

The Hitler File
A Novel of Fact
By Sam Vaknin

Draft
For your consideration

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Based on hundreds of newly-discovered documents in archives the world over – now ...

THE HITLER FILE

Israel Sarid Roth is the **only son of two survivors of the Holocaust**. When his boss at the Genocide Monitoring Group **sends him to Israel** on a routine assignment, he finds himself at the **deadly center of a nightmare**.

- What is on the **floppy disk** he picked up in Jerusalem?
- Who is Frankenberg, the investigative journalist and how did he track down the fearsome former **Chief of the Nazi Gestapo, Heinrich Mueller, long thought dead**?
- Why did Himmler, the leader of the SS, release Frankenberg's father from the **death camp Auschwitz**?
- What was in **Hitler's personal file**, kept by the Nazi Party's own intelligence service, the SD?
- Who **blackmailed Hitler** and what was the dark secret in his past?
- Why was the **Holocaust, the mass extermination of Europe's Jews**, set in motion only so late in World War II?
- Why did the **Nazi SS work hand-in-glove with Zionist organizations** in Palestine and throughout occupied Europe, even as the Holocaust was taking place?
- Who **assassinated** the prominent Zionist leader Chaim Arlosoroff in 1934 and why?

Time is running out. To survive, Roth must find the answers to these questions and remain one step ahead of **Nazis, old and new**, as well as the **Israeli Mossad**.

There is only one rule: TRUST NO ONE.

Dedicated to Lidija, my wife and life.

Facts and Speculations

All the historical events and personalities mentioned in this book are true and factual.

The only exceptions are:

- Leo Frankenberg the investigative journalist and his grandfather, the Auschwitz inmate, Ernst Frankenberg, are fictional characters.
- Heinrich Mueller. Though his body was never found, he probably died in the bunker in besieged Berlin or not far from it in May 1945. But, read on and judge for yourselves.

All the speculations in this book are just that: speculations.

The author visited all the locations mentioned in this tome and met many of the protagonists that populate this work of fiction.

In a way, therefore, this is a roman-a-clef.

Still, names and circumstances were altered to protect the identity of those involved.

“We are in,” – he almost whispered – “the files merged.”

Enraptured, we gazed at the screen as the text document unwound itself, page by flickering page.

I leaned forward:

“It’s an interview ... It’s the transcript of an interview ...”

Dan nodded, mouth open, hand frozen in mid-twitch. His voice was hoarse:

“It’s an interview with Gestapo Mueller.”

“Interview with Mueller?” – I had hoped for more – “He must have given many of them in his career.”

Dan blinked.

“Not posthumously, he didn’t. Not 16 years after he died in Berlin.”

Prologue

“Pol und Jude”

Political and a Jew.

It’s around 4 o’clock in the morning. I am not sure of the date. The days all look the same, so do the seasons. The barking, snarling, phlegm-permeated roar of the block’s senior prisoner. Beatings, curses, the fading reverberations of the wake-up gong.

I tear myself from my lice-infested dream. My clothes are still rain-drenched and crawling with the brown, hardy bugs. My skin is festering and spewing pus. My broken, dirt-encrusted nails leave bloody trails where I furiously burrow into the florid rash. I sleep in my tattered clogs – it saves some precious time and makes them hard to steal.

I jump down from the wooden bunk and make up my “bed” – a rotting clump of straw or wood shavings wrapped in paper which here pass for a mattress, a blanket rendered translucent by overuse. My narrow plank is shared with others. We move like automata, eyes downcast, skeletal hands shuttle with frenzy, folding the decomposing covers at precise, military angles. Failure to do so means flogging, or worse.

Fending off the rats that constantly attack us, we rush to the latrines. The silent, desperate scrimmage for the covered manholes into which we hastily relieve ourselves, half standing, half crouching, clothes dipped in excrement, no air, just the pervasive stench of aging urine.

A river of human flotsam, its moldy delta the elongated metal sinks. We push and shove to wash at least the moldering tips of our fingers, the parched corners of the mouth, the backside of a desiccated, weather-furrowed neck, rarely the sweat-cemented armpits, never the swollen feet or groin. Hundreds of us and so few water taps and such a feverish hush.

Don’t be among the last. Don’t miss the nebulous liquid that passes here for coffee, our only nourishment until the dinner break. In line, cup extended, I greedily measure the putrid slush and gulp it hurriedly, half-running to the roll call. The orchestra is playing a cheerful march in the distance. The

sounds waft around us, disembodied, nightmarish, like some discordant smoke.

The green stripe painted on a piece of cloth attached to the right pants leg of the eclectic attire of the prisoner in front of me identifies him as a common criminal. Not good company. Additionally, I am the last in the row of ten, not an auspicious place. They count us every morning when we depart, assigned to work details, and every evening, when some of us return, carrying the dead and murdered on our shoulders. The first and last positions in every row attract attention. Attention here means pain and, often, death.

This morning's roll call is mercifully brief, the foul mist and drizzle driving even the guards lethargic. Numbers are assigned to tasks and teams.

“A8806”

That's me.

From the corner of my eye, I see the block senior and two high-ranking officers, black tunics, iron crosses, skulls and bones, mirror-shiny boots. I am not allowed to look at them. I remove my cap forthwith. I can sense them examining the two pieces of cloth sewn to the left side of my shirt – a yellow square and a red triangle perched beneath it.

“Pol und Jude.” – says one of them. The voice of his younger but evidently senior colleague instructs: “Ask him.”

“Name?” – barks the other. I recoil. I have to think back to answer him. I haven't used my name since I arrived, since having crossed the wrought iron gates of this inhospitable planet.

I tell him my name, haltingly.

“He is the one” – the first, older officer opines.

Someone pushes me from behind with the tip of a wooden club: “You heard it, move!”

Move where? The other prisoners file away, putting distance between their emaciated selves and me, who am about to die. Smothered between four

guards, I am half walking, half carried from the square, through the barracks, across the rail tracks, on the ramp, and to the “Sauna”, the registration office, a vast expanse, littered with chairs and discarded personal belongings.

It is the usual mayhem this time of dawn: hundreds of new inmates, baffled, terrified, clinging to obsolete vestiges of their former lives. Some of them are ordered to climb on a rotating chair, are photographed en face, half profile, right profile, the lever is released, the chair bolts, they fall, the administrative personnel roar in unrestrained and venomous laughter.

Everyone is ordered to strip naked (“handkerchiefs and belts allowed!”), issued a number, tattooed, given new clothes, pushed into the showers, scalding hot or ice cold water, out of the showers, shivering, out the door, beaten, clubbed, cursed, into the barracks, whispered horror gossip, resented by his overcrowded blockmates, threatened, shoved, pushed, pulled ...

One of the guards motions; “Undress!” and when I am slow to respond, he mockingly taps me on the head with his baton. Frozen naked I am placed under a rusty showerhead. The icy emanation takes my belabored breath away. Seconds later, I am handed an oversized, perspiration-drenched, dandruff-flaked shabby business suit. I put it on.

The guards, ominous grins on their immaculately shaven faces, escort me back to the registration desk. A prisoner hands them a form bearing my number and photos of my previous incarnation. One of the guards signs and marks the date in a bulky book.

Next we exit the block and I am marched away from the camp, along the now-deserted railway ramp, through the electrified fences, the warning signs, the watchtower, the car barriers. There, on the muddy road, like an apparition, lurks a black Mercedes, no license plates, a white-gloved chauffeur holding the door wide open, snapped to attention.

My attendants blindfold me. A few minutes pass and then they address someone as “doctor”. They roll up my sleeve and I feel the painful prick of a syringe needle in my right arm. As I crumble, the last thing I see is the crooked sign that says: “Auschwitz II – Birkenau”. And then there’s darkness.

Chapter the First

The Frankenberg Bequest

Delivering me into this world was an act of defiance as is my name: Israel Sarid Roth. From early on, I was told that “Sarid” means “remnant” in Hebrew and this is what my parents were: survivors, ashen residues of that great conflagration, the Holocaust.

After the War, they met as two near-skeletons in a DP camp - that’s a Displaced Persons facility, often only marginally better than a concentration camp. They clung to each other in a hurried act of marriage and fourteen years later – the time it took them to regain some trust in life, not least by making a small fortune in the specialty publishing industry - they made me.

My mother slid the plate of broiled vegetables across the Formica-top table:

“Finish it!” – she demanded, almost ferociously – “You never know when you will eat next.”

My father pleaded with sad, rheumatic eyes and I nibbled half-heartedly at the multicolored mash.

It was almost time.

In Israel, the Holocaust Memorial Day opens with a wailing siren, followed by two minutes of contemplative, silent observation. One year, my mother traveled all the way to Jerusalem and, standing on the grounds of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum, she taped the piercing sound and the ensuing silence.

She played it every year since then on the appointed date and this year was no exception. As the sound faded, I rose up and exited this funereal abode, mumbling barely audible goodbyes.

The air outside was fresh with life.

I was 46 years old but didn’t have much to show for it, except a string of failed relationships. More out of angst than out of need, I worked three days

a week in the musty acquisitions department of the Genocide Monitoring Group (GMG), a non-government organization as well-funded and as morbid as my family.

There was a note on my creaking, plain-wood desk at the office: “urgent to see the manager Bauer”, Ashok, my Hindu assistant, scribbled. Bauer is my irascible boss. It sounded bad.

“Sit down” – droned Bauer, straightening an errant bow tie and, then, without a pause – “You’ve heard of Leo Frankenberg?”

I haven’t. And there was nowhere to sit in Bauer’s windowless and airless cubicle. The only thing that passed for a chair was bent shapeless by an avalanche of cardboard folders and reams of folded printouts. I crouched, resting my back on a polyglot tower of hardbacks.

“Neither have I,” – he confessed cheerfully – “until recently, that is. He is ... was ... supposed to have been a veteran and venerable investigative journalist. In other words, a bore and a loser ...”

Ever since he was criticized by the media for his high-handed ways at the GMG, Bauer detested journalists, investigative or otherwise.

“Was? He died?”

Bauer gave me a cryogenic look: “Of course he died! Why else would we be dissecting him here and now? For pleasure?”

Bauer was well-known for his rhetorical questions. I learned to avoid them.

Instead, I asked:

“It’s a bequest, then?”

Bauer beamed at me:

“Now you are talking. Bequest it is. The poor schmuck left us his notes, would you believe it? Luckily, they come with a handsome and” – he wagged a sausagy finger – “may I add, much-needed trust fund ...”

He rummaged among the tottering Everest of paper on his desk and withdrew what looked to me like a legal form.

Triumphantly:

“A sum of, never mind you how much, to defray all costs related to the cataloging, preservation, and publication of said works.”

I waited patiently. Perseverance paid with Bauer.

“I want you to travel to Israel tonight. Take an inventory of the bequest, a rough record, that sort of thing.”

“It’s that urgent?” – I protested mildly.

It didn’t register.

“On the one hand, it’s probably a load of worthless junk” – mused Bauer – “On the other hand, we sure could use the money.” He weighed his own arguments. I got up. When Bauer started to debate with himself, the meeting was over.

Only when I reached the incongruous carved oak door, did he come up for air:

“Breaking and entering is frowned upon in Israel. You may wish to take the key to his apartment with you.”

He had a point.

I have never been to Israel before. At the surprisingly shabby Ben-Gurion airport, the first thing that grabs you is the inordinate ubiquity of uniforms. They are everywhere: police, army, and a half dozen security agencies. Both men and women similarly attired, monolithically unsmiling, robotically efficient. It gave me the chills.

Add to that the largest concentration of yarmulkes and streimels this side of Brooklyn and a litany of sweaty, unkempt, bejeweled Levantine men and you can see why I wasn't too impressed.

And the decibels! Israel's typical noise level must be illegal in most civilized locales. People are very animated and amiable but there is something neurotic about it all, some pent-up aggression that is almost palpable.

Matters didn't improve in the queue to the idling taxis and my mood was hardly elevated when the driver refused to turn on the meter. "I will make you a special price" – he bawled in broken English. He kept his word.

I climbed the winding stairs to the top floor of a Jerusalem stone encased apartment block and faced a gaunt door whose erstwhile greenish paint was peeling exuberantly all over the mud-caked floor. The key fitted in but then refused to budge in either direction.

Talk about inauspicious.

That evening, safely ensconced in a faded leather armchair, I started taking stock of the cataract of paper that constituted Frankenberg's life. It wasn't much to behold and it was sad. One's life's work is another person's trash.

But there was a lot of it and it kept me busy for almost three days. And, then, as I was getting ready to up and go, I saw it. A black floppy disk of the kind that has been out of favor and out of use for years. It was labeled 3/3.

Frankenberg had an antique computer with a floppy drive and I tuned it on and inserted the diskette. It contained a strange file that wouldn't open no matter what I tried.

This was the first time in days that I felt curious about something. Frankenberg was a humdrum sort of fellow, not the kind that does well in his chosen line of work. The interviews he conducted were insipid, his writing was lethargic, his incredible naivety galling. I wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him good and proper. But under the circumstances that would probably have been against the law.

This obsolete piece of magnetic media was different. Frankenberg evidently did not want it read or why would he encode it? Did he encrypt it or was the data merely corrupt? Maybe the file could be opened by one of those ancient word-processing applications still in use only by my mother? The file extension, 003, was something I never came across before.

I was out of my depth here but I knew that this was right up Dan's alley and that's where I was heading next. On an impulse I would live to bitterly regret, I omitted to include the dismal object in the inventory. I shoved it into the inner pocket of my crumpled jacket and took the next flight home.

In the three days of my absence, Bauer was transformed. It wasn't owing to grief brought on by our separation. Bauer was excited, that much was obvious. But there was something else. Had I not known the man, I would have said that he was frightened.

He thumped the list with a clenched fist:

“Are you absolutely, one hundred and ten percent sure that everything is here?”

I shrugged. This was the third time in as many minutes that he had asked.

“There was nothing else? It's a big apartment, you may have missed something?”

“Like what?”

Bauer, apoplectic:

“I don't know what, dammit! Had I known what I wouldn't be asking you now, would I?”

Alert: rhetorical question. Mum's the word.

“OK, OK” – he panted – “Listen, I want you on the next flight to that narcissist's flat. I want you to buy a fine toothed comb before you leave.

And then I want you to apply it as you go over the place again and again, until you find it!”

“Find what?”

“Go, go! Don’t waste my time!” – Bauer was clearly pointing at the door. He really meant it. I spend five decades of my life avoiding the Holy Land and then, within a week, I am visiting it twice.

“Sit!”

As I didn’t rise from my chair yet, this was an easy one to comply with.

“Listen, I have a better idea. Personally - and I mean you, as ‘in person’ - go there and pack the whole thing up. Don’t leave a dust mote behind. Pack the dog food, too. I want the whole garbage dump on my doorstep, special delivery.”

“You mean ...”

“I mean courier, Federal Express or whatever we are using.”

“It will cost a fortune! Plus, I don’t think FedEx or UPS do these kinds of shipments.”

“Find someone who does. You go with the goods door to door. Don’t show your face here, unless accompanied by Frankenberg’s junk.”

I lost my patience.

“Bauer,” – I muttered ominously – “you mind filling me in? What’s the rush? What’s going on here? Anything I should know?”

“Nothing. I am eager to lay my hands of the trust fund, that’s all. The sooner the better. Can’t do that until the notes and everything else are actually in our warehouse.”

I don’t mind being lied to. But I hate being taken for a fool. For the first time, I felt real good for having absconded with the disk.

Back at Frankenberg's apartment, I had no problems with the key this time. The door was ajar. Actually, it was off its torn hinges. Someone went through the premises with a malfunctioning giant vacuum cleaner. The house was a mess, paper everywhere, the innards of the computer and its disemboweled printer strewn randomly across the carpet. Even the old men's suits were not spared. Pillows, shelves, book bindings, and folders littered the floor.

Jerusalem is the strangest place. The scene of much mayhem throughout three millennia of tortured history, it still exudes an air of ethereal tranquility, a calming effect that I would have called "spiritual" had I been so inclined. Between wailing walls and golden domes, this metropolis played host to King David and to Jesus, to King Solomon and to countless wannabe Roman emperors. It is one of the cradles of civilization and you can feel it among its winding alleys, stone facades, quaint bazaars ("Kasbahs"), and barren hills.

So, this ransacked private space was incongruent. This is what I told Bauer when I returned, empty-handed:

"There was little to salvage. I think they were equipped with the same fine toothed comb you had recommended."

Bauer glowered at me, speechless for a change.

I half expected it, but it was still a shock, the mutilated privacy of my shredded clothes, my trampled suits, my family photos, and my stolen laptop. Nothing else was missing but my apartment was in chaos. Whoever did it was thorough and brought to cruel light many things I had conveniently forgotten I possessed. I stared around in disbelief and budding outrage and then I crumbled on the knife-torn pillowcases on my bed and slept.

I woke up even more exhausted. Whatever had to be done will have to wait another day. I couldn't stay here. I had to get away and put some thinking distance between me and this bizarre affair.

I assembled a random sample of attire, stuffed it into a battered suitcase, and headed towards the office. Better to spend the night with Eddy, the watchman than alone with the ghosts of my past and a potentially revenant burglar.

One of the reasons I took the job with the GMG was that their headquarters was right across the street. This proximity came handy with a workaholic boss like Bauer. Two blocks, the traffic lights and there I was, entering the nondescript cottage and waving a fatigued hello at Eddy.

“Mr. Roth,” – he commented soberly – “You don’t look too good”.

“I don’t feel too good.” – I obliged him – “It’s been a long day.”

“And now it’s going to be a long night.” – Eddy gave me his mock-Latino wink – “They are waiting for you.”

I felt a tad disoriented.

“Waiting for me ...” – I repeated densely.

“Upstairs.” – Eddy was nothing if not patient – “All three of’em.”

“Eddy,” – I said slowly, trying to convey the gravity of the occasion – “who are these people? I came here by sheer chance. We wouldn’t be talking now had someone not broken and entered my apartment. So, you see” – I patronized him – “I don’t have an appointment with anyone or any three people.”

Eddy was on his feet, gun drawn, long before I ended my speech. He pressed a button under his counter at the reception. “The cops” – he mouthed as he moved stealthily down the corridor motioning me not to follow him which, of course, I did, too terrified to remain all by myself in the deserted lobby.

We climbed the muffled stairs slowly. My office was at the end of a semi-elliptical hallway, so we couldn’t see it from where we were standing. But we could definitely hear the voices, one commanding, the other two obliging.

“We are blocking their escape route.” – whispered Eddy – “You stay here and I will go and see what’s it all about.”

“Suppose we change places.” – I counter-susurrated – “You stay here and I will go and see what’s it all about.”

Eddy hesitated and then: “Suit yourself. It’s your office.”

I tiptoed towards the open door that marked my niche, knocked, and entered.

I remember little else, except the sound of a distant shot and the blurred image of two very surprised men, huddled around my filing cabinet. I woke up hours later in what looked like the emergency ward of a down-at-heel hospital, head bandaged.

The first thing I saw was Eddy, all bruised and livid. Next to him was a swarthy and burly cop who eyed me dispassionately.

“Can you answer a few questions for us, Mr. Roth?”

Clearly, empathy was not his strong suit. I groaned a “yes”.

“Did you see any of the three burglars? Can you identify them if I show you an album?”

“What burglars? I saw the silhouettes of two men in my office. They were going over the contents of my desk. They were not happy to see me, I guess.” – trying to sit up was a bad idea.

“Come now, Roth,” – growled the lawman – “don’t give us the runaround. We have been to your apartment, Mr. de Piccioto and I.” – It took a minute to register that Mr. de Piccioto was Eddy.

“Someone broke into my apartment, too” – I said obtusely.

The cop sighed. Eddy sighed. So, I joined them and sighed, too.

“Listen, mister” – the officer tried another tack – “They will be back, you know. Whatever it is they are looking for, they couldn’t find it in your

apartment and you rudely interrupted them at your office. But these are pros and they are not going to go away. “

“I haven’t seen anyone, officer. I must have been hit on the head or something.” – I winced. Eddy nodded in confirmation:

“One of them was watching the door. Mr. Roth didn’t have a chance. Then they came bursting down the hallway. I fired at them but they were all over me before I could get a good aim.”

The cop waved a hirsute hand to stem the verbal avalanche.

“OK, forget the burglars, just tell me what they were after.”

“I have no idea” – I lied and not too well. Even Eddy eyed me with sudden suspicion and unease.

“You’ll have only yourself to blame next time you meet with this delightful crew.” – snorted the officer – “In a dark alley late at night perhaps?”

I had it with his fear-mongering.

“I don’t go out at night.” – I retorted angrily – “And, now, gentlemen, if you have no official business here, I would ask you to leave my room. My head feels like a foundry in heat.”

I saw that the simile was lost on them.

“Throbbing and on fire.” – I translated.

That did the trick.

Chapter the Second

The Interview

A day later, in my ruined flat, head still pulsating, I reached an important decision: I couldn't stay here any longer. I knew that somehow all this had to do with the disk: the invasion of Frankenberg's apartment, the scouring of my home, using false pretenses to enter my office, and the vicious attack on my extremity.

Miraculously, through it all, I succeeded to hang on to my suitcase. I left it, and the disk, next to Eddy's station when I began to shadow him last night. It was there this afternoon, apparently unmolested. I lost the key but I didn't let that worry me.

Dan accepted my materialization on his doorstep with equanimity, if not with grace. He always did. We first met at the GMG, when he came to enquire about a piece of software that we authored, something to do with demographics and genocides.

I then thought him pompous and socially constipated. But there was something in his brown eyes that mitigated his overweening ways. Later I discovered what it was: pain.

We had nothing in common, really. He was into computers and other gadgets; I was into morbidity in its myriad manifestations. He was technology, I was humanities. But somehow these disparities brought us closer and we meshed well.

Dan was modestly taller than I, considerably stouter and sported an auburn, neatly trimmed moustache-cum-beard. He walked around barefoot and invariably wore a djellaba that succeeded to appear both flowing and well-pressed.

"Come in." – he said simply – "You look horrible. Tell me everything about it."

So, I did. Dan listened carefully, fingertips steepled under his an oval chin.

At long last, he moved, breaking the spell.

“Let’s have a look at the floppy.” – he suggested quietly.

I handed it to him and we walked in a truncated procession into his study.

Dan was interested in everything and his library was, therefore, best characterized as eclectic. But he was the most thorough person I knew. He really delved into the topics he fancied. Though an intellectual itinerant and an autodidact, he was not a charlatan. He was always willing to admit to ignorance. “My nescience fuels my learning” – he explained to me one quiet evening.

He was an early adopter and his house was always filled with gadgets. But he never bought anything just because it was new. He made good use of his acquisitions.

In his study, he kept his collection of personal computers, from the pioneering Sinclair, Atari, and Commodore to the latest HPs, iMacs, and Compaqs. He must have had dozens of them. I never asked him how he could afford all this and his lavish lifestyle to boot and he never volunteered the information. It was this kind of friendship.

Dan scrutinized the disk, nestled in his fleshy palm. He looked up at me:

“Why don’t you simply give it to them?”

Good question, this.

“Perhaps because they didn’t ask me nicely.” – I answered glibly. Dan wasn’t impressed. I tried again, more seriously this time:

“They broke into my apartment, raided my office, and rendered me unconscious for a few hours. This persistence makes me curious. I want to know what’s on this disk that’s worth taking so many risks.”

“What’s on this disk is dangerous. Perhaps the less you know, the better.” – Dan opined.

“You sound like my mother.” – I could think of no worse slight.

“She did survive two years in Auschwitz.” – observed Dan calmly.

An awkward pause ensued. Then, Dan:

“They can’t take the chance that you may have copied the disk. Giving it to them won’t be enough.”

That sounded alarming. And true.

“What do you mean?”

“Sarid” – expounded Dan patiently – “There’s something on this disk that’s worth breaking the law for. Something on it makes people risk life and limb and assault perfect strangers. This disk is bad juju.”

“It’s too late for that, isn’t it? I have the disk in my possession and I did not enter it in the inventory list. It’s a done deal, Dan.” – a miserable pun.

But Dan, his wide back to me, was already firing up a huge boxlike device.

“Let’s prey that the diskette is still readable. You ever hear of media rot?”

I haven’t.

“Magnetic media tend to disintegrate under the influence of airborne spores and gravity-induced leakage of bits and bytes.”

Very clear.

“Most magnetic media are not readable after ten years.”

“I saw the file on Frankenberg’s computer. I just couldn’t open it.”

The machine under Dan’s massive work area coughed and started and then hissed.

Dan paid no heed to it.

“Then he must have created this file within the last 5 to 10 years. No earlier, no way.”

“Why is that so important?” – I was beginning to feel exasperated.

Dan shrugged:

“I am not sure it is but one never knows. It is important to establish all the facts, pertinent or not, at the initial phase of a forensic investigation.”

I told him that I didn’t realize that’s what we were doing.

Dan remained standing as he gently inserted the disk into the slot of an antiquated driver and turned the latch down to secure its position.

The drive whirred and the computer shook violently. Gradually, a text line appeared:

Mint.003

“Outlandish file extension” – I commented knowingly.

Dan nodded, distracted:

“It’s not a file extension, it’s a chain numerator.”

He lost me. That’s all it took.

“What does that mean?” - I ate humble pie.

“This file is not encrypted,” – explained Dan – “it is the last link in a chain of 3 records. The original file was too big to fit on a single diskette, so Frankenberg or someone used a file splitter application to divide it to three parts. The first part contains the instructions on how to reconstruct or reconstitute the original document.”

He went to another computer, far more recent, and invited me over to watch.

He clicked open an application and selected a document. The program hummed and hawed and created six new files, each one 720 kilobytes large. They were numbered 001 to 006.

Dan then proceeded to copy them into a separate folder. There, he clicked on file number 001. Miraculously the original document reappeared.

I looked at him, dumbfounded.

“But we don’t have the first parts.” – I stammered.

Dan nodded gravely: “It’s a serious problem, but not insurmountable. I will have to create two dummy files with the attributes of the two missing installments. Then I will fool the application into believing that we have all three segments. Give me half an hour.”

“Sarid” – Dan’s voice was odd, almost choked – “Sarid, come here, man.” I never heard him like that before.

I found Dan crouching in front of the screen, mesmerized. I hurried over and kneeled by his side.

“We are in,” – he almost lisped – “the files merged.”

Enraptured, we gazed at the screen as the text document unwound itself, page by flickering page.

I leaned forward:

“It’s an interview ... It’s the transcript of an interview ...”

Dan nodded, mouth open, hand frozen in mid-twitch. His voice was hoarse:

“It’s an interview with Gestapo Mueller.”

“Interview with Mueller?” – I had hoped for more – “He must have given many of them in his career.”

Dan blinked.

“Not posthumously, he didn’t. Not 16 years after he died in Berlin.”

Chapter the Third

Transcript of an interview with Heinrich “Gestapo” Mueller Segment 3

“said to you is not true. I would have never collaborated with the Bolsheviks, not even to save my life!” – I imagined him more dispassionate, the much-feared “Gestapo” Mueller.

I imagined him taller. His eyes are still deep set and cunning, his chin still squarely firm despite his years, lips pursed and bloodless, his nose more massive, hawkish, now twitching in palpable disdain. He is as menacingly bullnecked as he must have been all those years back in occupied and tortured Europe.

I acknowledged his outburst by nodding my head and he calmed down abruptly. He grunted and shifted in the horsehair armchair:

“We, the Nazis were the natural allies of the Zionists – not the so called “liberal democracies”. Our idea was to clean Europe of Jews, our intractable enemies. We wanted to solve the Jewish question for centuries to come. We wanted them out, the Zionists wanted them out. The Jews are a race and the Zionists accepted that – they were proud of it!”

He leaned forward, transfixed, as if by a revelation:

“You know what? The Zionists agreed with us that the Jews have no place in Germany. Our mob shouted ‘To Palestine with you!’ and the Zionists concurred!”

He gazed at me intently, as though trying to gauge the effect of his words.

Suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed hoarsely:

“Hitler was the great white hope of Zionism! Our Jewish policies virtually guaranteed the emigration of wealthy Jews to Palestine! There would have been no State of Israel without us!”

He clutched his abdomen in excruciating pain. “The cancer,” – he volunteered unnecessarily – “it’s killing me.” Matter of factly.

“Some fools in the SD and the SS even learned Hebrew, listened to Jewish folk music, and published pro-Zionist articles in Goebbels’ propaganda rag and in the Schwarze Korps. But they were disillusioned soon enough.”

“Disillusioned? Why?”

He shrugged:

“Most Jews didn’t want to go to the Palestinian hellhole. They got too accustomed to the finery of Berlin. They wanted to make off with their money and possessions. They didn’t take us seriously. They laughed in our faces in our own country.”

A body-shattering cough. I moved to offer him a glass of water - then I remembered who he is and froze in mid-motion. He grinned as he noticed my cumbersome antics; he missed nothing, “Gestapo” Mueller.

“Anyhow, we let them haul their precious money with them. God knows, we were in dire economic straits ourselves, but we let them get away with their lucre. And still they wouldn’t go. Hitler gave up on Zionism as early as 1935, but he still staunchly supported the Transfer agreement ... Everyone wondered why, but only Rohm and later Himmler and myself found out.”

I must have raised my eyebrows, because Mueller brushed an imaginary insect aside and muttered: “Be patient. It is all in the file. He was being blackmailed by the Jews.”

He wouldn’t add a syllable to this cryptic and seemingly counterfactual announcement, so I tried a different tack:

“Why did Hitler give up on Zionism? After all, well over one third of Germany’s Jews did leave in the 1930s and many of them did go to Palestine. The Zionists did deliver ...”

He waved my words aside impatiently:

“We were acquiring Jew-infested territories far faster than the Zionists could ever evacuate them. I sent Eichmann on a mission in 1941 and he returned with horror stories that you won’t believe. We were drowning in disease-ridden, Bolshevik, partisan-supporting Jews.”

He paused, as if for emphasis:

“No one wanted the Jews. The British sealed off Palestine. The Americans imposed immigration quotas. The Jews merely abused our magnanimity.”

“I don’t understand” – I said and his head jerked up, his face a hostile mask.

I forced myself to proceed:

“Yesterday you told me that Russia was in the clutches of a Jewish-Bolshevik clique, that America and the United Kingdom were Jewish fiefdoms. Now, you are telling me that they did not want the Jews ...?”

“Precisely!” – He bellowed triumphantly – “The Jews betrayed their own! This is what forced us to adopt desperate measures in the East! The Jews themselves would not accept their own race and blood! The Zionists worked with us hand in glove, but they were impotent. The rest of the Jewish-controlled world hated our new, hopeful Germany. Naturally, they showed no interest to help us solve our problems with the Jews. They sought to poison us from the inside.”

“Did you need any help to solve your problems with the Jews?”

He glared at me, uncertain whether I was mocking him or not. His smallish body tensed and he put on a pair of rimless glasses that he removed from an inner pocket of his shirt. He studied me a while.

“Someone came up with the idea of establishing a Jewish reserve somewhere: Madagascar, Lublin, Palestine. Then the Arabs became our friends” – he snorted derisively – “and Palestine was out, officially.”

He ticked sausagey fingers:

“Immigration failed. Evacuation failed. Reservoirs failed. Being a Mischling, Hitler was soft on the Jews – but, by 1941 it was clear even to

him that we are all alone in this business. We did what we had to do. We had no choice, a la guerre comme la guerre.” – In guttural French.

As he took off his glasses, I noticed the abnormal proximity of his eyes, set in cavernous and penumbral sockets.

I may have misheard:

“Mischling? Person of mixed-race, partly Jewish?”

He became restless:

“Look, this is why I am talking to you, a Jewish journalist today. I want you to publish something for me. It is evidence that the Jews killed the Jews. We, the Germans only helped logistically. Hitler, Goebbels, Heydrich – they were all Mischlinge. Himmler and I had proof, of course. Courtesy of Rohm.” – He gave a malevolent chuckle.

He bent over the armrest of the creaky seat and grasped with arthritic fingers a slender manila envelope. He thrust it at me:

“Here, take it. Publish it. The truth must out.”

