

Wednesday, May 9, 1945

The next morning, as soon as I walked out of the door of our building, I was caught up in a regular maelstrom of people. The German Army was pulling back from the frontier. The streets were packed. There were Germans in dusty uniforms, some armed and some not, and a few on bikes, all heading west as fast as they could go. And there were refugees – swarms of them. And townspeople. While I stared, Franta, the glassmaker, burst out of the house next door with his shirtsleeves rolled up and made straight for the Germans, grabbed for a rifle slung over one soldier's back and started yanking at it. The German tried to push him away – but not very hard – then unhitched the strap and let the rifle fall, and the next minute Franta had already picked it up and was heading back to his house, holding the rifle up high in both hands. This sparked the crowd. From both sides of the street, people moved in on the Germans, scrambling to lay hands on a rifle, but the Germans closed ranks and trained their guns on the mob. They stood in a huddle bristling with muzzles; the mob stopped, then just stood there swearing at the Germans. The Germans moved on again and the crowd let them pass and, when they'd gone on, followed along behind. I tagged along, too. Looking at the backs and rumps of those guys tramping in front of me in their tight jackets and bulging pants, I thought they looked awfully well fed. So this was our uprising. I trailed merrily along behind them and every once in a while caught a glimpse of the grey German helmets and guns near the street corner now. The crowd of guys just ahead of me were still yelling and shaking their fists. We'd already reached the anti-tank barricade at Novotny's and there the Germans had to slow down a bit to get through the barrier. One soldier halted and waited for all the others to pass through. Then one guy jumped him and tried to wrest his rifle away from him. The crowd seethed. Two

other Germans turned and lifted their submachine guns. I caught a glimpse of their faces for a second – expressionless and exhausted – and then both of those guns held ready to fire into the crowd. Then somebody yelled and the rear of the crowd started pushing up against the front. That blocked my view. All I could see now were those fat backsides working their way forward. Then two shots rang out, one right after the other. Immediately the crowd started to scatter. The guy in front of me turned and piled into me full force, sending me sprawling on the sidewalk. First all I saw were stars and then people racing off every which way and in no time at all the street in front of me was deserted except for those two Germans with their submachine guns. They were still standing by the anti-tank barrier. One of the muzzles was still smoking and the third German was still holding his rifle and they all just stared blankly in front of them. I sat there, dazed, staring right back at them. One of them glanced at me, but then quickly turned to the others and said, 'Los! Gehn wa!'

'Warte, Fritz,' said the one with the rifle and, leaning it up against the barrier, he adjusted his helmet. It had been knocked crooked, probably when the guy from the crowd tried to grab his rifle away from him. The other two stood there, watching him. I looked around and saw Mr Habr and some other guys flattened up against the walls at the entrance to the bank, eyeing the Germans. Suddenly, all around it was quiet as a tomb and it seemed to me I must look pretty ridiculous sitting there in the middle of that empty street, just staring at those Germans. So this was an uprising. The German straightened his helmet, then all three of them turned and, draped with hand grenades, moved on. As soon as they'd disappeared beyond the barrier, people swarmed out of the doorways and a big crowd gathered around me.

Mr Habr hurried over. 'Are you hurt, Mr Smiricky?'

I scowled and got up. The crowd pressed in and stared at me.

'No,' I said. 'When you all took off, somebody ran into my stomach, that's all.'

You could tell they were disappointed. Nobody had been



hurt. The Germans had just fired into the air. The crowd broke up and drifted away. I went around the corner to Haryk's place. A family of gipsies was cooking something in a kettle over a little fire under a bunch of trees on Jirak Square. I rang the doorbell and Haryk leaned out the window.

'Hi,' he said.

'Throw down a key,' I said. Haryk disappeared and in a little while leaned out again.

'You going over to the brewery?' I asked.

'We've got to,' said Haryk, and tossed down the key. 'Come on up. I haven't finished breakfast yet.'

Upstairs somebody was playing 'Heartbreak Blues' on the piano. I opened the door and there was Lucie sitting at the piano, wearing a striped dress. Haryk was sitting at the table behind a big mug of coffee and Pedro was stretched out on the couch.

'Greetings,' he said to me. Lucie stopped playing and spun around towards me on the piano stool. She spun too hard, though, so she had to spin it back down a little.

'Hi, Danny,' she said.

'Hi. Are you going over to the brewery, too?' I asked.

'No.' She cocked her head to one side and, in an affected tone added, 'Women have no business in a place like that.' Her bare feet looked pretty in her white sandals.

'Well, I don't agree with that,' I said. 'So what are you going to do for your country?'

'I volunteered as a first-aid helper.'

'Jesus,' I said. 'I hope I don't get wounded.'

'Irena volunteered, too,' said Lucie.

'She did?'

'Yes. We went over to sign up together.' Lucie kept her face very blank and non-committal.

'Well, then, guess I'd better let myself get wounded – but not too seriously.'

'Oh? Why not?' said Lucie. She sounded disappointed.

'Why should I?'

'I thought you'd suffer anything for Irena.'

'Well, sure. Within reason.'

'Would you let them cut off a leg, for instance?'

'A leg? Sure,' I said breezily.

'Or an arm?'

'Sure.'

'Both arms?'

'Gladly,' I said, but as soon as I'd said it I realized that'd be a dumb thing to do because then I couldn't even touch Irena.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'One arm but not both.'

'Why not?'

'One would be enough, wouldn't it?'

'But what if you had to lose both?'

'Why would I have to lose both arms?'

'Well, just supposing.'

'Oh well, then, if I had to choose then I guess I'd rather lose an arm and a leg.'

'But I want to know whether you'd give up both arms,' said Lucie, swinging around on the piano stool and stretching out her legs.

'Well, okay. Sure,' I said.

'But you had to think about it first, didn't you?'

'Well, it isn't so simple – losing both arms.'

'You should have said yes without even giving it a second thought.'

'Well, but I said I *would*, didn't I?'

'You're just like Haryk. You're all the same.'

'I beg your pardon?' Haryk chimed in.

'Well, aren't you?'

'No.'

'Oh no?'

'Well, how do you mean – the same?'

'Well, for example I want you to shave off those awful-looking sideburns and you won't do it.'

'And I don't want you to dye your hair and you don't pay any attention to me either.'

'But you're supposed to listen to me.'

'Oh, well isn't that interesting? Why me and why not you?'

'Because you're a man,' said Lucie and turned back to the piano. 'Or at least you look like one,' she added and she started



playing 'In the Mood' real fast, the way she'd heard it played over ABSE, the American Broadcasting Station in Europe. She played well. Her slender fingers with their red nails played a hard, sure bass boogie. She wore a wide blue bracelet on her bare wrist.

'What a woman!' Haryk said to the two of us. You could tell he was bragging. And she really was something to brag about, too. Lucie was as silly as every other girl but she really knew how to play the piano and dance boogie like nobody else and she took ballet lessons and she was awfully pretty. I liked her a lot. Irena didn't know how to play the piano. All she could do was plunk out some bad Beethoven or stuff like that, but she didn't know 'Heartbreak Blues' or 'Canal Street Blues' or 'West End Blues' like Lucie did and which Irena never did and when Lucie played she looked like Mary Lou Williams, only prettier. And Irena didn't dye her hair either or paint her fingernails like Lucie and she didn't have a swell house with a swimming pool below the castle, but then again I remembered the cliffs and how I'd clung to the rope together with Irena that time at Spider Rock and all those evenings and nights I'd spent with her up there on the cliffs, but then Lucie started playing 'Nobody's Sweetheart' and I was all wrapped up in her again and didn't know for the life of me who I really had a crush on. Oh to hell with it, I said to myself, and went over to the couch where Pedro was sprawled out and sat down next to him. Pedro pulled in and let go a big long yawn.

'Damn,' he said.

'Shall we go?' I said.

'Just a second,' said Haryk, and he got up from the table and went over to the wardrobe. I looked over at his bed. It was still unmade and he had a big picture of Lucie on his bedside table. That reminded me to show him the picture of me with my submachine gun. I got out my wallet and took out one of the snapshots.

'Look,' I said to Pedro, and handed it to him. Pedro took it, looked at it, and said, 'Oho!' Then he turned and called over to Haryk.

'Haryk!'

'What?'

'A portrait of Partisan Smiricky. Want to take a look?'

Haryk came over to the couch and Lucie noticed and stopped playing.

'Lord!' said Haryk. 'I'd sure hate to meet you on a dark night.'

'Let's see,' said Lucie. She got up and sat down next to me.

'Lord!' she said, just like Haryk. 'Very impressive, Danny!' She laid it on very thick.

'You think so?' I said, taking the picture and sticking it back in my wallet.

'Why didn't you have your picture taken too, Haryk?' Lucie said.

'We should have,' Haryk said to Pedro. 'We were stupid not to.'

'We missed our big chance, all right,' said Pedro.

'Okay, let's go,' I said. 'You can still get your pictures. People are taking the Germans' guns away from them all over the place.'

'Really?' said Haryk.

'That's right. Let's go.'

'Better take along something to eat, Haryk,' said Pedro.

'Not a bad idea.'

Haryk went into the kitchen and Pedro got up off the couch. He went out in the hall and I heard him go into the john. I stayed there alone with Lucie. She stretched out, one leg dangling over the side and the other on the couch. I felt like flirting with her like I always do when I'm alone with a pretty girl. Maybe it was a fresh thing to do but I've never known one of them to object. So I started right in.

'Lucie.'

'Hmm?'

'You're beautiful.'

'Oh, God.'

'You're the most beautiful girl in all Kostelec.'

'How about Irena?'

'Compared to you? Nothing.'

'She ought to hear that!'



'Let her. It wouldn't make any difference to me.'

'Oh, no?'

'I mean it, Lucie.'

'Oh, I believe you, Danny.'

'Honest. When I'm with you. I don't even think about her.'

'Some love!'

I smiled cryptically.

'Well?' said Lucie.

'Lucie,' I said quietly. 'If there's anybody I'm in love with, it's you.'

'Mmmm.'

'Lucie,' I said, 'you're a wonderful girl.'

'I'm surprised at you!' said Lucie. 'Boy, I sure wouldn't like to be in Irena's shoes.'

'Why not? You mean you wouldn't like me to be in love with you?'

'Well, not that so much, but I mean I'd rather have nobody than somebody like you,' said Lucie. 'All right, you just said you love me, didn't you?'

'I do, Lucie.'

'As faithfully as you love Irena?'

'Much more,' I said, and slid closer over to her. She put her hand on my arm so she could push me away just in case.

'Well,' she said. 'And that's saying a lot, isn't it?'

Just then Haryk's voice boomed out from the hall. 'Let's go!'

His voice startled me and I jumped, but when I saw nobody was looking in through the door I turned to Lucie again. She'd pulled back a bit but when she saw nobody was coming she laughed and her eyes sparkled and she got up off the couch, and as she did she ran her hand with those red fingernails of hers up along my arm and the side of my face and into my hair and then she tugged it.

'You stinker,' she said and went to the door. I got up, too, stumbling after her as if I was drugged, and at the door ran my hand gently over her rump. She grabbed my hand and pushed me away. 'Cut that out!' she whispered, and then ran up to

Haryk, took the lunch bag out of his hand and, pretending to be awfully interested all of a sudden, said, 'Let's see what you took!' She looked and then she said, 'That's not going to be enough!'

'All right, all right,' Haryk said impatiently, and took back his lunch bag. 'Let's go.'

'I won't be hungry,' Lucie said.

'I'm sure you won't,' said Haryk, and steered her out into the hall. Pedro was already standing on the stairs. Haryk locked the door. We walked along Jirasek Boulevard but had to wait a while before crossing over towards the side street where the movie theatre was. The German Army, on bikes and on the double, was just making its way down the main street of Kostelec. Those on foot were mostly unarmed, had no helmets, and were being herded along by a handful of scowling Krauts, helmeted and armed with submachine guns, who were trying to carry out some sort of organized retreat. You could hear a steady crossfire of swearing and see the few diehard fanatical Nazis dragging their feet, marching slowly, still refusing to admit they were retreating. They stood out from the rest - their lips thin, their faces so full of fury their helmets looked like they were going to lift right off, like lids on top of steaming pots.

'I'll bet they've really gone through hell,' said Pedro gravely.

'How do you mean?'

'Well, just think who's coming after them.'

