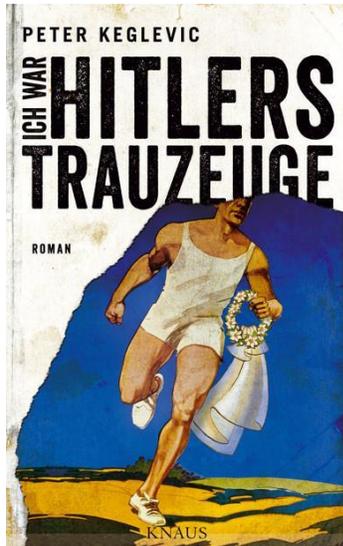


Peter Keglevic

## I was Hitler's Best Man



Literary Fiction

Siedler

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**A grandiose tragicomical novel featuring Harry Freudenthal, Eva Braun, Leni Riefenstahl, HJ Syberberg and many others, including Adolf Hitler**

Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945. The small town of Berchtesgaden, Adolf Hitler's favourite place in the Bavarian mountains, prepares for the 13th instalment of the popular people's run "Running for the Fuehrer". The route through the Thousand-Year Reich – documented by Leni Riefenstahl – includes the most important cities of the Nazi movement, the goal of the run is to demonstrate the German people's desire to win the war as well as their eternal loyalty to the Fuehrer. And like every year, the winner has the honour of personally wishing Adolf Hitler a happy birthday on the 20th of April in Berlin.

But unlike the years before, there are very few volunteers, and most candidates look like they'll never be able to survive the ordeal. Leni Riefenstahl is less than pleased with the "people material" on offer – until a tall blonde man escorted by policemen catches her eye just as the runners are lining up. Leni is adamant that this picture-perfect Arian, Paul Renner, should take part in the run. What neither she nor the organizers know: Paul's real name is Harry Freudenthal, and he is a Jew from Berlin who went into hiding in Vienna in 1943 and is now trying to survive the last weeks of the Nazi regime disguised as a pilgrim on his way to Santiago de Compostela. Instead of pilgrimaging to Spain, Paul has to run to Berlin – right into the centre of chaos.

With a passion for historic detail and the craziness of the last weeks of the Third Reich, Peter Keglevic tells the fascinating life story of a Jew from Berlin who makes it to the Fuehrer's bunker and whose destiny is closely entwined with that of Adolf Hitler. *I was Hitler's best man* is a brilliant, tragicomic novel, as grotesque as Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* and as moving as Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*.

**Peter Keglevic**, born in 1950 in Salzburg, is an Austrian living in Berlin. He is a bookseller by trade and, most notably, a successful film director. Several of his films feature actor Christoph Waltz. He has won many awards, including the Grimme-Preis, one of the most prestigious awards for German television, and the German Television Award. Twenty years of research went into his story about Harry Freudenthal and the "people's run". *I was Hitler's best man* is his first novel.

# Synopsis

Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945. The small town of Berchtesgaden, Adolf Hitler's favourite place in the Bavarian mountains, prepares for the 13th instalment of the popular people's run "Running for the Fuehrer". In 20 stages, participants cover a distance of 1000 kilometres through the Thousand-Year Reich. The route includes the most important cities of the Nazi movement, such as Braunau (Hitler's birth place), Nuremberg (Nazi party rally grounds), and Bayreuth (Richard Wagner's festival theatre). The goal of the run is to demonstrate the German people's desire to win the war as well as their eternal loyalty to the Fuehrer. And like every year, the winner has the honour of personally wishing Adolf Hitler a happy birthday on the 20th of April in Berlin.

But unlike the years before, there are very few volunteers in April of 1945. Large parts of the German Reich lie in ruins, the Allied troops are moving in from the West and East, air strikes and low level attacks occur almost daily. The organizers have to positively force people to participate, which results in a most peculiar assortment of runners. Most of them look like they'll never be able to survive the ordeal. Leni Riefenstahl is not at all happy. The famous film director (The Victory of Faith, Triumph of the Will, Olympia) is supposed to use the people's run for her next big film project demonstrating Germany's endurance. She is less than pleased with the "people material" on offer – until a tall blonde man escorted by policemen catches her eye just as the runners are lining up. Leni is adamant that this picture-perfect Arian, Paul Renner, should take part in the run. What neither she nor the organizers know: Paul's real name is Harry Freudenthal, and he is a Jew from Berlin who went into hiding in Vienna in 1943 and is now trying to survive the last weeks of the Nazi regime disguised as a pilgrim on his way to Santiago de Compostela.

Instead of pilgrimaging to Spain, Paul has to run to Berlin – right into the centre of chaos. His competitors include quadruplets straight out of Nazi training school (Napola) who are of course supposed to win the race. But Paul's worst rival is a man whom he secretly nicknames "Hagen von Tronje" – a bully with full body tattoos who is immediately suspicious of Paul and loses no opportunity to harass him. To protect himself, Paul plants the rumour that he is a cousin of Martin Bormann (one of Hitler's confidants), placed in the race to deliver an important message in Berlin – a myth that soon develops a life of its own.

The runners, whose ranks continue to thin, are cared for by a group of girls from the BDM (League of German Girls) under the supervision of their resolute commander Hilde. In volatile April weather, they pass through German provinces, coming upon travelling groups of refugees and cities in ruins. The imminent downfall is tangible. The closer they come to Berlin, the closer they are to the war front. One day, they discover an African American U.S. paratrooper trapped in a blooming apple tree. A perfect catch for the soldiers accompanying the run – none of them has ever seen a real-live "Negro" before.

But Paratrooper Lieutenant Joe Irving turns out to be both a true American sportsman and a guardian angel. When the runners arrive in Plauen, now occupied by the U.S. Army, Joe saves their lives by appealing to the gambling and sportsmanship instincts of the U.S. soldiers and officers. Unable to resist Joe's offer, they all, even General Patton, bet a lot of dollars on who will win the race. Joe and his transceiver continue to make it possible for the run to progress without being hindered by Americans or Russians.

Among the BDM girls is the pretty, buxom Rosi, whom Harry falls in love with. Two days before the run reaches Berlin, they are on the verge of consummating their relationship when Harry's secret is revealed: Rosi and the runners, summoned by her hysterical shouting, discover that he is uncircumcised. But Hagen has an idea: Does it really make sense to win with Germany's impending defeat being so obvious? Isn't the second prize, a BMW motorcycle with a sidecar that could be used to escape the chaos, a much better goal? A decision is quickly made: The Jew must win, putting him in the bunker with Hitler. The others will compete for the motorcycle.

But there is no need to force this meaningless victory upon Harry. At this point, he wants to win. A growing feeling tells him that his mishpocha, his family, expects him to get close to Hitler in order to rid the world of his tyranny. During the hours of running, trying to forget the pain, fear and hardship, Harry sees his whole life pass in front of him. The reader is introduced to the Freudenthals, a dentist's family from Berlin, and learns about Harry's two brothers who joined the Hitler resistance and were shot to death. And about his sister Hilly, a real pain the neck, who immigrated to Palestine where she almost immediately died in an Arab terrorist attack. And his grandmother and her words of wisdom. We also learn about his life on the run since 1940 that has taken him to the Netherlands, Belgium, France and finally, after many detours, to Vienna. Until, in the winter of 1944/45, the situation got too hot for him and he set out for Santiago.

