

The PIANO

A COLLECTION OF MOVING TALES ABOUT
A GRAND PIANO AND ITS SECRET PAST

EDWARD EVANS

Con brio: Jakob's Story

I

I seemed to have an affinity with Jakob, possibly because we both had a love of music. He loved playing and I loved listening. Or perhaps it was because we were both aliens from the other countries and had similar problems . . . I don't know, but it made for a lasting friendship.

The piano, as Charlotte has said, was in a mess and had not been touched since we had been bombed. It had been left almost on its side with one broken leg and another damaged, and even the rubble and dust still covered it. The priority of course was getting the hospital shipshape again, so repairing it was out of the question.

I remember Jakob went over to it and touched it, running his fingers along the wood. 'It's a Bechstein and it's beautiful!' he remarked, still touching it, as though it was new silk.

'It's ruined now,' I said.

'No, it's not ruined! I vill repair it. England has saved my life and given me a home and now it is looking after my vife Ira. It is the very least I can do.'

I didn't speak much English myself then, but I do remember trying to tell him not to bother as it was wrecked.

'I vas a piano tuner and repairer when I vas in Germany. I repaired all string instruments,' Jakob said.

'Then, monsieur,' I said, 'I will give you un coup de main; nothing is happening with my unit for several weeks yet, so I have plenty of time.'

Inevitably as we worked together I got to know Jakob very well. He was a lovely man and a very brave one and he was determined to repay the kindness shown him and his wife by the English.

The war was in full swing and I suppose you could say we were losing, particularly as the casualties were mounting by the day, not only from the bombing but also from the battles in Europe and on the Atlantic. There was little time for the ordinary things of life.

Jakob was employed at the Woolwich Arsenal making explosives. He worked a twelve-hour day and even then made only just enough to keep body and soul together for him and his wife Ira. But true to his word and, for between two and three hours a day after his work, he met me at the hospital and together we worked away on the piano. I just helped with the lifting and kept him company. Afterwards, believe it or not, he would go on air raid watch for another two to three hours. God knows when he ate or slept! Fortunately, perhaps, his wife was still in hospital recovering from the delivery, so at least he was close by. That same day she had been admitted Ira had had a little boy, Rubin, who was four weeks premature and sickly.

Jakob would generally arrive around teatime. We began by cleaning every bit of rubble and dust from it, as carefully and lovingly as though it was a human body.

'I don't want any more damage done!' Jakob exclaimed. 'She is a real beauty . . . a masterpiece.'

After that I just watched the master at his work, lifting the piano when required so that he could remove various parts, occasionally chatting about this and that. Then, one day, out of the blue, as you say, he began to tell me about his life in Germany, how he and his wife had lived in Berlin and had a lovely big apartment overlooking the Tiergarten. He also had a

little shop with a workshop at the back, in another part in Prenzlauer Berg where he used to repair the musical instruments.

Jakob and Ira already had a son Isaac and were very happy; particularly when Isaac even at five was beginning to show signs of being a gifted pianist. 'He had such a feel for music,' Jakob would say, almost sighing the words as he said them.

He was, in a moderate way, a successful man, though he often had to work sixteen or seventeen hours a day. It was not that he wanted to, but there were only three piano tuners – and only two that could repair string instruments – in the whole of Berlin. There was too much work and the customers always wanted everything done there and then.'

He often worked in theatres and clubs – this, you'll understand, was at the very beginning of the 1930s before the Nazis came to power. He had quite a reputation and some of the stars would have only him to tune their pianos or repair their instruments. He was very proud of the fact that Marlene Dietrich actually took him to Paris to ensure the piano was tuned to her liking. His proudest moment was when he worked for Fats Waller.

Those final years of the Weimar Republic were a wonderful time for him. After the Nazis came to power in 1933 of course things became increasingly difficult for him and of course other Jews as well. New laws made it more and more difficult for German Jews to run their businesses, and harassment by Nazi thugs and even by the ordinary German populace was becoming commonplace. It all came to a head in 1938 – with the terrible events of Kristallnacht.

One night late in 1938 the Nazis held a big rally and afterwards the hierarchy were invited to a dinner dance. Jakob was summoned to go and tune the piano and turned up at the appointed time.

Surprised to find himself in a room full of men in uniform busy with the preparations, Jakob tried to walk as unobtrusively as possible over to the piano and put down his sack of tools. He

had scarcely opened the lid when he found himself accosted by one of the officers.

'Ah so you are the dirty little Jew who's come to tune our piano? You had better get it right . . . the honour of the German Reich is at stake!'

Jakob turned round from his work

'Of course! No one has complained of my work before, Captain.'

The officer suddenly picked up Jakob's tool sack and tipped the contents all over the floor.

'What's this? What's this? What's a dirty little Jew doing with a knife?'

'It's for my work, Captain. I have to cut felt for the pianos.'

The officer opened the penknife and felt the blade.

'One dead little Jew is not going to be missed,' he laughed, his shenanigans now attracting the attention of his fellow officers.

'Hans,' one of them shouted across the room, 'at least wait until he has finished the piano. Then he won't be missed!'

The officer's mouth was scarred and twisted in a most peculiar way and when he pulled Jakob close to him by his shirt, their faces almost touched and he could feel the saliva running down Hans's face onto his.

'Hans, let him get the piano finished. Now!' his senior officer ordered. 'The pianist will be here soon.'

As quick as lightning, as he turned away, Hans drew the blade across Jakob's hand as it rested on the piano keys.

'Whoops! Don't get any Jew blood on the keys, Jew . . . I'll deal with you later,' he added, putting the knife into his pocket. 'A little souvenir . . .' he added.

Jakob was still working diligently when the pianist, Oskar Reisen, arrived. He was an old client.

'Jakob! How nice . . .' he began, then spotted the bloody cloth that Jakob had wound around his hand. 'What on earth happened, Jakob?'

Before Jakob could answer, Hans was back on the scene, 'Don't talk to the little Jew.'

'I have to! I need to know how the piano has been tuned so that I can give my best this evening.'

'Well, I've got my eye on you,' Hans roared at Oskar as he strolled away again. 'We don't want any Jew lovers here.'

Oskar turned to Jakob and whispered, 'I'm sorry, my friend. I'm not a party to this behaviour.'

Jakob continued to work but Oskar knew that something was the matter.

'Quickly, Jakob, tell me what happened?'

His friend told him. 'Oskar, I think he really is going to kill me – Can you help me? God knows what will happen to my wife and son if anything happened to me!'

'I'll see what I can do,' Oskar replied, smiling for effect.

To check his work, Jakob began to play. His touch was extraordinary; some of the German officers stopped what they were doing to listen. Oskar stopped him.

'You don't want to attract attention to yourself, Jakob. I'll take over and play a few practice pieces. You stand next to me and pretend to listen and I will tell you what to do.'

As Oskar began to play some sonorous snatch of Beethoven, he quickly outlined his plan. 'Collect your tools together. As soon as you see that he's not paying attention, just go! If he asks, I will tell him you are going to get something for me. Remember, my friend, I am truly sorry for this . . . for everything Germany is doing.' Oskar touched his hand discreetly in an act of friendship and a few moments later Jakob was gone.

Of course, Mr White, that was only the beginning of Jakob's story. That night, soon after he reached his home, all hell seemed to break out in the streets of Berlin. Synagogues were burned down; the Jewish department stores ransacked and vandalised; any Jews unlucky enough to be in the street terrorised . . .

