

## Blue Triangles, Yellow Stars

**Author's note: All events are true, though narrator voice and dialogue are imagined, based on conversations and interviews with Albert and Mary Vossler, my Grandparents.**

We are much the same you and I. I too come from a long line of murderers. I too am a child of the Holocaust. By the arbitrary classification of my race and the mercy of childhood I was spared, and my eyes were not seared like yours by Zyklon B gases or the images of dying ancestors, though I too have borne the name of refugee. I too have tasted fear. I know what it is to set your chin against the cold and march through the cracking snow to the sounds of war at your back. Like you, I am a refugee. I look for home.

I pray that you are home now; not in the slaughterhouses of Jewish flesh, the unmarked graves of Stutthof near Torun where my German family lived, but wrapped in the arms of a loving and hurting God, who more than once has wept the loss of Jewish blood. And in light of the ten million untold stories of your people, I tell mine, not as recompense, but to say that I too have been searching.

Like you, I am a refugee. I look for home.

### **Bremerhaven, Germany**

**May 10, 1952:**

The waves of the Atlantic lap against the side of the painted-black walls of the MSS General Harry Taylor. The water swells up and down in giant bubbles, splitting into pockets as it nudges the beams of the dock and ship sides. Always the water moves. It is transient, strong. By water we are borne to new lands. Like water we are always restless.

We hold our luggage in hand. Some people carry accordions, a small connection to our mother land. I can taste excitement and the salty air mixing upon my tongue, as we load on to the troop carrier bound for America. In my mind, I expect Indians and cowboys. Then, with the crewmen, we step off German soil and onto the ship: my father, Georg Johannes Vossler, my mother Rebekah, and my siblings Hans and Rebekah. We have left home and are not home yet.

### **Bessarabia, 1940:**

I was four years old in 1940 when my family was forced to leave our home town of Wittenberg, Bessarabia. The German-Soviet Pact had been signed a few months earlier allowing the Soviets to invade this Romanian-controlled territory without fear of Nazi retaliation.<sup>1</sup>

My father, though ethnically German, was drafted into the Romanian army to defend against the Russians. In late June, the Soviets issued a warring ultimatum. Romanian troops were

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1 . "German-Soviet Pact." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

given exactly four days to leave the state, and after two days the government cracked, ordering troops to retreat. In between June 28 and July 3, the Russians entered Romania and attacked the still-retreating soldiers. There were heavy casualties.<sup>2</sup>

I can only imagine what the conversation between my parents would've been like, for my father was stoic and both reserved:

“Rebekah. Rebekah!”

“What?”

“Be strong. Take care of the children. Hans, Rebekah, Albert.”

She blinks with strong and weary brown eyes. “Stay safe.”

“If we fight I will fight.” He leans to whisper into her ear and she gulps and my father is off, the footprints of his army-issued boots leaving empty spaces in the ground.

My father had to remain with the army for several months even after the Russians captured Bessarabia. Meanwhile, in September 1940, Hitler offered resettlement to ethnic Germans of the Black Sea area, promising them an equal value of land and possessions in the Fatherland. My parents did not believe him, and as I would find out later, with good cause. But this is what we had to do.

I still hold a few photos from this time. In one, three Nazis are riding a horse and carriage around a telephone pole. It is not a happy photo. They had come into town in order to take a record of all the people's farmland, possessions, and buildings. In an instant our farm was not our home; home was only a promise, written in the notebooks of Nazi soldiers. So it was though, and we left, riding in the beds of German army trucks.

At four years old I do not remember thinking much as we left. Looking back upon the photos, the town seems peaceful. The dirt roads curve gently and the white spire of the steeple caresses the sky. I think it would've been nice to live in peace, but I am sure that I wasn't regretting the evacuation at the time, only pressing my eyes between the wooden slats of the truck bed and staring at the vineyards and fields rushing past.

My father, still serving in the Romanian army, could not come with us.

### **Atlantic Ocean, May 12, 1952:**

It is afternoon and the sun shines high above the water. I press my hands against the railing and gaze down. A pod of dolphins swim in the wave trails left by the ship, leaping and spinning, grey-backed bodies glistening.

