

Chapter One—1946: Trials

Johann Brenner, M.D., climbed inside the first boxcar he could find in Berlin's train yards as the city was falling to the Russians. When the train headed south, toward Nuremberg, he cursed his luck. But he knew it could have gone east, deeper into the territory held by the Soviets, or into Russia itself. He knew that the war would soon end. If only the train were not bombed before he could jump off.

His false papers afforded him a new identity, a new life. He wanted to go west, to Karlsruhe, where he hoped to find his wife. He was comforted by his belief that she had fled their apartment in Nuremberg to live with her sister in the *Rhineland*. He missed her, but their separation helped him forget what he wanted to forget.

As the train neared Nuremberg, he jumped. American troops captured him within minutes. They brought him to a D.P. camp outside the city and assigned him and other "displaced persons" to one of the re-construction crews at Nuremberg's Palace of Justice. But his war wounds—a leg injury resulting in an awkward limp from the First World War, and a scarred right hand, which he concealed with a glove, from the Second—made him unfit for hard labor. Instead, he worked as a cleaner inside the courthouse. He followed orders, did as he was told, and the Americans were satisfied.

When the courthouse repairs were completed, Johann Brenner—now known as Heinrich Westermann—was selected to be the head custodian in Nuremberg's Palace of Justice. He liked his title. He assigned himself the night shift: eleven to seven. He appreciated the quiet. In the vast building, he alone was awake. He had a bunk, a small desk, and a cupboard under the stairs in the basement. He took his meals during the workweek in the building's cafeteria; on weekends, he lined up at the nearby soup kitchen. Supervising the others, he felt responsible, even a bit

important. Sometimes he hummed softly as he walked up and down the stairs. He alone knew that he had been a doctor at Auschwitz.

He was careful to not antagonize the other men or show any favoritism. He avoided asking them questions and answered few of theirs. Mostly in silence, they swept, mopped and polished the Palace of Justice's floors, stairs, and the various offices and meeting rooms, washed its windows, cleaned its toilets and prepared it for the trials that would begin in the late summer.

Johann took a particular interest in Room 600, the main courtroom, and assigned himself to dust and wax the defendants' dock, the lawyers' tables, and the wooden railing around the witness stand. He enjoyed smoothing the green felt over the judges' bench, arranging their chairs, tending to their pitchers of water and their glasses. He brought everything to a shining, pure order—an order best seen in the morning light when he drew back the heavy drapes. The wood-paneled walls turned to old gold. The aluminum clock numerals above the dock shone like silver. The green marble doorway gleamed. The judges' bench became a throne.

He knew that his *Vaterland* was in ruins. Millions had lost their lives. Millions more were starving and dreading the winter. And beyond Germany, millions more had been killed. Loves lost. Lives shattered. Homes bombed. The living faced chaos. Like them all, he was numbed by the war.

Debris and loose gravel covered Nuremberg's cobblestoned streets. More than ninety percent of the city had been destroyed. What remained was a tangled collection of fragments, of disconnected, painful memories and choices. Choices made before the war had consequences that led to more choices, all of them knotted and confused. Like Johann himself.

He had heard of the mayor's predictions that it would take seventy-five years for the city to be rebuilt. Walking along *Fürthstraße* toward the old city, he saw that the castle moat had

been drained and tented over with canvas to accommodate as many of the homeless as possible. He saw that his lovely, beloved city, “Germany’s little treasure chest,” had been bombed back to the time of ox-carts. All the more startling to see visiting Americans, dignitaries and businessmen, being driven in automobiles like space ships along cleared roads from the Palace of Justice to the relatively unharmed suburbs of the city. Some were staying in what was still standing of the *Deutsche Hof*, the hotel where Hitler himself often had stood on the balcony to address the *Volk* at the annual September Party rallies. Their robin’s egg blue, pearly gray or apple green automobiles looked gigantic—smooth, confident, powerful; with chrome-rimmed headlights and shiny grills; with hubcaps like silver platters and over-sized white-walled tires. Ash and sand swirled behind them. They came from a world where colors and brightness had not been obliterated. A different world than Nuremberg’s dark brown and sooty black. The contrast was painful. At first, Johann stayed inside as much as he could. His basement bunk became his home.