Pedro was a regular little Goebbels. But even I had a funny feeling in my stomach. I remembered the communist leaflet Prema had showed that winter - about how the uprising against the Germans would have to be transformed into a social revolution that would bring down the bourgeoisie and give the power to the workers, and so on. It had been printed in Rohnice and Prema showed it to me with that grim gangster face of his, looking like something out of a Blok poem somebody had loaned me in my sophomore year and that had stuck in my mind somehow - about men with cigarettes between tight lips, caps pulled down at an angle, jail staring out of their eyes - only now they were getting closer and God only knew



what would happen next. Which was silly, too. If I was worried it was because all I knew about what could happen was what Goebbels had dinned into us and what Mr Prudivy had told us ominously one night when he and his wife came over to our place and what Mr Skocdopole had said. He'd been in Russia with the Czech Legion and he hadn't just filled us up with horror stories either. He'd simply said that 'the poor people supported the Bolsheviks'. The poor. That was the whole thing in a nutshell and that was just the trouble. We weren't poor. But then we weren't millionaires by a long shot either. My father hadn't even been able to save up enough to buy a car. Call that rich? Well, in any case, the best thing to do was to see the whole thing as a big adventure. Let the people who owned a lot of real estate worry. I didn't own anything. Just my saxophone, which I wouldn't want them to take, but why should they? So what the hell. For now anyway, the best thing to do was just take in this big, mixed-up, shabby parade – all those men and cars and guns and pistols and the end of their splendour.

We crossed the street, passed the movie theatre and went through the arcade to the patch of lawn in front of the Czech Brethren Church. Refugees in concentration camp rags or Allied uniforms were straggling across the lawn and here and there you could spot a grey German uniform. They were fleeing across the green grass under the hot sun. We crossed the lawn with Lucie in her flowered dress which stood out bright against the grass, but the fleeing people didn't even notice her. I was the only one who was looking at her. Her skin was a delicate, almost creamy white – the kind a few girls have and which you can hardly believe is real and that makes you want to touch it to find out – and her lips were rosy with lipstick and her blonde hair looked great and her skirt was long like in a fashion magazine she'd dug up somewhere that said women would be wearing clothes like that after the war. She dodged her way between the pack-bearing, heavy-booted men who trudged past in silence, their mouths hanging open from exhaustion. We crossed the little bridge over the creek and headed towards the Czech Brethren Church. It was surrounded

by trees covered with white blossoms. We were just going by the front of the church when suddenly a coatless and unarmed German soldier came running towards us. Reverend Houba and Mr Rebarbora, the Sunday school teacher, were right on his heels – Houba holding a rifle, Rebarbora a German Army coat. Then, without slowing up, Reverend Houba dropped the rifle and made a beautiful flying tackle, just like an American football player, and brought the German down. They both made perfect belly-landings, flat out.

'Wow!' said Haryk. The Sunday school teacher ran to the preacher's aid and they both started clobbering the German. Then Houba tried to pull off his jackboots and, though the German kicked like mad, finally got them off, too. It was a weird sight – Rebarbora straddling the guy's back and thumping away at his head, Houba pulling the guy's pants off including his belt with its revolver and hooked-on hand grenades.

'There! *Du Verdamntes deutsches Schwein!*' Reverend Houba said in good high-school German and then let go of the guy. Rebarbora stood up, too. The German got up and started running. His long white underpants flashed in the sunlight as he sprinted across the lawn, heading west.

'Good morning,' I said to Reverend Houba.

'Good morning,' he said, gazing after the fleeing German. The scoundrel!

'What happened?' I said.

'He wanted to hide in the church!' the preacher said indignantly.

'Really?'

'We caught him just in time.'

'Well, you certainly got rid of him,' I said.

'May it be a lesson to him – the barbarian,' the preacher said. He looked around. 'Where's his gun?'

'Here,' said Mr Rebarbora, picking the rifle up. It was a handsome though obviously battle-worn German rifle. The preacher took it, looked it over, and said, 'God only knows how many lives this thing has on its conscience.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Do you know how to use it?'

'Know how to use it?' said the preacher as if I'd insulted



him. 'I'll have you know I was a Czech Legionnaire. I've had plenty of experience with toys like these in my time.'

'Maybe this one's different, though.'

The preacher scowled and pulled back the bolt. The bullets flew out of the gun on to the grass.

'No different,' he said.

'Well, then, that's fine,' I said. 'Are you going over to the brewery also?'

'No, I'm staying right here. I'd just like to see somebody else try to hide out in my church!'

'I'd hardly recommend it,' said Haryk.

'I guess not,' said the preacher with a grin.

'Not unless somebody's eager to walk around in his underwear.'

'Well, good-bye, Reverend,' I said.

'Good-bye,' said the preacher, and everybody mumbled their good-byes and the preacher and his Sunday school teacher went back into the church and we went on our way. After a while Lucie said, 'Haryk, are you sure you're all going to be all right?' she said.

'What's there to worry about?' said Haryk. 'You can see for yourself the Krauts are on the run, can't you?'

'Well, sure. I just hope the SS won't come through.'

'Oh, no. Don't worry,' said Haryk. We went along the path by the river till we got to the brewery. Others were headed there too - most of them wearing armbands. The brewery was completely hidden behind fragrant blossoming trees. Some women were standing around in front of the gate. Men and boys, their faces set in patriotic expressions, were saying good-bye to them. A few of the women were bawling. We stopped and Lucie said, 'Well, take care of yourselves.'

'Good-bye, Lucie,' I said and held out my hand. She squeezed it and smiled at me. I gave her a meaningful smile. Then she shook hands with Pedro and said good-bye to him, too.

'See you,' said Pedro. I watched to see whether Lucie and Haryk would kiss. They held hands and looked at each other.

'Well, 'bye, Lucie,' Haryk said.

'Bye,' said Lucie. Then she put on one of those vaguely

distant expressions girls get when they're with their boy-friends, even when there are other people around. Haryk kind of grinned. I stared at them and knew I was staring and knew I shouldn't be staring but went right on staring anyway. Then Haryk leaned over and kissed her.

'Good-bye,' sighed Lucie and pulled away from him and then she said good-bye to us all again and we all said so long and then she turned and hurried off. I went in through the gate. The first people I bumped into were Benda and Vahar. They were standing around at the edge of the crowd, looking disgusted. Benda was still doggedly wearing his black fireman's helmet. I said hello but they didn't bother to answer.

'What's new with Prema?'

'Still locked up,' said Benda.

'You mean old Cemelik hasn't let him out yet?' asked Haryk.

'Hell, no.'

'Are they going to let us in to see him, at least?'

'No.'

'Boy, I sure don't envy him. Two days sitting around in that cellar,' said Haryk. I looked around. The squad leaders were standing out in front of the main building, dressed in their hiking outfits, waiting. They were chatting together. They looked kind of pale. Major Weiss stood up by the door with Lieutenant Rubes and Captain Kuratko. All three were in uniform.

'Well, what're we going to do?' I said.

'Some uprising,' said Haryk.

'Three cheers for the Republic,' I said.

'Bottoms up,' said Pedro.

'Good morning, men,' somebody said behind us. It was Benno with Fonda and Lexa.

'Hi,' I said.

'Well, are you all steeled in your devotion to the holy cause of freedom?' asked Lexa. 'You hear Sabata's speech?'

'No. When?' I said.

'Last night over the public address system.'

'I didn't hear it,' I said. 'What crap did he come out with this time?' I asked, and thought back to what I'd been doing then.



'Oh, about devotion to the holy cause of freedom,' Lexa said. 'About how everybody should be prepared to sacrifice everything for their country if necessary.'

'And especially about how everybody should obey orders so they won't have to sacrifice anything,' said Haryk.

A bugle blew. The bugler disappeared from the window of the main building and Major Weiss took his place. Major Weiss was holding a sheet of paper. It was getting hot as hell. The Major's voice reached us clearly even though he was a long way off.

'Order number twelve,' he read. 'All those who have not yet undergone military training are to report immediately behind the icehouse where they will be given basic instruction in military technique. Signed, Colonel Cemelik.' Then Major Weiss held up another paper. 'I will now read the names of those to whom this order applies, compiled on the basis of the induction forms,' he said and started reading off names.

Boy, they've certainly got things running efficiently now, I thought, and then I remembered Prema and his naïve Robin-Hood notions of how to stage an uprising. This was the real thing, all right. With lists of names and everything. And the basic training in military technique. I watched the guys start off after their names had been called out, heading for the other side of the brewery yard. I saw Hrob's red head, then Benda, Prochazka, and Vahar, then that little squirt Dobrman, who was hardly five feet tall, trotting eagerly across the yard. Then Weiss read off Zdenek's name and I saw him in his mountain-climbing pants and his jacket with leather-patched elbows and left shoulder, wearing a Tyrolean hat with a knapsack on his back. He elbowed his way through the crowd towards the icehouse, his leg muscles bulging under his woollen knee socks. I still couldn't see what Irena saw in him. And at the same time I wished she could see the same thing in me and wondered what it was that makes girls like Irena fall in love with somebody. When I heard my name called, I straightened up and went over to the icehouse, too. The untrained forces were sitting on the grassy bank that sloped up to the fence at the edge of the woods. Most of them had taken their jackets off and were

loafing around in the grass in the shade of the loading ramp trestle. The shadows of the trestle fell like a checkerboard across the men and the grass. Zdenek was sitting up next to the fence, already settling down to eat. He was just squatting there with his knees spread apart and his pants stretched tight across his thighs. He peered out at me from under his Tyrolean hat and I thought that with those big thighs crammed into those mountain-climber pants and with all those black hairs crawling out from under his sleeves and with that big suntanned mug of his he looked pretty repulsive. In fact, everything about him was repulsive. He was eating with his mouth open, gnawing away at some bread or whatever it was and I could hear him smacking his lips as I got closer. And this was the guy Irena had picked out. I couldn't understand it. I would have loved to sock him in that big munching jaw and I didn't have a doubt in the world but that I was better than he was and that Irena would be better off with me, but then it struck me maybe I really wasn't all that much better than he was and when it came to what really counted with girls maybe he was better than I was, and just better in general since, after all, Irena was so wild about him and so I went up and said hello and sat down beside him.

'How do you do,' Zdenek said to me. 'How's it going?'

'Same as with you, I guess.'

'Look,' said Zdenek. 'I get the feeling all this doesn't make much sense.'

'All what?'

'All this organization.'

'Well, that's an original thought,' I said.

'Boy, we had a troop that was really organized. All mountain climbers, see?'

'Must've been great,' I said.

'I'll say,' went on Zdenek. 'Tonda was our leader and it was just guys from the club.'

'What happened?'

'They disbanded us. I guess they've forbidden any kind of private organization. That's what this army's for and anybody who doesn't obey will be treated like an outlaw.'



'A bunch of crooks themselves,' I said. 'What's Irena doing?' 'She signed up for the Red Cross. Hey, there's Tukes!' Zdenek said suddenly and whistled their signal. Tukes, another mountain climber, came across the grass towards us. He had buck-teeth and was wearing a ski cap and two other guys were with him. They were both wearing mountain-climbing pants with leather knee patches and jackets with more patches and Tyrolean hats.

So I quickly said to Zdenek, 'Gee, there's Benno. I've got to talk to him. See you later!' It was all the same to Zdenek. He didn't even hear me and he didn't even look at Benno.

'Well, greetings, gentlemen, greetings,' he yodelled at them. 'Come on, come on over!'

I went over to Benno and the other guys from the band who'd just shown up and just walking over there made me feel better. I'd always felt funny around Zdenek and all those sportsman types from the Alpine Club. I wasn't the athletic type. I belonged to the band. The Alpinists made me sick with their knapsacks stuffed with bread and butter and their patented butter holders and all their talk about the beauties of the sun going down on the cliffs and about traversing here and chimneying there and about pietons and etriers and belaying and roping down. The whole business gave me a big pain and I only went around with them on account of Irena, because she did, and that's why I floundered around, up and down the Ledecsky Rocks, dabbing my skinned knees and torn hands with iodine, and swinging all tangled up in loops of rope far out over the tops of the pine and spruce trees with the blue sky up above and grey cliffs in between whose sides had been gashed and etched by some primeval sea and flayed by the winds while down below, deep in the gulch over which I dangled, the moss grew soft and wet and dark in the shadows and there I was, clinging to those ropes like an untalented spider. Like the time I crossed from Five Fingers to Sleeve Peak. It felt awfully weird up there on those ropes but it really gave you a good feeling, too, because there was Irena sitting over on Sleeve Peak in her yellow sweater and those pants with the leather heart over her fanny, and she was watching me tensely

and telling me what to do next so it wasn't half bad. It was kind of fun, in a way, to be a mountain climber and crawl everywhere with Irena and sleep beside her and the others at night in the cabin down under the cliffs. All that was great, except I was no mountain climber. They had to pull me along the rope with loops and I'd always fall at Chimney Rock and my knees would knock going up the side of the cliff. I just wasn't built for that sort of thing. I was just interested in Irena and I did all that just on account of her and, man, what all I hadn't done! But almost everything I ever did was on account of girls. Just like every other guy I ever knew. Only some were lucky enough to be able to do things they were cut out for, things they loved doing and were talented at and that the girl loved doing too. No such luck for me. I loved playing jazz and I was clumsy as hell at doing it. Irena was all for cliffs and nature and for getting up at half past three to see the sunrise and she said herself she wasn't musical and she wasn't. She'd only taken piano lessons because her daddy wanted her to and she couldn't tell the difference between a trombone and a trumpet, but she didn't even care. I did. I was happiest when we were up in Benno's room, listening reverently to Armstrong's 'Ain't Misbehaving' or else when I was sitting at the Port Arthur sucking on the tenor reed and fiddling with the valves on its nice, cool, metallic body. That was the life for me. That was life and none of these other things were.

