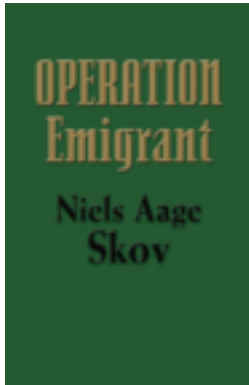


**OPERATION
Emigrant**

**Niels Aage
Skov**



With personal clandestine experience, the author of Operation Emigrant describes on an authentic background the ruthless actions of Britain's SOE agents in extracting, under the noses of Gestapo, a German engineer with critical knowledge of Hitler's super rocket, the V-2.

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by

Niels Aage Skov

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Operation *Emigrant*

I dedicate this book to Diane, my wife, muse, and superb critic, whose discerning eye and deft touch has enhanced the writing process and beneficially imprinted the narrative.

Niels Aage Skov

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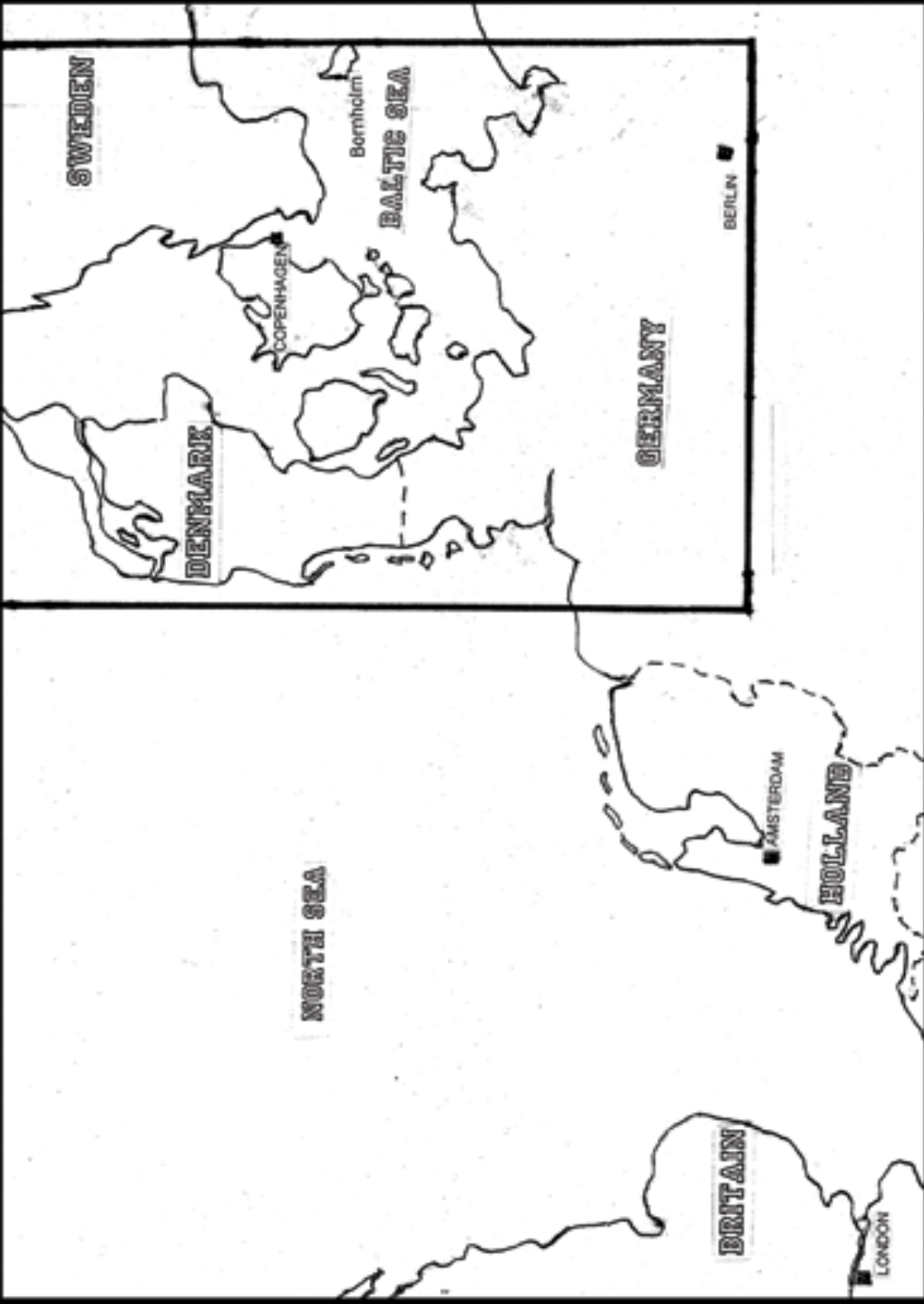
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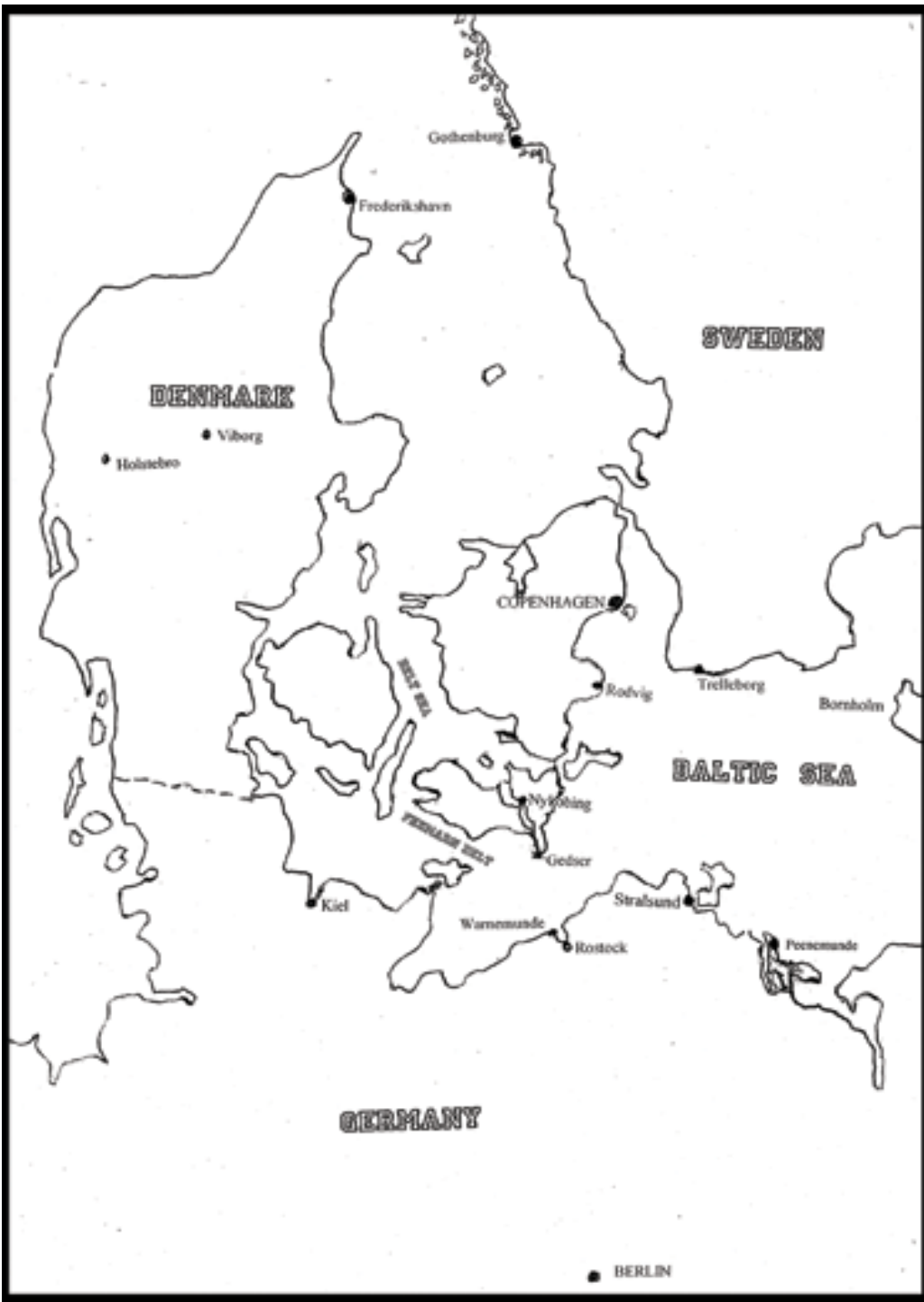
To the Reader