All the same, those six months in 1945, after the surrender and before the trials began, were his most carefree since before the Great Depression. Before the war, he had expected to be a hero. Then came chaos. He wanted to forget all that. To escape the morgue of the past. To believe that what he had seen and done before his *Vaterland*’s collapse was behind him. To escape his fear of being recognized. For a while, he succeeded. Then he began having nightmares again.

In November 1945, the International Military Tribunal began in Room 600. Twenty-two of the highest-ranking Nazis sat in the prisoners’ dock on the chairs that he had polished and straightened. They were on trial for “conspiracy to wage aggressive war,” for “crimes against peace,” for “violations of the laws of war,” and for “crimes against humanity.” The Russian,

French, British and American presiding judges propped their elbows on the green felt cloth that he had smoothed, and drank water from the glasses that he had set so neatly at each of their places.

On that first day of the trial, he stood against the back wall, behind the visitors' gallery. He wanted to see the Nazi defendants in flesh and blood. Goering was the only one he had seen up close before, when Hitler had given a speech in Nuremberg. He remembered that warm autumn night of ten years ago: soldiers singing and goose-stepping with power and confidence; workers marching with shovels, held like rifles over their shoulders; the flames from the torchlight parade dancing in his son Paul-Adolf's eyes. He remembered how they, along with the multitude, had cheered and stretched their arms out toward their *Führer*. The next day, the newspapers trumpeted the racial laws. Paul-Adolf wore his Hitler Youth uniform to school and was so excited that he forgot his books.

Goering, despite his defiant glare, looked shabby now in the prisoners' dock. So did the others. When the opening proceedings turned toward describing Nazi medical experimentation, sterilizations and genocide, Johann began to feel dizzy and went to lie down on his basement bunk. He soon fell into fitful sleep. Hours later, he awakened thrashing and screaming. "Clean this up! Clean this up at once!" he heard himself shouting into the blackness.

After that, he did not attend any more sessions of the International Military Tribunal. He worked his night shift, which suited the other janitors quite well, and then spent the daylight hours trying to sleep. He was relieved when the Tribunal ended on the last day of September 1946. But the nightmares did not stop.

The next trial—the "Nazi Doctors' Trial"—began soon afterwards. A panel of American judges was hearing evidence against twenty-two men and one woman. All were charged with

murder, torture and atrocities “in the name of medical science.” All but three of the defendants were physicians.

He did not plan to attend any of these proceedings. But when one of the defendants vomited before collapsing in the prisoner’s dock, the bailiff summoned him to clean it up. From then on, he was required to be present. He sat in the corner of the courtroom, just behind two photographers who were perched above him on their stepladders.

He tried to reassure himself that his fears of being recognized were groundless. He knew that he had aged. That he was stooped and gaunt to the point of looking skeletal. That he had not regained any of the weight he had lost since he was wounded at Auschwitz. The mirror in the basement washroom showed him how much his eyes were sunken and rimmed with shadows. How prominent were his cheekbones. And how, he thought, his thinning, gray hair, and the wispy moustache that he now wore made him look far older than forty-eight. ‘I am a different man now,’ he hoped. ‘A different man.’

Most of the time during the Doctors’ Trial he pretended to be asleep. Still, he could not contain his curiosity about the drama around him. Since he was not given earphones, he could not hear the simultaneous translations of the proceedings. He did not understand what the American judges and prosecuting attorneys were saying. That did not stop him from admiring their crisp uniforms, their bright brass buttons, their control of what was going on. By contrast, he thought the German defense attorneys, with their worn, baggy suits and their limp shirts, seemed confused and nervous.

He could not stop himself from glancing up into the spectators’ gallery. It was easy enough to pick out the Americans. They looked well fed and healthy. ‘Those hungry-looking ones must be Germans,’ he thought. ‘Perhaps family members of a defendant, or of one of the

witnesses.’ One woman, wearing a black coat, a tight-fitting black hat and a dark, heavy veil sat near the back of the gallery. When he noticed that she was staring at him, he quickly looked down at the floor. Sitting a few seats away in the same row, another woman wore the bright clothes and thick make-up that he thought must be the style of all American women, based on the movies he had seen before the war.