I went over to Benno and the others and joined them without a word. There was a big crowd behind the icehouse now. It looked like things should start any minute. We waited a while longer and then Major Weiss appeared around the corner of the icehouse in his elegant uniform. There was some other guy with him, a short guy with sergeant's stripes on his arm. He was squat and stubby and looked like a stump.

'Jeezuz,' said Benno. 'Is he going to instruct us?'

'Looks that way,' said Lexa.

Major Weiss blew his whistle and everybody stopped talking. He waited till everything got quiet and then said, 'Men, I'm turning over command of this group to Sergeant Krpata who



will give you the necessary basic training. His orders must be obeyed without question, as you yourselves pledged to do when you signed up. Good luck!

'Thank you, sir!' a couple of idiots called out feebly. Major Weiss said a few words to Krpata who clicked his heels and saluted. Major Weiss touched his cap casually and left. Company Sergeant Krpata looked us all over.

'We're in for a great time now,' said Benno.

'Don't forget, it's for the fatherland,' Lexa said.

'Shit,' said Benno.

'There are quite a lot of you here,' yelled Krpata. 'So Major Weiss and I decided that half of you will go out on patrol while the other half undergoes basic training here this morning and when the patrols return those who've remained will go out.'

'Are we going to parade around town again?' somebody up front asked.

'Yes,' Krpata told him. 'Somebody's got to help handle the refugees and move mattresses into temporary dormitories.'

'The same old grind all over again,' grumbled Benno.

'And now I'll read off half the men on this list. That half will remain here. You others'll leave and report back in two hours,' said Krpata. I looked at my watch. It was eleven. Krpata read off the names. All were present and accounted for. The sun was getting hotter and hotter and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was sweltering. Benno took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt all the way down to his belly. Drops of sweat glistened on his forehead and there were big wet stains under his armpits.

'Now what're they going to do with us?' he said in a low voice.

Krpata finished reading his list and said all those whose names had not been read should leave. Several guys hoisted themselves up off the grass and plodded off. I saw the mountain climbers leave with the leather patches on their behinds, looking like they were going to some kind of masquerade. The sun beat down on the green grass and on the guys clumping past the icehouse. The back wall of the icehouse was cracked and tiny useless bits of mica in the plaster glittered in the sun.

'Well, now,' said Krpata and then out of the clear blue sky, he let out an unnatural bellow: 'Ten-shun!' Though none of us moved, I noticed a number of boys jumping up off the grass. Hrob was standing in front of me, tense as a bowstring, his carrot top blazing in the sunshine.

'You! You back there! Didn't you hear me? I gave the order to stand at attention!' yelled Krpata, glaring at us. Warily we got up and drew ourselves to attention while Krpata kept his threatening glare trained on us. I could hear Benno behind me whispering, 'Jackass.'

'You waiting for somebody to pick you up?' said Krpata with suppressed rage. I looked around. Pedro was lazily getting up off the grass, smiling wryly. But no sooner had he stood up than he leaned over again and brushed off his knees.

'Well? You about ready now?' roared Krpata.

'Take it easy,' said Pedro. Krpata flushed and bristled. He strode sternly up to Pedro and stopped in front of him. Pedro straightened up. He was about a head taller than Krpata but the sergeant was very solidly built. Then he yelled right into Pedro's face.

'What's your name?'

Pedro twisted his mouth into a near grin. 'Gershwin,' he said.

'You know where you are?'

'Sure. At the brewery.'

'Don't try getting wise with me, and don't think you're going to get anywhere with your Schweik tricks either, because you're not!' bellowed Krpata. You could see he was trying to make up his mind whether he ought to start off his glorious training programme by marching Pedro off and locking him up in the cellar with Prema or not.

'Wouldn't think of it, sir,' said Pedro. Krpata sliced him with another bitter look.

'And stand up straight!' he barked, but in a somewhat milder tone now. Pedro straightened up a bit.

'Stomach in!'

Pedro sucked his stomach in and tilted slightly forward.

'Toes out!'

Pedro stood there looking like a toe dancer.



'Not so far out!' bellowed Krpata.

Pedro stood practically pigeon-toed. Krpata studied him for a minute, then said, 'All right. But I'm going to keep my eye on you.' Then he turned and went back to stand in front of the crowd.

'Prick,' said Haryk quietly.

'Form up behind me now, in a column of threes!' shouted Krpata, and he turned to face the icehouse wall. Everybody milled around for a while and three straggly lines formed up behind Krpata. Guys were pushing and shoving, trying to line up according to height, and meanwhile Krpata stood there with his back to them, one hand stretched out towards the sky.

'Let's get in the back,' said Benno. We headed for the rear. We stood right at the end of the line. Pedro, Lexa, and Fonda stood in front of me; Benno and Haryk and I brought up the rear. Far away I could see Krpata's upraised hand. Then his hand came down and I heard him yell, 'Line up!'

I took two steps to the right and stopped directly behind Lexa. I saw Krpata marching back along the column, checking every row. He was looking for us. I heard him stop behind us and then a roar: 'About face!'

Feet flashed in front of me and I pivoted slowly. It reminded me of the time at the beginning of the war when I went to Sokol Hall on account of Irena and let myself be shoved and ordered around by Brother Vladyk. When I turned around, there was Krpata again. His eyes were sparkling with vicious glee. The dunce had tricked us. Now the three of us were at the head of the column. Krpata studied us a moment. Benno stood right in front of him.

'I can see,' said Krpata, 'that some of you don't even know how to execute a proper about face. Be so kind as to watch. I'll demonstrate.'

He drew himself up stiff as a ramrod. 'This exercise is executed in two stages. In stage one, you pivot on your left foot and move your right foot out to the side, like so. In stage two, you bring your right foot up next to the left. Like so.' Like a billiard ball hit with just enough English, he spun around and clicked his heels.

'Once more,' he said, and did it again. We stood there watching him.

'All right, now,' he said. 'Company! About face!'

You could hear feet scraping over the ground and clumping together. I did it in two stages as he said. We stood there with our backs to him.

'Wonderful!' he howled sarcastically behind us. 'Company! About face!'

I spun again and saw Benno next to me, pivoting like an elephant. Krpata was watching him, too.

'You now. By yourself,' he said to Benno. 'About face!' Benno turned his back to him.

'My God,' said Krpata. 'Did you even listen to what I was saying?'

'Yeah,' said Benno, with his back towards him. I could tell he was mad and embarrassed. He always used to get embarrassed in gym class and always did everything wrong. Like the time when that ju-jitsu instructor came to our school to demonstrate self-defence and, of course, picked Benno for his demonstrations and threw him around on the mat for a full hour, twisting his arms and legs until, finally, he sat down on top of him while he explained the theory of self-defence to the whole class.

'Then kindly repeat what I said,' said Krpata.

'Well, first you pivot on one foot and put the other foot out and then bring it over,' said Benno.

'Then why didn't you do it?'

'I did.'

'Nonsense! Now try it again. Company! About face!' Benno turned back to face Krpata. A couple of clowns behind snickered.

'You're as graceful as a block of wood! See if you can't move that big right foot of yours this time! Company! About face!' Benno turned again.

'Company! About face!'

Benno turned back.

'Shift some of that flab of yours around, for Chrissake!' howled Krpata. 'Company! About face!'



Benno wanted to turn but just then Krpata bent down and grabbed his right foot and, as Benno turned, pulled. Only Benno, caught completely off guard, lost his balance and came down heavily on Krpata's foot. Krpata let out a hiss of pain.

In the middle of the silence, Pedro chuckled. It wasn't any joke, though, to have Benno sitting on your foot.

'Up! Get up, you!' roared Krpata and Benno scrambled up from the ground.

'I've never seen such a clumsy ox in my life,' said Krpata furiously. Then he turned and slowly went back to his place. He limped a bit, but tried to hide it.

'Let's hope they have to amputate,' whispered Lexa behind me.

Krpata started in on his instruction course again.

'The cornerstone of military training,' he said, 'is knowing what every order means. The order. "Forward march," for example, is done this way.'

He made a half turn, stuck out his bemedalled chest and yelled at himself, 'Forward, march!' Then he flung out his left foot and started marching past our line without making any mistakes that I could see.

'When the order "Halt!" is given,' I heard him say as he marched along, 'you come to a halt on your right foot, take one more step with your left, then bring your right foot up beside it. Like so.' He came along briskly till he got to us, yelled 'Halt!' and clacked his boots together. Then he looked at us triumphantly as if waiting for us all to applaud.

'Now let's all try it,' he said. 'Just mark time, standing where you are. Attention!' He looked imperiously around the yard. It was as quiet as a graveyard. Then he let out a yell like an Apache: 'Forward, march!'

I looked back and saw everybody tramping their feet up and down, looking embarrassed. The sun slid behind a small cloud and three long lines of guys marched away without going anywhere. 'Left!' howled Krpata. 'Left! Shift that flab! Higher! Higher! Lift those feet!' I could see him glaring at Benno. 'Get some life into it!' he bellowed. 'You look like you're going to a funeral!' Benno was staggering from foot to foot like a camel,

staring stupidly ahead at the sergeant, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head. He was red and shining with sweat. Then Krpata started off around the field. You could hear him howling remarks all over the place. The sun came out again and there we stood in the field behind the icehouse, marking time. Four guys went past the fence with a load of bazookas on their back. I stood there treading up and down and watched them until they disappeared around the corner. Then there wasn't anything else to look at so I glanced at my watch. Quarter to twelve. We'd been tramping up and down there for a good five minutes. We kept it up a while longer and then Krpata bellowed 'Halt' and started telling us all about half turns and oblique turns and marching doubletime and about field equipment and outfits and about how a platoon is made up of a couple of riflemen and a reconnaissance man and a machine gunner and I don't know what all and the sun beat down and we were sweating like down at the beach on the hottest summer day and Krpata kept on instructing us tirelessly there behind the icehouse and its white wall kept on sparkling away in the sunshine. He showed us how to salute a lieutenant and a colonel and a general and how many steps ahead you start and how many steps after you can bring your hand down again and he picked out Pedro to demonstrate with and really kept him stepping, past him and back and over and over again, bawling him out the whole time, and making him do those turns and half turns and obliques all by himself out in front of everybody until even Pedro was red with anger, though he was usually the last person in the world to lose his temper. Finally we each got a wooden stick handed to us - dummy rifles from Sokol Hall - and Krpata taught us how to present arms, but he himself had a rifle and kept waving its polished muzzle under our noses. You couldn't wear that guy down. When we took off our shirts because of the heat, he buttoned up the collar of his old uniform which he'd unbuttoned earlier and when we croaked from parched throats during the break he went right on roaring till we thought we'd go nuts. When we could hardly lift our feet after finishing that crazy stand-still march, he showed us how to hurdle obstacles and slip under wires,



wriggling past us on his belly like a slug in a hurry. At first I found the whole thing a big joke but then the humour wore thin and I started getting mad and finally wound up hating that idiot sergeant standing there, in the pink of condition though a bit overweight for his size, bellowing orders like one of the German guards out at Messerschmidt, like Mr Uippelt, the supervising manager, a pompous fart, bursting with zeal and unable to get his voice down under a shout. Finally Krpata dismissed us and trotted briskly off towards the administration building.

As soon as he turned his back on us, Benno collapsed and rolled over on the grass. He was soaking wet with sweat.

'Jesus H. Christ,' he said and stretched out his legs. We sat down around him.

'A turd. A genuine turd, that guy,' said Haryk.

'What're you griping about?' said Lexa. 'You've got a complete military education in one short morning.'

'Up yours,' said Benno.

'You're talking like a top sergeant already,' said Haryk.

'What's wrong? Aren't you happy, Benno?' said Lexa. 'Fonda, go tell your old man to give Benno some private lessons in how to be a soldier.'

'Up that, too,' said Benno.

'You know, your old man's really not very bright, Fonda,' said Haryk.

'Maybe not. But this farce isn't his fault,' said Fonda.

'Like hell it isn't. He thought this whole thing up.'

'Sure,' said Lexa. 'And when we finally attack, old Cemelik's going to send us back and make us do it all over in step the next time.' He turned to Benno. 'Hey, Benno, got anything to eat?'

