

Peter de Chamier

UNNAMED
FORCES

Peter de Chamier

Unnamed Forces



TWIN TREE™

Unnamed Forces

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Third edition – 2023

Watercolors and cover design by Lisa Stockler.

www.de-chamier.com



A TWINTREE™ PUBLICATION



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Important Note

This novel is set in 2002, and was written in the course of the following years. The reader should see people and story from that time perspective and not in hindsight. The historical mantle of this book follows historical facts; the plot itself and its possible implications are fictitious. In other words, this book is a work of fiction; the story is in essence a fantasy. The characters are products of the author's imagination. The author has exercised a novelist's right in taking a few necessary liberties with the weather at certain times and places, modern history, and the staff structures of the diplomatic and civil services and armed forces of different countries. Nobody in this story is based upon an actual person; and, hopefully, the German Foreign Office and other administrative bodies in today's Germany and elsewhere are staffed by people different from those described herein.

Honi soit qui mal y pense.

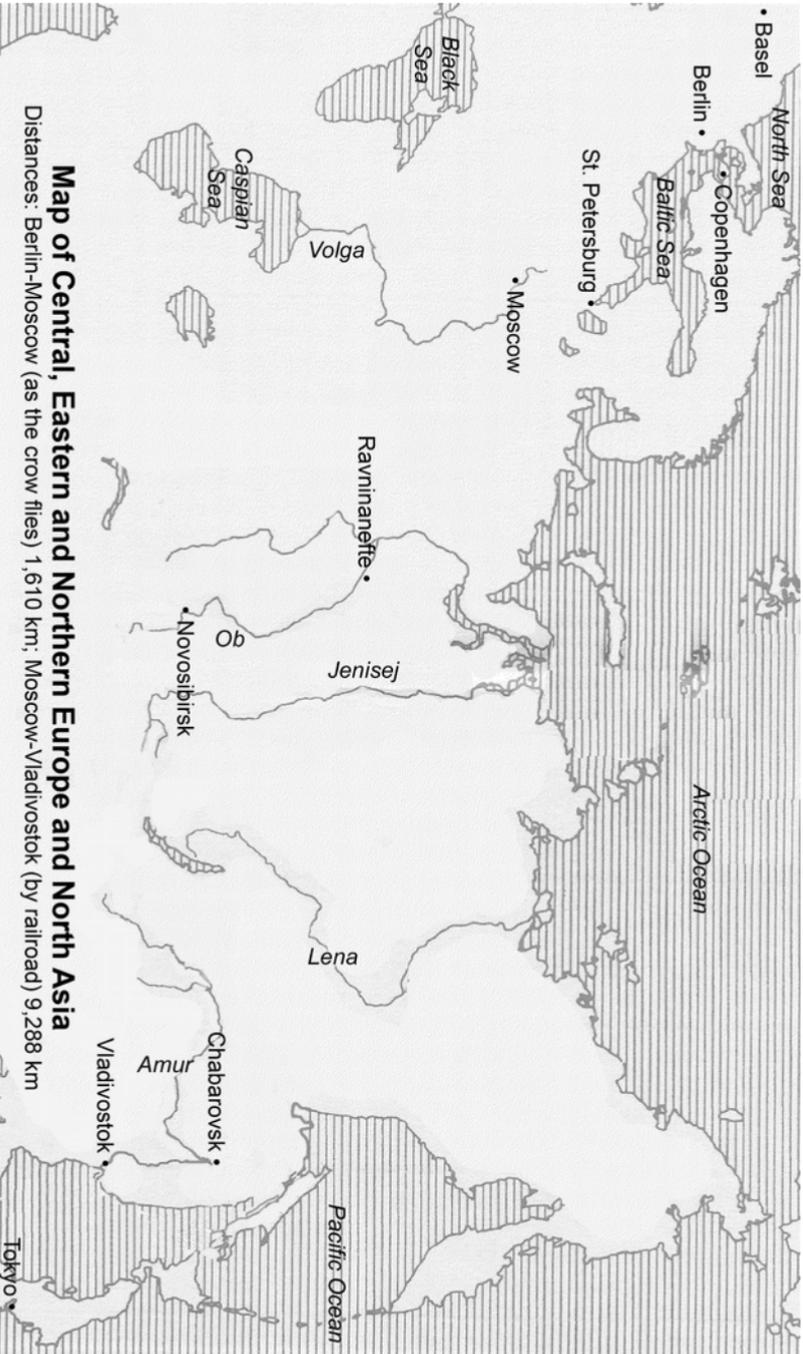
Editions

Hardcover with illustrations: Special Edition (2023)

Single copies at special request: twintree@trtf.eu

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Map of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe and North Asia

Distances: Berlin-Moscow (as the crow flies) 1,610 km; Moscow-Vladivostok (by railroad) 9,288 km

Some Words in Advance

So many intelligent persons misinterpret the novelist's trade
that I feel I must explain that not only are
all the characters and events in this story imaginary,
but that the narrator is too and that his creator does not always
share his views or commend his conduct.

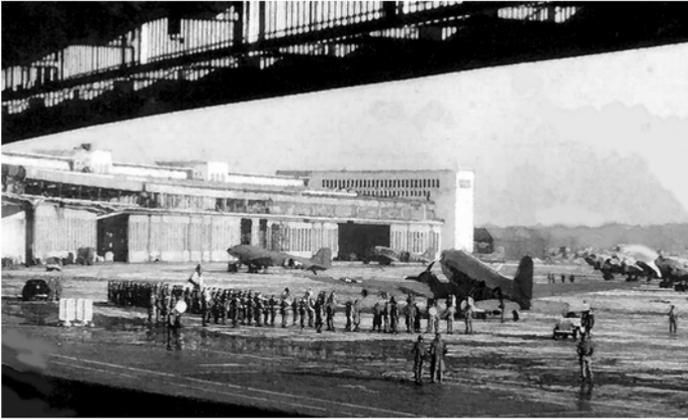
Bruce Marshall. Foreword. *The Divided Lady*. London 1960.

My way of joking is to tell the truth.
It's the funniest joke in the world.

George Bernard Shaw. *John Bull's Other Island*

Abbreviations

BFI	Bundesfinanzinspektion – (German) Federal Finance Inspection Services (<i>fictional</i>), part of the Federal Ministry of Finance.
BKA	Bundeskriminalamt – (German) Federal Office of Criminal Investigation.
BND	Bundesnachrichtendienst – (German) Federal Intelligence Service.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.A.).
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik – German acronym of GDR (East Germany between 1949 and 1989).
GDR	German Democratic Republic – official name of East Germany between 1949 and 1989.
GPS	Global Positioning System.
MfS	Ministerium für Staatssicherheit – (former East German) Ministry of State Security; also known as <i>Stasi</i> .
NCA	National Christian Organization (<i>fictional</i> pseudo-religious society in the U.S.A.)
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Народный комиссариат внутренних дел); Soviet Secret Service.
ORT	Obshchestvennoye Rossiskoye Televideniye (Russia); Television Channel One.
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (secret service) of the SS.
SS	Schutzstaffel – Protective Squadron. Security and paramilitary organization of the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party).
Stasi	popular name of the MfS.
US(A)	United States (of America).



German Architecture

But the privilege and pleasure
That we treasure beyond measure
Is to run on little errands for the Ministers of State.

W. S. Gilbert. *The Gondoliers*.

The plane from Basel was full. I settled down in my seat, tried to arrange my legs in the narrow space in front of it and was glad that the flight would only take ninety minutes.

My name is Jack Boulder, age 36, height six foot two or 1.85 meters, weight 80 kilos, black hair on my chest, light brown on my head. I live in Switzerland, travel with a Canadian passport, and earn my bread as a consultant – usually for clients interested in clear and unquestionable results in subtle and delicate affairs, governments included.

When traveling to Berlin by air, I try to book a flight into Tempelhof Airport. Tempelhof is one of the few airports in the world that has character. It is an airfield for airliners and a port for proper travelers, not a mazelike cattle market for the cheap mass shipment of passengers. "Tempelhof Aerodrome" my father used to call it.

I remember this old photograph, taken shortly after the end of World War II – the arrival of an important Allied personality, most likely a member of the American expeditionary force or some high-ranking civilian.

Even as a child the picture fascinated me, although it had been damaged by water and had big sepia stains.

The picture of the semicircular airport building, taken from under the canopy, the covered parking area of the planes, open to tarmac and runway embodied something inviting, but also protective: a gateway to the world that would receive you safely at your return.

Today, two years into the new, great millennium, there is an eerie feeling at Tempelhof Airport. It emanates a moribund charm and has fallen into a certain melancholy. At the same time, it is an airy, light, and peaceful airport. It does not exude the frantic pace and sterility of modern mega-airports. It is small planes flying into Tempelhof, of manageable size, not those wide-bodied jets caging in hundreds of passengers.

