



VINTAGE REMARQUE

THE
PROMISED
LAND

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About the Book

I walked through a shining rain of noise, words, traffic, laughter, shouts and the arousing din of a life that had nothing to do with me, but that battered my senses like a storm.

New York City, 1942. From the detention centre on Ellis Island, Ludwig Somner looks across a small stretch of water to the glittering towers of Manhattan, which whisper seductively of freedom after so many years of wandering a perilous, suffering Europe.

Unexpectedly released into the city's chaotic midst, Somner finds himself adrift in this promised land, living the precarious life of a refugee amongst a community held together by an unspeakable past. Slowly building a life for himself, each new luxury – ice cream served in drugstores, bright shop windows, art, a new suit, a new romance, and ultimately the possibility of a new life – has a bittersweet edge. Memories of war and inhumanity continue to resurface, even in a city seemingly bursting with opportunity.

A haunting snapshot of a unique time, place and predicament, this is a wonderful evocation of a city, a gripping exploration of an individual haunted by the past, and another powerful comment from Remarque on the devastating effects of war.

About the Author

Erich Maria Remarque was born in Osnabrück in 1898. Exiled from Nazi Germany and deprived of his citizenship, he lived in America and Switzerland. The author of a dozen novels, Remarque died in 1970.

Michael Hofmann is a poet, reviewer and translator from German (Benn, Fallada, Junger, Kafka, Roth and others). In 2012 he won the Thornton Wilder Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He teaches at the University of Florida. He is also the author of a book of essays, *Where Have You Been*.

ALSO BY ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

The Road Back
All Quiet on the Western Front
Three Comrades
The Spark of Life
A Time to Love and a Time to Die

The Promised Land

Erich Maria Remarque

Translated from the German by
Michael Hofmann

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

THE CITY WAS dangled in front of me for three weeks, but it might as well have been on a different planet. It was no more than a couple of miles away, the other side of a narrow sea channel I could almost have swum across; but it was so far out of my reach, it might have been surrounded by an armoured column of tanks. It was defended by the strongest walls the twentieth century could devise: walls of paper, passport and visa regulations, the inhuman laws of an indifferent bureaucracy. I was on Ellis Island, it was the summer of 1944 and the city in front of me was New York.

Ellis Island was the mildest internment camp I had ever known. There was no beating or torture, and we were neither gassed nor worked to death. There was even good food, which didn't cost anything, and beds to sleep in. There were guards everywhere, but they were almost friendly. Ellis Island was where those immigrants were kept whose documentation was doubtful or incomplete. In America it wasn't enough to have a valid visa from an American consulate in Europe - no, it had to be approved and endorsed by the immigration authorities in New York. Only then would you be admitted to the country, or, if you were undesirable, sent back on the next boat. Being sent back wasn't as straightforward as it used to be. Europe was at war, America was at war, German U-boats lurked in the Atlantic and very few passenger liners sailed to European ports. For those emigrants who were sent back, it might even have felt like a stroke of luck, being able to remain a little longer on Ellis Island - they who, for years, had seen their lives only in terms of days and weeks - but there were

too many other rumours for them to feel much relief: rumours of phantom ships full of desperate Jews criss-crossing the oceans for month after month, being turned away wherever they tried to make land. Some of the emigrants had personally seen the rows of screaming and desperate faces off Cuba and various South American ports, begging for mercy, pressing up against the railings of the ramshackle hulks outside the locked ports – dismal contemporary versions of the Flying Dutchman, on the run from submarines and human hard-heartedness, consignments of living dead and damned souls, whose only crime was to be human and to want to live.

There was the usual quota of nervous breakdowns. Oddly, they were even a little more frequent on Ellis Island than in the internment camps in France, practically under the noses of the Germans and the Gestapo. That was probably to do with having made the adjustment to the acute danger in France, which was such that it kept off breakdowns; whereas here the shattering effect from the prospect of imminent rescue being cast in doubt once more tended to bring them on. There were no suicides here, as there were in France; for that, the sense of hope (even hope mingled with despair) was too strong. But a collapse could be brought on by something as little as an interview with a harmless immigration inspector – the carapace of suspicion and alertness learned over the years suddenly cracked, and the immediate setting on of a counter-suspicion swelled into panic lest you had made a mistake. As always, there were more breakdowns among men than women.

