MY NAME IS MILLION

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The Experiences of an Englishwoman in Poland

My name is million, because I love millions
and for millions suffer torment.
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To coś mi rozkazał zrobić, zrobiłam

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PART ONE

Polish names have been written
in English letters and without
diacritical signs

Chapter 1

SUMMER IN POLAND

In the summer of 1938 we left Warsaw for five months. It was too far to go to the house in the Carpathians for trout-fishing in the Little Danube, but Szaniawski let us a small wooden house with four rooms, a huge attic and two verandas on the left bank of the River Narew. The Narew was then even dearer to us than the Little Danube and the winding, lovely Vistula, because very often it reminded us with its shifting bed, its backwaters, and its hundreds of little islands overgrown with scented grass and the bushes that the peasants quite incorrectly call oleanders, of our best river of all, the Loire. Not, I think, that Szaniawski ever realized himself that he had let us the house. His bailiff, a huge Ukrainian, once a landowner like his master, whose estates had stayed on the Bolshevik side after the last war, managed all that. He even did some whitewashing for us, and remembered that I was a writer too, though not so good a one as Szaniawski, when we fished the same part of the river and nodded from one boat to the other. His red Irish setter, hopelessly badly bred, like most gun dogs in Poland, knew me too, and would lift his ugly square head from the bottom of the boat and stare fixedly at me and my

Irish terrier bitch as if we were almost as interesting as fish. The bitch could not endure the sight of him, probably because he was Irish too; just as she could not endure the sight of certain of my friends or servants, my dressmaker, the telephone, or anything else that either touched me or seemed to her particular way of measuring things to come nearer to me than others.

No matter. They are all gone now. Irish setter, little red bitch, bailiff, Szaniawski (for all I know), wooden house and manor house, and, higher up on the same bank, the palace of Konstanty Radziwill, whose gardener used to sell me the best melons and the youngest peas I ever ate anywhere. For the fort of Zegrze was only a few kilometres away in the Warsaw direction, and the fort of Modlin was behind, and the Germans went through there months ago—and only Narew still flows as before, and in the spring, when the frost loosens, the grass will come pushing up between the levelled stones.

That was in 1938.

For five months I did not see Warsaw again. Now I shall never see it again, never again as I remembered it during those five slow, perfect months when the sun was so hot that I hardly ever left the shelter of the verandas or the little wood behind the house until four o'clock in the afternoon, the hour when the rays of the sun began to fall slantingly on the Mazovian plain. In the wood it was dark and pleasant; you could put your rug down on a thick bed of perfumed pine needles and all day long a pair of big golden birds with wings as brightly blue as a kingfisher's, flashed in and out among the pine-trees, black against the brilliant sunshine, call-

ing to each other, so often that you felt they were doing it on purpose and were grateful to them, with a note that you could never hear without thinking of a silver bell ringing somewhere under water. As a matter of fact, the peasants' name for them is *dzwoniec*, which means a bell. I never learned the name ornithologists call them by. It can hardly be more suitable.

Idling there, I liked to think of Warsaw. Strange town, last capital of the West, with many cobbled streets and more horse-drawn dorozki than taxis, which you amazedly exclaim to be a village, or, at most, a country town, when you come to it from Paris, as I first did, or from London or Vienna; and which opens its horizons to you only as you stay in it, showing you something more of itself every day, fixing your heart so gradually that you are enslaved before you know it; teaching you, if you are teachable at all, that it is the most European of the European capitals, because it is the last and because, just beyond it and always turning their eyes to it, always dreaming of Vistula and the black grainfields of Sandomierz and the spires of Krakow and the coal-mines of Silesia, the barbarians are waiting, like wolves that are waiting for a fire to die down; wolves ringed around the same fire for how many centuries now?

But I should have written all that in another tense. To-day things are changed in Warsaw. The fire has gone down, though the ashes are still glowing; the barbarians have got through to Vistula; the wolf-pack has closed the ring.

Then, when I thought of Warsaw, I cannot explain why, it was always as the Warsaw of its late eastern spring. I forgot the icy wind in the squares in winter, the

slush of the thaws, the dusty heat of the summer, the golden Polish autumn when the painted bronze leaves of the tree in the Chopin monument were indistinguishable from the falling bronze leaves of the giant hornbeams and limes surrounding it. In my memory the city was always foaming with white and purple lilac. When you sat in a tramcar with the window down and it was still morning, your whole coat-sleeve or your face might be brushed by a great scented branch of it still soaked in dew. In the Aleja and the Royal Park trees of magnolia burst into blossom overnight; the huge carp in the fish-ponds barely moved, and white and rose-coloured drifts of fallen petals lay on the water. As the carp sluggishly stirred they broke up the reflection of the ivory-coloured palace of the last King of Poland, that formed again behind them.

The eighteenth century produced nothing lovelier than that palace or its park. The windows of my flat looked on to it. I knew every squirrel in the trees, every swan on the island with its eighteenth-century ruins of a Greek theatre, every plant and tree in the orangery, some of them four hundred years old. I knew the Hermitage, the White House, the Hunting Lodge, all royal lodges within the park enclosure. I knew all the pictures in its twenty times soiled and plundered galleries; something like two hundred or less of them given back to Poland after the Treaty of Riga. In the King's inventory, many of them entered in his own beautiful handwriting, there were more than twenty-four hundred. I knew the famous chandeliers, like frozen cascades of purest water, in the ballroom; the sixteenth-century bathhouse, with its thousands of tiny encaustic tiles, of which no two designs are the same,

around which the palace itself came into existence. A book of my own, whose corrected proofs were sent off to England on the day when the posters went up for mobilization and which was published when my family believed me to have been killed in the siege of the city, was written in the Chinese cabinet, where the King himself used to write up his catalogues and dream the day away with his poets and landscape gardeners. Twenty-five years of loving, patient labour had gone to the scraping off of the filth left in its rooms by the Russian occupation; to obliterating the senseless decorations of the Romanovs, the grease and dung of Ivan Ivanovitch, most miserable of soldiers, and the soot and stains of his samovar and his wretched stove. Now it is the turn of the Storm Troopers and Gestapo, if the palace is still standing, as I sometimes hope it is not. Perhaps it is only a heap of ashes, with some stinking flesh buried beneath it, like so much of Warsaw. Sometimes rumour says one thing, sometimes another; our palaces, our cottages, our families and our friends, our lovers and our acquaintances, only rumour brings us news of them. There is no news. Only the certainty of daily torture, murder, starvation, and disease. The fire has gone down. The wolves have crossed the barrier.

Of Warsaw to-day, sitting here in London, it would be better not to think. But I think of it all the time. If only, for one hour, I could stop memory and quite forget. But I never think of it now as I did two summers ago, among the pines and in the company of a pair of golden, blue-winged birds. That image of Warsaw has had another for ever imposed on it. A man who had been all through the siege and who had seen the Ger-

man Army march in and Adolf Hitler come there from Danzig to look for himself on the work he had done, said to me: The tram-lines are full of clotted blood. That is the image I have now of a city I have loved more even than I loved Paris. No memory of wet lilac brushing my face will ever take its place again, I think.

In 1939 I said to my husband:

'Somebody had better go and get the cottage ready.'

Then I said, slowly, 'But will you be able to go?'

We decided that he might go for long week-ends. After all, it was only half-an-hour from Warsaw. Besides, one could take work and do it there. A man on a motor-bicycle could bring the courier from Warsaw. After all, what and who could keep us in the capital? A. was only manufacturing tiny special gadgets for aerodromes because nobody else did it as well, and because it made money for us. We were free. We could do without the money. Warsaw would be too hot, even in our flat. Bronka, the servant we would be taking, wanted to see her family. The boat had been laid up too long. The dogs had to get into the country. There was my cure to begin again. It seemed very odd to be discussing week-ends. We had never been tied before. The river would be high after the spring thaws, though not so high as we wanted. It had been a queer winter with very little snow. The cherry-trees would be full of singing birds, the asparagus nearly over, and the children would be bringing great cabbage leaves full of the wild Polish strawberries whose perfume makes every other wild strawberry in the world seem like a little bit of painted wood.

Well, we were free, weren't we? We could go.

'They took Grotek last night,' said A. 'He's a specialist, of course. I may be able to get him back. Nobody else can cut those rotary files like he can.'

That was the secret mobilization. It had been going on ever since the spring. Everybody said there had been a German ultimatum. I don't know. I know very little, really. Only more than you should know and remember, if you have to come out into the living world again. But every night men we knew were being called up. Quietly. Just a ring at the door and a paper telling you where to go. It was getting to be very hard on employers of skilled labour. Gardeners and people didn't matter so much, though one missed them. In the Royal Park, where I knew everybody, and had friends on all the gates and in all the lodges, I looked in vain for familiar faces nearly every day.

'All right,' I said. 'We'll try to get some week-ends. Only I don't like nobody living there. Shall we let half of it?'

So we did that. Somebody else wakened up there in the morning and left out bread and milk for our jackdaw and brought home faggots of dried wood from the islands and bathed from the boat. The idea that we had been free, that we could do what we liked, began to seem rather a comic one. When an official-looking paper came (and they come nearly every day in republics and look very official) I read them now instead of leaving them about under paper-weights. Forty-two, Officer of Reserve, twice wounded in 1920, thirteen years in France, no manœuvres since . . . not very likely, but you never knew. When we went out we left addresses and telephone numbers.

'Now, Bronka, my dear, you're quite sure you under-

stand? If the master's mobilization card comes, tell them . . . ring up. . . .'

Warsaw was very hot. I had a book to write. That took about nine hours a day. Then there was work to do because the war was coming. That took about five. It was so often not worth doing anything except take shower after shower and then sit down to work again that three weeks passed before I noticed that I had not once dressed or gone out in that time. On the balconies in the evening it was cool and the flower-woman brought me all the mignonette she could find to keep the flies out of the flat. The flower-baskets and the window-boxes smelt of wet earth. The little bitch complained sometimes. Can't I go out with you? I hate going out with servants, I'm naughty with them and have to be kept on the leash.

At night it was not easy to sleep. Our machines flew over the city nearly every night, manœuvring. Search-lights, conducting our own bombers to the aerodromes, lit up the sky with pale wands following a falling arc.

Falling, fallen arc. But it is not all over yet. Every light has not yet been quenched, never will be, in that Polish sky.

A. said: 'You must go to the country, at least for ten days. It can be done. Write and tell them to get ready.'

The day before we were to go, I said: 'I'm going down to the café on the ground floor. We've always taken their taxi. It's too small really, but I don't want to hurt their feelings. We can squeeze things in.'

'I haven't any money,' said my husband. 'It'll have to be the bus this time. I subscribed again to FON this week. I literally have no money at all.'

Subscribing to FON was all right. That was one of

the national loans. Everybody subscribed; more, far more than they had. Workers mortgaged their earnings months ahead, and their employers advanced the money for them, as well as what they gave themselves. So we went in the bus. It only took about twenty minutes longer, anyhow, and the dogs didn't even wear their muzzles, although Poland used to be very strict about that.

Between one or two little railway stations on unimportant one-track lines, long armoured trains were standing. Anti-aircraft gun emplacements in the fields had been masked by the usual unconvincing-looking green branches and so forth. I suppose that from the air they really did look more as if they had grown there. The harvest was being got in early. Everybody in Poland knows what that means. In her great days, when wars were still carried on between gentlemen, the Polish landowners, each of whom was rich enough to raise and support an army of his own, and often did, simply went home at harvest time and only started fighting again when all the barns and granaries were full. To the Polish grandee that was a very simple matter, obvious to anyone; and a duty really far more pressing and important than wars, which, after all, were only the sort of thing that other, rather low, people began, and which, being a gentleman and having been born to the bearing of arms, you were also obliged to accept as your responsibility. But that fighting is fun, and the land and the proper storing of harvests is serious, was very much what he felt.

I think it is Lord D'Abernon, in his fine book *The 18th Decisive Battle of the World* who speaks, of course not at all understanding why, of coming up against

practically this same instinctive attitude among his Polish acquaintances and even among the Polish High Command in 1920, when the colossal Red wave of the Bolshevik Army had rolled up almost to the very gates of Warsaw. The same Army that Pilsudski was to break and push back like scattered sheep across their own frontiers and with whom he afterwards made a typically mild and unaggressive Polish peace.

My library, like everything else I once possessed, is in Poland, in the hands of the Germans, so I cannot quite certainly say that it was Lord D'Abernon who mentions this. Anyhow, what is interesting is that even in 1920, with the Bolsheviks where they were and the Polish Army, desperately short of supplies, ammunition and officers, made up for the most part of students and trained men who had neither uniform nor boots, a friendly foreign military mission in Warsaw, without any clue to where such a feeling should come from or any comprehension of what it could mean, should again and again be keenly conscious of this feeling, the roots of which went straight down to Poland's glorious and richly coloured past. A past particularly misleading to the foreigner, who reads and hears of the most extravagant gestures—of two or three villages of serfs being given in exchange for one greyhound, of a Polish envoy to the King of France causing whole kilometres of the road into Paris to be buried under the finest salt so that he might make his entry in his own sleigh, tossing to the crowd the nails from the hooves of his gold-shod horses; and who never seems to have read or been told of all the simple, much more truly Polish things which have made that unhappiest of countries the most passionately loved in the world.

After Zegrze, where the barracks were and the fort which was the last stronghold where the Poles might hope to keep the Germans back from Warsaw, the fields were the oddest sight. The sun was pitilessly hot. The golden corn was falling under strong strokes of the scythe; the peasant women, half of whom we knew and all of whom knew us at least by sight, with their bell-shaped skirts swinging and the coloured kerchiefs tied round their heads dark and stained with sweat, were striding up and down the laid swathes gathering and binding; behind them the children, the dogs, the geese of the Commune and a few gypsies gleaning, drinking tepid water from bottles, laughing, quarrelling and dashing the sweat from their faces. The women's bodices clung to their soaked bodies; nobody, except the idle gleaners, bothered even to look up to watch the bus pass. Among the workers, a whole regiment of sappers, naked to the waist, white dust showing in queer patches on their broiled red skin, were flinging up barbed-wire entanglements. Every few yards or so steel posts were being driven into the ground. As soon as a post went in a dozen or so sappers ran along from the last one with what seemed the obscenest looking garlands of barbed wire and festooned it to at least the height of a man's head. It was easy to imagine anything at all, entrails, quiet corpses, even queer crimson tropical plants, flowering on that barbed wire. For as far as the eye could see it stretched away into the peaceful green country. The storks walked about as usual, taking no notice. The harvesters worked in and out among the lines, taking no notice. The bus coughed along as usual. A little farther along more sappers were putting up field telephones.

We said very little. There seemed to be nothing to say. One man on a seat near us rolled a cigarette and spat and said:

'Of course, this is Their direct road. From East Prussia. This is the way They'll come this time.'

That was our summer of 1939. We stayed there four days.

Chapter 2

MECHANIZED WAR

We went back once more. At the end of August. On the 30th we were ordered a total black-out. There was to be no showing so much as a torch.

We said: 'We'd better go to the cottage. There's money owing for milk. . . . It would be a good thing to bring those rugs here. . . .'

I have almost forgotten how we got there. It is not very important, anyhow. A bus still went part of the way. Dust-clouds hid the horizon. Troops, endlessly marching, field kitchens, horses being brought in from the villages, tanks, cattle, a few refugees. The worst thing when we got there was the women coming to see us. A lot of the men were gone already.

'You come from Warsaw—give us news—have They crossed the frontiers?—when will They be here? Are we to burn everything?—what does your honour order us to do?'

We had no orders to give. We were only people who happened to lease a house there. A. was not even mobilized. We knew as little as they. We paid our few debts and filled our rucksacks. The most of the things we gave away. A peasant is always comforted by a gift.

Weeping, they nevertheless eagerly hid among the folds of their skirts and in their shawls all sorts of things they would never be able to use. Jam jars, wooden spoons, bathing shoes, cucumbers and olive oil jealously shared out into all the small bottles that we could find: there were the usual rows about somebody getting more than somebody else. Now and then I threw something into Narew, something I couldn't take and wouldn't give away. The river had never looked more beautiful. A faint swell made the boats rock. A boy or two were fishing, whistling, hoping for a good catch. The water was still going down. I could see the half rotten piers of the bridge blown up by the Russians in 1920 sticking higher out of the water than I had ever seen them. An uncannily dry summer. Even in the famous marshlands, a long way away to the north-east. Getting ready for Hitler's tanks. Even then, a normal spell of rains could have saved us. No rain came.

In the park below the palace, where the half-tame white deer used to play, a sort of centre for the requisitioning of horses had been made. Dead-tired men were leading hundreds and hundreds of horses in day and night. Somebody said there were thousands of horses already. I think that was probably very exaggerated. Still, we could hear and smell them, though not see them, in that strange, sensual way in which you are always conscious of horseflesh in the mass, even when you are a long way away.

One woman whom I knew better than the others came and kissed my sleeve. A hard-bitten, sour-mouthed woman, who had known both Russians and Germans, and who knew what to expect.

'Tell me the truth,' she said. 'You'll not lie to me.

What am I to do when They come? I'll have to save the children. My man is paralysed—you know that. I'll leave him."

'Cross the river,' said A. 'Stay in the forest. Whatever you do don't show any smoke. They'll go straight on to Warsaw. I don't think They'll cross yet.'

He was wrong. We were all of us wrong, about nearly everything. Except about one thing. We knew what was coming. We preferred it to dishonour. We have paid, probably, the most fearful price in all history. But we were right to do it. We would do it again. None of us, not one of us, with all our faults, with all our quarrels, with all our regrets, if put to the same test, but would do the same thing again.

She nodded. She trusted us. I wonder where she is now. Before she went she washed the floors for me. It was not like me, she said rather sharply, to go away and leave the place in a mess. We left bedding, a frying-pan and a kettle, logs and a heap of dry sticks.

'Perhaps', I said, 'one of our soldiers will get a chance of spending a night in here. I'd like him to be comfortable.'

'Shall I leave my rods?' asked my husband. 'Would you like him to get some fishing?'

In the end he did leave them. They had come from England and cost far more than we could afford. But they didn't seem to matter very much. Finally we took our rucksacks and were rowed across the river. It was hopeless to think of trying the main road. A peasant waited on the other side for us with a cart. We drove for hours across the fields and through partly cleared forest. When the horse and cart fell into too big a hole we all helped to pull them out again. I thought of my

family in Cheshire and wondered just what they were doing and what they would think of travelling like this.

The peasant who drove us was in tearing spirits. He had, I think, a blue mobilization card. He expected to be called up soon. Perhaps it was some other colour; I forget now sometimes which cards were which. He had four little sons, he said. He could get killed with a clear conscience. And he had sold his young horse to the Army for a good price. His blue eyes laughed. He was quite ready to be killed for Poland, but he had bargained well with the officer. That pleased him. The only thing, they had not given him money; only an order to pay. His wife would have to take it to the Town Hall. In some places they had been paying cash. Well, she was a sensible woman, she would know what to do. When he had sold the young horse, he had bought this old mare for her. She would look after the land.

'But a good wife and a young horse, there's no sense in that! Now my mind is easy.'

When he left us he suddenly said passionately to A.:

'Your honour is an officer? Take me with you! Take me now! We can leave the horse. She'll find her own way home. Ah, the Szwaby, the Szwaby, why are we waiting? Let us attack them!'

We left him looking after us. He was only about twenty-seven and had been in the regiment that guarded Poland's frontiers, the homely, quite undashing, invaluable KOP, so far removed from traditions about gold-shod horses, so completely the expression of all the hard, careful post-Versailles work that has been temporarily smashed to atoms; so dogged, patient and enduring; so Polish; therefore so certain to live again.

My husband did not want to tell me that he envied the young man. Without being told, I knew. He would get to the front all right. For my husband, probably a staff job and military supervision of factories. As a matter of fact there wasn't even to be that. There was no time. But we still expected a regular front; idiotically enough, considering our perfectly indefensible frontiers. My own job was already allotted to me—I was to stay in Warsaw, or not, according to what the orders would be—but my French and English and other special knowledge I had were supposed to make me very valuable. What really happened was that I never got a chance to do anything. Until much later, when I helped to forge passports and fake visas and smuggled people across frontiers; but that is another and queerer story which can only be told after the war. Unless I am lucky enough to have forgotten it by then. I am afraid I shall remember it for ever.

We got back to Warsaw. There was some talk of gas-masks but everyone knew there were none really for the civilians. The Army, we were told, had been supplied. That seemed to be the essential. Already work had been started digging up the public gardens and all the squares and constructing trenches. People said: 'They'll be covered over, I expect, like in Barcelona, and all that. They're supposed to be very good.' A few people, like ourselves, more pessimistic, thought they were not really meant to be shelters at all. Obviously it was going to be quite impossible to bury all the civilians any other way.

The Royal Park was closed. The lodge-keeper said I couldn't come in, although he had always allowed me in before. Sometimes, when it was very, very cold, they

closed it for fear of people staying in by mistake after the lodge-keeper went home and getting frozen to death. But we were friends and he had always let me in. I knew what they were doing, anyhow, for an officer rang me up and said he had been put on duty on the anti-aircraft gun practically outside my windows, and he hoped I now felt safer. I said, what about the squirrels, and he said he didn't know. There was no Army order about the squirrels, but he expected they'd get off better than either he or I. In which, so far as I know, he was perfectly right. Later I never could see that they took any notice of bombardments. The rooks, on the other hand, and the swarms of pigeons that haunted every roof and window-sill in Warsaw simply loathed the bombing and protested almost as regularly and as usefully as President Roosevelt.

On the 31st, at noon, the posters went up for a general mobilization. Transport became completely militarized. There were no more civilian trains. Cars were called up. Bicycles. Horses. At every street corner quiet, dogged groups of people stood before the posters; the men whose classes had not yet been called felt as if they had been left with one foot in the air. Still, it gave them time to make arrangements about their families. Once called, you had only two hours. The telephone rang all day in our flat. 'I'm going, look after Janka for me . . . they've called up Oskar, he's over fifty and I'm only forty, but he's a specialist; perhaps they'll call me to-morrow. . . . I'm going; if you've any flour or coffee, think of Olesia; she's Air Warden for my block and she's forgotten to get food for herself . . . good-bye, good-bye, my father and mother are stuck in the country, no more trains. If they get back to Warsaw, tell

them I had to go at 2.30. No time to leave a letter. . . . Hello, haven't they called you either? I've been down to volunteer but they won't have me yet. So have you? Well, then it's no good. Have to wait, won't we? . . . Hello, do you know anybody in the world who has a can of petrol? . . .'

Then there was dialling and dialling on our own telephone, one number after another, and hearing the bell ring and ring in empty rooms.

We discussed what to do with the little bitch who could not be sent to the country.

'I want to see her put out myself,' I said. 'Before you go. You know what she is; it's no use pretending. She can't do without us. When you go, and I have to be out of the flat, for all I know out of Warsaw, she'll break her heart. Even if a servant can stay here and a bomb doesn't drop on the house, and perhaps even that won't be possible. Perhaps all the women will be wanted. Let us agree on it. Have her put out.'

Wherever I sat, she always came and laid her head against my foot. If I changed from one chair to another, she changed too. She never made a mistake as to whether we were talking about her or not. Not mentioning her name was no good. She knew anyhow. Now she lifted her head and looked first at one, then at the other of us; behaving as she always did when any kind of packing was going on. A mad fear of being left behind. An unreasonable fear, for we had only left her once and she had been with us for more than five years. The one time we had left her, she had refused even water until we came back.

'All right,' said my husband. 'How?'

'Revolver. Do it yourself. I loathe these lethal cham-

bers. There's always some part of a minute, perhaps more, when they know.'

Irena brought me warm beer to make sleep. Insomnia has been my bogey for years. All this night I slept heavily, completely exhausted. When I woke on the 1st of September, Hitler's War had begun.

From dawn we were attacked all along our frontiers. Those terrible frontiers, thousands of kilometres long. German fliers wearing our uniforms, their own colours painted out on their machines by our amaranth and silver, almost annihilated our aerodromes, and, flying almost as low as the hangars, machine-gunned their garrisons. At Bogumin, it seems, a mechanized unit crossed into Poland before anyone knew a war had started. The same thing almost happened with trainloads of troops crossing Pomerania. There was no ultimatum and no declaration of war. The German plan was worked out to its last perfect detail and was then supremely well executed. One should never underestimate the Germans.

Warsaw was bombed pretty late. I remember dressing and going down to the street, and the concierge, whose husband had been called up the day before, saying:

'Is it real this time, or is it just black-out practice again?' She was embarrassed. She didn't like to disturb people in the house if it was just more rehearsals, and on the other hand she had instructions and was duty-bound to disturb them if it was the real thing.

I remember another woman saying to me in English, which I forgot to be surprised at:

'Of course it's real. But I don't see what we can do. Personally, I'm going back to bed.'

Then, quite suddenly, we heard a radio somewhere:

'UWAGA! UWAGA! UWAGA!'

which meant, 'Look out! Look out! Look out!' Then all sorts of ciphers and positions, probably meant for the anti-aircraft people. . . . Such and such a number has passed such and such a zone. . . . Then another zone . . . then another. Then: Warszawa! Warszawa! And then there was a battle in the sky, and, important to me, A. coming in and saying:

'Some of these lunatics are still asking whether it's not manœuvres. I came back because I was going down the Aleja Ujazdowska and the whole yard of the American Embassy is full of cars and luggage. They're leaving already. I thought I'd better see you. I must go to see X——, but I expect you'd like to come with me. Have you had your coffee?'

Irena brought us coffee. She said:

'I wanted to wash the windows to-day. They say I can't. Why can't I?'

'Don't be a fool,' I said. 'Keep away from the windows. Just as far away as you can. And don't let them persuade you to go sticking those silly white paper crosses on them, either. They're no good, and I don't want you with glass splinters in you.'

After that we went out and walked a bit towards the town. There we found the trams running all right, but two air-raid alarms got us off our tram twice. The first time we were marshalled into a Garden Café, which seemed inappropriate. There were no shelters, so we stood about, talking to people in the way one does in trains. Then the usual woman complained of being tired of standing, and A. got a chair for her from some-

where, which let him in for getting chairs for all the women, of whom there were quite a lot. I don't know where he got them from, and I know I stood the whole time, feeling I had no right to my own husband's chivalry; and it was hard to realize that this was the war for which I had waited eight years. Later I was to find out that the worst part of war is the endless waiting for something; the dirt, the lack of any kind of coherence, the feeling that there is no reason why this should ever have begun and no reason why it should ever stop. You want to catch a train at five in the morning, so you go to the station at six the evening before to wait for it, because you are not allowed to go there at any other time, for some reason that nobody ever explains to you. Perhaps nobody knows. Your mind, unable any longer to feel pity, terror, grief, or any other sharp emotion, attaches itself to what is nearest and least tremendous. You scheme about how to wash out the rag that is your handkerchief, because you have nothing else, and water is being given out in drops. You concentrate all your mind on pulling your boots off at the right moment, because you have had high riding boots on for a week, night and day, and if you pull them off you may just do it the moment the bomb is going to fall, the drunk peasant with the torch in his hand set fire to the tapestries or the machine-gunning of the open trucks of your refugee train begin again—then you will be caught without your boots; once they come off, getting them on again takes hours. This comes to seem infinitely more important than the bomb, the machine-gun, or the torch. After I had lost everything, when not a stone, not a piece of paper, not a stitch of clothing remained of what a few weeks before had been our homes and the

accumulation of two people's whole lives; when I never knew whether I should eat again, sleep or wake, live or die, from one second to another; when I had seen everything I had cared for collapse like a house of cards, a nation stretched on the cross, a fair country burning behind me like a box of matches and hell itself opening in front of me, there were whole days when I never suffered anything. I was incapable of passion, even of tears; even of the desire for revenge. All that was left was the human instinct for some roof of my own, some place to crawl into. I had none, so I made my roof, I am conscious of it now, out of a big leather handbag I carried. Everything necessary to my appalling existence came within that handbag. I slept, when there was sleep, with it tied to my arm. I never forgot it, never laid it down; saved it once from a heap of wreckage from among the plunging hoofs of a dying horse; when my eyes were too full of blood to find it by sight I found it by instinct. Even now, in London, I cannot give it up. I sleep with it within reach of my hand. Everything I have that I still care for but never dare to look at—a pen, a button, a little tuppeny-ha'penny machine for making cigarettes, one or two snapshots and a piece of paper on which a lost hand once wrote a direction (for I have no letters and nothing else at all) are still kept in it. So is my passport, with which I came back to England. When I go out, instead of looking for the things other women look for, I instinctively look for my passport and make sure it is safe. Without it I know that I am lost. Without a passport you are nothing more than a number in a concentration camp. It is the first thing they take away from you. Once that is gone, they have the right to take everything else.

The second raid came very quickly after the first. When it was over we went a long way, to an atelier where my husband's most skilled artisans were working. There, almost unexpectedly, the whole yard had been torn up by bombs, and someone had lost an arm and a house had lost a chimney. Children, of course, were already playing in the pits made by the bombs: water was oozing up, and the children's mothers were screaming at them for making their frocks dirty. I remember another battle about then, and A. counting little boxes full of files for aluminium, and an apprentice who could not keep his mind on counting them too; and then a taxi and meeting my brother-in-law who said he had been called up; and then more coffee in a café in the Street of the New World, then the most fashionable street in Warsaw, now a heap of ashes, and watching German bombers rather a long way away and our fighters going up to meet them. And after that the visit to X——, who unfortunately must also wait until after the war to be written about, and the overwhelming disappointment for both of us of being told to wait—there would be plenty of work, but later—later—it was necessary to organize. X. was the man on whom the usefulness of both of us depended. Also, a good deal of his own usefulness depended on us.

The streets were already blazing with posted bills. The one I see most clearly now is of a loathsome, strangling hand, branded with the swastika and, transfixing and pinning it down, a dagger and the word WARA all across it in great red letters. It is impossible to translate the word. It is what you might shout to a man-killing brute of a dog as he tried to fasten his teeth in your throat. . . .

Already the newspapers had disappeared. Special editions of half a page had taken their place. There was an official Staff communiqué, and the President's proclamation, in which he attested before God and man that there had been a treacherous and brutal aggression, that the enemy had crossed our frontiers and that Poland had never sought a war. Later in the afternoon other sheets appeared, with the same news and the picture of the Queen of Poland, who is also the Mother of God, and to whose titles the Poles have added the crown of Poland.

We ate in a restaurant in the open air, to the sound of marching feet, armoured cars rolling over the cobbles and the creaking wheels of string after string of peasants' carts coming in from the country with provisions requisitioned for the Army. The peasants, for the most part, drove with their air of stolid indifference. The Szwaby had come again. There was to be another war. Very well. Each would be called up when his time came. In the meantime, he thought more about his horse, the most valuable thing, almost certainly, that he had in the world.

On every eighth cart or so, a soldier with a rifle was perched. Frequently he looked dead tired; almost always stolid and indifferent like the peasants he was convoying. Most of them were peasants themselves. There has been too much talk always of the famous *légèreté*, like the equally famous *charme Slave*. These men have neither *légèreté* nor *charme*, but they are dogged and terrible fighters, with an endurance and a power of recovery unlike that of any soldiers in the world. No army of occupation will ever break that spirit. No enemy patrol in Poland will ever dare to walk

about in bands of less than five or six—and even then they are afraid.

When we went home, Irena was still rather sulky. She said it was a great deal of trouble turning off the gas every time the sirens went. Must she really do it?

She must, I said. She must also see to the windows, leaving the outside pair slightly open and the inside pair must be shut and hasped. She must also not run off water needlessly, as it would be needed everywhere for putting out fires, and she must keep a torch, her identity papers, bandages, and some food within reach at every hour of the day and night. I had no idea, I said, of allowing her to be a nuisance, and she might as well stop now. This did her a lot of good.

I then, very seriously I remember, began a diary. Just a factual one. Nothing about emotions or hopes or fears. I wrote that I would keep it so long as I survived the war, because there would be plenty of war correspondents and plenty of historians but probably few records kept by the ordinary civilian exposed to at least as much danger as the Army, unarmed, and fed only on rumour. Our news service was already ceasing to exist.

That solemn diary I actually kept, until first five wounds in the head physically prevented me from writing it. Later I wrote it up again, only to abandon it finally when I became a prisoner of the Bolsheviks. I not only felt sure that it would be taken from me, but I also knew that to the ignorant and prejudiced nothing is more suspicious than any appearance of belonging to the pen and ink classes. Most of the Soviet officers could barely read and write their own language. Probably the diary still exists, hidden among other

papers in the Great House in Polesie where I left it. That is, if the Russians have ended by making a collective farm of the place. If they have not done that, then very likely the White Russian peasants have burnt it. A big blaze is their idea of putting everything right. That will be the fourth time it has been a bonfire in the lifetime of one of my kindest and dearest of friends, its mistress; who is now well over eighty, whose earliest memories are of exile in Siberia, and who literally, with her own hands, in whose veins runs some of the noblest blood in Poland, built it up inch by inch after the last war, when she was more than sixty years old.

Chapter 3

POLAND FIGHTS ALONE

Here, in London, away from all that agony and horror, in a clean bed beside a bright fire, I cannot sleep; even morphia will not put me off.

For almost two years, when I lived among the musical pines and gentle flower-starred slopes of the lesser Carpathians, soothed by the sound beneath my windows of a mountain river tumbling over stones, in my own home, with what was dearest to me in the world always beside me, with my own dogs and flowers and books, secure and beloved, sleep played me the same trick. Insomnia, like nostalgia, is an enemy who never fights fair. A pair of diseases that are past any kind of doctoring, they take no account of probabilities; and they are always certain of victory, and too much success has made them wanton, capricious and slightly insane. They will leave you alone when you are most confidently expecting them and fall on you when, for the briefest reprieve, you think you have shaken them off. And there is no doing anything at all with them; no possibility, for instance, of getting fairly used to them. Each thought of a lost country is as sharp as the million that went before it; one sleepless night is exactly as unbearable as all the others you have had before and all

the others that are waiting for you to get to them. At the end of your desired tunnel there is always the same excruciating daylight, glaring and white. Of this pair a human being really need be afraid, because so far as I know they are the only malignant diseases of which you cannot die.

From the first day of the war in Poland until the day when I first slept in an hotel in a neutral country, temporarily, at any rate, secure, I was not only able to sleep; I could not keep awake. I have lain on the bare ground among troops, horses, refugees, railwaymen, wounded and dying and dead, in bitter cold with no food and no water, badly wounded myself, desiring keenly to keep awake; and sleep has knocked me out as though it were hitting me on the head. For nine and ten hours it has been impossible to waken me. Once in Brzesc-nad-Bugiem when there were no more sirens and no more radio and no more anti-aircraft defence, it was necessary for the people in the town to listen for the raiders themselves. In the house where I was passing the night, we divided the time into watches of two hours. When your watch came on you went outside, walked up and down or sat on the steps if you could stand the cold and had any clothes to keep it out with, and listened for the sound of the engines coming over. You could always hear them; I don't know what mixture of petrol or substitutes for it the Germans used over Poland, but it made their engines as noisy as wooden rattles. My watch was never kept. At two o'clock when the man coming off was to waken me I was so dead asleep that he went downstairs again and carried on till four. After all, he had had some sleep about three days earlier, he said next day: he was by no means in a bad way. In

Polesie, after the Russians came, when the local Soviet was keeping us prisoners, the men from the estate and the village, hundreds of them, in stinking sheepskins and feet wrapped in rags, would come and make us turn on the radio for them until we could hear Moscow speaking. It was not so easy as it sounds. The valves and batteries were at their last gasp, and there was no possibility of renewing them. Then, too, in exactly the same way, sleep used to fell me to the ground. When the Komitet guards were absorbed in listening, propping their chins on the butts of their rifles and smiling their childlike, astonished smiles, I would stealthily leave the room behind the backs of some of the house-servants, who half wanted to betray me and half couldn't help clinging in spite of themselves to the ways in which they and all their forerunners had been born—one of our guards could never remember not to kiss his mistress's hands and mine as we sat down to whatever breakfast they gave us—and lie down on the floor or on a chair in the next room and sleep, perhaps for five minutes. I could not have done otherwise to save, not my own life, but lives that were far dearer to me. If only I could sleep like that now! But from my first day across a neutral frontier, my old enemy has turned up again, grinning. He is here now, watching me write this, at 3.25 a.m. He will be here to-morrow.

On the afternoon and evening of the first day of the war, I slept. At ten o'clock I woke, drank beer again, arranged two rucksacks, a dog-lead and furs beside the bed, fought against the obsession of the telephone, and turned over to sleep again. A man rang at the door and said:

'If they come over again, do you want to be wakened?'

'What for?'

'Well, you could go out to the trenches. . . . Some people are going to. I have to ask you. Do as you like.'

We smiled. So did he. The Roman augurs, they say, used to exchange smiles, without speaking, when they passed each other in the temples.

'Do you live in this house?'

'Yes. Above you, as it happens. You once came up and made a hell of a row because our wireless was on after ten.'

'I remember. Well, you were pretty rude, too. And besides, I could have told the police about you. Is that St. Bernard yours, then?'

'Yes. That bitch of yours gets on quite passably with him. Your servant and ours take them out together last thing at night.'

'She always gets on passably with big dogs. What she won't tolerate is her own sex, or any animal that's white, I don't know why. Well, I suppose *this* is the last thing at night now. What are you doing about your St. Bernard?'

'I don't know. What are you doing?'

'Well, we meant to do something. But we haven't yet. Why are you running this? You're not the Air Warden.'

'No. He's gone. Went after dinner.'

Silence. Then my husband saying:

'He was a doctor. They seem to want all the doctors. Are you on all night? Want any help?'

'No, my wife is sitting up with me. Won't go to bed. I'm letting her have her own way. She's got three brothers fighting already. The youngest of all's in Westerplatte. Her father's in Poznan. On the frontier. Well,

good night. Sure you don't want to be wakened?'

'Sure. Good night.'

Westerplatte. Tiny fort in Danzig. Verdun of Poland. You couldn't make much comment on that. Everybody knew, the garrison first of all, that nobody would get out of Westerplatte. Every few hours the garrison was receiving greetings and messages from the Commander-in-Chief of the Army. For a few days they were still able to answer. After that nothing, but the knowledge that they were still fighting. No help, no supplies, no messages, even, could be got to them. They were cut off from the rest of Poland and from land; bombed and shelled from the earth, the sea, and the sky. Finally there was a day when a Polish voice said on the radio (the mysteries of Warszawa One and Two and how they managed to speak at all cannot be cleared up now, and may never be; too many of those who could have told us will be dead): The prayers of all Poland are desired for the souls of the garrison of Westerplatte. Poland understood. It was over. There was not one of them left alive.

While I slept I was still asking myself the question I had been asking myself all day: What were England and France going to do? I woke up on the 2nd asking it. I went about keeping myself from voicing it. People telephoned and, intending to ask it, although I had no possible means of knowing more than they did, were too uneasy or too kind to make me hear that too, and rang off, leaving it unsaid.

I went about all day, already accustomed to constant and heavy bombardments, to the sky being filled with battles, to the house trembling and the windows rattling, to the first shortage of water, an almost total cessation

of taxis and buses, to the lack of newspapers, to no news on the wireless, to official communiqués that said nothing whatever: almost used to it when a little fair girl of about seven was killed in the street outside our park by a piece of shrapnel from the blue and radiant sky. I remember saying: 'Yes, yes,' as if I had been saying it for ever and had expected nothing different when more and more news, unofficial, disastrous and certain, kept coming in from the different Fronts, when a man casually talked with in a café told me of a church blown sky high at, I think, Legionow, just beyond Warsaw; of civilians who had been sheltering there undistinguishable from the rest of the charred rubbish, of great Government factories burning at Biala Podlaska; of the men and their families buried beneath the ruins of the Wola quarter; I felt as if that too were something with which I was infinitely familiar and had accepted and knew how to bear. The question in my mind was unbearable. To ease it, I went out into the town. I remember buying a duck for the next day's dinner, and a whole basketful of chrysanthemums and pears in a covered market-place. A radio was roaring on a butcher's stall. From the church of Ostra Brama, at Wilno, built above the street in the great wall of the city, an ancient Polish hymn came over the air. After the shrine of Czestochowa, Ostra Brama is the most sacred earth in Poland. Later, I saw the Bolshevik Army there, with their machine-guns, their tanks, their little red stars, and their red flags. Later still, I saw them march out and yet another army, the third to carve up Poland, marching in. As remorselessly as if I had foreseen all that—and indeed, although I still had some kind of hope, I did foresee it only too well—the question in my

mind kept on torturing me. As the afternoon ended I went home, walking slowly along the Street of the New World and past the plain-fronted British Embassy almost on the corner, where policemen were speechlessly grouped about the gates. In the courtyard cars and luggage and a few silent people; one of them a British officer. I do not know, nor want to know, who he was; he was not very young; I never noticed his rank.

The policemen let me pass in. It was all too simple to be dramatic. I don't think he was even surprised.

I said:

'Listen—your uniform—I can't help doing this. I'm sorry. We're both English. Is England coming in?'

This is the story of a civilian. It is, in fact, in another form, the diary I began to write on the first day of the war. Chance brought it about that I saw and took part in far more than I could ever have expected, but that first entry needs no changing—to the end I remain the civilian, caught in a machine of whose working I had no real knowledge, battered about by the horrible ebb and flow of rumour, with all landmarks and seeming certainties underwater, suffering in war, I still think, infinitely more than the combatant.

