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## Untitled Holocaust Story

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Chapter 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

Alone in a world made of stone, I began to understand that my life was over. My life, which had, so few hours before, been a series of well ordered years laid out like the wooden supports of a railroad track leading straight away into the bright future, had ended. I had been sitting placidly, staring at the beautiful painting of my life which I had naively believed to be reality, when the colors and canvas burned away, revealing the dingy walls beneath. The walls were a reality. They were my world now. I stared at the walls, cold and gray, an assembly of stone that encased me on all sides, and I was glad they were there. The stones were real. I could feel the beveled edges where they fit together. I could see the slight dimples where each block had been cut away from some greater whole and smoothed over time to a nearly flat surface. The stones were real. Not like my family. They were not a reality, at least not anymore. The man said that they had been taken. That they would never return. Never was such a long time, but as I stared at the walls, I began to accept the existence of such long periods of time. I had been there already for hundreds of years. Long enough for my family to cease to exist. Long enough for each of the stone blocks to replace in my mind a memory of the time before, the time when I had understood the world, had thought I understood my place in the world. But that time could not have truly existed. For then, I had no idea what I was. I had no idea that there was something inherent in my nature, something so tightly wound about my identity that I, and my family along with me, did not deserve a place in the world alongside true humans. No, I had no idea, until the day that I arrived at the room

of stone walls, until I heard of the death of my family, until I learned of the reality of the world, that being Jewish meant that I was unworthy of life.

But I had learned, and had come to my new life, one with all of the joy and hope and life of the cold stone. In the span of hours my world of color had faded away into the gray of the walls. At that time I knew despair. There are times when the mind walks in an impenetrable darkness, stumbling along paths dark and convoluted, when a dense fog rises all around and prevents the lost one from seeing what is ahead or even what was left behind. I was lost in that darkness for so long that I did not notice that others joined me in my new world of stone. I sat in the same position, with my forehead resting against the stone wall, my legs crossed before me, for so long that my body lost all feeling, and I was completely unaware of what happened around me. In the physical world my body was numbed by inactivity, and in the mental realm, the terrible fog that denied my struggling consciousness any sight of the color and light of understanding numbed my mind. I sought earnestly after the answer that would explain this new world, that would somehow reconcile my previous understanding with what was now reality, but it was as if my mind held the pieces of a broken toy, and every time I glued the pieces together, what I held was only a horrible perversion of what it should be. In the end, the only thing that saved me from falling forever through the maddening abyss of growing madness was a physical weakness. My stomach revolted against the jailer of my mind and demanded that I return to the world. When I raised my head from the wall, the muscles in my neck responded with sharp messages of pain. I turned stiffly away from the gray stone and was surprised to see five sets of eyes staring back at me, and in each I saw the dull reflection of the gray walls.

“Are you hungry?” The words came from an old man who sat to my left, near the heavy wooden door. The door, and the lone window, deeply set and near the top of the wall, were the only parts of the room not made of stone. The man was well dressed, and the sparkle of gold shone from a ring on his finger and the chain of a pocket watch at his belt. He pushed a basket toward me. I took a piece of hard bread from the basket.

“Thank you,” I said through a mouthful of dry bread. My voice sounded odd to me. I had expected it to be empty and weak, the way I felt after wandering through my mind’s darkness. But it was my voice, the same that answered the difficult questions in school, the same that said good night to my parents when they sent me to bed.

“Who are you?” I asked even though I knew the answer. They were Jews, and they had been forced to leave their own worlds behind to come here and hide from the fate that had taken my parents forever away from me. My eyes swept around the room, and I took in the faces of five people, ranging in age from just older than myself to a woman who had to be a grandmother twice over. My answer came from the man who had given me the bread.

“We are here as you are here. Just eat the bread, okay. We have saved it for you, but there may be no more coming.”

The grandmother spoke then. “We have only just come here this morning. We did not bother you, for we have all lost family and friends. We thought it best to allow you to come back to the world in your own time.” Her voice was soft, and smoothed the harshness of the man’s words from the air in the room. She looked on me with a smile, but her eyes were still, flat, gray. I understood the pain that had caused her to retreat emotionally behind the wall of those eyes. I knew that mine appeared the same.

“Where are we? The man who brought me said only that I would be safe. He said that they would not search for me outside of the ghetto, and that even if they did, they would not look for me here.”

“We are in one of the interior rooms of an old church. Apparently a munition truck was involved in an accident outside and the explosion caused several of the exterior walls to crumble. This room is mostly below ground and near the center of the church, so it is structurally safe.”

“Where did the food come from? Did you have time to gather things before...” A glance around the bare room served as enough of an answer to the second question.

“The man who brought you, he and another man, come by occasionally to check on us and bring us food.”

I had so many more questions, but I realized that these poor people could not know much more than I did. It was clear that each of them was still reeling from the shock of being displaced from their homes, from their lives. None of them sat close as relatives would, and I was sure that each had accepted that their families were lost to them. We all shared a common sad story, and I could find no comfort in those people who were only beginning to grasp the completeness of their own loss. The past few years had seen nothing but a series of concessions by the Jewish people of Germany. My family had gone along with each step, just like most every one else. In fact, I should have realized that we were headed for the point when even life was too much for Hitler to allow us, but I had chosen to believe that if I sat quietly in the ghetto, and did not make too much of a fuss over the things that I could not do or be a part of because I was Jewish, I would eventually be allowed to follow through on my dreams for the future.

But I had never truly thought that it would come to this. My parents were murdered by the state. Their deaths, and the deaths of the families of the other people hiding there with me, were the result of a thoroughly thought out policy, and it was being carried out by the machine of the Reich.

There was not very much light in the room, and what little made it through the window, which was apparently set in a westward facing wall, began to turn the opposite wall a shade of deep orange. I spoke with each of the other three people there, briefly, but I found that most of them felt very much the way I did, and were not enthusiastic about discussing the loss of their families and friends. I drew away, back into my space by the wall, and barely took notice that the others also melted back into the shadows. In fact, I was already forgetting the presence of the others, drawing about me all covering blanket of grief, when I felt a touch at my shoulder. I turned my head and found the other boy, he must have been about my age, sliding himself down the wall to settle in beside me.

“Could I talk to you for a while, please?” His voice was quiet, and none of the others turned from their musings to take interest in the two of us. I nodded to him slightly, an action he only just saw, as his eyes flicked to my face and quickly back to the stone tiles of the floor. “I – I tried to speak to the others, but they would only just let me begin, and then ‘Yes, yes, we know. Don’t say anymore’. But I feel I must say this.” Again the eyes briefly touched mine, and I saw the desperation held in the weak brown of those eyes, and I had not the heart to stifle his voice again. “I was there, then, when my parents were taken – and my sister. I – we, my sister and I, were playing a game. She is younger than I, wanted to play ‘find the brother.’ I hid in the wardrobe, and was just

decided to come out, to find Jessica, to see why she hadn't found me, when I heard them come. There were voices, hard, angry voices. You have heard them." The eyes rose again, now hard, staring through mine. "I could see booted feet through the break in the wardrobe doors, and I could hear my parents calming Jessica as the soldiers called for rope and tied my parents together. One soldier said, 'You must not try to escape. We are sending you to a better place.' The others laughed. I began to shake. I shook so that I thought the wardrobe must fall away from the wall. I heard my father's voice from far away, down the hall, hard to hear in the mixture of the rhythm of the booted feet and the cries of my sister. He said, as if to himself, 'What we leave behind is all we have, all that is to be left of us.' He knew. He knew they were to die. He knew that I had been overlooked. He knew." The boy slumped back against the wall, and it was clear that the story had exhausted him. I had no words for him, knew nothing to say. I lay my hand on his knee. It was all I knew to do. He rolled his face to me, and I was struck by the dryness of his eyes, the strength that lay behind them. "I will live. I will carry on. Yahweh has seen to it that my family did not end today. I will carry my father's name." The boy pushed himself up and away from the wall and made his way back to the place from which he had come. A few heads turned at the motion in the room, but there were no more words spoken that night. I sat in amazement at what I had heard, and at the boy himself. I had seen the scene as he had spoken, but I saw my parents. They were my own.

As the light traveled all the way up to the ceiling on the eastern wall, each of us grew quiet and still, preparing for the night. I knew from experience that they would not be able to sleep, that as they lay in the darkness, their eyes open and staring into the void

of the shadows, they would think again and again of that moment when their world ended, when someone had told them that their families were gone, that if they did not flee, their death would be as certain as the darkness that comes with the setting of the sun. As I sat there, my back against the wall, I closed my eyes and wished that sleep would come and take me to a place where I would not have to think about the fact that everything in the world was wrong, that nothing I had ever hoped or dreamed of would come to pass, that there would never be another time when I could be with my family. It might have been encouraging to me that there were others, both there with me and certainly other places. There had to be more people like my father's friend who would help to hide a handful of Jews in their homes, or abandoned buildings, or to sneak them out of the country. But the idea of a few small pockets of light and life in the much greater sea of darkness and death pushed me deeper into the chasm of depression and despair than before. It was so clear to me then that the darkness would eventually wash over the few slivers of light and hope that remained. I tried to find the hope, but the idea of emerging from my hiding place, along with the other five, into a world that had been ravaged by evil unchecked, a world where I would be one of only a handful of Jews, a world where my family would never exist again: all I gained from the effort was an overwhelming sense of the futility of life. I had hoped and dreamed and lived before, and all that had brought me was to this place, this prison of stone and despair that masqueraded as a safe haven from the terrible reality of the world outside.

It was then, as I realized that things would never be the same, that I made the choice. I did not want to survive in that stone box, only to come out later into a dead world. I did not want to hide in the wardrobe. I had never considered it before, but at



that moment the story of Noah that I had heard so often struck me in a completely different way. I could not understand how Noah and his family were able to walk off of that boat, see such complete devastation, and continue with their lives. How could they live knowing that everyone else had died, and died horrible deaths? At least Noah had his family with him. At least Noah and his family survived because of their righteousness. There, safe in the darkness of my cell while thousands of people outside were dying because they happened to be Jewish, I became violently ill at the thought of my lack of righteousness. I in no way deserved to live while others died, guilty of nothing more terrible than merely living their lives. My mother was one of the kindest and most giving people I had ever encountered, and she was killed for it. My mind was feverish and my imagination wild with images. I saw then the scene where they took my mother. She was cooking when they came— she was always cooking – and the pot was full, more than enough for just us, for she always cooked a little extra, for the men whose wives could not live long in the ghetto, for the children whose parents had disappeared early on. I should have died, not her. It should have been me. The darkness grew thick in my eyes, and filled my mind. It washed over me in waves, and then I was drowning. When the thoughts pounded my mind in the little light we had during the day, the “Jews” who were dying had been faceless, merely a long and morbid procession of innocent victims stumbling away to die. But in the depths of my ocean of darkness, the victims became everyone I knew and cared for. I saw my friends’ faces clearly, Eli and David and others I had grown and played with, staring at me in pain and fear from the darkness. I saw my father, his eyes hard to see through the glasses he never thought to clean. I saw him fall to his knees, curling into himself to hide from blows falling upon him by a Nazi

soldier, whose eyes shone with the same gleam that touched the 'SS' at his collar. I tried to shut the faces out, screwing my eyes so tightly shut that my temples throbbed, but the faces were in my mind, and they lingered, cycling through the whole of my worldly relations, and beginning again, and again. The thoughts burned in my mind, causing a pain as real as any physical. My hands pulled at my hair, pushed at my face, trying to tear the terrible images from my mind. Tears wet my face, salted my lips. I had begun to rock on my knees, my head in my hands. My lips moved, but the sound that came from my mouth could not have been understood as words. They were cries of agony, painfully wrenched from my heart every time one of the faces of friend, Mother, Father, cousin passed through my mind and away into death. No, I spoke no intelligible words, but there were words ringing loudly in my head, resounding louder with every innocent death I witnessed. "Why not me?" "It should have been me."

Much time had passed when I raised my head, the mixture of dry tears and dirt hardened somewhat on my face. The procession of faces had subsided, leaving behind a dullness in my mind matched in completeness by the emptiness of my heart. I looked around the room at my fellow prisoners, who had all apparently cried themselves to sleep. I hated them for being able to sleep. I hated them for being able to stay there, safe and alive, while everyone I cared for was hauled away, torn from their families, from their dreams, from their very lives. I could not stay there. I could not live, knowing that so many were dying, so many who certainly had more to offer than I did, who certainly did not deserve to die any more than I did. I rose to my feet slowly, my head spinning and cloudy from the crying. It was difficult to find my balance in the deep darkness of the room. I put my hand out to the wall to steady myself and was reassured by the cool

solidity of the stones. I thought about that wall of stone and I saw it as my old life. Before, I had thought everything was laid out well, that I had a firm foundation in life and that I could build my dreams on it. I was the son of Benjamin and Sarah Green. I was a favorite of the rabbi who taught me Hebrew. I would finish gymnasium and attend university, where I would study classical languages. My life was simple and straightforward, much like the wall. I was a culmination of one year stacked on another, just like stone on stone. But the wall was real and the life seemed quickly to be losing the feel of reality. I pushed off of the wall and picked my way gingerly among the sleeping bodies to the door. Opening it as quietly as I could, I squeezed through as soon as the opening allowed and left my room of stone behind.

Outside, the air was cool on my face. Away in the east the sky was just beginning to blush with the light of the coming day. I walked away from the church slowly, stepping over and around stones which had fallen from the walls. I did not know where to go, only the release that I sought. Leaving behind my sanctuary that promised at least a faint hope of life, I walked toward the heart of the city where I was sure that I could find what I needed. I deserved to die, wanted to die along with my family and friends. I could not survive in a world without them. I could not live knowing that I should have died instead of my parents, my cousins, my old schoolmates. Even the thought of the people I had hated before dying for nothing more than a heritage they shared with me, and that I still lived: the thought brought a fever to my mind. My feet began to move more quickly, stumbling over curbs and continually entwining themselves. I fell more than once, but I hardly noticed, I was in such a daze, my eyes seeing nothing but the returned images of death. The death of my family. The death of my people. My mind

registered nothing but the desire to join the others, to the death that apparently I deserved for believing in the God of Abraham.