The city, so near and so unattainable, became a torment – it beckoned and mocked, promised everything and kept nothing. Sometimes it was no more than a foggy monster, a thing garnished with scraps of clouds and the noisy ships screaming around it like so many steel ichthyosaurs. In the evening, in the storm of artificial light, it became a glittering carpet dangling between the horizons, alien and

disconcerting after the dark wartime nights of Europe. When, late at night, it turned into an austere white moonscape, a ghostly, silent Babel bristling with hundreds of towers, then in the dormitories the refugees would often get up, woken by the sobs and gasps and screams of the sleepers, who were hounded in their dreams by Gestapo, gendarmes and SS killers, and they would gather at the windows in drab little groups, mumbling or silent, staring with burning eyes across at the quivering panorama of lights of the Promised Land of America, in a community and fellow feeling that is known only to misery, never to joy.

I had a German passport, valid for another four months. It was made out in the name of Ludwig Sommer and it was almost genuine. I had come into it from a friend who had died almost two years before in Bordeaux; since our height, hair and eye colour were a match, Bauer, the onetime mathematics professor and passport forger in Marseilles, had urged me not to change the name on it. There were excellent lithographers among the emigrants who had helped the odd undocumented refugee to a workable passport; but nevertheless, I took Bauer's advice and renounced my own name, of which little enough was left to use. On the contrary, it was on the Gestapo lists and it was high time to lose it. So my passport was almost genuine, only the picture and I were false. The expert Bauer explained the advantages to me: a tampered-with passport, however expertly done, would only stand up to fleeting scrutiny at best – and the moment it was taken to a proper police lab it would give up its secret and the outcome would be prison, expatriation or worse. A real passport, though, with a false holder, was much more difficult and time-consuming to check; you would have to go back to the authority that had issued it – and that was no longer possible in the war. All ties with Germany were broken. Since then, the experts advised you to change your identity; stamps were easier to copy than names. The only difference

in my passport was the religion. Sommer had been a Jew; I wasn't. To Bauer the difference was negligible.

'If the Germans catch you, throw the passport away,' he said. 'Since you're not circumcised, you might be able to talk your way out and avoid the gas chamber. Perhaps it will even be useful to you on the run to be thought of as a Jew. You can always explain your ignorance of the religion by saying that you and your father were freethinkers anyway.'

Bauer was caught three months later. A friend, Robert Hirsch, himself furnished with the papers of a Spanish consular official, tried to get him out of prison. He was too late. Bauer had been put on a train to Germany the night before.

On Ellis Island I met two emigrants I'd known slightly from before. We had run into each other here and there on the 'Via Dolorosa'. The Via Dolorosa was the name given to the escape route from the Hitler regime. It went from Holland and Belgium and northern France down to Paris; there it forked. One fork dropped down from Lyons to the Mediterranean coast; the other went via Bordeaux, Marseilles and the Pyrenees into Spain, Portugal and the port of Lisbon. Emigrants and refugees from Germany gave it the name. They weren't just on the run from Hitler's Gestapo - they also had to hide from the police in the countries they fled to. Most of them had no visas and no valid papers. If the police caught them, they would be locked up, imprisoned and thrown out of the country. At least many of the countries were sufficiently humane not to repatriate them to Germany, where they would have died in concentration camps. Since only a small minority of the refugees had valid passports, most were on the run all the time. Nor could they work, without papers. Most were hungry, isolated and wretched; hence they called the road of their wanderings the Via Dolorosa. The stations of the cross were the post offices in the various towns and the

white walls along the streets were their newspapers. At the post offices they hoped for poste restante news of friends and family members. And then in charcoal and chalk on nearby walls they would find messages from the lost and missing, warnings, advice, screams into the void. This was during the brief period of indulgence that preceded the epoch of inhumanity when the Gestapo and the various national police forces made common cause against them.

One of the two emigrants I met on Ellis Island was Rabinovitz, a man I had run into on the Swiss border, where a customs official threw us out into France four times in a single night. We were chased back each time by the French border police. It was terribly cold, and finally Rabinovitz and I managed to persuade the Swiss to put us in a cell. Swiss prisons were heated; they enjoyed a paradisaical reputation and we would happily have spent the whole winter there, only the Swiss were practically minded. They quickly bundled us out over the Italian frontier of the Ticino, where we parted ways. Both the emigrants had relatives in America who would guarantee their support. Therefore they were able to leave Ellis Island after not many days. When he left, Rabinovitz promised me to try to look up other Via Dolorosa associates in New York. I didn't expect much. It was the usual promise that was forgotten as soon as the man making it found himself at liberty.

