

THE SEARCH

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The Search

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Chapter One

June 1942, a sleepy day in the village, the summer sky clear, save for a charcoal funnel of smoke rising from the steelworks in the nearby town. Above the fields of growing corn the hot air shimmers, languorous and heavy with pollen. Jan feels the sun burning his neck and forearms as he crawls through the prickly stalks. He is careful to keep his head down. Although the crop is abundant this year, it has not yet grown tall enough to hide him, and he knows he could be spotted at any moment. The ground is rough and he bites his lip to stop a cry when his knee grinds into something sharp. He rolls onto his back to rest for a moment, feeling the warm blood run down his leg. The pain nags at him and he risks raising his head enough to examine his knee. A small piece of glass is protruding from his leg. Gritting his teeth, he pulls it out and presses hard to try to stop the flow of blood. He glances at it briefly, just enough to assure himself it isn't a deep cut, but he doesn't examine it; blood makes him feel dizzy, it always has, since he was a small child and saw his father slice off the tip of his thumb when he was

gutting a rabbit he'd caught in a trap. After a few minutes he decides to go on. He has nothing to bind the cut and no option but to continue; they are too close behind and could catch him at any moment.

Ahead of him there is a copse of trees, near to Horak's farm. They will provide some cover. He crawls on, trying to keep his wounded knee off the ground. It makes for slow progress and he thanks God he had such a good start. At last he reaches the edge of the field with the trees only a few yards away. He risks raising his head. They're at the other end of the field, maybe a hundred and fifty metres away. He ducks down, but it's too late, they've spotted him. There's nothing for it but to run as fast as he can. He springs to his feet, wincing at the pain, and darts towards the trees, twisting round them, stumbling as his foot catches on a root. Two minutes and he'll be out of here.

Jan's chest tightens as he runs, squeezes his heart, forcing his breath out in short, painful gasps as he dashes into the yard at Horak's farm. There must be somewhere he can hide. He looks round. Blinded by the sun, Jan doesn't see the elderly mongrel slumbering near the barn. It staggers to its feet, barking, but when it recognizes him as a friend it sinks to the ground, its tail making swirls in the dust. Jan leans over to pat it, taking the chance to catch his breath. There's a pain in

his side and he pushes into it with his fist, to make it go away. The dog lies panting, its eyes begging, but Jan has nothing for it. He scratches behind its ear, whispers *sorry* and straightens up. His heart still pounding, he scans the farmyard. The barn? No, too obvious. The old cherry tree? No, the leaves aren't thick enough and he's wearing a red shirt; they'd spot him at once. Of course – the rain barrel. Jan rushes over to it, his legs weak from all that running. Not much time. He glances round. No sign of them; there should be time to get into it.

The barrel is chest height. Jan grasps the top and tries to haul himself up. His feet scrabble to get a grip, but the barrel is moss-covered, slippery, and he slides down, his finger catching on a rough piece of wood. He sucks at the splinter, pulling it out with his teeth, as he looks round for a stone to stand on. There's one nearby, but if he moves it, it'll be a dead giveaway. Nothing for it but to try again.

Nearly there. The muscles in his arms burn as he clammers onto the top. He kneels on the edge for an agonizing second before swinging his legs round to the inside. The barrel's almost empty because there's been no rain for weeks. He shimmies into it, landing with a light splash in a few centimetres of water. The strain has opened up the cut on his knee and he can feel the blood trickle down his leg. He brushes it away with his

fingers and wipes his hands on his shorts, wishing he had a hanky with him, something to cover it up with. Just thinking about the blood makes him giddy. He takes a deep breath to try to calm himself, but his heart hammers on.

Jan crouches, waiting. Minutes pass. There's a rustling right beside the barrel; he tenses, only relaxing when he hears the chirp of some chicks. Water, from the small puddle at the bottom, seeps into his shoes, and he shivers. But it's a small price to pay for such a good hiding place. He sniffs up the drip dangling from the end of his nose. The air in the barrel is stale. It smells like fish, like carp going off. If he doesn't get some fresh air soon, he'll puke.

Time ticks on, he risks sticking his head out. The farmyard is clear, no one in sight. Perhaps they've gone somewhere else. He tenses as he hears a shout – *Got you*. There's an answering scream, his sister's from the sound of it. His fists clench and he wishes he were bigger. He recognized the shout – it was Josef. He's always after Maria. He probably pinched her or stole a kiss. They act silly round each other nowadays, either fighting or giggling at nothing. Jan hates it when they do this, feels left out. He glowers; it makes him mad to think about them: stupid Josef with his spots and fuzzy upper lip and Maria pinching her cheeks to make them look red;

they're no fun any more. Jan spits into the barrel; never mind, there's always the rest of his crowd, Frantisek and Vaclav and little Karl. He pushes Maria and Josef out of his mind. Confident of a few seconds before anyone will come, he sucks in the fresh air, tastes the scent of mown grass. Delicious. He hears someone running and ducks down, feeling a thrill at the base of his spine.

"We're coming to get you, Jan." His sister's voice, faint still. "You can't hide for ever."

"That's what you think," he whispers.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." Josef's voice joins in, nearer.

Jan trembles. Deep in his belly there is a squirming, a fluttering of excitement. He can scarcely breathe.

The other children run into the courtyard. Jan can't believe they haven't found him. It's hard to resist sticking his head out, but he keeps as calm as he can. To distract himself he thinks of what he'll have for supper tonight. Mother said she'd make pork with *knedliche*. His stomach grumbles; surely they'll hear. A barrage of barking and Maria squeals. She doesn't like dogs. With any luck she'll run off home and the others will follow her – they always do.

Jan counts the seconds – nineteen, twenty. It is quiet once more – the only sound one last, lazy bark from the dog. Does this mean the others are going or are they are

keeping their mouths shut to trick him into showing himself? Jan concentrates. He can hear nothing except the caw of a raven and the faint burr of a far-off motor. He relaxes. They must have gone. His eyes close, pulled down by sleepiness; it would be nice to have a nap.

A thump on the side and the barrel lurches then starts to rock.

“Got you, Jan,” shouts Maria, her round face alight as she leans over the top. The sunlight forms a halo round her head. She’s no saint though. “Come on, out you come.” She tries to grab him, but he ducks out of her reach. The barrel rocks again and he stands up.

“All right, I’m coming. Keep the damn thing still.”

It’s even harder getting out. His feet flail, hopelessly flapping as he strains to lift himself. Josef leans down to try to pull him out, but he doesn’t have the strength, and eventually the others tip the barrel on to one side and he crawls out. His shorts are wet from the water in the barrel.

Back in the sunlight, he blinks and glares at his sister. Maria’s three years older than him, much taller and fatter, nearly as big as his mother. Through the thin material of her dress her nipples stand out, like the knobs on the radio. She seems immense as she stands in front of him pointing at his shorts. “You baby. We’ll have to get a nappy for you,” she says.

The sun is hot on Jan’s face. He kicks at a stone with the toe of his shoe. “There was water in the bottom of the barrel. I got wet when I was coming out.”

“Yeah, right,” says Frantisek. “Piss water by the smell of it.”

“No, it isn’t!”

Frantisek pushes him. He’s a bit of a bully, likes to show off in front of the others. “Piddle boy, piddle boy,” he chants, his voice a sneer.

Jan clenches his fists. One of these days he’ll be big enough to fight Frantisek and then he’ll show him. One punch and he’ll be begging for mercy. His bottom lip trembles.

“Come on, let him be,” Maria says, pulling at Frantisek’s arm. “He’s nothing but a crybaby.” The corners of her mouth turn down, making her more like their mother than ever, and she scowls at Jan.

“No, I’m not.” He pushes her, but she’s immovable.

“You can do better than that,” she jeers.