One can argue that the entire airport area has been erected during the Third Reich. At that time it was claimed to be the world's biggest building. For me, it lacks any negative architectural or historical connotation from which Germans often seem to suffer. Nowadays this point of criticism has disappeared in the historical mist.

The monumental structure remained but was threatened with closure for political and financial reasons. As always, some people were going to line their pockets with the proceeds.

A low cloud cover hid the city, and when the Saab turboprop aircraft dipped through it, I could see the reflections of wet streets and buildings. While I watched the Tempelhof runway approaching, I contemplated whether the grayness of the city was a repudiation or a fitting welcome. I thought: Cold feet and raincoat.

The thud of the plane touching down brought me back out of my gloomy mood into reality and I thought: Whoever picks you up, he better be there on time – with an umbrella.

The pilot brought his plane to a halt under the protective roof of the airport where it was dry – and I was lucky, there are traditional remnants of German efficiency: The driver was waiting.

He was not among the waiting crowd outside, but talking to the customs officials in the security sector of the arrival lounge while he was scrutinizing the passing travelers. He wore mufti: a gray suit and a dark tie, still, more uniform than civilian clothes.

When I looked at him, he stepped forward and asked me in English: "Mr. Boulder, is that you, sir?"

"Yes, that's me, but we can speak German," I answered, dropping into the language. I could see that he was relieved.

He wanted to take my small suitcase, but I refused. I rather carried it myself, but I accepted his umbrella.

They had special parking places for members of parliament close to the taxi stand at the exit. He had parked his car there; it was the only car, all other places were empty. When we reached it, a female traffic warden appeared out of nowhere.

"It is forbidden to use the parking places of the members of the parliament. I will have to fine you," she snarled.

I half turned. She was wet. She had no umbrella. I felt sorry for her. The driver did not. He snarled back:

"This is a limousine of the Foreign Office."

"Can you prove it?"

"Certainly."

The driver produced a permit out of his wallet. She checked it and, without saying anything, sulkily retreated into the rain. Welcome to Germany, I thought to myself with some amusement. Commonly, prejudice is not confirmed immediately when you arrive in a country, but in this case happenstance lived up to expectations.

The driver was pleased about his victory. With a smile he opened the back door and told me:

"It won't take long. There is hardly any traffic."

He was right. Within a quarter of an hour we arrived at a building whose architectural style resembled Tempelhof Airport: the German Foreign Office.

The building accommodating the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was erected for the German Reichsbank in 1934 and used by the Central Committee of the East German Communist Party between 1959 and 1990. Adjacent to the old building there is a new one, its style mirrors that of many of those new buildings in Berlin gone up after the fall of the Wall. It looks like a ultramodern airport terminal: a huge glass atrium without distinctive architectonic features.

"Vauban once said: 'Architects are God's vengeance on mankind,'" but the driver did not understand me; at least he did not react to my remark.

I did not mind, because who knows Vauban? Granted, even I did not know exactly who he had been, but I like that saying.

Perhaps, though, the driver liked Greater Berlin's new architectural style and did not answer out of sheer politeness. He stopped the car in front of the Reichsbank building and let me get off. They expected me at the reception; or – more correctly – a woman received and accompanied me to a conference room on the fourth floor.

"Dr. Engel will be here soon," she advised me in honeyed tones – with an official dry smile.

He arrived shortly after and crossed the room towards me with stretched out hands:

"Mr. Boulder, welcome to Berlin. I hope you had a pleasant journey."

"Yes, everything went smoothly."

Still pumping my hand, he ushered me to a chair.

"Do sit down. How are you? You look well."

He seemed not to expect an answer.

Dr. Engel was a man of fifty odd years. His face was puffed-up and he had dark rings under his eyes. His flaxen hair had turned gray some time ago. For as long as I had known him, he had always treated me affably, even effusively. He was completely aware that his people needed someone like me, they themselves could not perform the sometimes unpleasant work the Foreign Office entrusted me with. As they would put it: I could render services incompatible with their qualifications and authorization.

Civil servants are constrained by a labyrinth of rules and regulations; for certain tasks and ventures they need somebody independent with initiative who acts flexibly on his own authority and makes *ad hoc* decisions – a real pro – who can be blamed if some bold undertaking goes wrong. Civil servants are afraid of the public the same way politicians are.

Dr. Engel was the jovial *maître de plaisir* in this department of the foreign office. I do not know exactly where his place was in the picking order of this huge administration, but he had been my contact during a number of assignments I had carried out for his ministry.

Most of the times they had asked me to help track down Germans taken hostage somewhere in third world countries. In all cases they were finally released into my hands or directly to a German embassy without the German state being officially involved and the news reaching the public.

In many places political, religious or other groups consider it an excellent business to catch foreigners traveling around. A certain kind of naive and guileless tourist tends to visit outlandish places thinking life there is the same as in the province town they come from – physically and mentally.

Unexpectedly, one morning they wake up and suffer from dysentery, hepatitis, or malaria; or they find themselves in the local prison,

because they have done something for which they themselves would have placed under arrest any foreigner in Germany – however, if they do the same thing in another country and suddenly this or that part of their body is to be chopped off, they cry out for mom.

Mom, in this case, is *our German embassy* staffed with *our* people or directly the Foreign Office. Their staff are expected to make the diarrhea disappear at once and the natives understand that theft of artifacts is similar to shoplifting – a harmless sport.

Sometimes they even say it out loudly: "We did not mean it like that; anyway, the entire country is run down, the old sites are rotten and the natives do not care. Why not take home that little stone or perhaps those potsherds; they are safer with us than here and will look pretty on the windowsill or the chimney piece."

Then, there are also those characters who believe that pedaling away through the wilderness of Kurdistan or the southern Sahara is excellent physical training. They are surprised at being captured by local merchants or politicians smelling, rightly so, a good business opportunity – to be released only in return for ransom money, in cash or gold.

Occasionally I step in if that is the case and talk as friendly as I can to all parties involved – if they want to have a quiet chat with me. I am a successful negotiator. For some reason I seem to possess a talent for calming down and persuading people in extreme situations to see common sense.

Thus, with a little luck, the bicyclists can pedal through the Northern German heath some weeks later and are the heroes of their home town. Ghostwriters draw up books about their adventures, and the heroes' names appear on the cover. They are upset that, most of the time, their bicycles were not returned – and blame the embassy for their losses. They don't thank anybody and I am not mentioned in their books.

Dr. Engel offered me a cup of coffee. He had gone into great pains, it was served in choice china. I bet the china was usually locked away and he had needed a special permission to get it out. On a hand-painted dish there was a selection of pleasant-smelling *petit fours*. I got a funny feeling; usually our relationship was far more businesslike, and Dr. Engel got to the point without coffee and small cakes.

Today, however, he started by beating around the bush. "My dear Boulder," he said, "I would like to tell you how pleased we are

with your work. You are discreet, prudent, loyal, competent; you have helped us settle some of our small problems extremely efficiently." He coughed nervously. "This time we got something a little out of the ordinary."

I watched him: Why does he call me that? I am not a boy scout. I should have told him that I am headstrong, stubborn, independent – and, hopefully, honest and less corruptible than others.

What does he skirt around?

"I have to tell you, that – how should I sum it up?"

He stammered and began all over again: "The forces reigning in this matter want to stay in the background. They were also very strict with me. I have been ordered to ask you to meet me."

I could read his face; he did not appreciate to be under orders.

"The reason I have told you on the phone, was not completely true," he murmured. When he had called me some days ago, on a sunny morning in Basel while I had my breakfast on the balcony of my apartment, Dr. Engel had mentioned some vanished files; it would not be difficult to find them, most likely a minor task, although perhaps a little delicate. He cleared his throat.

"I myself do not know what it is all about."

It was written all over his face, that his statement was true and he did not like it. He would have liked to know what was happening behind the scenes, but it was apparently not desirable for him to know about it.

"I do not consider it lack of confidence," he said, "but as you would say in English: 'Good to know, should to know'."

I nodded assent. He made an unexpected effort and tried to speak English. I didn't know whether I should correct him.

"I quite agree. Yes, it's always safer to be told only what one needs to know," I said with a smile, hoping not to behave schoolmasterly.

"*Genau, genau*," he responded. "Exactly, exactly."

But he did not mean it. He did not appreciate the need-to-know basis upon which his department operated.

"To facilitate your task, we have prepared an exposé for you to read. However, the documents included may only be viewed in a special room in this building that will be at your disposal from tomorrow morning. You are not allowed to take anything into this room. If you want to take notes, you have to produce them to one of our staff. I hope you have no objection to that."

