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# Life's a Scream

Ingrid Pitt

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# LIFE’S A SCREAM

The autobiography of Ingrid Pitt

Ingrid Pitt


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*for Steffanie and Tonio*

# *Prologue*

Las Vegas loomed out of the shimmering heat haze like a mirage. I tried not to do the touristy thing and lean forward to look out of the window but that sort of control is beyond me. As we circled to land I thought I could pick out the constantly flashing, glaring names hyping the star-studded hotels that have taken the place of whitening bones and tumbleweed in the cardboard-brown desert. The plane levelled up on finals and sank decorously to the painted black strip of tarmac edged by low-level buildings and washed-out palm trees. My excitement increased – this was it. Three days of the biggest press junket they'd ever seen in America. And I was part of it. I checked my make-up as well as I could in a pocket mirror and tried to think of scintillating titbits for the press. After all, this was the big one. When I left the States a few years earlier I had flogged my heap of automotive rust at the airport and taken the first available flight out with the proceeds. Now was the triumphant return. Ticker-tape, gold-chained mayors, counter-marching mayorettes and a gold key. Or is that only in New York?

The doors opened and the heat hitting me in the face took my breath away. I shuffled out with the throng and looked for what, in those days, was the epitome of a status symbol – a stretch limo, preferably black, a Lincoln Continental no less. Zilch! Deflated, I followed the crocodile across the griddle-hot concrete into the ice shower of the reception buildings. Things started to look up immediately. A smartly dressed woman, with a clipboard welded to the crook of her left arm, gave a nurtured welcome smile and invited me to follow her. I had a moment of panic. What about my luggage? All that trendy gear I had spent hours trying on and visualising in action? Before I could communicate my

secret horror of losing everything, my guiding light hailed a distant crumpled linen suit and told the wearer to pick up my bags and take them to the hotel. It wasn't a scenario I was happy with but my misgivings were put on hold as I walked between rows of aggressive fruit machines, standing with arms at the salute like a well-trained band of military robots, into the sumptuous VIP lounge.

Another suit, this time immaculate in blue, slobbered over my hand at the door, told me archly that he was the vice-president of something or other and was on call to make my every wish come true. I gushed back and was disappointed that it wasn't the President of MGM himself, putting his body at my beck and call. I turned to meet the press. What's the collective noun for pressmen? A 'flash'? Maybe a 'clutter'? Whatever, there were more hot shots sucking pencils and burning flash bulbs than I had ever seen in my life. And they all called me 'Heidi' – the name of my character in the film I was there to promote, *Where Eagles Dare*. Rather sweet, really. And surprising. My role in the film was pretty good but it didn't deserve this sort of attention. I should have been worried. Where were Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood? Or even Mary Ure? Making other movies – that's where. Leaving me to do the ego-stroking job of promoting the film while they moved on to pastures new and pay-cheques big.

After half an hour of primping and posing the clipboard lady threw me a lifeline and suggested we move on to the hotel. I was torn between the thought that there might be someone who hadn't captured my image on his emulsion and the knowledge that in spite of the ice-blast air-conditioning, the wedge of bodies had produced a temperature that was melting my make-up. I followed her out to the car. At least I rated a Cadillac. The short drive through the tawdry streets was a little depressing. Las Vegas was built and designed by a gang of vampires. Everything looks glitzy and expensive at night. The senses

are overwhelmed by the millions of watts pumped out through the sparkling light from every ledge, roof-top and revolving door. Reality kicks in as the sun, a mephistophelean red, edges up over the hills and desert scrub. I tried not to notice the light sockets and angle iron, the paper blowing in the wind which carried sand in from the desert and coated everything in a dull layer of khaki. This was my day. I didn't want to know about reality.

The booking in at Caesar Palace, again saluted by rows of attention-grabbing fruits, was satisfactory. Another 'vice' something or other went through the knuckle-grazing ritual and assured me that his *casa* was my *casa*. I dimpled prettily. By now I had got the picture. If there wasn't too much effort involved I would be in line for an underling in an expensive suit and all the pressmen I could eat. I was beginning to come down off the mountain. Then the door to my suite was thrown open and I was sparkling again. Wall-to-wall flowers and a note that suggested I wasn't going to be confined for ever to the realm of vice-presidents and under-managers. I waited until my escort left with renewed promises of eternal servitude, then leaped on to the flowers and shuffled through the wad of visiting cards: 'For Heidi – welcome to Las Vegas – Bo Poke – President/MGM.' 'Welcome to America, F. Melnicker, President of Finance/MGM.' 'Knock 'em dead, kid! Luv – Alistair' (MacLean). 'Sorry not to be there with you, darling, Good Luck, Richard & Elizabeth.' A sop, that one. Richard was much better off where he was making *Staircase* and knew it. I read the rest of the ritualised billets-doux and stored them carefully away in my little box purse that was all the rage in London but had also taken on a tackiness in my ostentatious surroundings. I considered a bath but rejected it in favour of crashing out on the luxurious charpoy, as big as a singles court, and buried myself under a heap of cushions and pillows.