Jakob like so many others knew that they had reached a crisis

– they had either to get out of Germany and start a new life or stay and take the consequences. All decency had gone out of the window and they could no longer count on protection from the state.

One day Jakob went to report that his little car had been stolen and that he knew where it was and also the man that had it. He was quickly stopped in his tracks.

‘Are you accusing a German of stealing your car? Do you realise you can be imprisoned or shot for making such accusations?’ the police officer bawled.

‘But I know where it is!’ he protested.

‘Gerhard,’ he called to one of the other officers, ‘Lock him up!’

‘No, no, no, it doesn’t matter! He can have it,’ Jakob said hurriedly. That was the first time he just said to himself: ‘What the hell! What chance do I have?’

As he turned to leave, the officer shouted after him, ‘What does a Jew want with a car anyway?’ There was a peel of derisive laughter that rang in his burning ears.

Jakob spent the next few weeks building a hiding place in his apartment at the Tiergarten. This was entered through a huge wardrobe in the main bedroom that could be opened from the inside with the aid of a carpet needle. The wardrobe was fitted out with a fake floor which gave access to a passage that in turn led into the chimney. There he built a small steel ladder that went up into the concealed roof space. He made sure that he sealed the side of the chimney with steel plates to ensure the smoke went up the right part. He made everything soundproof and built spy holes in very clever places where he could see who was around, or when the coast was clear.

Jakob knew it wouldn’t be long now before war broke out. The Germans had already annexed Austria where, to his astonishment, most of the citizens had welcomed the Nazis and now they had simply walked into Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland. Rumours were rife that Hitler wanted to invade Poland and many

Jews hoped this would be the straw that broke the camel's back. If Britain declared war on Germany, the Nazi regime would not last long and things would get back to normal.

But no! The Germans conquered Poland in a matter of weeks and the whole nation got behind their victorious leader – apart from the Jews, of course. Britain and France declared war but nothing happened for months. Then things got really bad. The Jews were a fifth column at the heart of every town and city in Germany and had to be dealt with. The Nazis began to deport them to huge ghettos, where they could keep their eyes on them and make them work for the Reich simply for the privilege of staying alive. Many laboured on the roads, or in the factories making bombs, or doing anything the Nazis wouldn't do – and all for just a few scraps of food which would often simply be thrown at them as if they were dogs. If they fell, they died where they fell; if they were ill, or unable to work, they were sent to camps where they were murdered.

I will never forget when one day while we worked on the piano Jakob out of the blue said to me: 'Do you know, JP, what the worst thing of all was?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'We didn't do a thing about it and accepted our fate as though it was our destiny.'

What Jakob found to be the most awful and distasteful aspect of the whole thing was seeing his erstwhile friends – people he had lived with, dined with, played games with, and loved – suddenly not be there for him. They would look at him as though he was some disease; they would cross the street if they saw him coming. A few, he knew, hated themselves for what they were doing he could see it in their eyes. For the rest, though, the Jews were simply no longer human.

There were new anti-Semitic laws and directives almost every day telling the Jews what they could or couldn't do and then one day Jakob received a letter informing him he and his family were to be shipped off to a new home in the east. They were to have everything packed – each with only a small suitcase – and ready

to leave on the 11 January 1940 at 11 o'clock in the morning. It soon became clear that there was to be a street-by-street eviction to clear the Tiergarten area of its Jewish population and that they were being taken to unknown destinations in lorries and on trains. There was a flurry of meetings among the community elders, but it was decided that it would be wisest for the Jews to cooperate.

Jakob couldn't believe such resignation. They were to give up everything they – Ira and he – had worked for, everything they had struggled for! And all because some old men had decided it would be 'best' for all of them. He would not have any part of it and decided to escape, whatever the consequences. On the morning of the eleventh they would take food and water up to their secret place and stay there until the coast was clear. He thought they would try and get out of Berlin at night and escape to Belgium, Holland or France and try to get to England from there.

However, fate was to take a hand and on 11 January 1940 Jakob was woken up a five o'clock in the morning by loud banging on the front door of the apartment block. He went downstairs and was met by his good friend and neighbour Abraham Stein; together they opened the door and found themselves faced by two SS officers.

'The Jew Rosenberg, where is he?' one of them demanded. Jakob and Abraham were terrified as he brandished his pistol at them. He obviously enjoyed their fear.

Jakob had no choice but to reveal his identity. 'Get dressed! You're wanted. Now!' the officer ordered.

'What for? I've done nothing wrong,' Jakob protested.

'Just get dressed and get back down here!'

Jakob ran back up to the apartment and quickly told Ira to take Isaac up to the secret room and wait for him there. He promised he would try and get back as soon as possible and that she shouldn't worry. As he kissed his wife and son goodbye – for the last time he feared – he heard the roar from the SS brute

down below. '*Schnell, schnell, schnell!*' Jakob almost tripped twice in his haste to get down the stairs before he caused further trouble. As he passed Abe on his way through the door, his neighbour whispered, 'God bless you, Jakob.'

'Thanks!' he replied as he went towards the officer's car.

'Don't you need some tools?' the officer snapped.

'What for?'

'The Führer is visiting the Opera House tonight and they need the piano repaired quickly.'

'But you didn't tell me!'

The officer gave him an evil look. 'What do you think we wanted you for, Jew?'

Jakob was doing some quick thinking. 'Look, I know this instrument and I'm going to need my wife with me. It is impossible to do it on my own,' he said.

'Then get her and hurry.'

Jakob raced back in to the building, with Abe asking what the hell was going on. 'I've got to tune the Opera House piano,' he shouted as he ran upstairs. 'Can you look after Isaac until we get back? He asked. 'We shouldn't be long.'

'Yes of course!' Abe replied.

Ira was already almost dressed. Jakob hurriedly explained the situation and moments later they were running back down the stairs. Ira was unsure about leaving Isaac but reluctantly gave him over into the care of Abe.

It was almost seven o'clock in the morning when they entered the Opera House. The orchestra were already practising for the evening performance – no one wanted to drop a note or make a mistake in front of the Führer. Jakob knew the piano would be slightly out of tune – it was in constant use after all – but to his horror he realised that this time it would be a much bigger job than usual. Somebody had clearly been thumping away at it, so out of tune was it. Jakob knew it would be impossible to get back before 11 a.m., in time for the removal, even with his wife's help.

They worked non-stop, but finished only at 11.30 a.m. already half an hour late. They were in torment.

Jakob sat at the piano and, partly to calm himself and partly as a final test, he played the first part of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C, The Opera House staff stopped to listen, enraptured, but Ira quietly reminded him that Germany was not at that time friendly with Russia. Quickly he swapped to something more Germanic. It was the last time he played on any piano in Berlin or in Germany for that matter.

Spotting the officer who had brought them earlier Jakob asked if he could take them back home.

'You're not needed now. You can walk!' the officer snarled.

'We haven't got any papers to be able to do that,' Jakob replied humbly. 'Could you please give me some . . . Sir.'

'Go away and wait over there!'

Two hours later they were still waiting.

'What are you waiting for?' the same officer asked.

'You were going to give us some papers so that we could walk back to our home,' he replied, again in a subservient manner; he was beginning to realise that was what the Nazis officers liked.

