# 13

Volks Deutsche (people of German descent born in Poland and the Ukraine) took charge of us. Men and women were separated. The men's cars were more crowded than the women's, with barely standing space for the men. The floors were covered with straw. In the rear cars were machinery and raw materials taken from the Ukraine.

The girls around me were cheerful and friendly towards one another. They spoke loudly, wrapped up in their conversations, their jokes and giggling. I looked at them enviously. They soon unpacked baskets of boiled eggs, ham and cookies, spreading the food out on towels and sharing it among themselves. A plump girl, Marusia, even offered me some, but I had no appetite.

Most of the time I sat in a corner, surveying my fellow passengers. I left Dubno with a heavy heart. I thought of my family, buried in a grave which I might never see, and my homeland. Tears streaked down my cheeks. I was alone in the world and no one cared about me, an orphan. Now, entering a new life, I prepared myself for the long ride to Germany.

On the way we passed fields of corn and swaying wheat. We passed through the small cities of Galicia and through the larger industrial cities. Our trip was noisy and uncomfortable. The odor was stifling since there were few windows that we could open. I was afraid of falling asleep and mumbling in Yiddish: one little mistake could undo me. But I was so worn out that I fell asleep in an upright position.

The train stopped at Przemysl, a large city in Galicia. From the busy railway station we were led to a bathhouse where we were showered, disinfected and deloused again. It was a relief to go out into the fresh air. Women with yellow Stars of David on their sleeves came to the train to beg for something to eat. They wore torn dresses and were barefoot. They had been working near the

train tracks, crushing stones and paving roads. One said to the other in Yiddish, "Goldie, if I could only make believe I am Polish or Ukrainian and go to Germany, I might be able to survive." The other answered, "It is not worth it to survive the war without your family." Frightened, I almost cried out, "I'm also alone without a family!" And I couldn't keep my eyes from filling with tears, knowing that I was miraculously escaping death. I overheard one of my companions, Kathy, say when she saw the two women. "Hitler is making a mistake in not killing all of them." During the eight days of the trip I often heard passengers talk viciously against the Jews.

A tall slim man with small penetrating eyes and dark horn-rimmed glasses came to meet the train. He wore a gray uniform and shiny black leather boots. On his left sleeve was a black armband with a swastika and above his right breast pocket gleamed a German silver eagle and swastika. He also wore a shoulder holster. I found out later that he was Herr Schregler, SS Obergruppen fuehrer, an old party member. I also learned that he travelled throughout occupied Europe recruiting foreigners to work in Germany. He came to our train and spoke in German to our guard, Janek Schultz, a Volks Deutsch from Lemberg. The Ukrainians and Poles on the train resented his domineering attitude toward them and his informing the Germans of everything we did. He rode in his own car with a bed, table, and chair. I discovered that he had taken part in the slaughter of the Jews in Dubno. Here he watched to see that we did not disappear at each station. He later became a very important official in Germany.

Schultz was our interpreter when Schregler addressed us. Schregler lectured us about the German master race and about Germany's need for agricultural workers and workers in the airplane factories and other war industries. Later I overheard Schregler talking about Jews to Schultz. "The Jews are the poisoners of the minds of the world. They control the world's money. We got rid of them in Germany, but it looks like some of them are still left here in Poland." Schultz answered him, "Not too many," I felt an almost paralytic fear. We remained in Przemysl most of the day. As it came time to depart we were led to a passenger train with wooden floors and benches. Members of the train crew distributed bread and sardines which I could not swallow: my mind was filled with questions. What would I face at our next stop? Would I be found out?

On the eighth day of our journey, the train approached Bad Kreuznach. I was in a strange city in a strange country sur-

rounded by enemies. On the train platform was a sign "*Arbeit macht das leben sis*" (Work makes life sweet). For many years Bad Kreuznach was a resort town with paved roads and houses known for their cleanliness. The architecture was lovely with many fountains. The city had boulevards lined with tall trees and benches and other places to rest. There were also many old monasteries surrounded by gardens. Bad Kreuznach was located in the heart of the west German Rhineland, not far from Coblenz and the rich industrial city of Cologne. I could not understand—when I saw the beauty and cleanliness of this city—how these people could acquiesce in the murder of others.

It was drizzling as we arrived, and I was exhausted and hungry. I wondered if there were Jews in Bad Kreuznach. I kept telling myself that I must make a new life here in Germany and adapt myself to my new surroundings.

We were taken into arbeitsamt offices where an interpreter helped to register us. Someone read us the rules we were to obey. They included:

> Strikes are forbidden.
> Pregnancies are forbidden, and will be terminated by abortions.
> Identification patches must be worn.
> Visits to the theater and cinema are prohibited.
> Employers have the right to punish workers without giving an account of their actions.

We were handed a patch to sew over our right breast. People from the eastern Ukraine were given the initials "Ost" and those from Poland "P." I received a blue Ost.

Asked what kind of work I preferred, I thought I had better work in a hospital or restaurant. I certainly wasn't qualified for factory or farm work. Besides, if I worked in a restaurant, I would at least have food.

People came to the station to look us over and claim us for work. Herr Schregler was responsible for allotting the workers to the farms, factories, and hospitals, mostly according to our work preference. About seven hundred men and women were chosen for the farms, and they waited for trucks to transport them. Others went to work in factories to replace men in the army. Then a hospital van arrived and out of it stepped a heavily-built woman in her mid-sixties, dressed in a nun's habit and a nurse's cap. I overheard her say to Herr Schregler that she needed ten girls to

work in a hospital. Herr Schregler looked us over and I was immediately chosen.

I followed Sister Anna to the ambulance. We were driven to a hundred-bed recuperation facility for soldiers, called Evangelisches Erholung Heim, run by nuns. We were taken to the hospital sanitation center, a big building surrounded by trees, referred to as the "Westernheim." There we were medically examined, showered, and issued blue uniforms.

We were then led to a small building, the "Kleine Haus," where I was assigned to a basement room about 12 by 18 feet. Squeezed into our room were eight small cots, two feet apart, a table, a clothing rack, and two chests of drawers.

The next day, Sister Anna took us to an office to be interviewed. I told them that my name was Maria Fyoderova Filinuk and that I was eighteen years old and came from the Russian Ukraine. I described my family as consisting of a brother whose whereabouts were unknown and a stepmother living in Kiev. I said that I previously had worked as a maid. I was reminded not to mingle with the Germans and not to use the railroad or to visit any friends. I laughed bitterly to myself at the mention of the word "friends."

We were put under the charge of Sister Martha who quietly discussed our work with us, stressing that the nurses would demand absolute obedience. I was assigned a job in the kitchen of helping prepare meals, peeling potatoes and scraping vegetables; also helping clean the rooms and ironing.

A few weeks later Sister Martha took me around the hospital to show me the routine and to interest me in working with sick soldiers. She wanted to train me in nursing so that I could fill in for absent aides. She taught me how to read the temperature chart that hung over each bed, how to change the sheets properly, and how to groom my fingernails. She told me that it was important to cooperate with the other girls and that if one of the girls got sick, I should take on her duties along with my own.

I admired the efficiency and energy with which the doctors and nurses rushed from room to room to attend the sick. The rooms were spotless; the walls shone. All the hospital workers paid strict attention to their duties. They also showed respect for their supervisors. I had an opportunity to observe the *Gemutlichkeit* (order) of the German people. How could they also sanction murder!

Sister Martha was exceptionally kind and concerned about me. She would warn me of room inspections so that I could be prepared. She would praise me to Sister Anna—"*Maria ist eine*

*saubere personlichkeit*" (Maria is a clean person)—and she would try to cheer me up when I told her that my life was meaningless and empty. Between us was a special, unspoken communication. Her gray eyes filled with tenderness as she looked at me. She made me realize that there must be *some* decent people among the Germans: I felt secure when she was near me.

Sunday evenings, after the dishes were finished and the elderly nurses had gone upstairs to rest, Martha took out her sewing basket and called me to join her. She would confide in me, telling about her youth—the modest house in Cologne where she grew up, and the *volkschule* (elementary school) and *overschule* (high school) that she attended. She told me about the German depression in 1931, and how her uncle Albert, a successful industrialist, had committed suicide. She also told me about the years that she had spent working as a governess for the children of a *mischlinge*—a mixed marriage between Walter, a tall charming man who was Jewish, and his Protestant wife Emma—living in a predominantly Protestant neighborhood. As the sentiment against Jews grew stronger, Emma's family began to eject Walter. Finally, Emma took her twin ten-year-old daughters and moved into her family's home.