On April 20, Harry/Paul passes through the Brandenburg Gate as the only remaining runner, entering an utterly destroyed Berlin amid the hail of bombs. He finally arrives in Hitler's bunker, where he is warmly welcomed, especially by Eva Braun. In the turmoil of the bunker, he even grows close to the Fuehrer himself – until he is awakened one night: "You're to be his best man," says Goebbels. "For some reason he likes you. Let's go!"

New York, 2015: Harry Freudenthal, now an old man, is telling his story in the barbershop of his lifelong friend and former U.S. paratrooper Joe Irving. But as he arrives at its climax, when a rabbi "as old as Abraham, as blind as Solomon and as desperate as Job" enters through the bunker door to perform Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun's wedding ceremony, Joe intervenes. While he could vouch for the run, this alleged rabbi at Hitler's wedding was surely an invention of Harry's intoxicated mind, resulting from the medication he was under during the run.

Harry therefore cuts his story short, and only the readers find out what really happened in the bunker in April/May of 1945: that Harry, and not Hitler, spent the wedding night with Eva Braun; that Hitler, who read his own cards and foresaw a “pilgrim” passing judgment on him, asked Harry to fulfil the prophecy. And now we all know: It was no other than Harry Freudenthal from Berlin who shot Adolf Hitler in his bunker.

On October 20, 2015, this Harry Freudenthal who fled Germany at the end of the war and started a new life in New York with his wife Rosi leaves his friend Joe’s barbershop and walks home through Hudson Heights. And while he is reminiscing about his life, he is run over by a truck with the registration plate “NEW YORK – AH 88 HH”. In heaven, his mishpocha is there to greet him: “Finally,” his grandmother says, “it sure took you long enough to join us!”

## Sample Translation

by Imogen Taylor

‘The truth can wait, for it has a long life ahead of it.’

*Arthur Schopenhauer*

### **New York, 19 October 2015**

Everything is black. My eyes are shut. There is something in the air. All my senses are heightened. I hear the shop door open and the bell above the doorframe jingle. It’s louder than usual. Is that of any significance? Like what happened before on my way to Joe’s?

I had passed a shop, its window still plastered over with brown paper, but there was a strip hanging down on one side. I peered in and saw that it was going to be a tattoo studio. Display boards covered in richly coloured patterns and motifs hung on the wall, but one image caught my eye at once. Was it garlands? Or maybe vines? Or... A human shape appeared in the light behind the window. ‘We’re opening tonight,’ the shape said through the glass, sticking the loose strip of paper back onto the pane. ‘That image there, the one of the...’ I felt a start of shock because the words ‘hanged man’ had come to my lips before I could stop myself. ‘Where’s it from?’

‘No idea,’ said the voice. ‘Russia? Mexico?’

‘I think I’ve seen it before somewhere,’ I shouted, banging on the glass, and the voice on the other side replied crabbily, ‘Then you know all about it.’

Someone has come into the shop, letting in the sounds of the street for a few seconds. Someone who's after me? Because of my secret? The door falls shut with a jangle, and the noise breaks off. It's Boris Makaver; I recognise his habit of coughing in greeting. No need to open my eyes.

I calm down. It's Happy Hour on the classic radio channel: 'And now, straight from the bar – Dean Martin!' I hear the rattle of the fan, the soft scrape of feet and, clearest of all, the indefatigable snip of the scissors. Yes, my secret – suddenly it's piercing reality, like a crocus pushing its way up through the last of the snow.

'Send me the pillow that you dream on / So darling I can dream on it too...' I am sitting here in the green leather chair, my eyes shut, my head comfy on the neck bolster as Joe cuts my hair and we discuss whether or not I should have an operation on my spleen to treat my splenomegaly – when suddenly it hits me: at ninety-five, even I must expect to die at some point. Doesn't that mean it's time I told someone my secret? I cautiously open my eyes and see, as if in confirmation, my age-spotted medical-record-made-flesh staring out at me from the mirror in Joe's Barbershop on the corner of West 169<sup>th</sup> Street and Fort Washington Avenue: four bypasses, a temperamental prostate, a ceramic left hip (since 1999), creeping old-age diabetes...

Joe has finished cutting my hair and is now lathering my face. Joe is – as I have learnt to say – of Afro-American descent. He looks at me impatiently and gives me a shake. 'Paul! Are you even listening? Do you remember when I introduced you to the great Slick Whitey Ford? Do you? He was some guy. Not one of those little squirts you see so many of these days.'

I mumble agreement and smile – Joe and his Yankees!

'If I did my job like those boys, gentlemen, how do you think my customers would look? – As if they'd been barbered with a shard of glass! But those guys make the kind of money we can only dream of...'

Joe gives no thought to the transience of life – or, at least, not as far as I know. It's been seventy years now since I first met him, and he's been cutting my hair and shaving me for over half a century. I watch the razor in the mirror, gliding over the lathered side of my face as playfully as a youthful gangster dealing the cards for a round of poker. A rush of tenderness fills me for this old man who keeps up a running lament on squandered innings and wasted homers while he shaves my cheeks as if he were stroking a baby's bottom. I shall always associate Joe with the sight of apple blossom. I was fifteen kilometres from Bayreuth when I found him. There was this black man on a parachute, hanging in an apple tree, and the blossom was floating down like snow. He had a twig sticking in his woolly hair and with the sun behind him, he looked like a stoutly built Zulu girl against the light. And the smell! Although it was only spring and there was no fruit on the tree, it smelt of apples. I breathed in the scent and was hit by a craving to bite into an apple – undisturbed, unmolested, unafraid. All I wanted was to chew the bite of apple until the sweetness and the sourness flowed along my tongue and palate and slid

into my throat. Alkmene from Brandenburg! A Borsdorf Reinette! Pancakes with apple sauce from Altes Land!

Our reunion in 1959 was also marked by the smell of apples. I think it was the Yellow Bellflower variety from New Jersey – or the Westfield Seek-no-Further. Back then we were still living down in Brooklyn where our daughters, Sarah, Esther and Judith, were born – all delivered in Flatbush General Hospital. In those days I used to go running on Coney Island beach as often as I could, the Atlantic on my left, the boardwalk on my right. It was early morning and there was hardly a soul on Brighton Beach. Mist hung over the wooden pier and the rollercoaster was almost invisible.

*Poch, poch, poch*, my feet went in the wet sand. Up on the thick planks of the pier they go *tack, tack, tack*; when you run through knee-high grass it goes *ch, ch, ch*. I know all about running; I'm a specialist. I live by the motto 'I run therefore I am'. I've been running for as long as I can remember. I can't help myself. It's a kind of reflex; I'm always on the move. The thing is, you see, when you're on the move, they can't get you.

