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Opening Extract from...

Stettin Station

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Ways of leaving Berlin

There was no doubt about it – two years into the war, the Third Reich was beginning to smell.

The U-bahn was unusually ripe that morning, John Russell thought, though it was only the sheer severity of the pong which gave rise to any surprise. Berliners seemed increasingly reluctant to use the hyper-abrasive standardised soap, which removed both dirt and skin, and there was no alternative to the chemical-rich standardised food, which had created a city-wide epidemic of flatulence. Some laid particular blame on the grey, clayey bread, others on the miracle ingredient which turned the ersatz butter yellow. But whatever the cause, the U-bahn was the place to experience the consequences, and several of his fellow passengers were travelling with their noses buried deep in scarves and handkerchiefs.

At the far end of the violently rocking car – adequate suspension was a casualty of the rubber shortage – two middle-aged men in leather coats were looming over an attractive woman and her young child. They were all smiles, but her rapidly changing facial expressions bore all the unease of a potential victim, and her relief at reaching her stop was obvious to all but her unwitting tormentors.

The Gestapo seemed to be all over the capital these days, their numbers rising steadily since the onset of the Russian campaign and the economic downturn which had soon accompanied it. Over the last month, since the announcement of victory in early October and the subsequent collapse in morale when that had proved a mirage, the swelling numbers

of leather-coated myrmidons had been ever more noticeable, and the fact that these two were pestering women on the U-bahn offered clear proof that the bastards' numbers had outstripped the availability of their beloved black Mercedes.

The impression of political screws tightening was the main reason why Russell had finally decided it was time to get out. There was, however, no point in applying for an exit permit – with his history, the Germans wouldn't let him go until the United States formally entered the war, and maybe not even then. Even if they did prove unexpectedly willing to abide by international conventions in his particular case, Russell foresaw months of internment, trapped in a camp somewhere, waiting and wondering whether any of the freshly arrested were coughing up his name along with the blood and the broken teeth. It was not a pleasant prospect.

Nor were there any circumstances in which the Nazis would let his girlfriend Effi go. She might not be Marlene Dietrich, but her name and face were recognisable to a lot of Germans, and Joey Goebbels would never allow such a public defection. And if the authorities did, for reasons best known to themselves, let Russell go, they could always use her as a hostage for his good behaviour. All the stories he had not been allowed to file, the stories he hoped to tell once he escaped the cage, would have to remain untold. His exit – their exit – would have to be an illegal one.

The Americans wouldn't offer any real help, despite his years of admittedly half-hearted time in their employ. Russell's main contact at the Consulate had said that they would try to get him out, but that there was nothing they could do for Effi; the two of them were not married, and even if they were, well, surely Russell could see the problem. He could. These last few weeks, with the undeclared war escalating in the Atlantic, the German security agencies were no longer respecting the diplomatic rules, and had even invaded the Consulate on one occasion. If he and Effi sought sanctuary there, it seemed more than likely that Heydrich's goons would simply stride in and drag them back out.

Only the comrades remained, and the emergency telephone number he'd been given more than two years ago. This belonged to a photographic studio in Neukölln which he had used for work in his freelance days, and the burly Silesian named Miroslav Zembski who owned and ran it. Russell had used the number once in September 1939, and had thereafter deemed it prudent to avoid all contact with Zembski and his studio. Until the previous Friday, that is, when he'd called the number from a public telephone on the Ku'damm.

Someone had answered, at least in the sense of picking up the phone. A slight intake of breath was all Russell heard at the other end, and he had probably imagined the whiff of malevolence seeping down the wire. He had put the phone back after a few seconds, and concluded that a personal visit to the studio would be unwise. But three more days of ominous news from Washington – Japan and the US really did seem to be sliding into war – had reignited his sense of urgency, and put him on this train to Neukölln. He knew he was being reckless: if Zembski wasn't there, then at best he had disappeared, at worst he was under arrest, and Russell would gain nothing from finding out which it was. Yet here he was, needing to know. Like a moth to a very real flame.