'Food!' cried Benno. 'Food! The best idea I've heard all morning!' He reached over for his jacket and started taking little packages out of the pockets. We got out our supplies, too, and started in. Our mood picked up. Suddenly Fonda started tapping his feet and humming and after a while he gave out with some scat. Fonda was a great scat singer. He sat there, his skinny body jerking as he sang through his nose, just sounds,

no words. Haryk and Benno joined in, Benno like a trumpet, Haryk like a clarinet in the high registers, and then Fonda came in like a trombone. They scatted on into 'Drop Down Mama Blues' and as I sat there listening, I started feeling good. Guys around us turned to listen, too. The sun shone down as hot as ever, and we sat in that checkerboard slope of shadow and light and the blues echoed against the icehouse wall and when the boys had finished the final chorus, I started up in English, singing 'Woman I'm Loving' and the boys picked it up but stayed down soft and easy. 'One tooth solid gold', I sang, and when I got through with that verse, the boys broke out with a gorgeous dissonance that swelled to fortissimo and Fonda gave out with a great big glissando and then they faded off and I went on, 'dat's de only woman,' while they plucked staccato chords and I let my voice go down to a hoarse sob for 'a mortgage on my soul,' and then I joined in like I would on my tenor sax and we went on like that, drifting from one piece to another for at least a quarter of an hour. A circle formed around us, guys sitting there gaping at us and tapping their feet, their eyes full of wonder. Their eyes always looked that way when they heard jazz, like when they were sitting around a table at the Lion behind a glass of pink lemonade, listening reverently as we played 'Chinatown' and Brynych took over on his drums for an ear-shattering beautiful solo or when we played in our overalls at the Messerschmidt cafeteria at noon and I could feel their eyes on me when I played Coleman Hawkins's solo from 'Sweet Lorraine'. They were staring at us now with the same sort of eyes you saw when you told them the incredible fact that 'Big Noise from Winnetka' was nothing but drums and bass for one whole side, and this wonder in their eyes made me feel great and I loved them for it and figured they must be all right after all if they loved jazz so much, and that they'd run things differently than Mr Krocan who owned the factory or Mr Machan or Mr Petrbock, the band leader with his simpleminded merry-go-round music, and maybe their world was going to be a great world, full of jazz, and just generally a great place to live in. We sat there on the grass and were just blasting our way into 'Darktown Strutters'



Ball' when men with armbands on their sleeves came around the side of the icehouse and started calling up the patrols. We stopped singing. Our good mood faded fast.

'Why the hell can't they just leave us alone?' said Benno, but just then we heard Dr Bohadlo's piping voice, 'Dr Bohadlo's patrol, over here!' and you could see his chubby little hand signalling above his waterproof jacket.

'Screw him,' said Benno, and didn't move.

'Come on, Benno. Don't try anything stupid now,' I said. I figured it'd be good to get away from the brewery for a while.

'I'm not moving an inch. First they drill you to death and then you're still supposed to drag yourself all around town.'

'Yeah, but once you're outside it's easier to take off,' I said.

'A bright idea. And the next thing you know old Cemelik's stringing you up for desertion.'

'Well, they'll do it right now if you don't get up pretty soon,' I said. 'For refusing to obey orders.'

'Bullshit,' said Benno.

The field in front of us was slowly emptying. I watched the centipedes marching off. Dr Bohadlo stood there in his knickers peering around expectantly. He looked just as rosy and complacent as he had on Sunday.

'Ah, there you are,' he called out when he saw us and his voice was full of patriotic enthusiasm. 'All right, lads, come on, come on! We've got to be going!'

'I'll murder him,' said Benno quietly, but he got up. We dusted ourselves off and went over to Dr Bohadlo.

'All right, come on,' he said. 'I hope you won't run out on me again like last time,' he said jokingly. I grinned.

'Are we going around the town again?' said Benno.

'That's right,' nodded Dr Bohadlo.

'Three hours again?'

'That's right, Mr Manes. Three hours. This is the army. All right. Line up, boys, so we can be on our way. It's already quarter past.'

I looked at my watch. It was quarter past two. We lined up.

'So long, guys,' I said to Lexa and Pedro who were marching at the rear of the last centipede.

'So long,' said Lexa.

'For the good of our country!' said Pedro.

'Forward, march,' said Dr Bohadlo, flinging out his chubby little legs, and once again we started off on that crazy circuit around the town. We turned the corner and plunged on towards the gate. A bunch of guys were leaning against the iron fence by the gate, looking out. When we got closer, I saw they were arguing excitedly with a crowd that had gathered on the other side. The guards at the gate had been reinforced and they were arguing in two directions at once – with guys inside who wanted out and with people on the outside who wanted in.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'I don't know,' said Haryk. 'What's going on?' he yelled at a guy running from the gate towards the main building.

'The Russians are coming!' the guy yelled.

'Jesus!' said Haryk.

'Well, I guess that takes care of our revolution,' said Benno. 'Are we going on patrol, Doctor?'

Dr Bohadlo looked bewildered. 'Well, I don't know,' he said. 'The matter wasn't discussed at headquarters.'

'Well, let's skip it then. The whole thing doesn't make any sense, anyway,' said Benno.

'He's got something there,' said Haryk. 'Let's go out and welcome the Russians.'

'I don't know, boys. Wait here, I'll ... oh, Major!' shouted Dr Bohadlo, and he ran up to Major Weiss who was striding from the gate looking grave and important. He wore a tricolour badge on his cap and the buttons on his uniform shone in the sunshine. He stopped when he heard Dr Bohadlo calling, bent over to hear what he had to say, but meanwhile kept looking around. He looked preoccupied. Dr Bohadlo was telling him something and Weiss was listening and then he turned towards him sharply and shook his head. You could see him saying, 'No! Under no circumstances!' Dr Bohadlo bowed courteously, then remembered himself, stuck out his chest, touched his fingers to his hiking cap, then turned and came back to us as red as a lobster.



'Well, boys, we've got to go out on patrol.'

'Aw, but that's silly,' said Benno.

'No. No, Mr Manes. This is a matter of law and order.'

'But what's the point of patrolling if the Russians are coming?'

'Orders are orders, Mr Manes. We're in the army.'

'Fine. But orders aren't supposed to be stupid,' said Benno in disgust.

'It's a soldier's duty to obey orders,' said Dr Bohadlo, and then he addressed the rest of us, 'Let's go, boys.'

Benno grumbled. 'Sure. *Maul halten und weiter dienen*,' he said in an undertone. Dr Bohadlo flung out his leg again and we moved towards the gate.

'This is crazy,' said Benno. 'This is first-class lunacy.'

'It sure is,' I said, and looked around. Four soldiers on guard duty at the gate were fighting off a bunch of women trying to push their way in. Most of them were old women in babushkas and they were waving red flags and screaming, 'Let us in!' 'Our husbands are in there!' 'The Russians are coming!' 'Long live the Red Army!' I saw the back of one of the soldiers in green khaki. Holding his rifle horizontally in front of him, he was shoving the women back. A lieutenant was standing behind the soldiers. When I looked closer, I saw it was Baron Rozkosny whose prep school diploma had cost his parents a house which they'd built for the chairman of the examinations board. There he stood, an elegant little revolver in his hand, behind his men. We stopped by the gate and Rozkosny noticed us. 'Make way for the patrol!' he shouted, waving his revolver under the old women's noses. They went on cursing the guards but moved back. The soldiers made a corridor for us and our centipede jolted forward and passed through.

'Look at 'em, playing soldiers!' screamed one old lady.

'Well, they won't be playing much longer!'

I looked at Dr Bohadlo's back. No reaction. We turned down towards the bridge, trudging along in step. On the other side of the bridge we suddenly found ourselves caught up in a swarming throng of people. Flags were flying from the houses and buildings facing the station again, lots of flags. They looked

fresh and bright in the sun. Our centipede was swallowed up in the crowd. The crowd was streaming past the station, heading for the German border to the east. A parade of old men and women was forming up at the corner of the Lewith Mills. They were holding a banner made out of red cloth with some kind of Russian inscription on it. I spelled it out: LONG LIVE THE RED ARMY. Some of them were carrying red flags, some Czech flags, and children kept tearing back and forth on the sidewalk. Dark masses of people poured in from the factory section, all headed east towards the border. And we were marching along the main street, due west. It was slow going because we were going against the confused current of women pushing baby carriages and trying to carry children, too, little boys, Italians who'd suddenly started singing for joy, Russian refugees in their torn green clothes, guys in shirtsleeves and kids in knickers or short pants. Well, well, I said to myself, so it's only the élite who signed up at the brewery. The élite of the town's prize fools. And these guys here, they'd probably been hiding out in their cellars just waiting for this, for the Russians to come, and now they'd come out to welcome them while we had to march around on patrol and as we marched on I had this feeling that I was striding through Bombay or Rangoon, a member of His Majesty's colonial troops, and the next minute I was living the part – tight-lipped, pith-helmeted, marching through a mob, our revolvers in their holsters, our carbines in our hands – called in to put down some native uprising and, goddamn it, maybe that was all our army was called up for, too. The crowds made way for us and on we went and the tropical sun hung high above us, baking our faces. Then I saw Berty on a bike, a Leica hanging around his neck, riding off towards the border, peddling like mad in his short pants, his face eager with greed. The feeling of being in Rangoon popped. Photographs by kind permission of Mr B Moutelik, Jr. 'Our Liberators', the caption would be in the *Illustrated History of the Kostelec Revolution* under a picture of some triumphantly gesturing Russians. Flags flapped from the windows above us and people kept hanging out more and more and suddenly I noticed that there were an awful lot of Russian ones, par-



ticularly at the Kaldouns's where the long red-and-white noodle had hung on Saturday. Now there was an even longer red one. At Pittermans's, just like Rosta had said there would be, an immense violet flag flapped against the wall with a yellow star in the middle. It looked like something out of a circus. A Soviet flag also hung in front of the Krocans's house and in each window they'd stuck a pair of little paper Czech and Russian flags. The Russian flags looked new and homemade. I looked around – the town was ablaze with red flags. At the Jiraseks's, at the Mlejniks's, at the Burinohas's, at the Novotonys's, at the Novaks's, at the Wenigs's and as we went on, I saw more at the Mouteliks's, the Rydl's, the Sejnohas's – everywhere. Thousands of them. A car steered towards us across the square. Its windows were decorated as if for a wedding and the radiator covered with garlands. Mr Vipler, a municipal employee, was hanging out a big WE WELCOME YOU! banner above the loan association floor. The whole gipsy encampment in the square was going crazy, dancing around between the piles of knapsacks and bundles. In front of the Lion Hotel you could see the gleaming instruments of the local brass band. That intrigued me. I looked closer and saw Mr Petrobok, its leader, with his white admiral's cap and his baton topped with the golden ball, lining up his musicians while, behind, a parade was forming with flags and banners. The sun beat down on the chaos in the square. Somebody started to ring the church bells and through all the noise and singing and din of voices, the two big bells – Gabriel and Michael – tolled out as if sounding an alarm.

'Well, if this isn't the dumbest thing I ever heard of,' said Benno, and he stopped. Swinging along at a good clip, I tramped on his heels.

'Go on, go on,' I said.

'Boy, are we ever a bunch of idiots,' said Benno, and he plodded on. We crossed the square over to Sokol Hall. Another parade was forming up there. Sokol members in folk costume. Men and women. There weren't very many of them, but the ones up front were carrying a heavy flag with lots of ribbons dangling from it. Mr Sumec's brass band was behind them and

flags everywhere. The band started to play. It sounded sour and tinny. The Sokol members set off, the men stepping along majestically behind their pot bellies, the Sokol women in berets, then a straggle of kids and people in ordinary clothes. We headed down past Pozner's factory. The crowd had begun to thin out. It looked as if these parades had been lining up and setting off for hours, so that by now the head of the procession must already be at the border. There were hardly any people left in this part of town, just a few old grand-dads sitting on doorsteps, watching us in amazement, and grannies on footstools. We'd marched through town in tight formation; now we spread out over the empty streets on the western side. We'd come to the edge of town, to the lawn in front of Serpon's factory. The sun was still blazing away at us.

'Dr Bohadlo?' Benno said.

'Yes?' said Dr Bohadlo without stopping.

'Couldn't we take a little break here? We're all pretty tired out after that drill this morning,' said Benno.

'Yeah,' I said.

'We sure are,' said Haryk.

Dr Bohadlo stopped and looked at his watch. 'Well,' he said. 'I suppose we might be able to work in a fifteen minute break here.'

