A BOY FROM VIENNA

by URI ERICH SCHWARZ

A BOY FROM VIENNA

The early life of

URI ERICH SCHWARZ

TABLE OF CONTENTS (linked in blue)

List of photographs (linked in blue)

FOREWORD

It has been some 15 years since I first sat down to put these memories on paper – or actually on a computer diskette, already even then my favourite writing tool. In retrospect, I am glad I wrote them then, because today I might not be able to remember all the details of my early days that seemed to pour out of my memory.

So, here we are, with some 35 chapters covering only the first 30 years of my life. But they were years crowded with happenings: emigration, first to Italy, then Palestine, the outbreak of the Second World War, my joining the (British) Royal Air Force, becoming a meteorologist, and serving all over the Middle East, from Egypt to the Persian Gulf. The later chapters cover the post-war years, my progress as a meteorologist, getting married, the death of my young wife after only four years, and the death of my mother, who was killed in the Holocaust.

The memoirs in this volume may tell you a lot about what happened to me, but perhaps not too much about who or what I am. Mark Twain said: "a biography can describe the buttons and cuff-links of the man, but not the man." You be the judge whether he was right!

o o o o o

Man muesste wieder sechzehn Jahre sein
und alles was seitdem geschah vergessen.
Man muesste wieder seltne Blumen pressen
und (weil man waechst) sich an der Tuere messen
und auf dem Schulweg in die Tore schrein.

(One should be able to be once again sixteen —
to press rare flowers into books upon the floor,
to gauge one's growing height against the bedroom door,
and on the way to school shout into every store —
and should be able to forget all in-between.)*

BOOK ONE

VIENNA

* Free translation from Erich Kaestner's poem:
"*Existence im Wiederholungsfalle*"
(Existence in the Case of Repeat Performance)

1.Grandfather (on mother's side) Moritz Teller, in his seventies (Bsenez, Chech Republic, early 1900s)

CHAPTER 1

"Av-v-very ... ah ... nice boy," stammered my fifteen year old sister Hedi when they brought her to my mother's hospital room to see her new little brother. Of course, everybody broke out laughing because the poor girl obviously had to make quite an effort to praise my looks.

"You had long black hair and a wizened old face when they first brought you to me," my mother used to tell me, "and you held your chin in your hand with a sad expression as if you wanted to say, 'why on earth did you bring me into this world?'"

But my parents seemed to be anything but sad about their first, and as far as my mother was concerned, only baby. My father had been married before, and after a messy divorce his four children came to live with him and my mother, who had become his second wife. The reason why all four children came to live with them was that, when the divorce judge asked their mother whether she laid any claims to the children, she had answered, "Let him keep those Jewish bastards." Evidently, she was of a different persuasion.

Two of my three half-sisters and my half-brother did not stay with us for long. My mother realized that life with what must have been antagonistic and difficult teenagers was not what her young marriage needed. A determined woman, she soon made them learn a trade and fend for themselves. Only with Hedi, the most intelligent of the four, did she remain close, and Hedi was therefore the only one of them who continued to play a role in my life.

All this took place in Vienna, during the years following the First World War. My father, Ernst, born in 1876, was the son of a Viennese Jewish tailor, who worked hard to give his son a better education and a better life than he had himself. But both he and his wife died early, and my father's three elder sisters undertook to see the boy through school. Being a bright boy, he made it through university. It must have been a heroic effort on the part of his three sisters, who remained together and never married.

These three sisters became dear old aunts to me. They came to live in a small, overstuffed and overheated apartment in an old

tenement building. I used to love visiting them and being spoiled by them. The only thing I disliked was using their toilet. The old building had only one toilet on each floor. I well remember its smell and the quarrels arising from the use and cleaning of the toilets among the tenants living on the floor.

Ernst Schwarz (not "Schwartz" because the "t" was abandoned during the latter part of the 19th Century, when German spelling was changed; the many "Schwartz" living in North America must therefore have descended from immigrants who came before the spelling change) had a good head for mathematics and might have become a *Universitatsprofessor* but for a certain romantic side to his nature.

Before finishing university, he fell in love with one of the "sweet Viennese girls" immortalized by painters and poets, a little seamstress. And when a baby announced itself, he did the "right thing" and married her.

As his sisters were not able to support a young and growing family, Ernst had to abandon his studies before becoming a *Herr Doktor*. He found a job as an insurance mathematician. I suppose that in those days, before the advent of electronic computers and with only fairly clumsy, hand-cranked calculators, this was a labourious and not very interesting job.

A few years and several babies later, the First World War broke out. Ernst may not have been too unhappy about being drafted into the army. As he had the necessary education — in Austria-Hungary, anyone who had completed high school could become an officer — he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the infantry. His photograph shows a dashing intellectual, complete with sword, moustache and pince-nez. I don't think Ernst ever served in the front lines.

Apart from the photograph, my only mementos of this time are a box of post cards he wrote to my mother, whom he must have met on one of his leaves, and a little story. The post cards typically show pictures of dismal Polish villages in which he was stationed, in equally dismal, foggy grays or sepias. A military censor apparently tried to black out the names of the villages printed on the reverse side of the cards. But, like everything else the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy did, this censorship was done so inefficiently that the names of the villages remain quite legible. So much for military secrets.

The story goes like this: We had a couple of brass vases, some 30 centimetres high, with a cylindrical base and a black top part that

opened like a flower. These vases were made out of spent canon shells. The preparation of these vases, and that of other minor brass objects, provided a little pocket money for Russian prisoners of war in Austrian camps. Toward the end of the war, Ernst was in charge of one of those prisoner-of-war camps. He must have been a kindly overseer, who did not interfere with these extra-curricular activities of the prisoners. In fact, he sometimes ordered vases and other objects for himself or as presents for others.

Late one evening, there was a knock on his door. A prisoner came to deliver a couple of vases that Ernst had ordered. When Ernst asked why the delivery couldn't have waited until the next morning, the prisoner answered, "No, Herr Lieutenant, that is not possible because, you see, we are escaping tonight!"

My mother, Stephanie (or Steffi, as she was called), came once or twice to visit my father in his camp. She was a striking looking woman, with beautiful white skin, dark eyes and masses of pitch-black hair. Ernst's fellow officers must have made much of Steffi at dinner parties in the officers' mess. As Ernst himself was dark-blond with blue eyes, they must have been an attractive pair.

Steffi was born some ten years after my father in what is today the Czech Republic. She appeared somewhere among the middle of nine children (a tenth died in infancy, which was not a bad child mortality rate for those days) of a Jewish innkeeper and his farmer wife. They lived in a small Moravian village close to the Austrian border, which featured green, rolling countryside, lots of fruit trees, corn, vegetables and livestock, and a very rural atmosphere. In fact, the Viennese town folk used to refer to this area as the "pickled cucumber country" because of the excellent sweet pickles produced in the region.

There was indeed much sweetness and simplicity about this place, and life proceeded there at a much slower pace than in hectic Vienna. The Jewish innkeeper was a well-known figure in those days in Central, and particularly Eastern Europe. The inns were usually of a simple kind, where the local peasants came for their glass of schnapps. The innkeeper had to deal often with drunk and rowdy customers. Moritz Teller, my grandfather, was well suited for that job. A stern, bearded patriarch, he presided over the goings on in the inn. He ruled his wife, Rosalia, and their nine children with an iron hand and, in the case of the latter, sometimes with a birch.

Moritz Teller's inn also had a small butcher's shop attached to it, although he himself wouldn't have eaten a morsel of the pork loins

and other meats for sale there because he was strictly kosher. He decreed that his family would be kosher, too. But I bet the kids, who grew up together with the local peasant kids, ate the forbidden goodies whenever they had the chance, as kosher treats were not available too often.

Best of all, the children loved wieners with sauerkraut, but kosher wieners were only available once in a while when father went to town on business. At the rare meal that featured these delicacies, each of Moritz's girls showed appreciation for the food in her own way. Steffi, a high spirited, vivacious girl, wolfed down the wieners with gusto, while her younger sister, Mimi, ate them much more slowly, savouring each bite and always leaving a choice piece of sausage to the end. The look of this delicious morsel would tantalize my mother, who had long finished her portion, until, when Mimi's attention temporarily strayed, she would quickly snatch and devour it, to the wails of poor Mimi.

I am sure that my mother must have been punished for this and for other transgressions.

Growing up as country kids, my mother and her siblings walked barefoot every day several miles to and from school through the green landscape dotted with tempting fruit trees. A strong wall usually protected the best orchards. In order to get at the fruits, Steffi's brothers would help her climb over the wall and then let her down. With fruits in her hand, they would hoist her back by her long black pigtails.

My grandfather's inn, which was a square two-story building, had a courtyard in its centre, in the middle of which stood a large and gnarled pear tree. The branches would knock gently in the wind against the windowpanes of the second floor bedroom in which I sometimes slept when I came on a visit as small boy. I remember a circular bench that surrounded the tree, on which one could sit on summer evenings to listen to stories told by an uncle or aunt, or to answer riddles with any cousins who might be present. In those days before television, and with radio in its infancy, we loved riddles.

When my grandfather became too old to manage the inn, they sold it and moved into a smaller house in a larger village nearby. That house also had a large yard, with fruit trees, chickens and even geese. I used to watch with fascination when the servant girl would force-feed the geese. Sitting on a low stool, she would take the goose between her legs, hold its beak open and cram large quantities of corn into it. The goose squawked like crazy when it got a moment to take

breath, and in between did its best to swallow the unwanted abundance. When released, the goose waddled away with an air of injured dignity. As a result of this force feeding, the geese developed huge livers, which furnished a Jewish-type of *foie gras*. This, together with the goose fat in which the foie gras was prepared, provided delicious sandwiches throughout the winter.

When visiting my grandparents in their new place, I was already a little older and loved to terrorize the cats in the house and the yard. I enjoyed pulling their tails. They soon learned to scurry up the nearest tree whenever they saw me approaching. My grandparents were of course also older, and I remember my grandfather only as an old man with a gray beard, dozing in the sun, and my grandmother as a little bent old lady, with a kerchief around her head. She always wanted to kiss me, but the kerchief and the moustache-like hairs near her mouth made me shy. When I ran away, she would follow me, offering a shilling for a kiss. That, of course, usually did the trick. The sweets I bought with the shilling in the little village grocery made an unwelcome kiss quite worthwhile.

By that time, only my grandparents' youngest daughter, Mimi, was living with them. Vienna, the glamorous capital of Austria-Hungary, had become at the turn of the 20th century a magnet that drew country people to make their fortunes. If you were intelligent and hard working, you usually could get by, and if you were lucky on top of that, you could go far. Although my mother and her brothers and sisters had usually no other formal education beyond what the village school could offer, several of them, including my mother, were very intelligent. By reading voraciously, they had developed their minds. They all were bilingual, speaking German at home, where it was regarded as the language of culture, and Czech at school and with the other village kids.

The oldest girl, Anna, was the first of the girls to leave for Vienna. Her mission was to look after the oldest brother, Rudi, who had gone there earlier to find a better job than the pickled cucumber country could offer. Eventually, several others of the children made their way to Vienna, among them my mother. As Rudi had by then left to take up a position with a plantation in the Dutch East Indies (people were more internationally mobile than today, as no visas were needed), Anna came to rule them with the same iron fist as old Moritz had used.

Anna looked after their jobs and morals. Although they were all a bit scared of her and her caustic tongue, her apartment became the

monthly meeting place for the family members in Vienna until the late thirties, when Hitler dispersed them and eventually made most of them part of his final solution. They came to eat her good country cooking, to tell about their affairs, to get advice and, not infrequently, to be upbraided. Of course, differences in temperament and life styles invariably developed between them as they got married and had their own families, lives, jobs or businesses. This sometimes caused rifts, and two aunts might not be on speaking terms for several weeks. But in the end they usually made up. A basic cohesiveness continued, which was often the secret for Jewish success — family closeness and support.

My mother soon found a job with a haberdasher. She seems to have had difficulties keeping his and other men's hands off her well-rounded form. How and where she met my father I do not know. It must have been during the First World War, and could well have taken place in the Viennese "Prater," where the *Herr Lieutenant* on leave would have come to look for amusement among the roundabouts, cafes, shooting galleries and other attractions.

The Prater was a world made for young lovers, who could sit dreamily hand-in-hand in the grotto trains that dove into the pitch-black interior of artificial mountains to reveal sudden brilliantly lit scenes of beauty or terror. Furtive kisses would be exchanged during the dark intervals. Depending on their age and financial means, the kids would also flock to the Punch and Judy shows, round-abouts, peep shows of ladies without abdomen or worse.

Ernst and Steffi married during the last year of the war, 1918. It must have been a difficult year. There was little food, epidemics afflicted the weakened population, and even to the uninformed the war must have seemed lost. Then came the turbulent days of the revolution that put an end to the 1000-year reign of the Habsburgs, and the painful periods of re-adjustment, of re-integrating the thousands of returning soldiers into a shattered economy. But my parents probably did not feel the full impact of these miseries, partly because of their happiness with each other, and partly because of the help and support that the family gave as always to its members.

From Czechoslovakia came a little food now and then, particularly when a family member went there on a visit. Uncles and aunts helped each other to find jobs and, equally important, housing.

Uncle Rudi had returned from the Dutch East Indies at the end of the war (I believe he had been interned there during the war),

together with his Dutch wife, the daughter of the plantation owner. By using his ample means, he had been able to rent an apartment in Vienna. When he moved with his family to Holland shortly afterwards, he passed the apartment to the newly married Steffi and Ernst.

2. Mother, Stefanie Teller, in her twenties (Vienna, early 1900s)

CHAPTER 2

IT was to Uncle Rudi's former apartment that I was brought from the hospital, and there I continued to live until I left Vienna. Like most European cities during the latter part of the 19th Century, Vienna grew rapidly because of the inflow of country people seeking a better life in the capital. Consequently, there was a building boom; old tenement buildings were torn down and larger and more up-to-date apartment buildings were put up in their place or where only small houses with gardens had stood. As with many others built during this time, our apartment building occupied a whole city block, had four stories (more were difficult to build without elevators), a large court in the middle, and four entrances, one on each side, dividing the building into four separate houses. Due to its size and imposing yellow stucco exterior, the neighbourhood people had given the building the affectionate name of *Die Wanzenburg* (The Bed Bug Castle). Despite that name, my acquaintance with bed bugs came only much later, during the Second World War, in some dilapidated Royal Air Force barracks in Egypt.

The large interior court was covered with bushes, grass and some small trees, but also had a feature dear to the heart of Viennese housewives, namely wooden racks on which carpets could be hung and beaten. Before the advent of the vacuum cleaner, this was the only way to get carpets dust-free. The court therefore often rang to the dull, explosive sounds of carpets being beaten by portly housewives or feisty maids from the country. This activity may also have provided some psychological benefits by allowing the beaters to get rid of their aggressive feelings, the housewives probably thinking of their husbands and the maids of their mistresses.

Strange that Freud who lived in Vienna among all this carpet beating never seems to have mentioned it as a potential therapy!

Other sounds from the court came from children playing among the greenery and from another typical feature, particularly during the depression years of the later twenties and early thirties, namely, the "court yard singers" as the Viennese called them. Many down-and-outs, sometimes whole families, would trek from court to court,

holding their hats in their hands and singing folk songs or modern "hits" propagated by the new medium of radio. They would end or intersperse their musical performances with short speeches about their plight, and appeal to the generosity of listeners.

The listeners would then throw pennies, wrapped carefully in bits of newspaper, in amounts that varied not only in accordance with the quality of the performance, but also with the singer. If he were a young and handsome chap, and had sung one of the more sentimental hit songs, the maids would shower him with paper-wrapped pennies. Sometimes, if their mistresses were out, the young women might even come down with gifts of food and carry on a little giggling chat.

Our apartment was located on the second floor and looked down not only on the court but also on the street. The street view was exceptionally pleasant because there were no houses on the other side, but instead — the Danube. Well, we could not see the "big" Danube from our windows, but rather the Danube-canal, an arm of the Danube that goes through the city. The big (and never blue) Danube touches only Vienna's outskirts.

It was lovely being able to watch from one's window the traffic on the water: paddle steamers going to Czechoslovakia and Hungary, barges laden with goods floating to the markets, and sometimes groups of canoes paddled by members of a sports club. But even when nothing else passed by, there was always the ferry. This was a wooden boat seating some ten people that was tied to a cable spanning the canal opposite our windows. The current pushed the ferry from one side of the canal to the other, depending on which direction the ferry's steering oar pointed. The passage cost only a penny, but saved pedestrians wanting to reach a destination opposite our building a fifteen-minute walk to the nearest bridge and back. Despite the insignificant cost, my mother very seldom took the ferry. I suspect that she never quite trusted the safety of the boat and its suspension. So when we did take it, it was a treat for me to float on the Danube and let my hand trail through the rushing water.

When remembering the scene from our windows, I also have to remember the windows themselves. As Vienna has a climate typical of the northern European continent, winters are pretty cold. To insulate the apartment better from the cold (there was of course no central heating, only tall, tiled stoves in each room), double windows were usually employed. But energy saving went even further than that. In order to prevent drafts from coming in, a square pillow that was aptly called the "window pillow" usually occupied the lowest

20 centimetres or so of the empty space between the double windows. For still more protection against drafts, a heavy piece of drapery called a "window protector" was hung in front of the lower parts of the windows inside the room. My mother had bought our window protectors at an auction in the Royal Palace where, after the revolution, many of the imperial household goods could be purchased. Thus, our window protectors bore an emblazoned imperial eagle, which gave my imagination much nourishment, including dreams of being the misplaced scion of an aristocratic family.

The apartment itself consisted of a fairly long entrance hall, a kitchen, two large rooms and a smaller one, the latter called in Viennese dialect a *kabinett*. This word once caused me a bit of embarrassment. When fleeing to Italy to escape from the Nazis, I looked there for a place to live. Seeing a "For Rent" sign in a window, I knocked on the door and asked whether they had perhaps a small room, a *gabinetto*, to rent.

They eyed me suspiciously and said, "You may use it if you want to, but you certainly can't rent it." As it turned out, *gabinetto* does mean "small room" in Italian, but of a certain type, namely a toilet!

And, yes, there was a toilet in our apartment, and no, there was no bathroom. In fact, when my parents first moved in, there was only one water tap for the whole apartment, located in the entrance hall! Luckily, the kitchen was very large and walls sturdy enough to allow pipes to be re-laid; this allowed the kitchen to be divided into a kitchen and a bathroom, and (cold) water to be piped to both. The hot water for the bath had to be produced by a separate water heater suspended over the foot-end of the tub and heated by gas. Gas, which we used for cooking, we also used for lighting at first, as electricity only arrived later. I remember the coziness of gas lighting and even of paraffin lamps, which we used quite frequently when we sat around the table in the evenings reading or working even after the introduction of electricity, because electricity was still too expensive to be used too often.

The elaborate Tiffany-type lamp that hung over the red plush-covered dining room table illuminated, first by means of gas and later electricity, frequent dinner parties. Not only family, but more and more often friends of my parents would make an appearance, particularly those whom my father met in his new job as high school teacher and in his hobby as education reformer. Because my father had no doctorate, he must have had a difficult time finding a good

position after he came back from the army. But his good mathematics background and interests in education reform qualified him for a position as a teacher of mathematics in a newly founded private high school, the first co-educational school in Vienna. Catholic Vienna for a long time looked askance at such schools; much prejudice had to be overcome before they multiplied.

Ernst also pioneered another field of education to which his "proletarian" background probably led him. Together with other teachers, he founded the "People's University," which offered evening courses to workers who wanted to improve their education and to any others who wanted to enlarge their cultural horizons. Mathematics, physics, languages, painting, even theatre were taught there. I well remember attending plays by Brecht and other modern authors, who became household names in the West only after the Second World War. All in all, the People's University was a "progressive" enterprise that brought in little if any money, but much satisfaction.

I was only eight when my father died. From the little I remember about him, and from what others told me about him, he was a cheerful, convivial person, who spent much of his time with friends in coffeehouses and pubs, playing cards with family members at home and enjoying walks in the nearby Vienna woods. As a teacher, he seems to have been successful and well liked. Many years later, of all places in Egypt, I was reminded of that by a former pupil of his.

The very choice of my name shows that my father must have known a lot about students and their behaviour. My mother wanted to call me Hans, but my father dissuaded her by pointing out that, instead of Hans Schwarz, my fellow students would surely have called me "Hans Schwanz," which means "Hans the Prick." My mother accepted this forecast and decided on her second choice, "Erich".

My father characteristically used the Viennese dialect, even when teaching mathematics, which probably contributed to his popularity. There were, and most likely still are, different variations on the Viennese dialect. Sailors, coachmen and other blue collar workers spoke a coarser version, while other, more refined forms were used frequently even by the aristocracy, perhaps partly because of an unconscious wish to sound different from the Germans in the North. The Viennese dialect has a musical quality with much softer sounds than High German. Owing to the centuries-old association with other languages of the Austrian Empire, it includes many Slavic,

Hungarian and Italian words. In its broader forms, it can sound as different from High German and as difficult to understand by those who only speak the latter, as Swiss German.

The Viennese dialect served indispensably for telling jokes and funny stories, a favourite Viennese pastime. Professor Schwarz was no different in this respect from his compatriots, as the story about his supervision of the prisoner of war camp demonstrates. Incidentally, his title "Professor" was no joke. Austrian high school teachers had and still have the honorary title of professor, and their wives are of course called "Frau Professor." Having grown up in the title-conscious society of the Austrian Empire, this must have pleased my mother considerably.

Unfortunately, Ernst's "romantic" nature, which got him into trouble when he was young, also seems to have caused him some trouble later. I only heard hints about this from my mother, long after my father's death. He was said to have been too fond of his female pupils, and there were rumours that some of them took advantage of this to wheedle exam questions out of him. My mother also hinted that the rumpus caused by these accusations was a factor in his death at the early age of 52. It may well have been that any truth in these charges was seized upon and exaggerated by people whose true aim was to discredit co-education.

But despite all this my parents seem to have had a warm and loving marriage, with my mother probably the stronger and more "sensible" personality. This helped her when my father died after only ten years of marriage, leaving my mother to battle difficult economic circumstances. But during those ten years, we lived well, enjoyed good food, employed a maid and travelled quite widely for the time. As my mother suffered from gall bladder trouble, her doctor ordered her to take the waters at a Czechoslovak Spa, such as Karlsbad. So there we went, my mother basking in the admiration of many male cure-seekers. She continued to be a striking-looking woman, even when her figure became more ample than in her youth. This admiration was said to have been even more evident and openly expressed when we took a trip to Northern Italy, the Italian men making little secret of their appreciation of her Latin looks. My own memories of this trip (I must have been six) are more of the Northern Italian landscape around Lake Garda. Even then, I found the lemon trees and vineyards captivating as I stood on the open rear platform of the last railway car, while the train slowly climbed the terraced hills.

My earliest memories are more of a musical kind: sitting on the kitchen floor and playing "military band" by trumpeting as loud as I could and banging pot lids together. I may have been three, and my mother's eardrums must have been under much strain. This musical interest seems to have continued for some time. When I was four or five, we spent a holiday in a little Austrian village where, during a brass band concert on the main square, I grabbed a little girl and started dancing with her, to the amusement of bystanders.

Later, when being forced to learn piano from a sour old lady with long bony fingers (which often slapped mine), my musical interest diminished but never disappeared entirely. It returned again during lonely war days in the Persian Gulf, of all places. But that is a story for later.

At six, I started elementary school, which was a few minutes walk from where we lived, at the border of a pleasant wooded area of the city, part of the famous Vienna Prater. The amusement park of the same name occupied only a small part of the large wooded area, interspersed with meadows and even little lakes, of which the Prater consisted. The name probably derives from the Latin *pratum*, meaning meadow, which shows that the Viennese had used the place since ancient times for recreation and sport of all kinds, from ball games to courting. We young pupils used it extensively for the former in summer and for snowball fights or tobogganing in winter.

The only other memories that stand out from my elementary school days concern the teacher I had throughout my four years at the school. He was a relatively young man, in his late twenties perhaps, and quite modern in his views and methods. He would read to us every day from newspapers and had sessions in which we could ask him anything we liked. Once I asked during such a session, "How does a locomotive look from underneath?" That must have stumped him, because I can't remember the answer. His modernity did not always go down well with our parents, though. One bone of contention in this respect was his cavalier attitude to our handwriting. When mother once complained to him about my poor handwriting, he answered, "But madam, your son lives in the age of the typewriter. He will never have to write long-hand." Little did he know how much my future correspondents and secretaries would have to suffer from my handwriting, and even I when trying to decipher my notes.

He also did not teach us German (Gothic) script, which he thought outdated. When entering high school, I had to try and learn it fast, because our German professor insisted that we write our essays

in that script. As capital letters in Gothic script are particularly difficult, I was at first limited to using only those nouns whose capitals I knew how to write, which put a considerable crimp in my usually fertile imagination.

My father died during the middle of my elementary school days. He was a heavy smoker, loved rich food (everything was cooked in butter in those days) and may well have been troubled by accusations at school. He died of a sudden heart attack one night in early summer, just before we were to go on holiday. The evening before, we had guests. I was proud to be sent for the first time to the nearest pub for a jug of beer for them to wash down the rich goulash. When I woke up the next morning, my tearful mother told me that father had gone away for a trip, which I found very strange. Many years later, my mother told me that his last words had been about his "Erich," about leaving him so early.

I can't remember what we did that summer, but it seems to have taken a long time to sink in that my father would never return. When, during one of the first classes in school after the summer, my teacher took me aside and talked earnestly about facing life without a father courageously and manfully, I still was not quite sure what it all meant. I remember nodding as if I understood him well and walking away puzzled but also a little proud of having been singled out by the teacher for a personal heart-to-heart talk.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 3

ON my tenth birthday, my family gathered at Aunt Anna's to celebrate the end of my elementary school days over coffee and *guggelhupf*, a Viennese type of pound cake. My parents announced that I would continue my education by going to a *Gymnasium*.

Aunt Anna, always the practical woman, asked my mother, "Why don't you send the boy to a more technically oriented school, so that he can learn how to build machines for Adi's (her husband's) factory?" She put this question to my mother in Czech of course, which I was thought not to understand. But as kids often do, I managed to understand quite a bit of that language, particularly things I was not supposed to.

"No, Anna," my mother replied. "You know that Erich is not a practical sort of boy; he loves reading and playing puppet theatre. He's a dreamy boy and not good with his hands. I can see him becoming a writer or something to do with the theatre like a stage director, but not an engineer."

Although my mother was quite right in what she said, I wonder whether there was more to it than that. My mother, like most people at that time, saw the old-fashioned *Gymnasium*, where Latin and Greek were taught, as the fountainhead of real culture. Engineering made people think of hands dirty with axle grease. Even science was not yet the respected and desirable pursuit it later became.

The fact that a *Gymnasium* was situated close to where we lived — just across the bridge and then another five minutes' walk — may also have contributed to the decision to send me there. The other types of high schools (*Realschule* — no Latin or Greek, but English, French and lots of math; and *RealGymnasium* — Latin and some math, but no Greek) were more distant.

So, *Gymnasium* it was, and I never regretted the choice.

The lack of a better scientific background did not cause me too many difficulties later in life, despite my choice of career in meteorology. This was largely because the Austrian curriculum was pretty rigorous. Despite its reputation for emphasizing the liberal arts,

the *Gymnasium* provided me with a high school math background generally beyond British and American standards. And the rich, humanistic culture imparted by the *Gymnasium* — it was actually called the "Humanistic *Gymnasium*" — was something that enriched my life and gave me a greater appreciation for art, literature and music than other types of high schools would have given me.

* * *

"What's your name?"

The fat boy sitting next to me on my first day in the *Gymnasium* eyed me curiously.

"Erich Schwarz. What's yours?"

"Fritz Gruber. Are you Jewish?"

I had to think for a moment, because religion had played such a minor role in our progressive and "assimilated" home. In elementary school, moreover, the subject had never come up. Also, as my step-sisters and step-brother were Catholics, we had a Christmas tree and Easter eggs, and I got presents put into the stockings I hung over the stove on St. Nicholas' night (5/6 December).

" Yes I am — and you?"

"I thought you were Jewish. I am an "Old Catholic."

"What do you mean," I remember asking, perplexed. "You are still young, aren't you?"

He explained that "Old Catholic" was the name of a sect similar to the Russian "Old Believers" who had not agreed with some of the church's reformations. As an Old Catholic, Fritz was also a minority (of one) in the class. We became quite friendly in a sort of defensive alliance against the others, although we were very different in background and temperament.

It must have been instinct that helped Fritz, as most other Austrian gentiles, to spot a Jew at once. I did not look typically Jewish, nor did my name sound Jewish. Schwarz — meaning Black in English — is quite a common name among Germans and Austrians. In fact, a German Franciscan monk by the name of Berthold Schwarz was once thought to have "discovered" gunpowder in the 14th Century, although we now know that gunpowder was discussed by Roger Bacon in the 13th Century and was used by the Chinese even earlier.

Anti-Semitism pervaded all levels of Viennese and Austrian society, and had done so since time immemorial. The Austria in which I grew

up was 90 percent Catholic, as the Catholic Hapsburgs had prevented the Austrian people from joining the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church, of course, traditionally fostered Anti-Semitism. Later, when the emancipation of the Jews in the late 18th and early 19th century made them more visible, Anti-Semitism took on political as well as religious overtones. Demagogic politicians could always count on success with diatribes against Jewish moneylenders and bankers, even though people knew that most Jews — like my grandfather, the tailor — were members of the poor working class.

Although many prominent Viennese Jews of the generation before mine, such as Freud and Mahler, had encountered Anti-Semitism, the situation had become worse after the First World War. (Incidentally, Freud, Mahler, and several other well-known Austrian Jews originated in roughly the same area of today's Czech Republic as my mother's family.) The First World War destroyed much of the eastern part of the Austrian Empire, which included a large part of present-day Poland. A large Jewish population had inhabited that region, often living off the land or in small villages. After the War, many of these Jews flooded into Vienna, creating a Jewish population of well over 100,000 in a city of barely two million.

The newcomers usually spoke only Yiddish. They dressed in long black caftans, and the women wore the traditional kerchief on their heads. They were almost all poor and often lacked education or skills with which to earn more than a meagre living. The trades that they brought with them from the East, such as that of a blacksmith or cobbler, were of not much use in Vienna. The newcomers usually turned to peddling or buying old clothes. This, together with their appearance and language, made them an object of ridicule among the Viennese. When, through hard work and frugal living, some of the new arrivals managed to save some money, buy a house and establish themselves in society, this ridicule turned into active antipathy. The old-time Viennese regarded these Jews the way some modern-day Britons view the Pakistanis living in today's London: as a highly visible, alien element that reminded them of past imperial sins. Those minorities who succeeded were suspected of doing so through cunning or swindling.

The Anti-Semitism I encountered in high school was of a relatively low-level type. There were few fights or blows; some fellow students would simply ignore me or have as little to do with me as possible. I soon found out with whom I could associate and with

whom I could not. The less intelligent students were typically more Anti-Semitic. With teachers, the situation posed greater difficulties, because they could be sarcastic, against which there was little defence. They could also give poor marks, forcing Jewish students to study harder than their classmates in order to succeed. As I continued to be dreamy and fonder of playing than of studying, this often worked against me, particularly in subjects which did not interest me, or were not presented interestingly.

Anti-Semitism was of course not the only new experience I encountered in high school. Gone were the days of the satchel on my back. Now I proudly lugged my school bag by hand to class, often labouriously in the first years. There was no longer one teacher with whom to try to build a trusting relationship, but several — a separate one for each subject, who were usually much less approachable than my elementary school teachers. There were also so many older students, most of whom regarded us youngsters as scum and would kick or punch us when they did not ignore us.

On the whole, I reacted to high school with selective or graduated dislike, depending on subject and teacher. The subjects I liked best were German, History, Geography, and later English and Philosophy, subjects stimulating to my imagination or, in the case of the latter two, well presented. Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and something called "Natural History" were my least favourite subjects, often because the teachers presented them poorly or because the teachers and I eyed each other with mutual dislike.

In the case of my Math/Physics/Chemistry class, I found my professor to be both terrible at teaching and difficult to like. Unfortunately for me, Professor Lackner also served as the *Klassenvorstand* — Class Director, in English — and in this capacity was responsible for maintaining discipline. Other teachers would report our misdeeds to him, and he would mete out punishment, such as letters to parents, staying behind in school or writing extra essays. I am only glad that there was no corporal punishment!

To make matters worse, this professor lived close to my house. I sometimes thought that he was spying on me during after-school hours. If he saw me riding my bike or playing football with friends, he would call me the next day to the blackboard and give me some problems to solve. If I was unable to solve them, as was often the case, he would smile sarcastically and say, "You see! You should have studied instead of playing football!" Although he had a considerable paunch, he was also the Gym teacher and as such he

favoured outstanding athletes. Although better than average, I was never outstanding in athletics, except perhaps in swimming, over which he did not preside. When, during my last high school year, the Nazis came to power after having been suppressed for several years, it did not surprise me to learn that he had been a staunch underground Nazi member.

The younger teachers were generally more approachable, which in turn made the classes they taught more desirable. We didn't have any female teachers, although the girl students in parallel classes did occasionally have a woman as a teacher. I remember at least one woman who taught the girls Gym. Unfortunately, the younger teachers taught only the less important subjects, such as drawing, singing or English. I remember my English teacher as a natty-looking man with horn-rimmed glasses and a pencil moustache. He had spent a year in England and would often tell us stories about that time or read to us from English newspapers. Some of my classmates and I found this exotic and fascinating, but the majority did not take part in his lessons, because English was an extra-curricular subject taken by choice and did not count in the overall assessment average.

The most difficult subjects were Latin and Greek. We started the former at age 12 and the latter at 14, continuing until 18. Given the number of years we spent studying these ancient languages, particularly Latin, we should have reached quite a high level of capability. But the teachers were of indifferent quality, and the results were similarly indifferent. The schools were state owned and run, and the teachers were often civil servants who seemed simply to be marking time. Several of them made us learn by rote. One Greek teacher made us learn the first hundred lines of Homer's *Iliad* by heart, and then would leave us to our own devices during his classes, on the understanding that if the Director came in, we all would stand up and start reciting the lines like a Greek chorus.

While we were diverting ourselves, he would sit in the back and read books. I remember him exclaiming once on such an occasion, "What nonsense!" I craned my neck to see what he was reading and it turned out to be Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. When he saw me looking at the book (which was suppressed in Austria at that time), he grinned and said by way of explanation, "One must see what that fellow has to say, no?"

But there is little doubt that my Latin was of great help later in learning other languages, particularly Italian, French and even English. I still manage to stumble through Latin inscriptions on

tombstones and in museums, but have forgotten most of my Greek. Still, when I visited Greece for the first time many years after my time at the *Gymnasium*, I was surprised that I could make out many shop signs and newspaper headlines, although I couldn't understand anything of the spoken language because of the different pronunciation. Modern Greek seems to be full of "ee" sounds — what I learned in *Gymnasium* to call "Atainai" is now pronounced "Atheenee". Of course, who really knows how the ancient Greeks pronounced their language? Or how the Romans and their subjects pronounced Latin, for that matter? What we in school pronounced "Tsitsero" (Cicero) is pronounced "Sisero" in English and "Tshitshero" in Italian. I understand there are reasons to believe that the Romans pronounced it "Kikero." So take your pick!

The Nazi period, which started during my last *Gymnasium* year and forced me to change school and eventually flee the country, also made it impossible to stay in contact with the few classmates with whom I had been on friendly terms, such as Fritz Gruber. I will of course say more about the Nazi take-over later, but would like to close the account of my high school days with the following episode.

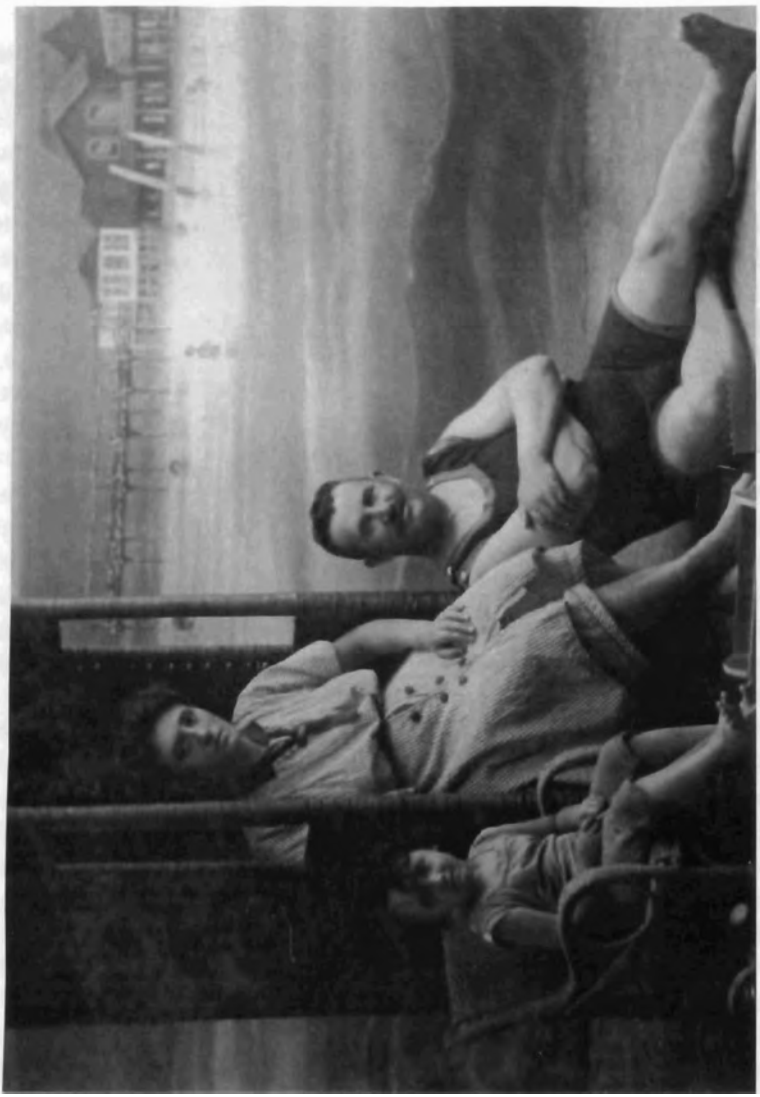
One of my classmates was a very intelligent boy of aristocratic descent, with interests and temperament similar to mine. Because of our social and religious differences, however, we never became friends. We were friendly rivals in things such as the reading in class of Goethe or Schiller plays, where he and I would usually have the leading roles assigned to us. When the Nazis came to power, he joined them enthusiastically and idealistically, believing wholeheartedly in their "national" and "socialistic" goals. One day he took me aside and said, "I want you to know, Erich, that we are not against all Jews, but only against the newcomers who don't belong in our country. We have nothing against Jews whose families have lived in Austria for generations, like yours."

But it did not take long for rumours to spread about Nazi atrocities against Jews in Vienna — irrespective of how long their families had lived in Austria — and even against many non-Jews. Soon these rumours became common knowledge.

One day there was a knock at my door and he asked me to come with him for a little walk in the Prater. During that walk, he told me how disappointed he was about Nazi behaviour in Austria, but that he hoped that this was only the first reaction of a party long suppressed. Things would surely improve as soon as the *Fuehrer* learned of the excesses going on in Vienna. That was the last time I saw him. Many

years later, I heard that a few months after our talk he had killed himself because he could not reconcile Nazi actions with his conscience.

There were other people like him as well, and we should honour all their memories.



3. Aunt, Anna Teller-Blau with husband Adolf Blau and daughter Erika (Grado, Italy, early 20th Century)

CHAPTER 4

"AND how was school today?" My mother's question, the same question asked by millions of other mothers every day, elicited the typical reply:

"Oh, same as always, Mummy."

How could I explain to my mother that it seemed terribly funny when Fritz stumbled through his Latin response, confusing *fugio* (to put to flight) with *fugo* (to flee), when that day he had been seen to run like a hare himself from a tall senior student; or how we had amused ourselves stalking some girls in the corridors between classes, imitating their chatter? How could I have explained the atmosphere, the background, without which the individual occurrences were meaningless or even silly? And even with those explanations, many of these incidents would have seemed nonsensical to grown-ups.

This does not mean that I was not fond of my mother. As there were only the two of us, we lived very close to each other, mentally and physically. Each of us knew at any moment what the other was thinking or feeling, and we each tried to meet the other's wishes before they were even spoken. I did not always try hard enough though, while she perhaps tried too hard, thinking that she had to be both mother and father to me.

What often got me into trouble with her was poor school performance. Whenever she returned from one of the twice-yearly parent/teacher interviews, she would be upset because, with the exception of teachers in my favourite subjects, they all said, "He could do much better, *Frau Professor*. He is a very intelligent boy, but he is too dreamy and does not work hard enough." As a result, I often felt quite guilty when she complained that she was trying to give me a good education under very difficult economic circumstances and that I did not sufficiently appreciate how good I had it. In fact, I now believe that the reason why she did not remarry, although she remained a good-looking woman with many admirers, was that she did not want to give me a stepfather, who might pay less attention to me than to his own offspring. And that probably meant self-denial on her part emotionally, physically and economically.

Our sharing the same bedroom heightened our physical proximity. As she was a very progressive person, she freely undressed in front of me because she thought that this would make me familiar with the female form and prevent me from having "stupid fantasies." As a matter of fact, it neither did that nor did it cause me incestuous or Oedipal feelings.

Apart from school, I fulfilled my need for siblings and male company by enthusiastically participating in boy scout activities and through a close relationship with my stepsister Hedi and her husband Ernst. I joined the scouts as a "cub" at quite an early age. My mother actively encouraged this, realizing that it would be good for me to have the company of boys other than my school mates, few of whom were close friends. She also used the time I spent on boy scout activities with other members of her family and with the occasional gentleman friend who passed through her life and mine. These gentleman friends were usually kind to me. Some gave me presents or played "four-hands" piano with me. I was not a very enthusiastic pianist and stopped playing as soon as I convinced my mother that I would not become a *wunderkind*, although I took up piano again later in life with more understanding and pleasure.

The boy scouts did more than provide male companionship; they also taught me discipline and responsibility, far better than school had. In Austria, there were two kinds of boy scouts groups: religious (Catholic) and non-religious. As a result, the non-religious scout groups usually had mostly Jewish members, which kept anti-Semitism to a minimum.

There was little contact between boy scouts and girl guides; this served to foster "crushes" among or on older boys, which sometimes led to homosexual acts as temporary outlets of feelings. For most scouts, particularly those of us who had no sisters, the separation of the genders also made us diffident when we did meet girls socially, or later romantically.

The scout troops met once a week in a basement that served as local headquarters, and played, sang songs or prepared for the outings that took place on many Sundays. The proximity of the Vienna Woods made it easy to arrange such outings and the Woods themselves contained ample terrain for short or long hikes, games or parades. Sometimes we would stay overnight, usually in dormitories provided by castles or monasteries that dotted the area. We generally used tents only during summer camping, and even then we usually had foundations and lower walls made of wood. The frequently cool

and rainy Alpine summers caused scout leaders to worry about their scouts catching colds.

Even the train trip to the summer camp was exciting — storming aboard, finding a place together with my particular friends, stowing away equipment and belongings, arranging space for a snooze at night. While it was fun for us, I can imagine how it must have seemed to the other travellers. We even had a way to get rid of others from our train compartment. We would redden a boy's face by paint or rubbing; then lead him into a compartment, carefully settle him into a corner and discuss his illness in hushed, worried tones. "It could be measles, you know!" one might say, while another would reply, "It seems more mumps to me. Better be careful, that's awfully contagious!" It wouldn't take long for other passengers to gather their belongings and look for another compartment.

Then we would settle down gleefully, some of us spreading paper on the floor for sleeping, while others would crawl up to sleep in the luggage racks made of hammock-like netting.

Except for rainy days, camp life was equally exciting. Our camps were usually located in glorious alpine settings with plentiful possibilities for climbs (of the easier variety) and hikes. There were also meadows for playing football and other games. Some camps were even located on the grounds of castles. I remember one camp particularly well because it was situated in the magnificent park of historic Schloss Kleesheim outside Salzburg. It is not so much the park that I remember, or even the Schloss, but Salzburg and its Festival. We managed to see some of the plays, including Goethe's *Faust*, performed in an old rock-hewn amphitheatre with Romanesque-arched galleries high up in the rock facing the audience. That was a particularly unforgettable experience for a theatre buff like me. The vast natural stage featured a medieval town section, with red flickering Hell below, and the Lord appearing in glory in the centre of the top gallery. Max Reinhardt, the famous stage director, had created this magnificent setting. His "Reinhardt Seminar" for actors flourished in the town. My niece Susi, Hedi's daughter, later studied there.

Camp life was not only fun but also brought responsibilities. I had ample ambition and soon became a troop leader, which made me responsible for periodic kitchen duties. Together with others in my troop, I peeled potatoes (mountains of them!), cleaned pots and pans (huge ones, which had to be cleaned without hot water, usually by taking them to the river and scrubbing them with sand) and actually

prepared some of the food. The camp director gave us the menu and the ingredients for its preparation, while the storekeeper kept his storeroom well guarded to prevent the disappearance of large slabs of cooking chocolate.

Once I had to prepare "bread dumplings," which are eaten along with meat and gravy instead of potatoes. To make bread dumplings, one breaks up stale rolls into small pieces and fries them in fat. Then, after soaking the bread pieces in milk and mixing in flour and fried onions, one moulds large dumplings that are boiled in water until they are hard enough to be sliced into slabs.

When it was my turn to make the dumplings, the camp director gave me a large amount of margarine, some of which was for frying the bread dumplings that night, and some to be used for next day's breakfast. I didn't realize that I was supposed to save part of the margarine for breakfast, nor did I know that stale rolls soak up fat very quickly. I soon used up all the margarine and went to ask the storekeeper for more. Not remembering that I had already been given all the fat that should have been used for the frying — and more — he handed me another healthy quantity. The dumplings turned out rich and excellent, but when the camp director and storekeeper realized how much margarine had been used in their preparation, they were aghast at the budgetary implications. During the meal, whenever they took a bite of dumplings, they would count aloud how much that bite cost: "20 Groschen," "another 25 Groschen" and so on. It took me a long time to live down that extravagance.

I continued scouting until I left Vienna at age 18. During the last few months, my scout troop had to operate underground because the Nazis had dissolved all youth movements except their own Hitler *Jugend*. Because of emigration and war, I was never able to resume scouting. I sorely would have liked to remain active in some youth activity of that kind. Nevertheless, my scouting past proved useful in many ways, particularly during my years in the Royal Air Force, and not only because it had given me experience of discipline, responsibility, parades, camp life and primitive cooking. More about that later, when I discuss my RAF days.

On Sundays when I was not engaged in scouting activities, I often spent time with my sister and her family. Hedi had developed into a slim and good-looking young woman, cheerful and down-to-earth, the right type for the job she undertook after finishing at a teachers' seminary. She became a social worker with the City of Vienna and did good work with the many difficult cases that came her

way. Not long after starting, at a party in our house, she met a young man who was a protege of my father's at the People's University. Ernst — the young man had the same first name as my father — was very keen on literature, but his father had insisted that he first become a lawyer (a *Herr Doktor*) before he could do anything else. After graduating from his law studies, the young Dr. Ernst Schoenwiese lost little time before starting to study and eventually to teach literature in evening courses and to write poetry. He also took a wife. Hedi and Ernst, despite minimal income, entertained many young and impecunious poets and writers, who drank at their house their only cup of coffee and ate their only buttered roll of the week.

I found the literary atmosphere of Hedi and Ernst's home exceptionally congenial. While other kids would have been excited to meet famous sportsmen, I thought it was marvellous to meet poets and writers. I also stood in greater awe of the young, impoverished poets than of the older, established ones. Once, the poet Ernst Lissauer, then some 60 years old, was visiting at the home of Hedi and Ernst. After a festive lunch, the discussion turned to world events reported in the press. When the famous poet revealed that he did not know the location of some far away place like Kigali or Ouagadougou, I exclaimed with the shock that only a 12-year-old in the full flush of *Gymnasium* geography knowledge could muster, "But Herr Lissauer, how could you not know that? It's in Central Africa, of course!" I hope Herr Lissauer forgave me.

I must admit that I was also keen on sport, in particular THE European game — soccer. A major league club had its pitch close to where we lived at the entrance to the Prater, and I loved to go to matches there whenever I had money for the entrance fee. Hedi and Ernst did give me a schilling as weekly pocket money, but that didn't go far. So, together with some friends, I would sometimes try to get into the spectator section of the soccer pitch by climbing over a part of the fence that was not too high and was hidden behind some tall trees.

We first would look around to see whether anyone could see us. We knew that the police had once nabbed some of our friends at the same type of escapade. When the coast was clear, we would quickly scale the wire fence. Once, when struggling over the last metre or so, my foot got caught in one of the wire meshes; I tugged and tugged, trying to hang on at the same time when — horror of horrors — a policeman materialized. My tugging became frantic but I remained stuck. Then I heard the policeman say, "Hold still, you dummer Bub!"

When I looked down in astonishment, he reached up, freed my foot and helped me over the fence. "Don't let me catch you again, *Lausbub* (little rascal)!"

Like most Viennese, Hedi and Ernst loved to ramble through the Vienna Woods. I sometimes went with them, showing them glades and views that I had found with my scout troop. Then we would rest in one of the many cafes or restaurants with which the Vienna Woods abound. That, incidentally, is one of the differences between Europe and North America: in the latter one merely goes for a walk, while in Europe one walks towards a goal, usually a café or restaurant. These were often rustic affairs, with bare wooden tables and benches set among the grass and the flowers. Visitors would eat their own food out of paper bags and buy a glass of wine, a soft drink or a cup of coffee. (Nobody drank tea; that was taken only when one had a cold. Had I been offered tea at any other time, I would have asked, "Do you think I am sick?") As finances were often strained, Ernst might drink a single glass of wine, while Hedi and I shared a bottle of soda. She still reminds me sometimes that on one such occasion I had been the first to drink from the soda bottle, nearly emptying it, and then handed it to her with a royal flourish, saying "You can drink it all, no need to leave me anything!"

Later, after their daughter Susi was born, we would walk on easier paths, with me pushing the pram and playing with the pretty baby. Sometimes Hedi and Susi would stay at home, and Ernst and I would take faster walks, with me trying to keep up with his longer legs and asking him innumerable questions about the world, philosophy, politics — all that a boy might ask his father. At other times, particularly during summer holidays, we would go swimming. It was Ernst who taught me the good breaststroke that gave me a prize in a countrywide boy scout swimming meet.

I spent the rest of my summers at a cottage my mother used to rent in a simple, inexpensive village not too far from Vienna. It belonged to a policeman, who used the upper floor and rented us the lower. In the bare, stone-walled basement, the policeman used to make his own wine (I suppose he had a permit!). It was fascinating to watch the concoction bubbling away in large green flasks and to smell the heady fumes. In front of the rustic house, a small brook flowed in a ravine, while in the back, grass and fruit trees ascended steeply to more level fields. The cherry trees yielded particularly delicious fruit. I loved to sit in a top branch, eat cherries right off the tree and spit the stones on kids passing by. The policeman owner had

several sons and daughters and, together with other children of the neighbourhood, we would eat cherries, roast potatoes in the fields and fish in the brook. On rainy days, the wine cellar gave us a place for games or, when the fumes went to our heads, for wrestling with the girls, which entailed more groping than fighting.

I got a bicycle on my 13th or 14th birthday, which allowed me to cycle from Vienna to our summer cottage, a trip of some 4-5 hours. I was already used to and liked long trips on "wheels". Before I got the bicycle, I had a skateboard, which looked like a two-wheeled scooter with handlebars for steering. From the time I was 10 or 11, I often used the scooter for a trip from my home to the Vienna Ringstrasse, then along the Ringstrasse past the Opera, Burgtheater, Hofburg, Stadtpark and other famous sites, for some three hours till I reached home again, usually without mishap.

I was not always so lucky with my bike, though. On one trip to the country cottage, wearing white shorts and a white jacket with green facings, an outfit then in fashion, the bike slipped on a freshly tarred road. When I got up, only the feathers were missing to make the miserable picture complete. To add insult to injury, the bike was "kaput" and had to be walked all the way to my destination, with my mother getting frantic waiting for my arrival. That was before everybody had a telephone.

I used to envy my cousin Richard (Aunt Anna's son), who was some 10 years older than I was and who had a motorbike on which he would roam around the country. Sometimes he came to visit us in the cottage, carrying a girlfriend on the backseat (which was another reason I envied him). My mother was much more liberal and understanding in this respect than Aunt Anna, who would not have hesitated to smack him, grown up or not, had she known how he spent his weekends with us.

Aunt Anna was a character very similar to the famous "Tante Jolesch," about whom Friedrich Torberg (one of Ernst's young poets) had written so well. Aunt Anna, like Tante Jolesch, could easily have said, "All cities are the same, only Venice is a little different." Or, "If a man is better looking than a monkey, it is luxury." (The latter saying applied when a niece complained that her prospective husband was not sufficiently good looking.)

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 5

"WALK slower and hold the sign up higher!"

"*Jawohl, Herr Sturmbannfuehrer*!" I slowed down as ordered, and raised the sign — ARYANS DON'T BUY IN JEWISH SHOPS — high above my head for all to see.

"Shut up, *Saujud* (Jew-pig)," answered the fat little SA* man who supervised my forced patrol outside a Jewish shop in our neighbourhood and who obviously did not hold the exalted rank by which I had addressed him. In the crowd around us some guffawed but most just gaped.

As I walked to and fro, I tried to keep as cheerful a face as I could manage, cursing inwardly for having gotten myself into this predicament. Not that things were desperate at this point, but how would they end? Would they let me go, or take me to their barracks? Would I be beaten, or worse?

It had all started when, together with two friends and former fellow boy scouts, I had set out to patrol an area of our neighbourhood. We had been making such patrols every afternoon since the Nazis had taken over Austria in March 1938. Since that time, assaults on Jews and others by uniformed and plain-clothes members of the Nazi party had become commonplace. We had nothing much else to do, as the boy scouts had been dissolved. We thought that we might succour injured victims or at least inform their families.

As we walked through the quiet streets into the teeth of a cold March wind, I had to stoop down for a moment to tie a shoelace. When I looked up, I saw my friends a little way ahead being interrogated by two Nazi storm troopers*. Having been their scout troop leader, I somehow felt responsible for their safety. Emotion rather than reason took over; I ran forward and asked the SA men,

"What do you want with those guys?" The SA men immediately turned to me. One of them, the little fat one, said, "We are taking these Jews to do some work for a change."

---

* Storm-troopers (called "SA" men, short for the German term *Sturm-Abteilung* — wearing brown shirts), were the more plebeian forerunners of the elite black-shirted SS.

"In that case, you can take me too, because I'm also a Jew!" They required no further urging and marched the three of us toward an area with several Jewish businesses. They ordered each of us to pace back and forth in front of a shop, each holding a sign that called on Aryans not to buy in Jewish stores.

I don't remember how long this lasted, but it seemed like hours. The number of onlookers remained steady, for people had little else to do and this was equivalent to a Punch and Judy show, with the prospect of a little real "punching" to follow. Then a tall and elegantly dressed SS officer broke through the crowd, took my overseer aside and gave him orders that appeared to make him unhappy. I heard the officer say to him more loudly, "No, there is no time for that, just give him a kick in the arse and let him go."

That is precisely what happened. I removed myself from the scene as quickly as I could after the kick and ran until I reached a quiet street close to my house. There I was joined by one of my two friends, but the other never returned. We learned later that "Toothbrush" (our nickname for him — he was tall and lean, and his favourite reply when he was asked for something he didn't have was, "No, I don't have that but I can draw you a toothbrush") had ended up in a concentration camp. During my subsequent stay in Italy, I tried to bring about his release and that of some others, about which I shall tell more later.

The Nazis took over Austria shortly before I turned eighteen. For me and many fellow Austrians, it had an immediate, violent impact — much more immediate and violent than the Nazis' rise to power in Germany some five years earlier. In Germany, Hitler had to feel his way to unrestricted authority, fearing the reaction of powerful opposition forces inside Germany and of the nations surrounding Germany, which had more military might than Germany at that time. It took Hitler a while to consolidate his grip on the army and to set up a repressive force for quelling dissent. For this purpose, he first used the brown-shirted storm troopers known as the SA, who had fought the Communists before he came to power. Later, Hitler increasingly relied on the elite black-shirted military group, known as the SS.

