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Opening Extract from...

Zoo Station

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Into the blue

There were two hours left of 1938. In Danzig it had been snowing on and off all day, and a gang of children were enjoying a snowball fight in front of the grain warehouses which lined the old waterfront. John Russell paused to watch them for a few moments, then walked on up the cobbled street towards the blue and yellow lights.

The Sweden Bar was far from crowded, and those few faces that turned his way weren't exactly brimming over with festive spirit. In fact, most of them looked like they'd rather be somewhere else.

It was an easy thing to want. The Christmas decorations hadn't been removed, just allowed to drop, and now formed part of the flooring, along with patches of melting slush, floating cigarette ends and the odd broken bottle. The bar was famous for the savagery of its international brawls, but on this particular night the various groups of Swedes, Finns and Letts seemed devoid of the energy needed to get one started. Usually a table or two of German naval ratings could be relied upon to provide the necessary spark, but the only Germans present were a couple of ageing prostitutes, and they were getting ready to leave.

Russell took a stool at the bar, bought himself a *Goldwasser* and glanced through the month-old copy of the *New York Herald Tribune* which, for some inexplicable reason, was lying there. One of his own articles was in it, a piece on German attitudes to their pets. It was accompanied by a cute-looking photograph of a Schnauzer.

Seeing him reading, a solitary Swede two stools down asked

him, in perfect English, if he spoke that language. Russell admitted that he did.

'You are English!' the Swede exclaimed, and shifted his considerable bulk to the stool adjoining Russell's.

Their conversation went from friendly to sentimental, and sentimental to maudlin, at what seemed like breakneck pace. Three *Goldwassers* later, the Swede was telling him that he, Lars, was not the true father of his children. Vibeke had never admitted it, but he knew it to be true.

Russell gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder, and Lars sunk forward, his head making a dull clunk as it made contact with the polished surface of the bar. 'Happy New Year,' Russell murmured. He shifted the Swede's head slightly to ease his breathing, and got up to leave.

Outside, the sky was beginning to clear, the air almost cold enough to sober him up. An organ was playing in the Protestant Seamen's church, nothing hymnal, just a slow lament, as if the organist was saying a personal farewell to the year gone by. It was a quarter to midnight.

Russell walked back across the city, conscious of the moisture seeping in through the holes in his shoes. The Langermarkt was full of couples, laughing and squealing as they clutched each other for balance on the slippery pavements.

He cut over the Breite Gasse and reached the Holzmarkt just as the bells began pealing in the New Year. The square was full of celebrating people, and an insistent hand pulled him into a circle of revellers dancing and singing in the snow. When the song ended and the circle broke up, the Polish girl on his left reached up and brushed her lips against his, eyes shining with happiness. It was, he thought, a better than expected opening to 1939.

* * *

His hotel's reception area was deserted, and the sounds of celebration emanating from the kitchen at the back suggested the night staff were enjoying their own private party. Russell thought about making himself a hot chocolate and drying his shoes in one of the ovens, but decided against. He took his key, clambered up the stairs to the third floor, and trundled down the corridor to his room. Closing the door behind him, he became painfully aware that the occupants of the neighbouring rooms were still welcoming in the new year, a singsong on one side, floor-shaking sex on the other. He took off his sodden shoes and socks, dried his wet feet with a towel and sank back onto the vibrating bed.

There was a discreet, barely audible tap on his door.

Cursing, he levered himself off the bed and prised the door open. A man in a crumpled suit and open shirt stared back at him.

'Mr John Russell,' the man said in English, as if he was introducing Russell to himself. The Russian accent was slight, but unmistakable. 'Could I talk with you for a few minutes?'

'It's a bit late …' Russell began. The man's face was vaguely familiar. 'But why not?' he continued, as the singers next door reached for a new and louder chorus. 'A journalist should never turn down a conversation,' he murmured, mostly to himself, as he let the man in. 'Take the chair,' he suggested.

His visitor sat back and crossed one leg over the other, hitching up his trouser leg as he did so. 'We have met before,' he said. 'A long time ago. My name is Shchepkin. Yevgeny Grigorovich Shchepkin. We …'

'Yes,' Russell interrupted, as the memory clicked into place. 'The discussion group on journalism at the fifth Congress. The summer of '24.'

