



### Chapter 20

The tank troop commander did not know what to make of an SS officer who spoke perfect English and claimed to belong to the RAF. The battered man's explanation of the woman and child was also pretty far fetched. It was not his problem; he sent them back to higher formation.

At division level there was a rudimentary POW processing facility. Despite Smith's protests, the first stage in the process separated him from Rani and Zuba. He was searched and, without further ado, thrown with several hundred others into a barb-wired compound that would have taken half their number, uncomfortably. Smith was past caring. He found a corner, curled up, and slept the sleep of the exhausted. He had been awake for 48 hours; he slept for 12, and would have taken more but for the boot that roused him. 'Are you Schmidt?' His questioner was a big military policeman, with an even bigger one standing behind him. 'Smith, Flight Lieutenant Smith', he replied, squinting into the light of a sun already well above the horizon.

'Same thing. Come with us.'

They took him to a hut beyond the compound. A line of trestle tables stretched from one end to the other, with chairs at regular intervals behind. Only one of them was occupied, by a languid young man wearing captain's pips and dangling a cigarette from elegant fingers. The policemen pushed Smith towards him and stationed themselves at the door.

'Your papers identify you as *Obersturmfuehrer* Johannes Schmidt, but you say you are Jonathon Smith, a RAF pilot shot down over Hamburg last month.'

'Yes. It is easily checked; I would have been posted missing.'

'I am glad you said that', the captain said with a sly smile, 'indeed you would have.' He pushed across a thick looseleaf volume labelled Allied POW and Missing. 'Can you show me your name.'

Smith's heart sank. He knew that he would not be able to find what the smarmy little number opposite had clearly been unable to, but he could not stop himself from looking for out-of-order entries and addenda. The captain had been thorough. Smith's name was not there, and he could think of no explanation to offer that would not blow his cover. He had almost decided to insist that this clever dick get in touch with London when another thought struck him. The omission might not be a mistake or



an oversight, and if Macalister had deliberately withheld his name from the list of missing, what good would contacting him do? The captain was putting another looseleaf folder before him. It was rather slimmer, and its label read Wanted (Enemy).

'But guess what?', said the captain.

His Russian allies were respectfully asking, in accordance with the agreed arrangements, for any British or American unit that might come across Johannes Schmidt, Reich Security, to apprehend and pass him over to the nearest Russian security unit. 'It seems that they want you for war crimes against the Soviet state, which is interesting, because the usual formula is for crimes against Soviet nationals. On the whole, I think I'd prefer to have the Russians after me for mass murder rather than for treason, or whatever.'

'What about the woman and child I came in with?', Smith asked.

'They're not on any list. They'll just be processed through to a displaced persons' camp.'

Smith said no more. Rani and Zina would be out of it, and if Rani were free she might be able to do something, although for the life of him he could not think what.

The military policemen took him to an improvised prison block. The senior, a sergeant, unlocked a cell and stood aside. With the assurance of routine the private, who was one of the biggest men Smith had seen, effortlessly lifted him by the throat, held him against the door and cocked a ham-sized fist. He peered into Smith's face. 'Someone's already done this one, sarge.'

The sergeant took a look himself. 'Ouch. Nice job, too. That'll do. Chuck him in.'

The private, enthusiastic as well as obedient, threw Smith across the cell, where his flight ended against the far wall.

A British MO came and perfunctorily taped up his ribs. 'Nothing broken, just a couple cracked.' It was two days before the division had enough from the Russian wanted list to fill a lorry. They were a motley lot, mainly Eastern Europeans. Some were in POW camp rags, but many wore national variants of German uniform. There were armed guards in the lorry and jeeps with machine guns ahead and behind. Smith found himself sitting next to an officer wearing the POA sleeve patch of Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army. 'Got cigarette?', he asked in broken German. Smith had to disappoint him, but the man seemed as much



interested in conversation as in tobacco. 'Why Moscow look for you?', he asked.

'I don't know. And you?'

The man flicked his sleeve patch. 'This, but also, I was officer in Red Army. At Katyn in '39. You know Katyn?'

'Where Allied propaganda said the SS massacred Poles in 1941?'

'*Da*, but we do job for you two years earlier, eh? But now Russia and Poland communist friends. People who know Katyn very inconvenient for Comrade Stalin.' He drew a finger across his throat.

'You two', said one of the guards, 'no talking'.

The lorry drove through Boizenberg to the rail junction beyond. At the station a goods train was taking aboard a miscellany of loot - machinery, furniture, clothing, household goods, captured equipment. The lorry backed up to a loading platform and the guards dismounted, lining up to face the train. Smith's companion looked keenly at the line of Russian soldiers beyond who were forming up for the handover. A little shudder of resignation shook him and he leaned back against the side of the lorry, his face devoid of animation. 'NKVD', he said.