Still, I wasn't unhappy. A few years before, in a museum in Brussels, I had learned to sit still for hours on end without getting in a panic. I was able to put myself into a state of self-induced blankness that was close to autohypnosis. It produced a kind of dull, out-of-the-body feeling, which made long suspenseful waiting bearable, because – in that benign version of schizophrenia – it no longer concerned me, as I didn't exist. That way I wasn't crushed by the solitariness of a very small lightless room where I was hidden for a few months. The museum director had given me refuge there while the Gestapo went through Brussels with a fine-tooth

comb. I only saw him briefly in the morning when he would bring me something to eat; and sometimes in the evening, when the museum was closed and I had the run of the place. In the daytime the space was kept locked; the director was the only other person with a key. Of course, I had to suppress coughing, sneezing and all sorts of noisy movement when there were people in the corridor. That was simple enough, but the nervous tickle of fear could have emerged as full-blown panic if I had been in actual danger. Therefore I went further than I had to into my state of blankness so as to have a kind of shock reserve and for a time ignored my watch so that I no longer knew if it was day or night, particularly on Sundays, when the director didn't come in; but I had to give that up as well. It tended to unbalance me and brought me close to self-abandonment. Not that I was too far from that at the best of times. The thing that pulled me through was not any belief in life anyway, so much as the desire for revenge.

A week after Rabinovitz's departure, a lean, cadaverous man spoke to me. He carried a green crocodile attaché case and looked like one of the lawyers who fluttered through the big day room like so many crows.

'Are you Ludwig Sommer?'

I gave the man a suspicious look. He had asked in German. 'Why?' I asked.

'Don't you know whether you're Ludwig Sommer or not?' The man burst into a creaking sort of laugh. He had unusually large white teeth in a lined grey face.

By now I had concluded that I had no need to keep my name secret. 'Of course I know,' I replied, 'but what's it to you?'

The man blinked owlishly once or twice. 'I'm here on behalf of Robert Hirsch,' he finally vouchsafed.

I looked up in surprise. 'Hirsch? Did you say Robert Hirsch?'

The man nodded. 'Who else?'

'Robert Hirsch is dead,' I said.

The man looked at me in puzzlement. 'Robert Hirsch is in New York,' he said. 'I spoke to him two hours ago.'

I shook my head. 'That's not possible. It must have been someone else. Robert Hirsch was shot dead in Marseilles.'

'Nonsense! Hirsch sent me here to help get you out.'

I didn't believe him. I sensed a trap from the immigration inspectors. 'How did he know I was here?' I asked.

'He had a call from a man by the name of Rabinovitz; that's how he heard you were here.' The man took a card out of his waistcoat pocket. 'Levin and Watson, law firm. I'm Levin. Now are you satisfied? You're not exactly trusting, are you? Why? Have you got so much to hide?'

I took a deep breath. Now I believed him. 'All over Marseilles, the word was that Robert Hirsch was shot by the Gestapo,' I said.

'Marseilles!' sneered Levin. 'This is America!'

'Are you sure?' I looked around the room with the barred windows and the huddled masses. Again, Levin launched into his cackling laugh.

'Well, maybe not quite. As I see, you haven't quite lost your sense of humour. Mr Hirsch gave me some information about you. You were together with him in an internment camp in France? Is that right?'

I nodded. I still felt stunned. Robert Hirsch alive and in New York!

'Is that right?' repeated Levin a little impatiently.

I nodded again. It was half true; Hirsch had only been in the camp for an hour. He had turned up in the uniform of an SS officer and had demanded that the French commandant hand over two German politicals who were wanted by the Gestapo. That was when he spotted me; he hadn't known I was in the camp. Without a hitch, he had then demanded my release as well. The camp commandant, who was a timid major in the reserve and hated all this, had only

insisted on a formal written request. Hirsch gave it to him; he always kept a supply of blank forms on his person. Then he gave the Hitler salute, packed us into his car and sped away. The two politicals were picked up a year later; they were caught in a police trap in Bordeaux.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ I said. ‘Would you mind showing me the material Hirsch gave you?’

Levin hesitated momentarily. ‘Of course. Why, if I might ask?’

I didn’t answer. I wanted to establish whether Robert’s statement corresponded with what I had said to the immigration inspectors. I read the document through carefully and gave it back.

‘Is that what happened, then?’ asked Levin again.

‘Yes,’ I said and looked around. In an instant, everything seemed to have changed. I was no longer alone. Robert Hirsch was alive. A voice had called to me, a voice I thought had died. Everything was changed. Nothing was lost.

‘How much money do you have?’ asked the lawyer.

‘A hundred and fifty dollars,’ I replied cautiously.

Levin inclined his bald head. ‘It’s not very much – even for a short-term visitor’s visa, to go on to Canada or Mexico. But we can fix that. Do you see what I’m saying?’

‘No. Why would I want to go to Canada or Mexico?’

Levin flashed his horsy teeth at me again. ‘No reason, Mr Sommer. The main thing is just to get you into New York. A short-term transit visa is easiest to arrange. Once you’re in the country you can fall ill. Be incapable of travel. And we can make further applications on your behalf. The situation can change. What matters is getting your foot in the door. Now do you understand me?’

