

Translated excerpt

Christoph Hein
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Ship of Fools

Translated by Linda L. Gaus





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3.

An Escape

In the second to last year of the war, Jonathan Schwarz wanted to leave Berlin unnoticed and make an escape over the mountains with Jakub Silbergstein. They had agreed to climb over the Schienerberg in the Alpine foothills in order to reach Stein am Rhein. The plan was to ride the train and bus to Iznang, spend the night there, and set out at four o'clock in the morning. Then they could cross the border before sunrise, when they suspected – or rather hoped – that there would be less surveillance, and they would reach Castle Hohenklingen at dawn and be able to cross the Rhine bridge near Stein am Rhein an hour later.

Jonathan Schwarz and Jakub Silbergstein were colleagues in the Friedhelm Walter engineering office. Jonathan worked designing turbo pumps for liquid propellant rocket engines, while Jakub was employed in the division concerned with the development and completion of electromechanical rocket relays. The whole Friedhelm Walter engineering office was regarded as

indispensable, even in times of peace, and three months after the start of the war it was classified as *essential to the war effort*, so that the six people employed there who could not provide proof of Aryan descent were not let go but rather were protected as indispensable specialists against a sudden termination of their employment contracts and any pursuit by state officials or party organizations.

Three years later, however, the engineers Goldberg and Zuckermann stopped coming to work. After two days, the boss sent an assistant to their apartments, and the assistant was able to learn from their neighbors that both employees had been arrested at home by the police on Tuesday morning.

Friedhelm Walter then went to police headquarters himself to inquire about these engineers who were indispensable to him. He was told that both men and the wife of the older man were arrested as part of an official administrative action by SS command headquarters and handed over to agents of the *Schutzstaffel*. No one at police headquarters knew anything about the current whereabouts of the three prisoners.

Walter returned to his office, asked his secretary for the official certificates stating that his engineering office and employees were classified as *essential to the war effort*, and presented these papers from the Reich War Ministry at the command headquarters of the Ninth SS Tank Division “Hohenstaufen,” which was based in his part of the city and had requested administrative assistance from police headquarters. He asked the first lieutenant to release his extremely qualified employees because otherwise the development and production of rocket combustion chambers would be jeopardized, which would cause unjustifiable damage to the *Luftwaffe*.

The lieutenant read the papers, which were signed by the general of the technical troops, and took them, after he had knocked briefly, into the next room. Shortly thereafter, Friedhelm Walter heard mocking laughter. The lieutenant appeared again, beckoned Walter over with his index finger, and informed him that the arrest of these two men was as directed. The *Standartenführer* acted based on an order from the Reich leader SS, whereby aliens are not to be employed in any production essential to the war effort in order to prevent sabotage. The *Standartenführer* told him he could use the paper from the Reich War Ministry to wipe his ass. However, he could also appear before the Reich leader SS to advocate personally for his Jews if he wished.

After he got back to the office, Friedhelm Walter called the directors of research and development into the conference room to tell them that their colleagues Goldberg and Zuckermann had been arrested and could no longer work at his company. These two men must be replaced immediately, which in times of war was nearly impossible.

The men at SS command headquarters were only interested in the Aryan descent of his employees; their required specialist qualification was not even worth mentioning. However, he would suffer extremely severe consequences if the controller models for the rocket combustion chambers were not delivered on time and in the required quality. At command headquarters, someone even mentioned the possibility of expropriation of companies essential to the war effort.

Walter told his employees that he had absolutely no chance of recruiting overnight a chemist and a physicist who knew as much as Goldberg and Zuckermann did and who could take over their work immediately. He would personally search the entire Reich for specialists who, even if his efforts should be successful, would require some training time, time that his company

did not have. In the meantime, he would have to redistribute the work of Goldberg and Zuckermann to everyone present. This would not be possible without overtime hours. Therefore, he would work with them and, within the hour, create a back-up plan for the next three weeks.