'Names and address?' he asked.

'Ira and Jakob Rosenberg,' he replied, giving their address.

'Wait there.' Some thirty minutes later a young soldier came over with their two passes. It was signed by the Commander of Berlin and gave the 'Reason' for being out as 'repairing pianos for Führer's concert.' He couldn't believe it; it wasn't dated!

They left the moment they were given the passes and almost ran back to Tiergarten which was well over two miles away. As they approached they could hear the screams of their neighbours as they were packed into trucks like sardines. They were just about to round the corner into their road when Jakob had the presence of mind to stop and take a quick look. They were still loading the lorries with the women and children and regardless of age they were almost being thrown into the back of the trucks.

The men were being separated from the others and he could see Abe in a doorway with Isaac behind him. There were soldiers everywhere and they now spotted Isaac and began to pull him away from Abe.

Jakob was about to run over when suddenly Abe pulled free and started to run away, gathering Isaac up into his arms. The Nazi officers ordered him to stop but he didn't. There was a burst of gunfire and then silence; the rest became a blank. The next thing Jakob saw was a senior officer standing over the two prostrate figures, take out his pistol and fire two shots to make sure Abe and Isaac were dead. Jakob could not watch anymore and pulled back from the corner.

He grabbed Ira firmly with his hand, covering her mouth so she could hardly breathe, and then began to tell her what he had seen. He could feel her scream, but no sound came out; he could feel her crying, but no tears fell from her eyes. Now for the first time he felt despair – now they had truly lost everything, their future. Ira tried to break free to see her little boy, but he would not let her and held her still for several minutes. They stood as they were, holding each other so tight, until her tears began to touch his face and he knew then he could release his grip.

They spent the rest of the day hiding in a deserted apartment. Only after night fell did they decide to try and return to their own home. It was their only chance of sanctuary. Out in the street, Jakob left Ira in a doorway and went to look around. To his horror there were several others that had had the same notion as them and had hidden until the Nazis had gone. It was amazing – there were dozens and what was worse you could hear them moving around with all their chatter and you could see the light from their torches as they moved from one house to another. He knew that, if he could hear them, so could the Nazis; they would need to keep away from them.

Soon after, Jakob and Ira made their way back to their apartment, hugging the walls and keeping in the shadows, not even

wanting to be seen by their own kind. There were many Jews who would turn on their friends in the hope of saving their own skins.

'I don't blame them!' Isaac said ruefully, when he explained this to his wife. What would he have done, if his family had been taken and he had been given the opportunity to save them? 'God forgive us all!'

Outside the apartment was a row of bodies lying in the street, left no doubt as a warning. Jakob knew one of them must be Isaac, but he couldn't risk going to see if it was.

Inside the apartment waited another dreadful surprise – it had been looted and all their lovely ornaments had gone, all their bedding and food, too – in fact, anything that was useful. Jakob, however, had already stashed a supply of anything useful in their hideout. Thankfully the wardrobe had been left undisturbed and the only odd thing was a little piece of paper – no bigger than a postage stamp – strategically placed in front of the door. Jakob knew instantly that it was a note from Abe. He had been a jeweller and was used to doing his work under a microscope.

The hiding place was cramped but at least they felt safe at last. For a time they simply wept silently – in part for their son and in part out of sheer relief. They were starving, worried, desperately unhappy and frightened, and yet soon they began to make plans for their escape, keeping their voices very low. They even dared to light a candle, open up a tin of food and have their first meal of the day.

They were so tired that night that they didn't wake up until mid-morning and only then because Jakob heard someone shuffling round in the apartment below. He put his hand over Ira's mouth and whispered 'Ssssh! There's someone down there.'

Jakob heard the key turn in the wardrobe and then the action of it being pulled out of the lock and then silence.

'Wait there,' he said as he began to crawl like a snake on its belly towards one of the many minute peepholes he had made for just such an occasion.

There was an SS officer in the apartment looking at everything meticulously – he could clearly sense that there was somebody somewhere in the apartment as he kept going back to the wardrobe. Eventually he shouted to some other individual and left the room, slamming the door behind him and then there was silence again. They listened with bated breath as the search continued in the neighbouring apartments – there was an occasional scream as some other poor soul was caught; an occasional shot as another vainly tried to run away.

It had been quiet for over an hour when he decided to take a look down in the apartment. He gently crawled down the chimney and silently lifted the floor to move into the wardrobe itself. He was surprised to find the SS officer had shut the door and even locked it, leaving the key in it. He really could not fathom this out and wondered why he would do such a thing. Common sense left him as he took out his carpet needle and slowly opened the door to find the SS officer sitting waiting, his pistol pointing in his direction.

‘Come on out, my little Jew,’ he said with a little laugh. ‘I have been waiting for you. I knew my little Jew would come. He thought he had been so clever with his key, didn’t he? . . . Out you come and stand up straight where I can see you!’

Their mutual recognition was instant.

It was Hans, the maniac officer from the concert.

‘YOU! You little Jewish bastard. This time you won’t escape!’

Slowly and purposefully Hans got out of his chair and almost swaggered over to his intended victim, making sure the pistol was pointing at his heart all the time. Jakob stood absolutely motionless, unable to speak. He could see the twisted mouth and the saliva dribbling out of the left-hand corner.

‘So now you are going to die, little Jew piano tuner, but first we’ll have some fun . . .’

Suddenly his attention was distracted for a second as Ira’s startled head appeared at the bottom of the wardrobe and in that second Jakob plunged the carpet needle deep into the SS officer’s

eye. Hans screamed in agony and, dropping his gun, brought his hands up to his face. He desperately struggled to pull the needle out but couldn't. He began to stare at Jakob and staggered towards him, his remaining Cyclops eye full of hatred. Blood spurted rhythmically out of the gruesome wound in time to the beating of his heart.

Jakob watched in horror as the twisted smile again appeared on the officer's face and his hands encircled his throat . . .

A shot rang out and Hans froze for a moment with his hands still at Jakob's throat until he began to slip slowly down to the floor.

Ira had shot him through the temple.

They did not speak; it was as though they had both been released from the same nightmare and were tasting freedom for the first time in a long time. It felt like an act of revenge and they felt strangely elated.

Eventually common sense kicked in. They knew the shot would be investigated and that they had to get the body out of sight and clean the place up. They pulled the corpse into the wardrobe and then pushed it under the floor. It made their own passage to their hideout extremely difficult, let alone gruesome, but they had no choice. In any case, they now knew that they could not linger – they had to escape that very night.

They decided to keep the gun – it would be their last line of defence – and Jakob spent the rest of the day practising with it, pretending to shoot it, taking it apart and putting it back together again.

At last the Nazis' search of the buildings stopped as it was becoming dark and they heard carpenters boarding up the doors for the night, preventing the buildings from being used. The Nazis hadn't got the sense to realise that they were using Jewish slave labour and some of the boarding was so cleverly fitted that they could be reopened in a matter of minutes.

It was now deathly quiet – only the occasional chatter of a few survivors broke the silence. Jakob and Ira decided it was time to

leave. They packed whatever they could carry into the linings and pockets of their coats, and Jakob swung his tool bag over his shoulder. 'You never know – it might be useful,' he told his puzzled wife.

