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Opening extract from

David's Story

Written by

Stig Dalager

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Stig Dalager

Born in Copenhagen 1952, Stig Dalager is the author of fifty different works including novels, drama, poetry, essays and documentary films. Several of his novels and plays have been published and/or staged internationally, appearing in twenty-one different countries.

His best known novels include the acclaimed *Journey in Blue* (about Hans Christian Andersen, nominated for the UK Impac Prize 2008) and *Two Days in July* (about the Stauffenberg plot to kill Hitler during WWII).

As a playwright, he had an international breakthrough with *I Count The Hours*, staged in New York, followed by *The Dream,* also staged in New York and *An American Electra,* first presented in Madrid (May 2009)and due to be staged in New York.

Dalager was for several years co-editor of the Danish-Jewish magazine *New Outlook*. His documentary *Darkness and Reconciliation* (2003) offers a personal account of the Israeli-Palestine conflict through portraits of people on both sides of the conflict.

Stig Dalager has lived in Leipzig, Vienna and New York and now lives with his two daughters in Copenhagen.

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The sky is slate grey, the morning chill, as he makes his way through the village in his thin jacket and worn boots. The path is muddy from the constant rain they've had for the last two days. No one notices him as he moves among the silent houses, apart from the crows that dart up from a puddle and flap away noisily over the rooftops. He stops to watch them as they glide in the wind and disappear like two black spots over the fields.

He always watches the birds, especially the crows, which nobody likes, not even his father. "They're only trouble," his father says. In the summer, their feathers gleam as if oiled. Sometimes he imagines himself flying like a bird.

From a distance, he can see a large piece of paper nailed to a barn door. He knows what it is, he's seen one before – a public notice. At the top, there's something printed in German and then the same thing printed below in Polish, only smaller. The words aren't hard to follow as he can read them in both languages.

The boy rushes to the door, tilting his head to get a

good look at it. The last time he read one of these, his father had asked him, "Do you understand it?" He nodded.

"So what does it say?" Proudly, he replied: "It says that it's forbidden for Jews to go on the train."

"Do you know what that means?"

He nodded again. But it was as if his father wasn't completely sure he understood – he had that look. His father bent down to him and took his hand. His father's large, wrinkled hand completely covered his own small hand and he usually did this whenever there was something he particularly wanted to impress upon him. He wanted his son to remain calm and to trust him. He shouldn't be afraid. He should listen carefully and do as he was told. But lately, he'd noticed that whenever his father took his hand that he was trembling slightly. Maybe he was frightened, too.

His father told him: "You mustn't take the train, no Jews may go on the train, if you do, you'll be punished."

"Not even to Kielce?" he said. "Do I have to walk to Kielce?"

"We can probably find someone to give you a lift," said his father. "But you don't take the train, understand?"

Yes, of course he understood. He just didn't know why, all of a sudden, Jews mustn't go on trains. And when he asked his father, he was told: "That's how it is. We'll talk about it later!"

They'd always talk about it 'later', when his father needed to think about something or when he thought he

wasn't old enough to understand.

But of course he knew what was wrong. It was the police. It was the Germans. Because of the Germans he had to wear an armband with a star, because of the Germans he couldn't go to school any more, he had to stay at home alone and read his books. Sometimes Jakob came by and they worked out some problems from the book. He was good at maths, it wasn't that hard, and if they couldn't figure it out, they could ask his father. But lately his father had taken to coming home at the strangest times. Then he'd sit for a long while, reading or writing, before suddenly going out again. He didn't know what he did. He wasn't a teacher any more. There wasn't any school.

His mother wasn't home, she cleaned house for some of the other families in the community, among them the Schliefersteins who had the grocery store by the square. She left early in the morning and came home late. He had to make his own dinner if his father wasn't home. And even if he was home, it was often the boy who put the food on the table. Sometimes when he called his father, he didn't come to the table. He'd go into the sitting room and stand beside him and say, "Dinner's ready." But his father just waved him away. "I don't have time," he'd say. Or "I'll be there soon." Sometimes he left the house without saying a word. Other times he just sat and stared out the window. He felt like he didn't know him any more. One day Jakob said: "I think your father's doing something dangerous!"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"My father says he's a communist."