Many of the visitors seemed to be uninterested in the proceedings, and that made them all the more conspicuous. Some, he decided, were probably Nurembergers simply trying to get warm after a night in makeshift lodgings. But others might be in disguise, just as fearful of detection as he was. Did he know them? Did they know him?

The twenty-three defendants mirrored Nuremberg’s wretchedness. He tried not to look too long at them, but could not avoid taking quick glances in their direction. The military men among them wore dusty old uniforms that looked like padded pajamas, bare of any insignia or decoration; the civilians wore shabby suits. Wearing his neatly pressed, gray janitor’s smock helped him believe he was different.

Most of the defendants appeared downcast. With their arms folded stiffly, they stared blankly or looked down into their laps. Only the chief defendant, *Doktor* Karl Brandt, one of Adolf Hitler’s personal physicians and the highest-ranking Nazi medical administrator to survive the war, seemed alert enough to understand the charges against him. Despite Brandt’s haggard appearance, Johann recognized him immediately.

The last time he had seen Brandt in Nuremberg was in the autumn of 1939, just after the war began. As *Reich* Commissioner for Health and Sanitation, *Generalleutnant* Brandt was the honored guest of Nuremberg’s chapter of the Nazi Physicians’ Association, in town to give a speech about the state’s concern with “mental defectives.” “We must be scientific,” he had said,

“especially when Germany’s survival is at stake. We must make hard choices and use our skills to heal our people.” Johann recalled how much he had admired Brandt’s certainty and self-confidence, his idealism and determination. All doctors should be like him, he thought. Fearless, uncompromising in their service to the *Volk*, worthy of respect. That evening, when he was introduced to Brandt, he had made an effusive comment about how history would not forget what was being said and done at meetings like this all across Germany. Brandt replied by raising his arm stiffly in a Hitler salute.

Now Brandt sat on trial, head unbowed, a disdainful arch in his eyebrow, sneering occasionally at his fellow defendants. His shiny black, pomaded hair, precisely parted and combed back from his high forehead, reflected the ceiling’s lights. His mouth and jaw seemed hard, even rigid, as though his facial structure and musculature made it impossible for him to smile. His head and neck had a chiseled, sculpted quality, much like the Nazis’ idealized Nordic hero. The small cleft in his chin added to the effect. Occasionally he glanced at the witnesses, or at the judges’ bench, but mostly he cocked his head so he could stare at the ceiling or look away from the other prisoners. His every gesture displayed a man wanting to be in control of himself, a man of self-confidence, entitled to authority. Johann blanched each time Brandt turned his head toward him. But if the *Reich* Commissioner recognized him, he did not show it.

This day’s testimony was about castration. On the stand stood a pudgy, balding man, who looked at least sixty, but was probably not yet thirty. After the preliminary oath, he began talking immediately in German with a Polish accent, without the hesitation or the stumbling Johann had noticed in previous witnesses. In a high voice that came in quick bursts followed by pauses and deep labored breaths, he told how he had avoided an earlier roundup of his fellow prisoners on a road-construction crew by hanging back. Those prisoners, he said, had been taken by truck to a

nearby clinic for an unspecified, brief treatment they could not understand. They had come back to the work camp the same day and began working at once.

The bulbous microphone, so tall that the witness had to stretch to reach it, made a hissing sound each time he spoke a word that ended in an “s.” Johann’s mind flashed back to Auschwitz and an image of Aronsohn, lying on the floor. Aronsohn had had the same accent. He sank down into his chair and put his hand over his eyes, as the prosecuting attorney directed the witness to continue.

Softly, the man said, “...twenty Jews, of twenty to twenty-four years of age, were chosen. But this time the selection went by the alphabet. I was one of the very first. We were deported to Birkenau into a woman labor camp. There a tall doctor, in the gray uniform of the *Luftwaffe* arrived.”

Johann winced. He sucked in air, making an almost audible whistle. In his mind, each sentence in the prisoner’s testimony ended with Aronsohn’s terrified scream: ‘I am a man!’ He sank deeper into his chair.

