

Between the Lindens Nicholas Birns

November 1944

Southeastern Pennsylvania

I was born Yoel Meyerowicz in Berlin, Germany, in 1928. My father was a prosperous lawyer. We lived in the Bernauerstrasse, in a nice townhouse. We were Jewish, but that hadn't seemed to matter so much. Nobody bothered us. Nobody disturbed us. In fact, much later, my father revealed to me that he actually considered converting to Lutheranism, attending the nearby, and ironically named, Zionskirche. But he did not feel that it was necessary. In any event, my father was not a man of faith. He was an ethical man. He believed in doing well by family; doing good for others; living a sober, high-minded life. He valued culture, art, music, and the company of good friends. But he did not worship any transcendent deity, even that of his ancestors.

I was too young to really remember German politics before the rise of Hitler. But I do remember, when Hitler first gained a parliamentary plurality, my father saying to me, 'You will outlast this man. This man is not Germany. Your Germany will be different from this man's.' My father was very active in the resistance against Nazism. He was acquainted with, though not good friends with, Kurt Weill, and when Weill and his collaborator, the playwright Bertolt Brecht, were accused by the Nazi regime of obscenity and undermining the state for their play, *Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), my father led their legal defense. It did not avail, and both Brecht and Weill fled Germany. My father stayed on because he simply could not believe that Hitler would stay in power. Every internal fissure in the Nazi party he saw as the *coup de grâce*, the unravelling of the Nazi order. When Ernst Röhm was purged, when General Fritsch was the object of unseemly and bizarre accusations and court-martialled, my father thought, *this was the crack-up, this was the Götterdämmerung*. The Hitler regime would soon fall, and Germany could go back to the prosperous, tolerant country that he knew. He even attended more than one event at the 1936 Olympics, saying it was not Hitler's Olympics, but Germany's, Berlin's.

By 1938, though, the fall of Hitler was clearly not happening, and even my father realised that we had to get out. By then, I was nine years old and had been attending elementary school for three years. One of my best friends was the son of a man who became good friends with my father. They were Gentiles. The school so far had resisted compulsory race separation laws, but the threat was coming. My friend's father warned, 'You must leave. We will do anything to help you. You must get out. We will take you over the mountains. We will row you across the Bodensee to the Swiss side. We will do anything. But you will die if you do not leave.' Fortunately, we did not have to go to such extremes. We were able to simply take the train to Paris, another train to the Calais coast, the ferry to England, and we were out.

We did not have a visa for England, though, and we had to be out of the country in three days. We were going to America. America was not exactly enthusiastic about taking in huge numbers of Jewish refugees, but my father got himself a job teaching at a college near Philadelphia. We

took the long voyage from Southampton, docking in Brooklyn. It was January 1939. A couple of train rides later, we were in our new home, a suburban town in southeastern Pennsylvania.

I had supposed my father would be teaching at a law school. After all, he was a prominent lawyer in Berlin. Instead, I learned that he had obtained a job at a women's college of horticulture which was located in this Pennsylvania town. I did not know what 'horticulture' was, but my mother explained it meant gardening. My father was a brilliant man and I knew that he could do anything. His legal work meant that he had a good knowledge of English and French, and he spoke English well enough to teach in America. But I knew he was unhappy, in exile and under-utilised.

In America, I was no longer Yoel. I was Joel. We were no longer Meyerowicz, but Meyers. We settled in, living in a small bungalow. Our town became my only America, just as my only Germany had been urban, cosmopolitan Berlin. Around the middle of the last century the community ceased to be mainly residential; a large factory opened which made a certain substance that was of great use in mining, a substance also used in insulating houses and sustaining structures and therefore very valuable in a country where houses were being built as the population grew. The main base of this *Zauberstoff*, as my father called it, this miracle substance, was in French Canada. But a major American node of its production was right here.

The town consequently had a gritty, industrial quality to it. By the time my family came, there were some worries that the *Zauberstoff* was making people sick, mainly whispers and subcurrents, but audible enough so that, when my father called the substance the *Zauberstoff*, I was never sure whether he was being genuine or sarcastic. But even these slight rumours had led certain people to sell their houses, which is why my family could buy the bungalow so cheaply, and why the opening at the horticultural college had almost instantly been granted to my father.

But that did not affect me. All that I knew about the town was taught to me by my sixth-grade teacher, Miss Johnson. She noted that I spoke with an accent, that I was from another country, and, perhaps, that I was Jewish, and I think she decided, on those grounds, that I merited a special welcome. She particularly praised my voice. 'You have a wonderful voice, Joel,' she said. 'Do you sing?' I responded that no, I did not sing, my mother was the musician in the family.

On the long voyage from Southampton, my father had told me America was a place of refuge and sanctuary. America had built, he said, a Statue of Liberty for all those who had sought succour on its shores. Since we all knew some English – my mother the least – and I studied at school, he said the country would be open to me. But I did not find America that way. I did not find there to be one America. There was just the small community where I lived, where I did not really know anyone. Miss Johnson was the face of America to me.

