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Opening Extract from...

The Day Without Yesterday

Written by Stuart Clark

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PART I
Space

1
Berlin, Germany
1914

Had the young men not been walking in rows, the physicist would have considered them a mob. Parading through the city in three-piece suits, fingers stained from their university inkwells, the youths held their straw boaters aloft and sang a rowdy version of 'Deutschland Über Alles'.

The march had brought the city to a standstill. Open-topped cars stood idling by the roadside, filling the air with fumes while the occupants craned to see. Bus carriages were similarly stalled, their horses nodding and snorting as passengers hung from the windows to applaud, forcing the students to raise their voices. Here and there, when a cheer was not enough, a clenched fist punched the sky.

The physicist had stumbled into the mayhem while lost in thought, hurrying through the streets. Snorting in disgust, he lowered his gaze and ploughed on, moving upstream. It was impossible not to bump shoulders; there must have been a hundred or more in the crowd, bold and boisterous. Emerging at the rear of the pack, he was surrounded by a straggle of older men and women egging on the lads.

He snorted again, louder this time. At least the boys had the excuse of youth.

'Albert! You're going the wrong way.'

The voice took Einstein by surprise. The lanky figure of Max Planck was standing on the nearby pavement, watching him through wire-rimmed spectacles. He grinned beneath a heavy, greying moustache. 'Beautiful day, isn't it?'

Einstein pursed his lips. 'I do not call *that* beautiful.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the march.

Planck lifted his hat to run a handkerchief over the dome of his head. 'Heading back to the university?'

'No, I can't stop. I'm late already.'

'Nothing wrong, I hope?' Planck replaced his hat.

Einstein forced a name from his lips. 'Mileva.'

Planck's face fell. 'I wish you the best.'

Einstein nodded in acknowledgement and hastened away. He reached his destination soon after: a house in the expensive part of town, stone-built and three storeys high, it exuded power and achievement. The shiny black door opened before he reached the top step, robbing him of the chance to compose himself, and the entrance filled with Fritz Haber.

Like Planck, Haber was bald and bespectacled; it seemed to be the fashion for anyone over fifty at the Institute. Unlike Planck, Haber would have suited a uniform. He was strong, upright, eyes burning with self-assurance. There was a mild scowl on his round face.

'Sorry I'm late, Fritz. The streets are packed.'

'Another rally?' asked Haber, lifting his glasses to glance eagerly down the street.

Einstein nodded. 'They make it feel like a carnival.'

'Well, you can't keep a people down forever.'

Einstein swallowed a reply; now was not the time to debate imperialism. He looked over Haber's shoulder into the empty hallway. 'Is she here?'

'Mileva? Yes. Shall we begin?'

Einstein squared his shoulders, nodded tightly and followed Haber into the house. He was shown into the front room with its upholstered armchairs and cushions, wall hangings and paintings. A dresser displayed a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with Teutonic hunting scenes, and a selection of freshly cut summer flowers filled the fireplace.

Einstein suppressed a twinge of envy, not for the furnishings but for the success they represented. Haber's nitrogen research had led to the manufacture of artificial fertiliser. He was a hero; his reputation and fortune were secure. He could please himself

with his research these days. Einstein chased away the image of his own papers, unfinished on his desk at home, scored through with deletions and rewrites.

His host sank comfortably into one of the plush chairs and indicated that Einstein should do the same, but he could only bring himself to perch. He was dressed in his very best: an unseasonal dark suit, necktie and freshly starched winged collar. Such a get-up always made him feel awkward.

'Remember, Albert, I'm not your colleague today. I'm your friend.' Haber's mellow voice purred.

'I know that, Fritz.'

The chinking of china drew Einstein's attention. Haber's petite wife was carrying in a tray of tea.

'Clara. How are you?' said Einstein.

'I'm well. Thank you.' She poured, not meeting his gaze. Then she left the room in silence.

He took a sip of his drink. As he replaced the cup, it rattled against the saucer. 'Fritz, the situation has to end. You've been so generous to take in Mileva and the boys – I can't thank you enough – but they must leave.'

'Hush, Albert,' soothed Haber. 'The solution is agreed.'