## Chapt 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

The street was empty of people, but the light of the rising sun caught in the small puddles of dew and old rainwater, throwing light up at odd angles. I walked toward the heart of the city, knowing that I was bound to come across one of the patrols. If I had simply sat down on the side of the road there, I would not have had to wait long for a patrol to find me, but I felt an urge to seek my death, to pursue and catch it, rather than waiting for it to catch me. As I walked, I took in the buildings and signs around me, seeing in them a tangible chronicle of the methodical removal of my people from society. There were still stars painted on the walls and doorways of businesses that were run by Jews. The bakery run by Chaim's family. And the small shop where Eli's father worked as a tailor. There were signs hanging, labeling places as 'for Jews only' or 'no Jews,' clearly declaring the separate, lower status of the *Juden*. As I walked, my mind wandered from the street, back to the ghetto where I had lived with my family. We had shared a home with several families, or pieces of families, really. I had known then to appreciate that we were all still together, my parents and I, seen in the light of Theodor Black, who would sit for hours at night, talking to a wife who was no longer there to answer him. But I had never had any sense of how empty I would be without my parents. There would be no more terrible jokes from my father. I would see no more that special look my mother reserved for me, her only child. It shamed me to become conscious only then, in the desolate emptiness of a now alien street, how truly special my mother was. Who else could have made the poor semblance of life in the ghetto tolerable just by the light of her smile? I did not see the street before me as I stumbled along, but saw the people, my

people, huddled together in a stubborn patience, refusing to give in to the Nazis and simply fade away, but held by fear from making any protest that might bring unwelcome attention. I saw the stars sewn to their clothes, felt in my mind the edge of the six-pointed badge that had been part of my own wardrobe. The Star of David was a symbol for us of the great kings of our past, and now it had become a badge of shame, a brand marking us as unfit for equality with other humans. My hand unconsciously strayed to my breast to feel the star. When my fingers encountered nothing but smooth fabric, I was brought out of my reverie back to the street. I stared down at my shirt, not comprehending the absence of my star, until I remembered the clothes the man had given me when spiriting me away from the ghetto. I had not thought of the man much since then, but now, in the emptiness of the street with the signs of the Nazi hatred of my people all about me, it occurred to me that the man, a loyal German, had helped me at much risk to himself. The thought that some Germans did not consider all Jews worthy of death just confused me more. I was seeking desperately to put one face on the situation, to understand it in simple terms. Jews deserved to die. I deserved to die. It did not matter that there was no logic in this for my mind to consider, only that I accept it, because obviously the world was not the way I had presumed it before. Jews were not people, at least not people like the Germans.

The buildings of the city surrounded me. I was dwarfed by their size, and the sharp shadows of their square bodies caught by the morning sun striated the streets, the shadows broken by bands of bright light streaming down through the alleys to my left. Apparently no one had risen yet to begin the day. Or perhaps fear of the Nazis kept them in bed. Or maybe my neighbors were loath to come out and see what their apathy had

brought to my family, their old friends, their grocer, or banker, or whatever. We were once a vital part of the family of this city, contributing to its commerce, adding the color of our personalities and lives to the painting of Schwarzburg. Once there was a place for us here, but no longer. My foot caught a small stone and sent it skipping along the walk ahead of me. I walked after the stone, stooping and scooping it up. I hated the town. I hated the buildings, and the streetlights, and all of the store windows without the Star of David. I hated the people who worked there, who were worthy of being able to come to work every day, to sell their wares and do their business without the state closing them down, shipping them off to die. I stumbled, and sat down hard on the curb, one hand to my head, the other curled tightly around the stone. The edges of the rock bit into my hand just as the hatred cut through my mind. It grew and grew inside me. I hated everyone and everything, the living and the dead, the German and the Jewish. They died and left me behind. They killed my family. They gave up with hardly a fight. They stood by and watched as a madman declared war on humanity. I stood up, tears coming to my eyes. Through the blur of my tears, I turned and looked for a window with no star. I hurled the rock, shattered the window. I ran down the street, not looking where I was going. I made it maybe one block or two before I tripped. My foot caught on a step, sending me sprawling. The pain in my knees and palms brought a different kind of tear to my eyes, and I curled up, hugging my knees close to my chest and blinking to clear my eyes. I did not even hear the door open, wasn't completely aware when the woman spoke to me or called her husband. I hardly felt the hands take hold of me, pull me up, and carry me away.

I remember sitting, and feeling the comfort of a cushion beneath me, my hands rubbing against the fabric, enjoying the softness. The muted light of a lamp fell upon me from behind. And sitting just before me, in chairs obviously drawn from their normal places, judging from their closeness and the indentions left in the rug, were two people, a man and a woman, looking at me with a concern and a kindness that seemed grossly out of place with the feelings I remembered having just before I collapsed.

“How do you feel?” the man asked in a voice low and soft. He was sitting to the left of the woman, leaning forward with one hand on his knee and the other holding to her outstretched hand.

“I am fine. My knees hurt a bit, but I am fine.” I was confused, not understanding the transition from my mad flight on the street to here, being attended to like someone’s wounded child. Thinking of the street reminded me of my morbid mission. “I must go. Thank you for your concern, but I must leave now.”

“You cannot be seen out there, child. They will take you.” The woman spoke this time, the concern in her voice mirrored in her eyes. “Do you not know us? You are Benjamin, yes?”

I looked again at their faces, trying my best to recall these who obviously knew who I was, but the only faces I could bring up from my memories were the tortured faces of those from my dreams at the church. “I am sorry. I don’t think I know you.”

“It has been a few years, and children do not often remember the adults who pass though on the borders of their lives. We are the parents of Dietrich, your friend from the lower school. You used to play together when you were young.” Her voice had dropped



to a whisper and her eyes no longer looked into mine, but rather through me entirely, seeing perhaps her son and I at play.

“I do remember. Dietrich was a good friend, but, well, you know the schools separated us and I have not seen or spoken to him in years.” This reminder of my old world was not comforting me, but rather inflaming my sense of anger and bitterness at its replacement. The two must have sensed my irritation, because the man, Mr. Muller I remembered, put his hand on my knee. “Why are you in the street? Do you not know what is happening? And how did you escape from the ghettos and the round up?” He looked old, too old to be the father of someone my age. I did not remember thinking so before, but now gray had replaced all but the faintest streak of brown hair that had covered his head the last time I had seen him. As he spoke to me, his voice slow and careful, the outside corners of his eyes and the lines of his face pulled more and more toward his knees. It struck me then, forcibly, that Herr Muller had once been happy, but no more. The wrinkles on his face had been made by years of laughter and smiles, but the lines of joy had been turned, mid course, into the solid imprint of pain. I saw in him my father, the way I remembered him in the weeks just before he had been ripped from my world. I felt the visions of death returning and I was reminded of my mission. I am sure that the resolve in my voice as I answered seemed out of place considering what I said.

“Yes, I know that my people are being sent away to die. My parents are already taken, and I should have been with them, but a friend of my father’s, a German who had official business in the ghetto, took me away to a safe place, where others like me are

hiding even now. Which brings me back to the present. I must leave. I go to rejoin my family.”

“You wish to die? Do you not care that your father and his friend saved you? Do not scorn the love that has kept you from death till now. You must stay here with us. We will keep you safe. It is the least we can do.” She was crying then, the tears rolling along the light wrinkles in her face. “You may stay in Dietrich’s room. He would have liked that.”

The words bounced through my head, striking at me in an eerie way. “Dietrich has died?” Everyone was dying. The world was dying.

Herr Muller answered, his wife rising and turning away, her hand brushing at her cheeks. “He was a victim of these damn Nazis and this damn war. But we should speak later. We need to get you upstairs and cleaned up. It is possible that someone saw you in the street. If a patrol comes by here and sees you, we will all be in trouble.”

I followed him up the narrow stairs, the cuts on my knees trickling blood and sending signals of pain to my brain every time they bent. I felt like resisting, like pushing past them to get back out to the street and my fate, but the kindness in their eyes and in their voices arrested my mind. A desire greater than my longing for death rose up. If I allowed these people to care for me, if I slept in their child’s room, then I could almost believe that the world was as it had been, and that I could believe in the existence of families, and love, and life. That is why I followed him. That is what I thought with every slightly painful step. Each step up and away from the street was a mental leap away from the horrible thoughts my mind had harbored in the street, and before, in the church. We arrived at the top of the stairs and came to stand, together, before a door at

the end of the short hallway. He pushed open the door to the bedroom slowly and paused in the opening before proceeding into the room.

“If you will sit here on the bed, I will get something to clean the scrapes on your knees.” He spoke as he walked to the far wall of the room, where a small and simple desk stood. He looked at some of the papers and things on the desk, his hand lingering on a book, then he opened a drawer and gathered together the papers and books from the desk and laid them inside. The rubbing of the wood between the drawer and the desk made a low, hollow noise. I sat and looked around the room while he disappeared and returned, holding a damp cloth. “Wipe those cuts.” The cloth was cool. It felt nice against the burning of the cuts as I brushed away the mingled dry and trickling blood. The door pushed open a little wider and I saw Frau Muller’s head peek around. “Are you feeling better, Benjamin? Is there anything we can get you?” If Herr Muller had reminded me of my father, at least in that it was obvious in both faces that there had once been a easy laugh and a jovial nature, Frau Muller struck me as just the opposite of my mother. My mother was always in motion, her face and her hands and her feet, always moving to some quick tune she no doubt kept playing in her head at all times. My mother was a bright spot in the ghetto, even up to the end. Dietrich’s mother, however, turned the air in the room a somber shade of gray. She was quiet, and still. She could have been the librarian at the school, but no librarian would look so sad. The sadness was not in her face so much as in her eyes, and the tired slump of her shoulders, and the shuffle of her feet.

“No, Ma’am, I am fine. I appreciate you taking care of me. But my being here is a danger to you and Herr Muller. I would not want to be responsible for bringing trouble to people as kind as you.” Not that kindness saved my mother and father.

“You will stay with us as long as it takes for you to be able to leave safely. And please, speak no more about leaving. We will not let you run to your death.” It was Herr Muller who spoke, his eyes turning from me to his wife, who in turn was staring away into a corner of the floor, where I saw nothing of interest. “We have already lost our child to this war. We would save one if we could.” With this, Herr Muller put his arm around the shoulders of his wife and guided her to the door. “Rest now, Benjamin. You don’t look like you have slept well for some time. You will be safe here, so sleep knowing that we will be here when you wake. And then we will eat something.” The door closed, scraping slightly against the jamb. I lay back on the bed, my eyes closed, trying to absorb all that had happened in the span of an hour or so. I tried to remember the street and my desire to die. I still felt the incredible guilt of surviving, and a part of me truly still did wish to die, but being in a bed, with people nearby who, for whatever reason, had seen fit to care for me, had given strength to that side of me that wanted only to forget the terror of the past few days, hell, even the past few years. I fell asleep then, and actually slept, free of nightmares and the progression of the dying faces. And so began the next phase of my life. I lived there with the Mullers for some time, forever conscious of the danger outside their door, but comforted by their kindness. It was a time of much reflection for me. I was for the most part confined to the bedroom, both as a means to avoid detection by any of the policing patrols, and because I liked that room the

most. Dietrich's room was one of an avid reader, and I had been reading through some of the books he had collected.

He had a wonderful collection of books, ranging in subject from our national mythology, like the *Nibelungenlied*, to a diverse lot of translated texts. He even had acquired a very few English language texts. The bindings were smooth and unwrinkled, and when I opened one, I was sure that it was the first time the pages had seen the light of the room. Dietrich must have collected these in anticipation of learning English. My parents had harbored a deep fascination with England and the New World, and had been sharing with me the gift of that tongue. I had learned much before they died, the long days in the ghetto giving me reason to devote myself to the lessons they made time to give when they were able. So it happened that I was able to appreciate the English texts, among which were some plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe. I very often was mired deep in my thoughts of the world changed and my place in it, but seeing as how the Mullers would not allow me to leave and seek my death, I eventually turned to reading to pass my time. I found that I could lose sight of the horrible present by becoming part of the fantastic stories that surrounded me. I did not realize it then, but with the distance of time and the clarity it brings, I can see now that the books in Dietrich's room helped me to improve my tenuous hold on my sanity. Somehow, even the darkness of *Hamlet* proved a balm to my battered mind, the rhythm of the words filling my mind. My breathing found the same rhythm and I would read for hours, sometimes finishing a passage and beginning it again, just to revel in the beauty of the words. Yes, the time I was lost in the books was definitely the best of my time living in the room of an old classmate, a boy of my age who had gone to join my parents in the

realm of the dead, a realm populated with people of my old world. But there were also the other times, when the reality of my new world would crowd around me, choking my senses and threatening to push me down into the depths of a depression from which I could never return. There was more than one time when I would find myself curled up tightly, rocking back and forth on the floor, with Herr or Frau Muller sitting by me, their hand on my head, bringing me slowly out of that dark place.

Days came and went, but I was only barely aware of their passing, the idea of time in the outside world more of a rumor to me than a reality. I ate occasionally, whatever they brought to me. I grew accustomed to the times of forced stillness and anxiously held breath when a knock on the wall below me signaled the potential danger of a visitor to the house. And so it was that I had no idea how long I had been there, the time measured in pages and plays rather than hours, when I found the journal. But the change that the find wrought in my daily existence was such that all of the time before that I had spent in the room could all be condensed into one small compartment labeled 'before,' and the experience of the journal making up the huge compartment of 'after.' Looking back now, setting the date when I left the ghetto at October 1941, I have determined that I spent most of two months living in Dietrich's room, which means that probably a little more than one week had passed before I found the journal.

I had been looking through the drawers of Dietrich's desk, ironically enough looking for a pencil and paper with which to journal my own thoughts. I had some distant notion that if the world ever recovered from its current state of chaos and terror, that people might find the diary of one who lived through the dark times valuable. But my search was interrupted, permanently, as it were, by the discovery of Dietrich's

journal. I noticed the worn leather cover more by touch, as my hands moved through the dark recesses of the drawer. When I pulled it out into the light, I saw a fairly sizable collection of papers, bound together in a leather folder and fastened by a bit of shoe string. I carried the bundle to the bed, and sat down with it before me, the forgotten drawer remaining open. I knew that the papers had to be of a personal nature, and with the idea of a journal so recently in my mind, I leapt to the conclusion that these papers must be Dietrich's own collection of his thoughts and dreams. I sat there for some time, absently staring at the cover, inwardly debating with myself whether or not to intrude into another man's private world. My fingers played over the creases and streaks in the leather, and it occurred to me that the contents must span a considerable time, for it was obvious that Dietrich had bent back the cover countless times to contribute to his work. After quite some time of this silent musing, I untied the string and opened the journal. At first I didn't read any of the entries, instead just letting my eyes drift across each page. There were pages and pages of neatly printed entries, paragraphs of text following a date. I turned through the pages, not lingering overlong on any one. I saw several sketches, pencil on paper shapes and drawings mingled among textual entries. But I paid scant attention to these; instead just leafing through the pages with eyes mostly glazed over. Instead of seeing what was on the page before my eyes, I was seeing in my mind a young boy, much like me. In my mind, I made him skinny and intent, sitting hunched at his desk, writing his life into the journal. I had not seen Dietrich for many years, but I imagined that he had grown up much like I had. I pictured him as having had a secure idea of the world, and was as much taken aback by the horrific changes in Germany as I was. He was angry, angry at the way the Jews were being treated and angry that the

welfare of Germany and its children was being subjugated to the mania and obsession of its ruler. I did not see what he had written in the journal, instead conjuring up the image of him writing his frustrations with the inequity of the world into the book, spending long hours contemplating the injustice and putting his grievance into words. These images faded from my mental eye when I realized that I had turned through most of the journal, and that only a few pages remained between the fingers of my right hand. The page I was on was one with a sketch, and at first I thought that the picture must be an affirmation to my ideas of Dietrich as a young champion of justice, but I realized slowly that what I was looking at was not a satirical commentary nor a harsh criticism. Instead, the roughly drawn picture, outlined and shaded in black pencil, seemed a celebration. A pressure began to pound behind my eyes, and I tasted acrid bile in the back of my mouth as I looked in growing horror at what Dietrich had drawn. A fairly detailed sketch of our globe, complete with outlines of the continents, was visible around the heavily shaded bars of a swastika.



