

POLSKIE WARSZAWA

Zakryna

Kolina

Posen/Poznan

DEUTSCHLAND



The Silver Sword

Thuringian wald

Baran

SCHWEIZ

Falkenburg

Bodensee

Überlingen

Appenzell

Ian Serrailier

WARSAW

The night the Nazis come to take their mother away, three children escape in a terrifying scramble across the rooftops. Alone in the chaos of Warsaw, they have to learn to survive on their own.

KI Warsza

Lakyna

Kolina

Posen

DEUTSCHLAND

Berlin

(Potsdamer Strasse)

Then they meet Jan, a ragged boy with a paperknife - the silver sword - that they recognize as belonging to their long-lost father. The sword becomes their symbol of hope as, with Jan, they begin the hazardous journey across war-torn Europe to find their parents.



Ian Serraillier's moving account of a family torn apart by war speaks as much to us today as it did when it was first written.

Elbe

Thuringia

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Schweiz



The Silver Sword



Ian Serraillier

RED FOX

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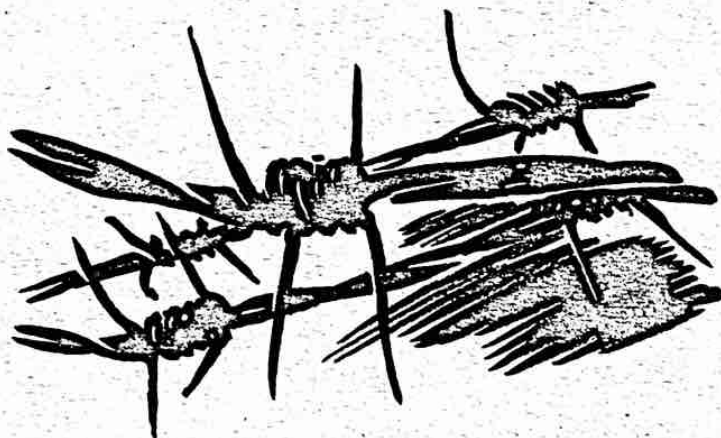
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Author's Note

The characters in this book are fictitious, but the story is based upon true fact. Imaginary names have been given to a few of the places mentioned – they are the villages of Boding and Kolina, the River Falken, the town of Falkenburg and the prison camp of Zakyna. All other place-names are real and can be found on the map of Europe. The description of the Red Army on the march is based on eye-witness accounts in J. Stransky's *East Wind over Prague*.

I.S.



CHAPTER 1

The Escape

This is the story of a Polish family, and of what happened to them during the Second World War and immediately afterwards. Their home was in a suburb of Warsaw, where the father, Joseph Balicki, was headmaster of a primary school. He and his Swiss wife Margrit had three children. In early 1940, the year when the Nazis took Joseph away to prison, Ruth the eldest was nearly thirteen, Edek was eleven, and the fair-haired Bronia three.

Warsaw under the Nazis was a place of terror, and without their father to protect them the Balickis had a grim time of it. But worse was in store for them. They were to endure hardships and conditions which made them think and plan and act more like adults than children. Great responsibilities were to fall upon Ruth.

The Silver Sword

Many other girls had to face difficulties as great as hers. But if there were any who faced them with as much courage, unselfishness, and common sense as she did, I have not heard of them.

First I must tell of Joseph Balicki and what happened to him in the prison camp of Zakyna.

The prison camp which the Nazis sent him to was in the mountains of South Poland. A few wooden huts clung to the edge of the bleak hillside. Day and night the wind beat down upon them, for the pine trees were thin and gave little shelter. For five months of the year snow lay thick upon the ground. It smothered the huts. It gave a coating of white fur to the twelve-foot double fence of wire that surrounded the clearing. In stormy weather it blew into the bare huts through cracks in the walls. There was no comfort in Zakyna.