Shchepkin nodded his acknowledgement. 'I remember your contributions,' he said. 'Full of passion,' he added, his eyes circling

the room and resting, for a few seconds, on his host's dilapidated shoes.

Russell perched himself on the edge of the bed. 'As you said – a long time ago.' He and Ilse had met at that conference, and set in motion their ten-year cycle of marriage, parenthood, separation and divorce. Shchepkin's hair had been black and wavy in 1924; now it was a close-cropped grey. They were both a little older than the century, Russell guessed, and Shchepkin was wearing pretty well, considering what he'd probably been through the last fifteen years. He had a handsome face of indeterminate nationality, with deep brown eyes above prominent slanting cheekbones, an aquiline nose and lips just the full side of perfect. He could have passed for a citizen of most European countries, and probably had.

The Russian completed his survey of the room. 'This is a dreadful hotel,' he said.

Russell laughed. 'Is that what you wanted to talk about?'

'No. Of course not.'

'So what are you here for?'

'Ah.' Shchepkin hitched his trouser leg again. 'I am here to offer you work.'

Russell raised an eyebrow. 'You? Who exactly do you represent?'

The Russian shrugged. 'My country. The Writers' Union. It doesn't matter. You will be working for us. You know who we are.'

'No,' Russell said. 'I mean, no I'm not interested. I …'

'Don't be so hasty,' Shchepkin said. 'Hear me out. We aren't asking you to do anything which your German hosts could object to.' The Russian allowed himself a smile. 'Let me tell you exactly what we have in mind. We want a series of articles about positive aspects of the Nazi regime.' He paused for a few seconds, waiting in vain for Russell to demand an explanation. 'You are not German but you live in Berlin,' he went on. 'You once had a reputation as

a journalist of the left, and though that reputation has, shall we say, faded, no one could accuse you of being an apologist for the Nazis …'

'But you want me to be just that.'

'No, no. We want positive aspects, not a positive picture overall. That would not be believable.'

Russell was curious in spite of himself. Or because of the *Goldwassers*. 'Do you just need my name on these articles?' he asked. 'Or do you want me to write them as well?'

'Oh, we want you to write them. We like your style – all that irony.'

Russell shook his head – Stalin and irony didn't seem like much of a match.

Shchepkin misread the gesture. 'Look,' he said, 'let me put all my cards on the table.'

Russell grinned.

Shchepkin offered a wry smile in return. 'Well, most of them anyway. Look, we are aware of your situation. You have a German son and a German lady-friend, and you want to stay in Germany if you possibly can. Of course if a war breaks out you will have to leave, or else they will intern you. But until that moment comes – and maybe it won't, miracles do happen – until it does you want to earn your living as a journalist without upsetting your hosts. What better way than this? You write nice things about the Nazis – not too nice, of course, the articles have to be credible – but you stress their good side.'

'Does shit have a good side?' Russell wondered out loud.

'Come, come,' Shchepkin insisted, 'you know better than that. Unemployment eliminated, a renewed sense of community, healthy children, cruises for workers, cars for the people …'

'You should work for Joe Goebbels.'

Shchepkin gave him a mock-reproachful look.

'OK,' Russell said, 'I take your point. Let me ask you a question. There's only one reason you'd want that sort of article – you're softening up your own people for some sort of deal with the devil. Right?'

Shchepkin flexed his shoulders in an eloquent shrug.

'Why?'

The Russian grunted. 'Why deal with the devil? I don't know what the leadership is thinking. But I could make an educated guess, and so could you.'

Russell could. 'The western powers are trying to push Hitler east, so Stalin has to push him west? Are we talking about a non-aggression pact, or something more?'

Shchepkin looked almost affronted. 'What more could there be? Any deal with that man can only be temporary. We know what he is.'

Russell nodded. It made sense. He closed his eyes, as if it were possible to blank out the approaching calamity. On the other side of the opposite wall, his musical neighbours were intoning one of those Polish river songs which could reduce a statue to tears. Through the wall behind him silence had fallen, but his bed was still quivering like a tuning fork.

