inspector. She questions me all night long to fill up the blanks in my mail. How could my answers satisfy her? The better to imagine my life in Paris, she spent weeks reading books or magazines about the Latin Quarter in Sambor's library, or maybe even in Lwów. She knows more than I do about carabins, bizutage, quat'zarts¹.

"I've seen pictures in a magazine..."

"But me, I have seen nothing."

"I don't believe you. Listen, puppy, you'd better tell me the truth right away. We'd save time."

"Do you want me to make up some debauchery just to please you?"

Because of my obstinate denial, Frydka must resume her cross-examination on the next night.

"You lied about the Chaplin film, yes or no? How can I know what was true and untrue in your letters? My mother did warn me."

"She said I lied in my letters?"

¹ Latin Quarter words for medicine students, fragging and a rather raunchy students' ball.

“She said all men are liars.”

While I get up after a sleepless night and go to medicine school, where I have to understand and study tough subjects in a language I don't master fully, Frydka stays in bed to regain strength for the next bout of our fight.

After observing my reactions to several kinds of arguments, she finds the weak spots in my armor.

“I should have known you would cheat on me with any hussy. Behind your grand cadet-of-the-guard posturing, you're just a punk. You did spend your childhood above a house of ill repute. I mean, how do you call these *dancers* who lived on the second floor? Was it not possible to go up with them after paying a certain amount of money? Wasn't a percentage of this amount perceived by the owner of the establishment? What word do the French use? Herring? No, that's not it. Ah, yes, *Maquereau*¹. And your mother, despite her religion and her morals, isn't she a former...”

When she insults my parents, I become furious. As I can't find words to answer her, I beat Frydka savagely. She exults. This proves she hit the bull's eye!

I don't understand what happens to me. It seems I can turn into a bully in the same manner Dr Jekyll changes into Mr Hyde. I don't even need to swallow a secret potion. My mother often told me I used to burst into red rages when I was a small child. But then, she added, I grew out of it. My mother—I can't let her say that my mother... That's right: I'm defending the honor of my family, as any real Pole would. I obey the commandment “Honor thy father and thy mother.” A slap for Father! A punch for Mother!

When I come out of medicine school, on rue de l'École de Médecine, I sometimes enter the François bookstore to look at a medical book or journal. As soon as I open the door to our room, I see in Frydka's velvety black eyes a nasty gleam I know too well.

“The course ended at four, it is a quarter to five. What did you do in the meantime? What whore did you gambol with? What new lie will you think of?”

“I banged a *marie-couche-toi-là* in a bordello!”

We prolong the torture by hurling our insults in a low voice instead of shouting them openly. We don't want our neighbors to hear. We worry about propriety, I guess. I learn the art of giving silent blows in the dark. I use only a small fraction of my great strength: in school, I always won the wrestling tournament. At times, I look at the whole scene as if I was someone else. “Negroes fighting in a tunnel,” I say to myself. The French students use this expression to describe a bad X-ray picture. When the film is white, they say: “Polar bears fighting on an ice-floe.”

¹ Mackerel. French slang for pimp.

The main consequence of these conjugal disturbances is that I fail my histology exam. I can't return to Sambor for the summer vacations as planned, because I must study for the September session. Frydka goes alone.

Phew! To sleep at last. Where? I look for a quiet place on the map. In Sambor, I would find a village in the mountains where I could study without being disturbed. What about Montreuil? The name sounds like Mont Blanc or Mont Dore—it has to be some kind of peak. Ha, but the train doesn't go very far. I don't see any mountain.¹ I ask a friendly-looking passer-by for his help.

"You should try the banks of the Marne," he says.

Thus I settle in Joinville, in the house of a little old lady by the river. It doesn't look like the Greif inn, but it has an orchard that reminds me of ours. My mother wrote to me that uncle Leon, her brother-in-law, just died. Aunt Regina now lives in the inn, in the children's former bedroom. My cousin Markus works in Berhometh, in the Carpathian mountains. Uncle Louis, aunt Anna and their two daughters haven't left Rumania yet. I miss Salka, my parents and all the others. I have never staid far away from home for such a long time.

The little old lady rents another room to two Turkish students. Turkish Jews. These fellows seem to enjoy life. They sing and dance in the garden with their friends of both sexes, swim in the Marne, barbecue lamb and chicken on skewers, drink their sweet aniseed liquor.

I stare at the beautiful oriental girls. I remember (blushingly) what my cousin Benjamin told me about Istanbul's red-light district. I pass them in the corridor or in the garden, I smile to them, I try a bashful *bonjour*.

The two students spend a day in Paris once or twice a week. They work in a restaurant to earn some money. On such a day, one of the girls comes to visit them. I've noticed her already: she has jet-black hair and laughs a lot, showing big white teeth. She doesn't seem to mind that her friends are not there. She changes in the bathroom, then dives into the river. Seeing me at my window, she hits the water with her hands, laughs and beckons me.

The weather being quite hot and the river quite tempting, I have indeed decided I would learn to swim. I bought bathing-trunks yesterday. I go down and enter the water carefully.

"Ahem, I can't swim, but I want to learn."

She laughs loudly enough to scare all the fish in the Marne.

"It is easy, I'll show you!"

She does a few breaststroke movements, then asks me to imitate her.

¹ Montreuil is a suburb just outside Paris. Joinville is slightly farther away in the same (eastern) direction.

“Stretch out in the water, I’ll hold you up.”

She puts her hands under my belly. She tickles me and laughs some more. But me—the feeling of these hands stroking my skin—a feeling—a desire—an upheaval...

I thought that a Jewish girl from Turkey would want to stay pure until her marriage, but my manly instincts, waking up after a long doze, read some of her gestures as definite approaches. How could I resist my instincts? I feel unhappy, I need consolation for my troubles and my loneliness. We move from the river to the bedroom. After the swimming lesson, my new mistress gives me a sex education course that I was certainly in need of.

Well, this could be expected. When Frydka pushed me to the brink, I often regretted I hadn’t actually done what she reproached me. So now I am guilty as charged. Who needs stupid conventions like faithfulness in marriage anyway? Salka was right when she made fun of honor and other nonsense. I could embroider new mottoes in red thread: “If you’re to be punished, you might as well commit the crime,” “You only live once,” “When an opportunity passes by, you’d better seize it.” In the slang of medicine students, the word “seize” has an obscene meaning. “You were right to seize this little Turkish opportunity,” they would say. “In the hussar manner!”¹ they would add.

After two months of bliss, we part amiably on the very day Frydka comes back from Poland.

Transformed by my Turkish summer, I cease to worry about my wife’s queries. Why should I explain that I can indeed spend forty minutes browsing books in François, or detail my schedule in advance so she can check it afterwards? Whatever I say, she’s convinced I’m lying. She slaps me in the street because I’m looking at another woman. She slaps me in the home of a Pole who gives a New Year’s party, because I hug the woman I’m dancing with too tenderly (or so she says). She knows I’m too shy to retort in public, but I repay her later, adding interest.

Sleepless nights in the hospital follow sleepless nights at home. The further I progress on the path to my medical diploma, the better I feel able to analyze the dynamics of our couple. It is very simple: *Me doctor, you patient*. I explain to Frydka that she suffers from a maniac-depressive psychosis with paranoid delusions.

“You’d better seek treatment before it gets worse. Obviously, your mother is a mental case too.”

“So I’m crazy? Let me tell you something: I went to the library and read some psychoanalysis books. You resemble your inn. Upstairs, good manners and fine

¹ To “seize a woman in the hussar manner” (*prendre une femme à la hussarde*) was an acceptable French expression until the fifties or sixties. Today it would be considered very offensive.

words, society and its conventions. Downstairs, infantile drives and base desires, gluttony and lechery. You repress these foul needs, but they dominate you unconsciously!”

In 1928 and 1929, we spend our vacations in Sambor and play a comedy of happiness to satisfy our parents’ expectations. In 1930, we go visit my cousin Markus in Berhometh. Nobody understands me as well as Markus: he notices at once that something’s wrong. He tells my parents about it.

I didn’t dare talk frankly to them. I was afraid they would throw a “we told you so” at me—in so many words or in some allusive manner. I hated to admit that free will and reason could lead me to failure, whereas their old-fashioned prejudices might have helped me steer a better course. Markus’s mediation helps us avoid a painful clash between the prodigal son and his parents. I can retreat quietly without losing face.

We did stay four years together. We patched up several times. I guess the Mr Hyde hidden deep inside me drew a dark pleasure from the violence that enlivened our nights and helped me persist in my mad endeavor.

I didn’t want to sadden my parents, who were so proud of my achievements. Now that Markus told them everything, which makes him partly responsible for their disappointment and grief, I feel free to decide the inevitable. I ask Frydka to let me return to Paris alone.

“I must study for my final exams in the best possible conditions, my dear. Now, concerning the future of our couple... Let’s say we’ll talk about it next year.”

1930. A Frenchwoman named Yanka.

I don’t feel like going back to the hotel on rue Grégoire de Tours, where sleeping is so difficult. One of my friends, who is moving to Lyon, lets me have a room he rented on rue Rollin. This is a very narrow street ascending from rue Monge to rue du Cardinal Lemoine. The flanks of the hill known as Montagne Sainte-Geneviève are so steep that the street actually begins with a flight of stairs. When I lean out of my window, I see the stairs, the rue Monge with its cars and passers-by, and then the garden around the *Lutèce* Roman arena.

I hire a small upright piano, which I sort of wedge between the bed and the window. When I shared my life with Frydka, piano playing was forbidden. She was jealous of music. I was supposed to love her and only her—nobody or nothing else.

On the other side of rue Rollin, quite close, a pretty young woman is dusting and sweeping her apartment. She leaves her window open, as women do when they clean their house, so that I can hear her sing. My window is open too, the October weather

being still quite warm. She wears an apron and a headscarf. She must be a maid. I think of cousin Malcia, who was a servant in the Greif inn and who reigns today like a queen in her little liquor and tobacco shop.

I feel happy. I haven't felt so happy for years. I am discovering everything anew, like a prisoner just set free: Paris, the Latin Quarter, the croissants and the coffee in the morning, the bookstores, the movie theaters, my medicine school comrades. As if I wanted to spread my elation around, I toss some Polish biscuits at the young maid across the street. She throws them out and closes her window.

My mother crammed my suitcase with candy, cakes, chocolate bars and other sweets. She thinks that food is scarce in Paris. Her concern reminds me of my school years. She never failed to slip a salmon or caviar sandwich into my satchel. She was afraid I would faint if I didn't eat anything during the 10 AM break. I was a privileged child, with my made-to-measure shirts and my caviar, but now I live in a tiny room like the other students. When I remember my mother's devotion, my eyes fill with warm tears.

I also cry when I attend a recital by Horowitz¹. I could have held center stage just like him...

I sometimes see the name of Alfred Cortot on concert bills. Instead of commiserating on my own fate, I could still enroll in École Normale de Musique. I could overcome my lack of practice with hard work. Eight hours a day: scales, arpeggios, Czerny exercises. Just need some willpower. No, it's impossible. After all this time, Steuermann's recommendation is as useless as stale bread. I've made a choice. I follow my path. If I had really been in love with music, like Horowitz and other virtuosos, nothing could have sidetracked me. I wouldn't have surrendered to Frydka's blackmail. She wanted to become a doctor's wife, not a pianist's.

She pretended that asking me to give up the piano wasn't even her own idea, but that she was following my father's secret instructions. As she used to invent all kinds of fooleries to smear my parents, I didn't believe her. Sometimes, though, I wondered... My father had asked his cousin to print the Doctor-General-in-Chief diploma hanging over my bed. He never inquired about my feelings after my change of career. Now I'm too old: twenty-five. In the hospital, they call me "Doctor" already.

I play some Chopin on my upright piano. My hands dance along the keyboard. The delicious feeling of freedom that has been reviving me since I returned gives them wings! Often, the woman with the headscarf listens to me and smiles. Her wide mouth seems shaped for laughing. One fine morning, she applauds at the end of a piece.

¹ Russian pianist (1904-1989). He emigrated to America in the thirties.

“Can you play waltz number seven?”

“Come and listen to it here!”

“This I can’t do. No, I really can’t.”

A few days later, she does cross the street.

“Five minutes, no more. I mean, you know, my husband—he keeps the hardware store on rue Monge, just left at the bottom of the stairs. You understand...”

“I’m such a fool. I thought you were a maid!”

Her name is Jeanne. Her husband brings her security, but she doesn’t love him. I soon discover that she’s just spellbound when I play Chopin. She finds my Polish accent rather exotic. I let her travel far away without leaving her narrow street. We get into the habit of meeting for afternoon walks in Parc Montsouris, until the day when I, ahem, seize the opportunity.

We rent rooms *by the hour* in small hotels where bed sheets aren’t as clean as could be. After a few months, she leaves her husband and we move into a hotel on rue des Gobelins. To mark the change in her life, she replaces her first name with its Polish version, Yanka.

I had a certain fondness for rue Rollin and its stairs, but we can hardly stay in the same street as her husband.

When I lived with Frydka, I met mostly Polish students. I was afraid French students would look down on us because we came from a remote uncivilized country and spoke with a ridiculous accent. Yanka introduces me to native Parisians in the neighborhood of rue Monge and place des Gobelins. Plain friendly people—factory workers, storekeepers, craftsmen—who remind me of the Greif inn regulars. There are some differences, though. Here, the concierges¹ can read. They spend hours leafing through the “Petit Parisien” newspaper on a chair in front of their building. Besides, they don’t get drunk every Sunday—or at least, not as drunk as the Poles.

Yanka’s parents live on rue Pestalozzi, one block away from rue Monge. Their home has the same waxed floors, sturdy furniture and musty smell as the apartment of madame Gomez, whose husband sunbathes in Marseille with his slut. Yanka’s father, a roundish and reddish gentleman, inserts a joke or two in most of his sentences without missing a beat. His Parisian working-class accent is more musical than the flat accent of my teachers. He can sing all the Italian operas in French translation, actually. His wife seems to have brought a strong peasant common sense from her native village in Brittany. She finds her daughter slightly too fickle. As she considers me a serious young man (a doctor!), she hopes I’ll help her settle into a stable life.

¹ The French concierge is a kind of doorman and guardian.

What surprises me most is that Yanka's father backs up radical socialist or communist ideas with sharp arguments and even references to Marx and Bakounine. He asks me why I didn't study medicine in Poland.

"Me, I came to France to study the piano, then I changed my mind. I chose medicine because it was convenient. Other Polish students must emigrate because the University is effectively closed to Jews."

"You don't say! But how do they know that you're Jewish?"

I smile, but in fact his question is nearly moving me to tears.

"It means a lot to me that you ask this question."

"Really? But why?"

"Because it proves that here people can be Jewish without anyone knowing about it. You're very lucky, believe me."

"Yes, but you didn't answer. How do they know it?"

"Well, it is written on my ID card: mosaic religion. In my country, we do not declare a birth in City Hall, but in a church or synagogue. In public school, there are courses in religion; the Catholics go with the priest, the Jews with their own instructor. The Jews came to Poland from Germany at the time of the Crusades, to flee persecutions. They speak a kind of German dialect and often have German names. *Greif*, for example, means *griffin* in German. This is quite a common name in Germany and Austria."

"If you speak your own language, of course they'll know you're Jewish. In France, the Jews speak French. Why don't you speak Polish?"

"They kept their language like the Québécois, who speak French amidst English-speaking people. Jews of my generation speak Polish. This doesn't help much. It is said the Poles have a kind of sixth sense that lets them recognize the Jews."

"If I understand well, it is not enough to speak Polish. You should also change your last name."

"And also my first name! When I was born, my parents gave me a Hebrew first name, Arie, which means Lion, to honor my dead grandfather. This Hebrew first name is printed on my ID card, even though my parents always called me Leon."

"Lonek is Léon?"

"Yes, my dear, it is a diminutive, like Jeannette for Jeanne. In any case, the catholic Poles don't christen a boy Leon, lest it be supposed his real name is Arie. They never name him Maurice, because the Jews replace Moses with Maurice."

"So the Jews should also avoid Léon and Maurice."

"Some choose Polish first names, like Stanislas or Casimir."

"That's a funny name, Casimir."

"They don't really say Casimir, but Kazik. For Stanislas, they say Stachek or Stajenku."

Now that I live with Yanka, I'm beginning to feel French. I've spent five years in Paris, but I always planned to return to Poland after completing my studies. I would exchange my French diploma for a Polish one (we call this procedure "nostrify") and practice medicine in Sambor or Lwów. During my last summer at home, my brothers-in-law, who are both doctors, advised me strongly against nostrification.

"There are already too many Jewish doctors in Jewish neighborhoods, but they won't let you practice elsewhere. You'd better try to stay in France if you can."

The cohabitation with Yanka opens new perspectives, lets me consider possibilities that I didn't dare imagine before meeting her.

And Frydka? Ah yes, Frydka. I promised I'd return to Sambor for the summer vacations. Resume our relationship, bring her back to Paris. No, no, no! Even if I hadn't met Yanka, I couldn't. The nightmare is over, I won't begin again. In the spring of 1931, I send a long explanatory letter to Frydka's aunt—who let us use her apartment in Lwów for our wedding. She's a reasonable woman, just the opposite of Frydka and her mother. I'm sure she'll understand.

To show how firmly I stand on my position, I decide to spend the summer in France. Yanka is delighted.

"But what about your wife? What will she think?"

"Frydka? With her cunning character, she'll say that I'm shirking my responsibilities, that I'm too much of a coward to face her and repudiate her openly, that I'm afraid to confront my parents. Let her think what she wants, I couldn't care less."

I thought I had managed to leave my troubles behind, but my father comes visit me. He pretends he wants to see the famous *Exposition Coloniale*.

I rent a room with him in a hotel near Gare de l'Est. I leave Yanka for the time being. I try to explain the failure of my marriage without mentioning her. In a small town like Sambor, people sometimes make up and pass along stupid rumors. Two or three years ago, one of the inn's customers showed a letter to my father: "See, my son studies medicine in France, in Nancy. He never heard of a medical student named Greif. You send him a stipend, but nothing proves he tells you the truth." Now they might say: "Life in Paris turned him into a knave. He deserts his wife to keep up a trollop!" Then I would have to go over there and convince them that Frydka is the evil character in this drama—that they shouldn't mistake me with the husband of madame Gomez, who found a harlot in Marseille and never returned.

Yanka wants to see the mysterious *tatko*.¹ She follows us at a distance, like a private detective in a film. We visit the Exposition Coloniale, then the main beer-halls in Paris. My father is bewildered:

“*Ach du Lieber Gott!*”² These Parisians, who are famous the world over for their refined tastes, drink very bad beers. Also, when I order a Half, I expect to get a half-liter, not this ridiculous small glass.”

I find it amazing that this old man, who is fifty-six already, can trot so jauntily from one end of the city to the other. I guess I’ll also be fifty-six someday. Shall I live in Poland? In France? Shall I have children? Shall I be as strong as my father?

As we sit in a café and taste one more bland beer, my father brings me the latest Sambor news.

“The restaurant and the liquor store are quite successful. You remember Max?”

“The waiter? Of course.”

“Well, he just retired. We hired a young fellow to replace him.”

“How is Mother?”

“She’s fine. You should see her: she dotes on Dolek and Melanie!”

They’re the children of Rózia and Benek.

“How old are they now?”

“Five and three. Two bright kids, full of life. I wish I could say as much about their father. Listen: he doesn’t go visit a patient unless a cab comes to pick him up. His practice is rather small, but he doesn’t even try to enlarge it.”

My father sounds somewhat bitter when he talks about this lazy son-in-law. The other son-in-law moved to Lwów with Salka. He works hard and earns a good living.

“We’re worried about Salka, you know.”

“Her nephritis?”

“She went to take the waters in Karlsbad³ several times, but it didn’t help much. She’s careless and stubborn: she refuses to follow the diet her husband recommends.”

“Yes, I know. We talked about it last time I saw her. She says she prefers a short and happy life to a long and painful one.”

“Your aunt Anna is very sick. She has tuberculosis in the lungs. She’s been staying in a sanatorium in the Italian Alps for six months now. Your cousin Rose wanted to come to France, like Sylvia, but she’s staying with her father in Czernowitz now.”

“I’ve seen Sylvia a few times. She studies medicine in Rouen. It is not too far from Paris. She’s in third year already.”

“She admired her cousin. She wanted to follow your example.”

¹ Variant of *tatus*, “dad”.

² My God!

³ This city was already known by its Czech name, Karlovy-Vary, but older people still used its former Austrian name.

As my father wishes to see the French Riviera, we spend a week together in Cannes. I swim every day with him: not only do I remember the lessons *alla turca* in the Marne river, but I often go to the swimming-pool with Yanka.

Coming from Lwów to Paris, my father passed places that meant nothing to him: Warsaw, Poznan, Berlin, Dortmund, Cologne, Aachen, Liege. He goes home by way of Genova and Venice, then a series of cities he heard about when he wore the Austrian uniform: Trieste, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Budapest and Krakow.

1936. Writers' cramp.

Yanka is lively and full of joy. She loves physical activities, she's never tired. She is *débrouillarde*¹—a quality so French that the word doesn't even exist in Polish. She gets a job as a secretary in an advertising agency. She finds a three-room apartment at 68 boulevard Saint Marcel, a few blocks from my hospital, la Salpêtrière.

Every evening, when she comes back from work, she prepares a good meal of French cuisine. First course: a vegetable soup or leeks with vinaigrette; second course: veal fried in bread-crumbs with noodles or a steak with sautéed potatoes; then a good cheese and fruit. I become a wine drinker, so that I forget the very taste of beer. After dinner, Yanka washes the dishes and I dry them.

She teaches me to ride a bike. We spend our week-ends camping with a group called Nature's Friends. We buy a tandem bike, but it's not really convenient, so we sell it and get regular bikes.

On Saturday evening, the campers light a great fire and sing all together. I learn old French songs: *Aux marches du palais*, *Le pont du nord*, *Le roi a fait battre tambour*. I play games called *candle* and *portraits* with the others, laughing like a child. I've become a joker and a prankster. People who knew me when I lived with Frydka do not recognize me.

I finish studying medicine in 1931. I must still pass my clinical exams and write a thesis before I can officially be called Docteur. I'm in no hurry, though. I earn good enough money as a hospital extern. I don't want to rush into a specialization. You choose for life and there is no turning back. As I like literature and other arts, I think of studying the pathologies of the mind. Just to get a foretaste, I follow a psychology course in the Sorbonne on top of my medical studies.

¹ Resourceful.

Psychiatry and neurology are grouped in a double specialty, neuropsychiatry, but you must still study both subjects separately.¹ I begin with neurology, because I'm offered a good position in the service of professeur Alajouanine, in the Bicêtre hospital. Under the influence of this great master, I discover the superiority of neurology over psychiatry. Neurology is a very refined science that lets you establish a precise diagnosis. By observing the symptoms, you can deduct the exact location of the ailment in the nervous system. While in some cases the illness spreads without relenting, it is often possible to achieve complete recovery through a simple surgical operation. As for psychiatry, it hardly qualifies as a science. It gives fancy names to illnesses it can neither define nor delineate. The only known treatment consists in squeezing patients in a straightjacket until the symptoms recede. Thus, although I find psychiatry more romantic (not to mention psychoanalysis, which I don't consider a science, but an art akin to poetry), neurology stands upon strong foundations and appeals to the rational element in my character.

I must still decide whether I'll go back to Poland and practice there or try to stay in France. Professeur Alajouanine is willing to help me.

"I know several professors in Warsaw. I'll give you a recommendation, so you'll be able to get a job as a department head in a good hospital."

I go back to Sambor in July 1932. I tell my brothers-in-law I'm reaching the end of my studies. They congratulate me.

"Professeur Alajouanine says that I should be able to become a department head in a Warsaw hospital with his recommendation."

"Are you crazy? No professor will take you. There are no more Jewish department heads."

My parents accept, albeit with broken heart, the prognosis of my brothers-in-law: I must find a way of practicing medicine in France. It can be done. I just need to pass the French baccalaureate to get a State diploma instead of the special University diploma they give foreign students. Then I must become a French national to be allowed to practice in France.

The French baccalaureate is divided in two parts. I pass the first one in 1933, the second one a year later. I get a question I know well in history: the 1815 Vienna Congress, which broke Poland apart.

I then write my thesis: "The writing dyskinesia syndrome (writers' cramp), by docteur Léon Greif." I show that writers' cramp is not a functional illness, i.e. a psychosomatic ailment like a singer's throat inflammation, but the first sign of certain nervous system disorders, usually Parkinson disease. This impairment of precise

¹ Today, the two specialties are quite separate. Some doctors are neurologists, others psychiatrists.

gestures will bother a writer more than a shepherd, whence its name, but there is no causal link between writing and the syndrome. So if you suffer from writers' cramp, you'd better consult a neurologist than a psychiatrist.

And now, naturalization. You can't compare France, this great and glorious Republic, to a country as backward as Poland, where you obtain favors by buying a recommendation or *proteksia*. At least there is no word in French for buying services of this kind. Let's say Yanka, who is very *débrouillarde*, knows someone who knows a senator. After you pay for certain unspecified expenses, your naturalization request is processed without delay. On November 14, 1937, I become a French citizen.

I get a driving licence. We buy motorcycles and ride all the way to the Riviera, where we spend the summer camping near various beaches.

The Curie Institute offers me a job. It is a small advanced hospital, founded by Marie Curie, where they use radio-activity to treat cancer and other diseases. Old Claudius Regaud, the institute's boss, looks and acts like a warm-hearted grandfather, so that we feel we belong to a family rather than a hospital. Since I'm a neurologist, they send me to the brain radiotherapy department. My department head, Docteur Castelnau, speaks with a singing southern accent. He is shy, nervous, excessively meticulous. He checks every procedure several times, as if he suffered from a compulsive-obsessive disorder. He puts me in charge of one half of the department.

"I trust you with the full responsibility of your half, Greif."

"Are you sure? I lack your experience."

"Yes, but I'd spend too much time checking everything you do. Better I don't look into it at all."

I certainly make mistakes, but it doesn't matter too much: as we can't focalize the rays very precisely onto the tumors, we get dubious results anyway.

Docteur Castelnau is very proud of his son, who just passed the entrance exam to *École Polytechnique*. I've heard that name, I think.

"It is an engineers' school, isn't it?"

"More than that, Greif, much more. An institution! Its alumni are the elite of France, the cream of the crop."

"Then this is really good for your son."

"Of course. We do not have to worry about his future. He can get a top position in the Administration or in a leading firm."

"I guess it must be difficult to pass this exam."

"Three hundred students are admitted every year, out of three thousand candidates or more. They study for the exam in special classes after the baccalaureate. You must plan ahead. *Lycée Louis-le-Grand* has the best preparatory classes. When my son was only a ten-year old kid, I put him in *lycée Montaigne*, because the best pupils of *Lycée Montaigne* go to *lycée Louis-le-Grand*."

As I now receive a decent salary, I buy a gorgeous 1929 Chrysler convertible, Empire-style furniture suitable for a doctor's office and a Pleyel grand piano.

Yanka seems to know all the storekeepers on boulevard Saint Marcel, avenue des Gobelins and rue Mouffetard, all the tenants in our building, all the nurses in the Salpêtrière hospital and the Curie Institute. People call her *Madame Greif*. In her company, I become an excellent swimmer, I learn to play volley-ball and bridge, I improve my fluency in French—especially the kind spoken by ordinary Parisians.

