Two Lives in Germany

by
Hans Rosenthal
Translated from the German
by
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Alles Liebe, Oma.
Most people who have lived in Germany in the seventies or eighties will smile at the mention of Hans Rosenthal’s name. A prolific game show host, Rosenthal dominated television and radio entertainment in postwar Berlin, and was much loved for his wit and warmth. Viewers and listeners felt they could relate to Rosenthal and welcomed him into their living rooms, but few knew his full life story until the 1980 publication of his autobiography, *Zwei Leben in Deutschland*—the English version of which you now hold in your hands.

Rosenthal’s cheery façade masked a dark childhood, in which his parents both died of illness, his brother was murdered in a concentration camp, and he himself was forced into hiding for many months, until the nightmare of World War II ended. Unlike many comparable survival stories, Rosenthal remained in Berlin after the war. Within several decades, he had a successful career in the public eye and seemed to hold no grudges against his homeland.

Although Rosenthal never experienced the trauma of a concentration camp or a battlefield firsthand, he was greatly affected by World War II. Rosenthal’s unusual openness about his Jewish identity and German pride is something I have not encountered in other survivors of his generation. By contrast, my own grandmother refuses to talk about her childhood in Berlin and does not identify as Jewish. Rosenthal relates his story honestly and candidly through his book, which is an
increasingly valuable historical document as firsthand witnesses of 1940s Germany die away, and tensions between German and Jewish historical narratives remains unresolved.

Modern Germany is still haunted by the ghosts of the Holocaust, with plaques and memorials on every street corner. Many young Germans I have met feel unfairly judged for their nation’s past and many Jews, my family included, still have reservations about going to Germany, even on a vacation. Armies have come and gone, a wall has risen and fallen, and Germany’s story continues to unfold, but Germans, Jews, and German Jews, still find themselves wrestling with the past.

Nonetheless, Hans Rosenthal, a Jew and a patriot, shared a homeland with living Nazis and countless implicated bystanders. The proximity of the past in Hans Rosenthal’s autobiography renders his attitude all the more surprising; instead of expressing resentment towards the German people, he sees his book as a tool to build understanding between his religion and his nationality. Throughout the narrative, Rosenthal emphasizes the influences of kind Germans in his life, including his wife, and in his “Afterword” he explains Jewish customs that may seem odd to outsiders. Rosenthal acknowledges the past, but also advocates taking optimistic steps towards reconciliation and tolerance.

I first heard about Hans Rosenthal when I was in Berlin on a grant from DAAD and doing research for a presentation about radio in divided Berlin. One popular program I read about, *The Islanders*, showcased satirical songs and skits about life in West Berlin, a little “island” of democracy. Hans Rosenthal worked on *The Islanders* for a time and he was remembered fondly on a number of online
message boards. One such forum posted comments about his little-known autobiography, now out of print, but, as luck would have it, available in the library of the Free University in Berlin.

Some Internet scouring and phone calls finally put me in touch with Gert Rosenthal, who sounded much like his father, but with the advantage of a complete education and advanced degrees. Hans Rosenthal had been forced to drop out of school as a teenager and admitted to having been a poor student after his father’s death.

After returning to New York, I decided to see what I could discover about Hans Rosenthal’s cousin, Rudi Maschke, who, as Rosenthal mentions, came to the United States as a boy. An online search led me to an article written by one of Maschke’s former employees, Barry Tanenbaum. I called the publication’s office and found Mr. Tanenbaum, who told me about “Rudy” and his son, David Maschke, who was working as an architect in Georgia. I then called David Maschke. We talked about his father and the Rosenthals, but he also gave me his sister’s phone number, saying she knew more than he did. Tamar Martin, David Maschke’s sister, is a therapist in New York City, and one short train ride brought me to her downtown office. The four subjects I interviewed knew either Rudy Maschke or Hans Rosenthal very well, and helped me build a fuller understanding of the work I was translating. I have included much of their commentary in the epilogue.

The German version of Zwei Leben in Deutschland was split into three parts: “First Life,” “Second Life,” and, in the middle, “Between Lives.” I have translated the entire first part and most of the middle part, with the exception of its final
sections, in which Hans Rosenthal moves to an opening at Radio In the American Sector (RIAS) in late July 1948. There he started developing on-air quiz shows, some of them pitting a RIAS team against stations in other German-speaking cities. In 1954, Hans Rosenthal hosted his first radio show, *Ask and Win*, an appropriation of Twenty Questions, later reformatted for television in 1964 as *Well Asked is Half Won*. During the sixties and seventies, Rosenthal continued to create an extraordinary number of shows for radio and television, including *Hit Parade of the 20’s, KO-OK, Guess it All with Rosenthal*. He left his salaried position at RIAS in 1980, committing to television full-time and commencing what he called “the beginning of independence.”

The narration of the successful and rather glamorous “second life” unfortunately bogs down in a lot of name-dropping and insider’s peeks behind the scenes of Rosenthal’s shows. Rosenthal helped form the German media landscape at the end of World War II and during the outbreak of the Cold War, but he provides no substantive commentary on life in the cultural battleground of Berlin. I could only conclude that Hans Rosenthal’s so-called “second life” would be of little interest to English-speaking readers unfamiliar with the celebrities Rosenthal mentions.

Because I translated only half of the book, I have eliminated the separation into parts and presented *Two Lives in Germany* as a simple series of chapters. Without the definitive divides between “lives,” the reader can watch Rosenthal develop from a resourceful young boy to a successful grown man, and Rosenthal’s second life gradually comes into view when he starts to depend on radio broadcasts for connection to the outside world while hiding in a garden cottage.
Hans Rosenthal may have been a talented entertainer and an excellent organizer, but his ability as a storyteller left something to be desired. His style is unpretentious, his tone somewhat naïve, and his infrequent metaphors and poetic descriptions often clichéd. He originally told his story chronologically, starting with his birth, until his son suggested that he add a flashback in the opening scene. Throughout the translation, I have occasionally taken the liberty of invigorating Herr Rosenthal’s voice to the best of my ability, condensing excessively long passages and sharpening Rosenthal’s word choice while still channeling his emotion. (One such example occurs in “The Smuggled Wedding Rings” when Rosenthal describes the arduous trip to Traudl’s home in Spandau.)

The rambling narration relies heavily on dashes and ellipses, but what seems like poor writing is simply a very faithful transcription. Rosenthal dictated the entire memoir and presumably gave the tapes to a secretary. He had never recounted his full life story before this undertaking, and style probably mattered little to him in his cathartic unloading. “He took his time and made himself comfortable,” his son remembers. “He stretched out in a deck chair on the terrace, an umbrella over him, turned on the recorder, and started to talk.” Rosenthal’s casual prose thus reflects his informal speaking voice, which I have tried to convey by using contractions and colloquialisms.

With Rosenthal’s voice in mind, I have also left a number of his mistakes and inconsistencies uncorrected, such as his misspelling of “Herschel Grynszpan,” the name of the Jewish refugee who assassinated the diplomat Ernst Von Rath in Paris in

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1 Gert Rosenthal, personal interview. 9 Aug, 2012
1938. Rosenthal’s most curious inconsistency is his use of the word “Jew,” to which he draws attention in the chapter, “When the Synagogues Burned”: “The word ‘Jew’ still seems like invective to me. I prefer to speak of a ‘Jewish person,’ or a ‘Jewish thing.’” This explanation comes as a bit of a surprise, since Rosenthal has identified himself as “a Jew” until this point in the narrative. After his explanation, Rosenthal calls members of his faith “Jewish people” for a short while, but soon drops the adjectival form and, in the very last sentence of the chapter, refers to his community as “us Jews.” I cannot imagine why Rosenthal feels compelled to advocate for a nomenclature that he himself does not use consistently. Perhaps he was betrayed by his own loose and unedited dictation.

As with any translation project, working within the limitations and dynamic ranges of each language provides interesting challenges. One example can be found in the final two sentences of Rosenthal’s afterword, which uses the German word “Glück” in ways that leave much room for interpretation: “Truly I have always moved fast in my life. Not to chase Glück, but to escape from danger. And in so doing, I’ve found Glück.”

Rosenthal intends these last words to be powerful and conclusive, but the translator into English is faced with ambiguity. Glück can be rendered as “happiness,” “luck,” “bliss” or “fortune.” Rosenthal might have been chasing fortune and have found happiness, or chasing luck and found fortune, or he could have found the very thing he was seeking, whatever it may be.

In these final lines, Rosenthal intends to return to an early reference to the fable Hans im Glück, or “Hans in Luck.” Although Rosenthal acknowledges his
extraordinary luck in having dodged death a number of times, I imagine he would be reluctant to attribute his success to anything other than his own resolve. As an entertainer, he was very hard-working and seemed to hold fast to the classically American value of self-determination, perhaps influenced by time spent in the West. I thus stayed away from using “luck” in these final lines, choosing instead to translate the first Glück as “fortune” and the second as “happiness,” since Hans Rosenthal emphasizes his good intentions throughout his book, subtly assuring the reader that he did not go into radio to seek fame or fortune, nor did he write his book for personal benefit.

Rosenthal’s positive outlook makes sense in the 21st century, but his philosophy may not have been completely appropriate in his time. One could argue that he was absolving Germany too easily by declaring himself an ambassador for the Jewish population and distributing implied pardons with each television appearance. Perhaps his non-confrontational public personality actually betrayed the interests of the embittered German Jewish community.

Whether Rosenthal was a noble representative or a naïve entertainer, his media presence embodied a number of cultural and historical rifts. In ongoing discussions about Jewish and German Vergangenheitsbewältigung—coming to terms with the past—Hans Rosenthal’s story struck me as an interesting voice to add to the conversation. Themes of forgiveness, identity, and guilt bubble beneath the surface of Rosenthal’s optimistic autobiography, but, coated in jokes and side stories, they are left up to the reader and translator to unearth.
DEAR READER,

You might think that I wrote this book to make myself more famous and to admire myself in my own mirror of paper and printer’s ink, as so many who work in theater, film, and television do. I too am suspicious of the motives behind celebrity autobiographies, but I write this book for a reason.

After the age of fifty, a man tends to think back on his life every now and then. As I looked back on my own childhood, my youth, my adult life, and the beginnings of my career and growing success, I recognized a sharp contrast between my life as a child and young boy, and my life as an adult. While I was writing this book, something critically important became quite clear to me: I had actually led two different lives. The first was shrouded in menacing shadows that soon gave way to complete darkness; the second was sunny and bright. When I say bright, I’m referring not only to the spotlight cast upon me, but also to the warmth and unprecedented sense of security that I’ve come to enjoy. Essentially it was the kind of happiness that resides, in the words of Walter Rathenau, in being liberated from fear—a freedom I never knew in the prewar period. For when I was still a boy, my people and I were all demoted to second-class human beings in an increasingly dark chapter of German history.

Then, during the war, I was turned into a nonperson. My existence wasn’t merely in danger—officially I didn’t exist. Every hour I spent in hiding was full of fear, yet at the same time, I was amazed to be alive at all.
After the war my life took a surprising turn for the better, like a revolving stage that rapidly swiveled to an entirely new scene. My extraordinarily awful past behind me, I felt like “Hans in Luck.”

Another interesting thing I noticed while writing this book: My own life, my two lives in Germany, mirrored what happened in this country, which, despite, or perhaps because of, the suffering I endured, I consider my homeland.

The German people emerged from complete darkness into the light. Though the illumination of the postwar period was sometimes glaring and not very warming, it was a stroke of good fortune that Germany managed to emerge out of that cold time, from which there had appeared to be no escape.

This observation strengthened my resolve to write this book. There are so many people who live almost entirely in the present and only occasionally look at the past, wanting to understand what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. Young people in particular are often confused by all the controversy over a history they didn’t experience. They just want to know what it was really like back then.

My two lives in Germany will probably be exciting and entertaining for the readers of this book. After all, it’s always exciting when someone has to fight for his survival, and it’s certainly entertaining to peek into the life of a person in the limelight and see what normally stays behind closed doors.

Seven times I have been saved from almost certain death. A man with such a past can’t write a book without wishing and hoping that his reader will come to

*Hans im Glück* is a fable about a boy who earns a lump of gold after years of hard labor. He naively swaps his gold for a horse, which he then trades for a cow, and on and on until he is finally left with a stone. Hans is satisfied with each of his unwise barters and scampers home happily at the end.
realize that you must never give up. Above all, you must never give up on yourself. After the tunnel comes light, after the deep valley comes a peak, after despair comes confidence, and after misery, bliss.

I hope this book can be an experience both serious and humorous, exciting and thought-provoking, critical and sympathetic, for you and for me.

Yours faithfully,

Hans Rosenthal
It was in the Frankfurt airport in the summer of 1979. My flight from Berlin had been like any other. A little kid had recognized me as the host of a popular game show and called out my signature command to contestants, “Make it Snappy!” A fellow passenger asked me for an autograph. My wife, sitting quietly next to me, smiled in embarrassment, as she always did when crowds recognized me in public.

Still, this was a very unusual flight for me—a fight into the past. My destination was Brussels. I was on my way to a rendezvous with Florent Loffet, my old friend Florent.

I had searched for him for years, written him letters, made inquiries—all in vain. Florent was untraceable. I never received an answer from him and found no information whatsoever, so I had to conclude that Florent was dead. Saddened, I gave up my search.

I would never have seen him again if TV hadn’t come to the rescue. One day, a letter reached Channel 2 asking if I was the Hans Rosenthal from Torgelow all those years ago . . . yes indeed! I was that Hans and still am! Florent, watching TV in his Belgian living room, had recognized me and written that letter. “Finally!” I replied. “See you soon!”
Now I was flying to visit him. My thoughts wandered through the past—good years and bad, thirty-six in all. 1942 was one of the bad ones, but worse were still to come.

Yes, 1942. I was seventeen years old, the orphaned son of Jewish parents, and assigned by the office for Jewish employment to hard labor in Alfred Hanne’s factory.

Hanne was a storm trooper who had built up a good business with used tin cans. His metal container factory bought them by the wagonload. They were delivered to a freight depot in Weissensee in boxcars. I had to transfer them to the “Speedy” delivery vans, three-wheeled vehicles that trundled the rattling cargo to the plant. First the old cans had to be washed in scalding lye. I stood there and scrubbed them; the jagged rims ripped the skin from my fingers and I could feel the lye biting into the wounds. Then they were sorted. That was also our job. I was considered pretty good at this part, which required some skill, since the cans came in different sizes—German, Belgian, and French standard sizes, not to mention the varying double-sized cans.

After the cans were dried, the sharp edges were cut off. I was allowed to operate the machine that punched new pressurized lids out of old metal buckets that originally filled with jam. After the “recycling” was completed, the refurbished cans, which Herr Hanne sold for 25 pfennigs apiece, were shipped from the factory by the thousands. In another factory, the cans would be filled with fuel to be sent to the front. German soldiers were already stationed in Russia at that time, and they would
cook their food with our canned heat. That was my contribution to the “final victory,” as it was called.

Our hourly pay was 35 pfennigs, so a little more than the price of one can. One day the boss came to us four young forced laborers at the punching station and said, “If each of you can produce five thousand units in one day, you’ll all get a 5-mark bonus.” We buckled down and pulled it off. Three days later, we each managed to reach six thousand units and got another 5 marks. Eventually, working without breaks, we made it up to ten thousand lids a day.

Alfred Hanne was thrilled. By then he had already stopped believing in the “final victory” and was, perhaps for that reason, very nice to us. His success in business spurred him on. One morning he took me aside and said “Rosenthal, I intend to open a branch in an old iron foundry in Torgelow. Would you like to come with me?”

Although I had no idea where Torgelow was, I accepted. After all, I had lost my parents and had been separated from my little brother, Gert. In this time of war and hardship, there was really nothing keeping me in Berlin.

Suddenly his face darkened. “There’s just one thing—you have to take off this star.” He meant the star we had to wear back then, the yellow Jewish star. Anyone who took it off would be severely punished—how severely, you could only guess. You could guess it could cost you your life.

I was taken aback. Before I could answer, Hanne came closer to me. “You’ll be riding with me in my car, so nothing will happen to you. “ So we drove to the Pomeranian town of Torgelow.
The factory grounds were surrounded by a fence. I slept in a shack located inside the foundry. Admittedly, I didn’t have a bed, but in my sleeping bag I felt almost secure—a concept that was entirely relative back then, and not only for me. Otto worked there; a soldier in the Third Reich’s Wehrmacht, no longer young, chubby, pleasant, and truly kind-hearted. He guarded three hundred Belgian prisoners of war who also worked and lived in the iron foundry. One of them was was Florent Loffet.

Otto didn’t mind my speaking with the prisoners. That’s how I got to know Florent. He was ten years older than me, thin with full, thick hair and a narrow face that framed his lively, gentle eyes. Although he was a French-speaking Belgian, his German was very good. Our many conversations gave me a sense of support and eased my loneliness. He occasionally let me have the bones he picked out of the horsemeat the prisoners were given—and that was important because we were so hungry we couldn’t sleep.

When I decided to escape from Torgelow, we promised each other that we would meet again—if we both survived the war. Florent came from Verviers, and I kept his address on me through all the dangers to come, until the nightmare that brought us together and then separated us had passed.

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I thought about this period during my flight to Brussels. I specifically remembered one story involving Russians…but the stewardess interrupted my thoughts. They were serving drinks. My god, how long ago that all was: back then I
had no idea what “drinks” were, nor would I have believed that one day I would be able to fly to see Florent and meet strangers who were kind to me.

Now Florent was over sixty. He didn’t live in Verviers anymore because his house had burned down during the war. That’s why my letters had never reached him. Now he lived over a hundred kilometers from Brussels, and he would be meeting us the day after we arrived.

Now I was sitting in my hotel room with my wife, waiting. He was going to bring his wife as well. At 5 o’clock the phone rang. “Monsieur Rosenthal, a Monsieur Loffet would like to speak with you,” the front desk announced. “Do you wish to come down?” Did I ever! Soon we were in each other’s arms. We had recognized each other immediately. His hair was gray, his face even leaner, but through the changes I could still see my Florent, my companion from that other life in Torgelow, which we both remembered as vividly as our friendship.

With our wives, we went out to eat. And tell stories. And reminisce. “You were the funniest one in the camp, Hans, even in the worst of times,” he told me. “Do you remember how cheerful you always were, in spite of everything?” Actually, I had forgotten.

Then he sang us the songs I had taught him back then. The other patrons in the restaurant stared in surprise. “My heart it pounds, thump-thump, its beats resound, thump-thump.” And “Come back, I wait only for you!” Yes, we too had waited for each other with pounding hearts.

Looking mysterious, Florent pulled an old, yellowed photograph out of his wallet. “Know who this is?” he asked with a smile. I certainly did. The photo showed
me as a seventeen-year-old boy, in the camp. He’d saved this photo for decades, waiting to give it back to me one day. Now it was my turn: all these years I had saved an old ten-pfennig banknote, his prisoner “salary.” He stared at it in disbelief, held it up to the light and sighed deeply. I think I understood what he was feeling.

Yes, and then the story with the Russians…

Alfred Hanne, our boss, needed more workers, since his business in Torgelow was going so fabulously. So one day he planted himself before me and said, “Rosenthal. You’re going to go to Stettin now to pick up ten Russian prisoners. You’ll bring them back to the camp on the other side of Torgelow, beyond the train line, so that they can work for us. And you, Rosenthal, will supervise them.”

This was my time to shine, but the task wasn’t so easy. It was winter and I didn’t even have a coat—and there was also the problem of the yellow star that I had to wear again.

Alfred Hanne was unfazed by the situation. “You’ll take my coat—without the star.” I took it, though Hanne, at 5-foot-10, was a giant compared to me, since I was only 5’2”. I looked pretty odd in his coat. Conspicuously odd…

When I heard that I was supposed to pick up the Russians from a camp run by the SS, I felt nauseated. Should I challenge fate this way? The boss clapped me on the shoulder. “Here are the papers. They say you’re supposed to pick up some Russians and bring them back here. These will protect you.”

So I went to Stettin. Herr Hanne had said that I should present myself as a German. Jewish people weren’t considered Germans at that time. I gathered all the courage of my seventeen years, walked up to the SS guard, and said: “Heil Hitler!”
“Heil Hitler!” the guard responded. “What do you want?” I drew the papers out of the pocket of my extra-long coat. “I’m here to pick up ten Russians to bring to Torgelow.”

The guard sent me to the office. I passed more sentinels, none of who seemed to notice my fear. Little by little, my confidence increased. “Hmm,” said the man in the SS office. “It’s noon now and the next local train doesn’t leave until 6. You’re not allowed to take the express with prisoners of war, so what are you going to do with the Russians all that time?”

“I can’t really wait around with them at the station for six hours,” I said. “Could I possibly come back later?” “All right then. The Russians will be ready for you at 5 o’clock. Heil Hitler!”

What was I to do with my five unexpected hours of freedom? I followed my growling stomach back to the train station. The restaurant there had soup that didn’t require a ration card. As ration cards were something I simply didn’t have, I sat down, ordered my soup, and dug in with abandon. I didn’t know that police detectives kept railroad station waiting rooms under special surveillance in those days, but I would find out soon enough.

Suddenly a man in a leather coat sat down next to me. He apparently saw no reason to remove his hat. Instead he pulled a police badge out of his pocket and said, “Your identification, please!” My response wasn’t all that imaginative. “I’m from Berlin and I don’t have any identification. But here, I have these papers: I’m picking up ten Russians.”
Leather Jacket was surprised. The papers were all in order. “Hmm,” he said, “I can hear that you’re German, but…” he inspected me warily. “Where did you get that coat?”

So that was it: the extra large coat that hung from my scrawny shoulders and went down to my ankles made me look suspicious.

“From my boss,” I said. Nothing else came to mind. “I don’t own one.” The man smiled from under his hat. “Good enough.”

Then a devil seemed to appear on my shoulder. “Just a minute please—maybe you can help me. I’m actually in a rather sticky situation: I have to take the local train to Torgelow with ten Russians this evening, and I don’t have a weapon. I think this could be dangerous because it will be dark. Could you get me authorization to take the express, so I can travel during the daytime?

He went with me to the railroad police. Heil Hitler all around. “A seventeen-year-old boy with ten Russians and no weapon —can’t we do something about that?” Indeed they could.

They called the camp and eventually I received permission, picked up the Russians, and rode with them to Torgelow. And I didn’t need a weapon.

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Florent and I had a hearty laugh as we sat together in beautiful, elegant Brussels. We didn’t laugh so much about other things. Like the business with the carrots and potatoes.

Alfred Hanne came to me one morning and said, “Hans, I have a wagon full of carrots and a wagon full of potatoes coming. We’ll store them over there in the
shed. You’ll have the key so you can fill jam canisters with them and give one to each of the Russians every morning. Clear?” So I did my duty.

The Russians were always famished because of their strenuous work. Their food rations were simply not enough. One day I turned to Nikolai and Sergei, whom I had gotten to know fairly well: “Tonight the key will be in the door. You go get yourselves more potatoes. But be careful, got it?!” They got it—only too well.

Things went smoothly for a while. Then one day those two had sneaked off to the mountain of potatoes and filled up a sack, as they always did, but on their way back to camp they were caught.

A plainclothes policeman came to see us. I pretended to be clueless when we were interrogated. He came back again the next day, this time with a colleague. Since I was responsible for the Russians, they wanted to squeeze a confession out of me. They’d discovered that I was Jewish. Anticipating disaster, I hid behind a mound of cans piled up for sorting. One of the men pointed his revolver at me. The other tried to move the cans aside to get at me. He could only fit one hand through to my hiding spot, and tried twice to strike at me.

Evidently the men then realized how ridiculous they looked. They retreated, cursing furiously. Some other boy got a beating, even though I was the one to blame. They had to take their anger out on someone… Those two police thugs were named Manthey and Lemke. Funny how something like that stays with you for thirty years. “Remember, Florent?” He remembered. He also recalled one particular story about a movie theater and a girl.
Since Alfred Hanne was lenient and Otto the night watchman was a sweetheart, I risked something egregious for someone in my position: I sneaked out into town one night to go to the movies. I didn’t even know what film was running. First came the newsreel, with stirring military fanfares, reports from the front, and war propaganda. Then came the feature, *Jew Süss.*

It was awful. I had never experienced this kind of perfidious hatred being whipped up to incite people against Jews. So this was how the Nazis instilled such unbelievable animosity toward us! I sat there, my yellow star hidden in my pocket, and trembled. There was nothing I could do but close my eyes to block out this vile film.

Then I sensed that someone was sitting next to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I recognized the profile of a pretty girl, around sixteen. After the show, I struck up a conversation with her. The girl was very friendly, and so was I.

Eventually I walked her home and we agreed to meet the next night. Sheer madness! But I could get out through the fence, no problem, thanks to Otto.

In my eagerness, I had completely forgotten my true circumstances. Then consequences began to swirl in my head: I would be branded a defiler of the German race! Sent to a penitentiary! Put to death! Things that were in the papers every day. Me, contaminating German blood? No. Better not. I summoned all my strength and told the girl who I was: a Jewish boy from the camp. I couldn’t see her again.

Her reaction was surprising: “I like you. You can come home with me. None of those things matter. But if you don’t come, I’ll rat you out.”

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*Jud Süss* was a well made, extremely anti-Semitic historical drama about Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, a corrupt official in the court of the Duke of Württemberg.
What was I to do? I went back and crept into my sleeping bag, questioning the ways of the world. The next morning I told Florent what had happened and asked him for advice. He talked with a Belgian friend of his who came up with a good plan:

“Give me your civilian clothes and I’ll go to her.”

Well, he was an experienced man and I was just an innocent boy. No sooner said than done. He sneaked out every evening, Otto looked the other way, and the rendezvous continued. The girl proved thoroughly satisfied with her substitute man. Every three to four days he came to borrow my civilian clothes. It seemed to be worthwhile for him, and it worked for me. He had his fun and I had my peace.

“Do you remember, Florent?” Naturally. Soon he would come to visit me in Berlin so we’d see each other again, but it was goodbye for now.
AN ALMOST HAPPY CHILDHOOD

The years of my childhood and early youth that were already behind me during that time in Torgelow had been half worry-free and sunny, half dark and gloomy. When I was seven, Adolf Hitler seized power and his grasp extended— I almost wrote “naturally”— into my little Jewish family.

My father was what they called a “mongrel”: the son of a Jewish father and an “Aryan,” non-Jewish, mother, who converted to Judaism after they married. As a result, my father was still considered indisputably Jewish. He was a banker and had started working at sixteen for the Disconto Bank, later acquired by Deutsche Bank. It was called the Deutsche and Disconto Bank for a while, until they dropped the “Disconto,” and to this day it remains Deutsche Bank.

My father was a true Prussian: punctual, dependable, helpful, hard-working, and proper. He was also artistic. He played the piano beautifully—but more about that later.

I was born in the Jewish hospital on Exerzierstrasse, today called Iranische Strasse, in Berlin’s Wedding district.