I merely watched him, not moving an inch. He sighed and raised both hands, manila envelope and all, in resignation:

“On April 30, the Fuehrer took his own life and left us all orphaned. I remained in the Feuhrerbunker with my radio specialist, Scholz. On May 1, we ran the 600 meters to my office in the headquarters of the RHSA. The week before, I packed all the files into large crates and Scholz and I and a couple of good men carried them into a waiting van.”

He hesitated but plunged on:

“The Catholics helped me get here through Spain aboard a submarine. The files were always with me. I never let them out of my sight. This envelope is the crown jewels” – he laughed bitterly – “My comrades would kill me if they knew that I am giving it to you.” He sobers up: “You are as good as dead if they find out about this little transaction of ours.”

This was it. He wouldn't say another word. He just eyed me pensively as I probed and tried to provoke him into a response. Finally, I got the hint and rose from my seat.

“Look,” – Mueller said suddenly – “Hitler abandoned us and betrayed us all by committing unmanly suicide in his bunker. He left us orphaned and at the mercy of the Red barbarians. He mismanaged the war and unnecessarily and stupidly abused the nations he occupied, many of them our natural allies. His master race delusions brought ruin on my nation and for that I cannot forgive him. But Europe should be grateful to Hitler: it could have never prospered and be peacefully united with the Jewish race amidst us.” – He half-whispered – “Even you, the Jews, must recognize this.”

There was nothing more to say. I left.

Asuncion, Paraguay, September 1960

Note to myself:

Devreaux and I decided not to publish any of it during the Eichmann trial. To re-consider later as per outcomes of the proceedings.

Enclosure

Gestapo name file:

Hitler, A. (Geheimstaatspolizei VP-55b/9.44/Zo/IG) – 81 pages

Chapter the Fourth

The Reichsfuehrer Enquires

“Cigar?”

I am facing a shuttered window. A picture of Hitler on the wall, eyes distant, body erect, hair swept across the prairie of his forehead. He is wearing a uniform of his own design. In the corner, a swastika flag clings to its pole. A leather armchair. Padded walls. The smell of ...

“Cognac?”

No, thanks, to both.

“It’s been a long time since you had either” – the voice is firm but understanding, almost compassionate or forgiving. My foibles seem to enhance its ostentatious magnanimity.

He is off focus. I blink and he waves at someone out of my field of vision. Another pinprick. Much better. Boundaries emerge and objects spring to autonomous life all around me – and so does he.

A puffy face and mousy moustache, eyes alternately hooded and frozen gray and blue behind his dainty pince-nez, his chin receding, faint whitish scars across a flabby cheek. He ceremoniously opens a folder and spends some time perusing it, marking it with a green pencil. He then looks up. I am surprised how stout he is. The photos in the papers and the newsreels do him injustice. He is almost athletic.

“Your name is Ernst Frankenberg?”

He knows the answer.

“Yes, Herr Reichsfuehrer!”

“Ah,” – he feigns pleasurable surprise – “so you recognize me?”

Someone prods me from behind. I am expected to respond.

“Yes, Herr Himmler, the whole world knows who you are.”

I can see that he is not sure how to take my backhanded compliment. He coughs nervously and the mask of courtly and infinitely tolerant schoolmaster crumbles momentarily.

“Well, yes,” – he declaims at last – “one has duties to perform, a debt to one’s predecessors as well as to future generations.” He doesn’t talk, he lectures.

“Back to our little business.”

He ruffles through the assorted documents in the file. One of them seems to catch his eye.

“You studied Law in Berlin in 1929?”

“Yes, Herr Reichsfuehrer, I did.”

He hums and haws.

“You knew one Magda Quandt?”

I nod and then, painful reminder in ribs, I mutter: “Yes, I did.”

Himmler smiles, but his eyes do not:

“You knew her real well, one might say?”

“One might” – I agree.

“How well?” – He leans forward conspiringly.

“We were lovers.” – I tell him. His mouth twitches and he clasps his stomach, as though in the throes of agony. After a while, he reasserts his posture.

“Were you the only Jew that had defiled her?”

“No. She had many Jewish friends of both sexes. One of them had loved her before me.”

“Viktor, Vitaly Arlosoroff” – he mutters darkly.

“Chaim” – I correct him – “Chaim Arlosoroff. He changed his name when he became a Zionist.”

“And an important one” – Himmler seek to impress me with his ersatz omniscience.

“And an important one” – I concur – “When he ... when he died, he was the head of the political section of the Jewish Agency.”

“You mean when he was assassinated by his own flesh and blood” – Himmler inserts, venomously.

“Yes, when he was murdered on the coast of Tel-Aviv in 1934.”

There is a pregnant pause and then Himmler proceeds:

“Did you ever meet Arlosoroff?”

“I did.”

“Once, more than once? Do I need to extract this information from you or perhaps you would consider sparing my time and energy?”

“More than once. I met him in Berlin a few times. He came to visit Magda.”

“When was the last time you met him?”

It was as if we are dissecting the contents of a movie, so far and alien it feels, my erstwhile life.

“In ... in 1933, I think. “

“You think?”

He never raises his voice and never wavers or flounders or gets flustered, Himmler. He reminds me of a Fritz Lang industrial robot.

“May 1933, Herr Reichsfuehrer, I am certain of it now.”

“And so are we” – he grins. He looks proud as though his favorite pupil had just passed an important test.

He toys with a golden pen on the bureau.

Almost inaudibly: “Did you give him the documents?”

“What documents?”

“Come, come, Herr Frankenberg” – laughs Himmler – “I thought that we have succeeded to impress you with our thoroughness. Don’t make me repeat the question, I beg you.”

Someone moves imperceptibly behind my back.

“I gave him the documents.”

“That’s better” – sighs Himmler – “I hate it when people force us to behave in manifestly un-Germanic and uncivilized ways.”

He scribbles something in a pad and then looks up:

“Well, go on, I haven’t got all day!”

A sudden gust from the ventilation shaft ruffles the pages of a wall calendar behind his chair. July 19, 1944. Chaim is dead. Magda is a hostage of the evil dwarf that she had married. Of the triangle only I am left, a prisoner in Auschwitz.

“These documents, Herr Reichsfuehrer, were handed down the generations in our family. After my ancestors converted to Christianity, we settled in Graz. It was there that the whole affair began.”

Chapter the Fifth

Mystery Wrapped in an Enigma

“There are four groups of documents here.” – Dan said as he tended the espresso-maker, all that he salvaged from his 5-years old marriage – “There’s the interview and three sets of images.”

“How can you drink this sludge?” – I mused aloud.

Dan glanced at me thoughtfully and chose to ignore my culinary aside.

”Now, we have read the interview – rather the last third of it – and we have had a look at the images.”

“Which didn’t advance us much. I have no idea what Muller is all about and the documents look pretty innocuous to me: birth certificates, business contracts, and the like.”

Dan nodded: “Yes, it is rather cryptic. But there are two reasons not to dismiss the whole thing out of hand.”

Dan had this unnerving habit of lapsing into telepathy and needed reminding that not all his interlocutors were similarly endowed.

“What reasons?” – I writhed as I sipped the tarry libation that he handed me.

“One,” – expounded didactic Dan – “the fact that the interviewee is Muller and two,” – he gargled contentedly as he let the dark lava caress his larynx – “the fact that this floppy disk seems to bring out the worst in people.”

I gingerly touched my skull. I knew exactly what he meant.

“This could be a hoax” – I suggested feebly. Dan shook his head emphatically: “Then why the breaking and entering? Why attack you so viciously? Why Bauer’s sudden obsession with the inventory?”

Good questions.

“Listen, Sarid, the cop was right. They seem to be a determined lot. You may be in real danger.”

I should have felt intimidated or helpless, but instead the whole affair struck me as hilarious. I laughed convulsively, tears running down my java-seared cheeks, and gasped for air.

Dan sounded worried:

“Maybe you better stay here tonight.”

Which was the coup-de-grace. I splayed out on the couch, bellowing with untrammelled mirth.

Dan fired his prized laptop.

“I am going to upload the contents of the disk to a Web page.”

That sobered me up.

“You are going to do *what?* Websites are public, aren’t they? You are going to publish the damn thing?”

Dan stroked the wireless mouse:

“Of course I am not. The page will be password protected. Only you and I will be able to access it from any computer in the world.”

Lapsed into telepathy again. “Dan?”

“Should something happen to you” – he paused and then: “or to me, the other one goes public with the page and makes the contents of the disk available to all Netizens.”

“What if we are both bumped?”

Poor joke. Dan took it seriously.

“I am going to set up a task and schedule it. If none of us reschedules the task, the address of the Webpage and the password will be e-mailed to selected online, print, and electronic media.”

“I don’t know how to reschedule a task” – I protested.

“It’s never too late to learn!” – declared Dan solemnly – “Grab a chair, there’s still some espresso left.”

I was afraid of that.

“Do you think they killed him?”

Dan’s conspiracy theory paranoia was infectious.

“Killed whom?”

“The journalist. Do you think they found out that he was had the documents and did him in?”

“Why wait four decades to eliminate such a substantial risk?”

Dan’s iron logic prevailed.

“So, having discovered it only recently, it came as a shock to them, the fact that the documents were in his possession?”

“It definitely unsettled some of them” – concluded Dan with an understatement.

Chapter the Sixth

Old News

“Heinrich Mueller? Gestapo Mueller? The head of the Nazi secret state police?”

I felt more awkward by the minute. Libby was the reference librarian of the GMG, a degreed historian, a recognized authority on both the Nazi Party and the Holocaust, a beauty in a quirky, decadent French way, and, unbeknownst to her, the perennial cynosure of my most illicit fantasies.

I tended to dismiss the disk as a ruse, the hybrid outcome of bad taste-meets-mass psychosis. With the Eichmann trial dominating the airwaves at the time, people were inclined to suspect even their own parents of being former high-ranking SS officers. An unscrupulous journalist could have made a killing by interviewing – or even by pretending to have interviewed – someone like Mueller.

Of course, this pet theory of mine failed to account for many facts:

If Frankenberg was a mere publicity hound, why did he decide not to publish the sensational interview after all?

If what’s on the disk was a spoof, why all the cloak and dagger stuff? Why bludgeon me into oblivion and why brutally alter the interior design of at least two apartments and one office a continent apart?

I needed a second opinion. Hence Libby. I sprawled on a laid-back settee, facing the counter behind which she presided from a battered swivel chair. The librarian position was adjacent to the frosty glass door that opened into an elongated corridor that spanned the length of the entire building. The library’s collections, some of them priceless, were stacked rather haphazardly on grey aluminum shelving which reached up to a semipternally cobwebbed ceiling and two paint-chipped fans.

The GMG’s library was not an inspiring place.

“Let’s have a look” – she said. We spent the next half hour in contented propinquity – at least, I did.

“There’s nothing here that was not widely known or speculated on in 1960, when the interview ostensibly took place.” – was her verdict.

I felt relieved. But not for long:

“Except for one curious point.” – She chewed on a lucky pencil – “Mueller says that Hitler, being a Mischling, went soft on the Jews....”

“And that’s not news?” – I barged in – “You should tell my mother that!”

“Whether or not he treated the Jews leniently, at least until 1941, is a matter for a debate among historians that goes back to the 1970s. That’s hardly news.” – Libby observed coolly – “I am referring to the assertion that Hitler was blackmailed by the Zionists into accepting and then actively supporting the Transfer Agreement, in the face of strong internal opposition.”

I wheeled away my librarian chair and raised my hands despondently:

“Libby, whoa, please! I don’t understand a word you are saying, even though it sounds suspiciously like English. You lost me back in 1941.”

She smiled and it was like the lights went on. I grinned back at her, I couldn’t help it. She had freckles, I noticed for the first time.

“Can I ask you some questions and can you try to answer them in a way that won’t force me to ask them all over again?”

She giggled girlishly:

“Sure, go ahead. Sorry I got carried away.”

“Was Hitler a Mischling? Did he have any Jewish blood in him?”

I thought of my mother. The mere question would have rendered her permanently apoplectic.

“No historian found any shred of evidence that Hitler had even one drop of Jewish blood in him.”

“It sounds like there’s a ‘but’ somewhere ...” – I wagered cautiously.

“But, during the 1930s, a lot of people – including senior members of the Nazi Party – believed that Hitler’s paternal grandfather might have been Jewish. The original birth certificate of Alois, Hitler’s father, said: father – unknown.”

“Hitler’s father was a bastard. That explains a lot of his off-springs’ foul character. Were children born out of wedlock common at that time?”

Libby nodded affirmatively: “In the second half of the nineteenth century, many rural folk moved to the cities. Sexual abuse was not unheard off.”

“So why was Hitler singled out?”

Libby twitched and looked away uncomfortably.

“Some of his relatives threatened repeatedly to reveal the family’s secrets. These recurrent attempts at blackmail convinced everyone that Hitler’s closets were crammed with skeletons.”

“What an apt metaphor” – I commented dryly.

She blushed: “Sorry, I forgot” – and touched my hand flutteringly.

“Hitler is known to have paid close to a quarter million US dollars to his nephew, a certain William Patrick. It was not out of familial devotion. Hitler found the little creep repulsive. The curious thing is that this extortionist was living in Berlin when he successfully bled Hitler, the omnipotent Reichskanzler! Hitler could have ordered him killed – but he didn’t.”

“OK, so he had some leeches for relatives. How does that lead to a Jewish ancestor?”

She shrugged:

“I think that this canard would have died a natural death had it not been for Hans Frank, a trusted lawyer who, during World War II, became entangled in all sorts of genocides in Poland and was executed in 1946. He wrote his memoirs in jail. He insisted that in the 1930s, Hitler asked him to delve deeper into the murky genealogy of his family in order to rebut the nasty and damaging rumors once and for all.”

“Be careful what you wish for” – I muttered.

“Precisely” – Libby agreed – “Frank discovered, or so he claimed, that Hitler’s grandfather was the 19 years old scion of a Jewish family from Graz, Austria – the Frankenbergs. This overactive youth is said to have impregnated Hitler’s parental grandmother, Maria Anna. Leopold Frankenberg, the clan’s patriarch, paid Alois child support until he was 14 or 18. The strange thing is that Hitler admitted to Frank that his grandmother had received these regular payments, but he said that she cheated the Jews and made them believe that she had conceived the child she was carrying with their son.”

I stared at her dumbfounded:

“Was any of this ever substantiated?”

“Not one iota. Graz expelled all its Jews in the 15th century and had remained Judenrein – cleansed of Jews – until the 1860s. There is no record of Maria Anna ever having been to Graz. There are no child support payment slips, money orders, or cancelled checks, nothing.”

I gestured my incomprehension and it worked.

“There is one more thing that may explain the persistent gossip about Hitler’s Jewish impurity. Mueller is right, you know” – Libby mused – “Hitler was atypically soft on the Jews until at least 1940.”

“You mean 1935 – the Nuremberg race laws?”

Libby shook her curls at me:

“No, I mean 1940. Maybe he felt insecure. Maybe he believed his own propaganda and was terrified of what World Jewry might do to him. Maybe

he was biding his time, waiting for Germany to get mightier and less dependent on other countries. Whatever the reason: regarding Jewish policy, Hitler was by far the most conciliatory and moderate figure in the Nazi Party and, perhaps even in Germany.”

“I never heard that one before.” – I countered, sarcastically.

“But it’s true.” – assured me Libby solemnly.

Chapter the Seventh

The Fuehrer's Curious Reluctance

“Is it always this busy?” – I asked Libby and she laughed. Not one patron, not a single phone call shattered the serene afternoon silence. Libby spent the last ten minutes grappling valiantly with an obstreperous coffee vending machine. She finally gave up and we settled for Coke.

“When Hitler assumed power in 1933, he exhorted the wild men of the SA not to attack the Jews: ‘Harassment of individuals, the obstruction of cars, and disruptions to business are to be put to an absolute stop ... Never let yourselves be distracted for one second from our watchword, which is the destruction of Marxism.’”

“Hitler made so many speeches ... Surely, you can find isolated quotes to substantiate any thesis...”

“No,” protested Libby, “this was not an isolated utterance. It is a pattern that remains unbroken for almost eight years. When Jews and others began to boycott Germany and German goods in early 1933, Hitler made his Vice-Chancellor, von Papen, publish an open letter addressed to the American Chamber of Commerce and saying that Jews were safe in Germany. Even Goering was forced to apologize to German Jewish organizations for the truly spontaneous violence of the SA and lower party ranks.”

“Hitler was always strong on expedience. I am not impressed. It was merely a tactical retreat in the strategic war on the Jews.”

“If it was merely a tactical retreat, as you say, then it was the longest one in history. Hitler spent 8 years avoiding battle with the Jews and less than 3 years frontally assaulting them.”

“Only results count. He killed 6 million Jews. That it took him 8 years to steel his nerves and put in place the necessary bureaucracy doesn't detract from his guilt.”

“Of course it doesn't!” – Exclaimed Libby impatiently – “I am not a holocaust denier, for Chrissake! But aren't you the least bit curious to find

out what took him so long and why, for eight otherwise triumphant years, Hitler did his best to shield the Jews from the unbridled wrath of his compatriots and comrades?”

“We disagree. I don’t think he – how did you put it? – ‘did his best to shield the Jews’ from anyone’s wrath. On the contrary, I happen to know that he fomented rage and insane animosity towards them. My mother was there and she told me all about it and I believe her because I saw how it scarred her and what else it did to her. I witnessed her nightmares, every single night. Hitler did this to my parents, directly and personally.”

“Israel” – Libby pleaded – “I am not trying to rob your life of meaning. It must hurt a lot, growing up like that. And, yes, Hitler is personally to blame for everything that’s happened. But the truth shall set you free. There was a sharp break in German-Nazi Jewish policy before and after 1939. Hitler was a different man after the war broke out. It may have been expedience or opportunism, we don’t know. Just listen to what I have to say and then make up your mind, will you?”

I nodded silently. She rose from her chair and, at long last, returned and thumped a thickset yellowing volume on the desk.

“Read” – she pointed at an official looking document – “It’s a report from the American Embassy in Berlin. See what it says about Hitler? ‘Hitler does not approve of the indiscriminate and general action which has been taken against the Jews ... He is believed to be very moderate in his views in this respect.’”

Libby evidently warmed up to her topic and I began to feel like a prop.

“Guess when was the first time that Hitler made an anti-Semitic speech as Prime Minister? 1935. That’s right – more than two years after he assumed power. Two and a half years of unbroken silence about Jews and all things Jewish. Between 1933 and 1939 he mentioned the Jews only three times in hundreds of public addresses. He chastised Goebbels on the eve of the September 1933 party rally and ordered him to excise all anti-Jewish references from all the texts of all the speeches. Not exactly a raving anti-Semitic maniac, now is he?”

She was talking to herself, largely, but I found it all morbidly fascinating:

“And a-propos Goebbels, who was a dyed in the wool Jew-hater: his Ministry of Propaganda made 2000 movies between 1933 and 1939. Only 3 of them had anti-Jewish overtones. Both the New-York Times and Business Week predicted ‘a steady decline of jingoistic action against the Jews’. British political commentators concurred: ‘Herr Hitler has not inadvertently been called the most moderate member of his own party.’”

Libby absentmindedly dipped her sculpted upper lip in the fizzy drink and proceeded:

“Hitler kept his promise to Hindenburg, the ailing President, and exempted war veterans and their children – a sizable minority of the Jews - from most anti-Jewish measures. Two thirds of all Jewish lawyers remained fully employed and very few Jewish children were expelled from schools.”

“A veritable Mother Theresa.”

“Far from it. Throughout this period, in his private conversations, he made clear what he thought about the Jews. He loathed and despised and feared them – but he also loathed and despised and feared what he called ‘gutter anti-Semitism, crude violence, injudicious propaganda’. He emphasized the ‘humanity of his restraint’. His private and public personas were not divorced. By making their lives intolerably miserable and destitute, he sought to force the Jews to emigrate somewhere or to evacuate them or, should all else fail, sterilize them. He said so in private and he acted this way in public. But until 1940, there was no murder in the air. Hitler became bloody-minded only then. I am coming to that.”

Libby seemed suddenly to be lost in thought and then resumed her oration:

“In 1935, Hitler and his minions made a series of surprising statements.” – Libby leafed through another tome and read: “‘Lawless outbursts against the Jews must cease at once! The Fuehrer forbids Nazi Party members from undertaking unauthorized actions against individual Jews.’ – That’s Hoess, his Deputy. Hitler himself railed against ‘provocateurs, rebels, and enemies of the state’ who posted unauthorized anti-Jewish signs and graffiti throughout Germany.”

“1935? Isn’t that the year of the rabidly anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws?”

“Yes, it is.” – Confirmed Libby – “These Laws are the most unequivocal instance of Hitler’s incomprehensible ambivalence towards his allegedly avowed enemies. The experts who drafted the Laws left it to Hitler to decide who is a Jew. They submitted four options. At first, Hitler selected the most rigorous definition: a Jew is someone whose two parents and four grandparents are full Jews. This would have made the Laws inapplicable to the vast majority of Jews in Germany. Hitler then regretted his moment of charity and crossed out the lenient definition. But he left the Laws without any definition at all! This was the crippled text that Goering was tasked to read aloud and which was subsequently approved by the compliant Reichstag.”

Libby, flushed and restless, looked me over, trying to gauge the effect of her words.

“Hitler made a speech that day in which he called for ‘tremendous discipline ... see to it that the nation itself does not stray from the straight and narrow path of the law.’ Throughout the last four months of 1935, Hitler was obsessed with the question of half-breeds, Mischlinge. He could see ‘no satisfactory biological solution’ but he hoped that the dominant Volk could absorb ‘mixed race material’ and thus ‘liquidate’ its Jewish traits. He agonized over what to do with ‘a large category of mixed-race citizens without rights who do not know where they belong’? In November, he let it be known that the Laws will apply only to Jews with three or four Jewish grandparents. One Jewish grandparent didn’t count and the person was considered Aryan...”

“How convenient if the rumors about his Jewish ancestry were true!”

“Yes, many old Nazi hands thought so, too. Goebbels warned Hitler that his newfound moderation won’t go down well with the population. Still, Hitler declined all invitations to the opening ceremonies of the numerous anti-Semitic institutes that mushroomed throughout Germany. Hitler ‘upgraded’ the status of almost one thousand people from Mischlinge to Aryan-Nordic. There were tens of thousands of German soldiers and even Generals who were Mischlinge. There was a half-Jew working in the Reich Chancellery. Even as late as 1938, Hitler was infuriated by Goebbels’ anti-Jewish pogrom, the Crystal Night.” – She hesitated – “At least, that’s what he told everyone who cared to listen. Until August 1941, he adamantly turned down

demands from both the Party and the bureaucracy to order the Jews to wear a yellow Star-of-David badge in Germany.”

Seeing what must have been a horrified expression on my face, she busily flicked a series of metal switches next to her chair and the fans overhead came to life unwillingly. There was the kind of silence that one gets at parties when the guest of honor commits an inexcusable faux-pas.

“Israel” – her voice was soft – “I am not an apologist for Hitler or his bestial regime.”

I raised my hand, turning my face away. I didn’t need to hear that. I didn’t want to listen to any of this.

“Just give me back the disk.” – I begged her, hoarsely. I felt tears welling in my eyes and dreaded the inevitable embarrassment that awaited us both if I did not bail out right then.

Chapter the Eighth

Not My Day

Bauer had this metaphysical influence on Ashok, my Indian amanuensis, who hailed from a consensual culture. Rendered well-nigh catatonic by Bauer's volcanic eruptions, Ashok would sit at my desk and scribble undecipherable (Sanskrit?) arabesques on my scarce supply of letterhead. Said supply was now being alarmingly depleted by my shattered assistant.

"Ashok," – I said gently – "good morning. He wants to see me?"

Ashok stared at me wildly. I reached to tap his shoulder and he bolted, upsetting in the process a cart with all its laboriously arranged contents.

That did it.

"Get a grip, man!" – I intoned minaciously – "Is there a message for me from the Big Boss?"

"I never seen anyone angry like this before." – said Ashok. And that was all I could extract from him that morning.

"Sit" – barked Bauer, his bow-tie flung around his wiry neck – "I want it now."

"Want what now?" – I enquired patiently.

Bauer went crimson in the face and the part of the chest that was visible through his disheveled attire.

He bent towards me, making the shiny points of our respective Jewish noses meet:

"I" – he growled – "want ... the ... disc ... that ... you ... stole ... from ... the ... apartment in Jerusalem **NOW!**"

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Sir.” – I removed a few outstanding volumes from the printed skyscraper on which I rested my tortured frame.

“Israel Sarid” – hissed Bauer – “You have embezzled GMG property. Better we end it right here right now real nice and cosy. Don’t want mother to read about her darling son behind bars, do we?”

“Bauer” – I said – “One thing I regrettably neglected to mention in my job application form is that I am telepathically-challenged. You mind sharing with me what’s on your mind?”

But I knew damn well what was on his mind. Libby was. Only an eyewitness account could have made him so cocky and so infuriated. His suspicions confirmed, he reverted to his customary bullying.

“OK, OK!” – He splayed venous hands in the air in a gesture of mute compliance – “That’s the way you want to play it. I sent you to Jerusalem as a representative of the Genocide Monitoring Group and at its expense. Agreed?”

I nodded assent.

“Good” – he paced to and fro in the cramped space behind his desk – “You were asked to compile an inventory of everything that was in a certain apartment and that was lawfully willed to the Genocide Monitoring Group and only to the Genocide Monitoring Group.”

Again, I genuflected. He beamed at me:

“And then what did you do with the trust placed in you? You borrowed an item – a floppy disk – from amongst the dead man’s possessions and toyed with it for awhile.”

This time I remained frozen. But my newfound immobility didn’t seem to deter him in the least:

“That’s understandable, this curiosity in a historian – in a young historian. Hell, if I were your age, I would have probably done the same.”

He paused for dramatic effect and then tuned on the charm:

“Cigar?”

I eyed him warily. No, thanks. “Brandy?” Thanks again, but no.

“Now you have had your fun. And so did the ravishing librarian I bet.” – He winked at me lasciviously – “Give it back and it will all be forgotten. We don’t want to involve anyone in this little peccadillo that we don’t have to. Youthful folly under wraps and that sort of thing. What do you say?”

By rights the disk was his. A voice inside me with an accent suspiciously like my father’s kept reminding me of that, even as I told Bauer to take a hike.

Well, not in so many words.

“Bauer,” – I said – “I don’t know who told you what, but your intelligence is sorely lacking both with regards to articles I allegedly possess and to women I allegedly possessed.”

Bauer took it surprisingly calmly, as though he expected me to react the way I did. He sighed and shrugged and then:

“You leave me no choice,” – he mumbled, curiously deflated – “but to fire you. So, you are fired. Please vacate the premises within one hour and hand all sets of keys in your possession to administration. I will inform security of your dismissal, so don’t try to pull any funny tricks on us.”

Bauer stood with his back to crouching me. Even though I half foretold this dénouement, I was shell-shocked and devastated. I often wandered what do exotically-sounding medical conditions like a collapsed lung or a syncope feel like. I had the answer now. They felt like being fired unexpectedly.

Ashok must have received his instructions long before I went to see Bauer. My stuff was neatly packed in two cardboard boxes. He handed me a bunch of forms to sign, with my name block printed and numerous personal details

inserted and left-adjusted in their appropriate rubrics. It must have taken hours to prepare. No snap decision at the heat of the moment this.

I needed stale air and lots of ruckus and cigarette haze to meditate in. I knew just the place.

My favorite deli. Right across the street, the most politically incorrect establishment imaginable: cholesterol dipped entrees, smog in lieu of atmosphere, racial slurs aplenty, and the kind of warmth that must have characterized Jewish-owned inns in obscure Stetls at the turn of the century. The 19th century, that is.

The owner was a classmate of my uncle's, or something like that. And, then, of course, there was Sarah.

"Isruel!" – She screamed at the top of her considerable lungs – "Long time no see you! Where have you been?" – She ploughed her way across a reluctant field of territorial clientele – "What's her name? When's the betrothal?"

"There's no one but you" – I assured her soberly, which won me a pulverizing smack on the back and a gold-filled grin.

"You Casanova, you!" – I could swear that she was actually blushing or maybe it was the sauerkraut steam from the giant ladle she was carrying effortlessly in one extended hand.

"What can I feed you today, Srulik? We have great ..."

"Sauerkraut and wunderbar wurst and kneidlach" – I completed the sentence. The three-items-only menu was the main draw of this joint.

"I will have kneidlach and wurst" – I said and hastened to add - "and sauerkraut, of course."

She nodded gravely and licked her lips as she memorized the order, repeating it aloud a few times

“You sit here, sussele” – she pointed at a one legged table with a grimy Formica top – “and I will be right back with them dishes.”

Sarah was the most Jewish black woman I have ever met or heard of. She could curse any man under the table in fluent, unmitigated Yiddish. And she knew more about Jewish cooking than my mother which, truth be told, isn't saying much.

This brought me back to Libby. She betrayed me to Bauer - that much was clear. But why? A sense of loyalty to her workplace? Possibly. Libby was an upright girl. Something I did or say to offend her? Maybe. Libby was also a sensitive lass. But neither motive felt right, so I let this line of enquiry go.

Next. Following the harrowing exploration of its contents with my object of desire in the corridor that passed for the GMG's library, I almost gave up on the disk. It looked like someone desperate for instant fame cobbled up a few tired clichés about the Third Reich and the Holocaust and placed them in the mouth of a long-dead Nazi who could hardly be expected to rise up and protest.

The Eichmann trial was in full swing in Jerusalem when the “interview” was conducted and media the world over were hungry for this sort of thing. After Eichmann was kidnapped by the Israeli Mossad from Buenos Aires, clandestine Nazis were reported hiding everywhere conceivable and inconceivable. It was a form of global sport.

What changed my mind about the troublesome object was Bauer. He wouldn't go to such great lengths and he definitely wouldn't fire his best - and, for that matter, his only – research librarian over a trifle. There was some serious game afoot. Someone somewhere was applying intolerable pressure.

So, what was on the disk that was – is – so earth-shattering? It can't be the interview itself. If Libby is to be trusted – which, admittedly, was a sizable “if” – it contained nothing new except the mumbo-jumbo about Hitler being blackmailed by the Jews owing to his tainted ancestry.

I was vaguely aware of a considerable diminution in luminosity which was surprising in this light-deprived eatery.

“Israel Sarid Roth?” – Susurrated someone. I never heard my name uttered so many times in one day and in so many different ways. I lifted my eyes and met a pair of insectoid sunglasses, perched uneasily over a prominent nose, which, in turn, was embedded in a pockmarked battlefield of a face. The guy looked like a fugitive from a 1930s comic strip except that he was far from funny.

His mate was no better. Squeezed improbably between my table and the counter, he flaunted a shock of a mane, dipped to its roots and beyond in unidentified dripping grease. His eyes were repulsively proximate and set in two receding tunnels that passed for sockets. He had a neatly trimmed line-thin moustache which he kept depressing with extended bony thumb and index finger. He stored his other palm under the table.

The whisperer was beefy, ruddy, and hunched. Grease Ball was leaner and had that psychopathic hypervigilance that characterizes criminals and cops. They both wore black from shirt-collar to trouser belts. I couldn't look under the table to gain a view of their inevitable pointy-toed shoes.

“Israel Sarid Roth?” – repeated the hulk. His colleague twitched and swayed, as though in prayer. “He is not going to answer” – he muttered to himself. I couldn't place their accent. It was gravelly and guttural, like broken glass.

“Roth, listen well” – said Grease Ball – “I have a muzzle pointed at your vital anatomy. Under the table. It is silenced and can do some serious damage to your chances of future procreation. So, why don't you act nice and play ball? Are You Israel Sarid Roth?”

“Does he always talk like this,” – I addressed Hulk – “or is it the sauerkraut? I am Israel Sarid Roth. How can I help you ... er ... gentlemen?”

“You are going to pick yourself up real slow and move towards the door. You are going to speak to no one on the way. Any gesture or misplaced word and my associate here, who is regrettably trigger-happy, is going to dispatch you to kingdom come. To make myself clearer: he is going to pop you. He is going to shoot many holes in you. Do you get it?”