### Chapter 3, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

I pushed the pages away. I sat for a time, questioning what I had seen, questioning the leaps that my mind had made. I leaned over the journal where it lay and looked again at the sketch. I could interpret it no other way than as a testimony of Dietrich's acceptance of the Nazi rule and all the implications that followed from it. As I sat in his room, surrounded by his things, I learned that Dietrich was the enemy, that he was part of the reason my parents were dead, why Jews were no longer free in Germany.

I took the journal back into my hands and stared at the closed cover for some time. It was as if I was seeing it anew. My mind began formulating a new picture of Dietrich, one in which he sat bent over his book in the dark of the night, scratching out his twisted thoughts and making his horrid sketches. I did not pause to question the incredibly quick transformation that had taken place in my estimation of my old friend. I opened the journal again to the last page and looked for the date of the entry. 1 December, 1938. I paid no attention to the sketch, but turned to the front of the book and noted the date of the first entry, 21 January, 1932. It began to occur to me that what I had found in the journal could be more than the musings of a child I had known, but a chronicle of one man's intimate experience with the Nazis.

I had known of the Nazi aggression in pieces for some time. I had seen and read pamphlets distributed among the people explaining the danger that I posed to stability of society. I had seen my family and life stripped away, in small increments, like being removed from the school I had previously shared with 'full' German children. I had seen my father have his job stripped from him because Jews had no place instructing Germans.

I was forced to see exactly what life was left a man, whose heaven was teaching in the university, when he no longer had students. I had learned much about the powers arrayed against us when the government took our homes, our wealth, our lives' worth of accumulations and pushed us into the ghetto. But I had never had access to the mind of one of the evil. I had often thought of the enemy, of the Nazis and had always pictured them as machines of efficiency and precision. The question of how they could hold such animosity for other men, or why they could act with such a lack of basic human compassion had always been a non-question. Machines do not think or feel, so there was no possibility of probing their motivations or understandings. But I had before me in the journal a glimpse into the mind behind the mechanism. And suddenly the revulsion was gone, replaced by a greater feeling, a desire intense and compelling. I wanted very much to read and devour every word that my old friend had written. I wanted to find the answers to my questions. I knew—had already decided -- that Dietrich would provide me with the understanding that I sought, that I needed so desperately.

I pushed back against the headboard of the bed, my feet tucked up beneath me, and laid the journal across my folded legs. The outside edges of the open book covered my knees as I turned back to that first page. I read, and reread, page after page. I was completely lost in the journal, unaware of the passing of time. When my feet grew tingly with the loss of circulation I simply pulled them from beneath me and stretched them along the bed, the cover of the journal retaining its place at my knees. I read the first five entries so many times that if I had intended to count them, I would have given up early on. After reading a passage, I would sit back and think about the words, about how he would have been holding his head when he wrote them, about the possibility that he had

written those words while sitting in the same position on this very bed. I have since come to know that there is a general sense of awe or perhaps just awareness when it comes to handling the things of people recently dead, especially items of an intimate nature, and I am certain that part of my fascination with the journal was made up by this very sort of morbid curiosity, but as I have said, my main interest was in seeing the life of my friend and how he viewed the evil empire that he had joined. And beyond that, and perhaps more important to those who would wish to understand my own progress through those days, the journal came to be the ultimate outlet for me in my seclusion. Where Hamlet the Dane was certainly interesting to me and even therapeutic in his own dealings with madness, I felt the world of Shakespeare and his characters, with their beautifully lyrical words were too far removed from my situation for me to draw much vicarious life through them. But the journal came alive in my mind, and I saw in the entries whole chapters of my friend's life.

The practice of sitting and reading for intense and long periods of time became my routine, and I became acclimated to the tremendous effect that the reading had on me. But that first day with the journal, I was in no way prepared for the revelations that it held. I have already relayed the shock and horror that consumed me with the initial realization that Dietrich was a Nazi, at least as far as I could tell by the last page of his journal and the grotesque picture he had drawn. But I was just as surprised when I began reading from the beginning, entries that began a good 6 years before the last, written when Dietrich would have had ten or eleven years, and found the writing to be the kind common to all young people who begin to compose their feelings and commit them to paper. I had not thought to find explicit musings on his hatred of Jews, but I had

certainly expected to read of his dark and solitary habits, his abuse of small animals, his secret desire to kill his parents. But there was nothing of the sort. Instead there was the almost unavoidable first entry which states the author's intent and explanation of what is to follow. There were short, quickly scribbled entries about school, "My first day back. New class, new people. Prof is a bag." I found myself identifying with his words, seeing again the boy I had met on my own first day back at school one day a few years ago. He had made comments about the most mundane and universal of things. He expressed uncertainty of how to deal with girls, excitement over being part of the team at sporting games. I had not known Dietrich so well when we did spend time together to actually connect his thought with true occurrences, but in the void I created wonderful scenes in which I saw everything that he spoke of in vivid clarity. I knew the people of whom he spoke. I felt the elation at being the champion of the team for that fleeting moment after scoring the goal. It happened, over the course of many days like that, in the loneliness of the room, that I began to confuse my own memories with those I had read, but I didn't matter to me. Dietrich was dead, my old life had died, and I felt that having memories at all was better than being completely alone in the void, with no tether to the fading past in the world I had loved and no dream of the next world to come. I was so thankful for the journal for that reason. I had realized that if a man was all alone in the world, the last survivor of a devastating disaster, then it would matter not at all if he had no name, and his own memories would be worth nothing with no one to share them with. At least in the pages that Dietrich had left me, there was a glimpse of the old world, and seeing through his eyes only served to make the experience more real and less like one of my many fevered nightmares.

So in that first day of reading I found a boy as I had remembered him, not very different from myself at the same age, more interested in avoiding any real work than understanding the society he was part of, and I closed the journal with a great deal of confusion rattling the worn and splintered walls of my mind. I had, while I read, turned occasionally to that last page and looked long and hard at the sketch and then back at the innocent musings of a child and I could not reconcile the two while I was reading and then, when I had finished for the day, the level of light in the room making it necessary to take a respite, I could still make no sense of it. As I tied the book closed and carried it back to the open drawer, my legs aching from the long hours of being forgotten, I looked around the room, trying again to see if it reflected the presence of a Nazi. But the room offered me no resolution, and I was resigned to ending the day caught between the image of Dietrich as a Nazi and as just a boy that I had known.

As I made my way back to the bed, already relishing the idea of laying down and letting the horde of flies in my head die for the night, I saw a bit of paper on the floor by the bed. Picking it up, I saw that it had probably been torn from the journal, and at first I feared that I had damaged the book. But looking more closely, it became obvious from the wear of the paper that the piece had been folded and unfolded, time and again. One edge was crimped and bent in such a way to suggest that it had been pushed into the crease where the pages met the binding and left there. My leafing through the journal had simply worked it loose and it had fallen free. I unfolded the small, worn piece of paper and noticed that one side had been written on, but just one word. I walked over to the window and held the paper up to the dying light of day and could just read the word that lay amid the creases. *Psalm 23*. I couldn't tell if the piece had been torn from

a greater passage or if Dietrich had simply scribbled this one reference on a page with nothing else related. I was intrigued. I left the journal in its bed for the night, but I walked to the shelf and found the bible that I had seen there before. It was a large book, and beautifully made. The words “from Martin Luther” were printed on the spine just beneath the title “the Holy Scripture.” I had seen such bibles before, in the homes of my Christian friends, but always in the family room, and treated as an heirloom. I opened the bible and, returning to the window, tried to quickly find the Psalms. I knew of the book from my own experience of course. Most of the songs contained within it are attributed to the great kings of my people, David and Solomon. And I thought that I recognized the reference, but when I turned to that page in the book, I was again surprised by my old friend. Most of my friends, Jewish, Catholic or Protestant had rarely if ever spoken of their faith. I suppose that we all assumed that everyone else was as bored by our Saturday or Sunday routines as we were. But here I saw that Dietrich had at least taken an active interest in his Scripture, at least as evidenced by the way the pages fell back to reveal Psalm 23 in such a way that made it clear that it had been opened to this point many, many times. There were marks on the page around the text, underlinings and arrows pointing to different lines and words. Again I got as close to the window as I could, letting as much of the sun’s afterglow touch the pages as possible.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

*he makes me lie down in green pastures,*

*he leads me beside still waters,*

*he restores my soul.*

*He guides me in paths of righteousness*

*for his name’s sake.*

*Even though I walk through the*

*valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
For you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.*

I closed the book and sank against the wall and down to the floor. The last touches of light faded from the room and I began to cry. I didn't know for what I was crying, especially not then, but I realized even at that time that these tears were very different from those which had fallen with such frequency over the past few days and weeks. There are times when a person cries that the mind can offer no logical explanation, but my tears were cathartic and therapeutic for me. I released the anger and confusion and pain and fear that had become my new world there on the floor while I cried, knowing even then that all would come creeping back with the morning sun, but I didn't care then. It felt so good to cry, and my tears cleansed my soul just as surely as the swiftly flowing stream cleans the filth from its rocky bed after a heavy rain. I have read that the smell of the air after a good rain is so different because the air is actually cleaned by the falling water, and the air smells as it did before man began his stranglehold on the

earth. As I lay on the floor, my face red and swollen from the crying, I felt like the air within me was clean and fresh. Finally when my breath was regular again and my eyes were dry, I pulled myself up from the floor and made my way to the bed, utterly drained of all energy, the long hours of sitting and reading finished off by an overflow of emotion. I slept soundly, with no dreams, no abrupt awakenings in the night, listening hard to hear any sounds from below over the anxious beating of my heart. I woke in the morning as the light of the sun reached through the window and touched my face.

I lay there for some time, reveling in the feeling of having slept well, of finally being rested. I knew that in a short while one of the Mullers would knock at the door and bring me something to eat. Very often they would sit with me while I ate and talk to me. I know that they were sensitive to how I felt being hidden away all day and they did their best to keep me sane with talk of meaningless happenings in the world. Very rarely did they mention the war, or the Jews, or anything that might bring me back to that condition in which they found me. Of course we all thought about nothing else, but the semblance of normality that they brought me with my breakfast went a long way in making the days more bearable. I slid from beneath the sheets and again retrieved the bible, this time from the floor where it had fallen from my hands as I cried. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I again turned to the Psalms, and read again the passage so carefully marked by my predecessor in the room. In the light of the morning and in the wake of my blissful night of rest, the passage did not strike me as it had before, or perhaps the complex amalgam of emotions did not come together in the same way as in the previous night, for the reading did not elicit any tears, but rather a simple curiosity. Why had the passage been so important to Dietrich? And what meaning could it possibly have for a



Nazi? None of my experience could elucidate that matter. I had never understood the Nazis as being very religious, but rather that they used the difference in their religion and ours as an easy means of categorization. It occurred to me finally to try to locate the page in the journal from which the piece had been torn to see if it offered any clues, but just as I rose to approach the desk, a knock came at the door. According to the routine, I said nothing, knowing that if it were a brown shirted patrolman, he might simply be knocking on all the doors, and if it were one of the Mullers, they would simply wait for me to have a chance to cover myself if I were naked, and then enter. At any rate, each time the handle turned and the door began swinging in, my heart sped up and time slowed down until I saw that it was only Herr or Frau Muller. In this case, it was Dietrich's mother, and she was carrying a small basket with bread and a small bit of butter. She had the handle of the basket hanging from her wrist to accommodate for the glass of water she carried in that hand. I went to take the glass from her when she spoke. "I am glad you were awake. I do so hate to wake you from your sleep." She walked into the room and pushed the door to behind her with her foot. "Come, sit down and eat." She set the basket on the desk and pulled the chair out for me, and she placed herself on the corner of the bed, smoothing the pleats in her skirt with her small hands.

"Thank you. The bread smells wonderful." I had taken the seat, and winced to hear the wooden leg scrape against the floor, even though she would have warned me if there had been anyone below to hear me.

"I just picked it up, from the bakery. You know, the one on the corner?"

I didn't know, but I nodded anyway as I chewed on the warm bread. It was part of the game we played. The bakery was a safe, friendly topic. She was especially good

at this part of my daily routine. Bring bread, butter, water, but leave all of the painful, frightening stuff outside. But today her eyes warned me that there might be more than what came in the basket. Where normally her pale, sad, blue eyes met mine with kindness and a motherly concern, now they moved quickly around the room, from one corner of the floor rug to another, never coming to rest on mine for more than the briefest of moments. “What is it, Frau Muller?” Her hands were in her lap, and I could see that her fingers were tightly together, the skin splotched red and white from the pressure.

“I very much do not wish to tell you this, Benjamin, but I feel that I must. Friedrich Burger was taken last night by the patrols.” I stopped chewing, my teeth closed hard around the bit of bread in my mouth. Friedrich had been the man who took me from the ghetto to the church. “It seems that he had been under suspicion for some time—they thought that he had been harboring Jews. And yesterday he was found carrying supplies in the neighborhood of that church you spoke of, and when he could not give an explanation pleasing to the soldiers, they took him. I do not believe that they gave him much of a chance. You know that when they suspect someone, it is just a matter of time. I am sorry Benjamin.” I hardly heard the last of what she said. I was falling quickly back into the stone walls of the church. Another man had died, when it should have been me. No, she had not told me that Friedrich had died—she may not have known yet—but death was the only outcome that Nazis allowed for one sympathetic to the *Juden*. I burned with gnawing guilt over having enjoyed my rest the night before when outside my sanctuary, the war against humanity still raged, the casualties on the side of right were piling high. The nausea swept over me again as I forced my mind to consider that a man had been found guilty and sentenced to death for doing the right thing. My mind bowed

beneath the strain of trying to reconcile the natural laws of the universe that I had previously accepted without question with the laws of the Nazis that they demanded the world accept without question. Herr Burger had acted on one of the most inherent principles of humanity and had reached out to another man in need, and for that he had been murdered. I hated life. I hated being alive. I wanted nothing more than to tear the air from my lungs and to cease living in a world so wrong, so twisted and demented. My eyes were shut tight against the light of the room, but I could not force from my mind the image in Dietrich's journal of the twisted cross covering the world. My throat became tight and my fists clenched. I held in my right hand the glass of water and feeling it break in my hand and the shards of glass cut my fingers served only to push me deeper into my anger. Finally the anger made its way past the constriction in my throat and I cried out in a voice that held all of the emotion that I had ever had, all that I had wept out the night before, all of the feelings that I had felt poured forth through my lips, "Why God, why? Answer me God, why?" I had stood up, my eyes still tightly closed and the blood from my hand quickly turning the puddle of spilled water at my feet an ugly red. My fists were raised to the roof, to the heavens, to wherever I thought that God was hiding from me. The anger in me made my body rigid, and I began to shake from my head to the soles of my feet, slightly at first and then with increasing violence. I continued to shout at God, my fists raised and my body shaking until I felt the arms of Frau Muller around me, her voice low and gentle in my ear.

"Be calm, Ben. Be still. Be calm. Let go of the anger. We will find the answers someday. We have to believe that there will be an end to this and then we will find the answers. Be calm. Be still."