At first, I was an outsider at school. I did not know the language idiomatically. I did not know the games. I did not know the jokes. But as time went on, and after Miss Johnson gave me confidence, I became accepted by the other boys. Everyone had a certain role. One was a good athlete. One was good at math. One was very gregarious. One was good at card games, which we played when Miss Johnson was not looking.

In seventh grade a new boy came in. His name was Stooboo. He was strong, muscular, charismatic. He was also phenomenally stupid. Indeed, in Berlin, he would have been the laughing stock of the class, because of his *lumpen* stupidity, the vacancy in his blank, cerulean eyes. German schooling may have been top-down and conformist, but intelligence was respected. Even in my school, Stooboo was clearly such an outsider that he teetered on being hero or scapegoat, celebrated or scorned. Yet his combination of brute strength and impalable

personal presence won the day. At first, I thought he was Italian-American, as most of the workers at the factory that manufactured the *Zauberstoff* were of Italian background, and many of my peers at the school were the children of these workers. But Stooboo's hair was fair, although he was clearly not rich. His every move showed he was from the wrong side of the tracks, a quality which might have ostracised him in nearly every other circumstance, but here give him the frisson of the extraordinary. Soon, he dominated all of us. The boys who had each had their own specialty now sat in the thrall of Stooboo and did whatever Stooboo wanted.

My father was often away teaching at the horticultural college. My mother, aside from going out shopping, would mostly stay home – she was not confident in her English – and play the piano, play Beethoven. She would play *Für Elise* over and over, insisting she was striving for ultimate mastery of the piece. One day I interrupted, saying there was something I had to ask her. She looked at me, her eyes wide and receptive. I was thirteen, and afterwards I realised she thought I was going to ask her about the facts of life. That was not what I had in mind, though. I said, 'Mother, tell me why we had to leave Germany. What did Hitler hate about us? We weren't even really Jews. I learned no Hebrew; I attended no synagogue; I was like all the other boys. Why did he hate us?' My mother looked at me and said, 'Yoel', – she still called me Yoel – 'it was because our eyes were brown and their eyes were blue. Because of that they hated us, and that was the only reason.'

By that time, America was in the war. The newspapers were full of Nazis and Japanese, and our games at school, led by Stooboo, were all about fighting them, though not Italians: there were too many Italians in the school for that. For a time, I had a fear that, because I was from Germany, I would be cast as the Nazi and forced to play the villain. But even the doltish Stooboo had some sort of understanding that I was not a Nazi, and should not be made to be one. Nonetheless Stooboo's dominance made sure that he controlled the games; he was always the commanding officer and the other boys were always privates.

By the age of fourteen, I was beginning to discover girls. There was one I particularly liked, an Italian-American called Emilia Panapinto. She had not been around before, even though her family lived in town. From the first week she was at school I looked at her, doe-eyed and yearning. Just one time, she looked at me. I wondered if I should speak to her but I was too shy.

On Wednesday of the second week in January 1944, my father received a telegram from the US Army, asking him to immediately report to the local recruiting office. He did so. He came back, flushed with pride and excitement. He whispered – though he hardly needed to whisper, since only my mother and I were in the room – that the recruiting officer had told him that the great cross-channel offensive that had been rumoured in the papers for over a year was going to start in mid-1944. The US and Britain, he said, hoped to be in Germany within a year after that. They needed people who could speak German. They needed, in particular, people who knew Berlin, its geography and infrastructure. My father said they were particularly pleased that he knew just where the Olympic Stadium was, and its various entrances. He said, 'I will be on the first jeep into Berlin!' He gave up his position at the horticultural college and left for a military base in central New Jersey. Occasionally, he would come back home, but only on weekends.

After my father left, I found some writing of his. I did not deliberately snoop, but I certainly did not hesitate when I opened a folded piece of paper that had fallen on the floor and saw his handwriting. It contained four sentences, each separated by a blank space. They were in German, but I knew what they meant, and my Americanised inner self translated them without thinking into English:

My principal identity is as a German.

My principal identity is as a Jew.

My principal identity is as an American.

My principal identity is as one who hates Hitler.

I felt a renewed sympathy, even some compassion, even some condescension. I, after all, knew *just* who I was. I was an American: an American boy, on his way to becoming an American man.

My father's absence liberated me even more than I had anticipated. I had thought that I would have my mother to myself. But once my father left, I began to desire *less* time with her. I felt that, now that the house was no longer a place of disappointment and frustration, I could go out more. I could make more friends.