They said farewell to their once-lovely apartment for the final time. On the floor of the living room lay scattered a bunch of yellow roses and the fragments of an old blue vase. The flowers themselves had wilted and the petals had begun to fall, but somehow Jakob knew Isaac wouldn't mind. He gathered them up and carried them gently downstairs. A few minutes later, having removed the boarding from the front door, he laid the flowers at the spot where Isaac and Abe had fallen. The bodies, mercifully, had vanished.

Just for a moment or two he stood holding Ira's arm and whispered quietly, just for the two of them, 'Thank you Abe for looking after our son. You were very brave. God bless you and Isaac; you will always be in our hearts and I know one day we will meet again.'

They were both in tears as he uttered the words, but he knew both Abe and Isaac would want them to get away; so without another look backwards they ran across the street to where he had seen them shot and were on their way; the life they once knew had gone forever.

II

They managed about two miles that first night and slept in a deserted garage at the back of a row of terraced houses. That part of the journey was the most difficult as neither, of course, had been on the run before and neither knew how to avoid capture, but it soon became second nature. On that first night, however, they dodged into some doorway with every sound and every headlight from an approaching car. They always thought they

had been seen and their hearts stopped until the person or car had either passed or turned away.

The next night they followed the main road out of Berlin to the west. Only once did they run into trouble when they were stopped by two young policemen, who had spotted them scurrying across the broad boulevard.

'Halte! Halte!'

Jakob pulled out the papers they had been given the day before and handed them over even before they had the chance to ask any questions.

'We have been repairing the Führer's piano and we are now going home,' he said, trying to impress them, which it did.

'Why were you running?' one of them asked, handing the papers back to him.

'We are frightened,' he replied, truthfully.

'What's in the bag?' the other asked.

'My tools for repairing pianos,' he replied, opening it to let him see.

'Go on. Get out of here. Jews should not be out at night.' They both laughed and they went on their way leaving Jakob and Ira with their hearts still in their mouths.

They were now out of Berlin and travelling westwards across the fields. Jakob knew that they needed to move faster and that the answer was to steal a car. Well, he reasoned, a German had stolen his; it was only fair he should now steal one of theirs. Except it wouldn't be just one but several. They would steal a car and travel as far as they could on the fuel that was in the tank and then dump it and then look for another.

Jakob was getting wily. He realised that each new car would have to be stolen some miles away from the previous one and that, to throw the police off their scent, they would have to zigzag across Germany. Any Nazi like that dog Hans would soon cotton on if all the stolen cars led in a westerly direction.

'You have got to remember, JP,' I remember Jakob telling me. 'I was one of the lucky ones. I had a car before the war and not

many people had. It wasn't until Hitler brought the Volkswagen into the picture that the ordinary German could even dream of having a car, but even then they were not able to have one as Hitler had turned all his manufacturing capacity to the war effort. So cars were easy to check, particularly when they were from a different area.'

At the time Jakob thought that it would be easy; they could walk into any town and in a few minutes find a car where the key was left in. The stealing was the easy bit; it was the walking into town that was hard. They no longer, of course, wore the Star of David on their clothes but they worried that they still looked Jewish. Jakob was always proud to be a German Jew, but now the only way to survive in Germany was to be inconspicuous.

'But look at me!' Jakob would say. 'I look like a typical Jew. I couldn't get away with anything.'

The following night they arrived at Stendal and hid in some outbuildings on the outskirts of the town. Jakob would go into town alone, but before he left he told Ira that should he not return, she should try to get to Holland. It was a terrible parting – it was as though they were saying goodbye for the last time.

On the way he passed an old Jewish tailor's shop. The window had been smashed but could still see parts of a painted Star of David still on the pieces of shattered glass while on the door was daubed the words '*Verflüchte Jude!*' – Damned Jew! Jakob wondered what had happened to him and if the Germans had thrown away the suits he had made for them. He doubted it. Jewish tailoring would outlast the Third Reich, no doubt about that.

This momentary lack of concentration nearly cost him his life and the stupidity of stopping and looking into the little shop was without question the most dangerous thing he had ever done. He hadn't seen the two men walking in his direction, but he heard them when they were about twenty feet away. He turned to walk in their direction as that was the way he was going in any event. '*Gute Nacht!*' he called out bravely.

'*Nacht!*' one of them said as they passed, but in the reflection

of the shop windows, he saw them stop and turn round. He quickened his pace and didn't dare turn round to see if they were following. He turned into a side street and then just ran as fast as he could up a little alleyway and hid. His suspicions were correct – they had followed him. He watched as one went further on up the side street whilst the other turned down the alleyway. He could hear him breathing heavily, as he slowly but cautiously passed his hiding place.

'I've got my gun,' he thought to himself. 'I could use it; it's either him or me.' He took it out of his pocket and slowly got up and quietly walked towards him.

'Hands up or I will kill you,' he whispered loudly.

The astonished German turned round; he had never been faced by a Jew with a gun before.

'One sound and I will kill you. I have nothing to lose.' His captive could see he was determined and remained quiet and surprisingly calm. He told him to turn round and as he did so he heard his friend calling. He was sure his captive was about to answer him when he cracked him over the back of his head with such force he actually saw the blood spurt out despite the dark. He fell to the floor unconscious . . . perhaps even dead.

Jakob jumped back into his hiding place and waited for the other to return.

'Klaus, where are you?' he shouted. 'I can't find that damned Jew. Klaus, where . . .' He didn't get to finish his sentence, for Jakob hit him on the back of the head and he too fell to the floor.

It was a terrible thing for Jakob, this violence, but it really was them or him. There was no way he could be gentle; he just had to hit them with all his might and hope that they didn't get up. He knew the second man was still alive so he pulled him somewhere he would remain hidden and ran for it. Now he had to act fast before the alarm was raised.

He returned to the main road determined not to be so stupid again and began to look into every car to see if anyone had the keys left in them. He was becoming more and more desperate

when at last he saw one and was about to open the door when he realised he still had the gun in his hand. He could not believe it; he could have been shot on sight.

He got into the car and his prayers were answered – it started – but he was so confused and worried, he forgot to put his lights on, but thankfully that too was not spotted. At last he was back to collect Ira, who by this time was a quivering nervous wreck. It had been wrong of him perhaps to leave her behind; but he knew in his heart it had been the safest thing to do.

They ran to the car and quickly set off for Gardelegen to the north and then back south in the direction of Lehrte, keeping where possible to the country roads. There was about five gallons registering on the gauge and he calculated that they would have about a hundred miles available to them. Often when they could see headlights in the distance they would stop and hide off the road, but they made good time and just before dawn he managed to park the car in the centre of Lehrte, leaving them just enough time to make their way back into the countryside where they would be sleeping for the day. It was midday when they were disturbed by the noise of the farmer passing with his animals and they suddenly felt pangs of hunger. But this time the only thing Jakob could find were six eggs from a very noisy bunch of hens and fresh water from a rather murky, slow-moving stream.

The following night, as they crept back into Lehrte Jakob managed to steal two loaves and a few stale cakes which a local baker had thrown in the bin. What's more they even found a couple of bicycles, which remained their means of transport for the next couple of nights and which took them past the outskirts of Hannover to Bad Salzuflen. There seemed to be more and more troops about and it truly looked like the threatened invasion of Holland and Belgium would come before they could get the chance to cross the border. Things were becoming more urgent – they had to steal another car.