Bad move!

My eyelids had hardly started to flutter when the telephone chirruped. Dazed after thirty hours with only a spine-snapping doze on the plane to fizz up the old batteries, it took me quite a while to realise that the one-armed bandit poised on the bedside table was doubling as a telephone. It was the lady with the clipboard whose name, if I remember rightly, was Soledad, and she had exciting news. *El Presidente*, Bo Poke, was already in the hotel and would like to meet me before the reception banquet – which, incidentally, was due to start in half an hour. I panicked. It would take me that much time to find a suitable frock. Never mind meeting the Poke bloke and doing all the things I should have done before diving into the pillows.

I made my entry into the Titanic-sized banqueting hall twenty minutes late and hating everybody. I was reminded not to get big ideas about my part in the PR operation by the fact that all of them were already seated at their tables and, if they weren't exactly at the cheese and coffee stage, they were prodding the bread rolls and had their napkins strategically placed to catch any dribbles.

Bo Poke did his bit. After all, he was strapped into the chair that could become a throne or electric according to the international performance of the film that I was fronting. He massaged my ego into some sort of shape and made a big fuss of seating me beside him. I had been curious to meet him. There were so many stories going around the industry that I didn't know what to expect. Someone pretty extraordinary, at least. You don't get head-hunted by a super-conglomerate like MGM unless you are something a bit special. Only three months earlier he had been little more than a glorified grocer – well, president of General Foods, actually – but what had that to do with film? I asked him. He laughed. He had been given a crash course. It was, *au fond*, all the same thing. You buy a commodity, price it attractively, get a few dumb broads to waggle their butts suggestively and you are in profit.

I looked at him and struggled with the concept that he saw me as a dumb broad wiggling my assets and went off him. It didn't bother him. He came out with 'present company excepted' but I read that as 'accepted' and withdrew my favours. As if he cared. Everyone was talking to everyone, tearing down reputations and questioning what everyone else was worth. I painted on a smile and went to sleep behind it. Which was fine – until Bo Poke jumped up and launched into a spiel which ended in a fanfare for Clint Eastwood. Nobody had bothered to tell me Clint was going to be there. It turned out that he had a couple of days off filming and had let MGM fly him in. I was glad of the distraction, I had the distinct impression that the head of finance was about to make a take-over bid for my prime assets. Clint and his wife Maggie were wonderful. He sailed charmingly down the line of executives, who stood to give him a welcoming ovation, until he reached me. I didn't know what to expect. Clint gave a big hello, gathered me in his arms and let the suits know that we were brothers under the skin. It got better after that. He sat on the other side of Poke and made a point of chatting to me across the President's soup plate.

I was beginning really to enjoy myself. Then Poke blasted out a corporate message about *Where Eagles Dare*, smarmed over Clint, threw me a titbit and thanked the Nazis for being the greatest source of entertainment since Nero burned down Rome.

As if on cue some joker smashed through the double doors of the banqueting hall in Adolf Hitler gear: stupid little black moustache, SS hat and Führer uniform. Just in case anyone missed the allusion, he kicked his heels together, shot up his arm in the Nazi salute and shouted, 'Heil Hitler!'

Everyone laughed.

I felt sick. I had to get out of there. I stalked from the room, leaving the laughter to fade in the distance,

overwhelmed by the morass of memories of my nightmare childhood – a lifetime ago.

# *One*

I had a strongly developed sense of the dramatic even before I was born. It has to be admitted that if you are trying to escape from your oppressors, having a baby in front of them is not a wise move.