This hospital where I first saw the light of the world on April 2, 1925, would become a fateful building for me. It was where my brother, Gert, was born. It was
where my father died, as did my mother, and both grandparents on my mother’s side. It was where I was treated when I contracted diphtheria and had to be quarantined.

This hospital still exists today. Though Hitler’s genocide reduced the Jewish community in Berlin to a fraction of what it once was, the name of this municipal hospital remains unchanged, despite the presence of only two members of the Jewish community on the Board of Trustees and only a few Jewish patients.

Our family lived on Winsstrasse in the Prenzlauer Berg district, near Immanuelkirchstrasse, between Prenzlauer Allee and Greifswalder Strasse. Today it’s behind the Wall and belongs to what the socialist states call “the Capital of the German Democratic Republic,” and what we call “East Berlin”—the dark side of this divided country.

Everyone in the family called me Hansi. We lived with my maternal grandparents. Grandma Klara was “as pretty as a picture,” as Grandpa Willi said. I always added my grandparents’ first names to their titles—that was a quirk in our family. Yes, it was nice at home . . .

I knew Grandpa Willi only as a retiree. His father, my great-grandfather, whom I never met, was well-to-do. He had seventeen children and bequeathed to each of them enough of his fortune to live on.

Grandpa Willi inherited a factory where straw was hacked up for animal feed. Unfortunately he fell victim to a passion for gambling; his luck drained his bank account and he gambled away the factory. So it was gone. This unfavorable episode left a minor trauma in our family, but the loss drove Grandpa Willi to Berlin.
Grandma Klara was an excellent cook, and as a boy I always considered her as good as my beloved mother. Every evening, before I went to bed, Oma Klara put my feather comforter in front of our cozy tiled stove and warmed it for me. I can still recall that sense of calmness, security, and childish bliss I derived from watching her.

My father used his musical talents to make some money on the side: he was part of the three-man band called Rosé, together with a violinist and a drummer. They played in various pubs in Berlin on the weekends, and often Father didn’t get back until around 2 in the morning.

He also enjoyed playing at home, particularly at family gatherings, to which he would invite his fellow band-mates. He taught me a song that I would perform on such occasions. It was always a crowd-pleaser and had another meaning, that is to say, a dirty one that I didn’t understand back then. The lyrics went like this:

Only a girly makes a lad complete

Nothing happens till those two meet

When in the moonlight his lust has grown

The rest comes entirely on its own

It was harmless and cheery and no clouds seemed to darken my family’s mood. A hit tune from the late 20’s, which even the sparrows seemed to chirp from the rooftops, added to the merriment: “Oh Donna Clara, I saw you dancin’, oh Donna Clara, you’re pretty enchantin’.” We all thought of Grandma Klara. We’d look at her, laugh, and shoot her a sympathetic smile—in our family, we all agreed that she was a real beauty.
Although my family was quite satisfied with my appearance, they thought my ears were too big. They turned to a solution popular in those days: every night I had to wear a band around my head that compressed my ears. Admittedly I wore it only a little while, because, like most patent remedies, it didn’t help at all. Still, the headband appealed to me because it made me feel like an Indian.

The second little defect they discovered in me was my occasional stutter. When it came over me, it was a huge embarrassment: words like “butter” or “cocoa” or that most important “goalie” devolved into endless staccatos. In those days I developed a skill that I still use: in a flash I came up with synonyms that I would have no trouble pronouncing. In the case of words that didn’t have synonyms, such as “butter,” “cocoa,” or “goalie,” I was hard-pressed for a solution.

Nevertheless, I had to find one. A sympathetic second-grade teacher recommended that I always take a deep breath before I started speaking—stemming my usual stream of words with a purposeful pause. He had observed that I was breathing incorrectly and ran out of breath when I spoke, which manifested itself as stuttering.

I still fall into this old habit when I get very excited. In such cases I inhale deeply— and my sentences glide effortlessly over the trickiest pitfalls.

*  

My early childhood was tarnished only by my father’s illness. He had a serious kidney disease, and I naturally sensed my mother’s mounting anxiety and felt the worry hanging over us all.
It was then that I resolved, in my childish naïveté, to become a doctor. I thought that it would be practical and that I could help my father, something the other doctors apparently couldn’t do, or couldn’t do well enough.

In spite of his Prussian ways, I never found my father stern. He was an authority figure to me, but not one I feared. It filled me with pride that he spoke perfect English, French, and Spanish, and because of his knowledge of foreign languages was the director of the bank’s most important branch and managed a number of foreign accounts. I admired him.

He finished work at 5 o’clock on the dot. He took the bus home from Spittelmarkt, getting off at our bus stop exactly five minutes before 5:30. My mother had dinner ready at precisely 5:30. Father ate, and then it was my turn to fulfill my Prussian duty and show my own punctuality: right after dinner, I had to present my homework to him.

As long as he was alive, I was never a bad student, even though I generally found soccer games more exciting than any schoolwork, but my academic performance deteriorated rapidly after his death.

My parents had met through my mother’s brother, Uncle Alfred, who was in my father’s class at school. My father was an outstanding student, while Uncle Alfred showed hardly any interest in academics, and thus a friendship developed between them that clearly benefitted Uncle Alfred: fairly often, my father would give him a copy of his written work, but he always sneaked in two or three mistakes to preserve a certain performance gap—also for his own protection. Finally, in 1924, the
model student married his friend’s sister, my mother. Her first son, born the following year, they named Hans.

* 

Many German Jewish families were remarkably patriotic, especially during World War I. Such was the case in our family. My mother’s oldest sister, Aunt Hanna, had married a man named Maschke. They owned a shoe store in Berlin. Maschke’s parents had emigrated to America, but they came back in 1904—simply out of love for their fatherland.

So Uncle Georg Maschke, later Aunt Hanna’s husband, returned to the German Empire as a young American. He volunteered for military service, fought in the imperial army on the front, receiving the Iron Cross First Class for bravery in the face of the enemy. When America entered the war in 1917, he had to fight against his old compatriots and automatically lost his American citizenship.

After that, he technically had no citizenship. This wasn’t a problem in the 1920s, but after the outbreak of World War II, when the shoe store was expropriated and Uncle Georg was drafted as a railroad worker, the loss of his American citizenship proved catastrophic. His love of his homeland was his downfall, thanks to the Nazi “patriots.” Knowing that Jewish Americans living in Germany were interned and had a chance to survive, my uncle applied to the Swiss embassy, which represented U.S. interests after America’s entry into the war. He requested intervention on his behalf and restoration of his American citizenship. A few days later, the Gestapo came for him. Apparently the letter he had sent was photocopied and passed to the Nazis. This essentially amounted to a death sentence. Only three
weeks after his arrival in the Buchenwald camp, my aunt received news that he had
died of “heart failure.”

That was the standard phrasing back then, the telling expression on the death
certificates of those murdered. Heart failure—an appropriate term, since the hearts of
his murderers had failed.

My uncle’s original letter must have eventually reached the right hands after
all, and this fateful series of events brought salvation to my widowed aunt. Although
she had never in her life visited the U.S. or spoken a word of English, she was picked
up and taken to an internment camp—as an American. The Red Cross delivered
supplies to this camp for “enemy aliens,” and the inmates were well fed. One day, to
her complete surprise, my mother’s sister and some other Americans were traded for
German prisoners-of-war and shipped off to America. Her son had already gone there
in 1938.

There had been an exchange program for Jewish children and young people at
that time, if American families volunteered to take them in. This opportunity for
Jewish youths to leave Germany enabled them to avoid certain death.

In 1938, our families didn’t yet know what the future had in store for them
and many missed this chance to save at least their children from the gas chambers.

*

My family did consider sending my brother Gert and me to the New World
and I honestly wasn’t opposed to the idea—not out of fear of what was coming, of
which I had no inkling, but rather out of thirst for adventure. I wanted to feel the
ocean breeze in my hair and discover a new, far-off world…
But nothing came of it. Father had died a year earlier and my mother didn’t want to give us up. So we stayed.

For my little brother, this meant death. Rudi, Aunt Hanna’s son, was supposed to come back, “when all this is over.” But today he still lives in the U.S. and is a successful publisher. He didn’t want to come back after all…

But I am getting ahead of myself. When I entered elementary school I was a bit cheeky but mostly well behaved and had no notable problems, as long as my father’s illness didn’t cast its shadow over us.

In 1932, my mother was expecting her second child. The fact that she had gained weight around her middle wasn’t noticeable to me as a seven-year-old, but I sensed that something important was about to happen. One day my grandmother told me I should sprinkle sugar on the window sill so the stork would bring me a little brother or sister.

Even back then, I made a special effort when something mattered to me. This task seemed extraordinarily significant, so I sprinkled sugar like mad and soon the window sill had a sugar icing. My efforts were rewarded in the form of my new baby brother.

My expectations, however, often exceeded reality, and at first I felt disappointed: this little thing you couldn’t play with, that you were hardly allowed to touch, and that constantly bawled, was supposed to be a brother?

My disappointment turned to joy when I was allowed to wheel the baby around in his carriage. With my eight years of age, I viewed this responsibility as a sign of trust, but also as an opportunity for a little fun: I treated the carriage, with its
live passenger, like a race car, and I pushed it every which way at top speed, taking curves left and right like a bat out of hell. One day I was so caught up in my race-track game that I forgot it was 5:30.

As I mentioned earlier, my father’s hour of Prussian authority struck 5:30. And on that particular evening, something else struck at 5:30: my father saw me racing the carriage around a left-hand curve with the right wheels lifting off the pavement. When I caught sight of my father, I tried to brake to a dead stop, but it didn’t help. I got a terrible thrashing.

I was used to getting a little slap every now and then when I deserved it—it was no big deal. This beating, which considerably exceeded the normal level of corporal punishment, I still remember today with undeniable queasiness.

That was the only time my father beat me.
One year later, the Nazis took Germany by storm. I felt my parents’ concern and my grandparents’ anxiety, and sensed there was danger in the air. Of course I didn’t yet understand the discussions in the family about the “seizure of power.” But this much I remember: people tried to stay calm and told themselves that things would get better. The Nazis couldn’t possibly last that long. So we kept our heads down and waited for everything to pass like a bad dream.

When I was out on the street in Berlin with my father and columns of storm troopers approached us with their blaring marching bands, he would pull me into an entryway or any niche he could find, until the parade was past. He didn’t want to extend his arm in the “German salute,” or show respect to the flags and banners of the “brown-shirted battalions.”

Otherwise, everything initially went along as usual, including my life in school. In 1935, I went to the Jewish middle school. My former schoolmates asked me why I didn’t go to school on Saturday—which was Shabbat—although I had to go on Sunday, when they all had the day off. More and more I felt that I was different, an outsider.

Our family certainly took its Jewish faith seriously, but in a very liberal way. Until 1933, we always had a Christmas tree for me with a few little presents, even
though that didn’t exactly comply with Jewish practice. My parents didn’t want me to feel conflicted and strove to limit my sense of the “otherness” that the surrounding world accused us of.

*

Because my Uncle Ernst had married a so-called “Aryan,” he thought he didn’t have to wear the star. He received quite a few warnings from the police. Later he was picked up and taken to Sachsenhausen. After three weeks, notification arrived that Uncle Ernst had died of “heart failure.”

My father’s third and youngest brother, Heinz, was taken away by the Gestapo and didn’t come back for two weeks. Then he actually returned. But he died three days later.

My grandparents on my father’s side had thus lost all three sons. Only Margit, the daughter of their youngest son, was still at home with them. She too was eventually imprisoned. She even spoke with Adolf Eichmann once, under what circumstances, I don’t know. She survived the Nazi period in the Bergen-Belsen camp and, after the liberation, moved to Israel, where she married. Her two children have served in the Israeli army and don’t speak a word of German. I have to speak English with them.

Today Margit is politically aligned with Menachem Begin, who is almost a little too radical for my taste. As a more tolerant person, I would rather see a policy of compensation and reconciliation, but I can’t blame her.
I once pointed out to Margit that Begin’s policies are so extreme that they turn even more people against Israel. She answered, “I’m afraid that’s unavoidable, whatever we do. They’ll always find a reason to be against us.”

*

In 1934, my two-year-old brother, Gert, contracted polio. There was no vaccine in those days and Gert went to Berlin’s Virchow Hospital, which specialized in polio treatment. The entire left side of his body was paralyzed and there were many tears in our household. This misfortune meant that I was kept out of school for a long time, since I was potentially contagious to the other students.

That was when the thing with my spinning top happened. A bad accident. Back in those days, our games were old-fashioned. Many kids today aren’t familiar with those colorful wooden tops that you would send dancing over the asphalt with a small stick. It was a wonderful game and helped me pass the time I wasn’t allowed to spend in school.

Once, when I was vigorously swinging my stick, I didn’t notice that a passerby was behind me, and I hit him in the eye. This accident landed him in the hospital, where I visited him daily, overwhelmed with guilt at having injured someone. Luckily his injury healed, but the incident embedded itself in my conscience.

One day my brother was released from the hospital. They administered a few light electroshock treatments and he was considered almost completely cured. Only his left leg and his left arm remained somewhat weak.
They’d developed a new treatment in those days: they would make a serum from the blood of someone who was cured and inject it into someone who had just developed the disease. So my mother had to take little Gert to the Virchow Hospital, where his blood was drawn.

These visits came to an abrupt end. The Nazis had just issued the Nuremberg Laws, the racial decrees that distinguished between “pure Aryan blood” and “dirty Jewish blood.” The doctor was embarrassed when he had to send my mother home with Gert—his blood was no longer wanted.

I was ten, and although I found this experience painful and degrading, I didn’t understand what it meant. Who could understand such a thing? We just wanted to help other people! Why would they push us away?

From this moment on we all knew, and I knew too, that we were cast out of our own homeland. We felt at home as Germans. We had always voted for the Social Democrats—of that I am sure—but my family backed Hindenburg for President. I was allowed to go with my father down the street to the pub on Winsstrasse, which was our polling place. Father and Mother didn’t care much for party politics. They weren’t politically engaged, actually quite the opposite.

I had Christian religious instruction during my first two years of elementary school. My parents’ logic was: “The Old Testament is the same in both religions, so why not?” Later, of course, I had Jewish religious instruction. For many years. Paradoxically, that would save my life one day. My schoolmates in the public elementary school accepted me. I was one of four Jewish students who later had a free period or got to go home during Religion.
My parents went to services on the High Holidays. I went to the youth service and sang in the choir, starting when I was twelve. That was on Grosse Hamburger Strasse.

Political posters and slogans hung everywhere at that time. And their messages—“The Jews are our Misfortune,” “No Jews Allowed,” and “Die, Jew”—were unmistakable to anyone who could read, as I had just learned to do. Then there were the signs plastered on store windows: “This is a Jewish store. “

The gradually increasing tension was hardly perceptible and I didn’t feel threatened—yet. My parents said, “We have a different faith and don’t believe Jesus is the Messiah.” They tried to explain the problem in religious terms. Yes, they tried to explain the inexplicable.

Until 1935, no one in the family thought of emigrating, or of leaving for good. My whole family preferred to believe that the Germans would come to their senses.

The situation first became serious in 1937, when my father was fired. He had received a very good offer from Deutsche Bank to go to their branch or a subsidiary in Cairo, but my father was convinced that, with his kidney disease, he wouldn’t be able to endure the climate. So we didn’t go to Egypt.

* 

From the time I was a little boy, soccer was my favorite sport. We used to pedal our bikes to Pichelsberg or to Heiligensee in Sandberg. Those were the places we liked to go “dumpling,” Berlin slang for playing soccer.
I mostly played forward, but of course I ended up all over the field, since we often had only four or five players altogether. We’d lay down a hat and a shirt to mark the goal line.

I was a big fan of Berlin’s Hertha sports club. I can still list the players who were on the team that won the championship: Schwarz, Bilek, Krause, Wilhelm, Schneider I, Schneider II, Hanne Sobeck, Menne Hahn… I lived and breathed with them, they were my heroes.

Every Monday I bought Soccer Weekly. I had to sit down and read this paper right away. Nothing was more important to me. My mother always sent me out for errands, so I developed a trick: I would go to bed early, around three o’clock, so that my mother wouldn’t send me out, and would blaze through the newest issue. This trick worked almost every time.

In 1935, I went to the Jewish middle school on Grosse Hamburger Strasse. There was another Hans Rosenthal in the same grade as me. He was actually Hans Alfred Rosenthal and my middle name was Günter, so he came ahead of me alphabetically.

The similarity of our names had its benefits, especially since we were friends. When our teacher called on “Rosenthal,” we would glance at each other, and whoever knew the answer would stand up quickly. Sometimes the teacher would catch us, but he found it so funny that he let it slide. And when he didn’t catch on, all the better!

Hans Alfred told me at one point that he had first discovered that he was Jewish when he had to leave the public elementary school. He hadn’t known before. Nevertheless, he survived the war, I don’t know how.
To my surprise, he joined the Communist Party and later the Socialist Unity Party. After the war, we had some heated discussions and soon fell out of contact. Politically, our paths diverged.

Rosenthal had a stellar career “over there,” is now a professor, and has a beautiful apartment on the Spree, as well as a summer cottage. He is a biologist and is allowed to travel to Western countries now and then, though he’s still not allowed to go to West Berlin.

One time, when I was in East Berlin, I called him after thirty years, and he invited me to come over right away. He showed off his apartment, which was really luxurious. I think he wanted to demonstrate what his system was capable of. He kept repeating how proud he was to be a Communist, but I didn’t want to reopen that conversation.

He told me that his father had also been in the Communist Party and he had given his life for his ideals. It was my old classmate’s conviction that communism would bring peace and happiness to the world—even though socialism wasn’t “fully realized” yet and still had its shortcomings…

He’d visited us in 1947 when we were living on Wustermarker Strasse in Spandau. I still remember him standing by the tiled stove, warming his hands, and telling me that capitalist countries gave preference to a “privileged few” and exploited and abused everyone else. Although in communism everyone had to start at the bottom and there was no affluence yet, it was crystal clear to him that communism would achieve such prosperity within the next ten years that capitalism would be unable to compete.
I was doubtful, based on my experiences around the time the Russians reached Berlin, and while I was working at Radio Berlin. These experiences made it impossible for me to accept his rhetoric of equality. And sure enough, a new, powerful caste became established under communism and exploited and abused everyone else.

I told him, “One thing must be clear to you: in capitalism, you can always criticize capitalism without being thrown in jail. Over there, you can’t say anything bad about communism. I would never be sure whether I would wake up in my own bed the next day.” He left unconvinced.

* 

Back in 1937/38, when I was twelve, I played in a Jewish sports club. There were four Jewish sport clubs in Berlin: Hakoah—“ha” is a Hebrew article similar to the English “the,” and “koah” means “strength”—and there was also the club Hagibor, which literally means “the hero.” Then there was the JSK, the Jewish Sports Club, and the JSG, the Jewish Sports Society. While Hakoah, Hagibor, and the JSK were part of the international Zionist association Maccabi, the JSG was German-oriented and wanted nothing to do with Zionism. Not even in Hitler’s time, when I joined. I chose the JSK because my cousin Rudi Maschke, who would later be sent to America, played there. Our uniforms were green and red—we looked like human parrots. I was the captain of the third-tier student team.

There were many nationalistic Jewish clubs, not all focused on sports. There was the Reich Association for Jewish Combat Veterans, for example. My father had been too young to serve, but my Uncle Georg was a member. I recall that my father
often played music at their balls. Their very names indicated the nationalistic orientation of these Jewish groups, in Berlin and throughout Germany.

The JSK played on Schäfer Lake, where the playing fields are still located. There were Jewish playing fields in the Grunewald as well. The sports club got me involved in the Maccabi movement and I became interested in Zionism, whose maxim is essentially, “We must emigrate and establish our own country; otherwise we will always be a minority, persecuted wherever we go. “

Before we were sent to a Zionist youth camp in the countryside to prepare for the Aliyah, we had a training course in Sigmundshof on the Spree. There are student dormitories there today. The Spree flowed right by our building.

One day, we were supposed to take a math test. I hadn’t studied at all and was dreading it, wondering what I could do to avoid it. Then I saw that the key had been left in the door to the classroom. I locked the door from the inside and tossed the key in the Spree.

The teacher came along and rattled the door. The whole class convulsed with laughter and called out to him, “It must be a prank! Someone probably came by and locked us in!” Fortunately, the whole class played along. Unfortunately, it took three hours for the locksmith to come and open the door. We all had to stay an extra hour after this whole ordeal. But I got out of taking the test.

* 

The bank where my father worked initially let him keep his position, but in 1935, he was transferred to the central office and was given reduced responsibilities.
In 1937, he was let go. He still attempted to find work. He bought a little car and tried to make a living as a salesman. That lasted only a few months.

Even though under the existing circumstances Deutsche Bank showed itself to be quite noble and courageous by keeping a Jewish employee on until 1937—my father was one of the last to be let go—the discrimination completely undermined my father’s fragile health and worsened his kidney condition. He suffered unspeakably from the ostracism. It made him even more ill than he already was.

His depression eventually resulted in a bout of uremia—urine got into his blood and poisoned it. If it happened again, the doctor warned my mother, there’d be no hope for him. Shortly after that, it happened a second time, and my father died.

In those days, they had no dialysis. And of course there were no kidney transplants. Had he been alive today, my father could have been saved. But perhaps his early death spared him a worse fate.

By the way, my son, Gert, followed in my father’s professional footsteps: before he studied law, he did a banking apprenticeship, just like his grandfather, which he completed with distinction.

For as long as it remained possible, my father went to the theater every week. To this day, I still have the clippings of theater and opera reviews, which he carefully collected and stuck in the pages of the classic texts or libretti. To this day, before we go to the theater, I read the old reviews and his notes in the margins. It’s lovely to see who played which role in his time, be it Ernst Deutsch or Albert Basserman, how they were received by the critics and, above all, how my beloved father experienced the performances and how I experience them in comparison.
The first nightmare my father was spared was the shock of Kristallnacht. For the German Jews who believed that the worst would never come and that the German people wouldn’t tolerate such barbarism, this night shattered all illusions.

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It took place on November 9, 1938. The windows of the Jewish shops were smashed, hoards of Storm Troopers swarmed through the streets, plundering as they went, and warehouses of Jewish businesses were ravaged and pillaged. At night, the synagogues went up in flames.

For me, thirteen at the time, this once and for all tore apart my world, which was already severely damaged and had only barely held together ever since the Nazis’ bellows of “Heil” first assailed our ears.

We had heard on the radio about Herschel Grünspan’s [sic] attack on the German ambassador in Paris, Ernst vom Rath. It was reported that he was injured. The following night, he succumbed to his wounds. On the radio, Nazi propaganda ceaselessly emphasized that the perpetrator was a Jewish person.

Maybe the reader wonders why I always say “Jewish person;” the word “Jew” still seems like invective to me. I prefer to speak of a “Jewish person,” or a “Jewish thing,” even though the word “Jew” is really not derogatory at all. But the Nazis’ inflammatory pamphlets, the giant headlines in their tabloid, Der Stürmer, have forever ruined it for me.

Back to the morning of November 9th. My mother and my grandparents—my father was already gone—hadn’t listened to the radio reports yet, and knew only about the assassination. I grabbed my bicycle and rode to my school on Grosse
Hamburger Strasse. There I learned that school was cancelled. Someone yelled, “Oranienburger Strasse is on fire!”

There was a huge synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse, large enough to hold a thousand worshippers. It was actually the largest synagogue in Germany. The main administrative offices of the Jewish community were also there. We all knew the significance of the location.

I headed there on my bike. I was still some distance away when an acquaintance of mine saw me and called out, “Go home immediately! Get out of here! As fast as you can!” Fiery plumes and black smoke clouds were rising to the sky from the synagogue’s enormous dome. “All right,” I thought, “if he says I should go home, he’s probably right.”

I got back on my bike and took my time pedaling back through Hackescher Markt and on to Schönhauser Allee. There wasn’t a single Jewish person on Dragonerstrasse, even though it was the most famous Jewish street at that time. The very devout lived there.

As I turned onto Winsstrasse, I saw Mother and Grandmother on the balcony. They waved to me as if the devil were at my heels and frantically called out to me that I should store my bike in the cellar and come upstairs at once.

My mother locked the apartment door behind me, which was very unusual. As she slid the bolt, she whispered to me, as if someone might be listening, “Jews have been beaten on the street. Windows are smashed down there. Something terrible is happening.”
I went out on the balcony and saw the broken glass on the street. There were three Jewish families in our house, including a rabbi who lived below us, but nothing happened in our building. In the evening, I heard on the radio that the “public outrage” was to be brought under control and there was to be no more destruction; the Jews would soon receive their just deserts. For what? And why was there “public outrage”?

The worst indignity was yet to come: not only did we have to repair the damage; the German Jews also had to pay a fine of one billion marks for the humiliation and destruction inflicted upon them.

One day later, on Immanuelkirchstrasse, I saw the Jewish owner of an appliance store with his head bandaged. I heard that someone had beaten him. Up to this time, such a thing had been inconceivable to me. Now I too understood what was unfolding.

* 

After that day, we began to talk seriously about getting out.

We were, however, a Jewish family with no relatives abroad, not in America or in South America, or in any other country. Where could we have gone and what could we have lived on?

We thought about it again and again and weighed the pros and cons. And that must have been where the idea came up that the boy, Hansi, could go to Palestine and do farming.

I must confess, however, that initially, after 1933, I didn’t yet understand the situation. When my friends began marching in the Hitler Youth and other youth
organizations, I felt left out—not like one who didn’t want to join, but rather one who wasn’t allowed to join. I would have preferred to march along. I don’t believe for a minute that it was the uniforms that appealed to me, or the testosterone-fueled drills, the commands and discipline, the heel-clicking and the marching songs, the paramilitary exercises that already smacked of real war, and the musk of sweat and leather that clung to this nationalistic collectivism. No, it was something else: kids just want to be like other kids. Individualism comes in later in life. Assimilation seems preferable, and standing out dangerous.

Once it became clear that Hans wasn’t allowed to participate because he was Jewish, I was left on the sidelines and felt more or less ashamed. It was childish immaturity and would soon change, but that’s how it was at the time.

As war began to brew and the Nazis’ anti-Semitism grew even more fanatical, I woke up and started figuring things out. At thirteen, I read all the newspapers attentively and tried to picture what was in store for us and how we could survive.

Ten days after Kristallnacht, Joseph Goebbels gave a speech calling for the “homecoming of the Sudetenland.” He yelled, at the top of his lungs: “We do not wish to export anti-Semitism! Why? Because we want to export the Jews!” His audience roared with laughter, then broke into manic applause. Goebbels ranted on: “If, for example, the whole world were anti-Semitic, where could we send our Jews?” And again he was answered with cruel, derisive laughter.