‘Yes.’

A loudly crying woman walked by. Levin pulled a pair of black horn rims out of his pocket and watched her. ‘It can’t be much fun sitting here,’ he observed.

I shrugged. ‘It could be worse.’

‘Worse? How so?’

‘Much worse,’ I said. ‘You could be here and have stomach cancer. Or Ellis Island could be in Germany and they could be nailing your father to the floor to get confessions out of you.’

Levin stared at me. ‘You have a morbid imagination,’ he said.

I shook my head. ‘Not at all,’ I said, ‘just morbid experiences.’

The lawyer pulled out a large patterned handkerchief and trumpetingly blew his nose. Then he folded it up carefully and pocketed it. ‘How old are you?’

‘Thirty-two.’

‘And how long have you been a refugee?’

‘For almost five years.’

It wasn’t true. I’d been on the run for longer than that; but Ludwig Sommer, the proprietor of my passport, had only been going since 1939.

‘Jewish?’

I nodded.

‘You don’t really look it, you know,’ said Levin.

‘That’s as may be. But would you say that Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler and Hess looked particularly Aryan?’

Levin emitted his cackling laugh again. ‘Ha, you’ve got a point there! Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. Why would you want to claim to be a Jew if you weren’t one? Now of all times! Right?’

‘Could be.’

‘Were you in a German concentration camp?’

‘Yes,’ I said unwillingly. ‘Four months.’

‘Are you able to prove that?’ Levin asked with a strange avidity.

‘There weren’t any documents. I was released and then I ran away.’

‘Too bad! They would have come in handy.’

I looked at Levin. I could understand him; but the idea of utilising something like that in a transaction was a little repugnant to me. It had been too grim. So grim that I made an effort to efface the memory. Not to forget it, only to erase it in me until such time as I needed it. Not here in Ellis Island – later, in Germany.

Levin opened his attaché case and pulled out some pieces of paper. ‘I still have what Mr Hirsch gave me by way of testimony and statements from people who knew you. Everything duly notarised. By my partner Watson, for the sake of convenience. Would you like to take a look at what we have?’

I shook my head. I’d seen these statements in Paris. Robert Hirsch was a past master at getting up such things. I didn’t want to see them now. I had an odd feeling that, with everything that was going for me today, I ought to leave something up to chance. Whoever fights at odds of a hundred to one will want to leave a little chink for chance. It would have been absurd to try to explain something like that to Levin.

The lawyer returned the papers to the case. ‘Now we need to find a sponsor, someone who will guarantee that you won’t fall burden on the state, as we like to say, while you’re in America. Do you know anyone?’

‘No.’

‘But maybe Robert Hirsch would know someone?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘He’ll find someone all right,’ said Levin with strange confidence. ‘He’s very good at such things. Where will you be staying in New York? Mr Hirsch suggests the Hotel Rausch. He stayed there himself.’

For a moment I said nothing. Then I said, ‘Mr Levin, are you telling me that I’m going to get out of here?’

‘Why not? That’s what I’m here for.’

‘You really believe that?’

‘Of course. Don’t you?’

I closed my eyes for a moment. 'Yes,' I finally said. 'I do too.'

'Well, then. Never lose hope! Or does that not apply to emigrants?'

I shook my head.

'There, see! Never give up hope - a good old American principle! You understand?'

I nodded. I didn't feel like explaining to this naive son of the law how destructive hope could be. It could gnaw away at a weakened heart, the way swinging and missing saps the reserves of a boxer in a losing fight. I'd seen more people go down with misplaced hope than in a tense resignation that concentrated everything on naked survival and left no place for anything else.

Levin shut his attaché case. 'I'm going to take these documents to the inspectors, then. I'll be back in a few days. Chin up, now! We'll get you there.' He took a sniff. 'The smell in here! Like a poorly disinfected hospital.'

'It smells of poverty, bureaucracy and despair,' I said.

Levin took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. 'Despair, eh,' he said ironically, 'can you smell that?'

'You're a happy man if you don't know that,' I replied.

'That seems to be starting your classification of happiness quite a long way down.'

I didn't answer; there was no point in trying to explain to him that you couldn't start low enough and that, in fact, that was the secret of survival. Levin gave me his big, bony hand. I wanted to ask him what price he was charging, but I didn't. You could wreck everything by asking too many questions. Hirsch had sent Levin, that was enough.