On the events, each one fatally precipitating the next, we have lived through since 1918, and the decisions of 1939, history will some day pronounce its verdict. I am not an historian and I have no verdict to give. I am not capable of giving one. There has been and will be nothing written here that is not the strictest truth, as I know it, but only that; and that means fragments and nightmare glimpses and words removed from almost the whole of their context and a view darkened by personal anguish. A shaken kaleidoscope, true in every one of its

details but not the whole picture. Unlike the historian, the civilian and even the soldier in wartime has no perspective and no known result, against which to take any kind of measurement. Every word, every act, every involuntary ejaculation recorded here, is fact. But the meaning of these facts, more often than not, is hidden. A day may come when the very things that were hardest to bear will be seen as the things that were the best designed to bring order out of the kaleidoscope. The first and hardest of these things is what seemed at the time to us, waiting in a night of appalling darkness, the inconceivable and fatal delay of the Allies in coming to Poland's aid. There was the visit of Poland's Foreign Minister to Berchtesgaden. There was the visit of von Ribbentrop to Warsaw. After these, the die was cast in Europe. Hitler and his advisers faced the fact that Poland, in spite of the geographical position and all the other causes which had forced her into a seeming, though cold, rapprochement with Nazi Germany, would never accept their terms. An acquiescent Poland, charmed by the siren song of German racialism, willing to forgo her ancient Latin and liberal culture in favour of Teutonic penetration and a Nazi protectorate, cynically abandoning her inherited role in the East and her centuries-old tie with France in the West, could and would have been allowed to live and even prosper in the shadow of the Third Reich. An independent, honourable Poland should and would be swept from the map.

From February onwards an attentive ear could already distinguish the sounds of what was to come. The wings of Hitler's bombers were already vibrating for flight. In March the fall of the Slovakian frontier set a sign and seal on what was already certain. In April a

typical Hitlerian ultimatum demanded Danzig and a corridor within the 'corridor'; in other words, complete domination of the Vistula and the military subjugation of Poland without a shot being fired. After the inevitable Polish refusal, a British guarantee was spontaneously offered to Poland and soberly and after deliberation accepted. All through that last, brilliant summer, the wheel once set spinning, gathered staggering pace. A treaty of mutual aid was signed between the new Allies. Poland, always Anglophile, was exalted. I shall not easily forget the noble enthusiasm with which the new friendship became an article of Polish faith. The terms of the treaty were published. Rightly or wrongly the average citizen in Poland believed that what we were promised was immediate military intervention in the event of unprovoked aggression.

The patience of the country, stretched to breaking-point, refused nevertheless to break. An interminable series of insults, public and official; abduction and murder of Poles on the German-Polish frontiers, the outrage of all that took place in Danzig, were all endured with a moderation that amazed Europe. According to no less an authority than M. D'Ormesson of the *Figaro*, this attitude of the Polish Government had its origin in the guarantees given by Great Britain. There was plenty of feeling among Poles that what had already been done constituted an aggression and that we should at once begin to reply to violence by armed defence. The Government, in constant communication with London and Paris, held the people back and called for more and more patience. In the meantime, the German staff had fixed on the 1st of September. The hour struck, the blow was dealt. Poland, bloody and

already reeling, turned her eyes to the West, and, asking for bread, received, or seemed to receive, a stone. For three days, with our terrible exposed frontiers and in a sunshine so glaring that a fly could not crawl unseen from above on the surface of the earth, we were completely alone. On the third day there was no longer any doubt of what the end must be. Poland, once again, had been assassinated. On the third day our Allies declared war.

For the ordinary British visitor or official in Poland during those days of waiting, I believe that the waiting was torture. To an individual like myself, married into a Polish family, familiar with the country and its language, literature and history, a Polish subject, Catholic, intensely Polish in sentiment, it was even more than this. It was the discovery that, in spite of the long passage of years, in spite of the ties of custom, religion, language, great love, friendships, and what is known as a stake in the country, I was ineradicably British, after all. If Poland could so gallantly commit an acknowledged act of suicide, how was it to be endured if England conceivably fell short? It was inconceivable; but night and day one lived with the possibility of it already advanced by so many more minutes, so many more hours. I do not think that the Polish people themselves ever doubted that England would keep to her word. They were bewildered, they groped about for explanations, but their imagination could not take so monstrous a leap as that. I confess that mine did. That would not have been possible if England's honour had not been dearer to me than it was to the Poles.

The Poles, relieved of that frightful double burden, nevertheless stood aghast. Immediate military interven-

tion as we saw it meant war in the West from the first hour in which the enemy attacked our frontiers; the bombing of our open towns and villages, the use of mustard-gas and other frightfulness, the machine-gunning from the air of isolated field workers, trains loaded with refugees, and even herds of cattle standing in the fields, must entail, we thought, the immediate bombardment of, at least, military and strategic positions in Germany. War in the West must have immediately relieved our fronts against which the German staff had thrown five armies. The bombing of Germany would have carried an international war on to purely German territory, the one test of endurance that the people of Germany are not morally prepared to pass; and it would have relieved our aerodromes, our centres of mobilization, the network of our railway system, our General Headquarters, and our defenceless towns and villages from the mass pressure of the three thousand and more bombers which Hitler was sending over three times a day. Yet in the West only the politicians were speaking; the guns were still silent. In that flawless September sky, only the wings of Hitler's raiders, so long stretched for flight, ceaselessly drummed. If the Germans advanced rapidly, it was increasingly evident that the Russians would advance, too. There would be nothing left of Poland. There was no official confirmation, but how fast the Germans were advancing admitted of no doubt. In a few days they would be within striding distance of Warsaw. Catastrophe, irrevocable catastrophe, was imminent. In the meantime our Allies were not moving. From the West, no help. At home, the end of a world.

For what it is worth, this is a record. It is nothing

else. If this book has any value, then it is as a document. As a summing-up, an appraisal, as anything but a plain tale of the days as they came, and the experiences that came with them, it has no pretensions at all. Inseparable from those experiences is the memory of waiting for England. Once again, if anybody in this narrative seems to have judged England hardly for that waiting, it was I. It was not the Poles. Their belief in England's ultimate aid was never shaken.

The British officer in the Embassy courtyard peered at me in the twilight. Although we could scarcely see each other, of all the faces I have seen since, out of all the grimaces of pain, of grief and madness, of ravenous hunger, of heroism, cruelty, of every kind of torture, I still remember his. After a very long time, a time measured by the creak of the refugees' carts and the straining harness of horses that had been on the march since morning, endlessly following each other up the Avenue of the Third of May, he said, heavily and as if he were being put to death:

'I don't know . . . there is no news . . . what do you expect me to tell you? . . . nobody has told *me*.'

Then, again:

'They say the wireless is jammed. You can't get anything. Yes, the wireless. . . . I expect we shall know to-morrow.'

To-morrow seemed a long way off. Even longer, I have thought, to him than it did to me.

I began to go away. How glad he must have been. Before I went I said one more thing. I never meant to say it.

'Perhaps,' I said, 'perhaps . . . England is going to let us down? Do you think she is?'

'Oh, no,' he said. You could see he had been repeating that to himself all day, and he was wearing the British uniform. 'Oh, no,' he said, smiling, and his look then was worse than when he had not smiled. 'Oh, no. That couldn't happen. To-morrow the wireless is sure to be working. We'll have all the news to-morrow. It's the wireless really—we can't get through to anybody. Did I tell you? They say it's jammed.'

That night, the 2nd of September, the first trainloads of wounded came into Warsaw. Soldiers have told me since that the Germans came into Poland in a column of fire and iron fifteen kilometres wide; nothing but fire and iron, armoured and plated and rolling like the cars of Juggernaut over those terrible dry roads where they would have been bogged for weeks if the heavens had only sent us a little rain. Not a man on foot. Nothing for cavalry to do. No chance of the bayonet fighting against which the Germans have never stood and never will. And we were alone.

The wounded men, looking very long and flat, lay on stretchers roughly covered with blankets. Horribly wounded. The first fruits of the Great Mechanized War. Their teeth were shut, but they opened their eyes and looked up into the faces of those who were waiting to help them—all that night the women of Warsaw stood on the stations, hoping to give them at least a cigarette to smoke, something hot to drink.

They did not even hear the questions. . . . Coffee? Tea? What would you like? Shall I light you a cigarette? . . .

Their teeth shut and their eyes wide open, they searched the friendly faces; their voices became quite strong, even authoritative.

'News . . .' they demanded. 'News. . . . How are they fighting in the West? . . . Are they bombing Germany? . . . *Is England in?*'

Chapter 4

ENGLAND DECLARES WAR

Between the house we lived in and the next house, also on a corner, used to run one of the quietest streets I have ever known. A few houses, set very far back in gardens with bright lawns and, in their flowering time, whole groves of cherry, lilac, and acacia trees all foaming white, looked out on to it. No traffic went through it. The only noise you ever heard there at night or in the early morning was the furious barking of the watch-dogs behind the locked gates, and the singing of a woman whose name I never knew, who used to sing for herself alone, without accompaniment, in an unlighted room at the top of a house with a green door and dark blue shutters. Very often she sang scales. Whatever she sang, you could always tell that she cared for what she was doing. Whoever she was, and I think she was a great artist, it was in work that she believed. Very often, during that last summer, very late at night when my own work was finished, or in the very early morning before it began, I would put a long coat over some pyjamas and my bare feet into slippers and walk up and down that street, with my husband and our little Irish terrier. After or before the heat of the day the street used to be heavenly cool; usually the concierges

with long hose-pipes had just finished watering the whole length of it. Along each side of the street there was a row of flowering chestnuts and double rows of aromatic box almost as high as my head. It was between these double rows that we liked to walk. Sometimes, I remember, after all, another sound would faintly chime in with the singing; never disturb it. A clink of iron on cobblestones. That would be, just beyond the chestnuts, the mounted police riding out towards the city or riding in from it to their barracks in the Street of the Cadets.

On the 2nd of September, at about seven o'clock in the morning, an enemy plane flew so low over our house as almost to tear its wings, turned away from the park and the anti-aircraft guns hidden there, and, I was told later, was shot down almost over Vistula, out of sight. This time I was fully dressed. No more strolling in a long coat over pyjamas. Our quiet street was no longer very quiet. From a few kilometres away came the almost ceaseless sound of artillery. No music came from the top room of the house with the blue shutters. Fire engines dashed wildly towards some quarter where incendiary bombs were falling. A moment later another fire engine at the top of its speed actually cut through our street itself; the first traffic I had ever seen there. The firemen were not smiling, buckling their belts and settling their helmets, as one had always seen them. They were silent and grimy and fully equipped; they had probably been out for hours. Already the city was full of fires. Very soon it would not be possible to put them out. In the direction of Wilanow, where visitors to Poland used to go to walk under the giant trees to hear tales of the great King Sovieski and his love for his

French wife, whose palace of Wilanow he filled with Turkish splendours and, they say, the finest collection of Ming porcelain in the world, the sky was full of explosions and white curling shrapnel puffs, and the dull report of fairly heavy guns. As a matter of fact, we should have been indoors anyhow. Once the sirens went, everybody was supposed to take shelter.

We left the street of our morning and evening memories and went in and stood on a balcony, watching the battle over Wilanow. In the Street of the Cadets, about a hundred workmen had been busy, all the last half of August, laying down drains. Now a score or so, not yet called up, were still at it. The foreman became crimson with anger every time the sirens blew and his men came popping up out of cover to count the raiders and watch the direction they took. So long as there was no raid they stayed down in what was in fact a perfect air-raid shelter, several metres below the road level, getting on with laying the pipes. A good many of the pipes had already been cracked by distant explosions, but I daresay they laid those too. What could it matter? As soon as there was danger, up they came; stood on wheelbarrows and climbed railings and raised their arms, pointing angrily and mockingly at the Szwaby and their machines. I said to them from my balcony:

'You are a lot of lunatics, gentlemen. Why don't you listen to your foreman? What's the good of behaving like that?'

They laughed again at my queer accent.

'Where does the lady come from? Is the lady an American?'

'I'm Polish,' I said.

We went on talking. The concierge and a woman from a dry-cleaning shop who knew me joined in.

'She's English,' they said, 'but her husband is Polish. She loves Poland.'

A score of faces eagerly looked up into my wretched one. Blue Polish eyes smiled up at me ardently and affectionately.

'England is a great country,' they said. 'The English are all gentlemen, like us poor Poles. But the English are Poland's friends.'

Only the foreman looked at me doubtfully. He had a wireless, he said. Had I one? No, I had always hated them, but I was sorry now. Now it was too late; there were no more to be bought. Then I had no news? Before we had left home, very early, he had had his on. There was nothing about England. What was she waiting for? Was Germany not to be attacked? It would become clear to us in the end, of course. The English, yes, the English were a nation of gentlemen. But what frontiers we had! How little money! Did the English understand about that?

I said, yes, I thought that they did. That I knew no more than he did. That, of course, it would be all right. Then I went in and ate, I had the impression, some sawdust for breakfast, and the day passed, and it was that evening that the first of the wounded came. On the morning of the 3rd, at about the same time, I went with my husband and Irena to the house on the opposite corner, across the street that had been quiet once, and walked through a garden full of birds and into a little chapel to pray. The house was the House of St. Ladislas and a hostel and refuge for the paralysed poor. All that summer, three times a day, Bronka or Irena had run

across with the newspapers as we finished reading them and, when we made jam, with a pot of whatever had turned out best, or with tobacco, cheap and black like Maryland, and fresh fish when it came up from the cottage on Narew, and sometimes just some soup.

At the sound of the sirens there was no need for any Air Warden to ask here: 'Do you want to go out to the trenches?' If they had wanted to, these paralysed old men and women could not have stirred. I have never heard what did finally happen in this place. Probably, like the Children's Hospital at Otwock, bombed without respite on the second day of the war until hardly a smear remained on the surface of the earth to witness that here had been either children or bricks and mortar, and like every other hospital and refuge in Warsaw, it was a picked and early target for the fury of the German raiders. If so, it is well with my helpless friends. As the Russian peasant story-teller, smiling for joy, so often ended his story: 'God has forgiven them their sins. They are dead.'

Mass was said and prayers for Poland. Both chapel and courtyard were crowded with kneeling and weeping Poles. A Pole is not ashamed to shed tears before the catastrophe of his native land. Hearts were breaking with a sorrow that had little or nothing to do with personal loss. The soil of Poland, so often and so frightfully violated, is regarded by the Poles with a sentiment which has no counterpart here in the West. Patriotism is passionate and articulate. The Englishman is never articulate about England because he has not needed to be. Exactly the opposite is true of the Poles. Quite literally, I think there can hardly be a foot of Polish earth which has not been drenched, over and over again,

in the best blood of a generation. The phrase is hackneyed enough and by repetition all phrases lose the awfulness of their first utterance. But, in Poland, such words are simply true, and truly awful. To understand Poland, to understand what a decision she took in determining to resist German aggression at whatever cost to her people and to the soil, even to begin to imagine what are her sufferings now, it is necessary to remember this.

There is a hymn, as old as Poland's martyrdom, which we sang on our knees in that chapel on the 3rd of September, and which I have heard again here in the poor church of the Polish Mission in Islington. As I make this record, as I go about my business, as I lie and long for sleep, wherever I am and whatever I am doing, and whoever's voice I seem to be listening to, the words of that hymn are never out of my ears. From thirty-six million of murdered and dying there comes to me one great cry:

Lord, what of Poland? So many years now, and so long!

I remember very well when I first began to learn about Poland. Her literature seemed to me something entirely strange. Her extraordinary heritage of poetry that is full of national vision was something altogether out of my experience. The great line of Polish poets, who were also her great line of patriots and seers, spoke a language which had very little meaning for me. At this time I was living in Paris in the Champs de Mars. Every time I crossed the Place de L'Alma there was the statue of Adam Mickiewicz, of whom, as their guest and professor, Paris and the College of France are still

proud; Polish poet, mystic and political exile, in whose writings I first found that curious and profoundly Polish philosophy which has been given the name of Messianism. I did not understand that philosophy at all.

Even when I had lived in Poland I was still far from understanding it. It seemed to me extravagant, exalted, and even a little arrogant. It seemed to me too terrific a claim for any nation to make; that it was not possible in sober truth, that it was even in pretty bad taste to make such a profession of faith. Long before 1939 I had come nearer to it. In the months before the war, I divined it. To-day, seeing what I have seen, knowing what I know, much of which will not be written here, for it can never be written anywhere, I affirm it. It is Poland, in Europe, whose hands and feet once again are pierced by nails. In Poland there is agony and bloody sweat as in the Garden of Gethsemane. In their own bodies, on the trees, the Poles are bearing, among the nations, what Jesus Christ bore for the world. In their own bodies, too, they will see a day of Resurrection. It is *not* finished. It is only begun.

The chaplain addressed the people. What he said was very short and very much to the point. This, he said, was the third day of the war. We had suffered, but we must be prepared for suffering infinitely more great. That even the history we all knew so well could provide no parallel for what was now before us. The object of the German attack was the complete annihilation of Poland. Materially it was all too likely that they would seem to succeed. Every kind of frightfulness and horror, surpassing even our knowledge or imagination, would be employed. What an Army of Occupation, under the orders now of Gestapo, could mean, nobody

needed to be in doubt. The Polish soil that we loved would be stamped into a bloody morass. Everywhere the lamp of freedom would be extinguished; men and women and even children would be tortured, maimed and executed for the crime of loving their country. The altars of Poland would be thrown down and her Holy of Holies desecrated by the foulest deeds. It was well, it was right, to be prepared, to entertain no fond hopes, to measure to the last bitter drop the depth of the cup, which Poland, true to her history, had elected to drink. In a few short days, very many of us might be homeless; some of us would have given our lives; that would be the easiest and the most enviable of sacrifices. In a few short days, we might already know thirst and hunger. Parting and bereavement was upon us already; and, for those who were parents of young children, an agony before which his own tongue halted, and which they could take only to the Queen of Poland, the Mother whose Son was also put to death before her eyes. But whatever the path before us, whatever remained still unknown, the lamp that seemed to be extinguished must go on burning for ever. Poland, wiped from the map, must go on existing, where she had ever existed, in Polish hearts. The iron crown of martyrdom, which had ever been fitted to the bleeding brow of the nation, was being held out to us again. This was the traditional crown of Poland which, it had briefly seemed, a new generation was to be spared the wearing, and which our generation, and our fathers', had already worn.

He paused. Of all the congregation he was the only one whose eyes were dry. He was past the relief of tears. Then he said again, gently and sadly:

'It is part of our heritage. God has willed it so. God has called us once again to martyrdom. That is why the enemy has passed our frontiers, wasted our cities, and is rapidly approaching our capital. That is why, on the third day of the war, we have no sign from our Allies. That is why such a country even as England is still waiting to fulfil her pledges. On the third day of the war, crushingly exposed and outnumbered, we are still alone.'

Nobody looked at me. Nobody thought of me. There was not the shadow of a reproach in the voice of the chaplain. He was speaking from the altar. His whole soul was with his people. Politics meant nothing to him. No kind of consideration of what, after all, was a question of statesmanship, was implied. But the fiery trial of that moment is one of the many things I shall never cease to remember. My intention had been to go up to the altar. I remember turning away. I was British, after all, before I was Polish. Until Britain came in, I would be her scapegoat. I would not approach the altar where hundreds of Poles were kneeling in tears to receive, as likely as not, their Last Sacrament.

It was foolish. It was most unnecessary. It was self-dramatization, anything you like. But it was also the war in Poland, of which this is my most imperfect record.

A little after noon, a friend telephoned. My husband lifted the receiver.

'Is your wife there?' said a voice neither of us will ever hear again. 'Tell her it's all right. England is in.'

Chapter 5

SEPTEMBER 3rd

For hours I was part of a crowd.

The whole population of Warsaw cheered and wept in the streets. With the crowd I surged forward against the railings outside the British Embassy. I fell back before the commands and entreaties of the police cordon. I climbed on to the running-boards of cars as they crawled in and out of the courtyard. I surged forward again to the same railings, fell back again before the same cordon, and shouted the same things over and over again until I was nearly voiceless and senseless. And all the time I was not even in existence. A thing called the crowd had taken my place. The wheel of an outgoing car did not crush my foot; only a foot belonging to the crowd. It was not I who had my ribs nearly driven in by the pressure on both sides and was most uselessly exposing myself to massacre from the air if the raiders took their opportunity. Only the crowd felt, willed, changed, or kept a direction. In this life I am living now, here in England, chained to myself and my memories like any one of those I have loved chained to another prisoner in a concentration camp, I think of that Sunday morning as a bright dream I can never recapture. Talking with people confuses me.

They tell me I have 'escaped' from Poland! Extraordinary irony of words! The only escape I have known, or shall know, was into that crowd, for a few hours, six months ago, to a day, as I write this down.

After his brief speech, the British Ambassador had left the balcony. The bank of flowers on it grew higher. The crowd passed them to the struggling policemen, and to anybody who succeeded for a second in establishing a foothold between the railings.

The occupants of the crawling cars were preoccupied and stern. On the other side of glass, one saw their faces in profile; set, and, for the most part, speechless. There were suddenly more British and French uniforms in Warsaw than one had supposed possible. The khaki, a little different from our own, and the familiar French blue, wavered a little before our wet eyes. British, French, and Polish together! We were all right now. Out of the Avenue a little company of very young soldiers from a frontier regiment, laughing all over their faces, swung to the right. The crowd somehow oozed back and they came into sight and passed out of it, catching the cigarettes that were flung to them, their splendid teeth shining as they shouted: 'Long Live England and Poland! Long Live King George! We'll soon be in Berlin now!' Each one wore in his cap the Highlander's eagle feather.

The cars continued to roll in and out at a foot's pace. Within them there was no laughter and no shouting. Gravely and courteously saluting at each fresh burst of acclamation, the Allied officers passed out of our sight, too; the full gravity for themselves and for Europe of the decision announced from that balcony rode in the cars with them. A bank of flowers could not bury it.

For Poland it was a day of rejoicing; her last for who knows how long? For her Allies, a day whose consequences were and still are beyond human calculation. In honouring their obligations, they did not disguise from themselves for a moment what honour costs. The crowd, with its strange sense of situation, a thing that cannot be expressed in words and is inseparable from crowds, understood and was humble. The tumultuous shouts of 'Long Live England!' came straight from the heart of a nation. The formal words were not a formula. There was nobody who did not comprehend that for England, too, it was life and death now in the balance, and it was England who had plainly chosen this. She had not, like us, an enemy over her frontiers. No mad dog as yet had closed his fangs on her throat. 'Long Live England!' echoed to the top of the roofs of Warsaw. 'Long Live England! Long Live King George!'

For King George there was some extra, an almost wistful, note of recognition. Poland has never forgotten her own Kings. Not all of them are worth remembering. Too many of them brought her internal troubles and laid her fatally open to attack from without. But the great dynasties of Piast and Jagiello, the names of Rurek, Batory, Sobieski, are among the most resounding in history. An individual again for an instant, I suddenly wondered what might have been the feelings of the King of England, who has heard that same cry so often from so many millions of throats in so many places, if he could have heard it then?

Warsaw was already in the first throes of her mutilation. In another twenty-four days, mangled and unrecognizable, she was to fall into the hands of her butchers. Surely, wherever and whenever that cry has

been raised, the note that was sounding in it in Warsaw can never have been heard.

The crowd, by another spontaneous movement of its will, without words, knew that it was now going to Frascati where the French Embassy used to stand. It does not stand there now, or so rumour, which is all our news, reports. On that Sunday it still looked very solid and reassuring. The green lawns looked as they always had. Again consciousness stirred for a minute. I remembered another Irish terrier, the superb son of my little bitch whom she had tolerated in the country where there were outdoor kennels for all the dogs except herself, but would not live with for five minutes in the closer quarters of a Warsaw flat, and who had had to go and live with our friends.

An hour's free run in the green and open quarter of Frascati had been his routine every morning. He needed and took exercise like a horse. In fact, because he was Irish and could take fences, he had been named Hunter while he was still blind and sucking. The fence then had been only the raised side of the box in my bedroom where he was supposed to lie quiescent beside his mother, and never would. But when he grew up the name continued to suit him. I have seen him clear a six-foot paling. The wild boars in the forest let themselves be rounded up by him. In an ecstasy of love he would leap in the air and remain somehow suspended in it, passionately kissing his master's forehead. For me, he never did that. I was second fiddle.

Outside the French Embassy the sense of tremendous things undertaken, of events pressing, of Time at its back, spread more contagiously than ever through the crowd. The faces of Frenchmen came and went, set

and even taciturn as we had seen them coming and going in the British courtyard. The crowd fell into a sort of taciturnity of its own. It is always difficult to imagine what it is that the French and the Poles have in common, except their Latin civilization. To any outward examination, no two temperaments could be farther apart. Yet it is one of the oldest friendships in Europe, and it survives everything. Each of the friends, in his turn, has loaded the other with reproaches, more or less deserved. Their quarrels have been frequent and often bitter. I know very well from my own experience, and I have lived a great deal with both of them, that you cannot have French and Polish people in the same room for more than five minutes without a discussion, more or less recriminatory, breaking out in several places at once, like a heath fire. But once they stop talking, a Pole and a Frenchman never fail to understand each other. Once the discussion is over and the smoke cleared away, they are always to be found together, fighting side by side.

Outside the Embassy, as the Ambassador stepped silently into a car and drove away, as staff officer after staff officer hurried in or out, pausing on the steps only long enough to acknowledge a cheer by the curtest of salutes, and went on about his business, they understood each other perfectly. The 'Marseillaise' in Polish is every bit as moving as it is in French, and almost as familiar. When the singing of it was over, the crowd began to trickle and finally melt away from Frascati and flow towards the heart of the city. By perhaps four o'clock in the afternoon I was no longer a part of it, for it no longer existed. A crowd is drawn back to its secret places as mysteriously as it wells up somewhere away

from them. We found that we were standing in the thoroughfare of Krakowskie Przedmiescie when this happened. A very hot morning had turned into an afternoon of cold wind and blowing dust. I shivered in a thin frock. The sirens were screaming again. Had they stopped since the morning, or was it just that the crowd had not heard them? I was very hungry and more tired than I had ever been in my life before. We hesitated between two restaurants. In the Hotel Europejski there would be Americans very likely, and any other foreigners still left in Warsaw. Reserve took hold of us again. We decided on one that was smaller and very Polish—Simon i Stecki. Every visitor in Warsaw who understands good food and drink remembers those two names. Its charm was that it was never overcrowded or noisy, not even cosmopolitan. If it still exists, and I have heard that some part of it does, then the people in Europe who least understand the art of eating or drinking will be swilling and guzzling there now. On the third day of the war it was still a place for Poles. The head waiter stopped smiling like a head waiter and said something to the man who was serving us. In a minute or two they came back to us together. We dined with a little silk Union Jack in a silver stand standing up beside my plate.

I remember choosing good food and the frightful fatigue of trying to eat it when it came. There was nothing to drink. The sale of wine or spirits had been prohibited from the first day of mobilization. Excitement had gone and would not come back again; but I remember feeling that this was happiness. England was in. I remember saying to A.:

'For once, I am going to enjoy the moment. After

this, for long enough, we have only parting and sorrow to expect. I am going to make this last for another half-hour.'

The sirens were so loud now that they sounded almost in our ears; the traffic had stopped outside. The wireless kept up its 'UWAGA! UWAGA! UWAGA! Zone such-and-such. . . . Zone another-and-another. . . . Zone. . . . Zone. . . . WARSZAWA! UWAGA! UWAGA! UWAGA! WARSZAWA! WARSZAWA!' That meant the raiders had got past the last observation post and were over the capital itself. I remember better than the sirens or the wireless the calm, half-contemptuous faces of the other people in the room. Nobody talked either more or less than usual. The waiters covered the windows and brought dishes and took them away as if nothing were going on. The anti-aircraft guns came into action. We were very near to the Vistula and the bridges were being attacked. We could feel all this old part of the town trembling very slightly. The air outside the windows was shaken by repeated explosions. The Germans, once again, had no luck. The bridges remained untouched.

In fact, from the beginning to the end of the war, I never could see that they had any certainty of hitting from the air any objective at which they were taking aim. Also, during the first few days, a lot of their material failed to explode. Afterwards it exploded much better. Why they were such bad shots I have no idea. I should not think it is something about them on which other nations ought to count. But that is how it was, so the fact belongs here. I have known a squadron of twenty-five to thirty raiders bombard a refugee train or some huge stationary object like the petrol refinery at

Chelm until the whole sky was fouled and darkened even for themselves, forcing them away; and yet not be able to hit their mark once. I have often wondered, too, how it could possibly be worth the money. Of course they always hit something. That was inevitable. Of course, scores of homes in Chelm, but not the building they had been trying for and which was one of the few in the town not to be made out of wood, blazed all night and smoked and smouldered for a week. Of course, when they swooped down with machine-guns over a little open latrine on a wayside railway station it was easy to murder the poor old man inside it, whom I later stumbled over lying with his head in filth and a grey face and grey exposed linen; but how can it possibly have been worth while? I have forgotten now how much I used to be told that a bomb weighing any given number of hundreds of kilos cost. At any rate there was no proportion between the sum, whatever it was, and the value of an old, grey man.

In Warsaw, the real destruction of buildings was done by the artillery. Artillery is sure. The bombing very often was effective only by accident; by accident, that is, against solid bricks and mortar, fireproof reinforced concrete and the terrific walls of Zamek and the Old Town, over whose great stays and buttresses even Time had no power; only the artillery of Hitler. Against queues miles long, waiting for a little water; against hordes of bewildered peasants seeking a refuge in the capital and herding in the streets or the Opera House, or where and how they could, like cattle in some shambles whose overseer was monstrously overworked; against families trying to drag their wounded to some mockery of shelter, it was very effective indeed.

In the towns and villages, where so much was constructed in wood, and for cutting our communications, it was the perfect weapon. But for all that, they have no eye, those German sportsmen. For once that they hit the wicket they used to send up about ten completely wide.

Out in the street again, it was still draughty and dusty. We went home gladly on a tram that would take us at least part of the way. Standing on the platform, we got into talk with a young airman. He may have been twenty years old. Our guns, he said, had brought down a Messerschmidt just beyond the viaduct. He had seen it himself. His eyes, bluer than his uniform, were beaming with happiness. This time Poland had friends. The greatest in the world. This time we would not be allowed to go down. . . . The British and the French Air Forces were with us—what were the Germans going to do about that? . . . Perhaps even now, Berlin. . . . It was fine now that the English had got going. . . . The English were a great people. Long Live England! Long Live King George!

When we got home, the little red bitch welcomed us hysterically. The St. Bernard could still be heard walking about, in his serious way, in the flat over our heads. He made almost no noise when he did this; just an impression of velvet bolsters being displaced. We said:

'To-morrow we will really do it.'

Very likely the people in the flat above were saying the same thing.

A handsome young married woman, with a beautiful baby, who lived in two rooms in the basement and sewed curtains and aprons for Irena, and occasionally let out seams or took them in, and things like that when

we needed a sewing-woman, came up to see me. She was shining and cheerful, like her rooms, and she had made me a Union Jack to fly on my balcony. She said Irena had found her a white shirt and a red linen frock to cut up, and they had taken *Chambers' Encyclopaedia* from my shelves and found a coloured plate in it called Flags of the Nations or something of that kind. The blue they had had to buy, she said. There had seemed to be nothing blue in any of my drawers or cupboards. The shade they had chosen, she was afraid, was a great deal too pale, much paler than the picture. But it was Sunday and they had only been able to get it at all by knocking up a friend who kept a shop.

I remember every minute of the night that followed. I remember waiting endlessly for that feeling of change, that first roll of the earth towards morning that always seems release of some kind after a long night of pain. I could not understand how I had forgotten to expect this pain. To provide in some way against it. It was very sharp.

'To-night,' I thought with every tick of the watch on my table, 'to-night They are over England. London is being bombed.'

Chapter 6

SIEGE OF WARSAW

Monday was the fourth day. If anybody had told me it was the fourth year I could have believed them. In fact, it would have seemed more probable. It was already impossible to think back to anything so remote as Before the War. Bad news was a commonplace. Half-cooked dinner, because the gas had had to be cut off twice during its preparation, was another. We forgot that we had not always made coffee on my Italian tea-table over a stinking little spirit lamp that had been brought from the cottage. Battles in the air no longer deafened us. Windows had never been meant to be looked out of, only to be kept away from. Glass smashing inwards and lying on a carpet in ground powder or long jagged saws hardly looked unnatural. Time always seemed to have been measured by sirens and it was hardly worth while to wind up a clock. There were no newspapers. Only an occasional sheet with a so-called communiqué which nobody at all believed. Not that what the communiqué said was untrue. They simply did not say anything. Just some words: . . . courage . . . tradition . . . the Polish people . . . our Allies. No facts as to where the fronts had broken. No figures about the pace at which the motorized German columns

were advancing over the body of Poland. Cavalry charges, of course. There was never a battle with Poles in it yet when the cavalry did not charge. To fight from the back of a horse, or, dismounted, cut your way in hand-to-hand fighting through mounted Uhlans and steel-plated Cuirassiers—that has been the Polish way for a millenium. But the car of Juggernaut simply rolled on this time, with men and horses plastered and clotted on its carapace and crunched between its caterpillar wheels. Not even the Polish cavalry could hold up the columns Hitler sent. What is fantastic, what is almost incredible, is the number of tanks and armoured cars they lost, for all that. I have seen men who went against them with their bare hands. Women with baskets full of hand grenades. The shopkeepers of Warsaw, children, servant girls, anybody who could lift an arm and throw a bottle, with bottles of benzine. Benzine and smouldering rag took more tanks than anything the War Office in any country had ever heard of. No matter that the thrower flared up too, like a piece of tow. No, the communiqués said nothing. They did not need to. We knew without being told. In my memory the whole of that Monday towers up like a great wall of sea-water, higher than you ever thought any wall of water could be. A green wall of water racing inland; in just that fraction of a second before it topples over and breaks and drowns the land.

Communiqués. Telephone. Rumours. A feverish desire for news. News leaking in. Certainty growing not to be shaken off. In our flat, no summons for either of us. Nothing to do. More promises. Yes, wait, wait, we are going to use you . . . you must give us time. . . . it is necessary to organize. . . . Time—but it was not

we who had Time in our hands. It was the Germans. In the streets, new posters going up. More classes called. Will he be among these? More groups eagerly and fatalistically scanning them. No, these are still classes who have mobilization cards, you know you have none. Come away. To-morrow they will give us something to do. Come away. There is no use in standing here.

In the afternoon a battle so near and so terrific that for the first time we decided to get nearer shelter and go down to the ground floor among the crowd that comes in from the street. Here the arches of the building are strong and reinforced by sandbags. Irena flatly refuses. She has ironing to do, she says. If she stopped work every time there was an air raid she would never be finished, would she? Very well, I say. She is older than I am, and should know her own mind. I cannot do more than give her orders. If she won't, she won't. Among the crowd are the few men who are all that are left now of the gang outside. They are still laying those drain-pipes. My husband and I, from long habit, talk to each other in French. One of the navvies, a man of about sixty, listens, and tells us that he, too, once lived in France. Somewhere in the north, working the mines. We talked about cheese and wine and crusty French bread well rubbed with garlic. It was good living in France, he says, but a man comes back to his own country. If only he could live in it, though. He laughs and says, 'Szwaby! They would not let any man have his own if they could help it.' The house, instead of rocking, lurches suddenly; for a moment we all think we are for it. A servant girl laughs too, and spits between her feet. It is a short laugh. 'Szwaby!' she says. 'Szwaby! Kill me if you can, —— you!' The house

settles again. The All Clear comes quite quickly. The crowd is in a hurry to get into the street again, and leaves us alone. The concierge's little son, who was eleven, or was it ten, last month, comes in from the courtyard. His mother had sent him out to see that all the tenants had their windows shut properly. He says: 'Mother, it's so hot, look, my shirt is soaking. Give me the money to buy an ice.' Irena is still ironing when we go upstairs again. She admits that once or twice she wished to come down, too.

'But my heaters were red-hot. It seemed a pity to let them go cold. After all, we haven't got very much coal in. Perhaps they won't have any more in the shop.'

Certainly they won't, I thought. Nor in the mines either. Not for us. The Germans are in Katowice, although no communiqué has told us so.

Irena has not the slightest idea of what is really happening. This war, she thinks, will be the same as any other war. In the last one, she was a child. She remembers leaving the farm with her family and staying all day in the forest until the Germans had gone from the village, and coming back at night. The soldiers had taken all the food and burst a few doors open, but when the family returned, the old uncle, who had stayed on, and the dogs were still alive. The Germans had been pressing forward to attack the Russians. That was in the spring, just after the sowing. In the autumn it was the Russians who were following up the retreating Germans and the Russian soldiers who had taken food in the villages and thrust their bayonets into cupboards. But neither army had burnt the farm buildings nor driven off the last of the beasts that time, and the peasants were used to hunger and to three foreign

armies on their soil. From 1914 to 1918 there had been more hunger and more movement of the foreigners' armies and more misery for Poles. That was all. What did it matter what they conscripted you for? There was a war and, as often as not, you found yourself fighting against your own brother; or there was peace and they sent you to Siberia or into Prussia, perhaps, for twenty-five years. One way or the other, you had to leave the farm. All wars were alike to Irena. They were never wanted by Poland, and they were always fought on Polish soil. Beyond that her imagination did not take her. The whole of the siege of Warsaw was before her and she had no idea of it. I know that she has survived the siege and that six weeks ago she was still alive. But she has no coal to heat her irons with, that is certain. I cannot imagine how she gets any kind of food. I should like to be able to forget her. She was very pretty, with charmingly arranged fair hair, and she was vain of her small feet and the good taste with which she wore her clothes. From her afternoons and evenings out she always came back with long tales of writers she had been having tea with in the Café Club, and of Japanese attachés who had discreetly inquired from the door-keeper who she could be. She was disappointed because I could not inform her about the movements of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and made mysteries about her name, which she asked me never to reveal to anybody in the shops where she bought our food as she did not want to compromise those members of her family who had not sunk in the world like herself. In a word, she was a perfect fool, but she was pretty and nice and I liked her. That afternoon we looked in the store-cupboard together.

'Do you remember what I said when we picked over all this fruit, Irena? I told you then we were getting it all ready for the Germans!'

Since then I have lost a good deal more than the contents of a store-cupboard. But that jam and those jars of preserves still stick in my memory. It was such a hot bright day when we bought the fruit in the market. The raspberries were so perfect. The white currant jelly took so many hours to strain. The mixed fruit salads for the winter were so attractive. The very young, very green peas from the palace garden had bottled so well. The work had been so exhausting. I remember a friend coming while I was still topping-and-tailing gooseberries, and that I lay down on a couch in my study and finished the gooseberries there while we talked. I cannot forgive the Germans for that cupboard of mine and for those shining coloured rows of jars and bottles. Neither do I know how to bear it here when occasionally somebody offers me jam with my tea.

Later we sat on a balcony with a man from one of the Ministeries, drinking one glass of tea after another. Four great thoroughfares crossed just below us here, and there was always a great rumbling and stir of traffic. The Vistula is just behind, spanned by the Viaduct and the Poniatowski Bridge. Now the normal traffic had stopped entirely and the noise was no longer a rumbling; it was more like an avalanche just loosened and starting to roll down and growling as it came. Convoy after convoy of food went by for the army. Ambulances and fire engines tore along the middle of the street. Companies, white with dust, went by in full field equipment, asleep on their feet. One traffic stream

brought in the refugees from the country, from the far side of Zegrze and Modlin, the two forts. Their carts were piled with furniture and farm implements and bedding. The family for the most part walked beside the carts. The dog walked too, under the shadow of the axle, avoiding the sun. We remembered our summer journey and the man in the bus saying: this is the way They will come. This is Their road from East Prussia. There were not as yet very many refugees. A peasant will hardly ever make up his mind to leave his home, even for the Germans. It is not that he will not see reason. It is that he has a different reason and he cannot help himself. It is the same reason that tells him, without a calendar, when to put in the plough and when to begin the harvest and what to do for a sick beast and which tree in the forest to fell. It is impossible for him to guide his actions by any voice from outside. These homeless people were mostly small traders and impermanent individuals of that kind: Jews, groups of people renting the produce of some vast mortgaged orchard on a contract of two or three years, summer cottage people, old parents seeking their children who were working in the town. All of them remembered 1919 and the great drive coming from Warsaw and flinging the enemy back. Once more, I suppose they argued, help would come out of Warsaw. Weary, thirsty, carefully steadying the bits of furniture slipping about under hastily tied cords, they walked of their own free will into the most appalling trap that has ever been heard of, and immediately began making acquaintances, buying cucumbers, setting up a few pots and a kitchen chair anywhere and feeling that they were safe.

We talked, as people always do in war, of trifles. F.

had had no job given him either. Like my husband, he was over forty and had no mobilization card. Still . . . to-morrow . . . naturally it all took time. . . . X. had said that he had seen us, that in a day or two, at the most, there would be work for us both . . . for F. too, perhaps . . . unless X. was getting ready to pack up . . . after all, they were a set of ——.

Another, and much louder explosion. Somebody said the Radio Station had been hit. This was obviously untrue as soon as it had been said. Still we had better go indoors. There was no sense in sitting out here. After all, if we were to be hit, we could be hit just as well inside and it was only fair to the waiters to keep to the regulations. Three more glasses of tea, please, and the telephone directory. When the tea came we forgot what the idea had been about telephoning. To whom?

'Do you remember?' asked F.

'No. It was your suggestion.'

The idea was allowed to slide away. The tables tilted occasionally. Almost anything could slide off on to the floor.

'The difficult thing is to keep your temper,' said F. suddenly. 'These —— Huns!'

'Czestochowa!' said my husband, apropos of nothing.

'Yes, I know. I saw a man to-day who came in from Poznan!' The most courteous of men, he turned on me in a kind of fury. It was like reaching out to somebody else, no matter whom, with a red-hot iron that has burnt your own flesh. A sure instinct made him choose me. The iron burnt me all right.

'The jackals follow the army,' he said. 'They have set up Gestapo there already. You know their methods, don't you? You know what they do? They have lists. They go from house to house.'