I got it. I rose slowly from my seat and turned my back on Laurel and Hardy. I weaved my way through the throngs of clamoring patrons and almost

reached my destination when my progress was impeded by an impressive silhouette.

“Where you going, mein kind?” – She enquired in impeccable Yiddish – “The food’s almost ready. Let her wait a while. A little separation anxiety is good for the relationship.” – She winked. Then she noticed my goon escort.

“Who are these?” – She pointed at Hulk and Grease Ball. Hulk nodded imperceptibly.

“Just friends” - I said unconvincingly – “We are going out for a short walk and I will be back for the delicatessen, I promise you, love of my heart.”

“You in any kind of trouble?” – She enquired, her voice rising alarmingly. Her muscular forearms tensed, ready to throw a debilitating punch. I have seen her doing it before. So did the other regulars. An unnatural hush fell over the place and everyone turned from their simmering plates to eye the imminent brawl.

“Sarah,” – I said quietly – “please don’t make a scene. I am going out now with my two buddies and I will be back before you know it. So, keep them plates hot for me.”

Sarah pranced aside, clearing a narrow path for our procession.

“If you are not back in half an hour, I am going to call the po-lice.” – She sounded her siren of a voice – “There are sixty eyewitnesses here, remember.”

Grease Ball moved closer to let me feel the tip of something which presumably was a revolver. We exited.

“Where to?” – I said.

“Just keep going.” – Huffed Hulk, obviously miffed by Sarah’s impromptu performance.

“We are at a crossroads.” – I lectured them – “For most people with average intelligence it means that we have four options: we can go left, we can go right, we can go ...”

A gun butt in the kidney hurts like hell, exactly as they say it does in dime novels and B movies. It feels like a stiletto plunged deep and then rotated. I knelt under and collapsed on the pavement, clutching my side and gasping for breath. Grease Ball brandished what looked like a miniature cannon in my face: “Don’t go cute on us, Roth.” – He sibilated – “Now, get up and start moving straight ahead.”

“Israel Sarid Roth?”

For a moment there, amidst the excruciating pain, I was disorientated.

“I answered that already!” – I protested feebly and waited for the red fog to lift.

“Are you Israel Sarid Roth?”

“I am.” – I confirmed for the umpteenth time. A hand materialized and dropped a bulky envelope at my feet.

“You have been served.” – said the disembodied courier.

“This sure ain’t your day.” – laughed Grease Ball. His laughter sounded more ominous than his threats.

Chapter the Ninth

Himmler Learns the Truth

Himmler motions to the guardian shadow behind my seat: “I want to be left alone with Herr Frankenberg.” – He orders.

“But, Reichsfuehrer...” – protests the discarnate voice.

“Obersturmbannfuehrer Eichmann, please.” – The Reichsfuehrer’s voice is calm but surprisingly authoritative. Eichmann leaves us without a further murmur.

“When the city of Graz expelled the Jews in the 15th century, tradition in my family has it that we moved to Poland or Russia. An offshoot settled in the fertile Hungarian plains of Novi Sad and the Yugoslav region of the Banat, where I was born. I relocated to Budapest for good only in 1942, January 1942, after the massacre of Serbs and Jews in Novi Sad. Until 1940, I was a Yugoslav citizen.”

Himmler nods sagely: “The Wandering Jew” – he proclaims, scrutinizing me shrewdly.

I ignore him and continue:

“Finally, at the end of the 18th century, one of my ancestors converted to Catholicism. That’s how I have always thought of myself: as a good and true Catholic.”

Himmler moves in his chair uneasily, but keeps me in his sights.

“He moved to Graz and established factories there. The story goes that sometime in the 1830s, my great-great-great-or-something-grandfather got himself in trouble.”

“He impregnated a German girl.” – intones Himmler disapprovingly.

“Yes,” – I bow my head – “he did. His father was forced to pay her child support for many years. His was a potentially explosive situation. Despite

their newfound religion, they were still considered to be Jews. Such an affair could lead to a pogrom not only against the Frankenbergs but against all the Jewish population in Styria.”

Himmler consents gravely.

“We kept all the documents regarding this situation in the family for many generations.”

“Why didn’t you simply destroy them?” – enquires Himmler and adjusts his pince-nez with a small and delicate, almost feminine, hand.

“There have been attempts at blackmail, Herr Reichsfuehrer. We wanted to preserve proof that both mother and child were treated decently, over and above the legal requirements.”

Himmler contemplates my answer.

“It makes eminent sense” – he pronounces his verdict – “Pray, continue.”

“The documents were handed from one male first-born to another. My father gave them to me on my thirteenth birthday. When I moved to Berlin to study Law, I brought them with me.”

“What made you give them to Arlosoroff?”

“In my early teens, I rediscovered my Jewish roots. I joined Hechalutz, a Zionist agricultural movement. I was trained as a pioneer-farmer. I was planning to emigrate to Palestine when my father intervened and on threat of banishment, sent me abroad. We agreed that if I am still as fervent by the time I graduate I could make Aliyah and settle in Eretz Israel with his blessings and some of his money.”

“Of course,” – sneers Himmler – “never forget the money.”

“While in Budapest, in 1928, I went to hear a speech by the Head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. At first I was taken aback by his youth. He was in his late-twenties, I think. But when he opened his mouth, all was forgotten. Here was clearly a towering intellect: a methodical, incisive, and original thinker. People were captivated and so was I.”

“Presumably, he spoke with a Russian accent?” – Himmler surprises me.

“His German struck me as impeccable but his Hebrew was heavily accented, yes.” – I answer.

“Go on” – motions Himmler, light glints ricocheting from his SS insignia.

“I approached him after the talk and joined the entourage of fans in a coffee house not far from the Hechalutz headquarters. Despite his tender age, he was very avuncular. He agreed with my father that a lifetime of commitment to a new country had better be postponed until I could experience other alternatives.”

Himmler waves impatiently: “Get to the point, Frankenberg.”

“Yes, Herr Reichsfuehrer. Arlosoroff told me that he had studied Economics in Berlin University and that his sister, Lisa, still lived there. He invited me to his hotel the next day and handed me two letters of introduction, one addressed to his sister and one to an intimate friend, Magda Quandt.”

“Was this the last time you saw Arlosoroff?”

“No, Herr Reichsfuehrer. I saw him again in 1933. But many things occurred between these two meetings. The nature of our relationship was irrevocably changed.”

Himmler removes his pince-nez and stares at me. His light blue eyes sparkle as he smiles:

“I am sure they have, Herr Frankenberg, I am sure they have.”

He presses a buzzer under the desk and the door opens instantly.

“Herr Eichmann,” – says Himmler, his voice fatigued – “Herr Frankenberg will be our guest for the night and maybe beyond. I want him properly washed and fed. I will meet him again at seven o’clock here. Kersten is on his way and then I have to attend to a few important matters. Take good care of our guest.”

“Jawohl, Herr Reichsfuehrer!” – Eichmann clicks his heels.

Chapter the Tenth

Recovering at Dan's Place

Dan dipped the flowery kitchen towel in a bowl of clattering ice cubes and applied it to my bloated face. “They didn’t have to do it.” – he murmured – “totally unnecessary.”

“They were trying to convey a message.” – I repeated patiently.

“No message here, only gashes ...” – Dan’s hand froze in mid-motion, the towel dripping all over his only Persian carpet. He gazed into far space and his eyes kept expanding at an alarming rate. He turned away and placed the receptacle carefully on the edge of a reclining chair.

“Sarid, you remember the first thing you told me when you knocked on the door?”

“I didn’t knock on it” – I corrected him – “I collapsed and sprawled against it. I can’t be held responsible for any audio effect this involuntary posture may have generated.” – I winced and touched my sliced-open lip.

Wisely, Dan ignored me.

“You said: ‘what’s on this disk that everyone wants it so badly?’”

“What, indeed?” – I concurred with vehemence – “Libby – that’s the GMG’s librarian – discounted the interview as so much rehashed claptrap. Nothing the alleged Mueller said was either new or true.”

“She did now, did she?” – interjected Dan, surprisingly alert.

“As for the documents, they are barely legible.”

“I Photoshopped them.” - volunteered Dan.

“You did what to them?”

Dan sighed:

“I used Photoshop – it’s an image processing software application. I enlarged them and enhanced certain features: contrast, that sort of thing.”

“Any PC-shattering discoveries?”

“I am not sure” – responded Dan thoughtfully and tucking his flowing djellaba under him, crumbled into an oriental squat.

“What is that supposed to mean?” – Sometimes I found Dan’s imperturbable equanimity harrowing.

“They are all in German, or Polish, or other godforsaken languages. Hard to believe people actually speak them. I couldn’t understand much. But maybe that’s precisely the idea.”

Before I could protest his typical opaqueness, Dan gestured retreat:

“Sorry, sorry, OK? This whole thing is an enigma wrapped in mystery to me, too. I need your help, Sarid. Can you take me again through your bruising encounter earlier tonight? I want you to concentrate real hard on what they said. Every word is crucial and may be the key.”

“The key to what?” – I grumbled.

“Just trust me, please, and do as I say.”

And, as usual, I did.

I led our three member expedition to my flat across the corner, clutching with one hand at the bundle of papers which I assumed was by now an irreparably drenched lawsuit. My other hand was busy rubbing my lower back and waist where Grease Ball gun-butted my hitherto inconspicuous kidney.

As we approached the lobbied entrance to my building, both my chaperons went through a cloak and dagger routine that struck me as being staged entirely for my consumption.

As they would not allow me to turn the meager lighting on, we stumbled across the spiral staircase immersed in gloom. Having opened the door to my apartment, they shoved me in and Grease Ball remained standing, leaning against it in feigned nonchalance.

Hulk motioned me to freeze and having satisfied himself that we were all alone, ordered me to sit. I obeyed him. It was obviously the only painless option. He remained towering over me but from what I judged to be a safe distance.

He wasted no time:

“Is the disk here, on your person, or in this apartment?”

“No, no, and yet again no” – I answered. Grease Ball growled from his corner.

“You will tell us where it is” – stated Hulk confidently.

“What does it matter?” – I challenged him – “By now I made a few copies, both offline and online. Even if you lay your hands on all the physical exemplars, there are still the password-protected Web pages.”

Hulk paled visibly. Grease Ball moved uneasily, straining against an imaginary leash. I touched a figurative nerve and prayed they don’t reciprocate concretely.

“My prayer was not answered” – I moaned and gingerly felt what used to be my left cheek, now melded with a drooping, blood-shot eye.

“They didn’t ask you what’s on the disk.” – observed Dan. He had this uncanny ability to home in on overlooked but pivotal facts.

“No, you are right, they didn’t.”

“Didn’t it strike you as odd?”

“Not at the time” – I admitted, feeling dense.

“If the disk was of no interest to them, why go through all the trouble of hijacking you from your favorite deli, coercing you into a nocturnal stroll, and knocking you about with a gun?” – Dan wondered and so, suddenly, did I.

“What did they want to know?”

“Does April 20th mean anything to you?” – barked Grease Ball from his cranny by the door. Hulk shot him a warning glance but it was too late.

I shook my head: “Nothing.”

“April 20th?” – Mused Dan – “That’s 204 or 420, depending on the country. In some regions of the world, the month comes first – in others, the day.”

My perplexity must have shown.

“Sarid, I can’t begin to tell you how important this is: did they ask you anything else?”

“No,” – I struggled to sit up – “but they sure were insistent. I never knew there are so many ways to ask the same, simple question. They attacked every angle, made me go through the whole sequence of events time and again. But they always came back to the same, inexorable query: the date, April 20th. Was it on the disk? Did I hear anyone mentioning it? Does it have any meaning to me? And they grew less convinced the more adamantly I insisted that I have no idea what they were blabbing about.”

“Israel?”

Hulk and Grease ball panicked. I could see it in their faces, though they did their utmost to hide it.

“Israel, are you there? We need to talk. Sorry about the late hour. The lady in the deli told me where to find you. I got your address from the Human Resources department at the GMG. Hope you don’t mind.”

Hulk attached a sausagy finger to his tightly-clenched lips. “Shut up” – he mouthed. Grease Ball drew out his gun and waved it at me and then at the door.

“Israel, I know you are in there and I know you are angry at me and hurt and I can understand that. But please let me in and we will sort it out. I thought of something which you may find interesting. More than interesting, in fact.”

Hulk tip-toed to the door and peered through the tiny peep hole.

“It’s about Hitler” – Libby said – “Something about Hitler.”

The only time I went hunting, I was repelled by the carnage but even more so by the transformation of the hunters as they closed in on the helpless and terrified prey. Hulk and Grease Ball now had that kind of murderous air about them as they skulked about the door, furtively glancing at me, and thumbing their guns.

“Libby” – I screamed – “Run away, danger, run!”

Grease Ball, like some demented kangaroo, leaped across the room and then all went dark for the second time in as many weeks.

Chapter the Eleventh

Codes and Ciphers

“Steganography.” – Said Dan triumphantly - “You remember earlier this evening when I lamented the condition of your erstwhile pristine face, you retorted: ‘They were trying to convey a message.’ I said: ‘No message here, only gashes’. But I was wrong: the gashes *contained* the message! It then occurred to me: steganography.”

I stared at him blankly.

“You heard of cryptography?”

I did. Well, vaguely, at least.

“Cryptography is when you encrypt a message. Everyone knows it’s there but only those who have the key can read it. Steganography is when you hide a message inside something and no one even suspects that it’s there.”

“Inside something? “ – I repeated dumbly.

“You can hide messages inside objects, engrave them on skin, or embed them in digital images and files. Many apparently innocuous photos and MP3 audio files actually contain steganographic messages.”

I was beginning to see the light. But not quite.

“And how do you do that?”

Dan settled into his favorite couch and placed one bare and hairy foot over another.

“Digital images are sequences of bits. Some sequences designate colors; other sequences code different properties of the image. Let’s assume that you isolate the last 2 bits in every color component, in all the sequences that code for colors. By carefully replacing these last 2 bits with your own you can write a message. This hidden message could be another image altogether or text or even tiny snippets of audio and video.”

“But if I change so many bits wouldn’t the image be affected?”

“Not perceptibly. The number of bits even in the simplest digital image is so huge that you can safely toy around with thousands of bits and go undetected. Actually, in a typical 24-bit bitmap, bits borrowed from three pixels only can code for one letter which is a lot! My computer screen has a resolution of 1024 by 768 pixels – for a total of almost a million pixels! I can insert a steganographic text message the size of a long essay into any image displayed on my screen.”

“Creepy” – I said.

“It is.” – Agreed Dan – “And what’s worse, advertisers are thinking about using steganography to inject ads into legitimate content. Even terrorists are rumored to have made use of this encryption technology. The New-York Times hinted that the September 11 attacks on the USA were coordinated using steganographic messages embedded in innocent-sounding e-mail and Usenet posts”

“You think that there are messages hidden inside the files on the disk?”

“I think so.” – Said Dan somberly – “The images make an odd and incoherent selection: Polish birth certificates, Hungarian tram schedules, restaurant menus in German, that sort of thing. What could be the point of all this? The only thing common to all of the documents on the disk is their file format: compressed images known as JPEG. This compression algorithm is prone to errors which are often leveraged by steganographers to conceal their messages.”

“But it’s still a code” – I protested – “If you don’t know which bits are used or abused you can’t find the hidden content.”

“An astute observation!” – Enthused Dan – “You are absolutely right. For steganalysis, to unearth the hidden messages, you need a key. You need to know which elements and components of the carrier were deployed to form the payload. The redundancy and noise ratio...”

“Dan!” – I humphed.

“Sorry, I got carried away.” – Apologized Dan half-heartedly – “April 20th.”

“Et tu, Dan?” – I groaned

“204 or 420, don’t you understand?” – Dan lost his patience, a rare occurrence – “This is the code! This is what we need in order to extract the hidden messages from the JPEG images! That’s the reason your pals were so insistent. They wanted to make sure that you haven’t got a clue.”

“This Libby,” – said Dan casually – “she a looker?”

“I may be in love with her” – I responded tentatively.

Dan didn’t lift a brow.

“I guessed as much.” – He said – “When you told her to run away, did she?”

“I don’t think so. When I woke up she was gone but someone tidied up and bandaged me and washed my wounds. It must have been she.”

Dan nodded approvingly:

“My kind of girl. Sarid, when we find the hidden content we may need the love of you life to decipher it. My German has never been worse.”

“Why German?”

Dan shrugged:

“This all thing is about Hitler’s Third Reich, isn’t it? The documents are mostly in German. Why should the stegotext be any different?”

He paused as though the thought just occurred to him:

“She does read German, doesn’t she?”

“Libby graduated magna cum laude in German history, so I guess she ought to.” – I assured him – “Her German is bound to be better than my English.”

Dan made a skeptical face and fired up one of his lumbering desktops.

Chapter the Twelfth

Libby Joins the Team

The next morning I returned to my apartment. Dan insisted that I move in with him and, for a change, I found the idea appealing.

The door to my abode was ajar but otherwise nothing seemed to have been disturbed. My heart raced as I picked up a random assortment of bath towels, T-shirts, underwear, jackets, and sweaters. I stuffed everything into two grimy duffel bags and was about to depart when Libby materialized on the doorstep.

“May I come in?”

I gestured expansively: “Make yourself at home.”

She shuffled in and leaned against the doorframe:

“You looked terrible after these thugs were through with you. I patched you up.”

“I know you did. Thank you.” – I half-bowed stiffly.

“Israel ...”

“Libby ...”

“Israel, I want you to forgive me for snitching to Bauer. At the time I thought it my obligation as both employee and reference librarian to tell him about the disk. I had no idea he would sack you.”

“Well, the road to hell is paved with good intentions and even better excuses” – I philosophized bitterly. I was delighted to notice that she flinched.

She then did something completely unexpected. She glided over and kissed me on the cheek. It was my turn to flinch.

“What was that for?”

“I want something from you” – she confided, not a trace of embarrassment in her voice.

“Sex?” – I ventured hopefully.

Her laughter caught me off-balance: it was throaty and Edith Piafy. Not at all like the Libby I imagined.

“No, at least not yet. I want to work with you on the disk. I have had time to consider what you had shown me. There is more to it than meets the eye.”

I held my breath, she sounded so like Dan.

“What do you mean by ‘more to it than meets the eye’?”

“I don’t know.” – She admitted disarmingly – “It’s not something I can put my finger on at this stage. Minute discrepancies, undersurface pointers, minor errors. It’s like the very impurities of style and language in the interview are meant to be, are designed to direct us somewhere and to attract our attention.”

Great minds do think alike but this confluence of opinions between Dan and Libby was too much to bear. It was also highly suspicious. In the current state of affairs paranoia was the only rational strategy.

I gave her a Humphrey Bogart look and exclaimed as nasally as I could:

“Who sent you, Libby?”

She flung her head back and again emitted her whiskey-cum-cigarette-smoke chuckle. Stretched like that, all curves and bulges, I found her irresistible.

By now Libby’s affair with my front door has ended and she was moving about freely in the general direction of the kitchen.

“Coffee?”

And, thus, perched over two steaming cups of freshly-ground beans I told her far more than I intended to. She didn't interrupt me even once, just sat there and absorbed my litany of words. When I finished my extemporaneous recital, she had this to contribute:

“204, not 420.”

“What? What, what?”

“204.” – she repeated – “The Germans, like all Europeans, place the day before the month: 20th April, not April 20th.”

She assembled the drained mugs and headed for the kitchen.

“Do you speak German?” – Her incorporeal voice overcame the gushing water.

“None.” – I said.

“And Dan?”

“Even less than that.” – I acknowledged miserably.

Her head popped around the door post, hair disheveled:

“That's where I come in.” – she announced cheerfully.

Much later, as we were about to leave, she enquired casually:

“Did you ask yourself why April 20th, what's so special about this date?”

I was caught off-guard.

“Dan thinks that it might be some sort of deadline or the date of a planned event, maybe even a terrorist attack.”

“It's possible, I guess.” – Libby sounded dubious – “But there's a far simpler explanation. It's Adolf Hitler's birthday. He was born on April 20th, 1889.”

Chapter the Thirteenth

The Eichmann Transfer

“Sturmbannfuhrer Lukas, I need the vehicle **now!** Reichsfuehrer’s orders. And at least two gallons of fuel to go with it. Come over to Desk IVb4, attention Obersturmbannfuhrer Eichmann... Yes, Kurfuersten Strasse 116. Use the back entrance ... There’s a pathway, yes... Thank you.”

Eichmann regards Himmler’s vacated chair pensively. He presses his thin lips bloodless and rubs his temples.

“Frankenberg,” – he says – “we are going on a short trip in the Reichsfuehrer’s own official car. I have no facilities to hold you here. Additionally, someone very important wants to talk to you, don’t ask me why.” – He shuts his eyes in a gesture of exasperation.

“In the meantime, let me take you down to the showers. Try not to make a mess, these are the staff facilities. I will get you something to eat and smoke as well.”

He straightens the lapels of his grey tunic and swivels his belt so that its shiny buckle shows.

“Get up, let’s go. We are on the fourth floor. We are going down via the public staircase. We have no other. This place was definitely not planned with offices in mind. You will talk to no one and answer no questions addressed to you, regardless of the rank of the enquirer. This injunction does not apply to the Reichsfuehrer, of course.”

I nod.

He opens the oak door and leads me into a corridor that ends in a huge, vaulted hall. From there we descend a marble-clad staircase wide enough to accommodate a parade. It is all incongruously sumptuous. People in SS uniforms are hurrying to and fro, their civilian secretaries and assistants in toe. They all salute Eichmann smartly and click heels as we pass. Eichmann actually halts each and every time to fully reciprocate.

“My team.” – He remarks to no one in particular – “Good people. They have been with me since Prague and Vienna. It’s Budapest’s turn soon.” – He laughs cynically.

Eichmann’s headquarters is a veritable palace: there is marble everywhere, wall-hugging gigantic mirrors, and velvet brocade curtains drape man-sized windows. Tinkling chandeliers hang from the stucco-decorated ceilings. It reminds me of a Habsburg-era opera house. Eichmann regards it all with growing distaste as we ascend from the basement. He sighs with relief when we exit the building.

The car is already there. The driver is running the motor to warm it up. When he sees my host, he rushes out of his seat and snaps to attention, his gaze averted, white-gloved hand resting on the hood.

Eichmann shoves me unceremoniously onto the back and places himself opposite me, on a folding, upholstered seat. He draws closed small, opaque curtains on rails on all the vehicle’s windows to obscure the view.

“Where to, Herr Obersturmbannfeuhrer?”

“Prinz-Albrecht Strasse.”

“Which Amt, Herr Obersturmbannfeuhrer?”

“Amt IV, Gestapo.” – responds Eichmann.

Even in distant Hungary we knew that a visit to Gestapo headquarters anywhere – let alone in the capital city of the Third Reich - meant protracted and agonizing death at the hands of trained and sadistic connoisseurs of torture and degradation. Few lived to tell what they had witnessed inside the labyrinth of badly-lit, blood-stained interrogation cells. In Berlin, party officials and civil servants complained about the shrieks and screams that penetrated the thick walls of this bastion day and night.

I am not afraid to die. Death is vastly preferable to Auschwitz where some guards entertain themselves by inventing ghastly ways of butchering us, the

prisoners. In Auschwitz death is omnipresent: you could die any minute for no apparent reason. In the camp, life itself is a slow form of death – so, we got accustomed to its presence.

But I am terrified of pain, of being tortured. Even the most hardened prisoners who have survived for months in festering swamps, iced rocky terrains, and lice-infested and mud-flooded blocks – even these transformed beings whimpered like little children and tried in vain to hide when they were invited to visit the camp’s Political Department, that galaxy of anguish and its demonic dispensers where torture was administered among howls of blood-spattered laughter.

The car suddenly comes to a halt and the driver opens the back door, stiff as a uniformed board, his other gloved hand taut at the side of his impeccably pressed suit.

“I and the Reichsfuehrer appreciate your help in this matter, Sturmbannfuehrer Lukas. Kindly give my regards to Herr Himmler when you see him tonight.”

Lukas bows and goes around the car. As it roars away, a guard leaves his wooden guard booth and clicks heels at Eichmann. Dazzled by the exposure to the blistering summer luminosity, I absorb only gradually the enormity of the granite structure that confronts me. It is a square building paneled throughout with white slabs. It looks monolithic, as though uninhabited by humans.

“Delivering a prisoner.” – Eichmann intones – “Please sign here. Notice his priority. He is to go straight to the top without delay. Place him in an interrogation cell and notify the recipient.”

The guard leafs through the paperwork and looks awestruck:

“Immediately, Herr Obersturmbannfuehrer, immediately!”

He signs his name laboriously and then grabs hold of my hand and half-leads, half-draws me towards a field telephone which is affixed to the wall of the massive fortress. I can hear the sound of traffic on the other side of this artificial mountain. There is life there, going on much as usual. But there is

death here, inside this monumental pyramid. Eichmann's stooping figure recedes, his coattails flapping, his insignia glinting in the sun.

The lone bulb burns intermittently, so I can't quite make out the features of the swarthy, bull-necked eminence that enters my cell and sits itself on a wooden chair opposite my stone bunk. He crosses his legs and puffs. There is something about his eyes that unsettles me: it is like he has none. Instead, there are two tenebrous underpasses. He reminds me of popular renditions of the Grim Reaper.

I leap to attention.

"So, you have met Heinrich with the Eyeglass?" – He sniggers.

He suddenly shoots up from the stool and paces along the inner wall of the dingy cubicle:

"Today, Herr Frankenberg, we executed a Sturmbannfeuhrer. This was his cell. He was an SS man, one of us. His name was Plaas. A good German name. Yet, we shot him like a dog. You are a Jew, Herr Frankenberg. Never forget that. You will remain standing while we have our little chat."

Chapter the Fourteenth

The Documents at Last

Dan had this spare room the size of a broom closet. I landed there with my hastily assembled duffel bags and immediately realized that there was no point in unpacking them. Dan apologized profusely:

“It’s only somewhere to crash in at night. The rest of the apartment is yours: kitchen, bathroom. Feel at home. Do you need a laptop?”

Typical of Dan to think that a man who was just saved from mutilation or worse by a hair’s breadth would even contemplate a laptop. I confided to him that computers never even crossed my mind lately. Dan looked unfazed:

“The reason you are being hunted down is a disk. It’s a form of magnetic media. You need a computer to read it. Hence my question. But suit yourself. Settle in. You can raid the fridge any time you feel like it. I have work to do.”

And he was gone.

Food was somewhere down there with laptops in the long list of my concerns. I couldn’t concentrate on anything, my appetite was gone. Dan’s words kept ringing in my recently mauled ears: “You are being hunted down.”

Later that day, Dan hollered from his study:

“Sarid, you may wish to see this, come over here.”

I was startled to find out that it was already seven PM. The whole day went by and I couldn’t account for a minute of it.

“Grab a chair” – Dan sounded excited as he usually does when he succeeds to crack and hack his way into a new software or gadget.

“It’s taken you a long time” – I noted. Dan didn’t look offended:

“Listen, Sarid, do you remember what is on the disk?”

“How can I ever forget?” – I groaned and when I realized that he actually expected me to respond: “Text and images. Is this the correct answer?”

“Well, yes and no.” – was Dan’s maddening reply.

“Yes and no?” – I repeated, incredulously

“The disk contains text, the interview. It also contains three groups of images – not one.” – He swiveled towards the screen and used the cursor to indicate them.

“Why three?” – He proceeded – “Why not place all the images in one folder and be done with it? And which group contains the stegotext, the hidden message or messages?”

Dan sipped cold, mucky coffee from his cherished, oft-mended, ceramic mug. He looked thoughtful and apprehensive.

“It was possible that the whole thing is booby-trapped and if I try to access any of the files, they will wipe themselves out, scramble themselves into meaningless hash.”

“They can do that?” – I interposed.

Dan sneered derisively: “You can do anything with a computer. That’s why it’s called a universal machine.”

He paused and turned to the flat display, his back to me:

“You’d better call your friend Libby. Ask her to come over here. We need to see this together.”

“She is not my friend.” – I said – “I may be infatuated with her but in moments of such fleeting weakness I keep reminding myself that she turned me over to Bauer, disk and all. I am not sure on whose side she is. She may be a mole.”

Dan nodded his assent:

“I agree, but we have little choice. We need her because she is a historian and because she reads German. At this late stage of the game, it makes no sense to involve someone else.”

“Then why don’t we visit the GMG? We can work in the library. It’s practically deserted at this time of day, or night. Actually, it’s deserted at all times. I don’t want her to know where I am and, for that matter, where you are.”

Dan chewed his lower lip and then got up:

“Call her” – he pronounced verdict – “and get dressed. And shave, by the way. You look horrible.”

The library had this tiny, Alice in Wonderland, type of door that opened to the GMG’s surprisingly lush cloister. For obvious reasons, we were keen to avoid the attentions of the night watchman. Libby unlocked the gate connecting the garden with the bustling thoroughfare that encircled the GMG. At midnight, the guards changed shifts and paid scant heed to their flickering security camera monitors. That’s when we sneaked into the library.

I introduced them to each other. Dan shook Libby’s hand cursorily and began to set up his equipment – a geeky looking notebook computer and a miniature printer. When we were finally assembled around the screen, he said:

“The disk contains three groups of images, one large and the others considerably smaller. I assumed that all the images, big and small alike, are covertexts. In other words: I assumed that each and every image contains a hidden message, a stegotext.”

“I took a gamble on the heftier folder and ran it through a stegalyzer – an application that analyzes covertexts to find stegotexts.”

“And...” – demanded Libby, breathless.

“And nothing. The images, as I suspected, were covertexts. They did contain hidden messages. The whole thing was almost amateurish. But the stegotexts were meaningless streams of characters.”

Libby and I sighed in unison and then, for no apparent reason, blushed.

“There were two possible explanations. Either the stegotexts were concatenated – or they were encrypted.”

“Yeah, right.” – I complained bitterly – “Now that we are impressed, can you put on your translator’s cap?”

“When I ran the stegalyzer on the images, I received distinct streams of characters, one per document. It was, therefore, clear that each original image on the disk contains a hidden message.”

Dan moved the mouse to indicate a series of folders, each one containing an original image and a text file. He clicked on one of the text files. It opened up to display a mammoth string of letters and figures and punctuation marks and Greek characters.

“Rubbish.” – Said Dan – “We call it rubbish or noise. But no one bothers to hide rubbish or noise inside carefully selected and manipulated images. I tried with both codes – 204 and 420. Nada.”

“Then it occurred to me: these could be interconnected parts of one, big, stegotext. Sarid, you remember how I unlocked the interview? The segment on the disk that contained the interview with Mueller was the third part of three – but we were missing the other two. So, I simulated the missing sections and then connected them to the one we had and, presto, the interview emerged.”

I was beginning to see where he was going.

“What if the stegotexts, these senseless rivers of apparently random characters, were actually somehow linked to one another? By themselves, as standalone texts, they are gibberish. Put them together in the right order and something might emerge!”

“Great idea!” – I exclaimed.

“Easier said than done. There are 52 stegotexts. That’s 52 text files. There are billions of possible ways to order them. Which stegotext comes first? Which comes second and third and twenty-sixth? Even a brute force attack by a supercomputer would take hundreds of years.”

“Aren’t the documents dated? Can’t we use their dates to determine the correct order?” – asked Libby.

Dan stared at her appreciatively:

“Precisely what I thought. But which dates to use? The ones mentioned in the imaged documents? The dates in which the files were created on the disk, or modified, or accessed? Which part of the date – day, month, year, hour, minute, second? Too many options. Won’t do.”

“It then occurred to me that the other, smaller groups of images may contain the answer. I ran them through the stegolyzer.”

Dan savored our tense anticipation. He smiled:

“And I extracted more of the same: a short string of characters.”

“Sounds bad.” – I mumbled – “So are we stuck? And why this midnight excursion? To tell us that you failed?”

“Nothing of the sort.” – Protested Dan – “Who says I failed?”

Chapter the Fifteenth

The Infected Domestic

Even through the thick walls of the underground cell I can hear the cars going to and fro, the shouts and cries, the orders barked, and the occasional shot. It must be early afternoon, July 20th, 1944. I have no way of knowing for sure.