## Chapter 4, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

Why God, why? Why must I believe when you never answer me. I have practiced patience, I have taken her advice, but I hear nothing when I speak to you. I am decided: I will waste no more time speaking to a god obviously deaf and dumb.

The words were not mine, rather they were Dietrich's. I read them in the journal long after that night, when I learned of Friedrich Burger's death. But the words rang true with me, echoing the very sentiments that had burdened my heart that night. I had desperately needed an answer from God, needed to understand, and when there was no response, I released from my mind the obligation of believing in someone on the receiving end of my cries for help, at least someone who cared.

God had failed to answer "Why?" and I had very few other places to turn for that answer. I was drawn back to the journal, both through a lack of little else to do in my confinement, and also out of some thought that I might be able to see through Dietrich's eyes why the world had to be as it was. I reasoned that there had been a time when Dietrich had not hated Jews, or else he had simply been ignorant that there was any difference between he and I when we played together as boys. I turned to the journal to see how the change had taken place in my friend. I dragged the book back from within the recesses of the desk drawer and carried it back to the bed with me. Undoing the tie, I leafed through the first few pages that I had already read, and reread, finding the next entry. I read the page and found much of the same, short anecdotes about what had

happened at school with his friends, or some note about a particularly good score he had made while sporting. There was one short entry in which he mentioned his parents – I believe it was the first time that their names had come up in the journal. He had written about how he wanted so desperately a guitar to play, but his parents would not spend the money. In his words,

I asked them, mother and father, today  
if they would buy me a guitar, and they  
refused. Some rot about how I wanted  
something different everyday. This is the  
first thing I have asked for in ages. I don't  
know why they never listen to me.

Looking around the room, I saw no guitar, or anything musical or artistic. Somehow, it struck me as funny that Dietrich had been interested in music. I had trouble picturing him sitting with the family at Christmas time, strumming quietly and singing Edelweiss, the red in his Hitler Youth armband glowing in the candlelight. The image was a sickening joke and just as I found the absurd contradictions amusing, they turned my stomach at the same time. I turned the page and began reading, but noticed that the writing looked significantly different and the language seemed somehow changed. Looking at the date of the entry, I noticed that it was a full year and some months later than the previous. I turned the page back and checked again, looking for evidence of pages being removed or lost, but there was none. I suppose that it was irrational for me to be surprised that a boy of twelve had little interest in consistently submitting himself to

a journal. But apparently, at the ripe age of thirteen, Dietrich had again found the inspiration necessary to take up the task of communicating with a book. He gave no excuse for the hiatus, but merely began writing.

I have met someone today, someone who I think  
I am going to like very much. Her name is Eleine,  
and she is beautiful.

I got to know Eleine fairly well that day. Dietrich appeared to have committed himself to writing, if not daily, then every odd day, and nearly every entry had something to do with the dark haired beauty that had apparently stolen his heart in the middle of history class. Dietrich spoke of her as if she had dropped from the sky quite suddenly and unexpectedly one day, but reading between and around his neatly printed lines, I got the impression that what had fallen upon Dietrich so unexpectedly was an awareness of women in general, rather than any specific one. It just so happened that Eleine was the woman who received the full force of Dietrich's initial awareness of the fairer sex. I remembered when I was thirteen. I could have written the same entries in my own journal.

At the thought I leaned back against the wall, my hands between my head and the hard wood, one finger absently pushing a small bit of hair around in circles. All that I had read so far that day came together and brought forth a memory of my own life. Dietrich and his guitar, parents not understanding, and the love of a thirteen year old boy into one memory of my life in the ghetto that I had thought gone and forgotten.

I was there at the celebration of a marriage. We were allowed to do such things, at that time. I guess the Nazis didn't care what we did then as long as they didn't have to see it or hear it or smell it. Jewish weddings are a time of joy and this was no exception. The ceremony gave way to dancing and music, the latter supplied by clapping hands and stomping feet and voices that were perfect in joy if not in key. The dancing, that was supplied by all, all of the men and women, boys and girls. Even I danced, though at the time my feet had charged ahead and grown faster than the rest of me and I danced like an elephant. It may have been that very day that my own awareness of the female dropped upon me. On the other side of the squalid square that the women had made beautiful for the bride I saw dancing a vision of beauty and all that was right in the world. I later learned that her name was Rebecca. She danced, and her braid of brown hair caressed her back as she twirled. The candlelight and the joy of the night shone in her eyes and she laughed and smiled and twirled and shone and I could not see enough. I had spoken with her, but my verbal feet were over large as well and I came away from the encounter feeling clumsy and embarrassed. I told my father of Rebecca, and how truly wonderful she was. I remember he laughed and tousled my short hair. At the time I felt that he was being dismissive, and I remember how angry I felt. I pulled away from his hand and told him he didn't understand. With the smile still in his eyes but his face much more serious, he had looked long at me and said quietly, "Boy, I do understand. Now, back to the dancing." The memory was too much for me to hold in my mind all at once. I had not thought of Rebecca in so long. And in context of reading about Eleine, the feelings came back with all the fullness there had ever been. Thinking of my father, and the tender way, which I realized now, too late, he had always treated me, brought quiet tears to my eyes.



I heard a knock at the door, and I quickly slid the journal and its collection of memories between the wall and the bed. Before the door opened, I had wiped the image of the marriage, Rebecca, my father and the tears that belonged to each of them from my eyes. Frau Muller stepped into the room and shut the door behind her, her eyes touching my own briefly before returning to her feet as she shuffled across the bare floor to the desk chair. “How is it with you today?” Her voice, her dress, the feeling in the room: all were the same as they had been every time she came to visit me. I wondered if she felt the flow of time streaming around her, like the flow of the current in the little river that ran near the summer home I had spent such wonderful times with my parents. I imagined that she must be aware that time continued to flow, no matter how firmly she stood still and stalwart. It had been a game for me, to try and walk against the current or even to stand against it, my toes curling against the cold rocks under my feet, trying to keep my legs from pulling away with the river. But for her it was no game. Rather, it had become her life, to remain still as the world moved by.

“I am well, thank you. I am sorry that I was so emotional.” My outburst seemed overmuch and irrational now. It should have been obvious to me that Friedrich would die – everyone else in the world who stood for something had died or was in imminent danger of death.

“Ben, he was a friend. No response to such news would be too emotional. What have you done today?” The question was of the typical sort which consumed our short visits, but I had yet to tell them of the discovery of the journal, so I avoided the question.

“Tell me, if it’s not too hard, about Dietrich. I enjoyed him as a friend when we were young, and living among his things makes me very curious about what he was like.”

I assumed that the Mullers had not spoken of Dietrich's affiliation with the Nazis out of some sort of deference to me, but I wanted to hear from them how he had come to subscribe to such an abhorrent belief system. Surely he did not learn to hate from his parents, or else their sheltering of me was more of an enigma than I had originally thought.

She looked at me for some time, the blues in her eyes becoming faint and distorted beneath a film of moisture. "I will tell you of my son, since you ask. Dietrich was always a good child to us, and since he was the only one Bertold and I had, we lavished all of our attention on him." Her eyes ranged across the ceiling, seeing not, I am sure, the confines of the room but instead the smiling face of her son. She swallowed – I saw the movement in her throat, and continued: "He used to come home from school and just talk and talk. He wanted to talk about everything. What had I done while he was away? When was his father arriving home? How did I know how many loops of thread were needed to hold a button to a shirt? He would watch me while I cooked and ask questions about the animal whose meat we were going to eat. 'Where was the cow from, mother?' I used to get tired of the endless questions, but he was always prepared to ask more. I would not mind so much now the questions." Her voice trailed off. After some time her eyes came back to mine. "He did most of the same things the other boys did. He played the sports, he became interested in women. There was this one girl he spoke of very often, but then she, well..." Her fingers twisted in her lap. I decided to change the subject:

"Did Dietrich like to read?" As I spoke I had looked about the room at the numerous books.

“Well, his father had access to so many books through his shop that Dietrich never wanted long for a book before he got it. I am not sure that he read many of them, or any of them for that matter, but he was always deciding that he wanted a new book. He even asked for a few English language books – well, I am sure that you have had the opportunity to look through the shelves. He decided at one point that he wished to read Shakespeare’s plays, and to do so in the original. But he never had the time to learn it. The English. Dietrich did not have enough time to do so many things...” I sensed that the conversation was getting to be too much for Frau Muller.

“Are you hungry? I am famished. I didn’t sleep much last night, and all of that tossing about has left me hungry.” My appeal brought her quickly back into her present role as care provider for me, by which I hoped to distract her from painful memories.

“Yes, dear. I will go and make us some lunch.” She nodded once and stood, slowly, smoothing her skirt and adjusting her blouse. “I will be back soon, okay?” She smiled at me and didn’t wait for my answer, but left out of the room quietly. When she was gone, I reflected on what she had told me of Dietrich. It seemed clear to me that she and Herr Muller assumed that I knew nothing of their son’s association with the authors of my people’s torture. She had not set out to defend her son’s memory to me, but had simply spoken of her son as any mother would about her child – her only child. The thing I couldn’t wrap my mind around was how could her son’s being a nazi not always be the foremost thought in her mind. I remembered one time when I was young, coming home and making fun of a boy at school whose crippled legs forced him to go about in a wheeled chair. My mother had father’s belt before the last words left my mouth and chased me to the corner with it. And forever after, any time conversation turned to

people who were different on the outside from me, my mother would turn on me with a look that reminded me both of how she felt as well as the sting of leather on my skin. Surely Dietrich's mother felt much the same, that she had raised and loved her son too much to harbor such hatred. Well, maybe that's why she didn't think of it or speak of it. Perhaps what she felt so strongly and what had become reality were too difficult to reconcile. Considering my own recent past and my attempts to make sense of the world, it was not difficult to feel sympathy for the woman.

She returned with food, I ate, and she left. We talked little; I believe that she still turned the thoughts of Dietrich as a child through her mind, cherishing the image. When the sound of her shuffling feet fell away, I returned to the journal.

Eleine is very easily the best girl in all of  
Deutschland. She has an answer for everything.  
I told her I intended to tell my parents of her,  
to arrange a meeting, and she just smiled, in that  
perfect, cute little smile. I told her I was going to  
tell them that she was Protestant. She says, "Good.  
Maybe they can come to the church Sunday. And  
have them bring the priest from St. Mark. We are  
always looking to share the truth with pagans." And  
then she laughs, all patting me on the arm and  
laughing. I asked her once if she was really so down  
on Catholics, why did she waste time with me. She

takes some things so seriously. She told me that she didn't care where I went to church, that she loved the spirit inside me, and God did too. I don't know for sure what that means, but I will not forget that she said she loves me.

I read most of every day, and mostly in the journal. When I was not reading, when my eyes had become tired and watery from staring at the page for hours on end, I would often sit back and replay the stories I had read, and see also the memories of my youth and especially the short time I had with Rebecca. As I said before, it happened that some stories and memories became confused, and intermingled. The fact that Rebecca and Eleine shared so many qualities did much to aid in this confusion. Based on the physical descriptions that Dietrich offered of his love interest – and there was no shortage of such descriptions, I had painted a picture of Eleine in my mind that borrowed much from my memories of Rebecca. Both ladies were bright and witty. Both challenged our notion that women existed only to be looked upon. Rebecca regularly took my king in chess, and according to Dietrich, if there was a woman who should always be picked for the team, Eleine was the one. I found that I eagerly anticipated the next day and the stories that I would read of Dietrich and Eleine, and I cursed the inevitable darkness that forced me to set the journal aside until the dawn.

## Chapter 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

My hair was getting long, longer than it had ever been before. The ends were brushing my neck and tickling my ears at night when I was ready to sleep. I suppose that the Mullers would have shortened my hair if I had asked, but I didn't care so much. I lost myself in the journal. Dietrich had become very close to Eleine, and I found great enjoyment in losing myself in his adolescent romantic adventures that so closely paralleled my own experience, as well, most likely, as the rest of history's young men who had the pleasure of sharing space with young women. I must confess, now, in all honesty, that at this period in my experience with the Mullers and in my reading of the journal, my understanding of Dietrich the Nazi began to dissociate from the Dietrich in the journal. He was a character in a story to me, and just as I imagined myself in Hamlet's shoes when reading Shakespeare, I identified with the young man in love. The journal contained entries about things other than Eleine, but these served only to strengthen the notion that he and I were not so different.

On one day I opened the book and was reminded of an earlier mystery which had never been resolved. When I turned the page from the last entry I had read, I found a piece of paper, of a different texture and color than the others, stuck between the two pages belonging to the journal. I immediately noticed that one corner of the page was torn, and my mind leapt to the scrap marked Psalm 23 that I had deposited in the desk drawer and forgotten. The paper was a letter, and it began 'Sweet Dietrich.' The script flowed down the page in characters that were of a distinctly feminine quality. I had often in my life wondered why boys and girls tend to write so differently, boys in tight,

smashed together print and girls in loopy, leaning letters. I pulled the paper from the book and felt a rush of excitement. Perhaps it is a testament to how lonely and separated from society that I was that a love letter so excited me. Many years before and in an entirely different world, I had often become so engrossed in a novel that the triumphs and the defeats of the hero affected me emotionally. So much more in this period of hardship for me, when Dietrich, through his journal, became my most constant companion. And so it was with an intense personal interest that I read the letter.

Sweet Dietrich,

I love you, Dietrich. I have and always will. I cannot blame you for what has happened. I have to believe that you do not fully understand what is going on. I love you, and I cannot believe that you are given over to being an evil man. You have changed, that is a certainty, but you are still Dietrich.

We were so close. I thought you had finally understood what I was trying to tell you. Somehow I have failed, Dietrich. I blame myself. But I will pray to be forgiven, and I will pray for you. Oh, how I wish that things were not as they are. But we can not change the world, only ourselves, and you have chosen something that I cannot abide.

One last thing: I have read your letter so many times, though it tears my heart at each reading. I accept that you do not wish to hear from me again. It would too complicate your current worldview. But I will not accept that our love was a mistake.

I will never forget you, Dietrich.

With love, Always,

Eleine

I laid the letter on my lap and exhaled an enormous breath that I realized I had been holding since the first line. I sat for a moment in confusion, then read the letter through again. I had expected a sweet, sappy letter, in keeping with the spirit of Dietrich's journal entries, but instead, there was this. Not only was the letter unexpected in content, I was completely at a loss as to what it meant. I was so ingrained in the context of the recent journal entries that I had been enjoying, that Eleine's mention of Dietrich's being given over to being an "evil man" did not register with me immediately as being in reference to the same evil I had associated with Dietrich when I had first looked at the journal. I checked the date at the top of the letter and soon discovered that Eleine had written it at a much later time than the journal entries on the pages where it had been left. It suddenly occurred to me that there might be other such letters stuck throughout the journal, not revealing themselves to the casual thumbing through I had given the book that first day. I leafed quickly through the pages, but saw no more notes from Eleine, or anyone else, for that matter. I set the journal aside and approached the desk. Pulling open all of the drawers, I looked for more letters. I felt certain that there had to have been more, and suddenly it was very important to me to have more of Eleine than just Dietrich's impressions of her. Looking through the drawers reminded me of that first day when I found the journal, as well as my discovery of Dietrich's Nazi



artwork at the end. Judging from the letter, Eleine must have been witness to the beginnings of Dietrich's evolution into the enemy.