When I did not answer, he said it again.

'You know what they do ——'

'Yes,' I said. 'I know.' The All Clear sounded.

'We must go to the post office,' my husband said. We left F. in the street. When I gave him my hand I found that his cheeks were wet. The post office was hard to find in the total black-out. A soldier with a bandaged head bumped into a cart and said: 'Believe me, brothers, the front is better than this!' In the post office no news at all. No chance of mail from anywhere. 'They have cut us off from Europe,' stated a girl behind a counter. She said it as, a week earlier, she might have given the information: 'Stamps at that counter, on the right.' She had no idea that she was a Mouthpiece of History. The last distribution from even the city pillar-boxes had been made. A clerk suggested that, being British-born, I might get somebody at the British Consulate or at the Embassy to put a letter into the bag for my family in England. Presumably there would be an aeroplane keeping up some sort of liaison. Out in the street again a great haggard lad was selling news sheets so fast that he could hardly hand them out. Of course there was no news in them. Still, buying them had become automatic. A hand-printed poster had some wild stop-press announcement about British advances: British Army in France: Britain Sends Aid to Poland.

'Is it true?' asked somebody.

'As God is my witness,' said the lad, 'I would give these two arms, yes, and these two feet, that it might be! Why should it not be true? The English can do anything.'

I remember that we embraced each other. I forget how it happened. I know I kissed his cheek and that he then squeezed me in his arms.

'Poor Poland,' he said. 'Poor Poland! *Biedna Polska!* But it is all right now that the English are with us. The English can do anything, *pani Angielka*. There is no need to cry.'

When we went home there was another thing to do. F. had put it into words sitting on that balcony. He had said that I must take down the dressmaker's Union Jack at once.

'Are you mad? Don't you know the whole place is crawling with spies? Don't you know what is going to happen here? If you don't care for yourself, remember there are other people in the house.'

I went out and cut the light cord it floated on. For a flagstaff the women had taken a length of fine bamboo from an old rod of A's. I did not know what to do with the flag when it came down. Finally I put it in the rucksack that was always waiting at the foot of our bed. No harm would come to it there and it would harm nobody. I could not quite decide to destroy it at once. No dramatic ideas of defending it occurred to me; but I would have it where I could destroy it if the worst came to the worst. The Germans should not have it. My ideas of the worst were still limited to a situation in which I would have a rucksack. As a matter of fact I did destroy it just seven days later, a long way from Warsaw, when I was afraid of the confusion in my own head, the result of wounds and loss of blood and want of food, and dared not put it off any longer. But as to what the worst was, even in that moment, I was very far from knowing. Knowledge came later, and is growing, every day.

Chapter 7

'THE HEART IS NO TRAVELLER'

We left Warsaw.

Somebody wrote somewhere (I now have no idea where and hope I am doing nothing out of order in quoting it here without permission and perhaps misquoting a bit):

When and where makes no difference.
There is no sense in choosing times for partings,
No matter when a wound comes,
It is still a wound.
Nor is travel a cure as is said.
The heart is no traveller,
It lives obstinately in its obscure trivial haunts——
The heart can make its home anywhere
But it will not change or move.
. . . it cannot always avoid the tune or the words,
For the wireless may play these, or
Some thoughtless hand fit a disk to the gramophone,
And the helpless heart is made aware again,
Of its home, and of the present emptiness there,
No other remaining, only itself, entirely alone.

Having written the three words 'We left Warsaw', try as I will, no other words but these will get them-

selves written down after them. When and where makes no difference. There is no sense in choosing times for partings. We left Warsaw, and did not even know we were going.

All the day before terrible news had been coming in. In any normal year the rains would have started. The Polish plans had been based on the conviction that tanks in autumn would be bogged and useless and that cavalry on its own terrain would have every advantage. This year the rains came too late. On hard ground the fighting below Czestochowa had been calamitous. Cavalry charge after cavalry charge against that unbreakable column of fire and iron. Mad, heart-breaking Polish tradition. Strange folly, if you like, that could undertake such a hopelessly lost cause. Tanks, blind, hideous, imperturbable, without will or blood-lust, even, of their own, rolling mechanically forward over the mangled beauty and ardour of men and horses. Caterpillar wheels going round and round with torn flesh and guts and scalps and bloody khaki cloth slowly revolving with them; and the caterpillar not even knowing what he had done.

The Polish cavalry! Outworn arm; *préjugé polonais*, as visiting military attachés used to call it. How often one heard that said, and how true it was. It was difficult for a Pole to believe. Right up to September we were giving the same answer: every war fought on Polish territory has been decided by the cavalry. The West has its ways, we have ours. Our country is altogether different. For us, a mobile army is essential. Our soldiers have unrivalled powers of recovery. Rout them on one front and the remnant will take you by surprise on another before you have got back your own breath.

Among our dense and spreading forests, in the rich clayfields of the Vistula and the central plain, once the rains come, in Polesie and the Pripet Marshes, a handful of Polish cavalry can harry and destroy a whole mechanized Army Corps sinking deeper and deeper above its axles. The whole Polish Army, if hard pressed enough, can always fall back and indefinitely sustain a guerilla warfare in the east. Polish cavalry, Polish light horse! Spellbinding words, immortal glory, immortal garland of Polish history until 1939! In 1939 fit only for the wheels of Juggernaut; bloody pulp to be fed to the blind and insensate Caterpillar.

I left Warsaw. In the end I left Poland. It is in the walls of this room that I do not believe. It is not the muted traffic noises of the London black-out that rises to this furnished flat. The walls roll back and the windows open on to the mechanized slaughter of the plain below Czestochowa. The heart is no traveller . . . it will not change or move.

At midday A. and I had a rendezvous. Our last in Warsaw, although we had no idea of that then. I waited inside a church. Spasmodic bursts of fire drowned the voice of the celebrant at the altar. Above me was a stained-glass window, with a coat of arms, two figures with crossed hands and feet, and verses of stately Latin, commemorating the conjugal virtues of a husband and wife buried below. No separation threatened them. The sun was more brilliant than ever when I went out again to look across the Place. It was so hot that even the pigeons did not stir. I walked down the steps amongst them, they did not even take their heads from under their wings.

A. said:

'I couldn't come sooner. X. is not in the Bureau. Do you know that general evacuation has started? The French have told me we are not going to defend Warsaw?'

'I know. I have been to the British. They are all going within an hour.'

In the Street of the New World a woman sprang out of a car and seized my hand.

'We are being evacuated. I can't tell you where. We are going at once.' She was as white as a cloth.

'Of course we shall come back. We shall come back within a few days.' She was a Polish journalist, in the British service, and her department had orders to leave. A few weeks ago we met again in Regent Street. If I had not spoken she says that she would not have recognized me. That morning in Warsaw I hardly recognized her. When she was a very young girl she went all through the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik Terror that came after it. The things that are considered unspeakable were to her perfectly familiar: firing squads; that queer indescribable look on men's faces when they have just killed other men, anonymously and under orders, in that particular way; the soft, unmistakable plop of bodies slipping from a wall to the pavement; walking along a street and finding your shoes dark with anonymous blood. Even in 1919, with the Red Army advancing, she had never thought of leaving Warsaw. Now she repeated, in the voice of a sleep-walker:

'We are leaving. I have a suit-case here. I have had to have it ready all the week, but we shall be coming back. It *cannot* all be over. It is impossible that this is the end.'

Somebody else came out of a shop. Somebody else

being evacuated. The engine of the car was running. 'Good-bye,' she said, 'we're coming back, you know. What about your husband? When he's called, what are you going to do?'

I remember laughing. Not a very nice laugh, probably. Rather like the laugh of the servant girl the day before when the house had given a great forward lurch. When she had said, 'Szwaby!' and spat. 'Staying!' I said. 'Good-bye. I hope it keeps fine for you. Staying! Somebody must be here when the Germans come.' We kissed. I was brutal and I made it worse for her. I knew she was distracted at having to go, but I would not help her an inch. She has forgiven me since. And I was a liar, too. I left almost as soon as she did. Anything, I have found, can happen to anybody. In the meantime, we walked on. Almost every door was open and every block and shop had at least one wireless set perpetually going. This was an order. It was difficult to speak to one another above the noise.

By one o'clock it was quite openly said: evacuate all children, invalids, and old people. The only thing was, nobody told them where. The Lublin Road is the great highway out of Warsaw, but after that, where? Towards the East? But the rains had not come. The marshes were like billiard tables. Well, at least to Lublin. After that, Lwow, the Roumanian frontier? And if the Ukrainians stop you? If you cannot get any petrol? For that matter, have you any now? Where are you going to get it from? How are you going to get a train? Are there any? Don't forget that the raiders are bombing every viaduct, every junction, every level-crossing, every train carrying refugees. Don't forget that the Lublin road is choked with army transport and that the

raiders will bomb you there, too, every inch of the way. Evacuate, by all means, the children, the invalids, and the aged. Only—where do you intend to take them? How are they going to get food and water? Where are they to lie down to sleep? Even the peasants dare not boil potatoes or light a fire on their hearths for fear of showing smoke. For fear of the machine-guns. What kind of money have you got? In a day or two, nobody will take coin from you any longer. Have you got salt to pay with? Do you remember the black bread of the last occupation, the bread that was the typhus carrier? Is it any use running out of Warsaw to die, like a nameless dog, in a farther ditch? Nobody asked those questions. If they had, nobody could have answered them. Of course, when we had all gone, Warsaw seemed as full as it had ever been and not at all different. The going away of everybody never does make the slightest difference to a city. The citizens of Warsaw, unaware of any gap in their numbers, continued to undergo the siege. Stefan Starzynski did not feel himself any less the city's Lord Mayor. The concentration camp of Dachau awaited him just as certainly. Prodigies of anonymous heroism continued to keep the wireless stations going. The newspaper boys in the street, whose extraordinary daily courage and doggedness the whole European Press was to exult in and then forget, noticed no falling off in their customers. Warsaw remained Warsaw without us. We have lost that chance of immortality. The defenders of Warsaw, rotting now in the thaw beneath the ruins, heaped one upon the other in pits in the squares and gardens, crucified on bayonets, set alight by benzine, machine-gunned as they waited for water, dropping down in the streets all this winter from frost-bite and

starvation, kicked to death in prisons, 'executed' by German law, are alive for ever. The rest of us, who survived, what are we? Only the Polish émigrés. Our travels in Europe are well known. They began in the eighteenth century. We do what we can.

Within a couple of hours, because of an urgent message from X., we ourselves had to leave. We meant to return by evening. At the latest, by the next day. X. gave us a rendezvous in his village in a pine forest. We were to cross the Vistula.

To Irena, before leaving, I said:

'Remember, if we don't come back, you have a roof here, unless the house is hit, of course. There's enough food for one for weeks. Keep it or share it. I can't tell you what is going to happen. Each day you must decide for yourself. If you need to, you can sell the silver and the furniture. There will always be somebody who will pay for such things. If you can, go and work with the Red Cross.'

For the first time, she burst into tears.

'Why do you say all this? Shall I not see you again?'

I told her all I knew. We were going to the country for a few hours. We believed we were coming back. It might also happen that we would be sent elsewhere. Nobody could tell such things. A bomb might smash us to jelly as we went out of our front door. Not to be silly. Not to cry. To go out and try to find us a horse. To find me some clean handkerchiefs to put in the rucksacks. Was she never going to finish that ironing? She really must not attach so much importance to bed-covers at present. What I needed was a horse, not all that Valenciennes lace and hand embroidery and tucks for a bed in which I was unlikely to sleep. Very well,

she said. A horse first. Then she would go out and look for that. But the linen was far too dry already. She had sprinkled it twice. If she sprinkled it again it would be spoiled no matter how hot her irons were. . . .

'Irena, go at once.'

She went. We prepared our rucksacks. Nothing more. I never even looked at my jewellery. My furs were in storage, and could not have been got at, anyway.

'Boots?' said A. 'We may have to walk.'

The heat was frightful. I could not imagine walking in boots. How often I thought of them afterwards. What would I not have given for a pair of boots?

'We can get them out to-morrow. They're with your ski-ing things. Irena knows where. If I ask her she'll take hours. I can walk better as I am.'

To-morrow still seemed a thing one could count on. When I look back on it, I can hardly believe in such a conversation. Why did we think we could do anything to-morrow? In what miracle did we still believe?

We went through the rooms together.

'What one thing shall I take? This *may* be going for ever.'

I answered myself.

'I want everything. I might as well take nothing.'

That seemed to sum it up. I wish now that I had taken at least photographs; two packets of letters; but in war these are not the things one does. Almost every action is irrelevant. Just as one is always talking about trifles. Irena came back with the news that she had found a dorozka. A. asked her for a bottle. When it came he filled it carefully from another larger one of very old Jamaica rum. Above our bed was a small oval

reproduction of Our Lady of Czestochowa that might have gone easily into a pocket.

'Shall we take Her?'

'No.'

In the cottage we had made the same decision. The Queen of Poland, from her place of honour, still bent downwards her grave and gentle gaze. It is a quiet face. In the right cheek are sabre wounds, inflicted in another Polish war. Irena wept again. She came with us to the dorozka. Horse and driver were sheltering under a high wall.

'Come back,' suddenly cried Irena, 'I love you so much!' She had no family. It must have been awful going back to that flat alone. I remember that when I had climbed up into the carriage she hugged my knees in her arms and kissed my husband's sleeve. I was surprised. She had come a long way from the peasant upbringing and I thought she had forgotten those old ways. Besides, she had been with us a very short time. The sun lit up her pretty hair and showed off her dark tailored suit.

'To-morrow,' I said.

She shook her head in despair and started to walk away.

I have always known that she believed us to be abandoning her. I wish I could once see her, just to explain.

Chapter 8

RENDEZVOUS WITH X.

On the ground, what from the air must have seemed a group of doll figures. A toy set of signal boxes and the shining double curve of a child's railway line. A dog, too small, I think, to be distinguished at all. Just a patch of something reddish in the arms of one of the dolls.

In the air, bursts of shrapnel, white plumes and flame. Outline of Heinkels; each a nightmare queen bee swollen with monstrous eggs. Concussion of bombs dropping, missing the bridge again. Beyond the viaduct a brilliant, grown-up fireworks show. Heinkels coming lower and nearer. A soft sound, quite unexpected, of a factory collapsing inwards. Not violent at all. A sort of gentle subsidence. The dolls still buying their tickets. The toy train getting ready to start. The awful ear-splitting roar of the bombers. The image of obscene queen bees coming back as queer ovoid pouches begin to fall from them. The dolls have never seen these pouches before. They fall slowly, drifting when a puff of wind gets behind them. A. saying:

'Mustard gas.'

The Germans have begun to use gas.

We are pleased that there is this train running. The

line is a single-track one. It will take us within a few miles of where we want to go. The dorozka came right out of the city with us. So far the journey is very easy. The heat is terrible, but we have not had to walk at all yet. More and more refugees are coming into Warsaw. All the rest of the traffic is leaving the town and it is all military. We are not in the stream of the great exodus. We are on our old road to Zegrze, but we are leaving it now, if the train gets away. If we get away. The terrier is heavy to hold, and A. has two rucksacks. Surely I can do that much. If I put her down I may get told to leave her behind. After all, this is war. It is not the bombers that make me sure of it. It is the boat-shaped convoys of live hogs going with the army. Sitting up on the high seat of the dorozka, I have looked down on hundreds and hundreds of these poor beasts this afternoon. Lashed together with ropes, blood welling up out of their lard. Pale hulks, screaming with pain and terror, their heads lolling, the sun burning them up, bloody bubbles coming from their snouts. War. No time for pity for a hog. Men will be worse treated than this. A gentle girl, a few hours after giving birth to her child, will be bombed out of a Warsaw clinic and, crawling with it on hands and knees, cover a mile or two in twenty-four hours. In the house that takes her in she is to find her murdered husband; to crawl over his body and lie down on it, and after that to live. She is alive to-day. War. Reality of a German invasion. The train moves. There is even a seat, and the air is not too terrible. Mustard gas, then. On the 5th of September. Afterwards they accused us of using it, and the British, I think, of supplying it! The train has an engine not much more powerful than a tea-kettle. A. calls it a

samovar. There is still the problem of the terrier. X. must lend us his revolver and finish that, anyhow. I realize that I am nearly asleep. All the suburb through which we have been passing has been damaged. Families are standing about, pulling crumpled bits of iron, probably bedsteads this morning, and all sorts of unrecognizable things out of heaps of rubble and dust. The body of a man is sprawling face downwards, quite alone. I wonder when somebody will find him. There is broken window-glass all along the permanent way.

It is still quite early afternoon as we walk through the pine forest. There is no road. I remember our coming here before, in a Chevrolet belonging to X. The chauffeur drove for miles between groves of pines and straight across fields and over sprawling roots and stumps of trees not altogether level with the ground. I suppose he had some quite clear route of his own in his head, but we are not able to find it. We meet one or two people who give us quite wrong directions, and the terrier enjoys the country smells and runs after hens. There are quite a lot of summer villas in the forest, but they are nearly all deserted. Some people of whom we ask the way answer us unwillingly. As we go on, we hear them begin a quarrel.

'When will you learn not to tell a stranger anything?' says one of the women. 'How do you know where they come from? What should they want with any captain's house? You'd better remember another time what you've been told about spies.'

She was perfectly right. The work done by German spies in Poland was fantastically successful. It is not that their existence was unknown. The trouble seems to have been, as in all civilized countries, to know what

to do about them. It is a pity that spies themselves apparently never have this difficulty. What they have to do is quite clear to them, and they do it well. What they did in Poland, they have done and are doing everywhere else. It was nice being in the forest. I thought I should not mind if we never found the house.

Of course before very long we did. X. was not there. His mother came out and asked us to come in.

'But where are you going to sleep? In an hour or two we are leaving this house. My son is sending a car. He cannot come himself. He has ordered us away at once. I understand nothing. I am inclined not to go.'

She was old and she remembered many wars. 1916, and X. one of the famous Legionaries; why, she thought, that was such a short time ago. And now, all to do again.

'We miss the Marshal,' she said, sadly shaking her head. 'We miss Pilsudski.'

Her daughter-in-law was not missing Pilsudski. She was feverishly smoking cigarettes, throwing things into suitcases, and breaking off every few minutes to try the telephone again. By a miracle, there was still a line to Warsaw. The telephone was one of those incredibly old dreary affairs fixed to a wall, and every time she tried to get through she had to turn a sort of crank. When she was not doing any of these things, she polished her already over-polished nails. With the telephone, you never knew. Sometimes a reedy voice would answer and a frantic conversation ensue, certain to be broken off in a minute by the telephone going dead. At other times nothing except that distant splutter and crackle of all telephones to which nobody comes. Occasionally it rang violently of its own accord. When it did that,

there was always a fraction of time in which everybody was afraid to go to it, and another in which everybody leapt at once to let out the reedy voice which might have some kind of News. After ringing, what it usually did was to splutter and crackle for a few minutes before going dead again. Nothing more. The whole evening and half the night was punctuated by that nerve-shattering telephone. At about eleven o'clock it died finally. The last liaison with Warsaw gone.

There were seven or eight people present. Perhaps ten, with ourselves. I remember none of them clearly except the old mother, the young second wife and a boy of about sixteen, X.'s son. There were some women, very calm, who insisted on us all having food. A colonel's wife, with a little daughter, I think, waiting to hear from her husband. After eleven o'clock she knew that she would not.

From six until ten the car was waited for. The wireless and the telephone made it impossible to hear anything. The boy kept going out into the road to listen. A housekeeper and some servants came in and out, discussing what to take; what food would be wanted; whether the cupboards should be locked and the keys taken away, or left with somebody who lived somewhere else. The housekeeper did not intend to leave the villa. The old lady kept shaking her head and saying:

'I don't like it. We never left our houses empty before. What will the Germans think when they come? There are all those sheets still unmarked, and the honey not put away for the winter.'

The young daughter-in-law could not stand it. She was frightened. She had not the stamina for that sort of thing. I don't know where X. met and married her. I

do know that he was frantic about her safety. At about ten o'clock his voice came through from Warsaw.

'Listen,' it said. 'I can't discuss anything. *You are to go.* Tell the boy he is to go with you. Wait for me at N——. I am transferring the Bureau there. The car will arrive somehow. It may be in the morning. But you are to go with it. The boy and every one of the women. I don't care how you fit in, or what you leave behind. Only *go.*'

She asked him what about her clothes? The flat in Warsaw? When they could come back? The boy, she said, refused to go. He could not expect her to have any control over him. Who was bringing the car? Why could he not drive them himself? Why could they not wait a few days? There could not be all this hurry. He had no idea how difficult it was to pack—to think of all they would need.

The telephone groaned and crackled.

'For the love of God,' said X., 'is there no man there in the room with you? Get off the line. Send me a man to talk to before this damned thing stops for ever.'

We could hear his voice in the room quite distinctly. The telephone was now magnifying instead of dwindling everything. A. took the receiver out of her hand. X. now insisted that he and A. must meet in Lublin. After a long time I heard A. say:

'What are you going to do about my wife? She can't go back either. You know she can't. X., you got her into this. You must make them take her at least as far as Lublin. She can't speak Polish properly! I'll get to her somehow there, or send somebody.'

The boy kept trying to get at the receiver. The women in the other room kept fading the wireless news

in and out. X. was saying: 'No. No! It is quite impossible.' The boy spoke over A.'s shoulder. 'Father, you must listen to me. Why should I be sent with the women? Father, you know I'm sixteen!'

The telephone gave a death rattle and broke down. The boy flopped on a couch and stared at his stepmother. He had to go. His stepmother said uneasily to A.:

'We'll take your wife if we can. But there are so many of us already and the car is very small and we are sure to be short of petrol.' All the time she talked she went on making cigarettes; hundreds of them. 'You see,' she said, 'it's a small car and we have a lot of luggage. We must have warm clothes. After all, this is September. The bad weather will be here in a few weeks.'

'You'll be throwing your luggage overboard very soon,' said A.

The wireless came on again full blast. All men of military age were to leave the towns upon which the Germans were advancing. All men of military age were to leave Warsaw. . . . Towards morning, the car came. The man driving it had been driving for thirty-six hours without sleep. He said that nothing on earth would induce him to take the wheel into his hands again unless he slept.

'You'd be done for quicker that way. In an hour you can waken me. Now I'd simply drive you off the road.'

He had been to Lublin and back. The car was in much the same state as himself. As he was saying this he fell asleep.

During the night I had asked A. nothing. We had lain down on two beds in an upstairs room for a few

hours. Every time I looked at him he was lying on his back in the moonlight with his hands behind his head, thinking what to do. When I looked he turned his eyes towards me and said, 'Sleep.' Whatever he decided, he knew that I would obey him. If he were to tell me to leave him, I would even do that. After the car came he went down to the kitchen and came back with a glass of hot tea.

'Well, they won't take you,' he said.

'Is the man who has come an officer?'

'Why?'

'I want a revolver.'

The terrier stirred and woke.

'I wish we had had it done when we said. I can't do it with a stone. Do you remember that frightful village we were once in where stray dogs were clubbed in the yard of the Town Hall?'

'Not at present,' said A. 'Neither need you. Be quiet.'

For days we had not ventured even to touch each other's hands. We were mortally afraid of tenderness. For him it was the worst thing that could have happened that they had not called him at once. That parting would have been natural; in some ways almost easy. Sooner or later we were bound to lose each other. We had not even the right to wish to die in each other's arms. I did wish it; but I knew that he did not. He would have seen me killed and still have wished to live so long as Poland needed a living man. I tell you, the Poles are a great people. Even yet the yoke has not been invented that can break their backs! Not though I hear to-day from Stockholm of thirty-six thousand Polish families newly deported to Siberia. Of the Vistula river folk driven inland a hundred kilometres from their

homesteads. Not though I read in the news from Paris of ten to fourteen 'executions' in Warsaw every day. Of Nazi guards bursting into houses and forcing the women present to choose which of the men is to be shot—husband, father, or brother. Of the body of a Warsaw butcher hanging before his own shop for a week. The Vistula folk, driven to hard labour, sang the Polish National Anthem. Two great and rich industrialists known all over Europe, both born of families coming originally from Germany, died for one reason only. They refused to sign away their Polish citizenship. They preferred the firing squad.

We decided to go to the nearest railway, hoping to return to Warsaw before the meeting in Lublin.

We walked for hours through sandhills. It was very exhausting. My white kid shoes were not much good to me. I realized how mad I had been to walk out of that flat without a pair of boots.

Yesterday already seemed a hundred years ago. We had a thermos with some tea, and at about nine o'clock, after three hours of walking, we halted and drank that. Afterwards there was a long and very bad period in a Town Hall and a worse one on a station, while the station-master controlled the evacuation trains going through. Twice the familiar hum and drumming of bombers approaching sent us to shelter. The thud and concussion of bombs falling began to be as exhausting as the sandhills and the sun. One got so endlessly tired of it. In and out of the Town Hall—in and out of the station-master's room. Everywhere the same answer, the same sun, the same bombers, the same trick every minute or two of glancing round to heel for the terrier who would not be there. Even in London I still do that.

By midday, we knew that return to Warsaw was impossible. We were homeless. The only thing to be done was to go on. The stationmaster passed another refugee train. There was still some tea in the thermos. It was astonishing how thirsty one got. . . .

From the air, a group of doll figures. A toy set of signal boxes, the shining double curves of playbox railway lines.

Chapter 9

THE LUBLIN ROAD

I thought this was going to be an easy bit to tell about. It is extraordinary how difficult it is. It is only about more travelling over these little single-track railways, buying tickets, waiting for waggons to come, suffering from the sun, hiring horses, arguing with peasants, saying, 'Are you all right?' 'Yes. Are you? Can you hold on a bit longer?' It is only about A. looking at me and then turning away, and myself looking at him. And remembering the terrier, and passing that place at Otwock where the Children's Hospital had been; and the queer idleness that had fallen on the villages and the endless waiting and talking and waiting again before you could get on another few kilometres. It was awful its being so unlike what one had pictured it. Some frightful apocalyptic convulsion would have been easier to deal with. But this was only everyday life, with the difference of a distorting and magnifying mirror somewhere.

The peasants did not even see the mirror. They had heard of it, but not looked into it yet. It made no difference to them that somebody forty kilometres away had. No peasant knows or cares anything about people forty kilometres away. There are strangers in the vil-

lage. They want to hire or buy horses. Strangers hiring or buying horses in a hurry are meant to be cheated. So the peasants cheat. Haggling is a village tradition, so they haggle. Ninety German divisions could not make them come to a decision a second sooner than they did; or keep them from going back on it again as soon as it was made and then changing their minds and saying it was a bargain after all.

For the most part, the man who had a horse and meant to go with you could not be seen at all. Those who had none, and would not have gone with you if they had, professed enthusiasm, and shame, and astonishment that anyone could be so obstinate, so blind to his own true interests and to what he owed the gentry, as everybody else. A horse was occasionally led out of some lean-to and his harness exuberantly thrown on to him and a cart approached; and then the owner, or very likely somebody speaking for the owner, would discover that the cart was not what we had been accustomed to, and lead the horse back again, saying no, he could not think of it. Besides, he could not possibly leave his wife.

The Germans were coming, apparently. Supposing he were not able to get back—who would draw the money that was due to him at the Town Hall for last week's road-mending? The fact was, they thought us out of our minds. Whoever heard of leaving one's home and running about the country and wanting a horse in a hurry? A horse is the wealth of a family and years always passed between a man's first envisaging himself as the owner of one and this actually coming true. Only strangers, from some other parish, would engage upon such an absurdity. Horses do not change hands like

that on the side of the road. But it was very entertaining. More so than watching the bombers and reconnaissance machines and all that traffic in the sky. At these they barely troubled to look up. Machinery does not impress the peasant. He is perfectly nonchalant about flooding his hut with electricity, filling it from morning to night with the strident cries of a radio set, even using the telephone if the government, to whom he feels no gratitude whatever, cares to supply him with these things. They do not intimidate him in the least. The serious things, the things that are approached with precaution, are manure and transactions about a horse or a cow; and the inexhaustible spectacle, of which he never possibly gets tired, is the irresponsibility and general eccentricity of people from any other parish.

Every one of these scenes was played in exactly the same way. Every one of them was finally brought to a conclusion when enough time had been gone through to make it possible, by A. slapping down the same card. Suddenly abandoning successive airs of indifference, man-to-man persuasion, raillery and the perfectly genuine attitude that no bank was paying out money and that we had practically none at all, A. would put on the officer manner; and somebody, probably up to now the most obstructive spirit, would automatically respond to that. The officer manner could always, in the end, get us out of the village and, once we had moved, obtain, say, ten kilometres where fifteen had been promised and six really intended. More than that it could not do. Ten kilometres away from home, not even a purse full of gold, which we were far from offering, could have overcome the urgency of the

peasant's instinct to turn his horse's head towards home.

The tracks along which we drove were unsheltered; the sun an enemy. The carts we hired were shaped like boats, and foul with animal droppings. The bundles of straw and matting on which we sat high above the wheels slipped forward another fraction of an inch every time the axles went round. The sheer physical effort of sitting up on them, the heat, the smell, the heartache and the fact that all this time we were going just where we did not want to go—is it possible to describe the wretchedness of all this? The closed, quite unsympathetic faces of the peasants standing about in groups and watching the exodus hurt me unbearably. A. did not mind them. Both he and they were Poles. Ultimately they understood each other. In 1919 he had commanded a company of just such soldiers, and asked for nothing better.

The track brought us out on to the Lublin road. The usual argument about further transport began. I sat on railings that ran round a little wayside calvary. Our rucksacks sagged against the cross. When I had sat there a few minutes I remembered again that I was among foreigners. A. was fifty yards away, going through the moves. I had to go to him, but I did not speak. We had already agreed that we must not talk French together, or, among peasants, let my halting Polish be much heard. It would not help us to be taken for spies. When I could not stand up any longer I went back to the railings. Some other women were waiting there now. One of them told a story about a woman she had seen in a poor street in Warsaw distributing sweets to children from her bag. She described a thick black

veil, a pair of glittering eyes behind it, and two policemen coming up and taking her away. The veil, the glittering eyes, the chocolates stuffed with corrosive acid, the insolent laugh with which the woman submitted to arrest, were like a further instalment in the adventures of Milady. Only truth would dare to be quite so melodramatic as that. There was no doubt that she believed it had really occurred.

'Why did she laugh?' I asked.

'The murderess? Oh, because she knew she would only have to wait a few days. The Germans will set her free when they get to Warsaw.'

The conversation flagged. Some kind of bargain was made. This time the boat-shaped cart, instead of going through byways and across fields, precipitated us into the racing millstream of the Lublin Road. It was difficult for the driver to keep the cart from being overturned. The traffic overtaking us was so violent that, if it had wanted to, it could not have pulled itself up. What was smashed lay in the road, like a spilt basket of salad. Once turned towards Lublin, you could not possibly turn back. The heavy army transport took the crown of the road. Every kind of vehicle had been pressed into service. Buses off the streets of Poznan and Bydgoszcz passed us, masked with green branches and roughly screened to keep the flies off the wounded. Aeroplanes flew overhead all day, bombing the traffic. In a way, the pedestrians had the best of it, at least they could slip a little aside, out of some of the hell. We looked with despair at the rich tilled fields, parched and baked for lack of rain. The Germans hardly needed the roads. They could roll across the fields almost as easily as over the macadam. The lovely plain stretched

away on each side to the horizon, laden with stacked corn, with piled granaries, fat hogs, Holland cows, bakeries and mills and smoke-houses; all for the hungry Germans. A pedestrian ran up alongside our cart. Would we make room for a sick man? He could walk no longer. Of course we would, but what about the merciless jolting? He was hoisted up and was less ill than we had feared. He could even sit up on some baggage instead of lying down almost on the axles, in the bottom of the boat. All that was wrong with him was a broken arm and fever from the pain of it. One or two of his comrades exchanged nods of recognition with A. They had all come from one of the ruined aeroplane factories. Everywhere mobilizable men were getting orders to leave the cities. Some were to rejoin their staff at some secret rendezvous and begin manufacturing under the new conditions. We still thought that this might be possible. We still did not know the completeness of the disaster. The Lublin road might look like a rout. It was not necessarily one. After all, only a very few people showed any sign of panic, and they were the people who, in doubt and danger, would have shown it anywhere.

All along the road cars had come to a standstill. Overloaded, overdriven, short of oil and water, they broke down. Many of them lay like turtles in the dust and had been abandoned. You could have bought a Rolls-Royce for a gallon of petrol. In another day or two, you could have bought one for a cigarette. We passed a small standing car that looked familiar. The luggage on the back and roof had broken the engine's heart. On foot and in the filthy pig-carts we had actually accomplished more than our company of the night

before. A. had been right. They should have thrown their luggage overboard.

Every five hundred metres or so we passed a half-concealed bivouac. Soldiers lay about at ease under the shelter of larches and birch. The hobbled horses did not trouble to graze. It was too hot. To every group of soldiers some small, fascinated, authoritative boy was temporarily attached. Less enterprising boys stood at a little distance, wishing they had the same nerve. A grave young corporal dipped in a bucket and gave me a drink. The peasant who was with us said:

'What about my horse, brother?'

The young corporal stared at him as if he could not believe his ears. The very enormity of the demand finally tickled him. After a long stare he passed up an empty pail and told the man where he could go to get water.

'But it's all mud by now,' he added sadly. He sighed. I had never thought of a soldier sighing in war-time. The sound of it in the falling afternoon, the taste of the water he had given me, remain. The water tasted faintly of green leaves and twigs. I suppose he came from some village where the well was a long way away. A full bucket of water painstakingly carried from a distance has always a handful of fresh leaves and twigs lying on its surface. They are supposed to keep the water in. I expect that in all his life he never carried one in any other way.

After his horse had drunk, our peasant soon abandoned us. I lay in a ditch with some other people. A. came back and said that a woman in a cottage was boiling us some water. A boy had been sent to another village for cigarettes. Large-scale overtures had begun

for getting another cart. Wherever A. was, he imparted a feeling of reality to the surroundings. After all, tea, cigarettes! He pulled me out of the ditch and showed me where I could sit on some stacked wood outside the cottage, a little way from the road. I remember combing my hair and wiping off some of the dust and lying down on the wood. My face and neck and arms were raw from the sun. The woman came with a kettle and I threw a little tea into it, and she said that the captain had also asked for eggs, but that she had none. Her neighbour had some, but she would not sell them to her.

'She says I will make a profit. She wants the profit herself. If you want them, she says you must go and buy them from her. After that, I can cook them.'

We had the eggs. We drank the tea, and put the black bread we had paid for into our rucksacks.

'I wish you could have slept here,' A. said. 'But this fellow is putting some straw in the bottom of his cart. You can lie down on that and sleep. Only the night will be very cold.'

'Isn't it very dangerous to go on through the night? All that traffic and no lights.'

'Yes,' said A. 'It is extremely dangerous.' He laced up the rucksacks and stood up. I had taken out the only warm clothes I had. A knitted suit that I put on now over the short-sleeved frock that had been too hot to bear all day. The cold could be felt already. There were endless delays between paying for what we had eaten and getting away. The peasant's wife did not want him to go with us. He had extorted a fearful price and taken it in advance. He did not want to go and he did not want to give up the money. He had a young horse who kicked and plunged. Everything was made to drag out

as long as possible: changing his mind a dozen times about the straw, the coverings, the bread and lard his wife was to give him. The boy came back with the cigarettes. More and more soldiers went through the village. One young lieutenant walking beside his company was never forgotten by either of us. His pure and rapt young face stamped itself like a medal on our minds. It was three months later that A. said to me:

'Do you remember—once—a young lieutenant—we never spoke to him, I think—a very Polish face?—where was that?'

'Yes. Before Garwolin. I remember him very well. But you never said a word about him. I did not know you even saw him go by.'

The tea and the mouthful of scrambled egg had taken some of the tiredness out of me. I said hopefully to A. what I had thought earlier.

'After all, it may not be a rout. It may only look like one.'

To that he answered me in two words only. In fact, I remember him hardly making any other comment right up to the end of the war.

'*Quelle déconfiture!*' And a sigh, like the corporal's.

Quelle déconfiture! From a man who had seen the great retreat in 1919, and the rally after it, and the Bolsheviks pushed back to Moscow by a *beaten* army, it was gentle, and it was enough.

Chapter 10

FIRST AID POST

A was counting rivers and bridges. Every river, however small, meant one more bridge between me and the Germans. For the moment he was thinking only of that. If he could get me behind enough bridges, he would have time perhaps to leave me in some remote country house in Polesie or Volynie, before we had to part. Neither of us yet understood that he would never be mobilized. That the Blitzkrieg had come off. Every bridge meant a pause, for it would be blown up before the Germans got to it. They might repair it in an hour, but every one of those hours would be used by A.

The peasant was muttering to himself. The great river of traffic, blind now, went roaring on with us in it. All the light had not yet gone from the sky. I dozed in the straw and covered myself with it from the cold and could not see the road. Whenever I pulled myself upward and peered over the sides of my boat, I found A. sitting dogged and watchful, and his face, too, had closed like those of the peasants I had seen all day. Only I could read his. Once or twice I asked him what was happening. I knew there were still bombers over the route. I saw an incendiary bomb drop on a wooden

manor-house and its owner standing helpless before the bonfire. All his wells were full of mud. Men and horses had been drinking them dry for days. I heard an explosion that sounded like dynamite, and reminded me passingly of my father blowing firewood out of an Irish bog with dynamite-sticks. On this childish recollection I fell asleep again. When I woke, A. had taken the whip from the peasant's hand and was leaning forward and himself urging on the young horse.

'What is it?' I asked him again. 'What is happening?'

He only shook his head.

'Lie down.'

I lay down. I wanted to. There was straw and I could sleep; and whatever was happening, there was nothing I could do. We stopped with a clatter in a village and the peasant jumped down and said he would not go another yard. The whole village was full of forms which I still seemed to be seeing through sleep. Horses reared around us. There were no lights, except now and again the fierce light of an explosion. An officer and a handful of sappers stood beside a small bridge. Below it ran a really very insignificant-looking stream. They were weary and filthy and they were standing by to blow the thing up.

'Sleep here,' pleaded the peasant. 'It is madness to go any further. Any one of these lorries will ride us down any minute. As God is my witness I'll take you no further to-night.'

The officer in charge of the bridge turned his eyes when A. spoke to him. He was too weary to turn his head. They exchanged names and rank.

'Stay here, or go on?' asked A. 'I have my wife with me.'

'Go on—go on,' said the sapper. To the peasant he said:

'Do you want me to requisition your cart and your horse too? If you don't, get on out of this. You have been paid.'

The peasant thought of his money and went on. What he said was true enough. Cars, bryczkas, carts like our own, were being driven off the road and driving themselves off it. If I had wanted something apocalyptic I had got it now. That late afternoon, lit only by flares, full of hurrying shapes, bored by the drone of bombers, that sense of the Germans being on our heels, the noise, the voices, the terrified and ejaculating peasant, the sight of A. flogging a spent horse, his hand coming down and covering my eyes, and then a red and searing agony, a mouthful of blood, eyes blind and warm with it, screams from the dying horse, the cart smashed to matchwood, myself knowing I must not lose the handbag with my papers and tearing my nails as I clawed for it on the road . . . the traffic perfectly unconscious of us in its path. . . blood streaming down my neck inside my dress and A. talking. On either side of me piled up sandbags and being told I was lying on explosives and not saying anything, although I could have spoken if I had tried. . . .

A. was talking to two soldiers. They were in charge of a lorry and it was as big as a house and had ridden us down. At the same time, I was told afterwards, I had received five shrapnel splinters in the head. I neither wondered or knew at the time what it had been. I rather enjoyed that warm blood flowing over me and the sickly drowsy feeling that went with it. The soldiers were sorry and they had pulled up, but they did not know

what they could do. The lorry was full of explosives. They could not pick up two unknown civilians off the road and take them on. The trouble was, I was already in the lorry! A. had done that. Before the drivers had got their wits about them he had wrenched the door open and laid me down inside. As I heard the argument progressing, I groaned instead of speaking. One of the soldiers came and looked at me. They could hardly lift me out again and they could not let me stay. I was determined not to speak. They asked me how I was and I went on groaning. I knew that A. would get what he wanted if I left it to him, and I was not sure what he did want. If I spoke I might say something that would be quite wrong. A groan could only help, I thought.

The next thing must have been unconsciousness. I never heard the end of the argument. But they took us on, on the strength of A.'s military papers and his being an officer, although not on active service; and also, I suppose, because they had wanted to all along.

We drove for about six hours, stopping now and again to give countersigns and fill up with petrol and for the soldiers to disappear into the darkness and parley with the sentries and be asked for News. To A. one of them said:

'Do you know?'

'I can tell,' said A. 'Where were they when you left?'

The soldier shook his head. He was not allowed to say. His comrade was asleep, standing up and leaning slightly towards the wheel, ready to take it even in his sleep if the driver dropped. I remember the intense cold and A. kneeling and holding me all through the night. Occasionally one of the men would ask, 'How is she now?' and curse because the only water they had was

in a square-necked petrol tin and would not run into my mouth.

I believed I was conscious all the time, but probably I was not. Once they tried to get a doctor at a First Aid Post, but there was none there. Once the man who was not driving offered to hold me in his spell off the wheel. The lorry was loaded to the limit of the stuff they were carrying. A. and I were pressed against the roof. Even passing round the can with the water was immensely difficult. By feeling with my hands I could tell that A. was in his shirt-sleeves. The soldiers had put their greatcoats over me, too. I was warm and partly concussed. Part of my mind was broad awake and the rest indifferent to everything. What was frightful to think of was the pain in A.'s voice and the first words he had said to me when I had let him know I was alive. It was frightful to know that he could suffer so much. I remember the intense rush of the cold on our faces and all sorts of shapes looming out of the night, and fragments of phrases which are perfectly clear in my memory, but have no form in which they can be recorded.