The roof of his mouth is dry. A pulse throbs in his throat. He sees nothing through his tears of rage.

“What were you thinking of?” His mother wets the corner of her apron and wipes the blood off Maria’s face.

“She started it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Jan says nothing. His eyebrows almost meet in the middle, he's scowling so hard. There's no point in arguing. The others are all Maria's friends when it comes down to it, and they've already told his mother he was to blame – *like a wild animal* – they said – *he went crazy, we were helping him out of the water barrel at Horak's farm and he went for her*. More trouble. He'll be lucky not to get a beating.

“Just as well your father's not home. Hitting Maria like that, and scratching her too, just like a girl. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“She's older than me,” he mutters, glowering at Maria, who sticks out her tongue.

His mother doesn't see this – she never does. “That's enough. Go to your bed. No supper for you tonight.”

He wants to ask his mother why she always takes Maria's side, but the look in her eye stops him and he stomps off upstairs, his body rigid. He sits on his bed and rubs his eyes, pushing the tears away. He hates his mother, hates Maria, hates her friends. He wishes they were dead. His stomach gurgles like an ancient plumbing system. It's hours since he's eaten. It isn't right to send a child to bed without any food. It isn't fair. The tears spill over, run down his cheeks and gather in the corner of his mouth, where he licks them away. He wants to scream, but instead he kicks the door of the bedroom. His shoe

dents the wood, another scuffed mark on the already shabby door. Downstairs his mother shouts: “Stop that nonsense and go to sleep.”

He won't. It's still light outside and he'll show them. They'll be sorry when they come into his room in the morning and find him gone. He opens his bedroom window and looks down. It isn't that far if he clings onto the window ledge and lets go. He's done it before, and they didn't even come after him. It would serve them right if he disappeared for ever. Jan crawls onto the window ledge and lowers himself until he is hanging on by the tips of his fingers. When he looks down it seems much further than it did a moment ago, but it's too late to do anything other than let go. Taking a deep breath, he drops down, biting his lip to stop himself crying out as he lands heavily in the backyard. He's scraped his right knee; that's both knees hurting now and his ankle is throbbing too. He rubs it, pressing his knuckles hard on it, bone to bone. Carefully he stands up and puts his weight on it, waiting for a moment before trying to walk. It aches, but not too much. Before he goes, he takes one last look through the window. Mother is putting bowls in front of the others. Cabbage and potato soup, from her native Poland; it smells delicious. His little sister, Lena, looks up, spots him, opens her mouth to speak. Jan puts his finger to his mouth and she smiles. She's a good kid.

The village is quiet at this time of night. Most people are inside, either eating or getting ready for bed. Jan slogs up the dusty road, occasionally kicking stones into the gutter, wishing he'd stayed put; he's famished. If he were at home, he could have sneaked into the kitchen when everyone was asleep, or maybe mother would have relented, called him downstairs for some food. She won't give him anything but trouble if he goes back now.

It's getting dark. The sun set fifteen minutes ago and the moon has yet to rise. Only a few stars spatter the dusk-laden sky. Jan wonders what to do. He's not going back, but he's tired. Looking around, he sees he's near the Horaks' farm. He can sleep there. Tiptoeing past the sleeping dog, he creeps into the barn and climbs the ladder. There's enough hay there to make himself comfortable for the night. He spreads some out and lies down. The straw is full of insects that bite and make him itch, but he's too tired to let it bother him. He scratches at a couple of spots, but within minutes he's asleep.

Something's coming to get him. He's running, looking over his shoulder, but he can't see what it is. He runs as fast as he can, but it's as if his feet are cased in concrete. He can't get away. Then he stumbles, falls down. He's on the ground, crouching in fear from the thing. He looks up. It's Frantisek, grown into an ogre twenty feet tall.

He stands over Jan, roaring, his pimples standing out purple in his pale face. Jan whimpers. The roaring gets louder. Jan tries to get up on his feet and run, but he can't. He's stuck in the rain barrel, the water rising. With a cry he wakes up. For a moment he can't think where he is and his heart pounds painfully. Then it comes back to him and he puffs out his cheeks, relieved. It's only a dream, he can go back to sleep. He closes his eyes, but the roaring is still there. It sounds like some sort of heavy traffic, lorries probably. Sometimes they pass through the village on their way to Prague, but never at night, not that he can remember. There are other sounds too: shouts, men's voices, rough and harsh. Jan sits up and strains to hear. The voices are closer, but he can't make out what is being said. Something is wrong – why doesn't he understand? He concentrates and recognizes the word *raus*. Germans. What are they doing here late at night? Jan's heart constricts. There's been a lot of talk in the village, serious talk: men in the street, in tight groups, suspicion in their eyes, glancing round as they muttered words of warning; women pulling their children closer; the children aware that something isn't right. Jan had listened at the door while his parents spoke in low voices, but he didn't fully understand it all, something to do with an important German being killed. The Germans had been in their country now for some years and many

people didn't like it, but they just had to get on with it, his mother said. This man had been blown up and the Germans were very angry; they blamed the Czechs. This seemed to frighten the grown-ups, though Jan didn't see why. His father has always told him there's nothing to fear if you haven't done anything wrong, and they certainly haven't.

Jan's mouth is dry. He doesn't want to be here any more. It's time to go home to his mother; he longs to feel her arms round him. Pushing the hay aside, he begins to edge his way to where he thinks the opening of the hayloft is, but he can't see anything, it's so dark. Frightened he'll fall over, he drops to his knees and crawls across the rough wooden floor, feeling his way inch by inch. It takes ages to find the ladder again. When he does, he clings to it and looks down into the black emptiness of the barn. He clenches his teeth as he turns his back to lower himself down the ladder. He counts as he goes, sure there's twelve rungs; his heart skips a beat as he counts thirteen, fourteen. How can he know for sure he'll find solid ground again? He could be entering hell itself. If he holds his breath, the next step will find him safe on the firm ground. It does. He leans against the ladder and thanks God.

His eyes are more used to the darkness now, and he can make out where the doorway is. The dog is barking and

he runs towards the sound. At the entrance to the barn, he stops to look out. The yard is full of menace. There is a small pool of light cast from one window of the farmhouse, but other than that, nothing. Only shadows of what? Trees? Men? Demons? With a moan, he hurtles into the courtyard, zigzags across it, dodges imaginary bullets, the clutching hands that reach from behind trees, the snares laid into the earth. Breathless, he reaches the road. He bends over to try to catch his breath, and looks down towards the main part of the village. About two hundred yards away there are a number of trucks; he can't see how many. Their headlamps are on, lighting up the scene, revealing dozens of soldiers and a few policemen. They've surrounded the main part of the village.

Without warning, a searchlight illuminates the road beside him. Jan turns round. There must be more soldiers further up towards the boundary of the village. He's trapped. He throws himself down and flattens himself against the ground. The searchlight skims over him and he waits for a shout. Nothing. He wriggles over the grass, wincing as his scraped knees drag on the rough earth, until he reaches a tree and hides behind it to watch.

A group of policemen march into the farmyard; they have six villagers with them, all men. Jan recognizes his uncle and presses his lips over his teeth to stop himself calling out. He longs to be with someone he knows, but

like an animal he senses danger. The group passes near to where Jan is crouching. He covers his eyes, as he did when he was a small child, thinking this will make him invisible. They carry on past him, up to the farm. Three of the policemen march straight into the farmhouse without knocking. In a minute or two, the farmer and his wife are dragged out. Horak is pushed over to the small group of men, but his wife is not allowed to join them, despite her pleas. Two policemen have her by the arms; her feet barely touch the ground as she is hauled off towards the main part of the village. Jan licks his lips to moisten them – they're drier than the sand in the desert. He feels emptier than ever, but this is more than hunger: a hollow feeling of dread, of knowing that something terrible is happening. He wonders whether to give himself up or to run and take his chance, but he can't move. He shivers like a sheep newly shorn, but the night is warm. Another sweep of the searchlight; he'll have to hide. There's nowhere to go but up into the cherry tree he rejected earlier that day. He climbs as high as he dares, the bark rough underneath his fingers. It's an old tree and he stops at its heart, snuggles into the crook between several branches. From here he can see into the farmyard and down to the floodlit village, where the soldiers are dragging people out of their houses into the streets. From time to time another group are marched up

to the courtyard. There are one or two women among them holding tight to their husbands, but most groups consist of men only.