But that day something was different. Something wasn't right. The smell of apples wafted over from the boardwalk where an enterprising Frank from Schwabach sold – and indeed still sells – potato cakes with apple sauce and sour cream. I've tried them; they taste delicious. I glanced up at the pier. A black man was cycling parallel to me along the wooden boards, unhurriedly. He eyed me – at first as if he had only happened to look my way, and then more obviously. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He was sizing me up openly now. What did he want of me? Was he planning to attack me? I worked out that I had only the key to my flat and a dollar bill on me. But, I thought, what if he beats me up and steals my key? What if he knows where I live? What if he...

I quickened my pace. The black man, too, stepped up the tempo. I broke out in a sweat; I was sure he had it in for me. My sweat gave way to the cold sweat of fear. I knew the smell only too well; it was a smell that lured every dog and every SS man for miles around. There wasn't a soul far and wide who could have come to my rescue. Then the black man yelled down at me, 'What is this? A new running style? Lost your memory, Herr Paul? So soon? Pull in your elbows, will you, and don't stick out your backside like that or there'll be trouble – big trouble!'

Slowly the words seeped into my consciousness and I began to grasp the incredible fact.

'Lieutenant Joe Irving?'

'Who else sees through your lousy technique?'

Tears shot into my eyes. Joe came down the steps, shrouded in an apple-blossom-scented cloud. We ran to one another, hugged and danced and jumped up and down on the sand. Lieutenant Irving – was it really possible? A miracle. I hadn't expected to see him again in this life. First Lieutenant Joe Irving! The 'roi noir', known to us as 'Roy Black'. I owed my life to Lieutenant Irving, but he wasn't a

lieutenant any more – not since being discharged from the army when he got his hip blown off in Korea, fighting for world freedom. Now he was just a black barber again.

And from that day on, he was my barber too.

Oh yes, life – or rather, survival – is a miracle. As if to confirm that you can never be too mistrustful, Joe uncovers a brown blotch beneath the shaving foam. It comes into view just above the point where the lower jawbone slots into the cheekbone. I lean forward and squint at the mark with my head on one side.

‘What’s that blotch there? You seen that before, Joe? Looks like a new cemetery flower.’

Joe spins me round in the chair to face him and looks at me crossly. ‘Yes, I’ve seen it before. It was there yesterday and it was there ten years ago. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve been droning on about potentially fatal illnesses and ominous symptoms. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve talked about dying the way other men talk about their wives and children. The fact is, you’re an incurable hypochondriac.’

I hear the blades of the fan slicing through the air and the shaving foam collapse in the dish with a snap, crackle and pop. I hear the gurgle of the pressure cooker where Joe heats the compresses he puts on your face after a shave. I hear Makaver cough as he waits his turn. I see my entire mishpocha and hear the words of my father when he takes me aside on my thirteenth birthday, puts his arms around my shoulders and says with a cheerful smile, ‘It’s in our nature always to reckon with the worst and to assume that the next step might prove fatal.’

I nod and smile at Joe.

‘You’re right, Joe.’

Mollified, he finishes shaving me.

‘Of course I’m right.’

He’s not, of course. My father was right. I’ve lived by his words ever since my thirteenth birthday – at first without meaning to, then because I didn’t have the choice, and finally from deep conviction. Is there *one* compelling reason not to reckon with death every day – especially at my age when it’s more than advisable to take the long view? To put it in Joe’s words: ‘The croak rate rises’.

‘OK, careful now,’ says Joe.

The razor scrapes my Adam’s apple and I hold tensely still, keeping my eyes closed. Every time I feel the thrill of survival. Every time I wonder whether today’s the day Joe’s going to go crazy and slit my throat. At this point I am seized by minor panic. And suddenly I know – it really is time I revealed my secret.

I open both eyes wide. Joe stops, disconcerted. The razor blade flashes perilously close to my eyes.

‘I was his best man.’

'Best man? Whose best man?'

'You know, *his*.'

'How do you mean, *his*?'

Joe stares at me and the awful suspicion begins to dawn on him. He shakes his head beseechingly.

'No...no, you're not serious.'

I nod with all the weight and dignity of the past.

'Oh yes, I was Hitler's best man and I...'

'What?'

'Wait and see.'

### **Saturday 31 March 1945**

It was late afternoon. Our little group of pilgrims was running strung out far apart. I was the rearguard because I was reliable and had stamina. If any of my fellow runners should show signs of flagging, I was to make sure they didn't fall by the wayside. But I hadn't seen anyone in front of me for quite some time; I must have missed the point where the River Salaach branches off into the River Ache. I'd gone off into a dream and lost my friends. Had it happened only recently or a while back? Should I retrace my steps and look for the path to the Ache? Or carry on and find another path heading south west? The latter seemed to me more sensible. It was beginning to drop dark. There was no light far and wide, not even an isolated farmstead. I waited a while until my eyes had grown accustomed to the half light and then went on my way. It was pleasantly mild for late March. No wind, no rain. For once, luck was on my side.

The path led uphill. Before long it was stony and beginning to resemble the dry bed of a stream. It was clear that I was heading for the mountains. I stopped. It made no sense to keep on up more or less blindly, with nothing to get my bearings by – although I wouldn't have minded running for another hour or two. I ate a boiled potato in its jacket, chewing slowly to keep my hunger at bay, and staring into the grey night ahead.

Gradually, the outlines of the mountains came into view and I felt my heart begin to race. I knew that silhouette. It was the back of the Untersberg massif. I knew where I was; I had known this place since my childhood.

\*

Until 1932 we spent every summer holiday at Platterhof. The whole family came: my parents, Grandmother, my two brothers Herrmann and Helmut, and my elder sister Hilly. We occupied the entire first floor. The summer I was two, Sigmund Freud gave me a sugar lump dipped in schnapps; like us, 'Uncle Fredi' (which is for some reason what I called him) spent his holidays in the mountains with his family. But unlike us, he only ever went walking on the flat. Arthur Schnitzler is said to have visited Freud there quite a bit, but I have no memory of him; I didn't hear about his visits until later, long after we had stopped going on holiday.

My personal hero, in any case, was Bruno, the manager of the guesthouse. He was a racing cyclist and racing driver, and he flew combat operations from Zanzibar to Kilimanjaro for Lettow-Vorbeck in his Pfalz D.III biplane. He helped me build my first soapbox car, which I designed myself and called Heia Safari, after my favourite book. As we worked, he told me about the time he had converted the biplane into a seaplane and patrolled along the Rufiji to protect SMS Königsberg. His wife Sissi showed me the hippo whip she had brought home from German East Africa. It was woven from the tail hairs of a hippopotamus and bound in black leather that was wrapped around with silver wire. I cracked it in the air and imagined it splitting open the skin on a black slave's back. Whizz! Thwack! Sissi took the whip out of my hand and smiled.

'If you show you deserve it, you can have one of your own when you grow up.'

This particular whip, though, was wrapped tenderly in brown tissue paper for a certain Herr Wolf who had once taken refuge in the guesthouse. Never mind. I had Heia Safari and could hurtle down the mountain road – although I only got round two bends before crashing into the bales of straw that Bruno had put out, just in case.

When I was eight, I once went to Berghof, which was called Wachenfeld House in those days. The widow of the late Councillor of Commerce Winter-Wachenfeld of Buxtehude had invited me to drink lemonade in her sitting room after I had helped tidy her garden, pick strawberries and currants, and turn over the compost. She was bent and ancient – almost eighty – and an excellent source of pocket money. We looked out through the open window at the Untersberg massif. In those days it was a normal window, not the famous retractable picture window.