I stood up and watched the lawyer leave. I still couldn't quite believe his assurances that everything would be fine. I had been through too much and had often come a cropper. But all the same, I felt a surge of feeling that got stronger and that I was unable to keep down. It wasn't just the thought that Robert Hirsch was alive in New York - it was

something else, the thing that a moment before I had tried to resist and that, with the arrogance of unhappiness, I had dismissed from my presence: a desperate hope. It was abruptly, silently there, just now come into being, a perverse, unjustified, wild hope, an anonymous hope almost without focus, save perhaps a nebulous freedom, but a freedom for what, or from what? I didn't know. It was a nameless hope that without my doing anything took the thing in me that said 'I' and saddled us with such a primitive lust for life that it was almost nothing to do with me. What had become of my resignation? My mistrust? My pathetically constructed spurious superiority? I didn't know.

I turned round and saw the woman who had cried just a moment ago. She was holding a red-haired boy by the hand. He was eating a banana.

'What did they do to you, then?' I asked.

'They don't want to admit my little boy.'

'Why not?'

'They claim he's—' She hesitated. 'He's slow,' she hurriedly finished. 'But he'll get better! After everything we've been through. He's not retarded! He's just a bit slow. He'll get better. He just needs time. He's not disturbed. But they won't believe me.'

'Was there a doctor present?'

'I don't know.'

'You must ask for a doctor. A specialist. He'll help you.'

'How can I ask for a specialist?' muttered the woman. 'I'm poor.'

'You must make an application. You can do that here.'

The little boy folded up his banana peel and popped it in his trouser pocket.

'He's so tidy,' whispered his mother. 'See how tidy he is! How can he possibly be mad?'

I looked at the boy. He seemed not to hear his mother. His lower lip drooped and he was scratching his flame-red hair. The sun glinted in his eyes as though they were made of

glass. 'Why don't they want to let him in?' the mother muttered. 'He's even worse off than the rest.'

There was no answer to that. 'They let in a lot of people,' I said finally. 'Almost everyone. Every morning some people are admitted. You just have to be patient.'

As I said it I despised myself. I could feel myself trying to hide from those eyes that were looking to me in their need, as though I had a real explanation. I had none. Awkwardly I reached into my pocket, took out some money and gave it to the apathetic boy. 'Here you are, go and buy yourself something nice!'

It was the oldest emigrant superstition; the attempt to bribe fate by a foolish gesture. I felt promptly ashamed of myself. A few pennies' worth of humanity in return for my freedom, I thought. What else? With the arrival of Hope, did her corrupt twin sister Fear arrive at the same time? And Fear's vile daughter, Cowardice?

That night I slept badly. For a long time I stood at the window, looking at the northern lights of New York quivering and flashing, and thinking of my broken life. Towards morning an old man had felt faint. Excited shapes moved around his bed. Someone went looking for nitroglycerine. The old man had lost his trunk. 'He mustn't get sick,' whispered his relatives. 'Otherwise everything is lost! He has to be able to get up in the morning!' They couldn't find the trunk; but a melancholy Turk with a long moustache helped them out with medicine. In the morning the old man was able to hobble into the day room again.

2

THE LAWYER CAME again three days later. 'You look awful,' he cackled. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Hope,' I quipped back. 'It kills a man faster than misfortune. You should know that, Mr Levin.'

'You and your émigré humour! You really have no reason to be downcast. I've got news for you.'

'What news would that be?' I asked cautiously. I was afraid that something might have come up to do with my passport.

Levin flashed his giant teeth. He does laugh a lot, I thought. 'We've found someone to guarantee your stay,' he said. 'Someone who will undertake to see that you do not fall burden on the state. A sponsor! What do you say now?'

'Hirsch?' I asked disbelievingly.

Levin shook his bald head. 'Hirsch doesn't have that sort of money. Do you know Tannenbaum the banker?'

I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure what I should admit to.

'Maybe,' I said.

'Maybe? What do you mean maybe?! You and your evasions! You must know him! He's going to sponsor you!'

A flock of seagulls suddenly squalled across the flashing sea, very close to the windows. I didn't know any banker called Tannenbaum. I didn't know anyone in New York, except Robert Hirsch. He must have fixed it for me. The way he did in France as a Spanish consul.

'I probably do,' I said. 'You meet so many people when you're on the run; you forget the names.'

Levin looked at me doubtfully. 'A name like Tannenbaum?'

I laughed. 'Yes, a name like Tannenbaum! Why not? Tannenbaum most of all. Who wants to share the name of a

German Christmas tree!’

Levin blew his hooked nose. ‘It doesn’t really matter if you know him or not. The important thing is that he’s prepared to sign for you.’

He opened his attaché case. A few newspapers tumbled out. ‘The morning papers. Have you read them yet?’

‘No.’

‘Why on earth not? Can’t you get the papers here?’

‘Sure. I just haven’t read them.’