Without another word Benno flopped down on the grass and we sat down beside him, facing out to the east. The sky was blue and a couple of thin white clouds stretched off from over the town towards Germany. The cherry trees glowed in the bright sun. There was no wind and from the centre of town all you could hear was a vague buzz. We sat there, staring off at the distant wooded hills between which the German border ran. I stretched out on the grass and looked up at the sky. Behind me loomed the big white Serpon factory, built like a Scottish fortress. It was a silent factory now. But I couldn't look straight up. The sun was right overhead. The closer I tried to look at it, the more it looked like a huge, shapeless, molten blotch, incandescent and melting into the blue sky around it, turning the whole sky to white lava. And, looking up at the sun and with the big white building looming behind me and in



that stillness which was like the quiet in a country where the people have all died, I felt very far away and an awful feeling of futility spread into every pore and cell of my body and everything, everything except me, myself, seemed worlds away. I myself was a snail inside the hard shell of that futility and very comfortable in there even though I couldn't feel anything and was all alone, and I'd just started to inch out of it when my soft vulnerable body came up against something that hurt. There I was, just coming out, and there was Irena and the hurt of not having her and the hurt of not knowing whether I really wanted her and the hurt of wanting her and of being jealous of her and the hurt of not really caring and the hurt of knowing I'd never have her and of knowing that everything was and always would be futile – those evenings and all those words and this revolution which wouldn't help me out with her at all, those pictures with me holding that submachine gun, and that clash by night with the gang of communists, and the triumphant celebration when the Red Army arrived and everything went back to normal again and we were all living together in a republic or a democracy, or who knew what, since as far as I was concerned all revolutions were futile, not for people in general but for me, anyway, because I was lost and would never win Irena, from which it followed I really must love her after all, and so I did – that dumb, beautiful Irena who didn't give a damn about me, that dimwitted girl with that little thinking machine in her head equipped with everything except the short waves we needed if we were ever going to establish contact. Which meant it must be her body I loved, and her face, but it wasn't only that. It was also that magical aura that always surrounded her and that maybe I'd helped to create myself – that window open at night above the river with the stars, and the cliffs and the white rope and her hair and the sun that seemed to follow her wherever she went. Which meant I was in love with her after all and never wanted to get out of it either but then I thought about Lucie and how when I was with her I didn't love Irena at all, and then about Vera and Helena and Mitzi and I knew I didn't think about Irena when I was with them but now, now I was thinking about her and

none of the others meant a thing to me now. And that this one thought only was important to me now, and only it was sure and everlasting and fixed. I lay on my back under the utterly pointless and monotonous blue sky and couldn't hear anything except Benno's snores and the hum of the town and up there in that pointless blue sky who do I see but Irena. There she is, and I'm with her, and at night I kiss her and caress her breasts and say, Irena, Irena, will you marry me? And she says yes and it's morning in the church now and no one knows and I'm kneeling with Irena before the altar and sunlight streams through the windows on us and soon we're mailing out little cards: *Daniel Smiricky and his wife Irena announce that their marriage was performed in St Anthony's Church.* Then my thoughts grew vaguer and vaguer until I hardly knew myself what I was thinking about – about Irena or happiness, I guess – probably happiness since of the two it was vaguer and couldn't be found up there in that pointless blue sky but in me. And I'd completely forgotten whatever it was I'd been thinking about when suddenly a sound rang out, a dark and peculiar sound completely different from all the tones I was listening to inside. It came from somewhere else, from outside, and I couldn't figure out what was going on but then a whole series of fainter noises rang out, one after the other, fast and very regular, and then they stopped and then started up again and by then I knew something had happened and I sat up and Irena and everything else vanished and I was sitting on the grass again next to Benno and he was looking tensely off to the east and Haryk and the three other boys and Dr Bohadlo were, too, and none of us said a word. For a moment, it was perfectly still and then came another series of muffled mechanical raps and then another and another and then I knew what it was but still couldn't figure out what was going on.

'What's that?' said Benno.

'Machine guns,' said Haryk.

'Jesus, maybe ... maybe they made a mistake ...'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, what if it's not the Russians after all?'

'That's crazy,' I said. 'That's ... well, who knows ...'



'The Russians wouldn't be machine-gunning anybody,' said Benno.

'But, look ... well, but everybody went out to welcome them, didn't they?'

'Sure. But who told them to?' Benno turned to Dr Bohadlo. 'Who told everybody the Russians were coming? Do you know, Doctor?'

'Well, I don't know,' said Dr Bohadlo. He'd suddenly turned pale and his usually optimistic face looked worried. 'I have no idea, boys. Nobody told us at the brewery, that's all I can say.'

'See?' said Benno, and turned to us. 'Somebody got this crazy idea and the whole town fell for it.'

'Oh, sure, sure,' I said sarcastically.

'Well, what do you think it is then?'

'How should I know?'

Just then the machine gun started chattering again, louder and quite clear now. You could hear each shot, sharp, dry, and hard. It sounded as if they were getting pretty close now.

'There, you see?' said Benno. 'That's not the Russians, that's the SS.' He got up off the grass. So did the rest of us. The machine gun let go another burst.

'Let's take cover,' said Benno.

'Wait a minute,' I said.

'You wait if you want to, I'm going,' said Benno, and started running towards the factory.

'Benno, don't be an idiot! Come back,' said Haryk.

'Wait, Mr Manes!' called Dr Bohadlo.

Benno stopped and turned.

'Wait a minute. We've got to go back to the brewery.'

'Not me. You're all crazy,' said Benno.

I watched him and was surprised to find I wasn't scared at all. Benno stood there and I heard Dr Bohadlo yelling, 'Mr Manes, you come right back! Leaving now would be desertion,' and I watched Benno standing there getting all red in the face and confused and suddenly all I wanted was to be in the middle of the actual fighting, to take up my gun or my pistol and fight for Irena, to win her. The machine gun hammered

away again and I longed to be out there firing back at it so I yelled, 'Come on, Benno. Don't be silly. Let's go back to the brewery. Come on!'

'Sure, hurry up!' said one of the other boys and I knew that when he said that he wasn't just talking to hear himself talk like me but because he was really brave, but it didn't make much difference, the effect was all the same. Benno still just stood there. So I yelled again, 'We're going, Benno! Don't be so stupid. Come on,' and I started off and the other guys and Haryk followed and Dr Bohadlo said, 'Mr Manes, I am ordering you to come!'

I was dragging my feet, looking at Benno.

'For Chrissake,' I said, 'come on.' I said it as if I was trying to lure him off to go swimming with me and Benno shuffled up all red and sweating like a pig and then Dr Bohadlo hurried up ahead to lead us back. 'All right, boys,' he said, 'let's take it back at a good trot now,' and off we went, with Benno jogging along behind us.

'Idiots,' he said. 'You're running straight into hell like a pack of fools. This isn't going to be any picnic.' That was all he had breath for though. We had to catch up with Dr Bohadlo and he was way out in front by now with his fat rump bouncing around in his knickers. When we got to the main street, Dr Bohadlo suddenly slowed to a walk. The people who'd stayed home were all out on the sidewalks nervously looking off to the east. Dr Bohadlo started trotting again. A good Scout-master's trot. We jogged down the middle of the street, our shoes clattering on the cobblestones. People turned to stare. The sound of gunfire rolled in from the east and here were people who would be hiding in their basements soon and there we were jogging along, in step, straight into the whole big mess. Calm and unmoved, the sun shone on as we clattered down the street. The street pointed straight as an arrow to the underpass and all along the sides I could see people standing on the sidewalk, looking smaller and smaller down the length of the street, and they were all waiting. A deep rumble came from the town. It grew louder. It was a familiar sound but I couldn't quite place it as we trotted towards it. I stared ahead and the



noise grew louder and then suddenly the people down by the underpass started to scatter and then to run. The sound was practically a roar now, yet through it our footsteps kept on clattering as we ran straight for it. There was a scream and a woman picked up a little boy and ran into a house with him. Then those two long rows of people lining the street from the underpass to where we were started to break up. They started to push, they crowded into doorways, they ran for the side-streets. The roar changed into an awful racket and was already coming from just on the other side of the underpass. We kept on trotting, then stopped as though someone had ordered us to. We huddled together and stared at the underpass. And there inside, under the iron girders and between the two stone pillars, a tank suddenly appeared, clattered up into full view and, making a terrific racket, made right for us going fast. I felt as if I was standing in a desert face to face with a rhinoceros. The tank's armoured plates glittered in the sunshine and it was swarming with soldiers in camouflaged parachute-troop uniforms. That was all I stayed to see before taking off like a shot around the corner and into a side street. Benno was ahead of me and Dr Bohadlo ahead of him. Haryk was running along beside me. The street led up a steep hill with a factory wall on one side and a warehouse fence on the other. We were trapped. It gave me a weird feeling as the roar of the tank grew louder and both that fence and that wall looked awfully long and the hill steep. I saw that Benno and Dr Bohadlo had already made it up to where the fence stopped and I was absolutely certain the tank was right at my heels. The roar sounded so close I couldn't believe it could get any louder. Dr Bohadlo and Benno disappeared around the corner. We weren't far from the end of the wall now. Haryk and I were both panting and the roar and clatter were unbelievably loud. There was only a little way to go. Suddenly I realized I was scared stiff. Then I made it around the corner, and Haryk tore in behind me, and we stopped because there were people behind the fence and others running along beside it out of town, away from that tank. We stood at the edge of the crowd and now all at once I wasn't scared any more. The tank rumbled along the street below us. I lay down

on the ground and cautiously stuck my head out for a look. The side street we'd raced up dropped steeply and was empty and so was the patch I could see of the main street below. The sun shone on it and that was all. I lay there for a couple of seconds and could feel the people behind me watching, too, and then I flattened out against the ground because just then the muzzle of a cannon appeared at the corner of the factory wall below. The cannon kept on coming for what seemed like an awfully long time, and then the front of the tank painted in big irregular splotches of colour, and then the squat turret, and then the whole tank hove into view with those soldiers all over it in those camouflaged uniforms with branches stuck into their netted helmets. Some were perched on ledges of armour above the clattering tank track, their legs dangling down in their heavy boots. They'd rolled up their sleeves, I noticed, and I could see the oily gleam of their long Lugers. A guy in black overalls and wearing earphones looked out over the open turret. Next to him, leaning against the side of the turret, stood a soldier holding on with his left hand with a submachine gun in his right, his uniform draped with grenades. For a moment everything was drowned out in the frantic roar of the machine and then the tank clanked out of sight - and the noise faded, grew fainter, and soon you could hardly hear it. All that was left were the bare cobblestones sparkling in the sun. I got up. Haryk came over and, in a hoarse voice, said, 'Is it gone?'

'Yes,' I said.

Then that whole crowd of people who'd been standing back of the wall came over and started asking me questions.

'Did you see it?'

'Yes.'

'Were they SS men?'

'I guess so. I don't know.'

'I thought you said you saw 'em,' one huge guy said in a hoarse voice. He sounded drunk.

'Well, you tell me how I'm supposed to recognize them and I'll tell you who they were,' I said irritably. 'Why didn't you look for yourself?'



Then I turned to Haryk. 'Let's clear out of here,' I said.  
'Hold on,' he said. 'There's Benno. Hey, Benno!' he yelled.  
Benno waddled over, his eyes still popping half-way out of his head.

'Still think it's fun?' he said.

'Who said anything about fun?' I said.

'You know what I mean. You're both nuts and you know that, too.'

'What are you complaining about? Nothing happened to you, did it?'

'Not, but it could have.'

Dr Bohadlo came plodding towards us.

'I don't know about the rest of you,' Benno said, 'but I'm going to take off for the woods.'

'On a mushroom hunt?' Haryk asked.

'I'm just going to wait up there till the Russians get here.'

'You'll starve,' I said.

'I'd rather starve than have some crazy SS man put a hole in my head,' said Benno.

I laughed like a movie hero. It was fun acting tough, now that the tank was gone. 'It's all a question of taste,' I said.

Benno blew up. 'Listen, Smiricky,' he said, 'if you think you're some kind of a hero...'

'It starts to look that way, doesn't it?' I said. 'Compared to you, anyway.'

'You're not, though.'

'And you are?'

'No. But neither are you.'

'So what am I, then?'

'Stupid. That's all.'

I looked at Benno as if that had really hurt. I hoped my eyes looked sad and, just to make sure they did, I lowered my lids and looked down for a minute.

'Maybe,' I said. 'Maybe I am.'

'You are sure,' said Benno. 'As stupid as they come.'

'Maybe I am,' I repeated, with my eyes still trained on the ground. Then I raised them abruptly, looked Benno right in the

eye and said, 'Things are different with me than they are with you.'

I wondered how he would react to that. It would have worked on Irena. But this was Benno. I hadn't really stopped to think how he'd take it. I'd said it more to satisfy myself than anything else.

'Bullshit. Just what in the hell is so different, if I may be forgiven for asking?' said Benno sarcastically.

'Well, oh, let's not argue about it,' I said. 'I'm going back to town no matter how stupid you think that makes me. You coming?'