"To be censored." "That was a rather tactless statement."

I smiled soothingly and reminded him:

"But I have to make notes, because I believe you expect me to clear up something for you? I need names, addresses, telephone numbers ...,"

I left open what else I might have to scribble down.

"Perhaps I don't want to make copious notes, but I am bound to make notes in writing – because I am not good in keeping mental notes."

"Quite. You can write down whatever you feel is important, but you have to submit your notes. You are not allowed to take pictures, but I suppose you understand these restrictions. By the way, please do not use your mobile phone or a recorder or something like that."

"Sure; and there are surveillance cameras breathing down my neck."

This expression did not exactly fit, yet he blushed, something I never had expected to happen to a seasoned old hand like him. He gave a little nervous cough and handed me another cup of coffee to cover his embarrassment.

"Certainly. I have the driver take you to your hotel. He will pick you up tomorrow morning at nine."

The hotel was small and pleasant, the Italian restaurant around the corner too. I like Italian kitchen and wines, perhaps because most of their dishes are unassuming, a combination of simplicity, grace and generosity – just my taste.

Immediately after I had come in and settled down at a corner table a group of Asian businessmen in dark suits arrived. I have always had difficulties making a distinction between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese faces and features, but I decided that they were Japanese. While I was having my meal, they seemed to enjoy themselves. I had the feeling that one of them tried to size me up; perhaps he thought that I was the only real Italian in the place. Fortunately there was no karaoke; he might have asked me to sing "Volare" or another one of those old schmaltzy croon songs.

I slept well and the next morning the driver returned exactly on time.

Shortly after nine I arrived in the room they had chosen for me. It was in the old part of the building, the renovated Reichsbank edifice. It was nicely appointed with beechwood furniture – if one likes the practical barren Scandinavian style. In a corner there was

a minibar, though without any alcoholic beverages, and on the table somebody had placed two thermos pots, one with coffee, one with tea.

Dr. Engel greeted me. "I trust that everything is to your complete satisfaction," he said, added some friendly platitudes and let himself out of the door. In the center of the table I found a file bound in green, a writing pad and pencils.

I poured some coffee, settled down on a chair and opened the green file.

It seemed to be fairly specific and began with a historical review. All records came from the archives of the Foreign Office. On the file there was a little yellow detachable note with a handwritten statement:

"Nowadays few people are familiar with the German-Japanese history of the past 150 years. This is a short refresher course. We assume that you know German and European history, above all the history between the two World Wars."

After a dry historical review I found in the file photocopies of official documents and accounts of journeys of members of the German diplomatic corps. They were neatly arranged in chronological order and related mostly to the course of events during a diplomatic journey of the attaché Albert von Stein in the late summer and autumn of 1936.

I turned to the first page and began to read the file. After a few sentences I stopped. I had immediately realized that somebody was trying to set me up. I dropped the file on the table and pondered over leaving the Foreign Office straightaway.

I went over to the window and looked out – but there was no helping inspiration coming from out there. Then curiosity prevailed and I returned to the file. If I had known what it all was about, how deep I would be personally involved in the ensuing affair and that malice was aforesought by certain parties I would have left Germany instantaneously.



Tokyo 1936

People often feed the hungry
so nothing may disturb their own enjoyment of a good meal.

W. Somerset Maugham. *A Writer's Notebook*.

The voice was sonorous. "They say that there is in the air a great lack of ozone, it's only about one third as much as in our countries. Therefore, these Orientals are unable to carry on as vigorous physical and mental labor as we at home."

Joseph, *call me Joe*, W. vander Heyden was a thickset man aged fifty. He was going bald, had a red face seamed with small bluish veins and he loved explaining to his listeners the world according to his view and in comparison with the United States – whoever these listeners might be and whatever absurdity he might voice.

"In America we have a lot of different climates, but Japan – as everybody knows – is far smaller, only a little bigger than Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin taken together."

He was looking at Lord Welterfield who accompanied the remarks of his vis-à-vis with short nods of acknowledgment. Welterfield thought about something completely different, but vander Heyden did not notice. He liked to lecture and tell stories down to the last flowery detail.

Vander Heyden represented the Dutch and American interests of *The Amalgamated Oil and Transport Company of the Low Countries and the British Isles*. Nobody could enunciate this complicated

appellation without messing up, therefore people used to call it 'Fish Oil', after the last name of one of its founders.

Lord Welterfield looked after the interests of the British branch of the company.

"I tell you, the British Empire is no longer the same it used to be," he continued. "Look at this hotel, American architect. Built with style, no Japanese paper hut; spectacular."

They stayed at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Frank Lloyd Wright had built the hotel next to the Imperial Palace. The style was a strange mixture of Mayan ruins and art deco. It was only some years old. On its opening night it had been struck by one of the most devastating earthquakes Japan had ever experienced. Vast sections of Tokyo and Yokohama had been razed, tens of thousands of people been killed. The new Imperial Hotel had been left intact. It remained *the* hotel in Tokyo for a long time.

Vander Heyden pulled his pocket watch out of his vest and checked the time.

"Let's walk up to Newton's suite. It is close to three."

Lord Welterfield pushed himself up in his armchair in the spacious lobby of the hotel and they started climbing up together to the upper floors of the hotel.

The man they were going to meet, Abbot Newton, was the representative of the Pan-Eurasian Oil Company, a company controlled by the British state thanks to the skilled negotiations of Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty. The British Navy had converted their fleet from coal to oil and was dependent on the oil from Persia ever since. Churchill's political manipulation had made economic sense. Pan-Eurasian Oil grew, flourished, and gained influence through its political relations and contacts.

On the way to Newton's suite Lord Welterfield uttered in a low voice:

"I wonder why Pan-Eurasian Oil has assigned Newton for this meeting. Do you trust him?"

"Trust? Why not? He is not Jewish," vander Heyden responded.

"Do you have something against Jews? Isn't the director of your company Jewish?"

"Fish?" vander Heyden asked guardedly. "I do not know. Judging by his nose, perhaps." He knew well enough, but added dryly: "Why don't you ask your friend Henry Ford? He knows about things like that." Henry Ford's antisemitism was well-known. Van-

der Heyden smirked and continued: "We, in America, don't like Jews. We don't let them join our clubs and many towns prevent them from settling."

"But here you are representing a British-Dutch company."

"So what? I think the Germans are right."

"That distinguishes Germans and Japanese. There are no Jews in Japan."

Welterfield changed the subject.

"I do not understand why these two countries want to collaborate all of a sudden."

"That's a historical consequence."

"Well, really – Britain has had contacts with Japan when the Germans were still ..." Vander Heyden interrupted him.

"Such careless talk may jeopardize these delicate negotiations. It might be better to think and act diplomatically. We want something from the Japanese and Germans. And, just by the way, don't forget the Americans; it was them who opened the Japanese ports for international trade."

Obviously Welterfield did not like the last sentence. He seemed to reflect for a moment, shrugged, and kept quiet. He considered vander Heyden more Dutch than American although vander Heyden insisted that his family had lived for more than eight generations in New England.

Pompous ass, show-off American – but Dutch remains Dutch, he thought to himself; still he did not comment on vander Heyden's remarks. Meanwhile vander Heyden enjoyed laying his knowledge and his thoughts out before Welterfield.

"German interests in the Far East were focused upon trade and science. Prussia signed with Japan a treaty of amity, commerce and maritime affairs in 1861, and Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi's bill of the new Japanese constitution was based on the constitution of Prussia. Compared with Japan – and other European nations – Germany's science and technology are superior. That's what the Japanese are interested in."

In support of his words he waved his hand. What a strange gesture, Welterfield thought, it fits his peculiar character.

"In the Great War Japan sided with the Allies, the enemies of Germany. Until recently the Japanese regarded the Germans as the most unpopular foreign power. But this has changed; these days certain sympathies of the government and the army are with Germany."

Climbing up the stairs got to him. On a half-landing he stopped and gasped for breath. Then he continued talking; he had warmed up to his explanations:

"On the other hand, Japan has taken over Germany's colonies in China. All the same, the Japanese feel humiliated by the other victorious powers. The relations with the United States have deteriorated. This, though, has led to a rapprochement between Japan and the German Reich – and that's where things have come full circle."

Welterfield nodded patiently, albeit a little bored, and studied the paintings on the wall. He had something else in his mind. "Do you really believe that there is oil in Siberia?" he asked lost in thought.

Vander Heyden was taken aback by Welterfield's abrupt mental leap, but dealt flexibly with the unexpected question:

"Who cares? Even if there was oil, how could it be transported? There are no roads, no navigable rivers. The land is either frost or mud – thousands of miles of nothingness."