'JP, everyone is entitled to a little luck,' I remember Jakob telling me with a smile,, 'but I suppose we were becoming experts

in hiding and listening to people and making the most of our opportunities. We were on the outskirts of Osnabruck where there were some beautiful big houses, with long drives and wrought-iron double gates across the entrances. Well, we were hidden watching this young man get out of his car; he left the engine running and ran through the side gate and down the drive to the house. The only problem was the car was one of those new sleek Mercedes, almost a two-seater and completely white; hardly a car not to be noticed. But we had to have it – it had been served up to us on a plate – and do you know what? It was full of petrol and by golly it went faster than anything I had ever driven before . . .’ By now Jakob was laughing. ‘If you could have seen us – we felt like royalty.’

That night they managed to reach Dortmund but ruefully decided to dump the car. They really could not take the chance of travelling in it in daylight. They really had done well and were now only about a hundred miles from Venlo and the other small towns along the border. Jakob hid the car after taking the two new car rugs they had found in the trunk and as luck would have it they managed to steal a tandem that had been left leaning against a wall. They now felt they could make the border within the next two days.

Once again they found a place to shelter and settle down for the day, to cuddle up under their new rugs and eat some more of the stale bread and another cake. Jakob even managed to find an odd turnip or two in one of the nearby fields whilst he was scavenging.

The following night they made wonderful time; it was as though they had the wind behind them. They had managed to reach Borken, probably less than twenty-five miles from the border and they were feeling very pleased with themselves. Having hidden the tandem under some bushes, they made their way to some farm buildings a short distance away, where they found a very comfortable hay loft for the day.

The farm didn't seem to be a very busy one – in fact it seemed

half abandoned. Towards midday, however, the farmer found them, or at least his dog did, barking madly until its master arrived. He was an evil-looking man and called them down under the watchful eye of his dog, as he brandished his double-barrelled shotgun. However, one should never judge a book by its cover.

'*Juden?*' he shouted up to them as they were clambering down.

'Yes . . .' they answered cautiously, at which he broke his gun and invited them to follow him.

'Would you like something to eat?' he asked.

'Oh yes please!' they answered in unison, thinking this was manna from heaven as this would be the first proper food they had eaten for a week.

They had fresh eggs – cooked this time – bread and coffee, and chatted for over an hour. They finished their meal and for the first time relaxed, feeling safe. He introduced himself as Hans Block and told them he had lost his family in the last war and was alone. He told them he was afraid he would lose everything when the fighting broke out for real. They in turn told him their story, even their names. He seemed extremely worried about their welfare and even offered to hide them for a while. He led them through a small door which in turn led into a larger wine and beer cellar and showed them the hiding place. It was well concealed and seemed to have been purpose-built.

'I have to go and bring in my cattle,' he suddenly announced. 'I'll be about an hour and then we will discuss how to get you across the border,' he continued. 'It's probably best you hide while I'm away.'

'Oh thank you, Hans, I really don't know how to thank you. You are so kind,' Ira said, almost in tears.

Hans shrugged his shoulders as if to say anyone would do the same.

'About an hour then,' he continued. As he left, he shouted, 'Help yourself to anything you want!'

'He is so kind . . .' Ira said the moment they were on their own.

‘Yes he is,’ Jakob replied. ‘But why? Why should he do this for complete strangers, when the entire German nation is totally against us . . . Why would he do it? There’s something odd about it all.’

Do you know, that was the first time Ira and Jakob really disagreed on anything. She wanted to stay and he wanted to go; he simply didn’t trust him. He didn’t know why but he felt there was something wrong. It was one of those things. Anyway they reached a compromise – if they heard anybody, she would go into the cupboard and he would hide upstairs with the gun.

They had relaxed and chatted for over an hour when they heard a car approaching fairly quickly and as agreed Ira went into the cupboard and he hid at the top of the stairs. From that position he could see everything inside and out and, sure enough, that nasty evil bastard had brought an SS officer and two German soldiers back with him. He knew he should have insisted that they leave, but Ira was so trusting and believing he couldn’t have done anything else, now it was too late.

The four men burst into the house.

‘They’re in there; now do I get the reward?’ Hans said, almost showing delight in his little coup.

‘*Raus, raus!* Come on out, my little Jewish friends . . . *raus!*’ the Major shouted, waving his pistol about.

Jakob saw the cellar door slowly open and Ira appeared in the doorway; he could see the shock and the hurt in her eyes as she looked at the German farmer who had betrayed them.

‘Where is the Jew Rosenberg?’ the officer bawled, pulling Ira to her feet.

‘He went to look round outside and when I heard the car coming I hurried into the cupboard as he told us to,’ she answered, shaking with fear.

The Major signalled for the other two to go outside and find him and then turned on Ira. ‘If you are lying I will kill you on the spot. Now where is he?’ he repeated.

‘I’ve told you: he went outside,’ she replied, becoming firmer.

'You check in there,' he ordered Hans, who soon reappeared.

'No Major, he isn't in there.'

'You told me you had them in the palm of your hand! Well, let me tell you if we fail to find the Jew Rosenberg, you will take his place, and that will be your reward.'

As you can imagine Hans was now terrified too and was shaking uncontrollably. Jakob knew he could not fire his gun too soon as he could see the soldiers were still too near the house, so he had to wait, hoping that they would not do anything quickly, and once again luck played a part in their lives.

The Major began to tell Ira that Rosenberg was wanted for murdering a German officer in Berlin as well as several other people. Everyone on the border had been alerted that he and his wife would probably be trying to escape the country. 'The Jewish rats must not be allowed to escape,' he added.

Jakob couldn't listen to anymore, the guards had gone further away and now he crept down the stairs a little way, pointing his gun. But the tell-tale squeak as he put my foot on the next step down made Hans shout, 'He's there!'

The Major turned quickly; there was just enough time for Jakob to see the whites of his eyes. A split second later the first bullet entered his head and the second one hit Hans at the top of his chest. The Major fell to the floor with a thud, but Hans staggered towards Ira and Jakob had to shoot at him again. This time he hit him in the arm and he too fell to the floor; but the noise had brought the two soldiers running towards the house.

'*Schnell, schnell!*' Jakob called out in his best military voice, hoping that the two soldiers would come running in unthinkingly. They burst in one after the other and were momentarily shocked at what they saw and it was in that split second he told them to drop their weapons and put their hands up, which they did. He couldn't risk a battle; as they weren't good enough to take on trained soldiers.

He never got over the shock of having to murder those two young men, barely out of school. He made them kneel down and

shot them through the back of the head. He felt dreadful and could only think of their families; but back then such thoughts had to be set aside. He grabbed hold of Ira, took all the guns and ammunition, as much food and drink, as they could find and loaded them into the German officer's Mercedes car, with its two swastika flags on the front, and set off.

They were now the living dead. If they were found, they would be shot if they were lucky; tortured then shot if they were not. They had to take big risks. Ira sat in the back with the weapons, wearing the Major's uniform jacket, which was soaked in his blood, whilst he wore the jacket and the helmet of one of the guards he had murdered. He intended to drive straight through the two border posts and through the barriers if necessary and gave Ira full instructions about what to do when they were almost at them.