“We’re at war, gentlemen,” he said, “and the Friedhelm Walter engineering office is essential to the war effort. This gives us certain privileges, as command headquarters explained to me; however, if we fail, if our engines or rocket relays do not work perfectly or we do not deliver on time, we could be brought before a war court. And that means all of us.”

Everyone at his company then knew what had happened to Goldberg and Zuckermann, and everyone suspected why they had been arrested by SS command headquarters.

During the lunch break, Jonathan Schwarz sat down to confer with Jakub Silbergstein. It was clear to both of them that it was possible they could also be arrested and taken to a camp at any time.

“At any time, do you understand?” said Jakub. “We’ve been lucky so far, but we’re on one of their lists. And clearly *essential to the war effort* doesn’t count for anything anymore, at least not for people like you and me.”

Jonathan nodded.

“That means we should disappear. We have to disappear. Without delay. Immediately. We should try to get across the border. Today, Jonathan. Tomorrow may be too late.”

“Across which border?”

“We’ll go to Switzerland. There isn’t any other country for us.”

“And how?”

“Over the mountains, over the Alps. The more difficult the route, the safer it is.”

Jakub suggested climbing through the Alpine foothills, where according to his experience, in that inhospitable and difficult-to-navigate terrain, there would be fewer officials on the border to Switzerland.

Silburgstein was an experienced mountain climber, and he said he knew this part of the Alps like the back of his hand. He had climbed the entire mountain massif from all sides. The Schienerberg was in the foothills, he said, so it would not present any problems for a mountain climber; in fact, it might even be boring. You could cross the area quickly if you had good shoes, run right on across it in order to reach Switzerland. It would also be possible to swim across the lake from Öhningen or to cross the border from Allensbach via Reichenau. However, there you would have to swim across Lake Constance. That’s two kilometers of water, which was doable, but without any baggage at all or with only a waterproof knapsack. He was a mountain climber, he preferred rocks to water, and the Schienerberg was a small mountain that Jonathan could conquer.

They agreed to take the train to Frankfurt that would leave at 6:20 PM.

“Pack only what you need. Money and papers. And only one knapsack, for we have to climb. And one more thing: tell your girl that she should go into hiding somewhere with the baby. With relatives in a village or someplace like that. Somewhere where she’s safe. She herself is not at risk, but your little daughter is.”

An hour after the lunch break and the agreement with Jakub Silbergstein, Jonathan had to throw up. The alarming idea about the danger to him and the very thought that he would have to part from his wife, Yvonne, and his little daughter Kathinka – they had named their daughter

after Kathinka Goethe, the fourth child of the writer they venerated – was so unbearable that suddenly his body twitched convulsively. His colleagues noticed his seizure, saw the twitching of his arms and legs, and his strangely rigid gaze. The manager of his group decided that he should see a doctor immediately and had him taken home in a company car.

Yvonne greeted him in their little apartment; she asked in amazement why he was home early. He reported what he had learned about the arrest of his two colleagues and then told her about the plan that he had discussed with his colleague Jakub.

“You want to leave tonight? But what am I supposed I do? Alone with our baby?”

“You’re probably not in danger, but our Kathinka will be if the authorities find out that I’m her father. You should disappear. Maybe you can take the baby and hide with your grandparents.”

Yvonne Lebinski and Jonathan Schwarz were not married. The laws of the Third Reich forbade them to marry. The Nuremberg Race Law prohibited marriage between Jews and non-Jews, and in order to keep German blood pure, as the law said, extramarital sexual relations were also deemed racial defilement and could be punished with imprisonment, which is why Yvonne had not named the baby’s father at the registry office. Embarrassed and blushing like crazy, she had told the registrar that she only knew the baby’s father’s first name, which caused the registrar to shake her head in contempt. Because Yvonne said that the baby’s father had explained, as his uniform indicated, that he was a sergeant in the *Luftgau* command Rostov, the registrar then officially recorded little Kathinka as of Aryan descent.

With Yvonne’s help, Jonathan packed his knapsack and dressed for the escape. Since he would have to cross mountainous terrain, he selected sturdy clothing and a pair of shoes that

seemed appropriate for an escape across the mountains. He sat in the armchair for half an hour with Yvonne and the baby on his lap, and they parted tearfully.