As in my previous book, *Underground*, some small pieces of World War Two history are offered as accurate in the fictional narrative of *Operation Emigrant*; the dates and overall events, as reliable; the words and behavior of the actors as derived from accounts of participants in similar situations. I know, for I was there: one shadowy and anonymous resistance fighter.

The reliability of detail in the historical events—the bombing of Hamburg, the Peenemunde testing—will, it is hoped, be clear to the informed reader. The exploits of the main fictional characters—Lund, Lowell, Morian—were repeated many times over in the course of our resistance fight.

My purpose in both *Underground* and the present book is to bring the past to life in the perceptions and passions of a few people caught in peripheral eddies of the war's maelstrom. I feel this purpose is served best by fidelity to historical fact, letting the invented drama play against this backdrop. Readers of both books will recognize a few of the characters reappearing from previous acquaintance.





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1

Lowell

Tom Lowell was hanging on to his bucket seat, when a sudden updraft made the plane jolt like a bucking horse. The Halifax bomber was not intended for transport of people, and the primitive seat installation had not included any provision to strap in the five passengers, who were all fighting the unpredictable motions of the low-level flight. Sergeant Nolan appeared from the cockpit and gave the heads-up signal with his flashlight: three minutes to go before they hit the silk. The five men left their seats, lined up at the Joe Hole and clipped their parachute chords onto the overhead slider. Nolan checked each of them to make sure; after all, they were not paras. Only Lowell had jumped for real, the others just a couple of times from the training tower. Lowell was last in line; the harness made him aware of the PPK under his left armpit, its presence as always reassuring. A gun could never be too close or too ready in the environment they were about to enter. Nolan slid open the Joe Hole, an opening in the floor where the lower gun turret had been removed, causing a blast of air to tear into the body of the plane. At the same time, the doors in the bomb bay started opening with a rumble audible even over the engine noise. Everybody stood transfixed watching the red light above the cargo door.

Lowell was one of a small group of Americans who had come to support Britain in the empire's life-and-death struggle with the Nazi monster. A native of Boston with

an American father and a German mother, he had before the war undertaken graduate studies in history at the University of Gottingen, where he had painstakingly perfected the German his mother had taught him. While studying at Gottingen, he had fallen in love with a young Jewish woman, Rachel Cohn, whose father owned a small publishing house. When the Nazi government passed the "Nuremberg laws," a decree to deprive Germany's Jews of their property, Amos Cohn had been vociferous in criticizing the government. The result had been prosecution and conviction for anti-state activities, followed by immediate incarceration in the Dachau concentration camp. Cohn had been a widower, and with nobody else to take up his cause, Rachel had contacted several foreign newspaper correspondents and pleaded for exposure of her father's case. The further result had been the sudden disappearance of Rachel herself, and it had taken Lowell more than a month just to discover that she had been arrested and also sent to Dachau. Lowell's efforts to make contact or get information about her or her father had met with a wall of official silence, and an inquiry through the American embassy eventually brought only a curt message that Rachel had died "from illness." Lowell had returned to Boston, disconsolate and furious at the Nazi regime. He did not believe in presentiment, but his familiarity with German culture enabled him to predict the likely, almost inevitable, trajectory of Hitler's success in appealing to the nation's Teutonic instincts.