Life in Germany did not change all that abruptly following Hitler's first rise to prominence in 1933. A cousin of mine married a German Jewish heiress from Hamburg well after 1933 and moved from Austria to Hamburg as if the Nazi regime there didn't matter. Like most Jews at that time, he didn't perceive the Nazis as a true

threat to life or property, which in his case included his father-in-law's large factory. He and his wife even returned to Vienna on a holiday, showing off diamonds and elegant clothes and playing down the effects of the Nazis on private lives. They admitted that Jews were being ostracized in Germany, but claimed that if Jews stayed out of politics, they were largely left alone and could pursue their own cultural and social activities. The Nazi horror in Germany grew slowly and often below the surface, striking first at individuals rather than at whole segments of the population.

When Hitler took over Austria, he was already much more powerful. The Nazis had crushed internal opposition and had greatly strengthened their party machinery and the SS. Moreover, any fear they had of reprisals by neighbouring States had greatly diminished after the unopposed entry of the German Army into the demilitarized Rhineland. Hitler could therefore subdue opposition in Austria much faster and with much more brutality than he could earlier in Germany.

The explosive force of the Nazi take-over of Austria and the violence that accompanied it was also fuelled by the pent-up hatred of the Austrian Nazis for their political opponents, who for a number of years had banned the Nazi party and forced it underground. While the underground Nazis may well have been in the minority, particularly in "red" Vienna, the large majority of Austrians sympathized with at least some of the Nazi's professed aims. The end of the First World War and the resulting break-up of the Austrian Empire had reduced many former middle-class Austrians to near-poverty status. They had lost their jobs and comfortable life styles, and saw only a bleak future for their children. It is no surprise that people in such circumstances would rally around an ideologue who promised a restoration of economic security and national pride. Indeed, following the end of the First World War, a majority of Austrians sought the integration of Austria into the German Reich, but the terms of the Austrian Peace Treaty, as dictated by the victorious Allies, forbade it. Also, many Austrians were anti-Semites, some openly and others in their hearts.

The violence of the Nazi take-over shocked even the German soldiers who occupied the country. A short-lived Austrian Nazi government had called these soldiers in, ostensibly to ensure public order and safety. Scenes such as the one I described earlier were not everyday occurrences in Germany, and the full knowledge of concentration camp horrors had not yet percolated through the

German masses. The Viennese Jewish grapevine passed along many stories of German soldiers intervening to stop ill treatment of Jews by Austrian Nazis. There may well have been only a few such rescues, but even those few demonstrate that there were also decent Germans, just as there were also many decent Austrians.

The Jewish grapevine became the most important source of information for us about what was really happening, even if we could not be sure of the reliability of the stories we heard. The grapevine not only spread news, but also served as a source of solace and strength, disseminating Viennese/Jewish jokes that continued to flourish despite the appalling circumstances. A typical example:

An SS man enters a Viennese tram and, in the press of people, steps on the foot of an elderly seated Jew. The heavy riding boot causes such pain to the Jew's corns that he forgets himself, jumps up and strikes the SS man. Whereupon another Jew sitting opposite jumps up and also boxes the SS man's ears. The latter drags both to a judge, who turns out to be a kindly old man, one who understands the pleading of the first Jew that his painful corns made him forget himself. Then he turns to the second Jew and asks, "But what on earth got into you to box the SS man's ears?" The second Jew replies, "Me? I thought it was already permitted!"

Those Viennese Jews who were not arrested and carried off to concentration camps tried to secure help and support through community efforts. Many, like my family, who had previously avoided religious or Zionists groups now joined such organizations. I got involved with various Zionist youth groups but, having little ideological grounding, did not feel comfortable in any of them. I still believed what the socialists (and communists) were preaching, namely, that nationalism was wrong, whether of the German or the Jewish variety, that all workers were brothers, and that when real socialism was established, the nation-state would wither away.

Most of us tried to leave the country and find a safe haven. The difficulty was that the most desirable countries had closed their borders to Jewish refugees. As President Weizmann of Israel later said, "The world was divided into countries in which the Jews couldn't stay, and countries into which they were not allowed to enter." Only a lucky few managed to trickle into England, France, Switzerland, Scandinavia or the United States, and most of those — like my cousin Richard — succeeded only through ties to family members already living in those countries or through prominent cultural, business or professional connections. A few others were

courageous enough to venture to exotic places such as China, Bolivia or Cuba, where immigration loopholes or bribes eased their entry.

The lack of effective support by the Western democracies for Austria's attempts to keep out of Hitler's clutches had disappointed us all. We were therefore not surprised that these countries offered little practical help for the victims of Nazi aggression, except for some political rhetoric. Some of us pinned our hopes on the Soviet Union, but the Soviet-German non-aggression pact showed how misplaced such hopes really were.

Long lines formed outside embassies and consulates, and similar lines outside the government offices that furnished "exit visas" based on proof that one had paid one's taxes and was not fleeing any other financial obligations. To gain an exit visa, one had to sign a statement promising never to return to Austria. I remember instinctively hesitating when my turn came to put my signature under such a terrible undertaking. The kindly old official who handed it to me saw my hesitation and tried to comfort me, "Don't worry, young man; who knows how long these people will stay in power? You may well be able to come back before long." He was obviously one of the decent Austrians.

I hated to leave my family. Moreover, my heart had recently established other ties. Just prior to my forced departure, I had started my first friendships with girls and had discovered the sweetness of progressing from holding hands while walking in a park, to kissing and embracing in the dark recesses of bushes and trees. My scouting activities had kept me away from contact with girls and made me rather shy with them. That this had not always been so is proven by the earlier told story about little six-year-old Erich grabbing a girl for an impromptu dance to the tunes of the village music. I also remember being with girls in a summer camp on the Adriatic — I must have been 10 or 11 — and, having grown fond of a little freckle-faced girl there, asking her shyly whether she wanted to "go with me". That was an expression I had heard from older boys, but I wasn't at all sure what it really meant. She answered, equally shyly, that her mother had told her she mustn't do that. Although I never saw her again, for years I felt my heart beating faster whenever I passed her street in Vienna.

Shortly before the Nazis came to power, I had started a friendship with Gitta, the fourteen-year-old sister of a schoolmate from elementary school. We met at some amateur theatricals — she, like I, was very keen on theatre and was happy to play Juliet to my Romeo — and we soon started to walk in the Vienna Woods and taste

the sweetness of young (and very innocent) love. I felt very grown up and protective, telling her that I would do my best to shield her from my baser instincts. She may well have been as sorry as I was that I succeeded in keeping those baser instincts under control. When we met again some 40 years later, one of her first questions was, "Are you still as idealistic as you were then, Erich?"

Although Gitta was half-Jewish, she looked quite the Gretchen type in her silver-buttoned *dirndl* that emphasized her willowy figure. Her Jewish father was a well-known musicologist — the Deutsch catalogue of Schubert works bears his name — and was buried in his books and papers most of the time. Her mother had died a few years before. We tried to keep our relationship secret in order not to upset her father (also to escape the teasing of her brother), but, as often happens, word apparently got around. One day, when I called Gitta on the phone, her father answered. I asked for Gitta in a high falsetto voice (what I thought girls' voices sounded like). Papa's answer came promptly, "Yes, Erich, I'll call her at once."

Gitta also received my first love poems. Fired by enthusiasm for the poetry of Ernst and his poet friends, I had begun trying my hand at verse some years before. Imitative and derivative as I knew much of it to be, these first poems gave pleasure not only to me but apparently to others as well. A friend even set one of my poems to music. What's more, a girl from an exclusive boarding school for Jewish girls, which was housed in a lovely old villa on a tree-lined road behind our house, told me that this song was on all their lips during this first Nazi-summer. It was very much in contrast to what happened in Vienna at that time, and that may have been a reason why they liked it. It went like this:

Ein kleines Lied

Ich singe Dir ein kleines Lied,
Ein Lied von Glueck und Liebe.
Es weht der Wind durchs Uferried
Und nimmt mein kleines Liedchen mit,
Mein Lied von Glueck und Liebe.
Der Wind weht durch das feuchte Grass,
Mein Lied wird wie von Traenen nass,
Mein Lied von Glueck und Liebe.
Und weht der Wind dann durch Dein Haar
Und kuesst er Deine Lippen,
So macht er meine Sehnsucht wahr,

Bringt Dir mein kleines Liedchen dar,
Mein Lied von Glueck und Liebe.

(I'm singing you a little song,
A song of happiness and love.
The wind moves through the river reeds
And takes my little song with it,
My song of happiness and love.
The wind blows through the dewy grass,
My song becomes as if stained by tears,
My song of happiness and love.
And blows the wind then through your hair,
And kisses your lips,
It fulfills at last my desire
and offers you my little song,
My song of happiness and love.)

As it happened, this, my first successful poem, turned out to be a sort of portent of subjects that would — separately and jointly — have a big influence on my life: love and meteorology (i.e., the wind).

Gitta left Vienna for England, sponsored by the Society of Friends (Quakers). I hated the idea of leaving Vienna, but the necessity of leaving became clearer from day to day as the Nazi terror increased. Luckily, I was still able to complete high school and take my *Matura* exam (equivalent to matriculation). Soon after their takeover, the Nazis yanked all the Jewish students out of their schools and put them into a special Jewish school, where we were the last to be permitted to matriculate. The next year, they shut down that school completely.

I had many long discussions with my mother about emigration. She always urged me to leave but refused to leave herself. "Why should I leave Vienna? Who would do something to an old widow? Here I have my pension — what would I live on elsewhere? It will be difficult enough to find money for your studies!" As there seemed to be merit in her arguments, especially in their financial aspects, I eventually agreed to leave without her. Within a few years, I would come to regret this decision very much. Things became so bad in Vienna that she was forced to flee under much more difficult circumstances, a flight that eventually ended in tragedy.

As for my emigration, the question was where to go and how to support my studies, because it was assumed as a matter of course that

I would go to some university and become a *Herr Doktor*. Obviously, the university would have to be in some country that would let me in and, preferably, where I knew the local language.

Ever since I visited Italy at the age of six, I had been in love with that country, its sunshine, musical language, and friendly and vivacious people. These impressions were later intensified by my contact with the *Drang nach dem Sueden* (Yearning for the South) of the German poets and painters, who, like their counterparts in most countries north of the Alps and across the Channel, yearned for the delights of nature, climate, art and history offered by the Mediterranean countries. As a result, when I was sixteen I had started to take private lessons in Italian from an old lady whose enthusiasm for all things Italian made her charge me only such small fees as my income from coaching younger students permitted. I was occasionally able to supplement these modest amounts with offerings from my mother's excellent kitchen, such as pates, jams or compotes. Thanks at least in part to my years studying Latin in *Gymnasium*, I took to Italian quickly, which astonished and pleased my teacher. To me, Italian seemed merely a variation of Latin, less pedantic and much more musical.

I revelled in the language of Dante, Manzoni and Leopardi, and was captivated by the lilting melancholy of the Renaissance poets such as Leonardo di Medici. His verses serve as a motto to the next "book" in these memoirs because they characterized my feelings during this time, when my delight in the joy of being young was confronted by the horrors of Nazism and later by the threat of war.

Italy also offered another important advantage. In view of the professed friendship of Mussolini's fascist Italy with the Austrian pseudo-fascist regimes of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg that preceded the Nazi-takeover, Austrians needed no visas to enter Italy. With my Austrian passport, which had remained valid despite the Nazi takeover, I hoped to get into Italy, particularly if I could prove that I had been accepted as a student at an Italian university.

Today it might seem a contradiction for a confirmed socialist, which I was at that time, to want to live in fascist Italy. But in reality, the overriding need was simply to get out of Austria. Mussolini's Italy, which had as yet no racist policies, seemed the lesser evil by far. Also, I hoped that Italy might eventually become a stepping stone to a country with a better political climate. But one lived for the present and the immediate future. Long-range planning was a luxury we could not afford.

I soon settled on an Italian university at which to pursue my studies. While the ancient university at Pisa attracted me (I nearly said that I had a leaning towards it...), Rome offered far more choices and, equally important, cheap accommodation in its *Casa dello Studente.* Mussolini's regime had created the *Casa dello Studente* to attract as many foreign students as possible so as to imbue them with Italian culture (and fascist ideology). Why not take advantage of it? As far as subjects of study were concerned, my mother and I decided that I should study languages — Italian, German and English. That would provide a broad enough basis for future applications as a potential writer, journalist, teacher or theatre person, etc.

But even the modest fees charged by the Rome University and its *Casa dello Studente* presented problems. The Nazis had forbidden money to be taken out of Austria — and there was precious little to take out anyway. So my mother wrote a long letter to her brother, rich Uncle Rudi in Holland, explaining our need and seeking his help. Uncle Rudi agreed to pay me a small monthly stipend, taking into consideration that I was most probably the only offspring of the nine Teller brothers and sisters who would go on to higher education.

Then came an unexpected blow. The grapevine brought information that the Italian Government had started to worry about the increasing influx of Jewish refugees from Austria. The Italians did not mind receiving the few non-Jewish refugees, mostly members of Austria's pre-Nazi regime, and could not require visas from non-refugee Austrians travelling to Italy for business or pleasure without offending the Nazis, with whom Mussolini had to come to terms. So the Italians had hit on the bright idea of requiring baptismal certificates from Austrian passport holders. This would keep the Jews out but let the others in.

For a while, we were at a loss as to how to solve that problem. Even for Jews wanting to undergo baptism, churches had received orders from the hierarchy (obviously in step with the Nazi regime) not to perform such baptisms because they were not "meaningful," but only sought for the purpose of escaping Nazism. But then the grapevine came up with an interesting rumour: the British Embassy in Vienna had a resident Chaplain from the Church of England, who was not bound to follow the rules of the Austrian Government or the Austrian churches. Upset about the persecution of Jews in Austria, he was apparently willing to provide certificates of baptism to those who needed them in order to escape the country.

The next day, I went to the British Embassy in the pretty rococo villa near the Belvedere Palace and asked to see the Chaplain. He was a tall and handsome man, dressed in tweeds and looking very different from the Catholic Chaplains and Prelates. I spoke English in hopes of impressing him, a halting schoolboy English, embellished with phrases memorized for the occasion from my Langenscheid dictionary, and told him what I wanted. He gave me a searching look. (I suppose he always had to be on guard for informers who might cause him to be sent home to England as *persona non grata*). After saying some things that I didn't understand too well, he told me when to come back and repeated the date and time in German to make sure I had understood. He also gave me a tract about the Church of England, its sacraments or something like that.

When I returned on the appointed day, I was led into a large room in which some 20 people eventually assembled — all Jews, as far as I could see. Then the Chaplain appeared, this time dressed in his working clothes (surplice, etc.). He made a little speech in English, of which I understood only "Jesus Christ," sprinkled some water on us, and then led us to another room where the certificates were typed out. We were each asked what "baptismal name" we wanted. I chose the only appealing English name that occurred to me — George. I thus became Erich George Schwarz, born in 1920 and baptized into the Church of England in the Parish of Vienna in 1938.

I presume that, as far as the Chaplain was concerned, this baptism ceremony was real and not merely a means of obtaining the certificates. He may well have believed that, in addition saving our bodies from concentration camps, torture and death, he was saving our souls. I must admit that the latter issue bothered me very little, because as a confirmed socialist and atheist I regarded the baptism as merely mumbo-jumbo, a meaningless piece of superstition.

While I can't say that I have changed my mind in this respect since, I have often regretted that I could not have become a believer in some religion. It would have probably helped me carry burdens that were — and are — often awfully heavy. Unfortunately, believing is not an act of will. It is usually a combination of upbringing and natural disposition, of which I had neither. I have, however, continued to feel gratitude for the Chaplain's courage in helping us despite the obvious risks he incurred.

The situation of the Spanish Jews in the 15th Century comes to my mind in this regard. They accepted baptism in order not to have to leave their country, but as *marannos* they continued to believe in and

secretly practice their "former" religion. In my case, I let myself be baptized in order to be able to flee my country, and did not believe in or practice Judaism or any other religion before or afterwards. I have, nevertheless, participated in religious ceremonies during the usual rites of passage (Jewish ceremonies — I never made any further use of my certificate of baptism), such as the entry into adulthood (*bar mitzvah*), and at marriage (no civil wedding ceremony was available at that time). I suppose I won't be able to avoid a religious ceremony after my death either.

Now the time had come to make detailed plans for my departure for Italy. Although it was still summer and the university was not due to open before autumn, it seemed better not to wait. Who knew what new passport or visa restrictions might arise. (As a matter of fact, within a few months, the Austrian Nazis no longer issued Austrian passports but only German passports, which for Jews were stamped with a large "J".)

We had at that time a lodger who had rented our *Kabinett*, an old gentleman whose Bismarkian appearance (stout, square head, close cropped white hair and upturned white moustache) belied his extremely good nature. A pensioned Austrian civil servant, Herr Hemala was the father of one of Aunt Anna's former maids, the latter having married an Italian. The couple had moved to Fiume, a harbour near Trieste in Northern Italy, near the Yugoslav border. Herr Hemala was glad to arrange for me to stay with his daughter in Fiume until I could continue to Rome. He even accompanied me to Fiume, which was particularly welcome, as we thought that an "Aryan" might be able to help me a little if difficulties arose on the journey or at the border. The grapevine had brought many stories of emigrating Jews being assaulted, robbed or otherwise mistreated by Nazi thugs when the trains passed through their provincial lairs.

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

CHAPTER 6

IT was a warm evening in late July when I stood with my mother and Herr Hemala in front of the train that I hoped would take me to Italy. Not long before, I had celebrated my eighteenth birthday and I felt very grown up, going out into the world on my own and braving border officers, foreign universities and who knows what else. There was also the excitement of a new beginning, away from the tensions and worries of Nazi Vienna. The excitement must have deadened the pangs of parting from my mother, who hid her own pangs under a volley of last-minute instructions and advice.

"Don't forget to write frequent and grateful letters to Uncle Rudi! And, Erich, watch out for bad people, ja? And remember to comb your hair in the back — you always neglect it as if it didn't belong to you!"

Except for these vignettes, I have no memory of the last time I saw my mother. I cannot recall how she looked, or whether we cried a little or smiled courageously. I can't even remember whether I stood for a long time at the window as the train chugged slowly out of the *Suedbahnhof*, or whether I waved my handkerchief. Perhaps my mind just wants to block out these painful memories.

Nor do I remember how I felt as I sat down next to Herr Hemala. But strangely enough, I do remember that his face was red with emotion, memorable perhaps because of its contrast with his snow-white hair and moustache. In fact, his face remained red throughout most of the journey, with the help of occasional sips from a hip flask full of *slivovitz* (plum brandy), the delights of which I learned to appreciate only later in life. In his buttonhole, Herr Hemala wore a little swastika, which we had made him put on — much to his disgust. The swastikas worn by two middle-aged ladies sitting on the other side of our compartment were much larger. In fact, they wore the emblems that only the Nazi elite — the party members who had been underground before the Nazi take-over — were allowed to wear. Their conversation revealed that they were on their way to an Italian holiday. They paid little attention to the two of us.

Soon night fell and the lovely Austrian landscape gave way to trees and hills that moved past our window, the former illuminated by

our light and the latter silhouetted against a starlit sky. I must have dozed off, because I was startled when German border police and customs officers noisily opened the door to our compartment.

"*Reisepaesse!*" ("Passports!") The word "please" was not in their vocabulary, but I don't think it was in the vocabulary of their Austrian predecessors either. My heart beat furiously as they pored over my exit visa, and my hands shook as I showed the customs officer my billfold to confirm that I had no more than the permitted 10 marks on me.

"What do you have in your suitcases?" he growled. In one suitcase I had my clothing. A second carried as many books as would fit — works by Goethe, Schiller, Rilke and Hoffmansthal, among others. My last suitcase contained some bedding, including a featherbed my mother insisted that I take with me, and which obviously never saw any use in Italy, Palestine or anywhere else for that matter. (I wonder what happened to it?) The customs man merely shook his head as he walked out. A wave of relief passed over me for having crossed this hurdle.

A little later, we arrived at the Italian border station of Udine. A loudspeaker blared in Italian and German, requesting all passengers to disembark with their belongings and report to the Italian border control and customs office. Herr Hemala, who only had a small overnight bag, helped me drag my suitcases to the stone benches where the customs officers inspected them. In the meantime, we had to present our passports, which were checked in a little office behind the customs shed.

I don't know whether we were the only Austrians on the train, but the four occupants of our compartment were taken together to the border office, where an elderly Italian official in uniform sat behind a desk scrutinizing our passports. Large photographs of Mussolini and the King watched over his activities. He looked up and asked for our certificates of baptism. Herr Hemala handed over his old and battered certificate, which received a quick glance and was quickly returned. Then came my turn. The official analysed my brand new certificate for a little while, trying to decipher its English words. Eventually, he looked at me and asked in broken German, "Why are you travelling to Italy, Signor Schwarz?" With my heart pounding in my breast, I answered in Italian, "To study, signore. I have already enrolled in the University of Rome — here is my letter of acceptance."

He read the letter, folded it and handed it back to me. "I doubt that you will be able to study there for long," he said in a non-

committal voice, but as he now spoke Italian, it already sounded a little friendlier. "But that is not my business." Then he turned to the two Nazi women and asked to see their baptismal certificates. "Why should we have brought those with us?" they asked in astonishment. The official explained that all Austrians had to have them to establish their background. The women protested that their Nazi insignia testified to their Arian descent and background, but to no avail. They were loudly cursing Italy and Mussolini as they were led out towards the other side of the station, where the train back to Austria stood. And I am sure I saw a smile on the official's face!

As we climbed back into the train, I was not only relieved, but also impressed by the humanity and decency of Italians, an impression that was to be renewed over and over again. The official stance was, of course, another thing, but for hundreds of years Italians had learned to live under oppressive rulers, both domestic and foreign. Indeed, the Mafia arose in such circumstances, as native Sicilians banded together against the Norman, German, Arab, French and Mainland Italian occupiers. On a more positive note, the series of oppressive regimes in Italy has produced a general spirit of helpfulness and kindness among the Italian masses, particularly the workers and lower paid officials. The bourgeoisie and aristocracy are different, but isn't that the case in many countries? I certainly noticed it in France, particularly outside Paris.

Herr Hemala and I managed to get very little sleep on the rest of the journey. We mostly watched the mists rising from the fir-clad slopes of the Southern Alps. When daylight came, Yugoslav border guards boarded and sealed the train as it passed for a few hours through the northwestern part of Yugoslav territory. As no one was allowed to get on or off, there was no need for passport or customs control, which was a relief.

There is little in my memory about our arrival in Fiume. I must have been very tired after all the excitement and the nearly sleepless night, but I do remember that, despite the cramped conditions in the house of Herr Hemala's daughter, I slept long and soundly.

When I awoke the next morning, I immediately sent a telegram to my mother, announcing my safe arrival. We had earlier agreed on a code for the telegram, in which I would indicate the degree of difficulty we encountered in crossing the border — easy, difficult or very difficult. I used the "difficult" version, leaving Herr Hemala to fill in the details on his return to Vienna.

o o o o o o o

Quant' e bella giovinezza,
Che si fugge tuttavia.
Chi vuol' esser lieto sia
Di doman' non ce certezza.
(Youth is lovely, knows no sorrow
But how quickly does it flee!
Know that happy will not be
Anyone who trusts tomorrow.)
Lorenzo di Medici

Im lo anee lee, mee lee?
(If I don't stand up for myself, who will?)
Hebrew Proverb

BOOK TWO

FROM ITALY TO PALESTINE

4. Father, Ernst Schwarz, Lieutenant in the Austrian-Hungarian Army, age about 40 (WWI, about 1916)

CHAPTER 7

HERR Hemala's daughter lived in a house on a little hill overlooking Fiume, which was then an Italian port city on the Gulf of Quarnero that lies in the northeast corner of the Adriatic. Fiume was built on a hill that gently descends almost to the sea, then breaks into rocks against which the water crashes. Sometimes the clash of water and rock is good-natured, with rainbow colours glistening in the sun-drenched spray. But when the cold, northeasterly wind known as the Bora whips in from the frozen East European plains, the scene along the coast of Fiume becomes grey and stormy.

Having just escaped from the depressing atmosphere of Nazi Vienna, Fiume and the Gulf presented a lovely sight indeed. I particularly marvelled at the view of Fiume's harbour, which was protected by a massive breakwater with warehouses and sheds, and which boasted a multitude of ships, among them many sleek, white tourist steamers.

On the other side of a ravine stood Sushak, Fiume's Yugoslav twin city, with the border running through the ravine. In fact, Fiume was supposed to have become part of Yugoslavia after World War I. However, the Italian soldier-poet Gabriele d'Annunzio commandeered an Italian submarine and, with a volunteer crew, led a daring attack to "capture" Fiume and turn it for a short time into a "Free City" under d'Annunzio's rule. Later, Italy took the city back. When I arrived, Italian-Yugoslav relations remained strained, although most of Fiume's housemaids were Yugoslav girls from Sushak, just as most of the chickens and vegetables on the tables of Fiume's burghers came from that side of the ravine.*

At first, sad thoughts of my mother, Gitta, and all the others I had left in Vienna lessened the pleasure that I drew from Fiume's lovely views. Herr Hemala went home with many messages and I

* After the Second World War, Fiume changed hands twice, and in this process acquired a new name (Rijeka). It first became part of Yugoslavia. When that State broke up, it fell to Croatia.

wrote many postcards, but neither the messages nor the postcards could really convey what was in my heart, both being subject to censors, internal as well as external. I also confess that my moments of sadness soon became less frequent, as the callousness of youth directed my attention to the here and now, shutting out painful thoughts as much as possible.

Like many Italian towns, Fiume had acquired areas of modern suburbia in its outermost parts. Trips to the centre of the city gave the impression of travelling backwards in time to progressively older quarters, until one came to the ancient core, still surrounded by a medieval wall. Inside the wall, one confronted narrow, crooked streets festooned with laundry, streets which opened now and then into small piazzas with old fountains splashing water into stone troughs. Taverns and cafes lined the sides of the larger piazzas, giving people a place to sit at outdoor tables ideal for drinking and gossiping. I remember sitting at one of those tables and being served freshly caught sardines fried in olive oil, a green salad and a glass of the slightly sparkling local rose wine.

Then, strengthened in body and spirit, I returned to the modern part of Fiume where, close to its main street (named *Corso d'Italia*, as usual) stood the forbidding building housing the *Prefettura*, the local police and security headquarters where I had to report and receive permission to reside in Fiume.

After my experience at the border, I was a little less apprehensive of what might happen at the *Prefettura*. I nevertheless realized that my fate could well depend on the whim of the local officials. As I entered the building, a uniformed clerk took my passport and motioned for me to wait in the anteroom. Sitting down in the bare room, I wondered whether the behinds of many other refugees seeking asylum had polished the hard bench, or whether the majority of its occupants had been local merchants or fisher folk with short-changing or smuggling on their consciences.

"Signor Swarts," called out the clerk after a little while. He motioned for me to come inside, opening the door to the Prefect's own office. "Well," I thought, "this doesn't look too good. Why should the Prefect want to examine me himself?" Like the official at the border, the Prefect — after the Mayor the highest ranking official in town — sat behind a desk with pictures of Mussolini and the King scowling at each other above his head. The Prefect was a man of slight stature, his greying hair sleeked back over his head. He looked very natty in his pinstriped suit and bow tie, with a handkerchief

triangle peeking out of his breast pocket as an amiable neighbour of the *fascio*, the Fascist emblem, in his buttonhole.

He looked up from my passport, which he had been studying, and started to speak to me in broken German. I politely interrupted him and said in my best Italian that I would be glad if he spoke Italian to me — that it would be a good practice for my studies, which I hoped to start soon in Rome.

"Ah, *benissime*, very good, Signor Schwarz! We don't get many visitors from your country speaking Italian as well as you do. So you have come to study in Italy, not to spend your holidays here?" His tone was quite friendly and I felt my early intervention had done some good. "*Si*, Signor Prefetto, here is my letter of acceptance from the University of Rome, where I will study Italian and some other languages. I intend to stay here in Fiume with friends until the University opens in September."

"Excellent!" replied the Prefect. "You will find Fiume a very pleasant place; and not far from here is Abbazia, the famous bathing resort of which I am sure you must have heard. But tell me, young man, why did you decide to study in Italy and not in your beautiful city of Vienna, which I have visited several times?"

I had my answer ready. "As you can see, Signor Prefetto, I have been studying Italian for quite some time, as I have been interested in Italy for many years. It may have started when my parents took me on a visit to Venice as a little boy. I found the landscape and people to be so different, so much more colourful than at home. Of course, the many years I have studied Latin in the *Gymnasium* may also have contributed."

The Prefetto smiled and got up, moving to a little table with two easy chairs and motioned me to sit down. "Tell me young man, is it true that things in Vienna have changed a great deal since the *Anschluss*"? It was clear to me now that the Prefect had no inkling of my background. He never asked for a baptism certificate, and may well have been less aware of circumstances in this respect than the officials at the border.

"Yes, Signor Prefetto", I answered, "this is unfortunately quite true; Vienna is not the same city you knew. The upheavals of the last few months have caused much unhappiness and insecurity. This, to tell you the truth, is another reason why I decided to study in Italy, because I have always been a supporter of Austrian independence." I floated this idea as a trial balloon. I had heard that Mussolini, who had always supported the Austrian regime, had only grudgingly

acquiesced in Hitler's takeover of Austria, not being at all happy to have a powerful Germany as his northern neighbour. I thought that the fascist officials might well share his sentiments in this respect.

The Prefetto nodded sagaciously. "Yes, I can well imagine, with German soldiers all over the town. But tell me, are the rumours one hears about the persecution and maltreatment of Jews true?"

"Yes, I am afraid they are quite true." I related some examples to which he listened with great interest, adding little exclamations of astonishment and abhorrence. "*Ma no! Terribile! Che gente*!" (But no! Terrible! What people!) In the end, he accompanied me to the door and shook my hand warmly. "I wish you a very pleasant stay in Fiume, Signor Schwarz, and good luck with your studies in Rome. Perhaps we will see each other again when you come back here during your vacations." Little did either of us know that I would be back in Fiume sooner than expected under considerably less pleasant circumstances.

But for the meantime, I was elated with the *sogiorno* (residence) stamp in my passport, and a benevolent Prefetto as my local guardian — as long as he remained ignorant of my true situation. But, I thought, why would he get to know about my situation? Who would tell him?

From then on, my time in Fiume seemed to glide away very quickly, with excursions into the town, ogling the *signorine* who walked arm in arm in the Corso between 4:00 and 5:00 every afternoon,* and exploring the surroundings, particularly the hills covered with fragrant herbs and bushes. Lying in the grass and breathing in the spicy summer smells, I continued to enjoy the lovely views of the bay. All too soon came the time to leave, to say good-bye and to thank Herr Hemala's family. I boarded the train to Rome, for what I thought would be four years of study and, who knows, also a little fun and relaxation in what seemed to be a sunny and friendly Italy.

o o o o o o o

* This was, and perhaps still is, the custom in most of the smaller Italian towns, with men walking on one side of the street — also often arm in arm — and girls on the other.

CHAPTER 8

THERE are only two things that I remember about my first train ride to Rome: that it was a very crowded night train, which seemed to take interminably long to get to its destination, and that the dreary journey was interrupted early on by an exciting and potentially dangerous occurrence.

During the one hour segment of the journey from Fiume to Trieste, a couple of *Carabinieri* — the Italian State Police, with their dashing three-cornered hats — entered my compartment to check the occupants. The others were all local people going to Trieste. I was the only one with luggage — the same three suitcases I had brought from Vienna (one with clothing, one with books and one with a featherbed). When the *Carabinieri* had seen my passport and learned that the suitcases were mine, they asked me to open one for inspection, pointing at one of two in the upper rack.

At that moment a thought struck me: my clothing in this suitcase included my Boy Scout uniform, as well as — horror! — a big hunting knife that went with the uniform. How stupid of me to take it along! And then another thought: the unusual check was probably due to an expected visit the next day by Mussolini to Trieste, where he was to give a big speech celebrating the return of Trieste to Italy, or some such occasion. If the *Carabinieri* found the knife, they might think I was planning to assassinate Mussolini! They would surely arrest me, if only to rule out any such possibility.

I did some quick thinking and, banking on the inborn amiability of Italians, said, "That suitcase up there is awfully heavy and difficult to get down, officer. Would you mind if I opened instead the one standing here on the floor?" One of the *Carabineri* nodded, "Va bene" (O.K.), and with an inward sigh of relief I let him grope his way through a real Viennese featherbed.

I got rid of the knife at the first opportunity that offered itself in Rome. But I did not really learn my lesson, because this was not the last time that I would try to hide weapons from police or other authorities. In fact, I recall at least three other occasions of this kind, but they will be related in due course.

I also remember relatively little about my first impressions of Rome itself, perhaps because they are overlaid by later impressions, when I visited Rome for work or pleasure. What I do remember is the *Casa dello Studente*, the modern student hostel that Mussolini had built to impress the foreign students housed there. The small rooms were simply but tastefully furnished in steel and teak and had what for me was the height of luxury — a telephone. I felt that, with a phone in my room, I had moved up a step in the world, even if I didn't have anyone to call. The uniformed Concierge had politely asked for my passport and informed me that he would arrange for the *sogiorno*. Thus, I did not need to report to the *Prefettura* — another luxury.

The hostel also had a very well equipped and bright dining room, where I ate my daily helpings of spaghetti and other Italian delicacies and where I made my first Italian acquaintances. I remember in particular one guy my age, elegant, debonair and good-humoured, the son of a Sicilian general. When I confided to him that I was Jewish (why would I have done that?), his eyes became round with astonishment. "*Veramente*? (Really?) I have never seen a Jew before. I always thought they had little horns on their heads!" Obviously, this shows the influence of Michelangelo's statue of Moses in a country with relatively few Jews.

In the meantime, Hitler was brainwashing Mussolini to adopt racial laws also in Italy. The papers soon carried news of new regulations in this respect, along with "justifications" for them. The latter were needed because racism was something quite foreign to the easy-going Italians, whose own racial background, particularly in the South, is quite a melange of Latin, Teuton, Arab and other assorted invaders. The newspapers made me recall the forecast of the border official — that I wouldn't be able to study in Rome very long — and I began to think that it might well come true.

One day, when I was returning from a visit to the town, the resplendent Concierge stopped me and told me apologetically that, to meet some new decree, he had to show the authorities my certificate of baptism.

"Oh, my certificate of baptism! Yes, yes, of course. Uh, let me see. I don't carry that with me — not many people do, do they? Well, I'll write my mother to send it to me, and it should be here in a week or so, all right?"

The Concierge nodded smilingly, assuring me that it was only one of those silly bureaucratic whims and that he was sure they would be able to wait a week to see the document.

My brain was seething as I left for my room. Should I show them my English certificate? They were certain to notice the recent date. God knows the trouble it might cause. Even if it had worked once more, it was only a matter of time before I would be found out. Also, to tell the truth, I was getting fed up, hiding behind that certificate. I had needed it to escape Nazi Austria, but now that I was in Italy I was determined to find some other means of existing, or else I would try to go elsewhere. Probably the latter, because Mussolini's aping of Hitler's racial laws was a bad portent for the future.

I wrote my mother an Express letter, censorship or no censorship, telling her what was happening and that I intended to go back to Fiume and decide what to do next from there. In those days, normal mail from Italy to Austria took only two days and Express letters one. My mother's reply came indeed after two days; it contained all sorts of suggestions cooked up by a family conclave as to how I might circumvent the new obstacle and continue my studies in Rome, as agreed to with Uncle Rudi, the money provider in Holland.

But I would have none of it. I felt that the situation was becoming too dangerous in Rome and that my mother and the rest of the family were unable to assess it adequately from Vienna. Subsequent developments — the outbreak of war within a year, the German occupation of Holland and Italy's entry into the war — unfortunately proved my intuition right.

So I went to the Concierge, telling him that I had received news about the sudden illness of my aunt in Fiume and that I had to leave at once, hoping to return in the near future. He expressed deep regret and assured me that I would be welcome anytime. I doubt he suspected that my sudden departure had anything to do with the request for my baptism certificate; the Italians were too politically (and religiously) naive for that.

I took my three suitcases back to Fiume on the next train. I remember nothing about that journey, nor about my arrival in Fiume. I suppose that I went back to the house of Herr Hemala's daughter for the first few days. But it must have become clear that I could not stay there long, as their living quarters were pretty cramped. Moreover, as the duration of my stay in Fiume was indeterminate, I would need rent a room somewhere in town. But first I had to go back to the *Prefettura* to get another *sogiorno*. And that, I knew, was not going to be as easy as the first time.

At my request, the clerk at the *Prefettura* took me straight to the *Prefetto*, who welcomed me with some astonishment. "Good morning

Signor Schwarz! What brings you back from Rome so soon? Has something happened?"

"Unfortunately, it has, Signor Prefetto. To be brief, the new racial laws make it impossible for me to study in an Italian university."

"What — you are — a Jew?" The Prefetto was obviously surprised and taken aback. "Why didn't you tell me that last time?"

"Because you did not ask me, and because I was afraid you might send me back to Nazi Austria if I had volunteered the information."

The Prefetto was silent for a moment. "Oh, *dio mio*, what are we going to do now?" he said, obviously in a quandary. He must have realized that he should have thought of asking me that important question the last time. But as it turned out, that was not his only thought.

"Signor Schwarz, I will tell you in honesty that these racial laws are not our idea. The Germans forced them on us Italians. We have nothing against the Jews. In fact, they are among my best friends here in Fiume. But orders are orders, and I will have to comply, although with regret and with all the leniency the law allows me. Listen. If you can show me a valid visa to another country, any country — America, Brazil, China, I don't care — I will regard you as being here in "transit" and you can stay for a reasonable period to allow you to find a permanent abode. I will not hasten you unduly. All right? Now, bring me a visa within a week and then I'll give you a *sogiorno*."

Relieved, I thanked the Prefetto profusely, shook his hand and went out, starting on my search for a visa.

As it happened, during my first stay in Fiume I had met a couple of Viennese refugees in one of Fiume's cafes, where they seemed to spend much of their time. As they appeared to be very "world-wise," I decided to see whether I could find them there again and get their advice on how to go about my search. And indeed, they were at their usual table, sipping their cappuccino.

"Well, look who has come back from Rome to this backwater village!" Kurt, the fat and jovial ex-jeweler, shook my hand and slapped me on the back in a friendly manner. "What about those university studies of yours, Doctor Schwarz? Did you fail Professor Mussolini's first exam?"

"He probably missed our sparkling conversation too much," said ex-tailor Hans, smaller and more acerbic than Kurt. Next to him sat

his beautiful blonde wife, Hilda. She merely smiled, as she had more looks than words at her command.

When I told them about my predicament, they broke out laughing. "Welcome to the club! How do you think we are all managing to stay in Fiume?" They revealed that they too had been given their *sogiornos* because they had obtained visas to other countries, and that the Prefetto was known to be helping refugees to the best of his limited ability. So it was not only because of my charm and knowledge of Italian that I had been allowed to stay!!

They proceeded to teach me the tricks of the visa trade. There were several representatives of foreign countries in Trieste, mostly "honorary Consuls" of Latin American countries, who were not averse to providing visas for cash. The amount of cash required and the manner of offering it varied from country to country, the larger ones charging more and being more discreet. I learned that a visa to Bolivia was the cheapest and easiest to obtain. One merely went to the Bolivian Consulate, gave the Concierge one's passport with 500 lire folded inside (then about $10, equivalent to today's $200). A little while later, your passport would emerge with a visa inside. The Ecuadorian visa was a little more expensive and required personal pleas to the honorary Consul.

Thanking them for the valuable information, I decided to go to Trieste the next day to try for a Bolivian visa. As I left their table, Kurt called after me, "No need to hurry! The next boat to La Paz doesn't leave for three days!" But I didn't regard that as one of his better Viennese jokes.

It turned out just as they had said. The uniformed Concierge at the dark and stuffy Bolivian Consulate peeked into the proffered passport and, when he had satisfied himself that it was adequately "filled," closed it carefully and motioned me to take a seat in a once elegant but now sleazy upholstered armchair. Then he vanished through a door with a shuttered window and reappeared a little later, returning my passport with a bow. It was now my turn to peek into the passport and saw, indeed, an ornately stamped visa, allowing "Signor Schwarz to enter Bolivia during the next six months and stay there up to one year." I handed the Concierge a few extra lire, for which he bowed even lower than before, and went out, hoping that my stay in Fiume was now secured. That was confirmed when I appeared the next day at the *Prefettura*, where, without having to see the boss, I was given a *sogiorno* for six months. More than enough time, I thought, to decide on my next moves.

The first of those next moves was to find a room. I scrutinized the local paper for ads, of which there were quite a few. But as I had to be careful with the lire doled out by Uncle Rudi, the possibilities were somewhat limited. Eventually, I found a large room in an older part of downtown Fiume, but not in the oldest part. The two windows of the room opened on to a narrow but busy side street. Opposite was a cinema, with colourful posters announcing the latest Hollywood cowboy picture featuring "*Il illustro* Tom Mix." I was to visit that cinema quite often, which furthered my knowledge of colloquial Italian, as all foreign films were dubbed into Italian. I thus discovered quite an efficient audio-visual method of language learning, even before that term was invented.

6. (Step) Sister Hedi at about 25 (Vienna, early 1930s)

CHAPTER 9

AFTER I moved into my rented room, I started to work seriously on the question of my future moves. I wrote letters to my mother and to Uncle Rudi in Holland, asking for their suggestions, and making some of my own. I also wrote to Cousin Erika, who had, together with her dentist husband, emigrated to New York several years before the advent of the Nazis in Austria; they must have foreseen the catastrophe. I asked Erika about the chances of her sending me an "affidavit"-- a financial guarantee needed to obtain an immigration visa to the USA. In fact, when visiting Trieste to get the Bolivian visa, I had also gone to the U.S. Consulate to register for such a visa. By registering, I received a place in the queue of Austrian citizens hoping for a U.S. visa.

The suggestions I made in my first letters home about fleeing Italy to go to other countries were not very realistic, as shown in the example below. They were based on my immediate reaction to developments and on my fears of being deported back to Nazi Austria if I didn't find a more secure place of refuge, even though I liked living in Italy very much. They were also based on further discussions with my refugee friends Kurt and Hans, who also were not certain of their eventual destinations. One idea that we dreamed up in a long cafe session was emigrating together to Bolivia, where we would set up a Viennese cafe. My mother and Uncle Rudi summarily shot down that idea, along with a few other similarly "exotic" suggestions.

We all regarded the USA as a very desirable destination. Unfortunately, we also knew that the possibility of obtaining an immigration visa was quite low, due to the large number of Austrian refugees and the relatively few visas for Austrians made available by the American government at that time. Also, in my case, I knew that Cousin Erika had already provided affidavits to closer family members, such as her parents and her brother, Richard.

Although I had never really been very aware of, or interested in, Zionism — except for the few months after the Nazi take-over, when events pushed me in that direction — I concluded that going to Palestine would prove the best solution. Palestine was the one place

where, with the help of Uncle Rudi, I stood a good chance to get a student visa. It was also one place from which I was unlikely to be forced to leave again. After my Italian experience, I wanted to go to a place where I could establish my home on a more permanent basis.

Mother and Uncle Rudi agreed to the idea of going to Palestine, and Uncle Rudi promised to find out how a student visa could be obtained. The plan was for me to go to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to study journalism and modern languages. Correspondence along these lines continued for quite some time and, in the end, it appeared that I would have no difficulty obtaining a student visa if Uncle Rudi paid in advance for a year's study and subsistence. There were, however, no places available in the Jerusalem University, only in the Technical University in Haifa. Would I want to go there? After some soul-searching, the desire for a safe refuge prevailed over my lukewarm interest in science (due probably as much to bad teachers as to natural inclination). On my application, I chose to study "Industrial Chemistry" because it sounded the most interesting, as well as the most rewarding financially. I then had to endure a long waiting period, while my uncle settled matters with the Jewish Agency for Palestine, the Zionist body dealing with the British Mandate Government of Palestine.

In the meantime, I started to learn Hebrew (of which I knew next to nothing) and attended meetings of the local Zionist association to obtain a better understanding of my future home. I also spent countless hours in the cafe with Kurt, Hans and the latter's wife. The three were older than me, and impressed me with their knowledge of the world and their *savoir faire*. They also passed on all sorts of interesting stories and rumours about the lives and fates of refugees.

For example, they told me a story about two Viennese Jews, whose Italian *sogiorno* had run out and who had been ordered to be deported back to Nazi Austria. A couple of Italian policemen had come to escort them to the border. It was a hot day, and the four were sweltering in the small railway compartment during a long, slow journey in a local train that stopped at every little town along the route. Eventually, one of the two deportees, who had some money stashed away, asked the policemen whether it would be all right to have a drink at the next station. They readily agreed and, as they too were very thirsty, imbibed freely of the drinks liberally offered by the deportee. This was repeated at each successive station. As the heat grew more and more unbearable — and as the libations grew (by design) progressively stronger — it was no wonder that the policemen

eventually dozed off. The two deportees, who had drunk less potent liquor, quietly left on the next train back to the town from which they had been deported. As the policemen were loath to report what had happened (and had probably forged some signatures to prove that they had handed over their charges), the Italian authorities never bothered the "deportees" again.

Sometimes, I had the job of temporarily escorting Hilda, Hans's wife, such as when she spent a couple of hours at the hairdresser and wanted someone to interpret for her. Her stunning blond beauty made me rather tongue-tied, but that hardly mattered with her. As beautiful as she was, she was also quite dumb, the proverbial dumb blonde. I wonder whether that is often an acquired trait, because beautiful people (men as well as women) are too busy and too fascinated with their appearance to leave much time for the cultivation of their minds. There is also little need, because attention and assistance fall into their laps.

On one such tour of duty to the hairdresser's, I had to act not only as interpreter but also as first aid and express messenger. The poor girl had fallen into a crying fit when the hairdresser's ministrations turned her blond hair into a shining blue. After trying to comfort her, I ran to fetch her husband from the cafe. The event had, of course, also revealed that she wasn't even a real dumb blonde!

But not all my time was spent on such useless undertakings. From the start, I had been thinking about ways to help friends get out of concentration camps in Austria, among them a friend referred to in Book One, whom we had nicknamed "Toothbrush." Having obtained a Bolivian visa so easily, I wondered whether I might also obtain visas for them and whether, with such visas, the Nazis might let some of them go. Taking what little money I could spare, I went back to the Bolivian Consulate in Trieste. But it turned out that the Consul was unwilling to provide visas without passports. So, I tried my luck with the Ecuadorian Consul, about whose willingness to co-operate I had heard earlier.

I rang the Consulate's doorbell. An old, fat and bald man opened the door and peered at me from behind thick, horn-rimmed glasses. "Could I speak to the Consul?" I inquired. The man nodded and motioned me to follow him inside. As he shuffled ahead, I could hardly make out the old prints hanging on the walls of the narrow corridor and staircase, which was lit by a single weak bulb. The room into which he led me was similarly dark, being lit only by the pale light filtering through a curtained window. But I could see

that it was completely book-lined, with an untidy writing desk in a corner and a dilapidated armchair in front. As the old man settled behind the desk, I presumed he must be the Consul himself, and so it turned out to be.

"What can I do for you, young man?" As the Consul seemed to be a man of learning, I decided to approach him with a little more subtlety. "A number of friends and I are interested in emigrating to Ecuador, Mr. Consul. Would you perhaps have a publication of some kind that could provide information about the country and the possibilities of finding work there?"

"I am afraid not. What kind of work would you and your friends be interested in?"

"Frankly, any kind, Mr. Consul. You see, my friends are mostly still in Austria, and would require visas to be able to leave. Do you think you could let me have visas for them, even though I don't have their passports with me? I would be glad to compensate you for your troubles."

The Consul eyed me like an owl through his thick lenses. "Are they in trouble in Austria?" I nodded and said, "Yes, they are in concentration camps; the only crime they have committed is being Jewish."

After a little pause, the Consul said, "Well, as my mother was also Jewish, I will help you. But it will cost you 1000 lire per visa, because I will have to pay people in the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry to keep quiet about the use of the visa stamp, which has a serial number."

Whether that was true or not, I did not know. 1000 lire was a lot of money for me at that time. I also knew that Uncle Rudi would not have been willing to give me additional money for this undertaking. Nevertheless, I readily told the Consul, "Yes, of course, I understand. I would like to have three visas." And with that, I had just committed the majority of my financial reserve.

The Consul took some official looking paper and asked me for the names of the people in question. As I gave them to him, he wrote out the three visas labouriously by hand in old-fashioned calligraphy, affixing to each a large, impressive stamp and a wax seal. I certainly got value for my money. The 3000 lire vanished in his pudgy hand. "I hope they will help, young man. But don't you want a visa for yourself as well?"

"Not just yet, Mr. Consul. I'll come back when the time comes." Why should I tell him that I was covered by the Bolivian competition?

As soon as I got back to Fiume, I sent the visas off to my mother, asking her to pass them to the families of the friends concerned. She did, but I never found out whether they helped or not.

When I told the story about the Ecuadorian visas to my cafe-house friends, Kurt said, "That was a good deed you did. Would you like to do another one like it?" "What's that?" I asked. "I would like to send some certificates of baptism to friends in Austria to enable them to enter Italy. I have an idea how to get hold of them. You could help me with it."

When I readily agreed, he told me to meet him the next morning at the bus stop going to a little village on top of a mountain overlooking Fiume. He would then tell me more about his plan.

The next morning, as we boarded the bus to the mountain village, he outlined what he had in mind. "There is a new, modern church in the village. I visited it the other day because I had heard about its wonderful architecture and beautiful view. But what I found even more interesting was that I was present at a christening. Afterwards, I watched the priest go into the sacristy and saw him take a stamp out of an open drawer and stamp a standard baptism certificate. Now, as it happens, one can buy blank certificates in any stationery shop — I have 20 such blank certificates here right now. I want to see whether we can get hold of the stamp and stamp them. The church seems to be empty much of the time as it is very bare, with no Michelangelos or Raffaels to be stolen."

When we entered the church, we saw a couple of old ladies praying in the front pews. So we sat down in the rear, as if admiring the architecture, which was really impressive in its stark, concrete simplicity. It was also adequately dark for our plans, with only a few coloured shafts of light slanting down from abstractly shaped glass windows. The old ladies took a long time finishing their devotions, but eventually crossed themselves and left. We got up and moved towards the sacristy. Fortunately, its door was open, allowing us to see that it was empty. Kurt told me to stand at the door and watch for anyone coming, while he stamped the forms. I stood at the door with my heart beating wildly, listening with one ear to the "bang-bang-bang" of Kurt's stamping, and with the other for anyone opening the church's entrance door. But no one came, and we managed to leave unobserved. Kurt gave me a couple of the forms to send to anyone I wished, and we went back to Fiume.

○○○○○○○

CHAPTER 10

APART from my cafe-house meetings with Kurt, Hans and Hilda, and occasional attendance at Zionist club meetings, I immersed myself completely in Italian. Italian newspapers, Italian books, Italian radio, Italian films and Italian conversations. No wonder that my Italian became very fluent — at 18, one still learns quickly — and that people wouldn't believe that I was Austrian. This gave me great pleasure, because I loved the musical sound of the language and the exploration of a different culture. I also took pride in this achievement, although I realized that it was mostly a question of aptitude. I had always had a good ear for languages, had done well in Latin and Greek in school, and would later learn English, French, Dutch and Hebrew with similar ease, although my writing and spelling abilities are best in German, English and Italian.

While I had lunch and dinner mostly in little cafes in town, I ate breakfast with my "hosts." They were an elderly couple, he a retired shipyard worker, burly and outspoken (even about Mussolini and his politics); she was a fat and bustling housewife, who often added homemade cake or cookies to the simple breakfast fare of coffee and rolls, with a bit of butter and jam. Their conversation frequently revolved around their only son, who was serving in the Italian army in Abyssinia. Mussolini's rhetoric about the glory of the Abyssinian adventure was lost on them. They only cared about the dangers that Italian soldiers faced in Africa's hostile environment and about the squalid conditions under which the soldiers lived. Returning wounded veterans and others on home leave had brought back enough information about such conditions to cause real worry among the families and friends of the soldiers who remained at the front.

The son's wife, a young woman of 21 or 22, was also living with them. Like so many others, she worked in the local shipyards, the largest employer in Fiume. She was slim and graceful, her dark hair setting off a very white face (that was before tanning had become fashionable, particularly in blue-collar circles). That face, while a bit bland, was not unattractive. Her one passion was dancing, and it did not take long before she invited me to dance with her in the living

room to the music coming over the radio most evenings. I had taken dancing lessons in Vienna, but they were of a genteel sort, with gloved hands, and several centimetres distance between partners. The feel of her lithe and firm body touching mine was novel and very pleasant indeed. She must have found it so too. During slow, romantic music, she would press closer, close her eyes and, I assumed, think of her distant husband.

During one of those romantic dances — it must have been a tango — we danced into a dark corridor and, to my considerable surprise (and pleasure), she suddenly pressed her lips against mine. Although this was not the first time I had kissed or been kissed by a girl, it turned out to be a much more mature and passionate variety of kissing. In a little while, it was not only lips but also tongues that were brought into action, at her instigation. I learned quickly, however. Eventually, we had to dance back into the living room, where the old couple was chaperoning us and where kissing was replaced by the squeezing of hands and little sighs.

Naturally, I looked forward to the next dance evening with great anticipation. When it arrived, we repeated the procedure throughout the evening, looking for any chance to dance into the corridor. I went to bed that night quite giddy and found it difficult to compose myself to sleep. I must have just dozed off when the creaking of my door being slowly opened made me sit up in bed. Miranda — as the young woman was called — stood before me in her nightshirt, putting her fingers to her lips and beckoning me to move over and make room for her. My heart beat violently. This was IT! IT was going to happen for the first time!

Miranda snuggled close to me and we kissed for a little while. I was shivering with excitement, which made her ask whether I was cold. "No, Miranda, but to tell you the truth, this is the first time I have been in bed with a girl." She giggled "I don't believe you. Here in Italy, boys start at 14 or 15. You are 18 and have never made love to a girl?" I assured her that this was the case and that conditions in Austria probably differed in this respect. But when my hand started to make tentative moves to explore her body under her nightshirt, she knocked it away. "*No! No mani* (no hands)!" I turned away, disappointed, but she comforted me by making me lie on top of her and, positioning me between her thighs, proceeded to give me a practical lesson in the facts of life. Once again, I learned quickly, but was mystified that she kept asking, "*Viene*? *Viene*? (Is it coming?)" But soon I gasped in involuntary reply, upon which she climaxed too

in what must have been a practised way. Before that she had whispered, "You can leave it inside — I have had an operation and can't have babies."

She soon left my room, where for quite some time I lay awake, proud about having attained the IT we boys had been thinking about, dreaming of, talking about, looking for in books, and hoping for in a half wishful, half frightened way. Now I felt grown up, like when I smoked my first cigarette or drank my first bottle of beer. I can't say that love was involved in any way. I was grateful to Miranda and found her sweet, if a little bossy. But I was certainly not in love with her.

That did not prevent me from looking forward to the next night, when we repeated the very pleasurable exercise — in a more practised way on my part — and the next few nights after that. Then one day she met me in the corridor and whispered that she wanted to talk to me and that I should meet her at the last bus stop of the mountain village at 3 o'clock that afternoon. I wondered what this was all about, but went to the meeting place at the appointed time. When she arrived and made sure that nobody she knew was there, she led me to a secluded meadow where we sat in the grass, amid the autumnal fragrance of herbs and shrubs.

What she told me had more than autumnal effects on me — wintry might be a better word. She told me that she was pregnant, and that I was the father of the baby she was carrying. She told me that I should take her away from Fiume and that we should make our life together in some other Italian town.

At first I was totally dumbfounded. But soon a little voice said, "Erich, you are being had. How can she already know that she is pregnant, when we have been making love for only a few days? And what about her assurances that she had an operation and couldn't have babies?" When I asked her about the latter, she just shrugged her shoulders and said that it seemed the operation hadn't worked.