‘Extraordinary. I’d have thought you couldn’t wait to see them every day. Isn’t that what all you people do here?’

‘Probably.’

‘But not you?’

‘No, not me. My English isn’t good enough.’

Levin shook his head. ‘You’re a strange fellow all right.’

‘Maybe so,’ I replied. I declined to explain to this apostle of straightforwardness that I was in no hurry to read about the war while I was locked up here. I preferred to keep my scant reserves intact by not subjecting them to pointless emotions. If I’d told him that my current reading matter was an anthology of German poetry that I had lugged the length of the Via Dolorosa, he might have stopped wanting to represent me on the grounds that I was insane. ‘Thanks a lot,’ I said and took the newspapers.

Levin went on rooting about in his attaché case. ‘Here are two hundred dollars that Mr Hirsch gave me for you,’ he said. ‘A down payment on my fee.’ He produced four bills, spread them out like a hand of cards and put them away again.

I watched them go. ‘Did Mr Hirsch give you the money specifically as a down payment?’ I asked.

‘Not specifically, but you want me to have it, don’t you?’ Levin grinned again, this time not just with his teeth and wrinkles but even with his ears. They flapped like an elephant’s. ‘You wouldn’t want me to work for you for nothing?’ he asked coyly.

‘Certainly not. But didn’t you tell me that my hundred and fifty dollars aren’t enough to get me admitted to America?’

‘Not if you have a sponsor. Tannenbaum’s changed the game for you.’

Levin was positively dazzling. He was so dazzling that I feared an attack on my hundred and fifty dollars. I resolved to defend them tooth and claw till I got my passport back with visa. Levin seemed to sense my position. ‘I’m going to take these papers to the inspectors,’ he said baldly. ‘If everything goes well, my partner Mr Watson will come to see you in a day or two. And he’ll settle the rest.’

‘Watson?’ I asked.

‘Watson,’ he replied.

‘Why Watson?’ I asked suspiciously.

To my surprise, Levin was a little thrown by the question. ‘Watson’s family has been in America for many generations. They are among the oldest Americans,’ he explained. ‘They came on the *Mayflower*. In America, that’s like aristocracy. It’s a helpful circumstance that one should make the most of. Especially in your case. Understand?’

‘I understand,’ I said, surprised. Presumably Watson wasn’t Jewish. So they had that over here as well.

‘He’ll give the whole thing the right sort of setting,’ said Levin with dignity. ‘It’s useful for subsequent applications too.’ He got up and held out his bony hand. ‘All the best! You’ll be in New York before you know it!’

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t like this latest turn. I was as superstitious as anyone who lives on chance and I thought the confidence with which he anticipated the future was unlucky. He had been like that the first day too, when he asked me where I was going to live in New York. You didn’t do that sort of thing among emigrants, it was unlucky. I had seen things go wrong too often. And Tannenbaum – what was that about? I couldn’t quite believe in something as odd and spectacular as that. And the fellow had just helped himself to Robert Hirsch’s money! It couldn’t have been

meant like that. Two hundred dollars! A fortune! It had taken me two years to put aside a hundred and fifty. Maybe Levin would take them off me next time. The only thing that inspired any confidence in me was the fact that this hyena with too many teeth had been sent to me by Robert Hirsch.

Hirsch was the only real Maccabee I knew. One day, shortly after the truce at Vichy, he had turned up in Provence in the guise of a Spanish vice consul. From somewhere he had got his hands on a diplomatic passport under the name Raul Tegner and he would show up in that capacity with fearless impertinence. No one knew to what degree the passport was genuine or not. People assumed he had got it via the French Resistance. Hirsch himself gave nothing away, but everyone knew that in his meteoric career he had also worked for the Resistance. He had a car with CD plates, wore a sharp suit and, at a time when petrol was about as scarce as hens' teeth, he always seemed to have plenty of it. He could only have laid his mitts on all these things with help from the Underground. He smuggled weapons, handbills and little single-sheet fold-over pamphlets for them. It was the time the Germans were in breach of the agreements about partial Occupation and broke into Free France to arrest emigrants. Hirsch tried to save as many as he could. His car, his passport and his boldness were all helpful to him. As an ostensible representative of a friendly dictator he played the Franco card whenever he was stopped. He gave tongue-lashings to patrols, appealing to his diplomatic immunity, invoking the General and his close ties to Hitler. The German patrols generally preferred to let him go rather than risk the possible consequences from higher-ups. With their innate feeling of subordination they were in awe of his title and ID; and their obedience training only reinforced their reluctance to take any responsibility, especially in the lower ranks. But even the SS wobbled when Hirsch started yelling at them. He was counting on the fear

that every dictatorship inculcates in its own supporters, its way of turning the law into something unpredictable and personal, and thereby dangerous for its supporters if they failed to keep up with the endlessly mutating paragraphs. In this way he profited from the scourge of cowardice, which along with brutality is the inevitable concomitant of any violent regime.