'We'd also like some information,' Shchepkin was saying, almost apologetically. 'Nothing military,' he added quickly, seeing the look on Russell's face. 'No armament statistics or those naval plans that Sherlock Holmes is always being asked to recover. Nothing of that sort. We just want a better idea of what ordinary Germans are thinking. How they are taking the changes in working conditions, how they are likely to react if war comes – that sort of thing. We don't want any secrets, just your opinions. And nothing on paper. You can deliver them in person, on a monthly basis.'

Russell looked sceptical.

Shchepkin ploughed on. 'You will be well paid – very well. In any currency, any bank, any country, that you choose. You can move into a better rooming house …'

'I like my rooming house.'

'You can buy things for your son, your girlfriend. You can have your shoes mended.'

'I don't …'

'The money is only an extra. You were with us once …'

'A long, long time ago.'

'Yes, I know. But you cared about your fellow human beings. I heard you talk. That doesn't change. And if we go under there will be nothing left.'

'A cynic might say there's not much to choose between you.'

'The cynic would be wrong,' Shchepkin replied, exasperated and perhaps a little angry. 'We have spilt blood, yes. But reluctantly, and in faith of a better future. *They* enjoy it. Their idea of progress is a European slave-state.'

'I know.'

'One more thing. If money and politics don't persuade you, think of this. We will be grateful, and we have influence almost everywhere. And a man like you, in a situation like yours, is going to need influential friends.'

'No doubt about that.'

Shchepkin was on his feet. 'Think about it, Mr Russell,' he said, drawing an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and placing it on the nightstand. 'All the details are in here – how many words, delivery dates, fees, and so on. If you decide to do the articles, write to our press attaché in Berlin, telling him who you are, and that you've had the idea for them yourself. He will ask you to send him one in the post. The Gestapo will read it, and

pass it on. You will then receive your first fee and suggestions for future stories. The last-but-one letters of the words in the opening sentence will spell out the name of a city outside Germany which you can reach fairly easily. Prague, perhaps, or Cracow. You will spend the last weekend of the month in that city. And be sure to make your hotel reservation at least a week in advance. Once you are there, someone will contact you.'

'I'll think about it,' Russell said, mostly to avoid further argu-ment. He wanted to spend his weekends with his son Paul and his girlfriend Effi, not the Shchepkins of this world.

The Russian nodded and let himself out. As if on cue, the Polish choir lapsed into silence.

Russell was woken by the scream of a locomotive whistle. Or at least, that was his first impression. Lying there awake all he could hear was a gathering swell of high-pitched voices. It sounded like a school playground full of terrified children.

He threw on some clothes and made his way downstairs. It was still dark, the street deserted, the tramlines hidden beneath a virginal sheet of snow. In the Hauptbahnhof booking hall a couple of would-be travellers were hunched in their seats, eyes averted, praying that they hadn't strayed into dangerous territory. Russell strode through the unmanned ticket barrier. There were trucks in the goods yard beyond the far platform, and a train which stretched out beyond the station throat. People were gathered under the yellow lights, mostly families by the look of them, because there were lots of children. And there were men in uniform. Brownshirts.

A sudden shrill whistle from the distant locomotive produced an eerie echo from the milling crowd, as if all the children had shrieked at once.

Russell took the subway steps two at a time, half-expecting to find that the tunnel had been blocked off. It hadn't. On the

far side, he emerged into a milling crowd of shouting, screaming people. He had already guessed what was happening – this was a *Kindertransport*, one of the trains hired to transport the ten thousand Jewish children that Britain had agreed to accept after *Kristallnacht*. The shriek had risen at the moment the guards started separating the children from their parents, and the two groups were now being shoved apart by snarling Brownshirts. Parents were backing away, tears running down their cheeks, as their children were herded onto the train, some waving frantically, some almost reluctantly, as if they feared to recognise the separation.

Further up the platform a violent dispute was underway between an SA Truppführer and a woman with a red cross on her sleeve. Both were screaming at the other, he in German, she in northern-accented English. The woman was beside herself with anger, almost spitting in the Brownshirt's eye, and it was obviously taking all the control he had not to smash his fist in her face. A few feet away one of the mothers was being helped to her feet by another woman. Blood was streaming from her nose.