It was unmistakable. Even to a thirteen-year-old. Animosity surrounded us, creating a sinister atmosphere of hate and foreboding. Soon the lights would go out for us Jews.
On September 1st, 1939, I happened to pass a radio store where a crowd of people had gathered at the entrance. I paused and listened to Hitler’s hoarse voice and his infamous words: “We have been returning fire since 5:45.”

I felt calm as I heard that war had broken out. I was thinking, “Now Hitler can’t last much longer. He’s not up to this.”

Of course, it surprised me how quickly Poland was defeated. Still I believed, because England and France promptly declared war, that Hitler’s luck would soon run out in the face of this overwhelming power. The following weeks dashed my hopes. I had no idea about warfare and didn’t know what it meant to assemble standing armies and mobilize them. “When are the French going to start fighting?” I asked myself.

Not until the Wehrmacht set out for Russia did I begin to grasp what was happening in the war. I never did believe that Germany could actually win. When America entered the war, I was convinced it would not go well for Hitler.

By then, however, I wasn’t sure I would survive the war. Nevertheless I told myself over and over again: you’re going to do it. I never gave up hope.

* *

In 1939, more important than the outbreak of a war, was a family tragedy: my mother became extremely ill. We soon found out that she was suffering from cancer.
A stomach and intestinal operation, resulting in an ileostomy, was the beginning of the end. I was terribly upset by my mother’s operation, after which she had to use a little bag on a stand that collected the contents of her bowels. I felt helpless in the face of her horrible, embarrassing illness. People tried to comfort my mother and us kids, suggesting that this appliance was temporary and that it would soon be removed. We believed them at first. But my mother’s condition grew worse from day to day.

Then she was taken to the hospital, the same one where I was born, my brother came into the world, and my father died. I visited my mother there as often as possible, given that I was then living outside of Berlin, in Jessen.

The doctors said that Mother had a very strong heart that would keep on beating. Oh, how I wished it would go on pounding until she was well again!

But children have a keen sense for disaster. And barely sixteen, I was still at child. My boyish optimism was floating on an undercurrent of hopelessness, and I gradually realized that my mother would die. She wrestled with death in the hospital for six months. In the end, she weighed only 70 pounds. I stood silently by her bed, at a loss as to how to comfort her. I could feel her gathering all of her remaining strength to console me. I held her hand and told her about trivial things in my daily life that didn’t interest me anymore, until I finally gave in to my sorrow.

In 1941, two years after the start of the war, my mother died. Now Gert, my nine-year-old brother, and I, at sixteen, were orphans. Jewish orphans in the Nazi Reich—our chances of surviving sank to zero.
Gert was sent to an orphanage. As a member of the youth Aliyah movement, I went off to a camp belonging to the Palestine Bureau. The camp was preparing us to go to Palestine, the future Israel. We received agricultural training to prepare us to survive in the ancient Jewish homeland. At the time, the Nazis still allowed this program to run, but most of the young people learning how to till the soil, plant trees, and cultivate crops would meet a different fate…

Youth Aliyah meant immigration, ascending to the Holy Land. Young people were being trained to farm because it was clear that when they went to Palestine more would be needed than just doctors, lawyers, and musicians. In those days it was a matter of drying out swamps, making the land arable, and erecting settlements. We wanted our people to develop the many areas that, we were told, had lain fallow for hundreds of years under Turkish rule. Thus there were agricultural education camps in Germany, authorized by the Nazis.

Our agricultural camp, which housed twenty boys and twenty girls, was called Jessen. It occupied an old mill in a village of the same name near Sommerfeld in southern Lusatia.

I was reminded of that time just a few years ago, when I was invited to a reception in Bonn for the Israeli foreign minister, Mosche Dajan. Foreign Minister Genscher was supposed to host the event. He was ill that day, so the Secretary of Commerce, Graf Lambsdorff, took his place. Among the guests was Secretary of State Schüler, Chancellor Schmidt’s right-hand man. He came up to me and said:

“Herr Rosenthal, I have to ask you something: were you in Jessen, in the Jewish camp in the mill?”
“Yes, I was! How did you know?”

“My aunt told me. You won’t believe it, but I come from Jessen. And we all knew that there was a Jewish training camp there.”

Back to the past. We had fields of tomatoes in this agricultural camp. I was assigned to do the picking. There were also asparagus fields. Altogether, we had to cultivate over thirty acres. I soon learned how to cut white asparagus. The tips turned green as soon as the sun touched them, so you had to harvest them before sunrise to keep the heads nice and white.

We even had four cows. Every now and then I had to herd them, which went fine from morning into the afternoon, but around half past three they couldn’t be controlled anymore. They simply headed back to their barn, ignoring my shouts and threats.

There was also the owner of a large farm named Broddack. Six to eight of us were always assigned to work with him. In the spring, we harvested turnips. That’s the worst farm work I know. After a few hours you can’t straighten your back, because you work stooped over.

We met Polish laborers, brought there as a result of the war and put to work. Broddack often had us harvesting potatoes. The tractor would drive along, unearthing the potatoes, and two of us ran behind it with a basket to gather them. Each of us had a strip of about fifteen to twenty meters to work. The field was around two hundred meters long.

One of the Poles, who wasn’t very nice, drove the tractor. As soon as he saw we had paused to catch our breath, he’d step on the gas to make us pick up the pace.
Later I heard that this Pole, who sometimes abused us, was badly injured: he had messed with the bull that Broddack kept on the farm, tugging on his nose ring. When the bull was let out to mate, he gored the Pole, severely wounding him. I can’t say I had a lot of pity for that jerk.

Not long ago, a woman I knew from the Jessen camp told me that I was always very cheery there and that I acted in plays—I was Gessler’s adjutant in *William Tell*, in which I had one line: “Hear ye, hear ye, here comes the magistrate…” and I was a good singer. My favorite song went:

I have a little philosophy
I just take life easy
I never get angry
I just take life easy
As much I can do
And this much is true

What I think won’t bother you

And this friend also told me she was surprised that I let everyone borrow my dress shoes—a coveted rarity in the camp.

I must admit, I’d forgotten all of that. Also that I had a “brown shirt” song in my repertoire: “Airmen, give my regards to the sun!”

Farmer Broddack was also a hunter and shot deer. Since there were a lot of deer in that area, there was delicious roast venison on the table almost every day. I grew thoroughly sick of it, but we were hungry and were allowed to fill up on gravy.
and potatoes. The time would come when I would think back wistfully on these lavish meals…

* When my mother died, the work with Broddack was already behind me, as was my job as a cemetery worker and gravedigger in Fürstenwalde.

After the Jessen camp was closed, we were all sent to the Neuendorf collecting point, where the unemployment office assigned us to jobs. I became a forced laborer in the public graveyard in Fürstenwalde.

Fürstenwalde was on the train line between Berlin and Frankfurt-on-Oder. You took a streetcar to Erkner, and then there was a commuter train that went by way of Hangelsberg to Fürstenwalde, the last stop. Because we were coming from Neuendorf, we always had to cross the tracks. In early June 1941, I realized that something must be happening in the east. The crossing gates were almost always closed because trains were heading eastward, one after another, without interruption.

In the graveyard, fifteen boys and I had to spread pebbles on the paths. The grounds of the municipal cemetery of Fürstenwalde had been laid out recently and we had to pack them down. We compacted crushed red brick and smoothed it with rollers. Then we put the pebbles on top and went over them with the roller again. Finally, a little cement was poured on top before the rollers could go over them one last time.

The head gardener was also the head gravedigger. His name was Gerbsch. He was an old, gray-haired man with a pale face and stained teeth. One day he came to
me and said: “You there, stop what you’re doing. Starting now, you’re working with me.”

While the others worked on the paths, I now served as his assistant gravedigger. Herr Gerbsch’s favorite saying was “Look here, Hans. One man dead is another man’s bread. That’s what your work is all about!” I heard this every day. My first job in the morning was to go into the mortuary and spray the coffins with an insecticide called Flit.

I soon realized that this was a “liberal” cemetery. Protestant and Catholic bodies were buried there without distinction.

Every day I had a grave to dig. We young people still managed to be silly despite all the hardships. So we had a contest to see who ended up the brownest after work—meaning the most tanned, not “brown” in reference to Nazi uniforms. For this reason, I always walked around shirtless.

In my time as an assistant gravedigger, I learned all sorts of things. In such cemeteries, there were rows of graves for the poor, double graves for families, and then special plots along the main paths and avenues. For the single graves, I had to dig not only a new hole, but also dig out half of the burial from the previous day, because otherwise the loose sand would run into the freshly dug pit. So I had to shovel away the sand almost down to the coffin before I excavated the new one. That produced huge piles, since we dug down about 6 feet.

I measured the coffins beforehand. Every coffin had to be covered with about one meter of sand to fill the hole up to ground level, not counting the mound.
was standard. The wealthier the deceased, the bigger the coffin, and the deeper I had to dig.

One day an embarrassing, or you might say funny, incident occurred: several girls at the cemetery worked in the nursery garden, but one of them was always assigned to work with me when I had to dig two graves in a row. She had to shovel away the sand I tossed out. Without her noticing, I exposed the coffin lid. She was shoveling away unsuspectingly when I banged on the lid with my shovel and said in a sepulchral voice, “Help! Let me out!”

The girl screamed and bolted. She was scared to death. It was a stupid prank. But I hadn’t yet developed reverence for the dead.

The girl denounced me to the camp. I had to report to our Jewish boss and got a rough reprimand that included a mandatory apology. On top of that, I offered to take over some of the girl’s chores around the camp. I later learned that the girl had truly believed someone had been buried alive.

Soon I became an expert on burials. One day Gerbsch told me, “Now you can install beams too.” Beams had to be laid down because boards would cause the sand to cave in as soon as people stood on them. I quickly got the hang of it.

Gerbsch always told me, “Hans, when there’s a burial, you’ve got to stand behind the hedge and be ready to scramble back in there and dig the sand out if need be.” So I always waited around and soon realized that there often weren’t enough chairs in the back rows for the mourners. So I opened up a chair rental business: as soon as I saw that a funeral with elderly mourners was coming, I would provide extra chairs. Sometimes I would get fifty pfennigs, sometimes two or three extra marks.
This was a lot, considering that we were paid only sixteen pfennigs per hour back then.

Later, when I requested my restitution from the German government, I received a retroactive payment that brought my hourly wage to almost 72 pfennigs.

The grave was always finished by noon. Gerbsch, who liked to relax because, as head gravedigger, he had nothing else to do all day, once came to me and said “Hans, there’s a stillborn child in a little coffin. Stick it under your arm and bury it in F5.” He gave me the child’s coffin and I trotted off through the cemetery with the small, sad burden and laid the child to rest.

I knew all the clergymen. There weren’t many. One always said, “Though the body from this world has passed, the soul eternal shall ever last. Amen!”

Burials were always scheduled for two or three o’clock in the afternoon. We never had more than one, or perhaps two, a day. In the latter case we’d need the help of a second worker, since I really could manage only one grave before noon. In the afternoon I had to do the plantings on the grave mounds. That was another of my duties.

The smaller mounds, fifteen to twenty centimeters high, were planted with sedum, which spread very quickly, or with ivy. I was supposed to put a few red flowers in the middle of the normal-sized mounds.

Gersch often summoned me: “Hans, we don’t have anything left in the nursery. Go to the graves that have too much sedum and pull out some shoots to put on the other graves.” I took shoots from several graves, which didn’t do them any harm. I was just thinning them out.
One day I went past a grave and saw a note that said, “Whoever steals sedum from here again, may your hands rot away.” A relative of the deceased visiting the grave had probably noticed, but what was I supposed to do?

A descendant of the von Ribbeck family from Havelland* was buried in the cemetery: there was a pear tree on his plot with fruit we were allowed to eat. It really helped us in autumn to be able to go there once in a while and grab a pear. We were always hungry.

Once there was a double burial. Two high-ranking SS officials had crashed their car into a tree and died in the accident. I had to dig their grave. As macabre as it sounds, I made their grave twenty centimeters deeper than necessary. You can never be too sure…

Then it occurred to me that I might be the only Jew who could put Nazis in the ground.

Relatives of the deceased often insisted that the mound be built very soon. Building the mound was also my responsibility, and I had also become expert at it. Herr Gerbsch and I didn’t like having to build the mound too early, because there was a risk that the sand in the grave would settle and the mound would cave in. In such cases we’d moisten the sand in the graves with water so that it would harden more quickly. On the other hand, this wasn’t good for the coffins. The dampness rotted them prematurely.

* Herr von Ribbeck from Havelland was a minor nobleman who liked to give children pears from his orchard. His story was immortalized in a famous poem by Theodore Fontane.
The case of the SS officers confirmed this. Their mound was built early, as requested. Gerbsch sought me out four weeks later. He whispered dramatically to me, “Tomorrow morning around 6, don’t show up, Hans. We have to dig up the two SS men again.” I looked at him questioningly. “Their life insurance won’t pay,” said Gersch. “It’s been determined that the accident was their fault. So they’ll be exhumed.”

So the grave was opened again. Gerbsch told me that the handles and other metal fittings had already rusted away, thanks to the wet sand.

One of my many tasks at the Fürstenwald Cemetery was trimming the hedges. There were kilometer-long hedges at the cemetery and the work was hard. One day I got tendonitis. My arm disappeared into a cast, leaving me unfit for work at the graveyard.

When I had healed, I was sent to a farm in the countryside, in the village of Buchholz near Fürstenwalde. I actually enjoyed the farm work; in comparison to my job as a gravedigger, there was something happy about it, even though it was just as hard. I found it especially strenuous during the harvest, when I had to pitch sheaves of grain onto the wagon with a pitchfork. My muscles grew noticeably.

In November of 1941, my mother died. You needed a permit to leave the village, and my fellow workers, rather than delivering word of her death to me immediately, went first to the courthouse in Tempelberg and procured the necessary pass for me to travel to Berlin. They gave it to me along with the sad news.

At Mother’s funeral, my little brother and I walked behind the rabbi, holding hands. When the funeral procession arrived at the grave, I knew at a glance that the
gravedigger had positioned the beams over my mother’s grave the wrong way! They wouldn’t hold, they’d collapse!

And as strange as it sounds, I let go of my little brother’s hand, went to the gravedigger, and said, “What you’ve done here is no good. It won’t hold.” He immediately apologized and positioned the beams as a proper gravedigger should.

* 

I remember these events with a huge question mark hanging above them. How had this all happened? How could our family have come to such a sudden end, when we had enjoyed such harmony and apparent safety? There I was, not yet grown, standing with my little brother behind my mother’s coffin—able to judge the quality of the grave like an expert! I wasn’t even in despair, just very sad. I looked towards the future with anxiety but not with hopelessness. I had lost all security, yet did not feel completely lost.

It may be that painful twists of fate, especially for young people, help develop special strengths—a desire to live, a desire to survive—as well as a degree of defiance that accompanies it.

When we left the cemetery, I knew that we were alone from then on.
I knew I couldn’t abandon my brother, so I requested authorization to move back to Berlin. My appeal was approved, and in Berlin I reported to the Jewish Employment Office. Many of the young people in the Jewish orphanage, where I now lived with my brother, worked in Borsigwalde, at the German Rifles and Munitions Factory. The plant is still called GRM today, but the meaning has changed: it’s now the German Railcar and Machine Factory. I wanted to work there so I could be with the other boys from the orphanage.

As I was trying to think about how I might justify my request to the clerk, a man went by, whirled around, and pointed at me. He was wearing a storm trooper uniform. I was terrified. What did he mean? The man in the brown shirt said to the clerk, “That one!”

The storm trooper was Alfred Hanne, the owner of the scrap metal processing plant. That was how I landed at the punching station, salvaging old tin cans, and how I eventually found my way to Torgelow and to my friend Florent.

They were very strict at the orphanage. We had to make our beds perfectly and maintain our quarters almost as meticulously as cadets. It was all very different from what I had hoped for. I wanted to be my brother’s protector, but he was grouped with younger children, ages nine to ten, and I was with the fourteen-to-sixteen-year-olds. We big kids ate at a separate table. The younger ones had to go to bed at 8 and we were allowed to stay up until 9:30. I saw Gert almost exclusively on weekends,
when we were allowed to visit our grandparents. That was our only time together. It still pains me that I didn’t pay more attention to my brother. I should have dedicated every spare minute to him, but at the time I didn’t know that we would have only a few months together. He would tell me about school and I told him about work, but the younger children mostly played in the courtyard, where their group was under orders to stay together.

We big kids had to make our own beds. I was often mad at our preceptor, who was very rigid and gave me grief because he thought that I didn’t make my bed neatly enough. He didn’t bother me much on weekdays, since he couldn’t stop me from going to work, but on Saturdays and Sundays, when we all wanted to go out, there was always roll call.

We lined up along the corridor. Then our preceptor went through all the rooms and examined each bed. If he thought one wasn’t neat enough, he would rip the covers off. Everyone was free to leave except those whose beds he didn’t approve of. They had to make their beds again and go through roll call once more. He was in no hurry. We stood there. Sometimes it took twenty minutes for him to come back and check all the beds again. He usually said to me, “Go back upstairs and fix your bed!”

We often were let out to visit our relatives an hour later than the others. Considering how little time we had off, this was agonizing. He would insist on inspecting my fingernails too. Since I worked in the can factory with dirty metal, sometimes I could scrub for an hour, but my hands would still have dirt stuck in the creases and wounds from the jagged rims.
Fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old girls lived beneath us. We were already a little cocky and trying to be suave. It was embarrassing when the preceptor would say in front of the girls, “Hans, your fingernails are filthy. Go back and clean them again.”

I actually gave him a shove one time. It was pretty brash but somehow I had already learned that I had to stand up for myself. I soon forgot the punishment I received for it.

The preceptor was twenty-six and named Süskind. Later he was put in charge of the younger children, and, I have to say, to his credit, that he chose to go with them when they were transported to the east. Rather than abandon them, he went to his death with them.

I stayed in this orphanage until I was seventeen. Shortly before my seventeenth birthday, I was summoned for a physical. I was blown away! Did they want to draft little Rosenthal into the Wehrmacht?

On the stated day, at the stated hour, I reported to the induction station and was directed to one of the barracks. There they were inducting young men into the army, but also into the Reich Labor Service. When I showed them my papers, they told me that I should go to the left. Their decision had been made. When I got to the next room, I looked through the window at the general induction station and saw the future soldiers, waiting in long rows, naked and shivering, for the physical examination.

I was spared that part. Instead I got a certificate—a certificate of disqualification, I soon noticed—but, like the others, I was also assigned a military service number. From there I was sent to the induction station for the Reich Labor
Service. Another disqualification certificate was waiting for me there. The reason in both cases did not need to be explained to me: as a Jewish boy, I was unfit for service. But, again, they couldn’t let me go without assigning me a number. I believe it was a very typical German thought process: we don’t actually need him, but he gets a number anyway. And so I had two different numbers, which was, of course, totally absurd. I still have them today.

Some time after that, I was called to the director of the orphanage. She told me, “Hans, we’re sorry, but you’re too old. You must go to the Jewish boys’ home.”

The Jewish boys’ home was at 2–4 Rosenstrasse. It also housed part of the congregation. We slept in bunk beds because it was so overcrowded. I could see my brother only on Saturdays and Sundays because I still had to work at the metal processing plant.

In October 1942, everyone in the Jewish orphanage was transported to the east. But not me: I was already living in the boys’ home on Rosenstrasse. That was the second time I dodged the gas chambers. Three weeks after I had moved into the orphanage, everyone in Neuendorf—all the young people preparing for life in Palestine—were sent to Auschwitz. That had been my first miraculous escape.

Later I moved to Torgelow. Four weeks after that, the entire Jewish boys’ home was shipped to Auschwitz. I never heard anything more from anyone. That was my third escape, but someone must have checked off my name on the deportation list, because the Gestapo didn’t come looking for me.
At least, for a while, I had seen Gert every day and had been able to be with him and protect him. He was loving, clever boy who depended entirely on me, his older brother.

When the transport was arranged for all the children, Gert was among them. We were never told where they were going. We didn’t know about extermination camps at that time, but we sensed a threat hanging over us, an uncertainty that stopped our breath and choked us with anxiety.

When I moved to the Jewish boys’ home, I had had only three quarters of a year with Gert in the orphanage, but I could still visit him until we had to say good-bye. Which turned out to be good-bye for good.

When I heard that he and the other children were to be shipped off to an unknown destination, I went to my grandparents and asked if we could hide Gert. For the first time, I thought about going into hiding myself, to avoid getting caught in the net that was closing around us. But my grandmother talked me out of it.

“Hansi,” she said, “Gert is ten years old. He wouldn’t be able to stick it out in hiding. He couldn’t stay quiet. He’d want to go out for air. A young boy can’t control himself like that. We have to let go of this idea.” I understood. But perhaps that was a fatal mistake.

When I went to the orphanage for the last time to say good-bye, Gert had bought fifty postcards with his savings. He held them up proudly to show me.

“Hansi,” he said, “your address is already on these postcards. I’ve prepared them all. I’ll write to you every other day about where I am and how I’m doing.”

I never received a single one of these postcards. And I never saw Gert again.
Later, after the end of the war, we thought he’d been deported to Majdanek and murdered. My further research, however, showed that he was initially sent to Riga. He must have been the victim of a mass murder in some other camp in the east. I’ve saved the notice from the International Red Cross, which says only “Transported to Riga.” This information came from a deportation list kept by the Berlin secret police. It was the “21st East-Transport.” The date was October 19, 1942.

* 

Four weeks later, Goebbels gave a speech. The war was no longer one proud Nazi victory after another. There was now an eastern front in Russia, and a number of setbacks were raising doubts about the “Final Victory.” Goebbels addressed this at the end of his speech, screaming: “No matter what the war brings us in its further stages, we will rise to every challenge. As the saying goes: Praised be what toughens us!” He was answered with cries of “Heil” and roaring cheers. We seldom heard such broadcasts directly, since we weren’t allowed to listen to the radio. Sometimes we could overhear bits and pieces at work or inform ourselves from newspapers left lying around.

I lay on my bed in the Jewish boy’s home and thought of my little brother, Gert, assuming that he was working hard somewhere and was probably even hungrier than I was. I hoped I would see him soon, and I wondered what our parents would say if they were still alive. Anticipating being taken away, I couldn’t bring myself to praise what had toughened me—if Goebbels was referring to the awful suffering he’d inflicted on the Germans and the Jewish people.

*
It was after the siege of Stalingrad, after the end of the Sixth Army, the turning point in the war, that disenchantment banished the dream of Germany victory. Many people were silently hoping for an end to the war, which seemed within reach. Especially the Jewish people hoped for this in their hour of need. But this hope was mixed with the certainty of being in even greater danger—with life and limb at risk. The Nazis were becoming more brutal everyday. More and more Jews were disappearing without a trace. We heard that SS vans pulled up to factories to deport Jewish forced laborers.

It was as though the SS wanted revenge for the bad turns their fortune had taken in the war.

The SS also came to Herr Hanne’s metal processing plant one day—I found out later it was February 27th, 1943—and rounded up all the Jewish workers. They never returned. Only one wasn’t there: Hans Rosenthal, who was working in Torgelow. I was saved yet again.

Although I had no idea what awaited us, I was gradually overcome by a fear of death. Nothing guaranteed that Torgelow would remain a little oasis of survival. I considered fleeing and perhaps going into hiding.

So I secretly packed my rucksack and decided to go to Berlin. At first I would seek shelter with my grandparents. My grandfather had been deferred from deportation thanks to my Aryan grandmother. I went to the railroad station and got onto a train.

As the train started to roll away, I thought of Gert. He too had ridden a train after he was taken away from the orphanage. But where to? None of his pre-
addressed cards had come. I worried about him, and it gnawed at my conscience. Had I abandoned him? Could I have saved him from his unknown journey? He was so young, so helpless. And I was essentially an adult already; based on the sheer amount of danger, worry, and heavy labor I had already experienced, I truly considered myself a man. Would it have been better if I hadn’t listened to my grandmother when she said it would be impossible to hide a little boy like Gert for such a long time?

Two men jolted me out of my melancholy reflections. They came into my compartment and demanded my identification. They were Nazi officials in plain clothes.

My heart was in my mouth. I didn’t have any identification. I summoned all my courage and told them I was coming from Torgelow, where I worked at the metal processing plant, and I just wanted to visit my grandparents, bring them the laundry I had here in my backpack, and then return.

They furrowed their brows and shot each other skeptical glances. Then they waved it off and turned to go. I exhaled.

The two men in their long coats suddenly halted. “Rather nervous, that young man,” one said under his breath, but loudly enough to scare the living daylights out of me. The other seemed to think for a second, then nodded. They came back.

The train I was sitting in, where I was at their mercy, still had those old compartments whose doors didn’t open onto a corridor, but onto a running board that extended the length of the car. I considered making a run for it: just getting up, tearing open the door and jumping out! A quick glance out the window made me
think twice: the scenery was going by too quickly and I wouldn’t have survived the jump.

When the train stopped in Prenzlau, one of the men spoke to me: “We have to screen you. Come with us.” I was already up and following them after the first words left his mouth. I didn’t try to fool myself about what was going to happen.

The train had a ten-minute stop in Prenzlau. I walked along the street from the station with my backpack, following the two men, who didn’t let me out of their sight.

They were chatting. “Hey, Otto, you starving too?” I was amazed by the turn their conversation was taking. Clearly they weren’t so concerned with doing me in. They were late for lunch, and basic human needs seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

“If we screen the boy now, we’ll lose half an hour. Then we won’t get anything to eat.”

I listened without getting my hopes up, as though from a great distance, my mind in a frenzy. Running away made no sense. They were certainly armed. Maybe they would just call Alfred Hanne in Torgelow. He probably wouldn’t say anything bad about me, despite my unauthorized departure. Why would he want to incriminate me? I had worked long and hard for him. And he didn’t believe in the “Final Victory” anymore. If he spared me, it could benefit him after the war ended, an outcome I longed for, because it would mean the end of the Nazis’ tyranny. Of that I was solidly convinced.
But perhaps my guards wouldn’t call Torgelow and would just put me on one of those deportation lists…

The two men stopped and turned to me. “Run back to the train. Beat it. But don’t forget your ID next time!”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Don’t mess this up, I warned myself. “Oh, thank you,” I gasped, ran back to the station as if the devil were at my heels, and jumped onto the train, clutching my backpack. As I sat down, my knees were trembling. The train jerked forward and tears streamed down my face.

It was my fifth miraculous escape.
When I reached Berlin, I saw worry and helplessness in my grandparents’ eyes. I was asking for trouble by running away, something they knew better than I.

“Hansi,” my grandmother said, “You can’t stay here. If your grandfather weren’t Jewish, perhaps it would be all right… but the Gestapo could come any day. Many Jewish people don’t sleep at home anymore; they go to relatives or friends instead. They are being snatched up, one after the other. You have to go, Hansi.”

She took me in her arms. My grandfather sat in his armchair, shaking his head. He seemed to realize that there was no hope for us.

“Where?” I asked. “Where should I go?”