For a few months he was a virtual legend among the emigrants. He saved a few lives with the help of some blank forms he had got hold of from somewhere and filled in according to need. People were able to escape over the Pyrenees, even though the Gestapo were already there. Others were hidden in Provençal monasteries until such time as they could be moved along. He was able to fish a couple out of a detention cell and let them escape. He carried whole bundles of Underground literature practically openly in his car. And then – this time disguised as an SS officer – he had got me and the two politicals out of the internment camp. Everyone was waiting for this one-man campaign against violence to end with the inevitable violent death. Then things went a bit quiet. It was said he had been shot by the Gestapo. As ever, there were people who claimed to have witnessed the scene personally.

After my liberation from the internment camp I had run into him the odd time and we spent a few evenings together, till daybreak. Hirsch was beside himself at the way the Jews had let themselves be rounded up by the Germans like so many rabbits; that so many thousands of them were stuffed – without any resistance – into overcrowded cattle cars and hauled away to the death camps. He couldn't understand why there were almost no attempts made to disobey or to resist; that they died meekly, without even a minority revolting, knowing they were about to be killed anyway, if only to take a few of the killers with them. We both understood that this wasn't explainable in terms of the superficial notions of fear, last-ditch, desperate hope, much

less cowardice – more the opposite – because it seemed to take more bravery to go silently to one's death than to die fighting in a last desperate parody of Teutonic vengeance. Even so, Hirsch was beside himself about the two-thousand-year-old tradition of meekness, ever since the time of the Maccabees. He hated his own people for it and understood it with a painful love. His private war against brutality had more than personal motivations; he was also in rebellion against himself.

I picked up the newspapers Levin had left me. I was a halting reader. A Syrian had lent me a French-language English grammar on the boat and given me some lessons; when he was released, he had left me the book and I continued to study it. I picked up pronunciation as best I could with the aid of a portable gramophone that a family of Polish emigrants had brought with them to Ellis Island. There were about a dozen records with it, making up an introduction to English. In the morning it was carried downstairs from the dormitory into the day room, and the entire family would huddle round it and practise their English. Reverently and effortfully they followed the drawling, plummy voice of the speaker, who slowly related the life of an imaginary English family called Brown, who had a house and garden, sons and daughters who went to school and did homework, while Mr Brown owned a bicycle on which he cycled to work and Mrs Brown watered the flowers, prepared the meals, wore a kitchen apron and had black hair. The desperate emigrants eagerly took part in this placid life, their mouths opening and closing in time with the speaker on the records as in a slow-motion film, while others sat with them in their circle, trying to learn from it as well. Sometimes in the gathering dusk, it looked as though people were sitting round a pond with old carp that slowly broke the surface, and opened and closed their mouths and waited to be fed.

Of course, there were also some who were fluent in English. Their fathers had had the foresight to enrol them in trade schools where they learned English, instead of the Latin and Greek that were taught in the gymnasiums. They now became highly sought-after teachers and would sometimes practise with the others, sitting over newspapers, spelling out articles about mass murder to learn to count – ten thousand dead, twenty thousand wounded, fifty thousand missing, hundred thousand taken prisoner – in that way the tragedy of the world was reduced to a school lesson in which the students did their best to pronounce the ‘th’ in ‘thousand’. The champion linguists kept patiently demonstrating it, that difficult sound that doesn’t exist in German and by whose mangling you can always tell a foreigner – ‘th’ as in thousand, fifty thousand dead in Berlin, in Hamburg, until suddenly someone went pale, gulped, forgot phonetics and muttered in dread, ‘Hamburg? That’s where my mother is!’

I had no idea what kind of accents I was picking up on Ellis Island, but after a while I started to hate the notion of using the war as material for a language primer. I would rather expose myself to the stupidity of my grammar, and to learn that Karl wore a green cap, that his sister was twelve years old and was fond of cake, and that his grandmother still went ice-skating. These profundities from bygone schoolmasters’ imaginations at least constituted a banal idyll, in among the bloody lessons in the newspapers. It was heart-wrenching seeing how the refugees turned against their own languages and were ashamed of them, how as soon as possible – even among themselves – they stammered in their broken English, not just to learn, but also to rid themselves of the last thing they had brought with them: the language of the murderers. Two days before my release I couldn’t find my German poetry book. I had left it in the day room and found it later in the toilet, shredded and covered in filth. I thought it served me right; this enchanting

poetry here was a terrible mockery of what had been done to these people by the selfsame Germany.