My parents were on their way from Nazi Germany to England via Poland when I decided to arrive. Grimly my mother tried to hold me off but when the train pulled in to Częstochowa station I was on my way out. My father managed to find someone who contacted a doctor and my mother was made more or less comfortable in a little room at the rear of the station. It was only just in time. I had already made my way into the world virtually unaided when the midwife arrived. I have a picture of smiling faces hovering above me and in the distance through the driving snow the sound of a train whistle welcoming me into the world.

In haste and without much thought – and to my continuing distress – my mother called me Ingrid, which in Swedish means ‘victorious on horseback’.

My father was a true-blue Prussian, a scientist and reluctant officer in the cavalry during the Great War. A man who knew how to live well. He was born in 1870 in Potsdam, although his family came from Torbetzkoy in the province of Kaluga, not far from Moscow, where they owned land until the Bolshevik revolution. The family was proud of its connection to the great Russian General Mikhail Larinovich Kutuzov, Prince of Smolensk, who stuck it to Napoleon pretty conclusively when he had designs on taking over Russia.

My father was my hero. He’d been educated at Heidelberg and later Oxford where he took up rowing. When

competitors were rounded up to enter the first Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens he was there. He won a medal and was received by the King. He could have gone anywhere to live but turn-of-the-century England suited him. My father's immediate claim to fame was his invention of a special electrical battery which he patented in 1900. To prove that his battery was a viable product with a modern application, he took his battery-driven car on a London-to-Brighton run – and finished, which was enough to prove a point.

Always looking for greater challenges, he worked on developing a purely British aeroplane. He also started on the design of a British airship. Then Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo and World War One became inevitable.

After twenty years in England my father considered himself British in everything but birth and wished to stay there. Kaiser Bill wanted him back, since my father was one of the top designers of lighter-than-air aircraft, and he therefore had the negative choice of staying in England in a detention camp or returning to Germany. He closed up his house in New Maiden and served in the Prussian cavalry.

The war over, my father tried to return to England but his initial overtures to old British friends and business acquaintances met with a less than enthusiastic response. The horror and futility of the Great War had left a psychological scar on the nation's psyche which was not easily healed. He always said that the detention camp would have been the lesser of two evils – and he would have improved his cricket . . .

He was a renowned engineer and inventor, a man of passion and intellect, of courage and conscience.

It was a love of horses which brought my parents together. They'd met when he spotted her competing skilfully in a dressage event at a horse show in Treptow. She was thirty years younger than him and from a Lithuanian background, but their interest in horses bridged the gap. My

father was never one to hang around and within the year they were married.

External events were not to allow them much time to enjoy their newly wedded happiness in Berlin. The Nazis were gaining influence and their rhetoric was directed with growing ferocity at the huge Jewish section of the community. My mother's Jewish blood put her in jeopardy. My father thought long and hard about the situation. He would probably have decided to sit it out and see what happened if he'd been able to continue to design non-military airships, but already the Nazi influence was beginning to show so he decided to leave his job. Despite the fact that he was over retirement age, he was ordered to stay on. It was time to leave.

Reacting quickly, he sold whatever he could and left the rest with his friend and partner, Abe Mandelstamm. It wasn't easy. The mounting number of attacks on Jews was turning the once elegant city into a hell-hole of racial discrimination and any Jew with a sense of history realised it was time to get out. This meant that the market was flooded with household goods and minor masterpieces. My family weren't too badly off. In the good old days my father had bought a number of shares in British engineering companies. When times were hard, after World War One, he had been tempted to sell them. Now he was glad that he hadn't. They would provide a nest-egg that would set him up in England.

My parents decided to take the route favoured by most *émigrés*, via Poland. There was just one small difficulty – me. I was due to be born at any minute. My father initially wanted to wait until after my birth but the authorities were getting heavy about his refusal to work on their war machines. He was picked up one night by men from the SSD, the State Security Service, and taken to Sachsenhausen – one of the first concentration camps – where he was told in unmistakable terms what would

happen to him and his Jewish wife if he didn't co-operate. It was four days before they put him in a black SSD car and dropped him off at home. My father had learned his lesson. My appearance would have to be postponed until the family was safely out of the country.

That might have been the plan but no one had consulted me. The train was crossing the Polish border when I made my untimely arrival. Once I was safely delivered, my mother begged my father to get back on the train and continue the journey. She would follow in a couple of days when she had recuperated. He should have listened to her. My arrival without a ticket hadn't gone unnoticed and to ingratiate himself with an enquiring SSD man the station-master passed on the news. The SSD man checked with Berlin and my father was held for 'further questioning'. They decided to take him back to the capital. At this point everyone's attitude to us changed. Before, they had been almost happy that the small railway station of their medieval town had been turned into a makeshift maternity home. Once my father had been fingered everyone wanted my mother – and me – out.