“We had to undress and our sexual organs were placed under an apparatus and kept there under the apparatus for fifteen minutes. The apparatus strongly heated the sexual organs...” The microphone crackled. “...and the surrounding parts, and later on those parts began to show a black color. After this treatment...”

The word “treatment” gave Johann a jolt. He shifted his feet and began to perspire.

“...we had to work again right away. After some days the sexual organs of most of my comrades became purulent and they had great difficulties in walking. In spite of this they had to go on working until they collapsed...” The witness paused for a loud, wheezing breath, then

continued, "...and those who collapsed were sent," another, longer pause, "...to the gas chambers."

Johann exhaled loudly. He felt panic rise in his throat. He reached into his pocket for his handkerchief and wiped his brow. He clenched his teeth and shut his eyes. 'Take deep breaths, Johann. Slow, deep breaths. Don't faint now. Yes, the genitalia often were 'purulent.' Grotesquely, pathetically filled with pus.'

The courtroom was quiet. For all Johann knew, everyone was looking at him. But all eyes were on the witness. The heavy drapes closed out the afternoon's sunlight. They hung motionless, cloaking everything in a funereal stupor. The military policemen's absurdly shiny, white helmets reflected the ceiling lights, but the lights themselves and the very air in the room now seemed shadowy and gray.

Speaking directly to the judges, in a startlingly calm voice, the witness said, "I myself had only an exudation, but no suppuration."

Johann gasped. 'Yes,' he thought. 'Many of them only had a slow oozing of pus, not a runny discharge. He was one of the lucky ones.' He dared to look directly at the witness for an instant before he looked down again into his lap, and closed his eyes.

"Two weeks later," the man continued, "it was about October 1943, seven men of our group were led to Auschwitz I. This distance had to be marched." Again the microphone hissed as the witness said the last phrase in his Polish accented German, "...zu Fuss..." He paused, turned to look at the judges' bench, and finally said, "The seven men had great difficulty in walking because their sexual organs were hurting. We were led to Auschwitz I, into the sick barracks, Block 20. There we were operated on."

The witness paused again, as though he had to turn another page in his mind before he could continue. “We received an injection in the back by which the lower part of the body became insensible while the upper part remained quite normal.” Another, longer pause. A sigh, like a gentle wind over grasses. “Both testicles were taken off.” These last words were spoken with such calmness, such resignation, so softly, even gently, that some of the prisoners in the dock smiled with the belief that the witness’s tone of voice was proof that no harm had been done. Johann clenched his teeth so tightly his jaw muscles began to hurt. He opened his eyes and saw that only Brandt among the defendants was as stony-faced as before. Standing on a ladder in the corner above Johann’s seat, a photographer was operating a motion picture camera that emitted a low, mechanical growl. Over its sound, Johann heard someone in the balcony crying.

After a brief pause, the witness added, in a somewhat louder voice, “There was no prior examination as to spermatic fluid.”

‘Yes,’ Johann recalled to himself, ‘until Schumann changed the protocol.’

When the witness next said, in his broken German, “I have been able to see the whole procedure in the mirror glass of a surgical lamp,” Johann was confused for a moment, then thought, ‘Yes, he could have seen what was happening to him. Lord!’ He swallowed and hung his head.

“Also,” the witness continued, now in a louder, stronger voice, “none of us were asked whether we agreed to the operation. They just said, ‘you go,’ and then we were sent to the operation table without the possibility of saying anything.” He looked over at the prisoners’ dock with an icy glare, drawing everyone’s eyes that way, too. Then he shouted, “No consent for the operation was obtained. We were merely told: ‘Your turn,’ and sent to the operating table without a word.”

Johann grimaced and clenched his fists in his lap. The glove on his right hand was beginning to tear between his thumb and forefinger. He longed to take it off, but knew he could not.

The witness slowly looked around the courtroom. “The man in charge of the sterilization and castration experiments at Auschwitz was a *Doktor* Schumann. During these operations, the doctors had white coats on. A gray uniform of the *Luftwaffe* was the only uniform I ever saw on any one of the doctors during the X-ray sterilization. This uniform had an open collar and a tie worn with it.”