Jan watches as they are herded together. Occasionally someone asks what is happening, but the Germans don't reply. He feels himself drifting off to sleep in spite of his terror, and lays his face on the bark of the cherry tree. It feels warm beneath his skin. His eyes close and he forces them open. Mustn't sleep, he might fall out of the tree.

It's been hours. In the east the sky lightens from black to indigo to deep blue. He must have dozed off, for his mouth has the thick taste of sleep. Jan scans his surroundings. Down in the village, the trucks have gone. But the farmyard is full of men. Jan scans their faces looking for his father. He cannot see him. Of course, he was on night shift at the steelworks. He'll be safe if only he doesn't come back. How can he warn him? Even as he thinks this, the rumble of a truck shakes the earth. It draws up nearby and stops. A soldier shouts an order and two others run across and open the doors. Several men stumble out, Jan's father among them. They are all workers from the steelworks. This cannot be happening. The men are pushed into the centre of the farmyard with the others. As it grows lighter, Jan recognizes many of them: his uncle standing with his father, the farmer

Horak, Arnost who lives next door and his wife, clinging to his arm, sobbing, and there on the edge, Josef and Frantisek. What are they doing there? They're only fifteen, not yet men.

Dawn. The sky is clear, promising a beautiful day. The villagers have been put into the barn with a guard of soldiers, and the door barricaded. Another truck appears and two policemen unload some mattresses. They must be for the prisoners to sleep on. But no, the mattresses are piled up outside, standing upright against the wall. One of the soldiers – he must be their leader – calls his troops to attention and speaks to them for a minute or two. Jan wishes he knew what was being said, but he can't hear the words, and even if he could he wouldn't understand them. When the commander finishes his speech, two of the soldiers open the barn door and bring out a group of villagers. They make them stand in front of the wall, the striped mattresses a strange backdrop to the group of dazed men. Without thinking, Jan counts them.

Ten soldiers stand before the ten men. Rifles appear, and as they do, a cacophony of sound rises from the villagers. Their pleas – *Why are you doing this? – Have mercy, I beg you* – are muddled in with shouts from the soldiers – *Ruhig*. Shots, followed by a brief silence which

is torn apart by a wail from the barn. As the bodies are dragged away, another ten men are marched out. Up in the tree, Jan watches; he wants to shut his eyes to this horror but he can't, he has to see what is happening. He can't believe it's real, and tells himself it's a bad dream, all the while knowing that if it were a dream he'd be screaming. Here, now, in this place, he remains silent, digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands.

There's a pause, a break from killing. The soldiers in the farmyard are quiet. Mainly they stand apart from each other, smoking, eating, drinking. Most are silent, lost in thought. One soldier walks towards the cherry tree where Jan is hiding. He rests his forehead against the trunk of the tree. Jan looks down and sees the man is shaking – is he crying? A moment later he retches loudly, vomits. Jan flinches from the acrid stench. He holds his breath, petrified. When the soldier finishes, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. As he does so, he looks up and his eyes meet Jan's. Jan stops breathing. The moment stretches into two, three, four seconds, but still the soldier does not speak. Jan cannot look away; he thinks he will always remember this face: the wide mouth, the tiny scar the shape of a horseshoe on his forehead, the light brown fuzz of hair on the chin. His eyes are pale blue, bloodshot and weary, with no expression. Jan waits for him to shout the others over, but instead the

soldier shakes his head and walks away. Without a word he rejoins the rest of his company. Jan swallows the bile rising in his throat. He's dizzy with terror; piss is seeping through his trousers into the bark.

Two hours later. The farmyard is full of dead bodies piled together in untidy lines. Jan doesn't know how many have been shot. After he saw his father brought out, he stopped counting. His mind is frozen at that scene, as if he has a photograph in his head. Over and over he sees his father standing beside the other men. He said nothing, didn't flinch when the soldiers raised their rifles, but the impact of the bullets made his body twitch like a puppet as it folded to the ground.

The soldiers are taking another break. The one who was sick earlier is approaching the tree. When he gets there he glances behind to check if any of the others are watching. Most of them are gathered in a group, smoking, uninterested in anyone else. The soldier pees against the tree and speaks to Jan without looking up. His Czech is faltering and it takes Jan a moment to understand what he is saying.

"Go. To the village. If they see you, they..." He mimes shooting. "In village, safe with other children. Go." He buttons his flies, and looks up. His pale blue eyes are intense. "Go. Now."

Jan slides down the tree. He doesn't care whether he's caught or not. The soldier walks back to the rest of the company. Jan stands for a moment, uncertain what to do. Then, as he sees the barn door open and another ten villagers dragged out, he turns away and stumbles over the rough grass to the road. He staggers down to the main part of the village, the sound of gunfire deafening him, blind to where he is going.

Barely conscious, he reaches his house. It looks the same as it did when he last saw it. He had thought it would be changed. The door is ajar and he pushes it open and creeps inside. There is no one there. His only thought is to get some food and drink. Thank God there's some stew left in the pot on the stove. Jan grabs a handful and stuffs it into his mouth. He salivates at the taste of onions and herbs: rosemary and perhaps sage. It's delicious, it always is – his mother is a great cook. Within a minute he's eaten it all. The door creaks and he spins round. A soldier gestures to him, his face grim. Jan puts the pot aside and wipes his hands on his shorts. He looks round but there's no escape. Walking slowly, he approaches the soldier who pulls him outside and pushes him towards a nearby truck. He opens the door and shoves Jan inside, slamming the door shut behind him. Jan panics; it's dark inside the truck. Only a crack of light by the door, a

thin line of brightness, stops it from being unbearable. Jan sits down by the doors and tries to peer through the tiny gap. He can see very little, a tiny patch of road with weeds growing up from a crack. He bangs on the side of the truck but no one takes any notice. For an hour maybe more, he waits, occasionally kicking the side of the truck, hoping someone will come and find him, but no one does. He wishes he hadn't eaten the stew for his stomach aches from wanting to empty his bowels. But he'd die rather than soil himself and he wills the pain away.

Just as he thinks the soldier has forgotten him, the engine starts. Jan runs to the front of the truck and shouts in to the driver, *let me go, what's happening*. There is no response. The driver changes gear and the truck lurches forwards, throwing Jan to the floor. He lies there without moving, tries to hold back the tears, which are threatening to spill over. But what's the point – there's no one here to mock him. Jan buries his head in the crook of his arm and sobs. God knows where he's going.

Chapter Two

The truck judders to a stop, throwing Jan to one side. The journey has been short but uncomfortable. It was impossible to sleep with the noise of the engine and the smell of diesel and Jan lay on the floor, tossed from side to side as the truck rumbled over the bumpy road. He sits up, grateful that the bruising movement has ceased, and brushes the dust off his clothes. It sticks to his sweaty fingers and he wipes his hands on his shirt, leaving filthy smears on the red cotton. He has never been so dirty in his life; his mother will be furious with him. He can hear her voice now, her Polish accent stronger as it always is when she's annoyed – *Look at you Jan, always so dirty. How will I get that shirt clean?* – it's so clear that he looks round to see her but of course she is not there and it dawns on him that he might never see her again, that if the Germans killed all the men, they might also have killed the women. Tears sting at the back of his eyes and he blinks to keep hold of them but they spill over anyway, running down his face. Before he can wipe them away, a noise at the door draws his attention and

he stills, fearful and wary. Metal scrapes on metal as the bolt is drawn and when the light and air spill in from outside, Jan knows where he is. The burnt metal smell of the furnace is unmistakable. This is the town where his father works, worked. No – he mustn't think of his father now.