Every Friday night, ten or twelve of us—doctors, nurses and Yanka—cram into the Chrysler to go to the swimming-pool on rue de Pontoise. You'd think the convertible has only two seats, but two more appear when you open the trunk. Some reckless fellows always stand on the footboards. After swimming in the pool, we ride along Boulevard Saint-Michel in the car while bellowing student songs, then we gulp mountains of croissants in the Capoulade café, on the corner of rue Soufflot.

"How many croissants did you eat?" the waiter asks.¹

"Twenty-nine, sixty-five, fifty-twelve," we guffaw, before stating a number much smaller than the real one.

I become friends with a tall Belgian doctor, a real swimming champion, Paul Fagnard. He says: "You don't know how to dive with such a crowd," instead of "you can't dive."² And also, *septante* and *nonante*. The others make fun of his accent. I don't know why they find it more amusing than mine.

And Frydka? Well, Frydka lives in Paris, where she came soon after my father's visit. As she had no idea of the bitter aversion that had crystallized in me after all these years, she wanted to "make things up." When a common friend told her about Yanka, she decided to wait "as long as needed." She studied literature in the Sorbonne, then found a job as a librarian in a Slavic language institute belonging to Paris university. She knows everything about me through this same common friend, so she calls me on the telephone around the end of 1937:

"Now that you are French, I can also be naturalized. You just have to request it, considering you are—still—the head of the family. This would help me. I could become a French civil servant."

"Of course. Why don't you prepare the request? Then I'll sign it."

We meet in a café. I find her less beautiful than in my memories. She has no sense of humor at all. Actually, she bored me to death.

¹ There used to be a basket full of croissants on every table. You told the waiter how many you had eaten.

² French-speaking Belgians say "know" for "can," *septante* and *nonante* for *soixante-dix* and *quatre-vingt-dix* (seventy and ninety).

“Let’s forget the past, Frydka. I don’t want to interfere with your career. Hmm, by the way... What about our divorce?”

“What divorce, my puppy?”

“I mean, when are we going to divorce?”

“Never! This is certainly no day to speak about that. Did you perhaps think that in exchange for your signature on this piece of paper, I would grant you a divorce? You’re naturalized, but you’re not as clever as a Frenchman yet!”

“All right, don’t get angry. You won’t slap me again, I hope!”

“I’ll never grant you a divorce! Never, do you hear?”

“Do you think you are in a position to grant or not to grant? In France, there are laws. In a divorce trial, the judge decides of the outcome.”

I understand that if I want to divorce, I’ll need a good lawyer and lots of money. Like Frydka, I decide to wait.

1938. The nurses.

Raymond Dupont, what a ridiculous name... We’re spending our summer vacations camping in Saint Jean de Luz, in the southwest corner of France. He’s a camper belonging to the Friends of Nature. He comes from Toulouse—a tall dark-haired easy-going fellow. Does Yanka meet him inside his tent? When? Later, when he comes every other week to see her in Paris, I can’t burrow my head into the sand. What bugs me most is that I didn’t notice anything.

I decide to behave like a gentleman. I suggest we have a man-to-man conversation.

“If you want her, and if she agrees, I won’t oppose it.”

The very next day, they leave together. I guess Yanka becomes Jeanne again—so she doesn’t have to explain to everybody, over there in Toulouse, that she owes this strange first name to a Polish lover.

Seven years. I knew this relationship wouldn’t last forever. We were not really made for each other. We never considered having a child, after all, and I didn’t even try to divorce from Frydka.

Before meeting Yanka, I had always lived in hotels and eaten in restaurants. Now I buy food on rue Mouffetard on the way home from the Curie Institute.

“Three pounds¹ of potatoes, a kilogram of pears, a beefsteak, a ripe camembert.”

In Poland, they cook meat in a pot. Here, you heat some butter on a frying pan until it sizzles... I’ve seen how Yanka did it. I don’t need any help. I can manage by myself.

¹ A pound (une livre) is an old French unit now equating half a kilogram. Its use is restricted to food and shows a good knowledge of French language and traditions.

“She scrambled to Toulouse with a plumber... You lose one, you find ten¹!” That’s what I tell my colleagues—who thought we were husband and wife.

“They’re all the same,” they comment.

Nurses are not as insensitive as doctors. Used to seeing bare souls confronting pain, they understand that my cynicism hides a deep sorrow. I hear accents of compassion and tenderness in their voice. I bet they’re ready to console me in my loneliness. I invite one of them, then another, to come listen to some music in my home. When I sit at my piano and play Chopin, no nurse can resist me. Under my nimble fingers, lancers jump over the octaves, joyful hussars invite hussies to dance on the black keys, Warsaw students erect barricades of chords while humming patriotic poems.

I imagine Chopin playing his masterpieces in Paris salons. All the women fell in love with him, I’m sure. I almost feel jealous. Actually, I don’t need to play the piano. I’ve declaimed so many poems as a youth that I can find the words to a woman’s heart without even thinking. My preys say that the mere sound of my voice already has a mesmerizing quality.

Poems... I laugh by myself when I remember the naive young man who got drunk on Byron and Wyspianski and considered honor the most precious good in the world. I play at being romantic to woo the poor girls, but I stopped dreaming the day I entered the dissection room for the first time.

My appointment notebook fills up with female names and becomes a mess. When one of my girlfriends wants to change her day, I get into a sweat.

I wake up in the middle of the night, with muddled mind, wondering about the body gleaming in the dark at my side. So I have seduced one more woman. I would like to celebrate this victory, but I only find in myself a painful feeling of failure.

A woman accosts me in a café.

“Bonjour, Lonek.”

“Bonjour, mademoiselle. Ahem, are we acquainted?”

By the way she blushes suddenly, I understand that we’ve been intimate. I examine her face, I search my memory for her name, in vain. She blushes even more and leaves. I don’t find the words to retain her.

Frydka had found me out, actually. Her jealousy was neither absurd nor sickly, but premonitory. She had foreseen inside me a rascal biding his time.

I sink into debauchery out of mere weakness. The nurses say my impish smile and my blue eyes fascinate them. As for me, when they fall into my arms, I can’t say no and I yield to temptation.

I am thirty-two. Old enough to understand the why and how of this illusion we call *love*: with this clever invention, society pairs innocents to found families that will

¹ *Une de perdue, dix de retrouvées*, an actual French saying.

perpetuate it. Love doesn't exist, obviously. On the one hand, men suffer from a kind of genital itching, which nurses can keep in check. On the other hand, our mind craves for an ideal, but no flesh creature can satisfy such a craving. We'd like the flesh creature to be ideal, that's for sure. We try to believe in her, endow her with imaginary qualities, overlook her defects, transform her, disguise her, dream about her. If we were more realistic, we wouldn't wake up with such a hangover.

I'm luckier than other guys. I can satisfy my longing for an ideal by studying Chopin. To seduce a nurse by playing Chopin to her: two shots with one stone!

Premature death.

Towards the end of the year 1938, acute uremia fells my sister Salka. They send her to a Krakow hospital. As her kidneys stop functioning, urea slowly poisons her blood. I go and fetch her. Her dried skin looks like an old parchment. I bring her to Paris by train. She lies unconscious in a first-class berth. An ambulance takes her to the department of professeur Lemierre, but they can't save her. She dies at the age of thirty-five. I bury her in cimetière de Pantin.

In the hospital, I meet my friend Paul Fagnard, the tall Belgian swimmer, who is studying urology. I tell him my sister's story.

"She dies because she wanted to," he says.

"What do you mean, she wanted to?"

"Unconsciously. Look, she told her husband she preferred a short happy life to a long painful one."

"This makes sense, doesn't it?"

"A simple diet seemed so terrible to her that she preferred to die. It is not rational."

"But then, why did she want to die? She wasn't unhappy?"

"I don't know about that. Maybe something happened when she was a child. You told me about your inn. A drunk customer tried to rape her, or she saw your father making it with a bar-girl in a dark corner. It's too late to psychoanalyze her, unfortunately."

"You never told me you were an admirer of Dr. Freud. With this way of thinking, people are ill because they desire it unconsciously. It's their own fault, so to speak. We can't really heal them. Let them repent of their sins!"

What makes me very sad is that I never took the time to have a serious conversation with my sister about our respective lives. When I went to Poland, I saw little of her, because she lived in Lwów rather than Sambor. When I arrived in the Krakow hospital, she was already drifting into a half-coma and didn't seem to recognize me. I know nothing of her last years.

Other people died before I could say good-bye to them: in 1935, my dear cousin Markus, of a bone sarcoma; in 1936, my grandmother Rachel, who was eighty-five years old. Even when you're eighty-five, you die too soon. Dying at thirty-five seems so unfair!

When I go home from the hospital to drop my suitcase and take a bath, I smell a familiar perfume. Yanka!

“Well, I came back from Toulouse last week.”

She asked madame Georgeai, the concierge, to open the door. Then she settled in the apartment to wait for me. With a sheepish voice that barely sounds like her (she's quite an actress!), she begs my forgiveness for her stupid mistake.

“I heard you're enjoying life without me. We can't erase what happened, obviously, but couldn't we, say, live side by side? We'd share the same apartment like good friends., without renouncing our freedom. I love this neighborhood so much! I'll take care of the shopping and the housecleaning. Do you remember the nice little dishes I prepared for you? I bet you'd prefer that to your bachelor's cuisine. You should let you beard grow, it enhances your good looks.”

Exhausted by the long trip and the longer hours in the hospital, comforted in spite of everything by Yanka's smiling face, overwhelmed by an exquisite *blanquette de veau*,¹ I let her stay with me.

I haven't had time to shave for a full week. I follow Yanka's advice, so that after a while everybody calls me “the bearded doctor.”

1939. Tall Isabelle.

Yanka lives in my apartment, not in my bedroom. Having decided to embark on a writing career, she shows a manuscript to the novelist Georges Duhamel, whom she met by chance. She meets many gentlemen by chance. I don't want to hear about it.

“I've been imprisoned in an office long enough,” she says.

She borrows money from all the people she knows at the Curie Institute and in the neighborhood.

I go on seducing nurses. They really fawn upon me when I'm at my coldest and most cynical. For example: Isabelle, one of the best nurses of the Institute. She's serious and clever, the daughter of a doctor in the Jura mountains—a tall brown-haired woman with a narrow face, velvety eyes, a kind of dignified poise. She falls in love with me. She wants to reform me.

“If someone took good care of you, you'd cease to behave like a spoiled brat.”

¹ Veal in a cream and mushroom sauce. A traditional French dish.

“You’ll take care of me?”

“Ha... I hesitate. I wonder whether you’re worth the trouble.”

She offers me a dog, a black and white cocker spaniel named Flip, to soften my character. She’s no nun, she says shit and fuck like everybody else in the hospital, but she never sounds coarse. Actually, I feel fine when I’m with her. I stop playing a game and become myself again. I’m close to overcoming this painful aftertaste of disaster that spoils gray dawns in rumpled sheets.

Okay, but I’ve decided I would treat women like toys. Remember that love doesn’t exist, I tell myself. I know one thing: no woman will ever love me like Flip. He accepts me as I am, doesn’t criticize me, never sulks, stays happy whatever happens.

Farewell to Sambor.

For the last few years, I’ve found it convenient to spend my Easter vacations in Sambor. In summer, I camp on the French Riviera or elsewhere with the Friends of Nature.

The pain of Salka’s death darkens my parents’ life. As if they needed more worries, evil ideas are spreading throughout Europe and war threatens to reach even our small remote town. My mother and my elder sister Rózia have never failed to visit the synagogue at least once a week. What’s new is that now my father goes along.

“Do you pray, Father?”

“I’m not getting any younger, you know. Maybe He does exist, after all!”

He is sixty-four years old. The round and jolly innkeeper has become a thin and stern old man. When Salka died, I deplored that exile had kept me away from her. Now I’d like to draw nearer to my parents. Ha, it’s not as easy as it sounds.

“So, Lonek, how are you doing over there?”

“I can’t complain.”

“Do you earn well? Why don’t you open a doctor’s practice?”

“I would earn more by opening a practice, that’s true, but I learn more in the hospital. I like the hospital, actually. My colleagues, my friends, the atmosphere...”

Paris is so far from Sambor. How could they understand? I bring them family news: my cousin Sylvia is specializing in dermatology; Rose, her sister, now lives with her in Rouen.

Every time I come, I find Dolek and Melanie, Rózia’s children, a little taller and wiser. Dolek is now thirteen years old. He loves mathematics. He can nearly beat me at chess.

“In a few years, you can come to Paris and stay with me. You’ll study for the École Polytechnique exam. The son of my department head at the Curie Institute graduated

from this school. It is the most prestigious in France. My department head says they accept foreign students.”

Melanie, a shy green-eyed girl, hides in the corridors with Cesia, the daughter of cousin Malcia. I hear whispers and hushed laughter.

When I leave, I shout the usual words from the train compartment’s window:

“See you next year!”

As war looms, nobody knows whether this wish will be fulfilled.

The fourth day.

A few blocks from the Curie Institute, just before rue Mouffetard, there’s a short narrow street called rue Tournefort. Some Lwów students live there in a small hotel. I met them all on December 31, 1938, when my friend Stiff-leg Viktor gave a New Year’s eve party in a rented gymnasium. This Viktor came to France three or four years after me. While I only lived with Yanka, he went all the way and married a Frenchwoman, Renée. We often met in Friends of Nature camps.

New Polish Jews keep coming to Paris to study medicine. They have no choice: they can’t go to Vienna or Prague like they used to, because the Nazis have grabbed Bohemia and Austria. All these newcomers—Birnbaum and Apfelbaum, Wunder and Warner—look alike to me. Narrow shoulders, bashful behavior... Beardless Talmudists!

I do know Henek Warner, the eldest of them, who already spent a few years in France when he began his studies, then went back to Poland. He lived with Viktor in Toulouse or somewhere, I think. He just married. When I stop in Hôtel Tournefort after my day at the Curie Institute, I often meet his wife, Wanda, and her friend Malvina Zien—a blue-eyed blonde whom all the students are in love with. Ignorant people (and Nazis) believe that the Jews always have heavy Middle-Eastern features, with dark hair, black eyes, a long nose, etc. My own eyes are blue, too. My hair is brown, but it was the color of ripe wheat when I was a child. My beard has a reddish tinge.

I get to know two more of the hotel’s clients, as they always seem to appear out of nowhere when Malvina’s around: Milek Roth, a man who was jailed for years in Poland because he belonged to the clandestine communist party; Bernard Kohn, a tall twenty-year old fellow who wants to pass his French baccalaureate before beginning his medical studies.

I don’t try to compete with them. Malvina doesn’t like me. The music of my voice fails to charm her, my jokes do not amuse her. Wanda tells me that I shouldn’t take it personally: she hates Flip, actually. Well, there is something wrong with a person who hates a dog, so I have no regrets.

Poor Flip. He becomes very quiet by and by and even refuses food. The vet diagnoses a Carré disease and says we can't do anything. My companion lies at my feet and looks at me as if he was calling for help. "You who produce food by magical power," he seems to say, "you should be able to cure me." What can I do? I let the vet give him a deadly shot to shorten his suffering. I cry at the loss of this faithful friend.

The Hôtel Tournefort crowd asks for my advice before the summer vacations. Viktor told them I was the king of campers.

"You should visit the French Riviera, of course. There are camping grounds in the middle of pine groves, near quiet beaches. Blue sky, warm sea. Believe me, it's paradise on earth!"

We decide to meet in Sainte-Maxime. They take the train, but I drive with Yanka, Viktor and Renée.

"Do I sit in the trunk with Renée?" Viktor asks.

"Of course not. With your stiff leg, you wouldn't be comfortable. Come in front. The girls will be just fine in the trunk. They'll be able to talk dress!"

I stop for a few days in a camping ground in the Jura mountains. While my passengers explore the peaks and valleys, I go see my friend the tall Isabelle, who is spending her vacations with her parents. Then, we follow the so-called Napoléon road to the Riviera.

The Tournefort people are waiting for us in Sainte-Maxime. They bask in the sun and swim in the sea for the first time in their life. They're as red as lobsters and drink gallons of sea-water unwittingly! Their women don't even try to swim. I drive them around in my Chrysler. I show them how to protect their spirit stoves from the wind and fry a steak in butter.

On August 23rd, Hitler and Stalin, who used to hate each other, sign a friendship treaty. As Hitler has already gobbled its southern neighbors, as he claims parts of Poland, the treaty's meaning is obvious: Stalin authorizes him to pursue his banquet. My Polish friends hurry back to Paris. They want to return to Lwów before the war begins.

This crisis doesn't concern me, since I'm not Polish anymore. I intend to stay on the beach until the end of my vacations.

On September 1st, Germany attacks Poland. Hey, this war does concern me after all: France decrees a general mobilization to honor the treaty that links it to its Polish ally.

The mobilization booklet they gave me at the same time as the French nationality says *Report on the third day*. I decide to take the shortest road, through Grenoble. After a while it is barred, because it runs too close to the Italian border, so I have to

turn back. National Road 7 is choked up with military trucks, but I have no choice. I stop for hours on the side while long lines of tanks crawl by.

“The French don’t seem quite ready,” Viktor says. “The Germans will flatten them in no time.”

“Starting a war during the summer vacations is a lousy idea. The road is completely clogged. Maybe I should turn around again.”

“Take it easy, my dear. What can we do but wait? You won’t improve things by getting angry.”

I seethe with impatience at the steering-wheel of my Chrysler: I can’t stand being late. Shame knots my stomach as I report to the Tourelles military post *on the fourth day*. The sergeant who looks at my papers doesn’t seem to mind.

“Do you have a fixed abode in Paris?”

“A fixed abode? Of course.”

“Well, go home and stay there. Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

I thought I’d compensate for my being late by going right away to the tailor’s. I imagined he’d measure me and cut my uniform on the spot. I expected to be with my regiment before the end of the week. Instead of that: “Do you have a fixed abode in Paris?”

The Germans crush Poland, then offer their Soviet allies the country’s oriental provinces—Bielorussia and Eastern Galicia. Meanwhile, the French and the English are standing pat.

I’m furious—not as an ex-Pole, but as a Frenchman. We signed a treaty of alliance with Poland, and now, by the devil’s ass, we’re witnessing our ally’s destruction without moving a finger! Every morning, I wait for a summons that never comes. I’m eager to meet my fate. I may not be Doctor-General-in-Chief, as the diploma hanging over my childhood bed promised, but I am indeed a medical officer. To arms, brothers! I buy officer boots. I cover the headlights of my Chrysler with colored paper. There’s a thing I find quite irritating: at night, the concierges shout “Lights! Lights!” in a fierce voice to enforce the curfew.

Unable to stay quietly at home much longer, I return to the military post, where I see the placid sergeant.

“So what? I was supposed to report on the third day, and now it has been already three weeks...”

“Listen, I don’t have an assignment for you yet. Why don’t you come again next month?”

“What do you mean, next month? Don’t you need doctors at the front?”

He seems surprised.

“Do you want to go to the front line?”

“Of course.”

“You can join a group that goes to Nancy tomorrow. Once there, they’ll find a front line regiment for you.”

I understand they may need doctors at the back, to repair wounded soldiers so they can return to the front, but I want to take part in the fight, give first aid, save lives under enemy fire.

The Nancy High Command assigns me to the 153rd RIF (Régiment d’Infanterie de Forteresse). I take a small train, then a slow military truck, to Euchenberg, in Lorraine. The regiment’s head doctor, a professional officer with the rank of commander, doesn’t need a newcomer, as each of the three battalions already has its doctor. He keeps me nevertheless.

“I notice you work in a hospital. This might be useful. You’ve seen acute illnesses, wounds, dying people, corpses. Excellent! Here, you’ll see more of those. Yes, you’ll see plenty.”

This is a strange place, where people over forty don’t speak French.¹ Actually, a secret order recommends that people from Alsace and Lorraine “and other untrustworthy elements” be kept away from the front. It so happens that the second battalion’s doctor is Alsatian. Thus, they send him to the back and I take his place. He is an Alsatian Jew, Dr Marx. Would an Alsatian Jew help the Germans? This seems absurd to me, but the French army distrusts the Jews as much as the Alsatians. It remembers a certain Captain Dreyfus, an Alsatian Jew who... Well, maybe he didn’t betray France, maybe he was innocent, Justice declared him innocent, but it remains a fact that the French army’s reputation suffered because of him². The army is an old institution, full of bitterness, capable of bearing a grudge for centuries.

The second battalion of the 153rd RIF is quartered in Frohmuhl, in a part of Lorraine that was emptied of its civilian population. We’re north of the Vosges mountains, very close to the German border. The officers live in the village’s empty houses, the soldiers sleep in tents. While I’ve been fond of uniforms since my childhood, I must admit that I prefer the reserve officers here to the professional ones. The joker of the officers’ mess is lieutenant Lévy, who works in a Paris advertising agency. Ah, this guy doesn’t mind making fun of the government and the army! Quoting from Clemenceau, he tells the commander that war is too serious a matter to be left to the military. He chooses me as a bridge partner. Not only does the game remind me of the whist we played in the Greif inn, but I have plenty of time to hone my skills, so I become an expert player quite fast. Lévy doesn’t hide he is Jewish

¹ The provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were German from 1870 to 1918.

² Dreyfus was falsely accused of betrayal and condemned at the end of the 19th century. He was sent to Cayenne, then declared innocent when the real traitor was found out. Many in the French army still hate him.

(how could he?). Lieutenant Bourla, a Paris lawyer, is more discreet. The commander, who doesn't know he's Jewish, asks him a stupid question:

“This Dr Greif, wouldn't he be Jewish, by any chance? It seems to me he is too friendly with Lévy.”

I remember Yanka's father, the opera lover, asking me: “But how do they know who is Jewish?” During the fifteen years I've lived in France, I've come to the conclusion that French people don't give a damn—and don't bother to find out—whether people are Jewish or not. I guess the army is a separate province, like Alsace or Lorraine.

1940. On the Maginot line.

Month follows month, but nothing happens. The newspapers call this the *Phony War*.¹ The Tourelles sergeant was right: I could have stayed in my fixed abode.

Every battalion owns several perfectly useless saddle horses. To fight boredom, I teach horse-riding to my fellow officers between two rounds of bridge. *Bubchen auf Pferdchen!* I find a piano in one of the empty houses and play Chopin for a few music lovers. At first, it was forbidden to enter the empty houses. Posters announced that looters would be shot. Time flowed so slowly, though, that it became hard to resist temptation. The authorities published a more realistic rule: necessary goods can be taken, on condition they be reported to a certain officer so that the army may compensate the owners.

On my first leave, I get my Chrysler, which was rusting in the Curie Institute's courtyard. Then—as soon as the snow begins to melt—I spend many days exploring the winding roads of the Vosges mountains.

My battalion guards a weak zone between two Maginot line fortresses. To reinforce it, the soldiers work hard at digging trenches and pouring concrete, under the command of a fat and hairless officer, who is a construction engineer in civilian life.

“If you find coins or old potteries when you dig, extract them carefully and call for me. We have received instructions from the Department of Historical Monuments.”

The men nickname him “Historical Monument.”

People come consult me for an ingrowing nail, a headache, a bout of laziness. Now and then, a patrol pays a visit to the other side. So far, nobody ever returned from the expedition with an interesting wound. I would love to show my stitching skills to gaping crowds! Our guys are careful to take along some pigs who are supposed to

¹ The French expression, *La drôle de guerre*, or the *funny war*, is milder.

locate mines by blowing up with them. Other battalions use dowsers, but we prefer pigs, because sautéed¹ dowser isn't very tasty.

I wonder whether I could have done things differently when I was naturalized. In Poland, I was an officer in mounted artillery, but I couldn't choose a similar arm in France, because doctors don't fight. I followed a training in a military hospital so I could enter the army's medical service. If I had thought of hiding my profession, I would be holding a gun and following the pigs instead of wasting my time playing bridge.

I find most of the officers rather boring. I feel closer to the ordinary soldiers. They remind me of my pals in The Friends of Nature, who were often simple factory workers or craftsmen. When we camped in summer by the sea, the bourgeois under their beach umbrellas looked at us with scorn: "Can't go to the beach anymore," they said. "The place is overrun with *Congés payés*."²

The guys' main entertainment consists in watching the aerial fights.

"Did you see how the Fritz turned on his wing!"

"Shit, one of ours is hit..."

"Are you sure Jerry got him? I bet it's his pal just behind shot a stray bullet."

The commander increases wine rations, saying it helps fight boredom. I'm beginning to see the familiar symptoms of poor people's alcoholism, which I learned to recognize in Parisian hospitals.

All these winter days in Lorraine are so much alike that we tend to consider our leaves more important than this so-called war. I spend time with Yanka, since she lives in my apartment on boulevard Saint Marcel. She offers me a dog, a small griffon. Another guy on leave whom she met (plenty men on leave in Paris) gave it to her. He found it in a Maginot line corridor, so he named it Béton.³

"He'll console you for the death of Flip," she says.

Béton is bright and brisk, somewhat temperamental. He reminds me of Bubi, my father's white fox terrier.

An unexpected visit during one of my leaves: my cousin Max Wald in a soldier's uniform. He is taller and less shy than in my memories.

"After the Germans came to Prague, I moved to our Amsterdam branch. Then when they signed their pact with the Soviets, I returned to Poland. I wanted to fight for my homeland, you understand. Well, war was so short that I didn't have time to enroll.

¹ In French, "sauté" also means "blown up."

² Literally: paid vacations. The expression was applied to the vacationers themselves. The first socialist government gave two weeks paid vacations to everybody in 1936, so it was quite a new thing.

³ Concrete.

The Russians took over. I didn't want to live in a communist country, so I went to Hungary. There I heard that exiled Poles were training a new army in France."

"Yes, someone told me about it. In Brittany, right?"

"In a place called Coëtquidan."

"So you're wearing this new army's uniform?"

"They put me in an office and gave me paper work, since I can type and all that. It's better this way, because the troops don't like Jews. They're just Poles, you know."

In April 1940, my last leave. Isabelle, who enrolled as a nurse in a surgical unit, takes her leave at the same time. We decide to meet outside the Odéon subway station. I start when I see her straight tall shape in front of Danton's statue. I've had time to think, far from the city's deceptive lights—when I explored hidden valleys in my car, when I walked in the woods with Béton. Yet I can't bring myself to pronounce the three small words Isabelle wants to hear: "I love you."

A few days later, the Germans invade Belgium. Thus ends the phony war.

The death of the Chrysler convertible.

Léopold III, the king of the Belgians, has been sulking since 1936. He protested when the German army came back to the Rhine, which was forbidden by the 1918 treaty, but nobody paid heed to him. Now he pretends he is "neutral." Some say he likes the Nazis. In any case, the allies never bothered to share their plans with him. They hope that the Belgian army will resist a little, that they'll have time to come to its help and start a big battle in the north. Some lucid officers, having studied the German invasion of Poland, have described the mechanics of *Blitzkrieg*¹. As the High Command failed to listen to them, it refuses to believe the news it receives on May 10th and the following days about the German progression's speed. Nor does it believe the people who report tank columns in the Ardennes forest, since everybody knows this forest is impenetrable.

Whole books have been written about this attack, but its brevity deserves a description in the style of Tacitus²: on one side, yesterday's army; on the other side, tomorrow's.

The German army breaks through the Belgian lines in days, almost hours. The French and the English enter Belgium, but Rommel and Guderian's tanks, having rushed across the Ardennes forest, surround them and actually reach the English Channel on May 20th. The French government panics. It replaces the general-in-

¹ Flash war.