He told himself that Zembski would probably be there, that his own telephone call could have been picked up by a child or an idiot while the fat Silesian was busy taking pictures, that he was, in any case, an innocent customer with a film in his pocket to prove it, a highly appropriate set of shots of his son Paul at a *Jungvolk* passing-out parade. The risk was negligible, he told himself, the potential prize enormous.

He emerged from the U-bahn entrance on the western side of Berlinerstrasse, and walked under the S-bahn bridge in the direction of the studio. The last time he had visited it, the street had been full of traffic, the air full of savoury smells, the buildings awash with neon and full of things to sell. Now it reminded him of a German colleague's words, that these days the capital had all the colour of a corpse. The lights were out, the odours dubious, the shop windows at least half empty. The sky seemed to be

clearing, a state of affairs which Russell and his fellow-Berliners had once anticipated with some relief, assuming – fools that they were – that such conditions would make it easier for the RAF to see and hit their industrial and transport targets. But no, the British pilots seemed incapable of hitting anything relevant to the war effort. Their bombing campaign was like an Italian lottery in reverse – your chances of losing were extremely remote, but no more remote than anyone else's. Some dear old grandmother in her suburban apartment was as likely to catch it as I.G. Farben – in fact probably more so, because the pilots were presumably targeting the chemical giant.

Russell stopped outside the restaurant which sat across the road from Zembski's. The photographer's name was still above the door, but the drawn black-out curtains precluded any view of the interior. Was there anyone in? There was only one way to find out.

Crossing the empty road, Russell pushed open the door with what he hoped was the brashness of innocence. There was nobody behind Zembski's counter, on which lay a tripod, still attached to a clearly broken camera. A middle-aged man in a dark grey suit was sitting on one of the chairs which the photographer had used for family portraits, his leather coat draped across another, his hands cradled in his lap. His younger partner was sitting almost behind the door, arms folded across the front of his coat. A gun lay on the cabinet beside him.

'How can I help you?' the older man asked with a heavy Bavarian accent. He was about forty, with sharpish features that ill-suited his general bulk, rather in the manner of an over-inflated Goebbels.

'Is the studio closed?' Russell asked. 'Where is Herr Zembski?' he added, realising a few seconds later that acknowledging an acquaintance with the studio's owner might prove unwise.

'He is no longer here,' said the younger man. He was a Berliner, dark and thin, with the sort of face that would always need shaving.

'He has gone out of business,' the first man said. 'Please sit down,' he told Russell, indicating a chair and taking a notebook and pencil from the inside pocket of his jacket. 'We have some questions.'

'What about?' Russell asked, staying on his feet. 'And who are you?' he added, hoping to play the outraged innocent.

'Gestapo,' the older man said shortly, as if it hardly needed saying.

It didn't, and Russell decided that asking to see the man's identification might be pushing his luck. He sat down.

'Your papers?'

Russell handed them over, and noted the flicker of interest in the Gestapo man's eyes.

'John Russell,' he read aloud. 'American,' he added, with a glance at his partner. 'Your German is excellent,' he told Russell.

'I've lived here for almost twenty years.'

'Ah. You live on Carmerstrasse. That's near Savignyplatz, is it not?'

'Yes.'

The man turned to his accreditation from Promi, as the Ministry of Propaganda was almost universally called. 'You are a journalist. Working for the *San Francisco Tribune*.'

'Yes.'

His interrogator was now scribbling in the notebook, copying down relevant details from Russell's identity and press documents. 'You have been to this studio before?' he asked without raising his eyes.

'Not for a long time. Before the war I used it whenever I needed photographic work.'

The eyes looked up. 'A long way from Savignyplatz. Are there no studios closer to home?'

'Zembski is cheap.'

'Ah. So why did you stop coming here?'

'I changed jobs. The paper I work for now uses the big agencies for photographs.'

'So why are you here today?'

'A personal job.' Russell took the envelope of snapshots from his inside pocket, silently blessing his own forethought, and handed them over. 'I wanted one of these enlarged, and I've lost the negatives. I remembered

Zembski doing something similar for me years ago, and doing it well. They're of my son,' he added in explanation.

The older Gestapo man was looking through the pictures, his younger partner peering over his shoulder. 'He's a good-looking boy. His mother is German?'

'Yes, she is.'