Levin's partner, Watson, did indeed turn up a couple of days later. He was a stately-looking man with a large, fleshy face and a carefully trimmed white moustache. As I had assumed, he was no Jew and had nothing of Levin's curiosity, and nothing of his intelligence either. He could speak neither German nor French, but he had an expansive line in gesture and a bland, foolish smile. We communicated as best we could. He didn't ask me for anything, but motioned to me imperiously to wait while he went to the inspectors' office.

There was a commotion in the women's section. Warders came running. Women had formed a circle round one woman who was lying on the floor, screaming.

'What's going on?' I asked an old man who had hurried over and was now back. 'Another nervous breakdown?'

The man shook his head. 'It seems one of the women is giving birth.'

'What? Giving birth? Here?'

'It looks that way. I wonder what the inspectors will have to say.' The man pulled a mirthless grin.

'A premature birth!' said one woman in a red velvet blouse. 'She's a month before due. No wonder, with all these excitements.'

'Is it born yet?' I asked.

The woman looked at me condescendingly. 'Of course not. Those are just the first contractions. She could be hours.'

'Will the child be an American if it's born here?' asked the old man.

'What else?' asked the woman in red.

'I mean, here on Ellis Island. We're only quarantined here, we're not in America proper. America's over there!'

'This is America all right,' said the woman indignantly. 'The guards are Americans! And the inspectors!'

‘It would be a boon for the mother,’ said the old man. ‘That way she’d have an American relative: her baby! It would make it easier for her to be admitted. Emigrants who have American relatives are admitted.’ The man looked around cautiously and grinned awkwardly.

‘If he’s not an American, then he’ll be the first real world citizen,’ I said.

‘The second,’ the man countered. ‘The first I saw on a bridge between Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1937. The German emigrants had been chased on to the bridge by the police forces of both countries. They were penned in and couldn’t go forward or back; the police sealed off both ends of the bridge. They were stuck on the frontier for three days. One woman had her baby there.’

‘What happened to it?’ asked the woman in the red blouse with interest.

‘It died before the two countries could come to war over it,’ replied the old man. ‘This was during the more humane period before the German annexation,’ he added apologetically. ‘Later, they would have clubbed mother and child like wet cats.’

I saw Watson come out of the office. In his light, chequered suit he towered over the refugees bunched around the door. I walked quickly towards him. All of a sudden my heart was beating fast. Watson waved my passport at me. ‘You’re in luck,’ he said. ‘A woman is apparently giving birth out here; the officials were completely distracted. Here’s your visa.’

I took my passport. My hands trembled. ‘For how long is it good?’ I asked.

Watson laughed. ‘They wanted to give you a transit visa of four weeks; I’ve got you two months as a tourist. You should thank the woman in labour. I think they couldn’t wait to see the back of you and me. A motorboat has been ordered for the woman. We could ride in with her. What about it?’ Watson thumped me vigorously on the back.

‘Am I free, then?’

‘Sure! For the next two months. Then it’s the next round.’

‘Two months!’ I said. ‘An eternity!’

Watson shook his leonine head. ‘No eternity. Two months. Best thing we start to reflect on our next steps right away.’

‘Once I’m over there,’ I said. ‘Not now.’

‘All right, but don’t leave it too long. There are still some expenses, travel, the cost of the visa and one or two more things. Fifty dollars altogether. Best to take care of that right away. You can pay the rest of the bill once you’ve settled in to your new life.’

‘How much is there still owing?’

‘A hundred dollars. Very modest. We’re not monsters.’

I made no reply. At that moment I just wanted to get out of here as fast as possible. Away from Ellis Island! I was afraid the door to the inspectors’ room might open at the very last moment and I might be called back. Quickly I pulled out my wallet and took out a fifty-dollar bill. Now I had ninety-nine left – and a hundred-dollar debt. Presumably I would spend the rest of my life servicing the interest to those lawyers, I thought fleetingly. But I didn’t care; everything was pushed aside by a wave of trembling, violent impatience.

‘Can we go now?’ I asked.

The woman in the red velvet blouse laughed. ‘It might be hours till the baby’s born. Hours! But those men don’t know that. Those inspectors! They know all about everything, but not that. And I’m not about to clue them in now either. Every little creature that comes into the world here represents a ray of hope to the others. Isn’t that right?’

‘Right,’ I said. I saw two people supporting the pregnant woman. ‘Can we go along with them?’ I asked Watson.

He nodded. The woman in the velvet blouse shook my hand. The old man came out too and congratulated me. We went out. I had to show my passport at the exit. The policeman handed it back to me right away. ‘Good luck, sir!’