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CHAPTER 1

Warsaw
August 2, 1941

Piotr Bruck shivered in the cold as he waited with twenty or so other naked boys in the long draughty corridor. He carried his clothes in an untidy bundle and hugged them close to his chest to try to keep warm. The late summer day was overcast and the rain had not let up since daybreak. He could see the goose pimples on the scrawny shoulder of the boy in front. That boy was shivering too, maybe from cold, maybe from fear. Two men in starched white coats sat at a table at the front of the line. They were giving each boy a cursory examination with strange-looking instruments. Some boys were sent to the room at the left of the table. Others were curtly dismissed to the room at the right.

Piotr and the other boys had been ordered to be silent and not look around. He willed his eyes to stay firmly fixed forward. So strong was Piotr's fear, he felt almost detached from his body. Every movement he made seemed unnatural, forced. The only thing keeping him in the here and now was a desperate ache in his bladder. Piotr knew there was no point asking for permission to use the lavatory. When the soldiers had descended on the orphanage to hustle the boys from their beds and into a waiting van, he had asked to go. But he got a sharp cuff round the ear for talking out of turn.

The soldiers had first come to the orphanage two

weeks ago. They had been back several times since. Sometimes they took boys, sometimes girls. Some of the boys in Piotr's overcrowded dormitory had been glad to see them go: 'More food for us, more room too, what's the problem?' said one. Only a few of the children came back. Those willing to tell what had happened had muttered something about being photographed and measured.

Now, just ahead in the corridor, Piotr could see several soldiers in black uniforms. The sort with lightning insignia on the collars. Some had dogs – fierce Alsatians who strained restlessly at their chain leashes. He had seen men like this before. They had come to his village during the fighting. He had seen first-hand what they were capable of.

There was another man watching them. He wore the same lightning insignia as the soldiers, but his was bold and large on the breast pocket of his white coat. He stood close to Piotr, tall and commanding, arms held behind his back, overseeing this mysterious procedure. When he turned around, Piotr noticed he carried a short leather riding whip. The man's dark hair flopped lankly over the top of his head, but it was shaved at the sides, in the German style, a good seven or eight centimetres above the ears.

Observing the boys through black-rimmed spectacles he would nod or shake his head as his eyes passed along the line. Most of the boys, Piotr noticed, were blond like him, although a few had darker hair.

The man had the self-assured air of a doctor, but what he reminded Piotr of most was a farmer, examining his pigs and wondering which would fetch the best price at

the village market. He caught Piotr staring and tutted impatiently through tight, thin lips, signalling for him to look to the front with a brisk, semicircular motion of his index finger.

Now Piotr was only three rows from the table, and could hear snippets of the conversation between the two men there. 'Why was this one brought in?' Then louder to the boy before him. 'To the right, quick, before you feel my boot up your arse.'

Piotr edged forward. He could see the room to the right led directly to another corridor and an open door that led outside. No wonder there was such a draught. Beyond was a covered wagon where he glimpsed sullen young faces and guards with bayonets on their rifles. He felt another sharp slap to the back of his head. 'Eyes forward!' yelled a soldier. Piotr thought he was going to wet himself, he was so terrified.

On the table was a large box file. Stencilled on it in bold black letters were the words:

RACE AND SETTLEMENT MAIN OFFICE

Now Piotr was at the front of the queue praying hard not to be sent to the room on the right. One of the men in the starched white coats was looking directly at him. He smiled and turned to his companion who was reaching for a strange device that reminded Piotr of a pair of spindly pincers. There were several of these on the table. They looked like sinister medical instruments, but their purpose was not to extend or hold open human orifices or surgical incisions. These pincers had centimetre measurements indented along their polished steel edges.

'We hardly need to bother,' he said to his companion. 'He looks just like that boy in the *Hitler-Jugend* poster.'

They set the pincers either side of his ears, taking swift measurements of his face. The man indicated he should go to the room on the left with a smile. Piotr scurried in. There, other boys were dressed and waiting. As his fear subsided, he felt foolish standing there naked, clutching his clothes. There were no soldiers here, just two nurses, one stout and maternal, the other young and petite. Piotr blushed crimson. He saw a door marked *Herren* and dashed inside.

The ache in his bladder gone, Piotr felt light-headed with relief. They had not sent him to the room on the right and the covered wagon. He was here with the nurses. There was a table with biscuits, and tumblers and a jug of water. He found a spot over by the window and hurriedly dressed. He had arrived at the orphanage with only the clothes he stood up in and these were a second set they had given him. He sometimes wondered who his grubby pullover had belonged to and hoped its previous owner had grown out of it rather than died.

Piotr looked around at the other boys here with him. He recognised several faces but there was no one here he would call a friend.

Outside in the corridor he heard the scrape of wood on polished floor. The table was being folded away. The selection was over. The last few boys quickly dressed as the older nurse clapped her hands to call everyone to attention.

'Children,' she said in a rasping German accent, stumbling clumsily round the Polish words. 'Very important gentleman here to talk. Who speak German?'

No one came forward.

'Come now,' she smiled. 'Do not be shy.'

Piotr could sense that this woman meant him no harm. He stepped forward, and addressed her in fluent German.

'Well, you are a clever one,' she replied in German, putting a chubby arm around his shoulder. 'Where did you learn to speak like that?'

'My parents, miss,' said Piotr. 'They both speak –' Then he stopped and his voice faltered. 'They both spoke German.'

The nurse hugged him harder as he fought back tears. No one had treated him this kindly at the orphanage.

'Now who are you, mein Junge?' she said. Between sobs he blurted out his name.

'Pull yourself together, young Piotr,' she whispered in German. 'The Doktor is not the most patient fellow.'

The tall, dark-haired man Piotr had seen earlier strolled into the room. He stood close to the nurse and asked her which of the boys spoke German. 'Just give me a moment with this one,' she said. She turned back to Piotr and said gently, 'Now dry those eyes. I want you to tell these children what the Doktor says.'

She pinched his cheek and Piotr stood nervously at the front of the room, waiting for the man to begin talking.

He spoke loudly, in short, clear sentences, allowing Piotr time to translate.

'My name is Doktor Fischer . . . I have something very special to tell you . . . You boys have been chosen as candidates . . . for the honour of being reclaimed by the German National Community . . . You will undergo further examinations . . . to establish your racial value . . .

and whether or not you are worthy of such an honour . . . Some of you will fail and be sent back to your own people.'

He paused, looking them over like a stern school – teacher.

'Those of you who are judged to be *Volksdeutsche* – of German blood – will be taken to the Fatherland . . . and found good German homes and German families.'

Piotr felt a glimmer of excitement, but as the other boys listened their eyes grew wide with shock. The room fell silent. Doktor Fischer turned on his heels and was gone. Then there was uproar – crying and angry shouting. Immediately, the Doktor sprang back into the room and cracked his whip against the door frame. Two soldiers stood behind him.

'How dare you react with such ingratitude. You will assist my staff in this process,' he yelled and the noise subsided instantly. 'And you will not want to be one of those left behind.'

Piotr shouted out these final remarks in Polish. He was too preoccupied trying to translate this stream of words to notice an angry boy walking purposefully towards him. The boy punched him hard on the side of the head and knocked him to the floor. 'Traitor,' he spat, as he was dragged away by a soldier.