I decided I would talk to Emilia Panapinto, the Italian American girl on whom I had a crush. I went to school that day and walked up to her locker. But somebody else was there. Stooboo was talking very earnestly to Emilia, and Emilia was smiling and laughing. I realised that Stooboo wanted Emilia. And what Stooboo wanted Stooboo got. He was omnipotent. Stooboo and Emilia would see each other every afternoon after school. They would hold hands, they would go to the local shop and sip an ice cream soda together. I did not say anything. I could not even look at them.

That summer I left town for the first time. There was a summer camp up in Hawk Mountain to the west of us, and my mother, sensing that I wanted to be away from home more, sent me there. At Hawk Mountain I learned how to skin a fish, how to set up camp, how to listen for the hiss of a snake. I learned how to blaze a trail. I felt more self-confident, and as the scout leader put it, 'self-reliant'. More than ever, I felt fully an American, at home with American nature, in the American woods. I was no longer just a German Jew in a semi-squalid Pennsylvania suburb, metaphorically buried in *Zauberstoff*.

The scout leader told us the reservation was created a few years before, by a wealthy woman concerned with the environment, to save birds of prey, hawks and eagles, from extinction. It struck me as odd that we should be trying to save birds who thrived by eating other, smaller and more innocent creatures. It seemed to sanction the worst parts of nature, the aspects of nature that reminded me too much of mankind. But when I first saw a broad-winged hawk, demure and compact, its talons gripping a tree branch with equal parts vulnerability and determination, I saw another form of life, one which appealed to me because it lived by different rules than I did or ever could live by.

Seeing that I was interested, the scout leader lent me a pair of binoculars. He encouraged me to look for a red-tailed hawk which, he said, was hard to find at this time of the year. 'But the birds are there if you get up early in the morning and have eyes to see,' he promised. I strove to get up with the sun. For several days I made no discoveries, although another boy found three baby broad-winged hawks that had tumbled out of their nest. Two died from concussions, but the third was rescued. Yet I only cared about catching sight of a red-tail. On my second to last day at Hawk Mountain, my efforts were rewarded. I saw a red-tail! Its feathers were striated and robust, the russet crest of its head staring out, alert and unbowed, its eyes inner circles of black

set off against an olive periphery. In a place in which I could never live, among a killing species alien to me in its blood and fiber, I felt weirdly at home.

America was *my* country. And I came back to school in the fall of 1944 with a new hope – only to see Emilia with Stooboo once more, holding hands, and then having to sit at separate desks in separate corners of the room, as the laws of gender still meant boys and girls sat apart, even though puberty was now rampant among us all. I braced myself for another year of having to not look at them. But in early October, something very interesting happened. Emilia and Stooboo had a huge fight in the hallway. It was so loud everybody came out to watch, even the principal. Emilia screamed at Stooboo, in both Italian and English. Stooboo, normally stolid in his domineering stance, in turn lost his temper. He yelled at Emilia, his face beet red, and his eyes seeming to pop out of his head. Emilia yelled back that she hated him, that he had hit her and hurt her. She said he was possessive, that he didn't understand her.

A couple of days later, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. 'Joel.' It was Emilia. She asked me if I wanted to go for a soda after school. I said I was not sure, I might have to go home and check on my mother because my father was away now. She said, 'Yes, I know. He is in the army.' I was impressed that she knew this. I realised that, to her, whose father was still working in the factories, my father was a man of greater prestige. I had spent so much time thinking about how diminished my father was from his life in Berlin that I had not realised he was still luckier than most Americans.

After we had gone together to the soda shop a few times, I got up the courage to invite Emilia to my house to meet my mother. One crisp October afternoon she came over to our little bungalow. My mother served cakes and tea and then went to the piano and played *Für Elise*. I had heard this thousands of times before, but Emilia was transfixed. 'I've never heard anybody *do* something like that, Mrs Meyers!' she exclaimed, and smiled at us both. I asked Emilia if I could walk her home, but she refused; her father was going to pick her up. When he arrived, Mr Panapinto waved from the car but did not get out.

The next week, Emilia said to me, 'You know, I've always wanted to go to that park just past the soda shop. The park with the nice linden trees.' I told her that in Berlin, where I came from, there was a whole street called *Unter den Linden*. I had loved this street. So on Thursday afternoon after school we shared a strawberry ice cream soda and then went to the park. There was, as Emilia had said, a big stand of linden trees, and we walked between the rows. I thought, in the old country it was *under* the lindens, but here in the new country it was *between* the lindens. I looked at Emilia and wondered if I should hold her hand, if I should try, even, to kiss her. We were sixteen, after all. My passion and desire were waxing, even as the November skies and the falling leaves of the trees signalled the waning of the year, the year which had seen America winning the war against the Nazi enemy.

As we walked between the lindens, I moved my hand towards Emilia when suddenly out from behind the trees leapt a menacing shadow. It was just after Halloween, and I thought it was somebody playing a prank. But it was no joke: it was Stooboo. He looked at me triumphantly and grabbed Emilia's hand. They both looked at me.

His blue eyes. Her brown eyes, like mine.

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