It is hard to understand what it was like for a child, for I was a child then, though not now. I did not understand that my childhood was laced with the darkest bloodshed of human history. The Holocaust, like the ocean, lies full of depth and darkness. But this was not my life, for as a child I did not sink beneath the waves. I saw dolphins and thought I understood the ocean, though the two are unbreakably intertwined. There is much I do not know, and yet, you cannot change memories.

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2 . Paul Goma (2006) [Săptămâna Roșie](#). p. 206.

## Bavaria, Germany, 1940:

The army trucks finally rolled into camp, and we unloaded. The resettlement camp was enjoyable for a child, yet mechanical in its operation. The nursery was like a factory with rows of babies stashed in wicker basket cribs. At nighttime we children, too, were stacked like cordwood in our bunkbeds. Silence was demanded, but we amused ourselves the same by signalling in gestures.

“Rebekah,” I would whisper, from the top bunk.

She'd lean over from across her bunk. Giggles.

“Shhh!” Still lying down, she'd wave at me with both hands.

I'd smile and stick out my tongue. She'd cross her eyes and stick out hers.

During these few months I was happy. It was the happiest time of my life. My father was released from his soldiership in the Romanian army, and joined us in Bavaria. When he came, and my mother embraced him, I could feel the heaviness being released from his back and the warmth reentering his soul. It was the first time I had seen them openly express their affection and I knew, for a while, that my parents were happy too.

Since we were in the city, a few times we could go to the army parades. These songs were romanticized in our minds, from the stories of an old German friend who had served in the army. He'd talk about how they would sing when they were tired during long marches. The bands played with full vigor, with the clashing of cymbals and echoes of trumpets. The soldiers marched and sang sentimental songs of the homeland and the strength of Germany.

*“Ob's stürmt oder schneit, ob die Sonne uns lacht,  
Der Tag glühend heiß, oder eiskalt die Nacht.  
Bestaubt sind die Gesichter, Doch froh  
ist unser Sinn.”*

*“In blizzard or storm, or in sun warm and bright,  
The day hot as hell. or bone-chilling be the night,  
Our faces may with dust be laid, but spirits never fade,*

*No, never fade.”<sup>3</sup>*

This is was what Hitler meant when he said, “He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.”<sup>4</sup> There was happiness to be found in these parades. The truth of Hitler's bloody Thousand-Year Reich was hidden beneath layers of propaganda and excitement. I did not know this; not many Germans did. After all, why would you keep a child from singing? How could you stop the shine of the soldiers' uniforms, the mesmerizing rhythm of their goose-stepping marches, and the melodic pitches of strong music from overwhelming a child's mind?

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3 . Von. Oblt. Wiehle, "Panzerlied." 25 June 1933. Trans. Frank Petersohn, 1998, Web. 5 Dec. 2012. <<http://ingeb.org/Lieder/obssturm.html>>.

4 . Von. Oblt. Wiehle, "Panzerlied." 25 June 1933. Trans. Frank Petersohn, 1998, Web. 5 Dec. 2012. <<http://ingeb.org/Lieder/obssturm.html>>.

## Atlantic Ocean, May 15, 1952:

Stormy waters are upon us. The foghorn blast sounds like a dying cow, and they have blown it every few minutes days on end, which is just one more layer of discomfort. The sea began to test our stomachs two days ago as soon as we passed through the English Channel and hit the waters of the Atlantic. The waves wash completely over the deck, which forces us to stay in the cramped cabins below. The smells of seasickness permeate the air, like an ongoing infestation. All the port hole windows are latched shut.

I lie down in the hammock, trying not to feel my stomach lurching or the vise closing around my head. Who knows how long the ship will roll in these stormy waves; we will live through until tomorrow.

## Austria, 1941:

The months in Bavaria were few. We were soon relocated to a housing development in Wiener Neustadt, Austria, where I started gradeschool. Life was good during this year, but still there was a sense of discomfort. My parents missed home, for they were farmers and did not belong in the city. Besides, Hitler had promised to give back land and equipment of equal value, and while our needs were met, it was not the same. One night we received a knock on our door:

“Open up!” The Austrian police were standing outside our door. It could've been my mother who opened the door gently to hear the words, “We would like to speak with Albert Vossler.”