² Latin historian and writer, famous for his concise style.

chief, Gamelin, by a hero of the previous war, Weygand—who promises to stop and drive back the barbarian hordes. Crazy rumors fly about: rebel regiments march on Paris, communist sabotage is responsible for the army's rout, etc.

In Frohmuhl, several hundred miles east of the battlefields, nothing happens.

Some English and French troops, having escaped being surrounded, embark in Dunkirk from May 26th to June 3rd. On that day, the first bombs fall upon Paris. A rumor pretends that vicious Jerry dropped poisoned candy on the French capital and many children died.

From June 10th to 13th, a great exodus of terrorized Parisians clogs the southward roads like blood oozing from a deadly wound. The Germans enter the defeated capital, declared "open city," on June 14th.

On June 12th, the Maginot line armies are ordered to retreat. As the official propaganda took care to skip the bad news, we don't understand what happens. After eight months of idleness, followed by one month of rumors and vague reports, the first really clear words that reach us order retreat. Evacuate these majestic fortresses? Let the enemy capture them without fighting? Actually, the remaining French troops are so weak that the Germans cross the Rhine unopposed on June 15th. If the fortress armies don't flee fast, they'll be surrounded too. This means more than 500,000 men.

A smoldering rage burns inside me. I volunteered to go to the front. I dreamt of fighting, but now I must retreat like a coward!

The French army may leave the Maginot line to the Sauerkraut eaters. As for me, I won't let them get my Chrysler. I've noticed a nice cliff a few miles from Frohmuhl, near Lemberg—a place that aroused my curiosity because Lwów was also named Lemberg when it belonged to the Austrian empire. I've seen it done in movies: you start the engine, you engage the first gear, you jump off at the last minute, then the car falls and breaks into pieces. In real life, it isn't that easy. The Chrysler doesn't move very fast, so I can step off without haste—no need to roll into a ball and risk banging my head on a stone. It stops moving, in fact. I must push it with all my strength. I feel that the veins in my forehead are bulging like leeches. With such symptoms, I can predict a sudden apoplexy attack. Killed by a contrarian convertible. Hell, will you move, you swine! My antics puzzle Béton. He wonders whether to run, jump or bark. If I had asked a comrade to come along, we could push it together. Bah, this isn't such a feat—no need of a witness—better relish my rage by myself. I hate the whole world. These French braggarts who let the Germans surround them without even fighting—these useless fortresses—this war that begins with a flight... If that's the way you want to play the game, count me out! When my beautiful Chrysler eventually falls into a thick bush, without breaking, without exploding, I feel the bitter powerless anger of a child who breaks his toys.

I mutter *Merde!* with clenched fists. These French swear-words are really weak. I shout “Dog’s ass!” in Polish. Béton begins to whine. I don’t think he understands the Polish language, so the tone of my voice must have frightened him.

My regiment covers the retreat of the main armies. It fights during a week or so. I see three battles, the main one on June 18th near the Marne-to-Rhine canal, twenty miles south of Frohmuhl. Foreign troops, including a Polish battalion coming from Coëtquidan, fight with great courage. I look in vain for my cousin Max amongst the Poles. He did tell me he was working in an office. Actually (he’ll tell me after the war), he’s sailing to England with his regiment.

These last battles are ferocious. Desperate soldiers, having used all their munitions, charge with bayonets. More than a thousand die on June 14th. Superior officers regret this waste: Marshall Pétain, who replaced prime minister Paul Reynaud yesterday, has already requested a cease-fire. The radio will announce the end of the fighting any time now. No officer wants to be the war’s last dead, you bet.

My work consists in examining bodies. This one is dead, that one is too badly wounded to be moved; we’ll leave him here when we retreat, trusting the Germans to take care of him. You, my friend, you’ll recover... Call two nurses to carry him to the truck. Say, this fat bald guy: isn’t he “Historical Monument,” the construction engineer? He won’t build anything more, he’s dead.

There’s too much noise on this battlefield—bullets whizz, shells explode, dying men yell. I tie tourniquets and dress wounds. I wipe my bloody hands on my beautiful uniform. War doesn’t look like what I imagined when I admired the honveds. I’ve known that for a while: I’m no kid anymore. People bleed and whimper like in the hospital, except they’re not lying in a bed, but on the muddy ground. In the hospital, you leave the dirtiest tasks to devoted nurses. Here, you’ve got to take care of everything yourself. I see unusual wounds. A burst of machine-gun fire mows down a young captain a few feet from me. I know him: he used to listen to my recitals in Frohmuhl, he knew and liked Chopin. Twelve bullets in the lower belly. The awful stink that rises out of the wound means the bowels are perforated.

“Don’t worry, they’ll sew you tight and you’ll be okay. I guess you’ll have to avoid vegetables and beans for the rest of your life.”

Jerry has machine-guns, but our guys often fight with Lebel rifles left over from the Great War.

A shell falls so close to me that the earth shoulder protecting my trench crumbles and buries me up to my shoulders. They dig and free me, but I can barely walk. A stone must have hit my right knee. The colonel congratulates me, as well as several officers who acted bravely under enemy fire. He gets a War Cross for us.

The French and the Germans sign a cease-fire on June 22nd, 1940. On June 23rd, Adolf Hitler parades on the Champs-Élysées, salutes Napoléon's tomb in the Invalides church and walks down boulevard Saint-Michel—an old student dream. The fighting ceases on June 25th.

Near Celles sur Plaine, a village located west of the Vosges mountains, twenty-five miles south of the canal, the colonel tells us we've been ordered to surrender. I can't believe it. Surrender? After three small battles?

"But, *mon Colonel*, we can go over the Schlucht pass. There's a road on the left, I've driven there in my car, we can escape the Germans. We join the armies in the Alps and pursue the fight."

"I'm sorry, Greif. An order is an order."

"Mon Colonel, rather than being prisoners in a camp and looking for a way out, we might as well seize the opportunity right now. Let me ask whether anybody volunteers to go for it with me!"

"Greif, if you disobey orders, I'll have to consider you a deserter."

Ha, I can't continue that war all by myself. I've done my best and received the War Cross. This little medal makes me a first class Frenchman. Better than being considered a deserter. "Naturalized" doesn't sound pretty, I imagine it can even be cancelled, whereas you can't cancel bravery under fire. The Nazis persecute the Jews, but I've heard they make an exception for the veterans who got medals in the Great War.

Béton the dog stayed at my side on the battlefield, showed as much courage as me, but received no medal. As nobody seems to know how the Geneva conventions about war prisoners apply to domestic animals, I leave him with a café owner in Celles sur Plaine.

"I'll come get him as soon as I can. I must surrender to the Fritz with my regiment..."

The good woman is moved to tears. Maybe she remembers a melodrama she saw in a Nancy theater long ago. With the war, you don't need to go to Nancy—the show comes to your own home.

Béton begins to cry when I walk away. I can't explain to this innocent animal that he is a victim of men's stupidity.

The officer camp.

We give our arms to the Germans. They take us back north to Sarrebourg, a city on the canal. As they caught us after June 22nd, they call us "irregulars" and order us to

walk with raised hands. A twenty-mile walk—I feel that my arms and shoulders will ache tomorrow. One of the guards jokes:

“Da beautiful Frinch army!”

I find his accent rather unpleasant, considering the situation.

“*Lacht am besten, wer zuletzt lacht*,”¹ I tell him in German. Without any accent—or rather, with a trace of the Austrian accent I picked up in Vienna in 1915.

Maybe they want to punish me for my sauciness. When we reach Sarrebourg, they separate me from my regiment and send me to a camp where I don’t know anybody. At the first roll call, the Germans announce that the Jews must come forward, as they’ll be regrouped in a special building. One of the reasons I’m glad to be French is that the word “Jew” isn’t stamped on my ID card like in Poland or Germany. So I don’t consider stepping forward, not even for one second. There aren’t that many Jews, it seems. The Germans’ systematic mind tells them the number is too low, considering demographics, statistics and probabilities.

“We don’t define Jews by their religion,” they add. “Anybody who has two Jewish grandparents must declare himself as a Jew.”

A few more guys step out of the ranks.

I’m very lucky. A prisoner named Lévy or Cohen can’t pretend he isn’t Jewish. Another may have parents or grandparents who go to a synagogue in Paris. Suppose the Nazis find their name on a register. They’ll know the prisoner is Jewish. If he hasn’t declared himself, they’ll punish him, as well as his parents and grandparents.

My name is neither Lévy nor Cohen, but I’d feel better with a French name. No need to offer a German name to their curiosity. I was foolish to say: *Lacht am besten, wer zuletzt lacht* in their language. I was very nervous. If they ask me where this “Greif” originates from, I won’t be able to say I’m Jewish, so I’ll have to pretend I’m Alsatian and then they’ll enroll me in their army. Thus, I decide to become Léon Graiffe. I can do it because they caught us on a hot day. I had taken my jacket off, so I’m paperless. I declare I’m “born in Alès,” as one of my university pals came from that city.

The camp is an Oflag.² As a doctor, I’m considered an officer. The French officers in the camp don’t seem to find it strange that the Jews are sent to separate barracks. Some even say:

“We could have come to an agreement with the Germans—we fought for the Jews—the Yids are getting what they deserve...”

Damn bastards. What do you mean, we fought? I remember my last stay in Sambor. Easter 1939—a little more than one year ago, but it already seems so far away. I met

¹ Who laughs last laughs best.

² Offizierenlager, officers’ camp.

a friend of my father, a commanding officer for the whole district, who was eating in the restaurant.

“So here’s our Frenchman! Your father told me you’re an officer in the French army, now. So are we going to war?”

“We’re allies. We’ll help you fight them!”

“What are you talking about? By the time you’ll be here, we’ll have given them such a spanking that you won’t have anything to do.”

In July 1940, a coup by Laval and Alibert replaces the French Republic with the “French State,” a totalitarian régime similar to the German and Italian ones. They give full powers to Marshall Pétain, but his actual control is restricted to the south of France. A German administration controls the north.

Towards the end of my first month in the camp, I see a vaguely familiar female shape in the distance. She talks to this guy and that guy, she asks questions, she’s looking for someone. She wears a brand new Red Cross arm band. She comes closer by and by. Do I know her? Who is she?

Yanka! She went to the ministry of War to discover what happened to the 153rd RIF, she sewed a red cross on a white band, she entered the camp, easy as pie. This is just like her!

A few days ago, I saw a whole bunch of officers getting ready to leave.

“Lucky guys. How did you do it?”

“We’re railway engineers. Our companies need us. The Germans accept to let us go because they want France to run at full power.”

Okay, so let’s see what we can do. I write a letter for Dr Castelnau, at the Curie Institute, and I give it to Yanka.

“It’s a cinch: he just has to say they need me! Hey, you should remind him to write Léon Graiffe, born in Alès, instead of Greif.”

I’m waiting for my discharge, so I don’t try to escape. Where would I go? It’s not as if I had some relatives in a village who’d hide me. It would be easy, though. I call in sick, go to the hospital, put on a white frock and walk out through the main door.

I play bridge and chess with the officers. My nephew Dolek was beginning to play chess quite well. He should have come to Paris to study for the École Polytechnique exam. In Germany, Jews can’t enter this kind of school anymore. What will happen in France? Dolek is safe in Sambor: the Soviets don’t separate the Jews from the other people.

Every time I went on leave, I said bonjour to the Hôtel Tournefort students. They rushed back from the Riviera just before the war began, but they couldn’t go back to Lwów, as it was already impossible to cross Germany and Austria. They received

news now and then. They told me the communists seized large apartments, factories, machinery, etc. No letter came from Sambor. Even if the Russians seized the inn, I'm confident my father is strong and resourceful enough—even after the shock of Salka's death—to keep the whole family out of trouble. My parents have known hard times when they were young, so they can overcome tough ordeals. Rózia is somewhat delicate, no doubt. Her husband, beefy Benek, the doctor who doesn't visit his patients unless they send a taxi, will certainly suffer more than the others.

The smartest fellow in this family is uncle Manès. He sailed to America to keep his ten fingers and now he drives a gigantic car and smokes cigars in Pittsburgh. They don't give a damn about this war over there. These bloody European kids are fighting again, they say. Why should we bother about it?

What is the main topic discussed around the bridge table (or, quite often, bridge bed)? Food, of course. The Nazis have been building camps for seven years to lock in their opponents, so they've become experts. They discovered how to subdue the toughest characters: just reduce the food rations. The officers try to fool their hunger—their stomach cramps, their headaches, their dizziness—by chewing cooking recipes and feasting tales.

“Me, I'll tell you, I first throw the sliced onions into the oiled pan and I add the herbs, thyme and laurel, you know, then I debone the chicken...”

“It's a restaurant that doesn't look like anything, but their *pot-au-feu*¹, hell... It's called *Chez la Mère Michel*, you go to the Stock Exchange neighborhood and you just ask, everybody knows the place. Their pot-au-feu melts in your mouth.”

“A pity we're locked in, because here, in Alsace, they have these fantastic sausages and ham... And their white wines!”

“It would be better than the bromide vinegar they serve us here.”

The officers believe that our jailers soak us in bromide to suppress our virility. Do the Germans really worry about their prisoners' libido? What's for sure is that our brave warriors were ready to fight like men, but that *femmelettes*² had taken over the High Command. A good thing the stomachs want to talk about pot-au-feu, otherwise the bridge players would spend all their waking hours debating a single subject: the defeat. Not that they could really look at such a defeat in full light. The conversation adopts the magical mode of *if*, that lets you invert the perspective and evoke victory. A military secret: in spite of its small size, the *if* is a devastating weapon.

“If we had attacked right away, in September '39... It would have been a pleasure-walk. We did enter Saarland and nobody stopped us—of course: they were in Poland.

¹ Beef boiled with vegetables, a hearty and tasty traditional French dish.

² “Small women.” A derogatory word applied to men, meaning “wimps.”

This bugger, Gamelin, stopped the attack after five miles, then we returned to the Maginot line. Five miles! As he wasn't old enough, they asked Pétain to come out of retirement."

"Obviously, if we had invaded Germany, the Soviets would have forgotten about their pact, and pretty fast. They attack on the other side and the whole mess is over in a matter of weeks."

"Wait a minute! You can't invade Germany with a defensive army. If we had known how to use tanks like Jerry, then yes. Instead of keeping them behind the infantry to support it, you create tank regiments and you rush forward! That's what this general advised, you know, the guy who went to London."

"De Gaulle? They made him a general provisionally, during the battle, but now they degraded him. You must say: *retired colonel De Gaulle*."

"We didn't have to copy the Germans with the tanks, but we could at least have seen how they used them in Poland and drawn conclusions to adopt new defensive measures."

"That their Blitzkrieg succeeded doesn't prove it was the best strategy. Tanks make a good terror weapon against weak enemies, like the Czechs or the Poles. Me, I say that if we hadn't left our bases to help this creep the king of Belgium, Guderian couldn't have surrounded us. Since we had a defensive army, we should have stayed at home. You know what? Their tank columns advanced too fast. They were lucky to reach the sea: it stopped them. Their line was getting too long and too thin. This trick won't always work, that's for sure."

"Ah, if we had attacked in '36."

"Say '34, when they brought their army back into Saarland."

"If we had taken the Rhine's left bank and occupied the whole country in '18, hey, Hitler wouldn't have come to power."

"The mistake, in '18, was to grant them a cease-fire. We should have crushed them totally and permanently. Now they've made the same mistake. They rose again, we'll rise too."

"If the stump of France that calls itself free tries to rise, do you think they'll let it? Not so stupid. Anyway, they seized all the industries in the north and sent a million men to Germany. I've even heard that we're outside France, my friends: they annexed Alsace last week!"

Facing the bellicose horde alone, an old reserve officer adopts a pacifist stance.

"The mistake in '18 wasn't that we were too generous. On the contrary. If we had founded the United States of Europe, this war wouldn't have started. Moreover, if we had been less stupid in '14, we would have avoided the first war."

This old officer defends the French leaders.

“So maybe they were too careful and timid, but they didn’t want to sacrifice our soldiers. Everybody knows these Germans behave like barbarians. They bomb civilians to provoke panic and disorder, then people flee all over the place, messing up our defense systems. Tanks, airplanes, and tomorrow what else? They call this progress. Nothing to be proud of. We’ve been wise enough not to adopt the same criminal methods and I consider we lost everything, except honor.¹ They got rid of their old generals long ago to replace them with young gangsters, and I say we’ve been right not to imitate them. I trust Marshall Pétain.”

I play my hand in the game now and then:

“It was all over, yet we didn’t have to capitulate right away. Me, I talked to the colonel: *Mon Colonel, let me cross the Schucht pass with a few men and try to reach the Alps...* Do you know what he answered? *I you do this, I’ll consider you a deserter!*”

The conversation sometimes strays onto muddy byways. I then play dummy and go for a walk.

“France didn’t want a new war, that’s all there was to it. At least the Germans know why they’re fighting: to flush the Jewish influence out of the world.”

“Well, of course, if we hadn’t given France away to the Jews in ’36². These people succeeded in making us totally impotent.”

“Gentlemen, I won’t let you... You’re flirting with anti-Semitism, which isn’t worthy of French officers. You shouldn’t say that France was given away to the Jews, but that a Jew became prime minister of France. Now, of course, putting a Jew at the head of our great country, even if we suppose (generously) that monsieur Blum is a honorable man, doesn’t look too good...”

I feel French enough with my new name. I don’t have to slander Léon Blum to prove I’m a patriot. I’d better abstain from defending him, though. With my accent. A shadow of an accent, actually, but I don’t want to tempt the devil.

I think a lot. Plenty of free time—whole days spent walking around the camp like a lion in a cage, searching the vacant lot behind the barracks for nettles to add to the soup. I’m wasting my life, I think. A marriage, a separation, a relationship, a short fling, another, a nurse in my bed, another nurse, and one more. I’ve lost so many years. A fake, shallow, unhappy life. And now I’ve met Isabelle, a wonderful—straight, honest, trustworthy—woman, with whom I could build a family and a life. So why do I hesitate? This is a clear issue. My old saw: establish no new link, avoid the trap of love... Foolish and childish.

¹ “We lost everything, except honor” is a quote. A French king (maybe François the first) said this after a battle.

² The socialist prime minister, Léon Blum, was Jewish.

But then sometimes I think that the world is falling to pieces. A kind of decay is gnawing at civilization, letting chaos and barbarity take over. Will I bring children into the world so bombs can crush them? Crazy.

I twist and turn ideas and arguments in my mind for weeks. In the end, I decide to propose to Isabelle as soon as I see her. I must divorce from Frydka yet, but I'm sure I can find a way.

Docteur Léon Greif, general practitioner, nervous diseases.

On October 20th, the commander of the Sarrebourg camp summons me.

"*Herr Doktor*, your hospital sent a note saying they need you. I'm freeing you. To be sure, you'll be more useful over there than here."

I don't go straight to Paris, of course. I must first get Béton in Celles sur Plaine! The café owner seems relieved:

"We couldn't keep the dog much longer. We have hardly enough food for ourselves, so how do I feed the beast?"

Béton lays a distrustful glance upon me. I apologize and we reconcile, but I feel he doesn't become as joyful and boisterous as before.

On October 24th, Marshall Pétain shakes Hitler's paw in Montoire and declares that the French State is willing to "collaborate" with the German *Reich*.

The Curie Institute didn't hesitate one second to send for me, but it is reordering its priorities. Patriots have hidden the radium in a safe place. The brain radiotherapy department is closed.

I visit my former boss, professeur Alajouanine, and some other hospital professors I know, just to see how things stand. I don't have a car anymore, so I walk—or rather, limp—and take the subway. They all advise me to open a private practice: with so many colleagues in prisoners' camps, neighborhood doctors have become scarce.

In one of the hospitals, I meet a nurse I used to know at the Curie Institute.

"Do you remember Isabelle, Docteur?" she asks, with a touch of irony in her tone.

"Of course I remember. Any news?"

"Well, you'll be glad to know she married an engineer who was an officer in her regiment. They live in Nice."

"Oh yeah?"

I pretend not to care, but I feel I'm blushing. Ha, women... Really...

Okay, that's over. I must wipe the slate clean and settle down. The boulevard Saint Marcel apartment, three small rooms on a courtyard, is too small. I need at least two more rooms, for a waiting room and an office, if possible in a tony neighborhood

where people can pay their doctor. Most Parisians have returned after the exodus, but quite a few have remained in the south, including those who work for the so-called State in Vichy, so I should be able to find a vacant apartment in the seventh or sixteenth arrondissement.¹

The government just created an “Order of Medical Doctors.” To open a private practice, I must register with the Order. The first thing the secretary of this new institution says is:

“You are not Jewish, of course.”

“Of course.”

Jews must declare themselves in police stations, but I didn’t even give it a thought. The secretary notices on my diploma that I’m born abroad.

“If you’re French through naturalization, you must send a special request to the President of the Order—unless you’ve been awarded the War Cross.”

I find it rather unnerving that this Order of Quacks write its own code of Jews and foreigners, rather stricter than the government’s one. This is no time to be picky, though. I can indeed produce a War Cross. The secretary suggests I read the new code carefully.

“Where did you intend to open your practice?”

“In the seventh or the sixteenth.”

“See, you’re not allowed to change neighborhood. Doctors who are prisoners of war will soon come back, like you. It would be unpleasant if they found that somebody else took over their practice.”

Order is the contrary of disorder.

Renouncing my avenue Foch² dreams, I begin to look for a big apartment in the Gobelins and Jardin des Plantes neighborhood. I have to stay close to my current address, I can’t even go elsewhere in the fifth arrondissement. I visit a reasonably-priced six-room apartment on rue Linné (just across the street from madame Gomez of the absconded husband), but my concierge, madame Georgeai, offers me a better idea:

“You could stay in the building, Docteur. The big apartment on the second floor above the boulevard is empty. The tenant went to Fougères just after the exodus. She hasn’t even paid her rent since.”

Madame Georgeai wants to keep me in-house, because I look after her old husband for no pay.

“Where is this Fougères? Near Paris?”

“In Brittany, Docteur, near Rennes.”

¹ There are twenty arrondissements (precincts) in Paris. Rich people live in the seventh and sixteenth.

² Similar to Park Avenue.

“Rennes? That’s perfect: I don’t have to cross the Demarcation line.¹”

I go visit the second-floor tenant in Fougères. I offer to pay the back-rent.

“You’re selling me the lease for this amount. I get the apartment and everybody’s happy.”

“Fair enough, but I left all my furniture inside.”

We agree on the following deal: I stack the furniture in the two rooms on rue Scipion; this leaves me five rooms, plus the kitchen and the bathroom.

I need money right away, since I’ve lost my Curie Institute revenues. Building a practice in my specialty, neuropsychiatry, takes a long time, so I have no choice: I must work primarily as a neighborhood general practitioner. I affix a marble plate outside the street door, as doctors do in France:

Docteur Léon Greif
General practitioner
Nervous diseases

General medicine is not something you can improvise. I decide to study it by helping professeur Gilbert Dreyfus and docteur Jean Weill with their consultation in the nearby Cochin hospital. I don’t want to see patients in bed, but people who just walk in. I spend the morning in the hospital, the afternoon in my office. My big waiting-room overflows every day. Not only is madame Georgeai a very efficient advertiser, but Yanka, who plays the part of my nurse and assistant, also brings in many people.

I’m soon as famous in the neighborhood as the owner of the Greif inn was in Sambor. People say bonjour in the street, stop me to say the treatment succeeded and their mother thanks me, invite me to dinner.

I eat dinner and play bridge with the Stockmanns, at the corner of boulevard Saint-Marcel and rue Jeanne d’Arc. Paul Stockmann was an accountant in a company whose owners moved to the free zone. He calls himself an *antiquaire*, which means he buys and sells all kinds of junk. He is another person the whole neighborhood knows. His wife, Raymonde, came to consult on the very first day I opened my practice. Her little boy suffered from a nasty bronchitis.

The Germans, the French, the Law, the Order, are so eager to topple Jewish personalities that professeur Dreyfus soon loses his job in the Cochin hospital. Docteur Weill², who stays for the time being, recruits me officially as his assistant. Maybe he thinks he is replacing a Jew with a non-Jew.

One morning, a tall guy calls me in the corridor.

¹ Separating the northern “occupied” zone from the southern “free” one.

² Dreyfus and Weill are common French Jewish names.

“Hey, Greif! That is a surprise... How are you?”

“Fagnard! You work here?”

“I specialize in radiology. That is not easy. One does not know to find enough film, with the war. But tell me, don’t you swim anymore?”

“You still go to the swimming-pool?”

“Every Friday, just like before.”

I join him for the sake of old times. My right knee is nearly healed.

On December 23rd, Jacques Bonsergent, an engineer, tries to help a couple quarrelling with a German officer on rue Saint-Lazare. The Germans arrest him and execute him.¹

Ever since I came back from the camp, I’ve been trying to contact the people who listen to the London radio broadcasts and want to resist. I talk with the patients who come consult me:

“What do you think of the situation, of the Germans?”

People who answer: “Oh, I find them quite well-behaved,” or “At least, they brought some order, which is what this country sorely needed” do not interest me—and disgust me altogether.

One day, as I am examining a patient who is lying at home on rue Claude Bernard with a severe case of flu, I notice that her husband is watching me closely.

“You have opened your practice recently, Docteur.”

“I was a prisoner in Sarrebourg.”

“You were a prisoner and you came back?”

“The fight is not over.”

“If you want to fight...”

His name is Stéphane. He works in the subway. I meet him several times on the Palais-Royal station platform, or in a métro car between Châtelet and Gare de Lyon. He belongs to a group that calls itself *Gaullist*, as a reference to the London general. He hands me leaflets that I insert into the mailboxes of my hospital colleagues.

On December 31st, I give a house-warming and New-Year’s Eve party. I hire a few musicians who remind me of the Sambor inn—whence I haven’t received any news since September, ’39. I’m beginning to earn good money. I buy Champagne on the black market.

I invite the Stockmanns, Fagnard, some Friends of Nature pals. And also, the Hôtel Tournefort Poles. Before the war, their parents sent them pensions. Now they must

¹ A métro station bears his name.

work to make a living. As most of them registered as Jews, many professions are barred. When they're ill, I don't charge them anything.

There aren't as many people as in the gymnasium Stiff-Leg Viktor rented two years ago. Viktor himself is hiding somewhere in the south, because he didn't declare himself as a Jew. I think he's right and the others are wrong:

"I saw what happened in the Oflag. They ask the Jews to register. It is a simple formality, so the Jews accept and nobody protests. Then, they separate them. Nothing brutal about it. Once more, the Jews obey and the others look elsewhere. One day, the Jews vanish, taken away to an unknown destination. You can't save them, it's too late. The Fritz are clever. The Jews register and step apart by themselves. What's more, by proceeding in stages, the Germans put to sleep the distrust of the Jews and of anybody willing to help them. Believe me, if they summon you, don't go!"

"They'll come for us. We gave them our addresses when we registered."

"Come hide here. There's plenty room."

We dance and forget our troubles. Let's have fun while we can! I notice that Malvina, the pretty blonde, dances a lot with the young tall fellow, Bernard Kohn. She doesn't like Béton any better than Flip. At 3 AM or so, a German soldier comes complain about the noise. Several of them are staying in a hotel just across the boulevard. I've seen German soldiers in the Oflag, they don't impress me. I offer Jerry a glass of Champagne.