At about two o'clock in the morning the lorry stopped in Lublin. The soldiers knew of a First Aid Post. I remember that standing up and being helped to walk in brought me out of my merciful drowsiness. I remember walking up stairs and thinking: This is it then. Poland has fallen. The war is lost. I don't know why I was so certain of it just then, but I was. At least it helped me to get through the operation. I remember the pain in my heart and those words 'Poland has fallen' piercing it while the dresser was busy with my head. What he did to the head must have hurt cruelly, and I never felt any of it. I only felt my heart.

I thought that the room was in complete darkness. It appears since that there was really a naked electric bulb and a white glare. I could not see the light. But I perfectly remember the dresser picking up a razor blade and laying the wounds bare and probing them with a sort of sharp spoon. I thought he trimmed the edges with very blunt scissors. Then he poured in the whole of a bottle of iodine which he had given A. to hold and packed in five steel stitches, leaning heavily on each one.

'I should put in a dozen,' he said, 'but I haven't got them. We'll have to do with five.'

He did it all rather slowly. Like everybody else, he was dead tired. I had time to think. Time to reflect that this was the 6th of September and that the war was already lost. When I talk of a pain in my heart instead of the one I should have been feeling in my head, I am not using fanciful language. I mean that mental pain, if it is sharp enough, can produce an actual physical lesion, and that it produced one in me then. Although my head has healed, the lesion never will. When the dressing was finished, they let me lie down on a bed with A. on the floor beside me. I do not think I can at all give a truthful description of the night that followed. It seems that, as with the light, nearly everything I remember is out of focus somewhere. What is true is that the dresser and one or two other men lay down and snored on mattresses in the same room and that every quarter of an hour or so one of them would have to spring up and go to the telephone and snatches of conversation would fill the room. . . . No, the doctor is not here . . . no, nobody can go out to a case . . . this is a First Aid Post . . . well, if he's dead already, that's all right . . . no . . . no . . . go out and get a dorozka and

take him to the hospital . . . well, I know there are no dorozki, but what do you expect me to say? . . . Oh, God's Love, get off the line, can't you? . . . The doctor? . . . haven't seen him since this afternoon. . . . Back to his mattress and his snoring, and the next time it rang perhaps the other man would get up. Towards morning the early air raid. Windows rattling, but nothing happening very close to us. The traffic still roaring through the streets. A. sleeping and myself cautiously getting off the bed to lie beside him on the floor.

The two men are up and put on their jackets and shoes. One of them looks at us uncertainly. 'You'll have to be going out of here, you know. It's against the rules.' A. wakening and clutching at an ankle. I learn only now that he injured one foot and jarred the other when the lorry hit us. All the blood except what is oozing from under my bandages is rusty and dry now. My finger-nails are loathsome. All my clothes have great rusty patches, still sticky, on them. When I move, dried blood falls like powder out of my hair. My eyes have to be washed before I can open them. The men are very kind and bring me a towel wrung out in water. When I get up as far as my knees I fall over again, and when I come round I am lying back on the bed and A. is sitting beside me and the room has been swept.

'But at eight we have to go. As it is, they should never have kept us the night.'

We drink a little rum and water. The thing is, where to go? We have no money, and there is no room in Lublin, and I am very ill. People say that the Government is here. Somebody has seen Colonel Beck. A policeman comes in and leaves a paper. One of the men who has been here all night sits down silently on a bed

and looks at us. The doctor will be coming in later, he says. Perhaps he will think of something. There might be a bed in the hospital. A. goes out and comes back at eight and the doctor is there. I am not quite sure what they say or what happens, but I lie on a couch in a room where the doctor says I may be, so long as nobody turns me out. I have no idea who might have done so or what it all meant. I am not even sure how many days I lay there. When I start trying to work it out, I feel as if I were dealing with eternity, and I give it up. Perhaps I was only there some hours. Anyhow, what I am not sure of I will not invent. All this part, except for the things I have written, is a well of pain and fever and anxiety about A., and I am dancing about somewhere in it in the bucket at the end of the rope. Sometimes the bucket brings something up from the bottom. Sometimes it is steady and getting quite near the top. Nearly all the time, though, it is dancing and kicking, perfectly empty. The first thing I remember clearly is going to the window and seeing fresh placards on the walls and people reading them. As a matter of fact, I think now that they were old ones and that people were just passing up and down. When I opened the window the roar of all the cars still going through the town confused me so much that I had to shut it again. I could not really read the placards from there. I read them in some way of my own, and made out of them that the Reserve Classes of A.'s age were being called now. So I should be left alone and wounded in Lublin, and how would he be able to bear that? I remember hearing a man in the next room, the dressers', talking and talking, his terrible dry sobs making everything he said unintelligible. It is A., I said to myself. He knows too, and is asking these

people to help me. He has broken down. What shall I do in a world that has been able to break down even that man, over whom all changes and chances have been powerless until now? The sobbing ceased and the dressers began moving about again. I could hear them picking up instruments and putting them down. Somebody, the man who had been in there, opened the door of my room and came in. His head and face and hands were stiff with bandages. He showed no surprise at seeing me there in mine and his coming did not surprise me. It is queer how natural one is in war. He was a sergeant or some other fairly high-grade non-commissioned officer. The thermos was on the table and the bottle of rum. I reached out and gave him the thermos top full of rum and he drank it, making a face. It was like warm velvet, and he preferred the fiery rawness of vodka.

'Well, what happened?' I said. 'Why were you crying like that?'

They had been in a car, he said. Something had run them down. His wife, sent hurtling through the air, had fallen on a naked bayonet. Some ruddy fool . . . she had twelve wounds, and they had told him at the hospital not to come back. . . .

One of the advantages of all being in something together is that it is no use wasting words. After he had told me, I said:

'Well . . . then you'd better stay here. Are they calling new classes? I've been trying to read the posters.'

'Christ!' he said, 'I don't know.' He lay down on the couch. He had to lie somewhere. He was all in. I think I put my arms round him. We slept, anyhow. When A. came, we woke, and the man whose wife had been

bayoneted went away. A. had brought me a piece of white bread and some tea, and I asked him about the placards. But what day it was or how long we stayed there afterwards I have no idea. I think I asked him that question once farther on, and he said, until the blood under my bandages had clotted. The doctor had said that we could stay till then.

Chapter 11

REFUGEE TRAIN

At Lublin we had made a plan.

Less, I think, because we expected to carry it out than for the sake of having it. The expectation of keeping rendezvous with X. had brought us so far, and had twice let us down. At Lublin there was no word for us. Warsaw by then was more out of reach than the moon. If X. was anywhere in the country he would be at Lwow. It was even more likely that he had already gone through there and over the Roumanian border. But Lwow would be worth trying. A private conversation with the highest local official got us places on the refugee train, for Lwow via Luck. It was neither his fault nor ours that the train never went near either of them. It did not even alter our humour much. We had not expected great things of Lwow; nor even counted on getting there. Failing Lwow, we had said, Pinsk, Polesie, and the Great House of K., where A. could leave me with friends, in comparative safety, with some chance of food, clothes, and a roof during the winter. If by the time we got there there was no general mobilization order, he would stay until the stitches were out of my wounds and the worst of my fever gone down; and if, by then, there were still no orders, he

would go back alone, and find one of the little mobile companies of skirmishers already harrying the Germans all over the country and especially in Pomeranie.

Meanwhile we started for Lwow.

The refugee train was a very long one and as it jerked along it got bombed a good deal. It was a desultory sort of bombing, though, and was really aimed more at the permanent way than at the refugees. The permanent way was pretty badly damaged. It was impossible to get up any kind of speed. Every six or seven hundred metres the driver had to pull up; on main lines the breakdown gangs were still rapidly repairing the damage the bombs did, but not quite rapidly enough for a driver ever to accomplish the distance between two stations without having to fling on the brakes. There was hardly ever an interval between putting the brakes on and grinding out of them that lasted long enough to be described with truth as anything but a forward jerk.

I have never seen a longer train. Of course, there were far more open trucks on it than coaches. Also, somewhere near its tail, there were two enormous tankers full of benzine. We did discuss their potential combustibility. The fantastic incongruity of their being there does not seem to have even occurred to us. After a week or two of war the only thing that actually would have made us sit up and rub our eyes would have been the occurrence of anything which would once have been normal. The war taught me a good many things. One of them is that the human animal is not, as a matter of fact, either sensitive or vulnerable. On the contrary, the creature has been given the most horrible powers of endurance. Almost nothing will finish it off. Shock after

shock simply produce some further form of adaptation. Even starvation, provided it does get something about every sixteenth day or so, is not fatal to it. Bombed and shelled out of its home, it simply transfers its instinct for shelter to the four walls of a filthy railway truck, where the sun and the Heinkels find it out. Bombed and machine-gunned out of the truck, it lies on its face on the ground and after an hour or two transfers its instincts to the hole it has clawed or to a doorway or a couple of planks. Even in the obscene promiscuity ordained for it by the agents of Gestapo and Ogpu, in a twenty-by-twelve foot cellar in which a hundred of the creatures have been living together for three days, the instinct finds something to cling to; something out of which it can make its own personal shelter. It may be, in fact, it cannot be more than some knack evolved of freeing an arm or a leg for an instant from the pressure of all the other arms and legs above and below it; or perhaps being nearer to what air there is, or farther from it; or something to do with the awful business of the bowels; some relief, or some change of torture; anything. It does not matter what, so long as the animal has something of its own; a habit. A habit is its shelter. The human animal survives.

The train was not very crowded. The trains for crowding were in the last half of the war, under the Russians. The people in the trucks suffered the most. I was very well off, lying full length, with my head on a rucksack, on a long seat in a third-class coach. If I could have taken off my thick coat, I would have been almost comfortable. I had a good deal of fever, and there was almost too much punishment in the heat of the sun striking on the glass and the weight of the foul

air inside the coach. But I was afraid to take it off even for a minute. If the coach was hit, if the train was derailed, if any of the likely contingencies happened, I would almost certainly lose it if it was not on my back. So I lay thankfully and sweltered. Without it, later, I should certainly freeze. At a station in which we stood for about thirty minutes, women and boys from the village handed up great hunks of bread and mugs of milk and water. The milk had been heavily sweetened and then burned. I can taste it now. Burnt milk will never seem so bad again. A window was let down and I remember a disappointment quite out of proportion to the occasion because the air would not stir my hair about as I longed for it to do. From being gummed and plastered down with fresh blood, my hair had now become an odious rusty casque fitted to my skull. I could neither comb it nor clean it, and the bandages were a torture in themselves, working loose every minute and being unskilfully tightened without being rewound. A locomotive with a breakdown gang on the platform drew level with us, going in the opposite direction.

'Bydgoscz is retaken,' they yelled to us. The Germans had lost a lot of tanks. Their losses in men, once any real hand-to-hand fighting was possible, were always terrific. A stationmaster farther up the line had heard it over the wireless, they said. A communiqué! One could believe it! I remember our joy. Hel was still holding out. Warsaw was going to stand a siege. Wild hopes revived in us. The breakdown gang got under steam again, to shout to the next friends encountered, 'Bydgoscz is retaken!' Two German reconnaissance planes hovered over us and went away again, flying very

slowly, their noses turned towards their base in East Prussia. It was early afternoon. This was their second home flight in the day. Before dusk they would come over a third time, and then go home for the night, exactly like birds going home to a rookery. After the first few days, the German Air Force did as it liked over the whole country. I hardly remember a moment when you could look up at the sky and not see some of them. They did not always remind me of birds. Only in dream-like scenes such as these, when they flew low over a quiet countryside, reconnoitring, making bird's-eye photographs, sailing along just missing the tallest trees in the forests, soberly making for home at the approach of darkness. Besides, my fever was mounting. A. got down and came back with some leaves folded and pounded in his handkerchief. I forget from what plant he got them. Something very ordinary, for he could always find some without having to look far. I have seen him pound them like that and apply them to a sprain or a gathering or one of my headaches scores of times. I lay still and shut my eyes and felt the fever leave my head a little. An officer who sat on a seat opposite gave me some quinine and studied the ordnance maps that A. had bought in Lublin. He was looking for his regiment.

Nothing in the war was worse than its chaos. The first day's aerial attack wiped out more than four hundred aerodromes, hangars, and fuel stores, and paralysed the communications. The massed tank and armoured-car attacks rolled over the desperate resistance of the guards and the few troops that had been hurried up to the frontiers within the first thirty-six hours. Once that was done, the mechanized divisions had only to be

headed for the interior. On the now famous map published by the Völkischer Beobachter you can see the way they went; irresistible wedges driven with a force unknown in the world's history into the living heart of a country.

The anti-tank defence was hopelessly weak. The anti-tank guns, what there were of them, far too light. The old story! Money and credits! Poland, up to the very last hour, asked in vain for both. With armaments on a scale and weight to offer serious resistance to the German Blitzkrieg, she could have saved Europe permanently. As it was, short of artillery, short of ammunition, short of uniforms, even, with no Air Force and no liaison between her armies, she secured the mobilization of France and England. She was never able to mobilize herself. No real strategic concentration of her forces was ever possible. All that the troops could do was to fight and go down where they stood.

That blisteringly hot day in September, on that refugee train, we had no facts and no Völkischer Beobachter map to make things clear to us. The officer with the quinine still expected at some point within the damnable circle in which he had been going round for nine days, to find his regiment. He was charming, and so were the two others who joined us and who were on the same sleeveless errand; the impression they chiefly gave me, nevertheless, was of men who for a very long time had been nursing very bad tempers. Looking for one's regiment is hardly the forty-year-old officer's idea of a campaign. All three were round about that age; A.'s contemporaries. All four had the same memories. The students' defence of Lwow. The comrades, the stolen permissions, the last ball in Grodno before the

Bolsheviks got there, and the trains going over Niemen's wooden bridge. The draught of sour milk sliding down the throat after a battle. The nights on guard in the great Warsaw warehouses and the size of the rats that came up out of the basements. The forced marches. The retreat and the victory and the old Field-Marshal.

'But this is the first time that we have gone about looking for our regiments!'

The first one offered me some more quinine. The second slipped his haversack off his shoulder and put his feet on it. The third merely looked out of the window. He was bored. We were all bored. The man with his feet on the haversack looked downward at it in disgust. I was not sure what was disgusting him until he said:

'A gas-mask for a bloody cavalryman!'

The compress on my forehead was warm right through by now. It was a break in the boredom to have A. change it. For one thing I liked watching him pound fresh leaves and fold them into the handkerchief. Everything he did with his hands was done superbly well. The man who had been looking out of the window watched him too.

'Now I know who you are,' he said. 'I didn't remember your name, though I felt I should have. What I do remember is the way you use your hands. You used to sharpen all our pencils in the Engineering School.'

To me he said:

'He used to take them away from us. He despised us. We hacked into the graphite with penknives instead of using a razor blade!'

'He has always taken them away from me,' I said.

The compress was put on my forehead. The train moved.

'*Where* is Smigly?' asked the second man suddenly and violently. 'I'm sick of being told that he's in Poznan and that he's in Grudziadz and that he's below Lwow. What I want to know is, where is he?'

As we did not know, we did not tell him. We wished he would not brood and then explode. It was odd and fortunate that he managed to explode in a voice inaudible beyond the group we made. The other people in the coach were enjoying themselves more. A woman with several small children and a young husband had come from Radom. They described the hand-to-hand fighting in the streets and the ceaseless bombing and intermittent artillery; and the way their house had started sliding before they got out. Now they were giving the baby sticky lemonade and looking forward to arriving at Auntie's. I forget where Auntie's was. Anyhow, it hardly matters, because I know that they never got there. And if they had, how unlikely that they should have found Auntie! The whole Polish nation had started on its travels. A girl of about twenty leaned her head on the shoulder of a man whom she addressed as Colleague. They had both come from Czestochowa, and both were clerical workers in one of the bureaux of the P.K.P. This is what the Polish National Railways were always called. The P.K.P. was one of the miracles of the post-Versailles Poland. Only the Northern Baltic and Scandinavian railways could stand a comparison. I do not know whether railroad and coach and locomotive building is something inherent in the Polish temperament; but any Pole with whom I have ever travelled outside Poland has always begun a rail journey by cast-

ing an expert eye about him and pronouncing, according to the circumstances, and always without a mistake:

'This waggon is pre-1916,' or 'These are German coaches, left over from the So-and-So Contract, after the Paris Exhibition,' or 'Imagine the old Russian horse-boxes still being used for passengers!' or 'The Belgian coach-builders never seem to have realized that one needs room for one's knees.'

No amount of smartening up and re-upholstering and no distance from the original works could mislead my Polish companions. I thought of some of those journeys out of the past as I listened to the tired voice repeating 'Colleague . . . Colleague.' If ever the full story of the German war in Poland is written, there must be a full dress Roll of Honour for the Polish railway servants. From the first to the last they were never out of the firing-line. While the war lasted they drove and conducted the trains, many of them for twenty-four hours at a stretch. They starved, they froze, they did their own repairs, God knows how. When they could have slept, they staggered about the lines hauling away wreckage that was the normal job of a swinging crane. They cheered and consoled the passengers and struggled the length of the trains, packed like no sardine-tins ever were, with a can of milk and water or crusts and gruel heated on the locomotive for a wailing child. The bombers and the machine-gunners never left them alone. When one was put out of action, another colleague stubbornly took his place. Even among themselves they were almost anonymous. All the old shifts were broken up. No man ever knew where his mate would come from; only that a mate would be there. Whenever a train broke down or went off the rails or

buckled up into scrap-iron under a hail of bullets, the survivors took the next one on. The one thing they could not do was to tell us with any assurance where we were going. Nobody ever knew. We went wherever a bridge could be propped up or a loop line laid, and with the proviso that somewhere they should be able to find coal and water. Under the occupations they did the same thing. The only difference was that instead of raiders and machine-guns in the air, an agent of Gestapo or of Ogpu rode on the locomotive itself, and kept a revolver pressed into the nape of the driver's neck. Another agent went round with the conductor, with a revolver covering the small of his back. I am not sure as to what the Germans further did, but I do know that the Russians ordered them to cut the Polish Eagle out of their caps, and that the Eagle nevertheless was still there when I last travelled in one of the Russian commanded trains. Under the third of the occupations, under the Lithuanians, there were no revolvers; but every stationmaster and higher official was degraded in the very first days, and by the end of a week almost every Pole on the railroad had received his dismissal. Before I left Lithuania the Polish engineers were working with wheelbarrows along the lines not far from Kowno. The last Pole to whom I said farewell in Poland was a guard on the station at Wilno. He saw the pass from the Lithuanian Military Governor that allowed me to travel to Kowno and apply there for a visa to go abroad.

Crying bitterly, I told him that I was going to England to tell our story; that so long as I lived I would live only to work for Poland. That we should be coming back. That Poland would again be free.

'But when will help come, *pani Angielka*? How are the people to hold out? War is nothing. Hunger and misery and imprisonment, that's how the real work is done! When is help to come to us? Must we wait until the spring?'

As I write, there is spring in London; in Poland, neither light nor change. The crops that are following last year's sowing are concentration camps, famine, and despair. The peasants of the Vistula are transported to Germany, and the peasants of Bug and Niemen to Siberia. The Polish fields are sour with blood and all the Polish bread wasted and set down before dogs.

'But when will help come, *pani Angielka*? How are the people to hold out?'

Chapter 12

MURDER AT CHELM

We reached Chelm some time in the late afternoon. The station gates were shut against us. Air-raid sirens were screaming in the town. There was not the slightest hope of making a dash for it. The train had not, in fact, finished slowing down before the raiders came over. We counted twenty-seven. There may have been even more. As far as I am concerned, the bombardment at Chelm has won the prize. I have been closer to death, I suppose, on several occasions; but I have never looked so closely at what seemed to me like the other side of death. The scene at Chelm was a crater in hell.

There was not an anti-aircraft gun in the whole town. As a matter of fact, I doubt if there was even a rifle. The Heinkels came down so low that they seemed to be gliding on to the roofs. Only the soaring columns of fire and smoke and the flying wreckage and the dense blackness for kilometres around forced them up higher. At one point they were compelled to make a half-circle detour and come back again. They could not see what they were doing. The one thing they most wanted to hit, the petrol refinery, was never touched that day. Houses caved in like packs of cards. The station was

strewn with overturned coaches and all the glass in the town blew out. For sheer wantonness and savagery I am sure that the German airmen never did better. As families ran out from the blazing houses they were machine-gunned with the precision that sportsmen in shooting galleries employ to knock the heads off clay pigeons. Inside the train, a first impulse to panic had been got under. A few bullets came through the roof and did no harm. Those who had headed for the open were now lying quite still in unnatural, crumpled attitudes. It required little more demonstration that the best chance, if there were any chances, was to stay on the train. A sort of dust-storm blew in through the shattered windows as the falling bombs ploughed up the sandy soil on either side of the railroad. We lay beneath the seats with our heads covered with anything soft like a haversack that could be reached for. I remember striking mine on an iron stay and feeling the scab come off one of my wounds and the familiar sensation of warm blood running down my neck again. Women prayed aloud and covered their infants with their bodies. A. covered mine with his. I remember thinking, not for the first or last time:

'Now it really is the end. And we are together. This is good.'

The raiders turned their particular attention to the train. Their time was already up. They had still to get home to the rookery. There was no more hope of destroying the refinery that day by direct bombing, for it was no longer possible to make it out. Very likely, however, as the fires got worse, more and more under way, it would blow itself up from the scorching heat, and the rest of Chelm with it. The long train, a little removed

from the inferno of their own creating, made a plain target. How they failed to hit us I am still unable to imagine. The bombs they unloaded tore up the ground one after the other and still we were lying under the seats, half buried under broken glass and a centimetre of flying sand and soil, listening to the slam and thud of the bombs and the detonations that seemed to be striking off the wall of our own skulls. Still we were alive and waiting for the next one. I have no real idea of how long it all lasted. Again it is one of those periods that get mixed up with eternity when I start counting. What distinguishes its horror for me from all the countless others was a strong sense behind it of a personal intention to flatten us. As a bombardment it was not just one more example of the totalitarian conception of warfare. Heaven knows we were used to that. It was the vengeance of the German marksmen who had not been able to hit the refinery. In it was released the real desire of creatures made like ourselves so to mutilate and pound us with their explosives that we might be only mangled pieces of fibre driven below the surface of the earth. The knowledge of what evil really is, what it can do to the human spirit open to receive it, has never left me since that hour at Chelm. I had felt it before, and I was to feel it again and again in a Gestapo prison; but never so strongly. To-day I cannot look at a map and see Chelm on it without shuddering. Chelm is the place in which I understood the man who wrote: Myself am hell, nor am I out of it. When I think of it, as I am doing now, for the first time it seems to me almost possible to forgive the Germans. As a race they have been born under a curse.

The raiders went away. It was almost dark. They

would be late in reaching East Prussia. As for us, late or early, it was all one. A., who had been foremost in keeping the women and their families in the train, drove them out of it now. A priest, stumbling over his soutane, helped. Dozens of children clung to his skirts.

'Get them a kilometre at least away from this,' A. commanded. When they were all out, he said:

'And you too. Come on.'

I came on. The ground was loose and sandy and much pitted with shell-holes. Some of the children sat down and said they wanted to go home. Half of the carriages on our train had turned over, and lay along the edge of the embankment.

'What odds?' I said. 'Let it blow up. Must we go any farther?'

We went much farther. Until we could no longer feel that wall of heat against our faces. The town was as white-hot as a foundry. Then we lay down and watched it. An old cow was one of the casualties. All through the bombardment she had stood beside the train, rearing her gaunt head into darkness and bellowing like a Beast of the Apocalypse. I have never heard such a horrible sound. When it was over, she had given three or four more great retches, like a clapper striking against hollow leather, and died. She was not wounded, anywhere. It was heart failure. I never knew before that a cow could die like that. The soaring spars and beams from houses blown sky-high began to come down again, their fire dying out in showers of sparks. Little by little the sky cleared, and, though the columns of flame were still climbing, they were not spreading. Incredible as it seems, the fires were being fought down. From every direction volunteers came running towards the holo-

caust. One man, almost mad with grief and fury, pulled up to curse A. and the priest who were turning their backs on the town.

'Men! Do you call yourselves men! Turning away from it! And there are women alone in that bonfire!' His lungs were almost bursting. Without waiting to hear what they said, he ran on again. As a matter of fact they said nothing. The children, after a little hesitation, began to play with some tall dried thistles they found in a field. The glow in the clearing sky was not exactly red in colour. It reminded me of molten fire, livid and running, seen when I was a child, at the casting of a bell.

Soon we went back to the train. The locomotive and what was left of the coaches had advanced. In the station buffet there was a light burning and somewhere behind the counters a place where, by some means, it was possible to get hot water. I know, because A. brought me some and we poured it on to the wet tea-leaves kept over from the last time we had drunk. The buffet was crowded. The dead lay inconspicuously on the floor, covered with coats and tablecloths and anything there was. Here we were much farther from the town than we had been before. The raiders had caught us on the far side of a level-crossing. Nevertheless the roar of the fire came to our ears all night. It was a curious loud yet muffled sound, like a tiger purring very close to you. We must have walked miles that night. In and out of the rails and across the sleepers and up and down the embankment and back again to the buffet, and then all to do again. It was fearfully cold. We could walk no more, we sat down on the permanent way and dozed against each other. Half a dozen times A. said:

'You've had enough of this. Come and lie down in the train.'

It was the one thing I would not do. The railwaymen said we would leave again before morning. There was company in their sullen voices and in the swinging of their bull's-eye lanterns. It was better to be with them than with the women in the coaches. The stationmaster had sent our locomotive to Brzecz-nad-Bugiem, where it was needed. Communications were still going through there to Modlin. If there was a spare locomotive, we would move too, some time. Probably also to Brzecz. Anyhow, not to Luck, our destination. By going to Brzecz, we would actually be nearer to our starting-place than we had been when we got on the train. It hardly seemed worth while having to come all the way round for that, nor to have gone through that last bombardment. We laughed, and the railwaymen laughed too. Compared with what they had been doing, we were travelling in a straight line.

In the burning town there had been a big colony of railwaymen's families. In one house alone twelve women and children had been trapped and burnt alive. Two colleagues had been riddled from head to foot with bullets.

'Like colanders,' said one of the voices. Only now and then a displaced lantern showed some angle of a face. They were moved and desperately angry. A., who had no coat, was too cold, and at last we climbed up and lay down on a couple of seats in the dirt and ashes. A woman whose fingers had been shot away groaned for hours. Another implored the absent and invisible stationmaster to give us a locomotive. She had been long enough in Chelm, she said. I must say I agreed

with her. I felt I would rather be anywhere else on earth myself. Every few minutes she burst into yet another ejaculation.

'Don't you realize', she demanded, 'that every minute here is making it too late for us? If the train does not run through the night, it might as well not run at all.'

The stationmaster, being about a quarter of a mile away, did not answer. One or two of the railwaymen, who had also come up in search of more warmth, said, 'That's right. You tell him where he gets off,' with feeling. Now, in a way, it was warmer, because of the huddle of bodies, but not much. It was impossible to stuff the windows. I remember passing into a state in which I was absolutely indifferent as to whether the train moved or not. What it did was to shunt about for hours and finally, not far off midnight, back in the direction from which we had come. It seemed possible that we were returning to Lublin. Nobody knew. 'The driver'll know,' said the railwaymen. The trouble was, he didn't. He was only obeying signals from the stationmaster, who did not know either. The locomotive that had shunted us was uncoupled and moved up the line again. It seemed certain that when the early morning raid came over we would still be there. Then another, more energetic locomotive came and joined us, and jerked us forward again. By one o'clock we were running out of Chelm and northward to Brzecz-nad-Bugiem. I remembered our making up our minds not to go there while there was still a choice, on the 6th of September; as we had eaten scrambled egg and sat on a pile of timber in the peasant's back-yard. The fretful women gradually ceased talking. A., who could sleep anywhere, fell asleep; and woke, vexed and authorita-

tive, when I cautiously tried to cover him with the grey army blanket we still had. Very soon he was asleep again. A moon came up and silvered everything. A night raid became possible, but unlikely. Why should they bother? They had all day, and all the time they needed. I held a few bloated tea-leaves in my mouth to moisten it. Whenever I think about having nothing to swallow, my throat seems to close and I panic. Tea-leaves were a help. By the time it was morning we were running through country very like Ireland. I thought: Not so good for tanks; and for a moment I forgot Chelm and the cow and those hours spent in stumbling up and down over sleepers. It is bitter now to remember how long we went on like this, hoping. At about five o'clock we stopped a few kilometres outside Brzecz, with the signals against us. Not far away an aeroplane or two cruised along an airfield and took off and sailed away over hangars.

'There is an anti-aircraft battery here,' said one of the railwaymen. 'They say the Government is here, too. Anyhow the town is well guarded. Brzecz has hardly been bombed at all.'

Chapter 13

BRZECZ-NAD-BUGIEM

Brzecz-nad-Bugiem was an important and very big station, junction for most places in Poland. Our train brought us within about half a mile of the platforms and stopped in a siding. From there we had to walk. The heavenly early morning freshness on everything and our own filthy and limping staleness must have been in remarkable contrast. I am sure we did not notice it. At the time the urgent preoccupations were to find a hospital and, if possible, some food.

In the station, I sat on the rucksacks and A. reconnoitred. A lad in the glorious embroidered clothes of the Hucul highlanders stood beside me and bit into an enormous piece of bread and a pickled cucumber. I didn't really care about the bread, but the pickle made my mouth water. In summer, all day long, in the Polish towns, the wooden carts of the cucumber-sellers used to creak up and down the streets. I cannot imagine any South Sea fruit more deliciously refreshing than those little green and yellow cucumbers. A. used to tell me about his childhood and of breathless dog-days in Russia when his father would spend the whole forenoon lying naked on a shelf in a brick bath-house with a

samovar beside him, drinking one boiling hot glass of tea after another while a servant came in and out with constantly renewed bath towels.

His own charm against dog-days was iced water-melon, but he would not eat it out of a refrigerator. In that same half-legendary childhood, the melon was brought in from the fields, plunged into a cauldron of water, kept at boiling point some moments, and then instantly exposed again to the straightest and hottest rays of the sun. Cut into after exactly the right number of seconds of this treatment, the rosy, faintly perfumed flesh inside was as perfectly chilled as if it had come from the bottom of a deep well. But bath-houses, samovars, and acres of water-melon are not always accessible. Cucumbers you could always get. Every little shop sold them.

The cucumber-sellers were a part of the life of the streets. In the country, we pickled great jars of them ourselves, perfuming them with heads of dill, a bead of garlic, and a bouquet of parsnip leaves and bay. Fermented beside the stove, the jars were later cooled in the earth. No wonder I watched the lad with envy as the juice of his ran down his chin. Probably I looked ravenous. Anyhow, after consideration, he held out the bread and motioned for me to break off a piece and eat it. I could hardly say: 'No, give me your cucumber.' Once I tasted the bread I was glad of it and hid a piece in my pocket for A.

In spite of the bombing of the station and its environs there were few ruined buildings in Brzecz, almost no gaping windows, and few shell-holes. A., coming back, commented:

'I bet they'll be sorry before the day is out that a

train with us on it came in this morning! You know what'll happen now!'

It was true. From first to last, wherever we stopped, even for a few hours, we brought bad luck with us; as if to command, as soon as we arrived, the bombing or the fighting either began or was immensely intensified.

On the other hand, so long as we stayed, the worst never happened. It was only as soon as we left, that the place would be altogether destroyed. So that we had really as much claim to being well received and made much of as we had to being thrown out on our necks. But we could never make up our minds whether we were scourges or protectors. It is fantastic the number of times this happened. It happened at Garwolin, of which not one stone remained on another, not one living soul to sit and lament among the ruins, after we had got through. It happened at Lublin. Chelm was bombarded for the first time when our train stopped there, but ceaselessly and daily bombarded and finally all but obliterated after we had left it. The same thing was to happen in Brzecz, and within the next few hours, just as A. predicted. In the meantime:

'Have you found if there's a hospital?'

'Three. The Jewish one is the best, they say. Very clean. Only, can you walk? The dorozki are not allowed outside a certain radius and all the hospitals are in the suburbs.' He ate the piece of bread and suggested to the Hucul lad that he should help to carry our rucksacks. The three of us left the station and immediately there was a warning and everybody had to take cover again.

Our cover was a sort of park, very sandy and full of flies. Horses were tied up to all the trees. The early

freshness was over and the sun began to beat down through the wilted branches. There was a tent with a Red Cross painted on its flap. We thought that there might be a doctor there but there were only young girls and flies and a few orderlies, and the heat was even worse than outside. Still, it was somewhere to sit. Hundreds of refugees were standing about, not talking much; waiting for something. They had no idea what. The tied-up horses were theirs and they had no fodder to give them. Beyond such a disaster as that a peasant cannot think. But each felt it profoundly in his heart.

The tent and its equipment were wretched. What bread there was was turning sour. There was no milk and very little water. The few people there had no real training. In a day or two even such shelters ceased to exist almost everywhere. Lwow, I have been told, had a well-organized Red Cross which held out for a long time, but I did not see it. The Wilno Red Cross also held out, until the Lithuanians came. On the whole, though, and obviously, it was impossible for any kind of organized relief work to operate. But everywhere anyone who had a crust shared it. Anyone who had a room filled it. Women without children took the coats off their own backs and wrapped other women's children in them. A cigarette would be passed round a whole group of people on a platform or in a cellar. The worse things got, the more there was of this. In the beginning there was still the strong instinct to preserve oneself and what was one's own. The great exodus from Warsaw, in the main, was a selfish enough affair: as the misery and anguish piled up the self-forgetfulness, resource, and heroism of people themselves were reinforced at every instant. It is an extraordinary thing

to me to recall that life on the roads of Poland; and, very especially, the last and saddest months that began on the 17th of September, when three enemy armies settled down to the organized frightfulness of three occupations. All that time I was in the provinces seized by the Soviets. In the name of Communism, millions were violently deprived of liberty, property, decency, citizenship, family, sanctuary, and food. Every kind of human right, except the right to suffer, which no tyrant up to now has ever tried to take away, was denied. The gospel of the brotherhood of man was propagated by tanks and machine-guns, by looting and burning, house-to-house perquisitions, mass deportations, murder, 'executions' where there had been no trial, sacrilege, torture, and the deliberate creation of famine. And all the time, the victims were living like brothers! All the time, the pure and maddening dream of Communism, for the first time since it was thought of, was actually being interpreted in action! The partisans of Communism, whenever and wherever it crops up, have invariably depraved it. Of all man's dreams, it has been the bloodiest and the most fatal.

In Poland under the Soviets, I found out at last the mystery. It is only its victims who are able to make it work.

We took a dorozka and jolted over the cobbles to the hospital. I forget how our driver got permission to go so far. Probably he just took it. The drive was very long and the glare and heat terrible. I had nothing with which to cover my head. The flies, always bad in Poland, were insufferable all that autumn. On the way to the hospital they tried me, I think, almost to the limit. Gorged blowflies, buzzing about in the folds of my

bandages and impossible to dislodge. Crawling on my face, stinging my hands.

There was no shade even under the trees. Thousands of refugees lay about on the ground in every park or square and even on the pavements. The sun burnt them up, most of them still had a little food brought from home. Lard and black bread and gruel. But no fodder for the horses, and very little water. No milk for the children. The police tried desperately to bring a little relief and to keep a little order. Some streets were closed to ordinary traffic. There were far too few policemen to regulate the circulation. The driver of a dorozka would not listen or go round another way. Orders and explanations had no effect on him. He had not yet had time to modify his stubborn coachman's mentality. Street regulations and young policemen still seemed to him the fair game they had always been. The policeman, himself driven by inexorable necessity, replied, not by the customary patient banter, but with the raised butt end of his rifle. These are the unforgettable sights, the true face of war. At such moments her grin is far more ghastly than any you see her wear on a battlefield. In the hospital, a doctor came out to us.

'Very well. Wait in here. In the meantime, no talking. Answer none of their questions.'

A crowd of curious women and young girls in a corridor were shut out. They had come with burns and whitlows and accidents and cuts to be dressed. There were no wounded yet in Brzecz. The doctor was keeping his beds for them. A nurse came in and talked to us.

'He's always like that,' she said. 'He thinks women are hopeless.'

I asked her if I could wash somewhere. A sister let me use a sort of scullery where cold water ran from a tap on to a flagstone and ran away through a grid. I have never enjoyed any bathe in my life so much. There was no lock on the door. People came in and out and I never bothered my head about them nor they about me. The floor and even the flagstone was littered with filthily repulsive men's clothes.

'For God's sake,' said the sister, 'don't touch those!'

I couldn't help touching them. She had to touch them herself when she passed in and out. I had to put my own clothes somewhere and there was not one nail, hook, chair, or anything else in the place.

'Oh, well,' she said, 'I suppose it doesn't matter.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'It's only that they're absolutely full of venereal disease,' she said. They looked it. They were so repulsive that they ceased to disgust and filled you with pity instead. You thought of the bodies that had gone about wearing them. A. came too, and washed. When we had finished we both felt that it had been splendid. The doctor said he would dress my head and took me into a crowded surgery. While it was being done, a girl of about twenty was having a stitch put into her hand somewhere and I remember thinking:

'If you're going to yell like that *now*——' But, very likely, later, when they came, she was perfectly quiet and brave.

After the dressing, I asked if I might comb my hair. A probationer in a summer frock sat down behind me and tried to do it. She took immense pains. In the end, we broke the comb. However, we did get a lot of the dried blood out of it and we cut away some of the worst

knots. The doctor said to A. that the stitches must come out in another week, at the latest.

'When the cicatrizing is complete, her head can be washed in ether.' He added: 'Or very clean petrol.' I don't know where he thought I should get either. The nurse took me into a small empty ward and gave me a cigarette. When I wanted to keep it for A. she said she had a whole packet. She had some milk, too, at home, she said; in her room. While the doctor had been doing the dressing, she had arranged with A. to take us there. As soon as he came back, we would go. She was not on duty. She was only there because she had slept in the hospital the night before instead of going back through the town.

'Tell me where the Germans really are,' she said. 'Never mind the doctor. He thinks we'll all have hysterics.'

'Where are they? Everywhere,' I said.

She lit another cigarette. She had been brought up in Ukrainia and smoked like a Russian.

'I remember the Bolsheviks,' she said. 'My old Aunt —they tired her so much before they killed her! But the Szwaby will be worse.'

'Where has A. gone? Why has he left me?'

'The doctor has allowed him to telephone. He is only on the other side of that door. He is trying to find friends.'

'Oh,' I said, 'with his almanack? Yes, of course. Of course he will find somebody.'

'Then smoke a cigarette,' she said, 'and wait. What else can we do? Look, there are the photographs of my children. They are with my mother. Some day the boy will be grown-up and he will fight for Poland.'

A. came back.

'In half an hour I shall have a bed for you,' he said.

When I last saw him, he had destroyed his almanack. In it the members of a Polish Academic Corporation can find the names and addresses of all the others. These corporations are very ancient. In the Middle Ages, I think, the guilds in England must have been very like them in spirit. At any time, in any circumstances, one comrade can ask any honourable service of another and be certain of obtaining it. In Lublin, we had spent our last night under the roof of a comrade of A.'s corporation, also found on the telephone. If I did not write of it in its place, it was because his fate was so frightful that I lacked the courage to evoke the memory. He and A. had never met before. When they did, they kissed, and the stranger said: 'Everything in my house is thine. Stay as long as thou hast need and take with thee on leaving everything that thou canst use.'

The exchange of thee and thou can hardly be produced in English, and I will not try to do it. In Polish and other languages it has profound and moving sense. Almost as soon as A. had sat down, a man in a corporal's uniform burst into the room. Again the kiss and the instant exchange of thee and thou. With this man, who was a surgeon attached to the hospital and had just heard of our arrival, A. had been acquainted twenty years earlier. The man who was to take us into his home was on his way. The surgeon, hearing of A.'s arrival, had set off before him on a bicycle. After the embrace, he had to leave again almost immediately. Another five kilometres back to his post, under that sun!

'But you will come to breakfast all the same?' pleaded the nurse. 'Your friend will come too.'

'Look,' she said to A., 'the photographs of my children. The boy is twelve already. . . .'

We went out into the garden and fell half asleep there. The hospital began to cast a shadow as the sun went round. Even the flies troubled us less. M. came and it was arranged that after breakfast we were to go to his flat. He had already told his wife and she was expecting us. At midday he would come there himself. He, too, had a bicycle and rode away on it. Our dorozka still waited and took me back towards the town. A. and the nurse walked. Both were desperately avid for tobacco. Nearly all the little kiosks had their shutters up. The nurse had her own ways of obtaining some. They were continually stopping and palavering with one person and another and whenever they secured a cigarette each immediately smoked a half of it, and the palavering and disappearing in and out of doorways and stopping behind or going up side streets and suddenly appearing in front of the dorozka began again. The police would not allow the dorozka to stop. To keep in touch with the others we had to drive round squares and come back to them, and turn and descend streets which we had just mounted; it was all part of a sort of feverish dream and abominably wearisome, and yet how could they help it? They needed tobacco far more than they needed food. When we got to a wretched row of houses up a cobbled street the nurse said: 'This is my home,' and took us inside.