I nearly collapsed with fear. My tongue had dried out.

“Boy, do you know anything about stolen money?”

I looked at their waists, afraid to see their faces. They had pistols in their belts, wore cut-gray uniforms.

“No.”

“Are you sure? Can you tell me how this construction office was broken into?”

I had done nothing. “I do not know sir.”

“Well one of your friends Lukas\* seems to think differently. He says you stole some things.”

“No sir.” I did know this boy Lukas though, one of my best friends though he was fourteen and I was six. After a few more minutes of questions, the police left.

I'm not confident on the exact details of this encounter, only that I felt much blame and fear. Later on I would know they never believed that I had stolen the money, but just wanted to scare me. This was Austria.

My father, too, felt out of his element. He was set to work in one of New Vienna's three aircraft factories, helping the German war machine to manufacture Messerschmitt Bf 109's, as well as various Junkers bombers and heavy fighters.<sup>5</sup> In a few months he'd experienced an entire industrial revolution: farmer to soldier to factory worker. And like an industrial revolution, there was angst and dissatisfaction.

Over the months, my parents kept pestering the German officials, and in 1942 they

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\* pseudonym

5 . "Wiener Neustadt-History of an 800-year-old city." *Wiener Neustadt*. n.d. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

offered a new resettlement location in Poland. We snatched at it, with desperation born of hope—a hope that Poland would be home for us.

### **Atlantic Ocean, May 15, 1952:**

“Here, eat this,” says my brother Hans. He holds an orange in his hands.

“Where'd you get it?”

“Kitchen. After my shift.”

“Thanks.” I sit up in my hammock. My head swims and stomach lurches. I lie down again and take the orange, peeling it slowly, efforts limited by the sloshing of my stomach. My head aches but I'm able to eat each slice of the orange, slowly, while the ocean tosses our ship around.

I can't do it anymore. “Hans,” I whisper, and then begin retching through the weaves of the hammock. Chunks of orange and stomach acid hit the floor. I roll over from looking at the warm, orange puddle, and dream about leaving the ship.

### **Poland, 1942:**

We first lived in Preusen Stargart, and then near Torun near my aunt and uncle. At this time the Polish people were included in the list of the Untermensch—under-men, or sub-humans. Many German farmers, encouraged by authorities, mistreated the Poles heavily. In turn, many farms were attacked by guerrilla forces.

When we came to Poland, it became immediately evident to my parents the devilry behind Hitler's promise. The substitutionary land, equipment, and livestock were not truly theirs, and the Poles who it belonged to were now displaced and working for Germans. As if by crafted innocence, I began to play with the Polish children. I was six years old and had no other friends. Thus, I learned to speak their language until my parents said they could tell no difference between me and my Polish friends.

Like at all times, life continued. My parents raised sugar beets, potatoes, and all kinds of grains. The farm also had livestock and three Polish families that worked for us. Compassion was etched deep into my parents' hearts and they treated their Polish help well, under-reporting their piglet crop each year and butchering the meat later in secrecy. This was much appreciated.

One memory from the summer of 1943 is still impressed upon my mind. The sun had filled the sky with light and beauty; the country roads had dried up from the winter snow and spring mud. Then I felt it, the vibration resonating in the hollow of my chest, even before I could see them. My eyes were pulled upward: the horizon was filled with metal locusts, swarms of bombers so thick they darkened the sky. It was an onset of a plague, and I knew it just as I could feel my flesh shaking. The first swarm passed by, yet day and night for three days the sky ran thick with Allied planes.

Radio reports still said that Germany was winning the war, on land, sea, and in the air. But the adults were all whispers, holding conversations long-forgotten, but all to the same effect:

“We can't trust the radio reports,” my father may have declared.

“Who then?” said a farmer.

“Are you a fool? Look at the sky. They say that the Air Force broke through, yet the British are right above our heads!”

“They are attacking Romania's oil fields, trying to cut the fuel supply.”<sup>6</sup>

“The war is coming to Romania.”