“Be brave, dear, you will have to take care of our Kathinka.”

“Of course. And when will we see each other again?”

“Soon, Yvonne, very soon. The war will be over soon, the Allies are advancing. Soon Hitler will be defeated, and we will be able to see each other, live together, get married.”

“Be careful, Jonathan.”

“I packed a lot of caution in my knapsack, about a hundred pounds.”

He went to the train station alone; if she had accompanied him, it could have endangered them both. His last words to her were his repeated plea to make sure that she and their daughter stayed safe.

That was the last that Yvonne saw or heard from Jonathan. Where he was, in a prison or a camp, or whether he was still alive, was never determined. Neither his wife nor his parents ever heard anything from him or about him again.

Jakub returned a few days later and resumed his work in Friedhelm Walter’s engineering office. He told his boss and colleagues that he hadn’t been able to call in sick due to violent food poisoning. He was able to work five more months on the rocket relays before he was taken to a work camp near Berlin even though he was *essential to the war effort*.

He had little to say about Jonathan’s whereabouts and fate after their obviously failed attempt to flee. They had gone their separate ways about a kilometer from the border since he, Jakub, was picked up by the border patrol. At that very moment, Jonathan was crouched behind a

bush answering nature's call, so he was able to elude the border guards' attention and escape arrest. They took him, Jakub, to the precinct, interrogated him for hours, searched his baggage and his pockets, and finally sent him back to Berlin.

He suspected, he told Yvonne, that Jonathan had made it across the border unnoticed, because while he was in the precinct, he didn't hear anything about anyone else who had been arrested.

Jonathan's parents – his mother, Chana Schwarz, was an ophthalmologist, his father, Rubin Schwarz, a world-renowned expert in Aramaic language and thirteen new Aramaic languages with a professorship in Jewish Studies in London – decided a few weeks after Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of the Reich not to return to their German homeland. They had pleaded with Jonathan, their only son, to leave Germany after completing his studies in physics in Berlin and his successful Ph.D. defense and join them in England. His father had already secured a position for him at the IOP, the *Physical Society of London*, in anticipation, and a well-paid job at *Vickers-Armstrongs Ltd.*, the most prominent British mechanical engineering company, but their son declined. Jonathan had met Yvonne and therefore wanted to remain in Berlin, plus his work in the engineering office was valued by his boss, Friedhelm Walter, and he was well paid and safe from pursuit since he was an engineer *essential to the war effort*.

However, living together was difficult and nearly impossible for Yvonne and Jonathan. So, they each remained in their own apartments, Yvonne with her parents, where she had a room of her own, and Jonathan in a tiny apartment on the fourth floor in the Bismarckstraße.

In the next five months, Yvonne was denounced by a neighbor twice; this neighbor also reported a case of racial defilement to the local police station. Searches of her parents' apartment, however, found no evidence to support any charge.

During the second search, Yvonne's father, a prominent engineer at the Berlin *Bergmann-Electricitäts-Werke*, was in the apartment and protested the police deployment vehemently. He explained to the officials that the child's father was an officer of the *Luftgau* corps, and that such an outrageous allegation cast a slur on the entire German *Wehrmacht*, something he wouldn't accept without protest. The confident and intimidating presence of the engineer and his threat unsettled the two young police officers. They immediately called off the search and instead warned the neighbor, the older woman who had denounced Yvonne.

One week after Jonathan's escape, Yvonne left her parents' apartment with the baby. Her father had been able to purchase a piece of land near the *Eintracht Orania* community garden; half of an orchard with a small, one-story house. The little house – her father called it her palazzo – had two rooms, a tiny kitchen, and a bathroom with a bathtub and a round wood oven. The house had electricity and water and was therefore habitable. Since there were only simple wooden huts on the other parcels in the community garden, where people were not permitted to stay overnight, and the tenants of the *Eintracht Orania* association weren't working in their gardens during the day in the late fall anyway – they would only come back in the spring – Yvonne was optimistic that she wouldn't be noticed in her new home for the next six months and she could hide from overly curious neighbors who might denounce her.