She would quietly discuss politics with me so that the others would not overhear us. She described how the president of Germany, Paul Von Hindenberg, had been weak, giving Hitler the opportunity to attract the liberals in Germany by promising to save them from poverty. She went on to say, "Hitler promised the Germans the skies," and concluded, "*Ich kann him nicht leiden*" (I can't stand him). Martha was a woman of character, and I could talk freely with her; yet I was afraid to tell her the whole truth. Suppose she was trying to trick me into admitting my Jewishness to her!

One day I heard that Sister Martha's birthday was coming up. I picked flowers from the garden and asked the girls to help me arrange them into a bouquet. I bought a card and wrote on it "*Die immerverstandnesvolle Schwester Martha in die schwersten zeiten*" (the always-understanding sister Martha in my worst times).

The sisters placed great importance on cleanliness. They taught us how to make our beds, keep ourselves neat, and our clothing clean. Sister Anna wanted us to learn the German language. When we spoke Ukrainian while working in the kitchen, she would say, "*Man spricht nur Deutsche*" (You must speak only German).

I busied myself with my work. While I was in the kitchen, I

tried to listen to the radio broadcasts of Hitler's speeches. Hitler dreamt of possessing the entire world. I gathered that the German people completely trusted their fuehrer. Hitler asked them to sacrifice themselves to the war effort, and called upon the German youth to defend their homeland. He kept repeating that it was an honor to be a citizen of his reich, while spewing hatred of the Jews.

From the headlines of the newspapers—we were not allowed to read newspapers—all I could determine was that German planes were bombing London and that the German military possessed a wonder weapon capable of destroying America. At times I thought that the world was lost to fascism, and everything looked hopeless to me. When Sister Anna realized my interest in the news, she reminded me that a woman should only be interested in "*Kinder, Kirche and Kuche*" (children, church and cooking).

Only on Sundays were we allowed time for ourselves, at least until four o'clock. One Sunday I went for a walk with the other workers. We watched a torchlight parade of the Hitler youth during which they sang the German national anthem and other patriotic melodies vowing love of their homeland: "*Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles. . .,*" "Today Germany is ours and tomorrow the whole world will be ours."

Another Sunday, on one of our excursions, we reached the intersection of Muller Street. I saw a large poster with a caricature of a Jew holding the Torah in one hand and a hammer and sickle in the other. I saw houses with swastikas smeared on them. My heart beat faster when I saw a man dressed in shabby clothing with a yellow Star of David on his right sleeve. I tried to see where he was going, but he turned down a small street and I lost him. I also saw signs in blue letters, "*Juden wander aus*!" (Jews get out!).

1942 was coming to a close—for me a long and cruel year. My roommates were receiving regular letters from their families in Galicia. The main subject in these letters was the Jews. My roommate Marusia received a letter from her sister Evka that she read to us. The letter said that the adjoining territory near her village was free of Jews. She wrote that the German language had been declared the official language of the Ukraine so she was now studying German. The eastern Ukraine was already free of Jews and the final solution of the Jews in the Ukraine was coming to an end. "We can buy good used items for low prices." I knew very well they were the possessions of murdered Jews. She described German-occupied warehouses filled to the brim

with clothing of Jews. She also wrote about extermination camps, the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Some of the girls who listened to her letters commented that this was God's will and that the Jews would all perish.

Sophia, a short fat girl, received a parcel from her family in a village near Tarnapole. In it was a cake of soap with the word *Juden-seife* (made from the fat of Jewish victims) stamped on it. I trembled when I saw it.

On January tenth, after breakfast, Marusia asked me why nobody wrote letters to me. I decided that it was time for me to receive a letter. The next day I pretended to be sick and told Sister Anna that I should remain in my room. When the day's mail came to our room, I tore off a stamp from someone's letter and I pasted it on an envelope which I addressed to myself. When the girls returned from work, I showed them my make-believe letter. I tore open the envelope quickly and cried out happily, "At last—a letter from home!" I told them that it was from my stepmother. The girls looked convinced.

I had adapted myself completely to a new life. I tried to have a friendly relationship with the girls with whom I shared the room. Despite their anti-Jewish jokes I even became accustomed to their boisterous shouts and laughter.

My roommates were all religious. After each evening meal we thanked God for our daily bread, ending with the prayer the nuns taught us: "Heil mein fuehrer. I promise to do my duties in love for my Fuehrer." Every night before bed, I prayed with the girls in a corner of the room under a portrait of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. I prayed like the other girls, sometimes even longer than them, trying imitate their gestures. I kneeled and crossed myself several times.

A shiver of dread passed through me as I mastered all the necessary maneuvers. I recited the Lord's Prayer. Whenever I made the sign of the cross I imagined my grandfather and my whole family of four generations standing around me, their heads bowed in shame. My eyes filled with tears and my heart pounded. I begged them to forgive me. I wanted so much to live.

My daily life continued, but there seemed to be no future. On December fifteenth painters came to paint the house. The nuns started to prepare the hospital for Christmas - "*Weinachten.*" I helped to polish furniture and took care of countless other duties. Keeping busy at least made me feel secure and wanted.

On December twentieth, Sister Martha showed us the Christmas tree and asked us to help decorate it. She taught me to say "*Freiliche Weinachten*" to the other sisters. A few days later,

Sister Martha took us to the store named "*Einkaufstadt fur kleider und schue*," where, she told us, the clothing there had been generously donated by the German people. I had my suspicion. In a pocket of one of the many worn dresses I found a little Jewish star hanging on a silver chain. Now I knew where the clothing came from and I would not take anything for myself. I wondered all day about that dress with its star.

On Christmas Eve, the Sisters took us to church. Before we left, Sister Anna instructed us to pray for all the people who were too sick to go to church. A wet snow was falling as we walked, making the ground slippery. In the church, the organ was softly accompanying the chorus which was singing "Hail Mary, Mother of God." I stood silently and thought about the past, and about my religious home. I felt like a sinner and begged God to forgive me. I stood numbly until finally Sister Anna reminded me to kneel in prayer. My legs felt weak under me. The old nun, with her wrinkled face, bent forward toward me again and repeated softly, "Pray my child, pray." I prayed silently: "Lord, please forgive me my sins. Please help me to find the right path, to go from darkness to light, to a life of freedom."

We remained in church until the conclusion of the midnight mass; then we waved good-bye to the parishioners and went home. The tall and beautiful Christmas tree stood in the corner of the living room, filling the room with its woody scent. It was trimmed with colorful decorations and its glittering ornaments reflected the flames of the little candles. Sister Anna distributed presents to all the girls. I unwrapped my present: a yellow flannel nightgown and a pair of mittens that Sister Martha had knitted for me. I also received an envelope with a few Deutsche reichsmark, my first pay. Everyone was in high spirits, singing Christmas carols until it was time to go to bed. As I started to get up to leave the room, Sister Martha called me over to her. She told me not to feel bitterness or hatred towards the German people, because not all of them were to blame for the war. "There is no collective guilt," she said. "Not all the German people listen to Hitler's words." I was stunned. It was hard for me to believe what I heard. Did she know the truth about me? She left me no time to wonder, because she quickly rose from her chair, embraced me, and wished me a merry Christmas.

On January the 30th I celebrated my nineteenth birthday. My gift had been from heaven, the gift of life. Yet I felt that hunger and death lay before me and I had nightmares. When I dreamt about my mother, I would see her shedding tears, struggling to survive. One night, I dreamt that the Nazis had arrested me, and

I saw my mother, her eyes empty and blood running down her cheeks. I cried out in Yiddish words of reassurance.

Vera, the girl who slept in the cot next to mine, woke me up. I feared that the girls would report my nightmares and that Herr Schregler would hear about them. I thought that the girls had become suspicious of me and I was frightened. I would surely betray myself if I continued to mutter Yiddish in my sleep. I must stop having nightmares, I told myself.

During the next few days I imagined the girls were whispering about me. They asked me about my background more frequently and they listened as I said my prayers. By their questions, I could tell they were wondering if I were Jewish. They must have told the kitchen help, because they too began to look at me strangely.

I passed the anxious days and nights. I had made a mistake. I should have gone to work on a farm where no one would have noticed me.

One day, my worst fears were realized. Martha told me that Schregler wished to question me. She told me not to worry, but I was not reassured. Tuesday night at 8 P.M., Gestapo Officer Schregler arrived at the recuperation center and came straight to my room. He was dressed in his military tunic with swastika armband, and wore a grim expression. He ransacked my room, scrutinizing my possessions and throwing everything onto the floor. He looked under my bed and in the closet for pictures and other identifying papers, all the while giving me only a cursory glance. Finding nothing of interest, he told me to come to his office the following week. I knew that I was now in a dangerous situation. Where could I disappear to I asked myself.

After the search, I suffered a restless night. To Sister Anna, the Mother Superior, I was just another worker, so she had no reason to suspect that I was any different from the others. She told me that Schregler had come again the next day to question her and my roommates. She said that he had asked her about my loyalty to the recuperation home. Again Martha spoke to me, telling me to cheer up and not to lose hope.