Lord Welterfield kept silent for a moment, then, with a disapproving undertone commenced speaking, changing the topic again: "As you know, the official representatives of the German and Japanese foreign ministries we are going to meet are low-ranking attachés."

"What did you hope for? You haven't really expected that the foreign ministers of the two countries would turn up in person, have you? It has already attracted attention that several high-ranking representatives of two major oil companies stay in Tokyo."

"You are right; we don't need more publicity," Welterfield conceded.

They had arrived. Vander Heyden knocked on the door of the suite. Newton opened straightaway.

"Please do come in. The other gentlemen have already arrived."

Two men were standing close to the window. Newton introduced them in German:

"Herr von Stein of the German Reich and Herr Tsuboi, representing the Japanese Empire."

Albert von Stein was born in Hamburg at the turn of the century and had grown up in the Far East.

He had light brown hair, small, warm eyes, was medium-sized and suntanned with the physique of a fit tennis player. He looked like a man who knew what he wanted, a man who would get the best available table in a restaurant.

After having graduated from high-school, he had joined his family and, like his father, worked for the German trading company *Kunst & Albers* in Vladivostok, on the Pacific coast of Russian Siberia. After a year and a half he left his post, returned to Germany and started reading law at Heidelberg University.

He got to know Yasuaki Tsuboi at the university. They spent part of their leisure time together, went on trips in the surroundings of Heidelberg and even on a one-week journey down the Rhine River.

Apparently by accident Tsuboi had become his counterpart in the negotiations in Tokyo. Since the university times they had stayed in touch, not closely, but on amicable terms – without the knowledge of their respective employers. Every now and then they exchanged postcards or letters.

Von Stein completed his university courses in Berlin during the last years of the Weimar Republic. Inflation was rampant and unemployment rife. Nevertheless, he aimed at pursuing a career in the diplomatic service and successfully passed the entrance examination – and now had been posted to Tokyo, assigned for special tasks at the German Embassy. A voyage lasting one and a half months on one of the steamer mail runs of the North German Lloyd had taken him to Japan earlier that year.

Yasuaki Tsuboi was born in 1898. He had studied in Japan before going to Heidelberg and spoke French, German, and English. At present he held a senior position in the Japanese Foreign Office. He was too young, however, to exert real influence, though he was on friendly terms with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Yamaguchi.

Thus, privately among themselves, he and his family hoped for further advancement.

"So, shall we all sit down, please, gentlemen?" Newton opened the meeting. "Gentlemen, we have gathered here today to wind up the long and intensive discussions of the German-Japanese Oil Treaty, the incorporation of our companies into this treaty and the final wording of the document to be signed."

He paused for a moment before he continued.

"As you know, the mere existence and the contents of this treaty are not meant to be released to the public."

Newton's statement had produced a split-second knowing, though unpleasant smile on vander Heyden's face. Von Stein saw it, but

could not make any sense of it. Newton had noticed it too and looked vander Heyden straight into the eye.

Vander Heyden felt caught, turned his head and remarked defensively: "We surely will keep it under wraps." By then, however, Newton had carried on.

"Rumor has it that the Japanese Empire and the German Reich have entered into negotiations. The objective is to find common ground in their relations to the Soviet Union and conclude a treaty. Our agreement will hide behind it. Seen from the standpoint of our companies, we are convinced that in the future Japan and Germany will become the leading powers in Asia and Continental Europe, perhaps even beyond it. This future depends on energy. Energy means petroleum. The one who has access to the oil fields, will dominate the world."

Lord Welterfield pulled a cigar out of a small leather case, cut off the tip and lighted it noisily, breaking several matches.

This distracted Newton and disrupted his line of thought. Into the abrupt silence von Stein addressed vander Heyden, while Tsuboi was staring at the table in front of him. "Can you brief us on the worldwide exploitation of petroleum today?"

Vander Heyden was flattered because he was sure to know all the ins and outs. "Sure. Let me try to fill you in." He took a deep breath.

"Iran and Iraq are controlled by Great Britain, and Russia with Siberia are now firmly in the hands of the Soviets. This will not change in the foreseeable future. The United States have their own oil and powerful oil companies. They don't sell to foreigners. On the contrary, after Roosevelt's New Deal seems to successfully lead the country out of its economic crisis, they will need more and more oil – and they will import it."

He drew a small map of the world from his briefcase and, with a pencil, began to circle the geographical regions he mentioned. He tapped one point on the map after the other.

"Our company primarily exploits the fields of Dutch East India and the Caspian Sea, but we also possess wells in the United States. The Caribbean oil off the coast of Venezuela and the Mexican fields are and will remain in the US sphere of influence — as Mussolini has already found out. The Romanian oilfields will help along the Europeans, but seen from a strategic point of view, both militarily and commercially, the Russian oilfields are of utmost importance for Germany and Japan."

"The Russian oilfields? You mean Baku – which does not lie in Russia, but in Azerbaijan."

"Of course; but today it's part of the Soviet Union. I ought to have said: the Soviet oilfields."

He signaled Newton that he was finished. Newton moistened his lips with his tongue and resumed his prepared speech.

"Gentlemen, Mr. vander Heyden has nicely summarized the situation for our friends from the foreign ministries. However, we do not – or not only – speak of the oilfields in the South. We are working on the assumption that there are huge, say, gigantic oilfields in Russia, notably in Siberia. Already today Japan possesses fields on norther Sakhalin. Germany and Japan need the Siberian fields for the prosperity of their countries." He gave a nod to vander Heyden and Lord Welterfield.

"This is just what I was going to say," vander Heyden threw in, "their co-prosperity."

"And what about the United States and the United Kingdom – don't they need additional supply of oil?" von Stein asked.

Tsuboi continued to remain silent and, with seemingly little interest, his glance shifted over the table. Perhaps he knew what lay behind it all. Newton took up the question.

"The two great English-speaking powers, if I can call them that, possess enough oil for their needs within their zones of influence. The Americans concentrate on the Americas, North, Central and South, the big British and Continental companies turn their attention first of all to Persia and the Dutch colonies in the Far East. Naturally, we also have interests in Baku. Sooner or later Germany and Japan will assume increasing economic and political importance; they will desperately require extra oil. It would be sheer lunacy if the great powers, France included, would wage war against each other to redistribute the reserves in Asia, Europe and the Americas."

Newton looked at von Stein:

"The Soviet oil would be of benefit to both countries. Germany and Japan could share its exploration and exploitation."

All of a sudden Lord Welterfield seemed to wake up. Looking sideways at Newton he interrupted his gentle and lulling oration.

"Right. And we will sign that we are not interested in Siberia and its resources if Germany and Japan approve that the rest of the world outside Continental Europe and Siberia are open to our companies. Russia herself does not need oil."

A short dumbfounded silence followed.

Von Stein thought him a fool: What an insensitive, thoughtless – and revealing remark; both in business and diplomatic terms. None of the remaining participants dared to comment and before anybody would go into Welterfield's blunt statement, Newton reached out for a sheaf of documents on the table in front of him.

He was the only real professional among the oil men. With a serious expression he turned to von Stein and Tsuboi:

"Gentlemen, we hope that we have revised the text of the treaty for a last time. It has been initialed by your governments previously. The alterations are marginal. I am optimistic that I hold in my hands its final version. It is an honor for me to present it to you."

He handed over to each von Stein and Tsuboi a stack of documents. Both stowed away their copies into their briefcases and von Stein stood up, folded his hands behind his back and stated.

"Gentlemen, I will submit these proposals to my ambassador and he, in turn, to our government. They will get in touch with you shortly."

He gave Tsuboi an inquisitive look across the table. Tsuboi also rose to his feet, bent his head and the upper part of his body and looking at von Stein rather than at Newton he said: "I am assuming that my superiors will treat this similarly. Also from my government you will hear soon."

The farewell was brief, a few polite words, then the two left Newton's suite together and moved down the corridors heading for the main hall in silence. On their way they passed a music salon with its door open. The room was empty. Tsuboi hesitated when he saw a grand piano.

"Do you play the piano?" he asked.

"Well," von Stein cleared his throat evasively; then he answered: "Pretty bad."

Tsuboi giggled briefly and said: "Let's give it a try." He waved his hand with the palm facing up, walked into the room and closed the door behind them.

"Did you know that we usually receive copies of the latest movies from Germany faster than the German embassy?"

Von Stein frowned, then grinned broadly at Tsuboi:

"I hope that is the only thing you get faster from Berlin than we do."

Tsuboi studied him shortly with a blank face, giggled again, then continued: "I like those UFA movies from Germany, and their songs." He sat down at the grand piano and started playing and singing. He sang with hardly any accent and knew many songs from German motion pictures by heart. He enjoyed himself. Von Stein joined in humming.