She was still hoping to get a message from Jonathan soon, but foreign correspondence was difficult and monitored very closely. The letters from her future mother-in-law unsettled her.

Her father-in-law, the famous Judaic scholar, had divorced his wife after taking up a professorial position at Yale University in New Haven, and he had emigrated to the United States. His ex-wife remained in London, still working at the former *Moorfields Eye Hospital*, which was now called the *Royal London Ophthalmic Hospital*, where she and her colleagues could only practice with restrictions, since the building had been partially destroyed during the bombardment of London.

Jonathan's mother maintained an active correspondence with her granddaughter's mother. Thus far, she had not been able to meet either her daughter-in-law or little Kathinka, and she had only photos of both. Her letters always took several weeks to arrive since Great Britain was at war with Germany, and because she did not want to connect Yvonne and her granddaughter to an exiled Jew, she sent her post to Yvonne via a Norwegian friend.

Chana Schwarz told her son's partner that all of her efforts to learn something about Jonathan in Palestine had come up empty. Both her ex-husband and friends at the Jewish Agency, which had been granted the League of Nations mandate to represent Jews in Palestine, had found absolutely no trace of the young man. After four months, Jonathan's mother was sure that her son had killed himself while fleeing Germany or been taken to one of the German concentration camps. She was convinced that Jakub Silbergstein, her son's colleague who had wanted to escape with him and who was allowed to return unharmed to the Walter engineering office after the failed attempt, had betrayed Jonathan. She was certain that he had bought his free passage by denouncing her son. There wasn't the slightest proof of this suspicion, especially since Silbergstein himself was taken to a work camp several months after his return, but the mother succeeded in persuading Yvonne that Jonathan had been betrayed by his colleague.

4.

Fight over a child

After the end of the war, Jonathan Schwarz was declared dead at the insistence of his mother, an action of which Yvonne disapproved and to which she reacted with disgust, since she still hoped that her partner and the father of her daughter was alive and would come back to her and Kathinka someday.

In December 1945, Jonathan's mother traveled back to Berlin for the first time to get to know her granddaughter and her granddaughter's mother.

The two women's encounters ended with name-calling and insults one week after Jonathan's mother's arrival in the bombed-out city. Yvonne had received her daughter's grandmother warmly, but Jonathan's mother, for her part, regarded his girlfriend very cautiously and with mistrust. She devoted herself entirely to the little girl, who looked at her grandmother with big eyes and just as much reticence. The old woman's caresses and constant hugs, combined with her insistence that Kathinka call her "grandma," were uncomfortable for the child.

On the second day of her visit, Jonathan's mother proposed to Yvonne that she take little Kathinka with her to London. She had a large apartment with four rooms and a bathroom there and could take excellent care of the little girl. She would also pay for a nanny for the child, someone who would take care of Kathinka when her grandmother had to work at the hospital. Yvonne had only a one-room apartment, a situation that was not likely to change for years in heavily bombed-out Berlin, plus as just an office assistant in the city administration, she would struggle to fulfill all of her financial obligations.

Yvonne was outraged and rejected this idea as impertinent and vicious, but at each subsequent visit, Jonathan's mother spoke about her desire to take her granddaughter with her. She said that Kathinka was all she had left of her son in the world, while Yvonne was young enough to have more children. The women berated each other so loudly that the little girl burst out in tears and was afraid of her grandmother and wouldn't let her touch her anymore.

After another visit from Jonathan's mother, Yvonne took her daughter to a friend who had a daughter of the same age. She told the grandmother that a child welfare organization had invited her daughter to take a vacation in a home in the Alps; this had been agreed upon months ago.

Although Yvonne feared a kidnapping, she had no idea how she could assert herself against the child's professionally successful grandmother, and she wasn't familiar with the legal situation either. Her city had been divided into four occupation zones; by the three western victors on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other. Once united in the fight against the Third Reich, these powers were now accusing one another of serious violations of international law and human rights violations.