Gynaecologically speaking, she was a greater expert than I was (which, of course, isn't saying much). I clearly had to take another tack. "Miranda," I said, "you know that I am only 18 and have no profession and no money. How could we get by if we ran off to live together?"

She gave me a shrewd look. "What about those letters with the big seals you keep getting from abroad? You don't need to pretend with me. I guessed long ago that you come from a rich, probably aristocratic, family that is supporting you here in temporary exile. They will surely send us money."

Despite a limited sense of humour, Uncle Rudi might surely have laughed out loud if he had heard that the letters in which he sent my meagre allowance had caused Miranda to think of him as a duke or a prince. Anyway, I did what I could to correct Miranda's misimpression of my wealth and position, although she was quite reluctant to change her mind. I offered to show her the next letter and its contents, but even that failed to convince her. She claimed that I could telephone or send a telegraph to my relative to change these contents from what they normally would be. In the end, we agreed to let matters rest for a while because she acknowledged that she "might have been mistaken about the baby."

We went back separately. When I reached the town, I went to a bar and had my first double brandy ever. That made me feel a little better and encouraged me to ask the bartender, with whom I had started a little chat, whether he knew of any rooms for rent in the vicinity, which was near the old part of the city and a good distance from my present room. He happened to know one. In fact, his sister and brother-in-law lived around the corner and wanted to rent a room to augment the latter's rather meagre earnings as a clerk with the city corporation. The next day, I moved my three suitcases there, paying my former landlord for the rest of the month and explaining that I wanted to be closer to the place where I took my lessons in Italian.

When I left, Miranda stood at the door with a handkerchief in her hand, but her eyes looked quite dry, as was the smile on her lips when she bade me *addio*. That was the last I saw of her, and I doubt very much that there is an Erich or Erika now living in Fiume, unaware of its "illustrious" father.

○○○○○○○

CHAPTER 11

THE house of the Family Baldo, with whom I now lived, stood at the edge of the old city of Fiume — indeed, the house was actually built against the old city wall. The hubbub that pervaded that house was in strong contrast to the quiet side street on which my previous room had been located. Mr. Baldo went to work early in the morning and Mrs. Baldo, something of a slattern, ruled vociferously over the house and her 12-year-old bundle of mischief of a daughter, not sparing the rod. The screams of the punished child (the punishment usually warranted) mingled with Mrs. Baldo's imprecations and with other noises coming from outside. Street vendors hawked their wares, drivers of horse carts bearing fish or other produce yelled at people to step aside, snatches of street songs wafted about — I heard a veritable symphony of sound, a cacophony if you like, but intensely alive.

Each morning, Mrs. Baldo brought me a breakfast tray and invariably offered some tidbit of town gossip. After breakfast, I usually stepped out on my diminutive balcony, from which I would receive some additional local news. I would hear the grocer and the fruit stall man quarrelling over space on the sidewalk they shared. Or I would see the flirty girl from the *pasticceria* (pastry shop) leaning outside the shop across the street to ogle boys. Or I would take in the open drains shimmering in the sun and sending up clouds of nasty smells.

Who needed TV in those days? The real thing was much more colourful and exciting, particularly as I could participate from my balcony, calling "*Bon giorno, signorina*" to the girl, or taking sides in the shopkeeper's quarrel.

When I had washed (no bathroom, just a basin and jug affair, supplemented by a weekly bath in the bathhouse) and dressed, I would go to town to do my things, including my Hebrew lessons and meetings with my Viennese friends in the café-house. Or I would go to the post office to see whether there was any mail from home or from Uncle Rudi. After moving to my new room, I received my mail *Poste restante*, largely to avoid calling attention to Uncle Rudi's

conspicuous letters. At first, I also received occasional letters from Gitta, but they had become rare after her father sent her to live with relatives in Hungary. Later she would emigrate to England with him, where he was to work on his major Schubert catalogue in Cambridge (except for a period when he was interned as an "enemy alien") and where she went to a girls' school in Eastbourne. After the war broke out, our contacts ceased completely and resumed only after some 40 years. Distance and circumstance had weakened and eventually dissolved the bonds of our youthful affection.

As most of my other friends in Vienna had by now dispersed — either gone abroad or been interned — my news from Vienna now came mostly from my mother. The tone of her letters continued to be cheerful, even after *Kristallnacht*, the infamous night of 9-10 November 1938, which brought the systematic destruction of synagogues in Germany and Austria and the killings and beatings of many Jews. The Nazi authorities had organized this pogrom to look like spontaneous reprisals against Jews for the killing of an attaché at the German Legation in Paris by a young Polish Jew, whose parents had been deported by the Germans. News of *Kristallnacht* reached me slowly, because the Italian papers did not cover it at all and foreign papers were unavailable.

My mother insisted that she did not want to leave Vienna and took pains not to make me feel bad about having left her behind. I realized, or at least had an inkling, that she was merely putting a good face on a terrible situation, and kept thinking of what could be done to get her out. But lacking means, there seemed little I could do. In retrospect, I should have been more active and more insistent, but I did not know then what I know now, and was not the man that I am now. Instead, I was, like most young people, callow and self-centred. That is an explanation and not an excuse, and there is pain when I think about it.

In the meantime, the *Prefettura* had learned that my Bolivian visa, like those of other would-be Bolivian immigrants skulking about in Fiume, was not worth the beautiful stamps and calligraphy with which they were imprinted in our passports. They realized, in short, that none of us carrying those visas had any real intention of leaving for Bolivia and that, even if we did, the Bolivian authorities would not likely have honoured the visas on our arrival in South America. I found myself called to the *Prefettura* and informed by the clerk, who was by now able to pronounce my name nearly correctly, that I had better procure a legitimate visa *pronto* — or else.

As luck would have it, I had just received a letter from cousin Erika in New York. She wrote that she was unable to send me an affidavit for an immigrant visa because she had exhausted her means to provide the necessary financial guarantees to the American authorities. For what it was worth, however, she included an affidavit for a tourist visa, for which no specific financial guarantee was needed. The trouble was only that, affidavit or not, the USA was not granting any tourist visas to people like me, emigrants with no visible means of support.

But the tourist visa affidavit was a very impressive piece of paper. In fact, it consisted of three pieces, one white, one pink and one green, each with a big red seal affixed by a New York notary. Armed with these colourful papers, I returned to the *Prefettura*, where I told my friend the clerk that I had something much better than the Bolivian visa, namely a visa to the USA. He was visibly impressed when I presented him with my "proof," particularly as he could not read English. He promised to inform the *Prefetto*, if Signor Schwars (nearly correct) would be so "gentile" as to wait in the anteroom. In a short while, he came back beaming and told me that *il Signor Prefetto* had declared that I could stay in Fiume until I decided to leave for the USA. Obviously, *il Signor Prefetto* could not read English either.

My evenings were usually rather dull, spent reading or chatting with my cafe-house friends. A welcome diversion arose when I ran into a young Italian whom I had met when he visited my previous hosts, whose son had been his friend and co-worker. He invited me to come the following Sunday evening to a dance of his local of the (fascist) trade union. I accepted with alacrity, and appeared Sunday evening with a new haircut and my best tie. It appeared to be a rather disappointing affair though, most of the girls dancing only with their boyfriends, and the rest not being all that interesting to dance or converse with.

Standing in the corridor and chatting with the chap who had brought me, I suddenly saw a girl enter with a few other newcomers. She immediately captured my attention. Although not conventionally pretty, she seemed lively and vivacious, taking in the room with her glances as if to assess whether there was anyone there who might interest her.

I asked my companion whether he knew who she was. "Oh, *si*, she is a visitor like you, *una ebrea*, the daughter of one of the directors." A Jewish girl? That sounded most interesting. Was she

alone, or had she come to the dance with a boyfriend? My friend told me that she did have a boyfriend, a senior official at the shipyards, but that he did not seem to have come with her to the dance. This emboldened me to approach her a little later, when I saw her standing alone for a moment between dances. I was still quite shy with girls, notwithstanding my recent experience with Miranda, so it was not without effort that asked her whether she would give me the pleasure of the next dance. She nodded smilingly.

The music started — luckily a fox trot and not some complicated dance like a tango or rumba — and we moved on to the dance floor. While I was still racking my brain as to how to start a conversation, she forestalled me by saying,

"Your Italian is really very good, you know!"

I was taken aback, because I had thought that, like most people who met me for the first time, she would think I was Italian. "How do you know that I am not Italian? Is it my accent?"

"Oh no! From that, I would probably not have noticed anything. But I know your name and what you are doing in Fiume!"

"You must be joking! How do you know that?"

"Trust me to hear about a Jewish boy having arrived in Fiume. This is a small town and such news spreads quickly through the Jewish community."

So that was it! I quite liked the idea of having been "noticed" — particularly by her. While still digesting this piece of information, Bettina (for that was her name) said, "I see that my friend whom I was to meet here tonight has just come. I am sorry, but I will have to leave you after this dance."

I was disappointed, but decided not to give up. "Would you perhaps be free sometime to tell me a little more about Fiume and its inhabitants? I need a good guide and you seem to know the town and the people well."

She laughed. "Do you mean, I have good connections and hear about things going on, like comings and goings? Well, seeing that you are a newcomer who might need a little help, I think I can spare an hour or so to give you the benefit of my advice. How about meeting for a walk on the Corso tomorrow afternoon?" I readily agreed, and she parted with that same friendly smile.

My eyes followed her as she joined her friend with lively greetings. While she seemed about my age or slightly older, he was obviously considerably older still. I judged him to be at least 30, a little stout and nearly bald, and I wondered what she saw in him. Not

that she was a stunning beauty, but her green, slightly slanted eyes and a rather full face gave her a pert look, which was enhanced by her slim quickness, vivaciousness, even impishness. There was also obvious intelligence and sharpness of mind, all qualities that attract me to a woman much more than mere beauty.

When I met her the next day on the Corso, I was disappointed that a girlfriend accompanied her. But I realized that she could not have walked alone with a young man — tongues would have started wagging at once, because that would have meant an engagement or something close to it. As it was, we had an amusing chat, with the girlfriend playing the applauding public to our sallies.

This meeting was followed by another and another, as we found increasing pleasure in each other's company. I have already described what attracted me to her. But what drew her to me? I was younger than she was — she turned out to be 19 and, although I fibbed and said that I was also 19, she didn't quite believe me and often asked jokingly to see my passport. I had few other drawing cards, being nearly penniless, without position or home — a young refugee. Well, maybe that was precisely what aroused her feelings at first, feelings of pity for the young immigrant boy to which she responded in an almost motherly way, which found a ready echo in my breast. But soon other feelings followed. After all, I came from Vienna and brought the atmosphere of the big city with me, a city that for people in this part of the world was still THE city, even if it was no longer the political and cultural centre it once was. Also, like most Jews in Fiume, she spoke German and was happy to be able to measure it against my Viennese *Gymnasium* background. We both were avid readers; she taught me a lot about Italian poetry, while I sang the praises of Rilke and other modern German and Austrian poets. And finally, from the photos that I still have of myself at that time, I seem to have been passably handsome, with a shock of darkish hair setting off my blue-green eyes.

Eventually our chaperone grew tired of her assignment. We started to walk alone, but of course not on the Corso and not during daylight. As starlit darkness engenders romantic feelings, it didn't take long before we started kissing, with some chaste caresses to follow. When I tried to stroke her young breasts, she demurred at first. "Why do you have to do that? Is that really necessary?" I assured her that it gave me a great deal of pleasure, and why would she refuse to let me have this pleasure when it did her no harm? Whereupon she opened her purse, took out a little notebook and asked me for a pencil.

Astonished, I handed one to her and she scribbled something, tore out the page and handed it to me. On it were the following words:

Permesso per il Piccolo Erico
da Colgiersi un Po' di Felicita
(Permit for little Erich to gather
for himself a little happiness)

Perhaps it was the next day, or the one after that, when Mrs. Baldo, having gone through the pockets of a pair of pants I had given her to take to the cleaners, drew forth to her amusement and my embarrassment a dainty girl's bra.

But this was only a part, and a relatively small part, of the love that grew between us. It was a romantic love, with hand-holding and tears in our eyes when we went dancing and partnered with someone else while "our song" played. (The Tango "Violetta"). These dances were usually 5 o'clock teas in nearby Abbazia, in cavernous hotel lounges where once upon a time wasp-waisted ladies and their mustachioed officer escorts had danced under Emperor Franz Joseph's portrait. Bettina's mother accompanied us on these outings, an elegant, smiling lady, who obviously thought me quite unsuitable for her daughter, but who loved her daughter too much to forbid her meeting a young man she fancied. I suppose that her mother figured that I would soon be gone anyway and would no longer pose a danger.

We also danced at Bettina's home or listened to her collection of dance records in her room, with the door to the living room always open. Still, we managed to kiss whenever her parents became engrossed in their card game.

Bettina had, of course, broken up with her boyfriend, but had never really told me much about him. I suspected that her parents might have been involved in bringing their relationship about, pushing her a little towards an up-and-coming young executive. That he was a high-ranking member of the fascist trade union may also have been a significant quality in their eyes. Bettina, an only child, loved her parents and was a very dutiful daughter. That just weakened a little when I came onto the scene, and her parents let her sow her "wild oats," albeit with all due care that they would not germinate.

Soon after we met, winter came. The cold winds of the Bora frequently whistled through the streets, bringing snow or sleet squalls down the mountain from the forests of the Karst plateau. But the

evenings were often clear and not too cold, so that we could walk arm-in-arm in the park among the shadows of the scraggy palm trees and laurel bushes that must have found it hard to await the coming of Adriatic spring. Sometimes we would walk on the breakwater, where dark nooks of quiet warehouses provided opportunities to stop, kiss and caress. When we walked on, we would pass other couples searching for similar havens.

One day I was called to the *Prefettura,* where I was told that the doubtful nature of my "American visa" had been discovered. Once again, I had to scramble. A cable to Uncle Rudi brought within a few days a certificate from the Jewish Agency for Palestine, informing all concerned that I was awaiting the granting of a visa from the Palestine Mandate Government, and that it should become available within a matter of weeks. That did the trick again and my *sogiornio* was once more renewed.

The days that followed must have passed quickly, too quickly for my love-filled heart. Instead of looking forward to finding a safe haven in Palestine, I had begun to dread leaving Fiume and Bettina. The early Adriatic spring was just starting to fill parks and hillsides with its first flowers when my "certificate" to enter Palestine as a student arrived, and with it the promise of another departure. The ties that bound me to Fiume in the short time I had spent there seemed no less strong than those binding me to Vienna, where I had spent all my youth. In fact, after I left Fiume, my homesickness for it was far greater than for Vienna.

Bettina and I had often spoken about the future. We had considered the possibility of her coming with me to Palestine, but she felt that she could not leave her parents. Also, she had no means of support in Palestine and I certainly could not provide such support. We resigned ourselves to the possibility that perhaps one day she might join me, when I had made my way.

And then my last day in Fiume came. The certificate had a limited validity period and I could tarry no longer. The details of my departure from Fiume are as blurred in my mind as those of my departure from Vienna. I remember waving from the train window to Bettina, who stood on the platform, waving too. And I remember that my eyes were blurred by tears. I wonder whether I would have had the strength to leave if I had known that I was never to see her again.

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

CHAPTER 12

OUR ship entered Haifa Bay in the middle of the night. The clanging of anchor chains and the shouting of sailors woke me up. I went on deck and stood with my fellow passengers along the railing, facing the twinkling lights and staring at our future home. Haifa certainly showed itself from its best side: the Bay, larger than the Bay of Naples, was outlined by lights, mostly white lights but some coloured. Other lights rose in a pyramid from Haifa's shore towards the sky. Those who knew the country explained that we were looking in the direction of Mount Carmel. A white beacon shone from the top of the pyramid, the light of Stella Maris, the seafarer's church.

As the harbour was closed at night, we had to lie out in the roadstead until well after dawn. When the sun's first light revealed features along the shore, we marvelled at the whitewashed houses framed by palm trees. Even the large, modern power station — white and squat, surrounded by lush, green vegetation — looked exotic to us. The smell of orange blossoms, tinged with more pungent, unfamiliar smells of the orient, made the balmy spring air sweet and aromatic.

The ship's bell called us to breakfast, which on the *SS Gallilea* was of typical Italian skimpiness - coffee, rolls, jam and butter. But to the passengers — one hundred or so mostly young immigrants — even that was too much this morning. We were too excited to do more than gulp down a cup of coffee and run back to the railing to gaze at our first view of the Promised Land. Those who had been there before explained the visible features in more detail, and I listened avidly to their explanations. I wasn't even upset that I had lost my pre-eminent position as "Italian" expert, translator and mediator with the Italian crew.

As we slowly inched our way into Haifa harbour, I leaned over the railing and wondered about the reception we would receive from the customs and immigration authorities. Would they search our luggage? What would they think of my Viennese featherbed? Would they find the starting gun I had acquired in Trieste, with which I intended to "defend" myself against Arab attackers?

Debarkation took a long time, as we slowly filed through the customs shed. The immigration officials fired questions at us in guttural Hebrew and English. Behind the front row of mostly swarthy officials (Christian Arabs, as I realized later) stood tall, blond English supervisors. My featherbed caused a little surprise — the Arab officials had obviously never seen such a thing — but it did not arouse any suspicions. The starting gun was duly found and caused more of a stir. It was passed around and examined by supervisors, one of whom eventually told me that I could bring it in only if I paid 10 pounds duty. Now, 10 pounds were a lot of money then, and were much more then the thing had cost. So I told him in my schoolboy English, "I don't vant it. You keep it." After signing a long form, I was allowed to drag my three suitcases to one of the waiting buses provided by the immigrant-aid society, and off I went to an immigrant hostel on the slopes of Mt. Carmel.

Spring in Haifa was even further along than in the Northern Adriatic. Mt. Carmel's slopes sported a multitude of blooming orange trees and colourful flowers. Houses often hid behind mauve and orange bougainvillea and palm trees. Higher up, pine trees took over, making the air fragrant with the smell of warm pine needles.

The hostel was a plain two-story building with a flat roof, like most buildings in Haifa. From my room on the second floor, I had a lovely view of Haifa Bay below; I could even make out our ship, small as a bathtub toy. But I was too tired to enjoy the view for long. My first sleep in Palestine was deep and dreamless.

The next day, I changed the little money I had been able to bring from Italy and took a bus to the Technical University, or the "Technion," as it was called. I hoped to pick up my monthly stipend from Uncle Rudi, which he now sent to the Technion, and register for my lectures. Although I wondered initially whether my rudimentary Hebrew would allow me to find the way and catch the right bus, I was pleasantly surprised to find that most people on Mt. Carmel spoke German as well as I did. Many German Jews who had come to Haifa since Hitler's rise to power in 1933 had settled there, particularly if they had been able to bring money with them or had made some money since. Mt. Carmel, with its cool breezes and lovely views, was a very desirable and pricey location.

The Haifa Technion consisted of a collection of modern buildings in a pseudo-oriental style: large arches, cupolas and plenty of well-kept greenery between buildings. The school sat on the middle slopes of Mt. Carmel, which were the focal point of the Jewish section

of Haifa. Lower down the slope was the Arab part of the town, and at the bottom near the harbour was the international part, where Jews, Arabs, Britons, and sailors from many countries rubbed shoulders in banks, shops and restaurants.

The sun was already quite warm as I climbed the broad stone steps to the entrance of the administration building of the Technion. The cool darkness that I encountered when I stepped inside was very pleasant. Unfortunately, that was to be the only pleasant part of my visit. When I told the clerk my name, he disappeared to consult his files and came back with an astonished look on his face. He said in Hebrew, "How did you get here?" Thinking that I must have misunderstood him, I asked him to repeat his question. "How did you get here," he asked again. I answered haltingly, "On the ship, from Trieste."

"Yes, of course, I know that," he answered testily, "but why did they let you come on land?

Again I thought that I must have had misunderstood him and had to have the question repeated. Ultimately, I said, "There was no difficulty. Why?"

"Well, because your visa has been cancelled. Your uncle has not sent all the money we asked for, so we cancelled the visa and sent it to another applicant. That student has already arrived, and now you appear here on the same visa!"

He then went to tell the others in the office about the error of the British Government. (If there really was an error, I never heard anything further about it.) They all came to look at the student who had come on a cancelled visa. While the attention I received was not entirely unwelcome, particularly when it came from pretty, dark-eyed secretaries, I still felt very uneasy.

"So, what do I do now? Go back to Italy?"

"No, of course not. Just be glad they let you in. We are happy that two Jewish students got in on one visa. The British are very niggardly with visas these days. You see, there has been growing resentment among the Arabs — even riots — due to the increasing Jewish immigration ever since that man Hitler came to power. The British are worried that tensions will get even worse if too many more Jews arrive."

"Oh, good," I exclaimed in relief. "Well, in that case, could I please have some money? As you know, I couldn't take any out of Italy and now I'm completely broke."

The clerk examined his file. "Sorry, but there is still some paper work to be finished. I suggest you come back in two weeks."

I looked at him uncomprehendingly. "But I just told you that I have no money. And I don't know anyone here. What do you want me to do for the next two weeks?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "That's not my business."

Now I was really upset. What a difference between the politeness, even helpfulness, with which the *Prefettura* treated me in Italy, and the indifference that I encountered here, among my "own people." When I tried to convey my feelings to him on that point, he looked at me coldly and asked, "Who forced you to come here?" But then he shrugged his shoulders again and said, "Why don't you go to the Association of German (Jewish) Immigrants? They might help you. Good-bye."

And that's where I went next, after ascertaining from some passing students the whereabouts of the Association, which happened to be close by. The secretary at the Association listened sympathetically to my tale of woe. I was able to tell it much more fluently and expressively (and was able to add some choice epithets) in German than I could have in Hebrew. She gave me a long form to fill out (in triplicate), which she took to her boss. When she came back, she handed me smilingly — 10 piastres. That was one tenth of a Palestinian pound — then worth about the same as an English pound — in other words, a little over a shilling! Mind you, money at that time went further than today and prices were lower in Palestine than in Europe. But still, it was an awfully paltry sum, especially since they knew that I had money coming that would enable me to repay their loan in a short time. But then, German Jews (there were very few Austrians there yet) were known in Vienna for their tight-fistedness — and poor cooking.

As a matter of fact, I was to experience German cooking in the near future and, at the same time, get a better impression of the Association and its members. A cadre of German doctors and lawyers ("academics," as they called themselves) had banded together to help the German Jewish students trying to work their way through the Technion with what they needed most, namely food. I found myself invited to the home of a lawyer's family, where I ate weekly dinners over the next several months. It not only filled my stomach with adequate (if not exciting) food at regular intervals, but also gave me a bit of home-like atmosphere. It even provided me with some cultural uplift. After dinner, the *pater familias* would sit at the piano and

accompany himself to some Brahms and Schubert songs, which he sang quite well in a small but warm baritone voice. Strange, how very German they and their like seemed — the men with facial scars received while duelling in German student associations, the bustling housewives careful with money and quantities of food served. But they were decent, well-meaning people. Later, a German doctor, a friend of theirs, treated me when I fell ill with an abscess on a facial gland; he operated, came to my home and treated me in his office, all without taking a penny.

Eventually, the Technion released my uncle's allowance, which they paid into a bank. I now had all of three pounds a month to my name. Uncle Rudi had sent the equivalent of six pounds per month for a year; they had asked for two years' worth, but he had refused. The Technion kept three pounds per month, supposedly to cover tuition fees. What a proportion!

With the help of the students' association, I found two other students willing to share a rented room, one that was only a 10-minute walk from the Technion. Well, the walk was 10 minutes if you climbed over a wall with the aid of a conveniently located olive tree — otherwise it was 15 minutes. The room was poky and dark, and cost three pounds per month, which meant one pound for each of us. That left me with two pounds for living expenses, books, etc. Not really enough, but I intended to supplement my income through occasional work.

As it turned out, the students' association controlled the most desirable work for students and doled out the jobs to its members. There was a catch, however. One needed to join the Socialist Student Society to qualify. Although I had been socialistically inclined as long as I could remember,* I refused to join — by that time Palestine Jewish officialdom had completely turned me off. As a result, I did not get any work from the student association and had to earn a few piastres here and there by occasional stevedoring in the harbour, selling newspapers in the streets and hawking geese and ducks around Mt. Carmel. But I didn't mind. On occasions when my monthly money ran out shortly before the end of the month, I simply stayed in bed for 24 or 48 hours, sleeping much of the time and subsisting on tea and *halwa*, the sticky, sweet sesame-nut and honey concoction that Arabs sold for pennies. It was extremely filling.

---

* As George Bernard Shaw said, "A man who is not a socialist when he is young is a bad man, and a man who is still a socialist when he is old is a stupid man."

The Technion studies started a few days after my arrival in early April. The idea was that I would try, by working very hard, to catch up to the other students and complete the semester by June. To my surprise, in some areas like mathematics, my Viennese *Gymnasium* grounding proved to be more than adequate. In fact, the first year of Technion studies in Haifa, which followed what I presume was a British curriculum, was in many respects similar to what had been taught in Vienna during the last year of *Gymnasium*.

The Technion required first-year students to take general technological subjects, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, architecture and — strangely enough — drawing. The latter had always been my poorest subject. By the end of the semester, I was still trying to draw the pitcher that served as the first model for the class, while the others had already progressed to much more interesting subjects. With all the erasing I had to do, it became less and less recognizable as a pitcher.

I was able to follow the lessons, which were given in Hebrew, without as much difficulty as I had feared. In subjects such as these, the knowledge of a limited number of phrases sufficed. Moreover, the lecturers themselves were often a bit shaky in their Hebrew, so they kept it fairly simple. One old German professor, who taught geometry and who had obviously memorized his lectures, would mumble them in Hebrew with a strong German accent. Now and then, he would raise his voice and, for the benefit of newcomers like myself, translate a term into German with obvious relish. There was also an elderly Italian lady who, after class, was very happy to explain things to me in Italian that I had not understood in Hebrew.

When it came to exams, however, I encountered greater difficulty. To pick up phrases by ear is one thing, but to decipher exam questions and, even more importantly, to write answers in Hebrew was very hard. Of course, I continued my Hebrew studies — the Technion provided them free of charge — but I did not make rapid progress. Somehow I had acquired a mental block. Perhaps it was the new alphabet, or perhaps it had to do with the shock of my reception and the unfriendliness of the locals, or maybe it grew out of my homesickness for Italy. In any case, I have never been able to write in Hebrew very well.

Yes, once the newness of the surroundings and the pressures of settling in had worn off, homesickness for Italy and for Bettina hit me hard, even harder than homesickness for Vienna. To me, Vienna represented a phase of my life that I knew was over; my continuing

feelings for the city centred on fear and persecution. But Fiume and my evenings with Bettina stood out in glowing colours and made my heart ache with longing. I was very lonely in Haifa, which also contributed to those feelings. My two roommates were decent enough chaps, but we had little in common. One was a bluff and rough Pole and the other, although also from Vienna, was not a typical Viennese, but was instead very quiet, withdrawn, and studious. It took me quite a few months, until the end of the first summer, to find some real friends.

As that summer of 1939 approached, I realized that I would not be able to "make" it. There was just no hope that I would be able to pass all the subjects in the short time available. The student association's guidance counsellor suggested that I drop the attempt and go to a Kibbutz for a few months, where I could stay without payment while working in the fields and improving my Hebrew. Then I could come back in the fall and start anew. But I was not willing to accept that idea, partly because it would mean that I had used Uncle Rudi's money for nothing, and partly because the thought of Kibbutz life did not appeal to me. I thought that by studying hard during the summer, I might be able to pass the repeat exams early in the fall and continue my second year studies.

My mother, whose letters came seldom but regularly, seemed to agree with that idea, particularly as it appeared more appropriate vis-a-vis Uncle Rudi's financial assistance. And then, one day while walking in the lush garden of the Technion (seeing in my mind's eye other gardens in far off Fiume), a thought struck me. Why not combine work with pleasure and return to Italy for two or three months, studying under the loving care of Bettina and her family? It seemed a marvelous solution to my misery, and I immediately sat down to write Bettina, asking her whether they would have me.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 13

SOON Bettina's reply came and, as I had expected, it warmly welcomed my plans to visit and contained an invitation from her parents to spend a month with them in Fiume and another month in the Dolomites. Bettina clearly was delighted at the prospect of seeing me again, although I am not sure that her parents shared her feelings. But then again, they probably found it difficult to deny their only daughter something that she desired very much.

I now had to find ways and means to travel to Italy within my very limited budget. After some searching, I found a Greek shipping line that had a tramp steamer going to Trieste, via Athens. They were willing to take me for three pounds. I calculated that I could just afford this amount, given that I would get food on the ship and would need very little money as a guest of Bettina's parents in Italy.

I sublet my portion of the room that I shared and paid my fare. Then, just as I thought everything was arranged, I received a letter from the shipping line, telling me that I needed a Greek transit visa, since the steamer would stop for a few days in Athens. Having learned so much about ancient Greece in the Viennese *Gymnasium*, including 5 years studying the Greek language, I found the idea of seeing Athens quite intriguing indeed. I promptly hitchhiked to the Greek Consulate in Jerusalem to obtain the visa. That is where disaster struck. The Consul was unwilling to give me a visa; he probably was afraid that I was intending to jump ship in Athens. I suppose he thought, "With those refugees you can never tell. He may well want to settle in Greece, and we don't need such have-nots. We have enough of our own!"

Despite my pleas, he remained adamant. I left the Consulate in a state of shock. I knew that, not being able to afford any other mode of travel, my dreams of seeing Bettina again and of escaping the penurious and lonely life in Haifa for a couple of months were shattered. The shock must have been severe because I wandered around Jerusalem in an aimless daze for a few hours until it became too late to return to Haifa. Then I remembered that I had an address in Jerusalem of friends of my German lunch hosts in Haifa, a lawyer

working for the Jewish Agency for Palestine. They lived in an elegant, tree-lined quarter and received me kindly, agreeing to put me up for the night.

As it turned out, their unexpected guest was to remain for more than one night. When morning came, I was running a high fever and was clearly not fit to travel back to Haifa. My host called a doctor, who diagnosed "sand fly fever," (also known by the colourful name of "*papatachi*"), an illness caught by many newcomers to the country. Perhaps my constitution had been weakened by inadequate food — the only vitamins I got were through the very cheap Jaffa oranges that we ate by the bushel — and by my despondency over the collapse of my Italian travel plans. Anyway, I remained with my kind hosts for over a week, looked after as though I had been a member of the family.

Papatachi is not a severe illness, but it left me weak and depressed for weeks. By the time I returned to Haifa, summer was well on its way, and it was to be a sad summer for me. The regretful letters I received from Bettina, ensconced in her cool Dolomite summer resort, made Haifa's Mediterranean heat feel all the more oppressive. My anxiety was also growing over the political developments in Europe, which seemed to be moving inexorably toward war. That blow fell on September 1, 1939. After that, the only news I had from Vienna came via friends and relatives who were living in neutral countries, such as my stepsister Hilda in Split, Yugoslavia, or Uncle Rudi in Holland, who relayed brief letters from my mother. Through those relays, I learned that my mother had been forced to leave our apartment, in which we had lived since I was born and move to a single room in a "ghetto" area. But she still wrote relatively cheerful letters, encouraging me to continue my studies and reminding me to express due gratitude to Uncle Rudi for his financial help.

Despite my mother's urgings, I felt very apathetic toward my studies at the Technion. In fact, everything connected with the university and with Palestinian officialdom had become distasteful to me. I began to cast around for different solutions. For some time I thought of abandoning my studies in favor of becoming a plumber or electrician, or taking up some other blue-collar trade. Such a change in direction seemed to offer me more direct control over my life. There was a special school for such trades attached to the Technion. Also, I had become friendly with two other young Viennese who were enrolled there. But, as I should have expected,

Uncle Rudi would have none of it. If I wanted his continued support, I would have to stick with my studies at the Technion, which I did in a very desultory way.

My main memories of these unhappy days are of walking up and down Herzlstreet, Haifa's "main drag," with my two Viennese friends, Zwi and Paul, who were nearly as unhappy as I was. We would decry the standards of local female beauty, criticize the poverty of the shop windows, ridicule the pretensions of cinema fronts and, when we were tired and thirsty, walk another kilometre to a restaurant where soda water could be bought for two pennies. We couldn't afford more. We were homesick, lonely and worried about our families. And in my case, the weakening bonds with Bettina added to my woes. Her letters had become less frequent and, it seemed to me, less ardent.

I started to look for sympathy, preferably of the female kind. Once, I unburdened my heart to Josie, my dishwashing companion at the German family home where we ate weekly lunches. She was several years older than I was and lived with her sister, who was a seamstress. I think Josie helped her a bit; she was very clever with her hands and could create attractive outfits from cheap shawls and imitation jewellery. In fact, she did look a bit like a gypsy, with her darkish, nearly leathery skin, very black hair and dark eyes. Her most attractive feature, though, was her cheerfulness. No mishap could get her down. She also called a spade a spade (or worse) and, despite her obvious femininity, was in some ways as much a man as I was — perhaps more.

Her solution for my despondency was to take me out to dances with Bill, her boyfriend, who was a sergeant in the Royal Army Service Corps. In the past, the majority of the Jewish population in Palestine had not looked too kindly upon fraternization between Jewish women and British soldiers. This was partly because the British army was often used to help the police stop illegal immigration and to raid Haganah weapons caches, and partly because most of the peacetime soldiers stationed in Palestine were uneducated and boorish. But with the outbreak of the war, this attitude was beginning to change. The Jewish population saw the need for cooperation against the common German enemy. Moreover, the new recruits sent from Britain were of a different type from the peacetime professional soldier.

I didn't dance very much during those evenings in the smoky bars because Josie and Bill spent most of the time dancing cheek-to-cheek. This astonished me a little because she had not seemed to me

the romantic kind; but it taught me that you never can tell! I felt very grown up, sitting in front of the whiskey-soda that my hosts had bought me and smoking my first cigarettes. (Josie herself smoked like a chimney and so did nearly everyone else those days.) Although my presence probably did not please Bill too much, he was too much of a gentleman to let it show. He and I even shared some limited conversation, which helped to improve my rusty school-English. Most important of all, these evenings lifted my depression for a few hours, for which I was very grateful.

Once I was able to do good turn for Josie. Late one night, following a bad quarrel between Josie and her sister, probably because of Josie's "loose" life-style, her sister had thrown her out. Josie came knocking on the window of my ground floor room. As it happened, I was alone that night. I only had one roommate at that point, and he was away. I let Josie climb in. She told me what had occurred and why she was looking for a place to sleep. The next day she hoped to get help from Bill, but she obviously couldn't barge into the army camp during the middle of the night.

We decided that we couldn't use my roommate's bed, since he would be bound to notice something. Josie said that she would be glad to share mine. And to tell the truth, so was I. But she soon disabused me of any hopes for dalliance. Josie asked me to lend her a spare blanket and then proceeded to wrap it around herself from the waist down, fastening it together with two large safety-pins she carried on her plaid skirt. "I know you men," she said. "Even if you promised to behave, temptation would soon overcome good intentions. Anyway, I doubt you have too many of the latter!" I didn't have a very restful night, next to a soon sleeping Josie, the warmth of whose lithe body came through the blanket and stirred up all sorts of dreams.

As the winter turned to spring, the warmer weather, the spring flowers and the blooming bougainvillea on the slopes of Mt. Carmel helped to create a more cheerful atmosphere, while developments in Europe diverted attention from my own miseries. The chance that my mother would escape Vienna seemed to be getting slimmer and slimmer, as more and more countries fell into Hitler's grasp. Several friends of mine joined the army, among them Zwi. They all joined the Pioneer Corps, which was then the only British Army formation enlisting "Palestinians." I envied them, because joining the Pioneer Corps would have given me a chance to help in the fight against the Nazis and at the same time permitted me to abandon my uncongenial Technion studies.

In order to be active, I joined the Haganah and was being trained in its "Maritime Brigade." We received instructions on how to help illegal immigrants get off their boats and come on land as quickly as possible so as to avoid detection by British patrols. And as a counterpoint to all that activity, I took up poetry again, translating my favourite Italian poet, Leopardi, into German. But clearly, developments were moving towards some sort of a climax, and Hitler saw to it that this was to take place very soon.

7. (Step) Brother Walter with wife Helene (Vienna,1964)

And he said, I am God,
the God of thy father; fear
not to go into Egypt.

Genesis, 46.3

BOOK THREE

EGYPT AND THE WESTERN DESERT

5. Erich, four years old, on summer holiday with Dad and Mum (now Herr and Frau Professor) and (Step) Sister Hedi and family friends (Gars, Austria, 1924)

CHAPTER 14

ON a hot day in July 1940, I walked down the slopes of Mt. Carmel to the British Army recruiting office in the harbour district. Summers are always hot in Haifa, and I walked because I couldn't afford the bus fare. The modest monthly cheque with which rich Uncle Rudi had supported my studies at the Technion had ceased in May when the Germans invaded Holland. After that, I worked at various jobs in order to continue my studies to the end of the semester and to keep my head above water. Occasionally I worked as a stevedore in the harbor, which had become busy with war preparations. I also went door to door among the wealthy homes in Haifa selling kosher chickens and geese from a shop owned by the parents of a Viennese friend. To reach these posh villas, I had to carry my "wares" up hundreds of rough steps cut into the rocky slopes of the mountain, with the rucksack becoming heavier with each step.

But when I stopped to rest on the top of Mount Carmel, the lovely panorama of Haifa Bay always refreshed me. To my right, I could see Acre and the white cliffs marking the Lebanese border beyond. I would then scan my eyes along the vast curving bay, where the valley of Esdraeleon reached the sea just short of Haifa, to the roof tops, cupolas and minarets of Haifa itself on the slopes immediately below. My eye would rest on the church of Stella Maris on a nearby lower peak of the mountain. Further down the mountain, shining through the palm tree tops, the golden dome of the Baha'i temple, which appears like a beacon far out at sea. Finally, my gaze would reach the harbour full of ships of all sizes: white passenger steamers, heavily laden black freighters and sleek gray warships. The view has often been compared to the Bay of Naples, but I think that it is even more beautiful, wider and more evocative.

When I eventually tired of selling chickens and geese, I found a more regular job, running a newspaper kiosk in a Royal Army Service Corp camp, one of the many British army camps that had sprung up in the strategic Haifa Bay region. The burly Service Corps drivers there who frequented the kiosk liked to pull my leg a lot, in a good-humoured way. They also taught me quite a bit of colloquial English, particularly of the four-letter variety. Once I recall that they asked me

if I had any "French" magazines. When I replied, "No, only English magazines," they laughed heartily, which puzzled me at the time.

Pretty, black haired and pink-cheeked Rosie, an 18-year old refugee from Germany, worked as my assistant. She seemed to understand the Service Corps drivers better, because their teasing had the effect of making her pink cheeks even pinker. Since her English was not as good as mine, I concluded that some kind of sexual "osmosis" helped her understand them in a way I did not. Unfortunately, that osmosis did not apply to me, as much as I would have liked it to. At barely twenty, I was just too young and unimportant in her eyes.

My work in the Service Corps camp and the contact with the Service Corps drivers started me thinking seriously about joining the British Army. It wasn't their smart uniforms — the drivers were usually quite sloppy — nor their steady pay. Being young, I cared little about money and felt sure to be able to find some kind of work, in light of the increasing number of jobs spawned by the mounting war effort. The war itself began to motivate me — the chance to fight back at the Nazis and to help stem their advance. A steady stream of propaganda from the Jewish Agency for Palestine must have also influenced me. Although Palestine was still ruled by Britain under a mandate from the League of Nations, the Jewish Agency for Palestine operated as a "shadow" government for the Jewish inhabitants. By 1940, the Agency had begun in earnest to urge young and able-bodied Jews to volunteer for the British Army in order to fight the common enemy.

Several of my friends had already joined the Pioneer Corps, the first British Army unit opened to "Palestinian" volunteers. I felt I owed it to them and to my family in Nazi-occupied Europe to join up too. If I could also escape a humdrum and penurious life in Haifa by signing up, all the better.

Walking through the teeming Arab souk that adjoined the Jewish section on the middle slope of Mt. Carmel, I actually felt grateful for the positive effects of the war. In addition to increased employment, it had brought an abrupt end to the Arab-Jewish hostilities that had lasted for many years and had cost many lives. The arrival of thousands of British soldiers, funnelled into the Mediterranean war theatre, had suppressed such strife, at least for the time being. Before that, I would not have dared to walk through the Arab souk, although the sights, sounds and particularly the smells of the souk always fascinated me when I rode past on the bus.

Now I could stop at stalls where men with brown, wrinkled faces and red-and-white checked headcloths sold vegetables that were typically larger and more vividly coloured than those I remembered seeing in Europe. I could also look into mysterious, windowless grocery shops, smelling of oriental spices. I entered one, merely for the pleasure of inhaling the smells and admiring the open sacks of dried peas and lentils, vats of olives and slabs of halva, the sticky but delicious paste made of crushed sesame seeds and honey.

"What is it you want, *Khouaja* (sir)," said an old man in Arabic, lifting his face from the water pipe he was sucking.

"A couple of Latif cigarettes, please," I answered in rudimentary Arabic, asking for the cheapest type of local cigarettes because they could be bought singly. The transaction was completed with the usual formal politeness that the Arabs love. Then the old man went back to his water pipe, his hand fingering a small chain of amber worry beads.

It was getting close to twelve o'clock when I reached the cosmopolitan harbour district, where Jews, Arabs, Englishmen had rubbed shoulders even during the past "disturbances." As the recruiting office, like most other offices, closed at twelve, I hastened to the Kingsway, the modern harbour thoroughfare lined with tall office buildings, banks and other commercial establishments. The recruiting office was located on the ground floor of such a building, which allowed potential recruits to walk in from the street, without giving them the opportunity for a second thought while climbing stairs or riding an elevator.

"Erich Schwarz. ... Hm ... Haven't you been here before?" A Sergeant seated behind a bare wooden desk looked up at me suspiciously.

As it happened, he was quite right. I had indeed been to his office a couple of weeks earlier and had made arrangements to go for medical and other tests in order to join the Pioneer Corps. But I didn't know how to tell him that, on the evening before I was supposed to arrive for those tests, I had taken part in a somewhat lively party with former university colleagues and had found it impossible to rise at dawn.

"Yes, Sergeant, I was here a couple of weeks ago and made an appointment to come for acceptance tests last Wednesday for the Pioneer Corps. But unfortunately, I felt very poorly on Wednesday, and I couldn't come." A truthful reply.

The Sergeant seemed satisfied and reached for his appointment book.

"All right. Shall I book you for next Wednesday then?"

But now there was another little complication. While I had earlier been willing to volunteer for the menial but necessary tasks performed by His Majesty's Pioneer Corps, such as building bridges (à la the River Kwai), roads and army camps, a more glamorous possibility had since offered itself. The Royal Air Force badly needed to expand its Middle Eastern capabilities in the wake of Italy's entry into the war. Not being able to obtain adequate reinforcements quickly enough from Britain, the RAF had decided to tap the reservoir of local talent in Palestine. An advertisement had appeared a few days earlier in the newspapers, calling for volunteers to join the RAF. Looking at the advertisement, I had visions of piloting fighter aircraft or dropping bombs on Nazi Germany.

"Well ... you see," I started hesitatingly, "a few days ago I saw an advertisement calling for volunteers for the RAF. Frankly, that would interest me more than joining the Pioneers. I think I could also be more useful in the RAF in view of my university background."

The Sergeant looked at me, and I was relieved to see that he smiled.

"Can't blame you, laddie. If I were still a civilian, I'd feel the same. Their uniforms are much smarter too. Collar and tie, you know! All right, let me see. RAF ... yes, they go to Sarafand for acceptance tests on Tuesdays. Seven o'clock sharp. Hope you won't be sick again!"

"Oh no, I certainly will be here on time. Thanks a lot! But could you tell me please, how long do these tests last? How long will I have to stay in Sarafand? How much stuff should I take with me?"

"They last usually about three days. You will need only an overnight bag, because you should be back by Friday. They inform you afterwards if you have passed the tests."

"All right. Once more, many thanks!" I replied.

When I turned to go, the Sergeant called after me. "The bus leaves from here at seven o'clock sharp! If you are late, it will have to be the Pioneer Corps after all!"

Unfortunately, there was no mother to be surprised with the news about my glorious future in the RAF, but only a middle-aged, broad-hipped Romanian landlady. But she was motherly enough to warn me in thickly accented Hebrew: "De English no good people; dey only look for fodder for Djerman cannons. Better stay at Haifa and become engineer!"

But I had given up on the idea of continuing my studies at the Technion, and not only because of my lack of funds. I had always been more inclined towards arts studies than those offered at the Technion. The uncongenial technical subjects, together with the unfamiliar Hebrew in which they were taught, had become just too wearying.

Not even Lea, the landlady's beautiful daughter, could change my mind. Not that she tried very hard. She was one of those girls who are alluring and seductive only outside her house, which was dark, not very clean, and usually smelled of onions and cheap perfume. There she moped around in a ratty slip, with unkempt hair falling over her large black eyes and a bored expression on her olive skinned face. But when she dressed to go out, she became animated and slinky looking, like an orchid growing in a dark and dank cave. But even then I couldn't forget the bedraggled ragweed she was at home, which quelched any desire to take advantage of the close proximity in which we lived.

I wished Lea would have been Rosie, and I wished someone like Rosie would come into my life. My poverty not only prevented me from continuing at the Technion, but also made it all but impossible to meet girls. At that time, one still had to "take a girl out," which I simply could not afford. My friends and I therefore spent our Sabbath days walking along the main street and ogling the girls. The dark-skinned Sephardic (Oriental Jewish) girls had flashing black eyes and were doubtless the prettiest. But even if we could have afforded to take them out, these girls would never have been allowed to date Ashkenazi (European Jewish) boys. Indeed, the parents of Sephardic girls looked after them nearly as strictly as Arab parents looked after their girls, which meant that they were basically off-limits to anyone.

Then the big day came. A blue and cloudless sky stretched over Haifa Bay as I made my way down to the Recruiting Office to keep my important seven o'clock appointment. A grey army bus already stood outside the Office. In front of it, I saw a small crowd of young men holding various types of bags, small suitcases and even some brown paper parcels. The crowd consisted entirely of Jews, as few Arabs volunteered for the British forces. I joined the crowd and participated in its small talk, which was confined to surmises as to when the driver would open the bus doors, how long the tests would keep us in Sarafand, and what the tests would be like. Of course, none of us knew the answers to these questions, so we soon grew bored and took up whistling at girls walking past on their way to work.

Eventually, the driver appeared, accompanied by the Recruiting Sergeant, who read off our names from a list, ticking off those that were present. Although some four or five were missing, the Sergeant told the bus driver to get going. He didn't have all day to wait for some lousy recruits.

The bus wound its way out of Haifa, past the steep green slopes of Mt. Carmel on one side and the blue Mediterranean on the other, then through the coastal plain, where irrigation devices sprayed each tree of the passing orange groves with little plumes of water. I sat next to a burly but pleasant man, some ten years older than I was. He introduced himself as Leo Gutmann, originally from Czechoslovakia, a lorry* driver by profession. We soon got into a deep conversation about our countries of origin. My mother came from Czechoslovakia. He had relatives in Austria and spoke German very well. In fact, most Czech Jews spoke both German and Czech, considering the former language to be the province of the intelligentsia, while the latter was the tongue of the hewers of wood and carriers of water.

It always astonished and pleased me how little social discrimination there was at that time among the Jews in Palestine. Blue collar workers, students, office workers, rich young people — they all mixed easily. It was not uncommon to see a girl from a rich house go dancing with a worker from her father's factory, or a banker's son to fall for a blond girl from a kibbutz. This phenomenon (which did not survive the founding of the State of Israel) arose from the common bond of emigration, of starting anew in a new country. The similarity of the immigrants' background also helped forge a bond. Leo had not been brought up to become a lorry driver. He had been trained as a teacher but, because he was unfamiliar with Hebrew, had to look for other work. Many lawyers from Germany were selling oranges or shoe laces during the depression years prior to 1939, but nothing prevented them from dressing up in the evening and sharing a coffeehouse table with practising lawyers and their wives. Manual work was not regarded as degrading, and the type of work mattered little. In fact, people even attached a kind of honour to manual work, particularly work on the land and in construction because it helped to build up the country.

The only type of discrimination I found was between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, or "Franks" as the former called the latter in a

* "Lorry" is the British term for "truck."

derogatory way. This name, which the Arabs used for all Europeans since the time of the Crusades, must have been applied also to the Sephardic Jews when they arrived as refugees from Spain towards the end of the 15th Century. The discrimination against them by the Ashkenazi had hardly any religious basis — the services were a bit different and they had separate rabbinical institutions — but derived rather from the different life styles and traditions. Most Sephardic Jews looked and lived more like Arabs. Black-haired, dusky-skinned, speaking a guttural Hebrew, they appeared very different from the European Jews, and difference is the father of discrimination. It was mostly the Ashkenazis who looked down their noses at the Sephardis and, as the latter usually lacked education, found it easy to keep them out of the better paying jobs. That situation caused a vicious circle, because poor people can't afford higher education for their children and, as a result, this discrimination is, unfortunately, continuing today.

I think that I can say truthfully that I never succumbed to such discrimination. I found the Sephardic Jews exotic, romantic and fascinating. They seemed to represent the type of people the Jews had been in ancient times, and their language was probably closer to the way Hebrew was originally spoken than ours. In return, they always treated me well, once they saw my interest and lack of prejudice.

The army camp of Sarafand, one of the oldest British bases in Palestine, appeared as a sprawling establishment, some 30 kilometres from Tel Aviv. At the gate, the sentry opened the boom with a grin. For him, probably a regular soldier from Britain's peace time army who might have served in India before, we were natives or perhaps even "Wogs," a derogatory army term for Arab mess waiters, carpet salesmen and other Middle Eastern types. The etymology of "Wogs" is uncertain, but may have derived from "Wily Oriental Gentleman."

While for him all locals were Wogs, the better-educated British soldiers in Palestine (particularly the officers) showed a pronounced preference for Arabs over Jews. This may have been partly for romantic reasons (the noble desert Sheik, Lawrence of Arabia, etc.) and partly because they were uneasy dealing with the complex and often better educated European Jews. The Arabs, even if they were sometimes a danger, could be understood; but Professor Buber and his kin were clever, subtle and therefore even more dangerous.

Of course there were exceptions, such as General Wingate, who organized Jewish defence forces against Arab raiders and looked at

the situation with a biblical eye, identifying himself, a fervent Protestant, with the Jewish cause. There were also cases of close friendships between Britons and Jews and even intermarriage between British soldiers and officers and Jewish women, certainly more than between Britons and Arab women in Palestine or elsewhere in the Middle East. I never felt any real anti-British sentiment among the Jews in Palestine. Of course they disliked officers or soldiers who behaved brutally or in anti-Semitic ways. But on the whole, opposition to Britain was a political and not an emotional issue. In fact, most Jews admired the British and were quite willing to throw in their lot with them, as Dr. Weitzman had done since the First World War. I had been attracted to the English since my school days, when I was introduced to English literature and life style, both of which seemed more relaxed and natural than the Teutonic uptightness and formality.

It took us quite a while to find our way around Sarafand, which appeared like a self-contained township with its own churches, cinemas, cemetery and huge parade ground. The wooden barracks nestled amid eucalyptus groves, were airy and, in the case of our barrack, clean and pleasant, smelling of new wood. Like most soldiers' barracks, it was very spartan, containing only the beds for the 40 odd soldiers, plus a little room at the back for the Corporal in charge. Next to each bed stood a small chest or "locker," and above it a rack with a shelf. On the iron bedsteads we found empty canvas sacks, which we had to fill with clean straw from a barn nearby, as well as a hard pillow and a rough blanket, which we called a horse blanket. There were sheets of coarse linen and, to the surprise of us locals, mosquito nets. One hung the nets from two wires strung above the bed and tucked the bottom parts under the straw-sacks. The nets not only provided protection against mosquitoes and flies (which were plentiful), but also a little privacy. Their drawback was that they decreased the air circulation, an important factor in the warm and humid Mediterranean coastal climate. So you either got bitten or you sweated — *chacun son goût*!

Leo and I managed to occupy neighbouring beds. In new surroundings and under difficult, stressful situations, I always found it helpful to form a close friendship with another person. In army life, such friendships allowed for the sharing of thoughts and confidences, as well as practical assistance. How often did I help Leo, the somewhat slower one, get ready for parade, and how often did he help me, the less tidy one, make my bed in the regulation manner and

arrange my clothing in the prescribed way on the rack. Of course, army friendships brought not only advantages but also obligations, leading at times to sacrifice and even self-sacrifice. Although in some cases they may have had homosexual overtones, in my six years in the RAF I never encountered a case of outright homosexuality. In fact, the RAF used to refer jokingly to the prevalence of homosexuality in the Navy. They expressed the belief that the usual type of toilet door with a big gap at the bottom was derived from Navy custom — it permitted one to see how many pairs of feet were inside the toilet!

I don't remember much about the tests themselves, except standing for hours in the nude and waiting for the doctor to see me. When my turn finally came, the overworked doctor put his finger below my testicles (to check for hernia, I presume) and barked: "Cough." Startled by the unfamiliar test procedure and the doctor's sudden command, I coughed explosively and probably productively, causing the doctor to bark even louder, "Not into my face, dammit!" I apologized and have remembered the incident as a lesson for consulting room procedure ever since.

The time spent taking the tests was nothing compared to the time spent waiting for the various tests themselves and waiting for other things — for the straw, for the food, for use of the latrines, and so on. The waiting, if nothing else, gave me a sound introduction to future service life. The Sarafand latrines were the next best introduction. The latrines in Sarafand did not even offer the short door described earlier, but had no doors at all! Free standing, for all to see, they sported six seats arranged in a circle over a single pit. Although there were divisions between the seats, the front was completely open to the world, including those impatiently awaiting their turn. In the beginning, I found it most disconcerting to sit there in the open with my trousers down, but then I hit upon a remedy. In the newspaper kiosk I bought the London Times, a paper of very large format. Holding that in front of me as if reading, I felt a bit hidden; at least, I didn't see them seeing me.

Towards midday of our third day in Sarafand, some thirty of us were taken to a large hut, politely ushered in and told to stand in a double line. A short while later an officer entered, took a stance facing us and asked us to raise our right hand and repeat after him words of which I remember only something like this: "... that I will serve faithfully King George the Sixth, his heirs and successors." Even my limited English was sufficient to make me a little apprehensive about this solemn undertaking, and many of my fellow

inductees, who had even less English, must have been at a complete loss as to what they were saying. They were not kept wondering long, though. As soon as the officer had finished, a door at the far end of the hut opened and a Sergeant Major approached, roaring at us, "Form single file, left turn, forward march! Come on, move men. You're in the army now!"

This, to my best recollection, is how I entered the British Armed Forces. We may well have been asked to sign something, but probably did not realize the finality of whatever it was. But worse was to come. Most of the new recruits had indicated to mothers, wives, landladies, girlfriends, etc., that we would be gone about three days and had taken only a few necessities with us. It was Friday afternoon with Sabbath rapidly approaching. We sat in our barracks, waiting for transportation back to Haifa, Tel-Aviv etc. Eventually, a tall Sergeant with a waxed moustache drawn into fine ends came in.

"Well, laddies, " he addressed us, "we better get acquainted with each other. I am Sergeant MacIntosh of the Black Watch regiment, and I will have the pleasure of introducing you to army life. I am not sure though that it will be a pleasure for you, because instead of the usual three months, you have only four weeks to learn army discipline, drill, and everything else a soldier needs to know. Oh, pardon me, you are supposed to become something better than mere soldiers — you are supposed to join the RAF! Well, we shall see that you get sufficiently polished to serve that honour.

With that, he set the stage for some of the most unpleasant four weeks of my life. But at the moment, we had not yet digested the full impact of his words. Once we had ascertained the drift of his statement through his heavily Scottish accent, a number of us asked when we could go home to tell our loved ones about our good fortune having become members of His Majesty's Forces, and get some clean underwear.

Sergeant MacIntosh was aghast. "Go home?"

"Yes, Sergeant," I said. "We have been here nearly four days. We were earlier told that we would stay only about three days. Soon it will be Sabbath and there will not be any transportation to get us to our homes."