On February the 14th I was ordered by Sister Anna to report to Herr Schregler's office the following day. Did he suspect me of being Jewish? It was unusual for Schregler to summon a worker to his office; he would usually check on us at the home. I felt bodily fear and I considered escaping; but if I were captured, they would surely lock me up send me to a concentration camp. Besides, where could I go without identification papers? I cried most of the night.

I entered Schregler's office the next morning, greeting him,

"Heil Hitler." Around my neck I wore a little cross which I made more visible by pulling it over my dress. Schregler raised his arm in the Nazi salute. He indicated a chair and politely asked me to sit. I was nervous, afraid that he would find loopholes in my story.

He was sitting in a leather armchair at a desk beneath a huge framed portrait of Hitler. On the other wall was a calendar. Looking at it I wondered if this would be my last month alive. On still another wall hung a big map of Europe marked in red with the cities occupied by the German army. How could I hope to escape the people who had overrun a continent?

Schregler looked at me through his heavy rimmed spectacles, and seemed to be examining every feature of my face. I forced myself to smile. He took out a notebook and stared at a page with my name written on it. Then he looked searchingly at me and began his questions. He asked my religion and nationality. His voice sounded cold, his face was like a stone. "Herr Schregler, I am a Ukrainian girl," I said. "I was raised a Greek Catholic in the city of Kiev."

He glanced at his watch. In a quiet tone of voice, ne asked me to produce my *Kenn Karte* (identification card). With a trembling hand, I took out my identification paper and my false Ukrainian passport as well as the paper from the Ortkommandater which was signed and stamped by Kraus. His eyes moved over the paper. He looked at the stamp of the Ortkommandater, then he accused me of being Jewish. I categorically denied it. He said that I spoke with a Jewish accent. I told him that the charges against me were untrue. I said to him. "*Ich haber geschworen, was wolen sie*?" He opened the newspaper *Volksblat* and pointed to an article and said, "You can read, Maria, that there are no Jews left in Germany. We shall eliminate every living Jew. Where were you born?" I said, "Anything that has been said against me is an invention. I am Greek Orthodox." I was afraid that I wouldn't get through this ordeal. "I'm telling the truth!" I cried out. A chill passed through me and I could see my end approaching. I told myself not to be a coward.

Schregler dropped his papers to his table and said angrily, "Maria, I can tell you are lying to me—in spite of all your cleverness." Then he sarcastically suggested that I write a letter home. He also asked me to start writing my entire autobiography. He asked me if I understood him. I tried to look unconcerned although my heart was pounding. I nodded, yes, I understood, and took the sheet of paper he handed me.

He was trying to trick me and extract a confession. I hoped I

would not turn pale and my eyes would not look red. He asked me if I knew someone in Germany from my native town. I said I could not immediately produce a witness who knew me. I repeated that I was Aryan and had no connection with Jews. Schregler said that he had to return to Kiev the following week to escort a transport of ostarbeiters. "I will inquire about your birth certificate." he said. I finished writing the letter, addressed it to my "stepmother Filiniuk Sophia Ivanova" and signed it, "Your daughter, Maria." I gave it to him, saying "Will you please deliver it to my stepmother?"

Schregler than remarked "You have forged papers. You are under house arrest until I get an answer from your family that proves you are telling the truth. Until then you will remain in the Evangelisches Home." He went to the phone to call Sister Anna. She was busy and Martha answered the phone. I waited until she came to the office, relieved at seeing her and anxious to talk with her. I said "*Guten tag*" to Schregler and left with her. Martha was silent and afraid to discuss my problem but she did try to comfort me, telling me not to give up hope. "Do not confess to any untruths," She told me. "Maria, *beschutz, e nur ihre namen.*"

I had a horrible fear that Schregler would send me to a concentration camp and I had to prepare for the worst. Thoughts of suicide came to me, but I didn't have the nerve to carry them out. What should I do next? I truly believed my days were numbered.

On February the 25th, as I stood by a window, drawing the curtains, Sister Anna entered the room and said: "I am sorry to tell you this, Maria, but your services are not longer needed here. Herr Schregler has given orders that you pack up by late afternoon. Someone will come and take you to the Ostarbeiter kranken baracke. There you will help the sick." The news sickened me so, that I had to run to the bathroom five times before my stomach settled down.

I tried to analyze my situation. I ran up the stairs to Martha to tell her of this latest development, and clung to the banister. Martha was sitting on her bed reading a newspaper. I said, "*Auf wiedersehen*, Martha." I saw tears in her eyes when she said. "*Ich wunsche sie gluck*, Maria." I wanted so much to fully confide in her but I didn't have the nerve. My face was wet with tears, and my hands too began to perspire as I shook hands with her. She said quietly. "*Dass all dieses einmal zusammen brechen konnt.* All these laws will collapse. You should be happy to work with sick people. It is easier than factory work."

I told no one else in the home that I was being transferred.

# 14

I realized that it was far better to be sent to the Ostarbeiter Kranken Baracke than to a concentration camp. The Kranken Baracke was a sixty-bed medical facility for foreign workers housed on the grounds of the Evangelishes Erholung Heim. Upon arriving there, I was introduced to Herr Schwerzel, the supervisor. He wore a starched white lab coat. Underneath, he wore the Nazi uniform. He was in his early sixties, well-groomed, with neatly combed silver hair and a trim moustache. I later learned that he was a long-time Nazi Party member. Before becoming the supervisor, he had been an orderly at the Erholung home. Although I often heard him say that he was a German doctor, it became clear to me that he hadn't the slightest idea about what was wrong with his patients, and he showed an unprofessional lack of concern towards the sick and the dying.

Once a week, usually on Monday, a doctor arrived to inspect the sick workers. Schwerzel accompanied the doctor as he took a history of each patient. But they did not really treat the sick: they gave them sugar pills. Many patients died from lack of care. The very sick patients, especially children, were injected with poison to speed their demise. Schwerzel was responsible for the death of hundreds of people.

Many sick factory workers arrived at the Krancken Baracke. They had arrived in Germany healthy or they would not have been allowed to come at all. After a short time working in the factories, they grew weak from malnourishment. Factory work lasted twelve hours a day. Tuberculosis, venereal disease, typhus, and pneumonia were widespread. The Krancken Baracke was filled with workers from "Saiz-Werke" a big military factory in the outskirts of Bad Kreuznach. There was also a chemical plant from which we received many sick. Chlorine had always leaked there, and the ostarbeiters had no protective gas masks. Noxious gasses from salts also overcame the workers.

Pregnancies, frequent among foreign workers, were terminated by abortion. Herr Schwerzel was the abortionist. I remember a nineteen-year-old girl, Marusia, from Poltava in the eastern Ukraine. Seven months pregnant, she was brought to the barracks by the farmer for whom she worked. When he learned about her condition, he had told her to take hot baths and to drink castor oil. She even tried to use knitting needles and jumping from high tables. By the time she reached the barracks, she was hemorrhaging. Schwerzel strapped her to a table and injected her with a needle. He had not sterilized his equipment nor had he washed his hands. After a few minutes, a fetus was expelled into a pan. It was a small boy – a complete person. I tried to comfort Marusia. Sometime after the procedure, I heard Schwerzel say to the doctor, "*Mein sun ist in der schlacht gefallen*" (My son was killed in action). I don't feel sorry for them."

There were cases of VD among the male patients. Maxim, a boy in his late teens, came to the hospital with gonorrhea. His hands and feet were covered with sores and wounds; patches of hair had fallen out of his head. He was running a mild fever and had a slight headache. His illness was not correctly diagnosed. In weeks the sores got worse, and he had trouble urinating. Schwerzel would not allow him to have a bed pan, so Maxim had to drag himself to the bathroom. His yells and screams were awful. Schwerzel ignored his requests for clean trousers. When I bandaged his wounds, he turned white with pain. In a few months he became insane, jumping off tables and chairs and running around the room. Then he drifted into a coma. Schwerzel decided to get rid of him and so he injected Maxim with poison.

Another patient that I met at the barracks was Olga, a pretty, twenty-six-year-old woman from a large city in the eastern Ukraine. The Germans had occupied her city in the fall of 1941. When they were forced to retreat that winter, they took young Russians back with them as slave laborers. Olga and her five-year-old Natasha were captured and sent to a farm. (Her husband had been mobilized into the Red Army at the beginning of the war.)

The farm that she was sent to was not far from Bad Kreuznach. Her daughter was left in the care of the housekeeper while Olga worked in the field. The housekeeper often complained that Natasha behaved badly and the farmer Hans wanted to eliminate her.