This goes on for many hours, well into the night. I think I heard sporadic gunshots. Metallic cell doors squeak open and clang shut. The bare bulb in my room dims and brightens in tandem with distant screams. People are being tortured with electricity: wires, prods, and electrodes.

After a while, I fall asleep and then wake up and fall asleep again. This cycle is repeated six or seven times. I lose track of time. I am forgotten: no guard observes me through the peep hole, I receive no food, and the bucket at the corner is overflowing with urine and excrement. What's left of the air in my enclave is a rancid and fetid exhalation. I gasp.

As a kind of diversion, I recreate my interrogation by the compact, bull-necked officer in this very dungeon. It feels like eons ago.

“The Reichsfuehrer” – he said, evidently amused – “is a good person but too soft-hearted. That's why he has me. I am not averse to – how shall we put it? – more coercive methods.” – He chuckled raspily and sank into oblivious contemplation.

He suddenly leapt from his chair and faced me, eyeball to penumbral socket.

“What was in these documents, Frankenberg? I really want to know, you see.”

I stared at him, genuinely perplexed.

“I thought you knew!”

“Don’t play your Jewish games with me, Frankenberg, or you won’t live to regret it.” – He hissed and took a step back, turning his back. The hair at the nape of his neck bristled.

“When I ask you a question, you answer, Jew-dog!” – He barked shrilly.

“My great-great grandfather was the wild, romantic artist type. He had a fling with a German servant-girl and seamstress in the household. His father paid her off and shipped her back to Germany. She then wrote to inform him that she was pregnant.”

“Go on.”

I swallowed hard.

“He offered to finance an abortion in one of the best clinics in Europe but she declined. She wanted to keep the baby. She was not so young anymore.”

The SS officer was a stout man. He turned around slowly, raised a clenched fist and sunk it into my temple with the full backing of his bulging musculature.

I woke up in a pool of ice cold water, surrounded by SS guards and a doctor who repeatedly plunged a syringe into my thigh while squeezing its plunger frantically.

“Leave us now.” – Susurrated my inquisitor.

“What else did these documents contain?” – He resumed as though nothing had transpired in the meantime.

“My ancestor didn’t want trouble with the locals. He was still considered to be a Jew despite his conversion and six decades of devout Catholicism. So, he agreed to pay her child support until the illegitimate issue reached the age of 14. And so he did. He kept all the receipts and money transfer papers.”

“We know all that, damn you!” – Exploded my tormentor – “I am going to ask you one last time before I hand you over to my less merciful subordinates: what – else – was – in – these – documents?”

He towered over me menacingly.

“She ... she was infected. My family covered all her medical bills.”

“Infected with what?” – He screamed and feet shuffled behind the iron-grated door.

“Syphilis.” – I whispered – “She contracted it during her ... her liaison with my great-great-grandfather. He had it, too. As a matter of fact, he died in an insane asylum from tertiary brain syphilis. Well, technically he had an infarct, a heart attack.”

My interlocutor glared at me with undisguised malice.

“The baby was born syphilitic. He had congenital syphilis, the kind that is acquired at birth. He probably passed it on to his off-spring.”

“What was her name?”

“Anna. Anna Maria Shicklgruber.”

Chapter the Sixteenth

The Hitler File

Libby went through her traditional and valiant battle with the coffee vending machine and, predictably, settled on three cokes.

“Who says I failed?” – Repeated Dan, his facial features wrinkled with this inimitable smile of his – “I immediately realized the importance the second group of images. It yielded a single stegotext and, by comparison to the other hidden messages, it was tiny.”

“So?” – I felt belligerent.

“Sarid,” – Dan assumed his angelic airs – “when you have a series of sizable texts and then a pint-sized addendum, what’s the first thing that springs to mind?”

“Computer malfunction?”

“Code!” – Whispered Libby – ‘These are coded messages! And the wee one is the key!’”

“I dig this girl!” – Enthused Dan – “I really like her! Corrrrrect! A private key, to be precise.”

“A private key?” - I was determined to put sticks in Dan’s juggernaut.

“Imagine there’s a group.” – Dan acquiesced – “They are on the run. Former Nazis and the like. They need a secure way to communicate. So, they agree on a key. This is a public key. Anyone can use it to encrypt a message and send it along. But only those in possession of a private key can decipher the incoming messages.

This time I was really baffled:

“You mean the key that is used to encode the message is not the same as the key that is needed to decode it?”

“Precisely. It’s known as public-key cryptography.”

“I don’t understand how this is possible.” – Libby on the offensive. I have been waiting all night for this to happen. – “If I use a key to encrypt or encode something, surely I can use the same key to reverse the process and decipher it, to make it intelligible again?”

“You are right.” – Agreed Dan – “This is the basis of classic cryptography. But imagine that you have an algorithm, a sort of a recipe, or set of rules with many steps. When you follow the algorithm you generate two sequences, two cryptographic keys. It’s like having a single key and then breaking it in half. One part you make public and the other you keep to yourself. The first piece can be used to encrypt a message but you would need the second slice to convert it back to its original form. The two components are related mathematically but the relationship is practically impossible to deduce.”

Libby gestured helplessly. Dan sighed.

“Do you know what prime numbers are?”

“Numbers that can be divided only by 1 and by themselves.”

“Great. Multiply two such numbers and you get a third number. This is the public key. If the prime numbers used to generate the public key are large enough, the result is a long sequence of figures. You can try to find out the factors – the prime numbers – that were originally used to generate the public key, but it would take you ages. The prime numbers involved are the private key.”

“So, he who controls the algorithm controls the information?”

“True. The third disk brought to us by our mutual friend here, Sarid, contains the private key without which the other two disks are useless. This is why he has become so perilously popular lately.”

“They encrypted information with a public key. Then they concealed it in arbitrarily chosen images. Then they copied the whole thing on three floppies. The private key needed to make sense of the whole mess in on the disk that I pilfered?”

“I am afraid so. The private key is needed in order to make sense of the whole mess, period. None of the files on any of the three disks can be rendered intelligible without the private key on the third disk.” – Confirmed Dan avuncularly – “And now to the main part of tonight’s show. Look what emerged when I applied the private key to the stegotexts.”

“This is unbelievable.” – Libby was ecstatic – “This is the greatest discovery in the field ever! I am so grateful that you guys chose to involve me! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Thank him.” – I retorted tersely and fingered Dan – “His idea. The Bauer debacle didn’t go down too well with me. It’s kind of hard to forget.”

Libby completely ignored me.

“This is Hitler’s file kept by the SD – the Sicherheitsdienst, the Nazi Party’s own secret police, established by Heydrich within the SS in 1932.” – Her fingers trembled on the keyboard – “At least, it’s part of it. Large sections of the file are gone. I can tell by the numerator, it’s sequential.”

“The missing bits are probably on the other two disks.” – said Dan.

“There were 18 documents in all and there are only three of them on this floppy. But these three are un-be-lievable!” – She vociferated. I wasn’t sure I liked her anymore.

“The stamp on this document is Geheimer Staatspolizei. Isn’t this the Gestapo?”

“It’s complicated.” – Libby answered, distractedly – “The SD was merged in 1939 with the criminal police, the Kripo, and with the Gestapo. Together they formed a bureaucratic monster, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, the Central Office for the Security of the Reich. In 1944, due to a series of botched investigations, all the police powers of the SD were assumed by the Gestapo. We sometimes find both types of stamps – Gestapo and SD – on the same documents.”

She closed her eyes and mediated for a minute, her breast heaving.

“I now understand why you are being chased by two groups of people.” – She said to me.

“Two groups?” – I felt alarmed – “What makes you say that?”

“To start with, Eddy. Earlier today, I saw the two guys who mangled your face.”

“What?!” – I couldn’t believe the calm with which she broke these crazy-making news – “You saw whom? Where?”

“The two guys who were in your apartment had a long and seemingly gratifying meeting with Bauer today. They even had lunch together.”

“Are you sure these are the same hoods?” – asked Dan. Even he sounded traumatized.

“They passed me by when they finished thrashing Israel that evening. I saw them clearly. I was hiding on the landing above the floor but you don’t forget faces like these. They were here today and they were treated as welcome and respected guests.”

“You said two groups?” – I reminded her.

“Eddy saw them too. Unlike you, they came through the front entrance. He told me that they were not the same as the crew that ransacked your office. So, we are faced with two violent and very desperate teams.”

“I now know why they are desperate and violent.” – She added – “I can also guess who they might be. One group is bound to be the Mossad or some other Israeli or Jewish agency. These are the guys who lunched with Bauer. The others are Nazis, or Neo-Nazis, or ODESSA.”

“What’s ODESSA?” – queried Dan.

“Why do you think so?” – queried I.

“Look at the documents.” – Libby pointed a manicured fingernail at the screen.

“We can’t read German.” – I reminded her gruffly. The whole thing was beginning to get on what was left of my nerves.

“A medical report. Hitler was infected with syphilis. It seems to have affected his brain. These are 26 pages of detailed analyses, lab reports, and medical opinions. By 1943 Hitler was certifiably insane. Here is Himmler’s signature on this document, in his favorite green pencil. He has read it and consulted with others. See this letter K? That’s most probably his Finnish masseur, Kersten, his best and only intimate friend.”

“The second document is a summary of contacts, agreements, money transfers, and liaisons between the SD and the SS and Zionist organizations the world over. It goes well into 1944, when the Holocaust was all but over and has long been public knowledge in the West.”

“The third and last document is an extract of an investigation carried out by Heinrich ‘Gestapo’ Mueller himself. Someone by the name of Frankenberg. There are some attachments, too. Materials confiscated from ...” – she strained her eyes – “... a lawyer by the name of Alfons Sack and a priest, a Father Bernhard Stempfle.”

She perused the collection:

“Also some personal papers of Magda Quandt – later known as The First Lady of the Reich and wife of Joseph Goebbels, the Reichsminister for Propaganda and Culture. What is she doing here? I need to go through them more carefully later on.” – She paused:

“Frankenberg. Isn’t this the name of the journalist?”

“Yes.” – I said – “That’s was his name before they, whoever ‘they’ are, had done him in. I now feel convinced that he was murdered for reasons we have yet to fathom.”

“What’s this?” – I placed the tip of my index finger on an icon.

“It’s a third document but it doesn’t belong to the same file and it is much more recent, I guess. At any rate it has no numerator or stamps and seals and so it cannot have come from a Gestapo or SD file. It’s a list of names. It is signed by someone called Schwend or Schweid or something of the sort.”

“There’s a date here, at the bottom.” – commented Dan.

She frowned; “I didn’t notice it.”

“What does it say?”

“It says that the operation is scheduled to take place on April 20, 2009.”

“What operation?”

“It doesn’t say but the word they use indicates something of a military nature.”

“You asked about ODESSA.” – Said Libby, turning to Dan – “It was an organization of former SS officers. They operated after the war mainly In Europe, South America, and the Middle East. They are supposed to have been concerned with the smuggling of top-level SS and Nazi war criminals out of the areas then occupied by the Allies. But they were also involved in money counterfeiting, stolen art dealing, drugs, weapons, and other illicit activities. The received opinion is that they ceased to exist in the 1970s.”

Dan steepled his fingertips and rested the bridge of his nose on the improvised cathedral.

“Public key encryption became widely used only in the late 1970s. Computer steganography is a lot more recent. These disks were put together no earlier than 5 or 6 years ago. We are not dealing with history here. We are faced with an organization which is very much alive and kicking. These people are computer-literate. And they are ruthless. And they are here.”

Chapter the Seventeenth

The Holocaust Memorial

Josh Harman and I were thrust into an uneasy friendship when, as schoolmates, we became the Jewish victims of bullying and worse. Both our families elevated the denial of emotions into a pernicious art form: “Crybaby! What would you have done in Auschwitz?” The children that we were, Auschwitz struck us as something akin to our alma mater: hounded by Aryan-WASP students, ridiculed by the sadistic, Jew-baiting staff, and repeatedly snubbed by everyone else. We empathized with our poor parents.

Contrary to clichés, Josh and I never drifted apart. We attended the same high school and proceeded to graduate from the same Ivy League university. We even had essentially the same job: Josh was a research librarian at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. The Genocide Monitoring Group and the Museum were brothers-in-arms and, to our intense embarrassment, Josh and I often ended up working together in ad-hoc joint teams. Understandably, it was with more than a modicum of trepidation that I decided to pay him a visit.

The Museum was the only exhibition space I knew that intentionally inspired claustrophobia. Its slanting hallways narrowed and converged into a convoluted web of underpasses and overpasses, surrealistic chambers and cell-like appendages. The whole edifice was a stylized rendition of a concentration camp. The photographs of dead people and gory atrocities adorned the walls, interlaced with pipes and other metal structures. Nazi symbols and paraphernalia blighted the surfaces and contrasted sacrilegiously with human hair, baby shoes and other artifacts left behind by the gassed and the tortured. Even the public-access computers were situated in a penumbral corridor. Josh waited for me there, ill-at-ease and apologetic.

“Josh,” – I said – “good to see you again. It’s been what ... a year now?”

“Four months” – mumbled Josh miserably and swept back an errant forelock.

“Four months.” – I concurred heartily.

We shuffled uneasily for a moment or two.

“I heard that old Bauer dumped you.” – was Josh’s contribution to small talk.

“Yes, he did.” – I confirmed airily – “Irreconcilable differences.”

Josh nodded, baffled. This exchange was going nowhere, so I switched gears.

“Josh, I need your help.”

Josh tucked his shirt-coated paunch into his shabby denim trousers and sounded utterly unconvincing: “Anything at all, Israel, you know that.”

I knew nothing of the sort but I proceeded all the same:

“Have you ever met Libby from the GMG?”

“The red-headed librarian? The one you have a crush on?”

Was it so obvious to everyone but me?

“That’s the one. The other day she told me a few things that unsettled me mightily. I want a third opinion.”

“I am honored.” – responded Josh sarcastically. I proceeded, unfazed, and recounted everything that Libby said. Josh just stood there and absorbed it all, like the oversized human sponge that he basically was.

“Sit.” – He motioned at one of the remote stations. I did.

“She sounds like a revisionist historian – that’s the politically correct term for a Holocaust denier.”

“She does not deny that the Holocaust took place or that Hitler was directly involved.” – I protested vehemently.

Josh shrugged melancholically and grabbed a tiny chair next to me:

“That’s the worst kind. Their poison runs deepest. They undermine the foundations, while pretending to support the building.”

“Josh, can we skip the metaphors?”

Josh laughed nervously:

“Look, there’s nothing historically wrong with what she is saying. Hitler was reluctant to more or less openly murder the Jews until 1941, until he felt strong enough. Conquering the better part of the USSR in less than 6 months did miracles for his anyhow bloated ego. Plus, he then acquired control of a million Jews he could exterminate with impunity.”

“With impunity?”

“Well, yes.” – Josh was twiddling his thumbs again which brought back bittersweet memories – “The local populations were supportive. The Germans were mere bystanders in many of the major massacres that took place courtesy of former neighbors and colleagues of the victims. Plus these remote corners of Stalin’s empire were inaccessible to the media. The German perpetrators were hastily organized into Einsatzgruppen – commando troupes - only a few thousand members strong. They couldn’t have slaughtered a million men, women, and children without the enthusiastic help that they had received.”

I decided not to tell Josh about the floppy, let alone what was on it. For all I knew, he might have been inextricably enmeshed in the Bauer network. I didn’t know whom to trust. I was disorientated.

Josh reflected for a while and then jackknifed towards me:

“It was a murderous regime, Israel. One of the first acts of the Hitler government was to secretly execute 100,000 feeble-minded and insane Germans. In 1940, the Interior Ministry was planning to exterminate millions of healthy Germans deemed asocial or anti-social. They were up to their eyeballs in the blood of Russians, Serbs, Gypsies, Homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, communist party officials, political opponents, you name it. Granted, the Jews were the largest item on the menu – but it was a diverse buffet.”

“It was all Hitler’s doing?”

Josh straightened and shut his eyes, as though in prayer:

“Hitler was unequivocal about the Jews. He was the only one who had it all figured. The other Nazi eminences merely followed his lead. As late as May 1940, Himmler was still opposed to mass extermination calling it, in a widely distributed memorandum he authored, Bolshevik, un-Germanic and uncivilized. But Hitler and perhaps Goebbels were different. They bayed for Jewish blood.”

“Josh, I need to know, I really do: did Hitler give the order? Was the Holocaust his brainchild?”

“There is no written order by Hitler, if that’s what you are after, but there are literally dozens of bits of circumstantial and not so circumstantial evidence. In January 1939 Hitler told the Czechoslovak Foreign minister; ‘Our Jews will be destroyed.’ Nine days later, in a public speech, he predicted the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe. Even in the closing stages of the war, Hitler reprimanded Himmler every time a Jew evaded capture. He was personally involved in determining the fate of individual Jews as far away as Hungary!”

“In his appointment book, on December 18, 1941, Himmler noted an instruction from the Fuehrer to ‘exterminate the Jews as partisans.’ Felix Kersten, Himmler’s masseur and close confidante recorded in his diary on November 11, 1941 a conversation with his client. Himmler just returned from the Chancellery and Hitler informed him that the destruction of the Jews is being planned.”

Josh turned towards one of the terminals and tapped in a password. He clicked on an icon and then entered a search term: “Jews”.

“Have a look.” – He invited me, vacating his position – “These are stenographic records of Hitler’s table talk: his interminable and incoherent rants and raves to the impromptu entourage he assembled daily around his dinner table.”

He placed the blinking cursor on a sentence and highlighted it:

“If the Jews refuse to go voluntarily, I see no other solution but absolute extermination. – January 23, 1942.

“But even much earlier...” – exclaimed Josh, moving the cursor about – “October 25, 1941... See this?”

“It’s not a bad thing that the public attributes to us in rumors a plan to exterminate the Jews ...”

February 22, 1942:

“We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jew.”

Josh cloaked Hitler’s minacious diatribes with a screensaver:

“There’s a lot more. Rudolf Hoess, the indefatigable first commandant of Auschwitz, describes in the memoirs he wrote in prison, how he was called to Berlin in the summer of 1941 to see Himmler. His boss instructed him to construct a string of extermination camps across the eastern territories. He told his subordinate: ‘The Fuehrer has ordered the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. Those of us in the SS must execute these plans. This is a hard job but if the act is not carried out at once, instead of us exterminating the Jews, the Jews will exterminate the Germans at a later date.’”

“They really believed that?”

“They really believed it.” – Responded Josh, gravely – “They were convinced that the Jews were a clear and present menace not only to Germany but to all of Europe. Hitler said: ‘The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged by Pasteur and Koch.’”

“Pasteur and Koch were medical doctors who pitted themselves against disease-causing bacteria.”

“The Jews as pathogens.” – Nodded Josh – “The Germans regarded the war against the Jews as an epoch-making eschatological conflict between ultimate good and unadulterated evil. Theirs was a romantic crusade intended to deliver the maiden Europe from the Jewish beast.”

“But why physical, messy, costly, disruptive extermination in the middle of a global war? Why not simply ship the Jews somewhere and dump them there?”

Josh laughed:

“You sound like a typical Nazi memo. As late as February 1942, when the Holocaust was already in full swing, Section D-III of the Foreign Ministry was still talking about making territories available for the Final Solution and how the Fuehrer has decided that the Jews are to be dumped not in Madagascar but in the East.”

Josh rose from his seat:

“Let me buy you coffee, Srulik. Welcome to the Third Reich, one of the messiest systems of government ever. Hitler was the final arbiter between dozens of competing officials, constantly at each other’s throats, each with his own fiefdom, each vying for the Fuehrer’s favor and attention. The Jewish question was tackled by numerous desks in ministries, agencies, secret services, the Party, the state, and various institutes and institutions. There was no monolithic policy. At any given time, well into 1942, there were co-extant, mutually-exclusive solutions and options. Hence the term Final Solution, the last link in a long chain.”

“Josh,” – I cried on an impulse – “Could Hitler have been blackmailed?”

Josh froze in mid-motion and then resumed his seat. He scrutinized me at length:

“That Hitler was the victim of extortion was widespread knowledge in the Third Reich. The upper echelons of the Party, as well as the Gestapo and the SD did their best to cover the tracks but failed. His nephew was paid off and others were arrested or murdered.”

“Father Bernhard Stempfle, for instance. He belonged to the Catholic order of St. Jerome. He transcribed and edited the first parts of Hitler’s book, ‘Mein Kampf.’ In 1934, during The Night of the Long Knives, Hitler’s thugs broke his neck, shot three bullets into his heart, and dumped him in a forest near Munich. He may have known the truth about the kinky relationship

between Hitler and his adolescent niece, Geli Raubel. She committed suicide in 1931 with Hitler's gun. That's the official version, anyhow."

Josh paused, visibly reddening: "There were rumors and more than rumors. Hitler may have been a pervert, a sexual deviant. Otto Strasser who knew him well, recounted some really sickening stories that Geli told him when he was interviewed in 1943 by the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA. She shared the same stories with one of Hitler's guards, Wilhelm Stocker." – Josh fumbled with his clouded eyeglasses, tugging at the shoelace that held the crumbling frame together.

"Stempfle was unlucky. Hitler is rumored to have written an explicit letter to Geli in 1929. The good father is then said to have procured it on behalf of the would-be Fuehrer from a ring of extortionists involving the son of Hitler's landlady and a self-appointed curator of Nazi memorabilia named Rense."

"There were others. His photographer's 15-year old daughter, Henny Hoffman, for instance. The actress Renate Mueller described an evening with Hitler, replete with abject displays of sexual masochism on his part. He was addicted to porno and strip shows. Some scholars say that he was a homosexual. The SA – his erstwhile private army – definitely included an inordinate amount of gays."

"The Soviet doctors who performed an autopsy on what they claimed to have been Hitler's body, found monorchism – he had a single testicle. Hoffman describes an incident in which Hitler punished a Jewish prostitute for mocking him by having her gang-banged by Nazi thugs in his presence. There were even rumors that he contracted syphilis in World War I. In his voluminous diary, Kersten claims that Himmler asked his expert opinion on a 26-page medical report to that effect. You see, Hitler was ripe for blackmail on several counts. Still, this is not really my field, you know."

Kersten did read the report after all! I made a mental note to share this tidbit with Libby and Dan.

I ignored his disclaimer impatiently:

"I know about his nephew and the others. That's not whom I had in mind. Could Hitler have been blackmailed by a Jew?"

Muscles and veins rippled across the hitherto smooth, clean-shaven surface of Josh's face.

"What do you mean to say, Roth?"

"Could Hitler have been threatened by Chaim Arlosoroff, the Zionist leader? There are rumors, Josh. Do you know anything about that?"

Josh turned to stone, his eyes dead, his posture petrified, his breath withheld:

"Roth, let me give you a bit of advice, for old times' sake: give back the disk. You are out of your depth. It doesn't belong to you and too many interested parties may feel unjustly deprived of access. It's dangerous, you fool! When you leave here, go straight to Bauer and surrender it. I can help, if you wish."

There was a protracted silence, interrupted by the hum of the computers and then Josh chuckled unexpectedly, his poise relaxing:

"Let's go get that coffee and I will tell you everything you wanted to know about Madagascar and other exotic destinations the Nazis had in mind for the Jews."

Chapter the Eighteenth

Enter the Mossad

Josh wouldn't tell me how he came to know about the disk and what he meant by his oracular dire warnings. I was still pondering this question in my sparsely furnished kitchenette when Bauer startled me. Well, Bauer's voice to be precise.

It emanated from the antiquated answering machine donated by my mother as a means of remotely micromanaging my life. Bauer sounded exhausted and morose:

“Roth, we need to talk. Tomorrow, 9 AM, my office.”

That's Bauer all right. Not a syllable wasted, all pleasantries summarily dispensed with.

I called Dan. He was out. I called Libby. So was she. It was late, I was tired and contemplation dissolved into a surrealistic hypnagogic landscape.

In my dream, I was back at the GMG. As I climbed the stairs and made it towards my corner office, I saw Libby and Dan and Bauer exiting my room, engaged in heated conversation. “Hey, what are you all doing here?” – I cried. But I must have been both invisible and inaudible because they kept ignoring me

Bauer was in the tortuous process of unfurling an enormous flag and Libby seemed particularly unhappy about it. It was the Israeli white and blue but where the Star of David, the Magen David, should have been there was an enormous black inverted swastika.

Now Libby was angrily tugging at the pennant's pole, trying to extract it from Bauer's arthritic hands. Dan stood aside grinning and tapping the tiny keyboard of a wireless device.

“He must not see it!” – screamed Libby – “You are jeopardizing the entire operation for no good reason!”

Someone tapped my back and I whirled around, alarmed.

“I thought I told you to return the disk, pal.” – screeched an odious version of Josh, eyes scarlet and ablaze, nostrils flaring, and veins throbbing all over his contorted face.

Mysteriously, Dan materialized behind Josh, clad in a hooded kind of robe that obscured his face, except his blood-red, visibly annoyed lips.

“He will never do it. He will never surrender the disk. Don’t you see? He is with them. With *THEM!*”

Libby shrieked in horror and I woke up to another hazy day.

Few drug fiends were given a body search as thorough as the one Eddy administered to me upon my arrival at the GMG the next morning. He ignored my forced cheerfulness and my “good morning” greeting. Not a muscle twitched in his weather-beaten face when I cracked a joke. I was an outsider now.

“You know the way” – he motioned vaguely upstairs. Disheveled and disorientated, I stuffed back into my briefcase the objects strewn on Eddy’s check-in counter and shuffled along indecisively.

“They are expecting you.” – Eddy called after me but when I turned around in surprise, he was intently absorbed in his tiny security videocam monitor.

They are expecting me. Not Bauer – but “they”. Bless you, Eddy, old friend.

I trudged towards the library. I had to gather some intelligence. Entombed as she was in her archival temple, Libby knew everything that went on and down at the GMG. The library was an unequalled juncture of grapevine gossip and official information. But now it was locked.

As I was preparing to beat a hasty retreat, at the other end of the corridor, someone opened the door to Bauer’s inner sanctum. Libby emerged and stooped to pick up something she had dropped. It looked like a floppy disk

to me. But, then, the distance, my state of mind, and the mote-riddled air may have conspired to delude me.

Bauer was disconcerted by my equanimity. He expected shock, even indignation at the presence of his guests.

“Israel Sarid, you know these two gentlemen, I assume.” – he gestured at the general direction of his desk.

“I beg to differ with your choice of word.” – I responded acerbically, spurning his extended hand – “But, yes, I know these two ... er ... gentlemen.”

Bauer sighed. Grease Ball twitched uneasily on his tiny stool. Hulk remained poised. As far as I could tell, still clad in black, they haven’t changed clothes since our last encounter.

Bauer assumed a familiar position behind his tottering desk.

“Are you a Jew?”

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

“You read my personnel file and interviewed me before you hired me. What’s the meaning of this question?”

“Just indulge me.” – Bauer’s eyes glinted.

“My parents are both Jews and I was, therefore, born a Jew, I guess. I don’t recall having converted lately.”

“Smartass” – mumbled Grease Ball and nervously straightened his thin moustache. Hulk shot him a warning glance.

“We are all Jews here, in this room. These are agents Lavon and Kennan from Israel.”

“Agents?”

Bauer twisted uneasily and ruffled through some papers on his desk. There was a long, increasingly discomfiting silence, at last broken by Hulk:

“Mossad agents.”

“Are you allowed to operate in the United States?” – was my unwise contribution to the developing dialog. Grease Ball – Kennan, I surmised – half rose from his convoluted posture but thought better of it.

Bauer cleared his throat:

“Do you know the significance of the date April 20th?”

I shrugged.

“One, Adolf Hitler, was born on April 20th, 1889.” – Hulk enlightened me.

“Neo-Nazis the world over are celebrating this date with demonstrations, vandalism, conferences, beerfests, and other recreational and educational activities.” – mused Bauer sadly.

“Only this coming year it’s going to be different.” – interjected Grease Ball.

“Different?”

“They are planning something more substantial. We don’t know what is in the works, but it’s a safe bet that it will involve Jews in some place or another. Maybe a terrorist attack. Maybe worse.”

“Worse?” – I was beginning to sound like an unfriendly quiz show host.

“Worse.” – Bauer weighed in.

“What could be worse than a terrorist attack?”

Hulk proceeded unperturbed:

“You have in your possession a floppy disk that once belonged to the journalist Leo Frankenberg. We need it.”

“Why do you need it?”

Grease Ball perked up: “So, you finally admit to having it?”

“I never denied or confirmed anything.” – I treaded cautiously. Bauer sniggered.

“I want to know what’s on this disk.” – I declared – “You have invaded my privacy, manhandled me, threatened and cajoled. You have even put me in a hospital ...”

“That wasn’t us.” – protested Grease Ball ungrammatically.

“... and none of it worked.” – I completed the sentence vehemently – “Why don’t you change tack and give openness and collaboration a chance?”

Grease Ball and Hulk exchanged a protracted series of meaningful glances.

Finally, Bauer intervened warily:

“Tell him. It’s your only chance. He may even be of help, who knows, he is the best research librarian I have ever come across.”

I couldn’t help feeling gratified at the backhanded compliment.

Hulk hesitated and then plunged in:

“Put together with the other two disks, the one you absconded with contains damaging material. If published, it can provide ammunition for generations of Holocaust deniers, anti-Semites, Jew-baiters and Israel-haters.”

“Is this damning evidence true?”

“That’s besides the point.” – spat Grease Ball.

“On the contrary,” – I responded bitterly – “it is the precise and only point. Is it true?”

“It’s true, we think.” – confirmed Hulk, averting my eyes.

“Roth.” – Bauer never called me Roth before.

I glared at him.

“The disks contain a series of documents that cast a new light on some issues regarding the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. Holocaust deniers are bound to deliberately misconstrue the contents to suit their pernicious purposes. Facts are nothing without interpretation and are often subject to malicious misinterpretation, you know that.”

“We want you to do your duty as a Jew and hand over the third disk to us. April 2009 is drawing near. We need time to foil their plans, whatever they are.”

I nodded and reached for the door handle. Grease Ball extended his leg across the doorframe. I glanced at Bauer.

“We need you to act now.” – he implored.

I took a deep breath:

“I didn’t ask to be sent to Jerusalem to rummage through the ossified remains of a dead journalist. You made this choice for me. I cannot pretend that nothing happened. I need to know the truth, Bauer. The truth. I have been living in an extension of Auschwitz since I was born. My mother and father never left the camp. I need to know why. I must discover what really happened. I feel compelled to unearth all the conspiracies and the lies and deceit. I can’t help it. And I don’t care who gets hurt in the process. I feel like I have already paid the price, like I have got nothing to lose.”

“Except your life.” – muttered Grease Ball.

“What life?” – said Bauer – “Let him go, boys.”

“One more thing” – advised me Hulk – “There’s another team in town and they may not be as understanding and as gentle as we are. Watch your step out there.”

“Another Mossad team?”

Grease Ball rolled his eyes in desperation: “He won’t survive another day, I am telling you.” – he prodded Hulk with his elbow. Hulk brushed him aside.

“The other side” – he explained – “The bad guys. The Nazis. They are after you, too. Have you heard of the Gehlen organization?”

I confessed my ignorance.

“You will. They are ruthless mercenaries for sale to the highest bidder. And the Nazis bid high for your head.” – Intoned Grease Ball and removed his extremity from the door – “You are free to go, stupid. Free to pursue the truth.”

As I was preparing to vacate the premises, I turned around and faced Bauer:

“What was Libby doing here, by the way?”

For the first time in our entire conversation, he looked genuinely flummoxed.

Chapter the Nineteenth

Mueller's Quest

Compressed into bloodlessness, his thin lips formed an eerie strip in the tenebrous cell. His chin was square and bulldoggish. He stared at me, speechless.

“Do you realize what you are saying, you scummy Jew?”

“You asked for the truth.” – I defended myself lamely.

“Maria Anna Shicklgruber. Is this the Fuehrer's grandmother you are referring to?”

“I don't know. But her son's name was Alois and he was born in 1837. She was well over 40 years of age at that time. It matches the facts.”

He swirled around and gazed at the pitted and grimy wall for a while. Then he turned back, determined.