Russell felt a sudden, almost violent aversion to the way the two men were staring at the pictures of Paul, but managed not to show it.

The photographs were handed back to him.

'So Zembski won't be back?' he asked.

'No,' the older man said with the hint of a smile. 'I believe he returned to Silesia.'

'Then I will have to find another studio. Is that all?'

'For the moment.'

Russell nodded, a tacit recognition that a conditional release was all that anyone could hope for in such difficult days, and the younger Gestapo man even opened the door for him. Once outside he play-acted a period of hesitation, ostentatiously checked that his ration stamps were in his pocket, then headed across the street to the café opposite, where he made a further show of inspecting the meagre menu on display before venturing into the steamy interior. Twice in the distant past handwritten notes on the studio door had pointed Russell in this direction, and on both occasions he had found Zembski amiably chatting with the proprietor, an old man with thick Hohenzollern sideburns. The latter was still there, propping up his counter and eyeing Russell with more than a trace of suspicion. The only other customer was reading a paper by the window.

'Remember me?' Russell asked. 'Zembski used to do a lot of work for me before the war. I came in here to collect him more than once.'

A non-committal grunt was all the reply he got.

Russell took a deep breath. 'And now there's a couple of Heydrich's finest camped out in his studio,' he went on more quietly, hoping that he hadn't misjudged his audience. 'Do you know what happened to him?'

The proprietor gave him a long stare. 'Nothing good,' he murmured eventually. 'It's not much of a secret, not around here anyway. The authorities came to call, soon after midnight on Thursday. There were two cars – I saw them from upstairs – I was just getting ready for bed. They just knocked the door down, woke up half the street. I think there were four of them went in – it's hard to see across the street in the black-out, but there was a moon that night. Anyway, there were shots, two of them really close together, and a few minutes later one man came out again and drove off. A van arrived after about half an hour and two bodies were carried out. It was too dark to see who they were, but I'm guessing one of them was Miroslav. He hasn't been seen, and two of the … two men have been arriving each morning and leaving each night ever since. What are they doing in there?'

Russell shrugged. 'Nothing much that I could see. Asking questions, but I've no idea why. Was Zembski mixed up in anything? Politics, maybe?'

It was a question too far. 'How should I know?' the proprietor said, straightening up to indicate the interview was over. 'He just came in here for coffee, in the days when we used to have some. That and a talk about football.'

All of which left a lot to be desired, Russell thought, walking back up Berlinerstrasse towards the U-bahn station. Particularly for Zembski, who presumably was dead. But also for himself. His only hope of an illegal escape was apparently gone, and worse: in the unlikely but still conceivable event that Zembski was alive, his own name might be one of those being mentioned in the interrogation. Russell counted the days – more than four had passed, if the café owner's memory was accurate. In the old KPD it had always been assumed that most prisoners, if denied the chance to kill themselves, would eventually break, and the only obligation placed on Party members was to hold out for twenty-four hours, thus giving their comrades a good head start on the inevitable pursuit.

Zembski must be dead, Russell thought, as he descended the stairs to the U-bahn platform. The Silesian would have given up his grandmother by now, let alone a casual fellow-traveller like himself.

Some certainty wouldn't go amiss, though. Zembski had falsified a passport for him once, and a few months later had helped him get a woman comrade out of the country. She had killed an SS colonel, but Zembski had not known that. He had known that Russell was in touch with Moscow, but not that the German authorities were aware of those contacts. The potential for confusion was enormous, and Russell earnestly hoped that the Gestapo were suitably confused. They usually liked some semblance of clarity before turning their dogs on a prominent foreigner.

As the U-bahn train rumbled north he remembered that even the Gestapo were legally obliged to inform a family of a relative's death. Zembski's cousin Hunder, who owned the garage across the river where Russell's car was waiting out the war, might have some definite information.

Russell changed onto the Stadtbahn at Friedrichstrasse, travelled the single stop to Lehrter station, and made his way through the tangle of streets which lay to the east of the rail yards. The garage office seemed deserted, which was hardly surprising given the virtual cessation of private motoring that had accompanied the Wehrmacht's long, petrol-hungry drive into Russia. The gate hadn't been locked though, and Russell finally found an old mechanic with his head under the bonnet of a Horch in the farthest corner of the yard.