'Over there, Harry,' said Frau Winter-Wachenfeld, whom we children called 'Trude of Buxtehude', 'over there, in the middle of the mountain, lives a bewitched old emperor. Some say it's Charlemagne, others say it's the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick. Whichever it is, he sits there in a marble palace on a throne of quartz, surrounded by his army of heroes, waiting for the hour when the raven will announce to him, "Arise and save the German people." Then the people will swear the oath of allegiance: "To Germany and her emperor I ever will be true. / Should any rogue speak ill of us, I'll slice his skull clean through!" And the emperor will leave the mountain and win victory, and his herald will announce the birth of Greater Germany.'

At this precise moment, a car stopped under our window and Herr Hitler and Herr Speer got out. They took a deep draught of mountain air and admired the view. Herr Hitler took Herr Speer by the shoulder and drew him close so that they stood cheek to cheek. With outstretched arm, he pointed towards the mountains of Salzburg.

'Look over there, my dear Speer. It's no coincidence that my residence overlooks the Untersberg massif.'

As Herr Hitler spoke, he slapped the hippopotamus whip against his leg with his free hand.

That was the summer I was eight. By the time I was ten, the red flags with the black bars hung from every house in Upper Salzburg and when I went climbing with Franzi, whose father was landlord at The Turkish Innkeeper, Franzi suddenly began to wave his arms in the air and yell, 'A sign, a sign! The cross!'

Indeed, with a little goodwill, you could see the clouds converging to form a swastika. Franzi was delirious and I have to admit, I let him infect me with his frenzy. We stood there, stretching our arms out to salute this prophetic cloud formation until it blurred and eventually dissolved altogether. Afterwards we masturbated. I had filched a pair of knickers from my sister Hilly's dirty washing; we sniffed at the little yellow mark on the gusset and off we went.

In 1932 I was twelve, and although Father had booked and confirmed our accommodation by telegraph, just like every year, Bruno told us when we arrived that we couldn't stay at Platterhof. A pointless argument ensued, Father insisting on his rightful reservation and Bruno adamant that the reservation was null and void because Father hadn't paid in advance.

'But I've always paid on arrival,' my father yelled. 'In cash! Since 1919!'

'It was always irregular,' Bruno yelled back. 'I tolerated it, that's all. As a courtesy.'

I went outside because all the yelling frightened me and because a thought had flashed into my mind. 'Since 1919!' my father had said. That meant the summer of 1919 – and I had been born on 15 March 1920. I counted off the months on my fingers – nine! Nine months! So I had been conceived during the summer holidays – in room number seven, the room my parents always took. I tried to imagine them in the act. The only nudes I knew were from Father's *History of Painting*: the women of Rubens and Titian, Botticelli's Venus and Rembrandt's Danaë. But I couldn't picture Mama like *that*.

'We're no longer wanted here!'

My father came storming out of the front door. The taxi that had driven us up from the station was still parked outside, but the driver didn't fancy driving down again so soon; he'd ordered a beer and wanted to watch Hitler. He wasn't alone: hundreds of others had trooped up and set up camp around Wachenfeld House. People were sitting on the grass, drinking and picnicking as if they were waiting for the Messiah to tell them to drop everything and follow Him. Suddenly a cry went through the crowd; a wave of rapture washed over the disciples; a thrill gripped them. Herr Hitler had stepped

out of the door and was walking among the people. All I saw of him was his side parting and his moustache, but it was like the fin of an orca cutting through a shoal of tuna fish. The crowd burst into spontaneous song. Up the mountain, people were intoning *Hail to Thee in Victor's Crown*, while down towards the valley a lone trumpeter led the *Horst Wessel Song*. This arrived at Platterhof, where I was standing, as an indigestible medley: 'Already millions... swastika... the highest joy... favourite of the people... but a little while now.'

My father grabbed me by the collar and bundled me and the rest of the family into the post bus to Berchtesgaden – a Mercedes Lo 2000, four-cylinder engine, 45 hp. The driver only grudgingly stuck to the timetable. He'd rather have carried on watching Hitler. The Lo 2000 was an open-top bus and in the glorious summer weather the soft roof had been rolled back. The view was better than from anywhere else. We freewheeled through the crowd in neutral, because the driver didn't want to impose the noise of the engine or the reek of the exhaust on these cheering, singing people – these people with rapture in their eyes, their cheeks red, their arms and hands stretched out in a kind of frenzy. It was such a solemn moment that all the sounds around me fell silent. And for a few seconds I saw Herr Hitler in all his glory. The people around him were full of awe: some of them knelt down before him, others gathered up the stones he had trodden on. We glided past him noiselessly and in that precise moment he looked up at me. His blue eyes followed me and I twisted round so as not to lose his gaze. I couldn't help myself; I leapt up, ran to the back of the bus, climbed onto the seat. I stood there, my arm stretched far out into the radiant sky – and still Herr Hitler's eyes followed me. It was like an invisible bond – something holding us together, chaining us together.

[...]

### **Monday 9 April 1945**

[...]

The countryside was beginning to open out and the ridges of hills had slowly receded. *BAYREUTH 15 KM*, it said on a milestone. I followed the wide loop of the path up the hill and past a chapel with onion domes surrounded by an old churchyard wall and magnificent lime trees. Right on the crest of the hill, an American paratrooper was hanging in the blossoming apple tree, black as a raven. He waved his coaly hands and a voice swelled up out of his tarry face.

'Hello!'

He had a twig sticking in his woolly hair, and blossom was floating down like snow. Against the light he looked like one of the stoutly built Zulu girls that Bruno had told me about at Platterhof. I had

seen black people at the Olympic Games in '36 – Cornelius Johnson, the high-jump champion, and Archie Williams, the 400-metre champion. But I had never been confronted with such intense blackness as this.

'How are you?' asked Uncle Tom from up in the apple tree.

As if that was the cue for the actors to appear on stage, they were suddenly all there. The DKW F8 came to a halt behind me, while I carried on running on the spot like an idiot – too surprised to stop, perhaps, or anxious not to lose the rhythm. Hilde, the girl squad leader, climbed down from the cab, the rest of the girls jumped off the back, and Rosi was suddenly so close beside me that I came out in gooseflesh.

The other runners arrived together and came to a halt behind me. *Running for the Führer* jogged on the spot and we all stared at the black night made flesh who was draped in white parachute silk.

Then we heard a familiar noise speed towards us and come to a standstill with a hydraulic hiss. The 770 Mercedes W150, F cabriolet was back. Leni Riefenstahl was back. The chief reporter from the *People's Observer* was also back – and Syberberg, the indestructible recruit. It was as if everyone were reporting back to duty after a coffee break.

I was glad to see them again. Frau Riefenstahl, the Reich film director was here, where she belonged. She was wearing her white director's coat – and that was what mattered. I even thought she smiled at me. Everything was falling back into place.

The reporter was the first to regain his composure. As we stood there gawping, he said triumphantly, 'No American has set foot on German soil.'