Since Yvonne lived in the Soviet-occupied sector of Berlin, she feared that – if her daughter were kidnapped and taken to London or even Palestine – Great Britain would prevent the return of her daughter. Therefore, she no longer let Kathinka go out by herself, and she accompanied her to the playground, especially since weeks before that, someone had stolen a newly purchased red winter coat from her daughter there.

On that day, she had taken her daughter to the playground and impressed upon her that she was under no circumstances to leave the area. She just wanted to go buy something quickly

and then pick her up. When, after a half hour, she returned to Kathinka, her daughter sat sobbing on the edge of the sandbox without the new coat. Yvonne understood only this much: a woman had taken Kathinka's coat and run away with it.

“Didn't anyone see what happened?”

“Of course they did. Everyone saw it, but nobody helped me.”

“Those pigs. Those damn Nazi pigs,” her mother screamed, “that coat was expensive enough. How am I supposed to buy you a new one? I will have to repair the old one, there's no other choice.”

On the remaining days of Jonathan's mother's stay in Berlin, she and Yvonne fought so much that neither of them made another visit to make up or see one another again. Instead, Yvonne tried to find new accommodations after her mother-in-law departed, to change apartments and live in another part of the city at an address that Jonathan's mother did not know in order to prevent another visit by this hated woman.

5.

A humorless man

Two years after the war, Yvonne met Johannes Goretzka, who had returned after being a prisoner of war; he was a cripple whose right leg had been destroyed by gangrene and who had been taken as an officer cadet-sergeant to the Workuta camp in the north of the Autonomous Soviet Komi Republic.

Since his leg injury made him useless for the pit work required there, after four months he was transferred to a collective camp for German war cripples. In this camp, he drew the notice of German immigrants who were helping the Russian camp management with registration and interrogations. In contrast to nearly all the other prisoners of war, Johannes read the writings of the *National Committee for a Free Germany* with interest and attended all lectures by the communist German emigrants where these Germans talked to the internees about their ideas of a new, completely different Germany. Since the young man was enthusiastic about Stalin, the communist German functionaries decided to send him to the headquarters of the German national committee, which was located in a holiday home of the railway workers' union in Lunowo. A well-known journalist, Rudolf Herrnstadt, who was a bit younger but already held a leading position in the political leadership of the Red Army, taught him there and succeeded in making this passionate follower of the National Socialists into an admirer of Stalin in just a few months, one who even talked about his new convictions so openly and passionately that Arthur Pieck, a German and captain in the Red Army and leader of the National Committee named him his personal secretary.

After the surprisingly successful large-scale attack of the Fifth Shock Army, which under Colonel General Nikolai Bersarin ended the last big battle of World War II victoriously, Bersarin

was named the first City Commander of Berlin. On May 5, Arthur Pieck was flown into Berlin in order to assist the City Commander as an interpreter and advisor. Before his departure, Pieck insisted that his secretary Johannes Goretzka should accompany him. Goretzka had purchased a walking stick at a Moscow farmers' market. It was artfully carved from the limb of a bog oak and seemed so stable that in case of emergency, it could also serve as a powerful club.

Arthur Pieck and his secretary Goretzka worked as Bersarin's aides for six weeks until mid-June, when the Colonel General was killed in a fatal collision between his motorcycle and a truck convoy, and the newly named City Commander, General Alexander Gorbatov, brought along his own assistants and interpreters. Pieck was transferred to the newly established Magistrate of Greater Berlin, and he made sure that Johannes Goretzka was admitted to the Soviet central hospital Beelitz, so that his gangrenous leg could be treated by a specialist and the provisional prosthesis that had been fitted for him in the collective camp for German war cripples during the war would be replaced with an orthopedically correct prosthesis. Then, the party leadership sent him to a one-year course in Marxist-Leninist economics.