Benno wasn't the type to fall for my kind of act. He did, though, look a bit more thoughtful suddenly.

'Smiricky, don't be a fool,' he said. 'Don't tell me you want to get yourself killed just to impress...'

'Don't worry,' I broke in. 'I don't want to get killed.'

'No? Then why are you knocking yourself out so hard to get into this?'

'I want to, that's all.'

'You just want to show off for Irena, that's all,' said Benno.

'Whatever you say, Benno.'

'Don't be dumb, Danny.'

'I can't help it. Maybe I just am.'

'Maybe you are.'

I smiled my pained little smile. 'Well, Benno,' I said, 'you coming with us?'

Benno looked at me, his face very serious now, as if this was nothing to joke about, and said, 'Boy, you've really lost your head on that girl, haven't you?'

'So you're coming?' I said with a smile.

'Don't say I didn't warn you. And I'll tell you one thing - I'd be sorry if you got knocked off.'

'Well, so long then, Benno,' I said and put out my hand. 'Don't be mad at me.'

'So long, Danny,' said Benno. 'Too bad about you. We'll miss you in the band and ... well, just in general.'

'Christ! All these good-byes. You make it sound like a funeral,' said Haryk.



'Coming with me, Haryk?' said Benno.  
'Hell, no. I'm going back to the brewery.'  
'Well, so long then,' said Benno, and put out his hand.  
'Oh, cut it out,' said Haryk. 'The look on your face is enough to make a guy vomit.'

Suddenly there was a roar of a motor again. We froze. The next thing we knew a plane was swooping over us, flying low. All over, people were dropping to the ground as the plane's shadow flickered across the field and disappeared against the sun, but you could still hear the roar of its motor.

'Run for the woods!' shouted Benno, as he scrambled up and started running off towards the first big trees. The roar of the motor, faint a minute before, was growing louder again. The plane was coming back. You couldn't see it, though, because of the sun.

'Get down, Benno!' I yelled. But the motor made too much noise and he was already too far away. He was scrambling up the slope towards the woods. Lots of people were scrambling up all around him. The motor was roaring full blast and the noise was growing louder. I flopped to the ground next to Haryk and Dr Bohadlo who were already flat out. The din reached a climax and through it came the long chattering bursts of a machine gun. I could hear the short dry strike of the bullets close by as they buried themselves in the earth. Then the sound of the motor faded again and the plane disappeared over the other side of the wall. I jumped up and looked over. I caught only a glimpse of a German fighter plane flying fast and low over the town. It turned east and vanished among the hills along the border.

'I'll bet that's the last we'll see of him,' Haryk said.

'Let's hope so.'

'We were lucky.'

'We sure as hell were,' I said, and all at once I felt how afraid I'd been. Christ, I might have been hit! I looked around. A few people were running across the field for the woods. Higher up, close to the rim of the woods, I made out Benno's well-rounded body swaying as he ran.

'Look,' I said to Haryk.

'What?'

'Over there. See Benno?'

'Good Lord. It doesn't look like he's planning to stop till he gets to Ratejna.'

'We can just let him go, can't we, Doctor?' I asked Dr Bohadlo who was standing next to us. He looked completely washed out.

'Yes, yes, certainly,' he said. 'It's no wonder. He's never experienced anything like it in his whole life.'

'Sure,' I said. 'Well, shall we go?'

'Yes,' said Dr Bohadlo, but he didn't sound so enthusiastic any more. I got the feeling he also knew, now, that you could get hit out of nowhere and it could all be over before you even had time to duck. We went down to the main street, turned, and headed for the underpass again. The three other guys in our patrol ran out of a house on the other side of the street and joined up with us.

'Where's the fat one?' one of them asked me.

'He got hurt,' I said coolly.

The guy's eyes popped. 'Yeah? How?'

I tripped on purpose so I could catch hold of him and push him off to the side a little. I didn't want Dr Bohadlo to hear.

'He got it in the leg,' I said.

'From that fighter plane?'

'Yeah.'

'Well ... you mean you just left him up there?'

'There was a doctor there. They're going to take him to the hospital.' I filled in a few other fake details and then we were quickly making our way through the underpass. In the bright light beyond the underpass, the crowd of people looked nearly black. They were all huddled around something. Then somebody screamed, a terrible inhuman scream. My blood ran cold. Then the scream started up again. A long, endless woman's scream which, after a tense terrifying second, died out and then welled up again, then dwindled off and changed into an almost animal-like gurgle. I felt sick to my stomach. We pushed up to the edge of the crowd.



'What is it? Somebody hurt?'

A man standing in front of us turned around. He looked grim. 'A woman,' he said.

'Do you know who it is?' I asked.

'No.'

A fat woman closer to the front turned and said, 'It's Dr Vasak's wife.'

'What?' I yelled. I nearly blacked out. Then that half-animal gurgling sound started up again.

'Let me through,' I said. 'Let me through. Has anyone gone for a car?'

I shoved ahead and, since nobody knew who I was, people respectfully made way for me and stared. Mrs Vasakova was lying on the sidewalk. Actually, only her feet in her little white shoes and her legs as far as her knees and then just a mass of ripped flowered material and scraps of blue cloth and blood and then all that was left of her in her flowered dress. Two Englishmen were kneeling beside her, the redheaded Scotsman holding her head up, the tall, handsome one with the bandaged head holding her hand. Neither knew what else to do. It took just one look to see there wasn't much that could be done. Silent and stunned, the people crowded around. I quickly knelt beside her. The Englishmen looked at me. Their eyes were calm and suddenly it struck me how hard their eyes were. They looked at this differently than the shocked crowd did. For them, this was nothing new. At the same time, however, they seemed to know, far better than anybody in that crowd, what it meant.

'Has anyone gone for a car?' I asked in English.

'Yes,' said the Scot.

'Isn't there a doctor around?'

'No.'

'Where's her husband?'

'At the hospital.'

I looked quietly at Mrs Vasakova. She wasn't screaming any more, just whimpering and her face was drawn with pain. Her breast under the thin dress rose and fell unevenly but she still looked young and pretty. Poor Mrs Vasakova. I looked at her

suffering there and everything around faded out and I saw her again in a white pleated dress smiling at me over a coffee cup and her bright eyes sparkling at me those Saturday evenings at Sokol Hall, and our casual chats about the war and shortages of food and me whispering some political joke to her and everybody bending our way to hear and I could feel her warm face close to mine and the interest in her eyes looking into mine, not in the joke but in other things, and I could see how it pleased her to have me flirt with her. She was about five years older than I was and about twenty-five years younger than her husband and she never would have let me get anywhere with her, not really, but she was pretty and she liked me and when we'd say good-bye and I'd kiss her hand, I could feel how she'd press her hand against my lips and once, when it was dark and her husband was saying good-bye to my mother, she turned her hand palm up and, when I kissed it, caught hold of my face and squeezed it in her hand so hard I saw stars, but then I was overcome with a feeling of joy that she'd done it and afterwards I watched her get into the car with her husband and saw her give a little wave and her smile glimmered in the dark and Father waved frantically because he thought it was meant for all of us but I knew it was just for me, and then I went out for a walk and felt wonderful and didn't think about Irena all that night because all I could think about was Mrs Vasakova. I thought about her and now there she lay, as pretty as ever, and it was all over, her mouth pulled down in an arch of pain and blood spilling out of her stomach. A crimson puddle glistening on the sidewalk and the blood kept running out of her. I looked at her face and real tears came to my eyes.

'Poor lady,' I said. 'How did it happen?'

'The plane,' said the Englishman with the bandaged head. I just knelt there speechless for a minute. Then I said, 'Isn't there any way to stop the bleeding?'

'No,' said the Englishman.

'You mean ...?'

'Yes,' said the Englishman and fell silent, too. Then he said softly, 'She'll die before we can get her to the hospital.'

A car honked and brakes screeched. The crowd parted. It



was Jozka the baker's car, a light delivery truck. Jozka jumped out from behind the wheel and ran over to us.

'Let's put her in the back,' he said.

'You have anything we can lay her on?' I asked.

'There're some empty sacks in the back.'

I turned to the Englishmen. 'Can you lift her?'

'Yeah,' said the Scotsman. 'It would help, though, if there was something we could put under her. A sheet would do.'

'Right,' I said. I turned to the crowd. 'Does anybody have a sheet we can lift her with?'

'Just a minute,' called the fat woman and she ran into a house.

'She'll get one for us,' I said to the Englishman. 'She'll be right back.' We waited. It was quiet. In what seemed like a second, the woman reappeared with a sheet. She gave it to me. Her face was wet with tears. She looked badly shaken.

'Thank you,' I said.

'Put it down beside her,' said the bandaged Englishman.

We spread the sheet out on the sidewalk. The Englishman took hold of Mrs Vasakova under her arms, the Scotsman around her waist.

'Could you lift her feet?' the Scotsman asked me.

'Yes,' I said, and did. I was scared to death her body wouldn't be able to take it. When we lifted her, she started screaming again, but feebly now. We laid her on the sheet. A guy stepped out from the front of the crowd to help us. We lifted the sheet by all four corners and slowly carried her over to the truck. Blood dripped through the sheet on to the cobblestones. Jozka ran around the side of the truck and opened up the back. There were empty sacks inside. He climbed in, quickly piled them up to make a bed for her, and then, very skilfully, the Englishmen crawled up and lifted Mrs Vasakova inside. The guy from the crowd and I held her legs until they'd slid her all the way in.

'All right. Drive fast,' I said to Jozka. 'You go with her. I'll see you later,' I said to the Englishmen.

They nodded and bent over Mrs Vasakova. Jozka shut the door and jumped in behind the wheel. As the little truck

moved off the crowd stood wordlessly on the sidewalk, watching it go through the underpass and turn off towards the high school. There was a big pool of blood on the sidewalk. It reflected the sun. I stepped on something and when I stooped over to look, saw it was a big bent anti-tank bullet from the plane's machine gun. The street seemed quiet. Then I realized the quiet had broken. I glanced around. People were running in from the square. They were all dusty and sweating, women and children and old man Baudys dressed up in his Sokol costume and carrying a furled flag.

'What's going on?' I yelled to a guy who'd run up to one of the houses and was opening the door.

'The SS! They're coming in from Prussia!'

'Were you out at the border?'

'Yeah. And it wasn't true. The Russians weren't there.'

'What was all that shooting about?'

'SS tanks.'

'Anyone killed?'

The man waved his hand. 'You can't even count 'em. One tank drove right into the parade out by the customs house. Right into a whole line of kids.'

'Oh my God!' screamed a woman next to me. The man beside her exploded. 'Who the hell was it then who said the Russians were coming anyway? Who started that rumour?'

'I don't know,' said the man at the door, 'but if I find him I'll flay him alive.'

'And what makes you so sure the SS will be coming through here?' I asked calmly.

'Because you can hear the gunfire already, just over the border in Prussia. There's a full-scale battle going on over there.'

Just then the big hollow voice of the public address system sounded. 'Citizens,' it said, 'retreating German tanks are approaching the frontier. We call upon all men capable of bearing arms to report immediately to the local Czechoslovak Army Command Headquarters at the municipal brewery. We repeat,' and the voice blared on into the noise spreading



through the streets as frightened people ran and shoved and swarmed with confusion. 'Women and children should take refuge in the air-raid shelters. It is possible that the town may be bombed,' intoned the announcer, and all around there was the shriek of women's voices. I saw them snatching up their kids and running. All of a sudden, a bunch of men in green uniforms appeared in the milling mob, hurrying against the main current of the crowd. Russian prisoners of war. People tried to make room for them. The confusion was tremendous. I looked around. Haryk was standing next to me.

'Let's go!' I shouted, and we both started to run. A couple of men started running along with us. This is what I'd been waiting for, the thing, a voice inside me said. And it was a great feeling. The voice over the loudspeaker went on: 'Citizens! Your city is in danger. Defend it against the Germans! Death to the German occupation forces!' We ran for the square. Russians with the white SU on their backs were charging along ahead of us. A few people had already panicked and hauled in their flags. Red and red-and-white flags flapped over the heads of the crowd and a cloud slid over the sun. I looked up. Clouds were gathering in the west. We got to the square. It was chaos. Women and children from the refugee camp had thronged into the church and, outside, men stood in little bunches. Others were racing towards the brewery and, meanwhile, people from the welcoming delegations poured back across the square from the border. A group of French and Dutch POWs joined us by the church. We ran across the square and hurried on down the narrow main street. The sun was completely hidden by clouds now and the street was as dark as at dusk. People with pale, frightened faces were rushing in every direction and bumping into each other. We ran along the right-hand side of the street. A brightly-polished tuba loomed out above the crowd we were struggling to make our way through; it bobbed past, heading in the other direction. Everybody was moving faster now. The public address system went on blaring above the murmur and cries and shouts of the crowd. Somebody was already taking down Novotny's banner – the one that had stretched all the way across the street with the inscription WE WELCOME YOU! We

got caught up in the jam in front of the anti-tank barricade. Two streams of people, trying to get through the narrow passage, collided there. From both sides, people were crawling over the barricade. We were shuffling forward when I noticed a girl wearing a Red Cross armband coming out of a side street. Then I saw that it was Irena. In her white dress she stood out against the dark background of the street. She crawled up and over the barricade and jumped down. Her skirt flew up a bit so I could see her legs above her knees.