Hunder Zembski had been called up two months ago, the man told him, grimacing as he straightened his body. The army needed all the mechanics it could get, and being almost fifty hadn't saved his boss. 'You have to be almost ready for burial to get an exemption,' the man said. 'Like me,' he added proudly.

After paying his car a sentimental visit, Russell retraced his steps to Lehrter station and took the S-bahn home. Darkness had almost fallen by the time he emerged from Zoo station, and as he walked the short distance

to Effi's apartment on Carmerstrasse a host of invisible hands were pulling and fixing black-out curtains into place on either side of the street.

Their own were already in place – in recent weeks, with both of them working long days, natural light was a weekend luxury. Russell treated himself to a glass of their precious wine, the penultimate bottle of a case which some lust-crazed producer out at Babelsberg had optimistically bestowed on Effi. It tasted slightly sour, a clear sign that they weren't drinking it fast enough.

There was food in the flat – his double rations as a foreign journalist and her variable perks as a reasonably prominent actress meant they never ran short – but the only real temptation were the two precious eggs. Effi had boiled an extra meal of potatoes yesterday for such an eventuality, and Russell put half of them in the frying pan with as little of the bilious butter as he could manage, eventually adding one of the eggs. He took his plate through to the living-room and turned on the radio, half hoping that Effi didn't get in until after the next news bulletin. As a foreign journalist he was allowed to listen to foreign broadcasts, but Germans were not. Many Berliners he knew ignored the prohibition, keeping the volume down low enough to foil any spying ears, but he and Effi had agreed that in their case the risk was unnecessary. There were enough times he could listen on his own, either here in the apartment or at one of the two foreign press clubs, and nothing to stop him telling her what he had heard.

The BBC news, when it came, was only mildly encouraging. On the Moscow front, the Germans had suffered a setback outside Tula, but the failure to mention any other sectors probably implied that the Wehrmacht was still advancing. The RAF had bombed several north German ports with unstated results, and the British army facing Rommel in North Africa was henceforth to be known as Eighth Army. What, Russell wondered, had happened to the other seven? The one piece of unalloyed good news came from Yugoslavia, where a German column had been wiped out by Serb partisans, and the German High Command had promised a retaliatory reign of terror. Some people never learned.

He switched the radio to a German station playing classical music and settled down with a book, eventually dozing off. The telephone woke him with a start. He picked up expecting to hear Effi, and an explanation of what had held her up. Had the air raid sirens gone off while he was asleep?

It wasn't her. 'Klaus, there's a game tonight,' a familiar voice told him. 'At number 26, ten o'clock.'

'There's no Klaus here,' Russell said. 'You must have got the wrong number.'

'My apologies.' The phone clicked off.

Russell pulled his much-creased map from his jacket pocket and counted out the stations on the Ringbahn, starting at Wedding and going round in a clockwise direction. As he had thought, number 26 was Puttlitz Strasse.

It was gone half-past eight, which didn't leave him much time. After checking his street atlas he decided it was walkable, just. He wrote a hurried note to Effi, put on his thickest coat, and headed out.

The moon was rising, cream-coloured and slightly short of full, above the double-headed flak tower in the distant Tiergarten. He walked north at a crisp pace, hoping that there wouldn't be an air raid, and that if there was, he could escape the attentions of some officious warden insistent on his taking shelter. As the moon rose, the white-painted kerbstones grew easier to follow, and his pace increased. There were quite a few people out, most of them wearing one or more of the phosphorescent buttons which sprinkled the black-out with faint blue lights. Vehicles were much thinner on the ground, one lorry with slitted headlights passing Russell as he crossed the moon-speckled Landwehrkanal.

It was ten to ten when he reached the Puttlitzstrasse station entrance, which lay on a long bridge across multiple tracks. Gerhard Ströhm was waiting for him, chatting to the booking clerk in the still open S-bahn ticket office. He was a tall, saturnine man with darting black eyes and a rough moustache. His hair was longer than the current fashion, and

he was forever pushing back the locks that flopped across his forehead. Physically, and only physically, he reminded Russell of the young Stalin.