Grandmother brewed some coffee, or rather the coffee substitute you could buy with ration cards in those days, made out of roasted malt. How fortunate that my parents never had to experience this despair, I thought for a second. And then I thought: perhaps it isn’t really a cause for despair. Maybe everything is going to be all right. But a glance at my grandfather told me no, that wasn’t the case.

“You know Frau Jauch,” my grandmother said. “Perhaps she’ll let you stay in her garden cottage. She’s kind and pious, and hates the Nazis. And she’s no coward.”
I knew Frau Jauch through my Aunt Else, my grandmother’s sister. The seamstresses for the Brenninkmeyer clothing company worked at home and were overseen by district supervisors, who cut and distributed swaths of the shoddy fabrics available at the time, and then picked up the finished garments. Aunt Else was one of these supervisors. If one cut the material carefully, some fabric would be left over. With these scraps, Aunt Else was able to make additional garments. Textiles were also rationed in those days, available only for “points” on a clothing card. Aunt Else’s “surplus clothes” were thus point-free, illegal, and much needed; they were sold on the black market. As a boy, I had brought them to customers. I soon became adept at this job, and could gauge what size our secret customers needed. One look was enough for me to see if a woman was a size 6 or a size 10, no problem!

Frau Jauch was a very special customer because in her cottage in the Trinity Garden Colony, she ran a tiny shop and made sure Aunt Else’s clothes ended up in the hands of her needy countrymen. Or, rather, countrywomen. I often came to her to bring new inventory. She’d always been kind to me, which couldn’t be taken for granted at that time—I bore the stigma of the yellow star.

I liked my Grandmother’s suggestion. So I took my backpack and bid my grandparents farewell.

* 

I rode to Lichtenberg, followed a path between the little garden plots, and rang the bell of Frau Jauch’s garden cottage. The petite woman opened the door. She was only slightly over five feet tall, and in age somewhere between my deceased mother and my grandmother. She had brown eyes and gray hair and wore a housedress. She
warmly invited me inside. I looked around nervously to see if I was being watched. Then I came through the door, which was so low that I had to stoop.

“So Hansi, what is it?” asked Frau Jauch, “are you delivering clothes?”

I hesitated before answering. I was about to ask her to risk her life for me. If she agreed to take me in, I might be discovered at any time. Could I ask her to make such a sacrifice? I forced myself to continue. “Frau Jauch,” I said, “my grandmother thought…” I floundered.

But there was no going back: “I need to hide, Frau Jauch. They’ve already taken Gert away. We haven’t heard from him since. I wanted to ask if you would consider taking me in and hiding me.”

The reaction I was dreading never came. The modest little woman laughed. “You can stay with me, Hansi. The war won’t last much longer anyway.”

From the table she took a thick book that I assumed was the Bible, thumbed through the pages, and pointed to a passage. “Soon this evil spell will be ended.” And then she told me the exact day on which the war would be over. She was religious beyond all measure, knew the Bible backwards and forwards, and had “calculated” when peace would come.

Even if I couldn’t quite believe her calculation, her response took a weight off my mind. I wanted to throw my arms around the neck of my new savior, but she’d said and done everything with such unbelievable calmness that an emotional reaction would have been inappropriate. She was the kind of person for whom “yes” or “no” sufficed. Any other response was unnecessary.

*
The cottages in the settlement were extremely modest, covered in tarpaper. Frau Jauch’s had two features that distinguished it from the others: the tiny shop in front and an even tinier room in the back, really only a shed. You could get to it through a secret door covered in wallpaper, and since the whole wall was papered, you wouldn’t guess that there was an additional room. This space, maybe about four meters square, became my hiding place. There was a cot in there, actually an old mattress on four wooden blocks. There was a small old table with a wobbly chair. A window, so small you could block it with a book, let a bit of light into the little chamber. A net curtain hung front of the tiny window, so that no one could see in.

This was such a memorable day for me, the day when a young German boy of the Jewish faith sought the protection of the “Trinity.” It was March 27, 1943.

I knew that my cousin Ruth and her mother, my grandfather’s sister, were in hiding, but I didn’t know where. I hadn’t ever wanted to know, so I wouldn’t reveal anything in a Gestapo interrogation if I were ever detained. We had all heard of torture, and there was no guarantee one could withstand it.

Sometimes my grandmother would visit me. She would bring a little bread or a few potatoes, since I was living off Frau Jauch’s food rations, which weren’t enough to sustain even one person. Yet Frau Jauch shared them with me.

The first time my grandmother came, I made her swear not to tell me where Ruth and her mother had taken cover and to keep my hiding place a secret as well.

My grandmother’s visits were always a big treat for me, because my days and nights in hiding were long. Despite Frau Jauch’s loving care, I often felt isolated and alone.
At the same time, my grandmother’s visits also made me anxious. When she came—and even days after she’d left—I worried someone might have seen her. I always had the same unnerving thought: Did someone follow her? Has she unknowingly put my pursuers on my trail?

Every time I heard footsteps outside, my anxiety level shot up. I soon developed an acute sense of hearing. I learned to differentiate steps, and after a while I could tell who was walking by and in what direction, even when I hadn’t peeked out through the tiny curtain. Sometimes I would hear unfamiliar steps that I couldn’t interpret and my heart would pound like a drum.

Whenever the little bell rang outside and customers arrived, I would slip through the secret door and crawl under my covers, trying not to make the slightest noise and holding my breath.

The view through my window was limited: six square meters of grass, a little wire fence enclosing a small run for Frau Jauch’s chickens, a hedge beyond it, and, looming over the hedge, a tree. That was it. But that view was such a comfort in my grueling confinement.

Soon I began to observe the chickens’ behavior with scientific precision. I discerned their pecking order, noted the hen whom the others drove away from the feed, and the hen who dominated the rest.

I soon knew the strong and the weak, those who confidently scratched away and those who had to run when the strong ones came near. I followed the younger roosters’ attempts to assert themselves against the older one. I sympathized with them, but felt a certain annoyance when they failed.
As for myself, I believed I was of the ilk that had to run away. My place was at the very bottom of the pecking order in this Nazi state.

Apart from my fear of being discovered, I had another problem that caused me grief and which I still consider my chief dilemma during my time in Frau Jauch’s hut: there was no toilet in the house, only an outhouse at the far end of the small garden. I couldn’t use it, however, because I wasn’t allowed to leave the cottage.

And so Frau Jauch put a chamber pot in my hiding place that she had to sneak out at night to empty. That was so awful, so embarrassing, and so painful to me.

Being forced to ask this of her tormented me and I apologized to her again and again. She was as stoic as a mother in this situation: “Think nothing of it, Hansi, it’s only natural. Don’t let it trouble you.” But it bothered me right up to the end.

The best times for me were the nights when the air raid sirens went and the “enemy” planes came. Then all the other residents would go to a bunker and I could leave the cottage!

Only when those higher up in the pecking order were sitting and quaking in their bunker—lord knows I didn’t envy them—did I feel safe. When the sirens screamed their undulating warnings, my spirits soared. As soon as the others had disappeared into their shelter, I went—no, ran—no, sprinted outside. I became familiar with the sound of the airplane’s engines and could tell roughly at what altitude they were flying. In the summer I lay down in the grass, crossed my arms behind my head and looked up at the Berlin night sky. At these moments, life was almost beautiful. From my point of view, only the British planes counted, since they
came at night. The Americans came during the day. They were useless to me, since I
didn’t dare to go out in broad daylight.

Sometimes, when I was outside, with the monotonous hum of the engines
overhead, I thought: if the pilots up there only knew how I feel down here, how happy
I am to hear them up there, though they bring fear and anguish to other Berliners and
represent death to so many. To me, they symbolized life. Their smoke trails were
signals from a better world, one where I too was allowed to live free.

*

Of course, I grew bored on my cot. The days went by very slowly. The hours
crept past. Then one day Frau Jauch had an idea.

“Hansi,” she said. “You know Frau Harndt, the one with the Red Flag, right?”

I had heard of her. Frau Harndt’s husband was a Communist, or rather what
they called a “pure Communist,” one who visualized communism in its ideal form
and not as a hierarchical system.

In 1935, the Nazis had come for Herr Harndt and sent him to a concentration
camp. But then he came back. During my time in the shed, he was a soldier on the
front—apparently he was good enough for the Nazis when they needed him to fight
for them. His wife had always delivered the Communist magazine Red Flag—but that
had been a good while ago. Ever since the Nazis came to power, there was no red flag
in Germany except the one with the white circle and swastika in the middle. But
what did Frau Jauch have in mind?

“We can tell her the truth, Hansi. We can confide in her. She wouldn’t rat us
out. Don’t you think so?”
I knew that any confidants posed potential risks, to me and to them. But I agreed to trust Frau Harndt. It would prove, unexpectedly, to be very worthwhile. From that day on, I got the *Berlin Morning Post* daily. As soon as Frau Harndt had read through that day’s edition, she brought it to Frau Jauch, and I would literally rip it out of her hands.

The good old newspaper published by Ullstein Press had, of course, already been ideologically “aligned” and forced to become a Nazi propaganda tool. Still, I gobbled up the paper, hungry for any information I could read between the lines. And I read every line, including the classifieds. The *Morning Post* was my link to the outside world and my escape from brooding and stupor.

And so my days passed. *Our* days. Some times we were very hungry. I knew that Frau Jauch would be less hungry if she didn’t have to share with me. This weighed heavily on me, but worse was yet to come.

One morning, Frau Jauch said to me, in her calm, matter-of-fact way, “Hansi, we don’t have anything to eat. You have to slaughter a rabbit. I don’t know who else could do it. I can’t do it myself.” I was taken aback.

“I can’t do it either, Frau Jauch,” I cried. “Please don’t make me! I won’t be able to. I’d rather go hungry.”

“You have no choice, Hansi,” said Frau Jauch.

“But I’ve never done it before.”

“Would you rather have us starve when there’s a juicy roast sitting out in the cage, just waiting for us?” She continued to insist and actually went to Frau Harndt for reinforcement.
“How did your husband kill all those rabbits? It can’t have been that hard!”

Unfortunately for me, Frau Harndt knew exactly how it had to be done. When Frau Jauch came back, I was gripped by sheer terror.

“Pay attention, Hansi,” she said. “You have to bludgeon it behind the ears to knock it unconscious, and then you can cut its throat. That’s it.”

It was too much for me. I resisted for another four days. Then a combination of Frau Jauch’s tenacity and hunger got the best of me.

I did the deed. But it turned my stomach. And despite my hunger, I still couldn’t eat the roast. While Frau Jauch helped herself to one serving after another, eating with gusto — of course I was happy for the dear woman — I ate only a few potatoes with gravy, which I picked at, listless and downcast.

Admittedly, life hadn’t exactly handled me with kid gloves up to this point. I also knew that many people had died in horrible ways — but the death of this rabbit, death by my hand, haunted me for a long time.

Soon afterwards, I was dealt another fateful blow. “Hansi, you have to slaughter the rooster. The old one. I don’t know what else to cook. We’ve gone through our rations. Please, you must do it,” Frau Jauch begged and pleaded.

I bristled again. To be sure, the old rooster, always crowing victoriously, wasn’t exactly my feathered friend. I always identified with the weak younger ones — but to chop off his head? No, anything but that. But eventually I did it. I simply couldn’t leave Frau Jauch in the lurch.

No sooner had I struck with the axe than I shut my eyes at the speed of lightning so I wouldn’t have to see the blood, and promptly let go of the now headless
bird. For a few seconds, the poor creature flapped around the kitchen. I was sick to my stomach. For days afterward, I felt lousy. This too the Nazis have brought upon me, I thought.

I continued to read my Morning Post. I doubt the editor in chief, the typesetter, or the proofreader read it as thoroughly as I did!

That paper wouldn’t be the only benefit of having Frau Harndt for a neighbor. One day she brought me a map of Europe. Frau Jauch got some red and blue pins out of her sewing basket. With the red pins, I marked the current location of the Eastern Front, which I had deduced from the reports of the Wehrmacht high command in the Morning Post. I told myself that this information had certainly been doctored and that the situation on the Eastern Front was probably much less favorable for Germany than they let on.

I saved the blue pins to mark the Western Front, were one ever to be established. We, at least, were banking on an invasion by the Allies. We were longing for it, and in fact it was only a matter of time. I can’t tell how big a role Frau Jauch’s knowledge of the Bible played in our certainty …

* * *

Just as a prisoner has good days even in the midst of his great misery, I too had one particularly bright moment: Frau Jauch had discovered something wonderful. Something dazzling. Something indescribably exhilarating for me—a crystal radio.

Nowadays, most people don’t know what that was: a radio receiver that didn’t require electricity. We didn’t have power in our little garden house except for an ancient little storage battery that fed a thirty-watt bulb. The crystal radio consisted of
an inductor, a condenser, a crystal, and a needle on a dial that could scratch lightly on the crystal, which was how you’d find a signal. You could receive broadcasts through headphones, sometimes clearly, sometimes less clearly, sometimes disappearing and sometimes reemerging from static.

The crystal radio splendidly supplemented my *Morning Post* reading and allowed me to hear Goebbels’ speeches. I was lying on my mattress one night with my headphones on, listening to the Propaganda Minister’s voice. At that point, his words were no longer music to the ears of most Germans, while to me, he had the voice of the devil, chilling, unsettling, and—I’m reluctant to admit—fascinating: a personification of all that menaced me in my solitude.

His voice rang shrill and clear through my headphones that night:

“People talk about the invasion of Europe as though it were the most inevitable thing in the world. The Jews want the invasion more than anyone else—probably because not one of them would face the fire after bringing it upon us with their battle cries.” At this point you could hear loud shouts of “Cowards!” Goebbels went on:

“But the English and the American soldiers will have to pay the price in blood. Our Wehrmacht is waiting to greet them!” Shouts of Heil. Then static.

That was very interesting: the Nazis were also expecting an invasion. They knew that we Jews were hoping for it. As far as I was concerned, he had it exactly right.

The fact that I couldn’t participate wasn’t my fault. I also couldn’t chime in with the “battle cries”—I had to stay absolutely quiet, actually.
In my current circumstances, it was hardly possible to test whether I was a coward or not, even to myself. In any case, I couldn’t disprove it while in hiding. Ultimately, Goebbels turned out to be wrong when he implied that Jews wouldn’t participate in the invasion. When it came, many Jews were involved.

My cousin Rudi Maschke, for example:

He was sent to America by the Refugee Children Movement, became a soldier, and returned to Europe with the invasion. He told me about it later. True, Goebbels seemed to have one thing right: Rudi was truly scared. Not so much of the Wehrmacht as of the water. He couldn’t swim and his job was to get the troops from the ship to shore in a landing craft and then return immediately for the next contingent. Shuttling back and forth amid the hail of artillery fire, he delivered the invading troops to their positions. He survived. He survived the rest of the war too. The same can’t be said of the great orator Goebbels.

I went on reading the Morning Post and listened to my radio as the world and the war ran their course. Admittedly, it was all going on without me, but in a strange way, it concerned me directly.

On Friday evenings, one of the announcers, Helmut Vietor or Günter Begeré, would read the article Joseph Goebbels had published in the Nazi weekly, The Reich. That filled me with cold fury. The two readers, however, were unperturbed—they were on the “right” side, after all. By the way, their careers progressed seamlessly after the war, as they read the new script of Germany’s “democratic renewal.”

In any case, I had a pretty good idea of what was going on. Especially because sometimes, maybe every four days—something very special, something enormously
encouraging, came my way: some nights at 2 AM, after the Reich programming had been turned off, I could hear—when the atmospheric conditions were just right—the German edition of the BBC.

These were uplifting moments. First came the drums of the theme: bumbumbum-bum. “Our” Beethoven. Then came the news that straightened out what the Nazi broadcast had twisted.

Now that I was better informed, my hopes grew, even though the war didn’t end on the date Frau Jauch had calculated. The war went on well past it. But things did not go well for Nazi Germany, and my odds of survival began to rise.
Night Raids

It had been a day like any other. There were overcooked rutabagas for lunch. I was watching the chickens and noticed that one of the weakest of the tormented young ones had started to defend herself. I was so happy to see her finally peck back, instead of running away cackling.

Since I had read nearly all of my *Morning Post* by mid-day, I spent the afternoon reading the obituaries of fallen soldiers. What an odd combination they were, a mixture of bellicosity and Nazi insanity with genuine maternal sentiment:

“My beloved son Harald died for Führer and Fatherland. May his death help build the foundation for a stronger, greater Germany.” Awful! Those cheated souls, mass-murdered in the name of a man who seemed infinitely hateful.

It must have been about two hours before midnight when the sirens began to howl. I was lying on my old cot, my hands clasped behind my neck, thinking again about the end. First my own end, if I were ever found. Then that other end, the end we longed for—the end of the war. I would go out on the street and wave to the victors, a liberated man among the liberators.

As the siren swelled—wailing, accusing, melancholy, and abrupt—startling me out of my daydream of an end to the horror, that strange happiness returned: in fifteen minutes at most, the others would all be in the air raid shelter. Then I could
step out into the fresh air of the bright, starry night. As for the bombs? They surely wouldn’t fall here.

I got up and cautiously opened the little window. It was now completely silent outside. I heard muffled voices from far away. Then that sound I knew so well: the drone of the airplane engines—not menacing from their great altitude. To me, this wasn’t the sound of aggression but of promise. Not a sign of danger, but of hope.

Just as I was about to open the secret door to slip out, I heard a loud crash, followed instantaneously by a dazzling flash of light. The neighboring garden cottage had been hit by an incendiary bomb. Seconds later, the first flames sprang up. People came running. Suddenly I could hear the commotion of voices and screams only a few steps away.

What was I to do? The fire couldn’t spread, my cottage couldn’t burn down—anything but that! It would be my end. Should I stand behind the curtain and wait to see how this stray firebomb would decide my fate?

Frau Jauch came in, agitated and out of breath. “Hansi! There’s fire!” she cried.

“We have to put it out,” I heard myself answering. Without hesitating for a second, I pulled her out into the open with me. The risk of being discovered struck me as less threatening than a fiery death. It wasn’t a deliberate decision, but my instinct had guided me again. In the next moment, I was right in the middle of the other residents of the garden colony who were trying to tear down the burning house with poles, to keep the flames from shooting up. There were only four meters between the roaring fire and my hiding spot.
I grabbed a large beanpole that I found in the grass. Then I stepped up as close to the fire as possible, its heat blasting my face, and tried to beat down a flaming wall.

The point of my pole caught fire. To extinguish it on the ground, I pulled it out of the blaze like a burning spear. Trying again, I clasped the pole with both hands and wound up to strike—and felt a piercing pain in my left hand. It felt as though it were gripped by hot pincers.

I turned around, horrified, and saw what had happened: the tarpaper on our hut had started to melt from the heat and was running down the wall, bubbling and steaming. My hand was stuck in this boiling tar. I let the pole fall, tore my hand out of the frothing pulp, and looked at it in the bright light of the fire. Hot tar had eaten away the skin from my fingertips to my wrist. The unbearable pain brought tears to my eyes. Frau Jauch came to me and, whispering, asked, “What’s wrong, Hansi?”

“I got burned,” I said softly and lurched back into my hiding spot. The neighboring cottage had now collapsed. There were no more arcing flames. What was left was mostly embers and smoke, which seeped through my window and stung my eyes.

* 

It was hot in my lair. I threw myself on the bed. In a haze, I heard the sirens and the sustained tone of the all-clear signal before falling unconscious. When I woke from confusing and tumultuous dreams, my hand was burning as though it were still engulfed in flames. Frau Jauch apparently hadn’t heard my answer, hadn’t noticed my burn, and had gone to bed.
I began to think feverishly. The burn would start to fester, probably turning into an infection. That was life-threatening. Was I to die in my hiding place with liberation so near?

It was impossible to call a doctor. Even if he didn’t turn me in, he would discover my dangerous secret. I thought for a moment and made a decision.

I would get up and leave the cottage under the cover of darkness. I would make my way through the garden colony slowly and inconspicuously and find the hospital. The Herzberg Hospital, an SS hospital at the time, was only about two kilometers away. I could make it on foot, in spite of my pain. When I signed in I would say… all right, what would I say? I’d come up with something. I knew I could think on my feet.

Suddenly Frau Jauch was by my bedside. She had heard me groaning in my sleep. She had a look at my wound, brought me a cup of weak tea and a slice of bread with jam. I took just one sip, told her of my decision, talked her out of her doubts and worries, and set out.

I supported my arm with my right hand. My burned hand looked terrible. Still, this journey was an important experience, almost pleasant. I stifled the fear that welled up in me. I felt I had taken my fate, as the saying goes, into my own hand.

In the final stretch before the hospital, I picked up the pace. I practiced my greeting: “Good morning, I was injured last night during the air raid. May I...” No—not “Good morning,” rather “Heil Hitler.” I mustn’t forget that.

Soon enough I was standing before the reception window. A grumpy old nurse raised the glass pane. “Can I help you?” I worried she could hear my heart
pounding. “Heil Hitler! I…” I hesitated. I simply held out my hand. “See my hand!” She glanced at it and looked at me searchingly. “It got burned,” I said. “Last night. A firebomb. While I was trying to put out the fire I…”

The nurse interrupted me. “Your ID please.” I had already thought about my answer and said quickly, “I don’t have it. Everything was so chaotic. I’m…” Luckily the nurse didn’t let me try to finish. “All right, go down to the end of this hallway and report to the second to last door on your left.

I did as I was told. I was so worked up that I forgot my pain. Over the door was a sign, “Treatment Room.” A pale young nurse came, looked at my hand and said, “Oh me, oh my. How’d you ever get that?”

She called the doctor. He was tall, gray-haired, and clearly in a rush. He held my hand up to the light, furrowed his brow and asked, “Does it hurt very much? From the bombing?”

I told him my story—well, not the whole thing, just what had happened with the bomb and the burn.

“May I see your ID?” Again I gave him my excuse. Another furrowed brow. And then his face softened. “We can sort that out later,” he said. “Your hand is what matters now.”

Finally he started the treatment. He washed out the embedded tar with rubbing alcohol. It hurt like hell. Then came ointment. Lastly, a thick bandage. I exhaled. In a strange way, I felt safe. It didn’t hurt anymore, and things seemed to be looking up.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you very much, Herr Doktor!” I was about to go.

“One minute, young man!” said the doctor. “You have to come back tomorrow
morning for a follow-up.” “Certainly, Herr Doktor.” I responded with almost military respectfulness. I stood up again. “Hold on,” he said, “we need your personal information for your medical record.”

I was petrified. It’s all over, I thought. Now I’m done for. I didn’t have any time to think. A name popped into my head: “Busch,” I said, “Lothar Busch.” Age? “Born June 12, 1925.” Then the address. A fake one. The name and address of a classmate had spontaneously come to mind. He was killed shortly after this time, I later learned. He would never know it, but in this moment he’d saved my life.

I was excused. And I went—ran!—sprinted!—off as gray dawn came. Stars had taken the place of bombers. They were fading as the sky brightened.

I arrived breathless at the garden colony, looked around, ducked behind a hedge as someone passed, and, taking the last few meters in a leap, tore open the front door and then the secret door. I fell on the bed, exhausted, and looked at my thickly bandaged hand.

I ate the bread and jam. Now I had plenty of time.

Outside, as the sun rose, smoke eddied from the charred remains of the cottage next door.

*  

I had already been in hiding with Frau Jauch for a year. I had “celebrated” my birthday. I had counted the days and the hours.

Many bombs fell during that time—the attacks increased steadily in number and in destructiveness, but our garden colony was spared—with the exception of that firebomb that almost ended my life in Frau Jauch’s care. The people in the Trinity
Colony believed they would remain untouched by the hail of bombs. Frau Jauch told me how bad the city looked and how the ruins were spreading.

But one night our idyllic allotment gardens were hit. The air-raid sirens went off and I was about to leave my hiding place. As I sat on the edge of the bed, I heard hissing and howling in the air. It came closer, swelled menacingly, and erupted in a violent explosion. Windowpanes clattered as they flew out of the brittle wooden frames. The air pressure swept me off my bed. A 500-pound bomb had fallen in our garden and exploded only fifteen meters from the cottage, leaving a huge crater.

Pious Frau Jauch thought it was a miracle: our cottage was unharmed! How was this possible? “Hansi,” she said, “God is holding his hand over you!” Maybe that was the case. But there was another explanation: the heavy bomb had crashed so deep into the ground that the blast was deflected from our cottage. It was because the bomb had struck so close that we were still alive. A neighboring cottage, fortunately unoccupied, was swept away like a house of cards.

Men from the Nazi district committee always came after such bombings to survey the damage and take applications for the ration cards one needed to procure repair materials. Now Frau Jauch and I were in a pickle. The windows in our cottage had to be replaced—how else would we survive the winter? The glass had even been blown from my little window. And without involving the Nazis, we would get no replacements.

“Hansi, we have to let these men come, and I’ll show them your room. We have no choice. You’ll simply lie under the mattress,” she said. “It won’t be so bad.”
When the men from the Party rang the doorbell, I crawled under my bed. The wooden blocks were just high enough for me to lie completely flat under the mattress. I heard the men speaking with Frau Jauch outside. Then they came through the secret door. Their steps neared my bed. I could see their shoes. They were close enough to touch. Then they sat down on my mattress!

I was scared to death. Dust from the floorboards that I had breathed in almost made me cough. I held my breath. Just in case, I’d grabbed a knife before I dove under the bed. I resolved that if they found me, I’d take one of them with me to the afterlife!

The conversation dragged on endlessly. “You were lucky, Frau Jauch. Man, oh man. That your cottage is still standing… it’s unbelievable.”

The dust was in my nose now. I had to sneeze. It was agonizing to suppress.

“Where were you when it landed?” The other man asked. “I was lying in bed, “ she answered.

The dust and spit that had collected in my mouth were choking me. My chest ached from holding my breath. I almost passed out. They’ve got to go now, I thought. Good god, please let them go!

One of the men shifted his position. The mattress springs squeaked. Suddenly I felt pressure on my chest—he was sitting right above me. My hands clenched and I saw stars.

“All right,” said one of the two. “You’ll get a ration of cardboard and a few window panes.”
They got up. Paper rustled. The ration cards were handed over. Then footsteps leaving. I breathed out, coughed, sneezed, took a deep breath, crawled out, and stood there shaking, finally able to swallow.

Then I sat next to Frau Jauch at the table, weak and still unable to speak, but more relieved than I could express. Those minutes had aged me by years.

* 

On the memorable day of the assassination attempt on Hitler, I heard the official version of the event on my crystal radio: Graf Stauffenberg had been executed! I was filled with sadness, worry, and hope. Officers had dared, at last, to put an end to this tyranny. But they seemed to have failed. Or was the Reich broadcast lying? Would the resistance continue? Would there be another chance? I hoped with all my heart: that night I tried to catch the BBC, but there was only static and crackling in the air.