Einstein nodded grimly. 'Then let us see that it is carried out quickly. They must return to Switzerland without further delay. Mileva knows this. We have grown too far apart. I am consumed with my work. This theorem inside me, it's alive – I can feel it, restless, kicking. It must be born or it will destroy me. Mileva knows that she is in its way as long as she remains.'

'Albert, listen to me. She does not need to leave. She has agreed to your terms.'

Einstein stared at Haber. 'She has agreed to leave my study without protest if I so request?'

Haber nodded.

'She will stop talking to me at once upon my say-so?'

Haber nodded again, his expression souring. 'And the rest, exactly as you have written.' He unfolded the sheet with Einstein's

handwritten list and brought it into focus. 'She must clean and keep my study neat but not interfere with my papers. She must travel separately from me. She must launder my clothes and provide me with three meals a day. She must expect no intimacy, nor reproach me in any way. At my command she . . .'

'Enough, please.' Einstein turned his head one way then another in an attempt to conceal his embarrassment. Listening to the demands like this, he could hardly believe that he had written so callous a document. In the isolation of his study, his pen had provided the exorcism that his mind had needed, but to hear it back like this . . . He had demanded that his wife obey him like a dog. His skin prickled.

The boys had been tired and fractious the night he had written the list; the pounding of their feet around the apartment had been deafening. He had pulled open his study door and caught a glimpse of his wife in the corridor playing some sort of chasing game with them. 'Can you not keep them calm?'

Then Mileva had badgered him to join the meal or it would spoil.

'What could possibly spoil about your cooking?' he spat over his shoulder.

Mileva had set her hands on her hips and the argument had started. In the morning, Haber had offered to lodge her until they could sort out their troubles.

Einstein's gaze must have dropped during the reverie, because the next things he became aware of were his shoes, scuffed where he had forgotten to polish them and dusty from the walk across town. He shuffled his feet in a futile attempt to hide the shoes and looked up, straight into Mileva's eyes; she was watching him from the door.

Her hair had been freshly washed, and she wore a new cream dress, with puffed shoulders and a bow at the neck. It harked back to a style she used to wear. Perhaps it wasn't new; perhaps it was an old favourite from a time when they had been happy. Clara stood behind her like a shadow.

The two men stood up.

'You win, Albert,' said Mileva in a steady voice. 'I agree to your terms.'

'You don't understand. It would be a business arrangement, not a marriage. You would be little more than a servant.'

'Your letter makes it clear that the personal aspects of our relationship would be reduced to a tiny remnant.'

'How can you settle for that, Mileva?'

'Because . . .' She faltered, her eyes beginning to moisten.

'We must separate. We hurt each other too much.'

She looked as if he had just thrust a knife through her ribs. 'You refuse me even though I agree to everything you demand?'

He nodded mutely, his stomach a vortex. There could be no pretence any more.

Clara stepped closer. She placed her arm around Mileva's shoulders, which were beginning to shake, and led her away.

Einstein could feel Haber's gaze on his back.

'I'm sorry, Fritz, but it's for the best.' The room was stale and airless. 'I'll see myself out.'

When the train station's tall façade hove into view the next day, Einstein found it difficult to swallow, as though someone's hands were around his throat. His pace slowed the nearer he drew to the lofty windows and giant curved roof until the bell of an oncoming electric tram brought him back to life. He skipped off the tracks into the shade of a tree, where he loosened his tie and let his heart rate settle as much as it was going to that day.

People came and went from the terminus in droves. From the cigar-shaped Zeppelin passing high above they must have looked like ants streaming to and fro. He caught sight of a couple, arm in arm, and a mixture of hatred and longing built inside him. It was all he could do not to turn his back on the station and stride off down the road. He shook the thought from his mind and forced himself to march inside.

Mileva and the boys were waiting on the busy platform. Haber stood with them but stepped aside as Einstein approached.

Hans Albert was as tall as his mother's shoulder now. The ten-year-old's thick black hair was combed into a fringe that hid his forehead and accentuated his puzzled eyes. On Mileva's other side, less than half her height and clinging to her hand, was Eduard, little Tete. He still seemed a baby to Einstein, even though he had to be four now. He seldom spoke, mostly contenting himself with sucking his fingers and grinning.

'Your tie's undone, Albert,' said Mileva.

'Sorry.' He mumbled and repaired the knot. 'Where are your things?'

'You don't have to worry, we're going . . .'