"Och, you must be joking, laddie! Four days is not a long time to have been away from home. Look at me, I have been two years in this bloody country without having been home! Anyway, do you think we will let army recruits leave the camp without uniforms and the basic knowledge of army life? Not bloody likely! So, you'd better be

patient and don't let me hear any more about this going home nonsense. And now on the double to the parade ground where you'll get your first lesson in drill."

It was to be three weeks before we were allowed to go home for a weekend. Most of us managed to phone home or send a message through someone who had a phone (not many had phones in those days in Palestine). Luckily we received uniforms before our clothing completely disintegrated, after being torn through crawling on the ground during exercises, soaked in perspiration during drill in the hot Mediterranean sun, and tattered from being washed more or less daily. But then we were able to parade proudly up and down the streets of our hometowns in our new uniforms, smartly saluting officers and, in my case even a surprised policeman, whom in my eagerness I had taken for an officer.

9. Gitta Deutsch, Erich's first girl friend, at age 14 (Vienna, 1938)

CHAPTER 15

SOFTLY rounded, yellow hillocks undulated past the window on my side of the train as it trundled through the Sinai Desert towards Egypt. On the other side, occasional palm groves drifted by. Beyond them, the Mediterranean Sea peeped through, blue and inviting as if pictured on a peace-time travel poster. But now, for all I knew, German or Italian U-boats could be lurking in the sea, their commanders watching our train through periscopes, waiting for us to come closer so that they could take pot shots.

I wondered how I would return from Egypt — proud and victorious, or running for my life as the British ran from France a few months before? Or like the Jewish refugees from Paris, trying to stay ahead of the advancing German armies? Would Egypt be my final destination, or would the RAF ship me elsewhere?

Thoughts like these went through my head and probably through the heads of my thirty or so fellow RAF volunteers from Palestine. We had completed our month-long basic training and were glad to leave the training camp, with its long, hot hours of "square-bashing," as the parade-ground exercises were called, and the sadistic Scots Guards drill sergeants whom we called worse names (behind their backs). We were glad to get away from all that, even if it meant moving closer to the war zone, which by August 1940 had moved towards the Egyptian/Libyan frontier. Soon the war zone would penetrate into Egypt during a major Italian advance that would threaten the Delta and Cairo.

I probably felt more curiosity and excitement than fear, perhaps because I had not experienced any real war yet. The spirit of adventure and the feeling of relief of getting away from the sordid, humdrum life in Haifa also arose within me. I was proud to be wearing the RAF uniform and to be entering the fight against the common enemy, Nazi-Germany, whom unfortunately my beloved Italy had recently joined as an active belligerent.

I was particularly proud to be in the first contingent sent to Egypt from among the 1500 volunteers whom the RAF had recruited in Palestine as ground staff. My contingent included mostly Jews,

who were better educated than the Arabs; there was only a handful of the latter among the 1500. If Churchill had had his way, the British Army would have recruited many more Palestinian Jews. His memoirs reveal that he "encountered every kind of resistance" on this matter, probably from cabinet members worried about Arab reaction.

My fellow RAF volunteers and I didn't really know what awaited us in Egypt — the kind of work we would have to do, the surroundings, conditions, etc. During the basic training, an RAF Officer had asked each of us what we would like to do and whether we possessed any special training or aptitudes. To my disappointment, he told me that I could not become a pilot because, at that time, the RAF only accepted British nationals for pilot training. As I had no alternative suggestion or ability, he decided that I should become an "Equipment Assistant," the RAF term for storekeeper, of which there was apparently a shortage. I had no idea what an Equipment Assistant really did, so I shrugged my shoulders and let my friend Leo step up to be interviewed. He knew how to drive a car, so the RAF made him a lorry driver.

Several years later, when I applied to take a course in weather forecasting, the aircrew situation had changed radically. Now the RAF was experiencing a shortage of pilots, and also needed other aircrew members such as navigators and air-gunners, the fellows who manned the machine-guns in large bombers and who were usually the first to be picked off during fighter attacks. With rapidly increasing numbers of aircraft, and equally rapidly increasing numbers of aircrews being "written-off" due to enemy action or crashes, all RAF personnel wishing to change their "trade" had to undergo an exam. If the exam showed them to be medically and mentally fit, they were forced to undertake aircrew training. But by that time my desire to be airborne had considerably diminished. Having seen a number of crashes and lost several aircrew pals, the glamour of being a pilot had worn off. By then, I was also looking forward to getting married and decided that I would do my best to fail the medical exam for aircrews.

During that medical test, I was asked to blow into a tube and hold a mercury column at a certain level for at least one minute. After half a minute, I went "Pfffft" and let out the air with obvious signs of breathing difficulties. The doctor looked at me quizzically and said, "Look Sergeant, I know you don't want to pass this test, but what about trying once more and doing it a bit better?" I blew once more

into the damn tube, but exhaled after 45 seconds as if utterly defeated. The doctor shrugged his shoulders and declared me unfit for flying duties. What else could he do? And what else should I have done? I never felt guilty — having unsuccessfully volunteered for aircrew duties once before, I had already given the RAF a fair chance to send me airborne. I didn't think that I had any obligation to give them a second chance.

But on that rickety train bound for Egypt, I looked at everything with new and curious eyes and put my trust into the mighty British war machine which, I felt sure, would take care of me. I could never shake off the admiration for the British way of life and attitudes that our English teacher in the *Gymnasium* had instilled in us.

When we left our train to cross the Suez Canal, we got an impressive first-hand glimpse of British military might. One big British warship after another, painted in various camouflage colours, passed through the Canal as our ferry waited to carry us from the Sinai to the Egyptian side. In the customs shed swarthy, tarboushed Egyptians checked the few civilian passengers, while the British Military Police gave us a very cursory examination.

On the other side we boarded an Egyptian train, with carriages considerably more modern than our old wooden one, but also considerably dirtier. After a little while we reached the Nile Delta, whose lush greenery provided a startling contrast to the barren Sinai. I could imagine the pleasure the old Israelites must have felt when, after a long, wearying trek through the desert, they came to this paradise, where their brother Joseph ruled in high office. And how loath many of them must have been to return to the desert, despite the hard labours they had to render for the Pharaoh.

We leaned out of the windows to enjoy the sight of water, palm trees, rice fields and women squatting at the edge of irrigation canals doing the family laundry. Naked children splashing in the canals waved to our train and we waved back. Then we stopped at a station where boys with skullcaps and long, nightshirt-like robes ran around selling fruit, tea and sweet cakes. As one of our group leaned out to accept the cup of tea he had paid for, the train started to move and the Arab boy used that opportunity to try and tear off the soldier's wrist watch. But he was quicker than the boy, grabbed the boy's wrist and hauled him into the moving train. The boy howled and cringed into a corner of the compartment as the owner of the wristwatch, a burly, mustachioed Russian Jew, threatened to cuff him. We felt pity for the boy, who had probably been forced into stealing by his parents or

older siblings. After some discussion, we managed to persuade his captor to let him go at the next stop, rather than hand him over to the police. The boy's fright seemed sufficient punishment.

At dusk we reached Ismailia, the largest town in the centre of the Nile Delta and the seat of the Suez Canal Company. There we were to spend the night at the local RAF Station. Night had fallen by the time we assembled on the platform and boarded the lorry that was to take us to the camp. The drive through the dark, moist night, with strange bird calls coming through the tarpaulin of the lorry, was my first such experience — many more drives into the unknown would follow during the war years, not all of them as mysterious or as peaceful.

The next morning, after the cooks had sloshed a breakfast of porridge and tea into the two halves of our new mess-tins, we were told that we would parade in front of the "C.O." (Commanding Officer) and should choose one of us to be in charge and to give the necessary commands. I was not surprised that the choice did not fall on me, as I was never physically very prepossessing. Also, I found parades and marching a bit ridiculous. During our final parade at the training camp in Palestine, when more than one thousand recruits had marched together, I found myself in the first row as we paraded in front of the Scots Colonel. When he shouted his commands, his voice, strained to the limit to make itself heard in this vast expanse of a parade ground, often turned into a sort of shrill falsetto. The contrast between that piping voice and the martial scene amused me. But not for long, because the Colonel commanded "As you were" (meaning, "at ease"), marched straight towards me and shouted, "Take that dirty grin off your face, you monkey!" Red-faced, I stammered, "Yes Sir," whereupon he strode back and resumed his piping.

We chose one of the three Leshchintzky brothers as our temporary commander. All three were tall, good-looking fellows from Poland, proud to carry the name of a former Polish king. Alfred Leshchintzky, who became our temporary corporal, was a bit nervous about this unfamiliar task. As he stood in front of us calling out orders in a nervous and unsteady voice, we started to grin because, in his nervous haste, he had put his cap on backwards. They were silly caps anyway, little boat-like things, sitting on the side of one's head. For a long time, I went around with my head leaning to one side, afraid that the damn thing would slide off the other side. The caps did not keep the rain off and required frequent polishing of brass buttons and cap-badge.

The C.O., an elderly Group Captain who twirled his bristling moustache, gave a short, perfunctory speech of welcome to the first contingent of "Palestinians" to arrive in Egypt. At that time, it seemed perfectly normal to be called by that name, which merely reflected the official name of the Palestinian Mandated Territory. But I may be among the few who can claim to have been both a Palestinian and an Israeli!

Then he read out the various RAF Stations to which we would be sent. Along with Leo, Alfred and some ten others, I was to go to RAF Station Helwan in the vicinity of Cairo. The others were divided among various stations, most of them located along the Suez Canal. So, we trudged back to the train for a ride of a few more hours through the Delta, until the landscape became more and more barren and the minarets of Cairo appeared in the distance.

Unfortunately, the lorry took us directly from the railway station to Helwan, so that we saw little of Cairo. However, I joined the crowd at the rear of the lorry where the tarpaulin was open to see what I could of the city as we passed. What I glimpsed made my mouth water to go exploring that fascinating, exotic place at leisure. We also got a brief view of the Nile, broad and majestically flowing, flanked by palm trees and dotted with the diagonally sloping, white sails of Nile fishing boats. We even saw smiling brown men working primitive irrigation machinery that consisted of large double wheels joined by wooden slats, which they worked like a treadmill.

We then left the green Nile banks and headed inland, where the landscape soon became desert-like again, except where irrigation canals provided sustenance to plants. The RAF station, at the edge of the town of Helwan, sprawled across a nearly flat desert landscape, probably because this allowed the construction of runways with a minimum of work to flatten the ground. In fact, the runways were merely tarred sand; concrete runways were not required for the much lighter aircraft of those days.

Another reception ceremony awaited us in Helwan. This time the C.O. was a younger officer, a former pilot whose flying career had been interrupted by an accident. His welcoming speech was warm and thoughtful. He had heard that we Jews followed certain special "food laws" and was willing to give orders that they should be accommodated as much as possible. In reply, Alfred assured him that, during war-time, Jews held their food laws in abeyance. At least, that's what a military rabbi had told us before we were sent to Egypt (not that Leo, Alfred or I cared much about them anyway, but that did not necessarily hold true for all the others).

The C.O. also said that his door would always be open for anyone of us who wanted to see him, considering that we were new to the RAF and to camp life and might need advice and help. In fact, we would have to take him up on that offer in quite a short while.

Then we were sent to various barracks. Along with two other "Equipment Assistants," I was directed to one that was occupied mostly by airmen of the same trade. Leo had to go to a barrack housing lorry drivers, but we consoled ourselves that we still would be able to meet and spend evenings or days off together.

I felt a bit strange and lonely that first night, settling down to sleep under my mosquito net among the forty odd airmen who, apart from us three newcomers, were all "regulars." They had chosen the RAF as a profession, most of them years ago, and had been serving in various parts of the globe-encircling empire that Britain still maintained at that time, many of them in India. My English was passable for everyday conversation — in fact, I often acted as a translator for some of my fellow Palestinians — but it took me a while to understand the regulars. This was partly due to the multitude of their local accents — Scots, Midlands, Cockney, etc. — and partly due to their use of army slang, which contained various Indian words like *tiffin* for lunch and *charpoy* for bed, and others which were connected with the RAF and work. A number of Arabic words had also crept into their slang, like *bint* for girl, *shwoia* for little and so on. These gave me fewer difficulties, because I had already encountered them in Haifa.

I also needed some time to learn how to behave among the British airmen, because they were very different from my fellow recruits. Most important, they were not inquisitive, which made living in a crowded barrack-room much easier. They did not crowd around the bed of the new recruits to and ask who we were, where we came from, whether we were married, how many children we had, etc. It wasn't that they were not interested. When I got to know some of them better, these things came out gradually and naturally. But they had a strong sense of privacy and respected each other's mental and emotional "lebensraum" in the same way as people keep their physical distance from each other.

In the beginning, my feelings about the RAF regulars were somewhat ambivalent. There was quite a bit of prejudice in these feelings, dating back to Palestine, where we had regarded them as uneducated, loutish brutes who liked to club peaceful demonstrators with their rifle butts and preferred the Arab brothels to the Jewish

cafes. But as I got to know them better, I realized that this was much too one-sided a view.

I soon learned that the regulars were quite a friendly lot, ready to help each other and to come to each other's defense. Faced with a difficult situation, I would much rather have been with them than with my compatriots. But they were very set in their ways, ways dictated to a large extent by military life. The daily routine of work, food, sleep, and the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute - the canteen) in the evenings and on Sundays governed their existence. Most of them did not go out regularly on Sundays or on their alternative days off, but those who did had their usual haunts in town such as pubs, cinemas and, yes, brothels. Hardly any of them had girlfriends; at that time Cairo had only very few English girls, usually only nurses who preferred to go out with officers. The local girls were difficult to approach, which added to the racial and cultural gulf and reinforced feelings of superiority over the "poor black beggars."

To satisfy my curiosity, I once got one of the regulars to take me to a Cairo brothel. It lurked in a dark alley just behind the famous Shepherds Hotel, where on a raised, flower-decorated terrace, senior officers drank tea with their ladies. In the back alley, soldiers stood in a queue in front of a dingy, multi-storied tenement building, waiting for their turn with one of the girls. When our turn came, we walked up the slippery stone stairs of the evil smelling hallway. I peeked furtively into open doorways and saw soldiers sitting with half-naked girls on their laps. The soldiers looked into the girls' eyes with yearning expressions that I could not reconcile with the ideas of romantic love instilled in me during my youth through large doses of 19th-Century German poets and Viennese composers. I never abandoned those ideas and have remained an unabashed romantic, unable to make love to a woman I did not love — or thought I loved, which is probably the same thing. No wonder I turned away in disgust from what the place had to offer.

My ears were keenly attuned to any signs of anti-Semitism from the RAF regulars. Although my barrack-mates soon understood where we came from and who we were, this did not seem to make any difference in their attitudes toward us. They kept treating us with the wary friendliness one adopts towards strangers with whom one is forced to live in close proximity. In fact, when I got to know some of them better, they would admit their astonishment that we were Jews, whom they had always pictured as rich merchants in Leeds who wore flashy clothes and jewellery. I did not regard this as anti-Semitism,

just a stereotype, in the same way as they pictured Italians as black haired singers of *O Sole Mio* who ate macaroni, or Frenchmen who smelled of perfume and ate frogs.

But then came the day when one of them returned drunk from his Sunday pub crawl and called me a "bloody Jew" for getting into his way. I clobbered him — no feat to be proud of, as he was drunk — which not only sobered him up but astonished him. I soon learned that he meant very little offense with that expression. Indeed, when he called Jock in the bed next to mine a "bloody Scotchman," and Paddy at the bottom of the barrack-room a "bloody Irishman," they did not bat an eyelid. For him it was just a conventional expression or curse, and he did not really mind being called a bloody Cockney.

Unfortunately, that situation soon changed and I had the opportunity to learn how easily anti-Semitism — or, for that matter, any type of racial, national or religious prejudice — can be created and, once created, becomes terribly difficult to combat.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 16

"I want a pair of calipers," said the airman at other side of my counter in the equipment store.

"Oh, yes, calipers ... just one moment, please." I walked to the back of the store, trying to appear nonchalant, as if I knew exactly what calipers were.

"Quick, Taffy, what is 'calipers'?" I asked as soon as my customer was out of earshot. Taffy was the "LAC "(Leading Aircraftman, the RAF equivalent of Lance Corporal in the Army, the lowest non-commissioned officer rank) and was supposed to be teaching me the ropes.

"You mean, 'what are calipers?' Look you, it's a plural because they have two legs that open and close, like those of a girl in bed, get it?"

I didn't really get it, but nodded my head sagely. "There is a chap who wants them; where can I find some?"

"Come, I'll show you. But look you, you should be able to fucking well figure it out yourself by now with the master ledger, bach!"

He was right, of course, but I still got flustered when I had to serve a customer and didn't understand what he wanted. If he asked for a hammer or a mosquito net, that was easy, but there were many more words I didn't know than ones that I did. Still, being an Equipment Assistant improved my English vocabulary, even if many of the new words I picked up were of a technical nature or, as in the case of conversations with Taffy, of rather limited use.

Taffy himself was an interesting specimen for me, being the first regular (i.e., a soldier who enlisted before the war) whom I got to know well and who told me a little about his life in England — or rather in Wales, as his nickname and way of speaking indicated. That, too, intrigued me. I had assumed that the whole island was "England," as we called it in Austria, and that all the people there spoke the same English language.

Taffy was small but well built, with curly black hair and baby blue eyes, whose innocent appearance often came into stark contrast

with his earthy language, made even more colourful by his lilting Welsh accent. He appeared extremely self-assured and told many tales of his success with girls.

I once asked Taffy why he joined the RAF during peacetime. Did he want to become a pilot like I did?

"Never on your life, Schwarz bach! It was all by accident!"

"By accident? What do you mean, were you drunk"?

"No, of course not, they wouldn't have taken me. But look you, I had this mate with whom I worked in a shoe factory in Cardiff. And one day the foreman accused him of stealing a pair of shoes and got him fired. When I asked my mate what he was going to do, he said he had it up to his arse with factory work and wanted to see the world. He was thinking of joining the RAF and why didn't I come with him. Well, him being my mate and all, I thought, what the hell, I'll join up too. So, I quit the fucking factory and we went to the RAF recruiting office. And in the end they wouldn't take him because he didn't pass the medical, but they had by then already taken me. Look you, that's how I joined the fucking RAF." I marvelled at the vagaries of fate.

Unfortunately, I did not get to know many regulars as well as Taffy to be able to find out why they enlisted in the forces during peacetime. From the few I did get to know, it seemed that it was usually due to tradition ("me dad was in the Navy") or financial difficulties ("I was dead broke and didn't know where my next bottle of beer was coming from"). I did not meet any T.E. Lawrences, though.*

Taffy lived in my barrackroom, as did most of the other chaps who worked in the store. Luckily, we only had a short walk from the barracks to the hangar in which our store was located, minimizing direct exposure to the Egyptian sun, which burned very cruelly during the day. Without the benefit of air-conditioning, which was not yet invented, the RAF adjusted our working hours to suit the climate. We worked from 6 until 8 in the morning, then ate breakfast, and then went back to work from 9 until noon. After lunch, we took a long siesta, with work resuming at 5 and ending finally at 7. Then we took a shower, ate dinner and, after that, repaired to the NAAFI canteen.

* T.E. Lawrence, or "Lawrence of Arabia," was an Oxford-educated budding archeologist who became famous during World War I for leading Arab irregulars in fighting behind Turkish lines. After the War, he participated in the Paris Peace Conference, trying to obtain independence for Arab States. His failure to achieve that goal, as well as his aversion to publicity, made him join the RAF under an assumed name as a common airman.

During the long afternoon siesta, the ceiling fans in the barrackroom turned lazily in a vain effort to dispel the oppressive heat. We would lie under our mosquito nets in our underwear (nudity was frowned upon, perhaps to discourage homosexual leanings) trying to sleep, the sweat trickling down our necks and arms and often tickling us awake.

Not all of us gave in to the heat, however. My Palestinian countrymen were used to living in a hot climate, but never before had the luxury of a siesta during the afternoon. So many of them grew bored and visited each other, sometimes organizing little poker games. These games, of course, were anything but quiet. Frequent shouts of *ganef* (Yiddish for thief), or profanities in Yiddish, Hebrew or Arabic rang out loudly through the quiet of the hot afternoon. The British regulars, who wanted a quiet siesta, answered with angry curses of their own. The poker players usually shrugged off the demands to shut up, regarding those who wanted to sleep in the afternoon as *meshuggene* (crazy people).

It did not take long for the RAF to act on complaints and move all the Palestinians into a separate barrackroom. Like several of the other Palestinians who had not participated in the poker games, I was appalled at this decision, which separated me from my co-workers just as I was starting to get to know them. We requested an interview with the C.O., who received us at once and listened politely to our remonstrances against the creation of a "ghetto" and to our promises to restrain our compatriots from annoying the other barrack dwellers. But the C.O. was adamant. He perceived big differences in lifestyles between the Palestinians and the regulars. Under such conditions, brawls could break out. His job, he said, was to prevent such brawls.

Unfortunately, our segregation from the regulars was not the worst part of the affair. The "big differences in lifestyle" that our C.O. had observed had engendered anti-Palestinian attitudes among a majority of the regulars, which we regarded as tantamount to anti-Semitism. I could not blame them for adopting these attitudes, though, even if I thought that they should have tried a little harder to understand the differences in upbringing and culture that had led to the situation. But I had a sneaking suspicion that, in their shoes, I might have felt similarly.

Not all the regulars condemned us completely. Taffy and some other co-workers remained friendly, but that didn't really console me all that much because it reminded me of conditions back home in Austria. Too often, I had heard people say things like, "We have

nothing against you, it's the others." Also, despite mutual goodwill, our very different backgrounds posed insurmountable obstacles to real friendships. Still, the support of the friendly regulars did make things a bit easier.

I also welcomed the chance to share a barrackroom with my friend Leo. Just seeing his smiling round face and roly-poly figure would improve my mood. On our first day off following our reunion as barrack mates, Leo and I decided to investigate the village of Helwan. Dressed in freshly washed and starched khaki shirts and shorts, we walked along a path that crossed the stretch of desert between the camp gate and the village, a distance of some two kilometres. The green trees that bordered the village were a welcome sight. We soon looked for another welcome sight — a place where we could get something to drink to slake a thirst that even a short walk through the Egyptian desert in August can cause.

We were in for a little surprise. We came upon a wide array of cafes, little ones with a few tables on the sidewalk, and bigger ones with gardens and music. As we later learned, Helwan was a favourite weekend destination for middle-class Cairenes. The town abounded with gardens and parks, watered by canals from the Nile. For Egyptians who spent their days surrounded by yellow desert sands, Helwan offered a treat for eyes and soul. The green shade and a cool glass of lemonade — or something stronger for the non-Moslem Copts, Greeks, Jews and Armenians, who formed a large part of the local middle class — attracted many family parties and outings. A modern, efficient diesel train permitted them to travel between Cairo and Helwan in about 45 minutes. Later, we took that train often ourselves.

As we scanned the scene for a café that appeared particularly inviting, Leo called out, "Look, Erich, there is one with a Star of David over the entrance!" Indeed, a wrought-iron gate, bearing a Star of David over its top, led into a large garden with people sitting around rustic tables between green bushes. That seemed a very suitable place to get our drink, so we walked in and sat down at one of the tables. People looked at us curiously, but did not really seem surprised, as airmen from the base often came to the village to drink their beer.

In our pidgin Arabic, we ordered a bottle of beer each from a tarboushed waiter. When he brought it, we asked him whether there were any Jews at the café with whom we could talk. He motioned for us to wait and left, soon returning with the owner of the café, a portly,

mustachioed man who spoke broken English. We explained that we were Jews from Palestine who had recently arrived in the RAF Station. His face broke into a broad smile and he embraced us, telling us, as well as he could, how glad he was to meet Jews from Palestine in the RAF.

Soon a whole crowd of Egyptian Jews surrounded us, men, women and children, gaping at the Palestinian airmen and obviously happy about finding co-religionists among the hitherto alien soldiery. Many of them were of European descent, usually from countries bordering or close to the Mediterranean, such as Greece, Italy or Romania. As most of them were second generation Egyptians, they spoke French among themselves, the language of the Egyptian middle class, although they all spoke also Arabic. English had just started to become popular, particularly among those who had dealings with the army.

The afternoon passed quickly as they plied us with questions as well as with food and drinks. It was late by the time we left and we had to promise to come back the next Sunday. They promised to bring other family members for us to meet and that there would be a big dinner party. We returned to camp in a happy mood, the desert walk seeming not only cooler, as it was close to midnight, but also shorter, even if we were not always able to walk in a straight line.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 17

FOR several weeks into the early autumn, our visits to Helwan were the highlights of our humdrum days. Also, they took our minds off worries caused by the Italian invasion of Egypt from Libya, at least temporarily. With each report of the invasion, the advancing Italian army seemed to come closer to the Nile Delta. The first Italian air raids soon followed, which luckily were not very effective. Typically, a single unseen bomber droned above and dropped its bombs harmlessly in the desert around the RAF Station while we lay in the sand, assuring each other about the unlikeness of being hit in all that expanse of desert. All the same, I was surprised that I found myself trembling when the thud of exploding bombs reached me. This was the first time I experienced my body's physical reaction to danger, which the mind cannot control. Despite these physical symptoms, I was always able to carry out my duties, both during the initial air raids and later, when I came in much closer contact with the enemy.

In the "Star of David" café in Helwan, Leo and I became friendly with a number of families with whom we could communicate in English or German. Most of the husbands were businessmen or professionals in their mid-thirties. Their teenage children were especially keen to associate with Jewish airmen and hoped that when they grew up they too would be able to join the Air Force. I told them that I sincerely hoped that by then the war would have been won, even without their help.

There was also a rather sweet girl of 12 or 13, quite tall for her age, who had a crush on me — or perhaps on my uniform. One day when we went for a walk in a park, she shyly asked me whether I would wait for her until she grew up and marry her then. Touched by her innocence, I explained as gently as I could that, while I liked her a lot, many things could happen in the meantime. I could be sent to another RAF Station and she might meet other boys whom she liked even better than me. I gave her a brotherly kiss. Then we walked back to the café and out of each other's lives.

Later I had a closer call with a more mature lady. Leo and I had become particularly friendly with two couples, both of them childless, who invited us to visit them in Cairo. We spent many Sundays with them, going out to eat Egyptian specialties, such as big black beans in a curd sauce or sticky, sweet pastries. Other times we passed the cool of the evening in an open-air cinema, where they served drinks at a little table next to one's seat.

One of the men confided in me about his exploits with women. His wife, who seemed to have sensed his extra-marital activities and probably wanted her revenge, started to act more and more friendly towards me. She would hold my arm whenever she could do so unnoticed and brush against me as if by accident. One day, when I arrived for one of my usual Sunday visits, she was alone, her husband being away on some errand. As she answered the door, I could hear music emanating from a rickety record player within the house. She wore a flimsy housecoat and asked me whether I wanted to dance with her. Well, one thing led to another, but in the end — to my considerable disappointment — it led nowhere. When things got hot, she asked whether I had any "protection" with me. As I did not, she drew back, telling me that she was too afraid of the possible consequences. Frankly, I knew very little about the kind of protection she meant and, in any case, would have been too shy to buy it.

While that was exciting, Cairo itself was even more so. The teeming city boasted a modern downtown, complete with department stores, an opera (built for the opening of the Suez Canal and the first performance of Aida) and elegant cafes in which tarboushed Sudanese waiters wore cummerbunds and served Turkish coffee, ices and sweet cakes. Chaotic traffic filled the streets — cars, donkey carts, horse-drawn droshkis, bicycles, pushcarts and trams. The trams were usually full to the point of bursting, with people hanging on outside like swarms of bees. The trams came in two classes; the few times I travelled on one of them I went first class to escape the pressure and smells of the second class trams, but still found it difficult to fight my way out at my destination. What amused me about the trams were their signs. Instead of having numbers or letters, like Route 1 or Line A, each route had its own symbol, such as a red star, a green cloverleaf, or a blue lozenge. Apparently, this overcame difficulties for the largely illiterate population.

An extraordinarily diverse population of western and middle eastern types thronged through the downtown area — men and women in western street clothes, some men combining western wear

with a tarboush, workers or hawkers in loose, white gowns that looked like night-shirts (the most sensible and coolest clothing in the 30-35 degree heat of August), and their female counterparts in not so practical black drapery and veil. This human melange walked and shoved each other along the pavements. In large open-air cafes sat men (but not women) manipulating amber worry beads or smoking water pipes, the mouthpieces of which would pass from man to man. When I threaded my way through these multitudes on the streets, they scarcely gave me a glance, except for the shoeshine boys, who would dart through the masses towards me and shout, "George, hey George (I don't know why they called all soldiers George) — shoeshine?" And sometimes little tots tried to lure me to a prostitute, "Hey, flying fish, want a flying fuck?"

Leo and I loved to go exploring this city, sufficiently western to be reassuring to city dwellers like us and sufficiently exotic to be stimulating and intriguing. Adventure seemed to lurk behind every corner and there was always something new to be explored, tasted, smelled or heard. Snake charmers and fire-eaters performed on street corners, little beggar boys tugged at your shirt sleeves, and coffee sellers, carrying their brass cans with Turkish coffee on their shoulders, bent over to pour the coffee into little cups without even taking down the cans.

We were, of course, not the only British airmen or soldiers exploring Cairo. Thousands of them, particularly on Sundays, strolled, lounged or swayed through the streets. One always had to be on the lookout for officers to salute; failing to do so could result in being confined to camp for a week or longer.

But among all those thousands of soldiers and airmen, we were a little different — we spoke German to each other. One day, while queuing up for cinema tickets and discussing, in German, the merits of the film being shown, an officer standing behind us listened in astonishment as we two RAF types conversed in the enemy's language. He started to chat with us and we were soon able to allay his suspicions about our background.

Relieved, he invited us for a drink to his flat. For some reason, Leo couldn't go, so I shared a whiskey with the officer, who turned out to be a captain in the British Intelligence Service. I felt rather uncomfortable — to be invited by an officer for a drink was highly unusual. I didn't know what to make of it, whether he wanted to probe further into my background or what. Eventually, it transpired that the captain was considering the possibility of making me a member of the

British Intelligence Service as well. I did not respond very enthusiastically to the proposal, largely because I didn't really know what was involved. Danger? Long hours at night, gum-shoeing around Cairo? However, I couldn't really refuse to give him my name, rank and serial number — all I was permitted to reveal to anyone, Intelligence or not. He promised to get back to me but never did. Who knows where it might have led if he had? Captain's pips on my shoulder? An early grave? Or both?

At the end of our day off, Leo and I would take a droshki or a taxi to the railway station at Bab-el-Louk, where we would catch the modern, streamlined diesel train back to Helwan. The train first passed through the outskirts of Cairo, which housed the worst slums I had ever seen (or, indeed, have seen since). I was appalled at the squalid, backward-leaning shanties that looked about to fall over at any moment. From the train, I could also see taller buildings, the front parts of which had long since broken off, in which people lived in public view and in constant danger of falling out or being buried under the terminal collapse of the building. Among the rubble, children scavenged and fought over scraps with stray dogs.

In jolting contrast, the train would then pass through Maadi, the luxurious garden suburb of Cairo, replete with country clubs, golf courses and the villas of high government officials and embassy personnel. This close proximity of wealth and abject poverty was typical for Cairo and probably still is. I only hope there is a larger indigenous middle class there now; then it consisted almost entirely of non-Egyptians (Greeks, Italians, Armenians and Jews of other nationalities), most of whom have since left Egypt.

These sights strengthened my socialist convictions, inherited from my father and fostered by my mother. But despite occasional pangs of pity that prompted me to offer some largesse of baksheesh to particularly ragged beggars and urchins, I never really felt the urge to do anything significant about the situation. Somehow the pressures of war and the worries about my family and friends in Europe, with most of whom the war had cut off any communications, overshadowed the inequity of the Egyptian conditions in my mind.

By the time we left the train and tramped the two kilometres to the Helwan camp gates, it was usually late at night. The following mornings, after what seemed like only a few minutes of sleep, Machmud, the little servant boy, would wake me with a mug of *chai* — hot, strong and sweet tea with milk — from the cook-house. Machmud also swept the barrack-room, polished our brass buttons

and was the general factotum who, through his connection with the boys working in the other barracks, kept us informed of goings on in the camp. Some "Machmuds" were better than others, some more honest and others more hard-working. Ours had the distinction of being the most cheerful; though I would curse him for waking me up, his cheerful laughter in reply would reconcile me to the reality of the morning. Those curses were usually in Arabic, not only for Machmud's benefit but also because I had learned several of them already in Haifa, where most students used the more potent Arabic or Russian curses instead of the faintly biblical Hebrew ones. The Arabic and Russian curses are mostly sexual and more imaginative than their English four-letter counterparts.

Except for the rudiments of my work, the equipment store had remained a mystery to me. What was I to make of airmen walking around and asking whether anyone had seen three Ford trucks that they had mislaid (on paper)? Or of Taffy, being short two typewriters, preparing a so-called "conversion voucher," which, as if by magic, transformed three surplus bags of No. 5 nuts and bolts into two typewriters and thereby made up the deficiency. This does not mean that I thought there was hanky-panky, such as selling things on the black market. Most regulars seemed either too simple or too lazy for that. But there may well have been some hanky-panky beyond my ability to recognize.

My lack of enthusiasm for the unexciting work of storekeeper had also something to do with my lack of advancement in military grade. I remained an Aircraftman Second Class, the lowest animal in the RAF zoo, drawing the minimum daily pay of two shillings and sixpence, hardly enough to keep me in cigarettes and to cover my weekly jaunts to Cairo, where I often had to rely on meals provided by my Egyptian hosts.

One day I approached the manager of my store, the jovial Sergeant Childs, who lorded over his kingdom from a little glassed-in enclosure in the corner of the hangar:

"Sarge, what about getting me a trade test so that I can become an AC1*? I have been AC2 for five months now!"

Sergeant Childs looked at me smilingly. "What's the rush, laddy? Look at me, I was an AC2 for three years before I got my trade test. And then I was an AC1 for five years. You have plenty of time! And you still have much to learn."

---

* Aircraftman First Class — they got four shillings a day!

So I went to drown my sorrow in the NAAFI, complaining to those who would listen and even to those who would not what a "bind" that bloody store was and how I hated it. Not really being used to drinking alcohol, a couple of beers helped me forget my troubles. Soon I was exchanging jokes and bantering with the others.

When Christmas came around, I volunteered for duty on Christmas Eve, to take the place of chaps who wanted to go to church. Most of the regulars were members of the Church of England, not very religious but "traditional." At first, we Palestinians had to participate in the Sunday church-parades, where all airmen marched in front of the Padre on the big hangar square. On the command, "Jews and Roman Catholics, FALL OUT," we turned around and made three steps away from the others, standing in silence with our backs to the church service until it ended. Luckily, somebody in power must have realized the ridiculousness of that affair and ended our participation in those marches, which was most welcome not so much for religious reasons but because it gave us more time for our Cairo visits.*

One of my Christmas Eve chores for which I volunteered to relieve a chap who celebrated Christmas consisted of measuring the amount of aircraft fuel in two enormous tanks embedded in a deep trench lined with concrete. To do that, I had to walk, carrying a long dipstick, on a narrow plank to the centre of each tank. There I inserted the dipstick into a narrow funnel, withdrew it and read the mark on the dipstick, similar to measuring the amount of oil in a car. The small difference was that my tank was about a thousand times larger and the dipstick was the size of a pole vaulting stick.

Earlier that day, I had sat with the boys in the NAAFI, imbibed several bottles of beer and learned numerous songs, some Christmassy and some less so. When the time came to put the dipstick in the tanks, my gait was not 100 percent steady, but I counterbalanced my decreasing stability with an increase in self-confidence and courage, the two usual effects of alcohol.

By the time I got to the narrow plank it was dark. My torch barely skimmed the depth of the yawning abyss below the plank. This did not affect my courage but did make me more careful. Clutching the dipstick and the torch, I got down on my hands and knees and

* Frankly, it never crossed my mind that, on paper at least, I could be considered to belong to the Church of England on the basis of the baptism certificate handed to me by the Padre of the British Embassy in Vienna in 1938.

crawled along the plank towards the funnel. There, I drew myself up and managed to insert and then withdraw the long stick, holding on to the funnel with my free arm for dear life. I repeated the procedure at the second funnel and then crawled back, all the time singing the German Christmas carol, "*O Tannenbaum*," at the top of my lungs. My British RAF friends always shushed me when I tried to sing it because it had the same tune as the British communist song, "Keep the Red Flag Flying High." The Commies must have stolen the tune, which is pretty old.

But despite Christmas, the NAAFI and the Cairo visits, I started to feel depressed. The boring work in the store made me realize that I could just as well have stayed in Haifa. I felt sure that I could contribute a lot more to the war effort. The Daily Routine Orders, which hung on the wall outside the camp's Orderly Room, often called for volunteers for various tasks. I started to scan them every day.

One day, a little paragraph appeared in the Daily Orders, which called for volunteers who had at least a high school education, to be trained as meteorological observers. Although for all I knew this might have something to do with counting meteors, I decided to put my name in. Leo and other friends raised lots of objections. If I wanted to change my trade, they said, I should at least become something that could lead to employment after the war, like a driver, a cook or a butcher. But I think it was the mention of "high school education" that got me. "I'd rather use my head than my hands," I thought. "My mother always said that I had two left hands!"

OOOOOOO

CHAPTER 18

"AND why do you want to become a meteorological observer?" asked the Group Captain. His blue eyes, which were looking me over carefully as I stood before his desk at Cairo's RAF Headquarters, had a distinct twinkle in them.

Encouraged by that twinkle, I answered truthfully. "Well — you see, Sir — I think that I could do more for the war effort than in the store I in which I am working at the moment. I know quite a bit of math — equivalent to the English 'inter-BSC' level, I believe. And that store is an awfully boring place ..."

The twinkle in the Group Captain's eyes became more pronounced. "But do you know that we are training observers with the idea of sending them to Crete and Greece?"

I knew that British forces had recently set up bases in Crete and were moving into Greece to help defend the Greeks against Italian onslaughts. The prospect of going there electrified me. I would be closer to Yugoslavia, where my stepsister Hilda lived in Split on the Adriatic coast. I knew that Hilda was in contact with my mother in Vienna. I also realized that I would be closer to Italy and would be able to see Greece, a land that had figured so prominently in my high school education. "That's fine with me, Sir," I answered and added, "I have learned a lot about Greece and Crete in school and would love to go there."

The Group Captain nodded. "All right. You will be transferred to RAF Station Heliopolis, where you will receive training in the MET Station. Good luck."

This time RAF Headquarters acted with unaccustomed speed — my posting to RAF Station Heliopolis arrived within a week. I felt sorry to part from Leo, but we consoled ourselves that we would still be able to meet during our Sunday outings to Cairo. Taffy wished me luck in his own special way. "You say that when you finish your training you will be made an LAC* right away, bach? After only half a year in the RAF, look you!"

---

* Leading Aircraft Man = Lance Corporal

I dimly remembered from school that Heliopolis had been the Northern Capital of ancient Egypt. I expected to see romantic ruins, obelisks and sphinxes. Instead I saw modern buildings, parks and hotels. Heliopolis was now a bustling modern suburb of Cairo, connected to it by a special tram line. My disappointment was an appropriate punishment for having never bothered to see the Pyramids and the Sphinx during any of my Sunday outings to Cairo in the past half year. The excitement of downtown Cairo must have been a more potent attraction. I somehow always assumed that there would be still plenty of time for the tourist stuff. In fact, I saw the Pyramids some three years later, under very different circumstances.

RAF Station Heliopolis was located on the outskirts of the town and, being close to town and to RAF Headquarters, was much more alive and posh than sleepy Helwan. Our barracks were modern, two-storied cement buildings, with the luxury of washrooms and showers next to each dormitory. One didn't have to walk several hundred feet in the open, rain or shine, as in Helwan, with a towel wrapped around one's middle that threatened to slip down any moment. (That was, of course, before the WAAFs* arrived in Egypt; no towel runs after that, I am sure.)

When I "booked in" at the Orderly Room, the registration clerk looked up on hearing the name Schwarz. He, too, was a German-speaking Palestinian, a little older than me. "Where do you come from, Schwarz?" he asked.

"*Von Wien*," I answered in our common mother tongue.

"Was you father a math teacher, by chance"?

"Yes, that's right."

"So you are the son of Professor Schwarz, my favourite teacher! Goodness, how extraordinary! What a man he was, your father! Warm and full of humour, and always willing to help. What happened to him? I left Vienna shortly after I graduated and lost track of people."

My eyes filled with tears, but they were tears of joy on hearing my father so well remembered and spoken of so fondly.

"He died many years ago. Long before the Nazis came."

Now I saw the clerk's eyes misting over. "But he couldn't have been more than fifty! Why do all good people have to die young? Well, maybe he was lucky, because that way he wasn't hounded out

* Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

of the city he loved so much. You know, he always lectured in Viennese dialect, which made calculus and trigonometry much less dry than if he had taught it in stilted High-German. Anyway, I am glad to have met his son and will do all I can to help you. For now, I will send you to a good barrackroom where there are some chaps you will like, particularly Sepp Oscher, from Munich."

Indeed, Sepp — a typical Bavarian name — soon became a close friend. Blond and sturdy, he looked very German and had an even temperament, quite different from my talkative and excitable Viennese nature. He listened more than he spoke and his humour was of the dry type. But we complemented each other. In fact, we spent so much time together, often sitting on each other's bed, reading or talking, that some people thought we were lovers. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He had a very pretty girlfriend in Haifa to whom he was completely faithful, and amused himself by listening to my tales of "conquests" among the girls in Cairo. Although Sepp had been born in Bavaria, he had grown up in Haifa, where his father was a dental mechanic who taught him the trade with which Sepp had enlisted in the RAF.

Sepp's friendship and the moral support from the friendly Orderly Room clerk went a long way toward helping me to in settle quickly into the new station. During my RAF days I always felt it wrenching to leave one place and be forced to get used to a new one, new people, new officers, new tasks. I found this form of uprooting all the more difficult to deal with because I lacked any family support. I felt very alone and vulnerable during those first years, until I acquired more self-confidence and more experience in dealing with new circumstances.

My "conquests" among Cairo's girls did not reduce this loneliness, because they did not really amount to very much. I sometimes exaggerated a little in telling Sepp about them, perhaps because he seemed more mature and sophisticated in this respect. In fact, I only got to know one young lady, a Jewish, Italian-speaking girl from Rhodes whom I had met in a Service Club organized by Cairo's Jewish ladies. She was about 18, quite pretty in a dark, Spanish way, and just about as inexperienced in encounters with the opposite sex as I was. We would go for long walks, during which we did not speak very much. She had little to offer in the way of small talk beyond accounts of her rather extensive family and showed little interest in meteorology and even less in equipment stores. Now and then we would kiss in dark corners or alleyways. She was afraid of

being seen with me because, like most Egyptian girls, she was very concerned about her reputation. Going around with men was bad, and with soldiers even worse.

There were a few surprises in store for me when I reported to the MET Office, as the meteorological station was commonly referred to, the day after my arrival in Heliopolis. The Office was housed in a low, bungalow-type wooden building on the main street of the camp. Like most structures along that road, the building had a large garden in front, tended by Egyptian gardeners. This garden, however, was functional as well as ornamental, serving as an enclosure to an array of weather observing instruments, such as thermometers, hygrometers, anemometers, and rain gauges.

My first surprise was that the officer in charge, Mr. Inman, was a civilian, as was his assistant, Mr. Reid, both employees of the Meteorological Office in Britain, who had been sent to Egypt some years before to man the station in Heliopolis. Now they had been given the task of training a number of airmen in weather observing through "on the job training." That was my second surprise — I had expected a more formal course, with lectures, demonstrations, etc.

Mr. Inman's appearance presented me with my third surprise that day. He was the thinnest person I had ever seen, a veritable skeleton in khaki shorts. As he offered only a small amount of flat skin to the sun — being extremely angular — he did not tan much and his whiteness accentuated the skeletal appearance. When he bent down or lifted something, I feared he might break in two.

But there was a fourth surprise in store for me, although its full extent would take some time to reveal itself. Mr. Inman's character turned out to be anything but sharp and angular. He was thoughtful, kind, well-read and interested in literature and music — the first such individual I had met in the RAF and, in fact, among all the British I had met so far.

Of the four or five trainees, only one other was a Palestinian, the others being British. Mr. Inman took us on a tour around the meteorological station, showing us the instruments housed inside, such as barometers and barographs, which are barometers that write a continuous trace of the pressure on a revolving drum, and the instruments located in the garden. He noted that one had to be careful when measuring the precipitation in the rain gauge — if it was yellow, it must have been the Commanding Officer's dog — and then demonstrated the way to take a weather observation. When he wrote

the results of the observation into the station's weather log, I received the fifth surprise of the day. While I thought that I could read and understand any straightforward text in English, the symbols and signs in that logbook could have been Egyptian hieroglyphs for all the sense they made for me. I thought that I would never be able to understand them; they looked far too complicated!

But within a couple of weeks the hieroglyphs became as familiar as the alphabet. A dot stood for rain, a comma for drizzle (doubled or tripled to indicate severity), three horizontal strokes for fog, two for mist — it all came to make sense. I was soon able to handle them as easily as I could use the thermometers, barometers and most of the other tools for weather observing. Later, I faced a similar episode when I reported to the MET Office in Alexandria, my first assignment as a forecaster. My first look at their weather map caused me to sit in a corner, close to crying because the map looked so different from anything we had seen. Yet even these maps, which largely reflected the idiosyncrasies of the very strange Senior MET Officer, soon became clear and manageable.

Some other things took a little longer to master than the hieroglyphs, however. For example, I took me some time to recognize the type and amounts of the various cloud forms and layers. Walking along the main road of the camp with my co-trainees, we often stopped to argue about the clouds that sailed overhead. "These are obviously Stratocumulus!"

"Certainly not. Don't you see the strong vertical development? They are normal Cumulus clouds!"

"Oh, come on, you both are quite wrong! Their bases are far too high to be either. They must be Altocumulus."

A gruff voice once interrupted our quarrels:

"And what are you fellows staring at?" The feared Station Warrant Officer (the RAF version of Sergeant Major) glared at us.

"Oh, we are just looking at clouds, Sir!" replied the other Palestinian.

"At clouds? Are you trying to be funny, or what?"

"No Sir, we are being trained as meteorological observers in the MET Station."

"Oh, I see. Well, all right, but don't stand there in the middle of the road, impeding traffic, see?"

"Yes, Sir, very good, Sir!" And off we went.

As I turned around, I saw the Station Warrant Officer still standing in the middle of the road, looking at the sky and shaking his

head, as if he were in some doubt about whether we were trying to fool him after all.

While all this took place, the war underwent a series of dramatic developments. The first such development that came to my attention was General Wavell's defeat of the Italians who had invaded Egypt. The defeat turned into a rout, and thousands of Italian prisoners of war were brought to camps in the Delta, including one near the RAF Station Helwan while I was still stationed there. I trekked through the sands to get a look at the prisoners and saw them crowding at the barbed wire fences, trying to talk to people, asking for cigarettes, or for someone to write a letter to a friend in Cairo or Alexandria. Although they were unshaven, tired and bedraggled, their eyes were merry. I was glad to be able to talk with them in Italian. They told me how happy they were that the war was over for them, a war Italy should never have entered. They cursed Mussolini and Hitler, but had good words for their little king, whom they thought Mussolini had imprisoned. I visited them several times, bringing them cigarettes and sweets, hoping that our roles would never be reversed.

Unfortunately, the Italian defeat and similar defeats in Greece and Albania led Germany to take a greater interest in North Africa and the Balkans. And that was going to have grave personal consequences.

While training to become a weather observer and getting ready to be sent to Crete or Greece, I received a very unexpected letter — from my mother, with whom I had had no direct contact since the outbreak of the war. She wrote that conditions in Vienna had continuously worsened for the Jews who remained there and had become so bad that she had decided to flee. Exactly how she did it, I never found out, but she managed to cross the wintry Alps by foot and to get into Yugoslavia, where she planned to join my step-sister Hilda. Unfortunately, the Yugoslavs, worried about the increasing numbers of refugees arriving from Austria and Italy, and fearing that Hitler and Mussolini would accuse Yugoslavia of harbouring their enemies, herded all refugees into camps, where the authorities could supervise them better. They were not concentration camps, but they were certainly not the most pleasant places to be, although various agencies, and particularly the Jewish community of Yugoslavia, did their best to help with food, medical assistance and other necessities.

My mother's letter was short and full of optimism that eventually she would be able to join Hilda, from whom she had obtained my RAF address. I was ecstatic about my mother's escape

from Nazi-Germany and started planning how to get her into Palestine. The first thing I did was to send a letter to RAF Headquarters in which I outlined my mother's position and asked that, in view of her son being in the RAF, instructions be given for the British consulate in Belgrade to look after her.

Before my efforts could advance very far, however, another blow fell. The Germans invaded Yugoslavia and conquered it in less than two weeks, after heavy air raids on Belgrade and other cities. With that, my poor mother was trapped again and all communications with her and with my stepsister ceased for the rest of the war.

Today, I find it difficult to understand how, despite this tragedy, I was able not only to continue my training, but to visit Cairo and do all the other things I did. I suppose it was not only the callousness of youth, but also the war. For example, the London blitz did not prevent London boys in the army from getting drunk. French soldiers in North Africa also drank their wine and made love, despite the German occupation of France. I suppose one had to, so as not to sink into inactive depression or worse. Still, today it seems hard to understand.

And then came another letter out of the blue. It was from a girl named Ruth Tetteles, in a Kibbutz in Palestine and it read (in German) approximately as follows:

Dear Comrade,

I have greetings to pass to you from your mother. We were together in the Yugoslav refugee camp of Sabac, where we became very friendly. She is a fine woman, who helped me a lot and often told me about you. She gave me your address and asked me to write to you. Along with some other young people, I was able to get away before the Germans invaded the country. The Jewish Community got us on a boat in which we went down the Danube into Romania and Bulgaria. During the winter, the boat was frozen in the river. There were several hundred of us in this small boat, with little food. We had a hard time. But when spring came, we managed to continue, to pass through the Black Sea into the Mediterranean and eventually to reach Palestine. Please let me know whether you received this letter.

Ruth

It seemed as if my mother had sent a messenger to me, and I was dying to hear more about her. So I answered Ruth's letter at once. I told her that I would receive my first week's leave as soon as I had passed my exam as a meteorological observer, and that I planned to visit her on her kibbutz. She promptly wrote that she looked forward to my visit.

8. Niece Susi Schoenwiese (Hedi's daughter), age five (Vienna, 1936)

CHAPTER 19

"WHIIIINE ... Whiiiine ... Whiiine," went the Cairo air raid sirens.

I was furious. "Damn it, now I have to stop my balloon observation and start all over again afterwards!"

It was bad enough to be alone on the night shift in the deserted Heliopolis MET Office. Now that stupid air raid forced me to abandon my upper wind observations and go to the nearby shelter. Instead of having an hour for a cup of cocoa and a bit of a read in my new Pelican book on astronomy, I would have to repeat the observations when the air raid was over.

In the cloudless conditions of a summer night in Cairo, I could usually follow the balloons to great heights, sometimes to 30,000 feet or more, which took well over an hour to complete.

There were hazards, of course, apart from air raids, which might force a repetition of the measurements. The balloon could have a puncture and start sinking at a low altitude. At higher altitudes, one could confuse the balloon's light with a star and follow the slow movements of the latter instead. That could make you feel like a real fool for having wasted a lot of time. But I had become quite good at this part of my MET observer training, which was why I was permitted to work alone even before my exam.

In fact, I liked meteorology from the moment the weather logbook had lost its mystery and things had started to make sense. The daily changes in weather, the romantic aspects of sky and clouds, the measurement of temperature, humidity and pressure by means of delicate instruments — they all appealed to me. I also enjoyed the feeling of doing something a bit different from what the majority of airmen were doing. In addition, meteorology seemed to bring me a little closer to actual flying, for which I was then still hankering. But even when I lost that desire, meteorology remained fascinating. Frankly, I never really embraced the quantitative side of meteorology — the dry formulae and mathematics of the physical basis of the science. I much preferred the qualitative side — meteorology's descriptive aspects and the need to rely on intuition and memory, on

which intuition is often unconsciously based. These became particularly important when I became a forecaster, at a time when computers did not yet carry out forecasting and when local experience, intuition and memory were more important and useful than differential equations.

As I made my way to the nearby shelter, the anti-aircraft guns opened fire, stammering their staccato "ack...ack...ack," while searchlights crisscrossed by tracer shells lit the sky over Cairo. I watched the exciting view from the shelter entrance where we usually stood until the whine of the first bomb made us dive below. Strangely enough, I couldn't hear any aircraft above, which usually accompanied — and sometimes even preceded — the air-raid warning and the spluttering of the anti-aircraft guns.

The firing soon died down and the "all clear" signal sounded. I began repeating my balloon procedure. First, I filled the red rubber balloon with hydrogen from a steel bottle until the balloon was about a metre in diameter. Then I tied the paper lantern to its nozzle by a string about 10 feet long so it wouldn't come so close to the balloon as to cause it to explode. Walking slowly with my back against the light wind, I released it so that it floated serenely into the sky, and then dashed to the theodolite* in order not to lose the quickly rising balloon from sight. Once I located the balloon through the theodolite. I began taking measurements of its positions at one-minute intervals.

I had made only a couple of measurements when the air raid sirens went off again. "To hell with it," I thought, "I am not going to abandon this balloon. At least I'll continue until I hear the first whine of a bomb." As a precaution, I put a steel helmet on my head, but had to wear it on an exaggerated slant in order to look through the telescope.

Then I heard the telephone ring in the office. "It must be something important for somebody to call in the middle of the air raid," I thought. I made a dash for the phone, hoping to miss only a few balloon readings.

"Are you MET people by chance making wind measurements with a balloon?" demanded a gruff voice on the other end of the phone.

"Yes, that's what I am trying to do. But these damn air raids are making it difficult," I answered.

---

* A theodolite is a telescope that allows horizontal and vertical measurements to be taken.

"Oh for Christ sake, why can't you tell us when you do that! We have been following that Goddamn balloon for the last half-hour and have been trying to shoot it down. We thought that it was some strange silent aircraft with a white and a red light marking!"

The red light must have been the reflection of the lantern on the red rubber balloon. I had to laugh about having disturbed the peace of Cairo's night with my balloon. "Oh all right, I'll tell Mr. Inman tomorrow morning. But at least you won't shoot at it tonight anymore, I hope?" "No bloody fear, now that we know what it is!"

From then on we always notified the anti-aircraft gunners before letting off our balloons and were no longer interrupted by air raids during the observations.

I had little difficulty passing the MET observer's exam, for which Mr. Inman's training had prepared us very thoroughly. Not that all the trainees appreciated his thoroughness. In fact, a lot of us sniggered about Mr. Inman behind his back because of his thinness and prissy ways. His unusual intellectual interests probably contributed to this. I confess that I, too, made my share of jokes about him. He was such an easy target. Also, I didn't want to be rejected by my fellow trainees, which would have increased my feelings of insecurity that youth, strangeness of surroundings and lack of family support engendered. It was only later that I learned to appreciate Inman's personality and acknowledged his merits.

A man named Ernie Chambers served as my examiner. He was one of the forecasters from the Weather Forecasting Office at nearby Almaza Airport, Cairo's civilian airport, which during the war was also under RAF jurisdiction. A dashing young Flight Lieutenant, he wore an ascot tie with his bush jacket, something fighter pilots often did. This was not regulation dress, but pilots got away with such things because they were regarded as heroes. Also, Chambers was married to the Group Captain's daughter. His nonchalant, off-hand manner hid a sharp mind and pungent wit, but to me his behaviour was lenient and pleasant. Some years later, when going through files at Heliopolis, I accidentally discovered a letter written by the Group Captain to Mr. Inman and the examiners, requesting them to take into account that my Palestinian colleagues and I did not speak English as our mother tongue. Accordingly, we should not be judged as severely as other examinees when we answered questions during our exam. A humane attitude, but I think that Ernie Chambers would have treated us humanely anyway.