Johann closed his eyes again. He remembered his first meeting with Horst Schumann, in early 1940 at the asylum in Grafeneck, just five years after he joined the party. He remembered how inspired he had been by Schumann’s resolute determination to do, as he had said, “whatever had to be done.” Grafeneck’s calm seemed to sanction, to justify, to make natural and even beautiful what took place there. Such lovely, pastoral beauty, such ordered nature. So civilized and thoughtful a place of refuge. Johann recalled the winter sunlight filtering through a light snowfall, how it softened the faces of bundled-up patients who were able to go outside and walk or be wheeled along by their attendants on tree-lined paths. He did not ask himself what those human beings might have been thinking on the day they were loaded onto a gray bus for their last, short journey. He had thought that they could not think.

His decision to help Schumann in the Nazis’ euthanasia program once had been one of the proudest moments of his life. Now he thought differently, that he had let himself be captured and used by Schumann’s certainty. That he was taken in by Grafeneck’s placid order. By all the reasoning that had led him to that place. He could still hear Schumann tell him, in his smooth, rich voice, “We are only doing what good doctors have done through the ages—saving the

patient, in this case our Germany, from a weakening, ultimately destructive condition. But we are doing it more humanely, more methodically than it has ever been done before. Healthy German boys and girls deserve to be protected from these useless creatures.”

He had been convinced at the time that the gassings at Grafeneck were essential, and for that reason, ethical and responsible. Even if he could not tell Helga, his wife, precisely what was happening there, he remembered how disappointed he was that she did not sense his satisfaction with his visit, that she did not share his enthusiasm, if only for his own sake. At the time, he had blamed it on his abbreviated account, nothing more. Only now, attending the trial, did he realize that her intuition had told her well enough what happened at Grafeneck.

From the day these trials began, he felt as though he had half-swallowed a serpent that coiled around his tongue and stretched down his throat. Each time, just when he felt he was going to suffocate or vomit, the serpent let him have another breath or two. Try as he might, he neither could spit it out, nor swallow it fully. He had once tried to examine his throat using a pencil as a tongue depressor, half-expecting to see a black, tumorous growth.

Johann looked up to see the witness trying to stop himself from sobbing. The microphone amplified the noise, making it sound like the walls were whispering. After two or three minutes, the man took a deep breath, and began to talk as though he had said all this many times before, without pause or hesitation. His testimony filled the courtroom with its smothering, dull sound: “After that I was in the hospital for three weeks. My other comrades suffered from strong suppuration as a result of the operation. We had very little food in the hospital, and we had fleas and every other possible vermin. Every third week a selection was made. Sixty percent were taken away into the gas chamber. After that, the hospital was almost empty. I, then, volunteered for work, in spite of the fact that I was still a very sick man.” A pause. Another deep breath. “The

only reason why I volunteered was that I was afraid of the gas chambers. I then worked with the prison tailor. The rest of the comrades still remained in the hospital.” The witness looked at the judges and said, “The selection took place in about the following manner: The block leader came into the room and reported, ‘All Jews stand to attention.’ All the sick had to get out of their beds, even those who were very ill, and they had to fall in completely naked. We had to stand to attention before an SS doctor with a high service grade. This doctor, however, did not see all the sick for he had to deal with thousands of persons. He only took the chart away from each sick person, and a day later, exactly during the most important Jewish holiday, sixty percent were transported into the gas chamber. The selections were always made by SS doctors.”

‘Yes,’ Johann thought. ‘I was there. I did that.’

“Later on,” the witness continued, “I worked in the camp and was beaten very often. Also, I had very much work. On the 18th of January, we had to cover a great distance by foot. As many of us broke down, we were loaded into cattle wagons and transported to Dachau, without food. When we arrived at Dachau on January 28, 1945, forty to fifty percent were dead.”

Johann forced himself to look at the witness. He closed his eyes when the witness began to weep. But he could not shut out the man’s testimony, whispering now: “I feel very discouraged, and I am ashamed of my castration. The worst is that I have no future anymore. I eat very little, and in spite of that I am getting fat.”

When Johann opened his eyes and looked again at the witness stand, the man was gone. An American military policeman stood against the wall by the door in the forced relaxation of his “at-ease,” looking like he had been carved of wood and painted to resemble a human being, just for effect. The courtroom was silent.