The small room was overflowing with people. I remember being made to lie down on the bed. Some bombs were falling on the railway station, quite far off. Nobody heeded them much. After all, there was no milk and I remember how I longed for some. Even more than I had longed for the cucumber. A man of

about seventy-five sat at a table. He had all the marks of extreme poverty and an air of great race. I have forgotten his name. A. knew it. He had been a celebrated inventor and engineer and had known A.'s father. Now he had a small mill somewhere and ground the peasants' flour. The house seemed to be his. But I really never grasped the identity of anybody. A man who had spent the morning trying to get petrol came in with bottles of methylated spirits and said he could make his car go on that. Two children whose father had been killed in Poznan came and sat on the bed beside me, quarrelling. The nurse seemed to have taken charge of them, too. The old man was making cigarettes. In his youth he had been a political suspect, deported to Siberia. He spoke with philosophy of the marches in chains, the convoys and the frequent deaths of prisoners on being suddenly exposed to fresh air and light when the marches began. It is all as God wills, he said. Nevertheless, his lips trembled as he recognized the inevitability of another partition of Poland. The nurse must have ruined herself to feed us. There was no table and she spread scrambled eggs swimming in hot lard and glasses of tea and different kinds of ham and some very sour bread and all the cigarettes on chairs for us. It was impossible not to accept such passionate hospitality; and impossible, too, not to keep thinking all the time one was eating it of how much one had wanted milk.

When we left, the bombing had come much nearer. The nurse came quite a long way with us and showed A. where he could still buy a pair of socks. She even bargained about the price with the shopkeeper.

'If you stay in the town, come and see me,' she said. 'Come to the hospital again. Or here.'

Chapter 14

PEOPLE DURING AIR RAIDS

At M.'s there was a hot dinner. Almost immediately after it was eaten, a German reconnaissance plane passed over the town. We made plans, I remember, and looked at maps. When the rains come . . . their tanks are rotten . . . their artillery is too heavy for our terrain . . . the eastern marshes . . . the cavalry . . . guerilla tactics. . . . It is useless to record these endless conversations. It is useless to record how we tried station after station on the radio and how the Germans, as usual, were jamming Warsaw One and Two; and how Baranowicze and Wilno (harder to jam) replied to us with heroic reminders of Poland's past, but no war news; and Rome with dance music; and Paris with dance music and an advertisement for somebody's *fil pur d'Écosse*. Nor of how one of the women in the room broke down and cried at the sound of French vowels and the other, gravely considering her with beautiful, short-sighted eyes, nodded and said:

'A cause du temps perdu? Cela se comprend.'

When the reconnaissance plane had passed a few smoke rings hung in the air. In this way the important targets were marked for the squadron of bombers that followed within a quarter of an hour. The first explo-

sions were terrific. The M.'s looked at each other.

'This is it in earnest,' they said. 'Brzecz has not been bombed like this before.'

The Air Warden, the wife of a colonel, a friend of the M.'s, sent up to say that we had better come down to the cellar. The two men shrugged their shoulders. The building was of reinforced concrete; the cellar had nothing to recommend it. If the building went, the cellar would most certainly be sealed. Before we had time to consider it, all the glass in the building blew out. The room we were in was immediately silted over with earth and sand and rubbish from the street. The white tablecloth remaining from dinner was lifted by the draught and fluttered against a wall. A bomb of at least five hundred kilos had fallen fifteen metres from the front door. The house stood like a rock. The raiders were straight above us. A second bomb fell within a few inches of the first. This time the house shuddered from top to bottom.

'Better go down,' said the men. 'Not to the cellar, though. It would be better to go outside than there.'

We went down the stairs and stood in a passage on the ground floor. The colonel's wife was there, with the other people who had been in the house. A couple of servant women wept bitterly because their children were alone at home and we would not let them leave the building. A wooden house in the street was already burning fiercely. The smoke poured into the building through the shattered windows. Other fires were breaking out in all this quarter of the town. As at Chelm, the sky was darkened. A few people were killed by timbers from the burning houses that had soared in the first explosion and now came crashing down.

M.'s wife stood within her husband's arms. A. held me in his. Even then, one might be hit and the other left, but it was the best we could do. The passage where we stood led through a pair of heavy doors on to a courtyard. The blast from the explosions and the pressure of the air kept slamming them open and shut with a noise like a thousand locomotives shunting. People ran in from behind, from little wooden houses and shops, and joined us. I remember seeing a woman jump a fence. Half a dozen men tried to keep the pair of doors shut. It was impossible. All that happened was that the doors, instead of yielding, blew right in and one of the men was killed. The house, instead of shuddering, started tilting.

'Out of this,' ordered M. and A. together. We went out, crossed the courtyard and took refuge in a shallow covered trench scooped out of sand. There was no exit and it was not deep enough for an average grown-up person to stand upright. I don't know how many we were in it. There were a number of children. The weeping women still clamoured to be allowed to go home. The volume of smoke and the fumes of the explosives were so overpowering that our faces streamed with water from our inflamed eyes. That trench was really hell. No stays or even planks had been laid in the interior. We sank in sand. Sand ran down our necks, entered into every recess of our clothes, finally filled our mouths. The Jewish owner of the house we had just left came tearing through the courtyard. He had come from another part of the town. He demanded whether his wife and child were safe. His little daughter answered him firmly from the farthest and most asphyxiating end of the trench.

'Yes, Papa. Mamma is here. We are both here.'

The father had lost his head and tried to force his way from the mouth of the trench to the unseen cavern from which he could hear the child's voice. The men nearest the opening were obliged to stop him, as the policeman, in the morning had been obliged to club the stubborn coachman. The air became worse and worse. The bombardment lasted longer than any other we endured. The raiders were being driven away from the station and the railroad by the battery we had been told of. In revenge, and to lighten their own escape, they simply unloaded their whole cargo on the most exposed part of the town. The air in the trench became so bad that those near the opening who could breathe and get out, left it; otherwise those farthest away would have died. M. and A. stood outside with a few others. They counted more than thirty bombers straight overhead. On this occasion, certainly because of the presence of the battery, they did not come down and machine-gun the population. For once Hitler's dictum 'destroy everything that can stand up, everything that can lie down, and everything that can flee' was neglected. I think a few fighters went up. There seemed to be shrapnel puffs in the sky, but it was difficult to be sure. I lost my shoes in the sand and never found them again. Fortunately they were only sandals lent me by Z.'s wife. The tennis shoes I had come so far in were still in the bathroom where I had left them. Weeks later I acquired a pair of rubber boots.

The crowding and the vicious air brought on hysteria far more effectively than the falling bombs. I remember sharing with Z. and the colonel's wife the duty of being loud-voiced and bossy. In my halting Polish I shouted

down weeping women. I even slapped one on the hand.

'Be quiet,' I said. 'How dare you cry? If this is death, we shall be dying for Poland. *Trudno!* We shall all go straight to Heaven. If we are to live, crying will not help. This is not the last of them. To-morrow will not be better than to-day. *Trudno!*'

No translation I can think of gives the exact sense of that Polish word. Literally, it means difficult. In use, it means a dozen things. The nearest to it, as I used it then, is Corporal Nym's 'It must be as it may.' As I sit here, recording this, I have just used it involuntarily to an English housemaid. She has asked me if she is to throw away the spoonful of coffee still left in the pot. Otherwise the pot cannot be washed. But it is a pity to throw away coffee. Then fill up my cup with it, I say. But the cup is already too full. She stands irresolute between my breakfast and the sink. Not enough of my attention really given to this problem, I have looked up at her and shrugged my shoulders. *Trudno*, I say. She wants to know what I mean. What was the word? I find it very hard to explain to her. Of Brzecz-nad-Bugiem she has certainly never heard. She has a fiancé in France, but I doubt whether we would get much further were I to mention even the Corporal and Agincourt. Nothing, I say; and she has thrown away the coffee. I daresay there is no better solution.

In the trench one thing finally became clear. It would have to be abandoned. As they were not machine-gunning to-day, there was, anyhow, little point in staying in it. Those at the closed end were already so far gone that they had to be carried into the open. Fewer bombs were falling and they were now falling farther away. As somebody remarked on this, there was quite a small

slam on the other side of the fence dividing our courtyard from shops and gardens, and a trench, just like our own, was so thoroughly and accurately disembowelled that of the twenty-five or so people sheltering in it not one was afterwards recognizable.

Even air raids come to an end. The house had steadied itself and stood. We went back to the flat and looked round it. No one could live there any more. The M.'s had given us a hot dinner and lent us slippers and arranged for me to wash our few belongings in their bath and had given us a clean bed. That was in the morning, when they had still been householders. Now they too were vagabonds. Z. collected a few absolute necessities in a small case. The sour-smelling and bloody rags that I had emptied on the bathroom floor, mixed up with a little lard and some spilt tea, were crammed back as they were into the rucksacks. As we left the house together another German plane appeared in the sky. We stood, looking up. Was this one, too, conducting a squadron of raiders? But it was only the photographer. It is quite impossible to describe how loathsome the great bird seemed to us, swooping and circling above the smoke and ruins, calmly, for the delight of German eyes, eternizing on his German films the Polish hell.

We camped in the upper part of an empty villa, farther from the station, in a quarter still intact. In the garden of this villa there was a comparatively good dug-out, with a roof and stays. It was generally full. Personally, I never felt that sitting in a shelter made any difference. This shelter was the first (not counting the trench) and last I was ever in. Generally speaking, there were none. I still think of the hours spent in it as a

special division of Time, having nothing to do with any other. Twice on the first afternoon, after the big attack, we were driven down to the dug-out. Perhaps eight times during the next day. At about eight o'clock on the evening of that day we left the villa and waited all night on the station for a train, and we never saw or had news of M. and Z. again. I do not know why it all seems so long and as if it had made a tie that will go on binding us together for ever. I do not know whether they are alive or dead. People I have known for thirty years are not as real to me as a young woman engineer called Kalina, whose surname I think I never heard, who was a friend of Z. and with whom, in all, I spent perhaps two hours. Bogdan was only a voice. He was so full of malaria, said his wife, that he stayed underground from one raid to another. Whether he was down in the cold dug-out or above it in the sun, he never stopped shaking. His two huge dogs used to come down looking for him, lugubriously howling. Each of us had his own place along a plank. Each of us could find it in the darkness and sit down quietly. Only the dogs paid no attention to these arrangements and sent the sand flying in our faces and set their great paws on our chests and tore from one end of the horrible place to the other, until M. would lose the last of his patience and get up and turn them out. I think I never saw Bogdan, but I am as intimate with him as I am with myself. The officer of Reserve, with the short black beard, who used to sit outside the dug-out, never inside it, during raids, was unknown to everybody. He was a man of about fifty and rapidly going melancholy mad. He was in Brzecz, he told us, to look for his regiment, which, of course, he never found. He, too, was ill. I remember how he

used to say to me, forcing himself to be gentle: 'Come up here and sit in the sun'; and when we had sat for a little and looked at each other, his shoulders would begin trembling again with his terrible anger and he would point to me, in my filth, and to Kalina and A., ravenously eating green tomatoes, and to the roving dogs and the smouldering town, and to M. and Z. mutely exchanging the looks which A. and I no longer risked, and say:

'The mark of the beast! The mark of the Prussian! A little more and we shall all be living like wild men.' I never understood why he said, a little more. That is how we were living then. On the afternoon of the second day he ceased to come. Nobody knew where to look for him. The dug-out was the only place and the air raids the only time in which he had appeared to us. Dead or alive, I think of him as still restless; still looking for his regiment.

There was a grandmother, too, with a child of three or four. Like animals, they would crawl above ground into the sunlight for a while, and the old woman would try to make the child play. Nothing she said or did could keep it from staring, dumb, up into the sky. I never heard it speak, only scream. Underground, it screamed without ever stopping except when suddenly it fell asleep. The poor grandmother did not recognize it, but the little thing had gone out of its mind. All my recollections of that dug-out begin and end with the eyes of the elderly officer sitting outside, and the child screaming and the grandmother praying 'Our Lady, Queen of Poland . . .' and sometimes 'Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. . . .' To the child on her knee, too, she said always: 'My Lamb.' I think she confused the two.

Z. fed us with a little thin gruel. We had no light and no gas. On the second day she got some wood and lit a fire and, after all, the partridges that had been in the larder at the flat were still there and M. and A. cleaned and cooked them and so we had hot midday dinner two days running. I remember how gay we all pretended to be. In the evening, we were to leave them. It was in this fire, very carefully, so as not to put it out, that I destroyed the Union Jack the dressmaker in Warsaw had made.

In the afternoon, a big man in a béret blocked the entrance of the dug-out during a very hot bombardment and a laughing voice asked for Pani Kalina, and at the sound of his voice Kalina exclaimed: 'Anton! thou!' It was one of the officers of the anti-aircraft battery. Our eyes, accustomed to the darkness, could make out the gleam of his face and the dome of his shoulders against the opening. To him we were invisible.

'Presently,' he said. 'They will soon be gone. Then you can come out and talk.' In the meantime M. went up and they sat together on the parapet, talking in low voices. They were very merry.

'Who else is down there?' asked Anton.

M. told him.

'And A.Z.,' he said, 'my comrade, with his wife.'

'A.Z.,' said the other. 'A.Z. who used to lead the mazurka!' It was all of his academic career that he remembered. The difference of a few years in their ages had made A. a brilliant and distant figure to a student in his first term. Now it was he in his béret and uniform, distributing cigarettes and inventing absurd war communiqués for us in his soldier's argot, who blazed with

glory. But all his prestige abandoned him suddenly at that recollection. He felt himself young and lost again. When A. too went and sat on the parapet, he introduced himself with diffidence.

'Good health,' said A. They embraced and kissed. I am sure that in their student days they had never exchanged one word. A. reached down a hand to me and I came and crouched on the duck-board beside them. He knew that I hated him to go even that distance from me when bombs were actually falling. Although I never said so, he knew that I always hoped that it would all end, and the sooner the better, in a direct hit for us both. The newcomer was besieged with questions from below. Everybody wanted to know if there were really French and English fliers with the battery; conscientiously adding to each question: 'Of course, if it's a secret we know you mustn't tell.'

'If there were, it would be a secret, and I wouldn't tell.' There was no more to be got out of him than that. The raiders, as he had foretold, did go away for a time. It was never for long. They might have been flies battening on a carcass. Kalina and the officer talked apart. She gave him one of the stunted tomatoes and they said good-bye to each other. I never knew what he was to her. Perhaps a colleague out of the past. Perhaps more. At any rate, she called him 'thou'. It was no business of mine. On leaving he took a rose from the wall and put it in his béret. It happened that he said good-bye to me the last. I was appalled to see what sorrow and foreboding was really in his face, behind his insouciance of an old campaigner.

'There *are* some English officers here,' he said, very low. 'I tell you, because you are English. But leave

Brzecz as soon as you can. I cannot tell you why. I have said the same to Pani Kalina. Do not stay here another day.'

Chapter 15

P. K. P.

We ate a little gruel in the dark. The bit of candle we had burnt down to the table before we began. There was so much to say. We were leaving so soon. Almost every day there was this little death to be died. At each remove, we loved and went away, and no news could follow us and there was no hope of a return. I ate lying down on the bed, and could just make out the places of the others by a sort of movement of the darkness. A. said: 'Are you ready?' and I said: 'Yes.' As we walked from one end of the town to the other, A. had to carry the two rucksacks and hold me up as well. Fire-engines were still trying to keep the destruction from spreading. The fire of the first afternoon had gone on licking up all the wooden property around it. The firemen had had to give it up. Now, as we passed it, and the house containing the M.'s abandoned flat, it had burnt down to a sort of mammoth brazier, but it was still purring away. Rather like a tiger that had been satisfied, this time. There is a frightfully evil sound about the purring of a satisfied fire. Every few minutes a jet of flame shot up from it, fanned by the wind, and sank down again. It was no longer dangerous. All the harm it could do had been done.

The walk, except when we were within the orbit of the fires, was accomplished in complete darkness. It was not exactly a walk. I do not know what it was. I know that it has left me still tired.

'The bridge here, I think?' said A. at last. We crossed it, with other shapes, and descended to the station. Our hope was to get on a train running in the direction of Pinsk. A. had friends among the landowners in Polesie and on the borders. But only if a train ran through the night. In the day-time, travelling by train was a harrowing kind of suicide. As a matter of fact we waited all night and did travel by train from dawn until late afternoon on the next day. But, at that moment, we did not expect to. We had promised the M.'s to return if there was no train before daylight. All night long one train after another ran through the station. Some of them without stopping. With steel blinds and machine-guns on the roofs, troop trains, refugee trains. Live men going to Modlin and Bialystok. Men coming from Modlin and Bialystok, dying and dead. Stretchers being carried out of them past us almost at a run. I remember thinking: God, why can't they carry them slowly; and realizing that the men on them were too far gone for it to matter any more. Most of them had died on the way. And anyhow, there was no time. There was never time for anything. The Germans were always too near. Modlin still stood. Bialystok was theirs. Every few hours the train for Pinsk was announced, and then turned out to be going somewhere else. The stationmaster and the guards and all the P.K.P. men worked like demons. Those who could, lay down on the bare ground and even on the railroad and snatched a little sleep. It was impossible to get into the waiting-rooms or even to lie down

on the platforms. The waiting-rooms were the worst; packed until you wondered why the walls did not push out, filled with the reek of unwashed bodies and the sickly gangrene smell, running with the even fouler smelling liquids that of necessity circulate in conditions like these. Nevertheless, hundreds and hundreds of human beings slept, and the strange peace of sleep relaxed their ghastly faces almost as though they had been in their beds. One girl, I remember, sat on a bicycle, her head and shoulders on the handlebars, and her sleep was deep and good. As for myself, I could not keep awake. Even walking up and down did not help, nor the bitter cold. A. said that he had often seen men marching fast asleep, but he had never expected to see me do it. In the end I simply lay down and slept with my head pressed into the loins of my neighbour and somebody else's arm across my mouth. Sometimes A. stood beside me. If I woke and looked for him, he was not far away, but he never slept or lay down all night. My neighbours woke and moved away as cautiously as they could. I could just make out the dimmed bull's-eyes of the lanterns at their waists. I had lain down among the railwaymen, then. The thought was reassuring and made me feel I was with friends. Others wedged into the vacant places. In perfect amity we kept each other warm. I had the grey army blanket, too; ours was a good encampment. All the same, the cold was like a knife and my head was uncovered. I remember thinking that and opening my eyes to find A. forcing rum between my teeth. After midnight I got up and walked again. A. said:

'There won't be a train for Pinsk at all after to-night. The stationmaster has just said so.' By one o'clock there

was still no train for us. I lay down again; where I could. This time my neighbour did not warm me. Queerer still, I found I was not warming him. The closer the other sleepers pushed us together, the colder he grew. Then I understood. He was dead. Disgusted, I pushed him off. It seemed just bad luck that I should have drawn such a good-for-nothing bedfellow. If any woman tells me she would have thought of his probable wife and children, or wondered if he had suffered much before he died, she is a liar. Those are only the things one thinks of afterwards. I can think of them now, with my pen in my hand. Not then. What we all thought of was: how many hours till daylight, until the first raid? What a shambles the place would be. What a perfect photograph we should make afterwards, from the air, smeared all over the station and the railroad like cultures on a glass slide.

Every three or four minutes or so, quite far away now, the flame fanned by the wind shot up from the brazier we had passed on the way, flickered, and sank down.

Towards morning, in the first grey light, a very long, empty train was kept locked until the last minute. A few soldiers were picketed alongside it. Two taciturn guards came and opened the coaches. The blinds remained down. By some extraordinary feat of will-power the railwaymen pressed the crowd back a little. Nobody was allowed to approach the train. The stragglers among the rails were driven off. From somewhere unknown (they must have come over the bridge and down the same road as ourselves, but there was no hint of their coming; and what possible passage had been made for them through the waiting-room and along the

platform I cannot imagine even now) there came into sight a file of men and women, two or three abreast, as grey as the light, their lowered heads and shoulders covered with sacks. Only their nostrils and mouths were free. Their hands, manacled perhaps, I do not know, were crossed and held together inside their drab sleeves. Because they all wore the same dress, with the same sleeves. The file must have been at least a kilometre long, although we never saw more than the breadth of the railroad of it at a time. For perhaps twenty minutes the drab-coloured column crossed the lines without ever appearing to change. Those who were swallowed up by the train and those who flowed into their places from behind were absolutely indistinguishable. They passed between weary soldiers and the weary picket handed them on to the train. Neither kindly nor unkindly. I am sure they were not thinking about them; only about the cold and the possibility of some sleep, and of getting the numbers right. A sheep-dog does not ask questions about the direction in which he has been told to guide his sheep; what he has to do is to get them there. Only we, the civilians, stood gaping at this sight which, to them, simply meant more standing about, more blisters on their feet, another convoy, still less chance of a sleep.

For the first time A. began to fume a little. Very little. Only somebody who knew him so well could have discerned it. I realized that, for the first time, he too was wondering whether there would ever be that train to Pinsk. Fifty times during the night I had said: Do you think there will really be a train; and fifty times he had replied, with half-amused patience: Yes.

We told each other no lies. Whatever he thought of

the situation, at any time, he faithfully told me. Now he said:

'So that is what that fellow who came to see Kalina meant! The battery has gone. They are no longer going to defend Brzecz.'

'How do you know?'

He nodded to the line of human ants still crossing the railroad.

'Don't you see? Do you know what that is?'

'No.'

'They are emptying the prisons. Those are the convicts. Going east.'

At five o'clock the P.K.P. men began shouting: Pinsk! Pinsk! This time the train was really going there. The stationmaster came out and told A. so himself. The battery had gone and the convicts were gone; and a mass of people, quite beyond my counting, for the most part clamouring, obstreperous, panic-stricken Jews with their poor belongings in bundles on their backs, and their money (for they always had money) God knows where, but safe, were going. A. and I were going. But the stationmaster and the P.K.P. men stayed. The P.K.P. men never got out, never retired, never broke. I wonder if any cavalryman would mind if he were told that, beside the glorious story of the Polish cavalry, there is another that need not grow pale and that is infinitely less likely to be remembered or told. It is the story of the servants of the railway company. They too should have the name of a Polish Army Corps. I can never honour them enough.

The stampede for the train left me indifferent. I knew perfectly well that A. would secure some place for us. When he had, I found that we were in a first-

class carriage, that I was leaning back against cushions, and that somebody was giving me a cigarette. It was an extraordinary sensation to be comfortable. In the compartment next door there were only three passengers. The door, however, was locked and the blind was down. One of the men with us explained why.

'The Voivod from ——. He has all his papers with him, and an aide. They are destroying everything. The third man is a judge. He is doing the same thing.'

A. and this man, a doctor, and then some other doctors, his colleagues, began to talk in low voices. In Poland, where any conversation between strangers begins by each giving his name and professional title, if he has one, and where every man of a certain age and class has the same souvenirs in common, and in effect the same traditions, it is possible immediately to recognize the person with whom one is talking. Cousinship, too, has a tremendously wide net. Certain words, such as Warsaw Polytechnic, Defence of Lwow, the Paris Mission, the names of a few men, and certain years, are passwords. The names of the academic corporations even more so; but strangers are not likely to exchange these until they have heard the others. A. knew perfectly, after the first few seconds, with whom he was talking, and that it was all right. I leaned back against my cushions, glad to be out of it. Whenever I opened my eyes, A. nodded across to me and said: Sleep.

The doctors told him how to take the stitches out of my head later, if he could not find anybody to do it. I saw them again, more than once, in the most curious circumstances. One of them, the one who was the most communicative, turned up again and again, always hundreds of kilometres away from where one had seen him

last. In Germany itself, he was a prisoner with me. He was one of the last Poles whose hand I touched. As we said good-bye, he was still—as he had been on that first train journey—smiling, unruffled, rather loquacious....

I am not going to describe the next few days. Everything that has been put down is what I saw and heard. There are omissions, but there is not a single addition. I am being absolutely honest about this.

The record breaks here, in this train going eastward, running through daylight and never out of the line of fire. Where I can resume the story, in the second part of this record, we shall already be in eastern Poland, in Polesie—the marshlands—on our way to the estate of our friend, Pani N., where the Russians invaded us, and where the whole heartbreaking Polish retreat from the eastern marches passed through the demesne, bivouacking in the house and around it.

In that record too there will be inevitable gaps. (In the first place, 'N' is not even the initial letter of a famous name with many lines and branches, encrusted in that province for many hundreds of years.) But it will in the same way be the truth.

PART TWO

Chapter 16

POLESIE

We did eventually get to K. in Polesie. It had been impossible to meet X. anywhere. I have not got the date to refer to. Almost every scrap of paper had to be destroyed at one time or another. But it was probably all of six days before the Russian march.

K. was the same, and yet not the same, as I remembered it. All the outside things were there; all the old order and abundance. The larders could have stood a siege. Over a hundred and thirty young hogs were fattening in the styes. For all the drought, the seventy demesne cows of pure Holland strain provided enough milk and cream and cheese for the Great House and to spare for the K. Co-operative Dairy. Fresh butter was churned for the table every day. Pani N. still went about the gardens, the bakeries, and the byre, in her patched skirt and thick stockings, with her scissors and keys hanging from her belt and a little flat basket on her arm. Her stockings had been darned so often that as a last resource they had now been mended over the heels with squares of cloth. When she was not walking, she was doing the estate accounts or turning a garment or sorting winter beans, or one of a dozen other things. From seven o'clock in the morning until the whole household

had gone to bed at night, she never spent an idle half-hour. Every guest that came to the door had his place at table set by herself. It made no difference whether he was an engineer, a forester, a Russian pope or a prince. I have seen her pick up in her fingers a potato baked in its jacket and put it in the gravy on the schoolmaster's plate. A general and the garden-boy had a water-melon shared out between them with her own pocket-knife.

Wherever she appeared, the work immediately went better. Anybody whom she liked accompanied her. It might be Nikifor the swineherd. It might be her cousin, once Poland's ambassador in London. A. was her favourite. For his sake she tried, as she said, to make me eat. The soups, the cream, the sauces, the charcuterie, the hors-d'œuvres, the braised fowl and boiled fish, the dishes of groats, millet and barley topped with crackling lardons, the maize cobs swimming in butter and the pancakes stuffed with sweet cheese of any one day's dinner were not, she considered, fortifying enough. When we walked round the garden she cut me bunches of the tiny white grapes she grew against a southern wall. When we came in she sent for two or three boiled eggs, so horribly soft that she expected me to stir them round in a glass and spoon them into my mouth. When I was lucky something called her away and A. got them. He really enjoyed eggs like this. In between she gave me honey, milk, and pieces of white bread sugared over and baked light brown, rather like biscuits, in the oven.

But the stream of refugees, the total lack of news, the wild growth of rumour and the persistent jamming of the wireless, the mourning (never spoken of) for a great-grandchild dead in Warsaw on the first day of the war, the absence of Krzyztof, the child's father, and the heir,

believed to have perished with the whole of his regiment somewhere near Grudziadz, and the helpless aching of our hearts, made it all into a sort of uneasy entr'acte. All the accessories of a normal life still miraculously existed. Only the life was not normal. In the middle of a forced conversation somebody would suddenly stop dead. The jokes were too successful. Everybody was too ready to be amused. The ones who were being amusing, looking round at the other haggard faces, would suddenly realize what their own must be like, and give it up. Getting through time was like trying to swim in the Dead Sea. We did the most incredible, fantastic things. Like sitting under an arbour smothered in roses, reading novels from the library in Pinsk! Whatever else I forget, I shall never forget the horror of that sort of thing. In Warsaw, women were throwing themselves against the German tanks, into a jet of machine-gun bullets, with buckets of boiling water. Warsaw schoolchildren were standing night and day on the roofs of houses, shovelling off the incendiary bombs before they had time to burn through.

One could understand people doing that. Nothing fantastic there. Just grim earnest. War. Just standing up to the Germans again. This time against tanks and incendiary bombs, as it happened; but, in sum, for Polish women and children, nothing new. All in the day's work; all part of what the dogged, exasperating, smiling Poles mean when they shrug their shoulders and explain laconically: *Polski los* (the Pole's lot). No phrase could possibly be more eloquent. Everything is in it. Their exact opinion of their neighbours. Their opinion of themselves. Their incurable contempt for death.

But reading novels in a sunny arbour was pure Grand Guignol. I remember an engineer looking up from a translation of *A Passage to India* and saying mildly: 'The difficulties of the English in India are hardly at all of the kind one would suppose, not having read this book.' The absolute peak of fantasy seemed to me to have been touched by that sentence. In the evenings we laid out patiences. Pani N. and A. knew dozens. Two packs of patience cards in a small leather box used to be taken out of Pani N.'s dressing-table drawer and lent to me. Nobody else was allowed to use them. Each evening, once I had finished with them, she wrapped the box up in its paper again and put it back. A present from Krzyztof. Heaven knows how long she thought she was going to preserve it. She was eighty-three and her first recollections were of a childhood in Siberia, between a father in chains and a mother who had followed him into exile. The Great House of K. had been destroyed three times in her lifetime, and rebuilt another three. When her father had been made a convict. By the Germans, during the last European war. By the Bolsheviks in 1920. Each time what was rebuilt was plainer and poorer than it had been the time before. When I knew it, it was still called the Great House, but it could hardly be compared with an English farmhouse. Only Pani N., in her worn clothes, with her stained and work-hardened hands, made it splendid. It was the Great House because she lived in it and because she had built it, when she was already more than sixty, with those very hands.

Polesie is a queer country. There is still jungle there and the only virgin forest in Europe; waterfowl and strange fish and innumerable prairie flowers. The elk

still skims over the marshes and the last auroch in the world moves ponderously through the forest. The golden lynx, as long as a jaguar, glides along the giant trees like a patch of sunlight. The black stork walks about all the summer. Waterways take the place of roads. The Great Houses stand on islands and the villages are linked by boats. In winter the white partridge comes when the snow comes. The marshes and the waterways freeze. Sleighs dash about and the boats are laid up and the pace of everything is accelerated. Only the blood of the grey bear slows down and he curls himself up and sleeps. Our own road to the Great House had stopped outside L., the market town thirty miles away. We were met there by the agent from K. Pani N. was old and the heir, a professional soldier, nearly always absent. Of late years the agent had had great authority. Pani N. even liked to have him sleep in the house and come to meals with her, as well as having his office there. A peasant's cart was commandeered for me. The little boy who drove it was very discontented. As we passed out of the town, we passed a man, probably his father, to whom he called an explanation.

'It is an order!'

The father shrugged his shoulders and stood to watch us out of sight.

I urged the boy not to gallop. A. and the agent were following us on foot. He gaped at me and pulled up.

'How far is it to the river?' I asked.

'What river?'

'The river where the boat is waiting.'

'I don't know.'

'Then where are you taking me?'

'I don't know.'

About a kilometre out of the town we turned aside. I could see no river, only a kind of waving steppe, on which sedges grew instead of corn. The men came up again, and the boy was sent back, grasping his copper coins, not saying a word, as discontented as he had come.

The agent shrugged his shoulders. After fifteen years on the property, fifteen years in which he had progressively ameliorated the peasants' lot, he expected nothing of them. At each new transaction they evinced the same eternal stubborn peasant distrust. His shrug was exactly the same gesture as the boy's father had made earlier. An order! Very well. Unexplained, of course. Who could explain the subtle caprices of the gentry? Who would try?

'Where is the river?' I asked.

The agent called. An old man came out of his hut, carrying a flat paddle. A. lifted me down from the cart. I saw now that a very long, shallow punt lay among the sedges.

'Will she take us all?' asked the agent.

The old man lamented. The water was getting lower and lower. The fish were dying from the heat of the sun. The marshes could be crossed on foot, even by a stranger who did not know the secret ways. The wild fowl were leaving. Since the marshes were inhabited, such a drought had not been known. The forest fires could not be extinguished. The peasants' cattle gave no milk. Only the cattle at the Great House still had a little pasture not quite burnt up. Probably it was the end of the world.

'And That One . . .' he broke off and looked over his shoulder. 'Master, tell us! Will He come here? Will He come to the poor folk of Polesie?'

'And wouldn't you be glad if he did?' asked the agent. 'Aren't you always complaining about the Government that's done so much for you! God knows, why wouldn't he come! I'm told there was an aeroplane went through the town yesterday, and flying so low down that she went up the street almost on her wheels!'

The old man said nothing. It had been market-day in the town. The police had been moving about in the square all day, breaking up the groups of peasants in too excited discussion. What was significant was that the plane had flown away in the direction of Minsk, over the Soviet frontier. A shopkeeper had told us that. The peasants were as mum as the dead about it except between themselves. They had seen nothing, heard nothing, and knew nothing when the gentry or the shopkeepers or the police spoke.

'That One!' repeated the agent. 'He's afraid to say "Hitler". He thinks the word would burn his tongue. They remember the Germans here all right, after having them for two years!'

'And the Russians?'

The agent shrugged his shoulders.

'Ah, the Russians! The famous Raj! That's another story. Peasants are all land-mad. They believe anything the agitators tell them. The Raj, indeed! Ah, I wish them joy of it. . . .'

At the word Raj, the old man bent low over his paddle. Soviet propaganda has had its ground fatally well prepared here. During the Partitions, Russian government systematically stultified the borderland peasants. From father to son, from son to great-grandson they successively sank to the level of the Russian moujik. After that, from 1914 onwards, millions of

Russian soldiers, already muttering social revolution, stood all along the Front here and right down to the south. When revolution broke, the peasants perceived that these men, so like themselves, could change the whole face of the world overnight. Pilsukdsi and the battle of Warsaw changed it again. The Bolsheviks retired behind the frontier, licking their wounds. The Russian influence lingered. Polish policy could only set itself to reform. Build and open schools. Drain the marshes. Gradually redress grievances. Aim at progressively raising the standard of living. Unlike the Russian propaganda, it could not promise a new heaven and a new earth. Untiring underground agitation kept the people discontented. Raj is the peasants' name for Paradise, and their paradise was Soviet Russia. As their fond imagination pictured it. A paradise in which all the land was taken away from the 'nobles' and given to themselves. Something as far removed from the real Soviets, from enslaved and gloomy Russia, as heaven from hell.

Lying in the bottom of the boat I already had a bed of hay and dried rushes. A. had no coat. The coachman, Ivan, with horses and wraps, was to meet us higher up. Fever shook me from head to foot, and there was nothing to cover me with. In these marshes, cursed by mosquitoes, it is very easy for a fever to take a bad turn. They piled more hay over me and pushed off. The high sedges brushed our faces, parted to let us through and closed in behind us. Standing only a few yards away, nobody who did not know the country could have told that we were passing. Of course the marsh folk themselves can tell by the direction of a bending reed or the flight of a marsh fowl or the movement of the fish higher

up everything that goes on in their preserves. In the days of the Russian gendarmerie, fugitives lived for years in these places, fed and guided by the natives, without being ferreted out. In the Carpathians the southern borderlands, among the mountain gorges and scrub, the Austrian gendarmerie played the same unending game of hide-and-seek.

The fierce heat of the sun was over. Very soon, said the agent, it would be bitterly cold. He frowned at the clothes in which we had lived since Warsaw—A.'s light suit; the white kid shoes hanging in strips from my feet.

The higher up we got, the more the punt scraped on the bottom. Wherever we went, there was horror. Even in winter, when the lakes and slow-moving rivers are frozen, much of the marshland itself freezes only very superficially. The vegetation rotting below is so closely packed that it smokes and keeps warm. A foot wrong and the stranger is choked in mud above his mouth. And now in the autumn, no rains on the horizon! Drought in Polesie. A sky so limpid that a bird leaving her nest on the ground could be picked out from a thousand feet up. The marshland a passage for tanks.

'Yes,' said the agent, 'and at the Great House not a drop of water in the moat! Every cask and barrel on the place splitting open. There is no water to stand them in. The horses have to drink in the courtyards, and even then at the end of a day there is only mud in their trough. The water-melons are only fit to throw to the pigs. Stunted. Empty inside. Half the maize cobs are empty. Even the pigeons start spinning suddenly and drop dead in the dust.'

From now on the boatman pulled the punt more than he paddled. Even so, it scraped and stuck. In the end,

over some bad bits, A. and the agent had to lighten it by getting out too.

I remember the strangeness of lying on my back and watching the sky as we travelled along. Its limpid blueness, its exquisite beauty, was perfectly empty. For hours we travelled like this and still the illusion continued. I could not think of it as anything else. I remember thinking over and over again, unbelieving: a *clean* sky. I looked at it timidly. I should have liked to feel its purity, but I could not, and cannot now. To me, the sky has been so fouled, like almost everything else in the world, that I hate to look up at it. A fair day, with sunshine and a dazzling clear dome of blue, only makes me think of visibility. Just as it is hateful to see how easily water runs from the tap when you turn one on. It no longer means just water. It means the patient queues, kilometres long, waiting for a drop of it, in Warsaw, and the German machine-gunners mowing them down in the sun.

Night came down on us, still travelling. It came down suddenly and it was very cold.

'The horses should be about here,' said the agent. He began to shout through the darkness. 'Ivan, o-héé! O-héé, Ivan!' The punt still advanced, through total darkness. The old man still had to descend the waterway to his home. No answer came from the land: 'Ivan! O-héé, Ivan! O-héé! O-héé!' We had been nearly three hours on the water. I had no idea how much farther we had to go.

The note they sent quivering over the marshland, the empty echo of it, the punt, the darkness, the wall of sedge on either side of us, the silent movement of the paddle through the water, the sense of being utterly lost if left

for an instant alone, the dampness and weight of my grass bed, heavy now with dew and with all its perfume faded, how long did they last? I thought they would last all night. Sleep and fever got the better of me again. I woke to hear Ivan's own 'O-héé!' coming closer and closer. There was the stir of horses and their harness somewhere very near. In black, impenetrable darkness, as it seemed to me, but in what must have been as clear as daylight to him, the old man brought the boat to the side and guided us, one after the other, over a sort of causeway of pointed stones. The agent indifferently walked through the water in his high leather boots. The punt started to descend.

We climbed up into the cart. Away from the water it seemed lighter. A. was glad of a pelisse with a thick bearskin lining. I was glad to see him put it on.

'Drive on,' said the agent. A. and I sat together on the usual stuffed sack laid across from one side to the other. The ground was terribly uneven. If A. had not held me, I should not have kept on a second. Partly because I persisted in sleeping; partly because I was so exhausted, that I had no power of holding on.

At the first bridge we were challenged. The agent advanced and spoke. His voice and horses were immediately recognized. But it made no difference.

'An order.'

'But from whom?'

'From the Gmina.'

Under Polish administration, the Gmina is the local commune; its officials are the Wojt and the Soltys, roughly translatable as village mayor and reeve.

'But there was no such order at three o'clock this afternoon. I saw the Wojt myself in L. He said nothing

about it. You can't stop people from going home and at this time of the night. Such an order is for strangers.'

The guard only muttered. They were delighted to have this occasion for scoring off the agent.

'An order. You must go round.'

'But there is no way round. Come, don't be fools. You know me. Who are you? Stand out, let me see you. Nikifor? Wassily?'

They retreated still farther into the shadow of the bridge. One of them, the farthest away, began to threaten Ivan. Everything he said to Ivan was meant for the master.

'And be off now, and quickly. Do you want us to turn your horses for you? We're too long talking here with you, as it is.'

In the end, we had to turn.

'In God's name,' said Ivan, 'how'll I get the horses through the scrub? Your honours must both get down and help me.'

The surly guard yelled after him mockingly. Quite where we passed nor how it was done, I don't know. I know we drove off the track and across roughly cleared forest-land and then in and out among trees and that after that we had to go down into the dry bed of a river and up the other side. The horses slid down on to their haunches. Ivan at their heads shouted in the queer patois I did not understand. A. and the agent were hanging on to the traces. As for me, I had been made to lie down in the straw and hold on to the sides of the cart.

'Can't I get down? Can't I walk with you?'

'No. Lie down and keep your eyes shut.'

There was an instant, I learnt afterwards, when the off-horse started to roll over and the agent slipped the trace and got him up again. One more terrific heave, an almighty strain, and they were out and up on the other side of the river-bed.

At the next bridge the same manœuvre, but fairly easy this time. At the third, no guard. The agent snorted.

'Just like them. God, when I see the police to-morrow!'

A journey that should not have taken an hour lasted three. The agent fell asleep. I fell into I don't know what coma of exhaustion, pain, and grief. Only A., immobile in his pelisse, neither slept nor altered nor took his eyes off the road.

'What do you think that order means?'

'To keep the track open.'

'But for whom? Since no-one is allowed to travel. . . .'

'For troops.'

'For troops,' said the agent, wakening finally. 'Look, Ivan, we are home.' A lamp shone. 'When will that boy learn to keep the lights covered? Duren!' He got down and led us in. An old lady and a young man, the village schoolmaster, rose from bending over a little wireless set.

'A.Z.', said the agent, 'and his wife. We have a bed for them, I suppose? And food at once. Where are the servants?'

The best thing was that they gave me at last a glass of milk.

Chapter 17

THE FIFTH PARTITION HAS BEGUN

At K. I first read the stanzas of Mickiewicz published in 1832. They might have been written last September.

Oh, Polish mother! when from thy son's eyes the light of genius shines . . .

When, with bowed head, he listens to the history of his sires . . .

Oh, Polish mother, ill are these pastimes for thy *son . . .*

Because though peace shall gladden all the world; though nations, rulers, minds, shall be at one; thy *son is called to battle without glory . . .*

Then bid him early choose for his musing place a lonely cave . . . with noxious reptiles shall he learn to hide his anger beneath the earth; to make his thoughts impenetrable . . . to poison speech . . .

Our Saviour, when a child at Nazareth, played with the little cross on which he saved the world. Oh, Polish mother! amuse thy *child with his future toys.*

So must thou early wreathe his little hands with chains and harness him to the convict's barrow . . .

For he *may not go as the knights of old to plant the cross in triumph in Jerusalem . . . nor as the soldier of the newer world . . .*

His challenger will be an unknown spy, a perjured Government will wage war with him. A secret dungeon will

be his battle-field. A strong enemy will pronounce his doom.

And, vanquished, his tombstone will be the scaffold's wood . . . his only glory the weeping of a woman, and the long night talks with his compatriots. . . .