"It's New Year's Eve. We do what we like!"

1941. I lose my dog and shave my beard.

In June 1941, the Germans attack their Soviet friends without any warning. It's *Blitzkrieg* all over again. The German army moves so fast that it rushes across Bielorrussia and Eastern Galicia in a matter of days. After two years of Soviet administration, the cities of Lwów and Sambor fall under Nazi rule.

Mail now travels with Teutonic efficiency between the east and the west of the great Reich. Towards the end of the summer, I receive a postcard from my father: "We're not staying at home anymore, but near the Dniestr. The happiest one is Salka." Near the Dniestr is where Sambor's poorest Jews used to live. I guess the Germans grouped the Jews in a ghetto, as they did in Lodz or Warsaw. My father states clearly that their life has become worse than death. A censor probably read the card without paying attention.

I'm a bloody swine: in three years, I haven't found one hour to go to Cimetière de Pantin and look at Salka's tomb.

I'm stupid, too. I should have thought that the Jews' situation, which worsened every time I went to Poland, would sink even lower. The inn was worth a fortune. If

my father had sold it, the whole family could have joined uncle Manès in America. With lots of money, you could certainly buy visas.

This war won't last forever. They're alive, after all. I do worry more than I'm willing to admit. Otherwise I wouldn't have lost Béton in the subway. I mean, I'm never late and never lose anything. This Béton was strange, though. He had spent his youth in the guts of the Maginot line. The Métro corridors' maze was Paradise Lost to him. Ever since I had left him in Celles sur Plaine, he had ceased to trust me.

I don't own a car anymore and besides they don't sell petrol to individuals, so I ride a bike to visit my patients in the neighborhood and I take the subway when I need to go elsewhere in Paris. I've stopped meeting Stéphane on the Palais-Royal platform: the Germans shot him. I found his leaflets too limp anyway.

A night in September 1941, at 4 AM or so, someone knocks on my door. I see a short man, as white as a sheet, wrapped in a large coat.

"Are you docteur Greif?"

"That's me. Come in..."

"My name is Zellermeier. I'm also a doctor. Do you remember Milek Roth?"

"The communist guy? I've heard he went back to Lwów with a special pass when Hitler and Stalin were still friends."

"Right. He told me about you. He said you were willing to hide people in your apartment. Malvina Zien gave me your address."

"Malvina Zien? Yes, I know her."

"If you could let me stay for a few days, until I heal."

He opens his coat and his shirt, revealing a wide bandage wrapped around his belly. My pulse quickens. By the devil, unusual business coming my way!

"Are you wounded?"

"Surgery. They removed my appendix yesterday."

"Your appendix? And you came out of the hospital already?"

"I had the surgery on purpose, so I could escape. I was caught in a trap by the French police. They brought me to the central police station with some other fellows. I thought they might question some of them first, so it left me a few days before they delivered me to the Gestapo. Then I simulated appendicitis. They sent me to hôpital Saint-Antoine. I told the surgeon I was allergic. Take it easy with the anesthesia, I said, better some pain than a deadly shock. I woke up in the middle of the night, feeling okay. They put a cop in front of the door to guard me. You bet he didn't expect me to get up, so he went and chattered with the nurses in their room. Well, I dressed silently and here I am."

What a story! I love this guy! I imagine I'm lying on the operating table, clenching my teeth like the Spartan boy to avoid shouting with pain.

“But say, why did you fall into the trap? What do you do?”

“I try to make myself useful. Listen, I’m going to bed. I’ll tell you everything tomorrow.”

“Wait, I’ll change your dressing first.”

Zellermeyer spends a few days in my apartment. As I tell him I would like to make myself useful too, he promises to send someone.

“He’ll say he’s a friend of Lucien, that’s my name in the *Résistance*.”

Soon afterward, a patient who comes consult me in the afternoon among the others says Lucien sent him.

“My name in the network is Pierre.”

He speaks with a thick Rumanian accent. I see him a few days later on place Monge. He introduces the third member of our cell, Louis, who seems to be Spanish. We spread leaflets that I find much stronger than the Gaullist ones: they describe camps where the Nazis “concentrate” people they want to eliminate, letting them die of hunger and diseases.

I belong (I’ll learn that much later) to a network called FTP-MOI, “Francs-Tireurs Partisans—Main d’Œuvre Immigrée¹”, founded by foreign members of the underground communist party. These foreigners are either Spanish republicans or “International Brigadists” who fought in Spain: Italian anti-fascists, Rumanian and Czech Jews.

Pierre asks me to shave my beard and change my first name.

“Let’s say they torture someone and he mentions you. We don’t want him to say: *He’s a bearded guy with a Russian name, Kopek or something*. If you want to be a clandestine fighter, there shouldn’t be anything unusual about you.”

I remember my grandmother named me Haïm when I was ill. I look for a French parallel. Joachim is close, but not bland enough. Jacques seems just right.

Pierre gives me more advice.

“There aren’t that many of us, so we must avoid losses. The network can topple like a house of cards if it isn’t partitioned carefully. That’s why Louis and you won’t meet anybody outside the cell. Me, I know a single member of the high command who gives me orders. If we receive an order to prepare an action, we must never, never, write down names, addresses and other information on paper. We must learn everything by rote. What do you think of place Monge, as a meeting spot?”

“It’s perfect. Lots of people. Several streets in all directions if we need to escape.”

“Well, we’ll never meet here again. Never meet twice in the same place! We’ll always talk in the street rather than inside a café or a restaurant, whence you can’t

¹ Guerilla irregulars—Immigrant workers.

flee in a hurry. Tell me, what would you have done if I hadn't been here at eleven, as agreed?"

"I would have waited for you."

"No. You must leave if the person you're meeting is more than five minutes late. If the Fritz catch me and then free me, you don't know me anymore. They may have turned me over. Of course, you don't talk about the network to your friends..."

1942. Jacques and Jacqueline.

In March '42, as I'm pedaling in the cold, hoping that spring will soon warm up the air, I see someone I know on rue de Tolbiac, between avenue d'Italie and rue Bobillot: Malvina Zien, the hôtel Tournefort blonde.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle."

"I'm sorry, Monsieur. I don't think I know you."

"Of course you do: Greif, the boulevard Saint-Marcel doctor. I shaved my beard, that's why you don't recognize me."

"Ah oui... Lonek Greif. I went to your apartment on New Year's Eve two years ago. You said you could hide people if the Germans were after them. In the end, the police summoned Henek Warner and Bernard Kohn for some kind of *verification*. Instead of hiding in your apartment, they went to the police station. They thought some official wanted to check their ID and no harm done, but the police sent them to a camp in Pithiviers."

"Yes, I know. Henek Warner escaped. He simulated colon troubles to go to the hospital. Wanda Warner called on me. She asked whether I could write a certificate to extend his stay in the hospital. What do you mean, extend his stay? I asked. Then he returns to the camp? I told them to flee right away. They went to Montpellier."

"I gave them the same advice. Wanda wrote to me from Montpellier. At least they're not cold, over there¹, but food is scarce."

"What about you? The Germans don't bother you? You can hide in my home, if you want."

"I didn't declare myself as a Jew."

"Good."

"Milek Roth sent me a fake baptism certificate from Poland. Also for my parents and grandparents. I'm one hundred per cent Aryan. And you?"

"I'm French."

"You're lucky."

¹ Montpellier is about as far south as you can go in France.

“Since neither one of us is Jewish, mademoiselle Zien, I invite you to go to the movies¹”

“Sure, but I’m not mademoiselle Zien anymore.”

“You got a fake name with your fake baptism certificate?”

“No, I’m madame Kohn. I married Bernard Kohn.”

“Really? But when?”

“Last September, when he was in Pithiviers.”

“What do you mean, he was? Where is he now?”

“They put him into another camp, in Compiègne. The foreign Jews in Pithiviers were deported east, except those who had Aryan wives. By marrying me, he avoided deportation.”

That’s a brave thing to do: marry this Bernard Kohn to save his life. Actually, someone told me they shared the same room in Hôtel Tournefort, but it doesn’t mean she wanted to stay with him forever.

As for myself, I’m divorcing from Frydka. She made me angry by embezzling some money that the Curie Institute tried to send me when I was on the Maginot line. I hired a lawyer. This gentleman said this was a tough case.

“She refuses to cooperate. For a couple separated eleven years ago, divorce should be easy to get, but she’s really fighting with tooth and nail. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Later, Frydka’s cousin told me she was living with a man. This changed the matter. If I prove my wife is cheating on me, divorce becomes a mere formality. Me, I’m not cheating on her. Yanka doesn’t live with me anymore. As she frequents black-market dealers and other dangerous people, I don’t want her to know about my underground activities. Besides, French law doesn’t punish adulterous husbands: what’s a mortal sin for the wife is a venial one for the husband.

The lawyer suggested we ask the police to catch them *flagrante delicto*.

“This ain’t much. They do it every day.”

“The cousin told me her lover is Jewish. His name is Katz. Won’t he be in trouble?”

“Ah... You’re right. I’ll think about it.”

A detective he knows obtained the concierge’s signed testimony saying Mrs Greif lives with a man who is not her husband. I’m certain to win the divorce case. If Frydka is lucky, they won’t send her to jail.

So Malvina Kohn born Zien and I, we’re both married but lonely. Our Polish friends have gone south or been sent to camps. We’re careful not to associate with French people we don’t trust fully. Malvina has a Polish friend: Tunia Kassar, the

¹ Movie theaters, museums, swimming-pools, even parks were forbidden to Jews.

wife of a doctor Bernard met in Pithiviers. She's a doctor herself, but she can't practice because she registered as a Jew. She hides in the home of a Frenchwoman in île Saint-Louis.

I invite Malvina to come and listen to a little piano recital. She doesn't fall into my arms right away like the nurses, but I can see she's moved when I play *La Grande Polonaise* and *L'Étude Révolutionnaire*.¹

Strangely, I don't miss so much the physical intimacy with the nurses as their heedful company. I like to talk with a woman, as I did with my sister Salka when I was young. Thus, Malvina becomes my confidant. I tell her about my life: Frydka the hysterical beauty, Minka the Lwów music lover, the Turkish swimmer in Joinville, resourceful Yanka, then the nurses, and tall Isabelle who was perhaps the ideal partner.

I tell her a recent story.

"In March, ten days maybe before we met on rue de Tolbiac, a woman came to my consultation in hôpital Cochin. Following a double post-mumpian orchitis, her husband is sterile."

"Following what?"

"Orchitis is an inflammation of the testicles (Malvina blushes); post-mumpian means after a case of mumps. This woman wants a child. She heard about artificial insemination, she even brought an authorization signed by her husband. I tell her it does exist, of course, but with this war everything is topsy-turvy. You need a healthy donor, and all our young men are prisoners in Germany. But then, if she really wants her insemination, I can be the donor. And why artificial? We might as well do it the way nature intended, which is certainly the most efficient one. Her husband works in construction. She speaks with a peasant's accent."

"So you did it?"

"Well, yes. She even came three times, to be really sure!"

"In hôpital Cochin?"

"Hm, no, in my practice on boulevard Saint Marcel..."

"Is she pregnant?"

"She should deliver in December. Her name is Suzanne."

Malvina smiles, as if to show that she forgives my pranks.

"Are you allowed to do that? I mean, as a doctor?"

"Bah, the Hippocratic Oath doesn't mention artificial insemination... What's more, there's a war going on. People are killing each other. I didn't commit a terrible crime."

¹ Two pieces by Chopin that celebrate Poland's spirit—composed when the Russian occupation held the country in a vise.

Jews who obey all the commandments declared themselves to avoid lying, so now they've vanished into the unknown. It is time to embroider new maxims: "Morals should adapt to circumstances," "In the land of the murderers, a thief is no criminal," "When you're not sure you'll survive to the end of the year, you can be forgiven a few trifles."

I invite Malvina to the theater, the movies, the restaurant. I work hard and earn money. To help Jews who want to flee to the free zone and maybe South America, I buy paintings and furniture from these poor people. A Max Ernst¹ canvas, a few small paintings of lesser artists, a Dutch chest, ivory trinkets, a china dinner set. I never bargain and I pay cash.

If somebody denounces me as a member of the Résistance, I may need to live underground. As a kind of insurance, I buy gold coins, which I can carry and hide easily.

Around mid-June, I kiss Malvina for the first time in a movie-theater. One August evening, I play Beethoven sonatas and recite Wyspianski pages: "To arms, brothers, to arms!" A violent storm breaks just as she prepares to walk back to her hotel. She prefers to stay with me. We spend our first night together.

Both my relationship with Malvina and my commitment to the Résistance are moving forward. I ask Pierre to tell his boss I would like to become more active. They name me the network leaders' doctor. I gain seven new patients: three directors and four detachment heads. My profile is ideal: I'm French, registered neither as a communist nor as a Jew, I speak German and Polish, I live in a large apartment. Instead of delivering leaflets with Pierre and Louis, I prepare emergency kits, which my new patients carry when they have a job to perform.

Other doctors take care of the ordinary network members. They seldom see bullet wounds. They fear workplace accidents among the fellows who make bombs and hand-grenades. Chemists are more important than gunners or bomb droppers, because they're harder to replace. The most valuable member of our network is a skillful artist who forges perfect papers, but I guess nobody will ever erect a statue to him.

As for me, I'm just an obscure cog in this great machine. Two rooms in my apartment are crammed with the former tenant's furniture. I hide the emergency kits in one of them. After a few months, the network leaders trust me so fully that one of them asks me to hide a small but heavy package with the kits.

"Don't ask me what it is, so in case of trouble you'll be able to say you didn't know."

"Okay."

¹ German-born French painter, co-founder of the "Dada" school (1891-1976).

I understand that the package contains some arms. I'm not charging the German army with a raised sword, like a real Polish hussar, but I know that by saying "Okay," I become a terrorist and risk the death penalty.

Malvina suspects something. Actually, I've told her about the strange dawn visit of docteur Zellermeier, who mentioned her name. She's seen him a few times, this Zellermeier. She carried letters and messages for him and for others. I see clearly, behind the tender mask of a woman in love, the iron will of someone I can really rely on. Thus, I don't hesitate one second and sign her on as a courier. It helps, obviously, that she has blonde hair, blue eyes, a small upturned nose and a proper baptism certificate.

"You'll call yourself Jacqueline, so they'll know I'm sending you."

The trap.

The London radio says the king of Denmark refuses to go to the movies, out of sympathy with the Jews. Me, I go precisely because I'm Jewish, to defend freedom against oppression. I swim every Friday in the rue de Pontoise swimming-pool with my Belgian colleague Paul Fagnard. While Jews must obey an 8 PM curfew, I go out at night with Malvina—or rather, Jacqueline. We could even stay out after the general midnight curfew, as I have a doctor's pass. I'd introduce her as my nurse.

We've certainly taken the right decision in not registering as Jews. Tunia Kassar, the friend of Jacqueline who hides in île Saint-Louis, received a message from her husband, brought by a railway worker who found it on the tracks. He writes he's leaving France toward an unknown destination. He spent more than one year in the Pithiviers camp and now they deport him to the east.

We don't even suffer from hunger. Patients with relatives in the countryside (for example, Raymonde Stockmann) give me eggs, potatoes, cheese and even meat. They say the peasants are angry because they can find neither fertilizer nor petrol for the tractor. Many Parisians have no relatives in the countryside. They consult me for rickets, scurvy, bronchitis due to the lack of heating. They ask me whether it is dangerous to eat cat meat, pigeons, crows. I advise them against eating cats: these beasts may have eaten plagued rats.

Attacks happen in Paris: two German policemen shot; a hand-grenade thrown on a group of Wehrmacht soldiers on avenue de Wagram; bombs launched in Jerry's favorite restaurants and hotels; four Germans killed and eight wounded in stade Jean Bouin. I guess the press doesn't even publish the real numbers. The leaders of the FTP-MOI who come to my apartment don't talk about these events, for their safety as well as mine, but the smile on their face after each attack says plenty.

There was a first roundup of Jews on May 14, 1941—that's when Henek Warner, Bernard Kohn and Armand Kassar were sent to Pithiviers—then another in August. Many young men who escaped want to join our network. The brigadists are wary. You can't trust amateurs who bring more goodwill than experience to the job. These kids aren't even communist. And actually, can they use a gun? The Party orders the network to stop wavering and recruit the young Jews, as fresh troops are needed. Let the oldsters teach the profession to the newcomers! The Rumanian Jew who heads the networks resigns (but stays in charge of the derailments). Boris Holban, a Bessarabian¹ Jew, replaces him. I see him often. I don't know any Boris Holban, of course, but only "Roger." He'll tell me his real name after the war. That's when I'll learn the whole story of the FTP-MOI network.

To enter the network and fight, young Polish Jews pretend they live underground and broke contact with their families. Yet, if a kid's parents have vanished but his little sister escaped the roundups by chance, how could he give up on her? The French police trails the sister, applying the infallible shadowing methods invented by the great Bertillon². The cops work in shifts, hide for hours, jot down every coming and going. They arrest many people.

Alas, the directors and detachment heads, veterans of the Spanish war, experienced professionals, behave as carelessly as the young guys. They know the way to my apartment on boulevard Saint Marcel, since I'm their doctor. In winter, they catch bronchitis in their dingy attics or basements, but otherwise they shouldn't come there without a serious reason, much less send their friends. Yeah, but I have such a magnificent bathroom and such a full larder! How could I refuse a warm bath and a slice of ham to a man who fights the Fritz? I even give a coat to a Polish Jew whom the Party sends in a secret mission to Warsaw in November. I should receive only seven visitors, or should I say seven sick visitors, but I see many more, under all kinds of pretexts. A Frenchman with a large apartment who can help the guys, this is not so common...

Among all these strangers who come day and night to take a bath, how many does the police trail?

Boris Holban is in charge of military actions. Karel Stefka (aka Karol) handles the political questions. Joaquim Olaso (aka Emmanuel) is the technical boss.

Nelly, Karol's companion, is pregnant. You can't raise a baby underground. On Wednesday, December 2nd, 1942, Karol comes to my apartment to ask for my help.

¹ Bessarabia, near the Black sea, is split today between Ukraine and Moldavia. The Bessarabian communists, who acquired experience fighting against the Rumanian dictatorship in the thirties, were very active in the FTP-MOI.

² Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914) perfected many modern police techniques.

On that day, I'm riding back from hôpital Cochin around noon, like every other day. As I reach place des Gobelins, I see a 68 boulevard Saint Marcel tenant, one of my patients, who waves her arms vigorously.

"Docteur, Docteur, where are you going?"

"What do you mean, where am I going? Home!"

"You can't go. The police is there! They're looking for you. They check all the people who enter the building."

Let's not mistake this neighbor for the goddess of chance. Even without her, I wasn't running a great risk. I instructed my maid, Annie, to hang a rag from the balcony's railing to warn me of a danger. This Annie is also a patient. She consulted me in hôpital Cochin for her syphilis; I hired her because she was out of work.

What a fool! I should have told the network directors about the rag.

The *Brigade Spéciale*—French policemen who help the Gestapo—catch Karel Stefka at 68 boulevard Saint Marcel. On that day and the following ones, the Brigade trails and arrests all the people who come visit me. They catch Olaso and his wife, then set a trap in their home and arrest several Spanish fighters. They catch Hirsch, the head of the first detachment. Also his wife. As she kept a list of appointments in her notebook, against all the rules, they set other traps and annihilate the first detachment.

They catch Paul Fagnard, my Belgian pal, who comes pick me up on Friday night to go for a swim. I'll learn about it after the war. I don't know whether he behaved in a suspect manner. They probably tortured him. He vanished forever. Maybe he belonged to another Résistance network, but he was indeed caught in my apartment and I've always felt some guilt.

My concierge, madame Georgeai, questions one of the policemen:

"What do you want from docteur Greif exactly?"

"We've got some business we want to talk to him about."

"Is he Jewish, maybe?"

"Of course not! If he was Jewish, he couldn't practice medicine."

As soon as the neighbor warns me, I turn back and pedal to Jacqueline's hotel, behind gare Montparnasse. Zellermeier recommended this hotel, saying it was safer than hôtel Tournefort. He knew and trusted the owners, monsieur and madame Trial. Jacqueline invites me to stay.

"I can't. If the Brigade Spéciale finds this address, they'll come."

"Did you leave the address on your desk?"

"Of course. In my file-box. You remember you consulted me when you had the flu? I wrote a file to your name."

“The wooden box? It contains hundreds of files. Why would they come especially here?”

“For one thing, they might decide to check all my patients. Anyway, a Polish woman married to a detained Jew will arouse their curiosity. I’ll stay two or three days, then I’ll have to find a safer hideout. Ah, look: this small bag is full of gold coins. You keep them. We may need them soon.”

On December 3rd, I telephone my nurse at hôpital Cochin to warn her:

“I must, hmm, take a leave of absence. I won’t be able to go on with my work. I’m sorry.”

“Docteur Greif? Bravo! Everybody is quite proud of you!”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Brigade Spéciale came here. You are a dangerous terrorist. You hid arms in your apartment”

“Bah, it wasn’t much. Some fellows really risk their life... By the way, I want to ask you something. A doctor has duties. I have no serious pending business, except one. You remember this woman who came consult last week, the well-dressed one?”

“You mean the expensive tart?”

“If you want.”

“Yeah. Me, I can’t buy Couture dresses, especially nowadays.”

“She consulted me because she was feverish in the evening. She coughed, she tired easily. I sent her for X-rays and I got the results yesterday. I told her I would call her. It isn’t good: there are pulmonary lesions, she needs to see a phthisiologist.”

“Pneumothorax?”

“That’s right. I thought I’d send her to Thévenard. If you give me her phone number, I’ll call her. Marie-Louise Bossu.”

I call my patient.

– Madame Bossu? This is docteur Greif. You came to my consultation in Cochin last week. Listen carefully. The X-rays revealed lesions in your lungs. It is not really serious, but we must act quickly. You should come to the hospital again to get an artificial pneumothorax. I’m sorry I can’t follow your case, but Thévenard, a very competent phthisiologist, will take care of you.”

“I have tuberculosis, is that it? Shouldn’t you tell me more about it? I mean, not on the phone. Don’t you consult in the hospital anymore?”

“Well... Certain circumstances force me to interrupt my consultation. I have to take a leave.”

“Ah, I understand. Why don’t we meet outside the hospital. I’ll be in Montparnasse this afternoon. Do you know café Dupont, near the railway station?¹”

“Of course.”

“4 PM, would that suit you?”

“I’ll be there.”

I don’t care about feminine frills and trifles, but I do notice that she wears, under a coat with a fox-fur collar, a dress as elegant, or should I say provocative, as last time. She begs me to forgive her for being slightly late: her hairdresser took longer than planned. Her long blonde hair ripples like wavelets. I confirm the diagnosis.

“The left lung is attacked, but you came to me just in time. We should be able to heal it.”

“Say, Docteur, is it dangerous, the treatment? What you told me about?”

“The pneumothorax? It’s nothing at all. They just blow air into your lung to help the lesion scar over.”

“Can’t you do it yourself? I don’t know why, but I trust you.”

“I told you, it is not possible, but docteur Thévenard is a lung specialist. He’ll take good care of you.”

“Are you in trouble? Are they looking for you? Did you leave your home? Where do you live?”

“Nowhere, actually. I must hide, maybe away from Paris.”

“Listen, Docteur, I can offer you some help, you’ll answer yes or no. I live on rue Poliveau, but I own a small house in Enghien, which I received as an inheritance. My former cleaning lady keeps the place. I’ve hidden underground fighters there already. If you want...”

“Thank you. This offer is quite generous. I can’t answer right away. I need to ask my, hmm, courier for advice.”

I explain to Jacqueline that madame Bossu is a very ill patient, who owes me her life. Of course, out of gratitude, she is willing to help me.

“Where is this Enghien?” she asks.

“About ten miles north of Paris.”

“It seems a good idea indeed.”

So I go with Marie-Louise Bossu to Enghien. She introduces me to the old woman who guards the house, then she returns to Paris. I gave Jacqueline’s address to Marie-Louise—and to Jacqueline, the phone number of Marie-Louise’s rue Poliveau apartment.

On December 6th, I go into a café and I phone to boulevard Saint Marcel : GOBelins 23 67. Annie, my maid, answers the call.

¹ This was the old station. It doesn’t exist anymore (nor does café Dupont).

Lonek

“Allo ? This is the office of docteur Greif.”

“Bonjour, madame. I would like to get an appointment with the doctor.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but the doctor is away. I don’t know when he’ll be back. You might try to call tomorrow.”

I’m sure she recognized my voice. Obviously, the police is still there and listening in. I call again on the next day. This time, Annie answers normally. As there are many calls, the police just listens now and then.

“Say, Annie, do you see the two small paintings in my office and the one in the hall? It would be nice if you could unhook them discreetly. Then, when you go out to buy food or something, you drop them at the home of Marie-Louise Bossu, at 36 rue Poliveau.”

“That much the Huns won’t get!”

As soon as I arrived in Enghien, I felt a kind of emptiness. I miss Jacqueline. I’ve known such a feeling already with tall Isabelle. This time, I won’t hesitate. On December 8th, I write to Jacqueline that I love her.

On that same day, Marie-Louise comes visit me in Enghien.

“Docteur, the Montparnasse hotel landlady called me this morning. The Brigade Spéciale arrested your courier, Milena I think, last night.”

Devil’s ass... They’ll torture her to death. Once more, I come too late with my “I love you.” What a fool! I left her name-file with the others, in the wooden box I kept on my desk. The police’s work was half-done. Pierre, my partner in the first Résistance group, did tell me never to write anything on a piece of paper. The communists should have given us courses in underground activities. They don’t mind sacrificing militants. Every time a lowly German is killed, hundreds are shot in retaliation. So one more courier or one less... And what about these brave fellows caught in my apartment? They worked hard building up experience in Spain and elsewhere, and now they’ll die because they could not resist the lure of my bathtub.

Marie-Louise stays for dinner. I’ve never met such a magnificent woman—or rather: a woman who knew so well how to enhance her strong points. Compared to Marie-Louise, other women... Frydka, the most beautiful girl in Sambor, is homely. Yanka is vulgar. I even think that Marie-Louise speaks a language of her own, more musical and voluptuous than the nurses’ rough lingo. But is she actually beautiful? I can’t say for sure, because my eyesight fails me when I approach her. Her heady perfume stuns me, recalls some forgotten delight from my childhood. There is some magic behind this trick. Paul Fagnard once told me that he’d fallen madly in love with a Parisian woman, a female Don Juan who could bewitch men with a flutter of her eyelashes and three drops of flower essence. Maybe it was Marie-Louise.

The former maid who lives in the house serves dinner. A little before the end of the meal, she ask:

“Madame, do I make your bedroom ready?”

“No, it isn’t necessary.”

Marie-Louise steals into my bed. Instead of rejecting her, I surrender myself to her consoling embrace. My distress blurs my judgment...

I wanted to conclude my career as a seducer. I had found a woman who contented me fully. Once more, fate shatters my happiness. The tall Toulouse camper stole Yanka from me. Some engineer married Isabelle. Now the Brigade Spéciale kidnaps Malvina. I know I won’t see her again. These dogs work with the Gestapo. People who vanish never come back. As I’m kissing Marie-Louise, I think about Jacqueline. Arrested in my place. While I’m alive, she’s dead...

When I was sad, Salka comforted me. She’s dead too. What about my mother? Rózia? Nobody’s left.

I’d better stop whimpering. I’ll be strong. I’ll forget Jacqueline, since she turned into nothingness.