By the time we had taken our exam, Crete and Greece had both fallen from allied control to the Germans, after a short but bloody campaign with heavy casualties and many prisoners of war. The thought of becoming a prisoner of war frightened me considerably and put a damper on my desire to come close to the enemy. Rampant rumours told of the nasty things the Germans did to prisoners who were found to be refugees from Nazi-Germany or Austria.

Brand-new LAC stripes (in the form of a propeller, equivalent in rank to a Lance Corporal in the army) adorned our sleeves once we passed the exam. While the RAF was deciding what to do with us new MET observers, I was sent to Almaza to assist the Senior MET Officer in breaking the Italian weather code. That long and tedious job required endless calculations. Once, while I was sitting at a desk in Squadron Leader Cumming's office, working on those reams of figures, I noticed him looking quizzically at me.

"You know, laddie, this is really a strange situation. There you are, with your German background, helping me, a Scotsman, break the Italian code! Isn't it really crazy!"

I liked Jock Cumming because he had a good sense of humour and was always honest and outspoken. He was also a Scots patriot. When foreigners who were largely ignorant about the intricacies of British nationalities and names referred to him as "Mr. Cummings from England," he would bristle. "I cum from Scotland, laddie, and my name is Cumming!" Many years later, an English MP came to visit the London Airport MET Office, where Jock was then in charge. The MP asked jokingly, "What does a Scotsman like you do here at London Airport?" Jock replied, "I've cum to educate you Sassenachs!"

Ernie Chambers and Jock Cumming would later become good friends and colleagues when I worked in the International Civil Aviation Organization in Montreal. But if somebody would have told me that in Heliopolis, I would not have believed it, in view of the gulf of rank, knowledge and background that separated us. In fact, the English caste and class system never really affected me later in life, perhaps because, as a foreigner, I did not fit into any of the standard classifications. I also think that it had something to do with the fact that I mixed mostly with intellectuals who were able to transcend common class prejudices. To be honest, though, I think I would have made similar class distinctions back in Vienna, and would have had no social contacts with either blue-collar people or aristocrats. As in England, the way people spoke in Vienna made their class easily

recognizable to other Viennese, despite the fact that we all spoke some form of German-Viennese dialect. As the character Henry Higgins pointed out in *My Fair Lady*, a trained ear could identify not only a speaker's class, but even the district of Vienna in which the speaker grew up (especially in the case of proletarians). But an English visitor would be able to move more freely across the social spectrum because the Viennese would not be able to place his English accent. He could be a "Mylord" for all people knew, even if his English had hints of cockney.

At last my first leave came due. I had been waiting for it anxiously, hoping to hear more about my mother from Ruth — about what happened while they were together in the refugee camp, and what she thought would happen now that the Germans occupied Yugoslavia. It was summer of 1941 and the war was not going well for the Allies. The Germans had formed the Afrika Korps under the command of General Rommel, who helped the Italians recapture most of eastern Libya and threaten, once again, the western approaches of Egypt, the so-called Western Desert. When I left for Palestine, I wondered whether German tanks would be at the outskirts of Cairo when I returned in two weeks.

The train that took me on my first "home-leave" left the cavernous Cairo railway station in the early afternoon. By late evening, we crossed the Suez Canal by boat and, on the other side, boarded the Palestinian train, which was full to the bursting point. I threaded my way in vain through the crowded corridors, trying to find a seat. Eventually I reached a carriage occupied by members of a hospital unit — doctors, nurses and orderlies. By that time, I must have looked very tired. One of the nurses took pity on me and motioned the others to make a little room so that I could squeeze in. Gratefully I unpacked some of the goodies I had brought with me from Cairo: halwa, the sticky, sweet sesame concoction; Turkish Delight, less sticky but even sweeter; and various kinds of exotic fruits. Much of this was new to the nurses, who had recently arrived from the Britain. The atmosphere in the compartment soon became friendly as we ate, chatted and drank tea, which one of the nurses made in an instrument sterilizer.

My accent made them ask where I came from. I told them about Vienna, my mother and the journey to meet my mother's young friend, which moved them visibly. When we parted in the morning, each nurse kissed me and wished me luck. This seemed to be a good omen for what awaited me in Palestine. I was (and am still) a bit

superstitious, even if the intelligent side of my brain tells me that it is nonsense.

The mists were lifting from the orange groves when I left the train in Lydda, the railway centre in Palestine's coastal plain, to catch a bus to Rechovoth, the town nearest to Ruth's Kibbutz. I had no idea how to get to the Kibbutz and decided to ask in the bus station at Rechovoth.

"Could you tell me please how one can get to Kwuzath Schiller?"* I asked the man behind a ticket counter in the bus station.

"One walks. There is no bus."

"Can you give me directions how to walk? Is it far?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "If you know how to go, its about 45 minutes. If you don't know, you might easily get lost in the dunes. But why don't you wait at the milk depot in the village? Kwuzath Schiller's lorry comes every afternoon to deliver milk and I am sure they will give you a lift."

I thanked him and asked my way to the milk depot, where I took up station, drinking milk and eating the remaining halwa to pass the time and keep my stomach quiet. Eventually the Kibbutz lorry came and after they had unloaded their milk cans we were off, with me perched on top of the empties, trying not to topple over as the lorry rattled over the ruts of the unpaved road. It did not take long until the green fields of the Kibbutz surrounded us and we passed through row after row of sprinklers that sent rainbow sparks into the bright-red evening sun. Then, behind cypress trees, the low, red-roofed Kibbutz houses appeared and we stopped in front of the only larger building which housed the dining hall and the Kibbutz administration.

A Kibbutz is a small community. The arrival of a man in RAF uniform caused people to crowd around and ask whom I had come to see. When I gave them Ruth's name someone quickly went to fetch her. And soon she came, smilingly offering me her hand. She was about seventeen then, small and a bit compact, but with a radiant face in which large brown eyes were the most pronounced feature, set off by wavy, auburn hair that had a pretty reddish glitter. The Palestinian sun, which was responsible for that glitter, had also brought out lots of freckles on her face, giving it a cheerful and open character. In her brief khaki shorts and sandals, she looked a bit tomboyish, but I soon saw that most Kibbutz girls dressed that way.

---

* Kwuzah is a less leftish type of Kibbutz.

We did not spend much time alone that first evening. After dinner in the communal dining hall, we shared a table with several others who were all curious about the airman visitor. I was plied with questions about the RAF, Egypt and the war. Having to hunt for the right words in my still imperfect Hebrew, the excitement of meeting Ruth and the long journey without sleep — all that made me very tired. Ruth took pity on me and asked in the office for a place for me to sleep. "He can sleep in Edna's bed, she is away for a week," said the Kibbutz Secretary, and off I went to fall into Edna's bed and slept until the morning.

When I woke up, the sun was already streaming into the window and the sounds of Kibbutz life could be heard outside the hut. As I lifted my head and looked around me I saw that against each wall stood a bed. One was empty, but in the other two — no it couldn't be — yes, indeed, two longhaired female heads peeked out from under the bedclothes. I quickly slunk back under my own blanket to consider the situation, which was highly unusual for me. Not having grown up with female siblings, and living now for some time in very male student and army surroundings, I may have longed for female sleeping companions; but when they materialized, I was far too shy to take advantage of it. I had been sleeping in my undershorts and wondered whether I could make a dash for the shower, grabbing my clothing as I ran. The two girls seemed to be asleep, so I gingerly lifted myself up and started to step on the floor.

"Good morning, soldier," came a sleepy voice from one of the girls whom my rustles must have woken. I quickly folded the blanket around me.

"Oh, good morning! Sorry if I have woken you up!"

"That's all right, I have to get up anyway. My duty starts at 10. Hope you slept well."

"Thanks, very well. But I better get going. Ruth will be waiting for me. She is the girl I am visiting."

"Yes, we know all about you, even that you are called Erich. What a funny name! Our chaps are called Joseph, Abi, Moshe. But I don't want to keep you, go right ahead."

As she saw me getting up hesitatingly and dragging the blanket with me, she said, "Don't worry, Erich, we have seen boys with nothing on before."

That didn't really reassure me all that much, but not having any choice, I let the blanket drop, grabbed my clothing and rushed out, to collide in the door with one of the other inhabitants of the hut coming

back from night shift. Eventually I made it to the shower, which, luckily, was deserted — it could also have been unisex for all I knew! I shaved and dressed hurriedly and went to look for Ruth.

I found her weeding the nearby vegetable garden. She greeted me with her radiant smile, speaking the Viennese German of my childhood rather than Hebrew, in which neither of us was as yet very proficient. Then she took me to the dining hall, where we joined shift workers having a belated breakfast. She had taken the day off — the weeding was only to pass the time. After breakfast, she gave me a tour of the Kibbutz, starting with the children's house, which is usually the first permanent building erected by a new Kibbutz. Then we saw the neat houses for members and separate ones for old people, parents or retirees, which are usually put up later when the Kibbutz has become wealthier. In between came the stables, the laundry and the music hut, where a girl sat practicing a Chopin etude. To round out the tour, we saw the chicken coops, a small factory for plywood, the packinghouse where the oranges were crated for export, and so on.

The juxtaposition of manual labour and cultural pursuits fascinated me. I thought it a desirable combination. After generations of unhealthy town and ghetto life, people on the Kibbutz could return to the land without forsaking an intellectual life. I also found that the behaviour of the Kibbutz members was much more natural than what I was used to, starting with my experience in the morning and the openness with which everything was being discussed. I soon found out that this openness did not indicate sexual promiscuity. If anything, people were stricter in their sexual behaviour than in town, where anonymity permits a greater freedom than the close proximity of Kibbutz life.

Despite all these desirable aspects of Kibbutz life, I did not consider joining one after the war because I soon learned that there were also many drawbacks. Even before the goal of establishing a Jewish State had been reached, the Kibbutz's main raison d'être, it did not provide enough incentive or reward for people wanting to get ahead. Also, the Kibbutz had all the disadvantages of life in small communities. Envy, gossip and spite abounded, which could make life very miserable and could be surmounted only by those few who had managed to keep their ideals intact, or those whose sensibilities had been blunted by age or vicissitudes of war and persecution.

On the outskirts of the Kibbutz, there was a little pond surrounded by sloping meadows. As we stretched out in the grass, I

asked Ruth to tell me about my mother. There was not really much she could tell except little vignettes of camp life, and of her admiration for my mother's dynamism, helpfulness and optimism. She had as little an idea as I of what would have happened after the Germans invaded Yugoslavia. But we both feared for the worst, even if we did not admit it at that time.

Then Ruth began to tell me about herself, although some of the most important things she would reveal only much later, and some she never told herself. She had been an illegitimate child, brought up by a series of foster parents and orphanages, where she had been neglected, mistreated and abused. At sixteen she had joined a Zionist youth group, with whom she managed to reach the refugee camp in Yugoslavia. After a relatively pleasant interlude there, she endured the long journey down the Danube on a little boat, a journey that became increasingly difficult and eventually harrowing. The overcrowded boat was stuck for many weeks in the frozen river without adequate food or heat, surrounded by indifferent or even hostile Balkan peasants. There were people of all ages on board, some with small children. Hunger and desperation caused quarrels and eventually fights for scraps of food or bits of clothing. Several of the older people died and even some younger ones succumbed to hunger and disease and had to be dumped into the river through holes cut into the ice. After that, Palestine and the Kibbutz seemed havens of security, where one did not go hungry or cold and where one did not have to run away from persecution but could take a stand and fight one's enemies.

I always found it a miracle how, despite these terrible experiences, Ruth remained the radiant, sweet-tempered and trusting person she was. She did not have an ounce of guile in her. She was open, helpful and friendly and always had only good things to say about people. There was something pleasingly simple about her, and I don't mean in respect of education — because of her difficult youth she indeed had never learned very much — but an appealing simplicity of the soul.

Her story (what little she told me of it then), her regard for my mother, the sweetness of her character, and, last but not least, her youthful charm — little wonder that I was captivated. In turn, I suppose she admired the dashing airman who, four years older, was the next best thing to a prince charming. And so, when we parted the next day, we kissed behind the cowshed to the accompaniment of low mooing that came through the lattice wall, and promised to write. And

we made plans that, when I returned on my next leave, we would go on a trip to Haifa where we would have more privacy than in the Kibbutz, cowshed, chicken coop and all.

I left the Kibbutz with a happy heart, not only because I had found a girlfriend, but because I had found someone who, in whatever tenuous way, re-connected me with my previous life and offered an island of familiarity in a very unfamiliar world.

10. Gitta's father, Otto Erich Deutsch, famous Schubert expert (Deutsch Catalogue) (Vienna, 1960s)

CHAPTER 20

"I saw the exam that you took to become a MET observer. You are good at taking upper wind observations with balloons, Schwarz," said Squadron Leader Cumming when I reported back for duty.

"Thank you, Sir. Yes, I think I am," I answered, wondering why he was bringing that up.

"How would you like to go with a mobile unit to the Western Desert and take upper wind observations for artillery corrections?"

Ah, so that was it! I hesitated a little. The prospect of adventure intrigued me, but I was apprehensive about falling into German hands.

"Well, Sir, I wouldn't mind, but is there a chance that I might be taken prisoner by the Germans? You know my background and what could happen to me if that occurred!"

"Oh no, laddie, I would never send you into such a situation. The artillery is always well behind the front line, so there is absolutely no chance of being captured."

That's how it started, and within a week we had our kits and were ready to strike out. We left in a three-ton lorry covered by a green tarpaulin with yellow and brown camouflage daubings, filled to the brim with steel bottles three metres long, containing the hydrogen for the balloons. We also carried measuring instruments, tripods, boxes with balloons, lanterns and candles, and all the other paraphernalia needed for our task. Our personal kit included a rubber "ground sheet" for each person, on which one could lie. Two ground sheets could also be fastened together to make a pup tent.

There were four of us in all. Corporal Young, our "commander," was fortyish, a new arrival from the U.K., with a perpetually worried expression on his face. "Titch" Miller, a youngster of barely eighteen, derived his nickname from his diminutive figure. Then there was Jones, the burly driver, and myself — the only non-Britisher, whom the others must have regarded as a bit of an oddity. That wore off when they saw that, despite the German accent, my store of four-letter swear words was as large as theirs, and that I was willing to pull my weight as much as anyone

else. In fact, Titch and I sometimes had to join forces to push the hesitant and overcautious Corporal Young into action. Jones, the driver, usually played the neutral. "I am just the driver. You people are the 'Mobile fucking MET Unit'!" he would say.

Corporal Young usually played his cards close to his chest in order to open himself as little as possible to reproaches if things went wrong. From the little he told us, we were to join the artillery of the New Zealand Divison, whose 25-pound shells, when fired at distant targets, reached considerable heights and required wind corrections to ensure that they would not be driven off-course. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of the Division were not too clear. The war situation in the Western Desert was confused because Rommel had broken through the British defences in Cyrenaica and the battle moved rapidly to and fro.

So we set off towards the Western Desert, stopping at major army depots on the way to obtain food, water and directions. It must have been tough for the shy and insecure Corporal Young to ask strange officers, "Please Sir, could you tell me where I can find the artillery of the New Zealand Division?"

Although those officers looked with some astonishment at Corporal Young's RAF uniform, which in the Western Desert was rarely seen outside aerodromes, they always seemed satisfied with his credentials. But soldiers who encountered us still eyed us suspicion. Once when I stood looking down from the back of a lorry dressed in my blue RAF winter coat — it was then the winter of 1941, and winter can be cold and miserable in the open desert — a group of infantrymen came towards us. One of them looked up at the dark-haired, unshaven man in the unfamiliar blue coat and said, "Itey prisoner? Wanti cigaretti?" Although he clearly meant well, it did offend me considerably, and I indignantly told him to fuck off, as I was RAF. I wonder whether my German accent confused him even further.

At first we slept in the back of the lorry, except for Jones, who used his more comfortable cab as his private bedroom. The floor of the lorry was pretty hard, and the proximity of the hydrogen bottles anything but comforting, particularly after some shells fired by marauding German tanks burst in our vicinity. After that we often bedded down on the desert sand, which seemed a little softer than the lorry floor, especially after we had learned to dig a little groove for our hipbones. That went well until it started to rain. Then we tried to construct our pup tents, but somehow never succeeded. Frankly, I did

not try too hard. In the small pup tent, I would have had to sleep closer to the others than I cared to.

On some days we had only two or three cups of water each for drinking, making tea, washing and shaving. Our priorities were obviously such that we didn't smell like roses. We continued sleeping on the desert sand, putting the rubber ground sheet on top of us when it rained. But the rainwater would seep into the sand and attack from the side and from below. So we got wet one way or the other, and the result was rheumatism, which plagued me for quite some years afterwards. My punishment for being too fastidious, I suppose.

When we reached an army headquarters near Sollum on the Egyptian/Libyan border, we were told that the New Zealand Division was somewhere along the road to the oasis of Siwa, about 250 kilometres due South from the Mediterranean coast. So, off we went, through the roadless desert, guided by a map and following tracks of other vehicles that had gone along that route before.

The desert we traversed was not the typical sand dune type, but rolling country with hard sand covered by small flints. The going was still pretty slow and we were not worried when we did not reach Siwa the first day. On the second day, another lorry bound for Siwa joined us, and it was good not to be alone in that wasteland. By the third day, I started wondering whether I hadn't seen this hillock or that rusty car wreck before. Could we be going in circles? On the fourth day, Corporal Young held a conference with the driver of the other lorry. They decided that we were well and truly lost. He came back from the conference bearing a case of beer to cheer us up. After giving the bad news, he gave us some good news. The second lorry was headed for the NAAFI in Siwa and had 5000 bottles of beer on board, which meant that we wouldn't die of thirst all that quickly.

On the fifth day, things got really bad, despite the beer. We were low on petrol and Corporal Young knelt in a corner of the lorry and prayed. Titch often hid his head because he had tears running down his young cheeks. I tried to forget things by keeping my nose buried in one of the several Pelican and Penguin books that I had brought with me, partly for reading and partly to stuff in the two breast pockets of my battle dress tunic. Someone had told me that books could stop bullets.

Towards the end of the day, we spotted tracks in the sand and decided to follow them wherever they led, even if they took us to the Italian-held oasis of Jerabub, which was not too far from Siwa on the other side of the border. And then, just as the sun was beginning to go

down, we reached the top of a little rise and Siwa appeared before us. Green palm trees surrounded a lake in front of a hill crowned by a mosque. The setting sun in the west framed the hill, the mosque and its slender minarets with a golden halo. The beauty of the scene and the relief of having reached our goal also made me cry a little.

I suppose it must have looked as beautiful to Alexander the Great when he visited the oasis some two thousand years before to interrogate the famous oracle of Jupiter Amon. Our oracles were the fellows from the Long Range Desert Group, who were stationed there and received us hospitably. This highly mobile force was used to navigating many hundreds of kilometres through trackless desert to reconnoitre or strike deep behind enemy lines. When they heard that we had got lost on our way to Siwa from the coast, they laughed as if that had been the best joke they had heard for a long time. They gave us a compass and told us that on our way back we should simply head North, disregarding any tracks we would encounter. But they did not know where to find the New Zealand Division — certainly not at Siwa, which was hundreds of kilometres from the war zone.

So we rested a couple of days, ate our fill of dates from Siwa's palm trees and bathed in the shimmering (but very salty) lake. Then we struck out again, this time back in a northerly direction. One of the Long Range Group's trucks accompanied us for an hour to set us on the right track. Using compass and map, we made it back roughly to where we started within a couple of days.

It was a dark and stormy night ... yes, even in the desert such nights occur, and that winter was the century's coldest and stormiest on record. Hard rain began to fall in the late afternoon as we made our way toward the coast, aiming again at the Egyptian/Libyan border village of Sollum, where we hoped to receive new directions and instructions.

But before we got there, a column of armoured cars suddenly appeared. An officer from the lead car jumped out and approached our lorry.

"And where the devil are you people going? Do you think this is peacetime? Are you driving to the coast for a swim? Who are you people anyway, and what are you doing here?"

Corporal Young vaulted over the tailgate of our lorry, saluted and said, "We are an RAF Mobile MET Unit, Sir, and we are looking for the New Zealand Division's artillery, for which we are supposed to do wind corrections. Would you by chance know where we can find them?"

The officer shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't got the faintest clue. But I do know that Jerry is milling around here. If he catches you on your own you are a dead duck. So you better come with us. It soon will be dark and we are heading for a fortified laager where you will be safe for the night."

Corporal Young looked hesitantly towards Titch and me. We stood at the tailboard of the lorry, nodding vigorously in his direction. "All right, Sir, we will follow you."

The officer nodded and returned to his armoured car. Our lorry took its place at the end of the convoy. Night had fallen by the time we reached the laager, which consisted of a large number of tanks and armoured cars drawn up in a circle, with the soft-skinned vehicles in the centre. Flashes of gunfire occasionally lit up the darkness like distant lightning, but the sounds of the explosions were often drowned out by the howling wind and by the rain pelting down on the tarpaulin of the lorry.

It was a night to scare the bravest, and I was not the bravest. As I lay on my blanket on the hard lorry floor and tried to sleep, my limbs shivered whenever an explosion became audible, making sleep pretty difficult. Eventually I dozed off but was woken up in the middle of the night by a commotion outside. I went to the tailgate and saw several armoured cars and lorries revving up their engines and making ready to leave. "What's happening?" I called across to the nearest armoured car. "Our squadron got orders to shove off," came the answer.

I woke Corporal Young, who came to the tailgate looking even more unsure and doubtful than usual. Titch and I thought that, as the chaps leaving were those who had brought us here, we might as well leave with them. We would have to leave the place in the morning anyway and it was better to travel in the company of others than alone. Corporal Young agreed and leapt out into the rain to let the others know that we would be following them. He came back looking like a bedraggled terrier.

The night continued to be stormy in every sense. Rain kept pelting down on our tarpaulin. Gun flashes continued to light up the horizon and seemed to be getting closer. At least that's what we thought when we calculated their distance from the interval between flash and sound. At daybreak, the convoy stopped briefly to permit us to boil water for tea and refuel the lorries and armoured cars from jerry cans with petrol, which a supply lorry brought round.

When the convoy resumed its trek towards the coast, we received orders to spread out so as to decrease the risk of a multiple

hit if the enemy attacked us. As we anxiously scanned the horizon, there suddenly came a whine followed by an explosion not far off. The attack had materialized.

The battles in the Western Desert were quite different from the land battles in Europe or elsewhere. To quote Churchill:

> Tanks had replaced the cavalry of former wars with a vastly more powerful and far-reaching weapon, and in many aspects their manoeuvres resembled naval warfare, with seas of sand instead of salt water. For more than two months [November 1941 - January 1942] in the Desert the most fierce continuous battle raged between scattered bands of men, armed with the latest weapons, seeking each other dawn after dawn, fighting to the death throughout the day and then often long into the night. ... All was dispersed and confused. Much depended on the individual soldier and the junior officer.

General Rommel with part of the Afrika Korps had broken through the British lines South of Tobruk and driven a wedge towards the Egyptian frontier. To quote Churchill again:

> On reaching the frontier he split his force into columns, some of which turned North and South, and others drove on twenty miles into Egyptian territory. He wrought havoc in our rearward areas and captured many prisoners.

Our convoy had been moving north along the Libyan/Egyptian frontier when one of those columns caught up with us. Without the benefit of binoculars, all I could make out were dark smudges on the horizon, from which red and yellow flashes now and then blossomed, producing explosions and spurts of sand being thrown sky-high somewhere nearby a few seconds later.

Our armoured cars and their guns were no match for the German tanks. The hydrogen tanks we carried were also potentially lethal to us. Under the circumstances, our convoy's only defence was flight. Orders were relayed by a small armoured car rapidly scurrying among the lorries that were not connected by wireless with the command car, to go at top speed but keep at least 100 yards distance between each vehicle.

And so we belted along, trying to keep up with the others. For some reason I cannot remember, I sat next to Jones in his cab, my

heart going faster than the nearly rhythmic bumps of the wheels on the uneven ground, my mouth dry and my fists clenched, as if I could hasten the lorry's progress. A flash and an explosion nearby made our lorry wobble but otherwise didn't seem to have caused damage. But a moment later, the engine started spluttering and then died. Jones cursed, opened his door and jumped to the ground. Scared as I was to leave the safety of the cab (which was more apparent than real), I felt I had to join him. "What happened, Jones?" I shouted anxiously. My question was echoed by Corporal Young's voice from behind the tarpaulin.

After a few moments search came Jones's disgusted reply. "Goddam shrapnel has cut the fucking petrol pipe."

Although this was bad, it could have been worse. The petrol tank was underneath the body of the lorry, separated from the front part of the lorry by an empty space of some two feet. The shrapnel had neatly sliced through the hose that traversed that space, stopping the petrol from the tank reaching the engine in the front. Jones asked me for my leather belt, cut off a piece and tried to construct a connection for the severed parts of the pipe. Unfortunately, petrol kept seeping through. There was no other solution but for one of us to ride in the space between the cab and the truck and hold the pipe together. Corporal Young and I alternated in the chore because he thought Titch would be too scared; he might drop the pipe or fall off.

In the meantime, the convoy had moved on and with it the shelling; we seemed to have been ignored by both. We lumbered on, trying to catch up with the convoy. As we approached its rear, we saw a lorry that had been hit being evacuated. An ambulance with stretchers stood at its side, and when we passed it, I cowardly turned away. I did not want to see the results.

Strangely, I felt less scared riding outside and holding the petrol pipe together than sitting in the cab and waiting to be hit. Having something to do took my mind of the fear, something I was to experience later again and again. The waiting was always the worst.

Eventually we outdistanced the slower tanks and their shells. When it was judged safe, orders were given for a halt so we could rest the steaming engines, make repairs and get something to eat. While Jones was consulting with mechanics in neighbouring lorries, Titch and I decided to brew some tea. We usually did this by filling a square petrol tin cut in half with sand, pour some petrol on the sand, put a

match to it and then sit the tea kettle on top of the tin. This time the thing wouldn't burn properly, so Titch took a can with petrol and sloshed some of it into the "stove". The flame whooshed up and ignited the petrol fumes coming out of the spout of the can Titch still held in his hand. For a brief moment he stared at the jet of flame shooting out of the can at least two metres into to air. Then he dropped it and ran. And so did others who had been standing around with their tea mugs at the ready.

The can stood partially buried in the sand with the flame still merrily spouting out. It looked quite pretty and I could not understand why they all had run away. There was a lot of sand around, so I bent down, scooped up a couple of hands full and dropped it on the narrow spout. That immediately extinguished the flame. The others who had watched from a distance came back and Corporal Young patted me on the shoulder. "That was very brave, Schwarz!"

I must have looked astonished. "What's so brave about dumping some sand on the flame?"

"Well, the can could have exploded." I looked blank. That certainly hadn't occurred to me. My knees felt a bit weak and I sat down on the desert sand, contemplating my quite unintentional bravery. "Is that the stuff heroes are made of?" I wondered.

We reached the coast without further mishap and were directed to units of the New Zealand Division lying before the coastal town of Bardia, still held by German units. The burly New Zealanders gave us a hearty welcome, but as they were an armoured Brigade and not the Artillery, there was little we could do for them. They suggested we stay with them until the next convoy of lorries left for the main body of the Division near Sidi Rezegh.

During the evening, while eating our supper of "bully-beef" (corned beef) and biscuits, a fellow came round and asked whether we were the RAF lorry that had stayed in the laager the previous night. When we answered in the affirmative, he told us that we had been lucky. Rommel had attacked the area with a big tank column near dawn, causing many casualties. We were aghast at the fate of the laager and our narrow escape.

The next morning, I explored the neighbourhood, looking for a secluded place to use as a lavatory, always a bit of a problem in the desert, where there were no latrines. One had to grab a spade, move away a little and squat down behind a dune, burying the results in the sand like a doggy. And that applied to all, irrespective of rank. I remember a fierce looking Brigadier with a bristling red moustache,

shouldering his spade and marching off, glaring around in case anyone dared to find it a funny sight.

Returning from that sortie, I passed by a group of soldiers brewing tea. They asked me whether I fancied a mugful. I stopped and stood chatting with them, holding my tea and a plate with fried sausages they had also offered me, a rare delicacy. Suddenly I heard the familiar whine of a shell and, as I had been taught, threw myself down flat on the ground. After hearing the distant explosion, I looked up and saw the soldiers grinning at me. I was covered with a gooey mixture of sand, tea and precious sausage. When I scrambled to my feet, they explained that the German artillery in Bardia was very methodical. It opened up every morning and afternoon at the same time, firing the same number of rounds at the same targets. My hosts knew that, and that there was no need to take precautions. Luckily they were not only cheerful but also kindly souls and gave me another helping of sausage and tea, which I wolfed down, still a bit nervous about the whine of shells overhead.

During my morning reconnaissance, I had found an Italian carbine lying in the sand, together with an ammunition belt. They were probably abandoned by fleeing Italian Bersaglieris, mountain troops who were carrying this type of very short rifle. I decided to take it with me and clean it. I had no rifle at all and it was much lighter than the Enfield 0.303s some of the others carried. It might come in handy, I thought.

A few days later, we set off with a convoy of some 20 lorries, protected by a couple of mobile two-pounder anti-tank guns, and moved west along the Capuzzo track. At lunchtime we stopped in a valley opening out towards the coastal plain. While we were eating, a rumour went around that the enemy had been sighted. Soon we saw the anti-tank guns taking up positions at the entrance of the valley and we were told to dig slit trenches. The sand was pretty hard but necessity is a marvellous incentive. When the first shells whistled overhead, I was able to duck into my trench, the top of my steel helmet — or tin hat as we called it — level with its rim.

Our anti-tank guns blazed away at two German tanks that were slowly advancing from the coastal plain towards us and firing their guns from time to time. The anti-tank shells seemed to make little impression on their heavy armour, but at least they kept the tanks occupied and diverted their fire from us. But as a fellow with binoculars in a nearby trench called out, infantry followed the tanks. Bullets whistling overhead soon proved that he was right. Orders were

passed around to start firing at anything we saw moving. I used my Italian carbine but doubt whether it had much effect due to its inadequate range. Despite my wildly beating heart, my hands were quite steady. I felt a sort of exultation being able to shoot at German soldiers for the first time.

During a lull in the firing, while the tanks and their accompanying posse of soldiers seemed to have halted, I took off my identification tag and buried it in a corner of the slit trench, together with my paybook. Those were the two proofs of identity that could give me away if I fell into German hands. Then I took one of the Pelicans out of my breast pocket store and buried my nose in it to shut out the scene. While occasional shots still whistled overhead, some chaps made a fire in their trench and called to me to come and get tea and a sandwich. "Thanks, I'm not hungry," I shouted back. No way that I would have left that lovely trench while bullets were still buzzing around!

The tanks opened up again. A shell burst quite close to my trench, but the desert sand stilled its impact, showering me with a blast of sand that filled eyes, ears and mouth. When I had spluttered and sneezed it out and cleaned my eyes, I saw a squadron of our own tanks slowly advancing from inside the valley towards the enemy, their guns blazing away at them. The Germans must have thought that enough was enough. They vanished quickly in the coastal haze. I suppose that their infantry had trucks standing by, because there were too many of them to fit in or on their tanks.

When I crawled out of my trench, I heard Corporal Young swearing from the lorry. It was indeed a sorry sight. Fragments from one of the shells had blasted through the tarpaulin, tearing it to shreds and causing havoc inside. Luckily, the hydrogen bottles escaped unscathed. Had they been hit, they would have exploded with greater devastation than anything caused by the shell. But much of our kit and many of our instruments were ruined or damaged.

This effectively ended our mission as a Mobile MET Unit. In the confusion of the battles taking place in the Western Desert, we had never found the New Zealand Division artillery and hadn't done a single balloon measurement. As we turned back towards Egypt, I was certainly not sorry, but congratulated myself for being alive and not having been taken prisoner.

That evening, we listened to the news broadcast on the BBC Middle East Service, which reported that "things were generally quiet today in the Western Desert." We all groaned in unison.

A few days later we stopped at Mersa Matruh, the first RAF aerodrome with a MET Office. Corporal Young went in to report to the MET Officer in charge, while we stood outside the large tent housing the office, wondering whether they would be able to fix us up with a new lorry and instruments. After a while, Corporal Young came out and told me that Squadron Leader Harrower wanted to speak also to other members of the Mobile Unit and that I should go in first.

The Squadron Leader, a heavy, bespectacled man, sat behind a trestle table. After I had saluted and introduced myself, he asked me to tell him briefly what had happened since we left Cairo. I told him our story, and ended by saying that it was really not Corporal Young's fault that we never managed to carry out our mission, but that the confusion and the disorganization caused by the battle had been the reason. "In fact," I added to emphasize how little these developments could have been foreseen, "even Squadron Leader Cumming in Almaza couldn't have expected what would happen when he sent us out. He was convinced that we would never get really close to the enemy. But as things turned out, we got right into the middle of things, and at one stage it was so bad that I decided to destroy my paybook and identity disk. We faced a serious chance of being captured by the Germans!"

Squadron Leader Harrower looked up, a bit astonished. "Now, why did you think that was necessary, laddie?"

"Well, Sir, if the Germans had realized that I was an Austrian refugee, they might have treated me very roughly."

"And Squadron Leader Cumming knew that?"

"Oh yes, we discussed it before he sent me with the Mobile Unit." Squadron Leader Harrower grabbed the field telephone. "Get me through to Squadron Leader Cumming in Almaza," he said curtly.

"Cumming? This is Harrower speaking, in Mersa Matruh. I've got LAC Schwarz with me. You know, the laddie you sent with the Mobile MET Unit into the Western Desert." And he repeated my story, expressing his amazement that Cumming could have sent me into such a dangerous situation. I felt embarrassed, because I had had no intention of accusing Squadron Leader Cumming, whom I did not think "guilty" at all, but had merely wanted to illustrate how unexpected the whole development had been. It was only later that I learned about the rivalry between the two Squadron Leaders. Harrower, who regarded himself as having been treated unfairly by

being sent to the Western Desert while Cumming was able to remain in cushy Cairo, used every opportunity that offered itself to get a dig into Cumming.

"I will inform Headquarters of that, you can be sure, and I will ask that they send the poor lad back to the Delta. Good bye." And with that, Harrower slammed the phone down.

"Get your things from the lorry, Schwarz," he said, turning to me, "and report to Sergeant Light. He'll take care of you until we get a new posting for you. Tell Sergeant Light to assign you in the meantime to an observer shift. And good luck."

"Thank you Sir." I saluted and returned to my colleagues, still embarrassed but happy about going back to the Delta. Not only because of the distance I would thereby put between the Germans and myself, but also because it meant that I had a better chance to be able to visit Ruth again in the not too distant future. I could already see her sitting at the Kibbutz pond, listening in wonderment at my tales of desert adventure.

My lorry-mates were in some wonderment of their own when I told them about the interview and its results. They thought I was a lucky devil. Corporal Young asked me to put in a good word for him when I got to somebody who was willing to listen. He had a wife and two kids and wanted to see them again. I promised to do what I could, acting very "gracious" I suppose. After I had collected my gear and shaken everyone's hand, I gave an affectionate kick to the lorry to thank it for having brought me back alive.

After working a week in RAF Station Mersa Matruh's MET Office, the new posting came through: RAF Station Aboukir, near Alexandria. At that "sea side resort," near which Nelson had beaten the pants off the French navy, I quickly recuperated from my desert hardships, helped by home-leave to Palestine, where I basked in Ruth's admiration and that of her fellow Kibbutzniks.

But after a few months, I got itchy feet again. I felt guilty for sitting in such a comfortable place, while my mother was in God knows what circumstances. Also, my friendship with Ruth had started to pall. I was too young to be looked up to by Ruth; her admiration made me feel uncomfortable. There was probably also another cause — the sophisticated young ladies in Alexandria, whom I admired from afar, made Ruth appear childlike and immature in comparison. So I told her that I thought we were too young to become deeply involved with each other, and that both of us should be free to date others. In any case, I might be sent away again, perhaps never to

return. She took it rather hard. And soon I found myself sitting alone in a desert much farther to the east, regretting our separation and wishing that I had acted less foolishly.

But in the meantime, I let word filter out to headquarters that I would welcome a posting to a more active location. It would not be long before they took me up on that.

11. Erich, just before leaving Vienna, barely 18 (Vienna, 1938)

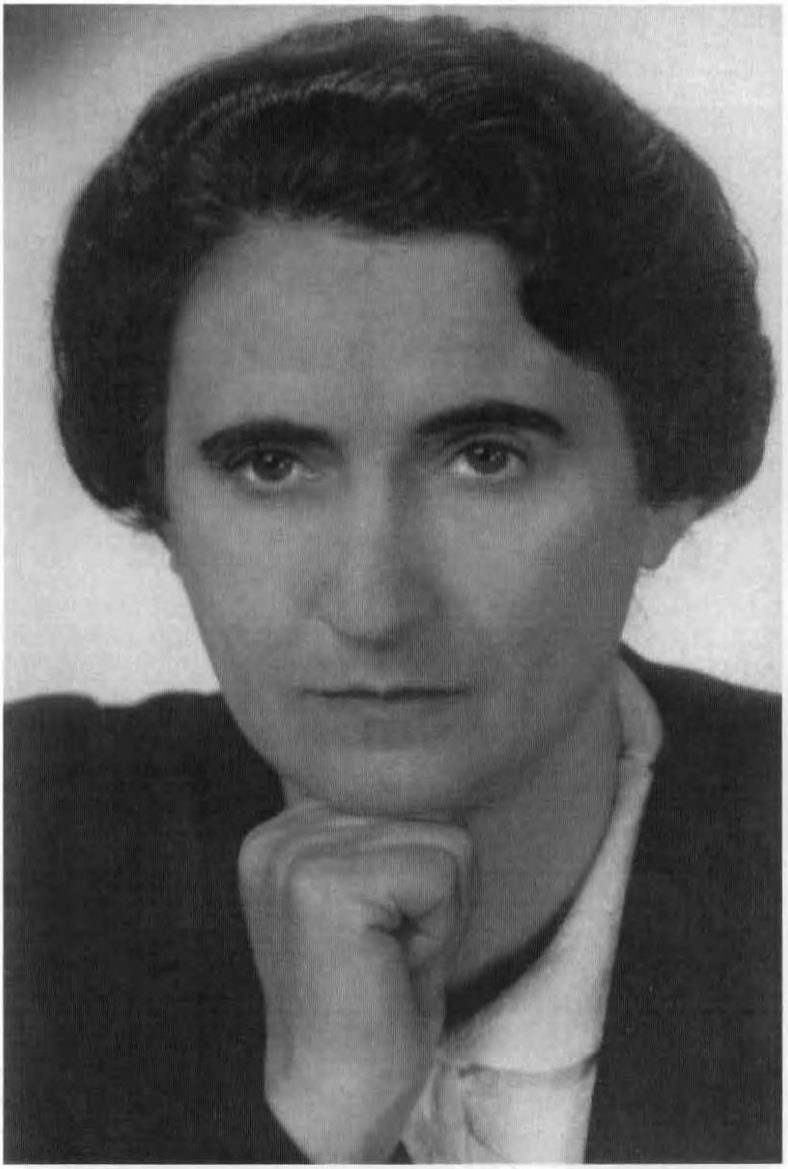
Ich leb — und weiss nicht wie lang.
Ich sterb — und weiss nicht wann.
Ich fahr — und weiss nicht wohin.
Ich wundre mich dass ich so froehlich bin.

(I live — and don't know how long.
I die — and don't know when.
I travel — and don't know where to.
I wonder that I am of such good cheer.)

Verses written in the 15th Century
By Emperor Maximillian of Austria
("The Last Knight") on the wall of
one of his castles in the Tyrol

BOOK FOUR

THE PERSIAN GULF



12. Mother, a year after Erich left Vienna
(Vienna, 1939)

PREFACE TO BOOK FOUR

Some years ago, as I watched the evening news, I saw a number of American warships steaming through the haze of the Persian Gulf. This image instantly brought back memories of myself, almost 50 years earlier, standing on a ship in the same Gulf, looking through the haze at the indistinct coastline and wondering what life was like there. I was going to have enough time to find out, spending a good part of a year on the Trucial Coast of Arabia.

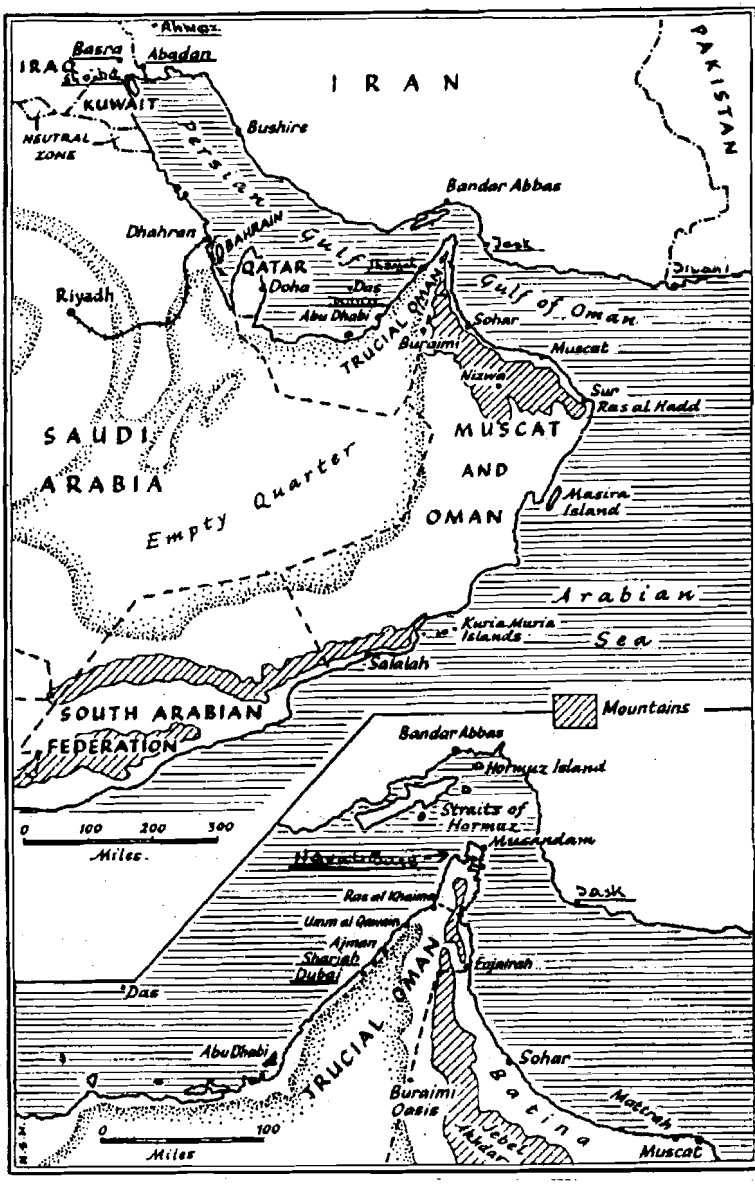
That was during the Second World War, when the Persian Gulf was a backwater in both military and historical terms, a very secondary theatre of operations compared to the limelight that it enjoyed during the Gulf War of the early 1990s. A half-century before, the region was one of the poorest and most backward in the Middle East. Villages were small and mean, and the few towns merely larger huddles of primitive structures, with no building over three stories tall and little or no electricity. Today it boasts some of the most modern airports in the world and more high-rise buildings than many a long developed country. In a few decades, oil has helped the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf bridge a gap of centuries in human and economic development.

Watching that scene on television made me think, "Why not write down in some detail how it was then? How a 22-year-old boy from Vienna, who grew up hiking in the Vienna Woods, discussing poetry and listening to Italian operas, felt among Arab pearl fishers and Bedouin slave traders, while doing his best to provide RAF pilots flying to India or Iraq with weather information."

The story in this book will move from the Persian Gulf to Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and will end in today's Israel. A later book will take the story further, from Israel to Canada, where I was invited to join the Secretariat of the International Civil Aviation Organization, a Specialized Agency of the United Nations in Montreal. But for now, I want to concentrate on the contrapuntal accompaniment to recent happenings in the Persian Gulf, Iran and other parts of the Middle East.

Throughout my stay in those parts, I tried to bring my Central European mentality into harmony with disparate ethnicities and their folkways: the British of the RAF, and the indigenous Arabs, Iranians, and Jews of the Middle Eastern countries. I succeeded, for the most part, probably because I endeavoured to learn as much as I could about the "otherness" of others and to accept this "otherness" without judgment. Above all, I sought to keep my Viennese sense of humour. The latter helped me a lot in making friends; people everywhere prefer a smile to a frown. My sense of humour also helped me keep up my morale, and it sometimes got me out of difficult situations. In fact, it once may even have saved my life.

The humour and generally relaxed attitude to life of the Viennese people are well known. After the First World War, people used to say that the situation in Germany was serious but not desperate, while in Austria it was desperate but never serious. This refusal to take things, including oneself, too seriously is in my view desirable. It is bound to help in getting through life, as it must have helped Emperor Maximillian of Austria endure life, death and the vicissitudes of the human journey.


Ahwaz
Basra
Abadan
IRAQ
Khorramshahr
KUWAIT
NEUTRAL ZONE
IRAN
PAKISTAN
Persian Gulf
Bushire
Bandar Abbas
Dhahran
BAHRAIN
QATAR
Doha
Dubai
Abu Dhabi
TRUCIAL OMAN
Jask
Qeshm
Riyadh
Gulf of Oman
Sohar
Buraimi
Muscat
Nizwa
Sur
Ras al Hadd
SAUDI ARABIA
Empty Quarter
MUSCAT AND OMAN
Masira Island
Arabian Sea
Kuria Muria Islands
Salalah
SOUTH ARABIAN FEDERATION
Mountains
Bandar Abbas
Hormuz Island
Straits of Hormuz
Musandam
Jask
Ras al Khaima
Umm al Qawain
Ajman
Sharjah
Dubai
Fujairah
Das
Abu Dhabi
TRUCIAL OMAN
Sohar
Buraimi Oasis
Batina
Jebel Akhdar
Matrah
Muscat
0 100 200 300
Miles
0 100
Miles

* * * * *

CHAPTER 21

"HOW on earth do you think we are going to get on land?" I asked John Fowler, who stood next to me on deck. We looked toward the shore, which was not too far away. But our ship could not approach any closer, and had anchored in its present spot since daybreak. Fowler remained his usual imperturbable self and, in reply to my question, merely took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed to a rowboat that was approaching our ship.

"Well, I'll be damned! Another type of vehicle to be added to those that brought us here from Egypt!" I thought for a moment and then enumerated them: "A train from Egypt to Palestine, a different type of train (small gauge) from Palestine to Damascus. A desert bus from Damascus to Baghdad. A plane from Baghdad to Basra, and a ship from Basra down the Persian Gulf to this place."

Now it seemed that the ship was not going to be the last type of conveyance to get us there. We climbed down the rope ladder towards the waiting rowboat, which was bobbing up and down in the water. I looked up and saw grinning faces at the railing. My former ship companions were obviously looking forward to seeing me miss the pitching rowing boat and fall into the drink. So, when I got to the end of the rope ladder, I waited for the boat to pitch up, closed my eyes and jumped.

To my surprise and to that of those above me, I made it, despite the gear that hung around my neck, festooning me like a Christmas tree. There was even some clapping from my grinning companions above, which was repeated when Fowler also landed safely.

Two dark-skinned Arabs rowed the boat toward shore. Each wore only a dirty white cloth that wrapped around his waist and reached his ankles, as well as a darker woven cloth, wrapped like a turban around his head. They also grinned — our only method of communication until I had picked up some of the local dialect. From the water, the shore appeared to be a flat and sandy beach with a few straggling, two-storey buildings. But before we reached shore, the water became too shallow for the boat to be rowed, so we took off our shoes and waded ashore. Our feet turned out to be our final mode of

conveyance, bringing us at last to the place that was to be "home" for some nine months.

The houses that dotted the shoreline appeared to be fairly crude and often dilapidated, made of mud brick or adobe, in Moorish styles with latticed verandas and arched windows. The scene looked like a slightly bleak parody of a picture from *A Thousand and One Nights*. The emptiness of the background — undulating sand hills — and the sultry heat from a sun that was only a white blob in the haze served to reinforce this impression.

This dismal scene reminded me of another scene, which was unpleasant in a different sense. It had taken place in a little room of the MET office in the RAF Station Habbaniyah, outside Baghdad. Squadron Leader Oddie, the chief of the office, had welcomed Fowler, myself and Jones, the third of the triumvirate of airmen who had set out from Cairo a few weeks earlier. All we had been told was that we had to report to Squadron Leader Oddie, who would inform us of our final destination.

Of course, we had spent much time speculating as to where we would be sent. It was autumn 1942, and we had already served as weather observers for two years in various places in Egypt and the Libyan Desert. Mostly, we had provided weather data for air operations, but also for artillery corrections during some of the heavy desert battles of the British 8th Army against General Rommel and his Africa Corps. When our transfer orders came through, we thought that our most likely destination was the Caucasus. Rumours had it that the Allies were about to increase their assistance to the Russians, who had their backs to the wall in Stalingrad, with German armies feeling their way towards the Caucasus. We therefore had taken with us all the warm clothing we could lay our hands on, particularly long johns, so as to cope with Russian winters! Interestingly enough, I was able to make good use of my long johns in the Persian Gulf, albeit for different purposes than those for which they were intended.

Squadron Leader Geoffrey (Geoff) Oddie, a pleasant and cheerful man in his middle thirties, sat behind his desk, with a big map of the Middle East behind him on the wall. "Well, I suppose you know where you are going, chaps," he said after we had told him about our journey from Cairo to Baghdad, and had handed over the tall mercury barometers we had been nursing on the long trip. To send them by air would have meant first emptying them and later refilling them labouriously under vacuum conditions, and then recalibrating them.

"No, Sir," said Jones, who acted as our spokesman. He was the oldest, a father of three from Liverpool, and old enough to have been our father as well. "We don't have a clue, to tell the truth," he added. Fowler and I shook our heads in vigorous agreement. "Oh, they didn't tell you in Cairo? Well, one of you is going to Bahrain, one to Sharjah and one to Jiwani."

We looked at each other in astonishment. Obviously not the Caucasus, but where on earth were those three places? Squadron Leader Oddie saw our astonishment and went to the wall map to show us where they were. "Bahrain is an island close to the Arabian mainland in the western part of the Persian Gulf. Sharjah is the major settlement of a sheikhdom of the same name on the eastern end of the Gulf. Jiwani is a village on the Indian (now Pakistani) coast of the Arabian Sea, close to the Iranian frontier. Each place has an RAF aerodrome used as a staging post for ferrying aircraft to India. Staff from India provide meteorological services at those aerodromes, and you will be serving as sort of liaison officers with these Indians to ensure that RAF aircraft receive adequate service. There have been a number of accidents due to weather, mostly aircraft crashing on landing during fog, that could have been avoided if timely warnings had been sent to the pilots."

Well, that told us where these places were and what we were going there for, but not what they were like. Were they large or small stations? Did they have towns nearby? What was the climate like? We pressed Squadron Leader Oddie for some further details.

"Bahrain airport is the only one of the three I have been to. It lies close to a sizeable town. Although the weather is hot and humid a good part of the year, as it is throughout the Persian Gulf, living conditions are not too bad. There are oil installations on the island and the oil people have imported many amenities, including something they call 'air conditioning' that supposedly cools you off. Sharjah is in the middle of nowhere, lots of sand and not much of a town. From what I hear, it's not a very pleasant place, I'm afraid. And about Jiwani, which is actually located in the Indian Command, I know absolutely nothing."

We looked at each other with obvious consternation. Then Jones spoke up again. "Could you tell us, Sir, – ah –-, which of us is going to – ah – which place?" "Well, it doesn't really matter to me. Can't you agree amongst yourself?"

From our perplexed looks, Squadron Leader Oddie realized that this was not a good way of going about things, so he suggested that

we draw lots. Oddie dropped three pieces of paper, each bearing the name of one of the places, into his officer's hat. Jones, as the oldest, had the first draw. He promptly drew Bahrain, the "good" place for himself. I then drew Sharjah, the lousy one, which left Jiwani for Fowler. That the method by which I had drawn Sharjah was democratic did little to alleviate my immediate disappointment. But as there was nothing I could do about it and as, for all we knew, Jiwani might turn out to be even worse (which in certain respects indeed it was), I soon regained my equilibrium.

We were told to be ready early next morning to fly to Basra, the Iraqi port and gateway to the Persian Gulf, and to wait at the RAF Station there for further transportation to our respective destinations. This gave us a chance to see a little bit of Habbaniyah, the oldest and largest RAF Station in Iraq, dating back to shortly after the First World War. It had become a sprawling, tree-lined camp with all the amenities of a home away from home in the middle of a desert. There were golf, polo and tennis facilities, although mostly for officers only. For other ranks there was of course the NAAFI.

And it was at the NAAFI in the evening that I left my two friends at their beer and dominoes to chat with a fellow "Palestinian" that I had met in the MET office. Werner Levi invited me to a game of chess, which he won hands down. I always found chess a bit too cerebral for me — I am more the instinctive type, I think. But it was pleasant enough to talk again to a person with a similar background. Werner came from Berlin and I from Vienna. It did seem a bit strange, though, to be speaking German in an RAF NAAFI in Iraq.

Werner praised Squadron Leader Oddie as fair and well-meaning, and commiserated with me about my lousy posting to Sharjah. But there could have been a hint of wistfulness in that commiseration, because, on the whole, life in Habbaniyah seemed to be pretty boring. The supposed marvels of nearby Baghdad (which, from what I heard from others, were highly overrated, including the brothels) did not alleviate the boredom. Werner and I were to meet again after the war in the Palestine (and later Israel) Meteorological Service. As I mentioned earlier, Squadron Leader Oddie was to be my colleague when I joined ICAO some years later.

The next morning we rose early to catch our flight to Basra. We had slept in a sort of transit camp in the RAF Station, which consisted of tents on one side of the aerodrome, surrounded by undulating, shadeless desert. By early morning, the air was already hot and very dry. Just one water tap was available for all of us, standing out in the

open. I lathered my face for the obligatory morning shave, then put a new blade into my razor, which took a minute or so. When I put the razor to my face and looked into the pocket mirror propped up on the tap, I saw that the desert wind had wiped every trace of lather from my face!

In Basra, we were taken to the RAF Station, where we stayed for several weeks waiting for a boat to take us down the Gulf. In the meantime, we were attached to the MET office, which was glad to get reinforcements for their observing and chart-plotting roster. The office was located in the terminal building of the combined civilian and military airport, just under the control tower with which it was connected by a pneumatic tube for messages. The tube was the first of its kind we had seen and we played around with it a lot, amused by the "whooosh" and "plop" with which the messages landed in the receiving basket. The only other remarkable thing I remember about this office was one of the forecasters, a bald, middle-aged Flight Lieutenant, whose daily recreation consisted of putting on his tropical helmet and walking for a half hour or so around the large plotting table in the middle of the circular forecast room. I don't know whether this is what the Middle East did to him or whether he simply found it cooler to take his "constitutional" indoors under a ceiling fan than outdoors in the midday heat. It probably was a bit of both.

Our living quarters were in an unused hangar close to the Shatt-el-Arab, the majestic confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. I loved to walk in the early evening hours along the banks of this broad waterway, where palm trees waved in the welcome evening breeze over the tow path that straggled along the bank. Herons waited patiently to catch their dinner not far from oil barges and fishing boats that moved up and down the river. When the sun set, the desert haze above the palm trees lining the opposite river bank turned a delicate pink, while the higher layers of the sky varied from powder blue to aquamarine.

The only other airman who sometimes shared my evening walk was André, whose bed stood next to mine in our bedroom hangar housing some 100 or so airmen. Andre's English was much worse than mine. He was half-French and had been brought up in France; but as his father was English, he had been inducted into the RAF rather than the Free French Forces, for which he pined. His dislike of the RAF probably made his English even worse than it really was and, as a result, he consequently suffered the consequences of numerous mistakes in his work, violations of dress code, etc. When it came to

the weekly "kit inspection," I had to lay out his kit for him because he could never learn where the shoes went, how the tunic had to be folded and put on the bed, and all the other silly requirements. My help still didn't save him from punishment though, because much of his kit was often missing. I loved his gallic exclamations, from *poof* to *merde*, and his irreverent cursing of the RAF and its officers (particularly warrant officers, the RAF's version of sergeant majors) in his funny half-English and half-French. I wonder whether he ever got transferred to the Free French Forces and, if so, whether he was happier there. He seemed to be the eternal misfit.