Russell strode up to them and flashed his Foreign Ministry press accreditation, which at least gave the man a new outlet for his anger.

'What the fuck are you doing here?' the Truppführer shouted. He had a depressingly porcine face, and the bulk to go with it.

'Trying to help,' Russell said calmly. 'I speak English.'

'Well then tell this English bitch to get back on the train with the kike brats where she belongs.'

Russell turned to the woman, a petite brunette who couldn't have been much more than twenty-five. 'He's not worth screaming at,' he told her in English. 'And it won't do you any good. In fact, you'll only make matters worse.'

'I …' She seemed lost for words.

'I know,' Russell said. 'You can't believe people could behave like this. But this lot do. All the time.'

As if to emphasise the point, the Truppführer man started shouting again. When she shouted back he seized her arm, and she kicked him in the shin. He backhanded her across the face with what seemed enormous force, spinning her round and dumping her face-first on the snowy platform. She groaned and shook her head.

Russell put himself between them. 'Look,' he said to the man, 'this will get you court-martialled if you're not careful. The Führer doesn't want you giving the English this sort of a propaganda victory. I know they're only kikes, and I'm sure you feel like I do – that we should put all the adults on the damn train with them, and get rid of the vermin once and for all – but that's for the Führer to decide, not us.'

The British woman was groggily raising herself onto all fours. The storm-trooper took one last look at his victim, made a 'pah!' noise that any pantomime villain would have been proud of and strode away down the platform.

Russell helped her to her feet.

'What did you say to him?' she asked, gingerly feeling an already swelling cheek.

'I appealed to his better nature.'

'There must be someone …' she began.

'There isn't,' he assured her. 'The laws don't apply to Jews, or anyone who acts on their behalf. Just look after the children. They look like they need it.'

'I don't need you to tell me …'

'I know you don't. I'm just trying …'

She was looking past his shoulder. 'He's coming back.'

The Truppführer had a Sturmführer with him, a smaller man

with round glasses and a chubby face. Out of uniform – assuming they ever took them off – he put them down as a shopkeeper and minor civil servant. Danzig's finest.

'Your papers,' the Sturmführer demanded.

'They're in my hotel room.'

'What is your name?'

'John Russell.'

'You are English?'

'I'm an English journalist. I live in the Reich, and I have full accreditation from the Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin.'

'We shall check that.'

'Of course.'

'And what are you doing here?'

'I came to see what was happening. As journalists do. I intervened in the argument between your colleague and this Red Cross worker because I thought his behaviour was damaging the reputation of the Reich.'

The Sturmführer paused for thought, then turned to his subordinate. 'I'm sure my colleague regrets any misunderstanding,' he said meaningfully.

The Truppführer looked at the woman. 'I apologise,' he said woodenly.

'He apologises,' Russell told her.

'Tell him to go to hell,' she said.

'She accepts your apology,' Russell told the two Brownshirts.

'Good. Now she must get back on the train, and you must come with us.'

Russell sighed. 'You should get on the train,' he told her. 'You won't get anywhere by protesting.'

She took a deep breath. 'All right,' she said, as if it was anything but. 'Thank you,' she added, offering her hand.

Russell took it. 'Tell the press when you get back to civilization,' he said. 'And good luck.'

He watched her mount the steps and disappear into the train. The children were all aboard now; most had their faces pressed against the windows, and were frantically wiping their breath from the glass to get a last clear look at their parents. A few had managed to force back the sliding ventilators and wedge their faces in the narrow gap. Some were shouting, some pleading. Most were crying.

Russell tore his gaze from the windows just in time to see a small girl leap nimbly down from the train and race across the platform. The storm-trooper by the door spun to catch her, but slipped in the slush as he did so, and fell face-first onto the platform. As he struggled to his feet a boy of around ten rushed past him.