When the presiding judge declared a recess, Johann watched the twenty-three defendants file out. Sullenness enveloped them like a cloud. The dull noise of muffled conversations, chairs scraping the floor, and shuffling feet filled the courtroom. The gallery emptied while he remained seated and closed his eyes again. ‘Take deep breaths, Johann. Slow deep breaths,’ he told himself. ‘You must not faint. You must not faint! Remember, you helped Philipp. You tried to do what was right. In the end, you tried. You tried.’ When everyone had gone, he got up stiffly and limped toward the basement door.

Another janitor caught up with him. “A woman in mourning gave this to the porter. He asked me to give it to you.” Puzzled, Johann took the piece of paper and said a quick “*Danke schön.*” At the bottom of the stairs, he read the note: “*Meet me at 5 p.m. in the St. Lorenz Kirche. H.*” He immediately recognized Helga’s handwriting.

It took him nearly a half an hour to walk to the church. When a woman wearing black near the altar heard his footsteps, she rose, turned toward him, and lifted her veil. She began to cry. They embraced, but he held her with a stiffness that she did not understand. She did not want to let him go. When he stepped back, she saw how much older he looked. His skin was sallow. His eyes were sunken. His cheeks were hollow. He had deep creases in his forehead. His lower jaw seemed larger, his lips thinner. But it was her Johann. She tried to dry her eyes.

Before she could speak, he said, “I can’t believe it. You are here. In Nuremberg. Why? When did you come back?”

“I never left.”

“But you wrote that you were leaving to go to your sister, to Erika in Karlsruhe.”

“That was just before the big bombing. I couldn’t leave after that. No trains. And too many people needed help here.”

“Where are you staying?”

“In our apartment. Our building escaped the bombs without too much damage. Every building around us is leveled. Many were killed. We were lucky. Poor *Frau* Bitzer, from downstairs—remember, with her hunchback? She was staying overnight with her daughter next door. Both killed in their basement’s bomb shelter. Grandchildren, too. The Barschelders from upstairs were killed in the street. He, on the spot. She died before they got her to the hospital. The Sonderbergs—both dead, under the bridge. Other neighbors, too. So many. Everywhere in the city. Thousands they say. Who can say how many? So many lost. So many.”

Helga reached out to touch him and caught her breath. “But I don’t understand. Why didn’t you come home? What are you doing as a janitor at the trial?”

He saw her eyes were asking other questions as well.

“I thought you had left Nuremberg,” he said, looking away. “I got your letter saying you were going to leave for Karlsruhe. And I couldn’t bear to see what had happened to our neighborhood. To our home. I couldn’t bear it. I was afraid.”

Helga had never heard him admit he was afraid. “The war is over,” she said. “What are you afraid of?”

“It’s over for some. Never for others. What am I afraid of?” He paused. Looking toward the altar, he said, “I dare not tell you, Helga.”

“Why can’t you tell me? Come home now. It’s alright.”

“No. I cannot go with you now. Not yet. Someday perhaps. Not yet.”

She saw that he was trembling. “Sit down. We can talk here.” She tried to control the rage inside her. She began to tremble, too.

Most of the church's windows were missing. Overhead, huge sections of the vaulted ceiling gaped open to the late afternoon's clouds. A mason's chisel rang in a staccato rhythm from somewhere outside. An old couple prayed in one of the side chapels. Votive candles flickered wildly. He put his hands in his overcoat pockets. She tried to take them out and hold them. He refused.

As calmly as she could, she said, "I had the feeling you would not want me to speak to you at the courthouse. You looked away every time I looked at you. That's why I wrote the note. You look ill."

"Your veil. Why are you still wearing mourning? Did Erika die?"

She gasped. "No, not for my sister. For you, Johann. For you." She heard her voice rising. "You died. At least that's what the official letter said. Addressed to me, "*Frau* Widow Johann Brandt, M.D." Right there on the envelope. Widow. I didn't even have to open it to know what it would say. How it got to me, I don't know. You died in Berlin, it said. In May '45. The letter came in December. Just before Christmas. I had no reason to doubt it. You never contacted me. Your last letter was almost a year before, in January. Before the war ended."