'Come,' Ströhm told Russell, and led him back out across the road and down a flight of dangerously unlit steps to the yard below. As they reached the foot an electric S-bahn train loomed noisily out of the dark, slowing as it neared the station.

'This way,' said Ströhm, leading Russell into the dark canyon which lay between two lines of stabled carriages. His accent was pure Berliner, and anyone unaware of his background would have had a hard job believing that he'd been born in California of first-generation German immigrants. Both parents had been lost in a road accident when he was twelve, and young Gerhard had been sent back to his mother's parents in Berlin. Bright enough for university in 1929, his strengthening political convictions had quickly disqualified him from any professional career in Hitler's Germany. Arrested in 1933 for a minor offence, he had served a short sentence and effectively gone underground on his release. For the last seven years he had earned a living as a dispatcher in the Stettin station goods yards.

Russell assumed Ströhm was a communist, although the latter had never claimed as much. He often sounded like one, and he had got Russell's name from a comrade, the young Jewish communist Wilhelm Isendahl, whose life had intersected with Russell's for a few nerve-shredding days in the summer of 1939. Ströhm himself was obviously not a Jew, but it was the fate of Berlin's Jewish community which had caused him to seek out Russell. Some six weeks earlier he had slid onto an adjoining stool in the Zoo station buffet and introduced himself, in a quiet compelling voice, as a fellow American, fellow anti-Nazi, and fellow friend of the Jews. He hoped Russell was as interested as he was in finding the answer to one particular question – where were the Jews being taken?

They had gone for a long walk in the Tiergarten, and Russell had been impressed. Ströhm exuded a confidence which didn't feel misplaced; he was clearly intelligent, and there was a watchfulness about him, a sense

of self-containment more serene than arrogant. Had it ever occurred to Russell, Ströhm asked, that those best placed to trace the Jews were the men of the Reichsbahn, those who timetabled, dispatched and drove the trains who carried them away? And if the men of the Reichsbahn provided him with chapter and verse, would Russell be able to put it in print?

Not now, Russell had told him – the authorities would never allow him to file such a story from Berlin. But once America had entered the war, and he and his colleagues had been repatriated, the story could and would be told. And the more details he carried back home the more convincing that story would be.

In a week or so's time, Ströhm had informed him, a trainload of Berlin's Jews would be leaving for the East. Did Russell want to see it leave?

He did. But why, Russell had wanted to know, was Ströhm taking such a personal interest in the Jews? He expected a standard Party answer, that oppression was oppression, race irrelevant. 'I was in love once,' Ströhm told him. 'With a Jewish girl. Storm-troopers threw her out of a fourth floor window at Columbiahaus.'

Which seemed reason enough.

Ströhm had suggested the simple Ringbahn code, and six days later Russell's phone had rung. Later that night he had watched from a distance as around a thousand elderly Jews were loaded aboard a train of ancient carriages in the yard outside Grunewald Station, not a kilometre away from the house where his ex-wife and son lived. A few days later they had watched a similar scene unfold a few hundred metres south of Anhalter station. The previous train, Ströhm told him, had terminated at Litzmannstadt, the Polish Lodz.

This was the fourth such night. Russell wasn't sure why he kept coming – the process would be identical, like watching the same sad film over and over, almost a form of masochism. But each train was different, he told himself, and when a week or so later Ströhm told him where each shipment of Jews had ended up, he wanted to remember their departure, to have it imprinted on his retina. Just knowing they were gone was not enough.

The two men had reached the end of their canyon, and a tall switch-tower loomed above them, a blue light burning within. As they climbed the stairs Russell could hear engines turning over somewhere close by, and the clanking of carriages being shunted. Up in the cabin there were two signalmen on duty, one close to retiring age, the other younger with a pronounced limp. Both men shook hands with Ströhm, the first with real warmth; both acknowledged Russell with a nod of the head, as if less certain of his right to be there.