One late Saturday afternoon, Natasha ran a high fever and Olga took her to the Ostarbeiter Krancken Barracke to be examined. Schwerzel told Olga that on Monday the doctor would

come to examine Natasha. Meanwhile, Schwerzel gave her sugar pills. I carried little Natasha to bed and took her temperature. She had 104 degrees, her eyes were glazed and she was gasping for air. I told Schwerzel that she would die of fever. I could do nothing but apply cold towels to her forehead.

On Sunday night Natasha died, and I helped Olga dress her daughter in her best dress. On Tuesday, the farmer came to pick up Olga. I overheard him say to Schwerzel that Natasha did nothing but "*Fressen*," She was too little to work. "*Keine arbeit, keine fressen*," he said. No work, no food.

Sister Anna sent Sister Martha to teach me how to take the pulse, temperature and respiration, how to massage the sick to prevent them from getting bed sores, and how to change the bed-sheets. When she saw me, Sister Martha embraced me. We clung together, tears streaming down our cheeks. She kissed me with tenderness and I thought that she would never let me go. Martha cleared her throat and said to me, "I am terribly sorry, Maria, that you must work under these circumstances." She went on to say that the Nazi poison had penetrated the minds of good people.

Martha visited me several times and assured me that I would be all right. She brough me an ill-fitting uniform and fixed it to my size. No matter how sympathetic she seemed, however, I still could not completely confide in her – even when I heard her say about Hitler. "*Ich kann him nicht leidem*" (I can't stand him). But her kindness gave me hope.

On April 20th, 1943, the German people celebrated Hitler's fifty-fourth birthday. Our place took on a holiday atmosphere. We had a better than usual breakfast. I had toast, bun and coffee, cereal and a red apple. The patients received extra portions of food and clean underwear, towels, and bedding.

Schwerzel got drunk that day.

On my daily trip to the Evangelisches Erholung Heim to pick up food and supplies for the barracks, I saw flags and Hitler's picture everywhere. I caught glimpses of a parade on Main Street, with colorful lanterns and gay banners held by Hitler youth and the marching band of the storm troopers.

All day long the radio in Schwerzel's office blared out, "Long live Hitler, our Fuehrer!" Hitler addressed the people over the radio saying that soon Germany would be the world's greatest nation; that Germany would fight to its last breath against Bolshevim.

We were relieved from work an hour earlier. That night I cried silently.

On May the 2nd, Sister Martha came to visit me and my co-worker Tamara to instruct us on dressing wounds. She asked me how I was and told me among other things that the African front was crumbling and that Germany had lost thousands of men in Russia. "Thank God," she said, "the war will soon be over."

We went for a walk. The air was warm and the sky was very blue. On the early deserted street we saw a frail little man dressed in an old gray jacket with the word *Yude*, stamped on his back and a yellow Star of David on his left sleeve. Sister Martha told me that we were on a Jewish street called the "Yiddishe Gasse." A handful of *mischlinge* (mixed married couples) lived here in a ghetto. I tried to follow the man with the Jewish star. He turned into a narrow street lined with old houses on which were painted the Star of David. I was speechless. I could not believe that there were Jews living so near me: if I could only talk to them, perhaps I would not feel so alone.

As more workers from the east came to replace the sick ones, they too became sick. Feodor, a slim boy about twenty-three years old, came to our barrack with tuberculosis. He had worked with radioactive material and coal dust and had difficulty breathing. He had not been given a mask to wear on the job. Neither had

*Donna working in the ostarbeiter kranken baracke with Herr Schwerzel.*

he been allowed to shower after work, although Germans had this privilege. His weight went down to ninety pounds and he coughed up blood continuously. He limped around the room, looking like a condemned man waiting for his death. Once he asked for his mother. Finally he lost his will to live. Around six o'clock one morning, while I was making my rounds of the patients, I found him dead. I complained to Schwerzel about the suffering he had undergone.

One day, I became so frustrated by what I saw, that I asked Schwerzel why he did not give better care to the patients. He said, "*Ich bin ein Deutschen Doctor, entschuldigung bitte*" (Excuse me, Maria, I am a German doctor). He was angry.

Schwerzel said that I should not bother so much about them, but just let them die. Schwerzel had a conference with Dr. Rudolph, the doctor from the Evangelisches Heim, about my concern for the sick. He wanted me to be dismissed.

In September, Schwerzel said that he would not allow me to remain under any circumstances, that I was too deeply involved with the lives of my comrades. He claimed that I purposely did not carry out his orders for the patients correctly. I waited anxiously to find out what my next assignment would be.

# 15

I was transferred to work in a steel factory, a "drath werke," about thirty kilometers from Bad Kreuznach. All my patients felt bad I was leaving and hoped I would come back to them. I left the Ostarbeiter clinic at twilight, accompanied by an SS man who worked as a guard at the factory. We rode together in silence, passing through fields and forests. The other passengers were mostly middle-aged women who spoke quietly to one another. The guard offered me some bread that he carried in a bag.

We got off the train at the Waldbackelheim station and walked a half mile to the factory, which was camouflaged by trees and shrubs. The factory manufactured munitions-bayonets, gun barrels, and heavy guns. It was part of the German armament industry. Big signs flanked the entrance: "*Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Fuehrer*" (One People, One Country, One Leader), and "*Arbeit mach das leben sis*" (Work Makes Life Sweet).

More and more foreign workers were needed to fulfill production quotas since the reserves of German workers were being exhausted. At this factory there were hundred of workers from the Ukraine and Poland, and from Przemysl in Galicia which had been under Austrian rule before the war. These workers were treated better than the workers from the Russian Ukraine. There also were French workers who lived in barracks better constructed than ours. They received monthly Care packages from the Red Cross, and were allowed to receive Christmas cards from their families and friends. Schregler continued to send more and more worker-slaves to this factory. Periodically he came to the factory to check on how we were doing, telling us, "*Wir mussen fur Deutschland arbeiten schneller* (We must work faster for Germany)."

We wore cotton uniforms with badges stating our nationalities sewn on them and wooden clogs so heavy that I could barely walk. We lived in unheated wooden barracks on the factory grounds. I slept in the same clothing in which I arrived in Ger-

many; and in cold weather, I used my coat as a blanket. The furnishings consisted of row after row of metal double-bunk beds with hard, lumpy straw mattresses. I slept poorly, on an upper bunk bed, always afraid I would fall out. The twenty girls in the room shared a single toilet and sink. The windows were nailed shut, so the room smelled bad. A small light bulb hung from the ceiling. Our only storage space was a big wall closet.

We suffered from undernourishment and overwork. I lost 12 pounds, developed terrible headaches, dark circles were under my eyes and I was infested with lice. Each morning we were given soup thin as water and a small slice of black bread. For supper we had cabbage soup and potatoes. We ate from tin cans with wooden spoons. If someone was sick and did not go to work, he received smaller rations.

Sometimes I grew dizzy from my job of lifting the heavy coils of steel and iron sheets from the floor to the "werkstadt"—machine. I also had difficulty adjusting to my hours, five in the afternoon to three in the morning, six and a half days a week. If I sat down for a few minutes, the German supervisor Fritz punished me by making me work an hour longer.

Janek, a Volkdeutsche from Lemburg who had come with my transport, was our foreman in charge of all the ostarbeiters at the factory. He took attendance three times during the work day to make sure that no one left his station. He also watched every move we made, even following us to the outhouse. A sadist, he was uncaring about the health of his workers. If we did not finish our work quota, we were deprived of food. He would also kick us with his boots. In fact both he and the German supervisor "disciplined" ostarbeiters with their fists as well as sticks. Fritz would tell us, "*Wenn mir ihre arbeit gefallt werde, ich sie lauben und mehr essen giben*" (When I approve of your work, I will praise you and give you more to eat). He said that the only thing the foreign workers liked doing was eating. He treated us like work horses and called us *dummheit untermenschen* (idiots).

Life with my roommates was a disaster. I hesitated talking to them because of my Jewish accent, my inability to pronounce a sharp "r." They would make fun of the way I pronounced "*dobroya utro*" (Good morning). They also told jokes about Jews and I worried constantly that they would find me out. Mostly, they excluded me from their conversations.

I dreamed about my past. One night, as I was sobbing in my sleep, Evka, the woman who lay in the bed next to mine, shook me, and asked me what I was crying about. I felt myself go faint. I was afraid I had cried out Yiddish words in my sleep. In the

morning, Evka and the other girls looked at me with suspicion, I thought. I wept inwardly, wishing I had died in Krasnastov with my parents; I was tired of suffering. I had the feeling that someone had betrayed me to Fritz and to Schregler. I lived in continual terror—of hunger, of dying, of what the next day would bring.

By Christmas, the food rations were cut down. It was a cold winter and there was not enough coal. Disease spread among the workers.