Basra offered me a chance to see a little of Iraq and to meet local people. There were a few civilians working in the MET office, including Armenians, Jews, and Assyrians. I was surprised that Assyrians still existed — interestingly enough, they were all Christians. The Jews were all Sephardic, whose ancestors had probably lived there since the destruction of King Solomon's Temple and the exile in Babylonia. They were small, dark men, speaking a guttural Hebrew that I found difficult to understand. They, in turn couldn't understand too much of my German-accented Hebrew. I was fascinated to encounter what were probably much "purer" Jews than I was, and they were thrilled to meet a "Palestinian" airman. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to visit the homes of civilians, but I did accept an invitation to come and speak about Palestine at their "club."

When the day came, they provided transportation into town, but I saw very little during that part of the trip, because their club was located in a part of the town that was "out of bounds" for us. To avoid being seen, I lay hidden under a tarpaulin in the back of their pick-up truck. Some 30-40 members (all male of course) attended the meeting. Tea and sticky sweet cookies were served. I don't remember much about my talk or of what happened immediately afterwards.

I do, however, remember walking back alone through the dark and deserted streets of Basra, anxiously looking over my shoulder to see whether military police, muggers or assassins were following me. But the streets remained deserted. The only sounds I heard were my footsteps echoing through a scene that looked like a picture from Harun al Raschid's times. Houses with crenellated roofs, latticed windows and balconies with Moorish vaultings, overlooked canals and small arched bridges. Lanes opened into tiny, still squares lit by cast-iron oil lamps mounted on house corners. The silent and moonlit landscape, with its air of mystery and menace, had a haunting beauty

that remained with me when — I don't know how — I got back to camp and forever afterwards. How sad to think that this lovely old city was bombarded during the Iran-Iraq war some 50 years later.

A few days later, we left Basra on the *S.S. Tinombo*, an old boat of some 2000 tons plying the route from Basra to Karachi. We stood on deck as we slid down the Shatt-el-Arab, passing by the big oil installations at Abadan, where oil tankers were loading in the harbour. The river was covered with patches of oil that glistened in the hazy sun with rainbow colours, and the air stank of petrol.

"I'm surprised you haven't blown us all up by lighting your bloody pipe!" I said jokingly to Fowler, who continued to puff away contentedly. I was still a cigarette smoker then. That weed dominated most of us at that time. Indeed, its availability or absence affected our moods more than the quality or quantity of food, which often was extremely poor. But private enterprise is a big helper. I remember the old Arab sitting at the entrance to our cookhouse in Basra selling duck's eggs, which the cooks afterwards fried for us, together with the bit of fried bread or fish rissole, which would otherwise have been our only breakfast.

The *S.S. Tinombo* was not a happy ship, at least as far as we were concerned. Apart from us, and a few other passengers, it carried a large load of bombs for RAF aircraft in India. That cargo, together with the many sharks that we saw in the water, was a guaranteed mood-dampener. Also, despite the heat and humidity, we were not allowed on deck, except in port. All in all, an unpleasant 4-5 days, relieved only by a few hours in the port of Bahrain. We said good-bye to Jones and, leaning at the railing, looked enviously as he walked down the gangplank (no rope ladder there) to "pleasant" Bahrain, of which we saw only oil refinery installations looming in the distance.

OOOOOOO

CHAPTER 22

SHARJAH lies on the Trucial Coast, which is the name for the stretch of the southern Persian Gulf coastline that extends from about Bahrain to the entrance of the Gulf at the Strait of Hormuz. Except for the mountainous peninsula at the end of the Coast, which forms the Horn of Arabia and stretches into, and thereby creates the Strait, it is a flat or slightly undulating sandy waste, an extension of the great Arabian Desert. The Coast is indented by many inlets and creeks, with a great multitude of sandbars, lagoons and coral islands.

Generally speaking, very little rain falls on the area. For at least six months each year, the Coast has one of the worst climates of the world. This is true particularly in the summer (July - September), when the sweltering heat often reaches 40-45 degrees Celsius, accompanied by very high humidity. The other six months, the climate is quite pleasant, except for blinding sandstorms from the interior that sometimes blanket the Coast.

Other names for the Coast are Trucial Oman, after one of the sheikdoms, and, during the 19th Century, the Pirate Coast. Coastal Arabs mixed with Persians and Beluchis from across the Gulf inhabit the area. They differ significantly from the Bedouin tribes inland. The aridity of the area prevents this small population from farming, except in a few inland oases and in some of the mountain valleys of the peninsula. The sea, therefore, offers the only real livelihood. Where the sandbars permit it, small harbours shelter fleets of seagoing *dhows*, which are large sailboats still used for fishing and pearling (often with auxiliary engine). In days gone by, the *dhows* also carried the slave traffic with East Africa. In fact, Zanzibar was under Persian Gulf control for quite some time and, as a result, brought about a considerable admixture of African racial strains among the population. When I came to Sharjah in 1942, sheiks and other notables still kept slaves. I was shown several and even talked to a couple. But more about that later.

Piracy was another form of seafaring livelihood, and was fostered by the division of the Coast into several independent

sheikdoms and emirates, including Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Dubai, Sharjah and others. These political subdivisions often found themselves at war amongst each other and made common cause only against infidels such as the Dutch and Portuguese, who tried at various times to dominate the area. The Europeans were invariably driven out, although I sometimes wonder whether they really tried hard to hang on, in view of the awful climate and the poverty. Portuguese forts or ruins thereof can still be seen. Indeed, I heard that in some of the local inter-tribal wars, old Portuguese canons were used not long before I came there.

During the first half of the 19th Century, Persian Gulf piracy and slave trading became too big a nuisance. A powerful British naval force from India imposed a General Treaty of Peace on the Sheikdoms, which became the foundation of, and reason for, the name of the Trucial Coast. But this treaty applied only to the sea, and land wars continued in the area. Britain was also worried about possible rivalries from France or Russia and, in 1892, signed treaties with each sheikh and emir, making Britain the only foreign power in the region and giving Britain responsibility for the foreign policy of the local rulers. A British Resident, responsible to the Government of India, looked after British interests in the Gulf. However, this did not prevent the local rulers from continuing little inter-tribal wars, some of which went on even while I was there. Nor did they bring about a general emancipation of slaves, although those slaves who appealed to the Resident had to be freed.

It was dark when a lorry brought us to the RAF Station. In the light of flickering oil lamps, the wicker huts looked more like a gypsy camp than an air force station. Beds were primitive *charpoys*, an Indian word for a wooden frame with loosely interlaced webbing, over which a couple of blankets are spread. After the discomfort and heat of S.S. Tinombo, this was quite bearable, even if the temperature was not much lower. Of course, there was no air conditioning. Before going to sleep, we went to the dining hall, a larger wicker hut with rows of benches and trestle tables, dimly lit by dangling oil lamps that illuminated some late diners huddled over their meals. They wore ragged shorts, were often shirtless and some wore coloured neckerchiefs around their throats — altogether quite appropriate for the Pirate Coast, I thought.

Our impression of RAF Station Sharjah the next morning was not much more favourable. The collection of wicker huts was surrounded by bleak, rolling desert. Three palm trees on a hillock

nearby provided the only greenery. But two crosses next to them offset their cheering impression, indicating the last resting-places of airmen who had succumbed to the heat and the dreariness of the place. Even silent Fowler was moved to remark, "Not much of a place, Schwarzy-boy. Hope you won't go round the bend here and join those two poor bastards." I thanked him for his solicitude and expressed the hope that Jiwani would turn out to be even worse.

After breakfast, we went to check in at the orderly room. Fowler was told that an aircraft to Jiwani was due that afternoon and that he should be prepared to leave with it. My presence caused a bit of head scratching, because they couldn't figure out how I fitted into the hierarchy of things at the Station. Every airman normally belongs to a unit that has an officer in command. But as the only "MET" man, they didn't know where to place me. Eventually, they decided that for disciplinary purposes I would be attached to the Station Adjutant's Office.

Flight Lieutenant Stanley, a young ex-pilot with a bristling moustache, received me in his adjutant's office and told me that they had been looking forward to my arrival. "As you probably know," he said, "three Blenheim aircraft on their way to India recently crashed here in early morning fog. You'd better bloody well see to it that in the future we get adequate fog warnings!"

"Yes Sir, I'll do my best. But as you know, it will depend on the Basra MET people to send me the forecasts, and on good wireless communications with Basra."

"Well, that's your business to organize. That's why they sent you here. The Indian MET chaps here don't have much of a clue. The forecasts they get from India are piss-poor and often late." After some further observations about the unreliability of anyone who had not been born and nurtured under northern skies, he dismissed me with a wave of his fly swatter. Fortunately, his attitudes toward "foreigners" were not typical of other officers, as I found out pretty soon.

I asked the orderly room clerk where the MET Office was located. "Oh, they're in the Fort, the lucky blighters," he replied. He took me outside and pointed to a structure about a kilometre away, separated from the camp by the end of the runways. As I walked across the desert towards the building, I saw that it was indeed built like a desert fortress out of "Beau Geste" or some such Foreign Legion film — crenellated battlements, a large ironclad gate with a heavy bar to close it against marauding Beduins, and a watch tower. The tower, it turned out, was used not only to watch for approaching

enemies but also for the more modern function of controlling the landing and take-off of aircraft.

Despite its forbidding and antique appearance, the Fort was not really an old structure. In fact, it was built in the 1930's by the Imperial Airways (now British Airways) to serve as an operations centre and hotel for passengers and crews whose aircraft had to stop at Sharjah overnight on the way to and from India. Its form took account of the general lawlessness that prevailed in the area, and was intended to dissuade Bedouins from attempting a plunder raid on the "rich" travellers. The Fort met these objectives admirably, and even protected its occupants from local wars that took place from time to time in the area. Not long before my arrival, a skirmish had taken place in a perennial war between Sharjah and neighbouring Dubai, with the combatants firing old front loading rifles at each other across the runways. Whenever an Imperial Airways aircraft was due to land, the Station Manager would drive his little Morris onto the runways, and display a large white flag. The shooting would then stop until the plane had landed and its occupants had reached the safety of the Fort!

The Fort was guarded by a small but wiry Arab, whose thin face nearly vanished under a big headcloth, wound turban style around his head, and ended in a straggling grey goatee. He wore a long brown robe girded with a sash, in which stuck a curved dagger, the handle and sheath of which were inlaid with crude silver filigree. As I later learned, this local filigree work, which could be quite intricate, was made of melted-down Austrian Maria Theresa Thalers, the currency in general use at that time in the interior. These were not the original 18th Century coins but modern re-casts by the Austrian mint, which made a tidy profit on these transactions. On the coast, Indian silver rupees were used, and that was also the currency in which we were paid.

I was to see this guard nearly daily and we even became involved in a little business deal. But that first day, he salaamed me by placing his right hand on his mouth, forehead and heart. This Bedouin gesture meant that, as a sign of respect, he kissed the sand on which I stood and brought it to his head and heart. I returned his greeting with a salute. According to RAF regulations, he wasn't really entitled to it. But this was one of the many cases of West meeting East that I had to face, and which clearly required some improvisation.

The guard opened the creaking gate and I entered the courtyard of the Fort, in the middle of which grew some straggling bushes that were being nibbled by what appeared to be a desert dwarf gazelle of

a species that by now is nearly extinct. This one was very delicate looking, not more than 3 feet high, and quite tame. It would nuzzle one for gifts of food, and had a special preference for cigarettes, which it munched contentedly — paper and all — and also strangely enough for raw onions. I confess that I found the effects of the soulful look of its liquid, dark eyes somewhat impaired when its breath smelled of a mixture of cigarettes and onions!

Doors and windows of the rooms and offices gave onto the courtyard. To reach a second storey, one had to climb stairs without a banister. That second storey was really only the flat roof with the crenellated battlements, but there was a sort of hut built against a portion of those battlements and that was the Indian MET office. Its location certainly afforded a magnificent view of the desert and the surrounding weather.

The chief observer, a tall, ascetic-looking Hindu, welcomed me with a few courteous English phrases. He was not very communicative and I guessed that he was suspicious of me. He probably thought that my arrival would decrease his importance as supplier of information to the RAF and Imperial Airways. I did my best to reassure him that I had come to co-operate with him and that together we would be able to provide better service than had been possible before. He always remained rather distant, but he never attempted to hinder me in my work.

I had better luck with his number two man, a jolly little Moslem from Peshawar in today's Pakistan, with a dark, monkey-like face from which crooked teeth protruded whenever he grinned, which was most of the time. He immediately appointed himself as my guide and cicerone and in many cases his advice proved very useful indeed.

As it was midday, they invited me to share their lunch. I gratefully accepted, as I did not feel like traipsing back to the camp across the hot desert under the midday sun. We sat cross-legged on the roof in front of the office, and an Arab servant brought brass bowls with curried rice, *chappatties* and *ghee* (flat breads and clarified butter of buffalo milk). We ate with our hands. When I took the first swallow of curry, I let out a yelp because I had never eaten Indian curry and thought my throat was on fire. I looked frantically around for water but No.2 grinned and said, "No, water would make it worse, *sahib*. Just wait a while, it will go away. Or eat a little *chappattie* with *ghee*." It did become better, but I never really befriended spicy curry or, for that matter, *ghee*, which had a faintly rancid taste. But I did like the watermelons and other local fruits,

which their Arab servant obtained for them at the local market. They were delicacies never seen in the camp's kitchen.

Walking back to the camp, I mulled over how best to organize my duties. Twice daily, I was to receive forecasts in cipher, via RAF "signals," covering the routes from Sharjah to Basra, and from Sharjah to Karachi. (All weather information was sent in cipher so as not to provide the enemy — in this case German or Japanese submarines — with useful data.) I was to decipher the forecasts and then use them for briefing aircrews flying from Sharjah towards either of those places, or to places in between such as Bahrain, Jiwani, or just locally for anti-submarine patrols, etc. I would also receive warnings of fog, sandstorms and other dangerous phenomena if they weren't already covered by the forecasts. For my part, I was to ensure that the local observations were carried out properly and regularly by the Indian MET people and punctually transmitted to Basra.

It did not take me long to agree with the advice of No.2 that I would only be able to fulfill my duties efficiently if I lived in the Fort. Continuous close contact with the Indian MET Office, as well as the need to brief aircrews who usually stayed overnight in the Fort and often left very early in the morning, seemed to make this essential. That it would also be very convenient and would make my life much more comfortable was an added plus. But my convenience and comfort were not things that would necessarily impress the Adjutant very much when I put the case to him, perhaps the contrary.

So, when I went to see him later that day, I concentrated on the aspects that made it essential for my "office" to be located in the Fort. He scratched his head. "Well, I suppose it could be arranged, but I couldn't do this on my own. You'd have to get me a letter or a signal from the Senior MET chap in Basra or Habbaniya that it was essential. I suppose the C.O. would then agree to requisition a room for you from the Airways people in charge of the Fort."

I ran rather than walked to the Signals Office and sent a message to Squadron Leader Oddie in Habbaniya, outlining the problem. The next morning I was called to the Adjutant's office. I was informed that, in response to a signal from Habbaniya, a room had been requisitioned for me in the Fort, which I could use as combined office and living quarters. I would still have to mess in the RAF Station, though.

A lorry later took my gear and me to the Fort, where I was shown to my room. It was the standard room given to overnight guests, rather small and narrow, with just enough space for a table and

chair against the left wall, a curtained clothes hanger against the right wall and a mosquito-net covered bed taking up all of the narrow back wall. There was no window, and light and air came through the screened door. But most important of all, there was electric light and a fan! Although both were to prove somewhat erratic as they depended on the Fort's temperamental generator, this was luxury indeed compared to the RAF camp.

I had to think of what Fowler said when I told him before his departure of my hope to move into the Fort. "Schwarzy-boy, you are craftier than I thought. I just hope there will be a similar opportunity for me in Jiwani!"

It didn't take me long to settle in. The only problem was where to keep my cipher books, which I had brought from Basra for deciphering the forecasts that were to be sent to me from there. Eventually, I decided that the safest place was under the mattress. I was to sleep soundly on them for the next nine months, where the room in the Fort was my home and office, the base from which I set out to explore Sharjah and the Pirate Coast.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 23

WHEN I went to announce to the Indian MET people that I had settled into my room in the Fort,I found them going out to conduct a weather observation, which they did every three hours. Normally this is a one-man operation, the weather observer going out to have a look at wind, clouds, weather (rain, snow, etc.), visibility. After reading the thermometers, hygrometers and assorted other "meters" in the instrument enclosure, the observer measures accumulated rainfall or snow, if any, and returns to his office with a few scribbles on a piece of paper. He then copies these notes, together with the barometer reading taken in the office, into his observation book (or nowadays into his computer). It is a bit like a stroll though a "weather garden."

Our Indian friends had transformed this stroll into a highly stylised ceremony. First came the chief observer, holding a big black umbrella over his head to shield it from the desert sun, a little reminiscent of those red and gold umbrellas held over the head of his maharajah ancestors. Then came No. 2, holding the observation book in both hands as if it were a precious incunabulum. Last in the procession came a little Arab servant boy, who held the key to the instrument enclosure and tried to keep up with the strides of the first two.

Once in the instrument enclosure, the chief observer called out in a nasal voice, "Four tenth cumulus clouds," which No. 2 repeated with tongue clenched between protruding teeth as he labouriously wrote it into the observation book. And so it would go on, right down to the dutiful peek into the rain gauge, followed by, "No accumulated rain or snow during last 12 hours." (It would have taken a major miracle for snow to have fallen there).

A little later, I witnessed an even grander procession and performance. As they did twice daily, the Indians carried out the standard measurement of winds aloft by releasing a hydrogen-filled balloon and tracking its path by means of a theodolite. This requires a reading of the balloon's position every minute as it rises at a constant speed, the differences between the positions being the result

of the wind acting on the balloon. As mentioned in Chapter 19, I had frequently carried out this kind of measurement alone, although I welcomed the help of a second person in releasing the balloon and transcribing the readings I would call out. The Indians, however, managed to involve four people in the process. In addition to the chief observer, No. 2 and the little Arab boy, there was the "balloon-maker," a small but sinewy Arab with a long drooping moustache, who held a large, red balloon that danced in the breeze. There was no lack of manpower, apparently.

To take theodolite readings of the balloon's position every minute obviously requires a watch, preferably a stopwatch. After the balloon-maker released the balloon, which rose quickly and was soon a mere red speck in the sky, the chief observer followed the balloon with his eye glued to the eyepiece of the theodolite. My attention, however, was drawn to No. 2, who stood next to the chief observer, making rhythmic arm movements and mumbling something. When I went nearer, I found that he was counting out loud, "21, 22, 23, ..." accompanying each number with an up/down movement of his arm and snapping his fingers to help keep rhythm. I soon understood that the counting took the place of a stopwatch, which had broken long before and had not been replaced. While I doubted the accuracy of the resulting wind computations, I had to admire the Indians for soldiering on regardless.

The balloon-maker, whose name was Ahmed, was a quiet and shy man. I didn't see much of him between his duties of making hydrogen gas for the balloons, filling balloons and carrying them in the daily processions to the point of release near the theodolite. To make the hydrogen, Ahmed poured certain ingredients into large steel bottles hung on a wooden rack and then swung them to and fro to accelerate the reaction. All of this took place on the flat roof of the Fort. Sometimes, I saw him squatting near the hydrogen shed smoking a water pipe, which was clearly not the safest place for the purpose. When I mentioned this to the Indians, they merely shrugged their shoulders in a fatalistic manner. "When Brahma (or Allah) wants to call you away, he will do so, hydrogen or no hydrogen." I replied that, while I could understand this, I wouldn't like to be called away too if Brahma only wanted Ahmed, but this did not seem to register!

One day, I saw No. 2 carrying out Ahmed's duties. I suspected the worst, even though I hadn't heard an explosion. The explanation I got from No. 2 was nearly as bad — Bedouins had kidnapped

Ahmed's wife. She had been on her way to the village well, which was in a little oasis, quite a way from the village. I often saw women on their way to the well, driving donkeys laden with large earthenware water jugs. Not that I saw much of the women themselves. Long black shawls covered them from head to ankles; long, black tight-fitting trousers peeped out below that. If that wasn't enough, they wore black face masks of bone or wood, which made them look like spooks. The Bedouins most likely carried her off because of her value as a worker, not because of the beauty of her appearance. I was told that the Bedouins captured such women quite frequently and then sold them in Omani villages across the mountains.

We took up a collection for Ahmed as he prepared to set off in quest of his wife. When he came to say good-bye, his moustache seemed to droop even more than before. I asked how he would find his wife and was told that he would go from village to village until he picked up a rumour that would lead him to her. Then he would bargain with her "owner" to buy her back, for which he would use the results of our collection and some savings of his own.

I knew few words in the local Arabic dialect, which limited my ability to converse with Ahmed and other locals. But I soon picked up enough words for rudimentary conversations. Most of us serving in the Army and the RAF in the Middle East learned some basic Arabic, typically from the servants who kept the barracks clean, polished the buttons, shined the shoes and brought the early morning *chai* (tea). At best, it was a sort of "kitchen" Arabic, similar to the kitchen Latin spoken by Gallic soldiers in Roman France, from which French later developed. At worst, it was a few shouted words or phrases to obtain service or goods. Due to some similarities between Hebrew and Arabic, I was able to do better than most of my fellow airmen. For example, "water" translates as *mayim* (Hebrew) and as *moya* (Arabic). "One" is *Akhat* in Hebrew and *Wakhat* in Arabic. "Five is *Khamesh* in Hebrew and *Khamsa* in Arabic.

My "teacher" of local Arabic was Joseph, a boy of 12 or 13, whom I had hired to keep my office/room clean and to carry out other domestic chores. He was an amusing lad of mixed Persian/Arab descent, worldly-wise and full of tales from the bazaars of the village. Joseph, whose name was actually Iussuf, would point at things and tell me their names until I remembered them. I also tried to remember some useful phrases. Many of these differed from their Egyptian versions that I had learned in Cairo, at least in pronunciation. In the beginning, Joseph couldn't stop laughing at my errors.

No less an exalted personality than one of the Sheikh's sons, Sayed, had obtained Joseph's services for me. He was a young man of 20 or so, studious looking, who wore black and white headgear against his flowing white robe, A curved dagger with silver filigree completed the costume. His horn-rimmed glasses somehow seemed out of place with the rest of his attire. He looked even more incongruous when he measured barometric pressure in these clothes, peering short-sightedly at the mercury column. After Sayed had completed high school in India (the cultural and economic focus of most educated Arabs in the Gulf at that time), his father had sent him to the Indian MET Office in Sharjah to learn some meteorology. Not that he learned much; his father would have done better to send him back to an Indian university. As late as 1971, when the Trucial Coast federated and became the United Arab Emirates, there were hardly more that 40 locals with university degrees on the whole coast!

Sayed and I became quite friendly. He was one of the few locals who noticed that I was not British and who showed an interest in world affairs. We had long talks about politics and the future of the Middle East, and were even able to discuss the Palestine problem. He assumed that the Gulf would remain in the hands of the British Empire for a long time. Neither of us could guess what would happen soon after the war as a consequence of the huge oil discoveries in the region and the withdrawal of the British.

In the meantime, a "Pax Britannica" hovered over the region, which the war — paradoxically enough — greatly strengthened. The presence of the many thousands of troops in the Middle East prevented or steamrollered any local nationalistic uprisings, from India to Iraq, Palestine and Egypt. This "Pax Britannica" permitted the lion and the lamb to walk peacefully side by side. It permitted me later to visit Sayed and to be accepted in Palestinian circles where, within a few years, I would have been made into mincemeat.

Sayed even invited me to his wedding. This gave me a rare opportunity to venture into Sharjah, which was normally out-of-bounds to us. Unfortunately, I did not get into Sayed's "palace," which was a larger building of the same yellow-brown mudbrick or clay construction as the surrounding primitive dwellings of his father's subjects. But the palace had a crenellated flat roof, with an old Portuguese cannon on each corner. The festivities took place outside, under a colourful tent in which refreshments were served. There was a lot of dancing, but the dancers were all men. Indeed, there was not

one woman to be seen — they were probably all gazing at us through the latticed windows of the palace.

I sat next to Sayed in a circle of men surrounding the dancers, whose gyrations sent their robes flying and who held curved daggers in their upraised arms. Sayed motioned to a black man carrying a coffeepot with a long spout. The man came over and filled small cups for us with the fragrant coffee spiced with cardamom. Sayed explained, "This is my personal slave." As Sayed's English was not free of mistakes, I said, "You mean your servant, no?" Sayed seemed a bit nettled that I had not believed him and insisted, "No, my slave. He belongs to me. I can sell him, even kill him. Come here, Machmud!" The slave turned back and, when Sayed told him to kneel down and salaam in front of us, he did it cheerfully, without spilling a drop from his coffeepot. He looked quite happy despite his slave status. A broad grin shone all around his shiny, well-nourished, black face.

When I mentioned to Sayed that I wanted to hire a boy to help me with domestic chores, he got me Joseph. Joseph not only kept my office clean, he even brought me early morning tea from the Imperial Airways kitchen where he had friends, and bought peanuts and other little goodies for me in the market. It seems there were many immigrants like him from the Northern Gulf shore, the Persian side of the Gulf. The Persian side was even poorer, wilder and more lawless than ours, as I was eventually to see with my own eyes. The Persian Shiites found greater economic possibilities in the Arab harbours and bazaars, just as today their descendants form the majority of oil exploration workers.

Quite a bit of smuggling also went on. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the Persian side supplied carpets, among other things. When I told Joseph that I might be interested in buying a small carpet, he got me one measuring about 1 1/2 by 2 metres for the equivalent of one pound! It was a so-called "village" carpet, woven in one of the villages of South Iran, with irregular patterns of sheep and flowers. Although it was not a top quality carpet, it graced my room in Sharjah and still graces my home today, after having been carried all over the Middle East in a kitbag. Once, when an RAF policeman searched my baggage in Cairo airport, I escaped paying duty by exclaiming indignantly, "But this is my prayer carpet!" The policeman obviously wasn't too clear about the differences between Moslem and Jewish religious customs and desisted from his demand.

Joseph's stories, as far as I could understand them, were graphic and colourful. He was not only worldly-wise but, like most of kids

from the bazaar, knowledgeable about the seamier sides of life. He once mentioned something about visiting local prostitutes. This made me prick up my ears, not because I would have been able to follow his example, out-of-bound regulations being what they were, but because of the intrinsic interest of the subject in our all-male society. I asked him whether he wasn't afraid of catching a disease from these women, but he gave a superior sort of smirk and said, no, there was an unfailing method for telling which women had a disease and which not. "You see, Khauaga, you just need to lie down next to a sleeping woman and touch her "there." If she murmurs contentedly, then she is all right. Otherwise, she would shrink back in discomfort." I cannot vouch for this method outside bazaar circumstances, and am not sure whether it was that unfailing there too!

To round off this account of some local characters, let me return to the colourful goateed warrior who guarded the gates of the Fort. Whenever I passed, we would chat a bit about the heat and the lack of rain. One day, he furtively drew from his robe a little box in which lay a large, pinkish, irregularly shaped pearl. "Want to buy lovely *loulou*?"* he asked. I was tempted, because the pearl was very pretty and would have made a marvellous centerpiece for a ring. "How much?" I answered. The figure he quoted (in rupees) was much more than I wanted to spend, and most likely more than the pearl was worth. To my offer of a quarter of his asking price, he smilingly shook his head and hid the box again under his robe. We repeated this performance nearly daily. He lowered his price a little from time to time; I raised mine a bit as well. He obviously enjoyed this performance considerably.

To cut a long story short, I did buy it in the end, shortly before leaving Sharjah, at a fraction of his original asking price. I lovingly wrapped it in cottonwool and put it into an empty matchbox. The matchbox went into my kitbag, together with the carpet, a brass coffeepot and other souvenirs. One day, several months later, I was sorting out the contents of my kitbags and came upon a matchbox. I shook it and, as it sounded empty, threw it away. A few days later, it dawned on me what I had thrown away with the matchbox. I could have kicked myself!

Perhaps I was not meant to enjoy that pearl, given that the guard had almost certainly obtained it by illegal means. Pearl fishing was

* Pearl.

the only real "industry" in the Persian Gulf (apart from piracy, slave trading and smuggling) before the advent of oil. But pearl fishing was a monopoly of the local Sheikh. He would hire several dozen divers to go out on large dhows and stay there throughout the pearling season, giving up all pearls they found to their supervisors. The divers would be searched before going back home, but I suppose most of them managed to secrete some pearls on their persons.

I was told that the "legal" pearls were sent to India by mail in jam jars, to have holes bored for threading. When I asked whether it was safe to send such valuable pearls through the mails without adequate safeguards, I was told that prior to being bored they were not all that valuable. The boring operation sometimes revealed flaws which caused the pearls to disintegrate.

13. Erich (on left) going down steps of Haifa's Technion (Technical University) (Haifa. Palestine. 1939)

CHAPTER 24

IN the meantime, my daily routine had become well established. Early in the morning, a runner brought me the daily forecast from the Signals Office. After deciphering it, I wrote it down on pre-printed sheets.* If there were pilots taking off early in the morning for distant locations, I briefed them in the briefing room. Otherwise, I first had my breakfast in my room and then ambled over to the briefing room to provide the forecast for local fliers. The squadron of Blenheim light bombers stationed in Sharjah was responsible for anti-submarine patrols in the eastern portion of the Persian Gulf and in the Gulf of Oman on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz. If the weather in Sharjah did not seem to match the forecast received, I sent a signal to Basra to get an amended forecast. Later, I visited the Indian MET Office, compared my forecast with the one they got from India and kept track of the quality and timeliness of their weather observations. Sometimes I participated in the preparation of these observations to "keep my hand in." I repeated the same routine with the afternoon forecast.

I kept my visits to the RAF Station to a minimum. Most days, I went there only to eat lunch and dinner, unless I was invited to eat with the Indians, which I always welcomed, as the food in the RAF mess was pretty uninspiring. The mess offered little if any fresh produce. The milk was thin and bluish and tasted fishy because the local cows were fed dried fish.

Occasionally, I visited the orderly room on administrative errands, such as drawing my pay in beautiful new silver rupees. Or I would have a drink and a chat in the NAAFI. I slowly became friendly with a few chaps, but there were not many with whom I had much in common, due to large differences in our interests and backgrounds.

---

* Later in my stay, after some experimentation, I even transformed the daily forecast into a type of pictorial cross-section showing clouds and weather in their proper geographical locations along the Sharjah-Basra, and Sharjah-Karachi routes. A similar method was later developed and used for many years internationally.

Sitting in the cacophonous dining hall or the NAAFI, I could easily pick out the few educated voices, and it was usually their owners who became my friends. This was not snobbishness on my part — I always got on very well with the non-educated chaps — but friendship and conversation are obviously more rewarding among people with similar interests and backgrounds. Occasionally, I entertained my friends in my room, where we had little parties in the evening, with drinks (highly illegal of course), peanuts and talk or cards. For them, this was luxury compared to the primitive NAAFI and the even more primitive barracks.

Some of us tried to enliven the dull camp life with amateur theatricals. I even tried my hand at writing a short play, but am glad that it was never performed. It was unbelievably lugubrious — something about a chap coming home from the wars and finding that he had been declared dead and that his wife had remarried.* I can't remember how I got the ensuing complications sorted out, but I do remember that the main reason it was not performed was the lack of an actress for the important role of the wife. There just were no women at all in the camp or the Fort. Not being able to just see a female face for months on end caused the whole camp to turn out when an Imperial Airways plane stopped at Sharjah and the passengers, which usually included women, took tea in the Fort's courtyard. Everyone, from the C.O. to the messenger, would find a reason to visit the Fort. The passengers must have wondered about the steady procession of grinning RAF men that filed past their tables.

And it was impossible to catch more than a glimpse of an Arab female face. The hideous veil-cum-facemasks they wore made their faces virtually invisible. On the isolated Trucial Coast, these ladies were unaware that women dressed differently elsewhere. One day, a boat from India carrying British civil servants and their families docked at nearby Dubai. When the passengers went ashore to look around, the local women gaped at the short skirts of the British women, something they had never seen. An Arab woman gathered her courage, ran after one British woman and lifted her skirt to see whether she wore any pants underneath. The latter, not knowing what motivated this attack, screamed with fright and didn't stop running until she reached the safety of her boat.

* This resembles the plot of the play (and movie) *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which came out later and was based on a true story!

I suppose that I might have shared interests with some of the officers, but friendships between officers and other ranks were out of the question. I did have many pleasant chats with the Medical Officer, who was intrigued with my Central European background and who tried to improve my English pronunciation, which, I suppose, still needed it quite a bit. I remember a funny exchange with him. We were talking about psychology, which I kept pronouncing with an audible "p".

"It's pronounced 'Sychology' in English," he advised. I didn't get the point and kept on with my audible "p". Whereupon he said, "No, the 'p' in Psychology is silent, as in 'bathing'". I thought about that for a minute and then queried, "But there is no 'p' in 'bathing', is there?" To which he replied, grinning, "Oh, but when I go, there is!" When the penny dropped, I was cured of the audible "p". I remember also being surprised by this joke, something that the much more formal Austrian officers from home probably would not have told to a non-officer.

Home was of course much on my mind, as loneliness and the monotony of the surrounding desert landscape invited introspection. "Home" for me was still Vienna, and thinking of it brought to mind above all my mother and her unknown fate. The last I had heard of her was what Ruth had told me. As mentioned earlier, when the Yugoslav situation had become precarious with a possible German invasion on the horizon, I had sent an application via RAF "channels" to the British Government, explaining that my mother was an Austrian refugee in a Yugoslav camp. As a member of the RAF, I requested that the British Embassy in Belgrade be instructed to look after her, but I never heard anything further about it. By the time Ruth arrived in Palestine, the German invasion had taken place and had ended all communications. Would I ever see my mother and other members of my family again? I feared for the worst and felt terribly helpless.

In addition to the feelings of helplessness and worry, there was a frequent feeling of disbelief that I should find myself in this strange corner of Arabia, surrounded by exotic turbaned types, Sheikh's sons, slaves and pearl fishers, and myself dressed in British Royal Air Force uniform. It all seemed so incongruous, so different from how I had thought that my life would progress. Of course, I was glad to be still alive, but that did not diminish the feelings of loneliness and strangeness that the surroundings induced.

I also had to deal with increasingly strong feelings of regret for having broken off relations with Ruth. I longed for news from her, my

only remaining link with the memory of my mother and of Vienna. I had left Ruth for a number of reasons which, while they seemed very cogent at the time, were starting to look silly and selfish. When we met, she was 17 and I was 21, and I simply did not feel ready to make a commitment. The way she looked up to me, the dashing young man in RAF uniform, was something I just could not handle. Also, surrounded as I was by older and more glamorous girls in Cairo, I found her by comparison childish and immature. My decision to break off our relationship had hurt her very much. As I began to realize the stupidity and callousness of my action, I decided to write to her and to apologize, admitting that the enforced introspection had made me recognize my mistake. Her answer did not reach me for a long time, and I will talk about it when my story reaches that point.

In the meantime, winter had come and with it cooler temperatures. Along the coast, only a little rain fell, usually just a few short and ineffectual showers. But the cold fronts that periodically swept down the Gulf from Iraq brought sufficient moisture to cause large cloud build-ups over the mountains of the Horn of Arabia. Those build-ups presented obstacles for aircraft flying to and from India. Aircraft in those days couldn't fly as high as today. When they were forced to fly through heavy cloudbanks, they could pick up dangerous amounts of icing that could seriously deform the wing shape and, by itself or together with strong turbulence, cause the aircraft to crash.

Our local aircrews in Sharjah who carried out their daily anti-submarine patrols were particularly keen to avoid bad weather over the mountains. Crashes were not only bad for the war effort but also for the crews. Even if they managed to walk away from the crash site, they might die of thirst in the barren mountains or the adjoining desert. Even if they were lucky enough to be found by local Bedouins, the luck could easily turn into disaster — some tribes were intensely xenophobic and killed strangers in various unpleasant ways, including castration of males by the women of the tribe. Each aircrew member thus carried a crash kit, which included among other things a detailed map of the area printed on silk so that it could be folded easily to fit in a pocket, a supply of silver Maria Theresa Thallers to mollify bloodthirsty Bedouins and, for those Bedouins who could read, a letter in flowery Arabic that promised a substantial reward for delivering the bearer safely to the nearest British base or representative. This letter was commonly know as a "Gooly Chit," goolies being the local term for testicles.

Our forecasting offices in Iraq and India had little or no direct information on the cloud situation over the mountains in Oman because there were no observation stations there. In order to obtain this information, I hit on the idea of making use of available British military installations in the vicinity. The first one that came to my mind was a naval station that controlled the passage through the Strait of Hormuz. That station was located at the tip of the peninsula forming the Horn of Arabia and had a good view of the mountains to the south and of the situation over the Strait itself. The route over the latter could be a useful alternative if the shorter mountain route was inadvisable.

I discussed the matter with the Adjutant, who saw the potential advantages of my idea for local operations as well as for aircraft flying to and from India. As I had cleared the idea with MET Headquarters in Iraq, he agreed to send a signal to the Navy for their concurrence. When that came, he arranged for my transportation to the Naval Station. There was no aerodrome connected with that station, and helicopters did not yet exist. Land transportation was impracticable due to the absence of roads, and undesirable in view of the Gooly Chit situation. That left only transportation by sea. The Navy had not volunteered to carry me, so a local *dhow* was hired to get me there.

The *dhow* was to leave from Dubai. A lorry brought me and my gear to the house of the merchant who owned the *dhow*. I suppose it was a typical house of a well-to-do Dubai merchant, a one-storey mud brick house, unpretentious from the outside but comfortable inside, with many Persian carpets on the floors and on the walls, some of the latter of silk. An interesting feature of the house was its "wind-tower," which most houses in that area used to have before the advent of electricity, fans and air-conditioning. Made of reed matting and coated with mud, they were hollow towers that rose some 2-3 metres above the flat roofs of the houses and caught the slightest breezes, which they channelled into the interior of the house. The wind tower served as a sort of primitive ceiling fan, and provided a little comfort in that sweltering climate.

The Dubai merchant and I sat on cushions on the floor, drank sweet tea and made primitive small talk until the *dhow* was ready. Then I was led outside to the "Creek," which is the salient feature of Dubai. Along the curves of the Creek, many *dhows* were moored, some two or three abreast. The crew helped me board the wooden vessel, which was some 12 metres long and sported an engine in addition to its sails.

It was early evening as we slid down the Creek, using the engine as it was quite calm. The glassy Creek's water reflected a silvery portrait of the full moon. I sat on a low chair in the stern of the ship and watched Dubai's houses gliding past, clutching my belongings, which included a thermometer, some code books and other work and personal paraphernalia, as well as a rifle. (The RAF only gave handguns to travelling officers for protection; all others got rifles.) The looks of the boat's crew made me keep the rifle close by my side. They wore dirty turbans around their heads, from which long strains of black hair escaped and fell wildly around their naked shoulders. An ankle-length piece of cloth that wound negligently around their waists, holding the usual silver dagger, was their only clothing.

As we left the Creek and reached the open Gulf, the water became rougher and the *dhow* started to wallow in the choppy swell. My landlubber's stomach was not used to that sort of movement and its contents begun to move towards my throat. But then the thought struck me that I couldn't possibly afford to have that rough crew see me being seen sick and defenceless. Indeed, a couple of them seemed to glance at me with grins on their faces, as if they guessed how I was feeling. I felt sure that if I gave in to my stomach's urgings, they would surely dump me overboard and steal my belongings, particularly the precious rifle! So I kept swallowing whatever the stomach brought up, clutching my rifle and feeling sick and miserable. As the night progressed, I grew more and more tired. Eventually tiredness won out and I fell asleep.

When I awoke it was daylight, the sun was shining on smooth blue water and we were gliding parallel to high, grey rocky cliffs that stretched along our starboard side only some 100 metres away. A crewmember saw me stir and smilingly offered me a cup of coffee. I finally let go of my rifle, which I had been clutching the whole night. As I sipped the sweet black coffee, the world started to look different than it had the previous evening, just as the scenery had changed from the grey waves and the flat coast.

We approached the Strait of Hormuz, where the rocky Horn of Arabia dips down towards the Gulf. The northernmost tip of the Horn is formed by the Musandam Peninusla, which, nearly separated from the Horn, consists of many rocky inlets and "drowned valleys." Lord Curzon, who visited the area in the early years of the 20th Century as a Viceroy of India, had even then thought that it would be a good location for a naval station, as it offered safe harbors and could

control the shipping routes that passed through the Strait. Only during the Second World War was such a station set up, however. As far as I know, it was demolished again after the war. It may of course have been re-established since, possibly by the Omani Navy, as this area is part of the Sultanate of Oman.

Our *dhow* glided into an opening between the cliffs. I saw a lookout tower and some nissen huts close to a pebbly shore and an inlet surrounded by low, bare hills. It looked a bit like a miniature fjord, bleaker but still a welcome change of scenery after Sharjah's monotonous desert landscape. A number of smaller naval vessels moored offshore, and there was quite a bit of movement between huts, tower and vessels. I went ashore with my rifle and other gear, along with a crewmember, who sought a receipt for my safe delivery. He obtained it quickly in the orderly room and we parted with smiles and salaams.

The orderly room clerk passed me to a rating clerk, who took me to a hut where hammocks were strung up, some of them occupied by sleeping figures --obviously, the night shift people. I stowed my gear near a vacant hammock and followed the rating clerk to the Signals Office. It was signallers who I was supposed to train to take simplified weather observations. The observations would be simplified because I could only provide my trainees with a thermometer, not any sophisticated instruments such as barometers.

In the Signals Office, I was introduced to Rating Smith, who was to take a short weather course from me, which he would afterwards pass on to a couple of others so that weather observations could be taken and transmitted 24 hours a day. Smith was a young and handsome blond chap, with eyes of Mediterranean blue. Despite his good looks, he was exceedingly shy, due to an unfortunate stammer. Not that this interfered with his learning ability. In fact, he learned to take the weather observations more quickly than I expected, because sailors are familiar with estimating wind and watching the weather. Some difficulties arose after I left, however. When Smith tried to pass my teachings on to others, I heard that he earned a new nickname — "We-we-weather Smith."

During my few days at the Naval Station, Smith and I became quite friendly. He lost much of his shyness when he saw that I would not tease him about his stammer. In return he did me a big favour. My first night in a hammock was an unmitigated disaster. I did not dare to turn around while lying in it for fear that I would spill onto the floor. As a consequence I lay awake most of the night, feeling like a

trussed up sheep. When I complained to Smith the following morning about my difficulties, he smiled and nodded his understanding.

During our lunch break, he took me to a jetty about a mile down from where we had landed. There the narrow inlet opened up into a sort of wide, green lagoon, surrounded by low, undulating hills. The lagoon sported a jetty at which two motor launches were moored. He took me aboard one of the launches and explained that it belonged to the Commodore commanding the Station, and that he, Smith, was responsible for servicing its communication equipment. The Commodore was at present away, and there was no reason why I couldn't sleep on the upholstered bench in its focsle. It would certainly be more comfortable than my hated hammock.

I jumped at his offer. That evening, he helped me get my gear aboard. As a special treat he showed me how to switch on the boat's short-wave receiver and to tune-in distant stations. He found one broadcasting dance music and we sat for a while listening to the music and drinking navy rum. As night fell, the water in the lagoon presented a lovely spectacle — the caps of the wavelets playing around us gave off wild colours, from some sort of phosphorescent algae that live in those tropical seas. Smith showed me how this phenomenon could be enhanced by waving a rope through the water. The rope would become a phosphorescent snake that glowed in scintillating colours all along its length.

After Smith left, I remained awake for quite some time despite my tiredness, watching the colourful spectacle of the waves and listening to music from the short-wave radio. When the dance music had faded away, I returned to the radio and got a station broadcasting classical music. Although I had learned piano as a boy, I had long ago given it up and, except for opera, had little interest in "serious" music. I don't know whether it was the surroundings or the music, or both, but that evening I became entranced with what I found out later to be Brahms' Second Piano Concerto. It remained my favourite piece of music for a long time and aroused my interest in more classical music. And later that night, replete with music, rum and scenery, I was lulled to unfettered sleep by the light rocking of the launch and the soft slap of wavelets against its hull.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 25

IT took only a few days to teach We-we-weather Smith all he needed to know about making simple weather observations. The single event of interest that occurred during those days was the visit of a large freighter, whose captain had heard that a "meteorologist" had come to the naval base and wanted to see me. It was my first visit to a large freighter and, landlubber that I was,* I nearly fell into a gaping hatch, three or more stories deep and not roped or marked off in any way. A whiskey offered to me in the captain's cabin — an unusual treat for an airman — helped me recuperate from the shock. Unfortunately, the captain did not get his money's worth for the drink, because I was unable to provide him with what he was after — a forecast of wind and waves that his ship would likely encounter when steaming through the Arabian Sea. At that time, I was only a weather observer; my forecasting days still lay in the undreamed-of future. But the burly seaman was gentlemanly enough not to show any disappointment and to appear happy with the seasonal weather values I outlined for him.

In the days that followed, I enjoyed more starlit nights, phosphorescent waves, rum, and Brahms or some other classical music on the wireless. It was probably just as well that my stay lasted only a short while, because the romantic nights might eventually have caused me to forget that blond, blue-eyed Rating Smith was not a girl. Who knows, as this was a naval base, if I really had made advances they might not have been rebuffed.

I returned to Sharjah in grander style than I had come. Instead of enduring another *dhow* voyage, I learned of a minesweeper heading up the Gulf whose captain was willing to drop me off at Sharjah. The trip back lasted only a few hours. I still remember the pitying looks I got from the bearded sailors when I climbed down the minesweeper's low gunwales into the rowboat that took me to the bleak desert beach.

---

* Since then I have improved a little by sailing on the St. Lawrence River near Montreal.

I must admit that if I had to do it all over again, the Navy seems the preferable service, where things happen in a more leisurely way than in aviation and there is no footslogging as in the Army. Most important, naval food and drink definitely outclassed anything I found elsewhere in the forces.

Back in Sharjah, the daily routine resumed and soon drove me to look for another chance to escape for a few days. This time my eyes fell on a small, new emergency landing field located on the northern Iranian shore of the entrance to the Gulf, near a village called Jask (see map). A couple of wireless operators, two general duty airmen and a cook manned the field. Observations from the northern shore of the Gulf entrance would usefully complement those from the naval station on the southern side, and I was sure that the airmen on the field would gladly take three weather observations a day to ward off boredom.

Arrangements were soon made for me to fly to Jask for a few days on one of our Blenheim bombers on its way to anti-submarine patrol over the Arabian Sea. It was only a short flight over the hazy Gulf. As we landed, we found the few airmen from the base awaiting us expectantly. The Blenheim deposited me and flew on at once. I was taken to the simple hut that served as terminal, living quarters, wireless office, kitchen, etc. — all in one large room.

The hut and the close proximity with humanity within it engendered a certain coziness, but the outside was desolate — a desert-like landscape, with a few scraggly scrubs and a line of bare hills on the horizon. The landing strip was just a levelled and tarred piece of desert marked with empty oil drums, with some full drums of emergency fuel on one side and a windsock on the other. A few distant wisps of smoke indicated the village of Jask. Blaiky, the Corporal-in-charge, told me that the village was a collection of mud huts inhabited by poor fisher folk, who offered only decaying fish and stories about bandits swooping down from the hills and robbing the poor of their few possessions.

The dreariness of the landscape seemed to have rubbed off on the airmen, who appeared subdued and listless and were even more slovenly than the rather scruffy lot in Sharjah. I must have stood out like a visiting film star. I continued my Sharjah practice of shaving daily and washing my khaki shirt and shorts as often as possible, a sort of self-defence against the bleak environment.

Below the subdued appearance of my fellow hut dwellers lurked a common emotion — fear. The tales of the Jask fisher folk about the

bandits from the hills shooting up defenceless people seemed to have taken root. When we sat around the dinner table eating the unexciting fare, mostly based on dried and tinned food, the conversation nearly always turned to those bandits — grisly details of what they did to people, how they forced them to disclose the location of poor valuables, and how they always got away before the few Iranian *gendarmes* "guarding" the village mustered the courage to ride out against them.

Under the circumstances, I hastened to set up the weather station and to teach Blaiky and another airman to take the simple observations and to encode them for wireless transmission to Sharjah. As I had guessed, they didn't mind taking on this chore; it changed their routine and took their mind off the bandits.

After three or four days, I felt that they knew their stuff sufficiently well for me to return to Sharjah. Blaiky sent a signal for me to be picked up. A few hours later came the reply that due to an operational emergency — a sub was being hunted in the Arabian Sea — no aircraft could be spared for the moment. And so I settled down to wait, rereading the Penguin book I had brought with me and helping Blaiky and the others with their observations and other chores.

Then the cook fell ill. He lay huddled in bed, his face ashen against his coarse, dark grey blankets, his feverish eyes flickering around the room as if searching for bandits hiding in the shadows. All we knew was that he had a high temperature, which Blaiky duly reported to Sharjah. Only an acknowledgement came back; no promise of an aircraft or instructions on what to do with the sick man. They were probably up to their ears in their own emergency. We took turns wiping the cook's forehead with wet towels and feeding him tea and Aspros, the only medication available. Luckily, he slept a lot, moaning fitfully in his sleep as if haunted by his fears. Our meals were even scrappier than before — we merely opened some tins and ate their contents without bothering to cook at all.

When I woke up the next morning, I also felt a little feverish and thought that my throat hurt a bit on swallowing. Panic! I must have caught whatever the cook had! And no aircraft back to Sharjah for God knows how long!

As soon as Blaiky was up, I asked him to inform Sharjah of another "casualty" — me. He surveyed me suspiciously (I suppose I didn't look all that ill), but went to his set and tapped out his Morse Code signals, which sounded like an angry woodpecker knocking

against a tree for his morning worm. Again there was only an acknowledgment. I spent the rest of the day feeling my forehead and drinking tepid tea, while the others tended to the cook and brought me their weather observations to check. Not that I was very interested, trying to listen to my insides for any progress of the illness, and for the wireless to start beeping.

In the afternoon it finally began to beep, announcing the arrival of an aircraft within the hour. I heaved a sigh of relief. By the time we heard its hum, we stood outside, the cook wrapped in blankets and me carrying my satchel and his kit bag. The aircraft came to a halt and taxied towards us. Then the pilot came out, accompanied by the cook's replacement. Neither seemed in too good a mood — the pilot because he would rather have been sub-hunting, and the new cook because he didn't much like what he saw of his new abode. As soon as the old cook and I were stowed away in the Blenheim's bomb bay, we took off, the few airmen below waving to us, a forlorn little group in a barren landscape.

When we landed in Sharjah, an ambulance at the runway took the cook and me to the camp's sick bay, where the doctor was already waiting for us. We were put into beds in separate rooms with clean white sheets, a luxury after months of coarse sheets or just blankets. When the doctor gave me a check-up, my throat seemed to have improved a lot and I had no trace of a fever. I told him a little of the situation in Jask and he probably thought that psychology (with or without a "p") had a lot to do with my symptoms. I have always been prone to autosuggestion, and am somewhat of a hypochondriac. The doctor patted me on the shoulder, wished me a good night's rest, and that's what I got. It was my first (and only) hospital stay during my RAF days. I made the most of the bed, clean sheets and eggs and bacon for breakfast the next morning. Unfortunately, soon after breakfast, I was unceremoniously ushered out and taken back to my room in the Fort, not as comfortable as the sick bay, but very much better than Jask.

I suppose the cook got better because I don't remember that he died (a funeral would have been an important event in the boring life of a desert station), nor do I remember having any further contact with Blaiky and his sad crew. But I do remember that the Jask observations continued to arrive on time as long as I remained in Sharjah. Whenever I saw them, I saw the sorry place and felt the atmosphere of fear pervading it.

This excursion was my last one from Sharjah. By then I had spent close to a year there, had set up a going liaison office with the

Indian MET people and had established several auxiliary MET stations in the area. I was quite proud of what I had achieved, considering that much of it was due to my own efforts. It was the first time in my life that I had the opportunity to display this kind of initiative and I liked the taste. From then on, I was always happiest when I had similar opportunities, and actively sought jobs that would offer them.

It did not take long for such a job to come along. Headquarters seemed happy with the work I had done in Sharjah, despite the occasion when I overslept and conducted an early morning briefing in my pajamas for an RAF crew that — unbeknownst to me — included a MET officer from Habbaniyah. Not long after returning from Ras el Hadd, I was called one morning to the Orderly Room to receive a message from Headquarters. The message informed me that I was promoted to Corporal and posted to RAF Station Tehran to be in charge of the MET observers there and at some five or six observing stations in the southern portion of Iran. At that time, the country was occupied jointly with the Russians and the Americans, the British being responsible for the Southern portion. My pleasure in the promotion and the new job was considerably increased by the prospect of leaving the hot and humid climate of the Persian Gulf for the much cooler climate of Tehran, located at an altitude of some 5000 feet — a delightful prospect.

But I can't leave the Persian Gulf without comparing its squalid villages and dilapidated Moorish "palaces" with what has become of it since because of its oil wealth. At first, only places such as Kuwait and Bahrain on the western side of the Gulf enjoyed such advances. Along the eastern side, not too much happened. In his book, *Farewell to Arabia*, David Holden describes Sharjah's Fort as he saw it in 1957, some 15 years after I lived there:

"Although Dubai had a bank, it had no hotel. Alone among the Trucial Sheikhdoms, that privilege belonged to Sharjah, where the inhabitants' chief pride and joy was a curious building known as 'The Fort'. Square, solid and white-washed, with a courtyard within and battlements without, The Fort was built in the wild and lawless 30's, when Imperial Airways began to use the Sharjah airstrip and required some safe overnight accommodation for their passengers and crews as well as an airfield operations centre. The Fort fulfilled these functions admirably, but no one could have described it as a comfortable or convenient place to stay for visitors who wanted to do business on the Coast. Except for an occasional airplane to Abu

Dhabi, the only means of getting anywhere from The Fort — even into Dubai — was to walk or hitchhike on what few vehicles were available. Its air conditioning units, installed as a well-meaning salute to the modern world, stopped every night when the local power supply failed; and its solitary shower never, while I was there, produced anything but salt water. Outside, RAF jets screamed off the airstrip in thundering clouds of dust, while a poor, deranged negro in naval cap strutted indefatigably round the walls all day controlling imaginary air movements at the top of his voice. "Sharjah callin', Sharjah callin', ovah to you, ovah to you, Rojjah!" he would cry, in a passable imitation of the signallers jargon, while the local Bedouin squatted at the gates, scraping their teeth with twigs and spitting in puzzled but respectful incomprehension.

"Elsewhere on the coast there was nothing but an occasional scatter of palm-thatch huts along the shore and sometimes a "palace" of white-washed mud occupied by the local ruler. This unrelieved poverty and barrenness was, and to a great extent still is, the most characteristic aspect of the Trucial Sheikhdoms.

"Saudi slave traffic seemed to have stopped after 1955, apart from a sort of white slave traffic, where Trucial Coast men marry young girls and take them to Muscat, where they divorce them in accordance with Muslim custom and force them to marry other men for a consideration.

"That is not to say that slaves have ceased entirely to exist upon the Trucial Coast. Slavery as an institution is permitted, with certain qualifications, under the Sharia Law of Islam, and it has always been therefore one of those 'internal affairs' of the Arabian rulers with which Britain chose not to concern herself officially ..."

Apparently, Britain managed to persuade five of the six rulers to free all slaves only in 1956. The sixth (Sheikh Shakhbuth of Abu Dhabi) was cajoled to follow them in 1963. But formal manumissions continued throughout the sixties, and possibly even later.

However the outward appearance of the Trucial Coast changed quickly thereafter. When David Holden visited there six years later in 1963, Dubai had four banks and two hotels; the wind towers wee fast disappearing and being replaced by tall blocks of air-conditioned flats, and an international airport had been opened with a control tower and loudspeakers purring in the passenger lounge. And even in Sharjah, there were now as many taxis as you wanted to take one from The Fort into town. And the mad negro was dead.