I found no letters, only dust and broken pencils. I returned to the bed in defeat, and sat there brooding, absently picking at my toenails. They had become long, annoyingly so, almost over night. It's strange, but I never notice my nails, and then one day they are unavoidably long and annoying and I cannot stop picking at them until I force them to retreat. I sat there for some time, picking and fuming, wishing in vain that I found something more of Eleine. I found myself growing angry with Dietrich, for not saving any more letters, for leaving the one for me to find, as well as for doing some damn foolish thing to ruin the relationship with Eleine. I know now that my reasoning was not completely sound and sane at the time, but I had developed a sincere interest in the two through the journals, and I had found in Dietrich's love for Eleine a hope of redemption for him from my earlier understanding. I had become quite convinced that in light of such pure, sweet love, that I must have been mistaken to consider Dietrich a Nazi. There could be no reconciling love with that kind of hate. In my desire to find something right and good in my new world, I had put my hope on their love, but it appeared that I had hoped in vain. All that remained for me then was to finish reading the journal in order to satisfy my curiosity as to how a normal person becomes a demon.

But I didn't want to then. The letter from Eleine had left me disturbed and anxious, and the thought of sitting still in that bed that had been my life, morning, evening and afternoon for long weeks was anathema to me. I got up from the offending furniture and paced about the room, conscious of keeping my footsteps quiet. I looked for the ten-thousandth time at the titles that lined the bookshelf and picked a few out,

flipping absently through the pages, interested not in what they said but in the distraction they provided. I went to the window and lay my head in the corner of the wall, to where I could just see out around the curtain, but no one from the street could see me. There was no action on the street below, and somehow this intensified my anxiety. I was becoming desperate for something to fixate on, for something to hold my attention away from the depressing thoughts contained in the letter and the journal. In this state of heightened anxiety and with my eyes on the street, my mind leapt back to that day that brought me to the Muller's. I tried to remember how I had felt, and what had put me into that rage and desire for death. The anger and the self-pity, and the self-loathing, and the hatred of all things about me in my new world came rushing back and poured through me. I conjured up the images of those few who had shared my temporary sanctuary of stone with me at the church. Their supply of food and support had been cut short along with Friedrich Burger's life. I wondered if they were still alive. The anger in my heart crested, and I began to ride down the steep slope into depression. As I paced around the room, the tears of anger and despair and loss mingling in my eyes, I realized that my life was a small scale portrait of what my people had endured for the past several years. I had no freedom, no ability to move about or do what I wished. Over every day and every action hung the fear of being noticed and called out, a distinction that would only lead to a train ride, a camp where people worked till they fell dead, or else were crowded together and killed en masse, when the Nazi's grew impatient with the sight of living Jews. The room and the feelings mixed and swirled, like acids and bases in an unsupervised chemistry class disaster, until the combination erupted in a billowing cloud of claustrophobia. I had to get out of my ghetto, had to stretch my legs and breathe new air. I hesitated but a

moment, the thought of leaving hanging in my mind just as the breath hung in my lungs. Both escaped slowly, gently, as I slowly, gently swung the door open and stepped outside.

I suppose that I expected a gauntlet of soldiers sporting the double S armband to greet me in the hallway, and was thus left disappointed when I found nothing but the tattered runner of carpet lining the floor. I eased down the hall, my feet shuffling along with all of the sound the oldest women in the synagogue made when they shuffled about. I reached the head of the stairs before I remembered to breathe again, and there the dust, newly disturbed from my hand on the banister, tickled the smallest hairs in my nose. I stopped for a minute to consider again what I was doing, and I must confess, thoughts of the Mullers and getting them into trouble did not reach my buzzing mind at the time, only much later when calmness and reason returned. I was terrified of continuing down the steps, but thoughts of returning to the room slid into my mind with the comfort of a sliver of wood piercing the soft skin of my foot. And so I conquered the steps, foot to step, foot to foot, foot to step, and so on, until I my bare toes found the floor at the bottom. I found reason to celebrate the accomplishment and allowed myself another breath. I heard no noise in the house, and I realized that no one was home. I relaxed considerably and began to look around. In the emotional confusion when I had first entered the house, I had not noticed anything. And since that time I had been holed away. In my euphoria of newfound semi-freedom, I took in everything. There were filled bookshelves in keeping with the loves of a man who runs a bookshop. The furniture reflected a taste for dark hard woods, certainly not innovative in the neighborhood, but still tasteful. My parents' furniture had been similar, in the days when my family had lived in the home they had

bought, with money they had earned. Before we all went to live in a place considered best for us by our guardians the government. I knelt to touch the fabric on an ottoman near the fireplace. It was exquisite, with embroidery that must have taken months to complete and left someone's fingers tired but proud. I raised from admiring the furniture and turned around – and screamed. When I had been able to speak for the previous few weeks, when someone was there to speak with, I had been forced to keep my voice low. But even after such a duration of disuse, I was capable of producing quite a good deal of noise. And when I had turned around and saw the face staring back at me, I cleared all of the dust and cobwebs from my throat. I also managed to fall square on my ass after backing directly into the ottoman so recently admired and losing my balance. Even as I fell I realized my foolishness, for just as my head had swung back in an effort to keep up with my plummeting backside, I saw the face before me do the exact same. I rose slowly, rubbing the bruised flesh that thankfully would not be seen by anyone else, and came to stand in front of the mirror.

I knew now that I had seen myself, but the self that I had seen was still a surprise to me. There was no mirror in Dietrich's room, and I realized that it had been since before the church that I had seen myself. My hair was longer, but that I had already known. What else was different? I was a young man, and a few weeks of solitude could not greatly change my appearance, but there was something different. I stared for long minutes before realizing that the change was in my eyes. I had always enjoyed looking into mirrors, practicing my smiles and making silly faces at myself and had always taken for granted the light in my eyes that made everything look and feel right in the mirror. Now, the light was gone. I did not question the change, but accepted the truth that when

a boy learns that his parents are dead, that his people are being killed like worthless vermin, and the world is nothing like it should be, the light goes out of his eyes. Aside from that, I saw the same boy who showed up at the mirror when I did. Brown hair, the color of my mother's, longer than before, just beginning to curl under my ears. Eyes the same color, a shade or two darker, more like the bark on a pine tree, and flecked with the black the same way. A mostly round face, nose coming out a fair distance, but if someone had described me, my nose would be the last thing they would think of.

I turned from the mirror laughing a little at the fright I had had, and in spite of the loneliness I had endured, I was glad that no one had seen me fall. I walked to a desk pushed against the wall between two windows facing the street. The curtains were pulled, so I did not fear being spotted from the street. The top of the desk appeared to act as most horizontal surfaces in a home will: it caught everything that passed through the house, from dust and mail, to keys and pocket change, as evidenced by the slight scrapes and indentions left by such objects. The familiar sight brought on a wave of homesickness. Closing my eyes, I could see my father coming in from his work, setting his hat aside without notice of where it landed, and emptying his baggy pockets of all the junk that had collected there during the day: keys, change, lint, and often a button he had pulled loose in a absent minded moment. I was thus lost in thought when I heard a noise at the door. My heart immediately moved to share space with stomach and not very much air in my throat. My eyes searched as much of the room as possible without me moving my head for a place to hide, as my entire body, from bare toes to long, curly hair was frozen in place, fear grafting that bare skin to the paneled wood floor. Soon I realized that the noise I had heard was a key turning in the lock, and my mind leapt to the

reassuring conclusion that only the Mullers would enter their home with a key, especially without knocking first, but I also knew that it was very likely that someone would enter with the Mullers who would not look kindly on a young, Jewish refugee. My feet unstuck as the handle turned and I leapt by the larger of the two upholstered chairs. I was immediately aware of the ludicrous choice I had made in hiding places, as the chair was of that style which emphasized the beauty of the wooden legs, and therefore left as much of them showing as was possible. My own legs and hands as I crouched behind the useless cover were also imminently visible to anyone who took the time to glance in the right direction. I held my breath and tried to force all of my organs to return to their respective parts of my body and to calm the beating of my heart which seemed loud enough to keep time for the parade band.

The door shut again and there were footsteps sounding on the wooden floor. I could not see from my vantage who the person was, not without revealing myself, so I was still unsure of whether or not it was one of the Mullers or not. There was a rustle of papers on the desk and the sound of keys falling together against the stained wood. Then came a sigh that clenched for me the idea that Herr Muller was home. I peaked my head around the edge of the chair, but barely, not wanting my assumption to lead to trouble. I saw the face of Herr Muller and rose up quickly, saying, "Hello, sir." It should have occurred to me that he might be surprised, but I was so entrenched in the context of being afraid, I never stopped to consider that I might be an agent of fright myself. But so it was. I had the chance to view firsthand what my body went through when I first saw the mirror and traded feet for ass. Herr Muller eyes flew wide, exposing nearly all the white. His mouth exploded in profanities and the mail in his hands became a fountain of paper.

The first words he spoke that had nothing to do with used food or the possibility of my being an illegitimate child were spoken amidst the sounds of a chuckle.

“Boy, you scared me silly. What are you doing down here? You might be seen.”

He was very receptive to my reply and his face softened to me considerably as he came to understand that the confinement of the room had become too much for me. He led me away from the curtained windows to a room further into the house, one in which most of all four walls were covered with books and the shelves they spilled from. “Have a seat, Ben. I should have brought you out of that room long ago, but it is dangerous, and the lady would remove my head if she knew that I had...”

“I will only stay here for a minute sir, but please, can we just sit and talk for awhile?” I tried to keep the desperate note from my voice, even as the desperation consumed me.

“Do you one better, son. How would you like a drink?” The thought of alcohol touched me like the smile of a beautiful baby. I was already relaxing even as I heard the clink of the glasses and the pouring of the drink. “Thank you, sir.” We sat and drank, and for long minutes, neither of us said a word.

## Chapter 6, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

The liquor produced the intended effect, and soon I was warm, fuzzy, and not in the least upset about the prospect of returning to the room, or concerned about much anything for that matter.

“Ben, let’s get you back upstairs, where we can at least try and shield you from the patrols, okay?” He took the two glasses and set them on the table before turning to me and pulling me up by my outstretched hand. “I will sit and talk with you for a while. We have not talked much in days.” I followed him to the steps, tracing again the pattern set by that first day in their home, the wobbliness in my step this time a result of the drink and not skinned knees. Once in the room, Herr Muller sat down on the bed, saying, “Pull up the chair. Let’s have a talk.” Herr Muller, I had learned in the time I had spent hiding in his dead child’s room, had more vested interest in the plight of my people than just my protection. His network of associates in the book industry and a small but trusted group of long time clients had established an information ring, using notes passed through books, to help other Jews in hiding, as well as spread news of the resistance effort building against the Nazis. He had told me little before that had actually given me hope, as the stories normally ended tragically. A group of students would start an underground newspaper, revealing the lies behind the propaganda issued by the fascists in power, and Herr Muller would whisper in excitement over the implications. But a week later he would return, his eyes unable to meet mine as he confessed that the students had been captured and killed for their treason. Or word would come through the group that the French had won a major victory against the German troops, and soon the war would be over, but the truth would come out that the rumor had begun in the bottom of the last of



many steins at the local pub. I got the feeling that he had something new to tell me. I was not in the mood for more bad news, and perhaps as an effect of the liquor, I felt a bit more at ease asking questions I would not have asked. So I changed the subject before I learned what it was.

“Tell me about Dietrich, please.” I saw his eyes narrow, both brows coming together to join in the middle over his nose.

“How do you mean?” My face was warm, and I could feel my pulse behind my eyes. It kept slow time like a clock wound down to the last of its spring. I should have told him that alcohol has its own direct route to my head. I think he was learning quickly, though.

“What was he doing when he died? Frau Muller doesn’t much like to talk about it.” He had taken two drinks to my one, and the light of the room glistened in his eyes, I thought, like moonlight in street puddles. Or tears.

“No, she doesn’t like to speak of it. I wish she would. Sometimes I believe she dreams the boy is still alive. God knows that I wish the same, but there is no bringing him back. He has been gone so long, even before he died, it seemed that he was gone from us.” His voice trailed away, leaving the room silent but for our breathing. I tried to take in all that he had said, and I felt that in the meat of it I had found a hint that Herr Muller wished to tell me of his son’s true history. I had not finished the journal, just a few pages took hours upon more hours for me to digest, and I was hungry to know what had transpired in the young man’s life to bring him into Nazi hatred. So I ventured a probing question.

“You have said that the war took your son from you. Was he fighting in the war, or was he a civilian casualty?” Having said the words, I almost wished that I could have them back in my mouth. I realized as I voiced them, my brain running ahead of the words, that I was leading Herr Muller into admitting that his son was a Nazi. I knew enough about human nature, even then, to be aware that parents loathed few things more than speaking ill of their own children. Some mixture of paternal protection and the threat to the parent’s pride produces that loathing in quantity. But the words were said, and as I watched his eyes retreat, and his head grow heavy and tug his shoulders toward the floor, I was sorry for bringing it up.

“Ben, I have to tell you some things, things that will probably hurt when you hear them – damn it, I know they hurt me—but you deserve to know the truth. But first...” His eyes came up at this point, and leveled with mine. I could see the beginnings of tears forming along the ridge of his lower eyelid, sad water coming close to pouring over the edge of the dam. “...you have to promise me that you will not speak of this to Frau Muller. It is nothing that she does not know, but knowing takes many forms, and she will admit this less willingly than that Dietrich has forever gone from this world.” He stopped speaking, and the message carried by his eyes and the silence in the room was a demand for an answer.

“I will say nothing.”

He nodded, once, then again, closed his eyes, and pushed the palms of his hands slowly down the length of his legs, from hip to knee. “Our son, Dietrich, died while serving Hitler in the war. He was a decorated soldier and was recognized with many honors for his service. I do not know in what capacity he served, for when he announced

his intention to fight, his mother and I forbade it. He went anyway, claiming to be following a higher purpose and that one day we would understand the system or be ground beneath it. We have not spoken with him since.” His eyes were still closed, and tightly, and his hands still rubbed against the fabric of his pant legs. I held my breath, completely drawn into his words, the light around his mouth growing hazy in my eyes as I focused all of my attention on his lips as they moved. “We received word of his death from his commanding officer, along with a statement of his valor and worth to the Reich.” Herr Muller exhaled sharply, producing a noise that could only be understood as one of disdain. His eyes opened and he saw me there, and perhaps misunderstood my stare. “Please don’t get me wrong, I know that my son was a perfect soldier. But I simply do not believe that the Reich and its demon leader valued him at all. Certainly not as much as his mother and I. He was our son, our only child, and Hitler has taken him from us just as he has taken your family from you.” His words were spoken in sincere sadness, and I could appreciate that he had opened his heart to me and was attempting to draw closer to me through some common ground we shared, but the words stung me. His son had chosen to join with the Evil. My parents were dragged away by it. But I could see the pain in his eyes, so I swallowed the anger, and felt the bitter taste begin to subside.