The camp was crowded with prisoners. Most of them were Poles, but there were some Czechs, Hungarians, and a few Russians too. Each hut held about 120 – yet it was hardly big enough for more than forty. They passed the time loafing about, playing chess, sewing, reading, fighting for old newspapers or cigarette stumps, quarrelling, shouting. At mealtimes they huddled round trestle tables to eat their cabbage and potato soup. It was the same for every meal. You could blow yourself out with it and never be satisfied. For drinking they had warm water with bread crumbs in it – the Nazi guards called it coffee. Twice a week they had a dab of butter, and there was a teaspoonful of jam on Saturdays. What use was this for keeping out the cold?

Few had the strength or the spirit to escape. Several prisoners had got away – a few even reached the plains. Those that were not caught and sent back died of exposure in the mountains.

But Joseph was determined to escape. During the first winter he was too ill and dispirited to try. He would sit around the hut, thinking of his family and staring at a few tattered photos of them that he had been allowed to keep. He would think of his school in Warsaw and wonder what was happening there now. When the Nazis came, they had not closed it. But they had taken away the Polish textbooks and made him teach in German. They had hung pictures of Hitler in all the classrooms. Once, during a scripture lesson, Joseph had turned the picture of Hitler's face to the wall. Someone had reported this to the Nazis. Then the Nazi Storm Troops had come for Joseph in the middle of the night and bundled him off to Zakyna. They had left Margrit and the three children behind. How he longed to see them again!

During the summer his health mended, but the number of guards was doubled. A group of six – he was one of them – tried to break away together, but their attempt failed. For this he had a month of solitary confinement.

The following winter he was ill again, but no less determined to escape. He decided to wait till early spring, when the snow was beginning to melt and the nights were not so bitter.

Very carefully he laid his plans.

It was no use thinking of cutting the wire fence. There

was a trip-line inside the double fence, and anyone who crossed it would be shot. If he got as far as touching the fence, the alarm bell in the guard-house would ring. There was only one way out – the way the guards went, through the gate and past the guard-house. His idea was to disguise himself as one of them and follow them as they went off duty. But how was he to get hold of the uniform?

At the back of each block was a leaky and unheated hut known as 'the cooler'. It had three or four cells to which unruly prisoners were sent to 'cool off'. To be sent there you only had to be late for roll-call or cheek a guard. It was quite a popular place in summer, as it was so quiet. But in winter you could freeze to death there. In spring, with a bit of luck, you might survive a night or two of frost.

One March day, during the morning hut inspection, he flicked a paper pellet at the guard. It stung him behind the ear and made him turn round. The next one made his nose smart. That was all there was time for. Within five minutes Joseph was in a cell in 'the cooler'.

For two days he stamped up and down, to keep himself warm. He clapped his arms against his sides. He dared not lie down for more than a few moments at a time in case he dropped off to sleep and never woke again. Twice a day a guard brought him food. For the rest of the time he was alone.

On the evening of the third day the guard came as usual. When Joseph heard the soft thud of his footsteps in the snow, he crouched down on the floor at the back

of his tiny cell. He had a smooth round stone and a catapult in his hands. He had made the catapult from pine twigs and the elastic sides of his boots. His eyes were fixed on the flap in the door. In a moment the guard would unlock it, peer inside and hand in the food.

Tensely Joseph waited. He heard the key grate in the rusty lock of the outside door of 'the cooler'. The hinges creaked open. There was the sound of a match spluttering – the guard was lighting the lamp. Heavy boots clumped across the floor towards his cell.

Joseph drew back the elastic. He heard the padlock on the flap being unlocked. The flap slid aside.

The guard had not seen Joseph when the stone struck him in the middle of the forehead and knocked him down. The floor shook as he tumbled. He groaned and rolled over.

Joseph must act quickly, before the guard came to his senses. He knew the guard kept his bunch of keys in his greatcoat pocket. He must get hold of them without delay. He must lift the guard till they were within reach.

He took a hook and line from under his bed. He had made the line by cutting thin strips from his blanket and plaiting them together. The hook was a bent four-inch nail that he had smuggled in from his hut.

After several attempts, the hook caught in the top fastened button of the guard's greatcoat. He tugged at the line and drew the guard, still groaning, up towards him . . . higher and higher.

Suddenly the line snapped. The guard fell back, striking his head sharply on the floor. The hook was lost.