The next day, I heard that a man named Goerdeler was wanted as one of the conspirators. I found out later that he was the conspirators’ choice for the next Reich Chancellor. I crossed my fingers for this man, prayed for him, and felt deeply connected with this hunted fugitive. I hoped he might have the good fortune that I had had, and find someone to hide and take care of him.

Then came the announcement that he had been caught. Two female air force volunteers had recognized him, denounced him, and turned him over to his executioners. I suffered with him.

On the evening of July 26, Joseph Goebbels spoke. I heard his overwrought voice crackle in my headphones: “... unleash by the hand of a brutal criminal,
who, carrying out the orders of a small, ambitious, soulless gang of thrill-seekers and daredevils, vowed to terminate the most precious life we know in this world. “

I threw myself back on my bed and hit my radio, making the needle scratch the crystal. This “most precious life,” I thought, has sent millions of people to their deaths! I tapped the needle and Goebbels came in again:

“We must all outdo one another in our love and devotion to him and believe in his historic mission. The choice is ours to turn the war to our advantage, and soon. The right conditions are in place—let us seize them! The Almighty could not reveal Himself more clearly than through the remarkable salvation of the Führer. He wants us to go forth to victory, so that he may one day hand us our laurels! And now we must get to work, looking towards a future that will belong to us.”

I tore off my headphones as the audience broke out in fervent applause and shouts of “Heil.” It was a night of tormented sleep, a night of confusing dreams, in which roars of “Sieg Heil” resounded, people were shot, houses were burned, and deathly pale officers wandered like marionettes down endless hallways. I saw my brother and wanted to speak to him. But it was no use. He couldn’t hear me.

When I woke up in the morning, my first thought was: The conspirators failed. The war will go on. This horror has no end. These criminals are still in control. I couldn’t have known the tables would soon be turned.
The Allies had already landed on the coast of Normandy on June 6, 1944! I brought out my blue pins to mark the second front. A new streak of hope had risen in the west. I feverishly followed all war-related events, and I assembled a complete picture from the prettified Wehrmacht reports and the snippets I caught on the BBC.

Things moved briskly: a lot was happening on the Eastern Front as well. The Russians had launched a major offensive. My pins were moving day by day. In August, the French returned to liberated Paris. The Russians took Bucharest. In September, the American troops reached the Reich. The pins were now not far from the spot on the map where my cottage stood.

The war looked as if it was moving towards its end at warp speed. Only the failed assassination attempt on July 20th struck me as a terrible setback. After the start of the invasion, when my fear that the Americans would be pushed back to the sea proved unfounded, I was convinced that the war would only last a few more months. I thought it could all be over by fall. That proved not to be the case.

Still, my mood improved steadily. The day I expected the war to end, according to Frau Jauch’s prophecy, had come and gone, but the movement of both fronts filled me with optimism.
Then I was dealt an unexpected blow: my beloved Frau Jauch unexpectedly became very ill. She had a high fever. When Frau Harndt came to bring me the *Morning Post*, I took her to the sickbed. “I must get a doctor immediately, Hansi,” she said. So I crawled into my hiding spot. The doctor came and promptly sent her to the hospital. Now I was alone.

It was clear what this meant for me: I couldn’t move around the house at all. No light. No noise. Complete stillness. The neighbors would have to think that no one was living in the cottage anymore. Shortly after Frau Jauch left in the ambulance, I felt crippling anxiety surge through me. And loneliness.

When Frau Harndt came back, I learned that it was an encapsulated fracture. The patient’s condition was very, very serious.

I spent the night sleeplessly, hoping, trembling, and praying. I needed Frau Jauch. I was lost without her.

Frau Harndt came back the next morning. She brought terrible news: Frau Jauch had died during the night. Once again I had lost a mother.

* 

In my helplessness and bewilderment, it occurred to me that Frau Jauch had a brother. He would probably come now, as the heir to Frau Jauch’s few possessions. The cottage was now his, and of course he didn’t know about me. I had to go away immediately. But where to?

I couldn’t find shelter with Frau Harndt. Her husband had returned early from the war, having lost a leg. The Nazis were keeping an eye on him, the old Communist. No, I couldn’t seek refuge there.
I thought of another neighbor, Frau Schönebeck. I knew she was opposed to the Nazis. She had a son my age, who was a radio operator with the German navy. I didn’t know more than that. It was all I needed to make a decision: I would confide in Frau Schönebeck and ask her for help. She had already run into me twice in Frau Jauch’s cottage. Frau Jauch had introduced me as a nephew who happened to be visiting. Now I had to tell her the truth.

In the evening, after dark, I left my hiding spot and made my way over crunching gravel to Frau Schönebeck’s cottage.

Frau Schönebeck opened the door, recognized me, and said, “Ah, you are poor Frau Jauch’s nephew. Dreadful—that dear woman. Such a sudden end. I assume you want to talk about the funeral with me?”

“No,” I said. “It’s about something else.”

She invited me in. I told her my story. And as I did, the relief of finally being able to open up to someone made me forget my anxiety. Silent and serious, Frau Schönebeck listened. Then she said: “All right, then. You will stay with me. You needn’t turn yourself in. I will take you.”

Today, when I look back on my life, it was these three women from Trinity Garden Colony—Frau Jauch, Frau Schönebeck, and Frau Harndt—whose help made it possible for me live freely in Germany today, after such a terrible time for us Jews, and to feel like a true German, a citizen of this country, without resentment. These women risked their lives for me.

I wasn’t related to them. They didn’t know me or had met me only in passing. They could have been completely indifferent towards me. But they were good,
righteous people. They were Germans, as I had been. As I am once again, now that
the nightmare of National Socialism has left our fatherland.

* 

It was August 1944 when I moved in with Frau Schönebeck. There was no hidden room, as there was in Frau Jauch’s cottage. During the day I hid in the bedroom and at night I slept on a couch in the small, shabby living room. My new rescuer also shared her meager rations with me. Once in a while—very rarely—her husband, who was on the Eastern Front, would send her a package with a can of lard or a sausage. Those were feasts for us. Hunger was part of our daily life.

One day her son came on furlough. He asked who I was. Tall and robust, he stood before his mother and me in his naval uniform—one of the strong ones who didn’t have to hide.

Frau Schönebeck said who I was and why I was living with her. Her son froze. Enraged, shocked, furious. “If this comes out, I’m implicated too,” he said.

“They won’t wait to pounce on this. No. You can’t stay here. That’s asking too much. You can’t impose this on my mother and me. Please go.” Frau Schönebeck cried. I too fought back tears. Her son was right!

But his mother pleaded with her son on my behalf. And turned him around.

“All right,” he said. “Then stay here. But I know nothing about it. I haven’t seen you here.” He’d been granted this leave because he was reassigned—to the submarine service. When his furlough was over he left us—forever; he never returned from a mission in the Arctic Ocean. Frau Schönebeck had saved me but had lost her own son. “Fallen for Führer, Folk, and Fatherland,” as the expression went.
While Frau Jauch could stave off the worst of the hunger with her little shop, Frau Schönebeck had only her food ration cards “for one average consumer,” which had to feed both of us. It wasn’t enough. We competed to see who could eat less, and the smallest morsel stuck in my throat.

“Hansi,” she said after a few days, “we can’t go on like this. There isn’t enough for both of us. The Nemnichs live next door, nice elderly people. We can tell them the truth, right? They’ll help us, I’m certain of it.” I felt queasy, but I had to agree. And so the Nemnichs were let in on the secret, and later two additional garden colony residents. The circle of people who knew about my illegal existence grew bigger—and so did my fears.

The front was now coming palpably closer. The number of bombings was increasing. Air raids became more frequent, and with them, my opportunities to get some fresh air.

Because only a few pilots in the approaching bomber squadrons were familiar with the terrain and the targets, they flew ahead and dropped “Christmas trees.” That’s what we called those cascades of flares that lit up the sky almost magically and marked the bombs’ targets. The planes that followed dropped their bombs in the designated sectors.

I stood under these Christmas trees like a child on the set of a Christmas pageant. But the others were worried that the bombing could still hit us. They also feared for me. And so a sort of bunker was built out of beams and dirt. It was initially intended for Frau Schönebeck and me. Old Herr Nemnich did most of the work. With time our little homemade bunker filled up. Frau Harndt came when the alarm
sounded, then the Nemnichs, and later also people I had never seen before. In the end, there were at least ten people in the shelter when the bombs were falling outside. But not one of these people betrayed me. Not one. I haven’t forgotten that.

These simple people, who were barely making it though, had a peculiarly childlike faith in me. Every time an air raid ended with everyone unscathed, they would say “Hansi, we have you to thank. The Allies know that a fugitive is hidden here. They must know. They’re sparing us because you’re here. Nothing can happen to us, and we have you to thank.”

At first I thought they were joking to cheer me up and lighten the burden of my gratitude. But no: in their touching naïveté, they really believed it that at their headquarters, the commanding officers of the British and American air forces had registered the presence of the Jewish boy Hans Rosenthal in the Trinity Garden Colony and had included it in their orders. In this way, though they were saving me, I was saving them.

From this time on, the neighbors would often bring something for me to eat. Clothing too, once in a while. They had hardly anything themselves. But they helped me. Wonderful people.

I found a way to repay the women after the Russians came. I protected them when they were threatened with rape. I once took a hefty beating for that—a price I paid gladly.

Yet initially we waited eagerly for the Russians. The front was coming closer every day. One day we heard the thunder of artillery. First from a distance. Either it was Russian tanks or German gun emplacements along the Oder River. My heart beat
faster. Marshall Zhukov was marching on Berlin. The pins on my map of Europe were converging on Germany. Blue and red. And I was right in the middle. One evening, I heard Joseph Goebbels on my crystal radio. His voice sounded oddly altered to me that February 28, 1945:

“The overall war situation, from a purely military perspective, has experienced an acute reversal due to the success of the Soviet offensive from the Baranov bridgehead. To our disadvantage. The Bolshevik shock troops that the Soviet leadership assembled at this extremely dangerous location have succeeded, despite bitter hardship, bloodshed, and severe losses, in advancing deep into Germany’s eastern territory and have created decidedly serious circumstances for us. Our situation has become extremely grave. But it is in no way devoid of prospects. Our enemies are celebrating too early—as has happened so often in the course of this war—if they think they have broken the back of the Reich.”

I had learned to ignore the stay-the-course rhetoric in Goebbels’ speeches and the empty flourishes about a “turning point”—it wasn’t hard to do. There was no more doubt about it; the war was coming to a close. For hours on end, I listened to my radio for whatever news I could catch. The Russians seemed to be preparing for an all-out attack on Berlin.

On April 13, I heard clips from a Führer’s announcement: “A barrage of artillery will meet the enemy . . . this time the Bolshevik will succumb to the same fate as ancient Asia. He must, and he will, bleed to death at the gates of the capital of the German Reich . . .” He addressed the officers and soldiers. “If someone unfamiliar to you orders you to retreat, he is to be detained and, if necessary, summarily shot . . .
Berlin remains German. Vienna will be German once more. And Europe will never be Russian.”

That was clear enough. Hitler clearly knew that all was lost. But his loss of his regime meant a victory for me—and not only for me, of course. I felt reborn. I no longer experienced hours of hopelessness. I forgot my hunger. My wits were sharpened for what was to come.

I sat up late with Frau Schönebeck and Frau Harndt. We spoke about the end of the war and what would happen next. We all agreed that we still had more dangers to get through—the struggle wasn’t over yet. Now distant thunder no longer sounded like a storm, but like a hail of bombs falling nearby. The ground trembled with the impact.

On the evening of April 19, the eve of Hitler’s fifty-sixth birthday, Joseph Goebbels spoke once more. His voice sounded ghostlike to me, eerily distorted in my little receiver:

“Once more, the armies of the enemy powers are storming our defensive front. Behind them comes the rabid international Jewry, frothing at the mouth, whipping them on, refusing to rest until it has satisfied its satanic goal of world destruction. But it will be in vain! As He has done so often when Lucifer stood before the gates of power, menacing all peoples, God will hurl him back into the abyss from which he came.”

It struck me as a hilarious idea, so hilarious I could cry, that the good Lord would undertake the extermination of the “enemy powers” after Hitler had failed on his own. And “international Jewry?” Was I, Hans Rosenthal, twenty years old, with
dead parents and a kidnapped brother who had disappeared without a trace, actually part of that?

In an old cardboard box, amid other possessions and personal documents, lay my yellow star. It was evidence of my membership in that category. But if I had made it my personal goal to destroy the world, I hadn’t realized it until now. My “satanic goal” was less ambitious: I just wanted to survive. Goebbels ended his speech: “What we so often ask of our leader on happy returns of his birthday has become, in this time of sorrow and danger for us all, a much deeper and more heartfelt plea: may he remain what he is and always was— our Hitler!”

It would soon become clear which “Lucifer” God intended to “hurl back into the abyss.”

* 

In the last week of April, beyond the roar of artillery, I heard an unfamiliar sound: a ground-shaking rattling—tanks. Tank treads, tank motors, muffled explosions. It wasn’t exactly music to my ears. But it was the sound of freedom.

“Frau Schönebeck,” I said, “ the Russians have come. Listen…”

Frau Schönebeck heard it too. She was shaking.

“Do you think it really is the Russians, Hansi? It could also be Wehrmacht tanks…”

“No,” I said. “I doubt that. Those have been stopped. I’ll go out and have a look.”

“Stay here, Hansi,” Frau Schönebeck said. “You’re risking your life!”

I didn’t let that deter me.
“I won’t go farther than Hohenschönhauser Way!” I left the cottage and ran, without further regard for my safety, towards the clanking tanks.

I hid behind a hedge. And then I saw the tanks coming, dirty, noisy monsters. One halted next to me. I crouched down. I could see the Soviet star very clearly on the armor plating.

I watched in horror as the stocky turret suddenly started to swivel in my direction. Slowly, the barrel descended.

I pulled out my handkerchief and waved. Immediately the tank hatch opened and a Soviet soldier stuck out his head, then his arm. He called out something in Russian that I didn’t understand, but I could tell from his gesture that I should get out of there.

As you can imagine, I got out of there. Breathless, I returned to the cottage and described what had happened. Frau Schönebeck thought it could have cost me my life.

Only later did I find out that members of the Hitler Youth and men from the Volkssturm, the last-ditch defense, had hidden behind such hedges and fired bazookas at the approaching Russians. These weapons had taken down a number of tanks.
Finally Frau Schönebeck gave me permission to sally forth. I proudly affixed my yellow star to my jacket and set out to find the liberators. I wasn’t scared of the Nazis anymore, even though a counterattack was still possible.

It felt very strange, after two years spent in hiding, after two years of fear and hunger, to walk freely and heedlessly down the street. I think I even whistled.

Then, at the Landsberg Avenue train station, I saw German tanks. Frightened, I took cover behind a house wall, but I quickly realized these tanks had been abandoned by their crews. When they had run out of gas, the heavy tracked vehicles had been left blocking the street to stop the Soviets’ advance.

A Russian tank was parked near the central cattle yard, its crew chatting next to it. Waving, ecstatic and giddy, I approached the soldiers.

One of them was Jewish. He greeted me warmly and spoke German. In a few minutes, he and his comrades had to press on to the center of the city, he said. Who knew whether he would survive or not. I squeezed his hand: “Mazel Tov,” I said.

Then I went back to the Trinity Colony with my yellow star. Suddenly, near the water plant, some Russians surrounded me. They pointed their submachine guns at me. I pointed to my star and smiled, though my heart was in my mouth. What was
wrong with them? Their menacing stance didn’t let me doubt for a second that they were ready to shoot me on the spot. I was brutally pushed against a wall. I stood there with my hands up, unable to comprehend the ways of the world anymore.

Was everything to come crashing down as a result of an incomprehensible misunderstanding? Were my determination and deprivation to have been in vain?

Then an officer rode up on a bicycle. He stopped, dismounted, and made his way to me, elbowing the soldiers aside. Other soldiers encircled us on bicycles they had looted somewhere. They looked like kids in a candy store, despite the grim conditions all around.

The officer was Jewish. That took a weight off my mind. He asked me in Yiddish if I was also Jewish. “Yes,” I said, “I’m Jewish. Not an SS man. I was in hiding.” I was babbling in terror because I had heard noises that sounded like “SS” from one of the other men. The officer was still skeptical. He challenged me to recite the declaration of our faith in Hebrew. I recited it, feeling as though I were truly understanding its meaning for the first time: “Schma yisrael, Adonai elohanu, Adonai echod—hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”

The officer seemed moved. He squeezed my hand and stared silently at the ground. “You are Jewish,” he said after a long pause. “You may go.”

“Take off that star,” he added.

“Why?” I asked.

“You were lucky,” said my savior. “This division liberated the Majdanek concentration camp. There the SS guards took the yellow stars from prisoners’
clothing and put them on their own. When we discovered that, a standing order was issued that anyone wearing the star was to be shot immediately.”

So I really would have been shot if this Jewish officer hadn’t come along. “The Lord is our God,” I said to myself, lost in thought. “The Lord is one.”

I put my star back in my pocket and returned to the garden colony. I didn’t stay there long. The urge to be out and about, to be with others, had become overpowering.

*

There was an anti-fascist committee in Lichtenberg. I signed up for it. The Wehrmacht hadn’t capitulated yet, and fighting continued in the city. Hitler was still alive in the Reich Chancellery’s bunker, as I later learned, giving deranged orders, and accusing his generals of treason.

From the newly named mayor of Lichtenberg, to whom I was sent by the anti-fascist committee, I received a certification:


Signed.

From this moment, I was officially registered again. It gave me a wonderful sense of salvation. The mayor, a modest man, was going through the district with a small team to search for hidden Nazis. I joined this group. The Nazis hadn’t capitulated yet, and people still feared attacks by Volkssturm members or “werewolves,” as the last desperate Nazi fighters were called.
I watched them quake before the mayor. Small-time Nazis, fellow travelers, the ensnared and the blinded, shuddered with fear that retribution had come—in the form of His Honor the Mayor. It wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.

In one apartment, he found a book with a swastika—the program of the Olympic games from 1936. A trembling mother stood there with her eleven-year-old son. Aha! Two Nazis! The swastika!

“That’s just absurd,” I said to the Mayor. “I know that book. It’s a souvenir of the Olympics. You can’t prove someone’s a Nazi with that!”

We argued back and forth. The mayor wanted to arrest the woman and the boy. I persuaded him not to. After two hours, I managed to free the two “fascists.”

With that, I ended my assignment with anti-fascist commission of Lichtenberg. This wasn’t the world I’d desired, craved, dreamed of. Wasn’t there any way to avoid the persecution of innocent people?

On May 1, when I came back to Frau Schönebeck’s cottage around midnight, there was great excitement: “Hitler is dead!” Frau Hardt verified it: “Yes, Hansi, the news came this evening.”

She had scribbled down the announcement on a sheet of paper:

“It was announced today from the Führer’s headquarters that our leader Adolf Hitler breathed his last breath this afternoon at his post, fighting Bolshevism. He fell for Germany. On April 30, the Führer named Admiral Dönitz as his successor.”

I was silent at first. Than I said simply, “At last!” Later I learned that there were two inaccuracies in this announcement. Hitler didn’t “fall,” he shot himself. And not on May 1, but already on April 30.
Either way, he was dead. The corrupter of Germany, the one guilty of millions of deaths among many peoples, the exterminator of the Jewish populace, was dead.

But I, Hans Rosenthal, was alive, healthy, and free.

Of course, in those days, I thought incessantly of my little brother. I didn’t have a lot of hope that he was still alive. I thought of the Jews who’d been humiliated, abducted, tormented, then murdered.

I swore to dedicate my new, second life to making sure this would never happen again.
The Nazis still seemed, despite Hitler’s death, to want to continue with their madness. Commander Karl Dönitz called for heroic resistance and for carrying on the struggle. I had to do something. So I went to Alexanderplatz and then to Dirksenstrasse. In my lonely nights, as I listened with my headphones to Goebbels’ speeches, news from the front, blaring propaganda, and the Führer’s orders, I had come up with a plan for my future: when this was all over, I would go into radio. I wanted to do broadcasts! The right kind. The free kind. The honest kind. I was thinking of political programs.

On Dirksenstrasse, I met a man named Meier. He was working to reestablish the police department there. Did I want to help? “Why not?” I said.

Again, we searched for members of the SS. And we found a man—no, not a man, a seventeen-year-old member of the Hitler Youth. He had—literally, at the last minute—when the Russian front was a kilometer away, shot nine women because they didn’t believe in victory anymore. The boy was taken away. The whole thing was too harsh for me. I went on my way.

Many years later, I saw this Herr Meier again at a reception in Berlin, without knowing who he was, though he certainly seemed familiar. He was the spokesman for the Berlin Press Consortium, and as we moved in the same circles, we once ended up chatting at length. He said that he’d been working with the Berlin police in 1945.
Now I knew why he seemed so familiar. Later he went to Israel, fought in the war of 1948, and is today the Berlin bureau chief for *Deutsche Welle*.

On May 8, the Wehrmacht capitulated. The absolute end of the war was no longer in doubt. Actually, in the last months of the war, I’d always hoped the Russians would reach Berlin before the Americans. I assumed that the Soviets would show less mercy to guilty Nazis than I expected the nice “Amis” to. In some respects, that may have initially been true. On the other hand, incriminated Nazis, yes, even members of the Gestapo, could very quickly reinvent themselves under the Soviet occupation—if they managed to float with the new tide. Back then I hadn’t recognized the oppression, the tyranny, and the other terrible similarities between the Soviet regime and the Nazis. I was unsuspecting, like many others who had suffered under Hitler’s despotism, and thus saw the Russians as liberators from the Nazi reign of terror. Other similar realizations came later, but still relatively soon. And from my own observation.

* 

I had heard that Radio Berlin was going to be reestablished. A broadcast operation freed from the shackles of Nazi propaganda. My time had come. I wanted to put to positive use, in deeds and, above all, in words, the bitter lessons that I’d received—pun intended—thanks to my crystal radio: I wanted to tell people the truth. That was what inspired me.

In those days, I had a bicycle. I’d acquired it through some kind of barter, but a possession like that wasn’t secure, since the Russians stole Germans’ bicycles *en masse*. 
My bike, however, was safe: the Russians had issued me a document in Cyrillic script to verify that I was the lawful owner and that the occupation soldiers weren’t allowed to take it away from me.

On my bike, protected by the victors, I pedaled down Masurenallee to the glazed brick building of the old Reich Radio. Although Masurenallee and the broadcast house were in the British sector, the transmitter was operated by the Soviets. The Russians had laid claim to it because their station in Leipzig was destroyed and they didn’t have a major transmitter within their occupation zone. The western allies, however, had Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, Frankfurt, etc. And the western powers, who at that time showed the Soviets astonishing generosity and almost sentimental comradeship, ceded to Moscow the largest station in West Berlin, the first building in Germany erected specifically for broadcast purposes.

As I entered the lobby, a Soviet soldier stood in my way. He was armed and eyed me contemptuously. Apparently I wasn’t wearing the kind of clothes that were standard around here.

“What you want?”

“Raboti, raboti,” I answered.

We had learned this word very quickly. It meant “work.” The Soviets demanded much “raboti” from the conquered Germans. It was a cue that sounded sweet to them—so long as it applied to us.

The soldier responded as expected. He let me through. I could speak German at the concierge’s booth: “I’d like to work here. Where can I sign up?” The concierge referred me to a Herr Klein in the personnel department. It came out that he was the
personnel chief, brought specially from Moscow. The Soviets imported their own
German functionaries, specially trained Communists who’d emigrated to Russia, for
important positions—and personnel manager was an important position.

Herr Klein was friendly. My short but turbulent—perhaps also moving—life
story made him receptive.

“Good,” he said. “You can work here. You’ll work fifty-six hours a week.
You start early tomorrow morning, at 8:30.”

“With what?” I asked.

“With the work,” Herr Klein answered.

“What kind of work?” I asked.

“Archival,” he said dryly and shifted his heaps of files. My audience was over
and I had a job.

I went along the corridors of the broadcast station in a daze. I remembered a
quotation from Joseph Goebbels: “Propaganda made the Third Reich.”

That had all happened here. This was where Goebbels gave his radio
speeches. This was where the “Führer” sat before the microphone and read out
proclamations and appeals to “his” people. This was where the reports from the
Wehrmacht high command were aired. This was where words of hatred aimed at the
Jews were spoken and blasted into millions of German ears.

I was standing, as it were, in the birthplace of the Nazis’ power and the
“public outrage” that I had come to know so early in life. Everything I had heard in
my headphones—with the exception of the BBC, of course—had emanated from
here.
And now I would be an employee in this building. I, who had had to hide from the phantoms hatched here. Didn’t the ghosts of Hitler and Goebbels still haunt these brick walls?

I hopped on my bike and rode back to Frau Schönebeck.

“They took me on!” I called to her. “It starts tomorrow. I’m working in radio.”

“As what?” asked Frau Schönebeck.

“That I don’t quite know,” I said. “Something in the archives.”

“How much will you be making?” she asked.

I’d completely forgotten to ask. Herr Klein hadn’t mentioned my salary. This oversight wouldn’t happen again.

Early the next morning, I arrived promptly at my post. My job did not start, as I expected, in the archives, but rather in the supplies department. I found that out from Herr Klein, who sent me to the basement. But before I went, I asked him about my wages.

“For the start and the probationary period, you’ll receive 120 reichmarks,” said Herr Klein.

“Good,” I said, “that’s fine with me.”

It almost didn’t matter to me how much I made. The reichmark was heading towards worthlessness in any case. When, shortly thereafter, the black market blossomed, twelve cigarettes were the equivalent of a month’s salary.

In the supplies department, there was none of the chaos of Berlin’s destruction. It looked very orderly. There was still plenty of stationery, carbon paper,
erasers, and pencils. I had to distribute these expensive office supplies. I did it for two days. Then I appeared before Herr Klein again.

“Herr Klein,” I said, “that work down in the basement isn’t for me. I’m very grateful that you hired me right away—but you don’t need Hans Rosenthal to hand out erasers. I want to do radio!” I have no idea where I got the nerve to speak up so brashly. In any case, he chuckled and seemed well disposed toward me.

“Well then,” he said, “don’t go back to the basement, go upstairs. Report to the news department, all right?”

That sounded promising. When I walked in, they were just putting together a current affairs show that would later become very popular: Pulse of Berlin.

Berlin’s pulse was beating again. My pulse, however, was pounding. And people noticed my eagerness right away. I became a jack of all trades. I organized and researched as if I were trying to catch up on everything I had missed in the years past.

Hanne Sobeck, the internationally renowned soccer player, headed the sports department. I worked directly with him, which made me more than a little proud.

Soon bicycle racing was revived amid the rubble of Berlin—but there were no telephone lines yet. My own bike became an important vehicle for the newly started radio station.

Hanne Sobeck took me aside: “You have a bike? Excellent. Then ride over to the bicycle race and bring me the results, all right?”