“Yes.”

“War will come here then.”

“It is a real possibility.”

“We may have to flee then.”

“Yes.”

### **Poland, December 1944:**

A messenger came riding through our farm, the horse's hooves punching imprints into the snow. His face was ruddy and red from the cold as he slammed a gloved fist against the glass windows. They rattled near enough to shatter, and we knew it was news. It had been foreseeable, yet inevitable.

“You cannot stay here,” the messenger declared. “The Soviets are pushing into the East German front. All of Poland is retreating.”

“Very well. We will leave our home,” said my father.

“You have children and a wife?”

“Yes.”

“The mothers and children will be retreating in a group with your belongings. The men will stay behind to drive the cattle.”

“Why! What the hell!” The image of his family being split again, like in Bessarabia, may have flickered across his eyes. Only this time, we would not be riding the German army trucks but walking in a refugee train, pursued by communist bullets. Maybe his eyes registered fear, though I doubt this, for he was a tough man.

“I will not be separated from Rebekah and the children.”

“You would force them to drive the cattle?”

“I would.”

“Damn! Sir, you can't do this! They must leave with the other women and children.”

“No.”

“This is an order. For the lives of our brothers, you will drive the cattle and your family join the others.”

“No!” He gripped the frame of the doorway until the blood ran from his knuckles.

I don't know exactly if this happened. I do know that it was against orders that he refused to let us join the other families. I know also that my father loved us.

### **Atlantic Ocean, May 16, 1952:**

The rough seas are subsiding, and I feel better. The salt water waves stopped rolling over the top deck, so our captain announced that we could go up. Fresh air is like freedom. I wish that I could feel this way always.

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<sup>6</sup> . *Video: American Bombers Smash Axis Oil Fields In Romania [etc.] (1943)*. National Archives and Records Administration. Universal Newsreel. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

## Poland, 1945

There is one more story of Poland that I must tell. Just as every man is born out of darkness, there is a part to every man's story that is dark. I tell it because I cannot let it go, for it is a part of the land where I lived. I celebrate a brotherhood with these people for in a sense I am no better than they.

In addition to being a farmer, my father was drafted into working as a night guard near Torun, in a sub-camp of the main concentration camp called Stutthof. Stutthof was the first of the Nazi concentration camps built outside of German borders, and also the last of the camps to be liberated by Allied forces. 'Liberated' is a desperate word, for the story is written in more blood than freedom.

It began in January of 1945, when reports showed an inevitable Russian takeover of Stutthof. The Nazi guards erupted a full-scale death plan. Five thousand Jews were marched into the Baltic Sea and machine-gunned. The rest were force-marched towards Eastern Germany, and then, when the Russians cut off the retreat, force-marched back to Stutthof. The cold, mixed with the brutality of SS guards, killed thousands more. Dark red blood and snow mingled in those days.

By April 1945, Soviets had completely encircled Stutthof. Once again, guards marched the prisoners into the freezing waters of the Baltic, and killed them. Several thousands were transported by sea to other concentration camps along the Baltic Coast. Many drowned along the way.

When the Russians finally broke into Stutthof and freed the camp, they found about one hundred prisoners, who had managed to hide during the final evacuation. The other fifty thousand were gone. May 9, 1945 marks Stutthof's bloody liberation day.<sup>7</sup>

However, an article dated two months earlier, March 6th, 1945, reported the liberation of several hundred prisoners from the Torun sub-camp, the women's labor camp where my father worked as a guard. Says the article:

*"Jewish women [were sent] to the Torun camp, where they were confined on a starvation diet [sic] and used for forced labor. About two hundred of them died from torture, hunger and cold. After six months in the Torun camp, they were liberated by the advance of the Russian armies which forced the Germans to flee."*<sup>8</sup>

These are not easy words, for they sound dry but smell of death. That is always the fear when speaking of death in quantities, for numbers are forgettable. Faces are not.

I remember some of these faces.

My father never spoke about his work at the camp. I think the job hurt him. But I didn't need his words to understand. On a day when my father was off duty, he and I rode to town in our wagon, hauling sugar beets. Women from the Torun camp were digging trenches along the road, as part of Germany's massive defense system across Poland.