Saint Josaphat, Patron of Ruthenia, pray for us.
From Russian, Austrian and Prussian bondage,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the martyrdom of thirty thousand knights of Bar who died for faith and freedom,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the martyrdom of twenty thousand citizens of Prague, slaughtered for faith and freedom,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the martyrdom of the youths of Lithuania, slain by the knout, dead in the mines and in exile,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the martyrdom of the people of Oszmiana, slaughtered in God's churches and in their homes,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the martyrdom of the soldiers murdered by the Prussians,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the martyrdom of the soldiers knouted to death by the Russians,
Deliver us, O Lord.
By the wounds, tears and sufferings of all the Polish prisoners, exiles and pilgrims,
Deliver us, O Lord.
For a universal war for the freedom of nations,
We beseech Thee, O Lord.
For the national arms and eagles,
We beseech Thee, O Lord.

For a happy death on the field of battle,
We beseech Thee, O Lord.
For a grave for our bones in our own land,
We beseech Thee, O Lord.
For the independence, integrity and freedom of our country,
We beseech Thee, O Lord.

In England, in France, in Scandinavia, in the internment camps in the Balkans, in the Baltic countries, in the concentration camps in Germany, in the labour camps in the heart of Russia, in Siberia, in the Polish ships, in their own country, the homeless, wandering Poles are saying that Litany now. And the Litany of the Polish Pilgrim:

Kyrie Eleison. Christe Eleison.
God the Father who didst lead Thy people forth from the captivity of Egypt, and didst lead them to the Holy Land,
Restore us to our native land.
God the Son, who wert tortured and crucified, who didst rise from the dead and who reignest in glory,
Raise our country from the dead.
Mother of God . . . Queen of Poland and Lithuania,
Save Poland and Lithuania.
Saint Stanislas, Patron of Poland,
Pray for us.
Saint Casimir, patron of Lithuania,
Pray for us.[1]

I had plenty of time to ponder over Mickiewicz. We got up at seven o'clock to listen to the problematic wire-

[1] This and all other translations from Adam Mickiewicz included in this book are taken from the work of Miss Monica Gardner.

less programme. The batteries were dying slowly and surely, but we could still occasionally get Baranowicze and even Wilno. Moscow, too, out of sheer desperation. Then one evening, by what seemed a miracle, there was LONDON, speaking in Polish. Any of us who are still alive will never forget that thrill. I believe it was the schoolmaster who made the great discovery. After that, the whole day only existed to be got through until 9 p.m. and the communiqué in Polish. We discovered, too, that exactly before and after it (I think) the same news was given in Czech and in French, from the same station. The same news, but always with some apparently unmeditated variant. To us, it was the variant that made the news. There was never anything very striking. Nearly all of it was plain bromide, but when we had listened to all three and done our own additions and subtractions (with a certain very cautious fraction or two from Moscow) we were able to guess a little about what was happening elsewhere. All the same, most of our guesses were wrong; in the sense that they were always incomplete. We might get news of a battle. We never got news of a whole Front. We did not in fact know whether any Front still existed, anywhere.

We heard from London of Polish divisions going into action, of brilliant Polish successes at various points against fantastic superiority of numbers and equipment on the German side. Of terrific German losses in men and material, and of Hel and Warsaw still holding out and sending messages to the world. But of the campaign as a whole we never heard a word. We were driven to violent alternations between unreasonable hope and premature despair. Our own common sense told us that the Polish strategy must always be to fall back on the east

and to reform a mobile army in the marshlands. That unexplained peremptory closing of the roads to all civilian traffic, even out of one village to another, of our first night journey through Polesie, had seemed the confirmation of it. If they could do that, and if the rains came, there was hope of holding the Germans for six months or more. Until, as we thought then, our allies in the West should have got beyond Saarbrucken. Saarbrucken, in our meagre war news, was a name of which we were already getting very tired.

A few machines flew daily over the trees, too high for their colours to be identified. They always seemed to fly between the same two points and more or less at the same times. It seemed probable that they were our own, doing liaison work. But we could not be sure. Everything was very extraordinary. No German bombers came near us. The villages were left in peace. The air war seemed to have stopped short of the marshes; which was nonsense. There was a strong sense about all this of there being something up, but nobody knew what. There was just one thing we all knew. That for the desperate chance of holding the Germans there must be rain. Long soaking days and nights of it; filling up the marshes, washing away the dirt tracks, immobilizing the German wheels. Instead, the sky grew more brazen every day, the soil harder and the marshes more parched. Every day, for hours at a time, we watched the heavens for a sign. For one small cloud. Once the clouds came. The whole sky went livid like lead. The heat was molten. We expected a terrific thunderstorm, and after, it, at last, the rain. I remember our absurd and puerile joy. I remember how we thought of all of 'Ours', and how, after all, perhaps. . . . We sat on the veranda before

the house, paced up and down the perron, noted how a plant or two stirred, how no birds sang, how the cattle crowded round the herdsman. But still not a drop of rain. At midday we said to each other: You cannot expect it to break before then. Some of us asserted that we could smell it coming. And, in fact, punctually at midday, the heavens did seem to be wrung by one last great convulsion; and, out in the garden, we found ourselves suddenly spattered with water. Huge, warm drops. Just spattered, and then it was over. As an answer to prayer, it was grotesque. It was worse than complete indifference. The effect was exactly like that of a giant hand having squeezed a dried lemon. We walked back to the house in silence. I think it was then that, for the first time, some current passed between us and the peasants. We could not say what it was. It was they who knew. As we passed them they lowered their eyes; equivalent of a secret smile.

There was no more tobacco in the shop. No more of anything that came from cities. The shopkeepers no longer kept shop. But everything was easy to do without except tobacco. Tobacco is a necessary poison. All other needs in Polesie are so exiguous that, if it were not for this incurable craving, it would be hard to think of anything of which the peasants could be deprived. No other physical hardship troubles them. Fevers and mosquitoes and half-aquatic living conditions pickle them too well from the day they are born. But without tobacco they grow desperate. In normal times Pani N. kept large stocks of it, brought out from Pinsk. The peasant, who seldom has spending money, could always get his tobacco from her. In the day books of the estate *tyton* (tobacco) recurred scores of times against every

name. None of them had ever dreamt of being thankful for the foresight that provided it or for the hours of patient book-keeping, all done by herself, that it involved. It is much more likely that they thought she made a profit out of it. Now that the stock was gone and she could get no more, they were sullenly resentful, convinced that she was keeping it from them. At almost every hour of the day one of the Indian-like figures would appear on the porch.

'Pani Dziedziczka!' When she looked up, the owner of the voice would come silently in, crossing the floor with bare feet that left a white patch of dust at every step. The desire for tobacco would draw him right up to the bureau where it had always been kept, at the far end of the living-room. He would even put out a hand to touch the wood, as if that could give him something.

'Pani Dziedziczka!' No more. The powerful being, if invoked by name sufficiently often, would end by working the miracle. They were really incapable of apprehending that she no longer could. 'Pani Dziedziczka!' No explanations had any effect on them. And the same indefinable something which had become visible in their attitude as we walked through the villages, or when we met them walking on the private paths near the house where they had never ventured before, began to come indoors with them too. This was a great change. The hardiest village spirits, in normal times, even the Communist agitators themselves, of whom every village had a few, lost their hardihood once actually over the threshold. It made no difference when Pani N. even took the key out of her belt and unlocked the drawers to show them that there was no tobacco left. Finally, suspicious, more convinced than ever that

somehow, for some reason, the gentry were cheating him, the visitor would go away. On our side, for each repetition of the comedy (and the repetitions became maddeningly frequent—one had to go through it a dozen times a day) an extra call had to be made on our reserve of nerve.

Without tobacco I watched them disintegrate a little more each day. I imagine that the cafard of an Indian, the unexplainable, incurable cafard of which the white man can make nothing, must be rather like it to watch. If there had been tobacco, lots of things at K. might have turned out differently. The refrain of the Russian propaganda was: We are bringing you tobacco. We are bringing you salt. The peasants were drunk with joy when they heard it. Many of them set out and walked to Pinsk and back, over one hundred and twenty kilometres, to meet the promised trains from the east bringing them provisions. When day after day no trains came, when the Russian soldiers themselves begged them for sour bread and cucumbers, the first doubts of the magnificence of what had happened to them began to enter their obscured heads. Within a few weeks they were to see the trains going out of Poland, piled with cabbage for Moscow, the Holy City of their Paradise.

At this time, too, the schoolmaster, who slept in the house with us and was a peasant himself, received strange warnings. One of his friends said: 'Come down to the village and sleep among us. Do not sleep alone. Above all, do not go to the Great House. Nobody will go there any more.' The schoolmaster, like us, knew that something was brewing, but could not tell what. 'Half the children did not come to school to-day. When I walked through the village, a few of them ran away

from me. They have news. I am sure that they have news. God help us if it's what I think.'

The gardener came back from Pinsk. The haricots, the eggs, cheeses, and charcuterie he had taken with him to feed Pani N.'s cousin in the town house came back too. Lying among them was the cousin. She was stout, partly paralysed, full of rheumatism, and about sixty-six years old. Pinsk was being bombed by the Germans. Her servants and friends had implored her to go out to K. where she had been brought up. She had brought with her the title-deeds and the estate maps of K. and all the gold and jewellery she could. For herself, some clean stockings and her workbox. Neither of these two women ever thought of anything as belonging to themselves. Everything was for Krzyztof, the heir. Until they knew for certain that he was dead, they prepared stubbornly to defend his property. The pictures she had been obliged to leave on the walls. Between air-raids, leaning on her two sticks, helped by her old servants, she had packed the miniatures herself. The gardener would not wait for more. As it was they had worked all day. The journey had been far worse than our own across scrub and through river-beds. As soon as night fell the gardener had insisted on their beginning it. Driving all night, in the morning he had felt himself near enough to home to risk driving in daylight as well. The cart was terribly overloaded and the two fast horses stood like a pair of broken-winded hacks before the house. The gardener and A. and the agent lifted the heavy old woman down. She was twisted with cramp and the agony in her limbs. But she stayed on the veranda until the chest with the papers and the miniatures and the worn leather cases, the chest she had

brought for Krzyztof, was lifted down too. Hours afterwards the cramp was only passing off. But she ate the supper of an ogress.

During these days refugees never stop coming; eating, sleeping a little, and moving on. The house is too full already to contain any more. The offices and the dairy and the schoolhouse are full, too. Eight women in ragged cotton dresses—one, in fact, has only a cotton wrapper—turn up one evening, with two boys and a horse and cart. They are rich peasants from Poznan, bombed out of bed one night. A time-bomb drove them again out of the cellar in which they took refuge. They have walked all across Poland. The old horse, too wretched to have been requisitioned for the army, has been able to do no more than drag the cart on which they have piled some bedding and a few sacks of potatoes and gruel. Now they have nothing left. Their feet are already full of cracks from sleeping out at night. It is too early for serious frostbite. Pani N. has nowhere to put them. Finally they are given straw to lie down on in the bakery. *Trudno!* The gardener comes in and says, why not put them to work? In return they will get their food and a roof to cover them. The peasants are less and less reliable. Even the demesne people, on regular wages, keep hanging back. Nobody refuses to work, but nobody works. To-morrow, if something is not done, there will be no corn for the sixteen horses. Nobody has touched the winnowing machine for days. The women sleep beside the ovens and waken so much refreshed that they come to beg clothes of us on the veranda: Anything at all, they say. They are so cold with their bare legs; and then what they have is so filthy. They are going to heat water and wash out their

rags. They can very well lie naked in the straw for one night.

They do not believe me when I tell them that I am no better off than themselves. That I literally have not even the oldest, most ragged bit of linen to give them. It is constantly brought home to me how little people's ideas can be changed fundamentally. These people have been through it all themselves. How can they be so incapable of understanding that the same thing has happened to us? No, I am Pani, A. is Pan. We have some mysterious, invisible resources. Some unexplained forces bear us up. I tell them that I am just as much a beggar as they are; that I too am living on charity. More so than they, because I cannot hoe potatoes and milk cattle and grind flour as they will be doing tomorrow. A., at least, earns his keep. I suppose he earns mine too. Pani N. is devoted to him, and the agent, the schoolmaster, and the engineer (the agent's evil genius) are jealous. Every day dozens and dozens of people are fed and rest a little and pass on; and later, I suppose, they perished. On the roads, in the woods, in sacked and garrisoned towns. There are no words in which it would be possible to convey the misery we witnessed. A whole nation was homeless. Mothers were looking for their children, soldiers for their regiments, husbands and wives for each other. The half of them had no plan, no provisions, no idea where they were going; nowhere to go. There cannot be a roadside in Poland where the starved and frozen bodies of these people do not lie. To almost all of them must have come a day when, after prodigies of endurance, weeks and months even of existing somehow, after having escaped death a hundred or a thousand times, the cold was just one degree

too cruel or the handful of roots just this once too insufficient. So they died, and lay where they died. There cannot be a road in Poland that is not bordered by these milestones. 'Let them walk to Warsaw,' said the Germans, when they drove every Polish man, woman, and child out of Gdynia, in the coldest winter Europe is able to remember. And set out to walk they did. At every few yards somebody, many even, must have fallen out. Cased in ice, they must have bordered the route; rotting only in the spring thaws. The route from Gdynia to Warsaw runs through any room in which a Pole sits alone. If Mickiewicz were writing to-day, he might have added a stanza to his litany:

By the haunted memories, by the dreams, insomnia and imaginings of those who survived,
Good Lord, deliver us.

Pani N. continues to go about her occupations. Half by the exercise of her authority, half by the promise of the bright printed cotton squares the women prize for their heads, she succeeds in getting a few workers from the village. One woman is put to wash. Two others carry the chaff away from the winnowing floor. The peasant who is the best hog-killer in the district has to be courted for two days before he will come. In the end she goes down to the village and faces him herself. In the evening he actually comes, and for the whole of the next day everybody seems to have red hands. Bucketsful of insides are being carried about everywhere. All the women from the village suddenly turn up and stand about, each one waiting to carry off something. Blood puddings and sausages are being manufactured all day in the kitchen. Out of the kitchen a passage opens into

the only big room in the house. This is the only living-room for everybody above kitchen rank. All the other rooms are bedrooms and open off it. There is no upper storey, only some low attics and a pigeon-house on the roof. The stairs up to the attics rise out of the living-room, and Pani N. keeps the keys. Even the housekeeper has to come to her for them. The most important of the larders is up these stairs. All the dry foods are there. The flours, the haricots, the maize, the stored apples and water-melons, and the joints of hog are carried up there.

A. takes the stitches out of my head with a pair of scissors. The wounds ache, and I feel sleepy and dull and, at the same time, my perceptions have never been keener. It does not make sense, but there it is.

The very evening of the day when A. removes the stitches a car stops outside at about eight o'clock. There are four or five men in it. Somehow room is made for them for the night. They are the men with whom we travelled in that train from Brzecz. The doctor looks at my head and says he could not have done the job better himself. In the morning they go on again. It is the morning of the 17th of September. In the afternoon the agent has horses brought round. We must go to the Gmina, he says; about fourteen kilometres off. As strangers, we have not the right to settle in the community without having our papers examined. My head aches so much that I dread the thought, but there is no help for it. Pani N. sees us off. At the last minute she sends a boy running after us with a huge tartan cloak of English cloth. It is about fifty years old and goes by the name of Abysynka at K., since Haile Selassie was photographed in something very like it.

On our way we drive through several villages. The attitude of the peasants is more marked than ever. A few ostentatiously turn aside as we go by. The agent takes no notice. Ivan is surly. The road runs almost all the way through exquisitely beautiful forest. The agent says that for anything we could offer him he would not come along here on a winter's night without a light.

'Wolves?' asks A.

'Yes. Not that they're very dangerous. They're not. There's too much game in the forest. They're never hungry enough to hunt in packs. With a light, they never come to within smelling distance of you. But without one. . . . And I have a horror of the brutes.'

The sky is empty. All the same, habit makes me instinctively uneasy when we get into a clearing and go along without cover.

On our way into K.W. where the Gmina is, we meet the Wojt on his way out of it, with two or three other men on a bryczka. The agent hails him and jumps down. When he comes back to us, he will not talk. We get through our business and drive home again. The agent's brow gets heavier and heavier. I am not the only one who feels something horrible about this afternoon. Clouds blow up. Clouds which we no longer expect to bring us rain. But the evening gets chilly and grey. I sit inside Abysynka and its huge folds keep me warm, head and all. As we pass through the villages again, not a soul calls a word of greeting. During supper the agent sits hunched up in his chair at the top of the table. For the first time since we have been there, he is not interested in food. He is a very stout, very brusque man. Ideal when things are going well, likely to crumple when they are not. Already he looks as if a little sawdust

had run out of his stuffing. Even the engineer cannot get a word out of him. While we are still eating he pushes back his chair and walks off into his office. The locked drawer of his desk is tried. He comes back, a little relieved. His revolver is still there.

'Do you know what that son of a —— was up to?' he asked suddenly. 'That Wojt. On his way to destroy all the town's flour!'

Consternation fell on the table.

'Why?' asked Pani N. calmly.

'Why? An order! Do those fools ever tell you anything else when you ask them a question?'

'Then They must be very near,' said somebody, with an air of having discovered America. Probably the housekeeper. She was perpetually saying things like this.

'Yes, but who?' said the agent, and we realized that he was not any longer thinking of the Germans.

A figure stood outside the glass doors, looking into the room. Lately people had been looking in at us in this way. None of us ever stirred. Sheets and rugs were hung on the windows by way of black-out, but our heads and our movements were visible to anyone who wanted to see in. After a while the watchers always went away. This time, though, the door-knob was turned. A Polish colonel entered. Very tall, very spare, with burning eyes in a deathly white face, he walked up to Pani N.'s chair and took her hand. If I had never seen any more of him, I should have remembered just those few steps and that one sight of his face. When they had greeted each other, she presented him to us. It was Colonel W., the famous skirmisher, who, with the even more famous J., harried the Bolshevik rear day and

night in the last war, in these same marshes, with a force of ten or twelve men.

'Nineteen years!' said the old lady. 'Nineteen years!'

'Twenty,' said the colonel. 'Twenty, since I had typhus and lay on that sofa in your house in Pinsk.'

'But after that—poor S. was in prison. They let me visit him in the end.'

'And we packed the china and the miniatures. And Sikorski evacuated you to Warsaw.'

'Sit down,' said Pani N. 'Sit down and eat.'

'Yes,' said the colonel, 'but I have something to ask first. I have some men outside. I want to bring them in.'

They came in behind him. Perhaps ten of them. Not all in uniform. W. was raising a skirmishing party again. Perhaps A. would join them.

Of them all, only three stand out quite distinctly. Colonel W. A tall fair boy of twenty-four or so, whose wife was in Warsaw and who had an English mother. This boy was one of those out of uniform. The third was the Rotmistrz, a typical cavalry captain; rolling a little out of the saddle, as tough as whalebone, with beautiful manners, and eyes that behind their sparkle were really as cold as steel. Before supper was ended he was asleep, his cheek on the arm of the man next to him. All the others have become blurred.

In all eight thousand or so of them were to pass during the next week. After the first few hundred, one remembers only the uniform: the ones that needed nursing, and the ones with the worst feet.

The colonel ate enormously.

'The more gall I have in my heart,' he said, 'the more ravenous my stomach. I have observed it any number of times.'

A smile, instead of lightening, darkened his features. It was a spasm of pain more than a smile. After supper he told us how he had been with his family in Poznan when the Germans attacked. How in the hour or two that remained at his disposal he had tried to convoy his wife, his old father, his nieces, and the feebler members of his huge household to another estate, a little more retired, a little out of the line of tanks. He had had time to see the convoy cut in two by a German column. The half that stayed on the German side simply went down under the wheels. He heard his old father cry out and he had to go on and leave him. The refuge he had counted on for the other half was a battleground when they reached it. Artillery had done for the house. Its owners were moving about in the battle, picking things up off the ground. The lighting was lurid and he could very distinctly see them doing this from half a kilometre away, and, half a kilometre away, in the middle of a road along which the Germans were rolling, in the line of artillery fire, is where he left the women. The time allowed by his mobilization orders had run out. He had not the shadow of an alternative.

'So I left them there.'

His little band was asleep. We were talking intimately. He took Pani N.'s worn hands and kissed them.

'Not even time to kiss my wife's hands! Not a word of farewell!'

Pani N. began to collect the supper plates.

'Krzyztof's boy is dead,' she said. 'Krzyztof too, perhaps. But you and I are alive. When we are gone, there will be others. "Poland has not perished yet, while we live to own her." '

'Ah,' said the colonel. 'Poland!'

I can still hear the change in his voice. The passion; entirely absent when he had been telling his personal tragedy. A little after that he left us, to lie down in another room and sleep. It was midnight. One might as well turn on Moscow; the station one was always sure of being able to get even with our burnt-out batteries.

At any time the mere sound of the high-pitched Russian voice, with its barbarous placing of accents, is exasperating. At present I have to shut my teeth hard to endure it at all. The usual clichés spin about the room . . . Stalin . . . the People's Army . . . parachutes . . . our invincible motorized units. . . .

The invincible motorized units are new. Instead of enduring, we listen. As we listen, we all rise to our feet. I have heard of being petrified with horror. Now I see it. All the people round me are petrified. If you touched them they would fall over. I am petrified myself. Another thing I have heard of is happening. I can feel my cheeks going hollow. The Russian voice does not stop for anything so insignificant. We may have stood there like that, rigid, for half an hour. When the voice stops at last, nobody in the room says anything. All our voices have dried up.

The Soviet Army has crossed our eastern frontier.

The Fifth Partition of Poland has begun.

Chapter 18

LAST POLISH SOLDIER

Almost as soon as it was morning, W. and his men appeared.

At the sight of us, on the same chairs, in the same attitudes, broad awake, they thought that we had been there all night. The windows and doors had not been opened. The floor was unswept and the cut water-melons and the used knives of the night before were still piled on the table.

Instead of going through to the yard, they leaned against the stone and the doors and looked at us.

'We were afraid of wakening you,' they said. 'We were going outside to the pump. Why have you not been to bed?'

We had been to bed. At least, we had gone to our rooms. But it had not been possible to sleep. Daylight had brought us all back here. Separating at all had only been for the servants. There had been no need for them to know last night.

'But they will have to know now.'

The schoolmaster lifted his eyes.

'They have known for a week.'

It was perfectly clear to us now that they had.

'For our first night off the ground since—what is it?

—two weeks?' said the Rotmistrz, 'we chose a good one! I suppose you said: don't wake them. Let them sleep while they can: well, we did. I never slept so well in my life.' He sat down heavily and stared at the colonel.

'The —— bastards,' he said. After a while, with increasing difficulty, he said it again. 'The —— bastards.'

A servant came into the room and took the watermelons and the dirty knives away.

The Rotmistrz said, 'Good morning, comrade,' and went on staring at the colonel. Pani N. said nothing. She was packing up cold chicken and sausage for the party to take away in their haversacks. The servant came in and out with breakfast. While we ate it Pani N. told us that the agent had gone. He had come to her room later in the night, and she had told him that he must do as he wished.

'He has enemies in the village. The Communists have him on their list. He has not always been very wise. All he has done for the peasants will not count now. They will remember only the other things. The fines he has made them pay. The times he has lost his temper. The agitators he has sent to prison.' She added: 'But it is very bad.'

It was. It was unlucky. Our situation was so bad anyhow that only one thing could make it worse, and that one thing the agent had done. He had shown fear. In the peasants' mind the agent and the family were almost the same thing. Any action of his involved us all. Even so, we did not make a tragedy out of it. By making no mistakes, with the advantage of Pani N.'s immense personal popularity and by not yielding an inch of pres-

tige, we might hold out twenty-four or forty-eight hours longer; but that would be the most. Not one of us doubted that the most horrible, and probably long drawn-out, agony awaited us. The Bolshevik methods are only too well-known in Poland. In the last war, even men, even soldiers, killed themselves rather than fall alive into their hands! We were perfectly matter-of-fact about it; my own preoccupation was, would my brain not break down? Already, great mists of grief and horror overwhelmed me often; confusing my mind. I was afraid of not doing as well as the Poles; of dying badly. I had one hope—that A. would go with the skirmishing party. Alone, I would manage somehow. One can always manage, by taking one minute at a time. By thinking: this minute will pass. I need only bear this minute now. The next one when it comes I could manage, if only A. did not have to look on at what they did to me. If they could not offer me the one choice I was not sure of refusing—between mercy for him and being a renegade myself.

This is the frightful preoccupation of anybody in the situation we were in then. It is no use knowing that you have courage. Almost anybody can have that. What nobody can know about themselves beforehand, is the sheer mechanics of how long brain and body will hold together. Few prisoners take their own lives to escape from the sufferings of their bodies; thousands to escape becoming traitors; to make it *impossible* for their tongue to speak.

The party left and A. remained. Now that the agent had gone, he felt that he could not leave Pani N.

Nothing happened at once. We listened to Moscow at intervals. All that was said was extraordinarily vague.

The wildest rumours circulated. That the Russians were really marching against the Germans. That Colonel Beck was in Moscow. The peasants, still unsure of their ground, hesitated to commit themselves. The first red flag to come out of hiding had been flown from the schoolhouse roof during the night. When the police boldly took it down, not one of them lifted a finger. But they no longer worked, even on their own holdings. The policemen (there were only two) passed between hedges of hostile faces. Wherever we went there were groups talking. Standing about the grounds. Some women even broke flowers off the bushes near the house. When Pani N. showed herself they fell back, half-foolish, half-surly. But they always came back again. The younger ones even came right up to the windows, looking in.

'They are counting,' said Pani N. in her calm voice. 'Choosing what they will have.'

Sometimes we wondered whether she was too old to realize what was happening. Her refusal to make any change in her habits was so absolute. Since W. left she had been arranging her indoor plants for the winter; re-potting them exactly as she had done every year. My own hands were icy, in spite of the thick gloves she lent me, from splitting up clumps of root and puddling in soil and water. We did this on the verandas, in full view of the peasants, spending hours over the work. But when she looked straight at you, and you saw the steady light in her blue eyes, and listened to one of those rare remarks, whose tone never altered, you knew that her eighty-three years were not kind to her. There was no blurring of anything.

The actual military position was, of course, unknown

to us. As a matter of fact, from September 12th onwards, the German divisions were not in too good a position. In spite of their surprise attack, their overwhelming armament superiority, the net of espionage and sabotage prepared by the German minority inside Poland, and the unprecedented hardness of the ground making tanks invaluable and cavalry almost useless, they had begun to suffer considerable defeat. The mechanized divisions had advanced so fast that their flanks were unprotected. On the Kutno–Lodz front German divisions were already routed and 30,000 prisoners taken. Our own troops had learnt the advantage of retreating rapidly before motorized units, and then cutting them off from their base. The hopes of a Polish army being able to make a fighting retreat into the eastern marches, and there reform on favourable ground, were very real and very well founded. The Russian move destroyed these hopes, and destroyed them completely. Even so, our troops fought on. Lwow, after repulsing several German attacks, was now attacked by the Russians. As the Russians advanced, the Germans retreated.

A clear territory was always left, by agreement, between the Germans and their allies. On September 22nd, Lwow finally fell. Warsaw, surrounded and besieged, held out until the 27th. The peninsula of Hel until the 29th. Even the Poles could not fight two gigantic invaders simultaneously. When I look back on it now, knowing the facts, I am surprised how nearly we guessed it all. How accurate the scores of maps were that we roughed out on the white American cloth covering the K. dining-table. Voices that I shall never hear again explained to me a hundred times that the Ger-

mans were advancing too quickly; that to leave their flank exposed has invariably been the German mistake, and the cause of German defeat. Our personal life was in ruins. The future could bring only deeper personal anguish, because it could only separate us. Whatever way events went, it could not possibly continue to keep us together. But until the 17th of September, there was still hope of Poland, and therefore hope for us.

On the night of the 17th, standing petrified around the wireless set, hope left us. Our hearts broke.

The stream of refugees now began to flow in the opposite direction. Those who had come from the west to the east began to pour back from the east towards the west. I suppose there was never anything like it. No human misery can ever have equalled this misery of the refugees in Poland. Bombed and shelled and machine-gunned out of their homes by the Western barbarians, they had dragged themselves hundreds and hundreds of miles, enduring every kind of progressive wretchedness and horror, only to fall into the hands of the barbarians from the East.

Their fate has been lingering and atrocious. Compared with it, a wholesale massacre would have been merciful. But nobody then took the trouble to massacre them, and, as they were alive, they had to act. They had to keep moving in the third week in September, between the two millstones, while the millstones still kept apart—later, wherever chance flung them. Some into the German occupation, some into the Russian. Others to the pits in which hundreds of nameless bodies lie piled together. Others to the yards, to face the execution squads. To concentration camps. To labour camps. To Siberia. To Germany. To internment camps abroad.

The only place to which none of them ever went was home. At K. there was food and rest for an hour or two. Without it, they would have perished a little sooner! The help we gave only prolonged suffering.

On our set, we could still hear London, very faintly. Poland was still in the news. We learnt that Modlin and Hel still stood. The whole civilized world, they said in London, was moved and awed by the heroism of the Polish people. We heard the Lord Mayor of London's broadcast to the Burgomaster of Warsaw, to Stefan Starzynski, now in Dachau, the worst concentration camp in the world. But we heard no single voice from England speak of a Russian aggression. As to that, silence; the silence of the grave.

Our frontiers had been crossed by a second invader. Our eastern provinces were overrun; our armies in a sprung trap. The murder the Germans could not do alone, the Russians had come in to finish. The future line of demarcation between the two occupations was already being discussed in Moscow. And from London not one word. Not even recognition of a fact.

On the Western Front, no advance. From America, protests. Rumania (pledged to us by a treaty), neutral and ill-disposed. Hungary, our oldest friend in the Balkans, neutral. Belgium neutral. From Italy, '*Polonia liquidata*.' The rumour that Turkey had joined the Allies, false after all. It would be hard for anyone who was not there to imagine those evenings of ours around the wireless.

As well as the refugees, troops were going through K. In all, we must have fed and temporarily sheltered as many as seven or eight thousand. The retreat was made in good order. But the men were desperately

weary, half-starved, and short of everything. Marines from Gdynia had been marching between fifty and sixty kilometres a day. Rumour, of course, came with them. They knew even less than we did. Lots of them still believed that once the Russian and German armies met they would fight between themselves. We heard again that members of the Polish Government were in Moscow. That Hitler had been assassinated. That Spain had joined the Allies. Half of the men were too dead beat to talk at all. Horses, relieved of their loads, lay down with heaving sides and never stood up again. At one time the house itself became a sort of headquarters, with thirty or forty staff officers under its roof. A field telephone (I helped to lay some lengths of it) worked all night. This was towards the end of the week, when the Russians were already as near as Pinsk. Communication was being maintained with the small outposts that had been left to cover the retreat. Bread was baked all day and all night. Hogs were slaughtered and their flesh cooked almost before it had stopped quivering. A. had to oversee everything. The soldiers were too exhausted even to survey their bivouac fires. We were afraid of a fire starting. The milk that had seemed so plentiful was now hardly sufficient just for the sick. For the worst cases of fever and dysentery, we had only two remedies, a drop of what still remained of the rum brought from Warsaw or A.'s own concoction prepared from the shells of fresh walnuts. The concoction, A. said, if only he knew how to make it properly, was the oldest known remedy against cholera. By guessing, instead of knowledge, at least it did no harm. Half our patients recovered. That is, they were able to stumble away from K. We called that recovery. Boots and dress-

ings for their feet were what they needed most. Only the very sick stayed more than a few hours. There was no time in which to do anything effective.

The Russians did not use their Air Force as the Germans did. That is, they were not bombing refugees and civilians, or towns from which the garrisons were withdrawn. The Moscow wireless was still repeating, 'we come as friends', and promising everybody heaven on earth.

Small Polish units, when surrounded and taken prisoners, were disarmed, and only their officers were kept under arrest. Private soldiers and non-commissioned officers, once disarmed, were told they might return to their homes. But reconnaissance planes were used to make strategic concentration impossible. The bombers only waited. Any large formations of troops were pounded from the air. For this reason, it seemed likely that K. might, at any moment, become a shambles. The troops continually passing through and bivouacking in the house and demesne could not be hidden. There were too many of them. It was not possible even to cover the fires.

There was also the possibility of a battle, if the Russians moved their artillery nearer. What is queer is that I remember those days as days of comparative security. The circle around us that had been narrowing so fast, widened again during them. The peasants fell back again while there was one Polish soldier left. Each night A. said to me, 'Take off your clothes, lie down in bed and sleep. When it becomes impossible I will tell you. In the meantime, sleep while you can.'

The soldiers told us of meetings with the Russians. Polish and Russian patrols had stumbled across each

other here and there, far from their own lines. The Russian soldiers were friendly, emptying their pockets for the tobacco-famished Poles. Many of them had said that they did not know what to make of this war. They had been told that they were to march straight through against the Germans. They had had no idea that their commanders meant treachery to the Poles. Later, we confirmed this, too. Nevertheless, they fought wherever they were put to it. Their own officers drove them on from behind and the G.P.U. agents drove on the officers. But their teeming superiority of numbers hardly counted. It was their Air Force that made further Polish resistance impossible.

At the end of the week, on Friday or Saturday, I cannot now remember which, the last Polish soldiers went. The police had already been evacuated. The peasants, with folded arms and their eyes on the ground, watched the column out of sight. The refugees and the soldiers had never stopped saying to us: 'You must be out of your minds. In a town at least, you have a chance of not being noticed. One can always get lost in a crowd. By being found here, you label yourselves "the nobles" . . . you are signing your own death warrants.'

Pani N. would not hear of leaving. If K. had been only her own property, it is just possible that she might have gone. As it was, she made the excuse that Krzyztof had left it in her charge. She could not leave unless it was Krzyztof himself who told her to. I think, though, that she would not have gone anyhow. In her secret heart she hoped for a bullet. She wanted to die at K. If she had gone I suppose we would have gone with her. As she would not, we stayed. There was no heroism about any of it. Neither on her side or on ours. All she

did was to obey her strongest feelings, to stay on was what she really preferred. As for us, we preferred it too. There is a strong human instinct for dying on one's own doorstep, so long as the doorstep is still there. As by then we had no other, K. had come to mean just that doorstep to us.

At six o'clock in the evening only Pani N., her cousin, the schoolmaster, A., and myself remained. From the very beginning, the weather had been uncanny. It was uncanny now, too. I have never seen a more lurid or more oppressive evening sky. Arm-in-arm, A. and I paced up and down in front of the house. There was nothing to say. The lurid light faded. Night began to come down and the autumn roses to fill the air with sweetness after the heat of the day. I had grown used to tears on the faces of men. But I was not used to A.'s. Even on the road to Lublin, kneeling for hours to hold me in his arms, with my blood soaking into his clothes, his eyes had been dry. They were not dry now. I know that his thought was: shall I ever see the Polish uniform again? Shall I ever again wear it myself?

As we went indoors, he said:

'To-night, you must not take off your clothes. Not even your boots. This is the time for which I wanted you to be ready. You see how well it was that you slept while you still could.'

Chapter 19

THE PEASANTS COME CLOSER

We were alone now with the peasants. There was neither Polish nor Russian rule.

This was the moment from which the agent had run away.

The servants brought in supper as usual. We ate, and showed no signs of our surprise. After supper, as usual, the wireless. No lamp, for the paraffin had been finished days before. A few brands blazing on the stove did to see by. Between nine and ten we went to our rooms. The uneasy night wore away. It was no more than that. A few shots were fired in the park, straight into the air. From time to time, a face was pressed against a window-pane and then silently withdrawn. Feet stirred on the verandas until morning. We were under surveillance. But nothing at all happened. The day passed exactly like the last days before the 17th. The troops gone, the peasants moved nearer again. They did not attack us. They did not even enter the house. But they sat down on the verandas and did not stand up nor speak as we moved in and out. Their own faces were troubled. During the night things became worse.

In the morning A. and the schoolmaster harangued

all the peasants who would listen. If we were to have Russian rule, and it seemed that we were, then let us have it as soon as possible. Whoever K. belonged to, whether to Pani N., or in fact, to the peasants, there was no sense in allowing it to be sacked, and perhaps burnt. In that way, it was difficult to see how anybody, except a few bandits, would be any better off. A guard should be kept on property. Bands of marauders were already infesting the villages. Another twenty-four hours like this and we should be living in a state of blazing anarchy. A committee and a militia would be Russian government. They could not object to that. And there would be law and order, instead of bloodshed and looting. When the Russians came, somebody would have to pay for what had been done already. Let them set about choosing a committee immediately, and the committee should form its militia and allow no other individuals to carry arms.

The peasants listened, deeply troubled. In their hearts they were afraid of their own leaders, all of whom were armed while they were not. It was true that the whole village would have to pay if crimes were committed. The Bolshevik advance up to now had not been in the least what had been expected. There was still no salt or tobacco. The towns were still without bread or the barest necessities. The trains, instead of bringing all that had been promised from Russia, were going back there stuffed to the roof. The Bolshevik hand, for the time being, was even heavier on the peasant than on the proprietor. Looting was rigidly forbidden. Stories came in of peasants summarily shot in the back of the head (after having been told with the familiar Bolshevik technique to turn about and walk away) for simple pil-

fering. The land, after all, it seemed, was not the sort of fabulous cake they had imagined; to be cut up into slices and handed round on a plate.

They had been told that it was their own, but now that it was being taken away from 'the nobles' they were not being allowed to touch it. The marauders who always follow a beaten army had begun to prey not only on the great houses but on the peasant holdings as well. Cattle had already been driven off from the village. They agreed with relief that a committee and a militia were what was wanted. We did not know it at the time, but this was actually the Bolshevik programme. K. was now its own Soviet. The Commissars from Moscow arrived only on the 6th of October.

When we got up the next morning, a red flag was flying from the roof. The militia had taken over the estate office as its headquarters. The flag had been planted there; not yet squarely in the middle of the whole house. We were prisoners, but we were not personally interfered with. Our meals were still served by the house servants. On Wednesday, the 27th, Warsaw fell. We heard of it at once, on the broadcast from London. I can find no way of describing how we lived. What I was myself most conscious of was the frightful slowing-down of time. At nine o'clock in the morning I would wonder how it could possibly not yet be night. Often what we felt was not even sorrow. The mind will not feel indefinitely. There is a point at which all feeling stops.

It must have been about this time that I destroyed my diary.

From the first twenty-four hours the Soviet was a farce. The members of the Committee quarrelled like

thieves. The village council was helpless. All the power was in the hands of those who had arms. A Russian proclamation was posted, ordering all citizens to hand over their arms to the militia. A. buried his. Fifty yards from the house there was an overgrown shrubbery, never visited by the peasants. When the German troops had withdrawn from occupying K. at the end of the last war they had left a rough grave there, with a cross but no name. Its tenant must have died in the house. The N.'s, when they returned, had respected it. During my own time at K. I was always irresistibly drawn to it. The heart of the shrubbery was always dark. In the terrible drought the rotting leaves underfoot gave a consoling illusion of moisture. The grave itself was so quiet, I so keenly envied the man lying there, that I could not keep away. A. was more practical. There was no grass on the mound. The loam would not show signs of disturbance. More leaves were falling on it every day and soon the snow would fall, too. He buried his arms beside the German. Carefully taken to pieces, coated with lard and rancid butter, wrapped in hand-woven linen, they can wait there twenty years. Or one. Until there is a chance of using them. A whole arsenal of arms lies buried in the soil of Poland.

Then the militia came, they took away all the sporting guns, an old revolver, and a useless Colt. During this week they gradually took over everything. The house was searched daily. Inventories of what was now said to be the peasants' property were begun daily and never finished. It is not that the peasants cannot read and write. It is that they have no heads on their shoulders for what is not their business. They are incapable of any kind of organization. What they understand is

the seasons, the rivers, the forest, and the soil. In this kind of knowledge there is nobody who can teach them anything. But within three days the flour was sour. Somebody had left a window open. The salt was spilt and wasted. The maize was left to spoil. Out of sheer anger at the sight of it, we went out and worked in it ourselves. I stripped maize cobs ten hours a day. Weeks afterwards I still had the welts left on my hands. For the rest of my life I never want to see maize or haricots again. The winter beans were left to freeze on the verandas in the now nightly frosts. Nobody would dig the potatoes. The beetroots and the cabbage lay on the surface of the ground and froze too. The Holland cows stood in the stalls all day. The people from three villages ran with jugs and bottles to milk them. Each sloven would milk as much as she wanted, perhaps trying two or three cows out of greed, and leave the rest. None of the herd was ever milked clean. For days they bellowed with pain and then went dry. The few hogs that remained were better off. The swineherd went doggedly about his business as he had always done. The hogs were what he cared for in this world. The Soviet seemed to him a joke. The gun-dogs starved at the end of their chains. Two died in the sun. The fowl escaped into the trees. The over-ripe melons and tomatoes, already past the time when they should have been gathered, turned to mush. The kitchen and the estate-office were full of feasters twenty-four hours a day. What was not eaten was trampled into the floor. The Great House, which could have stood a siege when we came to it, self-supporting all the year round, would soon have empty larders and gaping cupboards. Fortunately there was no vodka. Ever since I knew anything about eastern

Europe, I had known that Poland is Europe's frontier there. Any shrinking of Poland in the east is an advance of Asia. I saw it now with my own eyes. The Polish dyke had been levelled. The tide from Asia was up to our necks within a week. Nobody meant much harm. But nobody did any good. Russians not only do not know how to act. They cannot. Apathy, indecision, violent impulses having nothing to do with reason, total lack of measure; we saw it all at K. once the Russian influence was paramount. The new masters simply could not grasp the idea of plenty being exhaustible. Because there were hams in the larder, flour in the bins, and salt and sugar in the barrels when they took them over, they supposed that the store was inexhaustible. They thought that these things had come there by nobody's effort, all they had to do in this new paradise was to enjoy it. Only every day they quarrelled more violently with each other. Each was afraid of his neighbour benefiting. The ukase against looting was actually observed; more for this reason, at first, than out of fear. But as the days went by, they grew heartily afraid, too. Some of them went to Pinsk to see the Commissars and came back gloomy and apprehensive. It seemed that they were only now hearing of the collective farming that is the hated negation of everything a peasant desires. They did not yet realize, but they began to suspect for the first time, what we had always been sure of—that K. and the other confiscated properties would be exploited by collective labour. Nobody would get anything and they would have to work harder than they ever did in their lives before. The 'nobles' could not help losing, but the people would not be allowed to gain. Already we heard mur-

mured regret from the majority for the vanished Polish administration. Even the leaders could not quite hide their trouble. One or two of them, helpless against so old an instinct, came secretly to Pani N. and to A., admitting their bewilderment and demanding advice. A. looked at them with that ironic half-smile of his that has always made him enemies.