Four years later, at the outbreak of the war in Europe, Lowell was an assistant professor of history at Brown University, his anger against the Nazi state undimmed. When the opportunity arose in the fall of 1939, he

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interrupted his career without hesitation and joined the trickle of American volunteers taking flight training in Canada to qualify for the Royal Air Force. The following year the RAF took on Germany's air force, the Luftwaffe, in the Battle of Britain, and Lowell racked up a respectable record as a Hurricane pilot. He had three Messerschmitts to his credit by the time a bullet from a prospective number four plowed across his temple and reduced his left eye vision enough to disqualify him for further flight service.

When Lowell left America, his country had been at peace but with isolationists and interventionists in a screechy squabble. The Pearl Harbor attack had in one stroke united Americans in a bellicose patriotism driving for revenge, first of all against the Japanese. His RAF combat experience so far had given Lowell a different, more intimate take on the conflict. At the same time, his background in history allowed him to grasp the phenomenon in a far broader context. This was a war like none Thucydides could have imagined, a war so extensive as to ring the globe. Lowell's initial motivation to exact revenge for the crime against Rachel and her father had been gradually supplanted by the British attitude of quiet resignation to assume an unpalatable obligation that was compelled by civilization itself.

To continue, after his injury healed, what he viewed as an obligatory fight against the Nazis, he had turned to Britain's Special Operations Executive, a new branch established to nurture active resistance in countries under German occupation. On his first two assignments he had proven cool and effective under pressure; tonight's mission was an airdrop in Holland of five SOE instructors, of whom he was one, together with a cargo of

Sten guns, explosives, and triggering devices to the Dutch Underground. The drop was destined for a field in a farming area near the city of Meppel in northeastern Holland.

The ear-splitting rumble from the opening of the bomb bay ceased; the twelve containers loaded with material for the Underground dropped from their racks into the void, and the red light changed to green. As the first in line, Thomson dropped into the darkness, and the next in line followed. When Taylor, the man in front of Lowell, started to move, his foot got stuck behind one of the plane's structural ribs. Trying to pull loose, his foot slipped out of the shoe. With an oath he bent down, tore the shoe loose, and jumped into the darkness, shoe in hand. Without delay Lowell followed him. The infernal noise of the cargo hold was instantly replaced by near silence under the canopy of the parachute, as the drone of the four Rolls-Royce Merlin X engines drew distant. As he was swinging under the canopy of the 'chute, Lowell tried to discern ground features when his attention was diverted by the snarl of two different engines. He looked up as a Bf 110 night fighter flashed by, and he heard the tunk-tunk of its 20mm cannons as it bore down on the fleeing Halifax. He perceived a road below and hit the grassy shoulder, slid out of the parachute harness, and had his gun out and ready. Close on his right a voice excitedly called out, "*Hermann, hier ist ein Engländer!*" The exclamation clearly told that they were expected. They had landed in an ambush.

Lowell whirled and shot the dark figure who had spoken. He could make out a parked car in the darkness and ducked behind it, watching for the one called Hermann. Nearby he heard shots popping like

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firecrackers, and footsteps told him Hermann was running this way. Crouched behind the car, Lowell waited until the man was within six feet, then took him down with two shots, opened the car door, and found that the key was in the ignition. He started the engine, turned on the hooded lights, and drove slowly down the road, passed another car, probably Hermann's, and continued in low gear. Another parked car loomed up with someone standing next to it. Lowell stopped, rolled his window down, gave a low whistle, and said quietly in unaccented German, "*Hör 'mal zu,*" (Listen!). As the other fumbled to flick on a flashlight, Lowell shot him in the heart and drove on without hurrying, reached a main road and turned right, away from the landing area, and shifted into high gear.