“I am sorry. I did not want to cause you pain by asking. I was just curious. Living here, among his things, in his home, with his parents, I sometimes begin to question the reality of the situation. I...” I had been about to tell him that sometimes I felt that Dietrich had not died, that he still lived there, that I was Dietrich. Granted, these thoughts only came in the darkest of nights, when I awoke from fevered, terrifying

dreams, but I had thought them. Once I was convinced that I had lived Dietrich's life and was living out my punishment in the most fitting hell for a Nazi, seeing life and coming death through the eyes of a Jew. But those thoughts had no place here, and Herr Muller did not need to hear such crazy ramblings. I finished the sentence lamely. "...I just wanted to know. Sorry."

He did not seem to notice that I had changed directions in mid-sentence. His fingers were at his temples, pushing up folds of skin, then pulling them flat. "You are a good boy, Ben. You have been a good son to your father." He did not look at me as he spoke. Herr Muller had not known my father, had not known me before. He spoke out of the loss of his son. I was there, in Dietrich's room. I depended on he and Frau Muller for my very life. The situation must have made him feel very much a father, and the role I fit into in this was surrogate son. I remember feeling comforted at the thought, being able to imagine having a family again, being able to sit and talk and laugh with mother and father, and again have the sweet illusion of normalcy returned to my battered mind and spirit.

And then, in words spoken quickly to undo the damage caused by my slow wit, I returned, "And you are a wonderful father." He raised his head then, and eyes aged and sad lightened just a bit as his face bent against the grain into a smile. He reached his hand out to mine, and when they came together, he gave a small squeeze and lifted himself slowly from the bed.

"I am going now, but one of us will be up a bit later with some food, okay? You will probably get water with your dinner – I would be in trouble if it were known around here that I got our special guest tipsy." He smiled again as he turned to the door. I don't

know if he smiled at the thought of Frau Muller learning of our drink, or the odd choice of the word 'guest.' I know I did not feel much like a guest, rather more like a prisoner with a very kind couple of jailors.

When I was alone, I quickly pulled the journal out and turned to the page where I had left off reading. My foray into the house and the resulting time of conversation and closeness with Herr Muller had rekindled my interest in Dietrich and his journal. With a pillow just inside the small of my back for support, I pushed back against the wall along the side of the bed and found the position most comfortable for reading. I shook my head, thinking to clear the spider and the web it was weaving from my mind, but the liquor reminded me that the spider was just a bit drunk. I closed my eyes and waited for the pounding to subside, while at the same time solemnly resolving never to shake my head again. Once I could open my eyes and see the far wall, and not some fuzzy imitation of it, I looked down at the waiting page. It is probably best to copy here what I read, as I would not wish to color the meaning with my interpretive memory.

I am confused. Eleine came to me today and asked what I believe in. She has met up with some strange group of people, associated with her church. She is always now asking me such strange questions. I have learned that she is not looking for the normal answers. Once I began reciting the Creed, as a joke, and she only shook her head and smiled. Damn, it is

frustrating me. I love her dearly, but I do not know the answers. And it has rankled in me all day now. Why do I not know any more than what I have been told. I say that I believe in God, but what does that really mean? I have merely taken what other people have forced upon me as truth. It frightens me to say it, but I realized today that I do not know who I am. I grow even more frustrated with myself as I realize, even now, that Eleine is supremely confident in her identity. Her air of self-assurance is partly what attracted me in the beginning. But I thought then that it was a quality we shared. She must see the indecision and equivocation in me now, and it frightens me to no end that she will find me less valuable. Why the hell does God have to be so difficult to pin down. As little as a week ago, I was completely unaware that the question existed, but now I find every moment of my day consumed with the fear that I have no real identity based on anything I have chosen. In my mind I stripped away the layers of my life that have been given me by my church, family, school – and when I saw what was left, I realized that I had nothing, was nothing. I do not know what to do, or to think. I

do not know how to answer Eleine.

Hell, I don't even know how to answer myself.

I read the entry twice, to be sure that I had the full effect of it. I sat and breathed deeply though the nose, feeling that dizziness in my head that normally came when I was singing and taking in too much air with each breath. I felt that I understood Dietrich better. It seemed clear to me then, that Dietrich was lost and alone, having had the illusion of his life stripped away from him, not unlike the very situation I had found myself in weeks ago. He had no bearing, no point of reference to begin from in his attempt to understand his world. I believe now that I was romanticizing my friend's situation a bit, looking to find common ground with him so that I could feel commiseration. For some reason, learning of someone else's misfortune often makes our own seem less severe. I read the next entry, and have already explained the feeling of kinship it brought to me.

Why God, why? Why must I believe when you  
never answer me. I have practiced patience, I  
have taken her advice, but I hear nothing when I  
speak to you. I am decided: I will waste no more  
time speaking to a god obviously deaf and dumb.

It was with such an air of sympathy that I turned the page to the next entry, and found the first sketch I had encountered in the journal during my readings, not counting of course the one that had greeted me on my first viewing of the book. In rough dark pencil, in the left margin of the page and stretching nearly top to bottom, was the drawn likeness of a knife, of the sort I had seen S.S. officers carry when in full formal dress. It

did not seem ominous to me at the time, for I had always been fascinated by bladed weapons, and had in my own previous existence drawn a few knives and swords. Therefore, at the time it was merely a curiosity, and another example of the ways in which Dietrich and I were not so different. I began to read the passage, and I again I have chosen to transcribe it here, for in light of what was to come, I have reckoned this day's entry to be of some importance.

I feel some better today. I did not see Eleine,  
for one thing, and I did meet someone new,  
who has helped me find at least one answer.  
He pointed out the obvious, something I should  
clearly have thought of myself. I know that  
regardless of whether or not God exists, or how  
I feel about myself, I am a German. He spoke  
with such pride as he reminded me of this, I  
felt very much ashamed. I am part of the greatest  
nation on earth, and the greatness of my people's  
history is a heritage I share as a birthright.  
He also gave me some very practical advice,  
again, things I should have thought of. If I am  
having problems with a woman, I should  
take a break from her. If I find I have too much  
time to sit about contemplating meaningless  
questions, I should become more active. He told



me about a program I could join, that there were many others my age who were already taking part.

He says that there is some military training, and that in addition to getting some exercise and fresh air, that I would be serving my country and adding to the glorious heritage of Germany.

It is so very obvious to me now what the entry said, how it clearly detailed the first big step that Dietrich took toward becoming an agent of the Evil, but I missed it. I only saw words that I could have written. I knew what it meant to be lost and confused, struggling to make sense of the world, and I now know that I was, and still am, capable of making the incredibly wrong decision when presented with a choice. And so it was that as I read of the day that Dietrich chose to turn down the path towards evil, that I was initially ignorant and unaware of all but the fact that I was reading about a boy that could very easily have been me.

I remember wishing that as I had sat in that stone-walled room of the church so many days before, coming to hate myself, my life, my new world, that someone had come to me and offered me a purpose, something to believe in that I could touch, feel, understand. God had been such a part of my life before, whether by choice or not, there had always been much time devoted to our religion in my family that a day did not go by without giving thanks, or petitions or merely acknowledgment to YAHWEH. But since the exchange of worlds, God had faded from my mind. The one night when the news of Friedrich Burger sent me into fits of rage directed at God had been the emotional

highpoint of the decline in my relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But I found myself thinking of God then, or least, the lack of God in my life. I accepted that I had no direction, no higher calling, and sympathized with Dietrich in this, but before I had felt secure in the knowledge that I was following Torah, and that was all that could be asked of me. Why had I changed?

## Chapter 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

There was reason to be afraid on a daily, hourly basis, for my life. Not from the Mullers, no. They had proven their devotion to caring for me so many times over, as evidenced by the great risk to themselves by sheltering a state cursed Jew. And I accepted early on the role of surrogate child to them in the absence of their Dietrich, even though the truth of this was never expressed in words. No, the threat to my life did not come from them, but rather was aimed at my protectors as well. The Nazis were thorough, methodical, and completely dedicated to the task of eliminating “undesirables” from their land. They saw us as vermin in their fields, and they would choose to burn their own crop and die of starvation before allowing any to survive. Part of the routine in the town was for patrols of SS troops to root out hidden Jewish fugitives by turning neighbor on neighbor, watching for suspicious behavior or Jewish sympathies among the pure Germans, and to strike swiftly at any sign of disloyalty to the state.

And so I sat in my protective prison with terror in my heart, not only for me but also for the kind Mullers, when I heard the knock at the lower door, and the official salute of the Nazi officer elite. I could not hear Herr Muller’s reply, for he always spoke in the voice most people reserve for the library, low and soft, so as not to disturb anyone. And that is how I had seen him for so long, as not wishing to disturb anyone. I smile now to think of how surprised I was to find the heart within him filled with indignant anger at the horror of Nazi power and his mind focused on disturbing all he could of the evil Reich’s progress. At that time, however, all I could make room for in my head were thoughts of remaining quiet and preventing my fear from overcoming me. I heard nothing else for

some time, and as I strained to discover what transpired below me, my ears began to ring with the silence of the room. Presently I became aware of two low voices growing louder and closer in a terrifying quick way. I could hear the sounds of feet on the stairs, and they sounded overly loud, as if they were somehow much heavier. I had become accustomed to the sounds of the house, having very little to focus on in my captivity, and the strange sound of the stairs was ominous and frightening to me as much as the knowledge that at least two of the feet which made the sound belonged to an agent of the state which had murdered my family and my old life. It seems so odd to me now that I had no thoughts of escape, but as I crouched there I thought only of being silent and trusting in my friend Herr Muller to continue protecting me. It is very possible that I am simply too afraid to acknowledge that capture and death were so close at hand and hid behind the false pretense of the safety offered by Herr Muller to save me from the insanity that always lingered just beyond the horizon of my consciousness. The sound of the feet stopped at what I realized was the end of the hallway at the top of the stairs, and I let slip a silent breath through flared nostrils. There was a sound of heavy wood on wood, and then the voice of the Nazi demon, "I apologize again, sir, for the delay. Now I must return to the work that must be done. Heil Hitler!"

Herr Muller's voice came back in response, so much easier to hear now in his proximity to my room, but in the same tones as always before, "Ah, yes. Heil Hitler. And thank you again for bringing this by." There followed a staccato of booted feet on the steps and the creak and slam of the door being used quickly. Just outside my door I heard an enormous sigh and words spoken much too softly for me to understand, and then the rub of wood on wood mixed with the soft, even patter of Herr Muller's feet.

He spoke before entering, showing his always considerate nature yet again, even in the face of what must have been a stressful event for him. “Ben, I am coming in. Everything is fine. Our visitor has gone on his way.” I sat back against the wall on the long side of the bed and watched the door swing in enough to allow a stooped Herr Muller to step in dragging behind him a steel-banded wooden chest with the broken cross of the Nazis and a series of numbers painted along the side. In light of the panic so nearly achieved, so closely averted, I chose to sit quietly and let Herr Muller explain what was happening before I allowed any sort of emotional response to begin inside of me. He pulled the box clear of the door and swung it closed with his left hand as he sat, slowly, onto the trunk. With his head tilted toward his left shoulder and angled a bit forward, he scratched distractedly at the back of his neck. I had seen this before, and it signaled clearly to me that he was thinking hard about the words swimming in his head, contemplating which to let out first. The first words to escape were not what I had expected.

“Ben, I cannot tell you how glad I am that Frau Muller went out for groceries.” I had expected perhaps an explanation of the Nazi officer so close to discovering me and uncovering the Mullers’ deception, putting all of us in harm’s way. Or maybe just a word or two about his makeshift seat. But groceries?

“Okay. When is she to be home?” I had nothing better to say.

“Oh, I don’t know. Probably half an hour. Maybe more.” The itch had apparently moved from his neck to his nose, and this he rubbed absently with the backs of his fingers. And then, suddenly, both hands were on his knees and his eyes were wide as he looked into mine. “That was a bit of a scare, huh, boy? I thought we were done

for, and when he insisted to help carry the chest up the stairs – well, you understand perfectly, I know. Are you okay?” Finally, he spoke to my concerns.

“Yes. Yes, I am all right. I didn’t know what to do when I heard that man’s voice. I – I am sorry. I have put you and your wife in so much danger. I –”

“Hush up about all of that. We know exactly what we are doing, and we would do much more if we were able to right now. Now, like I was saying before, I am glad that Frau Muller is not at home now, and I need you help to keep this afternoon – and our visitor - our little secret.” I fully intended to jump in and ask some obvious questions, but he continued over my intake of breath that many people recognize as the prelude to speech. “You see, as I have told you before, Frau Muller has not dealt well with the passing of our son, and she would be perfectly happy continuing to hold on to some idea that he is still alive. This here,” he rapped his knuckles against the chest, “is Dietrich’s trunk of personal effects that he had with him while he served. The jackass in the Soldatisch Scheisse outfit said that he regretted the delay in getting it to us after our son’s glorious death in the service to his nation, but that their logistics lines had become somewhat confused by the latest vain attempt at attack by the Fuhrer’s enemies.”

“Those are Dietrich’s things, then?” I looked again at the number printed along the side, saw in it the worth of Dietrich to his nation. He had been reduced to a number. Something Herr Muller said rang out strangely in my head, but I couldn’t decide why it seemed important to me at the time. It was when he had spoken of service to his nation...

“Yes, his things. And now for the secret. Frau Muller cannot know of this. She would not be able to handle such a tangible sign that Dietrich will not be returning to us.

Do you understand?" He waited till I nodded my head, once, then again with a bit more conviction. "The box will fit inside of Dietrich's wardrobe, and she has little need to be in there, okay. And if she should start that way, well, you can come up with some reason for her to do otherwise. Thank you, son. I appreciate your help." I saw in his eyes that he mourned for his son, even more now than before, and that his concern for his wife's feelings, while sincere, was also a tool to control his own grief. I mourned with him, and for him, and wished that I could make his world right again. But I knew that I was impotent, that I could do nothing to change the world. I could not even come to grips with the reality of my own life, did not know where I stood in relation to anything, excepting an enduring and growing hatred for the Nazis. I began to reach my hand out to him, to make physical contact to reassure him and myself, to touch another person as I had so rarely been able in my new world, but he rose up from the trunk and went to the wardrobe. Another sigh escaped him as he pulled the two doors open. Stooping, he picked a pair of shoes from the bottom, below the hanging clothes worn by my predecessor, making room for the trunk to sit. I slid from the bed and took hold of the leather straps tacked to either end of the box. "I will bring the trunk over, sir." When I began to straighten my back to lift the chest from the floor, a chorus of muscles from my waist to my elbows sang out in protest. I realized quickly that weeks of doing nothing more strenuous than turning pages had taken the strength from my once firm body. Herr Muller had already moved to my side when I turned my head to look up at his smiling face.

"Let me help, Ben." He took one handle from me and I positioned myself at the other end, and though it was more a burden than such a weight should have been, I was

able to lift my side, and together we sidestepped the short distance across the room to the wardrobe and set the trunk inside. After extracting my fingers from the narrow space between trunk and wall, I straightened, and pressed my hands into the small of my back as I stretched back, arching my shoulders back and away and bringing some measure of relief to the sore muscles I had neglected. Herr Muller continued to smile at me. “Soon, very soon I hope, we will have you back outside, playing in the street and regaining your strength.”