'Irena!' I shouted. She looked around, then saw me. I ran over to the other side of the street, elbowing my way through the people.

'Irena!' I said, and took hold of her hand. Her hand was warm and soft and she looked at me wide-eyed. She was beautiful. The crowd moving in both directions along Jirasek Boulevard veered and eddied around us. She was wearing a red-and-white polka-dot kerchief. 'Clear the streets!' the loudspeaker boomed. 'German tanks are just passing through Chodov!' Irena smiled at me. I noticed how little and pink her ears were, and the tiny holes pierced in the lobes.

'Irena! Darling!' I said, though in all that noise she probably didn't even hear me. Still, her voice sounded awfully faint when she asked, 'Are you going to the brewery?'

'Yes,' I practically shouted. A big guy blundered into us like an ox. Irena held on to me. I held her close. It was growing darker and darker. Grey clouds were piling up above the houses and the wind was rising. Dust and papers swirled around people's feet.

'Good-bye, Danny,' Irena said. Her face looked white, her cheeks were flushed. The wind blew dust in our eyes. I closed mine. Somebody was yelling from over by the barricades; I couldn't understand a word. I opened my eyes and saw that Irena still had hers closed.

'Good-bye, Irena!' I said quickly. She made a face from all that dust in her eyes. I kissed her quickly on her red lips and stood back. She opened her eyes and tried to look around. A couple of women rushed between us. I caught one more glimpse of her as she stood on her tiptoes and rubbed her eyes



and looked after me. I blew her a kiss. Then the wind rose again and the dust and the trash swirled up again.

'Come on,' I heard Haryk say, and felt him pulling me along by the hand. We threaded our way back over to the other side of the street to the anti-tank barricade. Men were scrambling over it. The place was swarming with people's rear ends, then I saw somebody's shoes, their soles right in front of my nose, and then I was climbing over the barricade myself. Mr Panek, the schoolteacher, was next to me; we jumped at the same time. I turned. Haryk landed right behind me. We started to run. It was dark on the street and windy. We ran faster. I saw my parents looking out the window at our place but I pretended I hadn't seen them. I had to squint; the wind was blowing right in our faces. The crowds were all moving in one direction now, rushing along towards the station. Mr Pitterman and Rosta were standing at the entrance to Pitterman's arcade; they looked undecided; they were staring at the crowd. We came closer. You could see how confused and unhappy they were. When we were practically on top of them, I called out to Rosta but he didn't hear me. Suddenly people rushed out of the arcade, bumping into both Pittermans from behind. Mr Pitterman staggered, nearly fell, then was swallowed up in the crowd. All I could see was his bald head being borne along by the streaming throng. Then I looked around and saw Rosta's blond head bobbing behind us. We clattered past the Hotel Granada, under the railroad underpass and up to the bridge. The first drops of rain were starting to fall. I was feeling great. As we dashed across the bridge it started to pour. The crowd thinned out now that there was more room. A few men were turning in towards the Port Arthur. We ran up to the brewery gate just as a ten-ton truck, loaded with people was pulling out. I stopped. The guys packed into the truck were all armed. Then I recognized them. It was the mountain climbers. I caught sight of Zdenek with his Tyrolean hat and a rifle. The rain started coming down in buckets and the men in the truck swayed back and forth and, as the truck drove by, I turned to look again and saw the back of some of the guys standing on top. One was carrying a submachine gun and wearing an arm-

band, but it wasn't red and white with gold lettering. It was plain red. I stood there watching but then somebody gave me a shove and we hurried into the yard. A line of vehicles stood in the driveway in front of the main building - trucks of all sizes and cars. Guys carrying rifles were piling in. In the field by the icehouse three trim columns of kids stood facing Sergeant Krpata who was waving a revolver over his head. Some of the kids were armed. Then Krpata roared some command, jerked down his arm, and the whole company put their left feet forward and started marching off towards the gate. At the gate, people stepped back to let them through and Krpata, looking awfully pleased with himself, led his company out into the street. I ran along the row of trucks. The first one was just driving off towards the gate. It was already loaded with people. I saw Mr Krocan standing by the next truck, but he wasn't wearing his uniform any more. He stood there, in his shirt-sleeves, no longer wearing his cap, beside a man who had on another of those plain red armbands. Guys were scrambling up into the trucks, holding their rifles out carefully in front of them. I pushed through to the next truck.

'Where're they passing out the guns?' I yelled at a man who held a German bazooka in his hands.

'At the armoury,' he yelled back. I ran over to the armoury. A bunch of men was just coming out of the door, some of them in uniform, and I recognized Captain Kuratko, and they were carrying somebody. A line of guys shuffling in through the door of the armoury turned to stare.

'Who was that?' I asked as I got in line.

'Colonel Cemelik,' somebody said.

'Was he wounded?'

'No. A stroke, apparently.'

I was shoved from behind into the armoury. A couple of soldiers stood behind the long tables and also some more guys wearing red armbands and the janitor from the high school in his Czech Legion uniform and they were all passing out weapons. Nobody was writing anything down now. The line moved fast and once you got your gun you went right on out. Dear God, I said to myself, dear God, please let me get a sub-



machine gun. There were only three guys in front of me now. They handed a rifle to the first one, a rifle to the second one, too, and then I saw a soldier give a string of grenades to the guy right in front of me and then it was my turn and the red-cheeked kid with the sergeant's stripes was handing me a beautifully polished submachine gun with two clips and I grabbed it, said thank you, and ran out.

'Hey, wait!' I heard Haryk call out behind me. I slowed down and slung my submachine gun over my shoulder. The place was swarming with people; mud splashed as they slogged across the yard. Haryk ran up to me, holding a rifle with a bayonet fixed to it.

'Hey, did you see that?' he said to me.

'What?'

'Those guys . . . with those red armbands.'

'What about them?'

'They're communists.'

'Could be,' I said.

'Well, we're really in for it now,' said Haryk. 'They've taken over.'

'Jesus,' I said. 'You think maybe they shot old Cemelik?'

'No,' said Haryk. 'He went off all by himself. He didn't need any help from them.'

'Let's hope so anyway,' I said.

'Look,' said Haryk, 'what say we clear the hell out of here?'

'What do you mean?' I said. 'We can't do that now.'

'Benno was right after all,' said Haryk.

'Like hell he was,' I said. And even if he had been, it was too late to try to back out now. The best thing to do was get right into it. Even with the communists.

'Let's go,' I said. We were running towards the trucks when I heard somebody whistle our signal. I looked around and saw Lexa and Venca Stern standing with their rifles next to one of the trucks. We went over.

'Hi,' said Lexa. 'Where's Benno?'

'He skipped out,' said Haryk.

'You heard old Cemelik had a stroke?'

'Yeah, is it true?'

'It's true all right. It happened when that fighter came over.'

'Up you go!' somebody yelled in my ear and I saw Venca scrambling up into the truck. Lexa followed him and then I shifted my submachine gun over to one side and swung up, too. Haryk climbed in behind me. We were standing way at the back and two guys behind the truck lifted the tailgate and slammed it shut. I heard somebody yell 'Move!' Then with a lurch off we went. We drove slowly along the driveway towards the gate. Men who'd probably got there too late to get issued a weapon were sprinting across the courtyard in the drenching rain. We passed through the gate and when we got out on the road the driver stepped on the gas. The truck started swaying and we hung on to the tailgate to keep from falling. We went over the bridge and I looked up at Irena's window and then we turned right, on to the highway that leads to the border.

'Some fun,' said Haryk, his voice shaking as the truck bounced.

'You said it,' said Lexa.

'There will be more,' I said, and it was all we could do to keep from falling when the driver cut the sharp corner by Jonas's factory. We passed Krpata's well-drilled company. They trudged slowly, but in perfect step, through the rain which was letting up now. You could see the sun dodging in and out behind the clouds. We drove through the outskirts of town where there wasn't a soul on the street. Everybody had gone in. Then we passed the bunch of Russian POWs again, still hurrying towards the border. They yelled something at us but we didn't stop. We drove through the spa section and turned left by the bunker that was still standing from 1938. Guys with rifles were lying along the railroad track by the highway. They waved. Then one of them in a leather coat with a red armband on his sleeve jumped out of the ditch next to the road and signalled for us to stop. The driver put on the brakes. The man in the leather coat stepped up on the running board and said something to the driver. Now that the motor was just idling, I could hear that familiar rumbling drone again. Tanks were



somewhere not too far off. The man jumped down off the running board. We drove on.

'I don't like this,' said Lexa softly.

The sun was breaking through the clouds in the west; it was still drizzling, though. To the east, right above the border, rose a rainbow. We were heading due east on the highway. Men stood waiting in the doorways of houses, with rifles in their hands. Empty trucks stood parked along the side streets. Then we could hear the roar of a tank even over the noise of our motor. By the old customs house we turned on to the asphalt road to the new customs house that stood between two rows of blossoming cherry trees. The rainbow arched over the valley and was reflected in the wet asphalt. And all of a sudden a German tank appeared just beyond the new customs house; it was coming straight at us. Frantically, the driver jammed on the brakes; the truck started skidding. All I had time to see was the cannon lifting slowly, then everything lurched and reeled as the truck swung around. My ears rang with the tremendous racket of motors roaring and men shouting. Jostled, and with guys slamming into me, I crouched and saw that some were going over the side of the truck. The sound of a machine gun cut through the noise of the motors; you could feel the bullets ripping right through the metal. I saw Lexa jumping over the side into nowhere. Then the rear of the truck was facing the tank and there I was, so close to it I could see the men in their camouflaged uniforms clustered around the turret. Another second and they were gone as the truck skidded further around. There were only a few guys left in it now. One of them rolled towards me, his face smashed, leaving a smear of blood. I gripped the side of the truck with both hands, then pulled myself up and over, came down on my hands, and rolled into a ditch full of water. The truck had slowed down by the time I jumped so I made a fairly soft landing. I lifted my head out of the water. A few yards ahead of me, the truck plunged into the ditch. Flames burst out of the radiator. Then the tank went by on the road above me. I could hear the loud chatter of the machine gun, the bullets whistling over my head into the field beyond. Men were running across the field towards the

river. When I looked up again the tank was slowly moving off, its machine gun still blazing away. I was up to my neck in water. A man was lying in the field near me screaming. I glanced up to see where the tank was and heard it already clanking on the main highway that led into town. The machine gun was silent. I got up and looked around for the quickest way out of there. Lexa was just getting up on the other side of the road. He looked like he'd been rolling in mud and dirt. Blood was trickling down his forehead.

'Lexa!' I yelled. He saw me.

'Come on!' he shouted in a wild voice, and then turned and ran for a meadow that sloped up to the woods. There was a little stone dugout in the middle of the meadow; it was half fallen in, part of an old border defence system. I could still hear the roar of the tank motor but I couldn't see anything else coming so I crawled up on the highway, ran across, jumped the ditch, and started up through the meadow towards the woods. The sun was shining brightly now and, off to the east, dark clouds were piling up along the horizon. The rainbow still arched over the valley. Lexa ran ahead of me, limping as he ran. I couldn't feel anything wrong with me. Again I heard the roar of a motor from over by the customs house. Glancing back over my shoulder, I saw another tank moving rapidly along the highway. I ran as fast as I could up to the dugout and stopped for a second to look out over the whole highway and saw two more tanks headed our way. Then I didn't look back, but made for the woods, which were close by now, stumbled into their shade and dropped. For a while I just lay there, then I realized I wasn't alone. Dark figures with rifles were lying all around me, trying to dig in behind the trees. They'd scraped up little mounds of dirt and stones and were peering out over them towards the highway. I rolled over to an unoccupied tree and stretched out behind it. It was dark in the woods and you had a good clear view of the highway shining in the sun. Another tank pulled out from the customs house, turned, and headed slowly along the asphalt road towards the main highway. A couple of men were crouched inside the dugout straight ahead of us, about half-way between the woods and highway. I



recognized Hrob's red head. As the tank clattered along the road, Hrob knelt by the bunker and then I saw him aiming something at the tank. Flames and smoke flashed out of the end of the tube as a rocket flew out. It landed on the highway in front of the tank and started to burn. The tank stopped and men in camouflaged uniforms tumbled off on to the asphalt and scrambled into the ditches. The tank turret started to turn and the cannon was swivelling towards the stone dugout now. The crouching men stood up and ran for the woods. I watched Hrob, but he was still kneeling there, getting ready to fire off another rocket. The cannon was aimed straight at him now. I looked at Hrob. Again something flashed next to his head and smoke rolled out of the tube. Quickly I glanced back at the tank. But the tank just stood there and then something exploded a few yards in front of it and Hrob jumped up and made a dash for the woods. There was a terrific noise, then the whole dugout flew apart in a flash of flames and smoke. I saw Hrob pitching forward just before I pressed my face down against the ground. When I looked up again, he was back on his feet and running again. I heard something click next to me but didn't look around. Down on the highway, a tall SS man got up from the asphalt, swung his rifle around and took careful aim at Hrob. A short dry shot rang out. Hrob threw out his arms and fell face down in the grass. The other SS men got up, scrambled back up on the tank, and off it went again. Again I heard a click next to me. I turned to see what it was. His Leica up to his eye, Berty Moutelik was crouching behind the next tree, taking pictures. The last tank passed along the highway. The rumble of the motors grew fainter. The sharp quick crack of rifles could be heard from town, then the longer rattle of machine-gun fire. I looked off towards the east. The highway was empty.