He breathed deeply of the balmy night air streaming through the open car window. It carried scents of wet grass and flowers from the surrounding fields. He had been to Holland and knew it was beautiful. And it was good—actually wonderful—just to be alive.

Janiak

Konrad Janiak was standing far back in the queue of prisoners lining up for their one daily meal. It was being dispensed in the early afternoon from a large tub resting on the bed of an old Opel truck. Under the eyes of two SS guards, the group comprised almost a hundred concentration camp inmates, part of a larger consignment selected by the SS and contracted to work at the Peenemunde rocket test facility. Most of the inmates were fellow Poles of his, and today's work assignment involved cleaning up and removing debris after the last RAF raid.

Those who had received their soup were sitting on and around a large pile of concrete scraps, watched by two SS guards. Janiak was surveying the exact position of the truck as it was parked alongside the assembly building, trying to assess the chances of succeeding in his escape project. Sepp, the German prisoner who was ladling out the soup was near sixty, notably old in these surroundings and already worn down by the unremitting daily labor. To be sure, the German prisoners were favored by being assigned to kitchen duties, but even they were destined for short careers. The destiny of all concentration prisoners was death, inexpensively induced by the reliable means of starvation and overwork. The average life length on this project was just eight months. The Germans lasted a little longer than Poles or Frenchmen, but the eventual outcome was preordained. The high death rate necessitated regular infusions of manpower, but that was not a problem—there was plenty more to draw on.

It was not until he had become an inmate himself that Janiak had fully grasped the insidious idea behind the concentration camp system. Supplied by rebellious elements whose removal was desired by the Nazi government, the camps were a useful source of labor, organized and staffed by the SS, the elite guard Heinrich Himmler had built up to provide Adolf Hitler with the personal security every dictator needs to guarantee his survival. The black-uniformed corps, chosen from Germany's physically best specimens of young manhood, had quickly proven itself indispensable, and its area of responsibility had grown to include the concentration camps into which the Nazi state's opposition elements were being made to disappear without any telltale traces. Subminimal food rations

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combined with hard, brutally enforced physical labor would weaken and kill the inmates, in Janiak's estimate in an average of six to eight months. His decision to try to escape right away had been dictated by that compelling realization.

At long last Janiak was reaching the soup kettle, a 120-liter sheet metal tub from which Sepp was dipping out the soup, one ladleful for each prisoner as the receiver held out his bowl. With Sepp's metronomic precision Konrad got his soup and was nudged out of the way by the next man in line. He walked slowly along the side of the truck and stopped at the front bumper, looking around as if searching for a spot to sit down and eat. Pretending not to see any, he took the few steps to the building wall, away from the crowd, and sat down at the truck's front wheel, out of sight of the guards. If noticed, such irregular behavior might incur a good beating, but today that was a minor consideration. While quickly eating to still momentarily his ravenous hunger, he followed the events on the other side of the truck by listening to the sounds. Evidently neither of the guards had noticed Janiak's diversion, and Sepp was now resting his ladle. Janiak jammed his empty bowl under the left front tire, where it would be flattened into the ground when the truck started to move. Then he scooted sideways to the middle of the truck, detached from around his waist a sling made from a piece of electric wiring scavenged from another cleanup project, and slid under the truck. He knew this model, an old moving van, and deftly hooked the sling onto the frame, lifting his hips a few inches off the ground. Grasping the side channels of the frame, he could raise his upper body off the ground as well, a strenuous position but possible to hold for a

short while. He had estimated he would be able to hang on for the trip ahead, but that remained yet to be seen. The alternative, to be dragged on the asphalt road, would quickly tear the thin prison uniform and then the flesh off his back.

Janiak let his upper body rest on the ground and breathed deeply, steeling himself for the coming effort. He could hear that Sepp was getting into the cab, and moments later Dieter, the driver, started the engine and shifted into gear. As the truck began to move, Janiak lifted his body just enough to clear the ground, and he heard the faint crunch as his bowl was obliterated. Rumbling away, he heard one of the guards shouting an order, and he saw the feet of the group moving, back to work.