The little girl's arms were tightly wrapped around her kneeling mother's neck. 'Esther, we have to get on the train,' the boy said angrily, but daughter and mother were both crying too hard to notice him. The father's anguished appeals to reason – 'Ruth, we have to let her go; Esther, you must go with your brother' – fell on equally deaf ears.

The storm-trooper, red-faced with anger, took a fistful of the girl's long black hair and yanked. The shock tore her arms from her mother's neck, and he started dragging the girl across the slush-strewn platform to the train. The mother shrieked and went after them. The man let go of the girl and crashed his rubber cosh across one side of the mother's face. She sank back, a rivulet of blood running onto her coat collar. As the storm-trooper went to hit the woman again, her husband grabbed for the cosh, but two other Brownshirts wrestled him to the ground, and started raining down blows on his head. The boy picked up his whimpering sister and shepherded her back onto the train.

More storm-troopers came racing up, but they needn't have

bothered. Like Russell, the watching parents were too stunned to protest, let alone intervene.

'I don't want to go,' a small voice said behind him.

He turned to find its owner. She was standing on a seatback in the train, her face twisted sideways in an open ventilator window, brown eyes brimming with tears. She couldn't have been more than five.

'Please, can you tell the policemen that I don't want to go? My name is Fräulein Gisela Kluger.'

Russell walked across to the train, wondering what on earth he could say. 'I'm afraid you have to make this trip,' he said. 'Your mother and father think you'll be safer in England.'

'But I don't want to,' she said, a large tear sliding down either cheek.

'I know, but …' Another whistle shrilled down the platform; a spasm of steam escaped from the locomotive. 'I'm sorry,' he said helplessly.

The train jerked into motion. A momentary panic flitted across her face, followed by a look that Russell would long remember – one that blended accusation, incomprehension and the sort of grief that no five-year-old should have to bear.

As the train pulled away a tiny hand poked out through the window and waved.

'I'm sorry,' Russell murmured.

A hand grasped his arm. The Truppführer's. 'You, English. Come with us.'

He was ushered down the platform in the Sturmführer's wake. Most of the mothers and fathers were still focussed on the disappearing train, their eyes clinging to the red tail-light, the last flicker of family. They had sent their children away. To save their lives, they had turned them into orphans.

One woman, her eyes closed, was kneeling in the snow, a low keening noise rising up from inside her. The sound stayed with Russell as he was led out of the station. The sound of a heart caving in.

In the goods yard the Truppführer pushed him towards a car. 'My hotel's just across the road,' Russell protested.

'We will collect your papers,' the Sturmführer said.

As they bundled him into the car, it occurred to Russell that Shchepkin's envelope was still sitting on his nightstand.

Danzig was waking up as they drove back towards the city centre, shopkeepers clearing the night's snow off their patches of pavement. Russell kept his eyes on where they were going, hoping to God it wasn't some SA barracks out of humanity's hearing range. As they pulled up outside an official police station on Hundegasse he managed to suppress a sigh of relief.

The Truppführer pulled him out of the car and pushed him violently towards the entrance doors. Russell slipped in the snow, and fell onto the steps, catching a shin on one of the hard edges. He had no time to check the wound, though – the Truppführer was already propelling him forward.

Inside, a uniformed police officer was cradling a steaming cup of coffee. He looked up without much interest, sighed, and reached for the duty book. 'Name?'

Russell told him. 'I'm English,' he added.

The man was not impressed. 'We all have to come from somewhere. Now empty your pockets.'

Russell did as he was told. 'Who's in charge here?' he asked. 'The police or the SA?'

The policeman gave him a contemptuous look. 'Take a guess,' he suggested.

Russell felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. 'I want to speak to the British Consulate,' he said.

'No need for that,' the Truppführer said behind him. 'What's your hotel name and room number?' Armed with this information, he went back out through the doors. Russell had a glimpse of grey light in the eastern sky.

He tried pleading with the duty officer, and received a shrug for his pains. A younger policeman was summoned to take him downstairs, where two rows of cells lay either side of a dimly lit corridor. They had tiled floors and brick walls, black up to waist level, white above. It only needed a splash of blood to exhaust the Nazi palette.

Russell slumped to the floor, his back against the far wall. No need to feel frightened, he told himself. They wouldn't do any permanent damage to a foreign journalist.