Early one February morning in 1944, I reported to work as usual. As I was lifting the cables of steel to the machine, I noticed a man observing me. He was of medium height, slender, with dark eyes and brown hair, probably in his late twenties. He came over to me and introduced himself. His name was Octave, a French prisoner of war. As I struggled to lift an iron sheet, he helped me set it on the work counter. He spoke fluent German, and acted as an interpreter for the French workers. He told me that he came from the Ruhr Valley, where his father owned a small coal mine. The only boy in a family with five girls, he had completed high school and had begun college when he was drafted. He was serving in the French infantry as a sergeant when the Germans took him prisoner in June of 1940.

The next day Octave met me while I was walking home from work and he introduced me to his friends Marcel and Dominic, who were the survivors of his regiment. He showed me a picture of his mother, whom he strongly resembled. Discussing our work at the factory, he told me that under international law it was illegal for the Germans to employ foreign workers in war plants like the steel factory.

The following days he walked me home after work, along with Marcel and his girlfriend Kathy. Octave tried to cheer us up, assuring us that the war would soon be over. He had a radio on which he secretly listened to reports about the war's progress. "Maria," he said, "I promise you we will again live like free people."

He also spoke about the French resistance and underground forces. He said that France had a good army but had fallen so quickly because the British had abandoned them.

He gave me news about the war in Russia. He told me about Babi Yar, a mass grave in Kiev for 30,000 Jews who had been shot in a period of two days. He also said that in September of 1943, the Germans had been driven out of the Crimea and Odessa; that during the 1942-1943 winter, many Germans died in Russia, and that the German vehicles would not work in the sub-zero weather.

He also had news about Bad Kreuznach and the Erholung Heim: it had been hit by fire bombs; the marble stairway had

been destroyed and the big front windows had been blasted out.

I was very curious to learn about the Jews in France, but I didn't dare ask him.

Octave was always in good spirits. He never spoke to me of love, and good, too, because romance was far from my mind. And I always kept reminding myself of my mother's last words. "Don't leave our people, our heritage, my daughter." Octave and I behaved more like brother and sister. Our friendship was based on our common interest in becoming free. On the other hand, Octave's friend Marcel, short, blond, gray-eyed, fell in love with Kathy, a girl from Charcov, and he took her with him to France after the war.

Night after night, American and English bombers dropped bombs in the area surrounding the factory. Fearful, I often wished that I had died in Krasnastov with my relatives and friends. We grew accustomed to the sound of the sirens.

Octave was the only one who saw a brighter future for us. He told me that Germany was becoming drained and that younger and younger men had to be recruited to die for the Fatherland. The mood of the factory management was bad. They seemed nervous and spoke in whispers.

I caught sight of a headline in the newspaper, *Algemeine Zeitung*: "DIE EHRE FUR DEN FUEHRER ZU STERBEN" (It is an honor to die for the Fuehrer). The paper was full of Hitler's pictures. Seeing this, I began to feel hopeful. My one aim now was to survive the war.

On a hot summer day in July while I was at work, Octave managed to meet me for a moment and told me he had news to pass on. I couldn't wait to finish work, to hear what it was. He then told me how, in the Fuehrer's headquarters, a man named Stauffenberg, the Chief of Staff, placed a bomb under the map table. As Hitler leaned over to read the map, the bomb exploded. The building shook. Some people thought that Hitler had been killed, but he was only slightly injured. He was carried out of the room full of dust and suffering from a loss of hearing. Hitler ordered that anyone suspected of being part of the plot should be killed. Many army officers were killed. Octave said that he had overheard one of the factory supervisors say that it was a blessing from God that Hitler had survived. Later that evening, Hitler spoke on the radio. He said he was now convinced he was meant to carry the German cause to a happy conclusion.

That whole night I could scarcely sleep, thinking of what a miracle it would be if someone did kill Hitler. I knew now that it was a matter of time before Hitler would lose.

It was the end of August, 1944, a starry night. American and English planes were seeking military targets, factories and railroads. I worked the night shift. Someone entered the building and said that he heard some bombs exploding.

I spent a nervous night by the "werkstadt" machine lifting heavy coils of steel and listening to the planes. Their sounds frightened me—living seemed more frightening than dying. It is hard to describe the situation, knowing that sooner or later I would be killed by a bomb from a friendly airplane.

There was a terrible panic and chaos when the bombs hit the factory. We ran to the bunker in the basement and I was trapped with 32 other persons. The thought of starvation and death grew in my mind. I was extremely weak and I didn't have enough strength to free myself from the debris which fell on me from a wall. I dragged myself to the door for fresh air and tripped over a dead person. I was barely able to catch my breath.

I sat in the darkness, somebody produced a small candle. I was full of terror. The roof from the factory fell, sending smoke into the sky. The roof was demolished, the walls were rocking. After the all-clear sounded, those with the fire extinguishers came to our rescue. The *bytschuzwart* (air raid warden) used a ladder to get us out of the basement.

The heavy-set girl, Marina, had gone to the outside toilet just before the air raid warning sounded. The lights were extinguished and she couldn't find the door to the shelter. Fritz, the *aufseer* (supervisor), saw her running but didn't let her into the shelter. A bomb killed her on the step of the shelter. (After the war, Marina's husband took revenge and killed Fritz with a butcher knife.)

I returned to the barracks and gathered my belongings and my diary which I had kept hidden in my underwear. I started to walk. The smoke from burned wood was thick so I could not see too well. But I managed to pass through the unguarded gate and leave Waldbackelheim with its burning factory. I thanked God for my survival.

As I walked, shivering in the wind and bitter cold, I met an old German man. "Dear God in heaven!" he exclaimed. "What has happened?" He told me that he was from the Rhineland and that he, too, had been bombed out. We walked together for many hours.

Finally we reached Bad Kreuznach, with the streets full of rubble. I did not know where to go. I was homeless again, at the mercy of people who might or might not take me into their homes.

The old man had told me that it was safer to work in an old-age home or a school because, by international law, it was forbidden

to bomb such institutions. I could not but wonder why the Red Cross did not forbid the killing of old Jewish people and children.

It was almost dark. Many homeless people were walking in the streets—no travel permits necessary. I saw a house near Francisko Strasse with a sign in front, MUTTER HAUS. It was surrounded by pretty trees and shrubs. A portly nun stood in front of the house. I walked over and begged her to take me in. "Come in my child, it is cold outside," she answered. She introduced herself as Sister Margarita and said that she could use me to assist with the children. She opened the door for me and I went in. She led me to the kitchen and poured some coffee for me. Its smell woke me up. She felt sorry for me and I began to cry. Another nun, Sister Emma, a plump woman in her sixties, said to me, "*Gott ist mit sie, fraulein.*"

Sister Margarita took me to a bathroom and allowed me to bathe. Then she showed me to a small room. She wished me a good night and said that in the morning I could help her carry sand that was meant for use during a bombing, downstairs to the basement.

The next morning was clear and cool. I told Sister Margarita that I had worked in the Evangelisches Erholung Heim with Sister Martha and Sister Anna. She told me that Sister Martha had died of a heart attack following an air raid. Oh, that dearest woman, I thought, deeply saddened.

The days there passed quietly. In the mornings I helped to straighten out the children's rooms; afternoons I worked in the kitchen helping prepare the supper. As twilight approached I drew the blackout curtains. The nights, however, were dreadful. No night passed without a visit from the bombers. We spent the nights fully dressed in the drafty cellar knowing that our sleep would be interrupted. The nuns called the airplanes the "Angels of Death."

Late one cloudy autumn afternoon, I was looking out of the kitchen window and watching the leaves fall. I heard an air raid siren, a very common occurrence lately. Sister Emma called me to help gather the children and to take them to the luftschutz keller. We lay face down on the floor. One of the nuns said, "*Gott schutze uns*" – God protects us. Another nun, Sister Bertha, recited Hail Marys. She instructed us to pray. We sat up. I bowed my head and whispered to myself. "Almighty God, watch over us. Protect us from harm. Bring us out of here alive. Unite me with my remaining family in the United States." We held hands and prayed.

It was cold and damp in the shelter. We heard planes flying very low, then a loud explosion, and the lights went out. The

children screamed. We waited in the darkness until we no longer could hear the sounds of the planes, then the all-clear sounded. We tried to open the door leading out, but it would not budge. About twenty minutes later, an air raid warden came with a flashlight and lowered a ladder to us. I tripped over someone and sprained my wrist, which a member of the rescue team bandaged for me. Some of the nuns also had to be treated. The Mutter Haus had been slightly damaged.