'That's not what I meant.'

'The guard's loaded the trunk already.'

Mileva watched him from dark-circled eyes. Her hair was wiry, barely under control, not at all like it had been in Haber's apartment.

'When did you last sleep?'

She met his gaze with a challenging look. 'I don't think I've slept properly since you first visited Berlin.'

Einstein caught the weight of her answer as though it were a punch. She was referring to his trip two years ago to visit his mother, who had moved to Berlin from Italy after being widowed. At the time, Mileva had been unaware who else he would meet in the city. 'I knew you wouldn't like it here. I'm sorry,' he said hurriedly.

She locked eyes with him. 'Why are you here, Albert? In Berlin, I mean. Why did we leave Zurich for this? It can't be for the German people. You hate them and their pride, otherwise you'd have kept your German citizenship. Remember? You're Swiss now.'

Einstein tightened his jaw.

'Can't you see there's a war coming?' she continued, sarcasm gilding her delivery. 'You're going to be stuck here, with people you'll never agree with.'

'I still hope that common sense will prevail.'

'Don't be a fool. The parades, the marches; these people want war. They think they can just grab land from the French and no one will resist them. Switzerland's neutral. You were happy there.'

'They have offered me my own institute here, with staff.'

'Where is it, Albert? Not a word of it since we arrived, and who is going to build a new physics institute now? What good is science in wartime? Oh, you used to be so happy in Zurich. Marcel is still there.'

'Marcel?'

'Yes, Marcel.'

'Marcel isn't . . . isn't in the same league as the men here. Planck, Haber, even Nernst . . .'

'Same league? Listen to you. Marcel helped you recently because you couldn't do some piece of mathematics. What league are you in? Where's the Nobel prize you keep promising me? It's been nearly ten years since your paper on relative motion – it was going to make you world-famous, remember? We used to talk, discuss your work. You used to share. Now look at you. Your whole reputation is based on previous achievements.'

'But I'm so close now . . . The extension to relative motion is . . .' Again the image of his scattered papers assaulted him, sparking anger. 'Oh, why couldn't you have been more like Clara? That's the tragedy here. She knows how a wife should support her husband. He's a lucky man.'

Mileva glanced over at Haber, who was doing a very bad job of pretending not to eavesdrop. She fixed her granite expression on Einstein again. 'You just talk without thinking, don't you, Albert? Clara understands what being a wife is really all about? You men don't have to give up anything. Clara knows exactly how I feel.'

The train engine's whistle bit into the air. Einstein took the opportunity to break away, squatting in front of Eduard. Both sons had inherited his full lips and cleft chin. Hans Albert had his

father's eyes, but Eduard's were more widely spaced and, at the moment, blank.

'Now, you be a good boy for your mother.'

Eduard nodded solemnly, sucking a finger of his free hand. Einstein briefly touched the little boy's shoulders, then straightened and turned to his elder son. After an awkward pause, Einstein stuck out his hand. Hans Albert stared at it before placing his own in it. 'Write to me often, son. Tell me everything you do.'

There was no strength in his son's grip and Einstein let it drop.

He turned back to Mileva, who was watching him contemptuously. 'I don't intend to ask you for a divorce.' Some small hope kindled in her eyes. 'All I require is that you stay in Switzerland with the boys.'

'But you need someone to take care of you.' A hint of pleading had crept into her voice.

He almost said *I have someone to take care of me* in order to terminate the conversation. Though he remained silent, his face must have given him away.

Mileva nodded, her suspicions confirmed. 'Give my regards to your cousin,' she said frostily.

'You mean Elsa?' He forced innocence into his voice.

'Who else?' she spat. 'You'll be round there before the train's even reached the suburbs. She's the real reason you want me gone.'

Einstein's eyes darted around. Hans Albert was staring at him with bleak attention. Eduard was lost in four-year-old thoughts, pawing idly at his mother's skirt.

'Goodbye, Mileva,' he said formally. 'Don't miss your train.'

The image of Mileva climbing on to the train filled his mind, her stiff posture and defiant shoulders as she ushered his sons aboard. Some paralysis had forced him to watch, to wait for the final venomous look she had launched at him just before the guard shut the carriage door.

He had thanked Haber for escorting her and then trudged from the station, clawing off his tie. His feet had begun to carry him towards Elsa's, but his wife's final accusation rang in his ears and he refused to give in to the knowledge that she had been right.