Joseph had one spare hook, that was all.

He tried again. This time the cotton broke and the button went spinning across the floor.

He tried for the next button. Again the cotton broke.

He had begun to despair when he saw the keys. They were lying on the floor. They had been shaken out of the greatcoat pocket when the guard fell.

Quickly Joseph fished for the ring of keys and hauled it up. A few moments later he was kneeling beside the senseless body, hastily stripping off the uniform. There was no time to lose. Already the locking up of the prisoners had started and he could hear the guards shouting at them outside.

Joseph felt warm in the guard's uniform. The greatcoat reached to his ankles. The fur cap had flaps for covering his ears. He smiled to himself as he locked the guard in the freezing cell. Then, turning up his collar so that the tips touched his cheek-bones, he went out into the bitter night.

He walked through the snow towards Block E, where the Hungarian and Rumanian prisoners were kept. In the dark shadows behind the huts he hid until the trumpet sounded the change of guard.

Hundreds of times he had watched the soldiers of the guard fall in and march out of camp. He had memorized every order, every movement. It seemed to him quite natural now to be lining up with the others.

'Anything to report?' the officer asked each of them in turn.

'All correct, sir,' they answered.

'All correct, sir,' said Joseph in his best German.

'Guard, dismiss!' said the officer.

Joseph dropped to the rear and followed the other soldiers out – out of the great spiked gate and into freedom. It seemed too good to be true.

Some of the soldiers stopped outside the guard-house to gossip. A few went in. Joseph walked straight ahead, turning his head away from the window light as he passed.

'Where are you going?' one of them called.

'Shangri La,' he muttered. It was the soldiers' name for the night club in the village where they sometimes spent their off-duty times.

Without looking behind him, he walked on.



CHAPTER 2

Journey through the Air

The village of Zakyna was a mile below the camp. It was a mass of tiny huts clinging to the steep cliffside. There was no moon that night, but Joseph could see lights in the windows.

He walked straight through the village.

Suddenly he was challenged in German. 'Karl, give me the cigarettes,' said a rough voice.

He took no notice and walked on.

'Karl, the cigarettes!' the voice shouted, threateningly. He hurried on.

There were footsteps behind him.

He turned round to look. A drunken soldier was tottering after him.

Joseph began to run. The soldier ran too, swearing whenever he stumbled.

Just below the last huts in the village, the road curled away from the cliff edge. A mail car had pulled up. Her lights were on and the engine running. There was a pile of luggage in the road, and an angry group of people had gathered round.

'You're two hours late!' someone cried.

'I told you – there was an avalanche. The road was blocked,' returned the driver.

Joseph dived behind the white wall of snow that the snow plough had thrown up at the side of the road. He was right on the edge of the cliff, which dropped steeply into the darkness. He heard the sound of crates being dumped in the road. And he heard the drunken soldier roll up and cry, 'Driver, you've pinched my cigarettes!'

'Chuck him over the cliff,' said someone.

A scuffle. Laughter. Steps coming towards him.

Joseph slid quietly away – to where a square shape jutted out from the road. In the dark it looked like a cart without wheels. Quickly he hid underneath.

At once he wished he hadn't moved. A heavy crate banged down on to the boards above his head. The boards quivered and shook. Boots scraped the wood, shuffled on the snow.

There was a babble of voices – jokes and leg-pulling mixed with directions for the loading of the crates.

Joseph waited tensely while the crates were lifted in and the tarpaulin draped over them. When the soldiers were back in the road, he heaved himself over the wooden edge and under the tarpaulin.

A loud voice shouted, 'Are you ready, there?'

From the other side of the dark valley came an answering call.

Suddenly Joseph realized that the wooden boards he lay on were moving. They were sliding out into the darkness, away from the road. Where was he?

As soon as he dared, he lifted the edge of the tarpaulin and looked out. He was in a kind of roofless cage. It was hung by pulleys and wire to an overhead cable and was swinging giddily from side to side. An aerial luggage lift. These were quite common in the mountains. They were driven by electricity and used for carrying goods from one side of a steep valley to the other.