1943. Running on the roof.

I spend Christmas eve and New Year’s eve alone in Enghien. Marie-Louise can’t stay with me all the time. She has a friend, monsieur Fernand, a Belgian businessman who... protects her? keeps her? A “kept woman” lives with a man without being married and without working. If she’s married, she’s a honorable housewife. When monsieur Fernand travels to Paris, he lives on rue Poliveau with Marie-Louise. When he goes back to Belgium, she hops into a train and comes to me.

He buys and sells various goods. I suspect he has a hand in unsavory traffics. Marie-Louise defends him:

“A businessman, he sells to people who have money. These people are German, it’s none of their fault, and anyway money has no odor. If he didn’t sell, someone else would and in the end it wouldn’t make any difference. You can’t ask everybody to enter the Résistance.”

“One more year and the war is over. The bastard will face the firing squad.”

Marie-Louise is thinking about her future. Kept by a doctor ! She hedges her bet: a collaborator, a member of the Résistance. How can I reach such heights of passion with her? I feel ashamed. “I play this act to keep the hideout,” I tell myself, but I’m not sure I believe my own excuse. My willpower melts when she comes close. As soon as she’s gone, a sharp bitterness overwhelms me. I despise her. I despise myself even more.

Self-interest moves her above all. If she's in love with me, it's on the side. Also, I saved her life by sending her to the phthisiologist. By the way: I avoid kissing her, because tuberculosis doesn't heal in three weeks. This does partly explain our passion, I guess: death is casting its shadow on both of us. If we want to think about death, we just have to look out the window, as the house stands above a cemetery.

In March, monsieur Fernand spends several weeks in Belgium. I move to rue Poliveau. Being locked in Enghien was no fun. There were few books in the house. No piano, no telephone, no radio. I couldn't spend all my waking hours looking at the cemetery. In the rue Poliveau apartment, there aren't many more books. I can talk to Marie-Louise, well, yeah. I can look at the street by drawing the curtains slightly, but I can't go down and walk around, because everybody knows me in my former neighborhood. To entertain me, Marie-Louise invites her friends or her sister.

One evening, her sister comes to dinner with a young man who praises the LVF,¹ a troop of hoodlums fighting the Soviets on the German side, more than I find palatable. What an unpleasant fellow. Disliked him at first sight. Gives me the creeps. I'm wanted for terrorism, after all.

"Excuse me," he says. "An errand. I'm coming back soon."

Instead of breathing better because this stinking rat is gone, at least for a while, I get a nasty feeling, a foreboding. He'll return with the police!

"Hey, Marie-Louise, is there some kind of emergency exit in this apartment?"

"If you wiggle through the small window in the bathroom, you'll come upon the roof of a garret, which you can follow to the courtyard of the building next door."

So here I am, jumping onto the roof, then from roof to roof all the way to rue de l'Essai. Did the young knave come back with the police? Was I really exposed to a great danger? Let's say I felt like running on Paris roofs. Every Parisian who loves his city should look at it from above at least once in his life!

I do have to come down to the streets eventually and find a refuge for the night. I cross boulevard Saint-Marcel and knock at the Stockmanns' door at 11 PM. I stay one week with these safe friends. Raymonde gives me fresh underwear and clothes. Staying longer would put them at risk. Paul, whose father is Jewish, must not help a "terrorist." I'm lucky that I can trust many people in this neighborhood: those I cured of a bad disease, those I tended for free when they were penniless, those who dislike the Germans—and all the women who, hmm, appreciated Chopin. I live two days here, three days there. Then I remember Tunia Kassar. This friend of Jacqueline is hiding in île Saint-Louis in a big apartment belonging to a Frenchwoman, Simone Réti. I find the address in the phone book. Simone Réti lets me stay there for a whole month. I phone Marie-Louise.

¹ *Légion des Volontaires Français*: Legion of French volunteers.

“I had to go. I thought this admirer of the LVF would bring the police.”

“What are you talking about? He went down for cigarettes.”

“He could have returned with the police. I’ve got to be very careful. Just meeting someone like him is already dangerous for me.”

“Okay, I can understand that. But tell me, you ain’t sore at me?”

“Why should I be? Of course not. I can’t live with you because you have dangerous friends, that’s all. The reason I’m calling you—these paintings of mine you’ve got, I would like you to keep them until things clear up.”

“I’d like to see you again.”

“Well, hmm, yes, sure. I live in île Saint-Louis.”

I think I’d better play a straightforward game with her or I’ll lose my paintings, which are quite valuable. I give her my exact address. She comes visit me several times. She brings a chicken, flour, oranges and other hard-to-find goodies that her Belgian sugar daddy leaves behind.

I notice tiny wrinkles at the corner of her eyes. Obviously, her beauty owes a lot to the art of makeup. I’m not under her spell anymore.

She throws herself into my arms. She begs me to return to Enghien. She cries, she shouts. How gross. What will Simone Réti and Tunia Kassar think? In the end, I move away from their apartment, as much to escape Marie-Louise’s hysteria as to avoid overstaying my welcome.

I live here and there again. One day at a time. I discover the art of traveling light and the pleasures of Bohemian life. Then Yvonne Nougier, a patient whom I used as a “Jacqueline” once or twice, offers to help me. She’s a simple and honest young woman, who lives in her brother’s apartment while he is a war prisoner in Germany. She finds a small room for me in the 12th arrondissement, as well as food coupons—and also a precious item, an ID card in her brother’s name. Thus I become Émile Nougier.

I stay in contact with Tunia Kassar. In June 1943, she sends me a note: “Jacqueline is alive! I saw her!” I go to île Saint-Louis right away to learn more. Tunia is so nervous that she can barely talk. She didn’t expect to see someone return from the land of the dead.

“She spent six months in the Fresnes jail, which the Germans control. They questioned her, but she didn’t say anything. As they considered her useless, they gave her back to the French. She’s in some former barracks that serve as a women’s camp, in Les Lilas.”

“I know these barracks. That’s where I had to report at the beginning of the war. They told me to stay home and wait until they called me.”

“She’s allowed visits and parcels.”

“I can’t go and visit her, though. I’m a wanted terrorist.”

“Listen, she told me she could leave the camp under escort. Why don’t you meet here? The cops will wait for her downstairs, you’re not running any risk. If she accepts to see you again, of course.”

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“She asked me whether you still lived in Enghien. What could I say? I told her you left rue Poliveau in the middle of the night, so she knows you lived with Marie-Louise. Learning about it didn’t make her very happy.”

“I had never promised I would remain faithful to her. Besides, she was dead.”

“She’s still in love with you, otherwise she would have treated this story with scorn. I’ll invite her here without saying she’ll meet you. Then it’s up to you!”

The île Saint-Louis apartment plays a strange role in my love life. A few months ago, I met Marie-Louise here and she begged me to resume our relationship. Now it’s my turn to beg Jacqueline to take me back. I arrive one hour before her, as I’d rather not see the cops. When she enters the room and recognizes me, she blushes to a deep carmine. Ah, Tunia was right: she still cares about me. She turns toward her friend:

“I don’t want to see him.”

“But of course you do. I’m leaving you together.”

Tunia goes out. Jacqueline speaks in a strained voice, as if she had to overcome a physical barrier.

“It’s over between you and me.”

“Forgive me, Jacqueline.”

“I was in jail, thinking about you day and night, but you, meanwhile...”

“I thought you were dead. I wanted to die too. I was mad with grief. I’ve known many women without loving them. The very first one I’m in love with, the Krauts steal her from me! I even sent you a letter in which I wrote: *I love you!* First time I wrote these words.”

“Well, sending this letter was not very wise. Me, I was telling the cops that I hardly knew you, that you were just my doctor. They showed me the letter: ‘This doctor you hardly know sends you a love letter! You tried to trick us, you slut!’ They delivered me to the Gestapo. I lost six months of my life in jail. I told myself: He is alone in a room too, in Enghien.”

“Try to understand. Everybody thought you dead. Ask Tunia. Who would blame a widower if he marries again? But I left her, Tunia must have told you. I was so happy when I learned you were alive! Let’s erase these six months and begin all over again.”

“Erase these six months... Are you providing some magical eraser?”

“If we were leading a normal life, you could consider I acted wrong, but normal life stopped on September 1st, 1939. In war time, with death hovering, right and wrong sometimes get mixed up.”

I feel she's not rejecting my arguments. I want to kiss her, but she only accepts a little peck on the cheek.

She says the director of the Lilas camp, a good man, enrolled her as a secretary and promised he would find a way of setting her free before the end of summer. They never proved she had done anything wrong, after all. We decide not to plan another meeting in île Saint-Louis. Why should we run more risks? All we have to do is wait for her liberation.

I've been hiding for six months in various sections of Paris and its suburbs. Before the war, I used to go camping most week-ends and during the summer. I miss the countryside and the sea. Raymonde Stockmann spends her vacations in Loudun, at her parents' home, with Paul and their little boy. She invites me to join them. Besides, a Friends of Nature pal tells me of camping grounds in Niort¹. I ask Yvonne Nougier to go boulevard Saint-Marcel and get my bicycle from madame Georgeai, my concierge. I take the train with my bicycle to Loudun.

Monsieur Savatier, Raymonde Stockmann's father, owned a transportation company near Paris. The Germans requisitioned two brand new buses. He sold the remaining old one and moved to Loudun, where he drives a taxi. As petrol is severely rationed, he installed a gas-producing machine on his taxi's roof. He spends hours cutting wood for his gas-car with a power-saw. One morning, he's gone away driving, I try to use the saw to help him. You have to cut the logs into tiny cubes; it isn't as easy as I thought. He comes back while I'm working hard.

"Are you crazy? You need a long training before you can use this tool safely. What if you cut a finger? You're wanted, I can't take you to the hospital."

He's right, I guess, but then, what can I do all day? After two weeks, I decide to go to Niort. The camping grounds being on the shore of a river, at least I'll be able to swim.

Although I'm used to riding a bike in Paris, my legs and other parts of my body are quite sore after I've covered the sixty miles between Loudun and Niort. One consequence of the German occupation is that bikes replace automobiles. Bike repair shops sprout everywhere, as well as guarded bike storage lots in the street or on trains. Riding my bike all by myself between field and meadow, I feel wonderfully free. While the war is boosting the manufacture of tanks, canons, bombers, rockets, machine-guns, grenades, land-mines, nobody has ever invented a machine more perfect than the bike. Peaceful and harmless, too.

Near Parthenay, two cops arrest me to check my identity. I show them my fake card: Émile Nougier, born in La Rochelle...

¹ Loudun is 150 miles southwest of Paris, Niort a little farther.

“Well, you’re not far from home!”

My accent is so faint that I can pass for a true Frenchman. I’m quite proud!

They free Jacqueline at the end of September. She knows a building manager who finds an attic-room for us on rue Saint-Amand, near porte de Vanves. I rent the room under the name of Émile Nougier. For the first time, we actually live together. She just spent six months in complete solitude. I risk to be caught and shot any time. Is it possible to imagine a love more intense and desperate than ours?

Jacqueline earns some money by making leather belts. After she pays the rent, she doesn’t have enough left to buy the food coupons she’s entitled to. Oat flakes cooked in water make up the staple of our diet. I hate being so poor. When the special brigade arrested her, Jacqueline asked a friend to keep the gold coins I had given her. The friend knew a pharmacist who could hide them under the floor or something. Now the friend has vanished and the pharmacist says she’s never seen any gold coins. I know what I can do:

“I’ll ask Marie-Louise to return my paintings and I’ll sell them. They’re worth a lot.”

“You told me a professional underground fighter avoids taking unnecessary risks and distrusts everybody. So you have to distrust Marie-Louise.”

“Good advice. I just wonder whether I owe it to carefulness or jealousy.”

Taking care of my paintings would give me something to do. I walk around my room like a tiger in a cage. This is not so different from Enghien. Sometimes I go out for a walk. It’s dangerous, as there are roundups all the time.

I would like to contribute to Résistance actions, but the police just destroyed my former network. After a last feat, the execution of general Ritter, who was in charge of STO (Service du Travail Obligatoire¹), all the leaders were arrested and shot. Boris Holban ceased to be the network’s boss long ago. The Party sent him away from Paris because he felt the police were closing in and refused to intensify the rhythm of actions. Manouchian, who replaced him, wasn’t as experienced. The Party wanted to multiply actions to move the masses. Now Manouchian is dead. As far as I can see or hear from my garret, the masses are not stirring.

Jean-Jacques

We celebrate Christmas in île Saint-Louis with Tunia and Simone. They’ve also invited a woman who looks like a nervous child. Her name is Monette Meyerbeer, she’s coming from Grenoble. She talks so much that nobody else can fit in a word.

¹ Compulsory work (in Germany).

She works with the group of Poles who used to stay in Hotel Tournefort, or what's left of it. Milek Roth, the communist militant, went back to Poland. Another guy escaped to Switzerland. Jacqueline's husband is a prisoner in Drancy. Several vanished without a trace. One of them was shot in a Résistance action. These fearful people, who registered as Jews because they were afraid to carry fake IDs, have turned into tough underground fighters. They changed their names long ago. Monette Meyerbeer tells us what she's doing in Grenoble:

"I visit the Jewish families with Wanda. We explain that the Germans want to deport them to ghettos or camps whence nobody ever returned. They deported my mother and my brother, so I know what I'm talking about. We can't help the parents, but we can at least save the children if they leave them with us. We hide the boys in farms and the girls in a convent."

We eat a gastronomical dinner (or so it seems when I compare it to our oat flakes) and drink a few glasses of wine. Then we walk back to rue Saint-Amand—before the curfew, as I can't use my doctor's pass anymore.

We go to bed. Suddenly, Jacqueline utters a very unexpected request.

"I want a child."

"What do you mean, a child? You know that I can be arrested and shot any day."

"Well, that's why I want it!"

I find her very brave. I feel proud that she offers such a proof of love, and at the same time quite sad that maybe I'll never see my child.

"As I don't know whether I'll be around when the time comes, I suggest we choose a name right now. What do you think of Jacques if it's a boy? Thus we would have at least one real Jacques in the family."

"I'm afraid I'd find it confusing to live with two Jacques. I mean, I hope you'll survive. I'd prefer Jean-Jacques."

"Okay. If it's a girl, I suggest Isabelle."

"Like your tall nurse?"

"Well..."

"Fine. As you're facing death, I'll respect your last wish."

The Soviets have crushed the Germans in Stalingrad. They're pushing them back day after day. The war will soon be over. We hope our child will be born in a peaceful world and I'll hold that long.

1944. The pencil

Jacqueline knows someone in Normandy: Hélène, a hôtel Tournefort Pole who married a Frenchman. She lives in a farm. On January 15th, Jacqueline decides to go visit her:

“I can’t feed my baby on oatmeal. I’ll eat eggs and drink milk in the farm.”

“What do you mean, your baby? It’s too early to know whether you’re pregnant.”

“Men don’t understand these things. Me, I know I’m with child.”

“Bah, it can’t hurt you anyway.”

“Please promise not to do anything foolish while I’m away. Try not to go out too often.”

On the next day, I go to a café and call Marie-Louise. With Jacqueline out of the way, I should be able to get one of my paintings back and sell it. I live like a pauper although I own a Max Ernst and other valuable works of art. When she returns, she’ll have to admit she was wrong to oppose my plan. We’ll have enough money to live in comfort for at least one year!

Things turn out even better than I expected: Marie-Louise is willing to buy the Max Ernst herself.

“I didn’t like it too much at first, but now I’m getting used to it. I’ll keep it as a memento of our life together. When do you want to come?”

“Listen, I can’t go to rue Poliveau. It would be too risky. Couldn’t we meet elsewhere?”

“As you like. Just tell me where.”

“Let’s say the Dupont café, in Montparnasse, for the sake of the good old times.”

“Okay.”

“Tomorrow morning at eleven.”

I come early. Not only because I’ve always been early for appointments. I remember the rules the FTP-MOI taught me. Beware! Marie-Louise is a good girl, she still loves me enough to buy the Max Ernst and keep it for my sake, but you never know. I climb to the station’s second floor so I can take a good look at the surroundings. As I see people eating croissants in the Dupont café, I discover I’m quite hungry. In front of the café, on the corner of boulevard Montparnasse, stands a German policeman in civilian clothes. His green coat gives him away. Nothing to worry about: they monitor the main avenues and squares. A bus slows down and stops. A woman steps down, then Marie-Louise, then an old man with a thick white mustache.

My intuition tells me everything is okay. I leave my lookout post to join Marie-Louise at the café’s terrace. As I come near, I notice she’s very pale—except for the top of her cheekbones, which glows as if she had a high fever. She’s not taking care of her tuberculosis, I guess. Just as I’m saying Bonjour to her, the German policeman grabs my arm and shows me a Citroën parked in front of the café. Another policeman is waiting for me in the back of the car. I sit between the two cops. The old man with a thick mustache seems to be the team leader.

“*Die Dame auch*,¹” he says.

Marie-Louise sits near the driver.

“Well done, Marie-Louise!” I tell her

“You shut up!” one of the policemen shouts in German.

I look at Marie-Louise’s wavy blond hair. I find it vulgar and threatening. The bitch is murdering me as definitely as if she was sticking a knife into my heart. I’m living my last hours, I guess. My son will survive me. Jean-Jacques... Why did she denounce me? She’s sore because I left her. Yet I’m sure she didn’t really love me. She came and cried in île Saint-Louis—crocodile tears. She’s piqued at losing her prey, this doctor she had captured. She didn’t cling to me out of love, but out of greed. Yes, she’s always been greedy—that’s it: she denounces me to keep the paintings. To die for a Max Ernst canvas! What about these traffics, with her sister and the Belgian guy? To maintain good business relations with the Germans, she delivers bits of information now and then. A choice morsel: I know a man who’s hiding. She may ignore that I’m a wanted terrorist, but she certainly knows that I’m Jewish and that the Nazis don’t love the Jews... I’m a fool. I should have thought that you can’t be an underground fighter and a Casanova at the same time. Only in the movies do secret agents seduce flashy blondes. In real life, it would be too dangerous!

The Citroën drops me on avenue Foch at Sipo (Sicherheit Polizei), the Security police—divided into Gestapo and Kripo (Kriminal Polizei). The policemen lock me inside an empty room. I’m surprised not to feel anxious, but rather resigned and even relieved. We’ll see. I’ve imagined this moment so many times. They caught my parents, and now me. At least I’ve tried to fight back. I remember vaguely a character in a movie, whom the whole world accused of a crime he hadn’t committed. I’ll soon know what they reproach me. A part of myself mutters I’m guilty and merit a punishment. The little hussar didn’t cry when his mother spanked him, so she got weary. Without asking for permission, my mind wanders to Sambor. I drove the two russet cows to the Dniestr. Hare and Turtle. In summer, we went to bathe in the river, but I couldn’t swim. All of a sudden, my thoughts cease to float about and I know exactly what I want: to swim in the Dniestr!

After a few hours, an SS enters the room.

“What’s your name?”

“Émile Nougier.”

“Take off your glasses.”

They know I’m hiding. They think my name is fake, but they don’t know who I am. I never told Marie-Louise about the Résistance network, of course.

¹ The woman too.

The SS slaps me, then hits my head with a rubber club. I don't fall to the ground, as he expected. I look straight into his eyes. This seems to make him angry. He gives me a pencil. He orders me to stand it on its tip and turn around it. He hits me with his club. Blinded by blood, dazed and dizzy, I keep falling down. He shrieks:

“Get up! Go on! What's your name?”

If he doesn't know my name, I'm not going to tell him.

He goes out to rest a little, then comes back. He draws out his gun.

“Put your hands on the wall! Tell me your name or I kill you.”

I could laugh. You don't kill someone for a fake ID! Or, if they suspect I'm a big catch, they'll want me to give away my partners, so killing me goes against their interest. The SS reminds me of maniacs I've seen in the hospital. He shoots his gun near my head, as a way to assuage his anger.

Before the questioning began, I shivered with cold. I observed my body's reactions: “This is an excitation of the sympathetic nervous system, probably due to fear.” As soon as the torture started, I got mad at the SS. Now I feel I can face the worst.

When he comes into the room for the fourth or fifth time, he holds a sheet of paper in his hands and sneers:

“*Komm mal her, komm mal her*. Come here. Do you know docteur Greif?”

Dog's turd! Marie-Louise gave them my name.

“Yes, that's me.”

“Then why do you have a fake ID card?”

I don't need more than a tenth of a second to look at my prospects. If they try to find who is docteur Greif, they'll discover he's a terrorist and shoot me. There's one desperate maneuver I can try.

“Because I'm Jewish.”

“Ah ah ah, so that was it!”

His good-natured laugh fills the room. A simple case, after all. He hands me a cigarette, as if to say: “No hard feelings, my friend!” I decline his offer. I don't think I could smoke anyway. The blows have changed the shape of my face. An edema distorts my cheeks so much that they hang along my neck nearly all the way to my collar-bones. I've never seen such a thing in the hospital. If I survive, I'll write an article in the Medical Review. A good thing he stopped, or he could have hurt me bad. They should teach these guys not to go too far. They'd torture you to death without noticing.

Instead of confessing I'm Jacques, I revived Arie. I don't rejoice at letting the Nazis define me. They're sending me back to the ghetto.

“*Ach*, but where did you steal this ID card?”

“I met Nougier when I was a war prisoner. He told me he was born in La Rochelle, so I wrote there to order a birth certificate, then I showed it to my arrondissement’s city hall to get the card.”

“*Das ist aber eine wahre Schweinerei!* This is really disgusting.¹ You stole an Aryan’s identity! Who could imagine such a thing? You Jews are really vicious. Vampires, there’s no other word.”

Looking at the SS’s discomposed face, I understand the Nazis’ anti-Semitism. What they find wrong with us is that we’ve got more brains than they do. These poor guys are stupid, but they want to believe they belong to a “superior race.”

In the hôtel Tournefort group, there was a student who joked all the time. He told a story about the Nazis’ dumb humorless brain:

Hitler and Goebbels cringe when people pretend the Germans lack wit. They set a great Nazi professor on a mission: he should discover what wit is made of and how it can be acquired.

The great professor crisscrosses Europe and meets many witty people, but none willing to give away the secret of wit. Before returning to Berlin, he spends his last night abroad in the inn of Moses Rabinovich. The innkeeper notices he seems quite discouraged.

“Anything wrong, Herr Professor?”

“*Ach*, I have asked the best minds in Europe about wit, but I’m afraid I haven’t found what it is really.”

“Wit? Come on, Herr Professor, this is easy. I’ll give you an example of wit, I’m sure you’ll understand it. It is a riddle: Who is my father’s son and yet it is not my brother?”

“Your father’s son? Yet not your brother? But it is impossible—no, I don’t see... Are you sure? Please tell me the answer.”

“Well, no need to be Einstein... The son of my father who is not my brother, that’s me, Moses Rabinovich!”

The great professor is delighted. At last he understands what wit is made of. He’s glad he is not returning to Berlin empty-handed. As soon as he arrives, Hitler and Goebbels question him:

“So, Herr Professor, have you found anything?”

“At the last minute, after I had given up all hope. This is a vast subject. Already, in the Odyssey, when Ulysses meets the Cyclops...”

“Spare us your lecture! Just tell us what you found.”

“Hmm. Of course. To get to the core of the matter, I’ll examine a typical example right away: Who is my father’s son and yet it is not my brother?”

¹ Litterally: a true piggishness. German insults and swear words are often pork-based, like German food.

Hitler and Goebbels look at each other. They knit their brows and rack their brains to no avail. They don't find the answer. The great professor smiles at them.

"I'll give you the answer, gentlemen, so you'll understand what wit means: the son of my father who is not my brother, that's Moses Rabinovitch!"

They take me to Drancy, near Paris, where they have installed a camp in a block of unfinished low-rent buildings. Not only am I guilty of being a Jew, like the other prisoners, but I have committed a further crime by hiding my "race." Instead of putting me upstairs with the others, they lock me in the basement, which serves as the camp's jail.

A fat fellow, maybe a head guard, enters my cell.

"Where are the new guys? Are you Nougier?"

"Yes."

"Where is the second one, Greif?"

"That's me."

"Are you some kind of a wise guy?"

He seems very angry, comes closer as if he wanted to hit me, then goes away. My cell companion explains what just happened.

"This was Reich, the camp's prefect. He used to play soccer in the main Vienna team, but they sent him away because he was Jewish. He's always looking for a reason to hit people. When he saw your head, he didn't dare, yet it actually resembles a soccer ball. So then what is your name?"

"Jacques Greif. They were looking for me, so I had fake papers in the name of Nougier. What about you?"

"Georges Bardennes."

"Your real name?"

"I'm French."

"Me too."

"I'm only half Jewish. They shouldn't have arrested me. As I protested, they sent me to the basement."

They come and get me because they want to question me again. An SS who doesn't speak French holds a bloody rag. An interpreter translates his words:

"We searched your room. Look what we found. You took care of wounded people!"

What's this? I think fast. Jacqueline probably brought back some meat from the farm. She discovered somehow I'd been away for days, then guessed the Germans would come and search the place. She didn't stay, but left the piece of cloth behind.

"I understand what it is: a dishtowel that wrapped some meat. This is beef blood."

"Human blood."

“Beef blood.”

“Are you challenging the word of a German non-commissioned officer?”

“And you, are you challenging the word of a French officer?”

The interpreter hesitates to translate.

“*Was sagt er?* What does he say?” the SS asks.

I tell the interpreter he should translate my words. The SS becomes as red as the rag. He shouts:

“The lab says this is human blood!”

“I doubt it. A lab would need several days to know that.”

Knowing that I am a doctor, the SS renounces his bluff.

After a week, they shave my head. According to Georges Bardennes, it means they’ll deport me in the next convoy.

“We don’t know where the trains go. The comrades have made up a name, “Pitchi-Poï.” This is somewhere in Eastern Europe. What’s for sure is that nobody ever came back from the place. There are rumors that they let people die of hunger. Me, they won’t deport me, because I’m only half-Jewish.”

“Yes, you told me already.”

I’ve spread communist tracts myself that told about these camps where the Germans starve the Jews. Yet I prefer the reprieve of deportation to the certitude of a death sentence if they find who docteur Greif is.

Strangely, I feel glad, in a way, when I think I’m going to satisfy my curiosity: soon, I’ll know what really happens in the east.

On February 2nd, I see the SS who tortured me walking in the corridor with a superior officer. They’re talking in German.

“Why does this man have a head blown up like a balloon?”

“He’s is the terrorists’ doctor.”

On February 3rd, they gather the men they’re deporting in the courtyard. They call me with the others. I don’t understand. They’ve found who I am and yet they deport me instead of shooting me.

The number

Buses take us to the Bobigny railway station, a few minutes away from Drancy. I count several hundred men of all ages on the platform. I see a group of women and children. The women carry suitcases, the children hold teddy bears or dolls in their arms. Some of the men also carry suitcases. I guess they were arrested at home.

Others, rounded in the street or pulled out of French jails, are baggageless travelers,¹ like me. Will they give us spare clothes and a toothbrush? Faces are stern, as nobody knows what to expect in Pithi Poï. Such a crowd does count a few optimists, who rejoice at leaving the sinister Drancy buildings. They can't help joking when the train enters the station. A very young and very tall man asks:

“Hey, where are the first-class cars?”

“These are the boxcars for our luggage, man. The passenger-train will come later.”

“A boxcar is completely closed. Look at the openings under the roof: I call these cattle-cars.”