That was nonsense, of course. We all knew that the Americans were already firmly – and two-footedly – at home from Cologne to Würzburg, and that the reason today's run was taking so long was that we'd had to dodge them as they headed down from Coburg. But presumably the reporter telephoned daily to Goebbels, who dictated the headlines and told him what to write, and if he was carrying on like a lunatic now, it was because he had finally come up with a headline of his own that would surely win the approval of his master: 'ONLY GERMAN FEET ON GERMAN SOIL.'

We applauded. The girl squad leader climbed the apple tree and cut down the devilishly dark enemy, who fell to the ground with a thud, pulling branches and blossom with him. Then she planted herself in front of him. 'I am taking you prisoner,' she said, 'and you...'

The officer cadet, who had leapt out of the jeep, positioned himself between the girl squad leader and the prisoner of war, and pulled his pistol. 'The secret directive issued from the Führer's headquarters on 18 October '42 expressly orders the immediate execution of all allied paratroopers discovered on German soil. This also applies to parachutists plucked from German trees...' He cocked his gun.

But before he could do the vile deed, the resolute Hilde had pushed him aside. 'Why are you puffing yourself up like that? Put your gun away and sort out your shittily planned route – that's your secret military operation. Have you got that? It wouldn't surprise me if we'd lost a few runners again thanks to your incompetence.' She turned to the American who was still sitting on the ground like an oversized version of my sister Hilly's golliwog: 'I'm taking you prisoner and you are henceforth in the custody of the German Reich.'

With half-closed eyes the reporter dictated to Syberberg: 'A model capture, exemplary in its humanism. In the land of poets and thinkers even an act of capture is transformed into a shining example of civilisation.'

Only Frau Riefenstahl was not satisfied. 'Everybody back to first position! Tie the negro back in the tree. Syberberg, I need light.'

Syberberg the recruit regretfully handed the reporter his jotter and banged his heels together in front of Leni. 'Light. Yessir!'

He remained to attention as if frozen, because he clearly had no idea what was expected of him. An impatient Frau Riefenstahl began to unbutton her white director's coat.

'Now, help me out of here and hold the coat up like this so that the light reflects right onto the negro's face. He's so black he needs twice the usual lux. Paul, help him!'

It was a moment before I realised she meant me. I held up the director's coat with Syberberg and we deflected the sunlight onto the apple tree.

The resolute Hilde cut the uncomplaining negro down from the tree another four times while Leni kept changing the lens and the position of the camera. When Hilde groaned with annoyance, Leni snapped at her: 'Rommel reconstructed scenes too, you know, and kept repeating them until he'd got it right. You don't think he really had all those tanks at the parade in Tripoli, do you? Of course he didn't! He got them to drive round and round the block.'

Over the top of the tightly stretched coat, I saw that we were surrounded by a whole sea of blossoming apple trees.

'Hey, Joe, look this way,' Riefenstahl kept shouting. 'Look over here, Tom!' She called the black man by a whole variety of names. 'Jack, open your eyes! Jim, look over here!'

[...]

We ran off behind the supply truck, Rosi and Ilse from the League of German Girls sitting in the back with the girl squad leader, and between them Joe or Jim or Tom or Jack, the parachute silk tossed over his shoulder like a toga. He looked sleepy and resigned to his fate, so none of the others saw what I saw: as we jogged along behind the former broom wagon, he was observing us closely. I was trying to catch

Rosi's eye, which wasn't easy because she was wedged in behind the resolute Hilde, and I suddenly felt him watching me; even the flutter of his weary eyelids couldn't hide it. But why was he watching me? I felt myself blushing. I soon realised, though, that it wasn't me he was looking at; Joe or Jim or Tom or Jack was staring at the runner next to me – Martin, the one with the look of anguish on his face and the splashing feet. For a second I was disappointed, but then I saw that the two of them were communicating with one another. The black American was signalling to Martin to let his arms swing.

Martin followed his advice and it seemed to do him good. Now the prisoner was breathing, in and out, in and out, and Martin fell into breathing in the same rhythm – and that too seemed to do him good. There was harmony between receiver and sender – between Martin and the sack of coal that had fallen from the sky.

[...]

As we entered Bayreuth we were greeted by a banner proclaiming, 'Welcome to the City of Richard Wagner!' It was strung up across the road, between two pillars. One of these pillars was emblazoned with a swastika, the other with the cross pattée of the imperial war flag, and high above everything was the imperial eagle.

'O Bayreuth, balm for the soul! O Bayreuth, powerhouse of the movement!' Joseph Goebbels had once said fawningly. 'Better to eat in Beirut than shit in Bayreuth,' was my father's retort. The word *Wagner* was a non-word in our family which never failed to set off a many-voiced choir of anger.

But the Wagner women, Cosima and Winifred, had an even worse reputation in our circles. My grandmother insisted that those two anti-Semitic females came up with a new 'Aryanity' every day. Cosima, she said, had purged the opera house of all Israelites – or, as she put it, all *privileged* people; no Jewish singer, no Jewish conductor or director was allowed to set foot in the sacred house any more. 'Those privileged people with their oriental features' had been driven out of Wagnerdom.

'And Winifried,' my mother said heatedly, 'smuggled pencil and paper into Hitler's cell so he could write *Mein Kampf*.'

'And to show his gratitude, the "Bohemian lance corporal" always has his whip with him when he "pays a visit" to Frau Wagner,' said my grandmother, going one better.

'Mamma!' my father cried. 'The children!'

We were sitting at dinner and I couldn't understand what he was getting so worked up about. My brothers chuckled and my sister Hilly blushed. I had just turned fourteen and it was only the mention of the whip that electrified me. Was it the same whip Bruno's wife Sissi had shown me in Upper Salzburg? Before giving it to Herr Hitler, Sissi had let me crack it in the air a few times and I had imagined the black skin of an Askari splitting open as it came down on his back. Did the Führer now

use it to whip Frau Wagner? Did women's skin split open more easily than men's skin? And did white skin split open more easily than black skin?

I ran up to Martin again to get a better view of our prisoner, but what little I could see of his face told me nothing about the thickness of his skin. Still, something else occurred to me – that family dinner in September '34 (it was Rosh Hashanah) was the last time I had seen Uncle Julius, Uncle William II, Aunt Laetitia and Aunt Lily. I had forgotten about them until now.

One of the runners tripped, bringing me back to the present – back to Bayreuth. We were running along Erlanger Strasse and the people of Bayreuth lined the streets in their hundreds.

'The streets are packed with people,' I heard the reporter from the *People's Observer* dictate from the back of the Mercedes which was driving along just behind us. 'The whole city is out in force to greet the valiant runners with their jubilant cheers. Enthusiastic spectators are surging onto the streets to be near the bold sportsmen who are running to Berlin for our Führer...'

But the people of Bayreuth weren't calling out to us. They weren't cheering us on. They didn't give a toss about us. They had formed firefighting chains and were passing buckets of water along the lines. They were pulling hoses after them, clambering over smouldering wreckage and red-hot rubble, all yelling and shouting orders at once.

The Americans had bombed the city the day before. It had been Low Sunday, but that had been called off to bury the dead of 5 April. Then, a little before eleven, the B-24 bombers had appeared and dropped explosive and incendiary bombs on the city in four waves of attack.