I pedaled off and did what Hanne Sobeck had asked. The results I picked up were then broadcast—no telephone necessary.
Unfortunately, I proved too good a navigator through Berlin’s sea of ruins—I was sent out more and more often and sometimes pedaled my lungs out.

But I found a way to make these bike errands more relaxed and comfortable. The Russians were bringing in supplies from the east to Potsdam, by way of Lichtenberg. The Soviet trucks couldn’t drive any faster than thirty or forty kilometers per hour, so I held onto them and let them tow me.

I got a huge kick out of riding without having to move a muscle. It didn’t work as well on the way back, since the empty trucks drove faster and it was hard to hang on to them. Soon I had imitators. Whole packs of cyclists starting clinging to the convoys.

The reestablished Berlin police force frowned upon these goings-on. They were there to restore the peace, after all, and what we were doing clearly compromised it. The cops decided to put an end to this anarchy. They mobilized on bicycles. When they saw us coming, they hopped on their saddles—mostly in the roundabout by the Victory Column or in the square that would later become Ernst-Reuter-Platz. They darted out from the curb to cut us off.

We usually let them come within five meters of us before suddenly rocketing off—now that we were rested—to get ahead of the truck and leave the madly pedaling police officers in the dust. All we had to do was grab onto the back of a truck farther ahead in the convoy to win the race.

As traffic conditions gradually went back to normal and the Soviet trucks became more of a rarity on this route, I gave up my career as cyclist and entrusted myself to public transportation.
Unfortunately, that didn’t offer the same excitement.
I was still living in the cottage with Frau Schönebeck. I was very attached to her. The streetcar line 69, from the Landsberg Avenue train station to Herzberge, soon returned to service. But the light rail from Landsberg Avenue was not fully operational, since two bridges over the Spree, between Puttlitzstrasse and the Wedding railroad station, had been blown up. So I always had to get off at the Wedding station, walk across the tracks, and use a temporary walkway to reach Puttlitzstrasse, where I could board again. In those days, we tolerated such strain and inconvenience without complaint. It didn’t actually bother us at all. It was more important that we were alive and well. The new life that was proverbially rising from the ashes was, after all, our own.

I could have arranged to have an apartment near the broadcast station, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave Frau Schönebeck alone in her cottage. Now I felt like my protector’s protector.

A few months after the end of the war, both my grandparents passed away. The agitation after all the years of worry and anxiety had probably done them in. They had held out until the horrors were over and they’d learned that I had survived—but then, exhausted by so much protracted suffering, they lost their will to live.
At Radio Berlin, meanwhile, big plans were afoot. We were going to air the first post-war radio drama: *Nathan the Wise*, by Lessing. Old Nathan articulates the wise premise of the play: the three great world religions are equal before God.

Hannes Küppers would be the director. He’d adapted the play for radio and the Russian authorities demanded fast action when it came to cultural revival—*dawei! dawei!*—only three days’ production time before the show aired on the weekend.

The manuscript had to be submitted to the Russians for approval, which cost us time. Now we were scheduled to start recording the following day—but we still had only two copies of the script.

There are many roles in *Nathan*, however, and the actors needed to read through the scripts before rehearsals. We were in a pickle. We had no copy machines, no secretary who could type up 144 pages sixteen times.

What to do? Nathan’s wisdom couldn’t help us. This cultural project seemed fated to fall through. Director Küppers wrung his hands—and finally decided to call off the endeavor.

I’d heard about the problem. I pulled myself together and went to Küppers. When I saw him, he seemed deeply depressed, almost reluctant to be jolted out of his grief.

“So do you want to start production on *Nathan* tomorrow?” I asked sanctimoniously.

“No,” said Küppers. “I wanted to. But I have to call it off. We don’t have the scripts we need. Such a shame!”
“I’ll fix that,” I said. “In four hours you’ll have your sixteen copies.”

Küppers must have thought I was trying to pull some silly prank, but then he saw the determination in my face.

“Can you really type, and that fast?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “not exactly.”

“How do you plan to do this, young man?” Now he looked quite annoyed.

“You know,” I answered mysteriously, “I have an idea. If you’ll entrust me with a copy of the script… ” “Very well,” muttered Küppers. “We can wait four hours before we cancel the production. Go then, dammit.”

I didn’t go, I ran. I stormed into every room that had a typewriter and yelled, “The first radio drama in postwar Germany is on the line! You can save it if you copy two or three pages—but you have to do it right away!”

No one refused me. After an hour, I raced down the corridors again and collected the copies and carbons. All I had to do was put the pages in order.

After two hours, I arrived breathless at Herr Küppers’ door. “Here, Herr Küppers, sixteen copies!” Küppers was astonished. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Then I told him how I’d done it. And was quite pleased with myself. The director collapsed into his chair, breathed in deeply and, in a momentous voice, uttered these momentous words:

“Herr Rosenthal, starting now, you’re my assistant director for this radio drama.”

Just twenty years old, I left the room with the definite feeling that my career had begun.
During the production of the *Nathan* radio drama, after word about the copies got around, I experienced the mishap universally feared by those who work with audio tape: the tape of the second act fell off the bobbin.

“Bobby” is what we German radio people call the metal spool the tape is wound on. It holds the tape only when it’s taut—even the large tapes we usually refer to as “big cakes.” But the tape got loose on me and became a dreaded “tape salad.”

I searched feverishly for the beginning of the tape. Hundreds of meters flew in all directions around the room. The risk of kinks and tears—and with them the destruction of the magnetic sound structure—was high. It was inconceivable that we might have to produce the entire thing all over again! But hours later I had “my” *Nathan* all organized and back on the spool. It wouldn’t be the only time I had to bear the cost of my apprenticeship.

From then on, I couldn’t complain of a lack of work. Germany was veritably starving for radio dramas. I worked on a production of *The Spanish Fly*, a recording of the play *Now They’re Singing Again* by Max Frisch, and *The Fourth Commandment* by Anzengruber.

An interesting part of my job was delivering the casting offers. If the director had cast actors for the parts in the script and the secretaries couldn’t reach all of them on the recently patched-together telephone lines, I had to go to their houses and relay the offer. I especially enjoyed this because it allowed me to meet some impressive personalities. Since we still didn’t have any vehicles for this job and public transportation ran only until half past eight, my trusty bike earned yet more honors.
Other than the meeting with the director to discuss recording times and schedules, it was also my responsibility to provide sound effects. There were many tapes available in the archives—street noise, human footsteps, a squeaking door, squealing brakes, rushing water, trotting horses, chirping birds, howling storms, shattering glass, clacking typewriters, and dozens of other sounds. But many we recorded ourselves: coach wheels on cobblestones for one production set in the eighteenth century; a passing light rail train, whose sound was fundamentally different from that of a long-distance train, for which I had to lie down on the railway embankment with my recorder; grinding teeth, which was especially fun to produce.

Most of the radio drama scenes were recorded multiple times. From the different takes, the director would select the parts that seemed to work the best. That meant something like this: in the first scene, we might use the first four sentences from the second take, the next six sentences from the first take, and the last sentences from the fifth take.

I was allowed to sit with the editor in the cutting room and piece the puzzle together. It was important to sort and mark the individual cuts, otherwise we could end up with an unsalvageable mess.

During the recording sessions, I sat behind the director; while he concentrated on the speech and intonation of the actors and narrators, I made sure the sounds were cued in time and weren’t too loud or too soft. I clocked the length and timing of each sequence with my stopwatch, made sure performers had beverages, calmed irritable actors, smoothed over conflicts, and took notes.
I learned a lot from this job—everything I needed to know to later become a director myself. After all, the assistant director is the director’s conscience, memory, and punching bag.

By the way, I wasn’t assigned only to radio dramas; in my position with the news department—which included sports—I surely learned just as much and experienced many real-life comedies and tragedies, beyond what was merely portrayed in the radio dramas.

* *

One special event was the first big sports festival that the victorious powers hosted in the Olympic stadium. Of course, Radio Berlin broadcast the occasion.

Our mobile unit was an old Adler. During the war, because of the oil shortages, it had been refitted to run on wood. It had a sort of boiler that burned wood chips and piped the resulting gases to the motor. Sometimes the old rust bucket refused to budge. Then you had to put more wood in the fire box.

We rattled down Heerstrasse towards the stadium. A soldier was posted every fifty meters to salute prominent military personages as they drove by. We had to find a way to get into the stadium in order to report from the stands. We waited by the barricade in our Adler. After the car with General Clay passed, I noticed a gap in the convoy between his car and the following one.

“Step on it!” I shouted to the driver, and our prehistoric vehicle shot forward, reached the gap, and rolled towards the event sandwiched between two impressive American limousines. No one could stop us anymore—it would have halted the whole motorcade.
And so we drove through the underground entrance to the stadium and ended up at the exact location where the commandants stepped out: at the Marathon Gate, a perfect spot.

Then came the parade of the nations. The Americans were hosting the event and entered the stadium with at least 150 participants. The British had also mobilized over a hundred athletes. The numbers for the other allies were also considerable.

But then came one nation represented by only one man. An American soldier carrying the flag of Czechoslovakia walked ahead of him. His entrance was understandably amusing for the audience. Nobody knew this athlete who strode calmly and quietly amid the other nations’ contingents. Howling laughter erupted from several rows of seats, which didn’t seem to bother him at all. He clearly knew what he had come for.

Then the competition began. First came the five-thousand-meter race. The man from Czechoslovakia set off. After only a few laps, he was ahead of all the others—as alone as he had entered the stadium. Leading the pack by over a hundred meters, he reached the finish line, nimble-footed and nonchalant. The audience was stunned. Then came roaring applause.

The ten-thousand-meter race was again won by a solitary runner who finished with an even bigger lead. His name was Emil Zatopek.

That was my first encounter with this outstanding athlete, who ruled the race track for a long time. Later I would have him as a guest on my quiz show, *Well Begun is Half Done*. Zatopek wasn’t only a masterful runner, but also a loveable, humble, witty person.
After the experience in the Olympic stadium, Radio Berlin came up with another special project, our first big variety show. The theme was “Spice up the Airwaves.” Because I wasn’t so busy in the radio-play production department, I was tapped to help with the organizing. Soon everyone was calling me “Hansi” and word spread that I was a good “right Hans man.”

One of the organizers said to me, “Hey, Hansi, I’ve heard that the famous Ilse Werner survived the war. If you could get her for our variety show, that would be fabulous.”

I knew Ilse Werner’s films and her unique talent for whistling.

“Do you know where she lives?” I asked.

“Yes, on Gustav-Freytag-Strasse—somewhere near the White and Red Tennis Courts.

“And how should I get her here?” I asked.

“You have that bike, Hansi. Just put her on the handlebars.”

I rode off and found the address, rang the doorbell and asked, “Does Ilse Werner live here?”

A man invited me in and Ilse Werner appeared in the flesh. I bowed in awe and told her about the variety show and the part we had in mind for her.

“All right,” said Ilse Werner. “I’ll do it. With pleasure, even. But how will I get there?”

“I’ve been ordered to pick you up, ma’am,” I said.

“Where is your car?”
“I have a bicycle, ma’am, parked outside. And it has comfortable, shock-proof, fully-inflated, wide-tread tires. I’m also a very safe driver. Will you be so kind as to entrust yourself to me?”

She did. And I balanced the famous lady on my bike all the way to the radio station. She had clamped a parcel containing her evening gown onto the bike’s carrier. The evening, needless to say, proved a huge success.

We appeared on stage together nearly thirty-five years later, after the dedication of the International Congress Center, the ICC, in Berlin. The Berlin Transport Authority was celebrating an anniversary.

We discussed what we could present to the audience. Ilse Werner said, “Hansi, I’ll tell them the story about how you chauffeured me on that bicycle.”

The director didn’t just like it, he loved it, and he had an idea: “How about you do it again! You can ride on stage on a bicycle with Ilse on the handlebars and then tell the story.”

We liked the idea and tried it out. But during rehearsals we discovered that, after nearly three and a half decades, Frau Werner’s weight had, shall we say, changed. The plan proved impossible.

We decided to attach a small trailer to the bike that Ilse could sit in. It hooked onto the bike’s carrier and had two wheels.

First I rode a practice lap around the stage without a passenger. It went smoothly.
On the evening of the performance, Ilse Werner was loaded in. We rode onto the stage, which was big enough to let me attempt some daring curves. The audience cheered.

But these curves proved treacherous. When I finally wanted to stop and already had one leg off the bike, something unforeseen happened. The shift in weight slowly but surely lowered the trailer and its cargo to the floor; at the same time, my bike reared up. Ilse slid out of the trailer and I thudded to the ground. The audience shrieked with laughter.

In the following performances, I preferred to keep my full weight on the bike until an assistant had helped Ilse out of the vehicle.
OF CARE PACKAGES AND SILK STOCKINGS

My maternal grandmother’s sister had a son two years older than I named Heinz Renner. Heinz had emigrated to England in the nick of time and I hadn’t heard from him since. After the war, I naturally felt impelled to find my surviving family members, so I went to the British military administration and asked about this distant cousin.

They looked through various lists but couldn’t find his name. They promised to check with London headquarters and told me to come back. The British were extraordinarily friendly, but Heinz was still nowhere to be found, even after the query to London.

One day I took the U-Bahn to the broadcast station on Reichskanzlerplatz. An English soldier was standing by the door of the car, holding the handle.

He looks like Heinz, I thought, or at least bears an uncanny resemblance to him. I observed him more closely and finally decided to approach him from behind. In a low voice—so as not to potentially upset a stranger—I said, “Hello, Heinz!”

He turned around. “Hansi! Oh, my god—what a surprise!” We had so much to tell each other, we fortunate ones who had survived. I discovered that he was serving in a British armored unit and had been with it on the advance from Holland. Now he was stationed in Berlin—a member of the victorious powers.
“How can this be, Heinz?” I said. “I already asked the military administration about you. They couldn’t find you on any of their lists.”

The mystery was soon solved: “I don’t go by Heinz Renner anymore,” Heinz said. “Now my name is Harold Ramsey.”

We got off and walked together. There was so much to catch up on. That’s when I learned the reason for his name change:

As soon as Jewish immigrants of German descent joined the army, they were given new names. That way, if the Germans captured them, they wouldn’t be given away by their last names. It was a clever security measure. Heinz’s father had been hauled off to Sachsenhausen in 1937 and shot in a hostage taking in 1941. I couldn’t blame my distant cousin Harold Ramsey for later becoming an American citizen.

*

During my time at Radio Berlin, the democratic reeducation of the German people began. Political activities sprang up everywhere. Parties were founded, as well as the Cultural Association for the Democratic Revival of Germany.

Many events took place in our radio station, especially in the big studio, which was the only large assembly hall that hadn’t fallen victim to the bombings. The pioneering Communist politicians came and went constantly. I soon got to know them all.

I too developed an interest in politics and it wasn’t long before I was elected chairman of the Radio Berlin youth group. But I soon realized that communism was not for me.
Among the youth I was supposed to train for democracy was a young person who proved to be particularly foolish and narrow-minded. He hit us over the head with his Communist convictions. I was secretly delighted when we both ran for election to the works committee and he received only 275 votes, while 313 came out for me. His name was Heinrich Grote. Today he is one of the most prominent commentators on radio and television in East Berlin. His intellectual limitations must have suited the socialist state perfectly.

* 

It wasn’t easy for Germans to develop democratic attitudes—first, most young people were still politically influenced by the Nazis, and second, the occupying powers were intent on making certain that personal and political freedom didn’t deviate too far from the norm. It was the period of those long, nagging questionnaires. Let me mention only a few of the numerous questions on the personal questionnaire used by Radio Berlin:

Were you abroad before the war?  
How much do you earn per week?  
Did you belong to the National Socialist Party or one of its organizations?  
Starting when?  
Membership number?  
Which positions did you hold?  
Can anyone provide information about your party membership?  
Which organizations did you belong to?  
Which positions did you occupy in the organizations?  
What reasons, thinking, or considerations prompted you to join the National Socialists?  
Were you a member of or did you serve in the Gestapo or military intelligence?  
What were your monthly dues to the National Socialists?  
Are you part of any religious movement or the German Christian movement?  
Did you earn any military medals?  
Did members of your family belong to the National Socialist Party or one of its organizations?  
Were you a member of a democratic party before 1933?
Of course it was very important to find out whether former Nazis were seeking employment with the new radio station. Most of these questions had to be asked. But they were very typical of this time when, for serious reasons, there was still a good deal of suspicion.

In addition to my work, which—except for the incipient political bias and the increasingly red hue of Radio Berlin—made me very happy, I thought often, understandably, about my family situation. Not many in our extended family had survived. My cousin Rudi Maschke—whose father, though American, had nonetheless lost his life in a concentration camp—lived in the U.S. My cousin Margit, who survived the Bergen-Belsen camp, later moved to what was then Palestine. The daughter of my Aunt Lotte, my mother’s sister, went to Denmark. My distant cousin Margot lived near San Francisco. My other cousin, Heinz Renner, also known as Harold Ramsey, became an American citizen. Those are the survivors—scattered to the four winds.

Those who didn’t survive: the life-long companion of my father’s youngest brother; my father’s two brothers; my brother, Gert; my Uncle Alfred’s mother-in-law.

Yes, my parents and my grandparents died of natural causes—but it’s likely that the strain and fear of persecution shortened their lives. My life, however, went on—actually, it was just beginning.

* 

In 1946, I started to make myself available for activities outside of my job: I helped with booking stars from the music industry, film, and stage for live guest
appearances. These took place for the most part either during the day in the big movie theaters—always on Sunday mornings—or at night, around half past ten.

Since making movies didn’t allow them to earn a living in those days, the stars were grateful to appear in venues all around Berlin. These included the Primus Palace in Neukölln, the Rosy in Friedenau, the Mercedes Palace in Wedding, or the Corso Theater. There was no television, of course, and people were hungry for harmless entertainment that would allow them to forget the past.

For those who could sing, like Ilse Werner, such appearances were easy. It was harder for actors who could only read a few poems or short stories, or perform little scenes. But people came to these shows to see their favorite celebrities in person.

I organized these evenings in the eastern sector as well, since Berlin wasn’t yet divided.

On one such night, a juggling comedian performed. His name was McMoreland. He picked up his clubs, balls, and hats from one side of the stage and juggled them to the other side, where he put them down. To understand the joke that followed, you need to know that this was the time of the great démontage; the Russians were hauling away everything of decent quality that wasn’t bolted down.

McMoreland juggled his objects from one side to the other, then commented, “We can never learn enough from the Russians. Look, I take everything from one side and put it down on the other. I learned that from them. They take everything from the West and bring it to the East.”

The audience stomped with enthusiasm.
Suddenly the stage was stormed. Ten or so men in visored caps and fake leather trench coats bellowed from the stage that the show was over. Several turned to beat up poor McMoreland.

That was the moment of my first big stage appearance. I leaped out of the wings and punched McMoreland free. I didn’t hold back, and my efforts met with success. Thanks to the years of forced labor, I’d developed muscles, as two of the men learned firsthand. Now I received my first real round of applause: once I’d driven the attackers away and freed McMoreland, the audience clapped enthusiastically.

I shouted, “On with the show!” And on we went to the end, dripping with sweat and thrilled to have pulled it off.

When I left the theater later—with the applause still ringing in my ears—two sinister-looking men grabbed me on either side.

“We’re from the Socialist Unity Party, Priesterweg. Your ID, please.” I handed it over. They wrote down all my personal information. Then one of them said: “You’re coming with us!”

“But I’m a victim of fascism,” I said.

“Then how can you defend those Nazi pigs?”

“They’re not Nazi pigs,” I replied.

They walked me through Friedrichshain. I started to worry. The last thousand years had shown me what fanatical people are capable of. I looked around cautiously and made sure I was alone with my two red captors.
Then I punched to the left—the direction of their political persuasion—then to the right—because the two extremes were starting to resemble each other more and more—and ran off before I heard a peep out of the two of them, back to the western sector. I think they were knocked speechless.

The following night, I slept in the west for safety’s sake. But I was still living with my Frau Schönebeck, since I didn’t want to leave her alone. To keep her from worrying, the next day I went back to Lichtenberg, in the eastern sector, and stayed on with her. I continued working at Radio Berlin as if nothing had happened.

A week later, when I returned to the cottage from the radio station, Frau Schönebeck said: “Hansi, two men from the labor department were here asking for you.”

“What did they want?” I asked.

“You’re supposed to go clear rubble.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, they just said there are so many profiteers in the city that a law’s been passed saying everyone who changed jobs after 1945 must go back to his old job. “

What marvelous logic! Because the Nazis had forced me to do hard labor, I was now supposed to make that my career!

The next day, I went to the labor department. I showed the clerk the papers that proved I had been persecuted.

The man looked at them, glanced at me, and said, “Comrade, this law doesn’t apply to you.”

“Then why did you order me to come here?” I asked.
“Hmm,” he answered, “we got a letter from Party headquarters that we were to remove you from Radio Berlin as soon as possible and give you another job. But under these circumstances…”

So the Communists wanted revenge for the scandal on the stage and for my daring escape from my two captors.

From that point on, I realized exactly how dangerous it was to challenge the formulaic thinking of these people.

*

My experiences with the reality of Communism don’t stop there.

In those days, the Americans sent Care packages with food to starving Germany—a very generous form of relief. The Jewish community, which existed once more in Berlin—albeit shrunk to a distressingly small number of members—gave me one of these Care packages every month, which the Americans also sent for Jewish survivors. More specifically, it was a Jewish organization called “Joint” that collected Americans’ donations for Jewish survivors in Europe and sent packages. These packages contained butter, corned beef, chocolate, powdered milk, and sugar. Magical bounty in such times. The packages didn’t merely ease our hunger; they made us happy. The Soviets provided similar charity to Radio Berlin: “Pajoks” were Moscow’s version of the Care packages. Except that the Pajoks were distributed differently; as I discovered after some research, they were intended for people of importance on the staff.

I brought this inequality to the attention of the works committee and requested that the Pajoks not be distributed to specific individuals, but rather opened and
divided equally among all the workers. I submitted a written petition to discuss the issue and resolve it at the next meeting.

Comrade Dr. Matthias swung into action. He summoned me to his office for the occasion. He donned a gentle, pitying smile, indicating his hope that the defiant Hans Rosenthal could be brought to see reason.

He began: “So, my dear Hans, listen here—we can’t entertain your request. You have to withdraw it.”

“But why?”

The socialist with a PhD now switched to the informal mode of address, customary among comrades. “You must understand, Hans, that Hitler’s Wehrmacht attacked the Soviet Union…”

“Yes, I know. Fine. Or, actually, not so fine, in this case,” I said. “But what does that have to do with the Pajoks?”

“Let me finish,” said Dr. Matthias sternly. “The German people supported Hitler for twelve years…”

“Just a second,” I said, “not all of the German people. I know many who actively opposed him and even put their lives on the line…”

“Please don’t get sentimental on me,” said Dr. Matthias. “We anti-fascists need to reeducate the German people. There are very few people who can do that, who weren’t in the Nazi party. Those are now the chief technicians, the editors, and the department heads. They must be kept alive. That’s what matters. Look—it’s not so terrible if a cleaning woman starves to death tomorrow. You can get a new one the next day. Or if workers go hungry, it’s not hard to replace them. Chief technicians,
editors, and department heads—they’re irreplaceable these days. They must be kept alive. And that’s why they, and not the others, get the Pajoks. Do you understand?”

Did I understand! I understood all too well. It couldn’t be any clearer.

Although I’d never subscribed to Communist ideas or convictions, I had by no means radically opposed them. I’d nodded with approval when I heard their slogans about the equality of all humanity.

Now I saw what the reality looked like. If the Communists had ever had the potential to win me over, this conversation turned me off once and for all. So the Communists believed in a first and second class of people, and they thought there was valuable and useless human life. This realization disgusted me. I’d just received a lesson in theory versus practice.

I went to one of the upper floors of the broadcast house, still unoccupied and mostly destroyed, to be alone. Below, in one of the little inner courtyards, three German soldiers were buried. They’d fallen shortly before the end of the war. As I gazed down upon the sad little graves, I mulled over my situation: Should I stay here? What would the “first class” functionaries do to me? I put off making any decision and went back to work. My request was withheld from the works committee.

*  

There were also happy moments during this time, in this place, and I want to talk about the happiest of all:

I noticed a pretty blond girl in the cafeteria. She was graceful, charming, unaffected, and, to me, a feast for the eyes.
I wanted desperately to meet her—but she was always with other people and I didn’t know how to approach her directly. She seemed to work in engineering, since she ate with colleagues from that department.

One day, fortune favored me: the girl was sitting with Herr Rosenthal, my namesake—his name was Günter Rosenthal, while I was Hans Günter Rosenthal.

I’d already met him in passing. He too was a victim of the Nazis, worked in the culture department, and was an extraordinarily sensitive, caring person—as opposed to me, my wife would joke later.

I sat down in the empty seat at the table and hoped that perhaps my acquaintance, Herr Rosenthal, would bridge over any awkwardness or bashfulness. The conversation was slow getting started. The girl hardly noticed me. I tried a bold line: “You aren’t in our youth group yet,” I said. “That must change. You really should join.”

She responded with obvious lack of interest. What would she do in my youth group? She later told me that she was put off because I’d used the informal mode of address. She also thought I was much younger than she. To my chagrin, I really looked unbelievably young. But it turned out she’d already noticed me, as she subsequently revealed, because I swept through the cafeteria like a whirlwind, bringing food and drink to the actors, being considerate and pleasant to everyone. That had clearly impressed her.

When we were done eating, I urged her once again to join the youth group and asked for her home telephone number. I still remember it today: 421. There followed countless phone calls from me. Finally, the object of my affection joined the youth
group. But, as could have been foreseen, she didn’t like it one bit, nor did she like me very much yet. But my tenacity gradually, incrementally, won her over. She accepted an invitation to the Vienna Movie House, after some hemming and hawing. They had dancing and an appallingly bad hot drink. Only 18 and older admitted.

We sat at our table in high spirits, and I had no idea of the embarrassing situation that awaited me: detectives came in and began randomly questioning patrons. One of the policemen came to our table and asked for my identification.

“Are you even eighteen?” asked another.

“Yes, I am,” I said. “I’m already over twenty!”

He gave me back my ID, amid the laughter of all those around us.

Traudl, my date, wasn’t asked for her papers. This awkward situation undermined my hopes for the evening. I felt I’d been hung out to dry.

Ah, lest I forget: this girl would become—and remain!—my wife. Even before our wedding, there was a standing joke around the broadcast station about “little Hansi Rosenthal’s arranged child marriage!”

The day we met was September 9, 1946. We still celebrate it today.