"There was no mail service after that," he said.

"But I didn't want to go to Karlsruhe, in case you never received my letter. I stayed here. I put up your photograph in the train station. I began working at the hospital, thinking you would come there. I asked neighbors to watch for you during the day. Then the official letter."

"I left my papers on a corpse in Berlin and took his. I grew this moustache to look more like him. Heinrich Westermann."

"Come home with me."

He saw the anger in her eyes. How she had aged. How tired she was. "I cannot, Helga. No. We must not be seen together. I will be recognized."

"What have you done? What has happened to you?"

He looked away.

She stared at him. "At the trial," she said, "I hear terrible things. Today, the witness..."

"Why are you going to the trial?"

She was silent for a long time. "I want to find out what it meant to be a doctor over these years. To find out more about you. And now it's a miracle. I find you at the trial." She began to weep again. "I want you to come back to me. I want us to live our lives together again. We have lost so much. But we can still build a life together. Please. I work at the hospital. You could work there. You are needed"

"Helga..." He looked down, and then he turned toward the chapel where the old couple were crossing themselves and leaving. "Helga, please, I must work this out by myself." He was speaking so quietly she could barely hear him.

"By yourself? By yourself? Do you think I am a suit of clothes you can put on or off at your whim? You've been here in Nuremberg for more than a year and you never even looked for me? A year and you let me think you were dead? And now you want me to go home alone and wait some more?"

"You must understand. I can't come home with you now. I have a bed in the courthouse. I work there. I get my meals there. I cannot tell you any more. I cannot. Not yet."

"No, you don't understand. I miss you." She reached out again to touch his cheek, but he pulled away. "Johann, please...", she whispered.

“No. I’ve told you all I can. I am afraid. I will be recognized. If we are seen together, some neighbor or patient or former colleague will recognize me. Then it won’t be easy for you either. I don’t have to tell you that I was a member of the Party.”

“So? From the butcher to the mayor, who wasn’t a member of the Party in Nuremberg? The denazification procedures are a joke. Only the highest-ranking Nazis—and then only the ones who couldn’t offer up some forged documents—have any trouble. Doctors are needed now, Johann.”

“From what you have read and heard today in the trial, you must know that...”

“You can trust me....” Helga tried to look into his eyes.

“Maybe I will try to write it down.”

“And I should wait? Just wait? I have waited long enough. I will go to Erika in Karlsruhe. I won’t wear mourning any more. You can stay here if you like. But I won’t.”

“You don’t understand....”

“You never thought I could understand anything. Well, I understand that you are unable to help yourself and don’t want me to help you. I won’t waste any more time.” She began to cry.

He tried to hold her arm but she pulled free, stood up and walked away. He almost got up to follow her. But he slumped back into the pew and watched her go down the aisle. He watched her pause in the church’s shattered western door, silhouetted against the gray outside, and then she was gone.

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When the bombs fell, Helga could not leave Nuremberg. Like everyone else, she had to live by her wits to survive. A peasant woman whose husband had been Johann’s patient needed someone to write a letter to the authorities about her two missing sons. Soon others came, too,

asking her to write letters or complete forms or provide medical records. In exchange, each would bring her something—a few eggs, some potatoes, a piece of smoked meat, or a stick of firewood. She bartered away clothes for a can filled with lard and a pound of hard cheese. Her dressy shoes got her a half pound of tea in a metal box. She bartered some linens and the necklace of tiny pearls she was given by her mother at her confirmation for a sack of potatoes and some charcoal briquettes. She stashed it all—lard, cheese, tea, potatoes and briquettes—under her bed because she did not dare keep it in the basement. Each day she ate only one potato, which she fried in a bit of lard in a frying pan on her stove, and a thin slice of cheese. When the cheese and lard were gone, she roasted the potato in the stove. After she traded a neighbor ten potatoes for twenty candles, she did not dare burn the candles, lest their light attract drunken soldiers or robbers. One briquette in the parlor stove each night hardly made a difference, but she imagined herself warm enough until she went to bed. She turned her mirror to the wall, not wanting to see how thin she had become. Soon, she thought, Johann will be returning. Then things will be better. For a month, she waited in the station for every train rumored to be arriving from Berlin. The letter from Berlin arrived instead.