He had bought a coffee and sat on a wire-framed chair in a small café. Everywhere around him there was animated talk of war, the joy of conquest and the anticipation of destiny about to be fulfilled. He had lasted less than five minutes in there; eventually banging down the cup and slapping a few coins onto the table.

With nothing better to do, he had returned to his apartment, and as soon as the door shut behind him, he wept uncontrollably.

Now, as the sun began its slow dive towards the horizon, he began to perceive the stillness of which his home was capable. There was just the occasional muffled sound from the family in the apartment below, the whiff of onions or some other cooking. He felt strangely calm, drained.

There would be no interruptions now. Nor ever again.

His apprehension came from a new sensation growing inside him. It took him a puzzled moment to recognise it, but there could be no mistake. It was optimism: barefaced, naked optimism. Warm and comforting, it wrapped its arms around him. As it did so, mathematical symbols began to unfurl in his brain and Einstein reached for his pen and notepad.

It was days before Einstein emerged for anything more than a snatched meal or a trip to the post office. His first thought had been to visit Elsa, who was waiting for him across the city, puzzled by his absence. They had exchanged letters but he couldn't see her yet, not until the exorcism was complete and he had rid himself of the last vestige of Mileva.

Clara knows how I feel . . . His wife's parting words lingered in his thoughts like a thief in the shadows as he forced himself into a stiff suit and collar. He cursed every button but was determined to show that he was not helpless without a wife. He thought

about visiting his mother but decided he could not face her gloating. She had been against Mileva from the start.

With a final tug of his waistcoat, he set off for the one place he knew he would feel at home.

The honey-coloured stonework of the university was a welcome sight. He slipped across the courtyard, watched only by the statues on the roof of the great portico, and scanned the drifting groups of students with suspicion. Which of these young men, now so earnestly carrying their books, had been in the rally the other day?

The long and noisy corridors were dappled by patchworks of sunlight from the windows. When he turned the final corner he saw Haber loitering, hands thrust into his pockets, trying to look nonchalant, thick lips pursed in thought.

'Fritz?'

Haber gave a sheepish smile and nodded towards the window at the end of the corridor. 'I saw you coming.'

'Are you well?'

'I am.'

'And Clara?'

'Also well.'

Einstein turned the key in the lock and showed him in. The office was a bit dusty but otherwise tidy, unlike his study at home. There were a few official university documents on the desk here that Einstein had yet to get round to completing. No matter.

Haber leaned against an empty bookcase as if he owned the place. 'Did Mileva arrive safely?'

Einstein set the chair's wheels squeaking as he sat down. He nodded; her letter had arrived yesterday.

'Good,' said Haber. 'Perhaps some time apart will . . .'

'Are you and Clara all right?' Einstein asked the question sharply.

It took Haber a moment before he smiled. 'Yes, perfectly.'

'Mileva wanted to be a physicist.'

'She told us that, while she was staying.'

'She failed her exams when she was pregnant with . . .' Einstein ran a hand through his tousled hair. This was not a direction he wanted to take. 'Clara doesn't regret trading her profession for marriage, does she?'

Haber looked thoughtful. 'I think she sometimes feels a little frustrated. She was a good chemist before we married. Why do you ask?'

'It's just . . .' Einstein shook his head, 'Nothing. Forgive me. I'm rambling. Few things on my mind, that's all.'

Haber drew near and placed a hand briefly on Einstein's shoulder. 'Of course. Are you working?'

'Indeed, a little slowly but making progress.'

'You still think you can fix the mathematics?'

Einstein turned to face him. 'I'll have the final formulation soon, and within the month Erwin will have the observations.'

'So you got the money together for the expedition?'

Einstein nodded. 'Erwin's in the Crimea now, should have reached the site a few days ago. He's probably all set up and ready, just waiting for the eclipse.'

Haber looked alarmed. 'The Crimea? Then he's in danger.'

'Why? The war – if it comes – will be to the west.'

Haber snorted. 'Where have you been? The newspapers are full of it. The Russians are mobilising. All that's needed now is a formal declaration of war.'

'That's impossible. Germany cannot fight a war on two fronts. They'll have to see sense and negotiate.'