Joseph sighed with relief. The giddy movement of the cage made him feel sick, but he knew that every second it was taking him farther from his enemies.

Then suddenly the cage squeaked to a standstill. It began to slide back, back to the road. The voices on the road grew louder. A jerk, a rattle of pulleys, the scrape of wood on snow, and he was back where he had started. Someone leapt into the cage and lifted the tarpaulin on the other side of the crates from Joseph.

'There's room for it alongside – hurry up!' cried the same voice.

Joseph's hand was in his revolver holster. He meant to fight his way out of he had to. But all he could feel in the holster was a stick of chocolate.

Another crate was chucked in and kicked alongside the other pair. It banged against his foot and nearly made him scream with pain. He fell back and bit his lip, groaning.

But no one heard his groans, for the cage was already rattling out into the darkness again. While he rubbed his bruised toes, it pitched and swung from side to side. After a few minutes of climbing, a shape loomed down towards him and rattled past. It was the balance lift – the descending cage which balanced the weight of the climbing one – and it meant he had passed the halfway mark. Ahead of him was the black shape of the mountain. With every swing of the cage and every creak of the cable, it came nearer. Were there soldiers on that side, too? If so, what was he to do? He could not escape discovery and he was quite unarmed.

In a flash he made up his mind.

He lifted the tarpaulin from his shoulders and sat with his back to the crates, facing the dark mountain.



CHAPTER 3

The Hiding Place

The cage banged to a standstill. The light of a torch was flashed full into Joseph's face.

'I have you covered with my pistol,' said Joseph steadily. 'If you make a sound, I'll shoot.'

A Polish voice swore.

'Be quiet. Do you want me to shoot?' said Joseph. 'Hand me your torch.'

He seized it from the trembling hands and flashed the beam on to a grey-bearded peasant face. Joseph's spirits rose. The man was Polish, a countryman of his.

Joseph spoke more gently. 'Do as I tell you and you'll come to no harm. Unload the cage.'

Joseph questioned him while he was unloading. 'Is the cage worked from this end? The control is in your

hands? Good. We shan't be disturbed, then. Take me to where you live.'

The crates were safely stacked and the shed by the cage locked. The peasant had kept one crate for himself. It contained provisions and clothing from town. He lifted it on to his shoulder and then led the way along a track of beaten snow that wound upwards through pine trees. Soon they came to his home. It was a large chalet, with wide overhanging eaves. Wood was stacked at the sides.

He laid down the crate and led Joseph inside.

A wood fire was burning brightly in a wide open hearth. A large pot hung above it from a hook in the chimney. An old lady was sitting by the fire. She looked startled.

Joseph threw his cap and greatcoat over a chair.

'Here's the pistol I almost shot you with,' he said. 'It's a slab of chocolate.'

He broke it into three pieces, giving one to each of them. They were suspicious and waited till Joseph had swallowed his piece before they ate theirs.

'I don't understand,' said the peasant slowly. 'You speak like a Pole. You look like a Pole. But your uniform—'

At that moment a bell clanged out from the other side of the valley. It echoed among the mountains.

'That's the prison bell,' said Joseph. 'It's a long time since it rang like that — when the last prisoner escaped.'

'You've come to search for him?' asked the old lady.

'I am the prisoner,' said Joseph. 'I knocked out a

guard and stole his uniform. Look – if you don't believe me here's my camp number burnt into my arm – ZAK 2473. I want you to hide me.'

The number convinced them that he was telling the truth. They knew that if they were found hiding him they would die. But they were brave people and did not hesitate.

Joseph slept in a warm bed that night for the first time for two years.

In the morning the old man went to work the luggage lift as usual. Before going, he arranged a danger signal. If there were any soldiers coming across in the cage, he would whistle three times. And he showed Joseph a hiding place in the woodshed.

While he was away, Joseph showed the old woman the tattered photos of his family. He had taken them out of his wallet so many times to look at them that they were creased and crumpled and finger-marked all over. He spoke about his wife and children, his school, his capture by the Nazis; about the shortage of food, the destruction everywhere, and the continual fear of arrest. Every day had brought news of more families being split up.