Through the soles of my shoes I could feel that the asphalt was still hot. We ran past a piano factory just as the sounding boards of the grand pianos exploded with an almighty bang and the strings snapped off the frames, sharp as gunshot.

We crossed the Red Main and ran past the burnt-out goods station, its twisted steel structure cooling with loud cracking noises. Melted enamel signposts told us where the great fire had raged: Schillerstrasse, Wilhelmplatz, Nibelungenstrasse.

'What a hurrying and scurrying in the streets leading to the station!' the reporter dictated, growing more dramatic by the second. 'Seldom has Station Square known such crowds; their shouts ring out to the heroes of the open road...'

As a matter of fact, they were cries of anger. Firemen and volunteers who were trying to manoeuvre an engine-powered fire pump into a pond with the help of a tractor had spotted our prisoner. They ran after the truck and tried to climb onto the back to seize Joe or Jack or Tom or Jim, for his skin was unmistakably black and the American uniform, draped in parachute silk, settled any doubts they may have had: he was to blame for the misfortune that had befallen their city and he was to pay for it! They would almost certainly have thrown him off the truck and beaten him to death if the

girl squad leader hadn't trodden on the fingers of the first man who tried to pull himself up and dispatched the second with a kick on the shoulder.

The avenue climbed in a dead straight line and at its end, peeping out from the green of the trees that were coming into leaf, was a building that looked like a barn. I recognised the famous festival house. Here was something I wasn't prepared for – we were running right into the heart of *Parsifal*, the Aryan Christ!

[...]

### **Friday 20 April 1945**

[...]

There was nothing left of the baroque palace of the old Reich Chancellery except the heavily damaged front. My guides pulled me through the main portal into the ravaged garden which was a maze of communication trenches. Foxholes and fallen trees hampered our progress. Half-burnt mountains of paper were smouldering in shell craters, and judging by the smell, there were corpses being burnt further down the garden. Rubble, wreckage, decayed machines – and in amongst all that, six-foot-tall white and purple rhododendrons. Suddenly, I heard the sound of shots being fired – so close and menacing that I instinctively ducked. Three, four five!

'Eva!' said the agent from the National Socialist League of the Reich for Physical Exercise, pointing into the neighbouring courtyard.

Eva Braun was standing at a target with some women in grey suits, tapping bullet holes with her pistol. 'Two eights, two nines and one ten – forty-four altogether,' she cried enthusiastically. 'I win!'

'Bormann gave his permission,' my guide explained. 'The women are now allowed to learn to use pistols for their own protection.' He called out his congratulations.

They looked across at us and Fräulein Braun said, 'Forty-four points. I won the tournament! Who have you got there? Another of your stray curs?'

I blushed, ashamed of the state I was in.

'The thousand-kilometre champion, just rolled in. He's on his way to the Führer.'

'Really? And there was I thinking they'd all dropped by the wayside. My congratulations! What's the boy's name?'

'What's your name?'

'Paul. Paul Renner.'

'Paul Renner!' he called out.

'Wonderful! Be seeing you then, Pauli! At teatime!'

I stood there stunned, watching the women giddily regroup for another round of target practice. They tittered and threw amused glances in my direction. Didn't they know that outside the world was coming to an end?

The Physical Exercise man rapped me on the head with his knuckles and pulled me to the gates of the underworld. To get from the antebunker to the main bunker you had to go down thirty-four steps and round three bends in a twisty staircase. I counted instinctively; you never knew when it might come in useful. The walls were painted grey – some had been left bare concrete – and the floor was tiled white and beaded with damp. Caution! Slippery! A musty blast of air, smelling stronger by the second, assailed us, as if we were descending into a crypt. On I went into the lair of the dying dragon Fafnir, while the ash of the global conflagration smouldered all around.

When we entered the last corridor, the Big Ten were just leaving the anteroom to the Führer's apartment. They rushed past us like a procession of stout pelicans.

*Out of here! Out!* their body language said. *For goodness' sake, let us out!* They ignored me, as did Dr Morell and Bormann who were waiting at the narrow door to be called in. I felt dizzy at the thought that Morell might recognise me. But he didn't. And Bormann only glanced at me and screwed up his nose. No wonder – I was thick with dirt and stank to high heaven.

Somewhere down there, pumps were at work, sucking up the groundwater, but puddles of moisture and condensation were gathering in the corners even so. The ventilation system wheezed and gurgled like a dying old man. I felt as if I were on a shipwrecked luxury steamer.

Well-wishers were still arriving in dribs and drabs. They were let in ahead of me; I seemed to have been completely forgotten. But what a miserable birthday! In the past, people had arrived in cars, the guards of honour had presented arms, and dignitaries from all over the world had come in person to wish the Führer many happy returns and hand over their gifts. We'd seen it all on the weekly newsreels. But now?

A young man covered in scabs and bruises, his broken ribs held together with string, was sitting shivering in a Gobelin armchair outside the sanctum, waiting to be let in. All my antennae were picking up signals of imminent catastrophe. And if the morphine hadn't had some lingering effect, I wouldn't even have been able to swallow my own saliva.

Antique furniture and a red carpet from the Führer's former apartment in the Reich Chancellery gave the bunker room a vaguely homely feel. The walls were hung with pictures: landscapes, still lifes, and a Madonna and child.

My eyes were growing heavy.

'Nervous?' asked the guard who was keeping watch at the steel door.

I nodded, without knowing what he was talking about.

'Do you want me to test you?'

I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

'You know, your poem! Your birthday message! You're supposed to be wishing the Führer many happy returns!'

I'd forgotten about that. I had to hand over Mutschmann's pennant, that much I could remember – but a poem?'

'I don't know any... I never believed I'd be first,' I stammer.

'I'll help you, if you like.'

Xaver, a country lad from the Allgäu mountains who had made it to watchman at the last steel door, became a helpful ally to me. Together we came up with an ode that did justice to everything – the Führer's genius, Germany's global empire and inevitable victory.

Then the steel door opened and Goebbels came limping into the anteroom – no wonder people called him 'Hobblestiltskin' behind his back. Xaver stood to attention. I leapt to my feet. We both held ourselves stiff as boards. The minister scrutinised me with his propaganda eye – it had been the Big Eleven, then, not the Big Ten. He really was very small indeed, gaunt and hollow-cheeked. But it was a mystery to me how the 'Tadpole' – nothing but a head and a *Schwanz* – should be such a hit with the women.

'So it's you,' he said in his Rhenish singsong.

What's me? The victor? The well-wisher? The one sent by the mishpocha? I nodded. Then Fräulein Braun burst into the anteroom – actually, I later discovered, the 'great conference room'.

'Ah, Pauli! Nice of you to wait. Have you been offered anything? Coffee? Tea? A glass of Sekt?' She looked at me and then at Goebbels, questioningly. 'Jupp, don't tell me the boy hasn't been offered anything all this time. What an inhospitable house this is! Honestly! Come along, Pauli.'

She grabbed my arm and pulled me away. The minister followed us into the sanctum with a look of annoyance.