“Tell me about Magda Quandt.”

“I met her in when I came to Berlin to study law. She was introduced to me by a common friend at a lecture organized by Tikvat-Zion, the Zionist group.”

“The common friend was Lisa Arlosoroff.”

“Lisa Arlosoroff.” – I confirmed – “Magda and Lisa were planning to emigrate to Palestine. Magda's former boyfriend was Lisa's brother. He left Berlin in 1924 ...”

“Viktor Vitaly Chaim Arlosoroff, a Russian subject.” – Monotoned my interrogator. He must be a Gruppenfeuhrer or Obergruppenfeuhrer, I thought, at any rate a very high ranking SS dignitary. And suddenly I felt like giggling at how my long dead Jewish-despite-all-his-efforts ancestor could still rankle the high and mighty self-appointed representatives of the master race from his grave.

“Yes, Chaim Arlosoroff. He relocated to Palestine when he was appointed to a senior position in the Jewish Agency.”

There was an uneasy silence.

“Go on.” – His voice sounded hollow, as though emanating from a skull.

I remembered the vivacious girl that shook my hand and unabashedly assessed me when we first met: her slanted, flamboyant hat, defiant mannish costume, and, incredibly, a large Star of David tucked between exuberant breasts. Magda.

“We fell in love.” – I said simply.

The officer nodded: “She always had a weakness for the impure and the defective. Probably her Jewish upbringing. You know that her stepfather was a Jew? He met his maker in Buchenwald, courtesy of his second son-in-law, Goebbels.” – he laughed hoarsely.

I bowed my head:

“It was more than a weakness. We spent three years together, before and after her divorce from her husband, Quandt, the industrialist. Later, she had a large apartment in Reichskanzlerplatz. We used to meet there. Whenever I wanted to see her I would send her a bouquet of freshly cut flowers. She loved nature. We didn’t make a big secret of our love. Once we even went on a trip to Hotel Dreesen in Godesberg. I pretended to be her husband.”

“Until she came back to her senses and dumped you.” – His voice was incisive but not querulous.

“She never dumped me.” – I protested feebly and he smirked contemptuously.

“When did you first learn that she was dating another man?”

“Sometime in early 1931.”

“Can’t you be more specific?” – Even his most innocuous queries sounded minacious.

“I don’t remember.” – I whispered – “All I recall is the horrible fight we had. That was on April 12, 1931.”

“When you took pot shots at her?”

I shrugged helplessly.

“We were in a hotel room.” – I said incongruously – “I shot at the cupboard and the mirror, in her general direction. I missed. She laughed and said: ‘Had you really aimed at me and hit me, I might have been impressed. I find your behavior ridiculous.’ Then she stormed out of the room. We met on Saturday that week and then she bade me farewell in her own inimitable way. I never saw her again.”

“Did she confide in you as to who was your rival?”

There was no point in denying. For all I knew Magda may have been languishing in the cell next to mine.

“She said it was Joseph Goebbels, the Reichsminister for Propaganda and Culture. At the time, he was the Gauleiter of Berlin, I think.” – I hesitated.

I could swear that my interlocutor was holding his breath. He prodded me with the point of his shoe. It hurt.

“She also said that she was torn between him and Adolf Hitler.”

He slapped me forcefully and I tumbled on the bunk and propped myself against the slimy, frostbitten wall. I choked on a gory libation of salt and iron.

“The Fuehrer” – he muttered gruffly – “Whenever you mention the Fuehrer, you Jewish Pig-dog, you will do so by his official title. Clear?”

“Yes, Sir. My apologies. The Fuehrer.”

“That’s better. What did she mean by ‘torn’?”

“She said that the Fuehrer told her that he could never marry her because he was wed to the cause and to Germany. They haven’t been intimate but she told me that she was certain that it was only a matter of time. They were attracted to each other. She described him as the most incredible man she had ever met.”

“Herr Frankenberg, did you ever give Magda Quandt any documents regarding the Fuehrer?” – His voice was velvety but sly – “For instance, the documents we had discussed earlier, so painstakingly preserved by your cautious Jew ancestors?”

“Never. I never gave Magda anything regarding the Fuehrer.”

“Oh? So you gave her other papers regarding someone else? Joseph Goebbels, for instance? You tried to discredit him in her eyes, yes?”

He wasn’t fishing. He clearly knew the answer.

“Yes, I did.”

The officer groaned in pleasure, dumped his frame on the ledge behind me and stretched his booted legs, brushing off imaginary dust specks from the red stripes along his trousers.

“Tell me all about it in detail, if you please.”

“Magda informed me that Goebbels kept referring to me as ‘the foreigner’. That incensed me. I told her that my family has been living in Austria and Germany at least as long as his, if not longer.”

“You gave her something to help her change her mind with regards to the Reichsminister.”

“I gave her a letter I had in my possession.”

“What letter? How did you obtain it?”

“A friend gave it to me.”

“A friend?” – He sounded genuinely puzzled.

“Not everyone liked Dr. Goebbels and his methods. He struck many as ... radical, too extremist. Someone from the Gau Headquarters gave me a letter that Goebbels has written in the 1920s to Director Cohnen at Moenchengladbach. He copied on it Peter Simmons, the husband of his maternal aunt, Anna.”

“And the letter was incriminating?”

“Goebbels referred to the Jew Cohnen as ‘father’.”

He whistled and stuck two sausagy fingers under his tunic collar: “You don’t say! Magda took the letter and ...”

“She arranged a meeting between me and Dr. Goebbels in her ex-husband’s estate, Severin in Mecklenburg. The Gauleiter made it clear that my life depended on severing the relationship with Magda and leaving Germany. When I wouldn’t listen, Magda took matters into her own hands. Hence the vivid tryst at the hotel.”

The SS-officer nodded his head in apparent wonder, mumbled something and adjusted his posture on the stony bench.

“The documents we had discussed earlier, the ones concerning Anna Maria Schicklgruber, you gave them to Arlosoroff in 1931.”

This was not a question but a statement of fact. I did.

“When did you see him again?”

“He visited Berlin in May 1933. He called me and suggested a meeting in a bookstore not far from Lisa’s apartment. I met him on the pavement outside the shop. He was talking to Robert Weltsch, the editor of the Judische Rundschau, the Zionist paper.”

“And what did you three dainty Jews do after you have met?”

“Arlosoroff wanted to buy a book. We entered the premises and smack across the isle was this wedding photograph of Magda and Joseph Goebbels.

Chaim almost fainted. He leant on Weltsch, the color draining from his face, sweaty all over, and breathing audibly. It took him quite a while to recover. He couldn't digest the fact that Magda who was so into Zionism would marry an anti-Semite."

"Would see through the Jewish lies, schemes, and filthy conspiracies, you mean. Yes, criminals find it disheartening when they are exposed."

I ignored the tirade:

"Arlosoroff always sought to benefit from adversity. He was the most original and imaginative political thinker I ever met. Having recuperated from the shock of what he perceived to be Magda's betrayal, he came up with this idea to contact her and ask her to arrange for an interview with the Reichsminister, her husband. He wanted to promote his plan of Transfer, the Ha'avara. He wanted the Reich to allow Jews to sell their property in Germany, emigrate to Palestine, and receive a certain proportion of the proceeds in foreign currency in their destination. In return, the Jews would buy with the funds released by the Reich authorities German products and market them all over the Middle East."

"I remember the scheme – or shall I say the scam." – Confirmed my counterparty – "Everyone hated it, except the SD. We barely had enough foreign exchange to finance imports for a few weeks, yet you, Jews, were bleeding us dry with this Transfer idea of yours. Clever, I must say."

"I don't know much about it. I left Germany afterwards and moved to Budapest."

"Yes, you moved to Budapest. Like many of your race you thought you could escape the long arm of historical justice by doing what your coreligionists do best: scatter and flee. Well, not this time, it seems. But let's forget all that. I am a professional policeman, not an ideologist. My business is crime. What happened afterwards?"

"Arlosoroff had to travel to Warsaw on some official business. He made contact with Magda, I don't know by what means. He told Lisa that Magda agreed to meet him after his return to Berlin, but by the time he came back, Magda vanished, leaving word behind that she had some urgent matters to attend to in Italy. She warned Arlosoroff to leave Germany at once. To

continue to press for a meeting with her husband would place him in extreme danger, she wrote. I remember these words; ‘extreme danger’. I was there when he showed the note to Lisa and commented that he had just committed the greatest mistake of his life. We didn’t fully grasp what he meant. But two weeks later he was assassinated.”

“And you think that was Goebbels’ doing.”

“I don’t know what to think.” – I felt overwhelmingly fatigued. I didn’t care anymore. The memories were tougher on me than any torture this officer could mete out. I wanted everything, my life especially, over and done with.

There was a moment of serenity and then he bolted from his improvised seat and straightened his crumpled uniform.

“That’s all for tonight, Jew. I warn you on pain of your life not to talk to anyone but me. Anyone else comes to question you, you refuse, citing my authority.”

“It’s dark in here and I apologize for not recognizing you.” – I whispered.

He laughed heartily:

“It would have worried me greatly if you had. Stealth is half the good policeman’s work. My name is Mueller, Heinrich Mueller. They call me Gestapo Mueller behind my back. And there is a good to reason to it, too: I am the Head of the Gestapo, Amt IV. Mum’s the word, if you value your life.”

He knuckled the brass door and it was instantly flung open by two sentries.

“No one sees him, no one talks to him, no one but me. Is this absolutely clear?”

On the threshold he suddenly turned, a menacing shadow:

“You have told me everything, Frankenberg, haven’t you? There isn’t anything you have held back?”

“Nothing” – I reassured him tremulously.

“Frankenberg, Frankenberg ...” – he sounded genuinely disappointed – “I have spent the better part of my adult life becoming the best detective in Germany. Did you really think that you could waltz your way past me? Cough up, Jew. Tell me more about your former blonde lover and her penchant for all things Jewish.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” – I denied feebly.

He didn’t move. His breathing formed, misty about his face, like an evil halo. He waited and so did I, but I was merely bluffing.

“Magda and Chaim Arlosoroff planned to get married.”

“We know that, Frankenberg!” – growled Mueller.

“Chaim was a rising star in the Zionist movement. Had he married a non-Jew, it would have seriously impeded his career, you understand.”

“So ...”

“So, Magda secretly converted to Judaism in one of the liberal synagogues in Wilmersdorf, Berlin. She told no one except Chaim. No one knew, not even her family or closest intimates. Years later, when I found out about Goebbels ... about the Reichsminister, I accused her of playing both sides against the middle, of being a closet anti-Semite, a spineless opportunist, with no convictions of her own. She waved her conversion certificate at me. ‘How can I be an anti-Semite?’ – she screamed – ‘I am a Jewess!’”

“You gave this document to Arlosoroff, too.”

“Not the document itself, but a notarized copy.” – I admitted – “She didn’t remain a Jew for long, you know. She converted to Protestantism in order to marry Quandt.”

But he was already gone. The door clung shut behind him and the darkness, impregnated with a thousand dead voices, engulfed me.

Chapter the Twentieth

Himmler's Mill

“Herr Frankenberg, on your feet, please.”

I stare up at the silhouette of a thin man of average height whose face almost scrapes mine in an attempt not to be overheard.

“Who ... What do you want? Who are you?”

“There’s no time to lose.” – He urges – “The Reichsfuehrer wants to see you. We have to move fast.”

“Earlier, another SS officer warned me not to talk to anyone if I value my life.”

This gives him discernible pause but he recovers swiftly:

“If he is serving in the SS, he is subordinate to the Reichsfuehrer. Now, stop arguing, we have no time to spare. Put this over your eyes.”

A blindfold. I hear shuffling feet and two sturdy hands lift me from the bunk by my armpits and drag me along an uneven floor towards a gust of wind. An exit.

I am unceremoniously shoved onto the floor of a car, bumping into metal handles and doorframes in the process.

“Sorry about that.” – Whispers my escort unconvincingly – “We will soon be on our way. You may remove the blindfold now.”

The engine whirs, doors clang shut, and worn tires hug what sound like cobblestones.

“You can sit up, but remain on the floor.” – instructs my abductor.

There is a dilated moment of silence.

“You play cello, Herr Frankenberg?”

He catches me completely off-guard: “Yes, I am. I mean, I did. A not too gifted amateur, I am afraid.”

He stares away:

“I used to play the cello, too. I began taking lessons when I was eight.”

He ruminates for a while and then sighs:

“An accident put a stop to that. I broke both these, you see.” – He commits two gloved hands to the dim light of the vehicle’s passenger compartment.

“Like you, I am a lawyer, but didn’t practice except for three miserable months way back in the late 1930s.” – He leers joylessly.

“We haven’t been properly introduced: my name is Schellenberg, Walter Schellenberg. I am the head of the secret intelligence services, both Amt VI and the Military Office. I was ordered to bring you safely to our headquarters. The Reichsfuehrer has an interesting proposition for you.”

“Of what service can the insignificant Frankenberg be to the rulers of Europe?” - I mean it to sound sardonic but all I succeed was to appear pathetic. He allows a smile, crooked by a chin-length scar and bends down to face me:

“Let me be completely open with you: Hitler is destroying the German Volk. The false and corrupt people around him are unable to manage their own relationships, let alone rule Europe. The only hope Germany has – nay, correct that: the only hope Western civilization has is Himmler and his SS. We are the true reformers. You won’t believe how many of us in all ranks and departments are seeking to put a stop to this madness that engulfs us, courtesy of Hitler, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, and the likes of Kaltenbrunner.”

“There’s no hope for my people, either way.” – I counter dryly – “Have you ever visited Auschwitz, Herr Schellenberg?”

He recoils: “Let us not talk about such things. I know very little regarding these issues, anyhow. It is not my job. The only concentration camp I have ever inspected was Oranienburg and it looked just fine to me.”

He moves uneasily in the creaking leathered backseat:

“The really important question is this: do you want to help us end all this? Because you can, you know.”

I close my eyes and inhale the stench of stale tobacco and cheap eau-de-cologne that permeates the nightmarish ride.

“I would need to know a lot more.” – I respond – “You are, after all, an SS officer. We, camp inmates, learned not to trust you.”

He nods grimly:

“I fully understand you, Herr Frankenberg. Confidence cannot be established overnight. I have to be realistic.” – He settles back and brushes imaginary lintel from his expensively tailored business suit. He gazes out of the misted window and speaks more to himself than to me, I have the impression.

“I am a German and you are a Jew. You have unleashed sadistic aerial warfare on our defenseless and innocent civilians and we have placed you in concentration camps. We are enemies, Herr Frankenberg.”

“So, you might wonder why am I sharing with you today and here my innermost secrets? It’s because I don’t believe in ordering people about. I believe in cultivating a spirit of collaboration in pursuing a common goal: peace.”

“When this is over, Herr Frankenberg, we are all going to be judged by history. My aim and the aim of other like-minded fellow officers are to reach a separate peace in the West. We should have never fought our brothers, the English and we should have signed a peace agreement with France, not an armistice. We should have been more generous towards our adversaries and more enlightened towards occupied nations, both in the West and in the East. That would have been the only way to unite them against the one true and implacable enemy: Bolshevism. Regrettably, the ideologues took over

with their insane theories about a master-race lording it over slaves in colonies.”

“That being said, we have tried everything. We sent couriers with peace offers to both the Americans and the British. We released prisoners from concentration camps. We promised to change the government in Germany in every which way they had required. To no avail.”

“The West will never desert Russia, their ally. They are winning the war after all and they would be ill-advised to tinker with success.” – I venture.

Schellenberg shakes his head fiercely:

“You’d be surprised.” – He exclaims – “The problem is that we won’t give the Americans iron-clad guarantees regarding the fate of Hitler. If we had leaders instead of two-timing, sneaky, duplicitous cowards, the world today would have been completely different and definitely more peaceful.”

“Herr Frankenberg!” – There is urgency in his tone – “Please help me! It is for a good international and historical cause. I need the documents you possess, including the ones passed down in your family from one generation to the next. With this kind of insurance policy, people are bound to feel safer and to act in their best interests and in the interests of the German people and the West. Here” – he throws his hands up – “I am being impossibly open with you. No games of hide and seek.”

“You want to depose Hitler? You are planning a coup d’etat? You need the documents in order to get rid of him?” – I whisper deliriously.

My interlocutor purses his lips.

The driver lowers the glass partition:

“We have arrived, Obergruppenfuehrer.”

Schellenberg sits still and then asks:

“Who interrogated you earlier tonight? You mentioned another SS officer when I came to collect you.”

“Mueller.” – I say – “He claimed to be the head of the Gestapo, no less.”

“Mueller” – Schellenberg spits out the name – “The worst kind of bureaucrat. A friend of Bormann. Fanatically loyal to the state and overzealous in the performance of what he perceives to be his duties. Merciless and inanely intransigent.”

“Bormann?”

“The real Fuehrer. Hitler’s secretary, factotum, moat, and intimate. A menace wrapped in a sphinx. Be wary of both, Frankenberg. They are the most evil and dangerous types imaginable.”

And with this admonition he flings the car door open and steps out.

“We meet again” – says Himmler.

His face is grey and puffy, his beady eyes embedded in loose, ill-looking skin folds. He clutches his belly periodically and keeps rearranging the blotter and writing implements on the desk in front of him.

“Our Fuehrer was saved by divine providence.” – He suddenly blurts, genuinely awed – “Cowards and traitors placed a powerful bomb right under his very feet and he emerged unscathed. An omen, to be sure, long foretold by the stars.”

Schellenberg moves uneasily, startling his superior.

“Reichsfuehrer,” – he says – “Herr Frankenberg needs to be shipped out tomorrow, if we intend to go ahead with our plan and avoid unnecessary complications.”

“Yes, yes.” – Himmler waves impatiently – “Don’t you think I am fully aware of that?”

Fumbling in the top drawer, he emerges clasping a green-tipped pencil.

“Herr Frankenberg, we would like to take possession of the documents that you have mentioned in our previous conversation.”

“I don’t have them any longer.” – I tell him.

“We know that.” – He reprimands me primly – “We want you to go and get them for us. This mission will involve some traveling, I am afraid.”

“I gave the documents away.” – I repeat, endeavoring to penetrate his obtuseness.

“You gave them to Arlosoroff of the Jewish Agency. The man who succeeded him is Moshe Shertok. We can arrange for you to meet him in Istanbul.”

I glance at Schellenberg but he is stony-faced.

“Tell him.” – commands Himmler and leans back in his chair.

“We have a few Jewish agents on the ground. They can take care of your travel arrangements, accommodation and other needs.”

“Jewish agents? You mean like me?”

Schellenberg laughs perfunctorily:

“I mean full-time, salaried, and uniformed ones. My department employs agents of all nationalities and ethnic groups, Jews included.”

“We also have in Istanbul Jews from Hungary and Slovakia who are negotiating some deals with the Allies. They are already in touch with Shertok. You can use this channel.” – suggests Himmler.

Suddenly, he catapults from his seat and perches on the edge of the desk, close enough to touch.

“Shertok has the documents.” – Himmler says – “We want the originals. They tell me that you have been to Auschwitz. You bring back those papers, and I give you my word, I will immediately halt all the operations in the ‘mill’. All the goings-on in all the camps all over Europe will cease at once.

And I will release a whole trainload of Jews from Bergen-Belsen, all 1700 of them. Does that strike you as a fair bargain?"

"It strikes me as unbelievable." – I retort.

"You are an uppity Jewish dog, Herr Frankenberg." – Concludes Himmler pleasantly – "But I am sure that you will see the light. Obergruppenfuehrer Schellenberg will brief you as to your mission. You are to obey his instructions as though they were mine. He is my Benjamin and I have full trust in him. He saved my life once, on an airplane, you know. I wish you all the success in the interests of our common cause."

"Herr Reichsfuehrer" – I plead – "I want my family out of the Reich. At least my wife. She is in Budapest. She has Swiss protection papers. It shouldn't be too difficult to let her join me." When he ignores my pleas, I add: "It's my condition for helping you."

"You need no longer worry about your family, Herr Frankenberg. They are being given the best care. Of course, their ultimate fate and well-being rest in your hands." – Himmler dismisses me.

Schellenberg doesn't wait for my riposte. He pulls me to my feet and drags me out of the room, softly closing the door behind us.

Chapter the Twenty-first

Enter the US Government

The moment I laid eyes on him I knew something went horribly amiss. Dan wore tasseled shoes. His djellaba was gone, replaced by a trim dark suit. The only sartorial concession to his former self was a shiny yellow vest embroidered with what appeared to be Mesoamerican tribal designs.

“What’s wrong?” – I enquired, genuinely alarmed – “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Come in.” – invited me the ersatz Dan – “I would like you to meet someone.”

“I hope it’s not Libby,”- I whispered urgently – “because that’s what I came to talk to you about.”

He stanchd my verbal protestations with a raised palm:

“Libby is here but obviously she is not the one I would like to introduce you to.”

“I expressly asked you to be alone.” – I fulminated – “You had no right to do that!”

“Not the right maybe, but definitely the moral obligation. You are on a suicidal course. Friends are supposed to try to prevent such things from happening.”

“I saw her coming out of Bauer’s office. She was carrying a floppy disk. She looked furtive!”

“And you sound paranoid” – observed Dan coolly – “We can deal with her after my guest is gone. Please enter. Persecutory delusions are better discussed indoors.”

“You know Libby.” – Dan indicated her majestically. I did not acknowledge Libby’s presence and, from the corner of my jaundiced eye I could see the shock and hurt forming on her delicate face.

“This” – gestured Dan towards a long-legged, collapsible, besuited, bald apparition – “is my colleague, Preston.”

“Does he have a surname? And what do you mean by ‘colleague’?” – I was in no mood for cloak and dagger tonight.

The stranger laughed:

“Actually Preston is my family name. Dan and I work in different divisions but for the same agency.”

I was flabbergasted and incensed in equal measures.

“You never told me that you are employed by a government agency!” – I lashed at my double-crossing erstwhile friend.

“You never asked.” – said Dan.

“Had I asked would you have told me?” – I countered, disillusioned.

“Probably not.” – Volunteered Preston amiably – “Mr. Roth, we don’t have time for lovers’ quarrels right now. Your life is in danger and possibly the lives of many others. I want you to put aside your emotions and listen to what I have to say.”

“You guys never give up, do you? First the Gehlen organization, then the Mossad, now you, probably CIA or NSA or some other acronym.”

“You are an American citizen.” – Observed Preston icily – “I don’t appreciate being lumped together with mercenaries and foreign agents.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, calm down.” – Interposed Dan – “We are all on the same side. Sarid, why don’t you give Preston a chance? You might actually learn something from him. He has been hunting Nazis and Neo-Nazis since before prehistory.”

Preston grinned and his crinkled face reminded me of my favorite actor, James Stewart. He unfolded his frame, stood up and extended an unusually large and warm palm in my direction. I shook it and accepted the truce.

Preston settled back into his Procrustean chair and stretched his interminable legs:

“You have mentioned the Gehlen organization, Roth. What do you know about them?”

“Nothing much” – I admitted – “Hire-a-thug kind of thing, maybe?”

Preston chuckled. Despite myself, I was beginning to like the guy.

“Far from it.” – He said when he recovered from his self-inflicted bout of cheer – “They are probably the most sophisticated intelligence service there is. Have you heard of ODESSA?”

“Why don’t we just assume that I know close to nothing about these topics and move to expediently remedy this deficiency?” – I suggested acerbically.

Libby giggled. I snuck a stare in her direction. She reciprocated. I forgot how lushly alluring she could be with her full lips, and curls, and freckled face, and upturned sculpted nose. Still, what was she doing at Bauer’s office that day? And why was she present here today? Dan, a government agent? That defied the wildest of imaginations. I felt disorientated, cast into the innards of a constantly shaken kaleidoscope.

Preston settled back, rubbed his translucent temples with thumb and forefinger and sighed:

“Even as World War II was drawing to a close it was clear that the West is fast acquiring a new adversary: the Soviet Union. They were all over Europe, closing fast on Germany, Italy, even France. Stalin’s methods didn’t seem to differ much from Hitler’s. No wonder the two tyrants had this mutual admiration society thing going. May I?”

He pointed at a miraculously produced clay pipe and a tattered bag of tobacco. Stuffing the implement with prodigious quantities of the scented weed, he proceeded:

“Western intelligence services had no one inside the USSR and the fast forming Soviet Bloc in Eastern Europe. This emerging enemy, on the other hand, had well placed moles everywhere: the OSS, later the CIA, not to mention the Communist-infested British MI6. It looked hopeless until someone came with the idea of the Gehlen Organization.”

“Reinhard Gehlen was in charge of German army intelligence in the entire Eastern front. He had the know-how, he had files – he hid them in a tin drum in the Bavarian Alps – and, most important, he had the agents: thousands of them, infiltrated into all the Russian command and intelligence structures. He made us an offer we simply could not refuse.”

He readjusted his limbs and looked distinctly ill-at-ease.

“He proposed to put all these assets at our disposal and to provide us with a list of Red double agents, moles, and traitors in the West. Moreover, he undertook to build from scratch a West German intelligence service, to recruit former agents and new ones, and to cover the Warsaw Pact for us on a permanent basis. All we had to do is turn a blind eye to some friends of his going places.”

“Going places?” – I interjected.

“Former Nazis, some of them security threats, others what we would call today war criminals. He wanted safe passage for them to South America, Canada, the Middle East, anywhere out of the reach of Allied courts and prosecutors. As early as late 1944, former SS and senior Nazi Party members set up ratlines: networks that operated in Austria, Italy, France, and Spain. They provided safe houses, transportation, forged documents, visas from friendly countries, and contact with loved ones back home.”

“Some of these smooth operations were managed by high-level Catholic priests and their collaborators in various international organizations, such as the Red Cross.”

“Good God.” – Dan said.

Preston nodded sadly:

“ODESSA, Kameradenwerk, Spinne, Sechsgestirn – the code names varied and shifted. There was nothing like a coordinated effort or an umbrella organization. There was never an ODESSA File. Sympathetic governments lend a hand, too – most notoriously Juan Peron’s dictatorial regime in Argentina. But he was not alone. Brazil, Paraguay, Chile in South America. Syria and Egypt in the Middle East – they all volunteered to help.”

“Even our own government got involved. We piggybacked on these channels to smuggle hundreds of scientists and intelligence operatives into the States without entry visas. We were in a state of panic and grew paranoid by the day as we discovered how deep the Commies penetrated everything we had: the army, the secret services, and the press. Having vanquished Nazi Germany, we were losing the war in Europe. We could not allow the Soviets to lay their hands on advanced German weapons technologies and intelligence assets.”

He pondered something silently and then proceeded:

“Gehlen became a lifeline. The man was a genius. In a matter of months he set up a fully operational espionage and counter-espionage service throughout Eastern Europe: agents, double agents, moles, Russian-speakers in every country, anti-Communist dissidents and insurgents, agents provocateurs. He gave us more information than we knew what do with – we gave him money and logistical support.”

“Then things went awry?” – I suggested.

Preston shook his head:

“Not then and not for a very long time.”

“So, why are we here?” – I asked, my patience about to expire.

“In the late 1940s we seriously believed that the USSR is planning to invade the part of Europe it failed to conquer in the war. We made preparations: the CIA and, later, NATO together with the secret services of the countries of Western Europe. We set up clandestine cohorts of armed, hard-core, right-wing, anti-Communist civilians everywhere, sort of embryonic stay-behind resistance movements. If the NATO armies were to be defeated by the

Warsaw Pact formations, these underground forces were supposed to kick in and give the occupiers hell.”

Preston exhaled a bluish puff of smoke:

“The Italians called these contingency fighters Gladio, after the sword the gladiators used in the arena. Other countries gave them different designations: LOK in Greece, P26 and P27 in Switzerland, Absalon in Denmark and so on.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” – said Libby.

“The road to hell is paved with excellent ideas.” – Mused Preston bitterly – “This one was no exception. Soon, things got out of control. Since the mid-1960s, these secret militias were involved in home-grown terrorism, attempted coups d’etat, and internal subversion, mainly against left-leaning governments, leaders, and political parties. They were implicated in kidnappings and plain criminal activities. In some countries we completely lost control over them. When we tried to dismantle the operations and reclaim weapons caches, they went underground and bombed airplanes to teach us a lesson.”

“Things got a lot worse after the Cold War was over. With the Communist threat gone, we had no use for these would-be freedom fighters. In the 1990s the existence of NATO’s parallel paramilitary structures was exposed and they were officially outlawed or disbanded or both. At least on paper.”

“In reality, they vanished together with all the materiel we had provided over decades of collaboration. Small arms, missiles, satellite navigation systems, tapping equipment, poisons, explosives – a treasure trove of death and devastation now at the hands of criminalized fanatics roaming the streets of virtually every country in Western Europe.”

“Wonderful.’ – Sneered Dan – “And, of course, you could not have predicted any of this.”

Preston bowed his head in contrition:

“The German paramilitaries took our decision to put a stop to their clandestine activities hardest. The V-men, the original members of the

Gehlen organization, many of them ex-Nazis and unreformed former Fascists, had nowhere to go. They felt betrayed and abandoned by us. As soon as the TD BJD operation – the German code-name for the local Gladio - was declared officially over, the aging agents regrouped, rearmed and offered themselves to the highest bidder. Now, these zombie Cold Warriors can be found wherever there is terrorism and war – usually on both sides of the conflict simultaneously.”

“Fascinating.” – I said and I meant it – “Goes to prove that there is no folly that is beyond the military and our spooks. But what does it have to do with my predicament?”

Preston stared at me for a long while:

“I understand that the V-men paid you a painful visit the other day?”

“Someone did.” – I responded – “But we didn’t have the time to introduce ourselves, so I have no idea who they were.”

Preston tapped his pipe in his palm, scrutinizing the ashen results:

“Dan showed me the contents of the disk, Roth.” – He said quietly – “They are planning an operation on Hitler’s 120th birthday anniversary. The date is meaningful only to former Nazis. As you recall, this detail appears at the end of the third file that contains a list of names signed by someone named Schwend.”

I nodded.

“Schwend was an expert forger of documents. He worked for Nazi Germany and when the war was over, he was recruited by ODESSA and other networks of former SS members. He produced identity papers for virtually all the wanted Nazi war criminals in South America, which rendered him a standing threat to their personal safety.”

“He knew that the day will come when his services will be no longer required and he will have become dispensable. He compiled this list of names as a sort of insurance policy. When he was arrested in 1972 in Argentina, the police found it, hidden in his cellar, among many other documents.”

“Don’t you see?” – Pleaded Preston – “The disk contains this roster and Hitler’s birth date. It gives us reason to believe that the Gehlen organization is after you, Roth. The best trained and most experienced operatives in the whole world are out to get you.”

My mother told me how she would tune out and dissociate in Auschwitz. Faced with too many threats and repeated assaults, the mind shuts itself off and hibernates. I felt calm and composed.

“There are only two unresolved issues with this theory.” – said Libby. We all turned to face her.

“Assuming they are planning an act of terrorism on Hitler’s 120th birthday anniversary, why place 18 different and apparently unrelated historic documents on three floppy disks and then encode them? How are they all connected to each other and to the alleged plot?”

“Two, according to you, Preston, had they wanted to kill Sarid, he would have been dead by now. Evidently, they want him alive. But why? They were the ones who compiled the contents of the disk. They don’t need Frankenberg’s copy. Why break into Sarid’s office? What were they looking for?”

Preston assessed her appreciatively. Then he shrugged:

“I wish I knew.” – He responded despondently – “But, I don’t.”

Chapter the Twenty-second

Dan Enlightens Us

“I do.” – said Dan quietly. We glared at him, speechless. Preston was the first to recover some of his faculties:

“What do you mean you do?”

Dan adopted his maddeningly condescending guru-cum-disciples pose:

“I know the answers to both questions.” – He elaborated needlessly.

“And do you care to share them with us, lesser humans?” – I huffed.

Dan smiled at me compassionately:

“Sarid, think. Who compiled the disk?”

“Nazis, old and new, presumably.”

“Not presumably,” – objected Libby – “but certainly. Frankenberg received the disk from someone who claimed to be Heinrich Gestapo Mueller.”

“OK, OK.” – I grunted – “The Nazis did it.”