My father had no intention of returning with the SSD man to Berlin if he could help it. When the train pulled in at Gdansk he took a chance and managed to slip away. He returned to us and decided that it would be wisest to lie low with members of my mother's family in Grodno.

I have vague memories of life in Grodno, of idyllic, exciting fields to play in. Of course, in the wider world the war was now raging and when the SSD got wind of my father's new address it did not take them long once more to 'invite' him to go to Gdansk with them to 'discuss' his contribution to the war effort. He tried to tell them that he had retired but they didn't want to know about that. Reluctantly he agreed to go with them.

I was always allowed to sleep with my parents to keep warm and feel safe. They thought if there was any danger

they could just grab me and be off. Now I watched my mother stand at the window most of the night, wrapped in her coat, blowing warm breath on the glass to make the ice flowers melt and wipe it clear so she could see my father coming back. She waited and watched but for many nights the road was empty.

At last one night her vigil was rewarded. My father had been devious. He had agreed with everything the SSD had said. They wanted him to work on long-range rockets, V2s at Penemünde. He told them he had no problem with that. The fact that he would have to work with forced-labour battalions wasn't anything to get excited about either. They were so impressed that they made the error of letting him come home to pick up his family. He arrived in the middle of the night and, in spite of my grizzling, we were packed and on our way before the sun breached the eastern horizon.

My mother wanted to go to Vilna where her parents lived but my father was being masterful so we headed towards Bialystok.

Whenever I think of Poland it's cold. Cold that cuts into your face like tiny razors and burns out your sinuses. There's a smell about extreme cold that in small doses can be exhilarating. Day after day, for weeks on end, it gives you an overdose that has a touch of death about it. If you're fuelled up with food and can occasionally find somewhere warm it can be endured. When you're near starvation it's not so easy to be sanguine.

But the cold was not our worst enemy. My family had no status, no money, no passports, no roots. If we stayed in one place for more than a couple of days our hosts became terrified and made it clear that they wanted us out of their house and miles away.

At last we found a safe haven with one of my mother's relatives, who fixed up a barn so that, if soldiers came, we wouldn't be in their home and they could pretend they

didn’t know anything about us. It wasn’t at all bad. It was reasonably draught-proof and clean and, most important, we felt almost safe.

My parents would leave me in the barn for short spells while they helped around the farm. One morning I was on my own, asleep in the hay, when the door was thrust open and a woman ran in followed by a soldier. She seemed happy enough, giggling and playing some sort of game with the man. I was about to jump up and join in the fun when the mood changed. The woman’s squeals of laughter became shrieks of fear. I knew about fear. You have to keep away from its source in case you were contaminated. I stayed where I was hidden but could see everything. After a lot of thrashing around and moaning in the straw the soldier stood up, pulled up his trousers, buttoned his coat and left. The woman lay on the straw, whimpering to herself. I rushed to the kitchen and told my parents what I had seen. They were terrified. The thought of a soldier so close at hand had them practically in hysterics. They kept asking me over and over what exactly his uniform was like. I didn’t know. I couldn’t possibly know if he was German, Polish or Russian. No one thought to go and see if the woman was all right. They were too busy packing their bags.

Determined finally to get to Bialystok, we left that night. But whatever decision my parents took they would never be able to outrun the Nazis. They wanted my father and they were going to have him. He had become an ‘enemy of the Reich’ for deserting his country in its hour of need.

We arrived in Bialystok in the early hours of the morning. By wonderful coincidence my maternal grandparents had left Vilna a couple of months earlier and had come to Bialystok, where for some reason they felt safer, to stay with my grandmother’s brother. My maternal grandparents seemed genuinely pleased to see us. Our obvious distress surmounted the hostility they had expressed when they’d found that their darling daughter, Katja, had married a man

so much older than herself. We spent the summer and autumn with them and everyone began to relax. Having my father living with them helped to warm my grandparents' attitude towards him. It's one of the happiest times I can remember from my early childhood. There were children of my own age to play with and we spent hours catching crickets and making them jump, and digging up mounds in search of moles. In spite of long hours invested in the sport I don't think we ever actually unearthed one.