'There can be no negotiating with the enemy.' Haber's pale eyes had turned to steel. He laughed, a little embarrassed. 'Cheer up. It's probably no loss. Erwin's a bit hasty from what I hear, prone to errors.'

'He's the only one who's shown any real support for my extension of relativity,' said Einstein indignantly.

'Oh, don't be so dramatic,' Haber purred, all calm restored. 'We all support you.'

'Yes, but he *believes* me.'

2
Feodosiya, Russian Empire

Despite the acceleration of his heartbeat and the sudden shortness of his breath, Erwin Freundlich was finding it easier than he would have imagined to stare down the barrel of a loaded rifle. It was aimed at the patch of skin between his eyes. At the other end of the barrel he met the dark eyes of his captor across the gunsight. Freundlich found himself thinking they were too feminine for a man, even one as young as this soldier.

'You are German, yes?' asked the smug-looking, grey-haired commanding officer at the young soldier's side. Squeezed into a uniform that once must have fitted, the officer exuded the air of a pampered child.

The astronomer glanced at his two travelling companions, similarly held at gunpoint, and nodded his head.

'Name?' The commander's accent was thick.

'Erwin Freundlich.' A spot of rain from the thickening clouds landed on his left cheek and rolled into his thick moustache. It felt like a spider crawling across his skin.

The commander stepped closer, and the astronomer saw clean over the navy-blue peaked hat with its gold piping. He could see the waters of the Black Sea beyond and hear the sound of the waves, softened to a soothing murmur by their distance. It mixed with the rustle of the breeze around the camp and the pumping of blood in his ears.

'You're all under arrest,' said the commander, chin lifted, eyes gleaming.

'Why? I have the correct permits. Everything has been . . .' He made to indicate the battery of cameras strapped to the sturdy

wooden framework, pointing up at the sky, but stopped when the barrel of the gun jerked.

'No sudden movements, if you please,' warned the commander. 'Our countries are enemies now. Your government has declared war.'

Freundlich's mouth went dry.

The commander could barely keep the smile from his face as he finished his little speech. 'And that makes you our prisoners.'

They were forced to abandon the camp, leaving the cameras uncovered and the tarpaulins flapping, and marched to the police station at gunpoint, hands on their heads. Freundlich could feel the sweat running down his sides and the occasional raindrop along his jawline.

The townsfolk stared at them mostly with bemusement or confusion on their faces, but a few glared with hostility. Just the day before, the Germans had been moving around with anonymity; Zurhellen had lavished praise upon the local pastries while brushing the crumbs from his goatee, and Mechau had been watching the fishermen land their catches.

The police station itself was a damp stone affair just one road back from the harbour front. The three men were stripped of their papers and possessions – watches, pens, glasses – and taken deeper into the station.

'At least we're in the same cell,' said Mechau, laughing nervously as the door was shut solidly behind them and the key was turned.

Zurhellen stood glowering at the solid wooden barrier, fists flexing. 'How dare they? We're German citizens!'

'That's precisely why they've done it, Walther,' said Freundlich.

The comment drew a sharp glare. 'We can't just sit here and do nothing.'

'There's nothing else we can do.'

Freundlich studied the cell. There was a set of bunk beds lining both walls, a high window faced the door and there was a bucket

in the corner. Clearly the room was not designed for lengthy habitation. Judging by the smell, it was probably where they locked up the drunks overnight.

'What are they going to do to us?' Mechau was sweating profusely, his hands shaking visibly.

The sight unnerved Freundlich. If the lad panicked, it would only make things worse. 'Nothing, nothing at all. They'll keep us here until they've verified that we're no threat, and then they'll release us and we'll go back to our work. We'll take the readings and travel straight home.'

Zurhellen sneered. 'We're at war! You can forget astronomy now.'

Mechau looked from man to man, lips quivering.

'Walther, please. I'm in charge of this expedition,' said Freundlich.

Zurhellen's eyes narrowed. He was the eldest here by a clear five years. Freundlich held his gaze, then turned to Mechau.

'We'll be released soon, don't you worry.'

Mechau let out the breath he had been holding. So did Zurhellen, but in an angry rush.

The commander looked over his spectacles at Freundlich. 'And you expect me to believe you? Light bending round the sun?'