“Cattle-cars? I hope they're not sending us to the slaughterhouse!”

I step into a car with eighty men or so. The policemen lock the heavy door from outside. We're as tightly packed as subway passengers at rush hour. This means nobody can sit or lie down.

I have a strange feeling that time is congealing, like water turning into ice. A minute flows like an hour, sluggish and never-ending, but doesn't leave any trace in my memory, so that an hour flies away like a minute. When the train moves eventually, everybody sighs out of relief. At last, something is happening.

The train rushes ahead, slows down, stops in the middle of nowhere or in a station. We sometimes hear railroad employees speaking French.

Exchanging position with my closest neighbor, then with the next one, I move toward the giant who requested a first-class car. He belongs to a group of young men who may have been arrested for Résistance activities. I push them back so as to uncover a few square feet of floor.

“Look, you guys, wooden planks. They're nailed or screwed down...”

“Right. We could tear them out.”

“We should look for a tool.”

“We don't need a tool. Just look at them all. There has to be one that doesn't hold as well as the others. We disjoint it and pull it up.”

“Then when the train slows down, we take French leave. No need to say goodbye!”

“We've got to do it before we reach Germany. Once there, don't count on hiding among the Huns!”

Older men stand around us, observing us and listening to our conversation. They protest loudly.

“So you escape and what about us? They'll shoot us in retaliation.”

“If you go on, we'll have to call the guards next time we stop.”

How could they guess that men over fifty are gassed as soon as they enter the camp and that they're living their three last days on earth?

¹ A French expression (“Voyageurs sans bagages”) that can be taken to represent the human condition.

The openings under the roof don't let in enough air. The men who stand in the middle suffocate. Everybody tries to move closer to the walls. We must also force our way through the crowd to reach the corner where we empty a bucket full of water and fill an empty one. Soon, both buckets serve as chamber-pots. A foul smell spreads around. After a while, the buckets overflow. We succeed in moving away from the stinking corner, which proves we were not as tightly packed as possible.

A man shrieks. Losing control, he hits his neighbors blindly. Someone knocks him down with a blow under the chin.

An old man collapses suddenly. People try to prop him up. "I'm a doctor," I yell. They let me through to examine him.

"He's breathing. His pulse beats regularly. Just a malaise."

Time jumps in crazy fits, as if shaken by the train's jolts. All of a sudden, I notice that night has fallen, whereas a moment before it was still day. Every time I look at the sky beyond the openings, it changes color: black, then gray, then black again. A man dies, another, one more. I cease to play doctor when someone falls down. The employees in the stations speak German.

Waves of pain stream through my body. Whenever my mind clears up for a while, I try to gather the vague memories left over from my anatomy lessons. These twinges that shoot along my back are not due to my spine's strain, but to the spasmodic contractions of my dorsal muscles, poisoned by the accumulation of lactic acid. The skin of my thighs tingles because my body's upper part sits heavy on my haunches and pinches my femoral-cutaneous nerves. This burning sensation in my throat simply means I'm thirsty. Thank God, I've always been quite strong. At thirty-eight, I'm still young.

The odd flight of hours and days reduces one of my pains: my cheeks deflate slowly. I wish the bone in my nose would also return to its former shape. I believe it's not fully broken, but maybe split or something. Thus a scar is forming on the bone. My handsome straight nose is turning into a hooked one. As I've uttered the fateful words: "I am Jewish," a Jewish nose jumps onto my face like the sausage in the *Three Wishes* tale.

I try to imagine the camp. Will it resemble the Sarrebourg prisoners' camp? I remember days corroded by boredom, men in uniform walking around aimlessly. The officers rewrote the war with ifs. I can't help falling in the same trap. *If* only I had followed Jacqueline's advice and mistrusted Marie-Louise! As if attracted by a ruthless magnet, I return constantly in thought to the upper floor of the Montparnasse station, whence I look at the Dupont restaurant. *If* I had watched more carefully, I would have seen that the old man who stepped off the bus with Marie-Louise was

staying near the restaurant and waiting for me. I would have left the station through the back exit and gone home.

On February 6th at dawn, three days and three nights after leaving Bobigny, the train stops. This isn't one more halt in a station: the voices barking orders do not belong to railroad employees, but to SS, no doubt about it. Dogs also bark, actually. The door opens. *HERAUS! SCHNELL!* Even people who do not know German—supposing there are any left in a France occupied by the Fritz—can guess that we're told to jump out at once. The melody is clear, no need to understand the words. Yes, but we're paralyzed by the terrible trip, dazed by the wild meandering of our thoughts, blinded by the sudden brightness of the morning light. The SS thrust their clubs inside the cars so that they disgorge their contents faster. *HERAUS! SCHNELL!* Seven or eight old men lying on the floor fail to obey: they're dead.

"THE SUITCASES STAY IN THE CAR!" a French-speaking SS shouts.

I guess exhaustion muddles my mind. I see patients in pajamas on the station platform! Maybe they brought us to a sanitary camp. These patients seem in very bad shape: extreme cachexia¹ and general weakness... They remind me of terminal cancer cases whom I saw in the hospital. What makes no sense is that the SS force these dying men to work—to remove the corpses and the suitcases from the boxcars, to carry them to trucks waiting at the platform's end. Some of them brush against us and mutter a few words under their breath:

"You're in Auschwitz."

"In Poland, near Krakow."

"Avoid the trucks."

"Give us your watches. They'll take them anyway."

The SS and their dogs lead us to the end of the platform, where the trucks are parked. A well-dressed SS, whose black uniform was obviously cut by a skilled tailor, is standing in front of the trucks and welcomes the successive groups of prisoners with a short speech in French.

"This is a concentration camp. People who can walk, step to the right: you'll go to the camp on foot. People who are tired or old, mothers and children, step to the left: trucks will carry you to the camp."

The old people who survived the train journey climb into the trucks with the mothers and kids. There are also invalids leaning on crutches and sick people helped by their companions. A column of childless women starts on foot, escorted by female SS. Healthy men under fifty are left. I would say there are one hundred and fifty of us

¹ Thinness.

or so.¹ The SS line us five abreast. *Schnell, schnell!* they shout. They use their clubs on our heads and backs to speed up the maneuver. The dogs bite several men so viciously that their face is red with the men's blood.

We walk for half a mile or a little more and come to a gate topped by a sentence cast in iron: *Arbeit macht frei*². I still don't understand why sick men in pajamas are asked to welcome the newcomers. This mystery distracts my brain and prevents me from thinking. In spite of me, my mind wanders to my mother's kitchen and considers the sentences embroidered in red letters. I look for this fine formula, *Arbeit macht frei*, on all the walls, but I seem to see everywhere the same command: "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today." I imagine German soldiers taking possession of the Greif inn after kicking out my parents. They admire the maxims—which are written in German, as it happens. They're beginning to tear them off, but an officer orders them to leave everything as it is.

"Since we are quartered in this house, it won't hurt you to read these excellent formulas every morning. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today. I know several guys, in this troop, who still don't understand what it means!"

Are my parents alive? The ghetto on the shore of the Dniestr... Eastern Galicia and the city of Sambor lie behind the Carpathian mountains, which I can see in the distance. A whimsical fate brought me back to Poland, as if to make fun of my decision to become French.

Wooden barracks similar to the ones in the Sarreburg Oflag—as well as a few brick houses—line both sides of the camp's central alley. Prisoners wearing striped pajamas move in a slow gait here and there. I'm beginning to understand that hunger, rather than a specific illness, provokes their thinness. The bodies lying on the ground everywhere are not tired people taking a rest, but corpses. The quartered puppets hanging on the barbed wires in the distance are poor guys who shortened their agony by electrocution.

The SS put us in the care of some club-carrying prisoners, who seem less meager than the others. They lock us inside one of the barracks. In Sarrebourg, a barracks contained sixty beds or so, like a hospital common room. Here, three-tiered bunks fill the space. Once the more than 150 men in our convoy are settled, many beds stay empty.

We spend two days in these first barracks. Prisoners bring barrels of a soup that satisfies neither our hunger nor even our thirst, for it is as salty as seawater. In the

¹ Thanks to the bureaucratic efficiency of the Germans, we know there were 1214 people in the convoy, including 184 children. 166 men and 49 women were spared on arrival, the others gassed immediately. 14 men and 12 women survived in the end.

² Work makes free.

railway car, discomfort and anxiety churned the flow of time. Now that we sit and do nothing, time flows regularly, but very slowly. I call my comrades:

“I’ve been a prisoner already in a camp in Sarrebourg. To fight boredom, we gave lectures according to our knowledge. If you want, I can talk to you about speech troubles, as I am a neurologist and a psychiatrist.”

I describe the various kinds of aphasia. My public laughs when I evoke the patients who can’t help spewing dirty words continuously. Rabbi Hirschler, from Strasbourg, tells us about the Jewish communities who have lived for centuries in the east of France. The very tall joker imitates some famous actors: Michel Simon, Louis Jouvet, Jean Gabin.¹ He repeats a story he’s heard:

“You know that Tristan Bernard² is Jewish. The police came to arrest him and take him to Drancy. He was nearly eighty years old. His neighbors found it revolting and expressed their support. He told them not to worry: *Until today I lived in fear, from now on I’ll live in hope!*”

The club-wielding prisoners transfer us to an empty barracks. These guys are German or Polish. None of them speaks French. The Poles shout simple orders in German, like the others. They take away our clothes and leave us naked, in an empty building, for a day and a night. We huddle together lest we freeze to death. Nobody offers to give a lecture.

On the morning of our fourth day in Auschwitz, we’re walked across the camp naked. The February temperature is below zero Fahrenheit. Prisoners shave our body entirely with blunt shears that graze our skin, then paint it with a foul-smelling liquid. Some of us protest:

“Hey, be careful! Can’t you see my skin is gone? It burns, your stuff. What is it anyway?”

“Gasoline. We must disinfect you. The Krauts are scared stiff of germs. Until now, you were in quarantine.”

I remember that my head was shaved every summer when I was a child and that pan Neuberger, the jeweler, compared my shaved head to my father’s. Without his beard, Rabbi Hirschler doesn’t look like my idea of a rabbi anymore.

They give us our striped uniform: pants, shirt, jacket and cap—all made of a light fabric, quite rumpled, reeking of gasoline. Polish prisoners tattoo us. I become number 173283. *Hundertdreiundsiebzig, zweihundertdreiundachtzig*. Engraved on my arm and in my memory. Forgetting it is a death offense.

¹ This jolly giant, Willy Holt, became a famous movie decorator. In 1995, he published his Auschwitz memoirs, so my father discovered he had survived. He wrote to him. Willy Holt, greatly moved, came to visit my father right away. My father appears briefly in a documentary movie about Willy Holt.

² A very witty French playwright (1866-1947).

The guys who shave and disinfect us, those who tattoo us, want to know the latest news:

“Where do you come from?”

“France.”

“Are the Huns still in France? Haven’t the Americans landed?”

“They’ve landed in Sicilia, but they progress very slowly. It is said they’ll land in Normandy soon.”

“What about Russia?”

“The Germans retreat, but they still hold most of Ukraine.”

“Let’s hope the Russkies hurry and come here before they’ve killed us all.”

They take us to our permanent barracks, a two-floor brick house. The prisoners use the German word *Block* instead of barracks. They also say *Stube*, which means barrack-room. Our block’s upper floor resembles the room where we spent our first night, except it’s already full. Several hundred prisoners come back from work in the evening. Two or three men sleep on every straw mattress. I evaluate the total number of prisoners somewhere between seven and eight hundred.

Frenchmen come talk with us. They’re old numbers, meaning prisoners who’ve lived or survived in the camp for a long time. Some numbers are so old that they have only five digits. They question us about the war and the situation in France, then they tell us about the camp:

“This is Auschwitz I. Any women in your convoy?”

“Yes. They didn’t come here. We saw them walk away.”

“They went to Auschwitz II, which everybody calls Birkenau. There are also small camps and factories everywhere. IG Farben¹ is building a synthetic rubber factory in a camp called Auschwitz III or Monowitz.”

They don’t say “camp,” but *Lager*. They teach us words we should know: the *Blockältester* (block elder) is a prisoner who heads the block; he has several assistants, the main one being the *Stubendienst* (responsible for “room service”). The work *Kommandos* are lead by *Kapos*, assisted by *Vorarbeiter* (foremen). Kapo doesn’t mean corporal², but *Kameraden Polizei*. All these people, who are usually German or Austrian, are called “prominents.” They live on the ground floor, which is partly taken by a bathroom and collective toilets.

The old numbers say strange things.

“In 1942, man, you were extremely lucky if you survived more than three weeks. Now the Lager has become a real summer camp. In the beginning, the prominents were greens who killed people for fun. Even the SS got tired of the mess, so they let

¹ Huge chemical company. After the war, it was broken into smaller companies: Bayer, Hoechst, BASF, etc.

² The word is closer in French : “caporal.”

the reds put some order in the camp. These reds are German, like the greens. You still risk death at every moment, but at least they tell you why they kill you.”

“What do you mean, greens, reds?”

“Look at your *Winkel*: It is yellow because you’re Jewish. The criminal prisoners have a green Winkel, the political prisoners a red one, the homosexuals a pink one.”

I know the word *Winkel* because I speak German. It is the symbol shaped like bars or herring-bones that is sewn on military uniforms to show the rank. But “stripes” isn’t the same thing as a Winkel. I mean, when we were playing bridge on the Maginot line, we called officers “stripes.” The yellow triangle sewn on my pajama doesn’t turn me into an officer! A Winkel is a Winkel. The camp slang is full of German words that lose their meaning when we try to translate them. For example, the word *Blockältester* has a sonorous and pretentious flavor, with a slight ridiculous edge, that lets you expect arbitrary decisions and sadistic outbursts, whereas “barracks elder” inspires trust and sympathy. I remember that the Greif Inn customers flattered the waiter by calling him *Herr Ober*. Mister High. The SS have ranks like *Obersturmbannführer*, or “high chief of the assault troops.” This whole grand enterprise of the Third Reich is totally childish. The buffoons who founded a tiny political party under the protection of an operetta militia could be compared to the “retarded” patients in psychiatric hospitals, of whom we say their mental age is seven or eight. They draw flashy uniforms, they give themselves foolish titles and ranks, then they play war. My boulevard Saint-Marcel apartment stands above a schoolyard. I’ve heard the children sing: “Let’s throw the copybooks into the fire and the teachers too!”¹ That’s precisely the Nazi program.

A question bothers me. Why did the prisoners we saw on the station platform tell us to avoid the trucks? I think the trucks followed the same road as the women. I ask the old numbers.

“Where is the rest of our convoy? The oldsters, the women with children, the people who climbed into the trucks?”

The old numbers raise their heads and look at the ceiling.

“Gone with the wind.”

I remember the university hazing. They’re making fun of us. We’re the freshmen, the greenhorns, the butts of silly jokes.

I share a straw mattress and a blanket with another man. The three-tiered bunks are named *Pritschen*, a word used for sleeping-berths in night-trains. They wake us up at 5:30. We have thirty minutes to wash with freezing water and drink a brown liquid which we call coffee for lack of another name. At six, they line us in front of the

¹ *Les cahiers au feu, les maîtres au milieu* (sung on the last day of school, when the copybooks are not needed anymore).

block for an endless roll-call, which they begin again and again, pretending our lines aren't straight enough or we don't slap our caps on our thighs in unison. I don't understand this: how does the German efficiency tolerate such a meaningless ceremony? We huddle, as much to resist the freezing wind trying to fell us as to keep standing up in spite of our weariness.

Kapos and their assistants pick up men among the newcomers for their kommandos. The old numbers told us that some kommandos, headed by sadistic kapos, are very dangerous, but we have no choice. The best we can hope for is that the kapo of a "good" kommando will offer us a regular job eventually. All the old numbers stay in the same kommando. The prisoners whom no kapo takes away stay in the block, where they risk being beaten or killed by a bored Blockältester.

Besides the reds replacing the greens, another reason explains that Auschwitz has become a summer camp: Speer, the new boss of the German economy, convinced Himmler¹ that the Reich needs slave labor. Yet our life is not worth much. For example, a newcomer who keeps the clogs he received with his striped uniform is likely to slip on frozen snow while carrying a heavy load. If he hurts himself when he falls, the kapo will dispatch him immediately. Of course, thousands of good shoes enter the camp every week. You must find a way to get a pair. The camp slang says you "organize" a pair of shoes. By and by, I make friends with several Frenchmen, old numbers, whom I convince they'd better help me. A doctor can always be useful, obviously, but I need to persuade them before anything else that I'll be able to survive. Who'd want to invest in a doctor and see him die? I withstand the club beatings at dawn. The club is called "gummi," because it is made of heavy rubber or gum. I leave with a kommando. I dig ditches, I fill up tip-carts with stones, I carry rails and sleepers. I withstand the gummi beatings by the kapos and the *Vorarbeiter*. I return to the camp, welcomed under the *Arbeit macht frei* sign by the prisoners' orchestra playing operetta numbers and Wagner pieces. I stand up without flinching during the evening roll-call, which sometimes lasts four or five hours. I withstand the day's last gummi beatings...

Long ago, I've decided I wouldn't cry anymore when receiving a spanking. I understand that a terrible law applies in the camp: if you cry, you die.

The old numbers believe I may survive for a few months. They organize some shoes for me, then a woolen shirt, a cake of soap and a toothbrush.

I'm surprised to discover how fast you shrink when you work a lot and eat little. Apart from the liquid called "coffee," they give us a piece of bread and a liquid called "soup." The soup barrel contains vegetables and a few shreds of meat that remain at

¹ Minister for interior security and police. He was in charge of the camps.

the bottom for the prominents. For the ordinary prisoners, the soup is similar to the coffee, except it's more salty and exacerbates our constant thirst. I would say our daily ration represents about half of a normal man's needs—or a quarter of the needs of men working as hard as we do.

The old numbers give me some advice:

“ You'll see, SS sometimes come during the morning roll-call and say they're looking for a few men. Following them is less dangerous than going with a kommando.”

“Nice SS?”

“They have to perform a precise task, so they don't kill their workers. Actually, they may even feed them to strengthen them. It's a good way of putting on some flesh again.”

I've come to the conclusion that the old numbers do not tell jokes, that children and old people do ascend to heaven in thick wisps of black smoke. Thus, I'm eager to see these SS who feed their slaves.

The occasion comes soon enough. An SS officer wants men for a kommando outside Auschwitz. He's selecting people according to their profession. I volunteer right away as a doctor. As the French say: “Don't hesitate to grab Lady Luck by its long hair.” The SS chooses another doctor to take care of the kommando. None of the members of that kommando survived.

I understand why the German policemen on avenue Foch didn't send me to the firing-squad. “You admit you're Jewish but you don't want to confess you're a terrorist? You're wrong. The punishment we deal to the Jews is worse than what the terrorists can expect.”

The Revier

One morning, as I've already tested freedom through work in a dozen different kommandos, the kapo of the Post Office picks me up for his kommando. He's looking for strong newcomers to carry 180-pound mail bags. I guess he is satisfied with my performance: at the end of the day, he asks me to come again tomorrow. At last, I've found a regular job.

To survive in Auschwitz, you need certain qualities, like endurance and willpower, maybe certain shortcomings, like a distrustful character, but mainly lots of luck. A quality that I find useful is my muscular strength. The bags are awfully heavy, the more so for someone who is badly undernourished. 180 pounds of letters and parcels

coming from all over Europe, addressed to dead people. The postmen, Oswiecim¹ villagers, sometimes give us a little food they find in a torn parcel. It seems to us that every crumb of biscuit or cheese adds several days to our life. Yet these marvelous calories aren't even the best thing in the Post Office kommando. What's truly amazing is that the kapo and his assistants do not beat us!

I don't stay long in this paradise. How long? Can't say. For lack of watches and calendars, we don't measure time in Auschwitz. Expressions like "in one month" or "next week" are meaningless. We know only day and night: "Let's hope I can hold until this evening—let's hope there's no roll call at midnight—let's hope I'm still alive tomorrow morning..." When we notice that the sun rises nearly as early as we do, that mud replaces snow in the camp, that the corpses lying here and there are covered with flies, we understand that spring is coming. Towards March or April, an SS lieutenant inspecting the Post Office—to check that nobody's stealing the Reich's property—sees my cheeks. They don't hang to my collar-bones anymore, but glow with a rash called a sycosis, a mild infection of hair-roots. The barbers who shave us once a week can't disinfect their razors. The SS pounces upon me.

"You Jew!"

"Hundertdreiundsiebzig, zweihundertdreiundachtzig, herr Obersturmführer."

"Your cheeks... You're sick!"

"Jawohl, herr Obersturmführer."

"You go to the *Revier* tomorrow before infecting your comrades. Do you understand? Otherwise, *fünf und zwanzig!*"

"Jawohl, herr Obersturmführer."

This good man appreciates my knowledge of the Lords' language, so he spares my life and sends me to the *Revier*, or hospital. Before the Lager became a summer camp, the SS cured red cheeks with their gun. "*Fünf und zwanzig*" is the most common punishment—for a weakened prisoner, death penalty: twenty-five whacks on the buttocks with a thin rod.

The *Revier* is just another block, where the best doctors in Europe try to take care of skeletal patients without any medicine. Dr Kapuscinski, of Warsaw, examines me. A charming man who knows Paris and speaks French.

"It's nothing serious."

"I know. A sycosis. I'm a doctor myself in Paris."

"In Paris? Lucky man. Well, I guess not, but you see what I mean. Maybe you'll go back there some day. I spent one year myself in the Hôtel-Dieu hospital."

"My original hospital was Salpêtrière, but I also worked in the Curie Institute and in the Cochin hospital."

¹ Pronounced : Osvietsim. "Auschwitz" is the German version of this name.

“Listen, it won’t go away by itself. All I have is an ointment against chilblain. It will hide the rash somewhat. You’ll have to stay in the Revier for a few days.”

“Too dangerous. I’d rather take the risk of returning to my kommando.”

I’ve been able to survive two or three months—a great feat—because I understood in two or three days, with the help of the old numbers who believed in me, the camp’s main survival commandments, among which “Avoid the Revier” stands in good place. In the Paris hospitals I knew, we worked at extending the patients’ life. In Auschwitz, where human laws are turned upside-down according to a hellish logic, they send people to the Revier to shorten their life. The Revier has not become a summer camp! The Reich wants to use the slaves, but only if they can work. The SS doctors like to visit the Revier without warning and send to the gas chamber any patient whom they don’t expect to heal in the next two days. This is the dreadful process called “selection.”

We heard that rabbi Hirschler’s wife, who was detained in Birkenau, fell ill. Large red spots covered her body. It was probably scarlet fever, a benign disease that we usually treat with a few weeks of rest in bed. The SS made a selection and sent her to the gas. Not only do they refuse to feed unproductive slaves, but contagious illnesses terrify them. Influent—and pious—old numbers had found jobs for the rabbi and his wife in the same place: in the *Union* ammunition factory. Their kommandos worked in different buildings, but the two spouses could see each other from afar almost every day. When madame Hirschler ceased to come, the rabbi understood he would never see her again. He died of grief in less than a week. I had appreciated his lecture on the Alsatian Jews and hoped to chat with him some day.

I return to the Post Office. Bad luck: the same SS comes by. Actually, this is a lucky break, a life-saving break, but I don’t know it yet. When he sees me, he yells:

“You Jew, with the red cheeks, didn’t I send you to the Revier? If I see you again, you’ll really be in trouble.”

“*Jawohl, herr Obersturmführer.*”

This SS is a weakling, no doubt. The old numbers do tell us, with a nostalgia-tinged voice:

“The SS aren’t what they used to be.”

The great Reich sent the best, meaning the nastiest, to fight the Bolcheviks.

Kapuscinski puts me in the service of Dr. Spitzer—if a group of three-tiered Pritschen in a corner of the block can be called a service. Born in Hungary, Spitzer studied in Prague and Paris.

“Greif? Wait a minute. I know you. We met when Stiff-leg Viktor gave a party in a gymnasium near rue Mouffetard.”

“I don’t remember you, but I was there indeed. Do you practice medicine in Paris?”

“I am a dermatologist on avenue de la République. Let’s see these cheeks. Well, as I don’t have any antiseptic cream, the only thing we can do is pluck every hair one by one. The chilblain ointment will soothe the pain.”

He plucks my beard with tweezers. He rubs the ointment and applies a piece of paper as dressing.

“It will take a long time, but you’re not really ill. Do you know the joke of the doctor in the Warsaw ghetto? ‘I fear the worst,’ he tells his patient. ‘You mean I’ll heal?’ the patient asks.”

The SS employ prisoners as *Schreiber* or secretaries. A few days after my arrival in the Revier, a young Czech Schreiber, wearing clean and well-ironed pajamas, comes visit me.

“Are you Jacques Greif? Could you give me news about Marek Tennenbaum?”

“News about whom?”

“Marek Tennenbaum, who belonged to the FTP-MOI network.”

“Never heard that name.”

Better be careful. This Marek Tennenbaum was caught and shot, but I can’t tell it to someone I don’t know. The Schreiber comes again a couple of hours later.

“Hadassa Tennenbaum, Marek’s wife, is sending me.”

“I tell you I don’t know your Marek Tannenbaum.”

On his next visit, the Schreiber describes the FTP-MOI network with great accuracy.

“You were the leaders’ doctor. Karol and Emmanuel were caught in a trap in your apartment, but Roger escaped.”

“Okay. Marek Tennenbaum is dead. They shot him. I’m not sure you should tell his wife, though. She’ll give up and then it will be the end of her.”

“No, I won’t tell her. I’ll say you belonged to the same network, but don’t know what happened to him. If she survives, she’ll learn about it after the war.”

“Do you see women? I thought they were all in Birkenau.”

“She lives in block 10.”

The windows of block 10 are covered by boards. The SS doctors practice medical experiments there. The best-kept secrets of Auschwitz still reach our ears as strange frightful rumors. We’ll learn all the details after the war. My Nazi colleagues use the prisoners as guinea-pigs, flouting all the laws of medicine. Whenever Dr. Mengele¹ finds twins in a convoy, he kidnaps them, murders them with a formaldehyde shot to the heart, then dissects them. He hopes to discover how Nature creates twins, then double the fecundity of German women. He experiments with bone grafts, compares

¹ Head doctor of Auschwitz. He succeeded in fleeing to South America after the war.

Gipsy and Jewish blood, sends “scientific” articles to Berlin.¹ He would like to prove once and for all that Jews belong to a degenerate race. In the Middle Ages, the Jews could refute accusations of crime and even escape persecution by converting. Whereas “degenerate race” is scientific. Can’t escape.

The SS doctors dream of finding a simple process to sterilize the Jews without their knowledge. For example, you summon the Jews to the police station. A Jew is standing in front of a counter and filling some papers. The employee sitting behind the counter adjusts an X-ray gun according to the height of the Jew, pulls the trigger and takes care that the Jew spends at least ten minutes filling the forms.

Dr Mengele and his assistants spray the block 10 women with X-rays or inject various products into their wombs to sterilize them. To check the success of their experiments, they try to fecundate them by artificial insemination, then wait. The women don’t work in the quarries, are well-fed, perform administrative tasks for the doctors or the Schreiber without ever leaving the block. Thus Hadassa Tennenbaum notices that docteur Greif, from Paris, appears in the Revier register. She’ll tell me after the war, as she’ll survive (and emigrate to Israel).

Two weeks after my arrival, Dr. Fajkiel, a Polish lung specialist, pays a visit to Dr. Spitzer.