I decided to leave Bad Kreuznach once and for all because I felt that it was too dangerous to remain there. I ran from the kinderheim. It was quiet now that the air raids had stopped. But where would I go? I walked for a long time, dripping with perspiration in the growing darkness. Walking, I met a Ukrainian woman, Cecilia, who suggested that we head for the city tunnel, a public air raid shelter, a few miles from the kinderheim. When we got there, we found the long tunnel packed with people. It was dark and damp in there with many mothers and their children. They greeted us warmly. I overheard people say that since the tunnel was constructed of thick concrete, it was more secure against attack than ordinary air raid shelters. Suddenly we heard the all-too-familiar roar of planes in the distance and we all grew anxious. Someone took charge and ordered us to keep calm. A nun suggested that we all silently pray. Some old men, frightened, spoke among themselves. They were not proud of the Nazis and of Hitler. Someone said that Hitler had ordered the major bridges blown up. Another added that American troops already occupied large parts of Germany along the French border. They no longer had faith in the Fuehrer.

Other people were nervous about their homes, wondering whether they would find them intact. Still others expressed optimism, predicting that life would be normal once again and that Germany would be victorious.

I was worried about the next bombardment even before the last one was over. I could hear the pounding of German anti-aircraft guns. Desperately, the Germans were trying to shoot down American and British bombers. I fell asleep and awoke near midnight. Shivering, I put on the coat I had been using as a pillow and also wrapped a blanket around myself.

I spent the night fearing tomorrow and the threat of hunger and death. I glanced at a watch and saw that it was only six o'clock. People started to move out of the tunnel and I did too, picking my way nervously through the debris, afraid of possible unexploded bombs. I used a long stick I picked up to probe the ground ahead of me.

# 16

Hiffelsheim was a village some thirty miles west of Bad Kreuznach. Weary and almost collapsing from hunger, I approached a house and a farmer chased me away. I tried knocking at the farmhouse down the road. A big, middle-aged woman opened the door. When I told her how the place where I worked had been transformed into rubble, she asked me to come in. She said her name was Bertha and introduced me to her husband Otto Gearhardt, a short, stubby person with a ruddy face who looked almost jolly but who turned out to be otherwise to me.

The house, or *bauer stube*, was ordinary but big with red bricks and surrounded by a white wooden fence. It contained a dining room, a living room, a kitchen with a wooden stove and water pump and two bedrooms. Attached to the building was a stable. Part of the house was used as a beer saloon where the Gearhardts served schnapps, beer, and coffee. The farmer employed me to milk their two cows, clean the stable, work in the kitchen, and clean the house and saloon. A few streets away they also owned a chicken coop, where I went twice a week to clean up, feed the chickens, and collect the eggs. Every morning I delivered a pail of milk to a milk house, since it was the duty of each farmer to contribute milk for government use. Otto Gearhardt often reminded me that I was a servant and that I must work if I wanted to eat.

Herr Gearhardt and his beer patrons were ardent believers in the Fuehrer and his promises. One Sunday afternoon when the door to the saloon was ajar, I tiptoed barefoot to the door and eavesdropped on their conversation at the table. They talked about Germany's secret weapons like the V-1 and V-2, which would destroy Britain and the U.S.A. They also predicted that the Russians and the Americans would soon be fighting each other. "*In dritten reich Deutschland wet haven alle die westen*

*France aus West Deutschland.*" "*Deutsche Reich ist fur Deutsche zukunft.*" "The German luftwaffe will regain control of the air."

The conversation about the war soon flowed into a familiar channel – Jews. Walter, an enormous beer drinker, said that prior to the war, the Jews had become the dominating people of Germany. "They are our enemy," he said, "and they must be exterminated." Kurt, an elderly pharmacist, dominated the conversation. He said that Jewish merchants had swindled the Germans. "*Juden nach America auszusandern sneller*" (Jews should have emigrated to America sooner). "We drove the Jews from our country with one-way tickets to Palestine and to other lands. And it's good we got rid of them. They gave us only misfortune, like gypsies." Otto Gearhardt summed up everyone's sentiments when he said, "*Die beseitigung fur die Juden ist the beste sache Hitler had gemachte.*" "The elimination of the Jews is the best thing Hitler has done."

Once I overheard a conversation there about the availability of mattresses stuffed with human hair. I did not sleep that night, thinking about where the hair came from.

On many occasions Gearhardt spoke to his friends about ost arbeiter, the eastern workers. He said that they were *menschen zweiten klass* (second class people). He called them *untermenschen*. Some of Gearhardt's farmer friends did not find room for the east workers in their houses: they made them sleep in stables. One farmer declared however: "Slaves who are underfed and diseased can not produce much." He regretted that they had to be fed to be productive.

Whenever I entered the saloon, Gearhardt's customers stopped their chatter. After I left, I could hear them laugh heartily.

Otto Gearhardt was short-tempered. I often saw violence in his eyes. On many occasions he scolded me: "*Du bist eine dumin madchen Maria, eine schwein.*" He made my life as miserable as he could. He liked to abuse me if front of his friends and call me names like "*farflucte schwein.*" He would also beat me for little reason.

One frigid Sunday morning I went to milk the cows. I sat on the stool, the bucket between my knees, and for a while the milk did not flow. After finishing the first black and gray cow, I went to the second one. I accidently spilled the milk in the pail. Gearhardt flew into a rage and beat me brutally. He yanked me to my feet and slapped me across the face so hard that blood started running from my mouth. I lost a tooth. I fell to the floor, my nose running

and bleeding. His anger still not subsiding, he kept yelling things like "*Aufstehen los verdamt*" ("Get up, damn it"), and spat in my face.

I ran hysterically from the barn through the kitchen to my room. I took a drink of water, swallowing my tears along with the drink. For a whole week my right eye was so painful that I thought I might lose the sight of it. For many weeks I had black and blue marks from the beating. From that time on, every morning, around 5 a.m., Gearhardt came to my door and shouted "*Aufstehen*!" I had to get to the stable one half hour earlier than before so that I would not have to rush to my work.

Every second afternoon, I would walk to the chicken hatcheries and collect the eggs. On the way home I would take a few eggs out of the basket and eat them, always afraid that Gearhardt would find the shells. Once a neighbor saw me cracking some eggs and yelled. "*Ich werde es melden*" (I will tell him). I answered, "*Ich bitte sie lassen sie mir nach*" (I beg you, leave me alone).

One Sunday afternoon, my friend Octave came to visit me in especially high spirits while Gearhardt was lying on the couch, drunk. Octave told me that Germany was in political chaos. He went on to say that during the last month, many people of Bad Kreuznach had died from bomb blasts. There had been days and nights of bombardment, the heaviest yet. "The Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force have joined together to break Germany. Also, the Russian Army in the east has taken city after city and the Deutsche Wehrmacht has pulled back from some occupied territories." He said that Schregler had gone with some young boys to the French border to supervise the digging of ditches; also, that the Americans were 60 kilometers from Bad Kreuznach in Cimern. The main bridges in Bad Kreuznach had already been blown up.

I started to daydream about being free, being treated as an equal, being able to walk the streets without fear. My thoughts were actually of the future! Mrs. Gearhardt, very confused and nervous that Sunday, did not object when I went for a walk with Octave. She tried to show a friendly face.

Each day that went by brought me closer to liberty and I would think about this long into the night. During the day I tried to catch every news bulletin.

By the first few weeks in March, it was already glorious spring. I worked in the fields tending the grape vines, loosening the soil around the vines. Would the spring bring me liberty? One bright, sunny morning, with the spring air fresh and a sweet-smelling

aroma, I heard the sound of airplanes. I lay down on my back under a grape vine, looking up at the blue sky, watching white clouds float by and enjoying the warmth of the early morning sun. Then I heard what sounded like cannon fire. My mind immediately fastened on the possibility of soon being free. I did not know exactly what was happening. Mrs. Gearhardt, looking troubled, came over to take me home. On the way, she spoke quietly to a peasant woman so that I could not hear them. As we walked home in silence, my thoughts were far into the future.

Monday morning, I was awakened by a knock on my door. Mrs. Gearhardt, looking very sad, quietly told me to go into the kitchen and help her take valuable items down into the basement. I immediately got dressed and asked Mrs. Gearhardt what was going on but she did not answer. I carried things down the basement stairs, stretching the cramped muscles in my shoulders. We ate breakfast in silence. The Gearhardts were trying very hard to be nice to me. Mrs. Gearhardt had gotten fresh bread from a bakery, and she gave me a linen napkin for the first time since I had worked for them. Everything was changing for me. I felt a shiver of excitement when I saw their frightened faces. I heard common shots outside and I hurried to the door and stepped into the street. Breathless, and with a pounding heart, I ran toward the noise. The Americans must be entering Hiffelsheim and with them a free spring.

I had the opportunity to participate in the collapse of the Third Reich. This day—March 17, 1945—was an historic one for me. I felt as though I were being reborn. I thought of the many crimes that I knew had been perpetrated by the Nazis. How could such cruelty and slaughter have been committed in the twentieth century! My dream had at long last become real. "I am liberated," I screamed into the air. "I am free of the Nazis. I came through alive. Thank God I've survived the war!"