The fields were surrounded by ditches which were part of an old irrigation system. There were a few small dams at strategic places which could be released if too much water was backing up. It only happened a couple of times while we were there but it was something to remember. Once, the river dried out in places, leaving only small, deep pools. The fish knew about those pools and made for them when the water level started to sink. They should have been safe. But that's life. Just when you think you are home free something falls on you from a great height. When the water was low it was us kids that fell on the corralled fish. We harvested enough trout and crayfish to keep the table supplied for days.

German activity in the area had been pretty spasmodic so far. There had been a little detachment of troops bivouacking about two kilometres away in an old quarry but they were generally civil and the few times they had come to the house it had been merely to buy eggs. My father told everyone to treat them like guests in the hope that they might act the part and not embarrass their hosts. The ploy worked for a long time.

By this time we were surrounded by a lot of refugees. Nobody liked the danger they represented but to turn them away seemed so heartless that neither my father nor my grandfather nor uncle could bring himself to do it. Unfortunately the increased refugee activity had drawn the Nazis' attention and they were only too happy to vent their

anger over the reverses at the front. These, combined with the *Luftwaffe*'s inability to clear the skies of British Spitfires and the demoralising raids on Berlin, had changed how the Nazis saw themselves. Before, they had been able to strut around making high-handed decisions under the illusion that they were masters of the universe. Slowly it now dawned on them that maybe the whole of Europe wasn't going to roll over and play dead. The assurance of their leaders that reverses in Russia, the annihilation of the *Luftwaffe* and America entering the war were just annoying blips in the master plan was beginning to sound a bit like drowning by numbers. The result was another push to round up anyone who could be called a threat to the 1000-year Reich.

The troops arrived in their usual impressive manner: a couple of motor-bike outriders to clear the road, a saloon car and three trucks to pick up anyone they came across. They had obviously had a busy day. The trucks were already bulging with depressed-looking citizens stoically enduring the teeth-chipping experience of riding in the back of the rudimentarily sprung lorry. The people were unloaded from the trucks and stood around in the freezing night, waiting for further developments.

A man in a long leather coat and a smart snap-brimmed trilby knocked on the front door and politely asked my father to accompany him. There was nothing my father could do but agree. He did get a bit of a concession. He was allowed to bring my mother and me along. My mother wanted time to pack but was told there was no problem, she would be back long before she knew what was happening. Nobody believed that but so far everything had been fairly restrained and no one wanted to push at the shaky envelope of safety.

Outside, the little group of refugees, who had been our house guests for weeks, were made to join the people who had arrived on the lorries and looked pretty discouraged. My grandparents, Albert and Melanie, were among them. My

father asked the trilby if they could come with us and, unbelievably, he agreed. As we climbed on the back of the lorry and jolted off along the rutted cart track the soldiers started herding the new arrivals and the refugees into one of the barns. I still wonder what happened to them.

# *Two*

My father held me under his coat to keep me warm and put his arm around my mother to steady her as the lorry sped through the night. My grandparents had great trouble sitting on the truck floor and my poor grandpa couldn’t do a lot to ease Baba Melanie’s discomfort.

It seemed inevitable that the truck should finish up at the railway depot. We were ordered to join hundreds of people sitting on the cobbled stones of the station.

I didn’t really have any idea of what was going on. Why had I been snatched up and taken to this place where everyone seemed to be afraid, where the only sounds were frightened cries and harsh, terrifying shouts? I wanted my father to reassure me, to tell me that it would only last for a moment and then everyone would go away and we could return to our big, warm bed. I kept as close to him as I could but he had other problems: Grandpa Albert and Baba Melanie for a start. All their lives they had lived at peace with the world and they had no way of coping with these unfamiliar harsh circumstances. My father understood this and tried to make them as comfortable as possible, mentally as well as physically. Amid all the noise and confusion he battled to keep us together, to reassure us that everything would be all right.

We sat on the ground but my grandparents remained standing, their arms locked around each other. The guards were walking along the track-side, shouting at people to sit down and, when they didn’t react smartly enough, giving them a whack with their guns. My father helped Baba Melanie sit down. It was difficult for her. She suffered from arthritis and it was agony having to lower herself on to the damp cobbles. We all crouched around her and when the

guard had passed my father disappeared into the building behind us and emerged with a chair. He put it at the back of the track-side area where it was less conspicuous but still in touch with the mass of prisoners on the crowded platform and, with Grandpa Albert, gently lifted Melanie up and almost carried her to the chair. My mother gathered me close and watched the guards. They hadn't noticed our movements so we crawled back to where my grandmother was now sitting in the chair.