They would if they thought he was a spy. What had Shchepkin put in the damn envelope? If Russell's past experience of Stalin's NKVD security police was anything to go by, there was an institutional reluctance to spell anything out which verged on paranoia. And they wouldn't want to leave him with anything he might conceivably use against them.

All of which was good news.

But what language was the damn letter written in? If it was in Russian, or if roubles were mentioned, that would be enough for goons like the Truppführer.

He told himself to calm down. He had talked himself out of worse situations than this.

His shin was oozing blood, but didn't look too bad. His stomach felt queasy, though whether from hunger or fear was hard to tell. Both, probably.

It felt like more than an hour had passed when he heard feet on the stairs. Booted feet, and several of them.

The sliding panel on his door clanged open and clanged shut again. The boots moved on. Another clang, but this time a door swung open. A voice protested – a voice Russell thought he recognised – the Jew who'd tried to protect his wife. The voice rose, and was cut off, leaving echoes inside Russell's head. What had cut it off? A fist? A knee? A cosh? A door slammed shut.

Silence reasserted itself, a heavy silence which offered no reassurance. Eventually a door scraped open, a remark drew laughter, and the boots were back in the corridor. Russell felt his breath catch as they headed his way, but they clattered on past and up the stairs, leaving him staring at his shaking hands. Pressing his ear to the door he could hear no groans of pain, only the stillness of unconsciousness or death.

Time went by. He'd rushed out of the hotel without his watch, and when a tray of food was eventually shoved through his hatch he wondered if it was lunch or supper. The boots never came back, and with each hour that passed he found himself feeling a little more optimistic. When the door finally opened, his stomach lurched, but it was only the policeman who'd brought him down.

'This way, Herr Russell,' the man said, nodding him towards the stairs.

They beat people up in the cells, Russell told himself. Upstairs had to be better.

Two corridors and two flights of stairs later, he was ushered through a door labelled Kriminalinspektor Tesmer. The man himself had greased black hair, blue eyes, thin lips, and a bad case of five o'clock shadow. 'Please sit,' he told Russell.

He took one last look at the Englishman's passport, and then passed it across the desk along with the journalist's accreditation. There was no sign of Shchepkin's envelope.

'Everything is satisfactory,' Tesmer said with a sudden,

unconvincing smile. 'And I'm sorry this has taken so long.'

Russell reached for his documents. 'I can go?' he asked, trying not to sound too relieved.

'Just one question.'

'Yes?' There was no life behind the eyes, Russell thought. This was a man to be careful with.

'Why did you come to Danzig, Herr Russell? To write a story about the Jewish children?'

'No. I had no idea a *Kindertransport* was leaving from here. I'm staying at the hotel opposite the station, and the noise woke me up. I just walked across to see what was going on.'

'Then why did you come?'

Why indeed? Because he'd felt drawn to the place, the way a good journalist was always drawn to a story that mattered. A city in thrall to thugs and fools, and doomed for precisely that reason. Danzig was Europe writ small. It was a story for everyone.

Almost everyone.

'Stamps,' he said, suddenly remembering a conversation he'd overhead in the Café Weitzke. The city's German and Polish post offices were both putting out stamps to commemorate centuries-old victories over each other. 'I do occasional pieces for philately journals, and the two post offices here are bringing out some interesting new issues. I'm hoping to interview the postmasters tomorrow.'

Tesmer looked disappointed, like a fisherman realising that this catch was too small to eat. 'Enjoy your stay,' he said curtly.

Once outside, Russell discovered it was almost ten o'clock. A bar supplied him with a sandwich and a much-needed drink, and he trudged back to his hotel through mostly empty streets. Shchepkin's envelope was still lying where he'd left it.

It had been opened, though. Russell took out the single sheet and read it. They wanted four articles of between 1,200 and 1,500 words, delivered at fortnightly intervals, beginning in mid-January. The money was more generous than he'd expected – as much as an ordinary Soviet worker earned over a Five Year Plan. The thought crossed his mind that a car would transform his Saturdays with his son Paul.