I went back to the farmhouse where I discovered Mrs. Gearhardt had hung a few white sheets from the windows to show that the family surrendered. The Gearhardts did not rush me to work on this day. Mrs. Gearhardt said to me, "Maria, a new era is beginning," while Otto Gearhardt paced back and forth nervously. It was hard to believe that I was now free, no longer required to wear the identifying blue "Ost." But I still was afraid to reveal my Jewish identity.

Most of the Nazis in Hiffelsheim abandoned the village, seeking safety. Some made their escape to bigger cities. They tried to shake the blame off themselves, claiming they had nothing to do

with the Nazi Party. The chief of the village police ran away. Many Nazi farmers and SS people went free: they pretended to have been ordinary people doing their jobs, their duty for the Fatherland. A few Nazi leaders from Hiffelsheim surrendered to the American authorities and were removed from public office and their property was confiscated. However, I felt that the Nazis were not properly punished. Two days later when I went to pick up eggs from the chicken hatchery, I saw local party leaders on Main Street walking with their hands up as they were led to a denazification center where they renounced their past activities. At least that gave me satisfaction—to see Nazis walking with their hands in the air.

The day for which I had waited so long finally came. On Saturday afternoon, I went out to the village to meet the other girls working for the farmers. They said they too wanted to get away from Hiffelsheim as soon as possible. Marina, a plump girl from Poltawa, had slept for an entire year in a stable because there was no room in the house; the last few nights her boss Herr Bermann let her a sleep in a small bedroom. Marina told him, "Now you have an extra bed for me to sleep in," and his face turned red. Many of the farmers, like Gearhardt and Bermann, were suddenly treating their ostarbeiters like human beings, obviously concerned about the treatment they would receive from the Russians and Americans. Marina and I decided to leave Hiffelsheim on Sunday morning.

I awoke at dawn and gathered my few belongings. During breakfast, Mrs. Gearhardt said, "You will surely stay on, Maria? There is so much work to do on the farm with spring approaching." Otto Gearhardt, with a trembling voice, begged me to remain with them until the work in the grape fields was completed. Mrs. Gearhardt said, "Weren't you satisfied working with us? You will be happy here. After the war everything will be normal." She insisted that her husband apologize to me for all the vile things he had said to me, and she went on: "Maria, how will you find food on your way? You will have to eat from hand to mouth." I read fear in their faces. Mrs. Gearhardt warned me not to seek asylum with the American Army. "*Verstanden*? With us you will be safe. You are not a child."

I was in especially good spirits. I said to them, "*Ich danke ihnen, Herr Gearhardt und Frau Gearhardt. Vielen danke. Mein wunsch ist mein freiheit.*"—"I want to return to my homeland. You needn't waste your sympathy over me. I'm sticking to my decision."

Mrs. Gearhardt gave me 20 Reichmarks for the first time since I started to work for them. "You will need the money on the road." The Gearhardts managed weak smiles. It was the last time they would see me.

# 17

As I began walking, I thought, "What plans should I make for my future?" I wanted to run away from Hitler's territory as soon as possible. I wanted to run away from the country and the people who had helped the Nazis carry out their diabolic policy. The war was almost over, but I did not know where to go or what to do. I could only hope that from now on I would live in a world of peace and freedom.

I met Marina and some other girls. I did not tell them my real name, still afraid to remove my mask. I walked with the sun in my eyes in the clear light of the spring day, weeping tears of pride and gratitude that God had allowed me to live to see this day.

We passed highways where bodies lay in the mud. A military police jeep came by and stopped. We asked the driver for a ride to a city, suggesting that he drop us off at a displaced persons camp. We had heard about these camps where the east workers were being assembled. On that warm spring afternoon, with nature in full bloom, we passed green pastures. Oh, mama, if only you had lived to see this too!

We approached the D.P. camp in Sommerfield, formerly a German military barrack. We discovered that the allied armies had organized a huge camp with people from many different countries and backgrounds. Every nationality in its own barrack, however, and flying its own flag. There were people from France, Italy, Belgium, Poland, Russia and elsewhere. Over the Russian barrack flew the red flag with hammer and sickle. We were proud to display our country's colors. But perhaps we lived in Sommerfield as in a fool's paradise. We were given as much food and drink as we wanted, and we received packages of canned foods such as tuna fish, sardines, and juices. I took a job as a German-Russian interpreter. Each country had a committee for the re-orientation of its displaced people.

One starry night, we heard sounds of music and laughter from the Italian barrack. Marina and I decided to go and join the merriment. First we went to the Polish barrack to meet Marina's friend Zosia. We could hear singing from the Polish quarters too—girls singing Polish songs.

In the Polish barrack. I met a middle-aged man, Jacob Salzman, from Random, Poland. He said he was Jewish and had survived the war disguised as a non-Jewish Pole. The Nazis, however, did not overlook his family; they put his wife and child to death in a concentration camp. He limped because of a bullet wound in his left leg. A Gestapo officer had ordered him to lower his pants to see if he was circumcised. Salzman turned and ran, and the German opened fire on him.

His hope was to go to Palestine. He asked me to go with him to Munich where the Americans were assembling Jews who wanted to go to Palestine. My answer was, "I am tired of war. I would like to go to America, where I hope to find the rest of my family, my father's two brothers and their families." I had heard many wonderful things about America through the letters sent to my family by my uncles. I told Jacob Salzman my story in broken Yiddish, since it has been a long time since I had spoken the language. I told him that my whole family had died with the words "Shema Yisroel" on their lips. It was a relief to reveal the truth about myself.

Salzman wanted to explain to the inmates of his barrack about the evils of racism. I advised him against it feeling that our lives might still be endangered by the anti-Semites among them. He told me that in Poland anti-Semitism had existed. He said that the entire world had been blind to the victims of the Holocaust. Where, he asked bitterly, were the humanitarians such as Roosevelt and Churchill? And why had the Vatican been deaf to the cries of the victims? Jacob Salzman said to me: "How can a nation that has produced people like Bach and Beethoven and Goethe commit such murderous acts! Those polished Germans, with their mannerly *danke sheins* and *bitte sheins* at every second word. And why didn't the other countries stand up for human rights?" No, the entire western world closed its heart to the poor and the tortured. It was incredible that in the civilized twentieth century, the masters of technology would outdo themselves to produce human slaughterhouses.

The only warm feeling that Jacob Salzman felt was directed towards the American army men, and he made friends with the few who could speak Polish. Once, he brought me a pair of athletic shirts that he had received from a friend.

I had started to jot down dates and place names in a notebook a few months before I was liberated. I brought this diary with me to Sommerfield and I continued to write, in the hope of informing others about what had happened. So many things came to mind. What I wrote was true, even though I could not digest it all. I hoped that this nightmare in human history would never, never happen again, that it would no longer be dangerous to be Jewish. It was almost impossible for me to sort out my emotions as I watched my parents and the rest of my family suffer before they were led to their slaughter in Krasnostav. I was a witness to the most evil criminal state in the history of mankind and the story had to be told somehow—not only for my own sake, but also for all the people who went through the same ordeal.

The Russians and Ukrainians with whom I lived in Sommerfield were in fine spirits. They gave concerts and plays and they danced beautifully. But I felt that I didn't belong anywhere, that I was an outsider as if from another planet. I didn't feel wholly real either, since I was still afraid to reveal my identity to my friends. As the end of the war approached, all of us in the barracks were gloriously happy. Even I was happy—first to have survived, and second, if only to represent my family and keep their spirit alive.

One day the loudspeakers announced a meeting for all the Ukrainians and Russians in the social hall. There a Russian officer, Captain Kovalchok, and several representatives from Moscow greeted us warmly and gave us news of our homeland, Matushka Russia. They said that we were badly needed there and that there was an agreement among the Allies to send displaced people like us back to our homeland. They taught us to sing "The Internationale" and they also tried to poison our minds against the American capitalists. One of the officials said, "We do not believe in the American way of life. We do not have black slaves. We understand the problems of the common people."

Another official hinted that in the United States, Jews controlled the banks and the press. "It is true that America is our ally now, but our system is different from theirs. Let us not forget this. Under no circumstances should you permit the Americans to put pressure on you to emigrate to the U.S. Be nice to the Americans, but remember that they are our enemy nevertheless. The time will come when we can help free them from their capitalistic oppressors. But we cannot trust them because with one hand they give out favors, while with the other hand they want to take away our country."