The old woman was moved by his story. While he was speaking, she began to think of ways in which she could help him. He looked starved and needed good food. She had a little cheese and oatcakes, a side of bacon hanging in the cellar, and the remains of a tin of real coffee saved from before the war.

Suddenly there was a loud bang on the door. Was it a

search party? If so, why had the old man given no warning?

A voice called out in German.

There was no time to escape to the woodshed.

'Quick – up there!' The old woman pointed up the chimney. 'There's an opening on the right, halfway up.'

Joseph dived into the hearth and hauled himself up over the iron spit. The fire was only smouldering and there was not much smoke. He had not found the opening when the door burst open and two soldiers came in. While they searched the room, he stood very still, his legs astride the chimney. He wanted to cough. He thought his lungs would burst.

Suddenly a head peered up the chimney. It was the old woman. 'They've gone upstairs,' she said. 'But don't come down yet.'

She showed him where the opening was. He crept inside, coughing. He could see the sky through the wide chimney top above him.

He was congratulating himself on his good luck when he heard the soldiers return to the room below. With difficulty he controlled his cough.

'What about the chimney?' said a German voice. 'Plenty of room to hide up there.'

'Plenty of soot too,' said the other soldier. 'Your uniform's older than mine. What about you going up?'

'Not likely.'

'Then we'll send a couple of bullets up for luck.'

Two ear-splitting explosions. It seemed as if the whole chalet was falling down. Joseph clung on to his perch.

The Silver Sword

There was a great tumbling about his ears. He clung and clung and clung – till his fingers were torn from their grip, and he fell.

When he came to his senses, he was lying on the floor. The old woman was bending over him washing his face with cold water.

'It's all right – they've gone,' she said. 'The fall of soot saved you. The soldiers ran for it when the soot came down. They were afraid for their uniforms.'

'I'm sorry I didn't have time to warn you,' said the old man. 'The soldiers had hidden themselves in the cage. I didn't see them till it was too late.'

Joseph spent two whole weeks in the chalet. The old couple treated him like a son, sharing all they had with him. They fed him so well that his thin cheeks filled out and he gained several pounds in weight. They were simple, homely folk, and in their company his mind grew more peaceful than it had been for years. In the brutality of his prison life he had almost forgotten what kindness was.

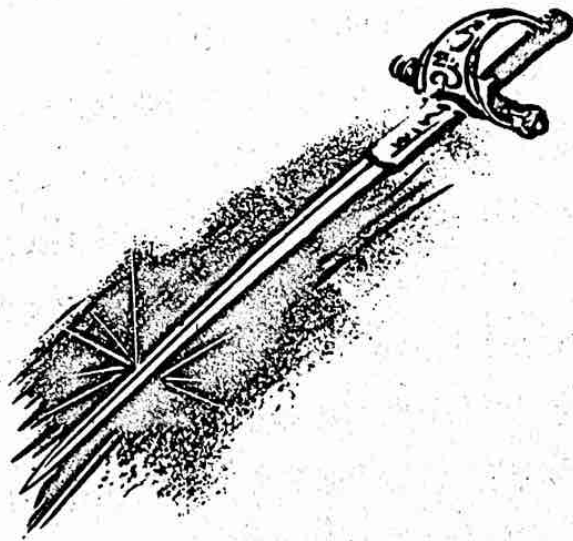
He passed his time indoors, mostly eating and resting. More than once he was tempted to go outside. The spring sun beamed down all day long from clear skies. It melted the icicles that hung from the roof; it roused the first crocuses from the bare brown patches in the snow. But there was no sense in exposing himself, and he wisely stayed indoors. The nights were freezing, and he was glad of his warm blankets.

On the fifteenth night he left the chalet on the first

stage of the long journey home. The moon was in her first quarter, and it was freezing hard. He was wearing the warm woollen clothes of a Polish highlander. The old man went with him as guide for three days till they were clear of the high mountains.