"No, you're crazy," he said, "he's definitely not a communist, there aren't any communists here!"

"My father doesn't lie," said Jakob. "He's seen him in Kielce with some other communists!"

"That's not true," he said confused, "how does he know they're communists?"

"You can tell!"

They started to quarrel, but just then his father came in and they fell silent. His father nodded 'hello' and went into the kitchen. He was wearing his black overcoat, the one he always wore for special occasions. Jakob smirked, quickly pulled on his jacket and dashed out.

The boy stormed in to the kitchen, tugged on his father's sleeve and demanded: "Why won't you tell me what you're doing?"

His father turned and hushed him.

"Jakob's father says you're a communist, but you're not, are you?"

His father took his hand and led him further into the kitchen. He sat down on a chair, still holding his hand, "Listen, it's best that you don't know what I'm doing."

"Yes … but why?" he said disappointed.

"There's a war on, David, you know …"

"Of course," he said.

"We have to be very careful. You have to watch

everything you say, and the less you know the better." But he wasn't satisfied.

"You've always said that I should know everything, that I should learn languages and keep my eyes open!"

"Yes," said his father, "but this is something else. You still have to keep your eyes open, but there are things that you should avoid, and there are things that, for your own sake, you shouldn't know anything about. It could be a matter of life or death. Understand?"

He nodded, but didn't really understand. What he could see was that his father was restless, that his mind was caught up in a crisis that he couldn't put into words. This crisis had taken him over so completely that the father he'd once known had almost disappeared. It was as if a shadow had embraced him.

That cold, grey morning, he reads the rain soaked announcement on the barn door: "It's forbidden for Jews to travel in cars." He reads it over again before turning and looking around at the deserted square. He's alone. He's freezing. He starts running, he runs and runs – he has to get home.

*

A few days later he wakes up with a start, and can hear sounds from the sitting room. It's a bright day, so he throws the heavy quilt aside and hops out of bed realising he must

have slept in. From his window, he can see the two great ash trees at the far end of the small garden. The branches are interwoven, black and bare; one branch has a strange round hole. Last spring a robin built a nest in the hole, and every morning when he woke up he could hear the cries of the young birds. Even though he knew the bird couldn't hear him, he often tiptoed over to the window and stood there, entranced by its song. He wondered how such a small bird could sing so high and clear.

He stands a moment and looks over the fields past the trees. In the distance Tomachevski is driving his horses, the cart moving slowly over the ruts in the road. Once, he'd been allowed to ride on the brown horse while Tomachevski watched him go around in the yard. Growing dizzier on every turn, he'd have fallen off if Tomachevski hadn't grabbed hold of him, laughing: "You'll never be a farmer!"

The clock in the hall strikes nine. He pulls on his clothes and walks into the sitting room. His mother's at the table eating. She turns towards him and smiles. Her dark eyes follow him around; she doesn't look as tired as usual. Suddenly, he notices that there's meat, cheese and pickle on the table.

"I don't have to work today," says his mother, "Mr Schlieferstein gave me some extra money so I'm taking a holiday."

As he eats, she sits quietly and watches him. She turns the cup round in her hands as she often does when she's thinking about something pleasant. Then she gets up,

in a sweater that's too big for her, with her curly black lashes and dark eyebrows etched against her pale, open face. How many times he'd looked into those bright eyes at bedtime, when she'd come into his room, sit on the edge of his bed and say evening prayers with him.

Occasionally, she'd purse her lips, as if biting her tongue, only to open her mouth again in a wide smile. When a thought occurred to her (unlike his father) she had to share it: "Spring's on its way," she'd say, "Can you feel it?"

She leans across the table and ruffles his hair.

"You're all right being left alone here, aren't you?"

"Mmm ..." he says, lying a little.

"Next month we'll go with your father to the woods like we used to."

"We can't, Mama."

"No," she says, "but we'll do it anyway."

"But, what if *they* come ..." he protests but he can't say *the soldiers*, he doesn't want to imagine soldiers in their forest.

"Don't think about that," she says, "I've talked to your father. And he says it's a good idea. He says that they shouldn't be allowed to ruin everything for us."

He knows that they want to make it all right for him, that they pretend they're not frightened for his sake. He moves around the table and hugs his mother.