'Well, they're gone,' I said and got up. Berty stood up, too, then he recognized me.

'Oh, hello, Danny,' he said.

'Hi,' I said.

We stepped out of the woods. Men started coming out from all over. Some had guns, some didn't, most were covered with

mud, a few were limping. I and a few other guys ran over to Hrob. I knelt down. He was lying with his face in the grass and in the back of his neck there was a big bloody hole. I turned him over on his back and could see he was dead. I got up.

'Dead?' somebody asked.

'Yes,' I said.

Some of the men were heading back down towards the road. I looked around and saw Lexa wiping his face with a handkerchief.

'You hurt?'

'No. Just tore up my face jumping out of that truck, that's all.'

'Where's Haryk?'

'I don't know.'

Then, from around the side of the woods, came the sound of a motor again. We were racing back up for the woods when I heard people yelling and I looked around and saw that they'd stopped farther down the slope and were looking off to the east, and then I saw a tank coming down the highway and this one didn't look like the others.

'Russians!' somebody shouted. The tank was still glistening from the rain and on the side of its turret there really was a red star. It was true. It was the Russians. The tank disappeared for a minute behind the customs house, then there it was again. People swarmed out over the highway, waving and cheering. The tank stopped. Lexa and I walked over slowly. Soldiers wearing wide Russian blouses were jumping down from the tank and our men rushed up and hugged them. We walked slowly over towards the highway. My submachine gun thumped against my back as I walked and I shifted it around under my arm. We came up to the tank. There was a crowd of people around the tank and, all across the field, people were running over to join the crowd.

'What say we see if we can find Haryk?' I said to Lexa.

'Sure,' said Lexa and we headed towards the overturned truck in the ditch. The crowd around the Russian tank was screaming and laughing and shouting. We jumped down into



the ditch and started looking for Haryk. Next to the truck lay a guy with his skull cracked open. Another lay on his belly a few feet away from him. He was still moving. I went up to the cab of the truck and looked in. There was the driver, upside down and all shot up and splotted with burns. In the meantime Lexa had crawled into the ditch under the truck.

'Is he there?' I called.

'No,' came Lexa's voice.

'Come on out,' I said.

And then the shouting around the tank changed pitch. Out of the old customs house ran a bunch of men waving their rifles. Lexa scrambled out from under the truck and stood next to me. The men with the rifles were running towards us now, yelling something we couldn't understand, and then the roar of motors started up from somewhere and I stared at the men and I knew then what it was they were saying.

'The Germans are coming back!' they yelled. The crowd around the tank suddenly dispersed, leaving only the Russians who glanced around for a second, then understood, too, what was going on. I wanted to get back to the woods but it was already too late. A couple of Russians jumped into the ditch in front of us and flopped down on their bellies. We got down, too. I swung my submachine gun around and rested its barrel on top of a highway marker. The Russian tank gunned its motor beside me and clanked off. I looked up the stretch of road ahead. A German tank had just emerged from between the two last houses in town. The Russian tank stopped and I saw the German cannon swing around and then both tanks started firing at the same time. The noise was earsplitting as chunks of metal whistled and sang overhead and the highway flashed with bursts of light. Flames were coming out of the Russian tank. A shot rang out right in front of me. The Russians leaped out of the ditch and rushed forward. The German tank was burning, too. I scrambled up on to the highway and took off after the Russians. Somebody was getting set to jump off the German tank. I heard the crack of a rifle and the German fell. I ran along after the Russians. They stopped running some way off from the tank to see if anything else was going to come out,

but nothing did. Suddenly it was very quiet. Then more men came out of the ditches. Flames were licking out of the German tank and smoke billowed out of it. I stood there next to the Russians. A guy wearing a red armband rushed up and started talking to them. A couple of seconds later a whole crowd had gathered again.

'Any more Germans coming?' someone called out.

'It doesn't look like it.'

'We ought to get the wounded out of here.'

The guy with the red armband waved his hand. 'You all ought to get back and take cover. There may be more Germans coming through.'

'And the wounded?'

'Take them over to the old customs house.'

'You mean you think there're more Germans coming along behind that Russian tank?'

'Yes,' said the guy with the red armband.

'How could *that* happen?'

'Well, that's what comrade captain here says anyway.'

It was the first time I'd ever heard the word 'comrade' used seriously.

'The Russians must have got ahead of them somewhere along the line.'

'Looks that way.'

'All right, come on, let's look after the wounded.'

'Come on, Lexa,' I said.

'Aren't we going to look for Haryk?'

'Oh, he's probably just lying low someplace. Let's go down to the customs house. If he's been hurt, they'll bring him there.'

We went to the old customs house. The men had spread out in groups across the fields and some were already carrying back the wounded. A truck pulled up in front of the customs house. We stood there, watching them bring in the wounded and lift them up into the truck. The guy with the red armband was supervising the loading.

'Leave the dead here. We're just taking the wounded this time,' he told the men who'd brought Hrob down. Soldiers



carried in two Russians from the tank. I looked at my watch. It was five.

Somebody yelled, 'Here's an Englishman or something.'

'Where?' I said right away.

'You know English?' the guy with the red armband asked.

'Yes.'

'Go over and talk to him.'

A man in an English uniform was lying on the ground groaning softly. I bent over him.

'Are you hurt?' I asked. He opened his eyes and nodded.

'Where?'

'Don't know,' he said between his teeth.

'He doesn't know where he's hurt.' I told the guy with the red armband. There were no obvious wounds that I could see.

'You better go along to the hospital with him,' said the guy. 'You may have to translate.'

'All right,' I said. They loaded the Englishman into the truck.

'We get everybody?' the guy asked.

'I guess so,' somebody said.

'Then get going.'

'So long, Lexa,' I said and got in next to the driver.

'So long,' said Lexa. I slammed the door shut and looked out. Some guys with rifles were standing with a bunch of Russians on the wet highway. A clouded sun shone on them and there was a singed smell in the fresh air. The truck started off. I leaned out of the window for a look at the two still-smoking tanks facing each other on the road. A light breeze blew the smoke low along the ground and across the meadows to the river. Above the hills of the frontier, big clouds were stacking up in tremendous mountains of their own. The figures on the field receded. I looked around at the driver. Gripping the steering wheel, he stared ahead nervously. The wet pavement shone and, in front of the houses, men and kids stood, rifles in hand. Lots of them, I noticed, were wearing red armbands now. As we turned off the highway towards the bunker and the spa, I saw a gang of German soldiers. Wearing camouflaged ponchos and walking along with their hands up, they were being herded along by a few raincoated men with their rifles at the ready.

We'd passed the bunker by then and were driving through the outskirts of town. I leaned back and lay my submachine gun across my knees. For the first time my muscles and brain relaxed. I felt a tremendous calm relief. This was a real uprising! With a feeling of deep satisfaction, I closed my eyes. Again I could see the wet asphalt road, the rainbow, the German tank glistening from the rain, the steam rising above its hot motor, and then that frantic moment when I was so close to it I could smell its mammoth steel body and the whole world started to spin and then falling into the cold water in the ditch and the treads of the tank clanking above me over the asphalt and the bullets whistling through the air into the field, and everywhere and always that terrifying deafening din.

The truck drove through the outskirts of town and the little red-roofed houses flashed past and, thinking back on all that had happened, I was glad. I could still see Hrob throwing out his arms before pitching over on to the grass and the turret of the tank rotating with deadly calm and the speckled figures of the SS men leaping down on to the asphalt and into the ditch. I felt the submachine gun lying across my knees and realized I hadn't even fired a shot. I was overcome with regret; I'd missed my big chance. And I could just see me lying there in the ditch, the muzzle sticking up over the side of the road and that grey iron German giant coming towards me. My God, why hadn't I fired? My fingers longed to pull the trigger now but now it wouldn't do much good. The gun lay in my lap, silent and cold, and it was too late now to feel sorry. My God, up there in the deep shade of the woods with the whole landscape in front of me like in the palm of my hand and that bunch of SS men clinging on to the tank - I could have fired then. But I hadn't. I hadn't fired a single shot. All I did was gawk at the tank and then run away. It made me furious. We drove past the station and across the bridge and up towards the hospital. I was furious. The wet branches of a weeping willow swished against the window. The hospital gates were wide open and a man in a white coat stood off to one side waving us in and, as we got up to him, he jumped on the running board, leaned in through the open window and hung on to the handle of my door.



'You got casualties?' he shouted.

'Yeah,' I said. There was an odd look of respect in his eyes as he looked me over. Then I realized I must look pretty impressive with my mud-spattered submachine gun lying in my lap and my clothes caked with mud and dirt. I must look pretty terrific, in fact. I just wished Irena could see me like that, and the thought made me feel pretty satisfied with myself again.

'Many?' the man asked.

'Enough,' I said.

'It must have been pretty bad up there.'

'It was.'

As we came up to the entrance of the surgery pavilion, a hospital attendant ran out. The white robes of the Franciscan nuns glimmered in the doorway. I got out and jumped heavily to the ground. I could practically feel everybody watching me. The tall figure of Dr Preisner, his glasses shining, loomed up over the nuns. He came over.

'How many do you have?' he asked.

'I don't know, Doctor, but we have quite a few,' I said. Stretcher-bearers hurried out to the truck. Some of them were still wearing street clothes.

'Careful,' shouted Dr Preisner. 'Take them to the hall in front of the operating room.' Then he went back into the hospital and the men set down their stretchers and I stood in the doorway next to the nurses watching them unload the wounded. The nurses eyed me and my weapon with awe. The first two stretcher-bearers trotted into the hospital. One of them was Mr Starec who taught at the high school and whose son was a doctor at the hospital. Then the second stretcher went by. I noticed they were just unloading my Englishman.

'I'll go in with this one,' I said. 'He's English - doesn't speak any Czech.'

The bearers glanced up at me, then carried the Englishman in on their stretcher and I followed them down a dim, rubber-carpeted corridor. It was quiet in there. People in pyjamas and hospital bathrobes stood at all the doors, looking out. As I walked along, I realized everybody was looking at me and that

I was tracking mud all over the clean floor. Nuns hurried on ahead of us. We turned a corner and stopped. Three stretchers had been set down on the floor next to the wall and through an open door at the end of the hall came a wedge of light. The stretcher-bearers set the Englishman down. Dr Capek appeared in the doorway, his rubber-gloved hands held out in front of him, his surgeon's gown spattered with blood.

'All right, next,' he said, and Mr Starec and another guy lifted their patient and carried him inside. The other guy was Jirka Hubalek whose father was chief of the internal medicine department. We shoved our stretcher up closer to the door. Jirka came out of the operating room, picked up the empty stretcher and some rags that had been left lying on it, and came towards me.

'Hi,' I said to him in a low voice. He didn't seem to recognize me. He was just walking along staring ahead of him, as blank as a sleepwalker, but looking worried. Then he recognized me.

'Hello,' he said.

'You helping out?' I said.

Jirka nodded. Then he suddenly just took hold of my arm and led me aside and said, 'I've got something I want to show you.'

'What?'

Jirka leaned the stretcher up against the wall and hunted through the rags he'd picked up. They were all that were left of a pair of Russian army pants. There were splotches of blood on the pants.

'Look,' he said. 'Look at what that Russian was carrying around in his pockets.' He held out his hand, then opened it in mournful silence. There lay two wrist watches and a silver pencil.

'Hmm,' I said. 'Well, so what?'

'Well, so it's true,' said Jirka somberly.

'So what's true?'

'Just that.'

'Well, what?'

'About the watches.'

'Well, sure. I can see they're watches, but what of it?'