“Do you have a French doctor among your patients?”

“Yes: Dr. Greif.”

“How is he doing?”

“He’s okay. I still have to pluck a few hairs.”

“Good. Give him a white frock and tell him to come help me.”

This Hadassa has influence.

Every service counts one doctor and one *Pfleger* (or male nurse). I work as second *Pfleger* in the lung-disease service, while my name stays in the patients’ register. This isn’t kosher at all. When the SS doctors come to inspect the Revier for a selection, I remove my white frock, leave the block and pretend to work outside: I move stones, etc. The SS select skeletal patients, dying men whom the Lager slang calls “moslems,” and also whoever is contagious or can’t be cured for lack of medicine. They examine the patients. They don’t give a damn about a healthy prisoner picking up stones. Okay, but they control the length of stay, too. In Auschwitz, there is no such thing as a long sick leave: men who don’t work go to the gas. As time passes, the risk of my being found out increases.

I’m lucky: a *Pfleger* follows a big kommando moving to a satellite camp, so I can take his place. It’s a perfect job—mainly because we’re not exposed to the harsh

¹ Where scientists can still consult them today.

winter weather, but also because the Germans respect the medical profession. We're privileged. I sleep alone on my straw mattress.

In line with the Lager's crazy logic, the nurses do not perform any medical act. Our main task consists in carrying the soup buckets. Two of us hold the bucket's handle with a pole. A good Pfleger doesn't spill one drop of soup. I can give a piece of advice that you'll find useful when you need to carry a twenty-gallon bucket of soup in this manner: choose a partner of your own size!

We must also clean and order the block. As it is a block similar to the others, we obey the Blockältester and the Stubendienst like everybody. A red Austrian and a green German. One day, an SS pretends that several straw mattresses in my service stick out from the Pritschen. We don't have ward helpers like in a Paris hospital, so we make the beds. As soon as the SS is gone, the Stubendienst rushes at me and slaps me. I'm ready to return his slap, but Spitzer holds me back:

"Are you mad? You can't touch a German! Might as well throw yourself onto the electrified fence."

As the Blockältester is red, I have a better relationship with him. Knowing I belonged to the communist Résistance in Paris, he mentions me to André Fandry, a French communist who invites me to join Auschwitz's secret communist organization. This is not as powerful an organization as exists for example in the Buchenwald camp. How can you build a network when people vanish all the time without giving notice?

The Czech Schreiber listens to the radio in the SS office. He announces the landing in Normandy on the very day: June 6th, 1944. These wonderful Americans already vanquished the Germans in 1917. We believe in their boundless power. Nobody wonders why they didn't land earlier, if they're so strong. We hope the radio will broadcast a continuous flow of good news—from the retreat of the German army to its rout, from the wobbling of the Reich to its collapse. Every morning, I expect to find the camp full of American tanks. They should be there in a fortnight at most. Hey, I won't return to France without a hair on my pate... I cease getting a head-shave. An SS non-commissioned officer with a ferocious reputation calls me as I'm walking outside the block.

"You son of a bitch, who are you?"

"*Hundertdreiundsiebzig, zweihundertdreiundachtzig, herr Oberscharführer.*"

"Do you have a hair permit?"

"*Hmm, nein, herr Oberscharführer.*"

Some prominents are allowed to keep their hair. When he finds out that my hair is growing without a permit, the SS becomes very angry:

“Lice will swarm in your hair, you stinking pig, and everybody will catch typhus. Do you know what you’re doing? Sabotaging the Reich’s war effort. You don’t deserve a clean gunshot death, but we’ll hang you in public like a saboteur or an escapee. Do you understand?”

“Jawohl, herr Oberscharführer.”

The SS often summon us to the central square to attend the hanging of our comrades. They hang dozens of poor guys under various pretexts. We must stand to attention for hours, as they stretch the ceremony to prolong their pleasure and our pain. Thus, I go to the barber’s right away.

Now that I spend my days in the Revier, I can take a good look at the patients. Their body is covered with scabs similar to what children get on their knees. As there’s no day without a beating, the sores never heal. They become infected for lack of hygiene and turn into ulcers, phlegmons, fistulas. Despite their obsession with cleanliness, the SS let shit flood the bathroom. They pack three prisoners per mattress, which promotes contagion. Infectious complications make a simple flu deadly. The SS rejoice at seeing the Jews’ physical misery. The men are so frail that a light gummi blow breaks their bones. I notice that when the body is very weak, the nervous system becomes affected as well, which leads to a state of apathy, asthenia, permanent weariness. While the prisoners should definitely rest after twelve hours of hard work, they have to get up for roll-calls in the middle of the night. Exhaustion increases psychic pain: the feeling of loneliness, of desertion, of powerlessness; the despair at seeing comrades tortured and murdered. Eventually, they give up the fight and come to the Revier to get it over with. They’ve reached the end of their life. They age very fast—as if a month in the Lager was worth one year of ordinary life. When we examine them, they appear to be twenty years older than their real age. All their organs are weakened. Their joints are creaky like old people’s. Not only has their fat melted long ago, but their muscles have vanished. Their skin, without any muscle to stretch it, crinkles and wrinkles. At last, their heart quits.

Thousands die. If their heart doesn’t just stop beating, a pulmonary edema kills them, or a brutal dysentery, erysipelas¹, typhus. When we succeed in saving one of them, we’re as happy as if we had won a great victory.

Thus a twenty-three year old Parisian, Alex Kohn, becomes a kind of mascot in our service. He seems even younger than his age. You might suppose youth can help you survive in the camp. Not at all. I’d put the ideal age around thirty-five. You need a thick skin, endurance, a certain experience of human relationships. When he enters the service, this young Parisian is barely conscious, emits a kind of death-rattle, holds

¹ Serious skin infection.

to life by a thread. Yet he's spent only ten days in the Lager—ten days of beatings, hunger, diarrhea, after three days in a cattle-car... A French doctor, who works in a kind of mock operating-room in block 21, brings the kid to us:

"We've been told he was so weak today that he couldn't get up anymore. The SS in charge of the roll-call showed him to an SS doctor, who decreed he suffered from appendicitis. So they sent him to us with an order to operate on him."

"No appendicitis?"

"You bet! There's something wrong with his lungs. You haven't got appendicitis, I told him. I'll get you out of here."

We call Fajkiel, the lung specialist. He examines the patient.

"I don't hear any murmur. The percussion sound is dull. In my opinion, a purulent pleurisy. We must tap the lung."

"Tap the lung? What will you tap it with?"

"I've got a puncture needle. I can't guarantee it's fully sterile, mind you, but we can try. Otherwise he won't last the night."

He comes back with a big syringe and a long needle. Puncturing three times, he taps a good pint of pus.

Two doctors saved his life: the Frenchman in block 21, then Fajkiel. In one week, he's on his feet again. If we were anywhere else, we'd open a bottle of champagne! We feel as joyful as if the Americans dug a tunnel and popped up in the middle of the camp, chewing their gum. The doctors from the other services come take a look at the survivor. Even some SS congratulate us. We can't resign ourselves to sending him back to his block. In ten days, he would be a moslem. We want to believe in our miracle. We offer him to become a clandestine Pfleger. I describe his new job to him:

"You clean the place, you help us carry the soup."

The first time he comes back from the kitchen, he winks.

"Hey, Greif, guess what I've got in my pocket."

"I don't know. They gave you a piece of bread?"

He laughs and pulls out of his pocket a dry sausage, a real full-size dry sausage, a chunk of fat juicy pork worth as much as a ton of gold.

"You stole it?"

"But no. I heard the cooks speaking Hungarian, so I chatted with them."

"You know Hungarian?"

"I'm born in Hungary. I came to France when I was three, but my parents spoke Hungarian to me."

"Say, we hit the right note when we decided to keep you with us!"

In July, the Schreiber tells us the radio interrupted its programs: terrorists just attacked Hitler. For a few hours, everybody believes him dead. We don't know

whether to rejoice or fear the worst. The SS could certainly accuse us of having murdered their Führer and kill us all. If a general hides a bomb under the dictator's chair, he has to be secretly Jewish or a puppet of the Jews. In the end, Hitler survives unscathed. We feel almost relieved!

The Schreiber tells a joke.

Two Jews have decided to murder Hitler. They make a hand grenade and wait at a spot where the Führer's car is expected at noon. They wait and wait. 12 AM, 12:15, 12:30. No car is coming. One of the Jews turns toward the other.

"Let's hope nothing happened to him!"

Towards the end of August, the Schreiber brings us more so-called good news.

"They've liberated Paris!"

Those of my French comrades who've left parents, a wife, children in Paris weep with joy: their dear ones cease to be at risk! I think about Jacqueline, of course. Meanwhile, I can't help dousing their enthusiasm with a touch of cold realism.

"If that's the way it is, we won't see the Americans next week or even next month. There are maybe 150 miles from the Channel to Paris and it took them two months and a half. This means sixty miles per month, two per day, 150 yards per hour. They'll be here in one year!"

I'm promoted to doctor, in place of a colleague who goes away with a kommando. I couldn't wish for a better break. The Revier may not help its patients much, but at least it saves its doctors' lives. So I don't have to carry the soup buckets and make the beds anymore. I can even hope to eat a vegetable or a fragment of meat now and then, like a prominent. I sleep in a separate room with the other doctors.

I become friends with a Pfleger, Charles Gelbhart. He's a four-digit number—that is, a real aristocrat. He came on the very first train, the Mayflower of the French convoys, which left Compiègne on March 28th, 1942. Gelbhart "organized" a violin. When the Jews depart to these mysterious colonies located somewhere in eastern Europe, they take their violins. The great Reich recycles the Jews' hair to make felt slippers used in submarines, sends the warm clothes and the shoes to the soldiers on the Russian front, but it doesn't need all these violins. As a privileged elder, Gelbhart owns a key to the hall where the orchestra rehearses the pieces it plays when the kommandos return. An upright piano stands in a corner, with a huge collection of scores brought by deported musicians. We play sonatas for violin and piano by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms—and even sonatas by Mendelssohn, a composer whom nobody is allowed to play in Germany.¹

¹ Mendelssohn was Christian but his ancestors were Jewish, so the Nazis considered he belonged to the "Jewish race."

Gelbhart often talks to me of his first year in the Lager:

“They wanted to wipe us out, but they hadn’t built the gas chambers yet, so they had to find other ways to kill us. You know, you sometimes read in the newspaper that troops massacred savages in Ethiopia or wherever. Here, they massacred people every day. They entered the block in the middle of the night and strangled the comrades in their sleep. When you went to bed, you didn’t know whether they had written your name on the list of the *morituri*¹. Yet we were so tired that we fell asleep anyway... You left with a kommando, the kapo and his assistants clubbed to death one fourth of the men. To escape this hell, you chose another kommando on the next day. There, they killed one half of the men. When you didn’t die, it wasn’t as if you were surviving, but rather as if you had gained a few hours. Actually, I’m dead.”

“What do you mean, you’re dead?”

“I’m a kind of living dead. Even if the Americans deliver us, do you think I’ll be able to forget what I’ve seen and gone through? Okay, let’s begin the adagio again... Two living dead playing Beethoven!”

“I find it surprising that no SS ever comes and listens to us. In Germany, even the coarsest people love classical music. They have certainly stolen recording machines from the Jews. They could press a record: Beethoven’s seventh violin and piano sonata, played by two living dead in the greatest graveyard in Europe! This would be quite original.²”

“You don’t know the SS as I do. They would ask you to play the bird’s song in *Siegfried*³. You’d make a mistake, then they would shoot a bullet into your head to teach you.”

Often, Gelbhart stops playing, as if overwhelmed by unbearable emotions.

“Forgive me—it is so beautiful—the violin is worthless, the piano sounds like a washboard, we don’t play very well, but Beethoven’s genius rises above everything. We’re so small, so frail, and this music is so great and so strong! I didn’t feel this before the war. I didn’t imagine music could bring such bliss.”

“Yeah? So why don’t you thank the Nazis for letting you discover this marvelous bliss? Maybe Jasha Heifetz and Vladimir Horowitz⁴ would play more movingly if it were announced they’d be shot after the final chord by a man standing on the stage. ‘Jasha Heifetz and Vladimir Horowitz’s last recital,’ the announcer would say.”

“You see, Greif, men can kill each other and also create all this beauty.”

¹ A Latin expression: Those who are going to die.

² Amazingly, a recording of Gelbhart playing violin in Auschwitz does exist. French TV filmed his visit to the camp around 1985. In a very moving scene, he plays his violin in the middle of an empty block.

³ An opera by Richard Wagner.

⁴ The most famous violinist and pianist before the war.

“Men or Germans? Me, I think the men—or even the Germans—who kill are not the same men who create masterpieces. Beethoven could never have been a Nazi. Everybody decides to act right or wrong.”

“What affects me most, I guess, is that Beethoven’s music enters the Lager. They locked us in this enclosed space, totally cut from the outside world, they pretend we’re not even human, but we’ve managed to establish a link with the rest of mankind. It is as if we jumped over the barbed wire...”

“Do you know the lied by Mahler, *Gedenke sind frei*?¹ It is the song of a prisoner in a tower. His body is jailed, but his mind stays free.”

“Well, the Germans lock up our minds too. We only think about the present. We haven’t lost only our freedom, but also books and music. For the last two and a half years, I haven’t read one book. They want to turn us into animals.”

“Okay: let’s find freedom in music. *Musik macht frei!* Why don’t we begin the adagio again?”

The summer is coming to an end. We’ve given up pricking our ears for the rumble of American cannons and tanks. One morning, a sharp pain in my belly wakes me up before dawn. This is neither the bowels nor the kidneys. I don’t know why, I think about Jacqueline. I question the Czech Schreiber.

“Tell me, you know these things usually, what day is this?”

“Saturday, September 23rd, 1944.”

When I’ll be back in France, I’ll learn my son Jean-Jacques was born on this day, a little before dawn.

I recognize a patient:

“Hey, Georges Bardennes. They deported you, after all, although you’re only half-Jewish!”

“When the Yankees landed in Normandy, the Jerries panicked. They didn’t try to know who was Jewish anymore, but deported everybody.”

“Something wrong with your health?”

“I work in the *Bombenkommando*. English airplanes drop bombs on the Buna factory. We must defuse the ones that didn’t explode. Often, they blow up and it is rather noisy, so my ears tingle.”

“This isn’t as bothersome as being shredded by an exploding bomb.”

“Let’s say I’ve seen a number of comrades turned into scrambled eggs. I thought two or three days of rest away from the kommando wouldn’t hurt.”

¹ Thoughts are free.

The months in the Lager are worth years not only for the prisoners, but also for the doctors. I've become a Revier veteran in no time. I've enough influence and authority to get Bardennes a Pfleger's position.

Towards October, a Red Cross delegation visits the camp. The SS imitate the Russian minister Potemkine: when the Great Catherine wanted to inspect her provinces, he used to build fake villages peopled by well-dressed mujiks to convince her that Russia was rushing towards progress. While Potemkine could enroll as many serfs as he needed, the SS can count on their slaves. The prisoners plant flowers, turn a waste-land into a soccer field and even dig a swimming-pool. We don't need to disguise the gas chambers as shower-stalls, because that's done already. The Red Cross sees plump prisoners, chosen among the prominents and the newcomers, wearing clean new pajamas, in a freshly-painted block where bunks only have two tiers.

The authorities do not fill up the swimming-pool right away. It freezes already, the water is very cold, but Polish prisoners swim on Sunday afternoon, when kommandos rest for half a day. I undress and dive into the pool.

"Look, the Frenchman is swimming," the Poles exclaim.

I want to save the honor of France. My country capitulated in Munich, let the Huns swallow Poland, collapsed in a few weeks, collaborates with the Nazis. All the people in Europe despise us—while they admire America and Russia, who'll get us out of here.

Gelbhart feels no urge to imitate me:

"Isn't it too cold?"

"What do you mean, cold? Bah, the trick is not to think about it."

The SS come to watch us swim. There are even SS doctors. According to the Czech Schreiber, who frequents our lords and masters, the SS doctors imagine experiments.

"They think natural selection made the Poles better adapted to the cold than the Italians. They would soak some Poles for longer and longer times into colder and colder water to measure how long they survive. Then they would dissect them to check whether the resistance to the cold might have something to do with the size of the spleen or whatever. They hope to find a way of helping the poor German pilots who fall into the cold Atlantic waters. How can they hold until the arrival of a lifeboat? Just graft them a Polish spleen!"

If only the Great Reich had lasted a thousand years, we would have seen amazing things.

I play the piano, I swim, I even play bridge. Coats with packs of cards in their pockets arrive in Auschwitz in even greater number than violins! Thus I divert a few

moments from the cruel Lager time—the bitter and sticky time that the shadow of death prevents from flowing like everywhere else. Not the same time as outside, not the same death. In the Salpêtrière or Cochin hospitals, I’ve seen people die when the treatment failed. We fought, we hoped to save the patient until the last minute. In the Revier, we can’t hope to win. The miracle that let us pull back Alex Kohn from the brink of death never occurred again. If we try to put a guy on the path to healing without any medicine, by organizing a vitamin-C-rich onion or something, the SS come and select him for the gas with all the others.

I’m “treating” a French patient, the great director of *Magasins Réunis*, a Paris department store. SS doctors on a selection round examine him.

“As you’re in poor shape, we’ll take you to a resting camp farther east. The truck will come for you tomorrow morning.”

They jot down his number on their list. All of a sudden, he forgets what everybody knows about selections.

“Ah, docteur,” he tells me, “I think this convalescence will do me good. The war will be over soon. We’ll meet again in Paris. I’ll treat you in a first-class restaurant. I’ll order the best, you can trust me!”

The resting camp is located in Birkenau, not in any way east but a little over a mile west of Auschwitz. When night falls, we see the flames that the tall crematorium chimneys spew toward heaven.

I pity the director of *Magasins Réunis*, but at the same time his denial of reality irritates me. I’m ready to call it cowardice. Gelbhart thinks otherwise:

“Who can say for sure he won’t begin to believe in the mythical resting camp, when the day comes? You don’t even have to decide you’ll believe. It happens by itself, as if you were touched by divine grace. You believe, that’s all.”

“Yeah, sure: ‘We’ll meet again in Paris... I’ll order the best...’ Me, I’d rather eat some croissants in Capoulade! You know, Gelbhart, I wonder sometimes. There are many Jews in this Lager. Instead of waiting for a death that will get them all, instead of accepting the lies of the murderers and walking to the gas, they could rebel. They’d die fighting. It would be more honorable. In Poland, they always said the Jews were unable to fight.”

“You volunteered for military service in Poland. You fought with the French Army. You enrolled in the Résistance and you told me there were other Jews in your network. You’re the living proof that Jews can fight. But here, what would you do? It’s too late. Let me tell you the story of the family Lager. This happened when you arrived, more or less. The Nazis had installed a kind of model ghetto in Theresienstadt¹, in Czechoslovakia. They showed it to the Red Cross and international

¹ The city’s Czech name is Teresin.

organizations' representatives who asked what became of the Jews. There were schools for children, a theater, an orchestra. After their defeat in Stalingrad, they figured it cost more than it was worth, as they had lost the war anyway. So they sent all the people to Auschwitz. They put them in a separate camp, which we called the family Lager. And then, one day, they decided to liquidate them. Thousands of people. The communists found about it in advance through their Schreiber friends. They warned the Czechs. It's unusual for the Germans to kill that many people together."

"I've heard they gassed trainloads of Hungarians."

"Yeah, but we couldn't warn them and they didn't have time to prepare a revolt."

"The Czechs revolted?"

"The communists prepared a plan: when the SS come for the Czechs, they set their blocks on fire. At the same time, the *Sonderkommando*¹ rebels. This double-whammy might unsettle the SS just enough for the rebels to grab some arms. The Czechs and the *Sonderkommando* members are condemned to death anyway, but at least they'd take some of their tormentors along. The Czechs refused."

"What do you mean, refused? They preferred the gas?"

"They were not like you. They hadn't accomplished their military service, they had never fought. In their Czech ghetto, they had tried to bribe the SS, convince them, coax them. They had turned the other cheek. The communists suggested they take some sticks and attack professional soldiers armed with machine-guns. When the SS turn angry, they can kill someone with one gummi or fist blow. They break members, pull out eyes and skins, seize a baby by its feet and burst its head on a wall. The Czechs chose to lead their kids to death in an orderly way, holding their hands, talking softly about a good warm shower, evoking paradise in a tender voice. Avoiding revolt, fire, sound and fury, blood. Me, I consider this a honorable way to behave. As honorable as dying with arms in hand. Besides, the Jews aren't the only ones who walk to the gas without rebelling. There was another family Lager, for Gypsies. They liquidated it in the same manner. They summoned the men to be 'resettled east.' They gave them half a bread and a dry sausage for the transfer, to put their mistrust to sleep. On the next day, they gathered women and kids 'to join the head of the family.'²"

¹ "Special Kommando" in charge of gassing the prisoners, removing gold teeth from the corpses and rolling them into the oven. The *Sonderkommando* itself was gassed after three months.

² On their last day, October 6th, 1944, the members of the 12th *Sonderkommando*, having organized some arms and explosives, rebelled. They blew up the third gas chamber and its crematorium, and damaged the fourth. They killed 70 SS. Out of the 860 kommando members, 7 were away and didn't take part in the revolt. All the others died, including 12 who escaped but were caught and brought back by Polish peasants.

Being a doctor protects me somewhat. Instead of saying “you Jew,” or “son of a bitch,” the SS call me “Herr Doktor.” Germans are taught to respect authority. They respect their parents, their teachers, their emperor, their Führer. *Herr Doktor* is a more respectful expression than “monsieur le docteur.” The presence in our block of Alex Kohn, whom we recalled from the kingdom of the dead, proves our magical powers. As we’re in Auschwitz, though, my white frock’s protective value goes only so far. For the German Stubendienst, I am a prisoner like the others. If he kills me under any kind of pretext, nobody will protest. They’ll find another doctor and that’s it.

We try to save a young Dutch doctor, Nick Richter. He entered the Revier as a patient, like me. He is less than thirty and still looks a little childish. He is frail and much too sensitive. *If you cry, you die*. Nick studied music, but his father forced him to become a doctor. This reminds me of my own story, except the person who barred me from becoming a musician was Frydka—whom I could have disobeyed if I had wanted to. Richter is composing an opera about Lilith, Adam’s second wife (not mentioned in the Bible, but a character in many Jewish legends). He sings pieces in Dutch to us, then translates the words into German. We could organize some music paper, but there’s no way we could keep it inside the block. Richter is confident he can compose the entire opera in his mind and remember it until the Americans arrive. It is possible? Can anybody create—and what’s more, remember—anything in Auschwitz?

I find it difficult to create memories and file them in my brain. I can see as sharply as I desire the events that marked my childhood or my years in Paris, but when I try to explore the thicket of my Lager impressions, I get lost in a mist of fuzzy fantasies. Some clear moments—the long train journey, the shock of seeing the first living dead in the station, the tattoo being engraved on my arm, the hard work in the Post Office kommando, the Revier—stick out of a long nightmare dominated by a mixture of painful sensations: hunger, thirst, cold, exhaustion, aches after a beating, fear. What’s for sure is that I can remember neither the text nor the music of *Lilith*.

We’re ready to believe that Richter has enough willpower to compose an opera in his mind. We want to believe it. If a Jew succeeds in creating a masterpiece in Auschwitz, what a snub to the Nazis! Alas, it can’t be. Richter is too weak to survive. I guess he was already thin before coming, for his emaciated body already resembles a moslem’s. We wonder how we can save him. We need to hurry. We think this genius merits to survive more than we do, because he carries inside himself a grand opera that will bring joy to mankind for centuries. He couldn’t become a *Pfleger*: he would spill the soup. We find a job for him as a doctor in a satellite camp with a good reputation. As the prisoners work in a factory, they are not starved. We’re happy to have contributed our tiny stone to the great monument of *Lilith*.

What happened? Maybe he irritated some prominent. With his artist's sensitivity, he sometimes became furious when he shouldn't have. He didn't lick the shoes of the vulgar and stupid people who pretended to be his masters. They dismissed him from his doctor's position and sent him to work like an ordinary prisoner. He died of exhaustion in less than a week.

I'm angry at Richter for not surviving. In spite of myself, I blame the prisoners who let themselves die. It seems to me they accept their fate like calves driven to the slaughterhouse. Their empty gaze bothers me. I want to shout: "Why don't you stop shuffling!" When I think about the Czechs going to the gas without rebelling, I must clench my fists not to erupt into a rage. The Huns will eventually kill me, I guess, but I won't go without a fight. I'll certainly do my utmost to survive. My strength isn't all gone, I've taken advantage of my lucky breaks, so that a tiny flame of hope still burns deep inside me. I'm ready to hold the fort like a real hussar.

But then sometimes a vague feeling of shame, of disgust at myself, overwhelms me. If the sensitive people die, then the survivors are unfeeling. I do not owe my survival to my hussar-like bravery, but to the callousness of my character. Looking down scornfully at the weaker prisoners helps me stay upright. You must be a misanthropist to survive in Auschwitz.

In December, we hear a low growl coming from the direction of the rising sun. I can barely describe what I feel: my heart beats noisily in my poor rib cage, my legs tremble, my eyes want to leave their sockets, a frozen sweat burns my skin...

"Gelbhart, do you hear?"

"I wonder whether I'll survive the shock. When I was a child, I learned some prayers, but I've forgotten them..."

"God doesn't exist, Gelbhart, but I allow you to say a prayer of thanks to Stalin!"

This noise we hear is the distant thunder of the Russian cannons rolling over the vast Polish plains.

1945. The first survivor

On December 25th, 1944, the great German Reich offers us a *Zulage*, a food supplement, to celebrate Christmas. Although we don't refuse it, we prefer another Christmas gift: the rumble that swells slowly to the east of the camp.

Soon after the beginning of the new year, the Czech Schreiber tells us that the authorities seem to be preparing the Lager's evacuation. Is this possible? The experience that we acquired painfully, that helped us face deadly dangers and become old numbers, becomes useless as we try to decipher unknown events. New patients crowd the block because SS doctors stop selecting dying men for the gas. Have the

SS turned soft? The real reason for their strange behavior (we'll find out later) is that they've decided to erase every trace of their crimes and asked our Birkenau comrades to break down the gas chambers. The feeling of euphoria that overwhelmed us when we heard the Russian cannons didn't linger. A dim uneasiness followed it. After the most ferocious SS departed to the front, Waffen-SS¹ soldiers replaced them. Some old reservists who seem almost human proffer worrisome advice.

"Beware at five-to."

This means the SS—the real ones—can slaughter everybody five minutes before the hour, lest the Russians find witnesses. They did it in Belzec and Maidanek, smaller camps located in provinces already liberated by the Soviet army.

Gelbhart is very pessimistic.

"They'll kill us all, obviously. Did you hear the Waffen-SS?"

"There are thousands of prisoners in the Lager. If they want to shoot them all, it will get quite messy. Maybe we can take advantage of the situation to hide or escape. Until now, they caught the escapees because the Polish peasants denounced them, but with the Russians approaching, the peasants should keep quiet."

"At least we know one thing: it wouldn't make sense to evacuate the camp."

Well, on Wednesday, January 18th, they do order evacuation. All valid prisoners must leave on foot towards camps located in Germany. They need the slaves to operate the last factories, repair bomb-damaged roads and railroads, prolong the Reich's death agony. The patients who can't walk stay in the Revier with three doctors. I utter a sigh of relief when they choose doctors other than me to stay with the patients. They'll dispatch doctors and patients at five-to, no doubt about that. Gelbhart regains some hope.