On the afternoon of the second day they reached the edge of the snow line. Little rivers coursed down from under the snow. Wherever they trod, the ground was soggy and their boots squelched. But it was a joy to leave the snow behind and to see the snowdrops and crocuses everywhere. Lower down in the valleys the grass was already green, gay with primroses, violets, and wild daffodils.

In the gorge where the River Sanajec tumbles down between the steep wooded rocks to meet the great rivers of the plains, they said goodbye to each other. The old man took Joseph's head between his hands, blessed him and wished him good fortune.



CHAPTER 4

The Silver Sword

It took Joseph four and a half weeks to walk to Warsaw. He had lived in the city all his life and knew it well. But now, on his return, there was hardly a street he recognized and not an undamaged building anywhere. The place was as bleak and silent as the craters of the moon. Instead of proud homes, he found crumbling walls; instead of streets, tracks of rubble between mountains of bricks. Windows were charred and glassless. Public buildings were burnt-out shells.

In this wilderness people still managed to go on living. Joseph saw them wandering, pale and hungry-eyed, and vanish down paths of their own into the ruins. They had made their homes in cellars or had dug caves in the rubble. A few had even tried to make them look gay. A bomb gash in a cellar wall was draped with bright

curtains. In another hole there was a window-box full of purple crocuses. Here and there a tree that had escaped blast damage sprouted with spring leaves.

But the only really lively place was the railway. The Nazis had to keep this clear, whatever the cost. Never had Joseph seen railway lines gleam as these did – eight lines of polished steel along which, day and night, the busy trains poured. Eastwards, with carriages of troops and trucks of ammunition, they carried war to Russia. Westwards they brought back the wounded to Germany, and sometimes rich plunder from the Ukraine.

Joseph spent three days finding the street where he used to live. The school and schoolhouse – his home – had disappeared.

There was a house opposite with a sign marked POLISH WELFARE. He made some inquiries there, but the people were new and could not help him. At another house he had better luck. He knew the woman who lived there – a Mrs Krause, who had had a child at his school some years ago. In a small back room he questioned her eagerly about his family.

‘The Nazis destroyed your school,’ she said.

‘What happened to my wife?’

‘They came for her in January last year, during the night. It was just after Dr Frank called for a million foreign workers to go to Germany. She’s in Germany, probably working on the land. I’m a member of the Polish Council for Protection and we tried to trace her, but without success.’

‘And the children – did they go with her?’ asked Joseph.

The Silver Sword

Mrs Krause turned away. 'I don't know anything about them,' she said.

Joseph felt that she was hiding unpleasant news. He begged her to speak.

'I know nothing,' she said.

'That's not true,' he said. 'As a member of the Council, you must have found out something.'

At last, with a weary sigh, she told him all she knew. 'On the night your wife was taken away, someone fired at the van from the attic of your house. A tyre was punctured and one of the Nazi soldiers was hit in the arm. But they got away with the van all the same. An hour later they sent a truckload of soldiers with explosives. They blew the whole place up. The children have not been seen since.'

Joseph was too dazed to grasp all this at once, and Mrs Krause had to repeat it. She told him of the efforts made to trace them, but it was obvious that she believed them to be dead.

Without a word Joseph got up and went out into the street.

For the rest of the day he wandered among the ruins, too dazed to think. He spent the night in the burnt-out shell of a bus station. In spite of the rain which fell through the roof, he slept.

He spent the next few days searching among the ruins for his children, with a kind of hopeless despair. At night he returned to the home of the Krauses, who fed him and gave him a bed.

One night Mrs Krause said to him, 'It's no use your going on like this. Your children are not alive. The house was locked before the soldiers left, and they must have died in the explosion. If you want to go on searching, search for your wife.'

'Germany's a large place,' said Joseph. 'What hope should I have of finding her?'

'She might escape, as you did,' said Mrs Krause. 'You must have known that something like this might happen. Did you never make any plans? Did you never fix a meeting place?'

Joseph thought for a moment. 'Yes, as a matter of fact we did. We arranged that, if we were separated, we would try to make for Switzerland. My wife is Swiss, and her parents live there still.'

Mrs Krause took his hands in hers and smiled. 'There's your answer, then. Go to Switzerland, and with God's help you will find her there.'

