



Chapter 15

The Havel continued its lazy way, through low-lying fields and forest patches. The bridge where it turned north to leave the Plauensee was choked with civilians, through which military transport occasionally forced its way. The moored barges alongside were deserted, as was the river. No-one seemed interested in the passing launch. The few people who glanced in its direction were incurious, discounting the evidence of their eyes. It made no sense for anyone to be going north.

The next town down river was Premnitz. 'Our problem', Smith told Rani, 'is that at any time we could pass from German-held to Russian-held territory without knowing it. For all I know, we might have done it already.' Their first glimpse of Premnitz did nothing to reassure them. From a distance, the buildings appeared to be covered with white spots. A closer approach showed the spots to be sheets, hanging from every second window. Smith was reluctant to get too close, but a single figure emerged from the nearest street and hurried along the tow path toward them, waving a large white handkerchief and shouting in English, 'Welcome, Americans! Welcome to Premnitz! Our ancient and peaceful town throws open its gates to the victors and is confident that a magnanimous foe will respect the lives and property of the vanquished.' What with the hurrying and the speech, repeated verbatim several times, the herald was out of breath by the time he reached the launch. Alarm and disappointment wrestled on his face when he saw Smith's uniform. Smith sympathised with his predicament. 'So neither the Americans nor the Russians are here yet. Who are you?'

The stout man sat on the tow path and mopped his brow. 'I am *bürgermeister*, or was, before National Socialism.'

'Where are the town's party officials?'

The man snorted derisively. 'Long gone. Do you know if the Americans are close?'

'You've put your sheets out on the wrong side of the city. The Americans have not crossed the Elbe anywhere near here. They're probably waiting for the Russians.'

The news was too much for the *bürgermeister*. He slumped and buried his face in his hands. 'I do not speak Russian, and if I did it would do no good. We have been told that they rape and pillage wherever they go. What can we do?'



Smith sounded more confident than he felt. 'If you don't resist, and if you hide your women for a few days, you might escape with nothing worse than a little looting and vandalism. Take your surrender offer to the most senior Soviet officer you can find. Tell him about everything there is of military value in the town. He might think it worth looking after.' He had been making it up as he went, but it revived the *bürgermeister*. 'Thank you. Thank you, *Herr Obersturmführer*. We will not forget the SS for this. Thank you. We have heard that there are Russians downstream at Rathenau. I don't imagine that you will be going so far?'

'I am afraid that we have no choice.'

'Then could you take a delegation there?'

Smith did not need passengers, but he would need help to get past Rathenau. 'To the outskirts only.'

The *bürgermeister* hurried back the way he had come. 'Looting will not satisfy the Russians', Rani said, 'They want revenge.'

'Probably', agreed Smith, 'but the closer they come to the Americans, the tighter the control that their commissars will be exercising.'

From somewhere in the heart of the town a bell began tolling. It continued as the delegation came aboard and could be heard long after the town itself was out of sight. It could have been a summons, or it could have been a requiem.

Smith quizzed the *bürgermeister* about the river crossings at Rathenau. There were two, he said, a railway bridge south of the town and road bridges two kilometres further on, at the town itself. The road crossed an island in the river and so had two bridges. He knew nothing of their condition. When the railway bridge came into sight, Smith put into the bank and reconnoitred on foot. It appeared to be intact, which probably meant that it was in Russian hands, but he could see no troops. Smith put the Premnitz delegation ashore. It was 11 am. It would take them no more than half an hour to reach the town but he asked the *bürgermeister* to wait until noon before entering. The *bürgermeister* was puzzled but grateful; of course he would do as he was asked.

As soon as the little party was out of sight, Smith took the major's gun from its mount. 'I hope we won't regret this, but it's altogether too German for where we're going.' He dropped it over the side. Rani threw off the ammunition drums. One fell on to the bank. She started after it but Smith called her back. 'Forget it. Give me a hand with the tripod, will you?' He hoisted the Soviet flag at the stern, put on the conical *budionovka* and



Russian soldiers' blouse, and sent Rani into the cabin to find Radio Moscow. It was playing a program of balalaika music. 'Leave it on', he said, and got the launch moving at a leisurely three or four knots. The bridge loomed, grey and impassive, and swallowed them in its shadow. They were emerging from the other side when Smith noticed, out of the corner of his eye, faces above. He worried that they might see his German uniform trousers and stood as close to the side of the cockpit as the wheel would permit. The launch had travelled perhaps another thirty metres before it was hailed. Smith looked around to see two Russian soldiers on the bridge, one with a rifle and the other with his arms above his head. The wheel went clammy in his hands. He looked again. The arms were being raised and lowered, raised and lowered. 'Turn it up, loud as you can,' he murmured to the cabin. The music swelled. '*Spaseeba, tovarisch, spaseeba*', came from the bridge. Smith turned and raised his cap. '*Da, tovarisch, da!*' The arm-raiser waved his in reply.