From then on there was no stopping and no looking back. By 1980, Dubai had a thirty-nine storey International Trade Centre — the tallest building in the Arab World — aluminum smelters, liquid gas plants, etc. The Sultan of Sharjah tried hard to catch up. A visitor in 1981 described seeing many new underused or half-finished buildings there and, on Sharjah's Arabian Sea coast (a small stretch it owns north of Muscat), a slightly bizarre but apparently profitable hotel attracting many tourists to the beautiful palm-fringed coast. In 1987, the Manchester Guardian Weekly included an article entitled, "A jewel on the wilder shores of the Arabian gulf," describing the magnificent golf course opened in Dubai, dominated by a clubhouse consisting of a series of seven spired Bedouin "tents" constructed of concrete and glass. General Zia of Pakistan and well known American and British golfers attended the opening. Well, the golf club may last as long as the oil doesn't run out or Iran does not get hold of it, by force of arms or by way of fundamentalist uprisings.

16. Ruth, Erich's future (first) wife at age 17 (Kvuzat Schiller, Palestine, 1941)

CHAPTER 26

I returned to the head of the Gulf by air. A couple of hours after leaving Sharjah, we landed at Shaiba, a new field in the vicinity of Basra, located among palm groves and surrounded by marshes, which bred outsize mosquitoes, and dates for those daring enough to climb the smooth, tall trees. The living quarters consisted of tents pitched on islands surrounded by irrigation ditches, with wooden planks here and there allowing a treacherous way across. Shaiba served as a transit station for arriving troops who were awaiting transshipment to bases in Iraq, the Persian Gulf or Iran. As most of these troops arrived straight from Britain, Shaiba provided a good introduction to the Middle Eastern way of life and, not surprisingly, inspired a song entitled, "Shaiba Blues."

There was absolutely nothing to do in the camp except go to the NAAFI when it opened in the evening. I had little choice but to sit there with my tent mates, drinking tepid Indian beer and smoking lousy "V" cigarettes, which I believe were produced solely for the armed forces and tasted as if camel dung had been added to make the precious tobacco go further. As I wasn't used to drinking large quantities of beer, my head soon became woozy and my bladder full. The latter could easily be dealt with via the obliging irrigation ditches, but the former was another thing. As I stumbled back in the darkness to my tent, the irrigation ditches proved less of an obliging friend, and I fell into several of them before reaching my goal, dripping with mud and cursing.

I resolved to stay away from the NAAFI — and the irrigation ditches. Together with my tent mates, I was lucky to obtain a pass to go into Basra for an afternoon. We were taken there by the so-called "liberty lorry," a truck that took pass holders into town and brought them back in the evening, an arrangement made by most RAF camps near a town.

Not wanting to leave my comrades and strike out on my own, I had little choice but to accompany them to the few bars that were not "out-of-bounds" for us and reprise our NAAFI drinking activities. The only differences were that, in the bars, we were served by women

(oh, to even see a woman again!) and were able to drink spirits instead of the insipid beer.

When we shambled out of one bar to sample the drinks and womanhood in another, we saw a Russian soldier, broad and sturdy in his top boots, strolling by and looking around. At that time — late summer 1943 — a lot of American and British war material was arriving in Basra to help the Russian war effort. From Basra, such material was loaded on trucks for transport to Iran and from there to Russia. This soldier was probably one of the convoy drivers and, like us, was looking around for relaxation and amusement.

When living in Palestine before joining the RAF, I had picked up a few salty Russian curses, used by the many Russian Jews living there, particularly in the *kibbutzim*. In my somewhat befuddled condition, I boasted to my co-drinkers that I knew Russian and could speak to the Russian soldier if I'd wanted to. They, of course, egged me on. Lacking better judgment, I approached the soldier, who looked at me curiously. I let go with some of my repertoire, typical of which was *Joptwoje mat*, which means "go and fuck your mother," a favourite Russian curse. At first, the soldier looked a bit uncomprehendingly. Then he started to grin broadly, spread out his arms and fell around my neck, kissing me on both cheeks. He was so glad to hear his mother tongue spoken far from his home! We made him an honorary member of our group and made the rounds of several more bars, where the other RAF chaps learned Russian curses and the Russian became quite successful in pronouncing things like "fuck" and "shit." I wonder whether he was later able to display this knowledge to English speaking visitors to his home country.

At last I received word that my departure had been fixed for the next day and that I should be ready to leave early in the morning. I was yearning to escape Shaiba, its mosquitoes and boredom, and exchange its hot and humid idleness for the more vigorous climate and activities I expected in Tehran. The next morning saw me up bright and early, complete with kitbag, tropical helmet and new corporal's stripes on my arm, climbing onto the lorry that was to take me on the first leg of what was to be a journey with several stages and using different modes of conveyance. From Shaiba, the lorry took a few other airmen and me to a ferryboat at Basra, which floated us across the Shatt el Arab to Abadan, the large oil refinery on the Iranian side of the broad river. Like the last time I went down the river towards the Persian Gulf, the place reeked of petrol, and a haze of mixed oil fumes and dust hung over the river and the town.

In Abadan, another lorry took me to the railway station where, after an interminable wait, a little train chugged-chugged in. I was told to take it to Ahwaz, a little town where the Gulf-to-Tehran railway had its terminal, built a few years before the war by German engineers. I will have to say more about them later. And more to say about the railway.

The little rickety train took more than three hours to reach Ahwaz, where it was terribly hot. Ahwaz lies in an arid plain between the Persian Gulf and the Zagros mountains and is one of the hottest places on earth, with temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius not uncommon. On the train, I was getting more and more thirsty, but there was nothing to drink. Eventually, I left the stifling carriage to stand on the open rear platform, which at least afforded some fresh air, albeit very hot air. An army sergeant sat on the edge of the platform floor with his legs dangling through its guard railings. I sat next to him and complained about the "fucking heat" and my "fucking thirst" (the only way to ensure that I would be taken seriously).

He looked at me sideways and said, "If you can keep your trap shut, Corp, I can offer you a drink."

"How can I keep it shut, Sarge, and drink at the same time?"

"No, you fool, I mean if you won't talk about it," he replied and drew forth a nearly full bottle of gin, something that only officers were allowed to carry.

Well, we finished that bottle during the next three hours, drinking it straight because there was nothing to use as a mixer. The gin together with the heat nearly knocked me out, and I don't remember much about reaching Ahwaz, where the sergeant, older and probably more used to spirits than I was, must have helped me reach the transit station where we stayed the night.

I must have been really dead to the world, because I woke the next morning covered with bug bites and itching all over. When I had scratched enough, I got off my bug-ridden straw sack and looked around. What I saw, except for that sack and my gear strewn around, was a small, bare, windowless cubicle. I went out the door and stood on a veranda of an old *caravanserai*, three tiers of covered verandas with loggias, which surrounded a bare courtyard. Normally, there would have been camels chewing their cud in the courtyard while their masters fought the bugs in the little cubicles. Or maybe only their slaves, with the masters snug in bug-less inns in the town?

Despite its oriental quaintness, I was very glad to leave that *caravanserai* and its bloodthirsty denizens, and embark on the final

and longest stretch of my journey to Tehran, by rail, close to 20 hours through some of the most spectacular landscapes on earth. The train soon reached the foothills of the wild Zagros Mountains and then started to wind its way through breath-taking gorges. After we climbed above the trees, I could see spectacular, deep chasms on one side and snowy peaks well above 4000 metres high on the other. The Persian Empire was founded in this region; colossal rock inscriptions relate the deeds of the Medes and the Parthians that followed. At dawn, we reached a high plateau, dry and dusty, as it lies surrounded by mountain chains that prevent rain clouds from reaching it. Not long afterwards appeared the domes and minarets of the holy city of Qom. Between Qom and Tehran, we traveled through grey-white salt flats formed by evaporated lakes.

As mentioned earlier, the Shah had brought in German engineers to build this railway because he distrusted both the Russians and the British. It must have been quite a feat to build it in this wild country, even if it was only a single-line railway, which meant that trains had to wait at stations or sidings to let trains coming from the other direction pass. To ensure the safety of the railway, which was now of great importance as a supply line to Russia, British military detachments (often Ghurkas or Sikhs) guarded sensitive points along the line, such as bridges and tunnels. I remember seeing some Sikhs at one such site outside their tents early in the morning, standing with toothbrushes in their hands and watching the train go by. They looked incongruous — tall bearded men, wearing only turbans, earrings and flowered under shorts. And a big smile.

We arrived in Tehran about midday. As I got off the train, I admired the modern station, which was also built by the Germans and completed only shortly before the war. In fact, the activities of these and other Germans had been one reason for the decision of the Allies to occupy the country and depose the Shah, putting his son on the throne in his place. The station's blue ceiling particularly caught my attention. An unusual white pattern criss-crossed that ceiling, which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be interlacing swastikas! Well, I suppose the builders could claim that it was an old Persian symbol.

I stumbled out from my carriage onto the platform, clutching my kitbag and other assorted gear. The scene brought to mind a similar occasion three years earlier when, shortly after joining the RAF, I arrived with other new recruits by rail in Cairo. As we walked along the platform toward the station exit, I was the last, struggling with the unfamiliar kitbag, the sausage-form carryall of soldiers and sailors at

the time, which must have been designed by a sadist. The kitbag was quite heavy and I had not mastered the trick of carrying it squeezed under my arm. It kept slipping from my grasp, requiring me to lay down all the other things I was carrying — rifle, tropical helmet, etc. – in an effort to reposition the damn thing under my arm. In short, a nightmare of a memory. To make matters worse, a bevy of elderly British ladies stood on the Cairo station platform, a sort of reception committee for arriving soldiers, handing out cigarettes and other little gifts to them as they went past. One of these ladies, noticing my especially clumsy struggles, cried out, "Oh, look at that poor boy! Come, let's give him a hand!" That made matters very much worse. In addition to juggling my gear, I had to fight off the hands of the well-meaning ladies, who were threatening my dignity as a competent airman. I also had to endure the jokes about "poor boy Schwarzy" for a long time afterwards.

When I stepped out of the railway station at Tehran, my eyes, used to the calm surroundings of Persian Gulf and sleepy Iraqi villages, were dazzled by the amount of traffic in the large square in front of the station. We soon joined that traffic in a lorry taking us to RAF Station Mehrabad, the Tehran aerodrome, some 20 kilometres west of the city. Driving through Tehran, I was struck by the mixture of modern and old-fashioned or even downright primitive. In fact, the railway station was situated in the only really modern quarter; the rest seemed to consist of low buildings, except for some higher ones in the town centre, and for the Shah's palace, standing on a mound and surrounded by a high wall.

What struck me most were the people, particularly the women. They presented a much more cheerful sight than the ones in the Persian Gulf, with their black veils and hideous face masks. In Tehran, the women wore flowered *yashmaks*, large pieces of cloth that fell from their heads to the ground, but left their faces free. When they saw themselves observed, however, they would take up a portion of the *yashmak* and cover the lower parts of their faces with it.

I found the fresher, drier air of Tehran particularly pleasant. I also savoured the wider view, especially the mountains on the near horizon in the north. These high mountains are part of the Elburz chain, which stretches from Tehran northward to the Caspian Sea. Some peaks in this chain are permanently snow-capped, particularly Mt. Demavend, which reaches some 5,600 metres. Moisture from the Caspian Sea feeds that snow, but little of it reaches the high plateau of Tehran, which lies in the southern rain shadow of the mountains,

and is therefore dry and rain starved. And yet, we saw from the lorry many little walled gardens and other greenery. As I found out later, carefully nurtured and irrigated run-off from the mountains made possible such greenery, as well as the general water supply of Tehran. The scarcity of water and the difficulty of creating gardens in a dry landscape made the Persians value their little gardens so much, as can be seen in the poetry of Omar Khayyam, Hafiz and Firduzi.

It was late when we arrived in RAF Station Mehrabad, and I saw little of it that first evening. But I was happy enough when going to bed, exhilarated by the many differences from the hot and humid backwater of the Persian Gulf. The climate, landscape, people, buildings, traffic — all were so refreshingly different and stimulating, that I looked forward with pleasure to my stay in Iran. And yet, I also had some doubts. Would I be able to get on with the 15 or more British airmen I would be supervising, not being British myself? And with my officers? And would I be able to get to know people in town, especially women? And when my eyes closed, my thoughts went back as always to my mother and the other members of my family in Vienna, Yugoslavia and other parts of German occupied Europe and I longed for news from them, and from Ruth in Palestine. Then I slept, for the first time in many months a really refreshing sleep in Tehran's cooler and drier air.

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays...

(Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, XLIX,
translated from Persian by
Edward Fitzgerald)

BOOK FIVE

IRAN AND RETURN TO THE LEVANT

14. Corporal Erich Schwarz, Royal Air Force (1943)

CHAPTER 27

WHEN I awoke that first morning in Tehran, the sight of snow-capped mountains gladdened my heart after the monotonous views of so many months in the Persian Gulf. The mountains reminded me of Austria. When I stepped outside, the air, too, seemed as fresh and dry as in the Tyrol and quite different from the sultry atmosphere of the Gulf. I felt sure that I would like it there.

I certainly liked the atmosphere in the MET Office at Tehran's Mehrabad aerodrome, where I received a warm welcome from its chief, Group Captain Moore, a kindly, grey-haired scholarly man. As I soon learned, part of his warm welcome arose from his expectation that I would relieve of a lot of his administrative drudgery, which would free him to pursue some research he was carrying out in Tehran. In fact, after he saw me settled into my duties, he reduced his appearances in the office to only once or twice a week.

"Everything all right, Corporal?" he would ask. When I assured him that it was, he would sign whatever I had prepared for him and vanish again for another week. A few years after the war, a book of his appeared in the Pelican series called *Dictionary of Geography*, a goodly portion of which could well have been the fruit of his — and my — labours in Tehran.

Apart from three or four junior officers who carried out forecasting duties for RAF flights in and out of Tehran, the office staff consisted of some twelve weather observers and chart plotters. They were all young conscripts from various parts of the United Kingdom. I got on well with them, which made me glad because I had felt unsure how they would take to a non-British corporal. I did have some trouble getting used to their different regional accents, though, particularly those of some dour Scottish lads, one or two Cockneys, and my favourite — a young, roly-poly fellow from Lancashire named Fielding. Returning from our weekly visits to town, where he would drink a little more than was good for him, he would sway precariously in the "liberty" lorry that brought us back at night and moan, "Ehh, by gum, ahhm so ashamed of mahself! If mah ould nurse could see me naow!"

My first experience of being "in charge" of people and of administering an office did not cause me undue difficulty. Actually, I had once before been in charge of others. That was during my scouting days in Vienna, when I learned to lord it over a group of boys without being too obnoxious about it. That experience may have helped in Tehran, when circumstances were more difficult.

My work at the aerodrome weather office consisted mainly of establishing duty rosters, checking the quality of observations and weather map plotting, filling out climatological returns and ensuring that we had adequate supplies of plotting charts, pens, hydrogen for weather balloons, etc. I also had less exalted duties, such as cleaning the paraffin stoves used to heat the underground bunker-like office in winter. "Strange," I thought, "when I had to do this stove-cleaning as an airman in Egypt, I wished I were a corporal and could order one of the airmen to do it. Now that I am a corporal, I am still doing it because I don't want to take an airman off work that is more urgent than stove cleaning. I just can't win!"

But there were compensations. Not long after I came to Tehran, the British authorities decided to help establish a Persian Meteorological Service.* A few young Persian air force officers had been sent for some basic training in Egypt. On their return to Tehran they were brought to our office for further instruction. One of them — slim, black haired and good-looking second lieutenant Taba — was later to become Dr. Taba, the Director of the Persian MET Service and subsequently a member of the World Meteorological Organisation Secretariat in Geneva. In that latter capacity, I had frequent contact with him when I worked for the International Civil Aviation Organization as Chief of Meteorology. He described the situation as follows in recently published reminiscences:

When we returned to our airfield in Tehran, Group Captain Moore arranged a special program for us, choosing for our instruction a meteorologist who spoke French. This chap went far out of his way to tutor us thoroughly in aeronautical meteorology and practical forecasting. He was none other than Uri Schwarz ...

In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. My French was rudimentary (school French from Vienna), and my knowledge of aeronautical meteorology and forecasting not much better. But as my French must have been superior to what the others were able to muster, I qualified. And it was fun to be out on the airfield, teaching

* Persia is the country now known as Iran.

the high-spirited young officers how to observe and report their Persian weather, instead of sitting all day in the dank weather bunker.

Shortly after I arrived in Tehran, I made the acquaintance of an exciting and sometimes exasperating newfangled instrument — a teleprinter. Until then, we transmitted and received all our weather information solely by wireless telegraphy in Morse code, which was a slow and labourious process prone to errors, interference and other obstacles. Of course, it would have been the Americans who — together with the Russians and us, occupied different parts of Persia — supplied the teleprinter and set up the connections.

In the beginning, we were fascinated by the reams of weather reports the teleprinter spewed out. We crowded around it for hours, watching how it rapidly typed line after line as if with unseen hands, the paper jerking up rhythmically. Being the corporal, I got first crack at typing our own weather report, and eventually got quite good at it, typing so fast (with two fingers) that the machine couldn't keep up with me. When I surpassed its maximum printing speed, the keyboard would jam.

In addition to weather reports, the teleprinter also typed out American news bulletins, which we usually found parochial and often ridiculously trivial. After a momentous news flash about the Allied invasion of Sicily, a domestic news item appeared: " Sixteen year old boy marries forty-two year old woman in Long Beach, California. The bride's fingernails were coloured dark green!"

We used the teleprinter to send to the Americans not only our Tehran weather report but also reports from other weather stations in the southern part of Persia, for which the British were responsible. We administered some five or six such stations and eventually I was to visit them all, for inspection, to bring supplies, and, sometimes — to be truthful — just to get to know the country. I also established a new station in the old capital of Persia, Isfahan. I will tell more about that exciting trip later.

Shortly after my arrival, we concluded an agreement with the Russians concerning the exchange of weather reports. In return for our reports, they were to send us the reports from their stations in northern Persia, which we then passed on to the Americans. A direct telephone line connected us with the Russians, over which they would pass their reports in broken English. (I did try to learn some Russian and managed to master Russian numerals in which weather reports were transmitted, but somehow my head never took kindly to the language. Perhaps Stalin's Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler of

1941, which deeply disappointed my socialist sentiments, caused a mental block!)

The direct phone to the Russians sometimes provided a source of exasperation as well as amusement. One night, during which we got sore arms cranking the field telephone without being able to raise them, a sheepish voice appeared at the other end saying apologetically, "So sorry, plenty vodka last night ..."

Another time, we grinned about their explanation of missing reports: "Telegraph very foolish today!" Other contacts with the Russians were not always as amusing. Our drivers, who had to deliver petrol to the Russian airfields north of Tehran, hated to drive there with their tankers. They said that the Russians were prone to shoot first and only afterwards shout the Russian equivalent of the customary "Halt, who goes there?".

Most of the Russian troops that I saw in Tehran appeared to be of Mongolian stock, but their officers were always Europeans. One day, in a bar, I met a Russian officer who turned out to be Jewish and spoke broken Yiddish. We sat in a dark corner and, as he sipped his vodka, he complained in a low voice about the hard life in the Russian army and particularly about the endemic anti-Semitism. But when we stepped out into the bright Tehran sunshine, he quickly said good-bye and moved to the other side of the street. It was not healthy for him to be seen consorting with a Westerner.

The contact with the Russians brought back with renewed force my worries about the fate of my mother in Yugoslavia. The Allied invasion of Sicily, which took place shortly after my arrival in Tehran in July 1943, seemed to offer an opportunity to return to Europe so as to get closer to whatever was happening there. I wrote an application to RAF Headquarters in Cairo. Detailing my background and underlining my knowledge of German and Italian, I asked to be transferred to the Sicilian theatre of war, where I thought I could be more useful than in Tehran. Frankly, I was not all that hopeful of a positive response. I remembered all too well the deafening silence that had followed my earlier entreaty for assistance to my mother when Yugoslavia was invaded. But I nevertheless thought it worthwhile to try, particularly as I seemed to have something useful to offer in exchange.

The memories of my mother also brought back memories of Ruth on the Kibbutz in Palestine. There had been no reply to the letter I had written from Sharjah apologising for my conduct and offering a renewal of our friendship. Had my letter gone astray? Or had she

been so offended that she did not want to reply? This caused more worries. It also occurred to me that, if I were sent to Sicily, it could well mean a permanent move to Italy which, in turn, could lead to the possibility of re-establishing contact with Bettina. Did I really want that? These worries, most of them useless as I could do nothing about them, followed a growing behavioural pattern that was to continue throughout my life: I had become a worrier.

15. On road to set up new RAF weather office (Erich standing in middle) (1943)

CHAPTER 28

DESPITE my worries about mother, Ruth, Bettina and so on, I was intensely curious about Tehran and its inhabitants. My exploration of the city began with bar crawling in the company of Fielding and the others but soon branched out. Most of the bars were located on Tehran's main street, a broad avenue lined with two or three-storeyed buildings, many ramshackle and only few that were really modern. Some of those buildings had large gardens in their rear, often used as open-air restaurants. The British embassy compound fronted on that avenue; its wall stretched along a whole large city block. Many old trees and tall bushes peeked over it, an oasis from the heat and noise of Tehran. Churchill stayed there in 1945 during his conference with Roosevelt and Stalin. (He observed that every Persian seemed to have a motorcar and to blow his horn continually.) I often wondered how the compound looked inside. My curiosity was eventually satisfied in a rather unexpected manner.

My first contact with Tehranians came through one of our civilian weather observers. He was a Jew from Baghdad whom I had met briefly when passing through Habbaniya, the big RAF Station in Iraq, where he worked in the MET Office. He had recently been transferred to Persia due to a shortage of observers for weather stations there.

Mr. Gabbai was a tall, heavy-set man with slightly slanting eyes that gave him a shrewd look. He had to undergo some training in Tehran before going to Khermanshah in the far southwest. In the meantime, he lived with a Jewish family in Tehran and invited me to share a meal with them on Sabbath eve. On the appointed day, Mr. Gabbai fetched me with a taxi from the place in the centre of town where our liberty lorry deposited us. From there, we drove to a dilapidated-looking house in what seemed to be a poor quarter of Tehran. The host and some of his male relatives awaited us outside. Their shabby dress and beards made them look like people to whom I would have offered a few coins for their Sabbath meal if I had met them outside a synagogue.

But when we entered the house, things changed dramatically. The room into which they led me featured high ceilings, lovely silk wall hangings and large Persian carpets on the floor. We sat down on leather cushions next to low tables with ivory inlaid tops that held water pipes or brass vases. Roses sat in the vases, offering a delicate scent. Mr. Gabbai saw my astonishment.

"You must be wondering about the contrast between the outside appearance of the house and its interior, no?"

I admitted my surprise. "You see," he explained, "the Persians are fanatic Shiites who despise and persecute other religions. The appearance of wealth often leads to such persecution, because it offers the persecutors not only heavenly but also earthly rewards. The local Jews therefore try to appear poor and not worth bothering."

Although that made excellent sense, I felt indignant that people should have to live under such conditions. But I came to understand that the Persian Jews had lived under such conditions for many generations. The traditions borne of that circumstance — and the opportunity to make a livelihood in some form of business in the local bazaar — made them willing to endure this life. The advent of Israel changed this, however. The majority of Persian Jews emigrated, spurred on by their religious feelings as well as by increased religious and economic persecution in Persia.

In the home of Mr. Gabbai's friends, I enjoyed a typical oriental meal. The men sat on cushions around a large brass bowl filled with spicy rice and bits of mutton from which we helped ourselves with our fingers. Women served the food and, when we finished, brought finger bowls with rose water to rinse our hands. The women ate separately in an adjoining room. When the spicy food made me look for something to drink, I was offered water from a brass beaker with a long spout. Now we had been warned not to drink the water in Tehran because it was unsanitary. In fact, I had seen how people fetched water from roadside ditches in which it ran downhill.

I must have recoiled visibly at the offered water because our host — via Mr. Gabbai's interpretation — said reassuringly, "Don't worry, this is good water. It comes directly from the Shah's palace!"

The fact that the water came directly from the palace where the Shah might have bathed in it (or worse) did not really make it more potable in my eyes. I therefore stuck to vodka and, as a result, eventually had to be brought back to camp by Mr. Gabbai in a taxi. I did not remember much about that drive home and Mr. Gabbai never

alluded to it, even a few years later when we worked together for the Israeli MET Service.

My next excursion again resulted from the invitation of a Jewish observer, this time a young Persian whom we had hired to augment our staff. He was a bright, well-dressed lad about my age who spoke fluent English. Indeed, he confided to me that he translated English and American detective novels into Persian for pirate editions. He saw little danger of being caught because it was wartime and people in the West surely had other worries.

Firouz, as the young man was called, invited me to a picnic in the woods on the northern outskirts of Tehran. Having recently read Omar Khayyam, I accepted eagerly. But as with so many things that one imagines in glowing colours, the reality turned out to be disappointing. There was only the jug and no young ladies, just Firouz and myself. And the woods seemed rather thin, no match for the Viennese ones. Various other picnicking parties sat in little groups under the straggling young trees lining a shallow ravine through which a brook ran. People sat on the ground or sometimes on carpets they had brought with them. Still, I did feel that for the Persians, living in a harsh environment with most of the country a rocky, barren wasteland, a little greenery went a long way and gave rise to the same pleasurable emotions as the lush Viennese woods evoked in spoiled Westerners.

On the way back, we dropped by Firouz' home to deposit the picnic utensils. He introduced me to his parents and to his very pretty and equally shy teenage sister. I still remember her name: Darachshaneh, meaning "butterfly." But with girls being so carefully guarded, her name and her delicate beauty are the only memories of that meeting I was allowed to carry with me.

My next excursion provided a striking contrast. A group of Western ladies, such as wives of embassy personnel and the like, ran a club for allied soldiers in a large, modern villa in a side street. During one of my visits there I happened to glance at the notice board, where an invitation to a violin recital caught my eye. The recital itself was an unusual treat, and the name of the violinist was also a little unusual. It was a Miss Kratz, and I couldn't help telling a fellow reader that her German name meant in English "scratch," not all that good an advertisement for her virtuosity. Still, I decided to go to the recital, which was to take place at her residence.

When I went there the next Saturday evening, I was glad to have done so by taxi. The house was located in a maze of alleyways and

fronted by tall mudbrick walls. I would never have been able to find it by myself. On entering, the primitive wall and the shabby-looking exterior of the low house gave way to a modern interior, centred on a large living room with Persian rugs, expressionist paintings and, at one end of the room, a black Bechstein grand piano.

Mr. Kratz, small, bald and genial, received me pleasantly. He had come as a refugee from Germany in the early thirties and had clearly been able make good in Tehran. Mrs. Kratz, overflowing her evening dress, presented a striking contrast to her daughter the violinist, a thin, angular and quiet young woman in her early twenties. Among the other guests were a few Scandinavian engineers with their blond wives and one strikingly handsome young Persian, the son of the chief of the Bakhtiari tribe, the largest and most important among the few remaining nomadic tribes in Persia. He had been educated in Germany and spoke the language well.

It was a very civilised evening, with Miss Kratz playing not at all badly, as far as I could judge. Her accompanist, a second secretary in the British Legation, played a bit more haltingly but was also quite acceptable. And the refreshments, consisting of cold cuts, pates and desserts — things I had not seen since Vienna — would have consoled me for a much worse performance.

I was to spend more evenings in these pleasant surroundings and owe them many musical and culinary memories. The former included my first acquaintance with Schubert's Trout Quintet, one of the first chamber music pieces I ever heard and which bowled me over. Who cared that the performers were not brilliant and sometimes stumbled through difficult passages, when the music was so heavenly, transforming a little song that we had sung in our Vienna school choir into a sound painting of a glittering fish cavorting in a mountain brook.

Unfortunately all good things come to an end, and so did my pleasant visits to this corner of Central Europe. It came about when the wife of one of the Scandinavian engineers, herself also a German refugee, told me in confidence that Mrs. Kratz had decided that I would make a good husband for her daughter and was going to mount a "campaign." As I found Miss Kratz not at all appealing in this respect, and in any case my heart being engaged in other directions, I decided that a tactical withdrawal was indicated.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 29

IN the meantime, winter had descended on Tehran. With an elevation close to 4000 feet, winters are quite cold there, but little snow falls, except on the mountains to the north. Still, ice flowers often appeared on our barrack windows in the mornings, and our cleanliness declined markedly as the camp's showers provided only cold water. In Tehran, the women walked with large woolen shawls over their flowery chadors, and little beggar boys sat huddled in makeshift shelters in front of the bazaar entrances.

This was perhaps not the best time to make a long train journey, but circumstances forced me to visit Durud, one of our weather stations in the mountains along the railway line to the Persian Gulf. During the fall, I had visited several others, among them Khermanshah, a friendly but somewhat nondescript village in Kurdistan on a turbulent rock-strewn river, and Hamadan in the western uplands.

I had been particularly curious about Hamadan because it is the old Median capital of Ecbatana. Queen Esther of biblical fame is supposed to lie buried there. The journey to Hamadan by lorry proved long and complicated. We had to pass through the sector occupied by the Russians. This required lots of documents, which successions of Russian officers scrutinized carefully, with considerable head scratching and whispered conversation amongst themselves.

In the end, Hamadan was disappointing. The town was small and dilapidated and the badly weathered Queen's tomb stood in a little fenced plot in the middle of a little square, surrounded by bedraggled greenery. But still, it felt good to obtain a kind of confirmation that the good Queen had really lived.

The train journey to Durud took some six or seven hours, during which we constantly climbed. Soon after the trip began it started snowing, so that when I arrived the snow there was several feet high. The Sergeant in charge of the detachment that looked after communications along the railway line — and, as a sideline, made six-hourly weather observations — received me pleasantly. They were clearly glad to get visitors.

After we had finished the official part of my visit, the Sergeant invited me to join them the next morning on a bear hunt. The villagers had complained about a bear that seemed to have left hibernation and gone marauding among their chickens. They hoped the soldiers could get rid of him. I felt excited to be able to participate in what was for me an unusual event.

When we set off early in the morning, it was still pitch dark. We trudged in single file along a narrow path that had been cleared, each of us clutching a .303 Enfield rifle, the standard British army issue. Some of us carried lanterns as well. Through the bitter cold, I started to feel a bit scared that we might stumble on the bear in the darkness. But there was no turning back. The path ascended steeply into the mountains and the walls of snow on either side seemed to become taller. When the first signs of a grey dawn appeared in the sky, we had entered an area with dense brush and less snow. Suddenly the Sergeant gave a sign for us to stop. We listened and heard a faint rustling among the bushes. As the Sergeant raised his gun, we did the same and then let off a ragged volley of shots into the area where the rustling had come from. A loud squeaking and thrashing resulted. The Sergeant peered into the bushes, raised his gun and with another shot finished off — a wild boar.

We agreed that this feat sufficed for one morning. With pine branches, we constructed a sort of sled and dragged the dead boar back down the path. I started to congratulate myself for having survived the expedition unscathed and even victorious, but this turned out to be a trifle premature. Suddenly, I felt the ground give way under my feet and I slid and slid, coming to rest on the bottom of a snow pile that covered me completely. Although I had air to breathe, I couldn't move my legs. The snow muffled my shouts.

Luckily, the chap behind me had seen me vanish suddenly and alerted the others, who started to poke in the snow with their rifles. One rifle came down in front of me and I grabbed it and tugged. Soon, my companions dragged me out. I came up spluttering and spitting snow, soaked through and swearing that I would never go bear- or boar-hunting again. And, so far, I have kept my promise.

But danger lurks in many places and, even without going on another hunt, I soon got myself into another dangerous situation. It started when I obtained the address of the representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in Tehran, a sort of unofficial ambassador of the Jewish population in Palestine. When I phoned and told him that I was a (Jewish) Palestinian in the RAF, he invited me to a Sabbath dinner

at his home. There, in addition to the "Ambassador" and his family, I met a young woman about my age, who worked as a the family's nanny. She had recently arrived, having fled her native Poland after the German invasion. She had managed to escape through Russia and into Persia, where the British had set up a refugee camp for some 3000 Polish women and girls.

Sara was buxom and lively, and spoke a broken German and a bit of Hebrew. It did not take much urging from her boss for me to ask her to a dance at our camp, which she enjoyed greatly, after all the hardships she must have endured. I was glad to have female company once more. We agreed to meet again on her next free evening when I promised to show her a bit of Tehran.

The evening started pleasantly with dinner in a restaurant. Afterwards, we walked through the downtown part of Tehran, where I showed her some of the sights, such as the Shah's palace and the British embassy. Then we got into some darker, tree shaded lanes, which I did not find unwelcome because it gave me a chance to try and reap a little reward for the guided tour. Although she did not object when I kissed her, she not only did not reciprocate but started to tremble. When I asked her why, she haltingly and sketchily told me about horrible things she had suffered during her flight through Russia and that these memories kept haunting her. I felt terribly sorry and put my arms comfortingly around her, trying to assure her that I would never do anything she wouldn't want me to do.

As we stood there embracing in a dark corner of an ill-lit lane, a figure appeared from the shadows. A Persian soldier leaped towards us and, taking hold of me with one hand by my lapels and with the other brandishing a horribly curved dagger, talked rapidly and wildly in Persian. I had heard some talk about British soldiers being attacked by Persians who, despite their government's consent to the presence of Allied troops, were violently xenophobic. To be seen walking with girls was particularly dangerous, because the Persians hated the thought that we might have affairs with Persian girls; it offended their morals as well as their religion. As some British soldiers had been killed in such attacks, the RAF arranged for us to be given courses in so-called "unarmed combat," in which we learned how to disarm an attacker and take away his knife or gun.

But at that moment, when the Persian stood in front of me with his knife glinting in the moonlight, my mind went blank. Everything I had learned in the course seemed to vanish. I only saw that horrible knife and Sara looking at us with wide, frightened eyes. Instinctively,

I motioned her with my head to run away and then started to talk to the Persian in slow and friendly English:

"Sorry old chap, I don't understand a word you are saying! You'll have to talk English to me if you want me to understand you!"

He kept gibbering away, holding me by my jacket and pressing the wicked looking knife to my throat. I kept shaking my head and, grinning as if it were all a joke, shrugging my shoulders. I continued to repeat, "Sorry, old man, I really can't understand a word you are saying."

That went on for several minutes. Eventually, the Persian soldier must have concluded that I was not worth bothering about or perhaps that I was an imbecile because of my grin. So he let go of me and vanished in the darkness. And I did the same, finding a shivering Sara pressed against a wall under the next lamppost. Then we ran to the nearest well-lit street, where light and people promised safety.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 30

WITH spring came the urge to travel again. I had heard a lot about the beauty of Isfahan, the old capital of Persia, and wanted very much to visit it. But as we had no weather observing station in Isfahan, I had no good reason for going there. Then one day, I overheard the duty forecaster wishing there were reports from Isfahan to remedy the "bloody big blank area" on the weather map in the southeastern region. I had helped to establish reporting stations in the Persian Gulf — why not in Isfahan also?

The Signals (Communications) Office seemed to be a good place to find out whether we had any military communications with Isfahan. If so, they would have to be army communications, as we had no aerodrome there. The sergeant in charge looked into his "book of words" and found nothing with which routine communications could take place. But on his suggestion, I rang the Tehran Military Police to see if they knew whether there was an army unit in or near the place. After the MPs had satisfied themselves about my identity, they told me that there was indeed a small Military Police detachment in Isfahan that had daily wireless contact with their headquarters in Tehran.

I broached the subject with Group Captain Moore on his next "visit" to the office. I suggested that he seek permission for me to go to Isfahan to teach the MPs to take simple weather observations, which could then be passed via their signals people to their headquarters in Tehran and from there by phone to our office. He thought it was worth trying, and it did not take long for the permission to come through.

From then on it was clear sailing. Thermometers, a barometer, a cloud chart and an observation log were all that was required to set up an observing station. Unless the military police chaps were exceptionally dumb, it would only take a few days to teach them how to use these things. A pick-up truck and a driver were put at my disposal. I also took one of the observers for company — perhaps for other reasons, too. Not long before, bandits along that sparsely populated route had killed some travelers. An additional person

carrying a gun would be useful. I myself carried a revolver, which normally only officers were allowed. I must have positively strutted around with it; at least that's how it appears in a photo that somebody took of me when we set off.

Just before we left, I received a message that I should report to the British Legation on my return from Isfahan. This puzzled me. Could it be in reply to my request to be posted to Sicily? What would that have to do with the Embassy? Did they want to make use of my foreign languages skills, which I had mentioned in that letter? Well, I would have to be patient, until my return.

We left at the crack of dawn and made our first stop in Qom, which was reputed to be the most fanatical town in Persia. We were advised to stop only for lunch at the local army post and leave afterwards by the most direct route. All I remember of Qom are the onion-shaped domes on the many mosques, large and small, rising from a sea of whitewashed, flat-roofed houses that gleamed in the harsh midday sun of the arid Persian high plateau.

We next drove for hours through empty, barren countryside, with here and there a hillock relieving its flatness. We passed large, grey salt flats, the remainder of former inland seas. There was hardly any other traffic on the unpaved road, but the few cars we encountered raised blinding dust clouds that nearly choked us. The camels and donkeys were much more environment-friendly in that respect. But even they were few and far between.

The barrenness and brooding solitude of the scene reinforced my apprehension about an attack by bandits. I felt quite frightened but did my best not to show it. I cracked jokes while anxiously scanning the horizon. My companions probably harboured similar feelings and must have been as pleased as I was when the silhouette of Isfahan appeared on the horizon towards dusk.

Consulting a sketch map, we found our way to the MP detachment that occupied the upper floor of a large two-storey building in the centre of the town. Most of the building was vacant. We were given a large bedroom, empty but for three mosquito-netted beds. Before going to sleep, I leaned out of the window and admired the reflection of the moon on the glazed tiles that covered a large, onion-shaped cupola nearby, the dome of one of Isfahan's famous mosques.

We saw many more mosques the next day when the MP Sergeant drove us through the town, some with green and others with blue-tiled domes, whose intricate ornaments stood out clearly in the bright sunlight. These gleaming domes were not the only difference

between Qom and Isfahan. The latter was bigger, the houses more stately and, most important of all, many avenues were lined with cypress trees, whose refreshing green shade dappled the mosques and white-clad pedestrians. The people were not all that friendly, however. Once or twice, urchins ran after our jeep and threw stones at us.

I asked the Sergeant how many military police were stationed in Tehran. "Just three of us," he told me, "plus a cook and a wireless operator. That's all."

I was dumbfounded. "Aren't you afraid, so few of you with several hundred thousand Persian fanatics around you?"

He looked at me, astonished. "Oh no, they won't do anything to us. We're British, you know!"

I thought at first he was joking, but then realized that he not only meant what he said, but also that Britain could never have created and maintained its empire without such an attitude. I was nevertheless glad when we returned from the jeep ride to the comparative safety of the MP's house.

The Allied "occupation" of Persia had by that time become mostly symbolic. After brief invasions from the south and north, the old German-friendly Shah was forced to abdicate. His son and successor accepted the Allied presence, necessary to keep the Germans out and the Russians supplied with American war material. The Americans took over the completion and running of the Persian Gulf-Caspian Sea railway, which British troops guarded as far as Tehran, and Russian troops north of Tehran. The Allies kept in Persia mostly air force and transport units, along with the occasional military police detachment to keep tabs on things and to assure the security of communications.

The people nevertheless resented even that symbolic occupation, as shown by the attack of the knife-wielding soldier. As far as I could tell, the resentment was based less on nationalism than on religious hatred of non-believers. "Non-believers," in this respect included not only westerners but also Sunni Moslems. The Shiite Persians, a minority among the much larger body of Sunni Moslems surrounding Persia, felt themselves disadvantaged in many respects, starting with their religious beliefs. The Shiites venerate Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed, and his sons Hassan and Hussein, who in their view should have become Mohammed's successors or caliphs, but were assassinated. The Shiites mark their day of martyrdom with turbulent parades in which fanatics flagellate themselves. In many other respects, too, I found Persians frequently

introverted, even unfriendly and suspicious, in strong contrast to Sunni Arabs, who tend to be extroverts *par excellence*, gracious and flamboyant, easily intoxicated by their flowery and mellifluous language.

The next day, after a few hours of weather reporting practice, we ventured out to visit the grand bazaar. Its large entrance opened on the most impressive square I had ever seen, the famous Maidan-i-Shah. The combination of wide open space, framed by low, regular, flat-roofed buildings and several rows of free standing columns and arches — and by the imposing Masjid-i-Shah mosque, with its gleaming enamelled dome — gave a feeling of perfection and serenity.

We entered the bustling bazaar, with its mysterious twilight and shadowy corners, where merchants sat smoking water pipes in cavernous emporia and half-naked men hammered various types of glinting brassware. I bought an ornamented brass candle holder and coffeepot, as well as some hand printed cotton squares. Wiry, dark-skinned boys had done the printing by wielding large stamps, which they dipped in various colours and imprinted on the cloth to yield intricate patterns in seamless continuity.

After our safe return to Tehran, I went to the Adjutant's office. I reluctantly returned my status-giving revolver and asked for transportation to the British Legation in Tehran. The strange request to report there had puzzled me throughout the Isfahan trip; I wanted to unravel the mystery as quickly as possible. Soon the great iron gates of the Legation swung open, and we drove past the old trees and shrubs covering much of the large compound to the low, bungalow-type office building.

"Corporal Schwarz?" The young lady who sat behind the reception desk smiled at me as if I were a visiting diplomat. "Mr. Myers of the British Council wants to see you. Please come this way."

I had never heard of the British Council and became even more puzzled. Mr. Myers, a tall, pipe-smoking man in summer tweeds, welcomed me and made me sit in a leather armchair.

"I hear you just visited Isfahan? Do tell me about it — I hear it is a fascinating city!" I gladly obliged and Mr. Myers listened attentively. Then he changed topics. "I must say, for an Austrian you speak remarkably good English!"

"Well, I have been speaking nothing else for the last three years. Also, I seem to have a good ear for languages — I managed to learn Italian and Hebrew rather easily."

Mr. Myers nodded. "Yes, I have noticed that. As a matter of fact, it is your language facility that we would like to tap. How would you like to teach English to young Persians in an evening course at the Tehran University?"

So that was the answer to the puzzle! But it immediately created a new puzzle.

"Me teach English? Why choose me when there are so many native English speakers in my camp and I'm the only non-English one there?"

"Ah, I can explain that. You see, for various reasons we want to use an airman rather than an officer for this task. But there are hardly any airmen who do not have some sort of strong regional accent. I discussed this with Group Captain Moore and he suggested you because you have no regional accent, a good ear for languages and relatively high level of education. He also told me that you seemed to be good at teaching people meteorology. So you should find teaching English to young Persians not too hard a task."

"Do these Persians know any English at all? Because if they don't, I would not be able to communicate with them, as I don't know any Persian."

"No, they are all beginners and know little or no English. But the idea is that you would use the Berlitz method — we will supply the books for yourself and the pupils — and use only English, starting from the extremely simple and using visual examples: Book, Table, Man, Here, There, Is, Is not, etc."

I was flattered and thought that I would enjoy the experience. "Well, I'm willing to try. When would you like me to start and where is the place?"

"Ah, good. Well, the place is the University of Tehran, and I would like you to start next Monday. We will arrange transportation for you to and from the University."

As a result, Corporal Schwarz sat next Monday evening stiffly but proudly in the Legation's black Rolls Royce, complete with British flag on the mudguard and liveried driver in the front seat. In the University lecture room, the black eyes of some 30 young Persians looked at me expectantly as I entered. They stood up, I motioned them to sit down and then started with my lesson by pointing to myself and saying, "Teacher" and at one of them, "Student" and acting at the same time teaching and learning roles. Soon a look of comprehension appeared on some of their faces and they called out the relevant Persian words to their fellow students.

Then I would write down the English words on the blackboard and make them repeat the words aloud, first in unison and then singly, correcting them when their pronunciation was faulty.

This mixture of teaching and play-acting gave me considerable pleasure, which was heightened by the obvious enthusiasm with which the young Persians entered the "game." Most of them progressed rapidly. They would crowd around me during intermission and at the end of lectures, trying out their phrases and asking for individual attention. They made me revise my views about the introverted and suspicious character of Persians in general, at least in the case of educated young men who obviously wanted to enlarge their horizons and make contacts with western civilization. This taught me never to generalize about people, just as I wouldn't want people to generalize about Jews and their characteristics.

I was sorry to discontinue my teaching when I left Tehran a few months later, and clearly so were my students. Mr. Myers wrote me a warm letter of thanks on behalf of the British Council, and I often wondered whether I might one day encounter a Persian professional or diplomat who spoke English with a slight Viennese accent.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 31

"THERE'S a letter for you in the Orderly Room, Corp!" came the voice of the clerk over the phone. "All right, I'll be there soon." When I finished the monthly weather statistics, I ambled over and, to my surprise, received a letter with a Palestinian stamp. Could it be from Ruth? I had been hoping to hear from her for a long time.

It was not from Ruth, but it was about her. The letter was written by the secretary of Ruth's kibbutz, who explained briefly that the letter I had sent to Ruth from the Persian Gulf had been received but that Ruth had by then left the kibbutz. As a matter of fact, she had joined the British Army as a driver in the so-called Auxiliary Transport Service (ATS), a new branch consisting entirely of women in order to relieve men for front-line duties. She had been posted to Egypt, but they did not know exactly where, probably somewhere near Cairo. Lacking contact with her, they thought it best to return my letter with this news.

This reply had taken a long time to reach me, having been relayed from Sharjah, via Cairo, to Tehran. And the kibbutz secretary had not written immediately after he received my letter to Ruth, perhaps because he hoped to hear from her. The news left me in a state of some turmoil. Did she join the army because of me? To try to get closer to me? Or just to forget me, which would have been much harder to do in the kibbutz, where many things reminded her of me? Would I be able to find her in Egypt?

These questions plagued me for several days, particular the problem of getting her new address. I concluded that it would be best to go to Cairo and try to find her somehow. But I needed a way to get to Cairo, several thousand miles away. Well, perhaps it would not be all that difficult. Our planes sometimes flew there, or at least to Damascus or RAF Station Ramleh in Palestine, from where other planes likely went to Cairo. Why not try an aerial "hitchhike"?

When my annual leave came due a few weeks later, I applied to the C.O. for permission to use available aircraft space to get to Cairo in order to locate a relative of mine. (This was not really a lie, I

thought, because we are all descended from Adam and Eve). He obliged and I soon took off, sitting proudly in the cockpit of an Anson trainer aircraft. The pilot was glad of my presence because I helped him wind up the undercarriage after take-off, something which was done manually and required 120 turns of a very stiff and awkwardly located handle between the pilot and the (absent) co-pilot seat.

In Habbaniya, the big RAF Station near Baghdad, I had to change aircraft. After only a short wait, I got a chilly aluminum seat in a Wellington bomber, much less comfortable than the co-pilot's upholstered seat in the Anson, but at least without winding chores. That evening, I landed in Heliopolis. My old friend Sepp Oscher was astonished when I appeared in his barrack room.

"Goodness, what brings you here, Erich? Have you been posted back to Heliopolis?"

"Unfortunately not, Sepp. It's a long story, the essence of which is that I am trying to locate Ruth — you remember, the girl I used to see in the Kibbutz. I have hitchhiked from Tehran to Cairo because she is supposed to be stationed somewhere near here with the ATS. Have you any idea where that might be?"

"Don't have a clue. But it shouldn't be too difficult to find out. Why don't you go to the Jewish Services Club tomorrow. You'll be sure to find some ATS girls there who can help you. Are you on leave or 'absent without leave?'"

"Luckily on leave. Could you find me a spare bed in your barrack room?"

"Oh sure, there are always some chaps away. But let's first eat something in the NAAFI."

A couple of bottles of beer, followed by a good night's rest, set me up for my sleuthing activity the next day. Dressed in my best khaki outfit, new black tie and prominent corporal's stripes, I made my way to the Jewish Services Club on Fuad-el-Awal Street, one of Cairo's main thoroughfares.

The club occupied the whole second floor of a large old-fashioned patrician building, with wrought iron railings along the staircases and a creaking elevator behind an iron grille. I rode up the wobbly elevator with a few ATS girls, whom I eyed with curiosity. They were the first I had ever seen, as this newfangled breed had not yet appeared beyond the civilized confines of Cairo and some other Egyptian towns.

They wore khaki shirts and skirts, darker caps with an ATS badge and brown shoes with khaki socks. "Not bad looking," I

thought. "I wonder whether the invisible part of their dress is equally smart?" Although I quickly rebuked myself for such unworthy thoughts, given my mission to find Ruth, it did not take me too long to find out that the answer to the question was decidedly negative.

In the hustle and bustle of the club, soldiers and ATS girls moved to and fro, carrying trays of food and drink to tables, where convivial groups emitted loud peals of laughter. It was not difficult to distinguish Hebrew speakers. I came up to a group of ATS girls and asked one of them, a petite, pert girl with dark hair and sloe eyes, whether she was stationed in Cairo. She gave me a sideways look as if my approach was a bit crude, so I hastened to add that I was trying to find a girl whom I knew from Palestine and who was supposed to be stationed here. I added that her name was Ruth Tetliss.

The ATS girl shook her head. "Sorry, Corporal, I don't know her. I am stationed in Alexandria and am here for just a few days leave. But my friend who is working here in Headquarters might know." She waved over a tall, blond girl and relayed my question to her. "Oh Ruth, yes of course I know her. She is stationed in Mena Camp. I haven't seen her for a week or so, but that doesn't mean much, she might have been busy. Why don't you ask at her camp?"

"How does one get there? Is it far?"

"Oh no, it's quite near the tram terminal at the Pyramids. From there the road goes to Alexandria past Mena House. The camp is on that road, not far from the terminal."

I thanked her and decided to try my luck right away. I easily found the tram that trundled its way to the Pyramids. The desert soon took over from the shabby suburbs, but the tramline and parallel road were still lined with honky-tonks, bars and nightclubs. Here and there, I got a glimpse of the distant Pyramids. Eventually, the nightclubs petered out and now the nearby Pyramids beckoned in their enigmatic majesty.

But that day they beckoned in vain. My heart was set on finding Ruth. I left the tram at the terminal, turned my back to the Pyramids and started to walk along the road to Alexandria, past the Mena House Hotel. Set somewhat incongruously in a sandy desert, that old-fashioned hotel, an ornate stone building with balustrades and canopied balconies, basked in the company of waving palm trees, through which I spied blue swimming pools and red clay tennis courts. Edwardian globetrotters had made the Mena House Hotel famous, like Sheppherd's Hotel in Cairo and the Raffles Hotel in

Singapore. I thought how nice it would be to go swimming there with Ruth, but suspected that it would be "out of bounds" for all but officers.

The notion of swimming in a cool pool may well have arisen because of the discomfort of walking on an asphalt road, which Cairo's early summer heat had softened to the consistency of semi-ripe camembert. Sweat trickled down inside my khaki tunic and under my collar and tie. Well, it won't be long, I thought. The blonde in the club had said the camp was quite near the terminal.

But "near" is a relative concept. What must have seemed near to her, driving to the camp in the comfort of a staff car, probably amused by the flirtations of the officers she drove, did not seem at all near to me. I must have walked an hour in the broiling midday sun, not daring to take off my tunic or tie in case an officer drove by and stopped me for non-regulation dress. But I was determined to get there. In the end, the gate of a large, barbed wire fenced camp appeared through the rivers of sweat running down my forehead into my eyes.

The guard at the gate asked me for a "movement order," written authority to enter the camp. I had none, but told him why I had come. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Sorry, Corp, can't let you in. Why don't you walk a little further along the fence and call to one of the ATS girls. They would know her and send her to you. I won't raise an alarm about you talking to them through the fence."

I thanked him and did what he suggested. The girl who soon came to the fence was English and did not know Ruth. "You say she is from Palestine? Wait, I'll call one of the girls from there."

She walked away and soon came back with another girl, who asked me in Hebrew what I wanted.

"I'm looking for an ATS girl from Palestine by the name of Ruth Tetliss. She is supposed to be stationed here. Do you know her?"

"Of course I do. But Ruth is away just now. She is driving a lorry in a convoy to Lebanon."

My heart sank. "Oh dear! And I have come all the way from Tehran to find her! Any idea when she is likely to be back?"

"Difficult to say. It takes about three days to get there and three days back, with a day in between. I guess she should be back in three days or so."

That wasn't so bad after all. "Would you be good enough to give her a message from me when she returns? Tell her that Erich has

come to see her and that I will be going to the Jewish Services Club each day from 3-6 in the afternoon. She should meet me there as soon as she comes back. I am only on leave here for another week. I very much hope she'll be able to come."

"Sure, I'll tell her. Won't you come in for a drink in the NAAFI? You look very hot."

I shook my head. "I wish I could, but they won't let me in. I don't have a movement order. But if you could bring me a drink I'd appreciate it — I have walked all the way from Mena House!"

The girl was duly impressed, and fetched me a lovely bottle of lemonade. What was more important, she said that in a few minutes some of her mates were going to drive their lorries to Cairo and that I could get a lift into town. That and the lemonade probably saved me from heatstroke.

The next day, I started my vigil at the Club. I ate my way through the various desserts the good club ladies offered, which was no hardship, and became an honorary member of several round-table groups of habitués. We discussed important questions of the day, such as where to find best ice cream in Cairo (at Groppi's) and how to avoid having to salute an officer (by pretending to tie a shoelace). Each evening I returned to Heliopolis to "sleep around" in any vacant bed available.

Although I was constantly on the lookout for Ruth while in the Club, when she did appear on the third day, as forecast, it caught me by surprise. I had just been at the counter and was carrying a tray with cake and coffee, when suddenly I stood face to face with her. She had come in with a group of ATS girls, chatting animatedly. My hands must have opened as wide as my eyes and mouth, because I dropped the tray in a clatter on the floor, spattering us all. The girls squealed and jumped back. But my apologies and attempts to clean up at least helped us get over the awkwardness of the reunion. Soon we sat at a table, just the two of us, trying to catch up with all that had happened since we had last met.

Ruth looked very pretty in her uniform and seemed to have changed from a diffident teenager to a self-assured young woman. I suppose that driving three-ton lorries (before the invention of power steering!) and living in the big world of Cairo must have contributed to that. She was clearly happy to see me again and I was full of undiluted joy. Although she made no recriminations, I repeated what I had said in my letter, that I regretted my foolishness in breaking off our relationship and that I very much hoped that we could resume it.

From then on, we met every evening for the remainder of my leave. On the last evening, we agreed to consider ourselves engaged. I promised that I would try hard to get posted back to Egypt, although there was no way to know how long that would take. In the meantime, we promised to write each other often. As soon as the war ended, we would get married.

It may perhaps seem a little strange that we decided so quickly to get married. But in the insecure world in which we lived, and without any close family to fall back on for support, marriage seemed to us a haven of security that would give us strength and comfort. Perhaps there was also something ordained about it. It was only after our marriage that Ruth confided to me that my mother had said to her on several occasions that she thought we would make a good pair.

Another strange thing is that, while I remember so many details of what happened during the war to me and around me, my recollections seem a bit hazy after that meeting with Ruth, as if everything else had become secondary and only our relations really mattered. But it could also be that subsequent traumatic events have blurred my memory, a sort of self-defence against painful recollections.

While I do not remember how I got back to Tehran, I do remember that it was wrenching to leave Cairo and Ruth. But at least I had the memories of our reunion and of the evenings we spent together, and more happiness to look forward to. I didn't know how I would manage to get posted to Cairo or at least to Egypt, but was determined to keep my eyes and ears open for a suitable opportunity.

Such an opportunity arose quite soon. One of the advantages of being a corporal with a mostly absent boss was that I was the first to see the incoming mail and with it things that might otherwise not have come to my notice. One day, the mail included a circular letter from Headquarters requesting Senior MET Officers to recommend experienced weather observers with a good knowledge of mathematics and physics to be sent to the first Middle East weather forecasters course, to be held in Cairo later that year. My heart gave a little jump when I read that letter. Here was a God-sent opportunity to be near Ruth and, at the same time, to take a big step ahead in my profession. It even held the promise of a promotion to sergeant if I passed the course satisfactorily! I had no doubt that I would be able to do that. When I compared my science background with that of British chaps, I found that what the good old Viennese Gymnasium

had taught me and what the Technion in Haifa had added matched up favourably with the so-called "Inter-BSc" education in Britain.