We passed by a work crew of these women. They wore the customary striped smock dresses and striped bonnets. On their dresses were badges in accordance with the Nazi identification code: pink triangles were sex offenders; black triangles were 'asocials'; green

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7 . "Stutthof." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

8 . "Jewish Women, Liberated from German Camp, Return to Their Homes in Vilna." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* 7 Mar 1945.

triangles were criminals; blue triangles—foreigners, stateless people; double yellow triangles, one inverted to form the Star of David—Jews.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the women were yellow stars. They kept their faces turned downward as they swung their arms. The metal blades of their shovels bit at the dirt.

I watched the backs of these women as we rode past. Suddenly, my father reached his hand back and jostled the sugar beets. He tried to make it look like the wagon had hit a rock in the road. The beets fell to the ground and bounced toward the women. The light brown tubers contrasted against the dark brown of the road, as they rolled lopsidedly.

Their eyes met mine. Their faces burned into my memory; and, as quickly as they looked up, the women looked down again. Shovels hit the ground as they reached for the beets, quickly tucking them into their smocks.

“Zurück!” screamed the German guard. “Get back!” He beat the women back, striking their bodies with his fists. There was the crunch of flesh on flesh. It was the crunch of cruelty.

As the future years and future deaths would reveal, Torun was no stranger to cruelty. Yet it was also a city split in dichotomy, by the compassion of my father and the bestiality of the guard, by the desperate eyes of tortured women and the naivety of a seven-year-old boy. It is a dark and sorrowful history that surrounds the city, one through which I emerged shielded in a thin sliver of light, by the grace of God.

Some would've called it a curse that we had to flee our home again, around Christmas of 1944. Christmas was supposed to be a day of joy, not a day of hurriedly stuffing food and horse feed into a wagon, preparing for a long and cold refugee march. But it wasn't; it was for God's mercy that we found ourselves on the road again, retreating to Germany.

### **Atlantic Ocean, May 18, 1952:**

There is always a day in between. The water is endless. Germany is gone, and the American coast line is invisible. The earth would curve out of our vision before it would let us catch a glimpse, and all we see is endless water.

It feels like we have been travelling for three months, a feeling that is a lie in both directions. In truth we are on Day Nine. In truth, we have been running much longer than that.

### **Poland, December 1944**

We had two horses, one decrepit and the other too young to be drafted for the army. We also had two oxen, two wagons, the help of Polish drivers, and three hundred cattle to be driven into Germany.

The night was clear and cold. Stars sparkled in the sky, and the moonlight reflected off the snow, brightening the night. The snow had crusted over from a slight melt in the day's sun.

We waited in an assembly area, bringing the cows together to form one giant herd.

“Let's go!” yelled my father at last.

They started walking in formation, herding the cattle.

“Verdammt!” It was one of the Polish hands. “Damn it!”

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<sup>9</sup> . "Classification System in Nazi Concentration Camps — Artifact." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

The cows were scattering. They ran in all directions, hooves crunching through the snow, snorting and mooing wildly. They were not used to leaving the barn on cold nights.

My father started pointing and yelling directions. Some of the Poles worked together with us. Others were not very happy about driving their cattle to Germany. In any case, cold mixed with confusion, and that first night over half the cows and several of the Polish men disappeared.

We walked all night while the cold bit at our faces and froze our hands. I helped with the herding, walking to cut off straggling cattle. In the morning we came to an abandoned farm and rested with the cattle. My limbs were tired, but at least the milk we drank was fresh and warm.

Day after day we kept this up, moving at a slow pace. Nights we stopped in deserted farms and fed the cattle. Sometimes though, the army would take one of the cows and butcher it for their meat supply.

I remember one incident, several days in, when we came to a bridge spanning the Oder river. A German officer stood sentinel, facing east, towards the refugees, towards the approaching Soviets.

“It is a good thing you came tonight,” he said.

“Why?” said my father.

“The Russians are fast approaching. We've already rigged the explosives on this bridge.”

“How far are they behind us?” We had left Torun with over a week ahead of the Red Army, but the cows were slowing us down.