After about a mile they stopped at the main gate in the perimeter fence, and he immediately let his body slump to the pavement, resting his arms. The truck would not return directly to the camp's kitchen, as it first had to pick up a load of potatoes and turnips in the village, a weekly routine on which his escape plan hinged. Here at the gate they were supposed to take on an SS guard for the trip outside. Some shouted conversation was causing a delay, which Janiak used to briefly close his eyes and rest. He knew this scheme was the sensible action to take, and to take now, before starvation could rob him of too much physical strength to carry it through. And then there was the information he had about Hitler's secret weapons program, critical data that must get into Allied hands fast, before the retaliation weapons could become operational.

The scraping sound of the main gate opening brought him back to the here and now. He could see

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black SS boots approaching and heard the truck's door open and close. The vehicle started with a jerk, as he hoisted himself off the ground once more. While they were gaining speed, he forced himself to think of the mission he was embarking on. Could it make a difference in the greater scheme of the war? Possibly, he decided. Ample foreknowledge of Hitler's plans might very well be of crucial value. A large pebble struck his neck when a pothole in the pavement made the vehicle bounce. He tried to hoist himself a little higher, but the muscles in his arms were numb and nearly out of strength.

The truck finally slowed, turned into a farmyard, came to a stop and backed up to a large barn door. Letting go his frantic grip on the frame channels, Janiak's body slumped to the barnyard dirt, and he felt the blood surging to his cramped muscles. He could see boots all around, some descending from the truck, others appearing from the house, and a brief babble of voices rose as the guard boots followed some work boots into the house. Now the prisoners opened the barn door and started shoveling potatoes into the truck from a pile on the barn floor.

So far, this was what he had expected to happen and what he had planned for. *From here on, I have to extemporize.* After a few minutes, the potato pile had been moved from barn floor to truck. Sepp brought a wheelbarrow from the barn, called to his partner to bring a hoe, and the two of them disappeared around the building, apparently going to the field for the turnips. So, the farmer saved himself work by using the prisoners to dig the turnips for him, while he placated the guard with ersatz coffee. Janiak waited until the sound of the wheelbarrow died away; then he slid out on the far side

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of the truck and silently moved farther into the barn, climbed a ladder to the loft and dug into a mound of fresh hay. Breathing the wholesome fragrance of the hay while relishing its softness, he closed his eyes and let his body relax completely.

He, Konrad Janiak, was actually free.

Esther and Ilse

It was late afternoon when Esther Lidman returned from downtown after this, her first shopping trip to buy food in Stralsund. Her shopping net held only some potatoes and a loaf of bread, as everything else had been sold out earlier in the day; her ration coupons were of no use, when the store shelves were bare, as was often the case when air raids disrupted the normal functioning of German society.

At twenty-two, Esther was an unusually attractive woman. Five foot five, with hazel eyes and dark hair, she was far from the Aryan female ideal the Nazis were always striving to promote, but regardless of their ideological convictions and preferences, men found it hard to take their eyes off her. The middle-aged butcher had sounded so genuinely sorry, when he told her that his cooler was empty, and he had hurried to assure her in a lowered voice that tomorrow he would reserve her a piece of *Speck* and some *Weisswurst*.

Esther was one of several new arrivals in town, people who had abandoned their homes in Hamburg during a weeklong, devastating British air raid. The city was still burning after the persistent onslaught of the bombers, while the exodus of refugees fleeing for their lives inundated surrounding towns and villages all the way to the Baltic coast. She had left her flaming

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apartment house and set out on her bicycle with only the clothes she was wearing; two days later she had reached her cousin, Ilse, in Stralsund.

The old harbor town of Stralsund had experienced its heyday when the Hanseatic League of merchants in the Middle Ages ruled both trade and politics within the cities of northern Germany and around the Baltic, the League's influence reaching as far as London in the west and the Norwegian town of Bergen in the north. By good luck, Stralsund held no military targets, and the war had left it unscathed, so far.