Fortunately, I had a few material advantages with which I could invigorate our initial friendship. My Care packages included cigarettes, 200 to a carton. And for those, I could get 1,200 reichmarks—a veritable small fortune, though with little purchasing power. With this money, three months after we first met, I bought Traudl a pair of silk stockings, a luxury in those days. Günter Rosenthal, my sensitive namesake, found it tasteless, but it brought us one step closer to our engagement.
THE SMUGGLED WEDDING RINGS

Young people nowadays can’t even imagine how we longed for little “luxuries” back then, things that are now part of everyday life and taken for granted. Because we found joy in even the most insignificant little gift, those times weren’t really poor—they were infinitely rich and full of surprises, even though the circumstances imposed modesty. Perhaps we enjoyed those times, so difficult in retrospect, because, compared to the war, they seemed almost fairytale-like. It was, quite simply, a new beginning.

Nevertheless, life among the ruins was harsh, and the food rations were just too skimpy: an “average consumer” got twenty grams of meat a day, thirty grams of starch, fifteen grams of sugar, and seven grams of fat.

Still, there was nothing but blue skies for me, for several reasons:

First, no bombs were falling from these skies; second, I was filled with a sense of freedom, having not only survived, but thrived; and third, I had a job that, in spite of increasing pressure from the Communists, made me very happy and that I was good at. The fourth reason was that I had found Traudl, the woman of my dreams—and that was the most important.

When we went out together, it was always a treat when I was allowed to see her home—but it was also an exhausting undertaking. Young fellows these days, who
drive their girls home in their own cars, with heating in cold weather and stereo music from the cassette player, would enjoy it much more—you could also say: would appreciate it more—if they’d experienced the war and the postwar period. I don’t mean to say, of course, that we old people wish that on our children—anything but! Yet experiencing danger and deprivation teaches people to see the world with gratitude and open eyes. We older people cherish the present all the more for our familiarity with the past.

Traudl lived in Spandau. We would take the streetcar along Kantstrasse, until we had to get out and cross the Havel River on a temporary walkway, because the tracks had been bombed. Then we took the streetcar out to Wörtherstrasse, where Traudl’s family lived. If we set out at 10 pm, we wouldn’t get there until around half past eleven. Then began my journey home, back to the river and across the broken tracks, with two transfers and additional waiting time in between. If all went well, I would arrive at the Trinity Garden Colony around half past one in the morning.

One day this was too much for me. I spoke with Frau Schönebeck. She certainly understood my desire to move closer to Traudl, but my departure, which would be permanent, was very hard for her. The prospect hurt me too.

Other than me, Frau Schönebeck had no one. Her son had fallen and her husband was a Russian prisoner of war. I’d pulled out all the stops appealing to the Soviet administration for his release and for better food rations than her “starvation card” allowed. After all, she’d put her life on the line to hide me from the Nazis. The Schönebecks were both confirmed enemies of the Hitler regime. But I had no success. Frau Schönebeck received nothing better than the lowest-level food ration card, nor
did her husband return from captivity. He must have died in some prisoner-of-war camp. So in 1947, two years after the liberation, we bid each other a teary farewell and I moved out. Later she wrote me that she’d found a new life companion.

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I rented a room on the fourth floor of my future in-laws’ building in Spandau. Traudl lived on the second floor with her parents, who took care of me from then on. A new chapter in my life had begun.

We decided to get engaged. This resolution was furthered by the reappearance of Aunt Else—the aunt with the black-market clothing business that had brought me to Frau Jauch’s cottage. She was my grandmother’s Aryan sister and had sent her family inheritance, 65,000 reichmarks’ worth of jewelry, to Munich for safe-keeping. She wanted, understandably, to have these treasures back.

But a trip from Berlin to Munich in those days was risky. That brought me into the picture—Hansi, such a brilliant “organizer.” At least that’s what they called me, and it was music to my ears. Aunt Else offered a very appealing reward: the gold wedding rings—22 carat!—that she’d saved after her husband passed away. She promised to them give to us if I went to fetch the jewelry, leaving Traudl alone for a few days. I agreed. And off I went.

I didn’t have the patience to apply for a pass for interzone travel, and I doubted I would receive one anyway. So I decided to sneak across the line. But Traudl worried. Everyone knew that border-crossers were shot at. The victorious powers didn’t tolerate “migration” across the occupied zones. We discussed it heatedly—and I relented; I set out on the obstacle course from one military office to
another to procure an interzone pass. As a first step, I obtained an affidavit from Radio Berlin attesting that I was traveling on business. That provided cover for my quest for gold and jewels. Then the paperwork went to the Russians. Then to the Americans. Then to the British. Then to the French. All of them had to sign off.

Today, when I fly from Berlin to Munich in an hour, I think back on that trip: the departure from the Charlottenburg train station; the ride to Hannover in overfilled cars. I was shoved in through a window, landed on the shoulders of a few fellow passengers, and with great effort managed to get one foot on the floor, then traveled crammed in between the closely-packed seats and the even more closely-packed standing passengers, holding onto a hand grip. The absence of personal space left an unforgettable impression on me. Continuing on from Hannover. Stopping in Eschwege. Passing through an American military checkpoint, because now I was crossing the border between the American and the British zone. After a day and a half, I reached Munich. Aunt Else’s relatives, who’d kept her treasures for her, lived in Dachau. I spent only an hour and a half in Munich, which lay in ruins at the time—ruins that didn’t faze a Berliner. Besides, nothing could stop me; I had to get home with the jewelry and the gold rings, which were wrapped in a big handkerchief and hidden in my pants.

It was the end of March. In southerly Munich, the first delicate greenery was sprouting in this spring of 1947, which for Traudl and me would become “our” spring. I arrived back in Berlin on April 1st. The next day, April 2nd, was my birthday. Four days later, we were engaged. On Easter, we slipped on Aunt Else’s wedding rings.
We were married on August 30, 1947. People told us with a wink that if our wedding came before the end of August, we could be in the more favorable tax bracket for the entire year. That we didn’t need to be told twice.

Traudl wanted to be married in a white dress and veil. A friend of hers was happy to oblige. My boss, Theodor Mühlen, even arranged a car for the drive into our life together. He also served as one of the witnesses. The other was my wife’s uncle, whose face had been injured by a grenade on the second-to-last day of the war. To this day, he has endured forty operations. I’ve always admired the bravery with which he bears his fate.

I rented a tuxedo and a top hat from a costume shop, which probably made me look unintentionally ridiculous. At the Spandau registry office, our lifelong covenant was legally certified. We were now man and wife.

Then we went by car to Kantstrasse, by way of the radio tower, whose steel skeleton was still standing after the war. A photographer I knew took our wedding picture: Traudl in her friend’s white dress and veil, me in my borrowed tuxedo, top hat in hand. We looked so young, but we felt very grown-up and serious.

It was a hot summer day. At home, a musician played an old brown piano belonging to my wife’s family. I’d gotten to know the pianist, Leopold Paasch, through Radio Berlin. He’d composed two big hits: “You aren’t in the phone book, I
can’t reach you...” and “Old Songs, Familiar Melodies.” That afternoon he played unforgettably. I listened, rapt in thought, remembering my father. Had he still been alive, he would have played for us, with his friends from the Rosé Trio… I thought of my mother, my grandparents, and also Gert, who would now be half grown. I’m not really a sentimental person, but on my wedding day, in that postwar summer of 1947, there were moments when I felt a lump in my throat.

But this was a wedding! A family had taken me in and the woman I loved would belong to me from now on. I think my happiness was intensified by the realization of how alone I’d been and how much misfortune had befallen me in the long years just past. Of course Frau Schönebeck was in attendance.

The wedding feast consisted of roulades, red cabbage, potatoes, and then, as a special treat, pudding. We’d saved our ration cards for months. And did we ever celebrate! But around 1 am, I ran out of steam. The cheap wine we’d drunk, since we had no way of getting Moselle wine or champagne, had done me in.

As a freshly minted husband, I felt I possessed a new kind of authority. To be sure, I was always open to discussion, but it seemed to me that one person had to have the final say, and I was it.

The next day, I announced my first decision, which seemed important for our future, to Traudl: “You should resign from Radio Berlin. I don’t want anyone else telling my wife what to do.”

Since no one was thinking about women’s liberation in those days—and my wife wasn’t inclined that way in any case—she only asked gently if my income would be sufficient for the household. I was confident we would manage. And not only that:
“Soon we’ll be able to eat an egg every morning,” I prophesied. “You can count on that.”

Traudl just smiled, indulging my daydreams. Her very skepticism spurred me on:

“We’ll also have a telephone one day! We’ll . . .” Traudl laughed outright, looking at me as if I’d lost my mind.

But I didn’t deny myself the pleasure of painting a rosy picture of our future together. I myself realized it was a little far-fetched, even though I didn’t even entertain the idea of a car or house of our own.

So she gave up her job, but still came to the station with me at night when I was finishing a production. She would sit quietly in the studio and knit sweaters. Because there was so little wool available at the time, she often unraveled finished masterpieces—this labor of Sisyphus seemed to embody those years, full of so many good intentions but with so few resources.

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As rare as materials were, food was even rarer. But there was a secret way to obtain some—“organizing,” we called it. One had to have something to trade and a mode of transportation that got one out into the country. There food was always to be had. The farmers were rarely reluctant to barter, so long as one had the right “currency.” It had nothing to do with money. People set off with jewelry, stamp collections, hats, or, if one was lucky enough to have a “source,” alcohol and cigarettes, and came home with bacon, sausages, preserves, or, in return for less
valuable items, turnips, onions, and potatoes—all of course as inconspicuously as possible, since this wasn’t exactly legal.

Potatoes, potato pancakes, mashed potatoes, potato soup—today no one can imagine what music to our ears that was! And one day, when my father in-law proposed a way to get a thousand kilograms of this valuable crop into our cellar, I didn’t hesitate for a second. A farmer in Krams had twenty sacks waiting for us; the problem was getting them to Berlin. First, one needed a big truck, which of course we didn’t have; second, one had to pass through Russian checkpoints, which specialized in sniffing out this kind of smuggling; and third, I would have to take a day off from Radio Berlin. In half an hour I had the solution, the key to those potatoes.

At Radio Berlin we had, as I’ve already mentioned, trucks with engines that ran on wood instead of gasoline. Once a month, a co-worker had to drive to Mecklenburg to get more wood chips for fuel. Because Krams was right on the way, I made a proposition to the overseer of the motor pool: this time I would ride along to Mecklenburg and pick up the potatoes on our way back. And he would get two sacks in return. Although my offer was very alluring, I didn’t convince him immediately that this endeavor could succeed:

“How do you plan to get through the Russian checkpoints? They’re just as hungry as we are. If they suspect anything, the potatoes are theirs—and your freedom is gone, man! And besides: where would we even hide the sacks? As far as I know, the truck bed has to be filled to the top with wood. You can be sure they’ll check that.”
I knew all this myself, of course. With a certain relish, I put his doubts to rest:

“Don’t worry about the cargo. The wood will certainly fill the truck to the top. But underneath will be the potatoes!”

The good motor-pool overseer was uneasy: “Do you think you can simply throw away half of the expensive wood?”

“No, we need the wood. We’ll give some of it to the farmer and put some of it in sacks—those will go to the Russians. Just think how grateful they’ll be to get some firewood to heat their guardhouses!”

We set out the next morning before daybreak: me, my father-in-law, and an especially responsible driver who’d been assigned to us. He too was in on the plan and would get a good deal out of it. The first part of the trip went without a hitch: we were stopped only twice on the way to Krams and were cheerfully waved on after we showed our papers, since we were traveling on an official mission. We smiled and didn’t doubt that the plan would work.

In Krams, my father-in-law and I got out at the farm and waited for our colleague to come back, meanwhile enjoying black bread and home-brewed brandy. The farmer was delighted when he heard about the wood that we’d leave in his barn, and placed an extra sack of potatoes next to the ones already lined up. They looked great, I thought, and they’d look even better at home in our cellar!

The truck drove into the farmyard, honking. We shut the gate and, safe from curious eyes, unloaded the wood. Then we loaded in the sacks, then as much wood as possible, both on top and in six sacks. That should do it, we thought: six sacks for six bribable guards. After a final shot, we set off into the evening. We were stopped as
we were leaving Krams. A guard stepped into the middle of the road and waved us over. We handed him our papers, but they didn’t seem to interest the man. He gestured towards our truck bed. “Wood,” we said. “Wood for Berlin.” He shook his head and pointed at his chest. The moment had come. I smiled at him and opened my door. He immediately raised his machine gun. “Not so fast,” said my father-in-law, “don’t make him nervous.” Although I was the nervous one, I tried to indicate to the Russian that I actually had something for him. But back in the truck bed. He lowered his weapon and I clambered carefully onto our double-decker cargo. There lay the first sack. I raised it in the air, smiling to show my good intentions. Everything was working out: the Russian called to his colleague, who came out of the guardhouse. When I dropped the sack off the truck, they came forward, slowly at first, before lifting it up and carrying it back to the guardhouse for further inspection. We waved and drove on. I assume they were expecting something better than wood, perhaps potatoes. But those we needed for ourselves.

To shorten this procedure and avoid the performance with the machine gun, we moved a sack of wood chips into the cab before each checkpoint and threw it out as we slowed down to pass the guard. As if in tacit agreement, the Russian would bend down to pick up the sack and let us pass through with our precious load.

I forgot to mention that it was already quite cold at the time. But we paid it no mind. And we weren’t worried at all. It may have had something to do with the schnapps that we’d downed in Krams. And with our happy anticipation of the potatoes, which, prepared in a variety of ways, would help us forget that bitter cold winter.
One of the best parts of my job is being able to meet so many people—not just stars and colleagues, but people of all backgrounds. Their responses to my shows don’t simply matter to me; they are truly the driving force behind my work. My audiences’ praise always encourages me to carry on, to make more of an effort—to trust myself. The criticism I receive is mostly constructive, inventive, and, in any case, important feedback. I can’t complain of any shortage of reactions! I know what people think of me. I also know they help me avoid mistakes and make what works even better.

Sometimes I have very special encounters:

One occurred around the time I was working on both *Make it Snappy* and *One Against All*. For the latter program, I had to travel to southern Germany to film in the small city of Walldürn. After the show, the mayor invited me to see their much-visited Baroque Catholic church.

We stepped quietly into the nave. Incense wafted toward us. In the dim light I could make out a splendid altar. It was so silent that our steps echoed. We came to a richly ornamented pulpit. Saints gazed down upon us from all sides. I spied a nun dusting the choir loft. When she spotted us, she laid the dust rag aside and came
down. I smiled at her. She recognized me and called out my name—perhaps a little too loudly for a house of worship.

“Herr Rosenthal! What are you doing here in our church? If the other sisters only knew!”

I was delighted by this unexpected warm welcome. When I wanted to move on, an idea seemed to have suddenly come to the friendly nun. “Oh, please wait,” she said. “I’d like to do something nice for you. Yes—let me turn on the lights.”

With that, she hurried away to the light switch and soon brilliant light illuminated the Baroque splendor. While I was discovering more and more figures on the church walls and along the side aisles that had been hidden in the dark, the nun had yet another thought.

“Your shows are so clean, Herr Rosenthal, we watch them all the time. So much of what you see on television is embarrassing, tactless, or violent. But your shows have none of those elements. I want to do something for you in return, something you’ll like. I know! I’ll ring the bells for you!”

My attempt to defer the nun from this display of enthusiasm, which challenged more than my modesty, came too late. She’d already rushed off again.

Then the bells pealed. For Hansi Rosenthal. I was touched.

“For you, Herr Rosenthal,” said the nun.

Solemnly she proceeded to the church portal. I followed her.

Outside, in front of the church, there was blinding sunlight and all the bells were clanging as if it were Sunday. Curious passers-by stared. A car zoomed toward
us and stopped with squealing brakes. Out sprang a priest dressed in black, very agitated:

“For heaven’s sake! Why are the bells tolling, sister?” he asked. “What has happened?”

The nun smiled from ear to ear.

“Herr Rosenthal is here with us, Father,” she said. “That is why I rang the bells.”

I stepped back, hiding my embarrassment by looking up at the steeple, from which the bells were booming as loudly as ever.

“I see. So this is Herr Rosenthal!” He cordially shook my hand. As I was leaving, I heard him say to the nun: “Well, of course—if Hans Rosenthal is here…”

My thoughts have often returned to Walldürn: the Baroque church, the bells that rang on a weekday for me, the friendly nun, the priest. And I’ve thought about how I lived, and still live, as a Jewish person in Christian Germany.

And how my life has changed. True, it still isn’t “normal” to be Jewish—but it’s no longer a stigma. Unfortunately the number of those who can take comfort in this fact is very small.

By the way—as a footnote to my experience in Walldürn—in 1980, I received an invitation to a Catholics Day festival, where I took part in a panel discussion before thousands of believers.

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One hundred eighty thousand Jewish citizens lived in the Reich capital before they were ousted by the Hitler regime, deported, or murdered. After the war, only one
thousand five hundred reemerged. But Jews who’d survived abroad or emigrated came back to Berlin. In this way, the Jewish community eventually expanded to around six thousand members—around 3.3% of what it had once been!

Some returned only to leave again. There wouldn’t be more than five thousand were it not for the influx of Jewish people from Russia, who struggled to get out of the Soviet Union but weren’t ready to go to Israel.

The Jewish communities in Germany don’t wish to, and can’t, force anyone who seeks asylum here to go to Israel. We remember only too well how happy and grateful we would have been in 1939 if someone had taken us in, if foreign countries had been more willing to give German Jewish emigrants a new home.

It makes no difference to our local communities if one is a Zionist, or whether he belongs to the more orthodox or more liberal sects. No one asked in the concentration camps. All Jews were the same there.

* * *

When it comes to our religion, I consider myself a believer. But not orthodox, in the sense of “righteous,” or strictly observant. Orthodox Jews would probably consider me “a lost soul.”

In this respect, we’re not very different from other religions. Devout Catholics believe they’re forbidden to marry Protestants. Others tolerate it—but don’t cease, for that reason, to be Catholic.

Some idiosyncrasies of orthodox Judaism have contributed to anti-Semitic resentment among non-Jews. It can probably be summarized aptly in the familiar cliché: “They’re just so strange. They’re so different.”
This lack of empathy is often only one step away from rejection, even persecution.

Everyone knows, for example, that observant Jews don’t eat pork. There’s a historical reason for that. When Moses was wandering through the desert to lead his people to Israel, other nomadic peoples were dying on the way to the Holy Land. Someone found out somehow that the consumption of pork was a common cause of death. They didn’t know about trichinosis in those days, but they recognized the lethal consequences of eating pork. So they said: God doesn’t want us to eat pork. He punishes it. Incidentally, it’s still a law for the orthodox. And Muslims don’t eat pork either!

It was the same with the religious rules bearing on kosher butchering. Someone had realized that the meat of slaughtered animals lasted longer in the heat when the blood was drained out. Otherwise the meat spoiled quickly and whoever ate it would sicken and die.

Or the command not to work on the Sabbath, the holy day of rest. It’s actually not very different from the Christian Sunday. Orthodox Jews don’t even flick on the lights—they consider that “work.” That may seem pigheaded or narrow-minded to those of another or no religion. Nevertheless, it too has its reasons: in earlier times it required a lot more effort to light a fire. Stones had to be struck together, the kindling fanned, and oil poured on the wood. So it was considered work—rightly so. Of course the founders of the religion didn’t know that one day it would be possible to switch on a lamp without such exertion.
Driving on the Sabbath is also prohibited, as a consequence of the prohibition on work: instead of simply turning on a motor as we do today, animals—horses or donkeys—had to be taken out of the stall and bridled, hitched up, and driven. Why shouldn’t the animals also have a day off?

I myself see these rules as obsolete nowadays. For this reason, I don’t observe them. However, I don’t feel I am being disloyal to my Jewish faith. I respect the devout, who feel bound to these religious traditions, and I of course hope that they can respect and tolerate my less orthodox attitude without thinking that I’ve broken with my faith.

Another peculiarity of the Jewish faith that is often considered outlandish by other religions: the Jewish calendar, in contrast to the solar calendar, is a lunar calendar. “Our” months have 28 days. For this reason, every three years we have an extra month, while the solar calendar’s leap year brings only one extra day.

Because the moon rises in the evening, that’s when the day starts—it’s the same in the Arab countries. For this reason, the Sabbath—the holy evening—starts on Friday. That seems strange to us here in Germany, because we’re used to the day’s starting at sunrise.

Nevertheless, Jews and Christians aren’t as different from one another as it seems: Christians celebrate the birth of Christ on the evening before, not on the morning of, December 25, the actual Christmas Day.

After everything that happened in Germany, partially due to a lack of knowledge, which in turn led to false conclusions, I consider it important to remind others of the common root of the Jewish and Christian faiths—without bigotry and in
the spirit of humility that’s essential to any faith committed to peace, human decency, and goodness.

We older folks certainly have it harder than younger people in this respect. When I, as a member of the board of the German Jewish Community, have to tell a taxi driver: “Please take me to the Jewish Community Center,” I always feel a little self-conscious because I don’t know how this reference to my destination will be received.

I often catch myself reluctantly wondering if others who aren’t Jewish accept me “in spite of my heritage and beliefs.” Reason tells me that of course they won’t judge someone because of his religion, but emotion lags behind logic. How could it be different after all that transpired?

I’m convinced that Judaism is one of the more tolerant religions. We don’t do missionary work, after all. We don’t consider it desirable to coax people of other religions to convert, to pressure them to put aside their beliefs and take up our own, although it’s possible to convert to Judaism.

I’ve always known that Jews and Christians believe in and pray to the same God. I consider this similarity more important than the main difference: that we Jews don’t believe in Christ.

In a Christian country like Germany, this difference sometimes gives rise to emotional complications, particularly when, as in my family, the wife was raised in a Christian household. It’s most noticeable at Christmastime. That’s when it also affects the children. They know all the Christian children are looking forward to a Christmas tree and presents. It’s hard for kids not to feel left out.
For this reason, we usually travel on Christmas and stay in a hotel, which still has the obligatory Christmas tree in the lobby. And our children—may my fellow orthodox Jews forgive me—always receive some gifts.

This Christian celebration of joy still imparts—despite all the materialism—a sense of community, a time of contemplation, and a very special peacefulness. When I walk down the glittering streets of Berlin with my wife around Christmastime and we admire the illuminated trees and look in the store windows amid the cheerful crowds, I wouldn’t want to be deprived of this atmosphere. I tell myself that a Christian can also be moved by the deep sincerity of the songs and prayers at a service in a synagogue—and need not stop being Christian for that reason.

Loyalty to the religion in which one was raised and which formed one’s beliefs should give one the capacity to value and appreciate other faiths. Religious intolerance has caused so much pain and unhappiness in the history of mankind. No one knows this better than we people of the Jewish faith.

For this reason, I see tolerance as another commandment, derived from our history of suffering. Adherence to this principle, that everyone should be allowed to achieve salvation in his own style, is part and parcel of being humane. And that’s why my tolerance ends where religious fanaticism begins, where one religion punishes the others’ right to exist, where similarities among all faiths give way to animosity and hate-filled estrangement.

Back in the cottage and among the ruins of Berlin, I had sworn to dedicate all my strength to ensuring that what happened to our people out of such fanaticism and hate-filled estrangement would never happen again. I wanted to help reestablish the
Jewish community, which had rendered invaluable services to Germany in centuries past, for which it, sadly, was never thanked. I wanted to keep an eye on the politicians and ideological currents in my fatherland, so that every danger would be recognized in time, every form of fanaticism unmasked in time.

This is why I work for the Jewish Community. And, not least of all, my motivation for writing this book.

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These days, I entertain people. I entertain millions, giving them a feeling of unity, of belonging. I try to show how competition in politics and work tends to make people lose their sense of humor, but that we also can have friendly competition, in which not only the winner wins, but also the good loser. My other concern is that the importance of humor not be overlooked.

When I’m asked whether humor masks problems that really affect people, I can only answer from my own experience: were it not for humor, these problems would be much bigger and more overwhelming. Those who know how hard life can be value entertainment, humor, and light-hearted competition. Those who know how easily people can turn against each other and stop communicating understand the value of television as a means of peaceful communication.

Sometimes, when I have the floor at a union meeting, as a member of the steering committee, or at a meeting of the Jewish Community, I notice that others are stunned: they are clearly amazed that a popular entertainer can be serious and ready to put up a fight, if need be. That he can stop smiling when necessary, become thoughtful, and, once in a while, even express outrage.
Ephraim Kishon once said that although he wrote funny books, he himself was no funnier than other people. As much joy as he derived from writing, it brought him just as much stress. He had no reason to be happier than anyone else; those who expected him to be bubbly and jovial in social settings would be sadly disappointed.

Likewise, I’m not always that Hansi who jumps in the air when something is “super” or appears to be so. I’m no stranger to occasional sadness, like any feeling individual. And even while I’m inventing some funny game for my candidates, I don’t forget how much danger, violence, and hardship there is in the world. Terrorism, military entanglements, hunger, tyranny, fanaticism, and fear affect me deeply. I don’t make my shows in spite of these things—I do it because of them.

In a world so filled with resentment, we shouldn’t forget to enjoy a bit of levity. When so many horrors come into peoples’ living rooms through their television sets, we should give other side of life, the naïve, easygoing, harmless side, a chance. And when someone such as me, who knows all too well from his own experience how terrible life can be, undertakes this task, that lends it, I hope, a particular legitimacy and cogency.

I know that quizmaster isn’t actually a job title. I’m a professional director. But I don’t rule out pursuing another career one day, one that would be considered “serious.” Going into politics would tempt me. Not out of a lust for prominence, partisan popularity, or even power. But rather for the same reasons that made me swear long ago to fight for religious, political, and interpersonal tolerance. That sounds pretentious, I know. But I can’t express it any other way because that’s how it is.
Friends asked me, when they heard of my intention to write this book: “Why now? People write memoirs at the end of their lives. Is your time already up?”

I answered these friends: “Actually, I feel as though I’m right in the thick of things, that I still have much ahead of me. Basically, it’s not a memoir I’m writing. These are stories about my life. One can tell such stories at any age. Either because they’re unusual or because many people identify with them: or because these stories represent certain experiences and insights—at least insights from a life that, up to the time of being shared, has gone through more highs and lows than average.

“And why is this book coming out at this particular moment?”

“Because I’ve learned to stay afloat. After thirty years as an employee, I’ve become self-sufficient, completely independent, and established myself on my own. Until now, there was always a safety net under my professional tightrope. Now there’s only the circus ring beneath me. The net is no longer there. My balancing pole is my experience and my faith in myself.”

The step towards autonomy is a milestone in one’s life that turns one pensive. And sharing one’s own path helps provide, among other things, the benefits of contemplation. What one has written “to get it off one’s chest,” gives one objectivity. And an objective view of oneself is so important in life.

I said that I’ve learned to stay afloat. People like me can’t help associating almost every word with the past, as I must with that expression.
That is to say, even as mature family man, I still couldn’t swim. That’s connected with the Nazi period. We Jewish children and youth didn’t have an opportunity to learn back then—Jews weren’t welcome in swimming pools after 1933 and later they were even banned.