“Then, pray tell,” – Dan beamed at me while delivering his checkmate – “why include in the anthology Hitler’s damning medical file and the allegations about his Jewish ancestry? What self-respecting Nazi would seek to ruin the Fuehrer’s reputation posthumously?”

Preston stirred in his seat and dabbed his immaculate pate with a polka dot handkerchief:

“Excellent point. And what’s your theory, Dan?”

“Credibility.” – Shrugged his interlocutor – “Who would believe the claims of a bunch of cranks who hanker after the golden age of the Third Reich and Auschwitz? There’s only one way they can be taken seriously: by not

holding back. Let's backtrack for a minute here. What's on the disks? Photostats of ostensibly authentic documents roughly belonging to three groups: Hitler's medical file, Hitler's personal life, and Hitler's close collaboration with the Zionists of his era."

"We don't know what's on the other two disks." – observed Libby.

"True," – admitted Dan – "but it is reasonable to assume that they contain more of the same. The documents that deal with the Fuehrer's unflattering occult side and his dismal hidden biography have only one purpose: to lend credibility to the documents that substantiate the unholy alliance between Nazism and Zionism."

"The compilers of the disks are telling us: listen, we are committed Nazis. There is nothing more sacred to us than the memory of Adolf Hitler, our beloved and admired Fuehrer. But to prove to you our sincerity and the authenticity of all the documents on these three disks, we have decided to strip naked and appear to you uncensored, warts and all."

"I am not sure I like this metaphor." – shuddered Libby.

"No one will doubt the veracity of anti-Hitler dossiers published by his own devout adherents. By coming clean about Hitler's mental state and impure antecedents, the people who put the disks together acquire an aura of objectivity and even-handedness. We suddenly feel that they can be trusted and that the documents they are making public are real."

"Fine." – Allowed Preston – "Actually, very fine work. But it doesn't answer Libby's questions."

"I am coming to that." – said Dan. He paused: "Anyone wants Coke?"

"No!" – We yelled in unison.

"Didn't think so for a minute." – Grinned Dan – "Right, let's see. Why did they break into Sarid's office? That's an easy one. They wanted to see if he succeeded to decode the disk."

Preston smacked his sloping forehead with an open palm:

“Of course! How stupid of me!”

“They don’t need the disk because they are its authors.” – Repeated Libby slowly – “But they do need to make sure that it remains a mystery, under lock and key and cipher ...”

“Until the moment comes.” – I completed her sentence.

“Until the moment comes.” – Concurred Dan – “These documents must remain secret and inaccessible until the 20th of April.”

“And now we know what’s going to happen on Hitler’s 120th birthday anniversary.” – mused Preston.

“Precisely!” – galloped Libby breathlessly

“Precisely.” – Summed up Dan – “On April 20th 2009 they are going to go public with the whole package and stun the world with its contents. Until that day, however, the disk must remain concealed and undecipherable. Premature exposure of the documentary explosives on the disks would render them somehow ineffective. Hence the amateurish breaking and entering at the GMG. They needed to ascertain that Sarid did not gain early access to the files on the third disk.”

“So, the documents are to be unleashed in conjuncture with another event?” – I pondered pensively.

“I am sure of that. Otherwise, why not publish them right away? The longer they are kept under wraps, the greater the risk that they will be inadvertently discovered or leaked.” – Reiterated Dan – “And this is the real enigma: what are they planning? What is going to happen on April 20th?”

“The oft-mentioned terrorist attack?” – suggested Libby.

“No.” – said Preston and fished his crooked pipe from a bulging side pocket – “Whatever they are cooking has to mesh well with the documents. One spectacle has to reinforce the other and together they should yield a world sensation. Only that explains their readiness to kill to keep the files on the disk private.”

“We are forgetting one thing.” – I remarked acidulously.

“What’s that?” – enquired Preston, energetically removing a blackened pipe-cleaner from the thoroughly chewed stem of his implement.

“Mueller gave the documents to Frankenberg, a Jewish journalist. Surely Nazis of any and all persuasions are unlikely to choose such a repugnant conduit.”

“On the very contrary.” – Countered Libby, avoiding my eyes and looking directly at Preston - “What better vehicle to deliver an anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist message than a Jewish journalist? Mueller couldn’t have foreseen the capture of Adolf Eichmann and his trial by the Israelis. He gave the documents to Frankenberg fully expecting the latter’s journalistic instincts to prevail and the material to be published a few weeks later.”

Dan nodded in agreement:

“I think that Libby is on the mark. The Eichmann affair foiled Mueller’s plans to make the files public. Moved by the revelations at the trial, Frankenberg opted to keep Mueller’s interview and the documents under wraps.”

“Mueller gave the material to Frankenberg in 1960. That’s 46 years ago. “I said – “If they are planning to release the documents in tandem with an earth-shattering event – why haven’t they acted sooner? What made them wait for so long?”

“Maybe Mueller died.” – Said Libby – “The interview transcript says he had cancer.”

“Mueller is only one of many.” – I dismissed her speculation – “Why haven’t the others picked up the thread?”

“Maybe Mueller was acting solo.” – Suggested Preston – “Dan, can you bring up the interview on the screen?”

Dan titled the laptop, allowing us to read the transcript.

“There!” – Indicated Preston with a skeletal finger – “See what he says to Frankenberg? ‘My comrades would kill me if they knew that I am giving it to you ... You are as good as dead if they find out about this little transaction of ours.’ As I said, this whole thing may have been his personal initiative.”

“Granted.” – I insisted – “But, then, who is behind the second round? Who is chasing those disks and who is planning the fireworks on April 20th 2009?”

Preston coughed and shifted uneasily in his narrow director’s chair:

“Maybe if the mountain fails to show up at Muhammad’s ...”

“Yes?” – encouraged him Dan to complete the mutilated quote.

“Roth can go to the mountain.”

It took a minute or two for this to sink in.

“Oh, no!” – I protested – “Don’t even think about it! No way!”

“Clearly they would like to meet Roth and have a wee chat with him.” – Ignored me Preston – “Why not give them the opportunity? We may learn a thing or two from the encounter.”

“If I survive to tell you about it.” – I demurred.

“Oh, you will survive.” – Said Preston airily – “I know what they want from you.”

“You do?” – I affected admiration.

Preston smiled:

“They want to do a Frankenberg on you. A historian, a Jew, a former senior member of the staff of the world’s leading genocide study group - what more could they ask for? Yours is the ideal profile for their purposes.”

“Which are?”

“To publish the contents of the disks, for one.” – Contributed Dan to the exchange – “Whom are the media more likely to listen to: a Himmler-clone in anachronistic garb and inverted swastika or a respectable Jewish historian? With you as the purveyor, they have a far better chance of getting the documents to be accepted as genuine.”

“You said ‘purposes’. That’s one purpose. What else do they have in mind?” – I demanded.

“We don’t know. It would be your job to find out.” – explained Dan, receding to the kitchen to replenish his libation.

“Only you can find out how they are planning to celebrate the Fuehrer’s 120th birthday.” – enunciated Preston calmly.

“We want them to think that they have cornered you. They must believe that whatever you are doing, you’d rather not do and it is only because you have no choice that you are collaborating with them.”

“We have a plan.” – Said Libby – “We need ...”

“We need to finally go through the documents on the disk. We need to render them into English. That’s what we need right now.” – I scowled.

“I agree with Roth here.” – Said Preston – “How long will it take you to translate the whole lot for us, Libby?”

“Two-three days of uninterrupted work.”

Preston whistled: “That long, eh? So, I suggest you get going.”

“Wait a minute!” – I protested – “The disk and its contents are mine, remember? My life is at stake here, not yours.” – I turned to Libby:

“What were you doing at Bauer’s office earlier today with the floppy disk? Don’t bother to deny it. I saw you coming out of his room.”

“I wasn’t about to deny it.” – Reacted Libby coolly – “I met Bauer and the Mossad people to discuss Preston’s plan regarding your next move with the Gehlen organization.”

For a moment there, I was speechless. Then I exploded:

“You and Dan and Preston and Bauer and the two thugs that assaulted me and God only knows who else are plotting behind my back, placing me in extreme danger, and you admit to it in such a carefree manner?”

Dan intervened:

“Sarid, by confiscating the disk, you have badly blundered. We are trying to save your life here, but you are not making it easy on your friends and colleagues. We are not endangering you – we are trying to shield you from the consequences of your actions. You are lucky to have Libby and Preston and Bauer who won’t give up on you, no matter how obnoxiously you act.”

“Get the documents translated.” – Preston rose from his seat – “I think we have exhausted the subject and each other enough for one day.

Chapter the Twenty-third

The Turkish Jaunt

The roads are congested and the car comes to frequent halts. Its curtained windows allow me only glimpses of a familiar territory on the way to Vienna. I am dressed well for the first time in almost a year: grey, iron-pressed trousers, a yellow vest, a snow white tunic and leather patent shoes. The vehicle is spacious and smells of expensive cigars and cognac. It boasts shiny SS plates.

The driver, a bullnecked, short cropped, Hitler-mustached officer, stares ahead intently and ignores my backward presence. He huffs and puffs and slaps the steering wheel with his meaty hand every time he traverses a checkpoint. He decelerates, but never seems to stop, rolls down the window manually and presents the guards with a bulky document folder. The sentries study the paperwork and salute smartly as my chauffeur revs up the engine and fades into a cloud of dust.

I dose off infrequently. Fields go by and rivers and lush woods and ravaged cities. Faraway sirens wail and bomber planes buzz overhead. My driver squirms and mutters. Once or twice, when we are forced to slow to a crawl, curious women, stout and blonde and ruddy, and children, well-fed and arrogant, peek into the passenger compartment. My Charon shoos them away impatiently.

I am reminded of different times when I took this route alone or with a loved one. My world is lost. Curiously, I am not sad. I merely feel betrayed. I am exhausted. I nap again.

A growl awakens me. My driver, face half turned towards his charge, indicates a four story building, draped in an undulating swastika banner. SS sentinels guard the entrance to a token garden and half naked men are strolling the grounds, or playing ball, or crouching, frowning at chessboards. Music wafts from tiny balconies.

“Get out” – my companion says, his accent a thick Bavarian brogue.

“What’s here?” – I enquire. He shifts uneasily in his Procrustean seat:

“It’s a hotel. For SS personnel. We are in Vienna.”

My Auschwitz habits prevail. I avoid his eyes and ponder my shoe toes as I speak.

“I humbly beg your pardon for mentioning this, but I am a Jew.”

He snorts with evident distaste, turns his monolithic back to me, and barks:

“Do as you are told.”

I gingerly disembark, a modest travel bag in hand. My guardian drives away. A female in a nurse uniform casts a curious glance in my direction. Three athletic figures converge around me. One of them, fair, tall, and evenly suntanned, extends a hand:

“Helmuth” – he spins around on his heels and points at his entourage:

“And these are Kurt and Heini.”

Heini, dark-complexioned and frail to the look, winces awkwardly, advances and retreats, right hand limp by his side. Kurt nods absentmindedly. He looks like my chauffeur’s long lost twin.

They watch me intently and suddenly I realize that I am staring at my feet, head bowed, hands and feet stretched to attention.

“We have a shy one here!” – Mocks me Helmuth goodheartedly – “What’s your name and where do you hail from?”

My eardrums resonate, heartbeat-assailed. I perspire profusely under the summer sun. I make a concerted effort and smile weakly, desperately trying to recall the new name they gave me when they handed me a batch of flawlessly forged documents.

“Leopold” – I sound unconvinced – “Leo Frank. I am from the Eastern Front, from Poland.”

Heini chuckles bitterly:

“Aren’t we all?” – And his mates laugh raucously.

“Well, Leo” – Helmuth feigns joviality – “What brought you here? Wounded?”

“Dehydration.” – I say the first thing that comes to mind.

They stare at me dumbfounded: “What was that again?”

But this time I am saved by my chaperon who had returned from parking his contraption and is now furiously signaling to me to join him.

“I told you to stay put and not to talk to anyone!” – He whispers wrathfully – “Or do you miss the concentration camp so much?”

He grabs me by the arm and we walk inside towards the reception.

“This one requires a single room.” When the day officer protests, he adds: “By order of the Reichsfuehrer.” That does the trick.

“You are not to leave your room. You are not to use the phone or to talk to anyone in these premises. I will bring you food. You will not avail yourself of the communal toilettes or showers without my permission. Above all, never peer out the window or exit to the balcony. Is this clear?”

“Completely clear, Meinherr.”

He snaps to attention and leaves my cubicle, thunderously shutting the door behind him. I crumble on the wooden bunk and study the brightly colored walls, the bookshelf, the metal locker, and the mawkish watercolors that adorn each corner. The window beckons me with promises of fresh air and nature views but I know better than to succumb.

“Wake up.” – My driver, clawing at my shoulders, rattles me – “Your passport is here. We are splitting. You have 15 minutes to make yourself presentable. I brought you some water and some bread.”

He hurls a brand new document in my direction and exits, evidently dismayed. I leaf through the masterful concoction. Leopold Frank is there, in full details, photo attached, a myriad stamps and signatures attesting to his busy schedule as an itinerant salesman of electrical appliances.

My chauffeur reappears:

“Catching up on your reading, eh? Get ready. You have a long day ahead of you.”

“Where are we going?”

To the airport, where I am hauled into a small turboprop aircraft and dumped at the back among mail packets and various luggage items. The pilot, separated from me by a mere perforated partition, asks the control tower for permission to take off and confirms a flight plan to Sofia, Bulgaria.

And, suddenly, like an unwelcome flood, the memories. I have had no tears since Auschwitz. Yet, on this rumbling plane, bumped by its angular contours, I cry.

I have been to Sofia before the war. It had a lot in common with Budapest, even with Vienna. The Austrians like to consider themselves refined and softer Germans, but, in truth, they are Balkanians, as are my erstwhile compatriots, the Hungarians.

The Balkans, my native habitat, is a region of extremes. Its winter is harsh in shades of white and grey. Its summer is naked and steamy and effulgent. It pulses throughout the year in smoke-filled, foudroyant bars and dingy coffee-houses.

Budapest in early summer. Polydipsic youths in migratory skeins, eager to be noted by their peers, young women on the hunt, ageing man keen to be preyed upon, suburbanites in search of recognition, gold chained mobsters surrounded by flaxen voluptuousness: the cast of the watering holes of every potholed eruption of a city throughout this pockmarked land.

I remember the faux pas of telling my future wife, an Austrian by birth and

pride, on our first date, that the only difference between Vienna and the rest of Central Europe is the Austrians' obsession with cleanliness. In Sofia and Budapest, the trash seems never to be collected and the streets are perilously punctured.

She bristled at my impudence. We made love that very night. We have been making love ever since.

Think back. Think hard. Conjure her. Himmler said that she is being taken care of, that our lives depend on my success. Her life and mine.

The Bulgarians and the Hungarians drive like the Italians, gesture like the Jews, dream like the Russians, are obstinate like the Serbs, desirous like the French and hospitable like the Bedouins. It is a magical concoction, coated in the subversive patience and the aggressive passivity of the long oppressed. There is the wisdom of fear itself in the eyes of the inhabitants of this mountain-surrounded habitat.

The peoples of this part of the world are never certain of their future, still grappling with their identity, in an air of "carpe diem" with the most solemn religiosity of the devout.

Our enchanted days and nights. The heartbeat of our propinquity. Her translucent, moonstruck hand. Her scent. The sheltering crannies of her body.

In Hungary as in Bulgaria, the past lives on and flows into the present seamlessly. People recount the history of every stone, recite the antecedents of every man. They grieve together, rejoice in common and envy en masse. A single organism with many heads, it offers the comforts of assimilation and solidarity and the horrors of violated privacy and bigotry.

The people of these conurbations may have left the village - but it has never let them go. They are the opsimaths of urbanism. Their rural roots are everywhere: in the division of the city into tight-knit, local-patriotic "settlements"; in the traditional marriages and funerals; in the scarcity of divorces despite the desperate shortage in accommodation; in the asphyxiating but oddly reassuring familiarity of faces, places, behaviors and beliefs, superstitions, dreams and nightmares. Life in a distended tempo of birth and death and in between.

Overwhelmed at first, she grew to love this all-pervasive intimacy. I introduced her to my cousins, then to my parents. She glanced once at the golden cross on the parlor's wall and made no mention of it later. But I knew she had noticed and disapproved, this descendant of rabbis and cantors.

In winter, the light throughout the Balkans is diaphanous and lambent. In summer, it is strong and all-pervasive. Like some coquettish woman, the cities here change mantles of orange autumn leaves and the green foliage of summer. Their pure white hearts of snow often are hardened into a grey and traitorous sleet. The Balkans is a fickle mistress, now pouring rain, now drizzle, now simmering sun. The snowy mountain caps watch patiently these vicissitudes. Its inhabitants drive out to ski on slopes, to bathe in lakes, to climb to sacred sites. It gives them nothing but congestion and foul atmosphere and yet they love their neighborhood dearly.

She metamorphosed before my startled eyes, matured, hardened in some aspects and softened in others. She became the radiant being that is a pregnant woman.

I glance out the round windows – more like peep holes – of the airplane. Clouds roll by, shape-shifting as they roam the azure expanse. It is a glorious day, the sun a deep, pulsating gold. Below, patchworks of brown and sparkling green alternate leisurely. We are about to depart from the Third Reich. It feels unreal.

The Jews and the nations of the Balkans are more alike than either would care to admit. They both are peripatetic patriots: forever shuttling between their residences abroad and their true and only homes. Between the Balkanian and his land is an incestuous relationship, a love affair unbroken, a covenant handed down the generations. Landscapes of infancy imprinted that provoke an almost Pavlovian reaction of return.

I bend over, my mouth next to the single pilot's ear:

“I am a Hungarian.” – I tell him – “I was practically born here.”

He turns to look at me, his eyes a greenish flare:

“You are a Jew, Herr Frank. You were born nowhere.”

It's time to land.

Two men in immaculate civilian suits stub their cigarettes into the earthen ground as my pilot hands me over, replete with my new passport and meager baggage.

“Leopold Frank?” – inquires one of them. He has a voice made harsh by years of relentless smoking of cheap tobacco.

“That’s me, Meinherr.” – I respond and incline my head respectfully.

They sign something and release the pilot while the second operative, sluggish and jaded, frisks me head to toes.

“He is clean” – he finally says.

“That the Jew can never be.” – retorts the other and they burst into rib-shattering laughter. They proceed to place gloved hands on my head and shove me into the back seat of a waiting nondescript vehicle.

“Name?”

“Leopold Frank.”

“**REAL** name!” – screams the officer and strokes his whip.

“Leopold Frank.”

“You filthy swine-dog Jew! You **WILL** tell me the truth, one way or the other, you piece of worthless slime.” - His armpits grow dark, as he sweats himself into a frenzy – “Name, again!”

“Frank. Leopold Frank. And I am not a Jew. I have my certificate of racial purity with me.”

“A lot of good that will do you when you rot in our cells!” – snarls the interrogator and loosens his shirt neck. The exertion leaves him breathing heavily. His watery eyes bulge. He is middle age and heavy set.

“Again: your name!”

“Can I have some water, please?”

My new interviewer acquiesces empathically:

“Of course you can. It’s been a long way. You must be hungry, too. Would you like me to order you a sandwich? Anything specific you prefer?”

I gaze at him, dazed by this alien generosity:

“Anything will do, Sir, thank you kindly.”

He smirks:

“My colleagues are not the most refined guys on the block, you must forgive them, Herr Frankenberg.”

“Frank.” – I protest weakly – “My name is Frank. I don’t know the Frankenberg that you are repeatedly confusing me with. I am an electronics salesman. I am on my way to Istanbul to close an important deal which will bring much-needed export proceeds to the Reich. I have told you that a hundred times already.”

His face darkens with disapproval:

“I thought that we had reached some understanding here, Herr Frankenberg, a modicum of, how shall I put it, an accommodation between your needs and ours. But it has all been in vain, my time was clearly wasted.”

“Frank” – I mumble feebly – “Frank is my name.”

I wake up in a stench pervaded cell. A lit projector prevents me from seeing any of the figures behind it.

“Herr Frank,” – says an unfamiliar voice – “congratulations. You have done well. If you haven’t guessed it by now, you are our guest here, at the headquarters of the Gestapo in Sofia.” – The penumbral outlines cackle obsequiously.

“We had to verify your credentials.” – Explains another disembodied shape – “The Turks and definitely the British, if they ever get their hands on you, will be even less understanding than we were.”

“You will be flying to Istanbul tomorrow. You will be met at the airfield. Do whatever our colleagues there tell you to do. It is for your own good.” – Concludes the first, authoritative person – “The Reichsfuehrer sends you Godspeed. And, frankly, so do we all.”

They turn around and shuffle out of the room in a long, black row. Someone swings the projector aside.

“Let’s go” – he says – “You need to get some rest in a real bed.”

Chapter the Twenty-fourth

Magda's Secret

It felt a bit like *deja-vu*, all of us slumped on the same pieces of furniture in the different corners of Dan's study. The landlord, mummified yet again in an ill-fitting suit, clung to an enormous computer screen, absent-mindedly caressing a curvaceous wireless mouse.

Preston whistled and startled me. He didn't strike me as the whistling type.

"Are you sure?" – He demanded, softly.

Libby swept an errant curl from her expansive forehead and nodded affirmation:

"That's what Frankenberg told Mueller, at any rate: Magda Goebbels converted to Judaism in the early 1920s in order to marry Chaim Arlosoroff and emigrate with him to Palestine. It's in the transcript of the interrogation in late July 1944."

"Why is it important?" – I inquired impatiently – "I mean, compared to the other documents on the disk: the medical report about Hitler's syphilis and his collaboration with an assortment of Jews and Zionists ..."

"These are old hat" – Preston flung one of his Briticisms at me – "That Hitler suffered from some sexually-transmitted disease was common knowledge or at least a very resilient rumor even in the Reich itself. The regime's alliance with the Zionists was an official, oft-proclaimed policy. Even the *Schwarze Korps*, the SS's own mouthpiece, trumpeted the ostensible affinity between the two ideologies. The SD, the Nazi Party's intelligence service, sometimes acted as the long arm of the Zionist movement, going as far as breaching the laws of the Reich and its international conventions in order to facilitate the illegal immigration of Jews."

"Many Germans firmly believed that the leading lights of the regime - Hitler, Heydrich, even Himmler - were of Jewish stock." – Added Libby –

“So, Frankenberg’s revelations about the documents handed down in his family about Hitler’s possible Jewish ancestry hardly constitute a sensation.”

Preston dizzily weaved and untangled his impossibly long digits:

“Hitler was kept abreast of all this buzz. In Princeton University, there is a file labeled ‘Hitler Collection’. These are papers lifted from Hitler’s Munich residence by a US Army private. It contains Gestapo reports classified Reichssache, the highest security designation and printed on the Fuehrer’s special, large-type, typewriter. Everything’s there: Hitler’s alleged progenitors, illegitimacy, inherited idiocy and insanity in his extended family, you name it. Throughout the existence of the Third Reich, the Gestapo kept confiscating damning material from various ‘collectors’, like Konrad Pacher of Graz and the Austrian politician Franz Jetzinger. Things got so bad that Goebbels had to issue a stream of reminders to the press: no speculation regarding the Fuehrer’s ancestry on pain of imprisonment. One such order survived. It is dated December 16, 1939, three months into the war.”

“In short,” – Dan jumped in – “the only novelty on this disk is the bit about Magda Goebbels.”

“There are still the documents on the other two disks.”

“Yes,” – observed Dan sagely – “but we don’t have them.”

“I give up.” – I said, turning to Libby – “Enlighten me, oh, Master! What is so earth-shattering about a blonde German bimbo converting to Judaism and then to Protestantism and then to Catholicism, all in the pursuit of a little *gemutlichkeit* and *heimlichkeit*?”

“To start with, she was not a natural blonde.” – giggled Libby.

“I take that back.” – I mock-apologized – “She sure looked blonde in all the photos I have seen.”

“Poor Josef was equally shocked to learn that she was dyeing her hair *and* wearing lipstick.” – Volunteered Preston, barely stifling a smirk.

Libby came to my rescue:

“Maybe this will help.” – She said – “She was most probably Hitler’s lover and he may have fathered children with her.”

“Give me a break.” – I sighed – “Can we please try to be serious here? My life is at stake, or so you keep informing me.”

“This *is* serious.” – Protested Preston.

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

“In September 1945, in an interview she granted to the Stars and Stripes, the bulletin of the occupying American forces, the wife of Dr. Otto Meissner, formerly President Hindenburg’s State Secretary, said that everyone believed that Hitler was the real father of Magda’s boy, Helmut Christian, born in October 1935. Magda spent the six months to January 1935 in Berlin, mostly away from her husband. She returned to their home in Kladow, pregnant with Helmut. Some historians think that Holdine Kathrin, nicknamed Holde, another Magda offspring, was also Hitler’s. She was born in May 1938.”

“Her marriage to Josef was very unhappy.” – Commiserated Preston – “He was a rabid womanizer and she had compensatory affairs with at least two senior members of his staff.”

“Nor did Hitler bother to hide his infatuation.” – Contributed Dan gleefully – “In 1931, he said to Otto Wagener, one of his closest aides: ‘This woman could play an important role in my life, even without being married to her. In all my work, she could represent the female counterpart to my one-sided male instincts. Too bad she isn’t married. Indeed, if she were, the Fuehrer, so wedded to politics, could be permitted a platonic intimacy with her of a depth impossible with a single woman.’”

“Twisted mutant.” – I mumbled.

“And she reciprocated.” – Proceeded Dan, unperturbed – “She is quoted as saying: ‘Love is meant for husbands, but my love for Hitler is stronger, I would give my life for it. When it became clear that Hitler can love no woman, but, as they say, only Germany, I consented to the marriage with Dr. Goebbels because I can now be close to the Fuehrer.’”

“Nauseating.” – I uttered – “Any other heart-wrenching revelations?”

“Magda’s step-father was a Jew, Richard Friedlander. When she married the Gauleiter of Berlin, Josef Goebbels, an opposition paper splashed the news across the front page: ‘Nazi Chief Marries Jewess.’” – reminisced Libby.

“Remember Otto Wagener?” – Inquired Preston, picking at stray tobacco strands firmly lodged in the clay stem of his eternal pipe – “On the way to an SA rally in Brunswick, in mid October 1931, he suddenly stopped his 100-horsepower Horch ‘for a picnic’. He then escorted Magda to a stroll in the woods and divulged to her that the Fuehrer had decided never to get married. Still, if she were to marry another man, she could be the Fuehrer’s intimate friend.”

Dan tugged at his ill-fitting tie and shifted awkwardly on his swivel chair:

“She wrote to a friend of hers: ‘For Adolf Hitler I’d be prepared to take everything on myself, even to die for him. If I get engaged to Josef, you will know that we made the greater commitment...’”

“Notice the ‘we’.” – Interrupted Libby – “Josef knew about the arrangement with Hitler. In return, she agreed to acquiesce in his affairs. At least, that’s what she told her most intimate friend and former sister-in-law, Ello Quandt.”

“A charming couple.” – I commented approvingly – “Anything else I should know?”

Preston laughed and, then, inevitably, coughed:

“Let Dan finish.”

“Thank you, Preston.” – said Dan and threw his mutilated cravat to the farthest corner of the room:

“‘If I get engaged to Josef, you will know that we made the greater commitment at the same time. If Hitler’s movement comes to power, I will be the first lady of Germany.’ So, in early November, she phoned Wagener from Munich and announced: ‘I have come to keep my promise.’ Josef and

his betrothed had lunch with Hitler and let him in on their plans. The Fuehrer served as second witness in the marriage ceremony and later attended the celebration at the hotel. The ever observant Wagener noted: "The mood was so carefree that I had the feeling that three people had at last found happiness."

Preston chuckled:

"Hitler didn't waste time, either. He began to frequent Magda's apartment on Reichskanzler Platz in her husband's absence. He shared his newfound bliss with hapless Josef: 'Here we've got everything to ourselves.' Magda made no secret about the liaison. She told Leni Riefenstahl, the Fuehrer's favorite film director that she married Goebbels only to be near Hitler."

Libby leafed through her notes:

"It all started a few months earlier. In 1931, Hitler moved from Munich to Berlin and rented a suite of rooms at the celebrated Kaiserhof Hotel, a stone's throw from the Reich Chancellery. There he met the industrialist Quandt, who tendered his support to the Nazis, having despaired of the other conservative parties, led by Bruening."

Libby sighed and got lost in thought, but then rebounded:

"Roehm, the inveterate gossip and homosexual leader of the SA, told Hitler how all Berlin is following the budding romance between Josef and Quandt's divorcee. Hitler even received Magda's first son, 10-year old Harald Quandt, who was attired in a blue outfit hand-sewn by his loving mother. The little darling saluted Hitler and let him in on a secret: he felt twice as strong when wearing a uniform. Having thus won the Fuehrer's heart, Goebbels phoned him and invited him to tea downstairs."

"How British." – I exclaimed and Libby blushed incongruently.

"Hitler asked Goering whether there is any reason he should not be seen with the 'divorced wife of the industrialist I met earlier'. Ever the oracle, Goering responded with a non-committal: 'No, but you can't be too careful with a Madame Pompadour', whatever that meant to convey."

“Wagener described the encounter between the future Kanzler and the dashing divorcee in gushing terms: ‘She made an excellent impression. She was blonde, with bright blue shining eyes and manicured hands. She was dressed well, but not excessively. She appeared calm in her movements, assured, self-confident, with a winning smile. I am tempted to say ‘enchanted’. I noticed the pleasure Hitler took in her innocent high spirits. I also noticed how her large eyes were hanging on Hitler’s gaze.’ Later Hitler confessed to Wagener how taken he was with her: ‘I thought these feelings were dead in me and buried, but today these same emotions have suddenly overwhelmed me again.’”

“Magda told her mother that Hitler made advances to her, albeit discretely and cautiously.” – remarked Preston, engulfed in a bluish haze of his own making.

“But the affair was doomed by events later that night.” – Ventured Dan – “Naughty, irrepressible Magda invited a few rowdy Nazis home for drinks. Josef, the limping Doctor, let himself in with a key after midnight and expressed his indignation at the scene. This proof of a relationship between Josef and Magda was duly reported to Hitler who then commented bitterly about his infatuation with the flaxen goddess: ‘It was only a brief relapse’.”

“Still, all’s well that ends well.” – Preston reassured me – “By 1936, the relationship was so well-established that Magda constructed a guest house for Hitler in their estate on the island of Schwanenwerder. He often showed up unannounced, sometimes accompanied by Jakob Werlin, General Manager of Daimler-Benz. When Josef complained to his Fuehrer about one of Magda’s more flagrant affairs, Hitler praised Magda profusely saying that he found her bewitching and telling Goebbels that she is the best wife he could ever find.”

“They didn’t even bother to keep up appearances.” – Mused Dan from his corner – “In January 1937, the Goebbelses spent a few days at Hitler’s Berghof. Josef returned to Berlin and Magda and Hitler remained sequestered together and then traveled to the capital in tandem. On other occasions, Hitler would send his private plane to fetch her. Well into May 1944, they shared many an evening, just she and her idol.”

“So, everyone knew about this ménage a trois. What got you all so excited?”

“This open secret was still a secret. Werner Count von Alvensleben was swiftly dispatched to a concentration camp for making an impolitic mention of this peculiar arrangement. Goebbels even fired his favorite cook, Martha, for gossiping.” – Preston rose from his reclining chair and paced the room.

“You are missing the point.” – He finally cried out, disappointed.

“I am? What, pray, *is* the point?”

“If Magda converted to Judaism, no subsequent conversions to other faiths would have rendered her less Jewish. Once a Jew, always a Jew.”

“You are telling me...” – I groaned.

“Judaism is matrilineal. In other words, if the mother is Jewish, her offspring are Jews.” – added Libby cautiously.

“I am impressed by your in-depth knowledge of this painful subject.” – I commended them – “Where does all this lead? All her children are dead, poisoned by her own hand in her beloved Fuehrer’s bunker.”

“Even this much is untrue.” – Preston shook his head.

“Harald survived. He was captured in Africa by the British and whiled the rest of the conflagration in a Prisoners of War camp.” – Explained Dan.