'How can you tell?', Smith wanted to know.

'Collar badges - red, blue.'

Smith had seen those colours before, in Havelberg. What had internal security troops been doing that far forward? Surely not looking for him: to put a name on a wanted list was one thing; active measures was something else entirely.

The Russian misread the puzzlement on his face. 'SMERSH - death to spies, deserters, traitors. Slow death. Not for me. Goodbye.'

With an easy motion, deceptive in its absurdity, he jumped from the lorry and strolled through the line of British guards. Before anyone had the wit to try to stop him he walked across to the Russian line and went up to one of men as casually as if he were asking for a cigarette. When he was no more than a pace away the security man finally thought to raise his PPD sub-machine gun. He was felled with a blow and the gun was torn from his grasp. The sight and sound of it being cocked broke the spell. Both lines of troops scattered for cover. They could have saved themselves the trouble. The POA man calmly placed the muzzle of the burp gun under his chin and blew the top half of his own head away.

The incident threw the prisoner handover into some disarray. The NKVD officer wanted the dead man identified on his list so that he could account



for being a body short. Smith's elegant interrogator, the only British Russian speaker present, could not provide a name. In any event, there was not enough face left to put a name to. Finally, the NKVD officer ordered the corpse thrown on to the train. Breathing or not, a body was a body. 'All dead sooner or later anyway,' he announced cheerfully.

Smith and the other prisoners were locked in a goods car. Smith told himself that he had made the biggest, and probably last, miscalculation of his life by not contacting London. Even if they had betrayed him, what could they do to him that would be worse than the doings in the cellars of the Lubyanka? The noise of loading went on for several hours. Then there was a brief silence, followed by the rumble of closing doors and the hiss of venting steam. There was a whistle and a lurch as driving wheels scabbled for traction. Buffers bounced against each other down the line of carriages, and then they were moving. Smith had hardly recovered his balance when the wheels screamed into reverse and the prisoners were thrown to the floor in a heap. The door rattled open.

'God, you really do look awful', said Angus Macalister.

'And you're still no oil painting', said Smith.

The NKVD officer was tired of dealing with these people who couldn't identify one prisoner but were now quite sure that another shouldn't be one at all. He could see ahead of him a mountain of paperwork and the possibility of a very unpleasant interrogation. He had a name and a body in SS uniform, and that was good enough for him. 'Have you listed his number as well as his name?', asked Macalister through the elegant captain, who immediately went quite red, as did Smith. The NKVD officer had not. 'It's easy enough to check. Roll up your sleeve, Smithy.' Smith and the captain exchanged apologetic looks. 'You see', Macalister said to the Russian. 'If he doesn't have a number tattooed he's not SS.' The NKVD officer wanted to see Smith's other arm, and even then he was not satisfied. He sent for his own interpreter.

'My officer wants to know why the prisoner is in SS uniform if he is not SS.' Smith saw an opportunity to redeem himself for his stupidity back at the reception camp. 'My British uniform was taken away by the Germans. When I escaped I picked up whatever I could from the roadside.' He waited for this to be translated, then pulled the *budionovka* from his pocket and put it on his head. 'As a uniform it didn't altogether match.' The NKVD officer's face was a study in emotion. From quizzical through thunderous to beyond in half a second. They're the Irish of Eastern



Europe, thought Smith; he'll shoot me or offer me a drink, or both. The officer exploded into laughter.

Smith flatly refused to let Macalister drive. Captain Elegant (Smith never did hear his name) was a supremely confident motorist, but it quickly became apparent that he had drunk even more of the vodka than Macalister. In the end Smith took the wheel himself. 'How did you find me?'

Macalister took some time to marshal his words. 'No thanks to shit-for-brains here. I've had a team looking for you ever since we heard German radio announce that Hitler would stay in Berlin. At Magdeburg the boys picked up your old boss, Strauss. He said that an SS officer called Kemp had denounced one Johannes Schmidt as an Allied spy sent to assassinate Hitler. It was a long shot but we started looking for you under that name. Fortunately shit-for-brains was prompt with his paperwork and my men saw the name on the army handover list.'

'Strauss said that Kemp, Gustav Kemp, denounced me?'

'That's the one, in writing what's more, and very surprised Strauss was to get it. He thought that you two were joined at the hip. In fact, he didn't believe it until Kemp was found dead where you left him. Then he went for a rummage and found a Russian revolver in your gear.'

'Wait a minute. The revolver was found after I'd gone?'

'That's what Strauss said.'

It made no sense at all. But enough. 'Do you know where Rani is?'

'Not personally, but if our friend here hasn't got her out of whatever DP camp he sent her to by the time we get back, he'll pretty soon find out what being displaced really means.'