Jan uses his heels to press himself as back as far as he can; he doesn't want to leave the truck to go God knows where. He squints past the soldier, who looms in the doorway, to try to make out exactly where he is. The truck has come to a standstill in what seems to be a schoolyard. He can see a school building nearby, much like the one in his village, only bigger. The soldier jerks his head to indicate that Jan should come out. Jan's knees are shaking; he knows they won't support him. He whimpers and curls in on himself as the soldier jumps up into the truck and strides towards him. The vehicle pulsates with each step. There's nowhere for Jan to go; he can't dodge the soldier's fist. Several people stop to watch as he is dragged from the van. A little girl clasps her mother's hand tight, her mouth shocked open. After a moment or two, her mother pulls her away, but the child continues to stare, her eyes wide and wondering. The woman doesn't look at him as she hurries away. Jan longs to cry out for help but he is too frightened; voiceless he stumbles across the yard into the school, the soldier

pushing him forwards. The tarmac is sticky beneath his feet; it is a hot day, even hotter than yesterday.

The school gymnasium is full with children and women from his village guarded by a cordon of police. In the centre of the room there is a girl from his class, Karla. Her face is strained, pale. She is looking at him but something in her eyes tells him that she is not really seeing him. Jan is pushed into the hall and told to sit down. He staggers across the threshold, his legs shaking, unable to take in what he is seeing – a haze of faces, tired and fearful. When he reaches a spot that is clear, he sinks to the straw covered floor and puts his head in his hands. He doesn't want to look at anyone; he is filthy, a smell of piss rises from his shorts, he wishes...

A hissing whisper – *Jan, come here*. He turns to the direction of the sound, sees his sisters and mother beckoning. Their faces are pallid, blurred, as if someone has tried to rub them out. He thinks he's dreaming; Jan is no longer sure what is real and what is not and wonders what will happen if he crawls over to be beside them. Perhaps they'll disappear and he'll be alone once more. He wants to keep them there, to be able to see them, so he doesn't move. A few seconds later and his mother is beside him. She grabs his hand and pulls him to her. She has been crying; her round face is crumpled and stained with tears. "Where have you been?" she says

in an undertone, looking behind to make sure none of the soldiers or police is watching.

Jan opens his mouth to speak but no sound comes out. A picture of his father twitching on the ground flickers in his mind and he retches. He looks down at the floor unable to speak. His mother draws him closer. Jan, who has been too old for cuddles for a year now and who never offers his mother or his sisters a goodnight kiss, accepts this, leaning his head on her shoulder.

“Let’s join the others. You can tell us later what happened.” They crawl back to his sisters. Lena is asleep, her head using Maria’s lap as a pillow. Maria wavers a smile at him. She is no longer angry with him. It is good to be near his family. Mother strokes his hair and after a while he is almost lulled into a doze. When he shuts his eyes though, the vision of his father folding onto the ground like a stringless puppet appears and he forces himself awake. He sits up and moves away from the others, frightened that they can see what’s in his head. Mother draws him back towards her. He wants to shake off her arm but the dull pain in her eyes stops him. Jan tries to speak but she shushes him.

“Hush, sweetheart. It’s all right. We’re together now.”

It’s not true; papa will never be with them again. How can he tell his mother and his sisters what he witnessed? His mother rocks him in her arms, calming him with the

steady motion. He looks round the room at the people there: no men whatsoever, the boys are all young, the oldest is thirteen, maybe fourteen. Everyone is huddled in family groups. Jan wonders if anyone escaped or whether they managed to get every villager. He can’t understand what is going on, why they chose to do these things to his village.

Maria catches his eye and begins to speak. Her voice is low and flat, lifeless. “We were going to bed when they came. There were three of them,” she shudders. “I thought they were going to kill us.”

Jan gags, puts a hand to his mouth.

“What’s the matter?”

He shakes his head, a tiny movement, all he has energy for. He wants to sleep for then he can wake up from this nightmare. Maria looks at him for several seconds: he counts, seven, eight, nine... He can’t bear the expression in her eyes, as if she knows exactly what he has seen, and he looks away.

She continues, “They burst into the house... they may have knocked, I’m not sure. There was a lot of noise, but they didn’t wait for us to answer. Mother was half undressed. They wouldn’t let her put anything else on.” He glances at his mother – it’s true, he hadn’t noticed before, she is wearing only her undergarments, the white petticoat grubby with sweat and dirt. Jan blushes for her shame.

Maria falls silent; perhaps she too finds it hard to talk of what she's seen. Jan's eyelids droop; he's exhausted but too tired to sleep, too frightened of what he might see in his dreams. He tries to distract himself, gives himself a meaningless task: on what day will his birthday fall this year. His birthday is in November, five months away, but when he thinks of this, his father, whose birthday is a few days after his, comes to mind. A tear runs down his cheek. Mother shakes him, asks why he is crying. He doesn't answer and after a few seconds, she carries on with the story that Maria couldn't finish.

"They dragged us downstairs and made us give them everything of any value. One of them held Lena while I went through our things. He had a gun in his right hand and he kept staring at me while I brought out all our valuables." Her lower lips trembles and her voice shakes as she goes on. "It was horrible. He was smirking and the whole time he stroked the trigger with his finger, pausing every so often as if he was about to squeeze it." A tear runs down her cheek. "I thought if I gave them what they wanted they'd go away. I gave them everything, even my wedding ring, but it was pointless." His mother pulls him closer. "When I took out the secret brick, you know, the one in the fireplace, I thought, that's it, they'll go now. All our money was there, and some jewellery that was my mother's. But they didn't. They took us outside

where everyone was being gathered. The street was full of trucks and soldiers. Dozens of them. There seemed to be more of them than us." Her eyes are full of tears. "They took the men away... I... I don't know where and put the women and children into the trucks and brought us here. God knows how long ago that was, but it was very early this morning, just after dawn." She stops speaking and pushes a fist into her stomach. "They've given us nothing to eat, only some water. I'm so hungry." She squeezes his arm, "And you, I didn't know where you were. You must be starving."

Jan shakes his head. He's empty inside but it isn't hunger. Lena stirs and Maria rocks her gently. It's better if she doesn't wake up. He wonders if he can speak and opens his mouth to try but the only sound that comes is a croak.

The day drags on. There are well over two hundred women and children in the hall, maybe as many as three hundred. All of them are tired and frightened. Every so often, but not often enough, some of them are allowed to go to the toilet. The smell is overpowering – a mixture of unwashed bodies, piss and shit. Jan watches as a toddler pulls at her sodden nappy until it falls to the ground. The child's mother sits nearby, looking on, but she does nothing. Her eyes are dead, as lifeless as the coal that lies

in slag heaps near the mines. One of the other women picks up the nappy by the tips of her fingers and takes it over to a growing pile of dirty clothes. The child's mother turns away as the infant pulls at her dress. Jan hears someone say that the woman's husband was badly beaten by the soldiers – *He couldn't have lived after the beating he took*. But no one does anything to comfort her.

Late in the afternoon, soup is produced, a hellish grey brew. It stinks as if made from bad meat. Most people eat it, holding their noses so they don't have to smell it. Jan won't touch it, even though his mother begs him to eat. He can't bear the thought of food. When night falls, they lie down on the straw and try to rest but the air is tense with fear and crackles with the cries of babies too hungry to sleep. Jan lies awake in the darkness listening to his mother sob. He hasn't told her what he saw but Maria whispers that they heard shots from the direction of the farm, did he know what they were. He pretends not to hear.