'My children,' he said, 'be thankful if they stop short at not giving you K.! And your own holdings? Do you think they will leave you those? and your own winter potatoes and straw, and your cow and your couple of hogs? Wait. A day is coming. Poland is down now. And, as you watched us going, you thought that you were up. I tell you, you will have enough of your Russian brothers. When the Polish soldiers march back again, you will be kneeling outside your houses to kiss their hands.'

We stayed long enough to know how true his words were. When the Polish soldiers march back again—at the very sound of the words, the heart almost stops beating. But the eastern provinces will look for them longest and meet them with the wildest joy. The President of the Committee, the shrewdest man in the village, was also the first man in it to realize his own disaster.

'Within three years,' he said to us, 'you will be back here again. As for me, I am a man who is finished. Nobody trusts me any longer. Least of all the peasants whom I have unknowingly helped to fool.'

News of battles with the Russians reached us. Stories came in that the majority of the troops that had passed through K. had been massacred farther on. The columns had been bombarded from the air. During two days we had heard distant detonations. Peasants who had been

commandeered to drive wagons came back with terrible accounts. Half of them may not have been true. But two things were. That two peasants who had been in the baggage train came back wounded, with shrapnel in their bodies, and that all of them had abandoned their horses. A peasant will abandon his brother more readily than his horse. So that in the main, the stories must have been well founded. We heard, too, that Brzecz-nad-Bugiem had been retaken by Polish troops and held for a day, after a battle in which the Russian troops were fearfully punished. How true that was, either, I do not know. I do know that long, crowded hospital trains of wounded left for Russia, and that, for some reason the Russian Command now changed its tactics. Even small troop concentrations were savagely bombarded. Polish officers taken prisoner were sent to internment in Russia itself and a distinction was made between non-commissioned officers and private soldiers. All this does seem to support the story that the Russians had suffered an unexpected and heavy defeat somewhere. Right up to the end outside Poland, I always heard it said that this had happened at Brzecz.

We continued to receive our food at table. The servants were not prevented from serving us. But we now got only what the Committee handed out for us. Even this worked fantastically. One comrade would be for keeping us on the shortest rations. Another would stealthily pass the keys to the housekeeper for half an hour. The president himself killed two fowls for us. Another member of the Committee found them and took them away. We lived from moment to moment, taking all these things as they came. If there was food, good. If there was not, we chewed melon seeds until

there was. A. ate walnuts all day. The mechanical grinding of his jaws did something to relieve his craving for tobacco, as terrible as the peasants' own. Sometimes, somebody would get a few cigarettes from somewhere. People kept passing all the time. The Russian soldiers in Pinsk continued to give away theirs. Occasionally, one of our guard (we were loosely guarded by the militia—this, like everything else, went by caprice) would get one in this way from a friend who had made the journey there and back; and when he did he usually handed it round for A. and myself to puff at and hand back.

The feeling against the agent grew. The peasants despised him for the first, and suspected him. They knew that his reason for going now was to see and himself talk things over with the Commissars. They were convinced that in some way (quite unexplainable, but still they were convinced) he meant to do them out of the treasure that was to fall to them. Their attitude even to us grew more aggressive as he did not return. For some days they had now been coming into the house, of course; but not yet into Pani N.'s own bedroom. For the first time some of them did so on Saturday, on the pretext that the agent had possessed arms that he had not handed over, and that they had been hidden by Pani N. somewhere among her own things.

She said:

'I have told you that I have done nothing of the kind. I have told you. You have all known me all your lives. Has a single one of you ever heard me tell you a lie? I am eighty-three now; not likely to begin.'

All the time we kept our hands at least busy. We darned, stitched, sorted the ubiquitous haricots, any-

thing at all. I remember that Pani N. was coring and slicing apples as she said this; she might have really been expecting to dry them for the coming winter, by her air. Her question contained a sort of mild curiosity, no more.

When nobody answered, she asked again:

'Well, speak up, can't you? Have you or have you not?'

As many as could shuffled away from her. There was a ripple right through the crowd. Of disapprobation. The intruders left her room looking foolish. A murmur greeted them, a few standing far back, not likely to be recognized, even said loudly 'Shame!' 'Why can't you take your time?' The situation, so far as it went, was saved again. But we were not in the least misled by this kind of reaction. Just as easily the wrong word pronounced by one of us might have unchained demons.

Once that happened, once the first blows were exchanged, or the first drop of blood shed, K. could be gutted and blazing within a couple of hours. Not even fear of the Russians would quiet the crowd until its peculiar madness was over. If they thought of the Russians at all, it would only be to remember that the inconvenient witnesses must be silenced while there was still time.

It was increasingly difficult to pick up London on our set. But the terrific Moscow station is audible on anything. The Committee did not know how to use the set, so A. used it for them. Three times a day. The windows and doors of the living-room were set open each time and the crowd listened from outside. The Committee and the militia (they were really one; anybody who had arms was a member of both) came in-

doors. Within the Soviet there was an unmistakable class system. Those who were left outside were treated with contempt by their elected representatives. These gatherings round the wireless were fearfully trying. It was not easy always to appear indifferent. The smell, the crowding and the staring irritated nerves already overstrained for too long. Very few of the listeners had the least idea what was being said. Their Russian was almost a patois. But the grandiloquent sentences, the assurances that the 'invincible People's Army' was being met everywhere with acclamation, that class distinctions had been wiped out for ever, that heaven had really arrived on earth, and all the rest of the vague Moscow perorations (never any different in substance and never likely to be, since I first heard Moscow speak) impressed them enormously. They stood with their hands clasped on the butt-ends of their rifles, their eyes fixed in space, like children fascinated by a fairy-tale. Sometimes I even felt that they were moving and pitiful themselves. A few sat. None felt really happy sitting in Pani N.'s home, without her invitation, violating her privacy. Only their new principles demanded the gesture. Unwilling to sit down himself, each would pull forward a chair for the man next to him, bolder for another than for himself. When it was finished, A. would be asked to repeat it all once more to them. Only then did they really understand it. When we could get through, we turned on Rome and London for ourselves. It was seldom possible to pick up anything. Our guards listened resentfully to the unknown languages, and yet they were not quite ready to forbid our listening if we liked. Right up to the end they received the news of German victory with con-

sternation. They were as impatient as ourselves for the French to break the Siegfried Line. Over the fall of Warsaw and the entry of the German troops they groaned with anger and indignation. They complained against the United States for not coming immediately to the help of the three Allies. I cannot emphasize often enough how naïve, how, in fact, childlike, they really were. They could not see cause and effect at all. They could not see in Russia the ally of Germany, whom they detested. Only the almost supernatural means by which they were all to become wealthy landowners. In no sense, and at no time, were they in their hearts anti-Polish. But greed and their own credulity and ignorance, for which they can hardly be blamed, made them incapable of judgement. They did not wish for Poland's ruin. They only wished for a state of things in which, as they thought, their impossible dream could be realized. Nobody could explain to them, for they could not understand, that one thing fatally involved the other. When we destroyed the Polish flag which was always kept in the upstairs room and flown on national holidays, we were saving it from the Bolsheviks, not from the peasants. I was reminded of the day in Brzecz when I did the same thing with a Union Jack.

The waiting was so intolerable that we ourselves began to be impatient for the arrival of the Commissars. Each day was harder to bear. Our jokes were altogether too thin. A. and I began to avoid being alone together. Yet if he left me for a minute I dragged myself after him. Most of the time I was so weak that I could hardly sit up on a chair. A. was secretly desperate. At the best, we would have to begin our wanderings again. It was perfectly obvious that I could not keep up for long.

I can never re-tell our conversations. In the room we had, always warm, next to the kitchen, the walls were almost black with autumn flies. The flies stung our hands and faces as we lay on our backs, on our bed, talking. We were never anything but matter-of-fact. The newcomers kept on promising that there would be no oppression, no religious persecution. That everyone would be allowed to live on the produce of his own work. All classes would be levelled, but anyone who could work could eat.

Only we did not believe it for an instant. The mass of the Russians in their own country are destitute, terrified and enslaved. If the machine could not work properly at home, in a country whose natural resources should make it the richest in the world, it was not likely to work better in devastated and occupied Poland. That is, even with the best will in the world. But, in fact, there would be no good will. No Pole who was not a renegade could hope for anything better than starvation. The fate of whole populations would be deportation, a shorter or a longer agony, and a nameless death in prison or the mines. All this has happened just as we foresaw it. Every day during the long winter the railroads were choked with trains, carrying numberless hundreds of thousands of human beings. The cargo, when it arrived, as often as not, was frozen to the walls and floors of the uncovered trucks. In Kiev day after day, the stevedores, with picks, unloaded deliveries of corpses.

We looked forward and foresaw all that. A. had a kind of courage I have never had. It is peculiarly Polish. It not only never surrenders. Even I could manage that. But it is also a determination to survive, and to begin again, at all costs, and in all circumstances. Because

Poles have it, Poland has remained alive, and goes on living. In our conversations I could never look forward to better luck than the chance of dying together. If we could lie down somewhere, on the same roadside, when starvation and too great exposure overtook us, and just have that, I thought that we would have been lucky after all. I said so. But it was the least likely thing to happen. Both of us knew that I had infinitely less resistance than A. and he would never shorten his own sufferings. After twenty or thirty years even of Siberia, men have returned and served Poland. What they could endure, A. would endure. I knew him too well to dream otherwise.

But, equally certainly, until martyrdom became necessary, he was not the man to desire martyrdom. Lying on his back in that room, tormented by flies, rolling an empty cigarette-holder between his teeth for hours, he worked out another plan. When he said to me, 'I will take you to England yet, and myself to France to the army,' I cried out in protest. I could not bear any renewal of hope. It is easier when you hope for nothing. But what he said, he almost invariably accomplished. We followed his plan in the end to the letter. We left K. and went to Wilno and crossed the Lithuanian border in contraband, all as he had worked it out before he told me about it. He did get me to England, which was what he chiefly intended. He did not get to France himself.

On Sunday the agent returned from Pinsk and brought news with him. This, Sunday, was the 1st of October.

Chapter 20

THE COMMISSARS ARRIVE

The agent had seen the Commissars. A new quarrel was just beginning, affecting Polesie. Some townships wished to be governed directly from Moscow, others from Minsk. A secret society had begun to distribute handbills, demanding the extermination of 'the Polish lords'. Pinsk was without food. The shopkeepers had been ordered to open and keep open, but they had none of the necessities, bread, paraffin, leather, cloth, tobacco, or salt to sell. Money had no value. Nobody knew what coin would be current, zloty or rouble, and nobody had confidence in either. We were told that Pani N.'s cousin, S., had been murdered. Later we heard that it was his brother who was dead. The old ambassador died a few weeks later of exhaustion and grief. Another cousin, Prince J., had been taken to Russia as a hostage. The agent had met and spoken with him somewhere in the streets or along the route—I forget now exactly where. The agent's talk was all about relatives, neighbours, old friends. Pani N. heard it all without a quiver. For S. she had had a special tenderness. In the last Bolshevik invasion, she had visited him daily in prison; obtained for him permission to play cards, and walk in the air of a courtyard.

Afterwards she had nursed him through a long fever. Of her own daughter, the mother of Krzyztof, whose estates lay on the other side of Pinsk, the agent had no news. Two or three times during the journey he had been questioned and arrested by the militia. Each Russian official before whom he had been conducted had dismissed their zeal with impatience.

'Leave it, leave it. Look to your own business,' said the officials. 'This man is looking to his. Everything has its own time.'

This Russian policy continued almost until we left the country. First they established themselves securely, with the smallest loss of men and material possible. While they were doing this they tolerated the bourgeois and held the peasants and the town workers who belonged to the Party both short and tight. The last thing they wanted was the destruction of property or violent outbreaks of popular passion. For a few weeks they even seriously hoped to see a Polish majority come over peacefully to Communism. Once that illusion was over and their hands were free, they disarmed the militia, took the illusion of power away from the local committees, and settled down to the reign of darkness and terror that has since cut off Russian-occupied Poland even from the German-occupied half on the other side of the Bug. Their own troops live behind barbed-wire fortifications, forbidden to mingle with the conquered. The Russian frontier is as impenetrably closed as ever. This has been one of the severest disappointments of the Party leaders who laboured for the Party programme during twenty years. Like Moses, they have led the people, but have not been allowed to see the promised land. Total Russian night has swallowed them, just as

it has swallowed almost one hundred and eighty million human beings inside Russia itself. I have never really understood why their commanders allowed the Russian Army the few weeks of comparative liberty they had; then they moved freely about in the towns and villages, turned over the contents of shops (particularly in Wilno, which had hardly suffered bombardment at all), asked and answered hundreds of questions, and betrayed with every look, exclamation, and gesture their astonishment at what they saw. A little farther on, I shall have more to tell about this. About other expropriations and other peasant communities also. I have tried to make it clear, I want to emphasize, that K. and Polesie in general was particularly fertile soil for Russian propaganda. In other communities the peasants themselves opposed the expropriations.

The agent's return became known. The whole village hurried to the Great House. The women stood a little apart from the men. As it was Sunday they were all dressed in their best. Many of them had silk skirts and ornaments round their necks and on their arms. They did not know how well off they still were. The Polish peasants were poor. By western European standards, wretchedly so. The peasants of Polesie were among the poorest of all. But they were not nearly so poor as the Russians who had told them that they were living in slavery under a capitalist government. When the villages, convoked to mass councils, innocently turned up in these holiday clothes, the Russians were first stupefied and then furious. The wearers of embroidery were told that they were not workers, but bourgeois. Almost capitalists. All these things were confiscated at once. It is true that they were also much

better dressed than Pani N., who, even on Sundays, wore her turned dresses and her thick stockings and boots made in the village. She came out now on to the veranda and sat down on a stool. I remember that I sat beside her. The eternal basket of beans stood between us. Several hundred peasants clamoured together for the agent. Pani N. would not even turn her head towards them.

'I have finished with them,' she said. 'There was a crowd like this the day of my father's funeral. They carried him to L. on their shoulders to the burying ground, thirty kilometres or more. And look at them now. Each is afraid of the man standing next to him. Not one of them dares to take his hat off his head in my presence. They are children, not even bad children. But I am finished with them. I am too old. I will not change.'

The scene was more than extraordinary. As I watched it I remembered that the same scene has been acted and re-acted in these borderlands for hundreds of years. At every period of crisis, it is to the same natural pivot, contained within the Polish Great Houses, that the community has turned. Everything from the outer world has come this way. Victory and defeat, births and deaths, accessions and abdications, national heroes and tyrants, John of Vienna, Catherine of Russia, Napoleon, Bismarck; all have been announced, saluted or execrated from these wooden verandas. No wilder paradox could have been invented; Pani N. a prisoner, the 'nobles' accused and proscribed, K. confiscated and the community turned proprietor, and yet spiritually the same scene. Uncertain of everything in its heart, mistrustful of every source but one, the crowd which had us in its

power, and was soon to prove its power absolutely, had come there in obedience to their strongest instinct. From the Great House would come assurance and direction. The question 'did anyone of you ever know me to lie to you?' could not have been more astonishingly answered. That the individuals in the crowd were not aware of their own motives alters none of the significance. At least, they were enough aware of the need in their hearts, momentarily to forget their carbines, their brassards of authority, and all their present promotion. Even the militia let their arms slope from their hands, propping them against anything. I said to Pani N.:

'Look at them. Look at their faces. All this misery will pass. It is true that they are children. What is happening now is a nightmare. They will waken and throw it off. K. and the thing it stands for are immortal. I don't know how long it will take, or what will have to be borne first, but K. will be itself again.'

'I shall not see it,' she said. 'I am too old. I thought I should die here, and that the same men who carried my father on their shoulders when they were young, would carry me, too, now that we are all old.'

I could not say, 'If you do not see it, Krzyztof will.' We no longer believed that Krzyztof was alive. I could not say, 'If not Krzyztof, then his son.' The child had died in Warsaw, on the first day of the war. There was no other direct heir. Before such sorrow I had to be silent. Pani N. now deeply disturbed me. Her father's peaceful death, after Siberia and an old age of great personal and family trouble, would not leave her mind. I could only hold my tongue and sadly kiss her faded hand as it came up out of the basket with a handful of

those beans. I knew I was no use to her. I was too young by fifty years.

The agent was no good. Within two hours he had lost his influence again. Pani N. still refused to think seriously of leaving. A. now did all in his power to persuade her. The Committee were in the mood to let her take with her a stock of food for the winter and her strictly personal possessions. Her house in Pinsk still remained. She could have existed in a corner of it. The Commissars had said as much. At times she would agree but only from weariness. She may even have wished to go. The thing was, she *could* not. Like the trees in her park, she belonged there, and neither her roots nor theirs could leave the soil of their own accord. Only a force from outside could fell the trees or dislodge the child of the men who planted them. To end a discussion she would say: 'Very well. To-morrow we shall see. But I cannot go just yet. I must leave the book-keeping in order.'

For hours and hours each day she sat at this book-keeping. Her back never bent. She put the pen aside only when the arthritis in her fingers brought on a particularly violent cramp. When the cramp passed, she would go on again. At nightfall she complained of having no lamp to continue by. For the first time she complained of the agent, too. Up to now, in the face of the rest of us, she had always found excuses for his faults.

'I am the one to blame. I forgot that he came from small beginnings and I made too big a man of him. My grandson warned me, but I never listened. I am a very obstinate old woman. In good times the poor fellow served us all well. Both K., and the peasants. But in bad

times, to fall well from a high place you have to be used to height. We can hardly ask the poor fellow to be better than he was born.'

Now she was not so lenient. The book-keeping was in arrears. It was an obsession with her to finish it.

'Too much driving about the country,' she said more than once. 'Too fond of sport and company!' These were the severest things she said about him. On Tuesday he left us again. The Commissars were said to be as near now as K.W. He was supposed to be going for news and returning the same night. There was nothing to be done with him. He would go, and of course, he failed to return. I must hurry over the next few days. The image of Pani N. sitting before her books, calling in one unfaithful servant after another and steadily, day by day, over a period of six months, eighteen months, two years sometimes, going over his account, haunts me. The peasants had seldom taken their wages. What they preferred was to accumulate a sum over years, only taking off it such trifles as tobacco, an occasional length of cloth or hide for the moccasins they made themselves, until they wanted it for getting married, buying a horse or building a new cabin. This closing interview made each of them uneasy. Many attempted to speak and could not. Only one or two betrayed a sense of triumph. Pani N. would neither show nor acknowledge any emotion. All her life she had worked harder than any of them. She had not ever thought even of a bank account of her own. Only the estate account. Everything taken from the land went back into the land. The forest paid the crushing taxes and gave her the fire she sat by; nothing more. No life could have been more useful, more laborious, or more democratic. But to

endure this last blow she had to stiffen. Even for Nikifor, the gentle swineherd, who wept as he took his money and openly said that God would send His curse upon such crimes, she never unbent again. I think, too, that everything except K. itself had begun to lose its personality for her. All of us, even A., whom she loved, moved a long way out of focus. She would have seen us all go and hardly remarked it. We ceased to suggest her own going. We understood that it was an impertinence.

'But in the end she will be driven out,' said A. 'She fancies that they will shoot her. Or that they will let her exist in a corner here, instead of going to Pinsk. That some of the older people would let her have at least potatoes. But, unless they do shoot her, what will happen now is that they will turn her out with nothing. She should have gone while there was time.'

'To what?' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. To the same thing, only a little delayed. His own mind was more and more set on reaching Wilno and attempting the frontier. But I find I cannot write about that, either. Nor about the schoolmaster, whom I have sworn to find again, if we both live and even though it should take me twenty years; and whose story ought to have been in this book. Nor about Pani N.'s cousin, who had come with the gardener from Pinsk, and who in saving the miniatures and the treasures of Krzyztof from the Germans, and bringing them here, had in fact made a present of them to the Bolsheviks. That she had also brought the estate map was an even more serious chagrin. We were now too closely under surveillance to attempt to conceal it anywhere. A few weeks before we might have found

an iron box and buried it. It was tremendously bulky and stout. It now had to lie as she had brought it, flat on the bottom of a wooden chest. So far, no search had been made for it. In the future, so long as the map existed, at least the demesne and the forest could be reconstituted. Because they still accepted their obligations to the future. It would not be theirs. They had no future; but so long as there was breath in their bodies they would not cease to make the effort or abdicate the handing on of what they had received.

These were the last days at K. We ate sometimes, slept, too. Feared to look at each other. Died by inches. Our separation really began on the first day of September. There were more than two months still ahead of us before we were allowed the *coup de grâce*. That we stayed together so long was a savage multiplication of suffering. There was not a moment of all that time in which the parting was not being repeated. We must have been taken from each other a hundred thousand times, instead of once. In this book I have never wanted to write of personal anguish. If I am doing it now, it is only to illustrate as clearly as I possibly can the book's title. What we suffered, millions suffered and are still suffering. The frightful bereavements of the war are nothing beside the bereavements of the Occupations. What A. and I endured for months, others are enduring still. I suppose there is not a family left in Poland whose surviving members are together; the few who are must fear every instant, as A. and I did, even to look into each other's faces, in anticipation of what else is to come. I know that when A. and I did finally lose each other, there was relief in it for both of us. Both felt: that agony is finished. Now, anything may happen. Nothing

will ever be worse. They cannot make us suffer any more: to have reached that, is to have lived through more than the individual's share of human suffering. What is to be the sum of the suffering of millions, in whose name I have, most humbly, written down everything that is here?

On the sixth, a Friday, there were rumours all the early morning and at about eleven o'clock a mass meeting outside the schoolhouse. We learned that the Commissars had at last arrived. The schoolmaster and the housekeeper went to see and hear them. The rest of us sat on round the table. Pani N. found me an old scarf to darn. The cousin continued to run a coarse ticking for a straw mattress. Pani N. counted on her little Chinese frame and made additions and subtractions and wrote them down in her books as calmly as she had been doing all the week. A. sat down beside me and said *dobrze*? all right? He began to re-read one of the novels. The meeting lasted less than an hour. After it the Commissars in a car, the president of the Committee, on the running-board, and the rest of three villages, on foot, arrived and entered the house. The Commissars were young. There were only three of them. Their uniform was of good quality, with the red Soviet star on the collarband. Their revolvers hung more than half-way down between their thighs and their knees, exactly within arm's reach. Their faces are harder to describe. I had seen brutality and sadism, but not yet quite what I saw in these faces. They looked so old in cruelty that even cruelty could no longer give them satisfaction. Later, I saw this look so often that I almost ceased to notice it. None of the three was of anything like pure Slav origin. On the contrary, like

the majority of G.P.U. agents, they were strongly Mongolian or Kalmuck. Their epithet in Poland was 'the Chinamen'. Their methods are probably Chinese. The accounts long current of their hypnotic power over prisoners and the moral effect of their cross-examinations were confirmed to me over and over again.

To a certain extent, I have even personal evidence of both, but not enough to make me an absolutely first-hand witness. The farthest I can go as a witness is to state my own conviction that these accounts are true. The Commissars did not care at all how the peasants dealt with their own problems. The peasants were told that they were a Soviet and must find their own way of settling disputes and of dealing with the Great House. The work was to be continued, but it was to be co-operative, and there were to be heavy penalties for any thefts or private profits. The Great House itself, however, was turned over to the peasants by the Commissars, who suggested that it should be used as a workmen's club.

Before they left, the Commissars gave one further order. Pani N., her cousin, and ourselves were to be out of the house in two hours.

When they left, we were ordered out of the house by the militia and locked up in one of the larders. The Soviet took final possession of everything. There was a solemn Committee meeting in the living-room. The peasants sat in our places round the table. As usual, they quarrelled bitterly. We could hear their furious voices and violent entrances and exits. The housekeeper and Antek, the house-boy, were also shut up with us. Antek, who was motherless, had lived in the Great House since he had been two years old. Pani N. had

first come on him asleep in a box of potato peelings in the kitchen. Ever since he had had shoes to wear, he ate, as often as not, from the same dish as Pani N., standing behind her chair, lorded it over the house-servants, who detested him, and despised the village. He was, I think, thoroughly detestable. Even Pani N. said so, but she was never angry with him for long. His age was now about thirteen, and he was extremely handsome and lively. His father was the president of the Committee. The fall of the Great House had not brought him down with it. On the contrary he had in a sense gone up. He looked forward to a future as full of privileges as his past had been. Few people can ever have been as well served by both worlds. Pani N. was so used to his presence that even in these last few weeks she had never stopped, before saying anything, to consider whether he was in the room or not.

'A spy? Of course he is spying,' she said occasionally. 'Much good may it do him. What should any of us be trying to conceal by now?'

A. regarded him with equal indifference. Until this morning when Pani N. had been cold and he had refused to bring any wood. Then he had boxed his ears for him, and the wood had been brought.

'What is it you think you are?' asked A. 'Do you suppose your father is founding a dynasty?'

This being locked in with ourselves upset him now tremendously. The new world which had turned his father into a president might not be going to work out so well after all. Pani N.'s favour had perhaps been a better thing to count on than the favour of three or four hundred people at once, all theoretically equal and all necessary to the election of a president. Although he

had never dreamt of being sorry for his mistress, he was quite desperately sorry for himself.

We were all sufficiently bad-tempered. Pani N. sat staring straight in front of her. There was a wooden bed in the room, but although she admitted that her head ached we could not induce her to lie down on it. The window had iron bars ending in spikes at the top, but by putting a hand through it was possible to open a square of glass and let the air in. She kept on demanding fresh air, even when this square was open.

The air was, in fact, both fresh and chilly. The room we were in never caught the sun all day. Its walls were always cold. My own head ached, too, more than usual, but precisely from the cold. I had left off my bandages and forgotten to pick up a shawl. It was obvious that Pani N. had a fever. She had no coat, but she had brought a pair of walking boots. Now she tried to put them on and found she could not stoop to lace them. When I began to do it for her, Antek was thoroughly jealous.

'Nobody can put on her boots for her as well as I can. Have I not always put on your boots for you, Pani Dziedziczka?' He knelt and laced them quickly and neatly. It was true that nobody else did it as well. This is the sort of absurdity which occurred scores of times in the most tragic circumstances. 'La Comédie humaine,' said the cousin, smiling. Antek had never heard of that.

He had no idea, either, of how funny his conversation was. Pani N. had lately given him a cake of perfumed soap, a length of stout calico, and the pictures off some old calendars. The old trunk he had stored them in had no lock and somebody had stolen the soap and the pictures.

'But they were mine,' he kept repeating indignantly. 'My *property*.' He expected Pani N.'s sympathy. His moral indignation was entirely genuine. When I said, 'Oh, shut up, Antek. We're all sick to death of you,' he turned his back on us and sulked.

When he was tired of sulking he told us two pieces of further news. One was that the Commissars when visiting the upstairs room had swept a lot of little silver-topped bottles off a shelf (Krzyztof must have left them there sometime) into their pockets. They had also carried off a pile of stockings and handkerchiefs. The peasants, who, for their part, had been warned that not so much as a straw must be missing from the inventory, were seething with anger. The second piece of news was that the unlucky agent had chosen for another return the hour of the Commissars' visit. His enemies in the village had denounced him for so many comings and goings. He was certainly a spy, they said. Long ago he had proved himself an enemy to the people.

He was now locked up, like ourselves, but alone. One of the objects of the meeting now going on was to decide what was to be done with him. Antek was of the opinion that this time it would really end in their shooting him.

So were we.

Chapter 21

THE GREAT HOUSE CHANGES HANDS

About three hours later the guard was taken off. We were told that we might come out.

Where we were to go, once out, was more difficult. The Commissars themselves had ordered our expulsion. Within two hours. Exactly as we stood. This time limit had already been passed several times over. It was night.

Pani N. now knew that she must leave K. Up to the last moment she had hoped for the end, somehow, to come there. She had, for instance, deliberately attempted to provoke the Commissars.

The president said awkwardly:

'Somewhere in the village can be found for you. Perhaps in the morning, I shall be able to get you horses.' He meant, her own horses. They now belonged neither to her nor to anybody. Only to the community. Three or four hundred people would have to agree to it. Each already regarded all the others with suspicion, resentment, and fear. Nothing would be easy to arrange.

Pani N.'s physical endurance began to weaken. The president said:

'Take her to her own room. Let it be on my head. They all hate me already. In a few days I shall be got

rid of, anyhow. I never did a worse day's work for myself than the day I let a rabble elect me.'

It was true. If they feared and suspected each other, the whole four hundred together were envious and suspicious of the nine or ten in power and of the president most of all.

The old Dziedziczka lay on her bed. For the first time she broke down. I would have preferred to see her dead.

'I should have gone when your husband wanted me to,' she said. 'I never believed they would really do it. Go now and ask that man, that Antek's father, for me. Ask him to leave me here another night.'

I was to ask him. Her back was bent at last. I could not decide to do it. She muttered, catching hold of my hand:

'Anything. So long as I have not to drag about in their village till morning! I shall not mind the ditch to-morrow. Only, to be out of their sight.'

That was what the Commissars had said, when we asked what they would do with her.

'Nothing. What should we do? An old woman, not worth a bullet. Let them take her six kilometres and leave her in a ditch. If she gets out of it, let her walk to Pinsk.'

The president agreed that she should stay. There was not a single remedy of any kind left in the house. Her amazing will actually asserted itself again and sent her temperature down. At about nine o'clock we were given some food. The agent had been given nothing. None of us was allowed to see him. Antek reported that he was still there. An interrogation was going on.

The schoolmaster had never been treated as a

prisoner. The Commissars had said that, for the time being, he should continue to open the school. The only change was to be that the teaching of history and religion was forbidden. The schoolmaster had refused these conditions. He now intended, if possible, to make his way back into the German occupation. His family were Mazovian peasants. Perhaps he would find some of them still alive. The village, he thought, would let him go safely, although they were very angry that he was refusing to stay with them. He had two coats. One, of thick sheepskins, he gave to A., who had nothing. When we had come to K. we had thought him rather a poor fellow. He was timid and, we thought, easily influenced. His constitution was tubercular and he did not seem to have any stamina. In adversity, we found that he was a hero. It was his persistence that now succeeded in getting some food and a glass of tea for the agent. Antek was allowed to carry it across. But nobody could succeed in getting permission for a word with him. Antek and another man who secretly kept in communication with us reported that there was a strong division among the peasants as to his ultimate fate. The majority were afraid of bloodshed. Not only because, once it began, you never could tell where it would stop; but also because they were afraid of Russian reprisals. A whole village had already been burnt out because some of its violent spirits had taken questions of life and death into their own hands. The agent's private enemies, who were four and who, in fact, terrorized the whole community, were determined on having his skin anyhow and risking what happened after that. A third party, influenced by the president, were for compromising between both the others. Their idea was to send

him to Pinsk to a Russian court-martial with a strong recommendation for his execution, and, once he had been escorted far enough to put him out of the reach of local passion, to lose him on the way. What did finally happen, we never had any certain knowledge, because we did not see it with our own eyes. But the evidence is that he was shot that night. There was a light until about two o'clock in his prison. The interrogation, which can only have been a series of insults and probably torture (the peasants could not have conducted even the semblance of a judicial proceeding), went on until then. After that, the lights were extinguished everywhere and everybody went away, even the regular guard from the estate office converted into a gendarmerie. At about half-past three there were five rifle shots not far from the house, and a quarter of an hour afterwards a whole salvo, again from rifles. Almost simultaneously, two revolver shots put an end to the firing. It was almost like seeing the thing happen, it was all so obvious. They had taken him to the edge of the forest, possibly at first for the sport of it. Unfortunately they already knew that he was a coward. The other man's fear is an irresistible excitant once bloodletting is in the air. In the forest, he had been tied to a tree or perhaps ordered to run. The first shots had been for amusement. Possibly the second round also. But somebody had lost his head and fired in earnest. The revolver shots had been necessary to finish the victim off and end the scene. We could not help reconstructing all this for ourselves. It was whispered to us beneath the window before it was light. More convincing than all that, though, were the looks and bearing of our guard when they woke us. Horses had been got for us. Our

rucksacks were given back. We took away a strip of blanket apiece and nothing was said. They did not even examine our rucksacks, or, if they did, they made no objection to our having hidden in them about half a stone each of sugar and salt and a great piece of smoked lard. The schoolmaster was allowed to bring us two pounds of black bread from a cabin where the housewife had just baked. A woman, the wife of a Polish sergeant who had been killed defending the frontier, and her two children, who had remained behind the flood of refugees and been lodged in a corner of the bakery, were hurried away in our company. They could not get rid of us fast enough. They were furtive, instead of arrogant. Sullen with each other and curiously on the defensive with us.

The president was green. We demanded either to remain or to have Pani N. leave at the same time. Nothing was of any use. We were obliged to abandon her. The schoolmaster was still there, still free. We wondered how long that would last. The president swore to us that he would get her away safely, in his own time. It is true that the peasants had absolutely no ill-feeling against her. They had once even loved and been proud of the Old One, as they often called her, but affection, in the balance against cupidity, of course had had no chance. It still seemed unlikely that they would harm her physically. That is, they would send her to die of exhaustion and slow starvation, but they would not murder her as they had, almost certainly, murdered the agent. I believe they never realized at all the extent of what they were doing. Somehow, somewhere, the gentry always have houses and gold. In Pinsk, or elsewhere, some miracle proper to the gentry would continue to

provide for the Dziedziczka. It was out of K. that they intended to drive her, because K. was the land; the thought of land made them drunker than barrels of the strongest vodka could have done. The passion for land is a permanent intoxication, unlike the intoxication of spirits. It comes into the world with a man and never leaves him again. Not even when he leaves the world himself, because then he carries it back with him into the soil.

At about seven o'clock in the morning we said farewell to her. No sign of the weakness of last night's fever appeared in her face. She stood on the veranda like the Rock of Ages, her short white hair blowing back from her face. Half of the estate map was wrapped round her body, underneath all her clothes. The cousin had done the same thing with the other half. She still doubted, she said, that the clothes they were wearing would actually be stripped off their backs. Everything else she had abandoned. When she left her room, she had called Antek and given him a few old letters.

'Destroy these. They might harm you now. These are the letters you wrote me when I was away in Pinsk and first had you sent to school. I have kept them too long as it is. You can take them away.'

I cannot guess the secret of her fondness for Antek. I do not believe what the village said, that he was in reality Krzyztof's son and not the son of the peasant who acknowledged him. There was not a drop of good blood in the little monster, nor a feature of the family in his face. But Pani N. had been old and lonely and stubborn. Her own child never came near her. Behind her stern exterior she was tender and indulgent to a fault. Antek, with his beauty and gaiety, had crept into her heart.

This was the last act I saw her perform. As he took the letters the boy's face crimsoned. He hesitated. I remember that I picked them up and looked over them. Antek knew I was his enemy and I never pretended I was not. They were full of childish gratitude, impatience for her return, naïve glory at his own progress, and protestations of attachment and respect. Each ended with a phrase difficult to translate out of Polish. Roughly, Antek-ever-given-to-the-service-and-love-of-K.-and-of Pani-Dziedziczka.

'Take them, animal,' I said. 'Take her last present. And I hope every crumb of bread you eat from this day till your last will turn as sour in your mouth as the words you wrote when you got your bread from her.'

He said that he would tell his father. That I had no right to abuse him. He had done nothing wrong. But he would have liked to refuse the letters, if he had had the pluck. He did half push them back across the table, then pounced on them again and ran with them to the stove. When they were burnt, he crept back to Pani N. on the far side of me, and bending down shamefacedly kissed her sleeve. She did not look at him. On the veranda, A. knelt down to leave his kisses on her hands. Our guards looked on. They shrugged their shoulders, but they did not interfere. The sergeant's wife did the same thing, and so did I.

While we were dressing, the president had given us a paper, written in Russian, signed by himself. It set out that we had been at K. between such and such dates in the character of refugees. It was really a safe-conduct for us at least out of the district. One was not supposed to move at all without a permit. A. had all but been shot as a spy during the Commissars' visit, as it was. One of

the neighbouring villages harboured a young man who had himself been a paid spy of the Polish Government and had several times crossed and returned over the Russian frontier during that career. The best means he could invent of distracting attention from himself was to denounce somebody else and so he had denounced A., particularly alleging the crimes of listening in to foreign stations and of repeatedly asserting that the Polish Government and the Polish Army would return. Nothing infuriated the Russian officials so much as this assertion. An inquiry had been made, not only about A. but about 'the arrogant foreign woman described as his wife'. The president's paper gave us cover. His colleagues knew nothing of it. We promised not to produce it until we had left K. If it was a safe-conduct for us, it was also an insurance policy for himself. We were not simple enough to take all he had done for unadulterated good feeling. That there was also good feeling in it somewhere, is true, nevertheless. He said:

'Do not forget me. When the old order returns here, remember that I did this for you.'

In his heart, he had given up the Russian Paradise. 'At the most,' he said, 'we have three years. I am an honest man, although you treat me now as though I was no better than a bandit. I shall be one of the first to be pulled down by my own. After that, if I am still alive, when the Polish Army returns, I am a marked man for them, too. It was I who led the village.'

Very curiously, I still have the paper. There are plenty of others I should have preferred to keep. If I am there, it may save his neck for him some day. I would a little rather save his neck than not. He was not really a bigger scoundrel than many who will come out

of it all better. He knew that we had long memories. One of the last things I heard the Polish radio say was: Remember, all of you who are listening. Learn off by heart names and places and evidence. If necessary, remember for years.

I am glad to be able to remember the name of one man whose instinct was towards mercy, even if he was an old fox, a liar, and a great deal too given to his propensity for changing his coat.

After we left the track an attempt was made to isolate A. from the rest of us, but it did not succeed. At about midday we got on a train. The train took us south into Volynie and then north again. All along the way we saw the same scenes repeated; the same movement of refugees. The Russians were allowing the trains to take passengers for a few days longer. Those who wished to return to the German Occupation could do so now, or never. The line of demarcation had at last been agreed upon. A Red officer in the train somewhere lent us a Russian newspaper and there was a map in it of the new Polish Partition. P.K.P. men were still driving and conducting the trains. Among the refugees the most noticeable groups were the expropriated landowners. They were recognizable whatever they wore and no matter what plight they were in. After going very far south we began to go north again and changed to another train after a long wait on the station at Sarny. The Red soldiers left the civilians alone on the whole. This train stood for hours in the night on some siding. The sergeant's wife had brought her bicycle to K. with her and was now bringing it back home. One of the little girls was ill, but there was nothing we could do for her. The window glass was broken. A. and I dozed

against each other, half stupefied by the cold, although it was only October. During these hours a man of about forty and a tall boy who looked about twenty got into our compartment. Both were famished and dressed in the most wretched clothes. At first we did not talk. Talking was dangerous. But we lent them our blankets and gave them some cold tea from our bottle. It was good tea, from K., with a fruit juice in it that helped against the dysentery that was the first misery of the refugees. But instinct easily recognizes its like. Very soon we were friends. The friendship begun that night lasted through innumerable adventures right up to the day we left for England. These two and two other men, comrades of theirs, were the last Poles to hold me in their arms before I left for Lithuania. We meant to meet again. To do tremendous things together. They were dearer to me than brothers. But they are lost with the rest. Dearest Rudy, Wladek, Zbyszek, and Papcio, we did what we could for each other, but we were all doomed from the beginning. Do not come any more at night, to stand beside my bed and reproach me with your haggard faces. A few inches of candle from my pocket gave us a light to see these two by. We stuck it in its own grease on the saddle of the bicycle. The boy turned out to be less than sixteen. His father had had his throat cut in a cellar on the first day of the Gestapo's taking over in Danzig. The boy had been incredibly manhandled. After escaping he had walked all across Poland. For ten days he had had nothing in his belly except green tomatoes and a little water. His one aim was to cross a neutral frontier and get to the army in France. The man was an employee of a Warsaw insurance firm, on the Reserve. He had left Warsaw in

obedience to the early order that men of military age were to leave the capital. He had fought on the same fronts as A., when they were both young. I have never known a human being so modest, so courageous, and so Christian. In appearance he was insignificant. He was literally incapable of regarding anything as his own. The boy, Rudy, had been picked up by him somewhere along the route. The story of their route, apart and together, would fill a volume. Their two comrades, also chance meetings, young tank officers of twenty and twenty-two, had been taken by G.P.U. the day before. They did not expect to see them again. We exchanged names, but the soldiers' affectionate nickname of Papcio (Little Papa) stuck to C. and suited him to the letter. Before the candle burnt out we chewed a little lard together. The sergeant's wife and her children left us in the early morning, getting down from the train a few kilometres from their home, if it still existed. Papcio and Rudy left us just before Slonim, where they hoped for twenty-four hours' rest. We agreed, if we could, to meet again in Wilno. We ourselves had nobody there and no plan of where to go, but there were always ways of sending and leaving messages. If we all got there, we were sure to meet. On the station at Slonim a face was pressed to the window and there were stifled exclamations of joy. This was Wladek, whom, with Zbyszek, they had given up. We did not meet him then; only dimly saw the meeting happen on the platform. After Slonim, Baranowicze, and, through Lida, over Niemen and into Wilno.