All around, everyone was talking in whispers. I still didn't understand what was going on but the atmosphere of fear was subsiding now. We were beginning to be philosophical about our position. The grown-ups reasoned that there was surely no mileage in doing anything nasty to us. It was obviously in everybody's best interest to buckle down and work in the resettlement camps and show that we could be depended upon to pull our weight.

A guard walked past and we all cowered down, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible – which wasn't easy with Grandma Melanie perched above us on the chair. He stopped and looked at her. My father's arm tightened around me. Melanie inclined her head and smiled at the guard as if greeting an acquaintance. The guard smiled back and moved on. We all relaxed.

I dropped off to sleep. I don't know how long I slept on my father's lap but I was awakened as he shifted his position to claim the attention of the guard who was walking along the line calling his name. Papa carefully transferred me to my mother, then got up and picked his way through the people lying on the ground. I wanted to cry out, to tell him to come back, not to leave me, but my mother put her hand over my mouth.

A man in a long leather coat came over to Papa, asked him a question and checked a detail in a sheaf of papers. My father shook his head and pointed to us. This did not suit his interrogator. He took my father by the arm, but Papa pulled

away and again pointed towards us. The leather coat wanted my father to go with him but Papa was desperate. Rashly he grabbed the man's arm in an attempt to detain him and, although the guard tried to shrug him off, my father wouldn't let go. Without warning, the man took out his Luger and smashed it across my father's head. For what seemed an eternity Papa stood and stared at the man with the leather coat, then he crumpled at the knees, fell on his back on to the cobblestones and lay very still. I screamed and clung to my petrified mother who, wisely, didn't react. The man nodded to my mother as if they were acquaintances acknowledging a chance meeting and walked off.

Mascha dropped to her knees beside my father and cradled his head on her lap. She tried to see how bad the wound was and looked around desperately to find something to staunch the bleeding. I was shrieking my little lungs out. The blood covering my father's head was something I couldn't cope with. Mama opened my coat and tore my pinafore off me, folded it and pressed it to my father's head. Someone tried to comfort me but I wasn't having it. Without warning my father's eyes opened and he looked solemnly at me for a moment or two, then smiled reassuringly and opened his arms. I threw myself on him and sobbed hysterically.

It was almost light. A train arrived with a haunting blast of its whistle, then set about shunting the cattle trucks around until the guards were satisfied that they occupied the exact position designated for them. Then, with their dogs, they began to round us up and force us aboard the train.

The man in the leather coat was standing near our group. He obviously had a problem with my father. As Papa desperately tried to get to his feet, he roughly pushed him out of line and snapped questions at him. My mother tried to stay with him and my grandfather also attempted to help but the night on the cold ground had been too much for

him. He could hardly move and Grandma Melanie was even worse. My mother, half carrying my father, tried to assist her parents but it was impossible. The guards were shouting and shoving everyone on to the train. Grandfather Albert told Matka to help my father to the train. They would follow. My mother hesitated but Grandmother gave her a reassuring smile and waved her away. I clung to my father's coat and went with them. When I looked back Baba Melanie was sitting like a queen on a throne and Albert was at her feet, his back resting against the chair leg, holding Baba's hand. They saw me looking and gave a wave and a reassuring smile. It was the last I ever saw of them.

We were pushed on to the train. My father's dazed state saved him. The man in the leather coat tired of not getting a coherent reply and pushed him roughly towards the door of the cattle truck. Mama elbowed the people getting on the train out of the way, held her position in the entrance by force and practically hauled my father aboard single-handed.

More and more people were hustled into the already packed cattle truck. A cacophony of shouts and shots fired outside cut into the screams and cries. Abruptly the doors slammed shut and bolts crashed home. It was pitch black inside. I couldn't see anything but I could hear the mass of people crammed around us pushing against each other, moaning and cursing. I started crying again. I was terrified.

The train began to move, very slowly at first, then gained traction and speeded up. But it was not long before it stopped again. We could just make out that it was snowing and we were standing in the middle of nowhere. A freezing draught blew through the slits in the wall and it was better not to look out. But the doors didn't open. With a lot of grumbling and shuffling everyone settled down again. The train stood and stood. Matka had managed to worm her way into a corner. She acted as a comfortable buffer against the