Johannes Goretzka, who had become a member of the Communist Party of Germany in the Soviet Union, joined the membership of the newly established Socialist Unity Party just one year after the end of the war. At the end of 1946, he was named department director in the Ministry for Heavy Machinery. Not yet forty years old and bearing the title Dr. of Engineering of metallurgy and ore mining that he had earned in Aachen, as well as the diploma from an abbreviated supplementary study of so-called *ML economics*, he now directed people who were well-trained and experienced and had been working as economists for years and decades. He quickly learned to make up for any specialized knowledge he lacked by making reference to his leadership function or referring to his membership in the Socialist Unity Party.

In May 1947, he met Yvonne Lebinski. On the third Sunday of the month, a sunny, almost summer-like day, Yvonne and three-year-old Kathinka had gone to swim in the Müggelsee and hike through the little forest to the restaurant there. As she wanted to order beverages for herself and the girl in the overfilled restaurant and was searching for free seats, there were just two folding chairs available at a table where a man sat by himself. Yvonne inquired whether they could sit there. The man nodded in friendly fashion and kept reading a pamphlet. But soon the little girl's funny and clever remarks amused him so much that he put his pamphlet away and began talking to the child. He then introduced himself very formally to her mother, standing up in the process and taking a business card from his briefcase and giving it to Yvonne.

On the gold-rimmed card were, below his name, Johannes Goretzka, his home address, and the address of a ministry, which surprised Yvonne. However, she was more impressed by the fact that this man possessed and handed out business cards than by his pompous title. She hadn't seen that since the beginning of the war, and it seemed to her like a sign from another, long-lost world. An irretrievable world. Yesterday's world.

The man inquired whether he could take her and her daughter to lunch. When she nodded hesitantly, he asked when she finished work next Saturday and they agreed to meet at one o'clock that day. She gave him back his business card and he wrote the address of the restaurant, which, as he told her, was a very good restaurant in the Johannisstraße.

"And you'll come along, right?" he asked the little girl as he was standing up and taking his leave with a bow.

On Saturday, Yvonne left work promptly, picked up her daughter, and was at the address he had given her promptly at one o'clock. However, she didn't see a restaurant there or anything that would indicate a restaurant. She pulled out the business card to look at the street name and number again, and since she was standing in front of the right building, she was perplexed and confused. She opened the heavy door to the four-story building and found herself in front of a doorman's desk where an older man sat. He looked at her inquiringly. Yvonne said that she was looking for a restaurant that was supposed to be right here in this building.

The doorman shook his head. "No, no, young lady, you are mistaken. There's no restaurant here. Or did you see a sign for a restaurant on the building?"

"Excuse me please, I must have misunderstood," she said, confused, reaching for her daughter's hand and leaving the building.

"Now I don't know what to do. That man played a joke on us dummies," she said to her daughter outside the door, "so let's go home so that I can cook us something nice."

All day, the sky over Berlin had been a dull gray, which had darkened over the course of the afternoon, and just as they went back out onto the street, it began to pour so hard that she pulled her daughter back and stood under the doorway arch to wait out the shower. Just a few seconds later, a car stopped in front of the building. Johannes Goretzka got out, hurried up to them, and excused himself for arriving ten minutes late.

"Literally at the last second, we received two telegrams that had to be answered quickly. But now let's go eat. And I hope that you're hungry, Kathinka."

"But there's no restaurant here. The doorman told me..."

“What? Come on.”

He opened the door, held it for the two of them, and walked past the doorman’s desk, pulling a small folding card out of his pocket and holding it out briefly. The doorman nodded a greeting.

Goretzka asked his guests to follow him. He turned left down the hall and opened the last door and motioned them in with a smile and an inviting gesture.

Now they were actually in a restaurant. It was a big room with several tables. A passage led to another dining room. All the tables were covered in white tablecloths, with napkins, silverware, and water and wine glasses. Just one person sat at nearly all the tables; three men were sitting at just one of the four-person tables. There were no women at the tables.

A waiter approached them immediately, greeted them, and led them to a table that was clearly reserved for them. He held their chairs for them and asked whether he should get a booster seat for the little girl or a cushion. Then he picked up the menus spread out on the table, opened them, and handed them over.