Around the next bend, Rani came up from the cabin and took Smith's arm. 'I didn't know you spoke Russian.' He looked at her impish smile. 'Of course I do, and you've heard all of it.' He kissed her cheek. 'Turn the radio off, darling. I doubt that the road bridge will be as easy.' Nearing Rathenau, he headed into the left channel around the island and stopped under the embankment a few hundred metres short of the western road bridge. They waited nervously, for the town was clearly in sight on the east bank, only a kilometre away. Shortly after noon, there was a commotion in the town and figures in uniform began moving from the eastern bridge towards it. Smith immediately started the engine and urged the launch to its best speed. At the western bridge there was no-one, but a few of its guards were out on the island, looking towards the town. The noise of the engine finally alerted them, but by the time they had run back to the bridge all that could be seen was a red flag receding in a cloud of diesel smoke. Only a foolhardy soldier will fire on his own flag without provocation; no-one would take responsibility for firing first, and so no-one fired at all.

'According to our *burgermeister*, there are no more bridges between here and just before the Elbe, at Havelberg,' Smith told Rani. 'If the Russians are holding Rathenau as a bridgehead that should mean less likelihood of running into them elsewhere on the river, so it should be OK to keep moving in daylight. It's a risk we've got to take anyway, if we're to get to Neuengamme in time. We'll try to slip past Havelberg after dark.' He



stuffed the *budionovka* into his trouser pocket and otherwise derussified himself and the launch. The afternoon wore on, splendid with the green and blue of spring. Only once was there anything like an alarm. A thin hum intruded on the quiet, and after some searching of the sky Smith found a small aircraft. It was at four o'clock and about 5000 feet. Evasive action was out of the question, as was hiding; the river was straight and narrow, its banks were low and bare. They were seen but the aircraft did not appear to be particularly interested in them. It banked briefly towards them, without losing much height, and then disappeared to the north, still flying parallel the river. Rani was concerned that it might have been Russian.

'No. Arado 96, I think, a German trainer. Nothing to worry about', Smith reassured her, 'probably a courier, or a bolter, like us.'

Havelberg is a fortress. It entirely covers a small island in the middle of the Havel, which serves it as a moat, and it commands the land communications of the surrounding marshland as well as the junction with the Elbe. The town island is joined to each bank of the river by a bridge. To describe the area as flat hardly does it justice. The rivers here lie only forty metres above sea level, and the sea itself is still hundreds of kilometres distant. The nearby hills, for want of a better word, rise all of ten metres higher. For Smith and Rani, it was an exposed bottleneck that could not be avoided. Smith slowed the launch so that they would approach the town just before dark. As they rounded the final bend, a last gleam of twilight in the west outlined its walls, a kilometre ahead. Smith cut the engine and the launch slowly, painfully slowly, drifted down in the enveloping darkness. Smith guessed that the eastern channel, which did not seem to diverge as much as the western, would carry the stronger current. This it did, but through a narrow race, more like a real moat, between the town and its small suburb on the east bank. They were approaching the bridge, and Smith was congratulating himself on his choice, when a light came on from the town, followed by another from the suburb. They quickly found and coned the launch, but there was no alarm and no firing. Smith hurried to start the engine as the launch was carried beneath the bridge, out of the light. Still no firing. 'We're almost through', he shouted to Rani, but just then the launch reared from the water and slewed broadside to the current. Its upstream gunwale dipped under. Water began to fill the cabin. The propeller was chopping away at something metallic. Smith switched off the engine.



Twin lights on the riverside, almost at water level, flicked on to illuminate the scene. They also reflected from the water, revealing a dark line running from shore to shore. Smith raised his hands, and silently cursed a long-dead fortification engineer. The dark line, which was a steel cable, rasped as the current chafed the launch against it. An engine started, the cable slackened and the launch was pulled ashore by unseen hands.