The Führer's living room was as cosy as it could be, given the circumstances. Eva Braun's resourceful touch was immediately evident. A two-seater sofa in blue-and-white patterned brocade, three armchairs and two stools upholstered in the same fabric. A soft patterned carpet. A small desk on which stood a photograph of Klara Hitler as a young mother, and on the wall behind, Anton Graff's painting of Frederick the Great. Old Fritz looked down at us with his big goggle eyes. A Meissen tiled stove gave off a pleasant heat, the remains of an Austrian ring cake stood on a side table next to a gramophone and the room was filled with flowers – mostly forget-me-nots. Arranged in order of size on a shelf lined with Delftware tiles was proof of the Führer's passion for collecting: a row of salt cellars. It was rumoured that in intimate circles he was fond of saying, 'We are the salt of the earth.'

Fräulein Braun followed my gaze and explained that the tiled shelf had been a gift from the Dutch secret police and that the salt shakers were filled with salt from the liberated territories. She took down one of the shakers. 'It's true. The Führer knows every *Gau* and every protectorate by the taste of its salt.'

She moistened her index finger, held it to the holes at the top of the salt cellar, tipped the salt cellar upside down and gave her finger to the Führer to lick. I got a terrible shock. The Führer had been sitting there in one of the armchairs all along and I hadn't even noticed him. He was so slumped, it looked as if there was nothing on the chair but an old dog's blanket. Eva thrust her salty fingertip between the Führer's lips and he sucked and slurped like an infant at the breast.

'Fräulein Braun,' the minister said reproachfully, 'what is this?'

'Oh honestly, Jupp, minerals aren't going to hurt him – they're perfectly harmless compared with all that filth Theo makes him take. Well, Dolfie, darling? What does it taste of?'

'Transylvania,' the Führer replied tonelessly, 'before it defected.'

'That's right, Mopsy Popsy. Deserve to go to hell, they do, those Judases!' She held out the salt cellar to me in triumph so that I could read the label on the bottom: 'Transylv.'

Now the Führer registered my presence. He looked at me – and that invisible bond that had connected us all those years ago at Platterhof when I had watched him from the top of the post bus was ineluctably re-established.

Goebbels bent down to the Führer and gabbled into his ear, 'The thousand-kilometre champion, just arrived. Good material – could make something out of him. The Horst Wessel type or, given his appearance, we might present him as the new Bernd Rosemeyer, just without the racing car. Forget the slogan "The machine has the power". Our new motto is "Time for the human challenge". There's something convincing about a young man with a thousand kilometres in his legs. He's no weakling. We'll put him in the uniform of a Hitler Youth group leader and I think we'll take a series of photos... What's your name?'

He had turned to face me. I looked at him in alarm, suddenly uncertain which of my many different names I was using at that moment.

'Renner, Paul Renner,' said Fräulein Braun, coming to my rescue. 'And now the boy really must have something to drink.'

As the minister continued to hold forth to the Führer about his plans for me (a front-page headline in the recently established newspaper, *Tank Bear*: 'Renner the Runner: Nomen est Omen'; an interview on Radio Werewolf...), Fräulein Braun handed me a brimming glass of Sekt and clinked glasses with me.

'Cheers, congratulations, ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!'

I made as if to raise my glass to the Führer, but Eva Braun gently pushed my arm back down. 'The Führer's not in a good mood – the *situation*, you know,' she said, clawing inverted commas in the air, 'although right now it's more a bad bout of pharyngitis that's getting him down. Stumpfi's imposed a strict talking ban, which of course explains his silence these last few days!'

I downed the contents of my glass in one go. Eva suddenly moved very close; her cheek was a hair's breadth from being on my cheek and she whispered, 'Pauli, will you do me a favour?'

I shrugged non-committedly.

'Because the thing is...'

'I think,' I said, 'the Führer wants me for something.'

And indeed he was beckoning to me with the tiniest movements of his index finger. Goebbels, too, was signalling to me with a jerk of his head. I stepped up to the Führer. *Closer*, his beckoning finger said. In the end I was an arm's length from him, my crotch level with his face. Will the Führer personally inspect my circumcised penis? I wondered, and the third verse of my poem for him came bubbling out of me:

'On this your birthday, then, I wish you  
Final victory and that the Jews...'

'Sh!' Goebbels interrupted. 'That can wait. As the thousand-kilometre champion, you will receive from the thousand-year victor a thousandfold sealed...'

'Renner, Renner, the name rings a bell,' the Führer whispered.

'Maybe...because it's a palindrome.'

'Isn't our little champion an original? We should save him for something special instead of letting Jupp use him for cannon fodder like all the others.' Eva filled my glass with a laugh, glancing mischievously at a rather miffed Goebbels.

I drained the Sekt again, I was so thirsty. Then I remembered the pennant and pulled it out from under my jacket. 'This is from Gauleiter Mutschmann in Leipzig with his sincerest good wishes for your birthday.'

Annoyed, the Führer took the gift and examined it in disgust.

'Mutschmann, that despicable rat.' He read out the words embroidered on the pennant: '*To the Führer in deep obedience. Endurance – that's what I ordered. Stand the test and never falter – that was my command. But where is Gera now? Where is Plauen? Where has Leipzig disappeared to?*'

'Betrayal!' Goebbels interrupted. 'Betrayal everywhere! Never has a people so disappointed its Führer. Never has a people let its Führer down in this way. What do you do with a people whose men don't put up a fight even when their mothers and wives and daughters are raped? Get rid of it! It deserves the fate that's coming to it!'

‘And where,’ shouts the Führer hoarsely, ‘where is Mutschmann? Where has that wretched swine made off to? I pray to God that he’s been captured by the Bolsheviks and beheaded in Lubyanka!’

‘But Mopsy Popsy, don’t get carried away by what Jupp says. Stumpfi said you were to spare your voice. You’ll be needing it – you’re sure to want to speak again at some point. Fate will catch up with that horrid Mutschmann eventually; it always gets the better of such unpleasant characters – the good Lord makes sure of that.’

The excitement died down. Silence fell. Only the sound of the bombs and grenades outside reached us in muffled waves.

‘Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay! Drink it down!’ Fräulein Braun had filled our glasses again and we drained them in one go. I felt the bubbles rise inside me. I felt myself beginning to sway. I wasn’t at risk of sailing up to the ceiling like my mishpocha, but I was losing contact with the ground – and I was losing consciousness...

I came to in the sick bay. I felt rested and had no idea how long I’d been unconscious. Hours? A day? Longer? I had been well looked after. My grazes had been rubbed with iodine, my bruises covered in ointment, my ribs bandaged tight. I was on a drip... Seized by a sudden panic, I flung back the covers and breathed a sigh of relief: I was wearing my underpants and it was clear that nobody had fiddled with them.

‘How are you feeling?’

I jumped. ‘Great. Haven’t slept so well for ages.’

I thought it was a doctor or nurse, but it was Bormann. More in panic than from a sense of respect, I sat up and flung out my right arm, pulling down the drip from the frame.

‘Leave the formalities, boy, and don’t fidget so! Just pretend I’m a relation who’s come to see you – imagine I’m your uncle.’