They drove down the track and back onto the main road. Thankfully it was now getting late – another hour and they would be in the twilight – which would make their job easier. This was perhaps the only time he became frightened, not for himself but for Ira. He could not foresee what would happen after they crashed through the barrier – perhaps they would both be killed but the worst would be if she were to survive and had to face her fate alone. And during these final moments together they could not sit side by side or touch each other! Any sign of closeness would give them away before they got to the border. They needed to hold each other one last time. About five miles from the border he turned up into a secluded track.

Jakob asked me if I had ever held anybody when you thought it was for the last time or touched anyone or looked at anyone knowing you might never see them again. He explained that that was how he felt when he kissed Ira before they set off again.

He never wanted to let her go and he could tell the way she was squeezing him she felt the same.

'Come on!' he whispered. 'We are doing this for Abe and Isaac and we are not going to let them down.'

What Jakob told me next made me smile. He sat Ira in the back of the car, still wearing the Major's jacket and placed his hat on her and said, 'Ira, my dear, if I didn't hate this hat so much I would say you looked lovely wearing it.'

He then drove on at full speed to the border, almost recklessly. He was getting used to driving the different cars and in some ways he found it exciting at what they were doing, but he was always brought back to reality when they saw one or two German soldiers as they passed through the little border towns. Thank goodness for the darkness for there was no real lighting in the towns and they were very quiet; it was as though they too were all on tenterhooks, waiting for the start of the fighting as Germany prepared to overrun Belgium and Holland.

Jakob became almost excited, as he told me all this. 'I could now see the border post in the distance, through to Venlo, Holland and Freedom!'

The border post was set back from the main route, leaving almost a clear road through, except for the two sentry positions at either side, and of course the inevitable wooden barriers on both sides of the border with the no-man's land in between.

In his haste he decided to flash the lights and as he found that the horn would stay on when he pressed one of the controls at the side of the steering wheel, he left that on as well. It was now all happening too quickly for him to be worried about anything as they raced along with everything flashing by as he slammed the accelerator right down to the floor. Strangely neither of them were afraid any more.

There was now about two hundred yards to go and with the car accelerating, the horn blasting and a German officer in the back, the first sentry smartly lifted the barrier, thinking he was doing his duty. It wasn't until they raced the next two hundred yards to the exit barrier causing the two guards to jump out of the way that the soldiers began to fire.

'Get down!' Jakob shouted to Ira on the back seat and within a split second he put his own head down, held the steering wheel

as hard and as straight as he could and smashed through the barrier. He felt the car shudder with the impact and the glass and metal from the windscreen showering over him as the barrier, which was not made of wood, skimmed over his head and knocked everything off the car in its way. Miraculously the car kept going straight,

'Stay down!' he shouted to Ira as he lifted himself up, just enough to see where he was going. The wing mirrors weren't damaged and he could see that the guards had begun running into no-man's land and were firing at them. The Dutch border guards gave chase and eventually Jakob thought it was best to stop and face them. He parked up the Mercedes and waited.

The Dutch border guards walked up to the car, fortunately without their weapons, and ordered him out. By now Jakob was reckless and having none of it. The little Jew just wasn't going to be pushed around anymore. Before they knew it he had whipped out his gun and ordered them to get onto the floor. Jacob told Ira to use the Major's gun and shoot them if they moved while he went to immobilise their car. He pointed the gun at the wheel and pulled the trigger; it was empty. He couldn't believe it; he had killed the Germans with his last bullets. He went back to the car and took one of the soldier's guns and repeated the exercise, but this one was semi-automatic and the bullets went everywhere. He took their guns, shot up their radio transmitter and left as quickly as possible.

Soon Jakob and Ira were on their way again. All the border towns and many of those further in were deserted, apart from small concentrations of troops, which seemed to be there just as token forces, to cause a nuisance to the advancing Germans when they arrived, It was obvious the Dutch knew it was only a matter of hours, not days, before the Germans invaded and were resigned to their fate; a few probably even welcomed it. What though were the Dutch Jews thinking?

They made Amsterdam about nine at night and that too seemed half deserted. The police were already acting as though

the Germans were already there, as if the Gestapo were controlling them from afar. War had not been declared and yet you could smell their influence. Amsterdam was now a very dangerous place, not only for Jews, but also for those who opposed the Nazis and that was nearly all the Dutch people, though, as it turned out, few showed any real resistance.

As they drove through the silent streets they could sense there were eyes everywhere and yet there was no one to be seen.

They managed to hide the car not too far from his uncle's house, in an unlocked and what appeared to be deserted garage. They covered the weapons with the blanket and took only two pistols just in case. They then went to find the old merchants house, slipping into the shadows of the odd doorway whenever they heard a sound. They had become used to this deadly game of hide and seek.

III

Jakob had visited Amsterdam many times – his uncle was a leading diamond merchant in the city – and he knew his way around. He needed to know if there was any chance they could escape from mainland Europe and, if so, whether his uncle would be able to help them. He lived in an old quarter of the city, and his house was one of ten in an enormous grand terrace, each with its own massive courtyard at the rear of the property, entered from the road through what seemed like a huge tunnel, which was blocked by enormous wrought-iron gates. The façade of the house was equally impressive, with an array of shimmering windows and massive wooden doors which seemed to have been hewn from two solid pieces of old Dutch oak.

Jakob banged on the door, and the sound seemed to echo not only through the house but throughout Amsterdam. 'Bang, bang,

bang' like some damn drum. He knocked several times until eventually a worried Ikshak came to the door.

'It's Jakob, Uncle . . . Jakob from Germany!' he whispered loudly.

'Jakob?' he whispered back through the door as he pulled the many bolts back and opened it.

'Jakob, Jakob, Jakob, my son, come in. And Ira, too!' he exclaimed.

'What are you doing here? Come in, come in!' he said quickly. 'It is not safe to be seen on the doorstep these days. Where's Isaac?'

They did not answer immediately and Ikshak, sensing their trouble, did not press them.

They trudged up the stairs of the enormous house by the light of a candle, every step seeming to echo the other. The house itself was almost empty – they had been preparing for the war and had got rid of much of the unnecessary furniture and other possessions, turning them into liquid assets. One small sitting room remained richly furnished as it had been in former times.

'Come in! Come in and sit down!' he said warmly. 'Now tell me: how is little Isaac?'

Ira broke down and cried uncontrollably as Jakob explained that their darling son had been murdered by the Germans in front of his eyes. He went on to tell his uncle the whole sorry tale.

'I came to see you, Uncle, to see if you could help us,' Jakob said finally. But where are Aunt Rose, Rubin and Mary?' Jakob asked suddenly, realising that the family weren't there.

'I sent them to Oostende a few weeks ago; I wanted them to go to America and told them I would follow later on, but I haven't heard anything of them since. There is no post anymore and the last thing anyone wants is dealings with the likes of us,' he said sadly. 'When the Germans arrive we will be finished. I've been telling the Society that for over a year now and no one would take me seriously. Some of them even want to open negotiations

with the Germans, in the hope that they can keep control of the business.'

Any way he listened intently as Ikshak continued his story. 'Come with me tomorrow morning, I have a special meeting with the Society and I want you to tell them what you have told me. We are also meeting a representative of the British Government on a matter of business, so he might be able to help you.'

None of them slept a wink during the night and he could hear his uncle trudging wearily from room to room, whiling away the hours until daybreak. The following day Ikshak led them to almost the top of the five-storey house, through a secret door into the next building and so on until they had passed through four of the houses in the terrace. They then went downstairs to the ground floor and entered one of the courtyards they had seen the night before and hence into a warren of little alleyways.