I raised the matter with my boss when he came on his next guest visit. As I had expected, it did not make him deliriously happy. For him it meant losing a tolerably efficient Corporal and having to train a new one, reducing his precious freedom to attend to his business in town. But he was a decent man, saw my keenness to get on the course and admitted that I had a good chance of being accepted. So he signed the letter I had already prepared and asked me to prepare another one requesting a new Corporal for dispatch as soon as my posting came through.

Then started the agony of waiting for the reply from Headquarters. I had written to Ruth immediately when the possibility of being sent to Cairo surfaced and her replies showed that she was equally anxious for it to come about. Luckily, it didn't take too long for the posting to arrive. Overjoyed, I made the rounds in Tehran to say good-bye to those with whom I still had contact, including the kind German lady who had warned me of the matrimonial designs of Mrs. Kratz, and, of course, my pupils at the university.

I flew once more over the mountains of Persia towards the south, only this time as a passenger in a real airliner. Not that it made all that much difference to the comfort of my seat. The aircraft had been overbooked and I had to sit on the doorstep of the entrance to the pilot's cabin, facing all the passengers and feeling a bit silly. But as I watched the mountain peaks gliding past the nearest window, I forgot about my awkward position and basked in the anticipation of joys to come.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 32

IT is said that, when arriving in Vienna from the Balkans, Vienna seems like the first civilized city along the route, while when arriving in Vienna from Germany, it seems like the first outpost of the Balkans. Something similar could be said about Cairo. Coming from the East, its high-rise buildings, department stores and trams make it seem like a western metropolis; coming from the West, it appears very Middle Eastern indeed.

I knew I was back in the bosom of western civilization when I woke up after my first night in RAF Station Heliopolis bitten all over by bedbugs. The poor things must have been starved. I had slept in one of the camp's former "married quarters," which had been empty since the beginning of the war, when families were sent back to Britain. But I didn't really care, being happy to attend the weather forecasters' course in Heliopolis, and looking forward to seeing Ruth.

Ruth and I met the first evening after my return and solemnly pledged to restrict our further meetings to once a week, so as not to interfere with my studies. Surprisingly, we stuck to that pledge, in part because the course turned out to be so tough that I needed to study really hard to pass the exams. Although I had an adequate grounding in math, the course went way beyond anything I had learned before. I had to memorize a lot of formulas and derivations. I also had to practice many hours in order to draw flowing isobars, not having much natural talent at free-hand drawing.

Our inability to meet as often as we would have liked — and hardly ever under conditions that allowed us to display our feelings fully — caused us great frustration. We soon agreed to advance the time of our wedding from *the end of the war* to *the end of the course*. Ruth's terms of enlistment in the ATS required her to quit when she got married, but she didn't seem to mind, particularly as her marriage to me would result in a family allowance from the RAF.

We also had a more difficult decision to make. During my four years in the RAF, I had come to know — and like — the British way of life. It compared favourably not only with life in Central Europe,

but even more with what I had seen of life in Palestine. My experiences with the Haifa Technion and Trade Union bureaucracies, the low standard of living, and the prospects of continuous fighting among Jews, Arabs and Britons, had made me want to move to Britain after the war. In fact, I had obtained, and was on the brink of submitting, an application for post-war employment with the British Civil Service.

For Ruth, such a thought was an anathema. Palestine to her meant liberation and salvation. She would not even consider leaving it for any other country. Moreover, she had grown to like the kibbutz way of life, which she regarded as healthier than town life, both physically and spiritually.

This question took many of our weekly meetings to resolve — to the detriment of more pleasant activities — and eventually ended in a compromise. We would remain in Palestine but live in a city, not on a kibbutz. We had no idea how we would get by, neither of us having any real profession. At that time, I did not see meteorology as a peacetime occupation. But we were young and optimistic and, like Mr. Micawber, believed that something would turn up.

I contacted the Jewish Army Chaplain to make the necessary arrangements for our wedding. As Ruth was under 21, he asked for her parents' consent. We could not furnish that, of course, as her mother had remained in Vienna. Eventually, the Rabbi relented. He realized that this was a very sensitive time for both of us. The Allied invasion of Europe had recently begun. Our thoughts were very much on what was happening in Europe at the front and on what might be happening, or might already have happened, beyond it.

Our wedding took place the day after the final exam. A kind Jewish couple whom we had met in the Services Club put their home and garden at our disposal. A few of Ruth's ATS friends and some RAF chaps from Heliopolis attended, four of whom held the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy. I was terribly excited, and didn't quite know what I was doing. For the ceremony, the Rabbi had sent me to buy a bottle of wine (the bride and the groom sip wine from a glass, which is afterwards smashed for luck). To everyone's consternation, I returned with a bottle of St. George's wine, complete with prominent cross — not a wine very suitable for a Jewish wedding ceremony.

And where did we spend our honeymoon (or rather "honey-weekend")? In Mena House Hotel, of course! I had been right to suppose that it was "officers only," but that did not exclude the ladies of the ATS, and an exception was made for newly promoted Sergeant

Schwarz accompanying one of those ladies. I don't recall much of the inside of the hotel. We had a large, very old-fashioned bedroom with wooden shutters closed tightly against the cruel Egyptian sun. A weak bulb sat in a glass chandelier, dimly illuminating a pyramidal mosquito net suspended from a single hook in the immensely high ceiling, which enveloped the bed and its occupants in a dank smell and stifling heat. But when the red-sashed and fezed waiter came with early morning tea, one could open the shutters, let in the cooler morning air and refresh one's eyes by looking out on palm trees and hibiscus bushes framing the distant pyramids.

Soon after our wedding, we had to separate again. Ruth returned to civilian life in Palestine, while I went on to my first post as a weather forecaster in RAF Headquarters in Alexandria. There I joined the small staff to provide weather briefings for the operations room. On the back of a wall-size transparent chart of the Eastern Mediterranean, we mounted toy planes, clouds, thunderstorms and other weather features for operations such as massed bomber raids on the Romanian oil fields in Ploesti.

The Chief of the MET Office, Squadron Leader Jenkinson, was a very intelligent but highly idiosyncratic man, who had run afoul of the RAF powers by wishing to marry a local Greek lady. They posted him for a year to Khartoum in the Sudan, but that had not cooled his ardour for the Greek lady. He married her upon his return and fathered a daughter, whom he named Nepheli, meaning "cloud" in Greek — thus emphasizing his love for things Greek and meteorology.

For the first few days after my arrival, he made me work by his side and write out the same forecasts, so that he could check the quality of my work. When I proudly handed him my first one (fog, starting at 0200 GMT), he gave it a look and said only one word: "rubbish." I went over it, thought that perhaps I had been too pessimistic about the time when the fog would appear and made it an hour later. "Still rubbish." And so it went, to my great vexation, until he deigned to explain why in his view there was no chance of fog at all. To make matters worse, he turned out to be quite right.

I learned a lot from him and from my work in that office. I spent most of my time there, hardly going to town, as I wanted to save money for my next leave to Palestine. When that came, I rushed to join Ruth in Jerusalem, where she was sharing a flat with a girl friend from her old kibbutz. Ruth had found a job in a shoe store, about which she told hilarious stories, including one about the

daughter of the owner who loved to sing and later became a famous opera singer by the name of Hilde Zadek. The week's leave passed all too quickly.

Soon after my return from leave, I received a new posting, this time to RAF Station Beirut. Our office there was high up in the modern terminal building of Beirut's aerodrome, which the RAF had taken over. The runway ended at a cliff with a steep drop to the sea, which caused aircraft to vanish suddenly after they took off. An aircraft, losing the so called "ground effect," would dip down toward sea level and rise again above the horizon when it had obtained sufficient lift from the sea surface.

The little I saw of Beirut I liked. I also found it interesting to compare what the French colonizers had brought to Lebanon with what the British had brought to Palestine. The latter had brought honest administration and good roads, while the former good food and wine. There was also much more fraternization and intermarriage between rulers and ruled in Beirut.

Beirut's landscape reminded me of Haifa. Beirut sits on the slopes of a wooded mountain, Mount Lebanon, from which King Solomon got the cedar wood for his temple. A ski resort atop the mountains bore the name *Les Cedres*, as well as a few actual cedars. Our Senior MET Officer, Squadron Leader Fish, a well educated person, took us there and also to Maronite monasteries in the mountains and Catholic ones in the Bekaa valley (where excellent red wine was made), to the magnificent Roman ruins at Baalbeck, and to Damascus.

In early 1945, I was told that I could apply for a commission because most forecasters in the RAF were officers and my sergeant's stripes were somewhat of an anomaly. I quickly applied and it did not take long before I was called to appear at a "Commissioning Board" at RAF Headquarters Levant in Jerusalem.

The Headquarters was located in a portion of a venerable grey-stone convent facing the old city and its crenellated wall near the Damascus Gate. I arrived late one evening and stayed the night in a simple room that must have been a nun's cell, as it contained little else than a cot, a chair and a crucifix on the wall. When I awoke the next morning and looked out of the window, it seemed that the Lord had acted. There had been a heavy snowfall, a relatively rare event in Jerusalem. The city wall and the buildings beyond it, including the Byzantine cupolas of the Holy Sepulchre, took on a very Christmassy look.

I was lucky not to be the first one called before the Board. This gave me the chance to pump the one who went before me, a sergeant whom I knew from the course, about the questions he had gotten. He was a bit of a "bolshie" and sounded very indignant about the class-consciousness of the examiners. They had asked him what schools he had attended and what newspaper he read. To the latter question, he answered carefully, if obliquely, that *The Times* was a good paper. But he said that his patience ran out when they asked him what games he played. He answered "darts and ludo," rather than rugby, soccer or some other public school sports they had wanted to hear!

When my turn came, I gave a smart salute to the three senior officers seated behind a table. They made me sit down and started to ask questions about my education, interests, etc. They were clearly at a loss about me, as I did not easily fit any of their British class labels. When the presiding officer asked whether the others had any further questions, one said:

"Yes, I'd like to know a little more about your background, Sergeant Schwarz. What did your father do?"

"He was a professor of mathematics in Vienna, Sir."

"And why did you leave Vienna?"

A silly question. I wondered whether it might help to underline my time in the Boy Scouts, which were, after all, a British invention. "Well, as you know, when Hitler came to power in Austria, there began a general persecution of the Jews. Although at first it did not really affect me directly, I suddenly needed to leave when the Nazis found a list of former Boy Scouts who had continued to meet clandestinely. My name was on that list, which gave them enough reason to arrest me and send me to a concentration camp. I left as quickly as I could, in the hope of being able to study abroad."

"Oh, so you were a Boy Scout?" said one of the officers.

"Yes, Sir, from my eighth year to the time I left at eighteen — Cub Scout, Boy Scout and Rover Scout."

"I see. Do you think it's a good thing for boys to be in the Scouts?"

"Certainly, Sir. I think every boy should have the chance."

"I quite agree!" He then turned to the presiding officer and announced, "I have no further questions."

The presiding officer thanked me and said I could leave, which I did with a copy of the smart salute I gave when entering. As I left the room, I could see out of the corner of my eye the three officers nodding to each other.

Despite these good portents, the wheels of the RAF administration turned very slowly. I did not hear anything about the matter for several months, during which I received *another* posting, this time even nearer to home, namely to RAF Station Aqir (today's Ekron) in the coastal plain of Palestine. This permitted me to go up to Jerusalem nearly every week (it is really "up" — Jerusalem lies in the Judean mountains at an altitude of nearly 3000 feet) so that Ruth and I could look for a flat and work on our post-war plans.

Being in Palestine also allowed me to read *The Palestinian Post*, the local English-language newspaper. That turned out to be more than a nice daily pastime. One day, I chanced upon an advertisement in the paper — the Palestine Mandate Government was looking for meteorologists! I answered the ad immediately and a few days later received an invitation to come to Jerusalem for an interview. I became quite nervous beforehand, given my need to find a post-war job.

Fortunately, that interview was very different from my encounter with the Commissioning Board. Only one person interviewed me, a Mr. Feige, the portly Director of the Palestine Meteorological Service. He conducted the interview quite informally — mostly in German, in fact, as Mr. Feige was a refugee from Breslau, Germany. Having come to Palestine later in life, he had never become very fluent in English and even less in Hebrew. All that relaxed me considerably.

The interview took place over lunch. Mr. Feige started with "Prosit!" and raised a large stein of beer. Then he asked me to tell him about myself and eventually put to me a few questions about meteorology. I was able to answer all of them to his satisfaction until he asked whether I knew what a double rainbow was. I said that I had heard about the phenomenon. Could I tell him whether the sequence of colours in the second rainbow was the same as in the first or did it appear in reverse order? Relaxed by the beer and the friendliness of the interview, I truthfully answered that I was not really sure. He smilingly waved this answer aside and assured me that he appreciated my candour, but not before informing me that the sequence appeared in the reverse order.

Then came the more difficult part of the interview. He said that he needed meteorologists rather urgently. I had no idea how long I would have to serve in the RAF, being committed for the "duration of the present emergency." Mr. Feige ventured that the Palestine Government might prevail upon the British Government to grant me

an early release. In Britain, persons serving in the forces could be given an early discharge if an employer in industry or the government could prove that they required their services and would employ them immediately. He promised to do his best to secure a similar arrangement for me. I thanked him for lunch and left the interview with high hopes, which I eagerly imparted to Ruth when she came home.

One morning a few weeks later, I was called to the Orderly Room, where a cable had come for me. It was from RAF Headquarters Levant and said:

"Sergeant Schwarz posted to Middle East Officer Training School Nr.1 if willing to serve at least one year longer than the present emergency."

I thanked the Orderly Room clerk and went out wondering what to do. To be an officer tempted me greatly as a fitting culmination to a five-year career in the ranks. But an extra year, most of it away from Ruth and possibly in the Far East, where the war with Japan was dragging on? Was it really worth all that?

I was preparing to discuss these questions with Ruth the next day during a weekend trip to Jerusalem. But that afternoon, I was called once more to the Orderly Room and was given another cable, this time from RAF General Headquarters in Cairo:

"Sergeant Schwarz offered an immediate release if willing to accept a position as a meteorologist with the Palestine Mandate Government."

I don't think that many people have had to face two such decisions on the same day. But my choice was not really all that difficult. Though I would have liked to become an officer, the prospect of living with Ruth — under favourable economic conditions — attracted me much more. I saw no need to consult her, because I knew that she would want me to join her as soon as possible in Jerusalem.

With one delay after another, it took until November 1945 for my release to come through. By then, the war had ended in Europe as well as in the Far East. While the former was always foremost in our minds, the latter was far away and meant relatively little to us. We were of course very much centred on our own young lives, but were also keen to learn about the fate of our families. We should hear about that soon. For my discharge from the RAF, I went back to RAF Station Ramleh, where I had been handed my first ill-fitting uniform. I handed back my smart Sergeant's uniform — a nostalgic occasion,

if ever I experienced one. In its place, they gave me a civilian suit, double breasted and pinstriped. It seemed strange afterwards, standing in that suit at the bus station, waiting for the bus to Jerusalem. I felt defenceless and vulnerable, as though if my outer skin had been peeled off.

○○○○○○○

17. Uri, painted by Z. Tadmor (Holon, about 1953)

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand
forget her cunning …

From Psalm 137

BOOK SIX

JERUSALEM AND LYDDA AIRPORT

18. Uri Schwarz, Chief Meteorology Section of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (Montreal, about 1970)

CHAPTER 33

"DO you see something moving down there — there, by the second big bush?" I whispered to Ruth as we peered across the moonlit meadow behind the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem.

It was 1947 and the Arabs were doing their best to foil the UN partition plan by staging attacks on Jews wherever possible. Ruth and I had volunteered for training by the Jewish underground defence force, the *Haganah* (Hebrew for "Defence"). As part of our training, we had guard duty on Mount Scopus. Ruth was used to that kind of activity from her kibbutz days and enjoyed every minute of it. After my Western Desert experience, I had become more cautious (scared?) and saw the duty as necessary more than enjoyable. I did like the bantering admiration we received from our colleagues for being a husband and wife guard-team. Most of the others served their guard duty alone, either being too young to be married or old enough to have wives who could not easily leave chores and kids at home to join them.

We kept staring at the bush. Yes, there really was something moving. Could it be the wind? But then the movement would be more widespread. I brought the whistle to my lips — we trainees were not trusted with the few precious guns the Haganah had — to summon the watch leader. There — again a movement! "Trrrrrrrr," I blew into my whistle as loud as I could.

We assumed that the watch leader would appear from behind us. But no. He rose in front of us, out of the grass! He had been lurking under the bushes, sneaking up on us to test our alertness! In a way, I was sorry that we only had a whistle with us. I would have loved to pay him back for earlier training sessions, when he made us creep towards him, wriggling on our stomachs through the desert grass, scraped by nettles and thorns. When we raised our heads just a little, he fired live bullets that whistled frighteningly close to our ears and made us sink back into the thorns with abandon.

But that night on Mount Scopus eventually passed. In the morning, we returned to Jerusalem by the armoured bus that had

brought us up the evening before. We passed through the dangerous Arab part of the town where, only a few weeks earlier, Arab terrorists had ambushed one of those buses carrying doctors and nurses to the Hadassa hospital and massacred its occupants.

After guard duty, Ruth and I luckily did not have to go to work right away. When I joined her in Jerusalem after my discharge from the RAF, she gave up her work in the shoe store and found a pleasant job with a neighbouring young family as a mother's helper. The parents were both doctors and spent much of their time in the hospital, leaving Ruth, who loved children, to look after their four-year old boy, Dindan (Dan), and two-year old girl, Ruru (Ruth). The morning after our guard duty, one of the parents happily agreed to stay home with the kids. As for me, my forecasting duties with the Palestine Meteorological Service involved shift work, which I could arrange so as to get free time whenever I needed it. I was working independently by then, after an initial period when I had been doubled up with an experienced forecaster, who tested my forecasting prowess and taught me local know-how.

Or at least that was the explanation Mr. Feige gave me for teaming me with old Mr. Juliusberger, who, like Mr. Feige and the other three forecasters, were German Jews, or "Jeckes" as these are still known in Israel. (I don't know where the term comes from; perhaps from *jacke*, meaning jacket, which the overly correct Jeckes wore even in summer, when others wore shirtsleeves or less.) Most employees in the middle echelon (climatologists, administrators, instrument experts, etc.) were also Jeckes, interspersed with a few Polish and Russian Jews. Arabs usually filled the positions of wireless operators, observers and chart plotters. I heard little or no Hebrew at that time in the MET Service; the Jeckes spoke German among themselves and mostly English with other government officials and the Arabs.

In fact, I was the first non-German to invade the august circle of MET Jeckes. Later, as the service grew, more Central and East European Jews and even Sabras (Jews born in Palestine) followed. Jeckes still got preference, not because they were trained meteorologists, but because they usually had better education and learned their new duties more easily. The MET Jeckes, who saw themselves as *la creme de la creme*, heirs to German science and culture, looked at me with some suspicion at first ("Are you a real Viennese? Not Polish, perhaps, or, God forbid, of Romanian descent?"). But eventually I became an "honorary Jecke" and managed all right. I even got to like some of them.

Mr. Feige and the core of the MET Jeckes had actually founded the Service. They had come in the early 1930s as part of a support team for glider pilots participating in Jewish Olympic games, the so-called *Makkabiade* (from Yehuda Makkabi). It gave them a way out of Nazi Germany. They remained in Palestine afterwards, where the British Mandate Government hired them en bloc to establish the Service.

This common background made the Jecke core a closely-knit group. Most of them lived together in a house that had been requisitioned for them by the Government. But despite such close contact they retained their German stiffness. After many years they still addressed each other as "Sie," or "Herr Feige," "Herr Gutfeld," "Herr Steinitz," etc. And of course "Herr Juliusberger," who, although not that old, was already a little senile and soon let me do all the work while he surreptitiously munched bits of chocolate from a supply he kept hidden in the chart drawer. That had of course been Mr. Feige's purpose. At first the arrangement did not bother me too much, because I was grateful to have been accepted as a forecaster without having had proper university training. But it soon came to light that the others were not Herr Doctors either, whereupon I began to feel exploited and to press for increases in status and rank, which were granted only slowly, bit by bit.

But we had other perks, particularly our living quarters. Soon after I started to work, tall and balding Mr. Gutfeld, who acted as Mr. Feige's second-in-command, asked me where I was living. When I told him that we were looking for a place, he intimated that something could be arranged. And soon Ruth and I moved into a little ground floor flat in the house neighbouring the "Jecke-bourg," which the Mandate Government owned. The upper portion of the building housed the Spanish Consulate. Mr. Gutfeld had been a bit apologetic about its small size (a room entered directly from the back garden, a small kitchen and a bathroom) and also about another feature. The flat had previously served as a small canteen and the living-cum-bedroom had folding shutters that opened on to the entrance hall of the building.

"I hope you won't feel insecure, Schwarz." (In view of my youth, the Jeckes did not refer to me as *Herr* Schwarz.) "The shutters seem quite strong, and you have a strong, young neighbour who can help defend you and Ruth. He is one of our best chart plotters, Yassir Abu-Arob," Mr. Gutfeld assured me, smiling benevolently.

Actually, the news that our neighbour was a young Arab worried us a little at first. But we soon got to know Yassir well. He

was not only good looking, with curly black hair and open blue eyes, but also open-minded, interested in Western science and culture. He read and discussed Freud and Einstein and was generally pleasant and helpful. Strangely enough, his attitude would change for a few days every month during the periodic visits of his father from the little Galilean mountain village where the Abu-Arobs lived. We caught glimpses through the garden window of father and son sitting on the carpet in their sparsely furnished room under the weak light of a bare bulb. Through the wall came the musical cadenzas of the Koran till late into the night. After his father left, Yassir would be sullen and xenophobic for a few days, but would mellow gradually until his former debonair self re-emerged.

Ruth and I were very happy in that small flat. We created our own little world, separated from the big one outside by the overgrown enclosed garden. All sorts of herbs grew wild in the garden and released their fragrance into the warm Jerusalem summer air, making it an enchanted place. Some of the proliferating greenery grew higher than the windows, bathing the flat in green light as if we lived on the bottom of the sea. The thick walls of the old building kept it cool even on days when the *khamsin*, the dreaded oven-hot wind from the Arabian desert, blew across the Judean hills and whistled through the gates of the old city wall, past the light pink granite houses of the new town, heating everything to nearly oven temperatures.

At first we owned very little furniture, apart from a couple of beds that we bought from the few pounds I had received as a good-bye present from the RAF. The rest had to wait until my first paycheck. In the meantime, we constructed tables out of suitcases and cardboard boxes, putting cheap tablecloths over them. We placed a little vase with wildflowers on the living room "table" and stuck a few reproductions on the wall with thumbtacks. The room looked warm and cozy, at least to us.

To improve our security, Yassir helped me fasten a large metal sheet over the wooden shutters. The wooden counter below the shutters now formed a useful shelf on which we put books and knickknacks. One of our two beds stood along the wall below the shelf and the other at right angles to it; covered with bright bed-covers, they served as sofas during the day.

We were like children playing house. Every addition to the furniture or to our few kitchen utensils was a meaningful joy, to be played with or admired for a long time. At night we would fall asleep in each others' arms like tired babes. Even our lovemaking had

something childish because of our inexperience and shyness, in particular Ruth's. She would never undress completely in front of me, perhaps because her chubbiness made her feel that she was not pretty enough, or perhaps because of incidents in foster homes during her youth or on the old Danube steamer when she fled Europe.

During our early days in Jerusalem, we managed to contact our remaining family members in Europe, including my step-sister Hilda in Split, Uncle Rudi in Holland and eventually my step-sister Hedi and her husband and daughter in Austria. Hedi and her daughter had been separated from husband Ernst as they fled separately from Budapest, where they had been living during the latter part of the war, he as an employee of the German news agency. Some months later they had met up with each other miraculously in a refugee camp in Salzburg.

From Hilda came the first concrete news about my mother. Shortly after the German occupation of Yugoslavia, SS troops had surrounded the refugee camp near the town of Sabac, where Ruth had been my mother's companion for a short time. The troops had shot all the inmates. Although we had expected something like that, it was a blow that I have really never gotten over. It has remained with me, together with a dull feeling of guilt for having left her alone in Vienna and not having been able to do more to save her, a feeling that will be with me for the rest of my life.

Eventually I also heard from Bettina. It was a moving story. When Italy entered the war, Mussolini's fascists interned her father in a concentration camp in southern Italy. Bettina and her mother moved to a little village close-by. In the meantime, her former boy-friend who had become a senior official in the fascist trade union movement re-appeared in Bettina's life and helped them make her father's condition more bearable. After Mussolini's fall and the father's release, she married the man and raised a family. I hoped that her marriage was a "happy ending" for her and not merely an act of gratefulness.

OOOOOOO

CHAPTER 34

"DO you really think the British will ever quit Palestine? Not on your life! It is far too important to them as a staging post to India and as a safe-guard for the Suez Canal, now that King Farouk of Egypt is starting to feel more independent."

Jochanan, the youngest member of our little dinner party, voiced the opinion of many Jews who believed — and perhaps secretly hoped — that the British would never leave the country. They were mostly German and Western European Jews, for whom British withdrawal would mean anarchy, war with the Arabs and quite possibly defeat.

"They may well want to stay, but we will make them change their minds and pack up and go. Just wait and see." That was Shlomo, the Warsaw Ghetto survivor, whom we suspected of being a member of the underground right-wing terrorist group, *Irgun*. The rest of us were members of the *Haganah*, the underground army of the Jewish population in general, but that movement was a defence force and not inclined to aggressive or terrorist attacks.

The discussion continued after the dinner party, and probably echoed many discussions of the day. It was autumn of 1947, the time of the Jewish high holidays, and as the only married couple of the younger set in the Met Service, we had become a focal point for them. Despite her youth, Ruth had developed into a sort of mother confessor for many of the young men, some of whom I taught weather forecasting in courses that the Service had arranged to create a larger body of professionals.

A number of them, like Werner (later Michael) Levi, had been weather observers in the RAF. As I mentioned earlier, Levi and I had met during the war when I passed through Iraq; we chatted in German while playing chess in the NAAFI. Others came from different British army units or from abroad. There were also a few native-born youngsters, like 18-year-old Yehuda Tokatly, whose intelligence and fluency in Hebrew helped him become Director of the Service many years later. Because of the war, few of them had any university

background, so we augmented the forecaster training with courses in mathematics and physics, subjects in which Herr Steinitz and some others of my older Jecke colleagues excelled. I liked teaching meteorology and would later teach not only young forecasters but also aircrews who, at a time when aircraft did not yet fly "above the weather," needed adequate knowledge of meteorology to cope with turbulence, icing and other hazards of low level flights.

Over all this spread, like a grey fog that thickened from day to day, our worries about the future of Palestine. The British ultimately decided to relinquish their status as Mandate Power and the United Nations was considering the subsequent fate of the territory. Various underground armies, Arab as well as Jewish, busily prepared for the day when open fighting would break out, and terrorist attacks kept the country, particularly the British police and military, on edge. My personal fate was entirely bound up with that of the Jewish population. But after more than five years in the British forces, I found it difficult to revile them for their harsh actions in trying to keep the peace, and to accept being reviled by them as an obstreperous native.

But the British had to do their duty, just like we did. Mine sometimes included guarding the approaches to the Jewish part of Jerusalem against Arab marauders. With a handful of others, I patrolled the quiet streets at night. We would listen carefully for the steps of British soldiers that would pass by from time to time, too loud to be effective in catching Arab gangs that would melt into dark alleys at their approach. We also made ourselves scarce when we heard their hobnailed boots on the cobblestone pavement because we did not want to be relieved of our precious few *Haganah* guns.

Once we were not quick enough. The five or six of us were lined up on the side of the road by a burly sergeant, who led a patrol of young conscripts.

"All right, you bastards, line up and we'll check you over. Smith, search them for guns. And you fuckers raise your arms above your bloody heads, see?"

As it happened, that time I was the only one carrying a revolver. It was fairly dark and I succeeded in dropping it quietly behind me into a grassy ditch before raising my arms. The search thus produced nothing. The sergeant told his men to let us go, which they did with curses and kicks, reminding me painfully of the episode a few years earlier in Nazi Vienna, when storm troopers had let me go after having made me carry an anti-Semitic placard in front of a Jewish store.

My fellow watchmen congratulated me for getting rid of the gun, which we soon retrieved. If the patrol had found it, we could have landed in prison. But I felt too incensed about our treatment by my former comrades-in-arms to enjoy the praise.

The tensions caused a nearly complete break in personal relations between Arabs and Jews in the Meteorological Service and in other departments of the British Mandate Government. Both sides regretted it. The Arabs were under particularly strong pressure to have no personal contacts with us. Still, friendship and goodwill sometimes transcended these barriers.

In November 1947, the U.N. formally approved the partition of Palestine into an Arab and Jewish State. While the Jews rejoiced in obtaining statehood — even the small, truncated State allotted to them, and even without Jerusalem, which was to be internationalized — the Arabs objected violently, claiming all of Palestine as their heritage. The day the U.N. decision became known, I was on forecasting duty in our downtown office, in an area inhabited mainly by Arabs. Foreseeing unrest, the British Mandate Government decided to close its offices at midday, sending all of us home.

As we left, crowds of Arabs had gathered on the pavement facing us across a small square, shouting curses and waving sticks. It looked ugly and I was clearly not the only scared person among the 30 or 40 of us, including several women. In situations like these, personalities often reveal unexpected sides. One of our colleagues, a middle-aged professor of mathematics from Hungary who had recently joined our Service and who had always been mild-mannered, polite and good-natured, took things in hand:

"Let the women walk in the centre, keep moving straight ahead, and don't look at the Arabs. Just keep walking in an orderly manner; don't run."

This was not shouted, but said in a normal, firm voice. We gladly heeded. He kept talking to me as we moved across the square, about trivial things that had happened during the day in the office, thereby helping me disregard my fear and to emulate his manner. Soon we reached the other side of the square and passed into the Jewish quarter. The Arabs were still shouting at us but, probably impressed by our lack of panic, did not attack us physically.

A growing friendship ensued between me and Yehuda Neumann, the quiet but determined math professor from Hungary. He knew little about meteorology and I was glad to teach him what I knew. I learned even more from him, as I began to adopt his manner,

which had impressed me so much on that difficult day. I learned to appear calm even when I did not feel that way, and what at first may have been difficult soon became second nature.

The political and security situation deteriorated further, particularly for those of us in Jerusalem. The British decided not to co-operate with the U.N. in implementing the partition plan. They did not want to antagonize the Arabs, who held many more cards in the global game than the Jews — oil and the Suez Canal, to name just two. The Arabs had expelled from the Old City the Jewish inhabitants, mostly pious old Hassidim, so that the remaining Jewish part of Jerusalem consisted essentially of the new suburbs around the Old City. Irregular Arab forces, joined by the regular forces of King Abdullah's Arab Legion, soon surrounded the area. The Legionnaires came unhindered from Transjordan and manned the crenellated walls of the Old City, where their red-chequered *keffiyehs* (headdresses) looked like so many tablecloths ready to be spread for a meal of Jews. Our own food became scarce. Convoys had to bring it from Tel Aviv, escorted by primitive armoured cars the *Haganah* had hurriedly built. Usually they were merely converted trucks bearing some newly soldered armour plating.

Now guard duty meant standing through winter nights, facing the Old City wall, which loomed across the valley of Gehennom. On one such night, I clutched a cold rifle, hoping that the time would pass quickly and that the Arab Legion would not shoot. Even during the day, *Haganah* guards patrolled our area, which lay on the border between Arab and Jewish quarters. Arabs and Jews had lived there together before, but most of the Arabs had moved out after a night of panic, when Jewish extremists of the *Irgun* had attacked an Arab quarter in revenge for the murder of a group of unarmed Jews.

That evening there came a knock at our door. It was Mahmoud, our office servant, a fat little man. With him was his even smaller, deeply veiled wife, clutching a baby to her breast. They stood in the entranceway, looking over their shoulders because they did not want to be seen. I had always been on good terms with Mahmoud. He was a helpful and often amusing person. Now I had a chance to repay him for the many little services he had done for me. I readily agreed to put him and his family up for the night. The next day they intended to move to his wife's village in the Galilee, but they feared that the *Irgun* might kill them in their beds before they could leave the quarter. It would not be long before I would receive a similar kindness from an Arab colleague.

One day Mr. Feige called me to his office. His bald head, illuminated by a table lamp, shone like a beacon in the chiaroscuro of the room. He kept the windows shuttered against the strong Jerusalem light that hurt his eyes, which were accustomed to the softer light of a northern German sun. "*Bitte setzen Sie sich*, Herr Schwarz," he said, offering me one of his carefully hoarded cigars, a clear sign that he wanted something from me.

"When were you last at Lydda Airport* doing forecasting duties?"

"Quite a while ago, Herr Feige," I answered. "As you know, the traveling has become very difficult, so Herr Gutfeld arranges the duty rosters in such a way that people stay there as long as possible before the next shift arrives. As a matter of fact, the last time I was in Lydda was before these difficulties started. I have been on special forecasting duty here at Headquarters since."

By "special forecasting duty" I meant forecasting for secret *Haganah* operations, to which some of the more experienced forecasters had been detailed. The winter weather, especially in the Judean hills, could be extremely bad. Heavy rain and occasional snow could slow down or even stall convoys that had not been forewarned about the weather. If trucks had to inch their way in bad weather up the steep ravines leading to Jerusalem, Arab marauders could approach them unseen. Still today, more than 50 years later, the sides of the mountain road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem are littered with the rusty skeletons of burned out trucks and armoured cars. The Israeli government leaves them there as a memento of the life and death struggles that took place in those days.

"Would you mind moving to Lydda for a longer period as the Assistant Chief of the Met Office under Van Ham? You could take your wife with you, of course; we'd get you a service flat at the aerodrome. We would also send a few more forecasters down there as well, so as to keep the need for travel to and from Jerusalem to a minimum."

So that was it. Well, it sounded interesting. As Assistant Chief of the Met Office at the country's largest airport, it would mean a promotion. It would also allow me to do aviation weather forecasting, with which I had become so familiar in the RAF.

---

* Lydda Airport was the main civilian airport in Palestine, located in the coastal plain, near Tel Aviv.

"I think I would like that, Mr. Feige. But would you mind if I first consulted with my wife? Not that I think she will have a different view, particularly if arrangements could be made for her to obtain work there as well."

The latter did not prove difficult. Ruth had been training to become a wireless operator, and the Meteorological Service readily agreed to employ her as one in the Lydda Met Office. In those days, weather stations exchanged their data in Morse code by wireless (or radio, as it is called in North America). Every major Met Office had several wireless operators on duty during each shift to collect the hundreds of weather observations needed to prepare a weather map.

Of course, Ruth and I were sad to leave Jerusalem and our home, where we had lived nearly three years by then. We would also miss the friends we made among the colleagues, many of whom were neighbours. Among them was Ferry Thaller and his wife, Agnes. He had very talented hands and produced, as a hobby, exquisite modern jewelry. He was also, and still is, a talented painter. But we thought it would only be for a few months. Our real concern was the trip to the coast through Arab territory.

This may well be a good time to remember what Jerusalem meant to me, particularly in comparison to the other main cities in the country. Haifa, where I lived when I first came to Palestine, was a place of great physical beauty. But I could never really enjoy it because of homesickness, poverty, worries about family and friends, and doubts about my future. Of Tel Aviv I knew very little at that time, and the little I knew I didn't much care for. Its shabby, modern cement structures compared unfavourably with Jerusalem's stone buildings, which all had to be made of natural stone to keep Jerusalem looking old and venerable. And although Haifa's cement structures were no prettier than Tel Aviv's, they were often hidden by tall pines or cypresses. Even where they were not, I tended to overlook them because of the overwhelming beauty of the slopes of Mount Carmel and the magnificent, curving bay.

I wish I could have seen Jerusalem for the first time from a plane because my first glimpse from the road was so disappointing. The city came into view at the last moment on a drive up the old, narrow road that ascends from the coastal plain. The road climbs through deep ravines flanked by pine trees and a series of rocky switchbacks called the Seven Sisters. Then it makes its way past barren hills crowned by crumbling monasteries, past whitewashed wayside shrines of Moslem holy men, and eventually above terraced

hillsides, where black-clad women tended vines and olive trees. I became increasingly keyed up to get my first glimpse of the holy city, but one turn of the road after another refused to reveal its glory.

When at last a curve showed some straggling white houses on a steep hillside overlooking the road, they were mere dwellings of poor Arab farmers. Then the road led through mean outskirts with low, untidy buildings. Like a chaste woman, Jerusalem hid her charms. Only after I had worked my way through the peripheral areas was I rewarded by the glorious view of the spires and copulas of the Old City, guarded by its Turkish wall and the slender strength of David's tower.

The character of the populations in these three cities seemed to take their cue from the different appearances of the cities. Tel Aviv was, and remains, entirely Jewish. The whole gamut of Jewish diaspora types had found their way to Tel Aviv. I saw many Middle Eastern Jews, indistinguishable from Arabs, except that they wore khaki pants and shirts or dirty western clothes instead of the Arab long shirt-like cloak and headdress. They frequently spoke Arabic among themselves while they sold fruit in the market or carried bales of goods.

Then there were the Western immigrants, often indistinguishable from their former European or North American neighbours in dress, look and language. They carried briefcases as they hurried to meetings. During leisure time, they strolled along the sea front or sat in open-air cafes, where the sea and young people in bathing suits offered the best views in Tel Aviv.

Because of these views, the sea front was not a place to see Tel Aviv's many orthodox Jews, who wore long black caftans and fur hats, even on days when the hot *Khamsin* wind blew in dust clouds from the desert. But they were everywhere else, gesticulating as they argued loudly in Yiddish.

And finally there were sprinklings of young Sabras, boys and girls in very brief khaki shorts, often visitors from kibbutzim looking at the wonders of the big city. They would call to each other in colloquial Hebrew interspersed with Arab curses because Hebrew offers a much less pungent choice in that respect.

All these people seemed to be in constant movement. Rather than slowing them down, the heat acted on them like high temperatures on water molecules, agitating them to faster motion hither and thither. As the temperature and humidity rose, voices grew louder and tempers grew shorter. People tended to be brash, life was

difficult and there was no time for niceties. Once, as I stood in a crammed bus, somebody stepped heavily on my toe. I let out an involuntary "ouch!" Instead of saying "sorry," the toe-stepper muttered, "What's the matter, did I kill ya?" The only relatively cool and quiet refuges were milk bars and sandwich shops, where unfriendly waiters served indifferent food.

From Tel Aviv's beach, I could see Jaffa's sea-wall and the minarets atop it. Though Tel Aviv's twin, Jaffa was an Arab city, separated from Tel Aviv by an invisible barrier that prevented interchange as effectively as barbed wire. Nevertheless, the barbed wire had to be put up when the partition troubles started, and the houses along the wire became a crumbling, haunted no-man's land.

Haifa's shape moulded its character. Built on the slopes of Mount Carmel, its higher and middle portions were Jewish, the lower slopes Arab, and the harbour area an uneasy mixture of the two, co-existing under the nonchalant supervision of tall British policemen. But co-exist they did, and that allowed me to slip occasionally into dark and noisy Arab restaurants to eat the much more interesting, spicy Arab food, wiping my plate clean with left-over bits of pita bread.

Mount Carmel also stratified its Jewish inhabitants. The better they were off, the higher they lived, the rich occupying villas on pine shaded lanes that traversed the peak and stretched many kilometres inland. There it became wilder and emptier and eventually, in startling contrast to its beginning, housed villages of fierce mountain Druses.

The middle class, including many workers in the harbour, refineries and factories of this manufacturing town, lived mostly in apartments on the middle slopes. The higher floors and the flat roofs of the apartment blocks, ideally suited for late-night parties or even sleeping during very hot spells (before air conditioning), allowed unobstructed and exhilarating views of the magnificent bay and the busy harbour.

While both Tel Aviv and Haifa were essentially "new" towns, owing nothing to history, Jerusalem's character rested fully on its antiquity. Every step brought to mind the question of who had walked there before — Canaanite peasants before they were conquered by David, or perhaps King David himself or other members of Judah's royal family? Bearded priests rushing to their temple duties? Rustic Galileans following Jesus to celebrate Passover with him in the holy city? Sword-wielding Roman legionnaires storming through the streets in pursuit of Jewish zealots? The possibilities are endless.

No one with the slightest sense of history or religion can escape these shades of the past.

Of course, these historical associations applied mainly to the Old City, which was now enemy territory. But I knew it quite well from my RAF days, when I had spent a few leaves in an old pilgrim hostel run by silent friars, which featured tall shade trees and cool stone floors. Its approach was by a lane that led from the steps of the steep Via Dolorosa, under the arches of which Jesus carried his cross to Calvary. When I saw it, Via Dolorosa teemed with turbaned Turks, bearded Jews, veiled Arab women, black robed priests of many denominations, gawking tourists and, last but not least, British servicemen and women. The tourists and soldiers were the best customers of the many souvenir shops that lined the narrow road. These places were often no more than dark holes in a wall, where the light falling from the entrance onto the cheap glass rosaries on the counter made them sparkle as if imbued with real heavenly grace.

But even the "new" Jerusalem held meaning and beauty, ancient and modern. The orderly, tree-lined streets of Rechavia, a modern quarter inhabited by well-to-do European immigrants, mostly from Germany, ended abruptly at a steep valley. From there, one looked down onto a cluster of gilded copulas that formed the roof of the Byzantine Monastery of the Cross, standing in a valley among a green wilderness of fig trees and thorn bushes. Retracing one's steps towards the broad road leading past the modern King David Hotel one would get views of Mount Zion, with its imposing church and, a little below, David's Tomb. An elevator ride to the top of the tall, American-built YMCA tower facing the King David hotel afforded a view into the Judean wilderness, with its undulating barren hills that stretch all the way to the mauve coloured horizon, where they fall abruptly to the Jordan river, way below sea-level.

If I would have known that I was to leave all this forever, it would have meant much heartache. And the pain would have been even greater if I would have known that after Jerusalem I would never again feel as rooted in the country, its people — Jews and Arabs — and its history, as I felt during those three years in Jerusalem.

o o o o o o o

CHAPTER 35

OUR vehicle, one of those converted pick-up trucks with armour plating soldered on its top and sides, swayed clumsily as the driver slalomed slowly through a welter of rocks and other obstacles littering the road. There were some ten of us trying to get from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, sitting on benches along the two sides of the truck, swaying with it and hoping it would not turn over. Those sitting next to the two windows, mere slits in the armour plating, gave a running commentary on what they saw outside.

"We are still in the mountain pass. The truck is just starting to swerve — hold on! Ah, we had to pass a burned out vehicle of some sort in the middle of the road!"

A noise outside. "A motorcycle is passing us. He is flagging us down!"

Our truck stopped. We could hear murmurs of talk between the motorcyclist and our driver. "What could it be?" I asked Ruth, "something wrong?" She reassuringly pressed my hand. Of the two of us, and perhaps of all ten, she seemed to be the most relaxed and least scared in our claustrophobic situation. Somehow she infused us with courage, her auburn hair and her smile radiating warmth and confidence. No doubt some of that was due to her experiences during her harrowing flight from Nazi-Europe to Palestine and afterwards the difficult years in the kibbutz, not to mention her time as an army driver. But those aspects of her character went deeper than that — she was born a positive and radiant person.

The truck started again and soon darkness fell, the most dangerous time for sneak attacks against our convoy. There were no more reports from the windows because nothing could be seen except our dimmed headlights and the red light of the truck in front. And so we rumbled on. After some three hours of tension and fear, the lights of Tel Aviv's outskirts flashed past the windows and we breathed sighs of relief.

That night we stayed at the home of a girlfriend of Ruth, who had also left the kibbutz and worked in Tel Aviv's Beth Hachalutzot, a training house where girls learned cooking, housekeeping etc. We

felt relaxed and gay with the dangerous journey from beleaguered Jerusalem behind us. But we still had to get to Lydda Airport, which was about half an hour's drive inland from Tel Aviv.

The next morning we boarded a regular bus — a Jewish bus, that is; there were Arab and Jewish bus companies — which took us to the country's main airport, situated in Arab territory near the town of Lydda. St. George was supposedly martyred there. We hoped that we would not follow his example as we looked skeptically at the lack of armour plating on the bus. But the roads here traversed the remnants of British-policed territory and armoured vehicles were banned. So we had to be satisfied with the usual wire-netting that protected bus windows from stones thrown by Arab urchins and, officially unknown to the British authorities, a couple of *Haganah* guards carrying guns under their jackets.

In that manner we traversed the fertile coastal plain, the "Sharon" as it is called in the Bible, with its orange groves and maize fields, rumbling over rutted and crumbling stone bridges built by Turkish governors, past fenced meadows in which grazing horses neighed at the passing bus.

Then the highway made an abrupt turn and we traveled along a barbed-wire fence guarding the airport runway area. The control tower of Lydda airport appeared in the distance. Soon we approached a gate guarded by British soldiers. They closely inspected the bus, then lifted the boom in front of the gate. Before reaching our destination, the terminal building, we passed a row of neat bungalows, which obviously housed the aerodrome employees. "Not bad, these houses, don't you think?" I said to Ruth, and she nodded agreement. We both looked forward to this change of surroundings, being young and keen to encounter new experiences and challenges.

The bus dropped us in front of the terminal building, which was quite imposing for that time. A couple of chaps in khaki stood in front of it and looked us over. One came towards me and said, " Shalom, I am Shmulik. What's your name?" I introduced Ruth and myself and told him why we had come.

"Oh, so you will be working in the MET office and staying at the airport. Let me give you a piece of advice. You'll be working with Arabs and you better be careful of what you say. Their ears are cocked to learn whatever they can about us, which they pass on quickly to the Arab Higher Command. The two of us are local *Haganah* representatives. If you see anything suspicious or need our help, at least one of us is usually in front or inside the terminal

building. Now, while you show Ruth the office, we will guard your luggage here."

We thanked Shmulik and left him with our suitcases, which contained all the worldly possessions we had brought from Jerusalem.

In the MET office, its chief — burly and jovial Van Ham — welcomed us warmly. He was a Dutch Jew, who had lived for many years in South Africa. He had served in the South African Army during the war and emigrated to Palestine afterwards. We had met before when I came to work some shifts at the airport. Our similar military backgrounds helped us get on well together.

"I am glad to have both of you here. Erich, you may have to work occasional shifts in addition to acting as my deputy. Ruth, you will be a very welcome addition to the wireless section. But you will have to work shifts too, of course. The two of you might not see each other very often!"

Then he introduced us to other members of the staff that were present, among them the senior observer — a tall, heavy-set middle-aged German Jew named Gottdiener (servant of God). That name always amused me. While rare in German, it translates into one of the most common Arab names — "Abdullah".

We were taken with our luggage to the little semi-detached bungalow that was to be our home, one of several houses in the little village made available to permanent workers at the airport. They were simply but adequately furnished. Ruth and I felt that we would have little difficulty getting used to our life there.

What we did not take into account in this assessment were the implications of the warning given to us by Shmulik on our arrival about working in close proximity with Arab colleagues. As it turned out, we would also live in close proximity to them, as they occupied some of the bungalows. Normally that would have been of little concern and might even have made life more colourful and interesting, but not under the present conditions of undeclared war, barely suppressed by British forces in some parts of the country and openly flaring up in others. Fortunately for us, Lydda Airport constituted an important element in the British communications network, so British security forces tried to keep things under control in the region of the airport. Still, as we soon found out from other Jewish airport workers, we lived in frighteningly exposed and dangerous conditions. With the help of local Arab workers, Arab terrorists from nearby villages or from Lydda town could easily infiltrate the airport village at night and sow death and destruction

before the British security forces could be roused. By then, the terrorists would have quietly melted into the night.

To counter this threat, the *Haganah* had set up guard duty rotations that included all airport workers. With other Jewish villagers, we took turns watching at night from our windows. In case of danger, we had arrangements for warning the others and for barricading ourselves in the most easily defended building.

As a result, life at Lydda Airport had a distinctly nightmarish quality. We always had to be on our guard, looking over our shoulders. We mistrusted our Arab co-workers and did not know whether to trust the few Britons in senior positions. In addition, both Ruth and I had to work shifts in the MET office, which made us tired and nervous. It also made me quarrelsome and aggressive, while Ruth, the sunny and cheerful optimist, became dispirited and pessimistic. She would even say sometimes, "I feel that I will never get out of here alive."

Although there were no terrorist incursions, we did have one close brush with death. We had intended to take the bus to Tel Aviv for a day's outing, to soothe our nerves in a calmer and more secure atmosphere. An hour or so before we were to leave, one of my Arab colleagues in the MET office who had always been pleasant and helpful took me aside and said quietly, "Mr. Schwarz, don't take the bus today."

"Why not?" I asked, but he shrugged his shoulders and would not say more.

Still, he had said enough. I told some others who were also planning to take the bus. But they disregarded the warning, as did the *Haganah* members. Soon after the bus left, we heard that Arab marauders attacked it in the open countryside and that several of its occupants had been killed before the bus could limp to safer territory.

There were also some brighter aspects of our lives at Lydda airport, particularly our friendship with Bob.

Bob Butler, former Squadron Leader in the RAF, was the British Deputy Director of the airport. After his demobilization he had decided to stay in Palestine and accept a job with the British Mandate Government. As so often, his decision not to return to Britain was a case of *cherchez la femme*. And Navah Arlosoroff was certainly a woman worth staying for. Small and delicate, with masses of dark hair and even darker eyebrows, she was the daughter of the former head of the Zionist Executive in Palestine, the foremost Jewish

personality in the country. Haim Arlosoroff's gifts of intellect and leadership would have allowed him to rise even higher, and he would probably have contested Ben-Gurion's claim to leadership, had he lived. But a few years earlier, an unknown assassin, who could have been an Arab or a Jewish right-wing extremist, shot him dead while on an evening stroll with his wife on Tel Aviv's sea front.

Navah's warm and straightforward personality complemented Bob's high spirits ideally. Of medium height and more graceful and elegant than athletic, Bob's most noticeable features were his radiant blue eyes and a shock of wavy brown hair. He exuded enthusiasm about many things, including flying — he was an accomplished pilot — sport, love, literature or politics. Educated in one of England's better public schools, Bob represented for me all that was good in the English way of life, as embodied in its educated elite. I admit that his willingness to befriend Ruth and me made me a little proud, in view of our differences in rank during our RAF days. But there was nothing condescending in his behaviour, as there was none a decade later, when Squadron Leader Geoff Oddie, my commander in the Persian Gulf, became my colleague and, later, my boss in ICAO in Montreal as well as a close friend. It seems that education and personal warmth can overcome class-consciousness.

How vibrantly it all started, and how sad it all ended. Bob has been dead now for many years, killed in some obscure part of the Middle East, where he worked as an expert for ICAO. After serving in the Israeli Air Force and helping to found El Al, Israel's airline, Bob and Navah went to live in England, where he joined the Department of Civil Aviation. Then, for reasons I do not know, Bob started to drink and his marriage foundered. I saw him sometimes in Montreal where he came to work for ICAO on a leave of absence from the British Government. His eyes still blazed with fire and enthusiasm when they were not dimmed by drink. And Geoff Oddie, who became at 40 plus ICAO's best skier (never having skied in his life before coming to Canada), died of cancer only a few years after passing the ICAO MET Section chief's mantle to me.

And as for Ruth ...

I remember only too clearly the beginning of that day in early April, some four months after our arrival at Lydda airport. I had come back from night duty in the MET office tired and in low spirits. I was also annoyed at finding Ruth, who should have gone off earlier to her day shift as wireless operator, still at home. We had some harsh words before she left for work and I went to bed to drown myself in sleep.

It could not have been long afterwards that colleagues from the MET office awakened me.

"Come quickly to the terminal building, Ruth has been in an accident!"

Barely awake, I tumbled out of bed. "What kind of an accident?"

"She was struck by a car as she walked to work. She's unconscious. They are trying to give her first aid, but they will have to take her to a hospital as quickly as possible."

From that moment on, everything is in a blur. I saw Ruth, still unconscious, being taken on a stretcher to an ambulance en route to the Beilinson Hospital outside Tel Aviv. I recall being in the back of the ambulance in a sort of stupor. Somehow I had got hold off of her wedding ring that must have been taken off or fallen off her finger. I clutched it in my hand as if I were holding her hand itself. I remember that I did not let go of that ring — except for the little sleep I managed to get — throughout the next few days, constantly holding and pressing it in the palm of my hand.

They told me that she had suffered multiple head fractures and that blood seemed to have seeped into her brain, which they were trying to drain. I spent many hours outside her room. Through friends that came to visit I made contact with the leading brain surgeon of Palestine, who told me that she was in good hands and that there was nothing he could do to help. I saw her only once, lying unconscious, her face distorted by the feeding and draining tubes in nose and cranium. The sight of her made me clutch her ring even more feverishly. And I did not seem to be the only one affected by the pitiful sight of that poor young woman. As I sat outside her room, I remember seeing two unfamiliar nurses coming out. One of them was crying softly and telling the other how affected she was by Ruth's state.

After five days she died without ever having regained consciousness. The doctor who looked after her sat down next to me, trying to give me some words of comfort. He said that there was nothing they could have done to save her and that even if there had been something, she would have lived the rest of her life with an irreparably damaged brain. I nodded as if I understood what he said, but it was like the time when, as an eight-year-old boy, my teacher tried to comfort me after my father's death. I heard the words, but they made little sense, and I just kept nodding my head.

I dimly remember throngs of people at the funeral, probably colleagues and former friends from army days and Ruth's kibbutz.

Then I must have returned to Tel Aviv, where the widowed sister of a colleague put me up in her large Tel Aviv flat. Friends came to talk and console me, but I continued in a stupor. My grief and lack of understanding of why it happened mingled with guilt feelings. Because of me, Ruth had come to live at the airport. Because of me, she had gone to work there. Because of me, she went off that fateful morning with words of anger ringing in her ears.

Guilt feelings were nothing new to me. They always haunted me, about having left my mother to her fate in Vienna, and having left my first love to hers in Italy. It did not matter that none of these actions were voluntary. Nor did it matter that Ruth's forebodings about the airport were fulfilled without me forcing her into coming or staying. And as the years passed, my guilt feelings did not diminish. To the contrary, more were added to them and have contributed greatly to shaping my personality and my fate.

Ruth died on 13 April 1948, one month before Israel's birth. The battles with the Arabs increased in intensity, beleaguered Jerusalem suffered daily bombarding, and the border between Jaffa and Tel Aviv became a war zone. Only by mobilizing its entire Jewish population did Israel survive. And in a way, Israel's survival ensured mine, because it forced me into immediate activity. I joined the fledgling Israeli Air Force, walked with a steel helmet on my head against shrapnel to forecasting duties at Tel Aviv airport, and later, as Lieutenant Uri Schwarz, took charge of the MET office at Ekron, a large air base just vacated by the RAF. It did not make me forget, but it drew me out of my stupor and lethargy. I simply had to act. And being forced to see all the pain and suffering around me decreased my own pain and suffering, because it gave me strength to bear what I saw others bear so courageously.

o o o o o o o

AFTERWORD

Of course, many things happened afterwards, but it was particularly those early years that I wanted to write about. The rest of the story is generally well known to my friends and family, anyway. It is primarily for them that I have endeavoured to get this material into print, which I could not have done without the wonderful encouragement and help of my cousin David Balton, who did a great job editing the material. Thanks, wise and good cousin, and thanks also to your helpful co-editors Averill Craig and Mary McAllister!

Thanks also to so many others who made my life worth living. My second wife, Jetti, a Dutch Holocaust survivor, whose life I was permitted to share for 47 years; the many friends I made all over the world during the 25 years I worked as meteorologist and later Chief of Meteorology in the International Civil Aviation Organization, a UN Agency in Montreal; and afterwards, the many friends I made in Canada during the nearly 20 years I worked, first as the Executive Director and now as Executive Director Emeritus, of the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society in Ottawa. And my dear relatives who survived the Second World War and with whom I was eventually able to become reunited, and my loving friends who supported and still support me. Maybe I will be able to say more about all that in a second volume.

Ottawa, Spring 2002