After a number of songs Tsuboi paused, spun around on the piano stool and said:

"I guess that's all I know. Sometimes the lyrics are difficult for me to understand. There is that song where somebody is being 'eingeseift'. I knew the word, he is being lathered. Since no barber shop was mentioned in the song it did not make any sense to me – until I found out that is also means 'conned'. It fits with today's discussion upstairs. In fact, these songs are meant to entertain but they also can be thought-provoking."

"Thought-provoking? What do you mean?" von Stein queried. "I have never seen it from that angle."

Tsuboi turned back to the keyboard, saying:

"One thing I know for sure is that those people we met upstairs want to cheat. However, I can't fathom out how, even after Welterfield's telltale remark. Perhaps you understand their motives? Do they know more than we and our governments do?"

Von Stein made a face, but did not say anything, whereupon Tsuboi added:

"All I know is that they might be singing too – and most likely it will be this song." He started playing and singing again:

"So long sad times, go long bad times,
we are rid of you at last.
Howdy gay times, cloudy gray times:
you are now a thing of the past.
Happy days are here again,
the skies above are clear again,
So let's sing a song of cheer again,
happy days are here again."

Von Stein recognized the perky melody.

"That's a piece by the *Comedian Harmonists*. I like the lively tempo and the cheerful lyrics, probably as everybody else. In Germany it's known as 'Weekend and Sunshine.' It's a very popular song, but has no association to good times or bad times, but rather

to having a good time – a sunny, merry and enjoyable weekend, boy and a girl alone in the woods – if you know what I mean."

Tsuboi was all ears: "The original lyrics have a political background – it's a campaign song for Franklin D. Roosevelt. It's tantamount to the promised emergence from the depression in America and Roosevelt's New Deal."

"Interesting that; I did not know," von Stein replied.

"And our friends upstairs believe that their happy days are here again – with the treaty we carry to be signed by our governments."

Von Stein interrupted him: "I wonder why SO is not involved."

"SO? The ministry's Stationery Office?"

"No," von Stein laughed. "Esso, the Standard Oil Company, Rockefeller's petroleum trust ..."

"Oh, yes – them. One of their bosses is in town; they know about the meeting." Von Stein was astonished and stared at Tsuboi.

"They know about the meeting," he repeated at length. "How have you discovered that? Are all foreigners kept under surveillance?"

Tsuboi only smiled. Von Stein thought he understood and dropped the subject. He returned to their original topic of conversation.

"One can describe the integration of our two countries into this treaty and the mutual relations of the partners slightly different, I imagine: *Virtus in medio*, Virtue in our midst, the devil said while sitting between two old whores."

Tsuboi commenced giggling once more. He had not overcome this way of coping with uneasiness or embarrassment although he dealt often with foreigners and had lived abroad; then he got serious.

"In our countries one ought to be very careful with such direct remarks. You I trust – but I don't trust the German ambassador or other German diplomats; nor do I trust many of my colleagues in the Foreign Office."

He got up from the piano stool.

"I feel the same," von Stein said, "but I have confidence in our ambassador. Yet, I try not to get embroiled in political matters. We are sitting in the center of a cobweb, a web of intrigues woven by others. I hope that we are not getting caught in it."

"Even if you assume that something is wrong with this treaty, you can't do anything about it or oppose it. You are just a civil servant, taking orders."

"And so we count among the people looking the other way."

Tsuboi gave an embarrassed smile and scratched his head. This remark seemed to have confused him.

They had left the music salon and crossed the entrance hall. In front of the hotel they said farewell. Their black limousines were parked on the forecourt, the drivers were waiting.

"Perhaps we will come across each other again, somewhere, under more favorable auspices."

"Aren't the auspices favorable?"

Hans von Stein looked straight into Tsuboi's eyes.

"This time it might take a little longer before we meet. I am smelling war. Of course, Germany and Japan will win it ..."

The sentence hung in the air; his voice trembled, then faltered.

"Japan is strong," Tsuboi said. He meant what he said.

"Germany is also strong, but others might be stronger. In many instances, the German and Japanese people are similar – a composition of brutality and very fine intellect."

"Let's hope for the best, for our own welfare. It seems, however, that there are always third parties that are lucky bystanders or, in this case not bystanders, but ambitious and aggressive actors. This is what I have finally learned today."

Von Stein gave a shrug and sighed.

"I am not opposed to them winning, but I am strictly opposed to them sending innocent people to their death."

"I share your opinion. Yet, we cannot let these documents disappear or burn them. Perhaps time will get rid of them."

Tsuboi bowed from the waist to von Stein. He returned the bow ceremoniously – two young diplomats in tailcoats on an empty square in front of a Maya temple in Tokyo. They remained silent for a short time, then von Stein bowed once more and said:

"It is highly likely that you are right. Sometimes, however, one can seize an opportunity to interfere in the course of history – but surely I am a megalomaniac having an idea like this."

Tsuboi answered in Japanese, but delivered the translation at the same time:

"*Un wa yuusha o tasuku* – the luck is with the brave. I hope we will stay alive and meet again – in Germany or in Japan." They met neither in Germany nor in Japan.

Somebody knocked on the door of the room I used at the Foreign Office. Dr. Engel came in and invited me for "a spot of lunch". I could not decline, although my mind was far away: It had taken some time, but suddenly I was reading in between the lines of the dry reports to and from officialdom.

Scenes were playing in my imagination: A sequence of pictures had formed in my mind, the characters turned into human shapes.

I had a light meal with a glass of wine; then I returned to my desk.



Transit through Siberia

Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator.

Travel light and you can sing in the robber's face.

Juvenal. Omnia Romae. X, 22.

One evening some two months after the meeting in the Imperial Hotel Hans von Stein left the chancellery of the German Embassy around ten and crossed the gardens toward the main building to see the ambassador.

The night was bright and balmy, but he felt ill at ease and unsafe outside the embassy buildings.

The moonshine's play of constantly moving and changing deep and sinister shadows and light through the canopy of leaves discomforted him.

He did not like this kind of darkness although treacherous intruders in the garden were unlikely. At least on paper Japan was a close ally of the German Reich, and the embassy compound was tightly guarded.

Still, the feeling persisted like a child's nightmare.

In the main building ambassador von Dirksen and the correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper, Dr. Sorge, sat in the light of a floor lamp and played chess. Von Stein handed the telegram he had just received from Berlin over to the ambassador and wanted to retire for the night. However, the ambassador held him back while glancing over the telegram. He then commented:

"This means that your sojourn in Tokyo is finished?"

The question was a statement – and the order to return to Berlin.

"Yes. Berlin has approved the text of the treaty, now it merely requires your signature."

"I will see to it in the next few days. Please inform Mr. Tsuboi and inquire whether the Japanese will follow suit. The other partners should also sign it. Let's discuss the details tomorrow."

With a nod of his head he dismissed von Stein and turned back to his chess game with Dr. Sorge.

Two weeks later von Stein set off for his trip home. He had acquired a dozen books for the long rail journey, from Colin Ross' latest travel book, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, to a leather-bound two-volume edition of Karl Marx' *Capital*, which had been published in Moscow in remembrance of the fiftieth anniversary of the author's death. Von Stein thought that these books would make an appropriate reading for travelers in the Soviet Union.

Yokohama was the first stopover.

He traveled together with Hans Struwe, a friendly, stocky man in his mid-thirties, who toured the world as a courier of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For the last two years his regular route had been Berlin-Tokyo-Berlin. He was used to the long journey, by ferry to Vladivostok, from there by the Trans-Siberian Railroad to Moscow, connecting to the Moscow-Paris-Express through the western parts of the Soviet Union and Poland to Berlin. If everything turned out well, one courier trip with the diplomatic pouch would take twenty days; but Struwe had given accounts of chaotic travels which had lasted for four weeks, even longer. Struwe spent more than six months per year between Germany and Japan, always on his own.

The *Harbin Maru* was a new ship; the cabins were welcoming, above all because the two Germans had junior suites. When von Stein entered his, the smell of freshly starched linen drifted from the bed. The shipping company had provided a small bowl of fruits on the table and, with a polite bow, the steward served him a cup of freshly brewed tea immediately after he had settled down in his cabin.

After the ship had cast off Yokohama harbor, the steward approached von Stein again, asking him if he wanted to take a hot bath before dinner.

Struwe advised him to go for it.

"Enjoy civilization – and never forget, the Japanese are very clean and civilized. Between Vladivostok and Moscow, most likely even between Vladivostok and Berlin, you will not get to see a tiled bathroom; and if you find one, there won't be hot water or the plug in the bathtub will be missing."