At last they reached a tall, old building and went into a plain gloomy room in which were already sitting some twenty of Amsterdam's leading Jewish diamond merchants. It was a sombre affair; there was nothing but fear and sadness in the air.

Ikshak quickly introduced his nephew and niece. 'I want Jakob to tell you what is happening to the Jews in Germany and what has happened to him and his wife . . . It may not be news, but I think it brings it home to us what will soon happen here,' Ikshak explained.

Jakob spoke with passion. Not even the rich were spared, he told them. Everyone believed it wouldn't happen to them until they were shipped away with the rest. 'To the Nazis we are Jews, and that's that.' He told them that their only chance was to leave before the Nazis got there. He tried to be firm but still couldn't believe their attitude when some still thought it wouldn't happen to them – they were Dutch after all.

'No! You are Jews!' Jakob protested.

They heard a car approach and all nervously looked out of the window, as a green army saloon car pulled up and four men alighted. One of the men seemed to be carrying an attaché case

and another seemed to be his bodyguard, whilst the other two took the car further down the road and remained with it. They all looked extremely furtive, especially the guards.

'They're the British diplomats,' Ikshak explained, with a smile. 'At last!'

Jakob was immediately hurried out of the room and told to wait until they had finished their business. He and Ira sat waiting in a cold little room for several hours, not knowing what was going on. The Jewish diamond merchants were a secretive lot.

Suddenly they heard banging on the main doors of the building and Ikshak came running in to tell them that it was the Dutch police, who, it seemed, were already collaborating with the Nazis.

'Hurry! You have to go!' Ikshak whispered, becoming visibly worried for our safety "You'll have to go back to your car . . . The diplomats are coming with us.'

'But the others! What about the others?' Jakob protested.

'They are staying,' he said simply shrugging his shoulders as if to say they don't believe it will happen to them and we are wasting our time. 'Come on we have to go!'

Ikshak led the way back through the maze of alleyways back to his house. The 'diplomats' or whatever they were, followed us seemingly remarkably unfazed by the whole affair and were as cool as cucumbers.

However, it was a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire, for back at Ikshak's house they discovered that it, too, was now under surveillance.

The two British men took control of the situation.

'The place is definitely being watched, Sir,' said one, as they stood out of sight to the side of a window. 'Look, over there, on the other side of the canal! And there are also two men on the bridge at the top of the street; they're definitely keeping watch and our car has gone, Sir.'

'Christ! What on earth are they playing at?' the officer exclaimed in shocked anger. 'Take a look outside, but try not to be seen and report back quickly.'

‘I’ll take him,’ Ikshak said. ‘He won’t be seen.’

He returned a few minutes later amazed where he had been taken, but unfortunately with the news confirming that neither the car nor the men were in the vicinity.

‘We need to go,’ the officer said. ‘Thank you for your cooperation, but we do need to find transport quickly.’

Jakob interrupted him somewhat sheepishly in German, which fortunately the senior of the two fully understood. He had a car but they would have to wait until dark to get it.

‘And where is this car?’ he asked a little suspiciously.

‘It’s a few hundred yards away . . . If I take you to wherever you want to go, would you get us out of Holland and take us to England?’ Jakob asked. He set out his deal as politely as possible.

‘I can’t promise, but I’ll do my best,’ the man replied. ‘Our ship is waiting for us at Rotterdam. We have to be there before ten tomorrow morning – the Captain is under strict orders to leave no later, as the invasion is now imminent. We know that the Germans are massing troops along the border and it would only be hours before they would be there and of course the ship would be in danger.’

He suddenly stopped and said, like all English gentlemen, ‘I am so sorry, we haven’t been introduced . . .’

‘I’m Jakob Rosenberg,’ Jakob interrupted, ‘and this is my wife, Ira, and of course you know my Uncle Ikshack,’ he replied. ‘And you are?’

‘We are British officers,’ he replied evasively, ‘but it’s better you don’t know our names . . . at present anyway. However, Mr Rosenberg, we do have one problem – we must stop at Sassenheim and collect a parcel before we go on to Rotterdam. Do you think you can do it; otherwise we must make alternative arrangements immediately?’

‘I can’t promise but I will do my best,’ Jakob replied smiling and then told them he had several weapons in the car and a reasonable amount of ammunition,

'We will leave the moment it gets dark. It's too dangerous beforehand. What about petrol?' he asked.

'There's plenty – we have at least half a tank.'

'Good then, we will rest up until its dark.'

Jakob told his uncle to get himself ready, but to his absolute horror, he refused to leave.

'Jakob, my son,' he began, 'I can't go. Where would I go? Who would want to help an old Jew like me? Look at me! I have nothing left except my memories and those for the rest of my days will be sufficient. I only wish I knew if my lovely wife Rose and my children were safe. I can only live for the rest of my life in the hope that one day I will know the truth, but in my heart I know that will never be.'

'But, Jakob . . .' He paused for a moment. '. . . I want you to do something for me. I have written every day to Rose since they left. I could not post them as I wanted them near to me. It was all I had left, but now, when you see her, I want you to give them to her and also I want you to give her this package. It's just sentimental stuff – a few old trinkets.'

He took the package and the letters, which were tied together with colourful ribbons, and placed them inside an old shoe box. He stared at the contents sadly.

'We bought those ribbons to decorate the children's cots; they were very important to us.' He was now weeping openly. 'Please don't tell her how you last saw me . . . like this, I mean. A defeated man! Let her think I was still defiant as I was when she and my lovely children left.'

He hurried over to his desk and returned with another letter, and put it tenderly on top of the others.

'My last letter! Take care of it, Jakob.'

Jakob could sense that everything was in that box – his love for his family and his spirit for life – and in handing it over he knew that Ikshak's life was at an end.

'Of course, Uncle,' Jakob replied. 'I'll make sure she gets it, if it takes the rest of my days.'

When twilight came, Ikshak took them through the maze of passageways and tunnels that would bring them out, he said, as close to the car as possible.

When they were almost at the street, he turned to Jakob.

‘Come here, Jakob,’ he said, putting his arms around him and holding him tightly.

Jakob could now feel his uncle’s thin body under his robes and knew he was not eating and was very unwell.

Ikshak could sense he knew this and held him tighter. ‘Try to find my Rose, Jakob!’ he whispered in his ear. ‘I know you and Ira will be safe. Don’t tell her how you found me. Don’t forget the letters, and here is something for you and Ira!’ he said, pushing a small package into Jakob’s pocket.

He kissed Jakob on his forehead, and then Ira, and told them to go. It was one of the most terrible moments of Jakob’s life – seeing his uncle for the last time like that. They knew and he knew that he would soon be murdered, if he wasn’t fortunate enough to die before the Germans arrived.

Jakob led the way out on to the street, only turning back to see a tired last wave from his uncle. Tears streamed from Jakob’s eyes like rain as they hurried towards the car.

‘Where on earth did you get this car?’ the officer asked, shocked to see the German Mercedes staff car.

‘I stole it to escape from Germany and smashed through the gates at the border. I also managed to get a few guns.’

The officer was delighted with the stash of German weaponry, but was now even more anxious to get away. ‘Get in quick and let’s get out of here!’ he ordered. He was in control, though Jakob was to be the driver.