I heard the tone in his voice, but I could not resist asking a selfish question, hoping against all logic for an answer that would bring relief to my aching, sore spirit. “Do you really think it will be over soon?” I could see my own infinite sadness and infinitesimal hope reflected in his eyes as he looked on me.

“Ben, I do not claim to know what will happen today or tomorrow, but I will say that we will be here for you, to love and protect you, as long as you need. You are as much a part of family as, well, anyone could be. Be comforted by that.” He had not answered my question, but I did feel a measure of comfort at his words. *Family*. It was almost too much to think of. I wanted so very much to have a mother and father. And for a mother and father to have me. It occurred to me then that a good deal of the reason that I had not questioned my life, or my place in the world, before was because, in the presence of a loving family, outside concerns seemed insignificant.

Then I had a new thought – “What would you have done if that man had wished to come in here?” My mind was blank. I had no idea how he would respond, and I waited to hear in complete anticipation. Herr Muller’s eyes narrowed, pulling wrinkles



into the skin just about his eyes. I could see his jaw tighten, pushing his chin out slightly, then pull back as he chewed on his lip, all in the second before he spoke.

“I would have killed him. Just given him a shove down the steps. Or something. I would not have let him take you. I have lost one already.” It looked as if he would say more. He did take the breath, but his eyes cut to the side and he let the air go. I did not know what to think. I was afraid. I have mentioned the anger and passion I had seen in him, all of it directed at the Nazis, but this spoken admission of the capability of his rage frightened me.

“Thank you. I am glad you did not have to.”

“You, and me also. I do believe that life is sacred, and should hate to waste any, but I should hate more for ours to be wasted when I could stop it.” His smile was not one of mirth, but the sort that slides out during a tense bit of conversation. “I should go now. The front door is still unlocked, and that is not good for several reasons, not the least of which being Frau Muller’s reaction if she finds it that way.” The new smile was better, and had reinforcements in the happy wrinkles around his eyes.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll see you later.” I slouched back on the bed, my hands just behind me, ready to push me up again as soon as he was gone. I could not wait to get into the wardrobe and see what Dietrich had carried with him, to find more of him than just the journal. Herr Muller passed through the door, and as it closed, I could hear his soft steps move to the steps, and slowly continue down them. Quickly, I was to the wardrobe and had the door open. I knelt before the trunk, and examined the latch that held it closed. There was no lock, only a simple twist and catch device. I let the catch loose and eased the top up from the case, pushing against the legs of hanging pants. I

heard the shoes I had forgotten about slide across the lid and knock against the rear wall of the wardrobe. I raised my head slightly, turning my ear to the door, but I could hear no sound. I am not sure why I wished to be so secretive about going through Dietrich's things, but only going as far as I had, unlatching the case and raising the lid, had accelerated my heartbeat and made me very much aware of my surroundings. I reached into the shadowed cavern of the trunk with my hands, seeing more by touch than with my sight, for the wardrobe and my own body prevented much light from entering in to my treasure chest. It would have been much easier to remove the case again from its hiding place, but I remembered the difficulty I had encountered when lifting it before. And besides, my ability to shield my exploration from discovery would have been much less if I removed the trunk.

The first touch inside the box was of fabric, and I gathered several folds of the stuff into my hands and withdrew it into light, suspecting already that which I held. In the light of Dietrich's room, I could see clearly that I had found his uniform of military service, emblazoned with the symbols of the Reich along with his specific division. I turned, swiveling about on my knees, to the bed, where I spread the clothing out. The shirt was not large, and looked to be about the size that would fit someone my size comfortably. The trousers were a bit long in the leg for me. I spread my hands along the legs, feeling the fabric, seeing in my mind Dietrich dressing for the day, pulling on one leg at a time before bending to buckle his boots. The image I had of Dietrich would have probably seemed strange to his parents, for I saw him as I had known him when we were children, aged along the lines of my imagination, which may have very well brought him to look like a different person altogether. I saw that the fabric was imperfect, was

broken in two places. It came as a shock when the holes registered with me as being the effect of bullets, and that served as a strong reminder that I was looking upon the clothes of a dead man, and one who had died violently. I looked more closely at the holes, fingering the worn fabric of the tear. I realized that the uniform must have been washed, which explained the only slightly discolored area around the holes. I brought into my mind again the image of Dietrich wearing the clothes, and I saw that the shots must have hit him in his right hip and just below the collar on the right side of his chest. It was only later, when I thought back to that time, that I realized the level of detachment that I had felt when picturing my old friend's death. It certainly did not move me to sadness at the time, but that coldness and detachment was not calculated – it simply did not occur to me to be sad. Knowing what I had suffered to that point, and knowing also what was to come, I will say, not as an excuse but merely an explanation, that I had seen so much of death and the absence of value placed on life, I had begun to grow apathetic.

I turned back to the trunk and reached again, this time feeling about some before choosing to remove anything. At first I felt the leather of boots, but did not care to see them. Just after, my hands encountered metal. I ran my fingers along its length, chilled by the cool of it and intrigued by the texture of it, where once it was smooth and flat, then raised ridges of more cool metal. I lifted the find out into the room and saw that I held the scabbard of a knife, the leather wrapped handle just beyond the crosspiece of shining steel where my exploring fingers had stopped. I slipped the restraining thong from the hilt catch and slid the six inches of steel from its case. The knife did not match the drawing from the journal. It was, somehow, less formal. There was the swastika imbedded there at the base of the blade, but the detail work was less meticulous. Dietrich

had drawn the knife of an officer, but the one he carried fit his rank as a lowly infantryman. I ran my finger along the beveled edge of the blade, feeling in it the scores I could also see catching the light, marks left when the knife had been pulled too quickly over the whetstone, a mistake I had made with my own knives, before learning the patience required to bring a fine edge to tool or weapon. Pushing against the blade itself with the thumb of my right hand, I smiled to myself as I felt an edge poorly done, scraped to a sharpness, but too thin to hold under pressure. I thought again of Dietrich, he and his blade together, both so thin and ready to break when the pressure came. The smile slid from my lips, and I felt a touch of sadness, inexplicably felt more for myself than for the owner of the knife I held.

## Chapter 8, 2<sup>nd</sup> draft

I continued my digging until the contents of the trunk were exhausted, and as I sat on the floor by the wardrobe, I held in my hands a find that brought me to the point of tears. They would have been happy tears, for I had discovered a bundle of letters inside the case, and the writing that wrapped around the outermost of the letters I quickly recognized as coming from the hand of Eleine. I had hoped so sincerely before for the chance to read more of Eleine's own words, to learn of her and Dietrich through those words, and now I held that very treasure.

The letters were tied together by a piece of shoe string, light green and frayed on both ends, where Dietrich, or someone, had tied small knots to keep the string from fraying away entirely. I began to loosen the knot with fingers trembling in anticipation, but I realized that the string had not been untied in a very long time, and it would take fingers far more dexterous than my own to unravel its tight bends and folds. I decided then that Dietrich had probably simply slid the letters from the loop of string and replaced them later, without having to tie and untie the knot. I pushed myself to my feet, and stood in the room on legs that did not seem ready to support me. I had been kneeling for quite some time and had not noticed the passing of time in my. I tossed the letters to the bed while I waited for the shaking in my knees to subside, and I looked about the room, noting the mess I had made with the contents of the chest. I had spread each of Dietrich's things out around the room, each with its own space and arranged carefully as I had taken great care and ample time to consider each object, and the stories they told me, or at least the stories I saw in them. His boots sat at the end of the bed, heels and toes together, the

laces neatly tied and laying just on top of each shoe as they would have when worn. The uniform was still spread on the bed as it was when I examined it earlier. The knife I had reattached to the belt I had found, just where I saw the scabbard clip had rubbed the leather over many months of use. And there were several other piles of Dietrich's personal items, things he had carried with him, had likely been on or near him when he died. I felt a closeness with Dietrich then, a feeling that overwhelmed the reality that stated we had never really known each other, that the time we had spent as children could hardly qualify us as friends of any real sort. As I stood there, in the midst of all things Dietrich, his accoutrements of life at war, his surroundings of his life at home, I knew Dietrich. I felt him. It disturbed me in ways I could not quantify. I shook my head, slowly at first, then more forcibly, trying to move past the moment.

I stooped and began gathering the things from the floor and the bed, replacing them into the trunk. It was irrational, but I wished for everything to be as Dietrich had left them, even though I was very much aware that he could not have been the one to pack his trunk, his bullet torn uniform folded neatly on top. I replaced all but the bundle of letters, not willing to relinquish yet the treasure I knew to be in those papers. With the trunk latched and the wardrobe doors closed, I made my way back to the all too familiar bed, and considered the bundle before me.

The string loop came away from the bundle easily, and I unfolded the pages, taking care with the task, noting the map of wrinkles that Dietrich's hands had worked into the papers through innumerable readings. I smoothed them over the bed, being sure not to read anything, choosing instead to order them first by date. I had the idea of taking the letters with me on my next sojourn into the journal, and read each in its place,

together with the journal entry for that day or week. I did not read them at the time, simply held one up, noted the date always written in the upper left corner of the page, smiled at the words 'Sweet Dietrich' and 'With love, Eleine' that began and ended each one.

The pages blurred in my eyes and I thought of the letters I had received from the girl I loved. Rebecca and her family had moved away. Her parents were not German born, not by any condition, least of all by the Reich rule that determined that my father and mother, whose parents and grandparents had all been born German citizens, were unfit for the right to be called German. When the situation first began to grow ill for my family and the other Jews in Eastern Europe, Rebecca's father took his family to Palestine. She had written me from there, every few weeks, until one day the letters simply came no more. I refused to believe that she had simply ceased in her caring for me, but suspected rather that the renowned efficiency Germany no longer applied to mail carrying Jewish surnames. Had I known what was to come, I would have kept those letters with me, as Dietrich had done, a constant presence in my life, and a reminder of better days past. But I had no letters to remember Rebecca by, only memories that were growing dark, or becoming confused with false memories of Eleine, fostered by Dietrich's account of her. The pages before me came back into focus, and I continued the ordering of each according to date. Soon I had the stack of letters, the curve of the bundle smoothed from them, arranged and ready to read. I retrieved the journal from its place, and brought it to the bed where it rested just below the letters. I settled into a position that felt comfortable at the time and pulled the now familiar bulk of the journal into my lap. My fingers lingered on its cover for a long second, savoring the feel. Then I

gathered the stack of letters, gently, and placed them just to my side, within easy reach. For a moment I just sat, surrounded by the objects that held the most interest for me in my new, limited existence. There had been times before, in the time before, when I would be reading a good book, and with the night wearing on, and my eyes glazing over and my head pulling heavily toward my chest, I could not stop reading. The turning of each page and beginning of each chapter brought a renewed sense of excitement. I would reason with myself that the next chapter finished would be the last for the night, but when the instance occurred, I would flip ahead, see how long the next chapter was, and decide to forge ahead one more time. Such was the depth of my involvement in a good story, and whether it was amplified by my situation, or I was simply desperate for any diversion, the anticipation of reading through the story of Dietrich, along with stories of his relationship with Eleine was greater than any motivation I could remember feeling before.

And so I read, for the remainder of that day, and all of the next, interrupted only by meals and the sleep that crept upon me, and left me with a bent and aching neck in the morning, punishment for drifting off while sitting with the journal still in my lap. When the knocks came at the door, signaling the coming of a meal, I slid the journal and the letters, the latter tucked carefully beneath the cover of the former, beneath the pillow that served as my backrest against the wall. I read and read, hardly noticing when my hand would drift to my face to rub aching eyes. I was unaware that my habit of chewing my lower lip as I read had caused that lip to dry and crack. The story absorbed me and consumed me. Eating was tedious beyond belief, and I could scarcely contain myself from asking my benefactors to leave me be, as they sat with me during my meals, so that



I could return to the journal. My excitement grew within me, till I was sure I should burst. For I had finally come to the crux of it, and although my emotions roiled at what I read, my heart rising and plummeting at the implications and outright declarations of the words penned by both Dietrich and his love, I read on, aware of no other desire than to finish, to understand, to reach my mind around Dietrich, and to pull him into me, and know him fully.

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Today was something of a big day in politics, I believe.

My parents were quite upset tonight at dinner. Father

didn't eat a thing. And Mother, she just looked back

and forth, from me to Father. And then she would just

jump up carry off a dish and rattle it around for a while

in the kitchen, then come back and sit down to look at us.

I tried to talk to Father about what happened, but he doesn't

think I know enough to talk about politics. He just said,

"Son, you and your children will look back on the day that

Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor as one of the blackest

in our history."

I talked to some of the guys today after school, Carl

and Gunther and that bunch, and they were telling me

that their parents had voted for Hitler, and that he was going

to save our country. Thank God! I don't understand why Mother

and Father don't like the guy. We need somebody to dig us out

of this hole. It just doesn't make sense. Father is always talking about how we have this glorious heritage and we live in this great country, but he gets all weepy when we elect someone who is willing to take necessary measures to make things better.

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Sweet Dietrich,

We have a new minister working with our church. His name is Bonhoffer. He spoke tonight at a special assembly about the election. He has apparently been following the career of Herr Hitler for some time, and had some interesting things to say about our new chancellor. You know, the Worker's Party has always had extreme positions on some issues, especially the Jewish question, but apparently Hitler is committed to that platform. Herr Bonhoffer was telling us that things might get hard for the Jews in Germany, and asked us to open our hearts to helping our Jewish brothers. None of us knew what to think about that. What do you think? And what are your parents saying about Hitler? My dad is not very happy about the election.

But enough of that. I miss you. I know I saw you earlier

today, and will see you again tomorrow, but I just can't get  
enough. Draw me a picture, would you? I keep that last  
sketch in a book by my bed.

With Love,

Eleine

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I am getting so very tired over these incessant  
discussions about the Jews. The Jews did this and  
that. Or they are harmless. They are to blame for  
everything, or they are victims of propaganda – it  
drives me mad. My parents go on about how the Jews  
are people just like everyone else. I don't get that. I  
haven't heard anyone claiming that the Jews are not  
people, just that they might not be Germans. And I can  
see sense in that. They have their Zion, right? Their  
promised land. So why not have all the Jews live there?  
Germans in Germany, Jews in Jewland. Or leave them  
here. I don't really care. I just don't want to hear any more.

\*\*\*

Sweet Dietrich,

I found what you had to say yesterday interesting. The thing about forgetting the Jewish Problem. I say because I have just heard today that the government has decided to limit the number of Jews that can go to university. And my mother's friend, Isaac, lost his job as a clerk in the Reichstag. Apparently, there are to be no Jews working in the Government. All this to say that the Reich is certainly not forgetting about the Jewish problem.

Herr Bonhoffer has called for another assembly. My father says that he will speak out against these actions. I wish that you would come to the meeting.

I love you Dietrich. I am glad that we have each other. So many people out there are alone.

I have been praying more lately, praying for our nation. I feel like things are coming to a bad place, and I want to be closer to God. Do you understand what I mean?

I was reading this scripture today, in the Psalms. 'The Lord is my shepherd,' you know the one. It really comforts me when I get upset.

Light a candle for me. I'll pray for you.