*

Half an hour later, he's beyond the village striding along the winding road to Kielce in his tightly laced boots. As he passes one small farm after another, fields and trees and hills seem to melt together. He hasn't seen a soul on the road so far and wonders where all the people have gone. In spite of the bitter wind, he's built up a sweat. When his legs begin to ache, he takes a break by the side of the road, and sits there, scratching the ground with a stick, until the roar of engines somewhere in the distance, forces him to jump up and hide behind a tree. A moment later, a convoy of motorcycles, trucks and armoured cars rumbles past him, leaving snatches of words and laughter hanging in the air. He stays safe behind the tree until they pass and then steps out onto the road.

At a bend further down the road, the last truck unexpectedly pulls in beside a clump of pines and stops.

Quickly, he hides behind a tree, closing his eyes and pressing his cheek up against the trunk. His heart's racing, his hands are sweaty, but nothing happens. In the descending mist he can only hear remote, incoherent sounds from the distant truck.

Finally, he sticks his head out and looks up the road: a man with boots and a grey cap has gotten out and opened the back of the truck while three others with steel helmets jump down and drag something out from the darkness. He can't see what it is – it looks like bundles of clothes or sacks of potatoes. The man with the grey

cap points to a spot in the brush and the three soldiers throw the bundles away. One of them lights a cigarette, they stand a while and talk, but he can't make out what they're saying. The man with the grey cap brushes something from his shoulder then casts a quick glance up and down the road.

David presses himself right up against the tree and digs his nails into the bark. With his eyes shut tightly he waits until he hears the truck start up and drive away.

Silence surrounds him, like a strange dream. Suddenly, he's startled by the sound of something rustling in the undergrowth. When he turns around he notices a squirrel watching him, calmly, before it darts off among the trees.

Not knowing what he's doing or why, he walks up the road towards the pines. Immediately, he can see the bundles lying where they were thrown amongst the bushes. Two canvas bags tied at the top with thick cord. They have a strange shape. He bends down and tries to lift one of them, but can't, it's too heavy. He happens to notice his boots, one of them is covered in a strange liquid, he bends down again and feels it with a finger – it's red, looks like something he's seen before. It looks like blood. It's only now that he notices that the bottom of one of the sacks is covered in blood. Frightened, he jumps back, looks around anxiously, but there's still no one around. He grabs a handful of grass and desperately tries to clean his boots, but no matter how much he rubs, there's still a trace of blood.

What should he do? He looks back and forth from the

sacks to his boots. But as his panic mounts, he remembers what his father told him … that sometimes … sometimes, farmers dispose of sick or dying animals, and he thinks: 'It's not people, it's pigs.' And then: 'The Germans must have stolen some pigs and discovered they were sick, so they threw them away. Yes, that's all it is. Now he'll just look in one of the sacks and then go on to Kielce and tell his uncle all about it.'

Somewhat relieved, he unties the cord on one of the sacks, opens it and looks in. He hasn't seen it, he won't see it, and yet he stands there staring at it, his hands frozen to the edge of the sack. Three long fingers stick up from inside the dark sack, a glazed eye and an open mouth twisted to the side in a deathly pale face, its cheek pressed against a shoulder, blue veins protruding from the thick neck, the body slumped in a heap …

With a start, as if he'd been stung, he drops the sack; it falls back into the brush with a faint dry sound. He stares at the two sacks for a moment, then walks out onto the road and continues to Kielce as fast as his legs can carry him. He sees nothing, just walks. A little way down the road he stops suddenly, grips his stomach, runs over to a field and vomits.

Once again he takes some grass, wipes his mouth and sets out onto the road on his way to Kielce.

Gradually, as he's walking along, thoughts return to him, and the image of the body floats before his eyes. Something in him is about to burst, a wave of feelings rush through him, he's been hit by something greater

than himself. He struggles to believe that it wasn't really a corpse. He won't believe it, and under no circumstances will he tell anyone about it, not his uncle, not his father, not his mother. He won't frighten them, no, why should he? They're frightened enough as it is. And anyway, his uncle would only say that it's something he's made up. "He has a lively imagination," he'd say. And then he'd say: "May God protect you, David, lest that imagination of yours gets you into trouble one day."

*