Freundlich spread his hands in supplication, talking quickly. 'Have you never played in the rivers? Tried to catch fish with your bare hands? When you thrust your hands into the water, the fish is not where your eyes have told you it is. Or a stick! A stick never looks straight when you place it in a glass of water. It seems to bend below the waterline because of refraction. Things aren't where we think they are. Gravity does the same. The sun will make the stars look as though they're in different places when it passes in front of them.'

'Those are some powerful-looking cameras you've got there.'

'They come from the searches for Vulcan.'

'Vulcan?' The commander cast his eyes around the grubby office. A uniformed policeman looked on from the corner. Two armed soldiers were stationed outside the door.

'Yes, the planet Mercury is off-course,' Freundlich gabbled, 'I mean it's not following Newton's law of gravity. Astronomers thought it was being pulled by the gravity of an undiscovered planet, Vulcan – but no one can find it . . .' He tailed off.

The commander lit a cigarette with slow deliberation. 'Planets, you say. One minute it's gravity, the next it's planets pulling each other about. Sounds to me like you need to get your story straight. You know what I think?' said the commander, not waiting for an answer. 'I think those cameras look powerful enough to take detailed photographs of the port.'

'We're not spies.' Freundlich wiped his brow. His anxiety must be making it look like he had something to hide. The realisation made him sweat even more. 'We're here to take pictures of the stars around the eclipsed sun and measure their positions. It's a crucial experiment. You must let us continue.'

If the commander's fat cheeks had risen any higher from his grin, he wouldn't have been able to see over them.

'We're going to miss it,' said Freundlich, standing on the frame of a lower bunk to look through the window bars.

'There'll be other chances,' said Mechau.

'When? It'll be years,' snapped Freundlich, immediately apologising when he saw the technician flinch.

'Beggar your theories.' Zurhellen spoke from the opposite corner of the cell, where he was squatting against the wall. 'We're at war. We should be out there now. Fighting for the Fatherland. Fighting these pigs!' He raised his voice for the last sentence.

Freundlich stepped from the bed. 'It's not our war. It's the Kaiser's. You'll only make things worse if you keep taunting them.'

'Speak for yourself,' Zurhellen sneered. 'How could someone like you understand, anyway?'

'Someone like me?'

'Well, you're not fully German, are you?'

'My grandmother was Jewish, if that's what you mean.'

'And your wife.'

'She's as German as you are.'

Zurhellen stood and took a step towards Freundlich. 'Not with those eyes and that hair.'

'She can be German *and* Jewish.'

The two men faced each other. Zurhellen's nostrils flared. Then, with a grim laugh, he turned and headed back towards his corner of the cell.

Freundlich turned too and smiled weakly at Mechau, who was watching with terrified eyes.

When the eclipse came, the darkness was complete. Freundlich peered out of the cell window and his mind filled with the work they should have been pursuing: loading the glass plates into the cameras, taking the exposures one by one, capturing the fleeting appearances of the stars in the brief minutes of the artificial night.

Einstein thought that strong gravitational fields were slightly different from Newton's predictions. He hadn't completed the maths yet, but it could explain the motion of Mercury and produce the light-bending effect, too. Freundlich's photographs were to have captured any deflection, allowing the theoretician to finish his work.

The astronomer felt a sharp sense of loss. He drew back from the glass and let his forehead rest against the cold windowsill.

They would not have seen anything anyway. It was pouring down out there.

Freundlich was frogmarched to the interrogation room a few days later. They had been given little but bread and water since their capture, and the sense of light-headedness from the hunger was beginning to feel normal. The fat commander was waiting for him, wreathed in the blue haze of cigarette smoke. 'You're to be

moved to a camp in Odessa. It'll take a day or so to make the final arrangements.'

'You're not going to repatriate us?'

The commander spoke as if addressing a child. 'You're prisoners of war.'

'What about the cameras and the equipment? We must be allowed to take them with us. They're on loan.'

The commander blew out a long plume of cigarette smoke and laughed. 'Those cameras now belong to the Russian government. Oh, cheer up. You'll like it in Odessa, we've got plenty of other Germans there already. You'll feel at home.'

Freundlich's insides tightened. 'I'll go and tell the others.'

'Not so fast. It's just you and the young lad going to Odessa. We've been listening to your big-mouthed friend. He's going somewhere else. We've got a special camp for people like him.'