'But the children – they may still be here,' said Joseph.

He spent several more days looking for them.

One afternoon, while he was poking among the rubble of his old home, he found a tiny silver sword. About five inches long, it had a brass hilt engraved with a dragon breathing fire. It was a paper knife that he had once given to his wife for a birthday present.

While he was cleaning the blade on his jersey, he noticed that he was not alone. A small ragged boy sat watching him keenly. He had fair wispy hair and

unnaturally bright eyes. Under one arm he had a wooden box, under the other a bony grey kitten.

For a moment Joseph thought it was his son, Edek. Then he realized that he was too small for Edek.

He walked over and stroked the kitten.

'What's his name?' he asked.

'He hasn't got a name. He's just mine,' said the boy.

'What's *your* name?' said Joseph.

The boy pouted and hugged the wooden box under his arm. His eyes were shrewdly summing Joseph up. After a while, 'Give me that sword,' he said.

'But it's mine,' said Joseph.

'You found it on my pitch. This is my place.'

Joseph explained about his house and how this rubble was all that was left of it.

'I'll give you food for it,' said the boy, and he offered Joseph a cheese sandwich.

'I have plenty,' said Joseph. He put his hand into his pocket, but it was empty. He looked at the boy's sandwich and saw it was one that Mrs Krause had given him that morning, only rather grubby now.

'You little pickpocket!' he laughed. But before he could grab it back, the boy had swallowed most of it himself and given the rest to the cat, which was now purring contentedly.

After a while Joseph said, 'I'm looking for my family. Ruth is the eldest – she'd be fifteen now, and tall and fair. Then Edek, he'd be thirteen. Bronia is the youngest – she'd be five.' He described them briefly, told him what he knew of their fate and asked if the boy had seen them.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. 'Warsaw is full of lost children,' he said. 'They're dirty and starving and they all look alike.'

His words made him sound indifferent. But Joseph noticed that the boy had listened carefully and seemed to be storing up everything in the back of his mind.

'I'll give you this sword on one condition,' said Joseph. 'I'm not sure that my children *are* dead. If ever you see Ruth or Edek or Bronia, you must tell them about our meeting. Tell them I'm going to Switzerland to find their mother. To their grandparents' home. Tell them to follow as soon as they can.'

The boy grabbed the sword before Joseph had time to change his mind. He popped it into the little wooden box, picked up the cat and ran off.

'I'll tell you more about them tomorrow,' Joseph called after him. 'Meet you here in the morning – and don't let me down.'

The boy vanished.



CHAPTER 5

The Goods Train

Joseph did not expect the boy to keep his appointment with him in the morning. But he was there, sitting on the rubble with his cat and his wooden box, waiting for him.

‘It’s no use your trying to pick my pockets this morning,’ said Joseph, sitting down beside him.

‘You’ve pinned the flaps,’ said the boy. ‘But that doesn’t make any difference.’

Joseph moved away a couple of paces. ‘Keep your hands off,’ he said. ‘Now, listen. I’m starting off for Switzerland tonight. I don’t want to walk all the way, so I’m going to jump a train. Where’s the best place?’

‘You will be caught and shot,’ said the boy. ‘Or you will freeze to death in the trucks. The nights are bitter. Your hair will be white with frost, your fingers will turn

to icicles. And when the Nazis find you, you will be stiff as the boards at the bottom of the truck. That is what happens to those who jump trains.'

'You seem to know a lot about it,' said Joseph.

'I have seen it,' said the boy.

'Can't be helped. I must risk it,' said Joseph. 'Better than going back to the place I've come from.'

'I'll take you to the bend where the trains slow down,' said the boy. He jumped up and began running.

Joseph had a job to keep up with him. But the boy could run and talk and point out the landmarks and stuff food into his mouth and the cat's, all at the same time.

Joseph tried to find out something about this extraordinary boy. What was his name? Where did he live? Were his parents still alive? But the boy would tell him nothing.

They came to the railway and followed the track past the station to a large bend. Here, beside a train shed, they sat down to watch.