Another day passes. Everyone is fearful, tight with anxiety. Lena sucks her thumb so fiercely that it worries her mother. She plays finger games with Lena to distract her and encourages Jan and Maria to join in. For a brief half hour they almost forget their predicament until one of the women tries to speak to a soldier in German. He

ignores her, stands aloof, his head turned away from her. When she persists, he hits her with the butt of his rifle and she falls down, blood pouring from her head. No one moves, as if they sense that the soldiers too are nearing breaking point. Five, ten minutes pass. To Jan's horror, his mother struggles to her feet and walks towards the woman, her hands in the air as a gesture of surrender. He tenses, waiting for her too to be felled. She leans over the woman and wipes the blood from her face. Jan closes his eyes. He hears his mother speak – *I would like some water*. Surely now someone will hit her. But no, his mother is walking towards the door accompanied by a soldier. In a moment she returns with a bowl. Everyone in the room watches as she washes the woman's head then tears a strip from her petticoat to make a bandage. The soldiers look on also, leaning on their rifles. She finishes what she is doing and returns to her children.

Two more hours go by. It's almost dark, nearly two days since they were taken away from their homes. They haven't had any food since lunchtime. Jan is troubled, whispers to his mother – *What do you think will happen to us?* She strokes his hair, smiles down at him, "We'll be fine as long as we're together." She doesn't mention father. Jan thinks she knows something's wrong but he isn't going to say anything about what happened. He can't.

“Jan, where were you that night?”

He shakes his head, “I don’t know, up at the farm.”

“I thought you were dead.” A tear runs down her face.
“I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I’m sorry, I was angry because I thought you were taking Maria’s side. I just wanted to run away.”

“Silly boy,” she hugs him and they sit silently for a moment. She takes a deep breath and asks what he has been dreading. “Was it Horak’s farm? Someone said that’s where they took the men. Did you see what happened to them? Did you see your father?”

Jan bows his head; she puts her finger under his chin and forces him to look at her. “Jan?”

He has to tell her. There is no possibility of lying about this. Jan opens his mouth but before he can speak, an officer enters the room. His uniform is different, smarter than the others and he looks stern, like their teacher does when something goes missing from the classroom or when one of the little ones piddles on the floor. The man stands in the centre of the room, waiting. The women and the older children fall silent, don’t move, but the little ones are too small to take heed and they carry on with what they are doing: rolling up little bunches of straw and throwing them aside, chewing at the hems of their dresses and shorts, sucking their thumbs.

“Women, stand.”

Uneasy glances dart from woman to woman. No one moves and the soldier raises his voice. “Now! Stand.” Slowly they get up from the floor.

“Line up here.” The officer points to the door.

One woman bends to lift her baby.

“Leave it.”

She ignores him and takes the child in her arms. The officer mutters in German and two privates march over. One of them seizes the baby from her while the other one holds her. Both mother and child wail. The taller of the soldiers strikes the woman with the back of his hand and she falls, her arms outstretched towards her disappearing child.

The officer says in a firm voice, “You will leave the children here.” Chaos breaks out as he says this and there are screams from some of the women. Jan clutches his mother’s leg.

“Quiet, or we will shoot.”

One of the women shouts that they can’t do this and a few more raise their voices in agreement but they are silenced a second later by the soldier firing his gun into the ceiling. Some plaster falls down and hits a small child on the head. She is only a toddler and starts to cry but when her mother moves towards her, one of the soldiers steps in between them and points his rifle at the child, gesturing with his head for the woman to leave.

The woman looks at him in horror and goes to stand at the door. There is no doubt the soldiers mean what they say.

Mother hugs them to her, kissing them hard. Jan thinks it would be better to be shot than lose her too. He is torn now about what to tell her about papa; it seems so hard that his last words to her should be ones of sorrow and pain. But before he can decide what to do, she is gone, pulled from them by a soldier who is just a boy, his face scarlet. Jan cannot tell whether the colour is from rage or embarrassment. Maria gathers him and Lena to her. Her body shakes with sobs and awkwardly he pats her arm.

They fall into an agitated sleep, which does nothing to revive them. Jan wakes several times and sees that Maria too lies with her eyes open. At dawn the soldiers shout to them to get up. One child, a little boy of maybe three howls and this starts off many of the others. Jan tenses. After what he has seen, nothing would surprise him and he's terrified of being shot. He grips his sisters' hands and wills them to do nothing to draw attention to themselves. They sense his urgency and they stand motionless beside him. The officer tells the children to line up and they do as they're told, the older ones trying to comfort the babies and toddlers. Jan prays they won't separate the boys from the girls. He cannot bear any

more pain. He has to stay with his sisters. Once they are in lines, the officer orders the doors to be opened. Jan breathes in deeply. The metallic fumes catch in his throat but they are perfume compared to the stink inside the school. For a moment he allows himself hope: they are going to be set free, their mother will be waiting outside for them, they will be sent home. It will be terrible to have to tell her about father but he will find the strength somehow. When he reaches the door and sees the three trucks waiting for them, he almost breaks down. Maria grabs his hand and he squeezes it wondering how he could ever have thought her a nuisance. She smiles at him, "We'll be all right, you'll see. As long as we're together." Jan nods but wonders whether they will be together for long.

They are bundled into the trucks, about thirty children in each. There are no seats and they have to sit on the floor which is filthy. Jan takes Lena on his knee so she doesn't have to sit in the muck. As they travel along the road the truck sways and bumps and some of the children are sick. Lena pukes all over her nightdress. She starts to cry. It is her favourite, mother made it for her only a few weeks ago. It's white cotton with tiny sprigged roses on it, all of them pink. Now there is a large yellow vomit stain on it. Maria tries to comfort her as she wipes the sick away with her hand.

“Never mind. It’ll wash out.”

Lena bites her lip. Maria hugs her tight and looks across at Jan. “I’m sorry about what happened the other day... that I teased you.”

The scratches he made on her face are still livid. Jan cannot believe he lost his temper over something so stupid. He shrugs and says he’s sorry too. Maria holds out her hand to him and he takes it, twining his fingers through hers.

“I wonder where Josef and Frantisek are.”

Jan doesn’t answer. He wants to forget he saw them in a row of ten, their faces bleached with fear as they waited for the shots that would kill them.

He must have fallen asleep. The truck stops and unprepared, he is thrown forwards, bumping his head on that of a boy two years or so older than him, Frantisek’s younger brother, Antonin. They’re all bullies in that family. He makes a threatening gesture and Jan apologises. There’s no point in making a stand when he has to save all his energy for what’s ahead. With a sneer the boy backs off. When he’s sure he can’t be seen, Jan sticks his tongue out. Maria giggles before she can help herself but when she remembers what is happening she covers her mouth with her hand, her face sad once more.

Now the trucks have stopped, they can hear the sounds of a town: traffic, a dog barking, a train hooting in the distance. The doors open and the children are told to get out. The four children at the front are reluctant to move and have to be pulled out by a rough soldier who whacks each of them on the head. No one needs a second telling; the rest of the truck empties within seconds on to a railway platform. Jan looks around him. “Where are we, do you think?” he asks Maria.

“I don’t know, Prague maybe.”

Jan nods his head, “Yes it might be. Can you see a sign anywhere?” They both look around but there is nothing to see except the train in front of them and a few yards away, a group of women, hard-faced and unsmiling. They walk over to greet the soldiers. One of the soldiers counts the children and a few minutes later after some signing of papers, he and the other men leave and the women take over. They line the children up in twos and march them to the other side of the station. Although he tries hard, Jan sees no signs and he is too scared to shout out to the few civilians they do see. Five minutes later a train steams in and the children are shoved into one of the carriages. The seats are hard wooden benches and there aren’t enough for everyone. Jan and his sisters are squashed into a corner, against a window. It’s uncomfortable but at least they are together.