“We're blowing this bridge tonight. Two days perhaps. They're not far.”

Fear had not yet set in. We were too tired, and so we stayed the night in an abandoned farm despite the guard's warning. We left dozens of cattle behind in the barn though, because they were too much work, too fat, and too slow.

The next night we came to Parken-Brücken, empty except for the Prisoner of War Camp. Again, the guards there advised us to keep going because the Russians were near. However, our oxen and horses were too tired to go on. Once again, we found an abandoned house and stationed the livestock in the barn.

My mother started a fire in the wood stove, and dug around the place to find some potatoes and cabbages. The house began to warm up. Throughout the evening, soldiers kept showing up at the door, hungry, and looking for a place to rest. My mother kept cooking into the night, feeding the soldiers and watching them fall asleep.

All the while, the Russian Army kept approaching. Fear-spurred-insomnia kept my mother from sleeping.

### **Atlantic Ocean, May 19 1952:**

This morning, I caught a glance at my mother today while she was still sleeping. Some days her face seems to change. She has the jolly German cheeks, that seem to pull up on the corners of her mouth, and round eyes. They are kind eyes. Her hair is brown and thick and pulled straight back across her head.

What I saw in her face was nothing unique. And yet, it was. Those eyes had seen a lifetime of hardship; those lips had spoken a million words, uttered frantically in fits of perfectionism, whispered softly as prayers during the night.

Like my father, at an early age she had lost one of her parents. It was her mother, killed by a plague, and so at five years old she was motherless and thrust into womanhood duties. You grow up quickly when there's no other choice. At five years old she was in charge of baking

bread for her family.

Of my parents, it is my mother who prays more. I wonder if she thought of those days when she taught me the Lord's prayer: *give us this day our daily bread. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*

Oh God, deliver us from evil.

## **Poland, 1945**

My mother sat in a chair, watching the rhythmic breathing of her sleeping family and the soldiers lined wall to wall. She listened to the noises that had started up.

Artillery fire was exploding overhead. By the echoes, she could tell many were overshots. Occasionally, a shell hit the town, exploding with fragments of wood and concrete and shrapnel. Fear ate at her, but she did not want to wake the exhausted soldiers.

Then it was no longer just artillery fire. Like a snare drum, the rat-a-tat of machine guns had joined the mix. Finally, fear overwhelmed courtesy, and my mother shook one of the soldiers awake.

“What does this mean!” she said.

He paused for a second, listening. “Get out of here,” he whispered. Enemy fire was close. The soldier went around and shook his buddies awake. They unlatched the back windows and escaped, not using the front door which was facing the fire.

My father went to hitch up the horses and release the oxen from the barn. He grabbed my sister, threw her into the back of the wagon, and joined the retreating Germans filling up the road. In the confusion, our family separated. My mother had grabbed my hand and Hans' and had already joined the retreat. She had not been thinking of separation, only hoping for survival.

She whispered prayers of protection. I too was praying: *Our father who is in heaven, holy be your name. Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.* It did not feel like the kingdom of heaven. It felt like war.

My mind raced. I held strongly to my mother's hand, afraid of death. The Russian artillery shots were flying overhead, landing to the sides of us, behind, exploding the earth. The Russian machine guns, too, were spray-kissing bullets. They were invisible in the darkness, invisible because of their speed, like invisible metal demons.

I was scared for my life. Like the howitzers tearing the earth, fear ripped at my heart. My fingers were laced with my mother's as we walked hurriedly, heads bent down. I walked with my own feet, but make no lie of it—she was carrying me. In some way God, too, was carrying us.

We walked in the dark, in the road, with the retreating army. It was dark except for the death fireworks from artillery. The night was cold. Our eyes were scared.

“Look!” said Hans.

There was a wagon in the road ahead of us.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” said my mother. We ran up to it.

I recognized the wood splinters of the bed, the coloring, the wheels. Rebekah and my father nearly collapsed when they saw us. It was love and war and joy, all in that one instant, on a Polish dirt road. My father almost smiled.

“We have to keep going,” he said. So we fled.