Sure enough, the bathroom belonging to his cabin on the *Harbin Maru* was tiled, the water hot, and the bathtub huge, so that he could stretch luxuriously. Afterwards he went with Struwe to have supper in the dining room; the service was obliging, courteous and friendly, and the meal was deliciously prepared, a mixture of Japanese and Occidental cooking.

When von Stein remarked:

"They even offer you a choice between tea and beer."

Struwe responded:

"I told you, they are civilized and Japanese beer is just as Bavarian as is Tsingtao beer from our former Chinese colony; the brew masters came from Germany."

Two days later, the *Harbin Maru* called at the Golden Horn Bay in the early afternoon.

Drizzling rain had accompanied them for the entire crossing and heavy gray clouds still hung over the hills surrounding Vladivostok.

The ship skimmed slowly across the waters of the inlet towards the quay.

From the observation deck Struwe and von Stein watched with mixed feelings the captain's careful approach through the minefields in the bay. They had reached the eastern coast of Siberia.

Shortly before the ship moored alongside the quay, the two Germans returned to Struwe's cabin. Struwe pulled out of his suitcase a kind of leather corset.

It consisted of narrow shoulder straps, with braces across the back, clipped to a belt held by the trousers, and a thin satchel that could be worn on the stomach like a knapsack. In reality it was a document case.

With von Stein's help, Struwe swiftly put it on. It was not bulky and disappeared under shirt and jacket. The corset had been tailor-made in Berlin, of soft, pliable, light-brown suede. It concealed in its inner pocket the secret documents of the treaty.

This done and dressed again, Struwe padlocked a small briefcase with handcuffs to his left wrist.

"The case contains the embassy's mail, as always, confidential, but not top secret," he commented. "Strictly speaking this transport should have gone on one of the Far East steamers of the North German Lloyd, one of those you have taken to Japan, on German territory. But it's urgent, I was told."

Less than half an hour later the *Harbin Maru* lay alongside the quay – and a pale sun emerged from behind the clouds.

The passengers disembarked.

Moving down the gangway, von Stein scanned the harbor and the surrounding buildings. The harbor was obviously well kept although equipment, tools and buildings urgently required a new coat of paint – or two.

The residential buildings looked worse. They lacked more than basic repairs or touch-ups. He had not seen the city since he had left for Germany twelve years ago. In the meantime, Vladivostok had not changed for the better.

"Welcome to the country of the proletarian revolution," he said and nodded in the direction of the city. He scrutinized the warehouses by the deserted pier. A Ford sedan was parked in front of one of them, four men in double-breasted blue serge suits and black leather caps leaning against it.

"Our bodyguards are waiting," he told Struwe.

"Completely inconspicuous," Struwe retorted. "They really blend in with the crowd."

All passengers who had arrived on the *Harbin Maru* were taken by car to the customs post. Struwe and von Stein traveled on diplomatic passports. They did not leave their suitcases out of sight and after a short verbal exchange with the head of customs the Soviet officials left them unopened and unchecked.

The suitcases of all other passengers were completely unpacked by the customs officers and everything printed was thoroughly examined, read – and in most cases confiscated.

Tsuboi had told von Stein the experiences of those Japanese Olympic participants who had returned by train from Berlin to Japan after the Olympic Games in the summer. At the Polish-Soviet border, the Soviet customs officers had impounded all German publications. This, in due course, had stirred up existent anti-Soviet resentments in Japan.

Clearly, the Soviet officials were more interested in Struwe than in von Stein. Struwe seemed to be pleased about it; he felt more important than the attaché.

"I am the courier, I am known to them. For the Soviets you are just one of the many diplomats on transit through their country."

I hope you are right, von Stein thought; but he said: "Don't hesitate to call them Russians, even if the country is now called 'Soviet Union'. It's the Russians running the country. Soviet is a friendly paraphrase of the occupational forces."

"Stalin is not Russian," Struwe replied.

"But he behaves like a good Russian," von Stein responded.

From the customs office the ride continued to their hotel. The choice came as a surprise for Struwe.

"Hotel Chelyuskin," he exclaimed, "earlier this year it was still called 'Hotel Versailles'. The change of name has not improved its quality. Who has made that reservation?" he moaned when they cautiously climbed the worn down steps up to their rooms.

Von Stein retorted: "Does it matter? It's for one short night. The next time you come back to Vladivostok, you will long for it. The proletarian revolution does not need luxury hotels for foreigners – and least of all for Soviet citizens."

They first went to his room, and he walked over to its window with its tattered curtains and broken blinds, looked down to the poor and sleazy side street with its crumbling tenements and turned up his nose.

"We have to set off for the station early in the morning, the train is scheduled to leave shortly after eight o'clock. We don't have time to be upset about the hotel room. Anyhow, I bet that there are less flies outside than inside the room. Let's take a look at the local department store – and don't forget your dispatch case."

Struwe grabbed his case and strapped it to his wrist. He was all smiles: "To Dresden Castle – to the *Zwinger* – the nationalized department store."

"Well, *Kunst & Albers* was something completely different – a real capitalist department store in the extreme Wild East, an emporium where people went shopping for everything they could possibly wish for, from sewing needles to live tigers. Today they call it GUM, and the proletarian masses revel in taking the elevator, if it still functions. I bet that the customers will consider themselves lucky if they can buy needles. They won't be able to get a tiger."

"Nationalization has hit you hard, hasn't it?"

"You know, Struwe, the ancient Romans used to say: 'Times change and we change with them.' Yet, part of the roots of our family were here, in the building of *Kunst & Albers*. It may be *nouveau riche* and not appropriate for this city which is not even eighty years old – but somehow it resembles Dresden castle – and it possessed the first electric elevator at the Pacific coast. In San Francisco you couldn't find an elevator at that time."

They walked out of the entrance of the hotel into Svetlanskaya Street and turned in the direction of the department store. The streets were mean. The pavement was uneven and had not been repaired for many years, curbstones had fallen over. Weed grew rampantly everywhere in the humid climate.

They did not stay alone long. A man left the hall of the hotel after them, lingered shortly, and followed them.

"They are not very inconspicuous," Struwe said, "and these blue suits remind me of uniforms."

"And what do you make of the black leather coats of the Gestapo?"

Immediately von Stein was frightened at his rash, careless statement. Let's hope, that this remark was not a costly error, he thought, I hardly know Struwe.

They continued walking down the hill and shortly after reached the GUM department store.

The main entrance was open.

"Don't you want to see it?"

Struwe asked when von Stein showed no signs of entering the store. "No. Let's keep moving," von Stein said.

"The managing director of *K&A* used to live in this building, together with a number of employees." He pointed out an *art nouveau* building on the opposite side of the street.

"The German consulate was located there too. I remember the poolroom. I have spent a lot of time playing billiards, a game with an enormous time-wasting potential."

He read a huge sign next to the door: "These days, the Physio-Therapeutic Research Institute resides in the building, whatever that stands for – perhaps they play billiards."

They strolled up the hill to get a better view over the harbor.

"Our blue friends are not very eager about sports," Struwe remarked looking around. "I can't spot them any more."

"There you guessed wrong, just look all the way up the hill," von Stein responded. "They are sporting motorists, no track-and-field

athletes. They have raced their Russian Ford up the hill. It's parked there."

When he made out the car, Struwe said:

"They play hare and hedgehog: I am here already."

"Yes," von Stein replied. "But they play it safe. We have never been out of their sight. Let's turn back and try to stock up with some supplies for the train ride."

Struwe frowned his incomprehension.

"I don't want to discourage you, but you won't find anything in Vladivostok. The supply situation has steadily deteriorated through the recent years. There is a shortage of food – of everything. Therefore I have made provisions for us. We have a spirit stove, canned sausage-meat, zwieback, stock cubes and ground coffee."

Struwe's prediction proved true. The little they saw in the run-down and neglected shops was not tempting. The shop windows were dirty, the goods on display covered with dust, the shelves inside filthy, and mostly empty.

Shortly before seven on the next morning a taxi took both of them to the station. The blue men followed them in their Ford. At the station, two got off the car, each carrying a small cardboard suitcase.

"Our friends travel light, but they travel with us," Struwe remarked. "We seem to be important to them. Usually the Russians let me travel without guardian angels."

"Try positive thinking," von Stein said. "They will protect us against police intrusions." Struwe laughed.

Alongside the long, poor-lighted platform the train stood with the engine already under steam. By the step leading up to their sleeping car the conductor and one of its two railroad car attendants were waiting. The attendant helped them mount and accompanied them to their compartment. It was in the middle of the next-to-the-last wagon, with two fold-out beds on top of each other.

As they dropped their luggage, the train's conductor showed up and asked for their tickets and passports. They produced them so that he could check their validity. When he took them and wanted to leave, von Stein intervened and wagged his finger at the conductor.