Because I’m athletic and found my lack of swimming ability embarrassing, I decided to make up for what I’d involuntarily missed out on: I wanted—literally this time—to learn to stay afloat.

That was all the more important when we bought a paddleboat. If it capsized, I would drown pathetically. Some of our friends, who didn’t believe that I couldn’t swim, rocked the boat and jokingly threatened to tip it over. Then I made them swear not to put me to the test.

In order to end this embarrassing situation, I signed up for swimming lessons at the Schöneberg municipal pool. I asked for individual instruction, so I wouldn’t become the laughingstock of the class.

The instructor asked me: “Can you at least swim a little, Herr Rosenthal?”

“Sure,” I answered, “I can manage three or four strokes.”

He decided to test me. “But you need a bathing cap,” he said.

I didn’t have one. He grabbed a water polo cap from the locker room.

I put it on and looked like the star striker on a water polo team. Then he sent me into the watery deep. I was to show what I could do.

I stepped into the chlorinated element until it reached my chest, took a deep breath, pushed off from the bottom, and managed four strokes. Then I sank. Still I clung to the hope that I’d impressed the instructor.
“Come out,” he said.

I turned back to him. He looked at me sternly, furrowed his brow, let me wait a bit for his verdict, and then asked: “Do you know what you can do?”

“No,” I said truthfully.

“You can’t do a thing. Nothing at all,” he replied in an almost threatening tone.

He asked me—no, he ordered me—to sit on one of the steps in the water until I was, in both meanings of the phrase, almost in over my head. Then he ordered: “Put your arms together, eins, arms forward and apart, push the water back, zwei, arms back, drei, then to the front again…”

I carried out his orders like a marionette whose strings were in his hands. And I gave it a lot of effort—obedient student that I am. After a few minutes, a whole flock of children surrounded me. They were falling over with laughter.

There I ended my unhappy lesson, stepped out of the water and said to the swim instructor: “I can’t do this. These kids are making too much of a racket—I feel like a twenty-five-year-old clown who can’t swim…”

The swim instructor was cheerfully sympathetic: “Okay,” he said. “There’s still another way we can do this: come with me to the deep end. First you’ll jump from the meter-high diving board. You’ll see, you’ll come to the surface automatically. Then I’ll hold out a pole to you and pull you through the water to the edge.”

The decision between the two choices was torture for me: I could either go back to being the laughingstock of the children or jump into the deep end. My internal
decision process, in which my wife and daughter flashed before my eyes as widow
and orphan, didn’t take long: “I’ll jump.”

And I jumped. The sinking part seemed to last forever and coming up felt
even longer. Then I gasped for air and grabbed the instructor’s pole. He pulled me
out.

Before I had a chance to relax, he coerced me into a second jump and then a
third. By then I was jumping for my own enjoyment. And I learned to swim!

Since then I’ve successfully swum across two midsized lakes. I certainly
won’t be breaking records any time soon, but I can keep my head above water—and
no one knows better than I do how important that is.

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I’ve told many stories and now it’s late. The path I had to relate was long. The
time has come to bring this chapter to a close. I mean in the book, not in my life. Life
is a series of beginnings for me. And every new beginning is a joy—probably because
I haven’t forgotten how it felt when everything seemed to be coming to an end in my
hiding spot and kind-hearted Frau Jauch gave me a piece of paper on which she’d
written, in her angular old German script, the psalm that goes:

For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways.

When the neighborhood children call “Make it Snappy” after me, I think:
Truly, I’ve always moved fast in my life. Not to chase fortune, but to escape from
danger.

And in so doing, I’ve found happiness.
I was nervous, so I took the U-Bahn to Kurfürstenstraße an hour early. We had a reservation for lunch at Café Einstein, an iconic Berlin restaurant with wood paneling and small dining rooms that hummed with silverware clinks and whispered conversations between well-coiffed members of Berlin’s professional class. I sat at what was to be our table, trying not to sweat through the collared dress I had bought for four euros at a flea market, and flipped through my German-English dictionary, double-checking words that I thought might be of use.

I recognized him as soon as he walked in: Gert Rosenthal looked exactly like his father. Not that I had ever met Hans Rosenthal, arguably the most famous game-show host in postwar Germany, but I had seen his toothy grin on old episodes of Dalli Dalli (which I have translated as Make it Snappy) and felt as though I knew him well. That was Hans Rosenthal’s magic.

“Guten Tag, Herr Rosenthal,” members of the wait staff greeted him. Gert Rosenthal flashed his father’s smile, ran his hands through his father’s hair, and sat down across from me. Though Hans Rosenthal’s name doesn’t ring a bell for most Americans, or, for that matter, most Germans of my generation, I was starstruck in the presence of his son and dead ringer. In the course of his career, Rosenthal produced and hosted over twenty-five different radio and television shows, and
published three books of games and trivia questions. He became a media mogul, renowned throughout Western Germany, Eastern Germany, Austria, and parts of Switzerland and Luxembourg, but he never expected to leave a lasting legacy.

“My father always said that people would quickly forget him,” Gert recalled. “He didn’t make films, which can be re-watched, but rather game shows with current politicians and actors that are subject to change, depending on who wins and loses, and you wouldn’t really want watch such a show twice. But it was his idea, his show idea. If only he had known that his show idea would be revived today, nearly unchanged, twenty-five years after his death, and become a great success!”

In fact, **Make it Snappy** was recently revived by a regional television channel in northern Germany. Gert admitted that “success’ is relative” since the new show’s viewership is quite small, but the average number of viewers is much higher than for many of the station’s other programs.

Gert believes his father would approve of the new **Make it Snappy**, which uses the same theme song and honeycomb-patterned backdrop as the original, although the host, Kai Pflaume, could take a few cues from his predecessor. “Kai Pflaume once asked, ‘What herbs do you keep in your refrigerator?’ My father would never have asked that question because you can’t get a funny answer out of it. If I were to ask simply, ‘What is in your refrigerator?’ someone could say, ‘My old socks.’ You can answer with funnier things.”

Hans Rosenthal developed a signature style as a writer, a director, and a moderator. The kinds of shows he produced were unprecedented in Europe, many

based on fairly simple concepts such as trivia rounds, timed word-associations, or, in the case of his first game show, *Ask and Win*, an appropriation of the popular American Twenty Questions game.

“Hans hosted the Channel 2 quiz show *Make it Snappy* from the early 70s on, and it made him, up to the end of his life, the biggest star in television entertainment. Hans Rosenthal didn’t see it that way, though,” remembers Paul Spiegel, a prominent leader in the Jewish community and close friend of Rosenthal’s. “For him, the game always came first, not his ego. And Hans made sure that the contestants—as well as the viewers—felt at ease with him. His jokes were never at his guests’ expense, and his policy was not to let any of them actually make fools of themselves.”

Rosenthal’s shows, as toothless and silly as many of them were, attempted to unite people in the spirit of good fun and provide harmless entertainment to soften the harshness of postwar conditions.

Christian Bienert, Rosenthal’s co-worker and later replacement on *Make it Snappy*, claimed that Hans’s magnetism had one simple explanation: “Hans liked people. That was one of his rules: one must like people in order to work with them. And people could sense that. People liked him. He was our Hansi.”

Rosenthal’s childish nickname suited his short stature and boyish energy, and was also proof of his popularity in a country given to titles and formalities.

Rosenthal’s warm personality made him a beloved figure throughout Germany, especially after he made the crossover to television. As Bienert remembers, “When a contestant would join Hans on stage—it’s a frightful feeling when you’re

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not used to being onstage, especially with a huge audience down below. It’s nightmarish. But Hans Rosenthal had met so many contestants in the course of his life—he could do more than just ease this nervousness. He would actually go and pick out a contestant who had volunteered: ‘Yes, the lady in the pink dress, please come with me.’ Then Hans would go to the farthest edge of the stage and escort the woman up, not because she couldn’t ascend the steps alone, no, Hans was instantly by her side to assure her, ‘Yes, you’re with me, I like you, and now we’ll play a game together.’”

Hans Rosenthal made a point of putting himself in the hot seat, “answering” questions as well asking them. Sometimes Make it Snappy would have a section in which Rosenthal’s assistant on the show, Tatiana Weiß, would sing him a number of funny, cheeky riddles, such as:

“All ways getting shorter, ever shorter, and soon they’ll disappear. Men get very emotional about them.”

“Miniskirts?” Rosenthal suggested.

“Working hours.”

Rosenthal was not afraid to make fun of himself, as his autobiography’s relentlessly self-deprecating humor makes apparent. Rosenthal wanted people to feel as though he was just like them, in spite of his fame. He hosted guests of varying prominence, and a big part of Make it Snappy’s appeal was the mix of celebrities and “everyday” people featured on the show—all asking questions, making mistakes, and cracking jokes, equal in front of the camera.
The daughter of Rosenthal’s cousin Rudy, Tamar Martin, now lives in New York City, but witnessed Rosenthal’s meteoric rise firsthand. She was living in Berlin when *Make it Snappy* first aired in 1971. “It was a success right from the start. I think it started at sixty minutes and went to ninety… it was a long show. And not easy. He worked *hard.*”4 Hans was extremely industrious, keeping a pen and notebook next to his bed for those times when he would wake up in the middle of the night with ideas. Curth Flatow, a writer for *Make it Snappy*, noted, “His popularity didn’t just fall in his lap, he was always a little more dedicated, a little sharper, a little quicker than the others.”5 Hans Rosenthal was not a natural star on camera, but compensated for his deficiencies tenfold with charm and eagerness. He was took lessons in vocal production and stage presence and would listen to or watch himself when his shows aired, to make note of any stutters or nervous mannerisms.

Hans considered himself a devoted family man, but his dedication to his television and radio shows took time away from his home life. “I always had the feeling that his job actually was his first priority. And we came next,” said his wife, Traudl.6 “Oh, we were certainly there, but it was his everything.” Away from the office, Hans was constantly working, even on weekends and during vacations, when he would have the family test out new games and trivia questions. On walks he was always besieged by autograph-seeking fans. He also traveled quite regularly, shooting episodes in cities all over German-speaking Europe. “He wasn’t often home, but he

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4 Tamar Martin, personal interview. 3 Jan. 2012.
wasn’t a bad father,” said Gert, who remembered fondly that his father always made a point of answering his son’s phone calls.

Much rested on Rosenthal’s hard-earned popularity: for many Germans, he was the first Jewish person they had known in the years after World War II. Rosenthal was determined to show his fellow countrymen that Jews could be “good neighbors,” as he told his son, and he worked tirelessly to become a force in the German media landscape of the seventies and eighties. According to Paul Spiegel, “Hans’s need for applause was undoubtedly compensation for the degrading ostracism and the horrors that he had to suffer under the Nazis.” Few viewers were aware before the release of Rosenthal’s autobiography that their beloved “Hansi” had been in hiding for almost two years during the Nazi period.

*Zwei Leben in Deutschland*, published in 1980, allowed Hans Rosenthal to truly “come out” as a Jew. Despite his last name, no one dared to ask Rosenthal about his past, nor did anyone know his whole story. Rosenthal’s own son had heard stories only about his father’s boyhood, not about his adolescent years. Not until he proofread *Zwei Leben* for publication did Gert Rosenthal finally learn about his father’s memories of Kristallnacht, his numerous close brushes with death, the fate of his little brother, Gert’s namesake, and the many months Hans spent hiding in garden cottages.

Although Rosenthal’s difficult past must have shocked some readers, his account is still relatively sunny, without a trace of bitterness, very much in keeping with Rosenthal’s cheery television persona. The book has few moments of personal reflection, and no professions of resentment or survivor’s guilt, save the occasional
sorrowful mention of Gert and his fate. Even when Hans goes to Dachau in the chapter “The Smuggled Wedding Rings,” he makes no mention of the town’s most notorious feature. *Zwei Leben* may be a survival memoir, but arguably it also represents a very deliberate publicity move by Rosenthal, as a part of his ongoing “Good Neighbor” project. Anger has no place in his book.

“He was the equalizer,” says Tamar, who confirmed that her cousin once removed was reluctant to dig up the past. “He didn’t wear it as a chip on his shoulder.” Rosenthal’s media presence implied his forgiveness, endearing him to a guilt-laden Germany that would not start to make public apologies until a few generations later.

Paul Spiegel suspected that Rosenthal saw his own success story as encouragement: “His incredible popularity, which he himself found unbelievable, was evidence for him of how the people in Germany had changed. Germans, who long ago had killed millions of Jews, including his brother, had now chosen the Jewish Hans Rosenthal as their favorite. It made him proud of the people of his homeland.” Nonetheless, Rosenthal became active in the Jewish community after he emerged from hiding, but primarily through social and political engagement, becoming very involved in the Central Council of Jews in Germany. He never grew especially devout or reacquainted himself with Jewish practice. According to his son, although Hans Rosenthal attended High Holiday services, he would usually joke that he “didn’t want to take seats away from the more religious.” In his book, Rosenthal notes that his religion does not stop him from marrying a non-Jewish woman, eating pork, and working on Saturdays, and he makes it clear that he identifies, first and foremost, as a
German. Indeed, he let his family know that he preferred to be buried with his wife rather than in a single grave in an exclusively Jewish cemetery.  

Rosenthal tends to skim over the darker sides of his experience, choosing instead to focus on his incredible luck. He makes no mention of any trauma that seeped into his private life. But others recognized traces of trauma. “He always wanted to have enough money to be able to flee as soon as possible if need be,” his son remembered. “He was still very vulnerable at night. He would insist he had heard the doorbell ring and I would assure him it hadn’t. He was still very haunted,” Rosenthal’s wife Traudl admitted. “He could also be a little serious sometimes, you know? But people don’t want to see that. They think he just went through life smiling.” It was not all fun and games behind the scenes of Hans Rosenthal’s life. Tamar described the way Rosenthal would pull down the shades and check the locks several times every night. “Always a little paranoid, always.”

Although the autobiography suggests that Rosenthal had made peace with his circumstances, certain realities in his life tormented him, such as the loss of his little brother. Gert Rosenthal later learned that “he always kept looking for his brother and couldn’t believe he was actually killed.” Hans Rosenthal was still searching for his brother up until the publication of his autobiography, which itself constituted an acceptance of his brother’s fate.

A number of outside threats could only have widened Rosenthal’s internal divides between past and present, private emotion and public presentation. As hard as he tried to be everyone’s favorite, Hans Rosenthal frequently fielded hate mail and

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7 Gert Rosenthal, personal interview. 9 Aug. 2012.
anti-Semitic slurs. Christian Bienert remembered that Rosenthal handled such attacks by saying, “Let’s ignore these. I’ve met many good Germans and I’ve met many bad Germans. You have to treat people with respect in order to receive respect in return.” Rosenthal eventually found himself on the list of the Red Army Faction, which made him consider buying a handgun, but he decided against it, joking, “If you have a gun, ten thousand people will come to your funeral. Without a gun, it’ll be one hundred thousand.” Ultimately, Rosenthal had no choice but to laugh off hostility and take the moral high road—at least in the public eye.

Although Hans Rosenthal neglects to mention any lasting effects from his years of loneliness, loss, and hard labor, Zwei Leben still offers a relatively honest account. Rosenthal can be somewhat candid at times when talking about his jealousy of the boys able to join the Hitler Youth, the pranks he played at his labor camp, and the mistakes he made in his broadcast career.

Hans Rosenthal’s shows were not sophisticated entertainment. For the most part, they were campy, candy-colored knockoffs of American programs that involved lots of hairspray and polyester. “They were slapstick! They were silly!” laughed Tamar, but they anticipated the progressive nation Germany strives to be today in that they often featured contestants of different races and social classes. One show, Gert Rosenthal’s personal favorite, stands out among the many of Rosenthal’s career. Noten die Verboten Wurden (loosely translated as Tunes That Were Banned), though not Rosenthal’s funniest or most popular program, showcased music by Jewish composers that the Nazis had proscribed. Noten, launched in 1983, represented

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Rosenthal’s eulogy for the art lost in the Third Reich, when “masterpieces were suddenly degenerate art.”¹⁹ Mendelssohn’s music was not played, Heine’s poems were not sung, and titles with Biblical or Jewish references had to be changed. Noten was Rosenthal’s most serious program, but his more frivolous game shows also gave subtle acknowledgement to the world outside the studio.

At the start of his career, Rosenthal distributed food and clothing as prizes, and on his later television shows, all contestants donated their earnings to a family in need. With prize money left over at Channel 2 (ZDF) after Hans Rosenthal’s death, Channel 2, Radio in American Sector (RIAS), and the Jewish Community of Berlin created the Hans Rosenthal Foundation, which aids needy families not eligible for government support. The foundation is now overseen and managed by Gert.

On the afternoon of September 11, 1986, Hans called Christian Bienert and told him that he couldn’t make it to Landau for a shoot. Bienert was taken aback, since Hans never called in sick. That’s when he told him: “What I fear the most has come: cancer.”¹⁰ Rosenthal found a replacement for Landau and the next day he shot his final episode of Make it Snappy. “Hans hosted the show in his usual style, professionally and seemingly optimistic. Shortly before the end of the episode, as always, the guests donated their winnings to a good cause. Hans announced that the funds this time would go to four young children who had recently lost their mother. She had died of cancer. There was—probably perceptible only to his inner circle—a quiver in his voice. The show came to an end. Hans made his exit, as always, with the

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¹⁰ Paul Spiegel, ”Deutschland Schwierig Vaterland,” Hans Rosenthal. Deutschlands Unvergessener Quizmaster (Teetz: Verlag Hentrich & Hentrich, 2004), 48
words, ‘Auf Wiedersehen until the next *Make it Snappy* in October!’ It was the last public appearance by Hans Rosenthal.”

Rosenthal’s illness struck at the peak of his career. His stomach cancer was painful, but the long treatment, which included several operations, gave Rosenthal’s friends and fans time enough to bid him farewell. Rosenthal hid his illness for months, and even on his deathbed remained matter-of-fact and cool-headed. When Curth Flatow went to visit him, he observed that Rosenthal “had quickly learned about all aspects of the hospital, just because he was curious. He could have run the place.”

Hans Rosenthal died surrounded by his family in February of 1987. Gert, twenty-nine at the time, looked out of the car in the funeral procession. “As we drove to the cemetery, both sides of the street, left and right, were full of people.”

In his eulogy for Rosenthal, Curth Flatow remembered Hans Rosenthal’s signature move on *Make it Snappy*. “When his contestants earned especially loud applause, the lights would flicker and Hans would shout: ‘So you think that was . . . super!’ Then he would jump up in the air, his face beaming, and the shot would freeze for a few seconds. It looked as though he was floating. Now that shot will freeze forever. He floats now, never to return to earth.”

Traudl is still alive today. She travels to her house on the Baltic Sea and goes to the theater, but she is alone. “She had a companion for a little while, but you know, she was very much in love with Hans,” says Tamar. “He is always present. She was a

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13 Ibid
very dedicated wife and homemaker. She still lives in the same place they lived and it’s perfect. Not a dusty thing anywhere.” It was known in the family that Hans Rosenthal carried on an affair for many years with his administrative assistant, but Tamar shrugged it off: “In Europe it’s not that uncommon.” Hans Rosenthal’s daughter Birgit earned a PhD in mathematics. She lives in Greece for half the year, but has an apartment on the same block as Traudl. Gert lives not much farther away. “Hans did very well and took very good care of his kids. And wife,” said Tamar. The garden colony where Hans Rosenthal once hid was torn down long ago to make way for an apartment complex. Hans pointed it out to Gert when he was seven or eight years old. A school in the area displays a plaque honoring the three women who protected Hans.

Hans might have been sent off to America along with his cousin Rudy, as Hans mentions in his biography (on page 20), but Hans’s recently widowed mother couldn't bear to part with her son. In 1938, Rudolf Maschke went to America, where a family in Philadelphia was paid to take care of him. He lived in their basement and, as he told his children, "starved to death," in comparison to his life back in Germany, where his mother used to spoon-feed him heavy cream. Rudy later joined the American navy, where he worked as a clergyman's assistant. “He went to Hebrew school, he knew more about the Old and New Testament than most American kids in the navy. That was his expertise," Tamar laughed, thinking about her father. "They didn’t care that he was Jewish, couldn’t care less. And he didn’t care. He said that the navy provided the best three meals a day."
In 1963 Rudy Maschke (by then pronounced "Mash-kee"), bought *Photographic Trade News*, which he built into the leading trade magazine for photo retailers and the cornerstone of his publishing empire. “In the publishing world of Rudy Maschke, there were no formal meetings, no policy manuals, no focus groups, no reader surveys,” wrote his onetime employee, Barry Tanenbaum.¹⁴ “There was only the Great Maschke, as he from time to time would call himself—half joking—as in, 'I, the Great Maschke, will solve your problem.' If you had an idea, he’d give you a decision on the spot. If he had an idea, he’d expect you to make it a reality.” To judge from Tanenbaum's testimony, Rudi, like his cousin Hans, valued coordination, efficiency, reliability, frugality, and self-sufficiency. He ran a notoriously tight ship and "hired people who were hungry to learn and eager," according to his son, David Maschke, now an architect in Georgia, who never wanted to get on his father's bad side. "‘I saw him chase someone out of the building. Screaming. I don’t know what she did.”¹⁵ He could be a difficult man, and he eventually left his family for another woman, but Tamar and David remained close with their father.

The families on both sides of the Atlantic visited each other often. Hans and Rudy remained lifelong friends, both having successful careers. “There was always a little bit of a funny feeling after the war. Hans said, ‘Come back, come back home’ and Rudi didn’t go back home,” said Tamar. “Every summer we went back, we’d get a Mercedes in Germany and go to the sea [with the Rosenthals] . . . we always traveled to Italy in the summer . . . And it was always a little competition, my father

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¹⁵ David Maschke, telephone interview. 14 Nov. 2012.
drove a Mercedes, Hansi drove BMWs. And Hansi was making it, you know? He was becoming something. He had eight radio shows.”

Before Hansi attained widespread success, Tamar remembered how, in her Long Island childhood home, “he watched Johnny Carson and all those shows. I think he was getting his ideas together about how to make [Make it Snappy]!” Hans was heavily influenced by his visits to Rudy in New York, and seemed to hold fast to the stereotypical “American” values of hard work and friendliness. Much to Hans Rosenthal’s chagrin, his own knowledge of English was severely lacking, and Gert remembers that, when talking to Americans, Hans “spoke with his hands and feet.”

On the rare occasions when Rudy talked about the past, he presented his own version of events. “My father, almost to his dying day, said that his parents sent him away, that they told him to get a good education and find a good woman. So he would make jokes—‘So I found several good women!’ But he never understood, really, that he wasn’t sent away, that they were trying to save his life.” Tamar brought out a hardcover copy of Zwei Leben, given to her father by Hans Rosenthal, with an inscription on the title page:

What to write to close relatives, who remember a few of the occurrences in this book better than I do? We have survived, overcome, restarted, and succeeded! After the past I’ve described, I wish you both—and Traudl and me as well—many wonderful years to come!

Yours, Hansi
October 19th, 1981, Huntington, Long Island

Even more than Hans, Rudy proved reticent when asked to recall his experiences, or even to speak about the general concept of death. “I didn’t know my grandfather died in a concentration camp until I went to Germany as a twenty-year-old and Hans told me,” said Tamar. “But we were raised this way. If our pet canary
died, she ‘flew out the window.’ Nobody ‘died.’” Rudy himself passed away in September of 2011, but two weeks before his death, “he ordered a brand-new Honda Pilot from someone. That’s the kind of guy he was. Eighty-eight years old! He couldn’t walk anymore and he’s in a wheelchair, and he’s ordering a Pilot because he’s going to go home and he’s going to hire someone to drive him around. That’s the mentality.” This ceaseless optimism, sometimes verging on delusion, offered a useful coping mechanism for Rosenthal and his relatives, enabling Rudy to travel back to Germany with his family every summer and allowing Hans to remain in his homeland, apparently holding no grudges.

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Gert Rosenthal finished off his pork schnitzel and signed the check. He then walked me to his sleek, sparse law office, right around the corner from Café Einstein. Though the neighborhood must have had charm at one point, Café Einstein and Gert Rosenthal’s office seem to be the only vestiges of its former dignity. I realized that Kurfürstenstraße was lined with prostitutes, when after lunch, several groups of women hadn’t moved from their spots.

I made some remark about the prostitutes to Gert, who laughed and told me how once, in a bitter Berlin winter, he had seen two women outside his building wearing flimsy jackets and neon fishnet stockings. He invited them into his office, where they warmed up and drank coffee for a little while, until Gert had a meeting scheduled and asked them to leave. After the meeting, Gert and his client stepped outside and were about to head for Café Einstein, when the two scantily clad women greeted Gert and thanked him by name. Gert chuckled as he remembered his attempts
to explain himself to his client. Gert Rosenthal’s story revealed that he had absorbed his father’s non-judgmental and humane attitude. Christian Bienert once said of Hans Rosenthal: “He was truly an idealist, a humanitarian, but without knowing it. He simply lived it.”

Gert, his father’s look-alike, unconsciously confirmed this assessment.

INTERVIEWS

Martin, Tamar. Personal interview. 3 Jan. 2012.
Tanenbaum, Barry. Telephone interview. 6 Nov. 2012.

SOURCES


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Note on the Translation—Hans Rosenthal (Schäbitz 6), on set with assistant Monica Sundermann (*Der Kleine Spielmeister*)

Dear Reader—Rosenthal on the set of *Make it Snappy* (*Spielmeister*)

“One Summer Evening in Brussels…”—Photograph (*Spielmeister*)

“An Almost Happy Childhood”—Hans Rosenthal (*Zwei Leben in Deutschland*)

“When the Synagogues Burned”—Hans Rosenthal (*Zwei Leben in Deutschland*)

“My Apprenticeship at the Graveyard”—Hans Rosenthal by his father’s grave (Schäbitz 10)

“In the Orphanage”—Hans and Gert (Schäbitz 15), the Rosenthal parents (Schäbitz 11)

“The Trinity Garden Colony”—Drawing by Hans Rosenthal. Frau Jauch’s cottage is marked “H.R.” (Schäbitz 23)

“Night Raids”—Aftermath of bombings (Klinsky 154)

“Endless Terrors…”—Bombed Berlin (Klinsky 18)

“…And a Terrible End”—Soup Kitchen (Klinsky 28)

“The Radio Messenger on the East-West Divide”—Women in shop window (Klinsky 61)

“Nathan the Saved”—German postcard by Film-Foto-Verlag. Photo: Ufa.

“Of Care Packages and Silk Stockings”—U.S. Care Package Distribution (Klinsky 28)

“The Smuggled Wedding Rings”—A packed train car (Klinsky 29) and Hans and Traudl on their wedding day (*Zwei Leben*)


Epilogue—The mayor of Wilhemsdorf, Traudl, and Gert at the dedication of Hans-Rosenthal-Platz (Schäbitz 59) and Hans on set (*Spielmeister*)