It was on the road to Sassenheim that they encountered the first of their problems. For some reason or other there was a roadblock – German collaborators seemed to be already at work.

‘When you get near enough, open fire and don’t miss!’ the senior Englishman ordered his colleague. ‘Can you fire a gun?’ he added, turning to Ira. ‘If you can, use this.’ He handed Ira a small

automatic pistol. 'And you, Mr Rosenberg, drive this thing as hard as you can! If any of them get in the way run them down.'

Jakob did just that. Once more he was crashing through a roadblock, only this time he had help. All hell let loose as he charged through; the car was peppered with bullets but thankfully none of them were hit. It looked as though they had killed all five of the men who had been manning the roadblock.

'Stop the car!' the Englishman roared at him.

Jakob braked sharply and before he had even stopped the two men had jumped out and were running back to where the men lay dead or dying. Jakob thought it cruel but two of them were still alive and were duly shot through the head. The Englishmen searched the bodies looking for anything that might help them and then scoured their car, bringing with them a briefcase and all the weapons they had. It was all expertly carried out.

'Let's get out of here and put your foot down!' the officer finally ordered.

They reached the outskirts of Sassenheim about an hour later. Ahead of them, a few hundred yards away, was another group of Dutch policemen, and seemingly heavily armed.

'Get the car off the road, and put it where it can't be seen and come with us!' the senior one said, giving them each a semi-automatic. He ordered Ira to go with him whilst Jakob was told to go with the other. 'See you back here in four to five minutes; if you are not here we will leave you.'

Jakob noticed that the 'Boss' – as he now thought of him – had strapped the attaché case to his back and for the first time Jakob began to wonder what all this was about; it was obviously a covert operation to get something out of Holland and over to England before the outbreak of war and it didn't take much for him to realise that the first part of their mission was to do with the collection or whereabouts of the Dutch diamonds and to prevent them getting into German hands, as for the other part that was yet to unfold.

The road was bordered by tall hedgerows, offering ideal cover.

The Boss and Ira made their way along the inner side of the hedge until they were level with the policemen while the other man and Jakob made their way along the opposite side. Jakob hated all this; he had never been brought up to be violent, quite the opposite in fact, and even though all the killing had to be done, he was sick at heart. However they couldn't risk getting stopped and searched, so they would have to kill again. He consoled himself by saying they were Nazi sympathisers.

It was at this point that Jakob and the other Englishman stumbled across several bodies that had been dumped over the hedge; all had been shot and it quickly dawned on them what had happened. They were adjacent to one of the main sluice gates and these men – they wore blue boiler suits like engineers – had probably been waiting for instructions to open them. This would have flooded the area and slowed up the German advance. They had obviously been killed by German sympathisers. Suddenly Jakob felt his qualms disappear.

They were now lying in wait for the signal – a short, sharp cry like a bird's – and when it came there was mayhem. The Dutch quislings didn't stand a chance; they didn't even know where the bullets were coming from.

'Go and get the car and be quick!' the Boss shouted. 'The whole area will have heard that racket. I'm going to open the sluice.'

Jakob felt like some terrorist as he ran back to the car; he felt strong and powerful and no longer afraid. Luck was with him that day as he just managed to stop himself in time as he saw two policemen looking over the car. He was prepared, and with the safety catch off, he charged and let fly. He didn't check to see if they were dead. He simply jumped into the car and raced back to the others and they were away.

It was pitch black when they reached the centre of Sassenheim, a lovely small town not far from the sea. All the streetlights had been turned off, so now they had only the headlights of the car to guide them around.

The Boss gave the instructions where to go and once again Jakob simply did as he was told. They drew up outside a big church almost in the centre, where the Boss left the three of them outside, on strict instructions to keep their eyes open for trouble and to warn him if there was. It took about twenty minutes for his business to be concluded, and when he came out he had four large boxes and put them into the car. All the time Jakob's heart was racing and the smell of fear was back in his nostrils.

'Please, please hurry!' Jakob kept saying under his breath.

The Boss climbed into the car next to him. 'Rotterdam here we come!' he said with an air of satisfaction.

They reached the outskirts of Rotterdam as dawn was breaking, and found themselves driving between hundreds of refugees, all hoping to catch a boat to freedom. It was a sad and terrible sight and with the rain now absolutely bucketing down they made only very slow progress along the thronged streets. There was only another hour before the boat was due to leave.

'Blast the horn!' the Boss shouted at Jakob. 'And keep your hand on it!' But it made no difference. The Englishman leaned out of the car window and let off a few rounds above the heads of the refugees and this time they scattered in terror. It was an exercise that had to be repeated on several occasions. The German staff car itself was creating its own problems as the refugees believed they were German –insults were flung and even the occasional stone hit the car. The Boss returned the compliment by firing one or two shots up into the air.

'Cruel but kind, I'm afraid. I have to get this to the boat at all costs,' he added, sitting back comfortably down in his seat.

They arrived at the dock gates with about twenty minutes to spare, but here again collaborators were manning the entrance. The docks were absolutely packed with refugees, many trying to get on the naval frigate which they could see tied up a short distance away.

'Papers!' It was a word Jakob had hoped he would never hear again. The accent was German.

‘We are English officers returning to our ship and these people are British diplomats,’ the Boss roared.

‘Papers!’ the man repeated, ignoring him.

‘Point the gun at him and shoot him if he makes any move,’ the Boss ordered.

They were all suddenly disturbed by the noise of an aircraft approaching and then, unexpectedly, by a shower of bullets as the plane strafed the dockyard. The refugees scattered, screaming.

The Englishmen seized the opportunity.

‘Drive straight through to the ship!’ he shouted.

Jakob didn’t see how it happened but when he turned he saw the officious little man with the German accent lying dead on the floor with a bullet hole in his head. It was strange – no bullets from the plane had come near them.

Fortunately they were now only a few yards from the boat and already the Boss was out of the car.

‘Get all the packages together and follow me; you stay there,’ he ordered the other man, ‘and look after the rest while I get some help.’ There were four well-armed ratings at the foot of the gangway and others standing by the capstans on the dockside, all simply there to prevent the thousands of refugees trying to get aboard.

Mr White, if you could have heard the way Jakob described what was happening. I’m sure you would have felt like crying as he did. People were actually trying to climb up the ropes and had to be knocked off and were just falling into the water. They were fighting with each other to get nearer the boat and yet they had no chance as the Captain was under orders not to take civilians.

Anyway Jakob and Ira both dutifully carried their parcels onto the ship and were immediately given permission by the Captain to board. The Boss, who turned out to be some very high-ranking officer involved in covert activities throughout Europe, explained what Jakob and Ira had done to help the mission – they had more than paid for their passage, he said.

THE PIANO

Jakob could not go on deck as they left harbour; it was too harrowing. The screams from those people desperate to escape the inevitable war was too much for him . . .

Well, Mr White, that is why Jakob wanted to do something as a thank-you to England. That is why he repaired the piano.

Over the years I naturally asked if he had ever found Rose, Ikshak's wife, but he never did. I remember he brought in the little bundle of letters to show me; there were about twenty of them, still sealed, and tied together by those ribbons. I think he passed them onto his son so that he could continue the search.

You can guess what the little package contained, of course. A little handful of diamonds. When the war was over Jakob was able to buy his little shop and workshop with the proceeds.