The tensions of readjusting to a normal life after my release from the Nazis were great. Doors seemed to be swinging open for me, yet they also seemed to be slamming shut. I lay awake half the night trying to decide what to do. Captain Kovalchok made it clear to us that the Russian government stood ready to help us return to Russia and pick up where we had left off. At the same time, I tried through interpreters to speak to American officers about going to America. I told them that I was a Holocaust survivor and that I did not want to go back to the land of my birth, to the people who betrayed me and helped the Nazis. I never again wanted to see the people who had helped murder my parents and relatives. I said that my goal was to emigrate to New York, where I had two uncles living. I described to them how it had been the city of my dreams ever since I was a little girl, when my grandmother asked me to read her the letters she received from America. Were my arms long enough to stretch across the ocean, I would happily reach out for my relatives in New York—people who shared my name.

Everybody in the office expressed sympathy for me, but did not see how they could help me. After checking with their supervisors, they told me that I would have to qualify under the existing D.P. quota for entry into the United States. "In America, the quota restrictions are applied equally to everyone. You will need the necessary papers. You will also need an affidavit from your relatives, a visa from the Department of Immigration, then you will have to complete other formalities." An American major summarized it. "I cannot guarantee you will be able to enter the United States in the near future."

I was very disappointed. Weary of running from one country to another, I yearned to settle down and start my life over again. Now I was left with the painful recollection of what I had gone through. I lay awake most of the night, wondering: should I should return to Russia or not? Perhaps I might find some distant relative who had also survived . . . but then it might be ages before I could ever see American land. Still . . .

The next day, I was called into the Russian Deportation Commission office. Apparently someone had eavesdropped on my conversation with the Americans and had told the Russians about my desire to go to the United States. The Russian official, Anatole Swerdlow, gave me a lecture about how I was born in Russia, had been educated there and received a stipend, and now was needed there. He described how badly the Russian schools needed teachers. "Where is your patriotism?" he challenged

me. "The Russian government waits to greet you on the soil of your Motherland." I told him that I remained a Russian citizen even though I had gone to Germany and I assured him that now I wanted to return home.

The deportation committee had the authority to handle plans for the foreign workers. An organization of workers from the east began to sort out where we would be sent. I was envious of my roommates who would be going home to their families. I still felt devotion and patriotism for my homeland, yet I did want very much to leave Europe behind me. While I might find life easier in Russia because I was familiar with the country and culture, I was also seeking the equal opportunity that the United States offered everyone. It was hard to decide where I belonged.

On April 12, 1945, our loudspeaker roared out; "President Roosevelt—is—dead!"

There were many broadcasts paying tribute to him on the radio. Flags were lowered to half-mast. American soldiers spoke about their President with tears in their eyes. There was a memorial service in the D.P. camp. We listened to speeches in English and German about President Roosevelt's life. Everybody mourned .

At the memorial service, I met Octave. His eyes lit on seeing me—even on this mournful occasion. He had gone to Hiffelsheim to see me but Herr Gearhardt had told him I had left that morning, so he went searching for me near Sommerfield and had finally arrived two days ago. I met with him and his friend Marcel almost every day. They were overjoyed over the defeat of Germany, frequently breaking into "The Marseilles." We went together to listen to concerts in the Italian barracks.

The Italians had organized a little chapel for Sunday services, where marriages were also performed by a Roman Catholic army priest between Polish girls and Italians boys. My roommate Zosia was married on a Sunday afternoon to an Italian ex-prisoner-of-war, Mario. I was her maid of honor. All the girls in our barrack worked for a whole week sewing her wedding gown out of a few yards of white battiste gathered from our friends. The dress fit quite well on her slender figure. Zosia let down her reddish blonde hair and was a beautiful bride as she walked to the altar. An Italian boy played the wedding march on his accordion and a tenor sang.

During my years in Germany, I did not think about men in a romantic way. My desire for boys was not like that of the other girls my age. Octave and I kept our relationship casual, our

prime topic of conversation being war. Late one afternoon, Octave and I went for a walk around the lake. The sun was nearly gone and the lake had turned a pale twilight blue. Octave asked me to marry him and go with him to France to live with his mother and sister.

I was confused and I slept little that night. Certainly I was fond of Octave. We enjoyed talking together. But would marriage to Octave have been my parents' wish? Should I deliberatley depart from my family's roots? Simply to ask the questions brought back a strong sense of Jewish consciousness. No, I did not want to change the course of my life. I felt that it was for me, the only survivor, not to fail my parents. I was their living memorial. I had hidden my identity and lived a lie to survive the war. But I could never wipe out the memory of my loving past with my family. How could I marry Octave and go with him to France? I was impressed by Octave's patience and earnestness and his wonderful spirits and intelligence. Yet an inner voice whispered, "Don't leave our heritage. Don't forget your past. Don't remain in the gentile world. Don't give in. You have a deep responsibility to your parents, to all of your family lying in unmarked graves. Do not contribute to Hitler's cause by helping to decimate Judaism and the Jewish people."

I closed my eyes and I could see my father in his skull cap, with the tefillin on his forehead and left arm and the prayer shawl around his shoulders, praying. I remembered him teaching me about the importance of the Torah and about the holiness of God. Then the terrifying remembrance of that 29th day of August, 1941, when all my family and the entire town of Krasnostav were wiped out . . . What did my mother dream of more than anything? To see me married under the chupah. To live the rest of my life falsely, as a Christian, was not part of it. No, I was too deeply devoted to the memory of my parents to give up my Jewishness.

I realized I had to break off with Octave no matter how painful that would be. But first I had to tell him my true identity.

And so I told him my life story. My eyes brimmed with tears and my voice shook when I told him that my real name was Dina, not Maria; when I described to him how I had gotten the false papers in order to remain alive in Germany, as a Christian . . . . Octave listened to every detail, his face taking on the color of white paste. Then he pleaded with me, saying that thousands of girls like me were marrying gentile. He said that life for him without me would be meaningless. I told him I could under-

stand how he felt now but that it all came down to this: "Octave, I do not want to renounce Judaism. My roots are too deep. I must pass all the traditions of my parents on to the next generation. I must look for someone Jewish to walk down the aisle with."

Octave was shaking his head now while tears filled his eyes. But in the end he looked at me with new admiration and respect. And I admired him even more than before. Our conversation had lasted through the night; we were still speaking at daybreak. Octave wiped away his own tears and said: "I hope, Dina—no, I'll always remember you as Maria–I hope from the bottom of my heart that you will find whatever you want from life."

Germany capitulated on May 8, 1945 and the whole world was relieved. On that day, I thought back to the heart-breaking goodbye of my mother and father. I remembered the moment when my mother and I clung together and I said to her, "I will never forget you." How I regretted that my parents did not live to see this day! But nobody survived—not one person of my large family of uncles and aunts and cousins.

I heard how Germany had been partitioned into four zones: Sommerfield became part of the French-occupied area; the Soviets occupied eastern Germany; while English, French and American troops moved into western Germany. It was a time of jubilation. On May 10, the occupation forces held a large reception in honor of the victory. I was chosen to attend as part of the Russian delegation because I spoke German.

The grand ballroom overflowed with people. It was an enormous hall with tremendous windows and walls decorated with scenes of the Rhineland. Chairs of polished mahogany lined the long tables which were covered with damask tablecloths and freshly laundered linen. The hall was illuminated by candlelight from the big candelabras. On the tables were bouquets of spring flowers, settings of glittering silver, Bavarian china in different colors, and crystal glasses of all kinds. There was wine, beer and plenty of Russian vodka (samagonka) to drink. I did not know the names of much of the food but I recognized chicken, roast beef, salmon, and shrimp.

We all stood up and applauded our liberators. Seated with the Russians was Major Anatoly Vasilevitsh, a man of about fifty, with a ruby-red face and gray eyes. An American suggested that we should all bow our heads in prayer to thank God for our deliverance. The Russian major pretended not to understand but said, finally, "We do not believe in prayers." So another American proposed a toast: "In lifting my glass, I wish everyone

a future of peace and happiness in his own way. We all agree that we should hope for peace." We Russians raised our glasses in return and thanked the Allied soldiers for liberating us. The remaining groups wished long life, peaceful co-existence among nations as we worked together to end racism and to assure peace and progress. I was so happy and moved to hear such noble thoughts that I had to swallow the lump in my throat and hold back my tears. Since I was chosen from the Russian delegation to make a speech in Russian, I began my voice my voice trembling with excitement—"We people from Russia thank you from the depths of our hearts for freeing us from slavery. We congratulate you on your victory." It was a moving moment for me and a scene I shall never forget. Everyone shook hands. I sat thinking about the past, overjoyed that I now was a free person, when my thoughts were interrupted by a Russian asking me to dance. We danced a German waltz on that evening of unexpected pleasantness.

This was the start of my search for a normal life, a life with a new family.

The barracks in Sommerfield where we had spent the summer started to empty out. The French and Italians were transported back to their homeland and the time came for us to return to the east. An official named Swerdlov assured me that I would receive a hearty welcome in Russia, that Russian schools were in dire need of teachers. Besides, I still hoped that some members . So once again I set out as a wanderer.