Jan drifts in and out of sleep on the journey. It goes on for hours; they pass through towns and countryside, none of it familiar. Day turns into night and all that can be seen is an occasional light in the distance. The children are all weak with hunger for they have been given nothing to eat, not even a slice of bread. One of the little ones, a toddler starts to cry, quickly becoming inconsolable. As she weeps, the women, who are guarding them, watch unmoved.

“What happened to the men, Jan, to father?” Maria’s voice is so quiet he is not sure he has heard right. He doesn’t answer but leans against the window, feeling the smooth coolness of the glass on his face.

“Did you hear me?” Insistent.

He shrugs, “I don’t know.” He won’t meet her eyes. Jan is sure she knows he’s lying but he doesn’t want to speak about it. He can’t, not yet.

“I heard shots. We all did. Are they dead?”

Jan sighs but before he can say anything, one of the women comes over to him and slaps his face. In a strong German accent she tells him to be quiet. Although his face hurts badly from the slap, Jan is glad to have an excuse not to talk. He saw the glint of tears in Maria’s eyes; she is close to breaking point and he senses that they need all the strength they have.

* * *

It is still dark when they reach their destination. The children are dragged out into the open air, which is sweet smelling and fresh after the staleness of the train. An owl hoots, making Lena jump. Jan cuddles her and whispers that everything will be fine. He can make out the dark shapes of trees against the blackness of the night. Something flies past, brushes his hair and he gives a little cry of fear. A bat, he’d swear to it. The women order them into lines and they are marched a short way to a large building. It’s like a factory Jan thinks when he sees it. Inside it is sparsely furnished; they are taken to a huge room with beds lined up in rows against the walls.

After a short wait, they are given some dry bread to eat. There is almost a riot as it is thrown at them in a random fashion. Jan manages to grab two loaves, enough for the three of them and he thinks he will try to save some for later as there’s no way of knowing how long it will be before they eat again. With great care, he divides each loaf into three and hands the girls two pieces each. He eats his first piece very slowly, chewing each mouthful thirty times like he used to hear his grandmother say. The bread is poor quality and stale and turns into a glutinous mass in his mouth, but he savours it as if it were fresh from his mother’s oven. The other piece is in his pocket and he touches it, making sure it is there, his safety net for

later. Although it is not nearly enough to fill his belly, the small amount of nourishment makes him feel better.

Some of the beds in the room are already occupied. Although the new arrivals make a lot of noise – the younger children are clamouring for more food, one of the babies is crying – the bodies in the beds don't move. Jan has a terrible thought that there are corpses under the grey blankets and he stares at the nearest shape and wills it to move. For several seconds nothing, then an almost imperceptible twitch at the foot of the bed. Not corpses after all, just more children like them.

When the children have finished their poor supper one of the women shouts at them to undress. Jan realizes he has to eat the bread or lose it so he forces it down though he would rather keep it for later. Once the children are naked, three of the women take them to a room with showers and tell them to wash. They have to stand in long queues for the showers can only take about ten people at a time. The water is cold and some of the children dash in and out, taking only a couple of seconds but Jan lingers as long as he can. The water is like needles piercing his skin but he relishes it. It will make him clean. He grabs the small bar of soap and scrubs himself all over, digging his nails into his skin and scraping the dirt away. His teeth are coated and he scrapes at them with a fingernail, wishing he had his toothbrush. He's last in

the shower and a woman comes and shouts at him in German. Jan blushes at being seen naked, runs back to the dormitory out of her sight.

He waits with the others, teeth chattering uncontrollably, hoping for a towel. Like the other children, Jan stands with his hands over his genitals. None of them look at each other, thank God. It's years since he has seen either of his sisters naked and he doesn't want to embarrass them. There's no sign of their clothes but Jan doesn't care. His shorts were stinking and he doesn't want to put them on again, now he's clean. The woman shouts again and points at the beds, indicating they should get into them. There is a scramble as children from the same family try to get beds close to each other. Jan doesn't manage to stay beside Maria and Lena but has to go over to the other side of the room. As he climbs into bed, he waves at them, tries to smile but his mouth wobbles.

The evening is warm and in spite of being damp from the shower, Jan soon heats up. He lies in bed trying to make out what is around him. The ceiling is high and there is little light; he has to give up. All will be revealed in the morning. Jan is frightened to close his eyes, scared of what he will see, but he is worn out and his eyelids droop and close. Within seconds he is sleeping.

Chapter Three

Jan wakes early. He knows it's light even though he keeps his eyes closed; the inside of his eyelids is transparently pink in a way only possible when sunshine is trying to get through. For a brief, delirious instant he is happy. The sun is warm on his cheek and he snuggles into the cocoon of bedclothes, drowsily lazy, ignoring the need to pee; he'll get up in a minute.

A niggle of unease, something's wrong. The smell. This isn't home. At home there's always something baking, filling the house with sweet aromas: vanilla, cinnamon, fruit. Here there's a tang of chemicals, cleaning fluid, bleach. Where on earth is he? He opens his eyes, sees walls that are too far away and too dark to be those of his bedroom. At home, his bed is by the wall and the white paint is scored with pencil marks where he and his sisters have played games or written messages to each other. Here the walls are made of brick, unpainted, like the outside of a building. His world has been turned inside out. He looks round and sees that there are many beds in this huge room, too many to count. Panic forces

his breath out quicker. He cannot think where he is... but then all at once, with no warning, the memory of what has happened punches him in his guts and he closes his eyes. His father's body is in front of him, falling to the ground. Jan blinks rapidly to try to rid himself of the image but each blink is like the shutter of a camera so that every movement of his father is stilled. It's like watching a jerky old-fashioned movie. Jan presses his fist into his mouth and moans, bites his knuckles to stop himself from screaming out. It can't be true, it must have been a bad dream, but if it was a dream why is he not at home in his own bed. Another groan, louder this time, escapes.

Someone taps his shoulder with a touch as gentle as a feather. Jan opens his eyes but the bright morning sunshine is dulled by his grief. By the side of his bed is a boy, probably a little older than he is. The boy holds out a sweet to him, a fruit boiling, dark red with a coating of dust and fluff, which makes it look mouldy. The unexpected kindness moves him and he brushes his hand across his eyes, not wanting the other boy to see. The boy lays the sweet on top of the bed and gives a gap-toothed smile. He says something but Jan doesn't catch it. When the boy says it again, more slowly, Jan realizes he's Polish. It takes him a few seconds to fully tune in to the sounds; the accent is different to his

mother's. The boy must think he doesn't understand for he points to himself and says, "Janusz", enunciating the syllables.

Jan smiles, "Me too."

The boy raises an eyebrow, "What's your name?"

"Same as yours, but they call me Jan."

Janusz' smile broadens, "Enjoy the sweet; we don't get them often." He turns to make his way back to his bed.

"Where are we?" says Jan.

"Poland."

Poland. He can't believe it. His mother often promised to take the children there to see their grandparents and other relatives but they never had enough money to visit. Before Jan can ask more, another boy sits up in bed, his hair sticking out at a crazy angle; he puts his fingers to his lips and shakes his head at them both. Janusz climbs into bed without another word.

"Where in Poland?"

"Lodz."

"Where's that?"

Janusz shrugs, "It's west of Warsaw, near Germany."

Dear God, they must be hundreds of miles from home. Why have they been brought here? What is this place? He asks Janusz, but he shrugs, saying he's not sure.

In the bed next to him is Karl, a boy from his village. Jan doesn't like him much; he's a bit of a swot but maybe

he'll have some idea of what's happening. He gets up and crosses the short space between the beds.