"These are diplomatic passports. They stay with us. We'll keep them."

The conductor was not impressed.

"Everybody is equal in the Soviet Union, Soviet citizens and foreigners. Your passports will be returned to you in Moscow."

Von Stein was going to lose his temper, but Struwe restrained him. He turned to the conductor respectfully and nodded his assent whereupon the conductor disappeared, pleased with himself, taking the passports with him.

"He won't misplace our passports," Struwe said.

In a low voice he continued: "He will take care of them, and it isn't worth it to quarrel with him. It will just antagonize him. If he loses them, they'll put him into a labor camp. Most likely they are safer with him than with us. They don't want foreigners getting off the train and touring their country unaccompanied."

Von Stein did not seem convinced.

"Trust me," Struwe said when he saw von Stein's questioning look. "I know their sort. I am much traveled in Russia."

Von Stein gave a resigned smile and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well. I'll give in," he said.

"I'll take a stroll on the platform. I suppose, you'll stay in the compartment."

He stood up.

"Sure! I don't feel like carrying around this case strapped to me. From now on one of us has to stay in the compartment all the time – otherwise I have to take the documents with me to the toilet. I would be deeply obliged to you, if we could arrange it like this."

"That is no problem whatsoever, though it means that only one of us can descend to the platform – or rather climb down those steep steps – when we make a stop. You can never predict what may happen; before you know, the food runs out in the restaurant car and we have to go hunting for victuals."

"Things like that have happened," Struwe said, "but in such a case I will not be of any use with an anchor chained to my left hand."

"If need be we can handle things differently and arrange to hide or deposit that case somewhere – although I am sure that in that instance somebody will take care of our compartment during our absence," von Stein interjected, placing "care" in quotation marks with his fingers.

Struwe unbuckled his briefcase and stowed it away in the luggage rack. His left wrist had become chafed and turned red by the tight grip of the handcuff. He began massaging it.

Von Stein mused loudly:

"Incidentally, I think I know the woman in the adjacent compartment."

Struwe grinned: "That ravishing all-legs blonde? Who is she?"

"Alexandra de Mandeville, if I am not wrong; the daughter of a well-known Canadian businessman. I once met her during a dinner arranged for her family at the British embassy in Berlin."

"The name 'de Mandeville' doesn't sound very Canadian."

"The family is of Dutch extraction, but with Norman background. As you have seen, she looks attractively Nordic. Part of the family emigrated to England several hundred years ago; but one also comes across de Mandevilles in Quebec, Louisiana, Jamaica and New Zealand. Back at that dinner I had asked the same question – therefore I know the answer. We'll find out whether it's her – we have a whole week ahead."

The opportunity came up faster than he had thought. When von Stein passed along the corridor, the woman just emerged from her compartment. She looked at him with her big blue eyes and said:

"I don't believe it. What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

"Miss de Mandeville, how are you?" Von Stein gave her a smile. "What am I doing here? To cut a long story short: I am on my way to Berlin. And you?"

"What a coincidence. Have you also arrived on the *Harbin Maru*?"

"Yes, from Yokohama – but I haven't seen you on board."

"I hate sea voyages. All I have to do to get seasick is to see water."

She put her hand on his back and pushed him gently down the corridor.

"Let's promenade a little on the platform."

Von Stein assented, although the carriage attendant tried to keep them back when they got off the train. "Eighteen minutes," he said, pointing at his watch.

"We will be back in our compartments in fifteen minutes," von Stein responded in Russian.

"How come you speak Russian?" Miss de Mandeville was astonished by the short exchange in a language she did not understand. "I used to live here in Vladivostok."

"I would have traced your family's roots to Berlin."

"Well, those were the years ... Today I live in Berlin."

They strolled slowly toward the station building.

"The train seems to be full," Miss de Mandeville remarked. "But I don't believe that all passengers travel the entire distance to Moscow. The attendant told me that the man in my compartment will get off the train in Khabarovsk."

"The man in your compartment?" von Stein was amazed.

"Yes, a man. In the sleepers of the Trans-Siberian Railroad a segregation of the sexes seems not to exist. Anyhow, he is an elderly – more than elderly – gentleman. I don't think he will molest me."

Her hand glided out upon his arm, as if without her will, rested there and halted him with a little pull.

"Where are we going? Let's check if we can find something to read."

Although there was a newsstand-cum-bookstore inside the station building, there was nothing to buy aside from some Russian newspapers and books. She was disappointed.

"This is a place a lot of foreigners pass through. They should at least sell something about the Soviet Union in German or English – or French."

A rancid smell drifted through the concourse of the station building. A large crowd of people dressed in rags with bags and bundles squatted on straw or the bare floor of the entrance hall. It was not clear whether they had arrived from inner-Siberia or whether they wanted to leave by rail.

They left the station building quickly. Outside, von Stein turned to Miss de Mandeville and said: "I can't give you anything about the Soviet Union except a three weeks old copy of the *Moscow News* from my hotel. However, I can offer you either 'War and Peace' or 'The Capital', if you haven't read them yet. Both are books you only read on long travels."

"Thank you."

"We will meet later, after the departure of the train. I'll have to dig them out. They are buried deeply somewhere in my suitcase."

At half past eight the train finally departed. It started to move suddenly with a jerk. The steam engine rhythmically chugged out of the station, hauling the train through the outskirts of Vladivostok, by the Pacific coast. It gained in speed and swung to the right, heading inland for the long journey across the continent. The train clattered and groaned.

"To me, these locomotives pumping out steam sound like asthmatic runners, chanting: 'I think I can, I think I can,'" Struwe contemplated, imitating the sound of the steam engine.

Von Stein and he got ready for the long trip and arranged their compartment. They unpacked the things they would need for the next nine days and repacked those they would not need before their arrival in Moscow.

Just when they were done spreading out their belongings, the carriage attendant appeared with two cups of tea.

"I am Sasha, the provodnik of this wagon. The name of my colleague is Igor. The breakfast service in the restaurant car starts at nine o'clock in the morning. Lunch is at three, dinner at eight. Please do not forget your little voucher books for the restaurant car," he explained and concluded: "We'll change the linen every three days."

Meanwhile the train rolled past birch, fir and larch trees. Most of the country was wooded, but mountainous in the hazy distance. In between, marches and swamps with willow bushes and stretches of dreary, drab-colored grass a meter high drifted by.

Now and then they saw a few shabby shacks, lonely settlements, and small villages. The land around the weathered log buildings served as pasture; rarely, however, they spotted more than two sheep, goats or pigs at the same time. Occasionally some chicken pecked in the grass next to the cart tracks. Greenish ponds were dotted with small families of geese and ducks.

Life seemed to be hard and beggarly, work backbreaking. Bent-over figures were scything away at the grass – harvesting hay and piling it into stacks with wooden rakes.

Then again, by contrast, the forests were rich – wonderful, unspoiled, left in their natural state. Forestry was restricted to occasional chopping down and clearing of windbreaks close to the railroad tracks.

They did not have breakfast in the dining car, but ate some cookies they had brought. As the morning went by, they had more tea, read and went smoking on the corridor watching the landscape move by. At one of these occasional cigarette breaks von Stein met again with Miss de Mandeville.

"One gets limp sitting all day long. A little moving up and down does one good," she greeted him. "Traveling long distance by train is a killer. I try to do some stretching and muscle relaxing exercises every so often. Should I show you?"

Von Stein had difficulties to maintain his composure and changed the topic.

"Wait a second, I'll look for the books I had promised you," he responded. He went and picked them up in his compartment.

"If I were you I would read Tolstoy first," he told her. "Do you know 'War and Peace'?"

She thumbed through the pages of the first volume.

"No – and this volume has more than five hundred pages. Granted, I always wanted to read 'War and Peace', but when do you find the time for it?"

"On the Trans-Siberian Railroad." She laughed. He liked her laugh.

Most of the compartment doors were left open towards the corridor, only a few were slid shut and the curtains drawn. Miss de Mandeville's belonged to the latter ones. Yet, they did not see much of their traveling companions, except when they were standing on the corridor to smoke – cigars, cigarettes, papyrossi; some preferred a pipe.

The majority of the first class travelers were foreigners, Scandinavians, Frenchmen, and Britons. Struwe and von Stein were the only Germans. Very few Russians traveled first-class. They kept to themselves and did not talk to the foreigners.

One of them was a young officer of the Red Army wearing a shirt tunic with collar tabs and gold buttons. He looked impressive. When von Stein saw him again later in the morning, he had replaced his tunic with his pajama top; and this was the way he would remain dressed for the coming days. During the short stops at small stations he put on an overcoat. Many other Russian passengers dressed the same for the journey.