With Love,

Eleine

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These books I have been reading have so much information about what is going on right now! And they were written so long ago. I have this one British fellow, in translation, who explained the Jewish Problem years ago. He makes it so clear that when the Jews are allowed to remain and to flourish, they are going to permeate the society they are in, leaving nothing untouched by their Jewishness. And it is not that they can help it, it is just their nature. He used the analogy of rats and disease. The rats that carried the plague through Europe didn't do so intentionally, but they brought pain and death nonetheless. I think that the government is doing the right thing, phasing the Jews out gradually. Surely they will take the hint now that they can't attend German schools and can't get their books published that they should just go home.

I tried to talk to Eleine about what I read, but she said she was expected at home and just ran off. And when I asked Father if he thought the Jews would leave soon, he just looked at me hard and said in this really quiet voice, "I hope so and I hope not. I wish

it was not an issue.”

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Sweet Dietrich,

I apologize that I had to leave so quickly today. I am writing now in hope of making the conversation up to you. You were asking me what I thought about what was going on with the Jews, and if I thought the government was dealing with the problem correctly. First, Dietrich, I have to say that I have felt a conviction lately. I feel that God has been telling me that I was of the wrong spirit on this issue. I have been thinking of the Jews as a problem to be dealt with, but I was wrong. The Jews are people, God’s children just as we are, and I was not giving them the love that I ought. I am sure that you have realized this all along, but I think I have been blinded to the truth for so very long. We have to reach out to our brothers, just as Herr Bonhoffer said, and give them our love and support.

I have to tell you, I think that we have a Christian responsibility to make sure that the Jews are not mistreated.

Dietrich, I am worried about you. You have been different lately.

I wish that you would talk to me about it. Are you having trouble with your parents again? Your father, I think, is just very upset with Der Fuhrer. And it is not like he has an outlet for those feelings. But, along those lines, my father was telling me the other day that he and some of his friends were going to organize a protest, maybe some sort of newsletter voicing their discontent with the Reich. Maybe your father would be interested in being part of that.

I love you, Dietrich. Please talk to me about whatever is wrong when you feel ready. I will be here.

With Love,

Eleine

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It is clear to me now, that we have much to fear from the Jews. Why else have they not left Germany, if not to bring some terrible disaster upon us. I have heard the rumors of the work camps. They must understand that there is no place for their kind in Germany. Their persistence betrays their dark purpose. My father is blind to it. He says that we have no right to treat the Jews this way. How does he not see that the true Germans are acting out of concern for Germany, that if we allow this pestilence to remain and grow, we will never rise

again to the power and glory that is Germany's heritage.

They have even corrupted the church, at least the weaker protestant churches. To hear Eleine speaking of reaching out to the murderers of the Christ – it is appalling that those who still claim to believe in a god would stomach such hypocrisy.

I must warn her to take no part in her father's treachery. The girl is naïve, but she is sweet and pretty. There is still hope that she will serve the Reich.

I am decided that I will serve the Reich more directly. No more of this waiting about for the world to fix itself. I spoke with an officer today about joining with the SS. He said that I had a good chance of becoming one of the elite, but needed to serve a brief term with the infantry first. I have yet to speak with my parents about my decision. I have no doubts that Father will fall into a fit. But he just sits and does nothing as the heart of our nation is gnawed away by these undesirable elements.

\*\*\*

Sweet Dietrich,

I am surprised at your choice to join with the military.

I admire your determination to make a change in the world, but are you sure that working with the government



is the way to achieve that goal? You were not specific about the changes you seek to bring about, but I fear that most young men in the infantry don't live long enough to change anything. You and I both lost grandparents in the Great War. The Good Lord knows that the way the world is today, there is a good chance that there is more war to come. I appreciate your concern for my father's safety, but he is acting on the will of God, and we cannot fail when we do the work of God.

I have heard that there is another work camp being built in Buchenwald. Why do you think they have need of another camp?

It is a disgrace to Germany that we treat our fellow man with such callous disrespect. Can you imagine being forced to leave your home, possibly be separated from your family, and have to submit to hard labor for being born with your nice blue eyes?

I think it is atrocious. And then there are the rumors that many of the Jews in the camp are being killed for various minor infractions. Perhaps once you are part of the military you will be able to look into these rumors and see what the truth of it is.

Are things better with your father? How did they take the news of your enlistment? I also have to ask why you have been so quiet with me lately. You told me about joining with the army, and that you were ready to make a change in the world, but like

I said before, you didn't really explain that. And when I try to talk to you about God, and where you are now in your relationship with Him, you draw up into yourself. I know that you don't feel as strongly about helping the Jews as I do, but I will talk less about that if it will help you be comfortable around me again.

My father and his group are making some sort of move tonight. I overheard him speaking with one of his friends about meeting at the Green Stein pub this evening to work out the details of their next protest newsletter. I wanted to go be part of it, but he echoed your concern for my safety, so be happy knowing that I will be sitting at home tonight, wishing I could be out doing my part to affect change in this crazy world. I love you completely.

With Love,

Eleine

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My parents did not take the news well. Not at all.

Father actually spoke, this time, instead of just staring at me with that finger pointed at my chest. He forbade me to join with the army. I tried to explain to him that I was committed to doing my part for Germany, and he just snorted at me. Imagine! I am joining though. I spoke with the officer again, Herr Kunst, and he says that I have a good chance of being one of the first into

Austria when me move to reclaim that territory. I will not give up this chance to serve my country. I owe a debt to Germany, so I say fuck my parents. I am going to the office tomorrow and getting my placement orders.

There is a chance that I could get a preferential placement. I told Herr Kunst about the little meeting at the Green Stein and he was very impressed with my surveillance and said he would deal with the traitors. They will probably be sent off to the camp with those damn Jews. Serves them right. I cannot abide people accepting the gifts of our nation only to betray it. Hypocrites. And now with her father's bad influence removed, hopefully Eleine will see the truth of our Germany. She really must give up her obsession with helping the Jews. There is no option open to them but to leave Germany to the pure born.

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Father told me tonight that if I must join with the army, I would go without his blessing or his support. I must say that telling him I would gather my things and be gone with the morning was the most liberating sentence I have ever spoken. He and Mother have only been an obstacle for me to overcome in my desire to better this land, and now

that obstacle is removed.

I have been commissioned as a private, and will actually get to be among the first to see action in Austria. To help regain what Germany has lost.

Apparently there was some sort of accident at the Green Stein before Herr Kunst's men arrived. There was a shooting and the men gathered there, Eleine's father among them, were killed. It is a tragedy to be sure, but at least Eleine will not see her father shipped away to toil among the Jews.

I have sent Eleine a letter. I knew she would never sit and listen to me while I said these things I have been trying to say for so long. I hope now that she knows that I have moved beyond the crutch of believing in a god that she might realize that she is ready too. She will probably not be overly happy at first to hear that I am in full favor of ridding ourselves of the burden of the Jews, but this too is for her own good. The sooner she accepts that the order of the world will not allow that sort to remain here, in Germany, among the pure born, the sooner she will be able to move on with her life.

I have also said goodbye to the girl, for I cannot shoulder the burden of worry for her to interfere with the work I go to do.

I have written much of my life into this book, but it is life now past, and I am going to leave it here with the remainders of who I once was.

Today begins my new life.

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Sweet Dietrich,

I love you, Dietrich. I have and always will. I cannot blame you for what has happened. I have to believe that you do not fully understand what is going on. I love you, and I cannot believe that you are given over to being an evil man. You have changed, that is a certainty, but you are still Dietrich.

We were so close. I thought you had finally understood what I was trying to tell you. Somehow I have failed, Dietrich. I blame myself. But I will pray to be forgiven, and I will pray for you. Oh, how I wish that things were not as they are. But we can not change the world, only ourselves, and you have chosen something that I cannot abide.

One last thing: I have read your letter so many times, though it tears my heart at each reading. I accept that you do not wish to hear from me again. I would only be a liability to you.

But I will not accept that our love was a mistake.

I will never forget you, Dietrich.

With love, Always, Eleine

## Chapter 9

I closed the journal, and arranged the stack of letters in a neat pile, smoothing the rounded edges of the worn papers with care, my hands steady. I had anticipated the moment for long, emotional weeks, and the actual of that moment was unlike nothing I had anticipated. I felt no anger, nor did I feel betrayed by the boy Dietrich who had grown to become a Nazi. As I had finished the last of the letters, placing it back into its original context, I straightened my back, sore from the hours of intense reading during which my body had scarcely stirred. I felt an October sadness grow within me. I met with a sadness of heart that produced no tears. I felt as the tree must surely feel in Fall when the cold winds and dark days strip its color and splendor till there are only bare branches, naked between the frost blue sky and the dying leaves.

I sat back, my head against the wall, and I closed eyes tired from the reading. Thoughts jostled and jumped, aching to be noticed, but I breathed deeply of the close air of the room, and allowed each thought to slide away, leaving my mind free to bathe in the quiet sadness of the moment. When all thoughts had gone and the quietness in my mind was complete, I opened my eyes and rose from the bed. I took up the journal and the letters stacked together on its cover, and carried them to the wardrobe and the chest within. I left the letters and Dietrich's journal there, and latched the trunk lid closed.

There was a still emptiness in the room when I turned from closing the doors of the wardrobe. I made my way to the bed with some thought of kneeling to pray. Praying seemed the thing to do. But on my knees, I found inside of me the same still emptiness of the room. Not even the quiet sadness remained. I knelt there for a time, waiting of the

voice of my mind to speak to me, but no words came. I pulled myself from my knees and slid my body across the bed, dragging the pillow close to me. I closed my eyes, and into that still emptiness I drifted away.

When I woke, there filled my head the smell of hot bread. I raised from the sheets and rubbed at the lines of sleep on my face. Soon, there was a knock at the door, followed by the peeking eyes of Bianca Muller. “I decided to bake my own today. Would you like to have some with me?”

I smiled and nodded, and took the hot bread, felt it fill my mouth. “What month is it? I seem to have lost track.” I could have easily asked what year we were living in. In my memory, the tenure with the Mullers contracted and expanded, appearing at times like years and at others just days.

“It is April, Dear. The tenth. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you. Very well. Did I ever tell you about Rebecca?” Frau Muller sat and listened as I talked, occasionally pulling free a small piece of bread which she chewed slowly, her eyes never leaving my face, where she looked from my mouth to my eyes and back. “Rebecca was the most beautiful girl.” I smiled at the memories, and would laugh at my own stories as I talked, on and on, about my life. The loaf of bread in the basket was reduced to leavings of brown flakes and crumbs and the light of the sun through the window made a considerable journey around the room before the last of my stories slipped from my memory and into the open ears of Frau Muller.

“Ben, I am so very glad that we have talked this morning. I hope that in the morning you will share more of your life with me. If all it takes is freshly baked bread, then that is what we will have every morning from now on.” I noticed that as she rose

and brushed away bits of bread from her skirt and gathered the basket and glasses to go, that her movements were different, calmer. She stood straight and still, and her eyes were steady as she smiled at me. “Is there anything you need from, well, anywhere?”

“No, but thank you. The bread was very nice, but you do not need to bake every day. I will tell you stories of my life as often as you like. Could you, though, ask Herr Muller to come see me when he returns home? I have a request for him.”

“That is easily done. I will send him straight up.” She left, and I could hear the clinking of the glasses as they rocked in the basket as she walked down the hall to the steps. I rose from the bed and pulled the desk chair close to the window and took down from the shelf the bible. I opened the front cover and was not surprised to find there a note written on the first leaf. It was short, but spoke volumes and confirmed my suspicion that Dietrich had not been the one to underline the psalm and wear the binding out opening to that scripture.

D-,  
I wanted you to have my Bible.  
I hope you find the same peace  
that I have found.  
Love, E-

I turned past the inscription and found the book of Job. Ever since one of my rabbis had told me that the book was thought to have been the earliest written, I had been obsessed with it, and read the book countless times. I read it again that day and saw it anew. I was there with Job in his loss, but when I came to the part where Job questioned God, and God answered, I smiled, and knew that I had discovered the truth of the passage.

I had just finished this reading when I heard Herr Muller’s heavy knock at the door, and the quiet clearing of his throat that always followed. I said nothing, as the



routine dictated, but set the book aside and turned in my chair towards the door. When he entered, he looked first to the bed and then to me. I think there was surprise in his eyes, but he moved quickly to the end of the bed and sat there, facing me, a smile on his face. “Bianca said that you wished to see me. What may I do for you?”

“I had hoped that you might be able to find for me a book or two. I am a student of the classics, and if you could bring me an Ovid, or perhaps a dialogue of Plato, I would be most grateful.”

“Well, I will see what I can do for you. I have quite a network of friends in the book industry. I should like to see some books read. Lately, it has seemed that they are good only for burning. Is that all, or is there more that I can do for you? You must surely grow tired of this room. Any distraction I am able to provide, I would gladly do my best...”

“No, thank you. I only wish to have the books. I fear I will soon forget all that I learned of Latin and Greek if I do not practice them. Actually, I do have a question for you, Herr Muller, if you would answer it.”

“Speak on, boy. We are family here.”

“Why is it that I have yet to be discovered? Surely the Nazis make every effort to find every last Jew they have record of.”

“A good question, Ben. I must say that I feel fortunate that there has been no search of our home, but I suspect that the families of soldiers who died for the cause are low on the list of priorities. And it can be no hurt to your cause that I have a friend with access, who destroyed the record of your birth.”

“I see. I thank you again for all that you have done. You have treated me well – you have treated me like a son, and I do thank you.”

“I will say this only once more: My only wish is that I could help more as I have helped you. And I wish that I could have protected my son. But that is passed. I will find you those books tomorrow, or perhaps the next day. You will let me know if there is anything else you wish for?” He had risen, and he gently squeezed my shoulder with his left hand as he spoke these last words. I nodded, quiet in respect of the words he had spoken in love about me, and the child he had lost.

The remainder of that day drifted by, its tranquility broken in small spaces by a small meal and a curious first occurrence when Frau Muller came to the door, as the darkness in the room grew out of the dusk. She opened the door enough to allow her head within, and said, simply, “Sleep well, Ben.”

It was there as I lay, watching the shadows expand to fill the room, that I thought again of the journal and of Dietrich. The peaceful calm of my mind embraced the thoughts. There was no more tumult of emotions associated with Dietrich for me. I could still feel the sadness I had discovered when I first finished the journal and laid it aside, and I will forever have a place within me where I can go to find that sadness, but it was only a memory now, and no longer possessed my mind. My experience with the journal had wrought a change within me, and a change so complete that I once again felt that I had left a world behind and entered a new one. Yet this new world did not hold the fear and dread and desolation that I had experienced in the church. Rather, I felt now a very real sense of hope.

When I first went into the journal, I went in search of understanding. I wanted to find an explanation as to how a normal boy could choose to become a killer. But the journal did not answer that question. I did not understand Dietrich's choice, and still do not. What I did take from Dietrich's words, and those of his young love Eleine, was far more fundamental. I saw myself in Dietrich. I saw what the world could do to a young boy who was confused, who thought he was alone. I saw how I might have come to that end, to a place where I saw no value in life, where I placed no value on the lives of others. I hated the Nazis and what they had done, yet I mourned for the loss of Dietrich, and for the loss of all the other men and women who had been corrupted by an ideal that valued country, or race, or religion over life.