For three days we travelled like this, as desperate refugees. Sleep avoided us. We rested only for short periods to feed the horses. Finally on the fourth day, the German soldiers grouped together and made a stand against the advancing Russians.

The Russians were slowed, just enough time for us to make a comfortable break from soldiers. Comfort is relative.

We were on our own, and still had to make it into Germany. This meant crossing the Elbe River, but thankfully the bridge had not been blown yet. I don't know how my father knew where we were going and I didn't think much about it at the time. He was just heading west.

As we drew closer to Berlin, we met up with other refugees. Fights began to break out in the competition for food and horsefeed. The towns were always occupied now, so we spent our nights in the wagon, or else in bombed-out buildings. It was cold still, and snowy.

Soon, the road became packed with refugees. Thousands of families displaced by war were packed onto a single road, heading west towards Berlin. If their wagon slipped off the road they were gone. No one dared to stop, lest they lose their spot in the train. Soldiers, too, who had been riding tracked vehicles were now on foot in the retreat. I remember one instance of looking up and down our refugee train. In both directions I saw sky and shrubs and people. I could not see the end or the beginning of the caravan.

Always, as we walked, there was evidence of war. There was clear separation too. The road itself was the path of the refugees—the living, the displaced, those scarred by memories and bullets. The side of the road, however, was the dominion of collateral damage.

There were war machines that had run out of gasoline, abandoned to the roadside. Also, there were people. Every ten steps I took was another face. The women were young and pretty and dead. The men were young and soldiers and dead. The babies were dead. The elderly were dead. Animals were dead.

Their bodies were strewn to the roadside, and those on the road were too desperate to stop and mourn. At times, I felt like crying.

## **Atlantic Ocean, May 19, 1952**

The setting sun is like a giant orange colliding with the ocean, streaking the sky with color wherever they touch. The beauty is heightened by evanescence; there is something tragic and sweet about the fleeting colors.

Many of the young teenagers are gathered singing and clapping, our songs drifting over the water. Some play the accordion. Deft fingers press buttons, hands stretching and compressing the body. The accordion is the commoner's instrument. It is folk music, for families, for localities, for peoples. Hearing the music is like a blast of German memories: Christmas songs, pine trees decorated with handkerchiefs, skipping school to ice skate, or to go swimming, or roam orchards and vineyards for cherries and grapes; festive springs, warm summers, bountiful autumns, cold winters.

I have my family. My friends are gone, except for those I've met on this voyage. The others are gone forever. The bittersweetness is ineffable. In the songs are emotions, excitement

laced with fear, love with a sense of loss. It is a last fling in our mother tongue. All the while, our ship's metal hull is breaking through the water, plowing steadily towards New York City.

### **Germany, 1945**

There was more to our journey. At one point, close to Berlin, soldiers would not let the refugees stop. They pushed us forward, until after an entire day we realized something: we were back at the same place. Adults were furious. The army had been making a major troop movement in the road, and so had detoured the refugees.

But in those situations, you can't do much; you can keep walking, so we did. Eventually we would come to Berlin. We would press deeper and deeper into Germany, looking for a place we could be given to stay. Families with small children were given homes first. But we kept up until late February, 1945, finally coming to the end of a ninety-day journey, the end of the snowy refugee road. We stayed with a farmer in Alfstead by Bremaförde.

### **Atlantic Ocean, May 21, 1952:**

My eyes strain, focused on the horizon line, trying to see the slight discolored layer between water and sky. That layer is land. That layer is everything that lies between heaven and the tumultuous water we journey across. That layer is a new home.

“Can you see it?” asks my brother, Hans, looking down at me.

The light glaring off the water hurts my eyes. I can see shiny objects on the horizon. They are moving, scattering bright light. I point at them.

“Those are cars,” he says, nodding.

### **Germany, 1945**

Our final home was in Bietigheim, southwest Germany. We moved there after a year spent with the farmer in northern Germany.

This area is also called Schwabenland. It is the original home of my ancestors, the ones who came to Bessarabia centuries ago. In a way it is almost fitting that we would come full-circle, from Schwabenland to Bessarabia to Bavaria to Austria to Poland and then returned. Like water we are restless, and like water we return to the streams we are borne from.