Helga's work at the hospital gave her some distraction. She saw so many others with a harder future. Hideously burned and blinded children. Young men with stumps for legs. A woman about her age whose lower jaw had been blown off, crying tears that saturated the bandages around what was left of her chin. She tried to feed them, to comfort all of them, to say some kind words to their few visitors. Mostly, she sat beside their beds in silence, not wanting to go home to her empty apartment. More than a year had passed since she believed her husband dead.

When she saw him that day in the courtroom, she could not believe it. Was that him, sitting there in a janitor's smock? He looked shrunken. Much older. If only he would stand up, she thought. If only he would take a few steps, she would know him by his limp. When the court recessed, she waited for him to leave, but he did not get up from his chair. Finally, she scribbled the note and gave it to the porter at the front door. 'If it is him, he will come,' she told herself.

Waiting in the church, she worried that it would not be him. What would she say? What would she do? She did not pray so much as hope. Then he had come to her. When the rhythm of his steps on the stone aisle confirmed her hopes, she stopped herself from saying "amen." Instead, she held him as tightly as she could.

She was entirely unprepared for his not wanting to go home. She refused to believe it. For more than a dozen years, while the storm was raging, she had been patient. Only when it stopped, she reasoned, could one begin to find one's bearings, make a path, and see the sunshine restore the world's familiar shapes. Eventually, the storm must end. And now, when it finally had, he wanted her to be patient and endure still more.

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It was nearly dark. Wind swirled dust and bits of debris at every corner. He began walking away from the church back toward the old city gate and the road to the Palace of Justice. When he found a sheltered place to sit down, he began to chew on a slice of bread that he had put in his pocket. He tried not to think about Helga.

Around him, teenage girls, women in kerchiefs, and a few old men, their faces red from the cold, were sorting out bricks from bombed-out buildings and stacking them by the narrow-gauge tracks of an improvised railway in the street. It crisscrossed the city for some eighty-miles,

transporting the rubble to more distant sorting piles, a rock crusher and a new brick factory. Did the past have to be crushed before the future could be built?

One old man standing apart from the others was using the handle of his cane to snag bricks off a heap far taller than he was. When two had tumbled down to his feet, he would pick them up and carry them over to the stack he had started some twenty feet away. He worked slowly, walking back and forth with a stiff, halting gait. Johann guessed the man to be in his mid-seventies. There was something familiar about him, but he could not decide what it was. A former patient? A neighbor before the war?

The old man never looked at him, as though moving the bricks to “his” stack by the street was his only concern in the universe. He was focused on a tangle of scorched and smashed bricks, broken glass, and shards from the soot-gray slate roof. The once solid lintel stone over the doorway—with its deeply incised letters, *Volksbank*, “People’s Bank”—lay cracked in three parts in the debris on the barely visible granite steps. Johann’s eyes widened when realized that this was the *Volksbank* where he and Helga had kept their savings.

He began to study the old man’s routine. Anything to forget the pain of his meeting with her. He guessed that there were over five thousand bricks in the pile. He divided that by the time the old man took to carry two bricks to his stack: thirty bricks per hour. If the old man worked six hours a day, six days a week—that seemed reasonable—he could move the pile in twenty-one days, finishing just before Christmas.

He had had this habit since childhood. Estimating things. Estimating time. How long would it take for a hive of bees to pollinate an orchard? How long would it take a dripping icicle to overflow a thawing flower box hanging outside his bedroom window in Pohlendorf, the town where he grew up? How many steps would it take to walk through the park on his way to the

policlinic in Nuremberg, if he stayed in the middle of the path? How many more or fewer if he stayed on one or the other of its edges?

‘Twenty-one days,’ he thought, ‘twenty-one days to put some order back the world. By Christmas. The old man is doing it. Why can’t I?’

He had been a physician. He was trained to diagnose illness. He knew he was ill. Confused, miserable, lost. Broken like the buildings in this city he once loved. He knew that he needed to examine the choices he had made—to see the consequences of each upon the next, in order to diagnose his condition. He decided to write a letter to Helga.