The letter was in German, the promised fee in Reichsmarks. There was nothing to say where the offer came from or what the articles would be about. 'God bless the NKVD,' Russell murmured to himself.

He woke around ten. Thick snow was cascading past his window, almost obscuring the station opposite. He used the lobby phone to call the two post offices, and was granted audiences with their Postmasters late that afternoon. When he emerged from the Café Weitzke on Langgasse, replete with scrambled eggs, Kashubian mushrooms and a mocha, it was still only midday. He had five hours to kill.

It had almost stopped snowing, but the sky was still heavy with cloud. As he stood there wondering what to do, there was a sudden swell of music from the loudspeakers which peppered the city. Hitler's New Year speech to the nation, Russell remembered. Danzig wasn't yet part of the German Reich, but try telling the Nazis that.

Russell sometimes enjoyed listening to Hitler. The man's sheer effrontery was entertaining, and knowing that millions were being taken in by his ludicrous bloodlust gave the whole experience a deplorably thrilling edge. If the Führer told them that gravity was a Jewish trick then millions of Germans would be practising levitation before the sun set.

Russell wasn't in the mood. A couple of hours by the sea, he thought. There wouldn't be any loudspeakers on the beach.

Hitler was just being introduced when a tram with a Brosen destination board burrowed out of the Langgasse Gate. Russell took a seat on the right and watched through the window as the tram skirted the Holzmarkt, swung right into Elisabethwall, and passed his hotel at the bottom of the Stadtgraben.

It was about six kilometres to Brosen. Russell had taken the same ride back in 1935, during his last visit to Danzig. He'd been doing a series of articles on Germans at play, and it had been the middle of summer. The resort had been awash with holiday-makers, and he had gone for a paddle.

Not today. It was as dark as it had been all morning, and the sparks from the overhead wires lit up the housefronts on either side of the street as the tram clanged and squealed its way out of the city. The loudspeakers were still audible, though. As they passed through the outlying suburbs of Langfuhr and Saspe, Russell caught snatches of the familiar voice, and one short passage in which the Führer offered the German people his fulsome congratulations for their 'wonderful behaviour' in 1938. He was probably talking about *Kristallnacht*.

By the time the tram reached Brosen the sky had visibly lightened. Russell got off outside the closed casino, where a single loudspeaker was doing its manful best to distort the Führer's message. Russell listened to the crackle for a few seconds, struck by the notion that he and Hitler were sharing a private moment together. The latter was promising help with the 'general pacification of the world'. Russell wondered how much irony one nation could eat.

He walked down past the boarded-up refreshment stands and padlocked beach huts to the snow-strewn beach. The previous season's final water temperature was still legible on the lifeguard hut

blackboard, alongside a poster explaining the mysteries of artificial respiration. The men in the poster all wore striped bathing suits and moustaches, like a posse of cartoon Führers.

The sea was gunmetal grey, the sky almost as dark, slate grey with a yellowish tinge. There was no one in sight.

A couple of kilometres to the east, two beacon lights marked the end of Danzig's channel to the sea, and Russell started walking towards them. Out to the left the lighthouse at the end of the dredged channel flickered into life with each revolution. To the north, a darker line marked the outflung arm of the Hela peninsular. Between the two a smudge of a freighter was inching out across the bay.

The stamp story was made for him, he thought. A story that amused, and didn't condemn. A story of stupidity, and rather lovable stupidity at that. He could implant a few ironies just beneath the skin of the text for those who wanted to pick at it, leave enough clues to the real situation for those who already understood it. They would congratulate themselves on reading between the lines, and him for writing between them. And he could sit on his necessary fence for a few more months, until Hitler drove something through it.

Too many metaphors, he told himself. And not nearly enough satisfaction.

He thought about the real Danzig story. Ten years ago he'd have written it, and written it well. But not now. Step out of line that far, and the toadies at the Propaganda Ministry would have him deported before he could say 'Heil Hitler'. He'd be saying goodbye to his son, probably for the duration of a war. And probably to Effi as well. She'd told him often enough that she'd go to England, or better still America, with him, but he had his doubts whether she meant it, whether she'd ever willingly leave her sister, parents,

agent and vast array of friends for life in a new country where no one knew who she was.