Esther and Ilse had known each other since childhood, having in common a partly Jewish ancestry. They were peripheral members of an extensive Jewish family, of which some had escaped their Nazi pursuers by fleeing to Britain, while others had been sent to forced resettlement in "the East." The latter were never heard from again.

Esther's deceased maternal grandfather, Oskar Meyer, had been an elder in Hamburg's large Jewish community and a prosperous merchant before the Nazi takeover. His wife Astrid was from a Holstein family of landed gentry by the name of Ruud. As a little girl Esther had spent summer vacations on their estate near Rendsburg, and she remembered the old couple with loving affection. Both of the grandparents had died shortly after Hitler came to power, and the synagogue with grandfather Oskar's personal records had been burned by Nazi hoodlums during the state-sanctioned *Kristallnacht* pogroms. It seemed to Esther like divine

justice that the Nazis themselves had made it impossible for their own bureaucracy to establish her Jewish bloodline.

Ilse's paternal grandmother, also deceased, had been Oskar's half-sister, a thinner bloodline than Esther's but still a worrisome and potentially dangerous problem in the Third Reich, as the Nazis had christened their new Germany. Ilse was living alone, while her husband was working on a job assignment that had no provision for families. When Esther arrived they had decided as last survivors of the family to stay together for mutual support.

Esther carried her meager purchases up the stairs to Ilse's three-room apartment on the top floor. Her cousin greeted her and made a grimace when she saw the paltry result of the shopping trip.

"I'm not surprised," Ilse exclaimed, relieving Esther of the shopping net, "but fortunately I have a bit of bacon to go with the potatoes for dinner. Besides, Hans will be visiting next weekend, and he usually brings some potatoes. He knows a farmer on the Peenemunde peninsula."

Her husband, an aircraft engineer, was employed by the Fieseler Werken in Kassel but had been transferred to the Luftwaffe test grounds at Peenemunde. Ilse had moved to Stralsund to be nearer to him, and he was able to visit every other weekend. The city of Kassel had been a frequent target of Allied bombers, but the quiet old town of Stralsund was a delight, a haven of peace even under the trying circumstances of war, with air attacks raging all around. Older than Esther by six years, Ilse had been married for almost seven years to Hans Holzinger. They were childless, an unusual condition in this country where all potential parents were being exhorted to produce

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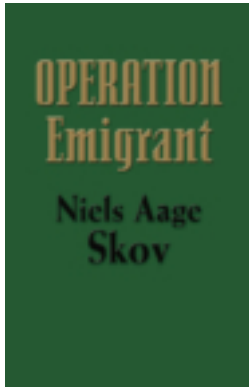
offspring who could strengthen the *Vaterland*, a fatherland which Hitler depicted as surrounded by hostile nations bent on its destruction.

While Ilse was preparing their dinner, Esther turned on the radio for the evening news. The announcer told about a daring action in Italy, where Colonel Otto Skorzeny, popularly known as "Hitler's Commando," and a handful of SS troops had contrived to snatch Mussolini from a mountain hotel high in the Abruzzi Apennines, where he had been confined after being caught by Allied forces. The commando group had taken *il Duce* to safety behind German lines in northern Italy, and the radio announcer went on to explain that this was another severe setback to the Americans, whose military incompetence was well known.

Esther turned off the radio and walked into the kitchen.

"When do you think we'll have a chance to meet some of these incompetent Americans?"

Ilse laughed. "It can't be too soon, as far as I'm concerned. When we do see them, this dreadful war will be over." Her face lost its mirth as she added, "I can't even imagine what must take place between now and then."



With personal clandestine experience, the author of Operation Emigrant describes on an authentic background the ruthless actions of Britain's SOE agents in extracting, under the noses of Gestapo, a German engineer with critical knowledge of Hitler's super rocket, the V-2.

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