I think often about why my ancestors left Schwabenland. There was a famine near the Black Sea, and so my skilled ancestor-farmers were invited to cultivate the land there.

My journey is part of a meta-journey, centuries long. In truth, it is much longer than that, for my ancestors before them, though their stories are lost, were searching. All men search. They scour the land for something the land does not have.

Schwabenland was given up in a hope of something better. Bessarabia was war. Bavaria was temporary. In Austria we did not belong. Poland was good, on the surface, yet deeper down it was a holocaust.

## **New York Harbor**

### **May 21, 1952:**

We have entered the harbor, and the sight of land, cars, and buildings stirs a frenzy within the passengers. Everyone is on deck now, every last man, woman, and child. There are thousands of people, walking the deck, pressed against the rails, pushing to see the harbor.

“We are here,” they say. They point at the buildings.

Tugboats are now attached by metal hooks and cables. The tugs push and pull at our transport liner, the MSS General Harry Taylor, maneuvering it through the New York Harbor.

Everything jostles, the water, the tugs, the people. America is a drug. The people are shouting and dancing and smiling, or else quietly gazing at the world with glazed eyes.

## **Germany, 1945 – 1952**

For us, Schwabenland was the closest thing to home. We stayed there seven years, longer than anywhere else. Bietigheim holds many memories. I finished eight grade, more schooling than either of my parents. I got a job too, as a carpenter's apprentice, working hard to prepare the shop, getting slapped by the journeymen if I made a mistake, and drinking beer or Coke to celebrate finished projects. The war was over and life was settling in.

All this time we lived in a house that was owned by an older widow. It had two bedrooms, and the widow took one, so Hans and I shared a bed in the attic. During the winter, snow would drift underneath the roof tiles and powder our blankets.

The house was sweet. It was like a gingerbread house, with a steep and tiled roof that flared out at the gutter line, a brick chimney, and many windows set into the front wall. All of this was good, for seven years.

I went through Lutheran Confirmation and learned more who God was. God was a man. The man was Jesus, and he died, but Jesus was not like other great men who died. He seemed real, touchable. He got mad at the priests and healed the sinners and then he let himself be crucified for both groups, as if groups didn't matter because the crucifixion was brutal and for both.

He was also a yellow star.

## **New York Harbor**

### **May 21, 1952:**

The air is fresh. The waters are clear and cold. The Statue of Liberty rises up from Liberty Island, the Colossus of America, her shining torch lifted high in greeting to the thousands of immigrants teeming the ship deck.

From the inside of the pedestal, she gives promise of opportunity:

*“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me...”*<sup>10</sup>

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10 . Lazarus, Emma. “The New Colossus.” Poetry X. Ed. Jough Dempsey. 4 Sep 2006. Web. 5 Dec. 2012

Never mind the sad controversies around those words. They are a promise to us, the homeless, and promises are all we have.

## **Germany, 1952**

In the end, it was not enough—the gingerbread house, the apprenticeship, the Coca-Cola and beer. Maybe we were used to running. Maybe we had been refugees for so long that we were restless. Maybe all the restless people go to America.

Our family applied for emigration to America and to Canada. For the emigration photo, we dressed up in our suits and grinned our best German smiles. Hans would not wear a tie, so my mother drew a striped tie on the photograph with a pen because she thought it would help our chances.

It did. On May 10, 1952, we set sail for new lands.

## **Manhattan Island, New York**

### **May 21, 1952:**

Metal crunches against wood as the ship slides into dock. Everyone is on deck, anxious to get off.

“We're not going to rush it,” says my father. We have no sponsors anyway, so we don't rush it. We wait on deck for a long time until we are the last ones off the ship, out of thousands. I'm anxious and my feet ache from standing so long, when it strikes me: we are in America. We have no place to go, no money, no sponsors, and no way of communication. There is no Germany any more, at least for us.

I take a second to look at the ocean sky and pray. *Dear Father, holy be your name. Give us today our daily bread.* I pray because even though we have arrived, we are not home.

Still, we are refugees. Still, we will search for home.