“What kind of strange restaurant is this, Mr. Goretzka? It’s somewhat mysterious.”

“No, no, it’s not a secret. It’s a kind of cafeteria for the ministries. Admittedly, a fine cafeteria, that’s why I had to reserve a table.”

“A cafeteria? For all employees of the ministries?”

“No, not for everyone. These two rooms would be much too small for that. Let’s say for leading functionaries. Starting with the state secretary. A kind of ministers’ restaurant. – So, now select something, please. For yourself and the little one.”

There were only a few dishes listed on the menu: two soups, three main dishes, and two desserts. Yvonne was surprised at how inexpensive everything was; she never could have eaten in a restaurant so cheaply. She chose a roulade for herself and the noodle plate for her daughter but asked that her daughter be served a sauce without meat instead of goulash.

“And what would you like to drink?” asked Johannes Goretzka, “would you have a glass of wine with me? I’ll order a seltzer for Kathinka, OK?”

“Yes, please. But just one glass of wine.”

They didn’t have to wait long for the food, and the waiter served them their food and wine almost reverentially.

Johannes Goretzka tried hard to entertain Yvonne, telling her about his work as department manager of the State Committee for Heavy Machinery, which in a year or two would become the Ministry for Heavy Machinery in the Soviet occupation zone, and he would probably be named state secretary. With a worried look, he told her about the brutal and inhuman attacks by agents and saboteurs that were hindering their committee’s foundational work.

“It’s a new war that’s coming, Miss Yvonne, a war between East and West,” he said urgently, “and another war about success or failure.”

Yvonne listened to him silently; she had nothing to say about all of this. In her office, nobody talked about politics, and neither she nor any of the secretaries read a newspaper. The

topics of discussion were information about shops with special deliveries, store owners who had a heart for needy young women, and addresses of farmer in nearby villages who were willing to trade flour or even meat for jewelry and valuable clothing.

Now and again Goretzka turned to Kathinka, tried to amuse her with a nursery rhyme, or showed her small tricks with his matchbox, only some of which succeeded. The little girl watched his efforts with interest, kept looking up at his face, but did not react with any remarks; she did not smile, and her expression did not change.

After they had eaten, Goretzka ordered vanilla pudding with fruit for both of them and asked them to excuse him, he had to sit at another table for five minutes. He stood up, greeted some of the guests briefly, then sat down at a table where an older man was sitting in order to discuss something with him.

Yvonne asked her daughter if she liked the uncle.

“He’s so strict,” said the little girl. “Even when he laughs, he isn’t funny.”

“He’s a serious person,” said her mother, “you can’t fool around in such an important profession.”

When Goretzka returned to the table, he excused himself again for the interruption.

“This restaurant is like a second office for us, Miss Yvonne. That’s also the reason they don’t serve just anyone. Here you have the opportunity to meet people who are otherwise hard to reach. And when I see someone I absolutely have to speak to, I have to take the opportunity. – Would you like a coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

“And you, Kathinka, what else do you want?”

“Thank you,” said the child, “I don’t need anything else.”

Goretzka paid and they left the restaurant. Standing under the doorway arch, he waved his hand in the air and his car came right away. The chauffeur got out and opened the rear doors of the car so that they could get in.

“Where may I take you?”

“I live on Ackerstraße, it’s just two streets away. We could also walk.”

“But not in this weather. No, no. Allow me to take you there.”

“Was your chauffeur waiting for us in front of the building the whole time?”

“Of course. That’s his job. That’s the way things have to be so that we don’t lose any valuable working hours. Imagine if we had to spend two or three hours making our way through the city every day!”

The car stopped in front of their house on Ackerstraße. Goretzka got out with them and took his leave from Yvonne with a kiss on the hand.

“May I call you next week?”

“Of course, I’m always home after six in the evening. Here, on the second floor.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch. – Goodbye, Kathinka. The next time we see each other I’d like to bring you something. Is there anything you want?”

The girl shook her head.

“Nothing? Nothing at all?”

Since the girl didn't say anything, he figured he'd have to think of something. He waited until both of them had gone into the building and then got back in the car.