'All the trains slow down here,' said the boy. 'You will find no better place to jump on.'

They saw several trains pass westwards. One of them was a goods train, and it went more slowly than the rest. Would there be a goods train passing that way tonight? Joseph thought he could jump it without danger.

'Let's have something to eat,' said Joseph, and he unpinned the flaps of his pockets. But his hands went straight through and came out into daylight. He looked at the boy watching the trains, still chewing. He

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looked at the cat, curled and purring in the boy's lap. He knew where his sandwiches were now.

'You little devil!' he cried. 'Just wait till I catch you.'

But the boy had vanished.

He didn't see him again till after dark, after he had said goodbye to the Krauses and left their house for the last time. The boy was waiting for him at the bottom of the street.

'Ssh!' said the boy. 'We must go by the back ways – it's curfew time. If the Nazi patrols see us, they'll shoot.'

'What's all that you're carrying?' said Joseph.

He looked closer and saw the boy's ragged shirt was stuffed with long loaves, like monster cigars.

'Mother in heaven! Where did you get all that lot from?'

'I borrowed them,' said the boy. 'I know the canteen at the Nazi barracks. There's plenty in the bakehouse there. Take them – you'll be hungry.'

'Ought to see me through to America, that lot,' said Joseph, as he took them. 'What about yourself? You've some appetite, if I remember rightly.'

'I borrow for everybody,' said the boy. 'They always send me. I'm so small I can wriggle under the barbed wire. I run so fast the soldiers can never catch me, and if—' He broke off suddenly. 'Lie down. Patrol coming.'

They dropped behind a wall and lay flat till the patrol had passed. Then they hurried by the back ways to the railway. They almost ran into another patrol, and there were shots in the darkness. But the boy knew the ruins better than the patrol, and they got away.

They came to the bend where Joseph intended to jump, and they hid beside an empty warehouse. It was drizzling. The warehouse was littered with broken glass and charred timber. It was open to the sky except at one corner, where a strip of iron roof curled over. Under this they sheltered from the wet. A train clattered by, with a churning of pistons and a great hiss of steam. The long carriages clanked into the darkness, and the red light on the guard's van faded.

Too fast for me, thought Joseph. I must wait for a goods train.

As they sat there waiting, Joseph said, 'I have much to thank you for, and I don't even know your name.'

The boy said nothing, but went on stroking the cat.

The drizzle turned to heavy rain. The drops danced on the roof, which creaked at every gust of wind.

'Have you no parents?' said Joseph.

'I have my grey cat and this box,' he said.

'You won't come with me?' said Joseph.

The boy ignored the question. He was undoing the wooden box, and he took out the little silver sword. 'This is the best of my treasures,' he said. 'It will bring me luck. And it will bring you luck, because you gave it to me. I don't tell anybody my name – it is not safe. But because you gave me the sword and I didn't borrow it, I will tell you.' He whispered. 'It is Jan.'

'There are many Jans in Poland, what's your surname?'

'That's all. Just Jan.'

Joseph did not question him further. 'Stay here in the

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dry,' he said, when it was time to go. But Jan insisted on going with him.

They crouched down beside the main track.

A train came along – was it a goods train? By the light of a signal lamp they saw red crosses painted on the carriages, streaming with rain. A hospital train. The blinds were down. Except for an occasional blur where one had worn thin, no light peeped through.

At last, when Joseph had almost given up hope, a goods train came. The first few trucks rumbled slowly past.

'Goodbye, Jan. Remember your promise. Whatever happens, I shall not forget you. God bless you.'

Joseph chose an empty truck and ran alongside at the same speed as the train. Darkness swallowed him. Jan did not see him jump.

One by one the heavy, dismal, sodden trucks clanked by. Last of all, the small red light, so dim that it hardly showed. Then the shrill note of a whistle, as the train gathered speed beyond the bend.

It was raining heavily now.

Jan was soon soaked to the skin. He hurried away through the dark streets. He had tucked the grey cat inside his jacket. It was almost as wet as he was and hardly warm at all. Under his arm he hugged the wooden box. And he thought of the silver sword inside.