He shakes Karl's shoulder, "Karl, wake up, won't you."

Karl opens one eye and glowers, "Go away Jan. I want to sleep."

"Do *you* know where we are?"

Karl ignores him, pulling the sheet over his head. In spite of the warmth of the sun, Jan shivers. Why is everyone being so horrible? Surely they should stick together. Jan tries again. "Karl, where are we?"

A sigh. "Jan, I don't know, how could I? You think they told me specially?"

The door to the room opens and Jan runs across to his bed and jumps in. He thinks it's probably best not to get caught.

A woman's voice resonates in the room, harsh sounds; she is speaking German. The bodies in the beds stir; begin to rise from their beds. Jan swings his legs out of bed, but of course he has no clothes. They were taken away the night before. He stands there, beside the bed, unsure what to do. He can't see anyone he knows. None of the other children from his village have stirred. They're exhausted from their journey yesterday.

An extremely large woman, who wasn't with them yesterday – Just as well, thinks Jan, there would have been no room for anyone else – comes into the room and

shouts in a gruff, deep voice like a man's. Jan wonders if her face will explode – it is flushed red and shiny. He had a ball that looked just like it once, a long time ago. It had burst when he kicked it into some wild roses.

Another four women join them. They carry huge piles of clothes, so high that their faces are hidden, and dump them in the centre of the room. The fat woman points to them with a doughy finger and Jan realizes they have to pick some clothes and get dressed. He runs across to the pile and searches for his own clothes. His shirt, a vivid red splash, is easy to find but not his shorts. For a moment he hesitates then chooses a pair that look to be about the right size, as well as a pair of underpants, and scampers back to his bedside before they can be taken from him. He dresses quickly, keeping an eye on what the others are doing. The women indicate that they should line up and they visit the toilets before being taken into another large, austere room.

It's empty apart from several long wooden tables, each maybe twelve feet long with benches on either side. They jostle each other to get a space. Jan manages to sit at the same table as his sisters. With a pang, he realizes Lena has been crying. Her face is blotchy in the way it always is when she's been sobbing. Although he's several feet away, he can see her eyes are swollen. Maria cuddles her but Lena doesn't respond. He stares at them, helpless.

The two people at the top of each table rise in turn and go to a hatch where they pick up some plates. One is set down in front of Jan. It has two slices of dark bread on it and something that might be butter. He looks round for cutlery but sees that the other children, the ones who were here before them and presumably know what to do, are wiping the bread over the butter before stuffing it into their mouths. One of them, a tall blond boy who looks older than the rest, moves his hand towards Jan's plate but Jan sees it coming and grabs his bread. The boy retreats, a sneer sliding across his face. Careful to watch all sides and ready to protect what he and his sisters have, Jan eats the bread. It is dry and hard, tastes of sawdust. He wouldn't be surprised if they'd put wood scrapings in the flour; he's heard of such things. Nonetheless even though it's tasteless, it is food and he's hungry, starving, so he eats every scrap. As soon as he's finished he realizes how foolish he's been; he has no idea when they'll next be fed.

When they have all finished they are sent back up to their room to make their beds and then to the kitchen where they have to wash the dishes they used for breakfast. All the time, the women who are supervising speak to them in German. Jan understands nothing. He follows the rest of the children keeping out of the way of the women. A couple of times he tries to find out if anyone else knows what's going on, but they're all as ignorant as him. When

the other children, the ones who are not from his village, hear him speak, they shake their heads and glance at the women. Jan isn't sure but he thinks they're warning him. It's frightening, makes the future even more uncertain. A terrible thought comes to him: his mother too might be dead, shot like his father and the men of the village. It's unbearable, he has to know and without thinking he shouts out as loud as he can, "Where are our mothers?"

One of the women turns and looks at him. Her face is fat and round, dimpled all over, like a piece of bread dough that's just been kneaded. She strides over to him and grips his shoulder, leaning forwards to speak. The strange sounding words roll out in a furious stream, tumbling into incoherence. Jan makes out one word said over and over again, "*Deutsch*". He knows this means German but he doesn't understand the rest. Her voice rises and she shakes him in time to her words. Gradually he distinguishes the separate sounds as they are spat in his face. "*Du musst nur Deutsch sprechen.*" Still he doesn't understand. At last she stops and walks away, leaving him bewildered and frightened. He's shaking, doesn't dare look at the others in the room, but instead carries on with his cleaning duties, too terrified to speak, dusting the one spot over and over in a frenzy of rage and fear.

* * *

The morning passes in a bewilderment of chores. He had never thought there could be so much to do: floors to be washed, potatoes to be scrubbed and peeled, clothes to be wrung out. By the end of the morning his hands are red and creased from being wet all the time and he knows he has bruises on his back where the women keep hitting him. They beat him for so many things: a cloth not wrung out properly, a potato peeled too thickly, water slopped on the floor. He gave up counting after the twentieth slap. They hit all the children, especially the boys, at the least excuse. One boy, who is tiny, maybe only four or five years old, begins to cry, huge tears rolling down his face, merging with snot streaming from his nose. Jan wishes he could comfort him, he is so small, like his own little sister and he cannot bear to think of her crying in this way, but he is too scared to do anything and so he stands by and watches. The women seem pleased to have got a reaction, one of them smiles showing large yellow teeth, like a horse's, and Jan vows that no matter how hard they hit him, he will not cry.

In the afternoon, after a lunch of salty cabbage and potato soup (nothing like his mother's delicious broth) they are lined up and taken to another smaller building, a house, about two kilometres away. They are forced to run, which, after all they've done this morning, exhausts

them. When they arrive at huge iron gates, they have a chance to rest while the women struggle to open it. For a few precious seconds they stand gasping for breath, hoping for something to drink for the day is hotter than ever and the salty soup has left them with a pernicious thirst.

The gates are opened and they pour through. The house looks more welcoming than the factory they have just left. It stands alone surrounded by a large garden, which is unkempt but still bears traces of once having been cared for. There is a small orchard of apricot trees and though they are not yet ripe, several of the children grab what they can as they pass, stuffing the fibrous fruits into their mouths. Jan manages to pocket three and he thinks he will save them for later, give one to each of his sisters. He looks round for them but they are at the back of the line. Lena is limping, he notices and he hopes she'll be all right.

The women stop them in front of a large wooden door. Black paint is flaking off round the edges showing greying wood beneath. The windows are filthy, Jan spots a cobweb stretching across the top of one of them; they can't have been washed for years. Two of the women move through the line, ordering the children to one side or another. After ten minutes they are sorted to the women's satisfaction; two long lines, segregated by sex.

The younger children are at the front. Lena is one of the smallest. She stands near the start of the queue, wearing clothes that are too big for her. The dress she is wearing almost reaches the ground. As the girls move into the house, she lifts the dress to stop herself tripping over it and Jan catches sight of something beneath, flapping. He peers, trying to make it out, then smiles. It's her precious nightdress. She must have managed to get hold of it and decided to keep it safe by wearing it under her day clothes. She's a smart kid for only four years old. The girls vanish into the dark interior of the house leaving the boys outside in the afternoon heat.

Hours pass. Jan is giddy with hunger. He has eaten his apricot, nibbling at the hard fibrous flesh, which catches in his teeth. Now and again, he fingers the two remaining in his pocket; Maria and Lena will never know if he eats them or not, they might even have some of their own. He'll give it another hour, he decides, and then he'll eat another one.