It was an excellent vantage point. Across the Ringbahn tracks, beyond another three lines of carriages, the familiar scene presented itself with greater clarity than usual, courtesy of the risen moon. Three canvas-covered furniture trucks were parked in a line, having transported the guards and those few Jews deemed incapable of walking the two kilometres from the synagogue on the corner of Levetzowstrasse and Jagowstrasse. Taking out his telescopic spyglass – a guilty purchase from a Jewish auction two years earlier – Russell found two stretchers lying on the ground beside the front van, each bearing an unmoving, and presumably unwilling, traveller.

The remaining 998 Jews – according to Ströhm, the SS had decided that a round thousand was the optimal number for such transports – were crowded in the space beyond the line of carriages, and making, in the circumstances, remarkably little noise. Their mental journey into exile, as Russell knew from friends in the Jewish community, would have begun about a week ago, when notification arrived from the Gestapo of their imminent removal from Berlin. Eight pages of instructions filled in the details: what they could and could not bring, the maximum weight of their single suitcase, what to do with the keys of their confiscated homes. Yesterday evening, or in some cases early this morning, they had been collected by the Gestapo and their Jewish auxiliaries, taken to the synagogue, and searched for any remaining passports, medals, pens or jewellery. Then all had been issued with matching numbers for their suitcases and themselves, the latter worn around the neck.

'The Reichsbahn is charging the SS four pfennigs per passenger per kilometre,' Ströhm murmured. 'Children go free.'

Russell couldn't see any children, although his spyglass had picked out a baby carriage lying on its side, as if violently discarded. As usual, the Jews were mostly old, with more women than men. Many of the latter were struggling under the weight of the sewing machines deemed advisable for a new life in the East. Others, worried at the prospect of colder winters, were carrying small heating stoves.

The loading had obviously begin, the crowd inching forward and out of his line of vision. At the rear, a line of Jewish auxiliaries with blue armbands were advancing sheepdog-style, exhaling small clouds of breath into the cold air, as their Gestapo handlers watched and smoked in the comfort of their vehicles.

There were seven carriages in the train, each with around sixty seats for a hundred and fifty people.

One man walked back to one of the auxiliaries and obviously asked him a question. A shake of the head was all the response he got. There was a sudden shout from somewhere further down the train, and it took Russell a moment to find the source – a woman was weeping, a man laid out on the ground, a guard busy slitting open a large white pillow. There was a glint of falling coins, a sudden upward fluttering of feathers, white turning blue in the halo of the yard lamp.

There was no more dissent. Twenty minutes more and the yard was clear, the furniture vans and cars heading back toward the centre of the city, leaving only a line of armed police standing sentry over the stationary, eerily silent train. Feathers still hung in the air, as if reluctant to leave.

A few minutes later a locomotive backed under the bridge and onto the carriages, flickers of human movement silhouetted against the glowing firebox. A swift coupling, and the train was in motion, moonlit smoke pouring up into the starry sky, wheels clattering over the points outside Puttlitzstrasse station. Even in the spyglass, the passengers' faces seemed

pale and featureless, like deep sea fish pressed up against the wall of a moving aquarium.

'Do we know where it's going?' Russell asked, as the last coach passed under the bridge.

'That crew are only booked through to Posen,' Ströhm said, 'but they'll find out where the next crew are taking it. It could be Litzmannstadt, could be Riga like the last one. We'll know by the end of the week.'

Russell nodded, but wondered what difference it would make. Not for the first time, he doubted the value of what they were doing. Wherever the trains were going, there was no way of bringing them back.

He and Ströhm descended the stairs, retraced their path between the lines of carriages to the distant bridge. After climbing the steps to the street they separated, Russell walking wearily south, his imagination working overtime. What were those thousand Jews thinking as their train worked its way around the Ringbahn, before turning off to the East? What were they expecting? The worst? Some of them certainly were, hence the rising number of suicides. Some would be brimming with wishful thinking, others with hope that things weren't as bad as they feared. And maybe they weren't. Two families that Russell knew had received letters from friends deported to Litzmannstadt, friends who asked for food packages but claimed they were well. They were obviously going hungry, but if that was the worst of it Russell would be pleasantly surprised.

He reached home soon after midnight. Effi was already in bed, the innocence of her sleeping face captured in the grey light that spilt in from the living-room. Staring at her, Russell felt tears forming in his eyes. It really was time to leave. But how was he going to get them both out?