The following Tuesday, he rang the bell at her front door shortly after six o'clock. They had agreed to meet to go to the movies; her daughter was already with Yvonne's parents, where she would also spend the night.

They watched the movie *The Vow*, in which Lenin's successor Stalin, a god-like and compassionate man, warned farmers to always follow Lenin's rules. He also helped the farmers on the collective farm repair a tractor with just a few motions. Whenever he was on the screen, his eyes lit up lovingly, and he chatted with the workers with fatherly benevolence. He approached all people affably, spoke to them with a hidden, profound humor, was familiar with the tasks that the future would pose to his country, and worked energetically and knowledgeably like a trained mechanic on setting up a tractor factory.

After the movies, they went to a restaurant to have a glass of wine. Goretzka was very excited about the film and asserted that Stalin was a great man.

"A genius! That man freed us from Hitler, rescued Germany and Europe from the fascists," he said to Yvonne, who listened to him silently. The film hadn't impressed her; it bored her from start to finish, something she kept to herself.

With the last sip of wine, he said they should call each other by their first names, which surprised and alienated her, but she nodded anyhow since it seemed impolite to refuse the offer after everything he had done for her.

A few months later, in February, he mentioned for the first time that they could marry. Yvonne was not surprised; they had been meeting several times each week and they had slept together, which was a bit difficult at first since they had to consider his injured leg.

She had anticipated his question and already decided to accept such a proposal. She hadn't heard anything from Jonathan in more than three years, and like his mother, she was now convinced that he was no longer alive.

Johannes Goretzka was not the man of her dreams; his handicap didn't bother her, but rather the fact that he was so humorless – so unfunny, as her daughter said – that he was actually never carefree and cheerful. The way he always instructed her about the importance of his work and talked about the Soviet Union as if it were the promised land and Stalin the representative of God on Earth irritated her. Her friends and colleagues were less enthusiastic about the Soviet zone and the Soviet occupying soldiers – they called them the Russians – and they mistrusted the daily hymns of praise about the achievements of the East German zone. Yvonne avoided talking to Goretzka about this; she listened to his explanations silently or just nodded her head. She wasn't as politically educated and eloquent as he was; he could defeat her in any dispute.

Yet despite her skepticism about living with him, he would be a great help to her. She didn't earn much as an office assistant; without her parents' help, she wouldn't have had a lot of things, and she wouldn't have been able to buy her daughter the clothing and shoes that she wanted her to have. In addition, Goretzka had a larger apartment than she did; he lived in a beautiful three-room apartment with a maid's room that could be Kathinka's room.

She decided to accept should he ask her for her hand. She would never see her beloved Jonathan again on this Earth, and the chances that someone else would court her, a young woman

with a child, were about as likely as winning the lottery. Too many men of her generation had fallen in the war, were prisoners of war for years, or had come home as helpless cripples unable to work. Many of her friends and colleagues lived alone and had neither a husband nor a boyfriend.

Therefore, she smiled when Johannes Goretzka asked her to marry him. She said only that she would have to ask her daughter since this step would also mean a big change for her little one.

The next day, she sat with Kathinka on the sofa and told her that Uncle Johannes wanted to marry her.

“So, you’ll have a papa, something you’ve always wanted,” she said, “and we would move into his apartment, which is much larger and prettier than ours. You’d have your own room there, a room all to yourself.”

“Uncle Johannes is going to be my papa?”

“Your stepfather, yes. Hardly anything would change since we’re already with him a lot, almost every day.”

“But...” said the girl, then she fell silent.

“What is it? What’s your problem? You won’t be lacking for anything, to the contrary. We’ll be a real family with mama, papa, and child. And we’ll be well cared-for, we won’t have to pinch every last penny.”

“But it’s also nice when it’s just the two of us, Mama.”

“I know. But your father is dead, and I think both of us need a man in the house.”

“But why Uncle Johannes?”

“Who else would it be? Or is there someone you’d rather have? Unfortunately, we can’t bake ourselves a Papa.”