The scuffed door creaks open and a tall, distinguished man beckons to them to come in. The women push them forwards into the house. It is dark inside and blissfully cool. Jan squeezes his eyes open and shut to try to get used to the dark. Within a few seconds he can see quite well. They are in a huge hall, bigger than their kitchen at home. There is no carpet on the floor and the wooden

floorboards are scuffed and dusty. In front of them is a massive staircase, big enough for a castle. It sweeps straight up from the middle of the hall and branches off to both sides. The man marches the boys upstairs, telling them to keep away from the balustrade: several posts are missing and they could fall through. He takes them off to the right and makes them stand in a corridor. The boys are upright and don't dare to stir. Two of the women guards are with them still and to begin with they lash out at any movement. But eventually they get bored and start to chat to one another, only striking out very occasionally. While their backs are turned, Jan cranes his neck but sees no sign of the girls. There is a room at the end of the corridor. Its door is open and Jan sees several people there, a woman, and some men, talking and laughing. After a few minutes the woman comes out and indicates to the boy at the front of the queue to come in. The door of the room shuts behind him. Several minutes pass. In the trees outside a bird is singing and the smell of cut grass is in the air. It feels like home and despite himself, Jan relaxes. The bruises on his back don't hurt so much now and he is no longer hungry. He leans against the wall for support but one of the woman spots him and at once he is slapped across the head. It is a hard slap, he'd swear they had it in for him since he'd shouted out the question about their mothers that

morning. He narrows his eyes and stands up straight. It'll take more than a slap to get at him.

One by one the boys go into the room. Jan waits for them to return, to try to guess from their faces what to expect but no one reappears. This is worrying. Jan senses the fear of the boys who remain; they are so frightened they don't look at each other. The line gets smaller until at last, it is his turn.

The room is spacious and bright with large windows framed by green velvet curtains. On one wall there is a picture of a man in uniform. He looks ugly, frightening. Jan recognizes him. His father used to talk to him about this man and say how evil he was. The man's eyes seem to look right through him and the sensation makes Jan shiver. He looks down at the ground so he can't see the portrait.

There are four people in the room. One man lifts his head as Jan enters; he has a white coat on, like a doctor. Thank God. Doctors are good people; they help you. Sometimes they hurt you, but only to make you better, like when his arm was broken and he had to get plaster on it. For the first time in several days, Jan allows himself to relax. The doctor speaks in Czech, not very good Czech, difficult to understand, but at least it is familiar. But when he tells Jan to get undressed, Jan's fears return.

"All clothes off," he says as Jan removes only his shorts and shirt.

Reluctantly, Jan removes his underpants. They're soiled for there was nothing to clean himself with in the toilet and he's frightened he will be beaten for being dirty. He folds them carefully so only the clean side can be seen and stands in front of the adults, hands in front of his private parts. The woman has a tape measure and tells him to stand against the wall so she can take his height. She writes it down on a piece of paper along with other measurements she takes: round his waist, his chest, the size of his ears, his nose, the length of his legs, the width of his feet. The measuring goes on for what seems like hours. Then she asks him questions. At first he doesn't answer. It's so long since he has spoken that his mouth is dry and in any case, her accent is thick, difficult to understand. She speaks more slowly and he picks up what she is saying. The questions are easy: what colour is grass, what should you do if a boy hits you, why should you not touch an oven. Jan answers them, for a brief moment feeling proud that he knows so much, then, remembering he is with the enemy, in a much more surly way.

They make him sit in a chair and listen to his chest with a cold stethoscope, look at his teeth with a tiny mirror, examine his ears with an instrument he has never seen before. They weigh him, make him hop, jump, squat.

The doctor man even holds his testicles and makes him cough. Jan does so, his face scarlet with embarrassment and rage. No one has ever touched him there. Mother and father told him to keep that part of him private and not be like that boy from the next village who runs around giggling and showing off his willy.

At last they finish with him. The doctor gives him back his clothes and Jan gets back into them in record speed. He hated being naked in front of their curious eyes. Three doors lead out of the room. One goes back into the hall where they waited for so long. The one that they tell Jan to go through takes him into a room where there are several other boys. Not as many as there should be though, not nearly as many. There were perhaps fifty boys from their village and yet in this room there are only half a dozen. The others must have been sent through the remaining door. Jan feels cold when he tries to think what this might mean. At some level, he feels it is safer to be in large numbers. And yet... with no warning the scenes from the farmyard flash into his mind. There were lots of men there; safety in numbers, perhaps it doesn't make sense after all.

All the boys here are younger than him. He knows them all by sight and knows some of their older brothers well. One of them comes over now, tries to look tough but his voice is cracked and his eyes too bright.

“Hey, Jan,” he says, “I think maybe they’re going to send us home.”

“You’re soft in the head if you think that,” says Jan, and is immediately sorry when the boy turns quickly away. Not so quick that Jan doesn’t see a tear slide down his cheek. What a stupid thing to say. The kid can only be about seven years old. He should be able to hope they’re going home.

“Maybe you’re right,” he calls to him. “I think I heard one of them say...”

He tails off as the boy turns round. The hope is naked in his face; he is so vulnerable that Jan cannot continue. He mumbles incoherently, not meeting the boy’s eyes. Before the boy can say any more, there is a diversion as one of the others draws their attention to what’s going on outside.

Two trucks have drawn up and parked on the lawn. They are monstrous in the small garden. Large, painted an indeterminate blue-green colour. Jan thinks they are the ones that brought them there the night before but he cannot be sure. A soldier runs out of the house and opens the doors to both trucks. Jan thinks they are going to spill over with more children but no, they are empty. A moment later a large group of children are led into the courtyard. They are all from their village. The seven boys in the room press their noses against the window to

watch. Jan sees Maria and draws in his breath. He can't bear this. He had thought they would be kept together. He bangs on the window, willing her to look up but her head remains down. The slope of her shoulders tells him that she is crying. "Maria!" he shouts, "Maria, where are you going?"

She's heard him. Maria turns round and looks up at the window, moves as if to try to reach him but a woman grabs her and shoves her towards the truck. Maria stumbles and hits her shin on the edge of one of the doors. Blood streams down her leg. Jan strikes the window once more but this time Maria doesn't look back and within seconds the truck has devoured her. The remaining children are lined up in twos and pushed into the truck. Jan scours the crowd. He can't see Lena anywhere. He can only hope that she is still here in the house somewhere.

As the truck draws out of the courtyard, its tyres churning up the muddy grass, Jan wonders if he will ever see any of his family again. This is unbearable; he digs his fingernails into the palms of his hands to stop these horrible thoughts but they persist. When he can no longer see the truck, he leaves his place at the window and goes to a corner of the room where he lies down and curls himself into a ball in a hopeless attempt to comfort himself. Karl, the smallest of the boys comes over to

him and reaches out to touch his arm but Jan cannot be consoled and he shrugs the child away.

Later that day they are moved to yet another building, not far from where they have been. It too is a large old house with grass surrounding it. It could almost be a family home, except for a huge fence all round which makes it feel like a prison. A nun comes to the door to let them in. Her face is like every other face they've seen in Lodz: hard, unsmiling. Jan doesn't like nuns. He knows they're supposed to be holy but in his experience they can be as cruel as anyone he's ever met. This one reminds him of Sister Maria Josef who was his teacher in kindergarten. She'd hit you on the knuckles if your writing wasn't neat enough. The poor logic of this always upset Jan. He used to cry to his mother about it – *How am I supposed to write better if my hand hurts?*

When they get inside and see the other nuns scurrying around it becomes clear this must be a convent. The nuns are almost all elderly, though there are a few who are young. One of them, who is wearing a white habit, guides the children upstairs to their rooms. The boys and girls are kept apart; it's several hours, just before suppertime, before Jan discovers that his little sister has not been taken away with the others. He spots her, with a small number of other girls, and breaks free from the group of

boys that have been sent to help prepare vegetables. He manages to reach her and hug her before he is grabbed from behind and sent to the boys' room without any supper. He doesn't care, he is happy just to know she's here with him.