The conditions of the journey (it can only have lasted about forty-eight hours and seemed like weeks) were naturally utterly wretched. Although the wagons were

not locked, as they were later, and sealed, the result was much the same. The crowding made it impossible for anybody to move under any circumstances. There were a great many Polish soldiers on the train, disarmed and sent home, many of them starving and wounded. They were so consumed with fury and grief that they did not care what they did. I listened to one of them try, by every provocative word in his vocabulary, to insult the Red officer who had lent round the map. The officer understood Polish perfectly. He must have, because he spoke it. I have seldom seen a more profoundly melancholy face than his. He stood for hours, when, after all, a few people were sitting. He might have taken one of the places for himself. Unlike the G.P.U. men, his features were pure Slav; even half Polish. Almost certainly he came from somewhere along the borders, where Russian and Polish blood is mixed. It would have been hard to say what he was thinking. It is unlikely that there was any romantic pity in his mind. But he refused to be drawn into the quarrel the Pole was dying for. It need not even have been a quarrel. One revolver shot would have done. His melancholy glance wandered several times to the face of a sleeping woman with two children lying in a feverish sleep of their own across her knees. I do not suppose he had romantic thoughts about helpless women and children, either. But when the flies buzzed about the children too much, he mechanically put out a hand and brushed them away.

Chapter 22

WILNO

We arrived in Wilno on the evening of the 8th. There we were only about eighteen miles from the Polish-Lithuanian frontier. Anyone succeeding in crossing this frontier might get to the Allied and neutral consulates in Kovno. From Kovno the way to France lay either through Latvia from the port of Riga or still farther north through Estonia and the port of Revel.

One thing had been certain.

From the moment Poland lost her independence, three other states must immediately lose theirs.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the so-called 'Baltic States', fell when Poland fell. Their defeat was not a degree less crushing. The only difference was that they accepted it without firing one shot. They were even proud of their good management. Army officers of these three countries, as the Russian garrisons took over their own ports and defences, derided the defenders of Westerplatte, of Warsaw, of Hel. In their eyes only madmen did such things. *Polski honor* (the honour of the Poles) was quoted ironically. Somewhere in every conversation a Pole was sure to have that expression flung at his head.

'He wanted Danzig,' repeated a Lithuanian soldier to me in genuine stupefaction. 'Why did you not give it to Him? When He asked for Memel in March, we gave it. Why cannot you Poles be satisfied to behave like other people?'

As he said this, he had just finished adjusting his uniform. The Lithuanian uniform is extremely impressive, and he was proud of its effect. He was now cleaning his rifle. His revolver lay on the table between us.

'But what', I asked 'are those for? As fancy dress they are very expensive. And if, instead of asking, an enemy invaded your country? Would you fight then?'

'If we thought we should be defeated, certainly not. You Poles must have known it. It is all pride with you. *Polski honor!* A man does not need *honor*. What he needs is bread and a warm coat.'

'And you have both,' I said, 'and the Poles have neither. Each has what he prefers, so we need not argue any more. The material in your coat is excellent, and so long as the buttons and the epaulettes cause you no discomfort, I hope you may live to wear it a long time.'

He was a kind-hearted man. All the food we had eaten during three days had come from him. For more than a week he slept on a cold floor so that I and another woman, another Polish officer's wife, might sleep in his bed. He had, in fact, almost all the virtues except a little courage and any kind of foresight. For lack of those two virtues, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania walked into slavery and then congratulated themselves on it. Sovietization, if things continue as they are, can only be a question of time for them. No countries less desire such a régime. In it lies the ruin of everything they claim to value; the well-being of materialism. To

safeguard that, they accepted ignominy. If they had only known it, in seizing the safeguard, they gave away the thing they meant to guard.

Estonia fell the first. Latvia was the next. Finally, by the beginning of October, it was the turn of Lithuania. In the course of talks in Moscow, it was made clear to the Lithuanian Foreign Minister that the occupation of the Polish-Lithuanian frontier and the garrisoning of Wilno had been carried out not only for the subjection of Poland. The Red Army now stood within a day's march of the Lithuanian capital. Effectively, whether she consented or not, her occupation was as good as begun. In return for complaisance, she might, however, have Wilno, and the district of Wilno. The Russians were anxious, for some time longer, to avoid open aggression in the eyes of the world. Except against Poland, of course. As for Wilno, they did not want it once they themselves had deported as much of its population as they had use for, emptied its banks, and looted its public and private buildings. The Lithuanian people were assured by their broadcasting stations, their Press, and their statesmen that the desire of their hearts had been granted to them. In their joy, the people lost sight of what it would cost them. It is inconceivable that the statesmen did, but the promise of Wilno turned their heads. In the first days of catastrophe the Polish refugees and the Polish units attempting to escape and reform in France had met with great kindness over the frontier. Forced by their declared neutrality to intern all captured troops and their officers, the Lithuanians did everything to make internment tolerable. It is not giving away any secret to admit that by turning a blind eye wherever they at all could, they gave the first contingents of Poles

every opportunity of getting through. These generous sentiments gave way now before an ignoble sense of triumph. Lithuanians allowed themselves to rejoice at seeing, as they said, the Polish pride corrected. The Polish Legation in Kovno was forced to close. Refugees were no longer received, even into camps, but driven back again across the frontier, which remained occupied by Russian troops until the 27th of October. German and Russian pressure obtained drastic severity in the internment camps. Police visits and perquisitions harried private families who had begun by opening their homes and hearts to the refugees.

Anti-Polish propaganda was disseminated by every possible means; even from pulpits. It is only fair to say that plenty of people, while publicly blaming the Poles and the late Polish Government for everything imaginable, privately continued to show kindness and hospitality whenever they dared. But a new gulf of misery opened beneath the feet of a people already savagely tormented by two invaders.

That misery increases as time passes. I shall be criticized by friends as well as enemies for saying so, but I do say it. Lithuania's guilt is greater than the guilt even of the first two. It is more than six centuries since the Polish and Lithuanian nations voluntarily united their history, their interests, and their blood. Only the will of the enemies of both ever disunited them again. The act by which Lithuania, after the last war, became an independent republic, was an act directly inspired by Germany, whatever it has been made to appear. In recognizing the Fifth Partition, in seizing and occupying Wilno, the Lithuanian republic betrayed not only an heroic and helpless neighbour. She betrayed her own

brothers and cousins. She betrayed such men as Adam Mickiewicz and Josef Pilsudski, both Poles who to the last day of their lives cherished above everything the Lithuanian soil from which they and so many other Polish patriots were born.

When we arrived in Wilno, of course, a lot of this had not yet happened, and most of what had was not known. Even about Estonia and Latvia there was the greatest uncertainty. No news that did reach Poland then could be considered either complete or reliable. The first hint of it was given us in the Latvian Legation, still open. We went there to ask whether, *should* we succeed in leaving Poland, we were likely to receive a Latvian transit *visa*. The Minister was extremely amiable. Neither he nor we made any allusion to the means by which the actual leaving was to be done. Each of us knew that, if at all, it would have to be by what is called crossing the Green Frontier. That is, by slipping through the patrols somewhere in open country and risking a hail of bullets on the spot. To call it a risk was in fact to employ words wrongly. With twelve thousand Red soldiers, it was reckoned, occupying a frontier of not many kilometres, it was a lot more like a certainty. Still we had the notion of trying it. The Polish-Lithuanian frontier cut villages and holdings in two all along its length. On one side of it you would find a farmhouse and on the other side the farm buildings and the well. The farmer had to cross into another country to till his own fields or water his stock. It could not be otherwise. To draw a Polish-Lithuanian frontier at all was such an irrational undertaking that it could produce only absurdities. The Lithuanians holding land in Poland and the Poles doing the same in Lithuania, within a certain

territorial limit, were allowed backwards and forwards by presenting their permits to the frontier guards. Naturally, there was a great deal of latitude within the limit. A familiar-looking figure taking a familiar path would not often be challenged. Naturally, too, there was tremendous business done in contraband; another reason for the guards to avoid too searching examinations. The frontier had no depth; there was not an inch of neutral zone. Much of the line was thickly wooded. For twenty years, crossing the Green Frontier had been child's play even for a complete stranger, if he had made himself friends in one of the villages and had plenty of aplomb. It should not be altogether impossible now, even under the nose of twelve thousand Bolsheviks. It was at least as attractive a chance as remaining where we were. Once across, we had some cards to play. Among others, we still had our passports, of the kind called consular, given in Paris in 1937, and valid until October 1940. Our official domicile had never been Poland, but France. The Minister agreed. Our passports were very satisfactory. But why did we not go to see his Lithuanian colleague at the Hotel George? He said this in a very significant way, with a little nod of his head and a discreet look. We set out for the George.

'The Lithuanians are up to something,' said A. 'The colleague, by all means.' We walked miles. The streets teemed like anthills with refugees and Russian soldiers. Until midday the sun was still hot. Also, we walked with everything we possessed, afraid to leave even a rag for a moment. A. was still limping from the crash of the bryczka. I noticed here even more than at K. how much he had aged in five weeks. His hair got greyer daily. There was no way of concealing my own lame-

ness from him. I had no real boots, only high rubber snow-boots, and nothing inside them. I do not know when I had last taken them off. The pain they caused me was endless. On pavements, being jostled against at each step, I made agonized progress. A. smiled his beautiful stern smile at me, from time to time. '*Dobrze?*' I said, '*Dobrze.*' If I ever had a wish, all through the time together, it was that A. could have been mobilized at once and been spared all that. With all my heart I wished him the happy death on the field of battle that the Polish litany prays for. From beginning to end, nothing but the hardest choice ever came his way. If I had known the end then, and what more he was to suffer through me, I suppose I would still have gone on walking, still said, '*Dobrze,*' but I am not sure. Anyhow, we did not know. In the hotel, we saw the secretary. The Minister was not there. The secretary was a young woman. Her air was at once condescending and important. She also, quite sincerely, did mean to be kind. Officially she had no instructions and no news whatever. She paused, and added that the situation was extraordinary. That another tremendous change was likely to happen in a day or two. That, in short, Wilno and the Wilno district seemed certain to come under Lithuanian protection, if Russo-Lithuanian talks continued to be satisfactory. If the bargain were really made, instead of our having to get into Lithuania (like our first friend, she ignored, and at the same time, perfectly understood our notions for getting there), Lithuania would come to us. The Bolshevik occupation in which we now found ourselves, instead of having to be somehow left, would itself leave us. The Lithuanians, she said, once in power in Wilno, would certainly be

distinguished by their broadmindedness and the help they would extend to the unfortunate Poles. We limped out of the Consulate.

'So that', said A., 'is what the sons of bitches are up to. A very charming young lady. I should like to slap her behind.

'All the same,' he added, 'we shall undoubtedly follow her suggestions.'

The first thing to do was to find some kind of refuge. To describe how we found it would take a whole chapter. A Hungarian woman married to a Pole, and her two children, occupied a basement room in the flat of a small Jewish shopkeeper. Her own home had been in the quarter of Wilno that had been bombarded. Her husband, to whom the Jew had obligations, brought his family here, before leaving with his company. A spy had brought her news that he was in an internment camp. Through her, a second room was found for us in the same basement. We were to pay for it with salt or sugar, in which we were rich. The room was, in fact, so icy cold and so infested by cockroaches that we lived almost altogether with Ketty and the children in theirs, which was a little better. Ketty had never either seen or heard of us before, but we lived like one family. I still think of her whenever I have soup. I can buy now for eightpence a tin of soup that, diluted, would have lasted the five of us for three days. The plateful she gave me in the first five minutes of our acquaintance must have been wretched stuff. I remember I thought it heavenly. What I cannot buy is that glow again, and A.'s joy in seeing me fed. Neither of us was actually starving, but exhaustion would not let me digest the raw smoky fat we had been living on. I had vomited it so often that for

the last twenty-four hours the first taste of it had brought the vomiting on before I could even try to swallow. To Ketty, almost more than to any of the others, I promised that this book should be written. I wish there were more about them in it, and less about myself. Our room contained absolutely nothing except an iron bed with no mattress. A. rolled up his sheepskins for a pillow, and Ketty lent us feather quilts. After the ruin we had seen, Wilno appeared to us almost untouched by the war. The houses still stood. The townspeople had their own clothes, bedding, furniture and stores. Ketty had white flour and melted lard and whole rows of jams and jelly. A. and she rose at five in the morning and stood in the bread queues till eight. The Russians allowed the town a little black flour daily, after the troops had had all they wanted. They took turns at carrying coal in one of our rucksacks from the cellar of Ketty's old house three or four kilometres away. When we had a fire in the stove, life seemed even luxurious. After my soup, I slept and then remained in bed with recurring spells of fever and a sudden attack of pleurisy. I remember Ketty procuring from somewhere half a cupful of milk and giving it to me mixed with honey somebody else had brought; the first and last time we saw milk in Wilno. A. and she made soup from flour and fat. The children never went seriously hungry, not at that stage. Flour pastes were filling. Ketty went out every day to look for potatoes. Sometimes a peasant would bring them into the town and barter them against clothing or salt. The children lived chiefly on pastes and black bread. Neither of the basement rooms had any kind of arrangement for cooking, but the house-porter still had some fuel and when there was a fire he would always make room for a sauce-

pan that A. or Ketty would carry across the yard. The Jewish proprietor did the same thing. He had a stationery shop on the level of the street and did business with the Russians.

As a class, the Jews went over wholesale to the Bolsheviks. In Wilno and elsewhere the worst type of Jew turned informer overnight. Thousands of the same Jews who had counted on the Polish Army to save them from Hitler arrived as refugees from the German Occupation and proceeded to sell the Poles in the Russian Occupation like hot cakes. Even the G.P.U. agents whom they guided from house to house expressed contempt for these self-appointed jackals. Many Jewish individuals must have felt the same, only painfully and deeply. Nevertheless, the truth remains that within the Russian Occupation the patriot's worst enemy at this time was his Jewish fellow citizen. The Bolshevik régime, the Jews thought, meant power for themselves. In the towns and even in the villages (K. was an exception in having a purely peasant population) the local Committee and the militia, supposed to represent the entire community, began to be made up entirely from this renegade and revolutionary Jewish element. How it has been since, I do not know. I think it likely that their day is already over.

Our landlord himself said very little. He was a good sort of man, and he hated the upstart type of Jew as only Jews can. We were fairly secure from a surprise so long as we lodged with him. No Jewish houses were searched. The house-to-house searches went on every night, from curfew (at six o'clock by Polish time, eight o'clock by the new time taken from Moscow) until the lifting of curfew in the early morning. The loot taken was human

beings. Four or five long trains of prisoners left every day for Russia. Others remained on the railway sidings indefinitely, until it was almost impossible to distinguish between the living and the dead. As long afterwards as the beginning of December, a Lithuanian official told me of the appalling truck-loads of victims they had found still there when they took over the city, and still there in December; and of the Soviet indifference and apathy, more than genuine sadism, before facts of this kind. Lithuanian intervention did not interest them either. Somebody, some day, was going to go into the matter. In the meantime a few dozen victims more or less—they could not imagine why the Lithuanians even troubled to ask questions. For all I know those trucks are still standing on the sidings. The first convoys were taken from among what were called the political suspects. That meant, without exception, every Pole who had administered the Code. Judges, magistrates, and every other member of the legal profession, down to the lawyers' clerks. It included any private citizen who had ever sat on a jury to try a member of the Communist party. Every Pole who had in any way stood for national leadership in the town. Every Pole whose scientific, literary or other labour had been in a national direction. All these had figured under the label of Political Suspects or Patriots on lists drawn up long before the Red Armies passed the frontiers. Gaps in the lists were filled up by the informers. By the time we arrived in the town, it was the turn of the professions and the skilled trades. Doctors, dentists, engineers and, after them, mechanics and artisans. Any skilled manual labourer, even a locksmith or a zinc-cutter, was needed for the interior of Russia, where skilled labour is absolutely lacking. A

population of one hundred and eighty million cannot produce, under its present régime, even the artisans it needs. It cannot, apparently, produce even cabbage. The thunderstruck inhabitants of Wilno saw the departure of cabbages, worn brooms, wooden tables, trestles, and rough plank flooring torn out of barracks and institutions, for Moscow. The Russian uniform was poorer and shoddier than the poorest garments the townspeople, anxious not to show themselves in wool and furs, could muster. The soldiers, while they were still allowed to talk with us, exclaimed, admired, and exclaimed again at the riches of a provincial town in reality never rich; beautiful but frugal, ruined and beginning to be famished. All their wonderings and exclamations had a single theme. How could these things be possible in a capitalist state? The capitalist state, they had always been told, consisted of a bourgeois minority and a people of slaves. On the contrary, they now saw with their own eyes a country in which every citizen was a bourgeois. Our doctors, our learned professions, they said, do not live like a doorkeeper lives here. A few, who dared, passionately uttered: They have lied to us! At the same time, with the profoundest melancholy, they realized how far-reaching for themselves would be the consequences of their having perceived the lie: We shall never return to our homes, they said; we will never be allowed to cross our own frontiers again. Either we will be shot, or it will be Siberia, in chains. They will not dare to let us tell what we have seen. They did not realize yet that there was a third solution of their problem. That arrangements had already been made for them to keep eternal silence in Finland.

One other thing had also been certain. Once the

Baltic countries had accepted servitude, the Finns would be attacked and would defend themselves.

Officers read and wrote with difficulty. An engineer described his own studies: 'First I went to the village school for three years. After that they sent me to the township and put me through a mangle in the Polytechnic for two more.' Many of them had never seen watches before. They tested unknown things by putting them in their mouths, like children. Face creams out of tubes were not so bad. Coloured cakes of soap made them angry by lathering on their tongues and having an unexpected taste. At a performance of a propaganda play commanded at the theatre, women Commissars turned up in nightdresses of artificial silk tricot, bought in the town, which they had supposed to be evening gowns. The audience was quite unable to control its laughter. A police charge could not have stopped it. The Russians had sense enough to realize that laughter is a weapon too. The mortified Commissars were obliged to retire. Until they did the performance simply could not go on. Soldiers appeared in the villages demanding civilian clothes: when the time comes, they said to the peasants, we will go together against Moscow. The most curious and most startling thing the townspeople observed was that some of them, passing before a church, furtively made the sign of the cross. This was not the generation which hated Christ. It was, we had supposed, the generation which did not even know Him. When he asked them what they meant, they said: 'In our homes the old people have told us secretly about this Man, and shown us His Sign.'

Chapter 23

FRONTIER POST

The Russo-Lithuanian agreement was announced. A little later it was ratified. Wilno was to be handed over by the 16th of October. The Lithuanian Government broadcast their intention to maintain friendly relations with the Poles under their jurisdiction, to supply Wilno with food, to concern themselves about the refugees, to inflict no language penalties and to close no Polish schools. The young woman in the Consulate was radiant. The Jews were crestfallen. The White Russians were furious. The few thousand Lithuanians living in Wilno almost burst with importance. The Poles were not asked what they felt, and there was nothing left to them except to feel. The Russians, I daresay, laughed. At any rate, up to the 16th and for another eleven days after it their armoured cars rumbled through the streets all night and stood outside the shops, the University and the Banks all day. When Wilno was handed over, it was as empty as a cracked nutshell. Even the radio station had been blown up and the scrap taken away. The Lithuanian Army waited humbly at the frontier, cooling its heels. When they were at last allowed in, there was hardly a seat or a table left in the barracks they took

over. Even the floors had been ripped up. Metal knobs and finger-plates and locks were taken even from private apartments. Typewriters from offices. Money out of tills. The entire bag of tricks, including the gas burners and the revolving chairs, from the laboratory of the University. After the 16th a good deal of doubt even began to be expressed as to whether the Russians had ever intended to hand the city over at all.

Not to have handed it over would have been such a characteristically Russian joke. In Polish there is a saying: 'Muscovite pleasantry.' There have been so many of these pleasantries in Poland. As for instance in 1905, when the Tsar first promised the people a Constitution and then turned the guns of the citadel on them when they ran out unarmed into the streets of Warsaw to demonstrate their joy. Five thousand men, women, and children fell on the Place of the Theatre alone. Every day, the train bringing the Lithuanian authorities was looked for. But the Russians, when they had first occupied the frontier, had torn up the railroad. The authorities would have to come by air. The secretary told her audience at the George that the Red troops had been withdrawn from the frontier. The peasants coming in from the villages reported that they were still there. Then the peasants stopped coming altogether. The Bolsheviks had opened all the prisons when they had first arrived. The countryside was infested by bandits, as well as by troops. The aeroplanes from Kovno did not arrive, either. The Consulate was besieged. The arrests went on, by day now as well as by night. A force of Polish irregulars, under Dombrowski, made lightning raids on the Russian forces in the suburbs. The wireless gave us dance music, when we tried London.

The first news of what was being prepared for Finland reached us from Budapest. The chances of ever getting to France seemed more infinitesimal than ever. Nevertheless, we steadily prepared for the undertaking. The first day I was able to sit up in bed, I began to knit a pair of gloves. I remember looking round me and thinking, this really is a war picture: Ketty laying her water trap for cockroaches, the children sitting patiently, watching A. cut up food, the room like an ice-house, two young officers in civilian disguise playing chess. The gloves were quite seriously intended for the passage of the Baltic. A second pair had to be made for A. For these I had only the brightest green wool, ripped out of something of Ketty's. Wool could not have been said to be worth its weight in gold, because with all the gold in the world you would not have been able to buy any.

None of us had ever made gloves before. They turned out very oddly but they were gloves. Also, they did cross the Baltic. After that, they went to a concentration camp in Germany. I have no idea where they are now.

When I was well enough to go out (and I had to start going out as soon as I could stand, so as to be ready for moving at any moment) the little twelve-year-old girl gave me her boots. Nobody else had any to fit me. For the first time since Warsaw my feet were comfortable. A Polish soldier had given me a pair of stockings. For underclothing Ketty gave me a woollen pair of bathing trunks of her husband's. Papcio, Rudy, and Wladek turned up. Wladek had fought everywhere where the fighting was hottest. At Modlin, at Zamosc, right down to the Rumanian frontier and again at Lwow. His company had finally been completely cut off and sur-

rounded. After fighting all night, in the early morning the Commandant gave the order to surrender. The remnant preferred annihilation.

'Not good enough,' said their officer. 'For me, yes. I am an old man. But you are all young. Better let them take you now, save your lives if you can and fight again. Fixed as we are, no man has the right to throw his life away to-day.'

Wladek was twenty. His father had fallen at the head of his own regiment. He had been brought up to soldiering. He obeyed and persuaded others to obey. His friend Zbyszek had tried to kill himself with his own revolver rather than yield. A Polish soldier lying on the ground beside him mortally wounded, had made one terrific effort, heaved himself upward and knocked the revolver from his hand and fallen back dead. The Bolsheviks had taken their arms and torn off their regimental badges. Wladek, Zbyszek, and others had escaped later and made their way northwards. Ukrainian peasants had given them civilian clothing and hidden them during daylight. At night they had advanced again. Ten were murdered. The Polish front had moved from Poland to France. The burning idea in all their minds was to get to that new front. This meant fighting a very different sort of battle. Within the occupation they had to avoid the continual traps of informers and secret police while still trying to get food and shelter with no means but their wits. The Jewish informers could pick them out as cadets by some air they had, some way of moving and speaking, however disguised. In countries that were neutral only in name they had to overcome the obstruction of officials. Seven visas were indispensable. They had to learn to deal in lies and forgery;

to starve, hide, and wait. All this they were willing to undergo in order to continue their fight for Poland on new ground. All the setbacks they experienced never lessened their determination. Out of the 17,000 Poles in Lithuania only 1,400 or so got to France. The rest failed. They never stopped believing in a Polish future; not even when they knew they would not get away, when they began to turn backwards, to melt over the frontiers again, back to the Occupations, into ambush in the forests, to redden the snow with more Polish blood.

Papcio had an agonizing cough that never left him again. People in Wilno were able to help with clothes. The Red Cross tried to keep a kitchen open. I should need a whole book to tell of all our expedients, dangers, miseries, and glories. The town was full of young officers in hiding and disguise, trying to get farther and over to France. All of them had had to destroy their papers, to keep them out of the hands of the G.P.U. All of them had to be supplied with false ones. There were centres, as there were in Kovno later, where miracles were achieved. No account of the audacity, cool-headedness, and ingenuity of these young men, few of them even in their twenties, could ever do them justice, even if it were possible to attempt one. Obviously it is not, at least until the war is over, because these are secrets costing more than lives. As the Russians' time in the city shortened the arrests became more and more indiscriminate. For a Red soldier to dislike something about your face was enough. This pretext for arrest was given over and over again. An agent would ask, after days of interrogation, in which nothing at all was found out because there was in fact nothing to find: 'Why was this man (or this woman)

brought in?' and the guards would find nothing to allege except: 'His face was not pleasing to me.'

Between the old Russian administration under the Tsar and the new one under Stalin, the difference is only in name There is the same ignorance and slovenliness among officials. The same secret police. The same system of interrogation. A Russian will still empty his pockets for you one minute and carry out an order for your execution the next without so much as changing his expression. Soldiers halted by the roadsides shared their soup with women and children who asked for it. But at the next move they would as little think of turning their heads after a comrade who fell out as after a refugee or a dead dog. Children are not more fatalistic or more insensible. In the streets, crawling with them, A. would say:

'It is too much. To have to look at them *again*!'

Only the Russians could produce in him this nervous exasperation. He had been brought up in another Russian Occupation, when Poles were tortured, transported, flogged; sent to rot in prison, to freeze in Siberia, to break their hearts in France and America, to serve in foreign armies all over the world, wherever a lost cause or a desperate Legion raised a flag.

There is not one Polish family whose members, within living memory, who have escaped these fates, have not been persecuted at home; liable to the extremest penalties, and even the hangman's rope, for the crimes of speaking their own language, reading their own poets or teaching to their children the history of their own fathers; who have not been spied upon even in their beds, informed against, sold; harried day and night, indoors and out of doors, at home or in business,

in the streets or at Mass, by an unspeakably corrupt, barbarous, sadist and imbecile gendarmerie controlled from Moscow and St. Petersburg. After 1918 he had been part of that Polish army of volunteers, students, and boys who, short of every kind of ammunition, half trained, in rags of uniform, bootless, had thrown the Russians back towards Asia.

'The same manœuvres,' he said, 'the same way of handling their arms, the same outland faces, the same loutish imbecility! Riding us down in their forage carts, scratching and crowding and chewing in our streets *again*. Body of God!'

Oaths were not A.'s habit, either. He cursed now blackly and bitterly. I had always known that he hated the Russians. As certain creatures hate each other, instinctively, out of a sort of race memory, from under the skin. Ketty trembled when he was out of doors. She said that the G.P.U. men never took their eyes off him. They have a way of watching without moving. Only their eyes move. We could never understand how he escaped being arrested.

'Those sheepskins and boots!' Ketty exclaimed often. 'Instead of making a moujik of him, they only draw attention to that air of being *dziedzicz*.'

He was never even questioned. I thought myself that it was his extreme inflexibility that saved him. To save his life he could not have lowered his eyes before a G.P.U. man or walked an inch out of his way to avoid one. A cur dog hardly ever bites when he is treated like this. Whoever came back in the morning without bread, Ketty and A. always secured at least two pounds. They needed to. The children, if they were never very hungry, never really had their appetites satisfied either.

Many people gathered in the basement room. There was always somebody who had not eaten for days. Rudy was the most difficult to feed. Whatever was put into him was too little. His stomach incessantly demanded compensation for his fifteen and a half years, his six feet of height, the cellar in Danzig, the green tomatoes, and the slimy water. His appetite embarrassed both himself and Papcio, who tried to eat less than ever to make up the ravages. A. not only took care to get bread for our own party; he forced order on other queues, putting somebody of his own into each of them. The Jews, at least while they lined up for bread, had to take their turn, and so had the Russian soldiers who wanted more than their issue. From five o'clock each morning, when he took his sheepskins from under my head until he returned with bread, I lay and wondered how long his luck would hold. Each night, from curfew to curfew, when he was indoors, with us I wondered the same thing. He had not destroyed, and would not destroy, his passport or his military papers. Once detained, it was the heart of Russia for him. An engineer, with Paris diplomas. An officer. A veteran of the Bolshevik war. Decorated. A defender of Lwow. Twice the porters' books were scrutinized. Registration was compulsory for all males passing one night in the town. Not to have registered, if they ferreted you out, meant certain death. To register was to fall into a trap. The luck held on both occasions. On one of them, a Russian officer came into the room by one door and A. simply rose and walked out of it by another. This sort of thing was always happening. The Russian looked at the pile of feather quilts. He could not be bothered to see if there were somebody hidden under them or not. My four needles and the

way I lay on my back with the knitting close to my face diverted him. He did open the door that had just closed but went no farther down the passage. He came back and held out his hand. In clumsy Polish he asked:

'What is this?'

'A glove,' I said.

'Why do you knit lying down?'

'Because I am ill. I cannot sit up.'

'Is it because you have no food that you cannot sit up?'

'We have plenty of food.'

He shrugged his shoulders. A few inches of the glove was done. He still held out his hand and I tried the circle over his wrist. Oskar, the little boy, was there and he looked on as I would have looked on at his age if a talking bear had suddenly stepped out of one of my books and into the nursery. The Russian asked some other questions, I have forgotten what; something about the time. He had three bracelet watches, one above the other on his arm. The question was intended to display them. He was excessively pleased at having three watches. When he had consulted them all he straightened his arm again and signed to me to take back my knitting, but he still stood.

Oskar's school books lay on the table. He had the idea of showing them to the visitor.

'All lies,' said the Russian indifferently. But he was quite interested in the volumes with pictures. When he went, Oskar sighed with disenchantment. I knew exactly what he unconsciously felt, because I felt it, too. An inhuman creature had strayed inside our human circle for an instant and tried to communicate with us, and now it was gone and we had neither captured nor understood it.

Our refuge daily became more precarious. The owner, fairly naturally, disliked the coming and going of so many young men. Papcio and Rudy did our intelligence work. They were the least noticeable of our own band, because they were the most haggard and scarecrow. News reached us from all over the Russian Occupation. Irregular Polish troops were still fighting. Towns here and there were in Polish hands for a few hours and only retaken with great losses. There had been trouble between the allies over the line of demarcation. The Germans had been the ones to give in. Bialystok, which they had wanted badly, had been evacuated after all and handed over to the Russians. A Bolshevik Commission coming into it after the Germans had left, exclaimed:

'All the same, how *low* the Germans are!' Dead and dying Polish soldiers lay in heaps on the bare floors of completely gutted hospitals. There was not a drop of water or an inch of lint in the place. Maggots crawled out of their wounds. Praga, a suburb of Warsaw across the Vistula, was to be Russian too. The Germans were required to keep strictly beyond the river. The early tolerance within the Russian Occupation was wearing off. Churches were being closed. Catholic prelates were arrested. The cathedral in Pinsk was blown up with dynamite. Orthodox priests serving the Ruthenian and Ukrainian congregations were buried alive. The peasants, horrified and faced with starvation, were burying their root crops and driving their live stock into the forests. Horses, particularly needed in Russia, were being requisitioned all over the place. The local Soviets were all being discarded and replaced; banks, industries, small trades and handicrafts, already more than half

ruined, were completely paralysed by incorporation within the disorderly and incapable Soviet bureaucratic machine. The railroads were choked with coal going to the richest minefields in the world! Even the locomotives never came back. The Russians dreamed of converting them to use on their own broad-gauge roads. Almost certainly they have never been touched. In the next war they will be found rusting somewhere along the route to Moscow. Even the land was robbed. Nothing was sown for the coming year. The late autumn crops rotted where they grew. Trees were hacked down wholesale; great wedges driven into the forests in the first few weeks of looting and nothing planted to heal the scars. Frequently whole communities, told that the forests were theirs to strip were afterwards accused of sabotage and savagely punished. The first experiments were made in collectivization. Famine spread beyond the towns to the villages and farms.

Six of us decided that we must leave Wilno. Papcio, Wladek, Rudy and Ketty, A. and myself. If the Lithuanian frontier was open we would cross it legally. If it was still guarded by the Russians, we would cross it illegally, somehow or other. For five of us, Wilno had become too hot. Ketty might have stayed, but she was determined to find her husband, either in Lithuania, if he was interned, or in France if he had got through. By staying where she was, she would never know anything. A friend came and took charge of the children. For three days, Ketty said: 'Time to get to Kovno and back from the French and British Consulates with news.'

'Once in Kovno,' said somebody to us wistfully, 'you will be as free as birds!' I often thought of that when we actually were there.

I forget the exact day on which we started. It must have been very shortly after the 16th. The Russians took so little trouble about the Lithuanians that neither the Consul nor his staff had the least idea of the real sequence of events. The secretary assured us again that there would be no difficulty at the frontier. Everything was in Lithuanian hands, she said. Of course, it would be a rough journey. The damage to the railroad had not been repaired. As there was still no communications, no mail and no bag, she gave us a whole packet of letters for Kovno, some of them addressed even to Ministers, and asked us to deliver them. The railway company unhesitatingly sold us tickets marked 'Wilno–Kaunas via Landwarow'. The story of how I still come to have them is too long to tell. It is also too painful. But here they are. I have just had the curiosity to look at them. They are stamped 18.x.39, so after all I do know the date on which we left. It is an extraordinary sensation to hold those things in my hands now.

The frontier, when we reached it, was heavily occupied. It was only by heroic obstinacy that we reached it at all. The recollection of that day and night, of the courage, endurance, and gaiety of my companions, is far harder to bear now than the terrible hardships that we shared were then. I have tried and tried until I can spend no more time trying. I *cannot* fill up their chronicle, and nobody else ever will. The full Polish story never will be written. The acts are hurried into the ground with the witnesses. What survivors there are turn dumb with pain and resentment, like beasts flogged out of their wits. I can only write that on the night between the 18th and the 19th, we crossed the frontier, that a Bolshevik patrol was never farther than fifty yards from

us, during the six hours and the length of kilometres the adventure took. Once across, a Lithuanian patrol fired on us and captured one. The rest of us, after scattering, reassembled. We decided to give ourselves up to this patrol in the hope that they would arrest us and send us to Kovno—where in fact we wanted to go. Not out of loyalty. There was no loyalty of that kind between us. The four men thought of themselves first as soldiers and only afterwards as friends. But because it was clear we could get no farther. Behind the frontier guards a whole army was drawn up waiting for their triumphal advance on Wilno. We were bogged in mud to our knees soaked, to the skin, and lost. The guards took us to the post. After scrutinizing our papers, our persons, and the packet of letters and hearing our stories, they said we must go back again. They could neither imprison us, nor let us through. We belonged to the Occupation. The Bolsheviks would do us no harm, they said. A palaver lasted for hours. At the end of it, Papcio, Wladek, and Rudy were sent back. Ketty, A., and myself were allowed to remain. Unofficially and on parole. We lived in the post; slept in straw with the guards, shared their bags and their tobacco and some gleams of good fellowship until the 28th of October. Whenever it was not against their interests they were kind to us. They did not remind us more than fifty times a day that we were now a conquered people and that it was in their power to show us favour. The post was as near to the frontier as one side of this street is to the other. The Bolsheviks patrolled it in companies of never less than six. The Lithuanians, on their side, avoided encountering them. When the dark figures, in heavy coats to their heels,

seldom speaking, crossed the skyline the Lithuanians dived into their guard-house. For ten days, twelve hours a day, I walked up and down that frontier myself, thinking of the politicians responsible for it and who never set eyes on it and do not know where it is. On the Lithuanian side, all the time I was there, I never met a soul who spoke anything but Polish, except the guards and the generation going to school. Since Lithuania has been an independent republic the archaic Lithuanian language has been compulsorily revived.

It is curious and ancient, the nearest language in the world to Sanskrit, and full of the same words as Hindustani, but it is not the living language of the people growing up to use it. Polish is that. The people in the village hated the guards. In fact, they were not bad fellows; but they were too raw. Post-war doctrines had been pumped into them by a propaganda machine and they had not been able to defend themselves against the process. They were aggressive and chauvinistic, and thought that they were so because they were frontier guards and had seen the way things were. In reality, it had been the other way round. Because they were to be frontier guards, they had first been taught to be the other things. During those ten days we continued to get messages through to other Poles in Kovno. We touched, we thought then, but we were wrong, the peak of anxiety, false hope, and mental suffering. The crisis of physical suffering whose germs we had been carrying about with us for so long passed unnoticed. The three who had been sent back lived on the other side under cover a day or two until the patrols picked them up. We saw it happen. Their captors were mounted. The falling afternoon light showed us only silhouettes. The

long-skirted greatcoats covered the flanks of the horses. The prisoners ran at saddle-height, outlined against the same skyline. The whole scene passed like a moving frieze, appearing and disappearing again once or twice between wood and water. A peasant from that side crossed secretly to tell us, but we already knew. This peasant and his family had been robbed of clothes, furniture, and livestock by the Russians. They were not peasants, said the Bolsheviks. They were bourgeois. Only bourgeois could have a wall-clock and an armchair with arms and a straw seat. His dying son was hidden in a hayrick with nineteen wounds in his body. The German civilians in a Polish town had given him those on the first day of the war. As he climbed into an armoured car, his hamstrings had been cut from behind.

On Friday, the 27th, the Lithuanians were allowed to take their prize. The army slithered forward through the mud. It was a much less glorious affair than they had counted on. Torrents of rain had fallen while they waited. Equipment, uniforms, boots, sky and route were all reduced to one muddy monotony. The Lithuanian soldier's heart is in his uniform; galons, sidearms, shakoes, and white gloves are what he marches for. Wilno was taken over in an atmosphere of glum anticlimax. On Saturday, food trains and a Lithuanian mission went from Kovno. We found that turning back to Wilno was the only thing left to us to try. The Commandant of the post had done what he could for us; and we had rewarded him fairly badly. We had been troublesome guests. One of his own guards had stealthily carried letters between us and a consulate in Kovno. The Commandant had been reprimanded by his chiefs. I honestly think that he behaved better than we did.

But now he had had more than enough of us. We were personally conducted across the line to the ex-Polish side.

'Get yourselves permits and come back,' he said. 'With permits, we shall always be delighted to see you.'

It was not easy to conceive how we were to get to Wilno. There were no trains for civilians. The roads and fields were impassable. Both were infested by marauders. The corpses of the robbed were stripped of their clothes; even false teeth or metal stoppings were wrenched out of their jaws. We got there, as it happens, with the food train and the mission, simply by asking the young colonel at the head of it to take us along. The train had halted for three minutes for water. I don't know why he agreed. I think because he could not read our consular passports and they looked very impressive. We told him that we were British journalists.

The journey was not very long. We stopped at only two or three stations. The mission took itself very seriously. Officers put their heads out of windows and waved enthusiastically to children herding cattle and peasants who came and stood dumbly before their doors. In Landwarow, where the halt was longest, they even had themselves photographed throwing chocolates and cigarettes down among the rails. Of course a few children, half-grown louts and Jewish hawkers scrambled for them. The rest of the spectators stood listless, hungry, and cold. Their expression was not quite scornful. It was more patient than that. It said, as clearly as if the words had been spoken:

'We are keeping our bravos until later. Until our own army marches back.'

The officers were disappointed; puzzled also. The chocolates had been thrown with perfect goodwill. The entry into Wilno was equally a fiasco. The parades, in full dress, of the next day, Sunday, were carried out in the atmosphere of a funeral. The townspeople, for the most part, stayed indoors. The lines of people along the pavements stood with folded arms and bent heads, as if they were looking down into a grave.

Papcio, Rudy, and Wladek were at liberty again, and waiting for us in Wilno. Eels would have been easier to hold.

On Monday A. obtained three passes. They were the first out of occupied Wilno, and the military governor signed them himself. The third was for Rudy. From now on he was adopted. In this, and every other declaration of identity, he figured as our nephew, the son of a sister of A. If perjury could have saved him, he would have been saved.

In the evening we arrived in the Lithuanian capital. Exactly fifty-five days since the afternoon when we had left our own. Not a day more. I remember that we stood together before a mirror and that we said before our double reflection: 'Who would believe, looking at those faces, that it had been less than ten years?'

Chapter 24

POSTSCRIPT

Up to now, I have tried to tell a story. Nobody can be more conscious than myself of how badly it has been done. Added to all my grief, is the grief of not having told Poland's story well. Again and again I have broken down in the writing of it. Since the first day I landed in England, from a German prison, there has not been a single hour in which I have not been labouring at this duty, in one way or another, and it is still not done.

Since the 1st of September 1939 I have been running a race with exhaustion. Mental exhaustion is overtaking me now so fast that I have despaired innumerable times of ever setting all the story down. I know now that I never will set it down. Not as I planned it. Not as A., when the parting did come, left me the charge of doing it. If I could have done it, I should have understood a little why I have had to live, when so many I love are dead. Why I am free when the whole of Poland is in prison. Why all my efforts, first to stay in Poland, afterwards to return there, could never come to anything.

I can only finish it now with an outline of events, dates, and journeys.

These dates and journeys will take you as far as

the day on which we started our journey to England.

From Kovno in Lithuania we travelled through Latvia to Riga and from Riga to Revel in Estonia. From Revel we crossed the Baltic in a neutral ship, on our way to Stockholm. A quarter of an hour out of the Swedish territorial waters, the ship was captured by a German cruiser. A German crew, armed with machine guns and hand-grenades, was put aboard and took us to a port in Germany. In this port we were handed over to Gestapo. Days later, I was freed and given a visa out of Germany. I never saw A. again. From Germany I was sent to Scandinavia. From Scandinavia I came to England. But of the things that happened in Kovno and after Kovno I shall not attempt to tell you any more. The 8th of December, the day we left there, is the last date in this book.