He picked up the tube I had pulled down and shouted, ‘Stumpfegger!’ Turning to me, he said, ‘Be glad Morell’s not here any more – he’d have pumped you full of Balestol.’

Dr Stumpfegger came in and was startled to see the disconnected drip. I was about to explain, but Uncle Martin motioned to me to be quiet and yelled his head off at poor Stumpfi – what an awful botch-up this was; the Führer couldn’t even rely on a teeny weeny needle staying where it belonged, and if he, Herr Minister of the Reich, hadn’t happened to be passing, the patient would probably be drinking cold beer in Walhalla by now. I understood why everyone was so scared of Bormann.

No sooner had the doctor replaced the needle and left the room than Bormann sat down on my bed. ‘The Führer knows you. He’s seen you before somewhere. Where?’

I realised it was going to be hard to field Bormann’s suspicions. ‘In Berchtesgaden – I can’t believe the Führer remembers. Incredible!’

He eyed me coldly. 'When was this? I want details.'

'July '32, on a day trip from Salzburg to Berchtesgaden. The original plan was to go to Lake König and Saint Bartholomew's, but then we heard that the Führer was on the mountain, so off we rushed. We got the post bus up and stood outside Wachenfeld House with all the others. When the Führer stepped through the garden gate, we all fell on our knees...'

Bormann believed my story and I was allowed to remain in the sick bay in the Führer's bunker. Apart from anything else, I was the thousand-kilometre champion and so much the worse for wear that it looked as if I was going to need patching up some more. There was talk of flying me out to Berchtesgaden with the secretaries. That would have been quite a trick of fate: *Return to Go*, like in Monopoly. But for the moment there was no room for me on the outgoing aeroplanes. And whenever Dr Goebbels came by, he gave me this searching look, as if he still had plans for me.

So the days passed. I got used to the 'Bonker', as the Führer called it in his mumbling voice. I felt as if I were in the eye of the storm. Outside, the Russian bombardment was getting fiercer and fiercer, but down here it was calm and cloudless. I was like an insect spun in a cocoon, biding my time to hatch. At first, my mishpocha appeared to me regularly, urging me to get on and slit the Führer's throat at last – but I waved them away. 'The time will come,' I said, 'and I'll be ready.'

'What nonsense,' they scolded. 'Excuses, nothing but excuses! There's absolutely no reason not to do the deed at once. Give us just one reason.'

I couldn't. All I knew was that everything was predestined.

[...]

## **New York, 20 October 2015**

Here I am, then, sauntering home on this momentous day after regaling Joe the barber with my story. Admittedly, I didn't tell him the whole story. The time will never be ripe for that, because nothing's harder than facing up to the truth.

It's drizzling and the damn rain is seeping into my skin as if it were blotting paper. But I've only got two blocks to go, then a left past J.H. Wright Park and I'm home.

'Hey, Mr Wobbly Man!' Somebody pokes me in the side. It's Dr Ruth Westheimer who lives a few doors down from me. She's been in the same apartment since the late fifties – the apartment where she raised her children, where her husband Manfred died. 'Everything all right?'

Coming from the mouth of America's most celebrated sex expert, such a question always carries undertones of menace.

'One does one's best,' I reply.

'That's a good start,' she says in her unmistakable husky voice, 'but it's not enough, my dear.'

I look at her, standing here in front of me under her yellow umbrella, a tiny little woman in a salmon-pink jacket whose lapels are trimmed with edelweiss and gentian – I look at her and can hardly believe that this is Karola 'Dr Ruth' Siegel from Wiesenfeld, Lower Franconia, who is now world famous. Is it really her? And me? Is this really me? I'm not world famous – merely old. But I carry a secret around with me, so weighty that I am almost crushed by the burden.

'The road's blocked ahead – burst water mains. You have to turn onto Broadway, go past Loew's and then back along 176<sup>th</sup> Street. Are you sure everything's all right? You look exhausted.'

'I'm all right, really. I just spent too long at the barber's, listening to tales of meshugga old Jews.'

'Oh dear, that can be depressing.'

I think about retracing my steps and taking 173<sup>rd</sup> Street, but then turn onto 174<sup>th</sup>. I don't like 174<sup>th</sup> Street. I have to pass the Pest Control Center where there's a sign saying 'Bed Bugs, Cockroaches, Rats – Home Visits' which always makes me think of Goebbels and the Gestapo.

[...]

The noise of the crash can be only inadequately expressed in letters. I didn't see it happen; I only felt the signs approaching in a breakneck moment, like in some futurist film: NEW YORK AH 88 HH.

The aitches, the A and the two eights of the registration plate crashed into my body and tore holes in me. I see a crack opening up and I see Hagen coming through it towards me – Hagen von Tronje. What's going on? I think. How come he hasn't got any older? Was he the angel of death who was destined for me all along – unassailable in the face of my armada of guardian angels? Was he Satan? Or Satan's son, grandson, great-grandson? Did the likes of Hagen pass evil down through the generations for ever and ever?

I hadn't taken the sign seriously when I passed the tattoo shop yesterday. There had been that hangman's garland, winding its way over the pasteboard like a snake.

'That image there – the one of the hanged man – where's it from?' I had called through the window.

'No idea. Russia? Mexico?'

I didn't persist. I ignored the sign and went on my way to Joe's Barbershop. So it's my own fault if I'm now lying beneath the twin tyres of a cement mixer truck and there are red carnations strewn all over the road. Why didn't it drive down 177<sup>th</sup> Street to Washington Bridge where they're probably waiting for the cement? Why did it drive down 176<sup>th</sup> street against the one-way system and run me over? Or was the truck only a disguise to mask the conspiracy against me? Pointless questions, now that everything's over and done with.

I count my pulse: *thirty...twenty...* If it's true, what they say about the rate of living, then, like a tortoise, I'd now have 170 years to go, take away the ninety-five I've already lived. That would still leave me with seventy-five. *Fifteen...ten...* But I fear my allotted quota of three billion heartbeats is rapidly dwindling. My heart's only beating every ten seconds now.

I see myself from above. I see the passers-by bend over and peer at me. Now I know how Joe Gillis feels in the Billy Wilder film when he's lying dead in the swimming pool and his thought voice is making a list of everything he can see – the policeman, for instance, who is bending over the edge of the pool and looking at him floating on the bottom. Right now there's a policeman bending over me. He's shaking his head.

'Nothing to be done – not a chance,' he says. 'The guy's dead as a dodo.'

There are tattoos shimmering beside him and I quickly count them – there are ninety-nine now and the last hanged man is wearing a silver fern on his chest and gleaming blue and red as if he's just been painted in oils. Hagen's standing there like after a job well done. He's wearing shorts and still the same vest he had on during the run or else he...

Hagen fades away. My family are waiting for me. They're sitting on the truck, in front of the rotating drum, and they all grin at me as I climb up to them.

'At last!' says Bobe. 'It's taken you long enough!'

'Fell in the war!' Uncle Max calls out teasingly, and their comments remind me of Goebbels' radio broadcast announcing the Führer's death – his martyr's death.

Thus the 27,808<sup>th</sup> day of the war gradually comes to an end for me. It's a shame really – just a day later and it would have been such a lovely prime number.