He left the path and walked down to the edge of the water, searching for pebbles to skim. He wanted to take Shchepkin's offer, he realised, but he wasn't sure why. He only half-bought the argument that by helping the Soviets he'd be hurting the Nazis. If he really wanted to take Hitler on there were more effective ways, most of them depressingly self-sacrificial. The money would be nice, but the risks would be high. The Nazis still beheaded spies.

He skimmed a flat pebble between two waves. Could he trust Shchepkin? Of course he couldn't. The Soviets might want what they said they wanted – no more, no less – but even if they did, that wouldn't be the end of it. You didn't do a few articles for Stalin, bank the cheques and move on. You would be on a list, one of their people, someone to call up when something else was needed. And once you were on the list, they took refusals badly.

And then there was the attitude of his own country to worry about. He didn't need England now, but the way things were going he soon might, and writing for Stalin would hardly endear him to the Foreign Office. He could end up *persona non grata* with just about everyone. Why was he even thinking about it?

He knew why. A couple of weeks before Christmas Paul had told him about an exercise that new recruits into the *Jungvolk* were forced to undergo. They were taken out into the countryside without maps and invited to find their way back home the best they could. It was called a *Fahrt ins Blau*, a journey into the blue.

The idea had appealed to Paul, as it probably did to most boys of eleven. It appealed to Russell too. If he took this journey into the blue he might, conceivably, find his way home again.

He skimmed his last stone, a large one that took a single bounce and sunk. The sparse daylight was receding. The freighter and the

Hela peninsula had both been sucked into the surrounding grey, and the beam from the lighthouse was sending shivers of reflection back off the darkening sea. He was in the middle of nowhere, lost in space. With ice for feet.

The two postmasters were both short-sighted men in sober suits with small moustaches. The Polish one could hardly wait for the honour of distributing his new stamps. A minion was sent for samples, and came back with King Jagiello and Queen Hedwig. The Polish queen, the postmaster explained, had spurned a German prince in favour of marrying the Lithuanian Jagiello. Their joint kingdom had forced the Prussians to accept the first Polish Corridor and bi-national status for Danzig. Admittedly this had all happened in the early fifteenth century but – and here the postmaster leaned back in his chair with a self-satisfied smile – the contemporary relevance should be obvious. Even to a German.

The German postmaster had his own sample. His stamp featured a beautiful miniature of stout Danzigers routing the Polish forces of King Stephan Batory in 1577. 'A German city defended by German arms,' he announced smugly. Russell repeated the question he had put to the Polish postmaster – weren't these stamps a little provocative? Shouldn't the civil authorities be trying to reduce the tension between their two countries, rather than using their stamps to stoke up old quarrels?

The German postmaster gave the same reply as his Polish opposite number. How, he asked, could anyone take postage stamps that seriously?

Russell's train left the Hauptbahnhof at ten o'clock. After paying for a sleeping berth he could barely afford, he sat in the restaurant car for the better part of two hours, nursing a single gold-flecked

schnapps, feeling restless and uncertain. The Polish customs checked his visa just before Dirschau and the German authorities examined his passport at Flatow, on the far side of the Polish Corridor. He had no trouble with the latter – if the Danzig SA were submitting a report on his visit they were probably still struggling with their spelling.

He thought about the *Kindertransport*, and wondered where it was at that moment. Still chugging west across Germany, most likely. The Englishwoman's cheek would be purple by now – he hoped she would go to the press when she got back and make a real stink. Not that it would do any good. It had taken her five minutes to learn what Nazism was all about, but there was no substitute for first-hand experience. If you told people, they didn't believe you. No one, their eyes always said, could be as bad as that.

He walked back down the train to his sleeping compartment. The two lower berths were empty, one of the upper pair occupied by a gently snoring German youth. Russell sat on the berth beneath him, pulled back the edge of the curtain, and stared out at the frozen fields of Pomerania.

He lay back and shut his eyes. Fräulein Gisela Kluger looked back at him.

He would write Shchepkin's articles. See where the journey took him. Into the blue. Or into the black.