"We'll leave this hell at last! Maybe we'll walk all the way to Germany while the temperature hovers under zero. Many will die, but we still have a meager chance of surviving. The odds are against us. We should try, though."

"I won't. I'm staying here."

"Are you crazy, Greif? You just said they'd do away with doctors and patients at five-to."

"I won't go to Germany while the Russians are a stone's throw away. I don't stay officially as a doctor either. I hide and I wait for the Red Army."

"The SS will search the Lager to make sure that nobody tells the Russians what happened here. Or maybe they won't even bother with searching the place. They'll just blow up everything."

"It's a bet. You try your luck on the road, I try mine in the Lager..."

¹ The SS belonged to the police, the Waffen-SS to the army. They were considered less cruel.

I guess I won't see him again. Auschwitz friendship ties are fragile. You barely have time to consider someone a friend that he becomes a moslen and goes to the gas.¹

Alex Kohn and Georges Bardennes decide to stay with me.

Wednesday, 9 PM. The SS order the prisoners out of the blocks and to the central square. My two companions and I, we watch the crowd through the window of the Revier, which is block 19. When we see the prisoners have left the neighborhood, we hide in a tiny storeroom on the ground floor of block 15. After one hour, the huge pathetic horde of the striped-pajama men begins its march. Not much later, we hear explosions that can mean only one thing: the SS are shooting whoever is too weak to follow the rest of the troop.

We spend the night alternating sleep and watch every three hours. In the morning, we wake up in a deserted camp. It resembles a city emptied of its people by an epidemic. I understand the expression "death silence" for the first time in my life. The comrades are gone, but it seems to me that the ghost of their sadness remains behind, permeating everything like a gray fog.

No SS or kapo is to be seen between the blocks, even though SS still guard the watch-towers. Stealing close to the walls to avoid a mishap, I go to the Revier. The SS left behind only severe cases—patients who really can't walk. The Blockältester and Stubendienst hid and came back, like me. I consider it safer to return to block 15.

As we can't expect the usual delivery of soup, we decide to find out how things stand in the kitchen.

"Walk along the walls, you guys. There are still SS in the watch-towers. Besides, we'd better not leave footprints in the snow in the middle of the alley."

The kitchen proper, which occupies a third of a block, is empty. Having forced a door at the back of the room, we stand on the threshold, dumbfounded: mountains of tin cans, biscuit packages, dried sausages and cheese fill up a huge hall, whose windows are boarded by planks. Alex Kohn is moved to tears.

"The labels are written in Hungarian. They took this food from all the Hungarian Jews whom they gassed last year. There's enough to feed thousands."

"Meanwhile, we were starving to death."

"I suppose they sent all this to their army. They ceased because it was retreating too fast. Be careful, guys: don't eat too much. Your body should get re-acquainted with food in a progressive way."

On Friday, January 20th, the watch-tower SS vanish and old Wehrmacht¹ soldiers replace them. Before locking the gate behind himself, the last SS puts a bullet into the

¹ I mentioned a film showing Gelbart and his violin. Thus, he survived. He sometimes came in our home to play Beethoven sonatas with my father.

head of a Dutch comrade who wasn't walking close enough to the wall. A pity to die thus at five-to. The old soldiers see the ghosts gliding slowly from one block to another, the corpses lying everywhere. They seem scared and climb on top of the watch-towers as fast as possible. It seems even the soldiers in the German army didn't know what was happening in the camps.

As I discover this fear in the soldiers' eyes, I wonder what the Lager looks like to them. I notice that my comrades (a few hundred stayed behind, hiding in various blocks) are bent like very old men, seem to fight a contrary wind when they move forward, resemble specters wrapped in a crinkled gray skin. Anatomy students should see them: they'd learn a lot by observing walking skeletons, with visible bones and joints. I notice the scattered corpses, which I ceased seeing long ago. For the first time since my arrival, they seem human to me. They hoped to live to a great age and die a natural death. Instead of frozen remains, half buried under the snow, I see murdered people.

I remember my father used to pick up corpses on battlefields during the great war. When he found a dead body, he didn't know whether to call it friend or foe.

I live in block 15, but I still take care of my service's patients in the Revier. On January 23rd, a Pfleger calls me in block 15.

"Two Polish women are looking for you."

"Two Polish women? How's that possible?"

"There's no more power in the barbed wires. They come from outside. They want to take away one of your patient. The priest, you know."

"Oh yeah, the Polish priest who helped the underground guys."

I go to the Revier with the Pfleger. Everybody is looking at the women as if they came from another planet. I talk to them in Polish.

"Do you want to take away the priest?"

"Yes. We are his sisters."

"He's very sick, you know. His tuberculosis has reached the last stage. He can't walk. How do you plan to take him away?"

"We came from Krakow. We're living in the house of a railway worker in Ozwiecim. We should be able to find a cart and a horse."

"What do you mean, a horse? Thousands of Germans are fleeing and you think you can find a horse? We'd better get a stretcher. You'll carry the front part and I the back."

The sisters accept. They thank me with tears in their eyes. They wear layers of old gray clothes. They're so huge, you'd think they're nine-month pregnant. As I look at

¹ The German army.

them, I discover that I'm quite cold. Gosh, I must escort two ladies to town. I'd better find a smarter outfit than my striped pajamas. I beg them wait for me. I break the door of the clothes' store. I choose strong woolen pants, a thick shirt, a silk tie, a tweed jacket cut according to the latest Budapest fashion, winter shoes and a magnificent leather coat with a silk lining.¹ I also find a great treasure: a notebook and a pencil.

These stores full of food and clothes, where you can help yourself at will, are similar to a child's dreams. Let's not forget harsh reality, though: thinking of the troops of various nationalities I might meet, I mark my trade clearly by tying a Red Cross armband on my sleeve.

Thus, I walk out of the Lager on Monday, January 23rd, behind a dying priest. I am the first Auschwitz survivor.²

I live in the house of the Ozwiecim railroad worker with the two sisters and the priest. I try to jot a few words every day on my notebook. I begin my diary on evacuation day—Wednesday, January 18th. From that day on, time regained its usual and regular manner of flowing minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day.

On Friday, January 27th, I see my first Soviet troops, marching in six-men wide columns like in a parade. I feel unbounded love for these dear mujiks, as well as a sincere admiration for communism, eternal Russia, the great Stalin. I remember Cossacks walking across Czernowitz in 1914. Yesterday's enemies are saving us from hell.

I can't believe it. I survived! For the first time since I arrived, I think: "I'll live." But at the same time: "I'm dead. From now on, I live on borrowed time."

The French trio

Having said goodbye to the two sisters, the priest and the railroad worker, I return to the camp. The Russian military doctors who're in charge of the Revier seem to know their business. Since they can manage without me, I prefer to leave the camp for good. I ask Bardennes and Kohn whether they want to come with me:

¹ Although the SS burned 29 stores out of 35, the Soviets found in Auschwitz 368,000 men's suits, 836,000 coats and dresses, seven tons of hair.

² In "If this is a man," Primo Levi describes these same January days in Monowitz, the Auschwitz annex where the I.G. Farben factory kept its slaves. He is sick with scarlet fever. On January 18th, instead of being evacuated, he is left behind in the hospital (he doesn't say Revier but Ka-Be, *Krankenbau*—sickroom) with several hundred other patients. They expect to be shot. On January 19th, Primo Levi gets up and explores the empty camp with his comrades. On January 20th, they find some food. On January 21st, they light a fire and cook a vegetable soup. On January 22nd, they're reckless enough to enter the SS camp, where they take vodka and newspapers. Eighteen Frenchmen decide to eat in the lords' dining-room. SS who happen to pass through kill them with a bullet in the neck. On January 23rd, Primo Levi goes beyond the fence, with several hundred Monowitz prisoners, to get potatoes hidden in a trench. The first Soviet soldiers enter Monowitz on January 27th, 1945.

“We can go to Krakow and see what’s doing. I speak the language, so we’ll get our bearings. We should be able to find some French consul or military attaché who’ll send us home.”

On January 30th, we walk under the *Arbeit macht frei* motto for the last time. We want to reach the main Katowice to Krakow road, fifteen miles to the northeast or so. We walk slowly and must stop all the time to catch our breath. Georges Bardennes chose brand new boots in the clothing store. He slips on the snow and falls every two minutes.

The priest’s sisters told us about a convent in Trzebinia and gave us a letter of introduction. The nuns lodge us for two days. They detail their ailments and show me their sores. I give free consultations.

I also advise my comrades.

“Don’t accept the sausages and cabbage, tempting as they may be. Just dunk a piece of bread into a bowl of milk.”

“You’re the boss, doc!”

“A pity I can’t drink a small glass of mass wine, though.”

On February 2nd, we start again eastwards. A Russian truck, whose female driver is as fat and gross and a male one, picks us up. I understand some Russian, as I learned the Ukrainian language, which is quite close, at the end of the great war. I can translate our driver’s expletives for my companions’ instruction.

“When we passed the cart, I think she said *Let the wolves eat your balls, bastard son of a poxed pope!*”

She drops us in the center of Krakow, near the cathedral. We sleep in empty houses, we eat in Red Cross soup-kitchens. The city, liberated a few days ago, is still a mess. To find an administration, officials, a French consul, we must go to Lublin, temporary capital of Poland.¹

We leave Krakow on February 5th. A Russian woman, a giantess wearing an army uniform, regulates traffic on one of the main city squares.

“Hey, Greif, do you imagine such a woman on place de l’Opéra?”

“Wait a minute, you guys, I’ll exchange a few words with her.”

Zigzagging among the tangle of military vehicles, I reach the traffic amazon and ask her for directions to Lublin. My Russian sentences are certainly tangled too. I tell her that we are French prisoners whom the valiant Red Army liberated from the Auschwitz camp. She requisitions a truck for us. We sit on the open deck, where the freezing wind blows right through us.

The truck brings us to Rzochow, the first railway-station open to traffic. The train takes forty-eight hours to reach Rozwadow, forty miles farther. We’re told a direct

¹ See maps at the end of the book.

train to Lublin will soon stop in Rozwadow. We wait for it all night on the platform. They're rebuilding the bombed station building, so we can't go in. The temperature drops below zero. We don't want to lie on the ground, lest we freeze and—even worse—miss the train. We just stand there, as we used to do during the night roll-calls in the Lager. Bardennes sleeps soundly: I see his eyes rolling during the dream phases.

The train comes at dawn. The yelling crowd that storms it opens a path for us, frightened by these three moving mummies, so that we can climb into the cars and even find seats.

All kinds of people walk the streets of Lublin: Soviet soldiers and officers; Polish communists, who spent the war in Russia and try to assemble a provisional government; recently liberated prisoners of various nationalities. People living in Lublin or nearby try to exchange all kinds of things against food, turning the city into a vast flea-market. We succeed in finding a French military attaché, commandant Fouchet,¹ who receives us on February 9th. He agrees that we should be sent home, but wonders how to do it.

“You don't want to walk across Germany, I'm sure. The Poles should take care of you, but they're still mired in their own misfortunes. The Russians have other fish to fry. I'll see what I can do.”

He gives us a residency permit that allows us to sleep in a school where the Red Cross installed a kind of field hospital.

On February 10th, we go to the Polish radio and send messages, hoping they might reach our remote homeland. *Can you tell Jacqueline Kohn that Jacques is alive? She lives in Paris. She can probably be found through madame Trial, who runs a hotel on rue Perceval, in the 14th arrondissement.* The radio director asks us to tell about our stay in Auschwitz. We speak in turn. I translate my comrades' story into Polish. We're pleasantly surprised when they pay us for our work.

I write a series of articles in Polish for the newspaper *Glos Ludu* (The People's Voice): “Memories of a French doctor in Auschwitz.” Then they order a feature story about the Paris Commune. We read books in the library and learn lots of things. We're paid 1500 zlotys. We spend half of this treasure to eat a *bigos*, a kind of Polish sauerkraut.

I send a letter to Sambor, without much hope of an answer.

A journalist, Kama, is taking care of us. We attend a theater play and a concert with her. Not only do I sleep poorly, not only does my digestive system act strange when it has to face freedom, but my mind remains kind of numb. When I look at Kama and other women I meet, I just can't see whether they are pretty or not. I mix up dates and

¹ He'll be a minister in one of the général de Gaulle's governments in the sixties.

events. I read in my notebook that I heard a concert by the pianist Wielhorzki and the violinist Bacewicza, but I barely remember it. Kama introduces us to some city dignitaries, who invite us for dinner. We play bridge.

Alex Kohn insists on boxing in a great meeting opposing Frenchmen to Poles. He expects to win a 2000-zloty prize. During the two-week training period, the boxers eat free meals, as well as their manager (this means Georges) and physical form adviser (this means me). This is the real bounty! Alex's opponent, a Polish Hercules, doesn't dare hit him too hard, lest he kill him. He is content with winning on points. Alex laughs about his defeat:

“What a licking, buddies! I'm lucky I kept my teeth.”

We hear rumors of repatriation. They're making up lists. Commandant Fouchet, whom we call on twice a week, knows nothing.

One day, as I am passing by café La Palette, I hear a violin and cello. Two French officers, former war prisoners, are playing a Haydn trio. I walk in and interrupt them.

“What is this? You're playing a trio without a pianist?”

“We haven't got a pianist, but if you want to try, here is the piano score.”

The café La Palette's French trio becomes famous. So many people come listen to us that most have to stand up. They've spent the war as prisoners in a camp, or somewhere in Siberia. They're in need of music, culture, whatever pulls human beings above their condition. The radio records us. I also play on my own—Mozart's A major sonata, Debussy's first Arabesque. I wonder whether Gelbhart is still alive. The public's applause bothers me as I try to recall the feeling that gripped my heart when I played music in the shadow of death.

A voyage at sea

Towards mid-March, repatriation rumors take shape. It seems an English ship is waiting for us in Odessa. We begin to believe it might be true.

On March 23rd, commandant Fouchet tells us an Odessa-bound train is leaving this very evening. We depart at midnight. The other passengers are mostly soldiers and officers wearing French or English uniforms.

I thought the train would follow a southeastern direction, cross the Carpathian mountains and stop in Lwów. A kind of torpor prevents me from reading the stations' names. I wake up at dawn when the train ceases to move: we're in Kowel, east of Lublin. We're skirting my home province by way of north and east. Maybe this is better. I would feel like rolling through a vast graveyard. Doubting that my parents, my sister Rózia and her two children died in the gas chamber would be very foolish. A painful feeling of emptiness grips me when I think I'll never see them again. I try

to divert my thoughts to other subjects, but my body pulls me back to my grief, as if it wanted me to keep on suffering: it burns and trembles and sweats.

I jot down facts and numbers on my notebook: "Lublin to Odessa, 500 miles, two days and three nights." In Odessa, trucks take us to military barracks. Rushing across town, I see the monumental stairs that play such an important part in *Battleship Potemkin*. They gather us in the barracks' courtyard to tell us where we'll stay, when we'll sail and so on. I don't know how long I stand as officers give us instructions in French and English. I feel very tired. I've spent hours, days, weeks standing half naked in front of the block, braving snowstorms, summoning the last wisps of my will to hold some more and survive, while my comrades were falling like logs. And now I've drained my strength, exhausted my will. I can't go on. I don't risk death if I fail to understand the instructions. I collapse slowly, between my two companions. They prop me up, as we used to do in Auschwitz when we thought there was some life left inside a guy.

I regain consciousness in a hospital bed. A woman doctor is watching me.

"Good morning, madam. Are you Ukrainian?"

"You speak our language!"

"I learned it in school long ago. I was born in Sambor, on the Dniestr."

"You have a high fever. You must rest."

"A high fever? What kind of diagnosis is this? You can tell me everything: I'm a doctor myself."

"Probably typhus."

"Typhus? Hell..."

I sleep. When I wake up, it is night. I fall asleep again. The woman doctor comes again in the morning to take my temperature. I think about the English ship waiting in the harbor. This won't do. Can't let my pals return without me because of a little temperature. I shake the thermometer on the sly before showing it to the doctor.

"Look, the fever is gone!"

She pretends to be convinced and discharges me. Her diagnosis was wrong anyway: if I had really caught typhus, I would have been too weak to shake the thermometer.

I go back to the barracks, where I find Bardennes and Kohn playing cards. As rubber sticks seem to have replaced my leg bones, I decide to lie down. On the next day, we embark on the English ship. I feel rather weak, but my fever has really gone down.

The ship is repatriating French war prisoners. While simple soldiers sleep in hammocks in the hold, we travel first class with the officers. They look down on us. The grand clothes we found in the camp hang on our lank bodies, so we resemble scarecrows. We haven't been to the barber since Lublin. Actually, I don't dare look at

myself in a mirror, but I guess my face is as gray and frightening as Bardennes and Kohn's. One has lost all his teeth, the other keeps his mouth open like an idiot. Their eyes are popping out of their heads, as if they wanted to explore some other dimension. The haughty officers wonder why the authorities gave the best cabin to three bums.

Bardennes and Kohn make fun of me.

"Hey, Greif, you're an officer too."

"You should introduce yourself to the colonel!"

"Yeah, good joke. They remind me of the officers I have known in Sarrebourg when I was a war prisoner. They said that the Jews had provoked this mess. That if they had been consulted, France would have attacked Germany on the first day and won the war. You know what? I don't see why I couldn't talk to them. We'll explain who we are and tell them about the Lager, to make their education."

My two friends consider this a fine idea. I don't approach the colonel right away, because I can barely keep awake. I do note that we call in Istanbul on March 31st. I try to remember—I think I've heard about this city in a former life. A sentence whirls in my mind... *Listen to this, old boy: they leave the street doors ajar, so you get glimpses of naked women in the darkness.* Has this sentence got anything to do with Istanbul? Who said it?

We see Greek islands, cross the straits of Messina, pass near the Stromboli volcano—which lights the night like a huge red torch. I report to the colonel:

"Capitaine Greif, 153rd RIF. My comrades and I have spent part of the war in a Nazi concentration camp. I would like to give a kind of conference about it for the benefit of my fellow officers."

"But of course! Excellent. You may have noticed that some of my men wonder about your presence in our midst. This will pass time, too."

We describe the journey in cattle-cars; the first corpses in the car; the arrival in Auschwitz; the selection of mothers with children, of sick and old people, who went straight to the gas; the kapos who could kill whoever they wished; the moslems; the ceremony of the escapees' hanging; the selection of sick patients in the Revier; block 10, where the SS doctors practiced medical experiments; the gassing of entire Hungarian convoys; the main thought that filled our minds, *hold until tomorrow.*

The officers interrupt us constantly. Questions gush forth.

"Why would they deport women and old people to a labor camp?"

"How could they hide the gassing of thousands from the whole wide world?"

"Why would they eliminate entire convoys when they lacked workers in the arms factories?"

I hoped to puncture the officers' inflated pride by showing them what trials we underwent, but I failed miserably. They consider us poor fellows whose minds the war unhinged, or braggarts who make up fairy tales.

While we were barely beginning to revive, this mishap gives us a painful reality jolt. Bardennes and Kohn are in a sour mood.

"See, Greif, if people who hear direct witnesses don't believe it, what will happen with the other ones?"

"Nobody will ever want to believe it... It's hopeless."

"Bah, you're jumping to conclusions. my friends. They are officers, which is to say, perfect fools! In the Lager, they wouldn't have reached the end of the third week."

I do worry, though. I bring everything back to the Lager. I'll never leave it for good if I can't tell my story. To alleviate my pain, I must share it with other people.

The end of the road

On April 5th, at 11 AM, we disembark in Marseille. The Police Academy orchestra plays military marches to welcome the brave officers in a proper manner. A general gives a speech.

They take us to some kind of official building. A young lieutenant of the Army Security service asks me to fill several forms. He questions me at length. I bet he suspects me to be a wily foreigner who pretends he was deported from France as a way to enter the country without a visa. He wants to know what Résistance network I belonged to. I answer FTP, but the young man doesn't know these initials and I must add: Francs-Tireurs Partisans.¹

As I don't know where Jacqueline is living, I send a telegram to Tunia Kassar, care of Simone Réti, in île Saint-Louis.

Our train starts on the same day, at 11 PM. There must be lots of traffic on tracks needing repair: we reach Paris twenty-four hours later. When I step off the train in Gare de Lyon, I scan the crowd of anxious people waiting for the passengers. Every officer is ingested by a small group that comprises a red-eyed wife, old parents, kids who do not remember their father. Bardennes, Kohn and I, we watch these weepy reunions with utter indifference. We're coming to the end of the road. We have no plans for the future. One more railway platform, similar to all the other platforms. Three unknown women are looking at us. They seem to hesitate, as if they wanted to talk to us but didn't dare. One of them calls me.

"Jacques?"

¹ Either he was really very young, or the big communist network had another name in Marseille.

Two names come to my mind: Tunia Kassar, Simone Réti. The third woman bursts out laughing.

“Don’t you recognize me? I’m Yanka! I live in your apartment on boulevard Saint-Marcel. Madame Kassar came to see whether you could return there. When she told me you were coming back today, I insisted on going to the station with her. Do you know you have a beautiful son? I’ve seen him! He has wide blue eyes, just like you.”

“Where is Jacqueline? Where is the child?”

Tunia answers:

“She went to Normandy. She wanted to spend a few days with her friend Hélène, so the baby can breathe some good country air. I telephoned her as soon as I received your telegram. She’s been renting a place on rue des Morillons since Jean-Jacques was born. It’s not far from rue Saint-Amand, but instead of a seven-floor walkup it is a first-floor studio. It is easier with a baby. If you agree, we’ll go to Hôtel Trial: Wanda Warner has an extra set of keys, so we can wait for Jacqueline in her studio.

Bardennes and Kohn vanish I don’t know where. We take a taxi. The boulevards and streets seem vaguely familiar. Noticing my puzzled look, Yanka plays the part of a guide:

“This is the Salpêtrière, your old hospital. Now we come to boulevard Saint-Marcel. Look, your apartment! The Gobelins intersection, now the boulevard de Port-Royal. If you look left, you can see Hôpital Cochin.”

Although it is close to Midnight, Parisians are walking in the streets. Maybe there’s no more curfew. I see people who step out of cafés laughing, couples who kiss. They don’t seem to know that millions of people... The gas... “From here nobody gets out, except through the chimney,” the kapos used to say.

In Hôtel Trial, we meet two other women whose faces may be stored in some musty recess of my memory. They introduce themselves as Wanda Warner and Danka Müller. Since they didn’t expect me, my sudden appearance surprises them. They come with us to rue des Morillons. I tell them about the Lager once, then Jacqueline and the child arrive at sunrise and I tell them again. Jacqueline is as plump as a prominent. Fat tears roll down her cheeks. *If you cry, you die*. Now and then, my Odessa fever returns, so that my mind wanders outside the present time and place.

“Where is the dog?”

I’ve forgotten that I lost Béton in the subway. I interrupt my tale.

“Later—we’ll see later...”

The women’s faces become blurred and all alike. I hear a man’s voice tell impossible things that happened long ago in a Lager named Auschwitz.

Noël

Yanka, who was “keeping my apartment until my return,” moves out of it. Jacqueline settles there with me. She doesn’t live in a maid’s room anymore, but in a seven-room apartment. Our maid lives in a maid’s room! I buy a new car: a big Peugeot 402 sedan.

I thought I had divorced from Frydka, but she appealed the judgment—saying she couldn’t defend herself in 1942 because she was Jewish. Jacqueline is still married to Bernard Kohn. She wanted our son to have a father even if I didn’t survive. They can’t divorce right away: Bernard Kohn joined the French army and “occupies” Germany with his regiment. She writes to him that I’m alive. On his first leave, he begins a procedure of paternity disavowal for Jean-Jacques. He has a good alibi: nine months before the child’s birth, he was a prisoner in the Aurigny concentration camp.

As our second son is born on December 25th, 1945, we name him Noël.¹ I declare I’m his father; thus he is entered into the books as Noël Greif rather than Noël Kohn.

Jacqueline says the police arrested Marie-Louise. She died in jail of tuberculosis two months before her trial. These news don’t move me much, for I barely remember her. I find it hard to reconcile myself to the world’s diversity and complexity.

A few officers of the Brigade Spéciale have been condemned to death. Their men—the fellows who set a trap in my home, arrested Jacqueline and committed many other crimes—received Résistance medals for changing side a few days before the liberation of Paris.

My parents, my sister Rózia and her children, my uncle Louis and my aunt Regina have vanished. Melanie and Dolek didn’t have time to grow up. I think that Dolek, who had a good mind for mathematics, could have come to Paris and entered École Polytechnique. Dolek is a diminutive of Adolf. A name that nobody would give to a Jewish child today. Bernfeld, Rózia’s husband, the lazy doctor, escaped death by following the Russian troops when they retreated eastwards in 1941.

Sylvie, the daughter of my uncle Louis, survived in Rouen, but her sister Rose died in 1940, gassed without even going to Auschwitz. She fell asleep while cooking fruit in her hotel room to make jams. The pan overflowed, which put off the gas flame.

My cousin Max Wald spent the war in England. I guess he isn’t afraid to speak English anymore. He works for the American army in Germany. He says he’ll probably be allowed to take the American nationality and emigrate to the United States.

The gas chamber swallowed cousin Malcia, who sold cigars in the Greif inn, as well as her daughter Cesia. I wish I could remember Cesia. I just can’t distinguish her

¹ A common first name in France. It means Christmas, of course.

from Melanie. The ghosts of the two girls keep running and laughing in the dark corridors of my memory.

Author's postface

My mother died on June 14th, 1978. While she was already quite ill, I asked her to write her memoirs.¹ After we buried her, my father opened a drawer in her room and gave me the blue copybook which contained the story of her life.

“Thanks. I’ll read it right away. You know, I think you should do it too. You’ve known the Austrian empire, the first world war. You played piano in movie theaters to enliven silent films. You took part in a battle during the second world war. You were deported to Auschwitz. You’ve seen quite a few highlights of the century!”

My brother Olivier laughed.

“You sound like the angel of death. Confess, weigh your life, write your memoirs!”

“No, no, he’s right. I’ve been thinking about it for a while indeed. I’ve bought the copybook already.”

My father survived my mother more than twenty years. He died on November 20th, 1999. He was ninety-four years old. Until he was ninety-two, he drove his car at full speed, like the crazy hussar he was. At ninety-three, he sold his apartment, which he didn’t like anymore, and moved to a new one. Then he went on vacation to the Riviera, because he wanted to see the Mediterranean sea once more. The trip exhausted him. Soon after coming back, he fell ill et was hospitalized for the first time in his life. The doctors suggested a small operation. The idea of taking a risk delighted him.

“Either I’m cured or I die on the operating table. A fine death. You fall asleep, never to wake up.”

He hadn’t thought that the outcome of the operation might hover between these two possibilities. The shock of the anesthesia weakened him a lot. After staying weeks in bed, he couldn’t walk anymore. He never recovered a complete lucidity and waned slowly. During the last weeks of his life, he spoke Polish. He slumbered. Maybe he dreamt he was driving the two russet cows, Hare and Turtle, to the banks of the Dniestr. When I said: “Bonjour, Jacques,” he didn’t react, but when I said: “*Dzien dobry*², Lonek,” he half-opened his eyes.

¹ See “Malvina.”

² Pron : Jinn dobray.