“Good for him.” – I said – “I guess the uniform didn’t make him omnipotent after all. He should have joined the SS.”

“Israel,” – Libby laid her hand on my shoulder, burning a pleasurable hole right through it – “do you really not see the implications? If Magda converted to Judaism and then had children with Hitler, this means that the Fuehrer of the Third Reich fathered Jewish offspring.”

It took a while to sink in.

“So, this whole thing is not about Hitler’s ancestry. It’s about his progeny.”

“Well put!” – Enthused Preston, perilously waving his lit pipe, sparks airborne across the carpeted room – “It’s not about who his grandmother may have slept with or how many of his relatives were gassed in the euthanasia program that he himself initiated. It all revolves around his descendants. His Jewish descendants.”

I waited until the conflagration subsided before I punctured his bubble:

“Then it can’t be the Nazis.”

“Come again?” – said Dan.

“Why would the Nazis or the Neo-Nazis make such information public?”

“Maybe they felt betrayed by the Fuehrer’s liaison with a Jewess.” – suggested Libby feebly but no one took her proposition seriously, the least of all she.

“Roth has a point there.” – allowed Preston and thumbed his billowing contraption, wincing as he did.

“I mean, what do these guys have going for them? They possess no territory, no coherent ideology, and no serious funding. The only sentiment that keeps them more or less intact is nostalgia for the good old days and for the Fuehrer. This self-cremated corpse of an erstwhile lunatic is their talisman, their raison d’etre, and their source of inspiration. Take that away from them and nothing’s left, they crumble, like so many vampires exposed to scorching sunlight. They would never betray the deal leader’s memory. It’s all about self-preservation.”

Libby clapped: “I didn’t know you had that in you, Israel! This was so poetic!”

Preston raised a splayed hand:

“Wait a minute, wait a minute here! If the Neo-Nazis are not behind all this, then who is? Who would go to such lengths to publish these damning documents on Hitler’s 120th birthday anniversary? If they are not ideologically committed to Hitler and the Third Reich, why did Mueller collaborate with them back in the early 1960s? Why did he try to leak these

papers to a Jewish journalist? To what purpose? What was he hoping to achieve?"

We glanced at each other, befuddled.

"I have no idea." – said Dan.

"Neither do I." – admitted Libby.

"I am not in better shape." – conceded Preston.

"Let's recap." – I resorted to my favorite stratagem – "Someone claiming to be Gestapo Mueller, the bulwark of the Nazi regime, handed, on his deathbed, a series of documents to a Jewish journalist. These purport to substantiate various unsavory rumors regarding the immortal Fuehrer: his demented family, his syphilitic brain, his long-term collaboration with Zionists and Jews, and, to top it all, his love affair with a dazzling convert to Judaism, who was married to one of his closest aides."

"Not to mention the possibility that he fathered children with her." – interjected Libby and our eyes locked for a split second.

"Definitely not the Gehlen Organization." – Admitted Preston – "I hate to break the news to you but it seems like we have no clue as to who these people are."

Chapter the Twenty-fifth

The Mousetrap

“They could be Jews.” – I offered tentatively – “Holocaust survivors or their offspring out to drag Hitler through the mud.”

“By proving that he had a Jewish lover and Jewish tots? Then why is the Mossad after you?” – Countered Preston, dismissing my idea – “The Israelis clearly want to prevent the documents from becoming public. The Jewish State would find Hitler’s amorous pursuits rather embarrassing I should think, not to mention the close alliance between the Nazis and Zionists well into the war.”

“Just a thought.” – I retreated as gracefully as I could.

“There is only one way to find out.” – said Dan.

Preston and Libby bowed their heads. The whole scene began to bear an unsettling resemblance to a funeral procession. My funeral procession.

“How do you suggest that I get in touch with them when we don’t have the faintest clue as to who they are?” – I enquired, feigning more courage than I harbored.

“They will get in touch with you, rest assured.” – Consoled me Preston – “You just have to be prepared for this inevitable eventuality.”

“Prepared?”

“Under no circumstances must you let them know that we have deciphered the contents of the disk.” – advised me Dan.

“You, guys, sound awfully coordinated. You must have been rehearsing it before I burst in on the scene.”

“We just want you to be safe, Israel.” – pleaded Libby and when she saw the canine look on my face, she exclaimed: “I just want you to be safe.”

“That’s much better.” – I encouraged her.

“When they make contact, you must appear reluctant.” – Tutored me Preston – “And frightened.”

“I think I can manage that.”

He ignored my sarcasm:

“Let them be the ones to tell you what’s on the disk and look mightily surprised and properly awed when they do. Your thespian skills are your only guarantee of survival.”

“Don’t be over-eager. Play hard to get.” – Dan followed seamlessly – “Allow them to lure you and tempt you and seduce you into their petty scheme.”

“But don’t overplay it, either. We don’t have much time left. After a while, make them believe that you have seen the light.”

“It’s easy, actually.” – I said and meant it – “Every historian would have given his right hand to gain access to such material and, as a Jew and the son of two irreparably scarred Holocaust survivors, I should jump at the opportunity to besmirch Hitler and denounce him to his still too numerous followers.”

“True, but the transition from reticence to keenness should be credible and, therefore, gradual.” – opined Preston.

“Worry not, “– I soothed him – “credibility is my middle name.”

At which point Libby looked extremely doubtful.

Chapter the Twenty-sixth

A Turkish Respite

My travel mate, jovial by nature, is rendered taciturn by the circumstances of our trip. The private airplane shudders and hums as it bounces off air pockets and cloud formations. We share the same unfriendly pilot and a stone-faced stewardess in a crisp but faded blue uniform.

“I am Richard Klatt” – is all he says in an unmistakable melodious Viennese accent. He is a Jew, too. I can tell by his startled restlessness and meek obsequiousness every time the pilot turns his tightly-cropped head to peep at us.

“Who are you going to meet in Istanbul? The Zionists?”

I am evidently taken aback by his question because he laughs mirthlessly:

“There has been a veritable stampede in this route in the last few months.”

“Stampede?”

He shrugs:

“Jews. Czech Jews. Slovak Jews. Austrian, Russian, even Palestinian Jews. And not one way either. Coming and going, looking self-important and hush-hush, if you know what I mean.”

“Jews in SS chartered airplanes?”

“SD.” – he corrects me gravely – “There are many Jews and mongrels working for the SD. Some of them are pretty high up, wear uniforms, are driven around, saluted, that sort of thing.”

I stare at him speechless. I want to tell him about Auschwitz, but he preempts me:

“Don’t give them what they want, at least not all of it at once. Bargain hard. They are desperate now and will go to any length to buy whatever it is that

you are selling. Exact the highest price possible, be a real Jew for once.” – Again this hollow chuckle.

He squeezes my hand and turns his back to me, preparing to nap.

“I was a sports journalist before this madness started.” – He suddenly mutters. We talk no more as the airplane hurtles through unblemished skies.

The stewardess, evidently repelled by our propinquity, plunges manicured fingertips into my ribcage:

“Disembark!”

I do, dazed by the infernal sunlight, the shimmering air, and the oppressive humidity. I tread wearily on a narrow metal staircase, loosely adjacent to the aircraft’s door. The asphalt adheres to my thin-soled shoes and simmers underfoot. Klatt maintains a discernible distance between us.

The terminal is a grimy, fly-infested, colorful, and odoriferous place. A kaleidoscope of official uniforms, traditional garb, the mangled sights and sounds of the Orient: sour milk, fetid honey, coagulated perspiration, calls for prayer, muted bargaining, loud protests, and eruptive singing. Istanbul.

We are separated and my sojourner is accompanied – more like abducted – by two German-speaking civilians into a waiting, official-looking vehicle. I am left alone, disoriented, but elated at this newfound personal autonomy. For one crazy moment I am contemplating an escape. But from whom?

“Frank? Herr Frank?” - A thick Viennese accent.

I turn around to face a short, informally attired, but stout and powerful-looking man. He gazes at me from under bushy brows:

“My name is Avriel, Ehud Avriel. I am from Eretz Israel. Listen well, we don’t have time for niceties. Be careful of the Americans and the British. They are not our friends. I will explain later. They think that we are collaborating with the Nazis to bring Jews to Palestine, to strengthen the Yishuv against the Arabs and the Mandate authorities.”

“Well, are you?” – I blurt. Avriel recoils and recomposes himself:

“I will see you later, Frank.”

He grabs my limp, damp palm and shakes it vigorously. Then he turns his back on me and expertly vanishes only to be replaced with another apparition, this time a Turk, mustaches and all, clad in an expensive-looking western suit and sporting gold-rimmed glasses:

“Frank, Herr Frank?”

This would have been comic under different circumstances. I nod. He smiles widely, gold teeth glittering:

“Welcome to our stimulating city, Herr Frank!” – He bellows in impeccable Hungarian, adding to the surrealistic qualities of the scene – “I am Mehmed Sipahioglu, Chairman of the Antalya Transportgesellschaft, a Magyar firm here in Istanbul, at your complete and humble service!”

He bows affectedly and extends a fleshy hand which I shake reluctantly. Still smirking inanely, he urgently whispers through the corners of a rubicund beefy mouth: “You are my business partner, you understand perfectly? Nod if you do!”

I obey him instinctively and, more relaxed, he gently guides me towards the uniformed policemen at the passport control booth. A rapid-fire exchange in Turkish follows at the end of which my documents are cursorily examined, my visa stamped and I am waved through into a waiting vehicle of royal proportions.

“My only vice” – sighs my host, indicating the car, and ostentatiously flings the door open for me.

“Enter!” – He commands benevolently and then, somewhat incongruently – “I am a great admirer of the Jews.”

“This is the Pera Palace hotel.” – My impromptu partner proudly points at a multistoried structure. “No questions asked” – he expounds unnecessarily as we stroll into the opulent lobby. A red, plush carpet floods the elongated hall and snakes up the five stairs that divide a marble balustrade in two.

It is dusk and a firmament of electric lights ignites in the ornate ceiling high above us. Tinkling, lustrous chandeliers fend off remaining shadows. We pass a fountain, arched doors, and clumps of low mahogany tables surrounded with upright chairs. The thickset curtains and the furry rugs merge into a soundless mirage that is reflected a myriad times in the vitrages and the mirrors strewn everywhere. Golden hearths rest ensconced under striped Egyptian columns. A symphony in red and brown.

The reception desk – a nondescript confined booth, plunged in the middle of nowhere in particular – is as disorienting as is the clerk: a German native. He eyes me malevolently but bows obsequiously when my escort presents him with an SD identity card. “The best room,” – he mumbles timorously – “only the best for Meinherr!”

My “partner’s” manservant unloads my meager baggage, glancing at me suspiciously and disapprovingly.

“You stay here, don’t move!” – Says the Turk in broken English – “Your people will soon come to visit, to talk to you. Good people, safe people. You are safe, too. Just stay inside the hotel, is all.”

I nod my assent which makes him positively exultant. He releases me with a regal wave of his hand and climbs aboard his transport, pointing a sausagey admonishing finger at me as he embarks: “In the room. Wait there! They will visit you very soon, I promise.”

And so they do that evening. Three of them, led by Avriel. They wake me up, surreptitiously knocking on the sculpted, gold-braided wooden door. When I open it, they abashedly shuffle their feet and gaze at their ill-fitting shoes. Avriel introduces them as Wenja Pomeranz and Menachem Bader, both Kibbutzniks, members of the communal settlements that dot Palestine’s much-scarred landscape.

I stare at them, these idols of my youth: sunburned, muscular, and hirsute, an air of no-nonsense innocence, naïve optimism, and can-do nonchalance about them. The stuff of myths: their unbridled freedom, newfangled self-confidence, military prowess, and independence. Prior to Auschwitz, they reified our future, our hopes and dreams. They were the New Jews: proud, upright, dignified, just, and fair and mighty.

At my silent invitation, they settle awkwardly on the only loveseat in the room, a sumptuous, fluffy affair next to the folded wings of a massive secretaire. The low-hung chandelier casts sparkling, shimmering light on the green-coated walls, the dark blue drapes, and the gloomy paintings of Oriental hunting scenes.

My guests crack their joints in unison. The taller one gets up, turns on the lights above the twin beds, and returns to his place. I offer them something to drink, a gesture of civility dismissed by Avriel impatiently:

“Tell us what you came for. They don’t let Jews out of occupied Europe for no good reason.”

I chortle bitterly:

“I come from Auschwitz.”

They are stunned into embarrassed silence, which proves to me that they have heard of the place.

Bader says softly:

“Frank, can we help?”

“My name is not Frank” – I counter stiffly – “It’s Frankenberg. And there is nothing you can do to help anyone there. Millions have already died.”

“Then why are you here?” – Insists Avriel.

“To save my family.” – I retort. Pomernaz shifts uneasily in his seat. Bader closes his eyes, as though in anguish. Avriel averts his gaze.

“And maybe a few thousand Jews that are still in the camps and in Budapest. But that’s it. No one else is left. The Jewish people are dead and not even buried. It is floating like so many smoke particles, a pollution, poisoning the heavens and the earth itself.”

“Enough!” – Snaps Avriel, jumping up and pacing the room, fists clenched – “Tell us what we can do.” He turns towards me, eyes flaring; “Tell us what to do, Frank!”

So I tell them about how I gave the documents to Arlosoroff and how he was assassinated and how these few pieces of paper can put a stop to the war, to the bloodshed, to the massacre of innocents, to the camps and the crematoria and the chimneys and the burning, asphyxiating body piles. I tell them about Himmler and Hitler and Magda and those far away days when I thought I was in love and so did Chaim and how we all wound up dead or dying or as good as dead. And all the while I am thinking about Magda’s aureate curls and her firm breasts and the gentle curvature of her neck.

They listen thoughtfully and don’t interrupt me even once. When I peter off, Bader bends forward and lays a creased and sun-parched hand on my knee:

“Who do you believe has these documents now?”

I motion helplessly: “I don’t know. Shertok, I guess.”

They look incredulous, so I add:

“He may not even know it.”

Pomeranz rises and straightens his clothes:

“Only one way to find out, comrades.” – He declares – “I will fly to Eretz Israel tomorrow morning to meet with Shertok. If he has these papers, I will get them and bring them here, I give you my word.”

Avriel get up as well. Only Bader remains seated, his face furrowed and broken:

“I will visit you later.” – He promises – “We will talk.”

Chapter the Twenty-seventh

The Enfant Terrible

“I have no intention of letting another month go by.” – I informed them and took a sip from the “Golan” red wine (made in Israel) that my mother brought back from one of her morbid trips. Libby winced when I gingerly placed the half-emptied bottle in the sink, amid a regatta of moldy dishes.

Preston tapped his charred pipe on my long-suffering kitchen counter and studied the results apprehensively.

“Where are the documents that Frankenberg mentioned in his interrogation, anyhow?” – I demanded petulantly.

“We don’t know” – said Libby – “Presumably, they are on the other two disks.”

“Presumably.” – I imitated her and was instantly ashamed on myself – “Sorry.”

“It’s OK” – she said softly and cupped my hand in hers. She felt warm and peaceful. I sighed:

“They haven’t made contact. It’s been almost five weeks and not a word from these Neo-Nazis or Gehlenites or deranged Jews or whoever they are. Evidently, some of our assumptions are wrong and we’d better find out which ones and soon.”

“How do you suggest we do that?” – enquired Dan, to Preston’s great dismay. Dan wasn’t supposed to encourage my delusional streak. He was attired in his semipternal djellaba, uncomfortably crouching between my CD collection and my battered television set.

“I have given it a lot of thought” – I enunciated grandiloquently.

“That’s good,” – intoned Preston – “because, if anything goes wrong, you are the one likely to suffer the consequences.”

This observation dampened my fervor somewhat. But there was no turning back now, not with Libby's adulating eyes hanging on my every word. I recovered admirably:

"We have constructed this whole theory on the assumption – a pretty wild one, if I may add – that Hitler had fathered children with a Jewess. This flight of fancy is in turn based on the truncated and possibly tampered with record of an interrogation that took place 60 years ago. And what was actually said on that unsavory occasion? That Frankenberg used to possess documentary proof of these incredible assertions, but he had conveniently handed them over to a Zionist politician who was mysteriously assassinated. To describe this delirium as farfetched would be the understatement of the century, if you ask me."

"Equally implausible things have turned out to be true" – commented Preston and puffed an aromatic nimbus in my direction.

"Not in the absence of even a shredded document" – I countered triumphantly, retreating for cover towards my antique refrigerator – "Which leads me to my plan."

Collective exhalation.

"Our only real lead is Frankenberg – I mean the journalist, not the prisoner."

"For all we know, they may even be related." – contributed Dan – "Mueller may have chosen Frankenberg the journalist because of his family ties to the man he had once tortured and whose confession he included in the documents he had given to his namesake."

"We must find Frankenberg's living relatives." – I proceeded, unperturbed – "He may have bequeathed something to them to remember him by: the other two disks, the original Mueller documents, or the fruits of his own research. For all we know, he may have been in possession of the very papers that consigned his ancestor to the Gestapo's dungeons."

"And dispatched him to an early death." – Interjected Preston acidulously.

“And when you find these relatives – if they exist – what are you going to tell them? How are you going to make them talk?” – Wondered Dan from his strategic perch.

I ignored him:

“That’s part one of my plan. There’s part two for those who care to listen.”

“Hint taken.” – Laughed Preston – “Sorry. Pray, share with us the rest.”

“Let’s assume for a moment that our wildest speculations are proven true. I find a Frankenberg who is in the possession of those incriminating documents. I convince him to hand them over to me. They prove that Hitler fathered children with Magda Goebbels, a Jewess. We still need to find out if any of these illicit offspring is alive. Magda poisoned her six children at night, after she had a doctor sedate them and before she and her husband took their own lives. As far as we know, she did not have any other kids. It’s not like you can hide a pregnancy from the world – not when you are the First Lady of the Reich and the darling of the media.”

“Many ifs” – observed the contrarian Preston.

“Not really,” – Dan surprised us yet again – “Remember Arlosoroff? He visits Berlin, gets in touch with Magda, asks her to arrange a meeting with Goebbels, her husband and perhaps even with her truly beloved Fuehrer. A few days later, he is murdered. Too much of a coincidence, if you ask me. He was assassinated because he knew something that involved Magda and the uppermost echelons of the Reich. It could well have been the birth of an illegitimate child.”

“Or any other number of secrets.” – Preston countered.

“I agree with Dan this time” – said Libby and smiled at Preston apologetically – “Arlosoroff surely knew about Magda’s conversion to Judaism. She did it in order to marry him and become the First Lady of the Zionist movement. If this information leaked out, it could have undermined the very foundations of the nascent Third Reich. It was a bombshell. A nuclear bombshell.” – She added anachronistically.

“Imagine the following scenario:” – I exhorted them – “Hitler fathers one or more children with Magda. Arlosoroff appears on the scene and tries to blackmail Magda with proof of her conversion to Judaism not so long before. His price? Goebbels and Hitler should refrain from anti-Jewish activities and support the transfer of the Jews to Palestine with their property intact.”

“Terrified, Magda flees to Italy, but not before confiding in the two most important men in her life: Adolf and Josef, the Fuehrer and his evil dwarf. She knows that, in the wake of her confession, her erstwhile lover-turned-extortionist is as good as dead. He realizes it, too and makes haste for Palestine. But he is doomed. German agents, in cahoots with Arab mercenaries or maybe Jewish extremists, stab him to death on the beach of Tel-Aviv, in the presence of his wife, only two days after he had returned from his European tour.”

Preston perked up: “You mean to say that the identity of his assassin is unknown?”

“Assassins” – I corrected him – “There were two of them. Chaim’s wife identified Jewish right-wing extremists as the culprits and almost had them executed. Her husband supposedly said to her when they were accosted by the two murderers: ‘They are Jewish. Since when are you afraid of Jews?’ It was nighttime, so the criminals used a flashlight to make a positive identification of the victim. She clearly saw the face of one of them and nearly fainted when she identified him later at the holding pen.”

“An Arab suddenly confessed to the foul act: he and a friend of his planned to rape Sima, Arlosoroff’s wife, he admitted. He then recanted, confessed again, and retracted his confession, saying that the real perpetrators, the two Jews, had bribed him. He had nothing to lose as he was already jailed for life for an unrelated murder.”

“Why would ultra-nationalist Jews serve as hit men for the Nazis, their nation’s worst enemy?” – Dan sounded genuinely perplexed.

“Because they considered the Nazis as natural allies against a more immediate foe: the British Mandate authorities in Palestine. And for a long time such views were not the exception, either.” – Explained Libby – “Zionists of all stripes and many Nazis – including the SD and the SS –

shared a common interest in fostering Jewish immigration to Palestine. They actively collaborated. Nazis helped the Mossad to organize ships and evade customs and port authorities even in Germany itself. Both parties regarded emigration as the only appropriate form of solving the Jewish problem in Europe. The British, of course, were mildly anti-Semitic and terrified by the prospect of a Palestine inundated with Jews from the Greater Reich. So were the Arabs.”

Libby knew her stuff. I couldn't help but be impressed time and again.

“But while mainstream Zionists gradually disengaged themselves from the increasingly bloodthirsty regime of Hitler and the SS – Jewish radicals such as the Stern Gang and the Irgun Zvai Leumi, the National Military Organization, only clung to the Nazis more desperately. They sent delegates to meet Italian and German agents abroad and offered them a deal: The Irgun will fight alongside the Axis Powers against the British in return for the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine. One such proposal was discovered in the German Embassy in Istanbul after the war. It is dated January 1941. It idolizes Hitler and speaks of the totalitarian German New Order in glowing terms. It was probably approved if not outright composed by Yitzhak Yezernitzky-Shamir, then Operations Commander of the Irgun and, later, Prime Minister of the State of Israel.”

Dan whistled.

“At any rate, in the mid-1970s, an Israeli journalist, Haviv Kena'an, claimed to have discovered evidence that Goebbels dispatched two agents, Theo Korth and Heinz Geronda, to finish Arlosoroff off.” – I concluded.

“You were telling us about the second part of your plan.” – Reminded me Preston – “Can I have some of that wine?”

I poured him some and bravely remained standing next to him:

“Preston, you have spent many years of your life hunting Nazis, I am told.”

He nodded gravely.

“If you were Hitler and you have just discovered, courtesy her Jewish lover, that the woman of your dreams is technically a Jew and that your progeny is,

therefore, Jewish, at least according to Jewish religious Law – what would you have done?”

“Committed suicide?” – suggested Preston

I laughed:

“Too early for that. You have just attained power. You have great plans for Germany. You can’t allow a minor indiscretion to disrupt the Thousand Years’ Reich.”

“Kill her. I would order her killed.” – Dan clearly relished the thought.

“Too obvious. Will serve to attract attention rather than suppress it. Don’t forget that she is a celebrity and closely associated in the public mind with two main figures of the new regime. Impractical and, no offense meant, also unwise.”

Dan sulked in his corner.

“Get rid of the child.” – He suddenly brightened up – “If I can’t get rid of the mother, I can get rid of the child. No one would notice the disappearance or death of natural causes of a ... er ... how old would the child have been?”

“We don’t know for sure.” – Responded Libby – “Arlosoroff visited Berlin in May 1933. Magda married Josef in 1931. So, the child would have been 2 or 3 years old at the most by the time the whole affair blew up.”

“Easy to dispense with.” – Shocked us Dan.

“Easy, maybe, but not likely. Hitler had a soft spot when it came to his family. Though he did his best to avoid most of them, his sisters included, he did support them financially.” – Libby shook her mane – “Even when they proved ungrateful or dangerous – at least one of them tried to blackmail him – he turned a blind eye to their misbehavior. He would not have killed his own child. He was besieged by feeble-minded and demented relatives, but, with one exception, he didn’t have them euthanized. Instead, he dumped them in all kinds of institutions and private apartments all over the Greater Reich and paid for their upkeep. He only asked that they assume a

pseudonym. His sister Angela called herself Mrs. Wolf throughout his reign.”

“So, he would have placed this embarrassing child in an institution? An orphanage, perhaps?” – mused Dan.

“Lebensborn,” – said Preston quietly – “That’s where he would have stashed him. Lebensborn.”

Chapter the Twenty-eighth

Fount of Life

Preston rendered all four of us speechless, which in itself must have been a historic event. Lebensborn – the Fountain of Life, the most sinister part of the SS, from 1938 a part of Himmler’s Personal Staff, micromanaged by the pervert. He even designed the high-protein diet for the children.

“What’s Lebensborn?” – Asked Dan, evidently irritated by his recurrent ignorance. It challenged his self-imputed omniscience.

“A maternity welfare institution ...”

“Stud farms ...”

“The SS arm for kidnapping children and Germanizing them ...”

We responded simultaneously and then glanced at each other shamefacedly. I collapsed into a crumbling armchair next to Dan:

“Libby, you go ahead. You know more about this than we do.”

She blushed and vaguely gesticulated in Preston’s general direction:

“Actually, Preston should do the honors. The US government or the Army put the leaders and main functionaries of the Lebensborn on trial after the war.”

“USA vs. Ulrich Greifelt et al.” – Nodded Preston sagely but showed no inclination to follow up on this cryptic remark.

“Himmler was very worried about a wave of abortions and precipitously declining birth rates in Germany.” – Libby picked up steam – “He registered this society at the end of 1935 and called it ‘Lebensborn’, literally, the fount of life.”

“Wait a minute!” – Exclaimed Dan – “I thought we agreed that the kid was made to disappear in mid 1933, after the Arlosoroff blackmail attempt. He end of 1935 is way too late!”

“The activities of the Lebensborn actually started in 1933, as an office within the SS in charge of family welfare programs. The HQ was in Munich all along. Between 1935 and 1938 it was part of the Race and Settlement Bureau and then it was transferred to Himmler’s personal supervision as part of his Personal Staff.” – Enlightened us Preston – “All senior SS commanders were compelled to join Lebensborn and to pay a tax equal to 5-8% of their salaries, which they resented mightily, I may add.”

Dan waved impatiently: “Who cares! What does this welfare organization have to do with anything?”

“Patience.” – I advised him gleefully. Dan sneered and tapped the television top impatiently.

Libby scurried to the rescue:

“Lebensborn started as a series of maternity wards for wives and mistresses of lascivious SS officers. The Society mainly helped unmarried pregnant women. Childbirth out of wedlock was still frowned upon in the conservative, bourgeois society that was Germany ...”

“Gassing people was not as morally reprehensible, I guess.” – I interposed bitterly.

“Hence the mistaken imagery of the Lebensborn as a chain of stud farms and high-class bordellos for blue-eyed, tall, and blond SS officers” – Completed Libby the sentence – “Non-SS parents had to prove that they were ‘racially valuable’ and genetically pure. SS doctors examined them and their progeny: noted down family histories and took measurements. There were 62 parameters: nose, nails, genitalia, hairline, lips. Children born within the program were taken care of in special homes and then given for adoption to good, purebred, pro-Nazi, mostly childless German families.”

“Sickening.” – Muttered Dan.

“It only gets worse.” – Soothed him Preston – “The SS established such homes in quite a few occupied countries, most notably Poland and Norway. There they took care of ‘war children’ born to German soldiers and local women. In the East, other arms of the SS kidnapped Aryan or Nordic-looking children and transferred them to Germany. Some of these toddlers and even young adolescents ended up in Lebensborn homes and boarding schools where they went through a process of Germanization. They were punished if they used their mother tongue and they were indoctrinated in the Hitler Youth spirit. Then they were whisked off to deserving German families to be adopted.”

“I think I am going to be sick.” – Mumbled an ashen-faced Dan – “How many were there? Children, I mean?”

“About 200,000.” – Said Libby – “But only a small minority of them ended up in German homes. The rest were sent back, died in concentration camps and ghettos, were sterilized, or perished as slave laborers.”

“The Lebensborn was a small and insignificant part of this massive operation.” – Added Preston – “About 500 kids went through their homes and, by all accounts, they were taken good care of. But its officials were authorized to issue forged birth certificates with fake data: invented place and date of birth and such. They also served as legal guardians of the abducted children.”

“What about the parents?” – Enquired Dan, feebly.

I shrugged:

“At first they were told that their children would be returned home after they undergo some physical and IQ tests to determine their future schooling. Then they were informed that the kids were sent to Germany for health reasons. And then they were simply ignored. Their questions went unanswered.”

Preston gazed at his shoe toes pensively:

“The abductions took place on special days of the month and the kidnapers were escorted by nurses in uniforms, the Brown Sisters. Children were

literally torn from their mothers' arms if they were fair-skinned, blue-eyed, or blond."

"But the children were not mistreated?" – Pleaded Dan

"Those who made it through the battery of tests were well taken care off." – Assured him Libby – "The food was good. They did lots of physical exercise and team building: climbing, obstacle courses, marching, and singing around campfires at night. Not everything was peachy, though: the wards were cold because the nurses insisted on leaving the windows open even during the frostiest nights. An internal audit by the SS discovered that infant mortality in the Lebensborn facilities, at 8 percent, was above the national average. The denizens were observed at all times and obsessively measured by roving teams of SS medical staff. They underwent neurological tests and their personal habits were carefully recorded and analyzed. Bedwetting, untidiness, nail-biting, farting, or masturbation got you kicked out, often to certain death."

"Death was an integral part of the Lebensborn program." – Agreed Preston – "The doctors and nurses killed children born with disabilities, for instance."

"And you think the merciful Fuehrer placed his only son in such a program and, on the same occasion, handed his own head on a tray to Himmler and the SS? He would have become a perennial target for extortion by his underlings! Hitler may have been insane but he was surely not that daft!" – Dan sounded doubtful.

"Hitler dubbed the Reichsfuehrer 'Loyal Heinrich'. He had full trust in him until the very last days of the war. Hence his wrath and despair when he discovered that Himmler was trying to negotiate with the Western Allies behind his back. Himmler himself idolized Hitler. He would never do a thing to harm him. It proved next to impossible to induce the Reichs Heini to betray his Leader by conducting negotiations for a separate peace with the USA and Britain or by plotting to assassinate Hitler and take his place." – expounded Libby.

"Let me tell you a story." – Offered Preston – "According to Felix Kersten, Himmler's masseur and confidante, his only friend, really, the Reichsfuehrer regularly referred to Hitler as 'the greatest brain of all time'. He would stand up and click his heels when speaking to Hitler over the phone, for

Chrissakes. One day, Kersten took a call from Hitler and Himmler rushed to congratulate him: ‘Herr Kersten, do you know whom you have been talking to? You have heard the voice of the Fuehrer. What luck! Put that in a letter to your wife straight away! How happy she will be that you should have had such a unique opportunity’”

“OK, OK, you convinced me!” – Dan raised his hands in mock surrender – “Hitler would have trusted Himmler to the fullest and would have entrusted him with the delicate affair of disposing of the child.”

“Lebensborn was the epitome of discretion. Records were sealed, false names used, fake addresses and personal data a matter of routine. The ideal place for inventing a new identity for the Fuehrer’s delicate issue, pun intended.” – I summed up.

“Where does that leave us?” – Asked Dan after a moment’s contemplative silence.

“The second part of my plan calls for a trip to Germany. To central-east Germany, to be precise. I want to meet Lebensborn survivors in their natural habitat. I have a few questions I want answered. And they may well have the answers.” – I said.

“What makes you think they will be happy to accommodate you?” - Asked Preston, eyeing me with growing concern.

“Lebensspuren” – I said victoriously.

It was their turn to gape. It felt good.

“Lebensspuren - Traces of Life - is an organization of Lebensborn children, scholars, and just about anyone else who is interested in the SS-run outfit.” – I enlightened them self-importantly – “They had a sort of reunion in November 2006 in a small central-east German town by the name of Wernigerode, site of the Lebensborn’s Harz home. That’s where Lebensspuren set up their HQ. I wrote to them.”

“You did **WHAT**???” – Exploded Preston, the first time I saw him lose his cool – “Are you out of your mind? Do you have a death wish?”

“That was hasty and incredibly dangerous.” – Translated Dan.

“And foolish.” – Suggested Libby.

“And foolish.” – Concurred Preston, gratefully.

“They wrote back to me.” – I proceeded.