"Rather casual," Struwe said. "By the way, I have located the little blue men. They seem to believe that we can't escape them on this train and their interest in us appears to be limited. They occupy a compartment of their own in the second-class carriage and spend their time drinking vodka, chatting and having a good time."

For want of anything better to do they started playing cards. Struwe was happy that for once he did not have to travel alone. He was joking and clowning with the names of Russian cities and of the stations on the line, singing:

"Irkutsk, Bratsk; Omsk, Tomsk; Sima, prima ..."

The creaking and rattling of the rolling stock was bearable, but the dust and noise of the train disagreed with von Stein. Struwe tried to placate him.

"There is hardly anything to be done about the dust and it takes a bit of getting used to the noise," he admitted.

Von Stein glanced up at the built-in loudspeaker above the sliding door of the compartment.

"What brings me to the verge of despair are these loudspeakers. One cannot switch them off, and I can't stand the mixture of Russian music and Soviet propaganda. I am contemplating plugging my ears with cotton wool until Moscow – although I am used to strange noises."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Struwe remarked with a wide grin, "just wait some seconds outside in the corridor and keep an eye on the provodniks."

Von Stein took up position in front of the door. Barely a minute later he heard Struwe knocking on the window.

"You can come back in." Von Stein slid open the door. There was no radio sound in the compartment.

"How did you do that?"

"It's easy when you know how. If you turn down the volume, one of the provodniks will show up – usually sooner rather than later – and turn it up again. However, with a screwdriver you can solve this problem promptly and once and for all: regrettably, the loudspeaker is broken. Everybody knocks on it, tenderly or violently, but it doesn't blare any more. They are susceptible to that kind of failure, I was told – and one has to wait until Moscow for repairs of damaged loudspeakers."

The two provodniks cleaned the wagon all day long. They worked in shifts and slept in turns for some hours in their little cubbyhole at the front end of the wagon, next to the toilets and the hot water boiler that worked on fire. The samovar provided the hot water for the freshly brewed tea that was served obligingly and courteously without interruption, day and night, even without precise request.

At midday, first von Stein, then Struwe went for lunch to the restaurant car. Their way took them through the second- and third-class carriages and the luggage car. The restaurant car was directly coupled to the locomotive. Von Stein sighted the little blue NKVD men sitting in their second-class compartment, still drinking vodka. Acting on a sudden impulse he greeted them friendly. They looked straight through him and did not reply.

The wagons of the third class were crammed with people from all over the Soviet Union. They were sitting or lying tightly packed

on the wooden benches – men, women, families with small children, and some better dressed soldiers and officers of the Red Army. They had their omnipresent teacups on the cubicle tables, slept, played cards, ate sunflower seeds or food they had brought along, preserved fruit, cucumbers, dried fish.

As the train pulled into small stations, crowds of mostly old women and children in tatters swarmed each doorway, wielding buckets or bags made of old newspapers filled with berries they tried to sell.

Rainy spells took turns with sunny spells. From time to time the train trundled past hamlets and small villages by the tracks. People were standing outside their houses and watched it passing by indifferently. Only sometimes children ran along with the train and waved.

Around eight o'clock one of the waiters of the restaurant car staggered through the corridor of the tottering sleeping car, rung the gong and announced the social highlight of the day: "Dinner is ready."

This time Struwe went first. When he returned, the provodnik had prepared their compartment for the night and made up the beds, the mattresses with clean sheets on, pillows and blankets piled up in one corner. After his return von Stein sallied forth to the restaurant car. When he reached it, he caught sight of Miss de Mandeville, seated alone at a table for two.

She gave him an inviting nod. "Sit with me," she said.

"With pleasure," he answered.

"Tonight's dinner selection is roast chicken or steak. I think I'll have the steak. The cabbage soup for lunch was excellent. The chef on this train seems to know his trade."

Both of them ordered steak.

"May I invite you for a glass of red wine?" von Stein asked. At this moment the train jolted the passengers and rattled dishes and glasses on the tables. A pile of sliced bread, orderly stacked in a bread basket, fell down to the floor. Von Stein stooped to pick it up.

"This may not agree with the laws of hygiene, but if we only eat the slices in the middle, we should be all right. I doubt that they have seen it – or that they will replace the bread."

The carriage leaped once more and Miss de Mandeville complained: "This permanent bouncing and swaying is rather disagreeable. You try to sit still, but anyhow you move all the time. The tea

spills or you lose your line reading. Apart from that, for some reason you get dirtier and dirtier, sitting in your compartment. I try to wash myself from head to toe at least once per day – it's rather difficult on a train like this one."

She paused and loosened up again: "Sorry, I shouldn't lament. Otherwise, I have a restful and entertaining trip."

Von Stein was amazed when the waiter turned up with a basket of fresh bread and apologized profusely.

"That has never happened to me in the Soviet Union," he commented. "This is like service for Uncle Joe."

"I believe that you are prejudiced against Stalin and the Soviet Union," Miss de Mandeville said. "They are not as bad as foreign propaganda insists. Most of the major newspapers try to paint too black a picture of the country."

Von Stein frowned: "I have seen the country before and after the revolution. In the past people possibly were forced to be more polite, perhaps even docile and subservient. Today socialism rules. When you look around, however, the proletariat frequently seems to go to sleep on an empty stomach."

She did not answer him, mostly because the waiter served their steaks. He changed the topic:

"Have you also been followed by those little blue men?"

"Which little blue men?"

"Those who just arrived to have dinner."

She watched them and inquired: "Businessmen?"

He laughed and told her that they were secret policemen of the NKVD, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. She was not familiar with the name and had not realized that such a secret police even existed.

"Well, officially they are not here. In the diplomatic corps we call them 'those curious Soviet citizens', because the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs denies the very existence of a secret service. They say, however, that they cannot stop curious citizens to follow foreigners. It's a democratic country."

Miss De Mandeville chuckled. Von Stein raised his glass to her: "Grusinian wine, a steak with cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and sour cream – savory and tasty. An excellent dinner."

Meanwhile a rain shower lashed against the grimy windows of the restaurant car though without really cleaning them. The greasy soot was stuck to the train.

Their conversation was stilted and forced. They both seemed to feel it, but did not know what to do about it.

"It's good to sit here in the dry and have dinner in good company," Miss de Mandeville tried to resume their dialogue. Von Stein nodded, he did not want to speak with his mouth full.

She began to talk about her life, England, Berlin, now the trip to the Far East; her brothers and sisters, school, university – the bottle emptied visibly. It was the red wine that made barriers break down.

"Do you want children?" von Stein asked her.

"Yes," she responded, "a highly intelligent girl and a boy of average intelligence."

He stared at her with an amazed and questioning look. She continued: "Families, when a child is born, want it to be intelligent. I, through intelligence, having wrecked my whole life, only hope the baby will prove ignorant and stupid. Then he will crown a tranquil life by becoming a Cabinet Minister."

His facial expression made her smile in amusement.

"This is a rather cynical comment Su Tung Po made some nine hundred years ago – and my standard answer to your question. It blocks this subject abruptly, both with men and women. Men ask this question quite often – I gather with certain ulterior motives – and such conversations are apt to be somewhat repetitive in character."

Von Stein felt caught – but she continued smiling, straightened her body and met his eyes.

Her hard nipples pressed against the thin fabric of her dark blouse. Apparently she did not wear anything under it. Yet, she looked completely innocent; von Stein could not sort her out and put her in her proper place.

"Seriously now, I would like to have children; only the father is missing." Once again she fixed him with her big blue smiling eyes.

"It can't be so difficult to find one," he said half jokingly.

"Mr. Right has not yet been introduced to me."

She hesitated. "And you?" she questioned him.

"I am still waiting for Mrs. Right."

Slowly the restaurant car emptied until they were the only customers left. When they had finished the bottle they left too.



Social Developments

A tragedy, with song and dance.

Theater pamphlet.

By the time von Stein returned to his compartment, Struwe complained about a tickle in his throat and aching joints. Out of his suitcase von Stein pulled a silver pocket flask and each had a cupful of cognac, as he put it:

"Just as a preventive against an unlikely flu".

Von Stein woke up at dawn and had a short glance of the bridge crossing the Amur River, stretching for miles and miles. Then he fell asleep again, lulled into dreams by the soporific sound of the swaying train. As the morning light strengthened, both he and Struwe finally were woken up by the noise of a station. The train had reached Obluchye. It seemed to be a large railway junction.

Struwe had a heavy cold. His eyes were swollen, his nose running and he was congested. In the course of the morning he came down with a temperature and a hacking cough.

The two provodniks took care of him. They brought tea and cold drinking water, later broth from the restaurant car and another blanket.

*Read
Unnamed Forces
to find out what happened next ...*