Preston the pragmatic was the first to concede defeat:

“And what did they say?”

“I scheduled a meeting with them. They are willing to help. I only told them that I am a historian of the Holocaust in search of a Jewish child abducted from Poland. My cover story didn’t strike them as odd. This kind of thing happened a lot.”

“When’s the meeting?” – Enquired Dan grudgingly.

“Tomorrow afternoon” – I said – “In Europe.”

Chapter the Twenty-ninth

Of Grosz and Brand

Bader is at ease, now that we are alone. He lets down his guard, his self-imputed mantle of invincibility, so typical of emissaries from Palestine, the New Jews. He tells me that Pomerantz couldn't find a free seat in the flight to Eretz-Israel. Instead, he will be taking the train first thing tomorrow morning. "It's an arduous trip," – he commiserates – "but it has to be done. He will meet with Shertok the minute he arrives."

He asks me about my family. I tell him about my wife, still in the camp, as far as I know. I mention Himmler's promise to extricate my kin if I succeed and Bader snorts derisively.

"Don't raise your hopes too high! Nazi promises are rarely kept." – He warns me – "The British, the Americans, the Turks, they all have their agendas vested in a Jew-free future. Hitler may have been right when he said that history will be grateful to him for having rid the world of Jewry." – Bader clenches his fists and raises them, a gesture of unmitigated helplessness:

"Last time, the Turks wouldn't even let harmless Shertok have an entry visa. They don't want to get involved in the War, definitely not as allies of the British or the Jews or the Gestapo, for that matter!"

"Last time?" – I ask, dumbfounded.

Bader sighs wearily:

"You are not the first to pass through here. Three months ago, the Germans sent two couriers, Grosz and Brand, to offer anyone who would listen a goods-for-Jews deal."

"Goods-for-Jews?"

"Trucks, mainly. The Nazis demanded 10,000 winterized trucks in return for the lives of Hungary's Jews. It was a mess. The Turks wanted to deport the two couriers, whom they suspected of being Gestapo agents. The British

refused at first to accept them. To placate the increasingly suspicious Germans, I had to sign a fictitious agreement with Brand, in my capacity as a representative of 'Moledet', a code name for the Jewish Agency. I was afraid that if Brand were to return empty-handed, he and all his family would be executed on the spot. Brand even gave me his last will and testament." – Bader shudders visibly.

He has to unburden himself, I think, he has to exonerate himself in my eyes, in the eyes of the millions who were massacred and received no help from the New, courageous Jews of Palestine.

Bader leans forward and taps my knee:

"I simply don't want to see you end up like Brand: bitter, broken, and resentful. There is little we can do. It is a time of war and negotiations with the enemy are proscribed, you know." – He swallows hard – "We kept the discussions going for as long as we could, but we had nothing to offer them: no goods, no funds, no diplomatic leverage with the Allies. Nothing at all."

"That's all you did? Haggle in bad faith for as long as you could? I am impressed."

Bader evades my fiery gaze:

"We cannot confront the British or the Americans. They are, after all, shedding blood to fight our common enemy, the Nazi Germans. What would you have us do? We are helpless: too few, too scattered, too hated by one and all. We rescue Jews from burning Europe and smuggle them into Eretz Israel. The British make sure that even these Aliyah Bet excursions end badly. Avriël lost a whole ship – the Uranus – in Yugoslavia, with 1400 souls on board. The British pressured the Yugoslavs to incarcerate them in Sabac. Last we heard from them was two years ago. They have probably been slaughtered by the German occupiers." – He ended dejectedly.

"The Allies could have blasted the railways to Auschwitz and similar camps." – I recall the sound of bombers flying overhead, miraculously resurrecting us, skeletal inmates. How we prayed for them to pulverize both us and our tormentors.

"What happened to Brand and Grosz?" – I enquire.

“I don’t know much about Grosz, he had his own mission which he pursued through his own contacts. His wife joined him here. He must have been exceedingly well-connected to pull that through. At any rate, he refused to return to Budapest with Brand. Said he had yet to accomplish his task without which the contract I had signed on behalf of Moledet was worthless. He simply disappeared one day. Heard the Brits and the Americans ferried him to Syria. He supposedly was carrying an offer from Himmler suing for a separate peace in the West.”

Bader chokes on his words:

“Brand stayed here, in this very room. We spent the night arguing, crying, analyzing, and then crying some more. At the crack of dawn, he agreed to return to Budapest to try to buy us more time, even at the price of his certain death.”

“And so, he returned?”

Bader paces the room and stops to glance out the window, gingerly lifting one end of the brocaded curtain:

“No. Luckily for him, the British changed their minds and he left Istanbul together with Avriel. They traveled to Syria, where Brand was arrested by the Brits but, after much pleading, was given the chance to meet with Shertok and other members of the Jewish Agency.”

I felt the rage surge in me:

“I don’t need to meet Shertok. In fact, I’d rather not come face to face with any of the Palestinian leadership. I just want him to hand over what’s mine: the documents I had given to Arlosoroff in good faith and for safekeeping. Your leaders failed to save the Jews of Europe once – well, this is their second and, probably, last chance to redeem themselves.”

Bader bends his head, contrite and abject and whispers:

“We are doing all that we can. There is nothing more we can do.”

“There was a lot more you could have done!” – I shout at him, hands fisted, veins throbbing – “But you have placed the fate of your precious experiment in Palestine above every other consideration. Well, now you have a national home but no nation to occupy it. You have let us die, so that your dream may live. Soon you will find out that it has mutated into a nightmare that will last a hundred years. You will drown in your own blood as we have. You will witness your young and your old perish. You will redeem with suffering your criminal abandonment of your people.”

A muscle ripples across Bader’s corpulent face as he withstands my heated outburst.

Breathing heavily, I crumple onto the settee and stare at Bader’s silhouette:

“Get me those documents. You can still save us, you know. Promise me you will do your best!”

Bader rests his palms on the wide windowsill and stretches upwards in a kind of impromptu gymnastics. He resumes his narrative quietly, as though talking to himself:

“The British refused to let Brand return to Budapest. They interrogated him repeatedly. The Germans grew restless, the Jewish leadership in Hungary panicked.”

He turns to face me, tears streaking down his contorted face. But his voice is firm:

“We had a contact in the Hungarian Embassy in Ankara. We used him to communicate with Budapest. He brought back a message from Eichmann. One of us, the Palestinian emissaries, was invited to travel to Hungary to continue the negotiations. Krumei, Eichmann’s right-hand man, would guarantee our personal safety and eventual return.” – Bader chuckles sullenly.

“I met a German agent calling himself Colonel Stiller, who claimed to be working in the German consulate in Istanbul. He offered me a plane ride to Vienna, to discuss Brand’s proposal there. I wanted to go, but the British wouldn’t let me. Everyone believed that the whole thing was some kind of

Gestapo plot to split the Allies by negotiating a truce only with the West while continuing to fight in the East.”

Bader fishes for some crumpled papers from his back pocket, straightens them on the secretaire’s polished surface and invites me to read them as he turns on the desk lamp. They are press cuts from various dates in July 1944: the New York Herald Tribune, the London Times. They are unanimous about Brand’s mission, calling it a “loathsome story” and a “humanitarian blackmail”.

Bader folds the papers and tucks them in:

“Brand went on hunger strikes, planned to commit suicide, or to break out of prison. Now, he is desperate to go back to Budapest. He knows how the Nazis would interpret his failure to return.”

A moment of pregnant silence.

“Frankenberg,” – Bader wavers but then recovers his composure – “what’s really in those papers? Why is Himmler so keen to lay his hands on them? How can they end the war and ... and ...”

“The mass murder of the Jews.” – I complete the sentence for him – “I told you already: Hitler may have had a love affair with a Jewess. A converted Jewess but a Jewess all the same.”

Bader shakes his head vigorously:

“That’s not enough to even dent Hitler’s war machine or to loosen by one notch his grip on power. There’s got to be a lot more than that. You are not telling us everything.” – He glares at me shrewdly from under bushy brows.

But I am a penumbral presence, as talkative as the sphinx, a dead man walking. Our conversation is at an end and Bader knows it. He turns the chandeliered lights on as he walks towards the door:

“Better stay in your room and keep the drapes closed at all times.” – He advises me avuncularly – “The Germans have many agents here and not all them are in agreement. You may unwittingly become a target. I will be in

touch with you daily. Prepare lists of things you need: food, other necessities. I will buy them for you. Do you have any questions?”

I shake my head:

“I will wait.” – I say and Bader leaves the room.

Chapter the Thirtieth

The Paper Trail

Pomerantz looks haggard: unshaven, unkempt, and somehow more skeletal. He blinks his bloodshot eyes with disorienting rapidity and fidgets with the tails of a much soiled khaki shirt.

“Shertok is not coming.” – He reiterates to no one in particular.

“Damn Shertok!” – I susurrate – “Where are my documents? Where are my family jewels?”

Pomerantz shifts uneasily on the high-backed wooden chair:

“He doesn’t have them. Swears he never did. It was a well-known and much derided fact that Chaim Arlosoroff carried with him a mysterious briefcase with a set of papers he claimed could alter the destiny of the Jewish people. He would let no one as much as sneak a peek at them. Said it was too dangerous. Might have been your documents.”

“And ...?” – I growl at him.

“Chaim and his attaché case were inseparable. Sima, his wife, told Shertok that he was clutching it when he was gunned down.”

“So, where is it, Wanja?” – interjects Avriel impatiently.

“That’s precisely the question. It vanished. By the time the hemorrhaging Arlosoroff was brought to one of the adjacent houses, prior to being taken to the hospital, he had nothing with him or on him. Sima was, of course, not in the condition to notice such things just then.”

Bader mumbles, eyes shut, and raises his hands as though in desperate prayer. Avriel sits frozen, contemplating the implications of Pomerantz’s failed mission.

“Was the absence of the suitcase mentioned at the trial?” – He finally asks.

“Sima testified that nothing was stolen. Hence the widespread belief that this was a political assassination.”

“Why would she lie?” – Demands Bader vehemently – “Why would she protect the real killers?”

Pomerantz shrugs:

“Says she had forgotten all about the briefcase. But I believe that Ben-Gurion and Shertok advised her in no uncertain terms to hold her tongue.”

“Threatened her, you mean.” - I utter grimly.

“There was no need to do that. Sima is as patriotic as they come.” – Avriel slumps in his seat and massages his temples – “Admittedly, there was no love lost between Chaim and the other comrades in the Jewish Agency. Because of his contacts with the Nazis, he was often called a grandstanding traitor behind his back and to his face. He was envied for his meteoric rise, his youth, and his intellect. But Sima would have never betrayed the movement and Eretz-Israel. If she neglected to mention the documents, she must have thought that there was a good reason to do so.”

“I am relieved to hear that.” – I mock him cynically – “It’s good to know that one is about to die for the right cause. I will convey these sentiments to my wife as we are being mowed down by a German machine-gun.”

Bader turns away from the window and faces Avriel:

“Ehud, his murderers absconded with the papers. Don’t you think that we might ...”

Avriel dismisses the suggestion in mid-sentence:

“The Stern Gang would never give them to us. As far as they are concerned, we are as much the enemy as the British.”

“What’s the Stern Gang? Are they Germans? Arabs?” – I begin to get exasperated by inter-Palestinian politics.

“Jews!” – Avriel spits the word – “Renegade Jews! Fascists in our midst. Terrorists who seek to erect a Jewish polity on rivers of blood and mounds of corpses and they kill their way into statehood. They had murdered Chaim, although that’s not the official version.”

“Can’t you offer them money, weapons, political recognition, collaboration, training, anything at all to obtain these documents? The lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews depend on it.” – I plead.

“We are not even sure that they still possess the papers. Arlosoroff was assassinated 10 years ago. We can’t change the course of Jewish history just to find out that, in the end, they have nothing to offer us.”

“Did you just say *Jewish* history? Aren’t the people who are being gassed and cremated and hanged and ripped to shreds in Auschwitz – Jews? Don’t they have a say as to what constitutes Jewish history? Who gave you the monopoly on the fate of our people? How dare you make such decisions so flippantly?”

Bader comes between us like a referee:

“Calm down, friends, clam down. I have got an idea.”

Avriel and I settle back and watch him expectantly, hyperventilating.

Bader clears his throat:

“Only the four of us know that the documents cannot be found. No one else does. My suggestion is simple: tell the Germans that you have got them and that you are willing to trade them for your wife.”

A moment of stunned silence as the perfection of this stratagem sinks in.

Avriel’s eyes light up:

“Frankenberg, it’s ingenious! You just tell them that you are willing to trade the papers for your wife in a neutral location.”

“Like Switzerland” – Contributes Bader.

“Like Switzerland” – Concludes Avriel.

I glare at them incredulously:

“Are you mere figments of my tortured imagination, or are you real, flesh-and-blood, Jews from Eretz-Israel, the ultimate shelter for the entire Jewish race? Can you imagine what the Nazis will do to the rest of my family, not to mention the Jews of Budapest, when they find out that they have been double-crossed? They shoot one hundred hostages for far lesser offenses! They will massacre the whole lot in the cruelest ways their sick minds can conceive!”

Avriel sighs:

“Frankenberg, before you sail away on the ill-winds of your tirade, can you just answer one question?”

I nod.

“What will the Nazis do to the rest of your family, not to mention the Jews of Budapest, if you return empty-handed?”

A soft, perfumed breeze wafts through the room. The sounds of the city engulf us: calls for prayer, haggling, car horns, clacking horse hooves, a woman laughing. For a moment, life is restored, hope reconstituted. Budapest feels so far away.

“Let’s get in touch with them.” – I admit defeat – “We’ve got nothing to lose.”

Chapter the Thirty-first

Underground

“I don’t want you to go there! I forbid you to go there!”

I have never heard my diminutive and frail father raise his voice, not once in 46 years. I am taken aback by this unexpected shrillness. His skin, extended like yellowing parchment over piercing cheekbones, threatens to fracture with the exertion.

“It’s Germany. You are going to the Nazis.”

I was equally startled by my mother’s whispered admonition, so contrary to her voluble and sonorous self.

“They are not Nazis.” – I tried to reason with them – “They were children at the time, victims of the monstrous SS Lebensborn program.”

“They are Germans.” – My mother regained her booming diction – “All Germans were Nazis! Haven’t you learned anything in your genocide outfit? Whenever they captured a city or town or village in the East, the first thing the Germans did was round up the Jews and murder them in the most bestial and sadistic manner imaginable. Even their ‘honorable’ army, the Wehrmacht, took full part and pride in the games and fun.”

My father laid a restraining hand on her and she crumbled, puppet-like, into the kitchen stool and buried her face in her fleshy palms.

“Son,” – said my father, eyes downcast – “you are all we’ve got. You are the world to us. We may have never told you that because we have enduring problems with expressing our emotions.” – He impatiently waived away my incipient objections – “Just listen to us. Please.”

He cleared his throat, retooling a rusted, rarely-used instrument:

“As you know, both your mother and I have been to the belly of the beast: assorted work camps and then Auschwitz. Some survivors mourn those lost

years, the trampled innocence of youth, the wounds that never heal. I view it differently.”

My mother sobbed softly, shoulders flexing spasmodically, elbows resting on the dilapidated table-top. Though wealthy, they have never discarded a thing, turning the spacious residence into a veritable junkyard.

“The camp system taught me the most valuable lesson of all about the true nature of the world: what we call ‘civilization’ is but a thin veneer, you see, and easily cracked. Beneath it lies a seething inferno, an abomination, the stuff that forms into our nightmares. Kafka grasped this horror intuitively. He wrote about it and we lived through it, in this nether land. The Nazis were merely our guides in Hades.”

My mother stirred, wiping her tears with a tattered, coarse kitchen towel:

“We make money, we drive to work, we watch a movie, we make love, we see you grow – and, all the time, there’s this fear, this gnawing doubt: is it all real? When will the Nazis return to gas us? When will the earth swallow us whole, transport us to a subterranean Auschwitz? We can never leave the camp, don’t you see? We were never liberated!” – She was screaming now, hysterical, clawing at my father’s sinewed, venous arm. He bowed his head:

“Kazetnik, Yekhiel Dinur, the writer, during his harrowing testimony in the Eichmann trial called Auschwitz a planet. It was, you know. There were no villains or heroes there, just people trying to survive, often at the expense of others. With the exception of a few sadists, even the camp guards were trapped.” – He smoothed the drooping ends of his wannabe moustache:

“It is still Hitler’s world, son. He accomplished all his goals: the Soviet Union is gone, Europe is Judenfrei, cleansed of Jews, and a united continent is led by a prosperous and mighty single Germany. The Fuehrer would have approved.”

My mother sniffed and trembled:

“Why are you really going there? What happened? Something horrible has happened, I can feel it in my bones!”

“Calm down, mother. I am going there merely to interview some elderly people for a research project about the crimes of the SS and the Lebensborn.”

“And the Germans, they are going to let you waltz in there and unearth all the dirty secrets that they have been concealing all these years? The scum of the earth are going to unroll the red carpet, place a welcome mat for the Jew Roth and fling the doors of their festering archives wide open? Are you that naïve? Don’t you realize that Germany is in the hands of the same thugs or their offspring? The Nazis were not the minority! They were adored by the people. Thrashing the Jews was a national pastime and everyone participated: Germans of all ages, of both sexes, and of every social, economic, and educational status. No German is innocent of our blood! And now the sons and daughters of these murderers are in power and they won’t let you soil daddy’s memory! They will not hesitate to do to you what their forefathers did to your entire family in Europe!”

“Your mother has a point.” – My father reverted to his old, cogitative incarnation – “The Germans, regardless of origin or creed, are bound to be unhappy with your mission. You may well be exposing yourself to some grave risks.”

“He won’t listen!” – My mother bellowed – “He is as pig-headed as they come. There’s nothing we can do but watch him throw his life away!”

“Re-consider, son, please, do it for us!” – Begged my father.

“This is what you fail to understand: I am doing it for you. Everything I have been doing is for you. I feel that I owe you somehow, the burden of your expectations, your unfulfilled lives. I am your exorcism, nothing more.” – I felt pungent acid well in my throat – “I am going to Germany. I came to say goodbye. I came to tell you that finally I am ready to confront the monsters which you, evidently, are powerless to ward off.”

The wooden pendulum of the wall-mounted Swiss cuckoo clock swung to and fro, the lead weights cranked, a miniature bird chimed the hour.

“I am sorry we couldn’t give you a better life, son.” – Said my father at last, his voice stifled. He rose from his seat and stunned me for the second time that day. He hugged me tight.

Chapter the Thirty-second

A Reluctant Reception

“I don’t serve Jews”.

The words are scrawled in careful Gothic script across a meticulously folded, elongated piece of paper, placed in a coffee cup on a silver filigreed tray. The bellboy eyes me nervously as I crumple the missive and place it back in its receptacle.

“Who wrote this?” – I ask him in a half dozen languages before I realize that he is not about to respond, no matter what.

“Go away” – I shoo him and march towards the reception cubicle. The German clerk is there, entering corrections in a neat, familiar handwriting into a massive guestbook.

I lean forward and read aloud the name on his gold-plated tag:

“Herr Naumann. A Jewish-sounding name.”

He startles and gives me a venomous look, which he then hastens to conceal:

“I am a pure German, Herr Frank!” – He protests, eyelids nervously fluttering over watery-blue orbs. He withdraws from the counter’s edge, propping his stocky, hirsute body against the rows of wooden pigeonholes behind him. An ornate room key falls to the carpet with a thud.

“You are not only a pure German, you are also an employee of this establishment and you have just refused to serve one of its paying patrons.”

“I don’t serve Jews!” – He declares proudly, strutting his chest and caressing the shining buttons of his uniform.

“And why is that, Herr Naumann?”

“We are enemies, Herr Frank, as you may have heard.” – He laughs meekly

at his own audacity and scratches the sloping corners of his fleshy lips. His is a thick Bavarian accent.

“Allow me to rephrase my question: why are we enemies?”

He pauses and weighs his answer, self-consciously straightening thin strands of ephemeral hair on his shining pate.

“We, the Germans, are shedding our blood defending the world against the Judeo-Bolshevik menace. And you know what’s the irony?” – He warms up to his subject, all flushed – “The evil machinations of the Marxist contagion threaten the common Jews as much as they do the rest of us. The Jewish elites – both capitalists and communists - manipulate their working class brethren to ungratefully act against us, their liberator and salvation. What do we get in return for our services to Mankind? Jewish aerial bombardments! Hundreds of thousands of civilians reduced to pulp from the air. We get anti-German propaganda, replete with implausible tales of incomprehensible atrocities, we get partisans, most of whom are Jews.”

“Don’t forget the epidemics spread by the Jews to decimate the noble Aryan-Nordic stock. Don’t neglect to mention the race defilers: Jewish men and boys who force themselves upon fair German maidens in order to pollute and contaminate your purest of pure race.” – I remind him and he eyes me suspiciously.

“Herr Naumann, have you heard of Dachau?”

He moves uneasily behind the elevated carved timber counter:

“What if I have?”

“You approve of detaining people without trial, torturing them brutally, and then murdering them for sadistic fun?”

“Every country has preventive custody concentration camps: the British, the Americans, the Russians. Enemies of the state must be isolated lest they cause harm and sabotage the nation’s prospects. Naturally, you are enraged because we finally got around to dealing with you – but we are equally enraged that it took our politicians so long to get to grips with the Jewish Question.”

“Well put. And in which way do hundreds of thousands of infants constitute a threat to the great and mighty Reich?”

He stares at me blankly:

“What do you mean?”

I tell him about Auschwitz. As I recount the horrors, he grows crimson in the face, nostrils flaring, veins throbbing. Finally, he rudely interrupts my narrative:

“This is precisely the kind of atrocity propaganda that the German Volk has been subjected to by its implacable enemies, the Jews! You don’t expect me to believe half of it, do you?”

“Every word is true, Herr Naumann. I have been there myself. That you choose to deny it is normal. But your denial won’t make it any less real, you know.”

For a moment, he is undecided, but then he reasserts his self-control:

“Whatever the case may be, we don’t serve Jews here, Herr Frank.”

I laugh in his face and leave him fuming behind his desk. I have just made an enemy but I couldn’t care less. As I climb the stairs towards the elevators, someone taps me on the shoulder and I cower instinctively.

My escort is evidently embarrassed by my reaction. A respectable-looking, tall man in his late forties, he wears a shining monocle, an old-fashioned Kaiser Wilhelm moustache, and a golden watch chain tucked into an expensive-looking three-piece suit. His features are pleasantly harmonious.

“Please forgive me if I have startled you, it was not my intention.” – He declares and extends a long-fingered, manicured hand – “Prince Max-Egon zu Hohenlohe-Langenburg at your service, Sir. I also apologize on behalf of my crude and coarse countryman. People like him give my Fatherland a bad name.”

I shake his hand, dazed. He gestures expansively, as though he owns the place:

“Would you care for a drink, Herr Frank, or should I say, Herr Frankenberg?”

He snaps his fingers in the general direction of the clerk and leads me gently but firmly to a corner table surrounded by ornate armchairs and a sofa. Minutes later, a waiter appears and places a bottle of brandy and two glasses before us. He pours the libation and vanished as stealthily as he has arrived.

“I understand that you are a lawyer and philosopher, Herr Frank. So I have been told by Schellenberg.” – He says, eyeing me intently.

I nod in affirmation.

“Before we get down to business, I would like to try to make you understand Germany’s point of view which really is shared by everyone, except by the Jews themselves. I believe that it is imperative that you are fully committed to the task at hand and this cannot be achieved if you still regard us as irrational barbarians bent of slaughter and mayhem. Mind you, I don’t care much for Hitler. As for myself, I live in Spain and our family is better represented outside the Thousand Years’ Reich than inside its borders.”

“I prefer to discuss the transaction we are here to consummate.” – I protest feebly, but he won’t hear of it, cherishing the color of his brandy as he launches into a thinly-veiled diatribe against the Jews, couched in scholarly terms and a civil vocabulary:

“Herr Frank, you are advantaged in this conversation. It takes one Jew to really know another. Conditioned by millennia of persecution, naturally you are defensive and obsessively secretive. It is impossible for a gentile - whom you hold to be inferior and reflexively hostile - to penetrate your counsels.”

“Jews come in all sizes and shapes.” – I protest – “There no such thing as a ‘typical’ Jew.”

“Come, come, Herr Frankenberg.” – Smiles my interlocutor genteelly – “I don’t adhere to the more deranged notions of the Nazis but if the Jews do not constitute a race, then who does? If race is defined in terms of genetic purity,

then Jews are as much a race as the remotest and most isolated of the tribes of the Amazon. Centuries of in-breeding took care of that. There are hereditary diseases which afflict only the Jews, you know.” – He sips the amber liquid in his glass and sighs in pleasure - “Judaism is founded on shared biology as well as shared history and customs. As a religion, it proscribes a conjugal union with non-Jews. Jews are not even allowed to partake in the food and wine of gentiles and have kept their distance from the communities which they inhabited - maintaining tenaciously, through countless generations, their language, habits, creed, dress, and national ethos. But then you know all that already.”

“Your Excellency, you are wrong.” – He sits up, his visage undecided, both amused and irritated.

“Jews are not so much a race as a community, united in age-old traditions and beliefs, lore and myths, history and language.” – I expound – “Anyone can become a Jew by following a set of clear - though, admittedly, demanding - rules. There is absolutely no biological test or restriction on joining the collective that is known as the Jewish people or the religion that is Judaism. It is true that some Jews are differentiated from their gentile environments. But this distinction has largely been imposed on us by countless generations of hostile hosts and neighbors. The yellow and blue Stars of David are only the latest in a series of measures to isolate the Jews, clearly mark them, restrict their economic and intellectual activities, and limit their social interactions. The only way to survive was to stick together. Can you blame us for responding to what you yourselves have so enthusiastically instigated?”

“I like your spirit, Frankenberg!” – He salutes me with his glass – “Weren’t you the ones who invented the concept of the Herrnrasse, the Master Race, the Chosen People? Orthodox Jews and secular Jews differ, of course, in their perception of this self-imputed supremacy. The religious attribute it to divine will, intellectuals to the outstanding achievements of Jewish scientists and scholars. But they all share a sense of privilege and commensurate obligation to civilize their inferiors and to spread progress and enlightenment wherever they are. This is coupled with disdain and contempt for the lowly gentiles.”

I shrug:

“We, the Jews, are proud of our achievements. Show me one group of people - including the anti-Semites - who isn't? But there is an abyss between being justly proud of one's true accomplishments and feeling superior as a result. Granted, there are megalomaniacs everywhere and among the members of any human collective. Hitler and his Aryan superiority is a good example.”

“Touché!” – He roars – “I like you, Frankenberg, and that is something I cannot say about too many people! You give as good as you get. A pity you Jews are so disloyal. We could have used a few like yourself right now!”

“Disloyal? My grandfather and father both died on the battlefield, fighting for their respective homelands. Other members of my family have been maimed and we even have medals to show for it!”

He brushes my arguments aside:

“No one doubts that a few Jews here and there distinguished themselves in battle – but getting wounded or killed in action does not a true patriot make!” He leans forward, removes his silver-rimmed monocle and carefully places it in a velvet-padded case:

“Granted, it is false to say that Jews are first and foremost Jews and only then are they the loyal citizens of their respective countries. Jews have unreservedly fought and sacrificed in the service of their homelands, often killing their coreligionists in the process. But it is true that Jews believe that what is good for the Jews is good for the country they reside in. By aligning the interests of their adopted habitat with their narrower and selfish agenda, Jews feel justified to promote their own interests to the exclusion of all else and all others. Hence the Jewish propensity to infiltrate decision-making centers, such as politics and the newspapers. Their aim is to minimize conflicts of interests by transforming their peculiar concerns and preferences into official, if not always consensual, policy. It is a fact that Jews are over-represented in certain, influential, professions: in banking, finance, politics, the film industry, in publishing, science, the humanities and arts, etc.. This is partly the result of their emphasis on education. But it is also due to the tendency of well-placed Jews to promote their brethren and provide them with privileged access to opportunities, funding, and jobs.”

He finishes with a flourish, as though administering the coup-de-grace and ogles me triumphantly.

I swirl the brandy in my glass, letting the aroma waft across the confined space:

“Every ethnic, religious, cultural, political, intellectual, and economic or business group tries to influence policy-making by various means. This is both legitimate and desirable. The Jews are no exception. Jews are, indeed, over-represented in certain professions in Germany. But they are under-represented in other, equally important, vocations, as you should know. When was the last time you came across a Jewish military officer or diplomat?”

He waves impatiently:

“You are missing the point entirely, Herr Frankenberg! I am not a raving lunatic like some of my more primitive compatriots. There is no organized, hierarchical, and centralized worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Rather the Jews operate in cross-border alliances to tackle specific issues. Jewish organizations serve as administrative backup. The Jews’ ability and readiness to mobilize and act to further their plans is a matter of record and the source of their inordinate influence in world affairs.” – He raises his hand, stanching my imminent response:

“When two Jews meet, even randomly, and regardless of the disparities in their background, they immediately endeavor to see how they can further each other's interests, even and often at the expense of everyone else's. The Jewish diaspora, now two millennia old, is the first worldwide phenomenon. Bound by a common history, a common set of languages, a common ethos, a common religion, common defenses and ubiquitous enemies, Jews have learned to closely cooperate in order to survive. No wonder that all modern global nets - from Rothschild to Reuters - were established by Jews. Jews also featured prominently in all the revolutionary movements of the past three centuries. Individual Jews - though rarely the Jewish community as a whole - seem to benefit no matter what. When Czarist Russia collapsed, Jews occupied 7 out of 10 prominent positions in both the Jew Kerensky’s government and in the Jew Lenin’s and early Stalin administrations.”

“Your Excellency, what group does not behave this way? As long as people co-operate legally and for legal ends, without breaching ethics and without discriminating against deserving non-members - what is wrong with that? As a matter of fact, Jews are actually under-represented in the echelons of power everywhere.”

The Prince sits back and gazes at the ceiling, contemplating his next move. Guests come and go, their chatter dying in the distance.

“Frankenberg,” – he finally whispers – “what’s really happening in Germany? I couldn’t help but overhearing your tall tales about that camp, I forget its name ...”

“Auschwitz, Mein Prinz, and, alas, every word the truth.”

For the second time that evening, I share with a German the horror of the concentration camps: the days-long transport in freezing cattle wagons, without water or food or lavatories; the chaotic nocturnal disembarkation, the nightmarish mélange of dazzling light from mounted floodlights, ferocious canines, lashing SS whips, screams and cries, the bloated corpses; the selection, to the right and to the left, by SS doctors in white robes, their eyes dead; the registration process, the tattoos, the delousing in ice cold water; the barracks, the sadistic Kapos, the endless roll calls, the public tortures and gallows; the rumors about the gas chambers and the crematoria; the ever billowing, sickeningly sweet smoke and the human dust particles that descend from the grey, merciless skies above to feed the lice in our clothes and our hair. The hunger, the emaciated skeletons that pass for inmates and drop dead suddenly, like flies.

Von Hohenlohe listens attentively and doesn’t interrupt me even once. As my words peter out, syntactically exhausted, he mutters: “Mein Gott!” and fixes me with a stern gaze:

“Schellenberg tells me that you have documents in your possession that can put a stop to this madness, to the war, to Hitler.”

I hesitate and his face darkens:

“These papers,” – he observes – “they are not at your disposal?”

“My wife is in Auschwitz.” – I whisper incongruently – “I want my wife to join me in Switzerland.”

He studies me coldly:

“I can understand that, Frankenberg. Your wife in return for the documents.”

“In Switzerland.” – I mumble incoherently – “In Switzerland, the neutral country.”

The Prince smiles contemptuously:

“No one is neutral in this day and age, Herr Frankenberg. I would have thought that this is the least you should have gleaned from your recent experiences.”

By the time I think of a response and lift my eyes, he is gone. The bellboy approached me timidly:

“Herr Naumann requests that you revert to your room immediately, Herr Frank, now that you have had your drink and have been served.” – He says, his voice wavering.

These are excerpts from my new thriller, “The Hitler File”.

If you enjoyed these excerpts, please **help me get the book published.**

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