

PROLOGUE

At its edge the unmade road crumbles away into the ditch. Grass grows through the gravel; the wheels of the pram bounce over the stones. A few moments ago her left foot slipped on the crumbling gravel and there is a dull ache in her ankle. She must have strained the ligaments, and she is trying not to put her full weight on the foot. Progress has been slow for several hours; they are practically crawling, leaning on their prams for support, taking it in turns to push. It has long been difficult to see clearly where they are going. The lights of torches and the headlights of the trucks reach them only intermittently, and when they do they huddle closer together, quicken their pace, throw coats over the prams to cover the children from sight.

She has no clear idea of how long they have been walking. It feels like they have been on the go forever. But it isn't even light yet, so it can't be more than a few hours. She is tired, and so are her companions. Should she try to stop and rest?

Several times they have passed people sitting on the ground or on the luggage they are dragging along with them. Several times, too, they have seen a young man run over and dash the butt of his rifle against someone's head. She is afraid to stop. In spite of the pain in her groins and her left ankle she forces herself onwards.

The girl next to her whispers something about being thirsty.

Gerta says nothing. For herself and the child she has some water hidden away, which she can't offer to others when she doesn't know what is ahead of her. She, too, is thirsty, but she says nothing, just continues to put one foot in front of the other, heading God knows where. God? She gave up on Him long ago. She used to pray to Him, ask Him to help

her, to do something. Anything that would change her life. When she understood there was nothing God could do for her, it was already too late.

Since that time she no longer prays and no longer thinks about God. She wants to get along on her own, even in such times as this. God doesn't know where they are being driven; only the raging, brattish young men know that, and perhaps even they don't. Such adolescent kids, she fumes. Their voices bear down on her and are lost again in the cries of the people in front. Several times she catches sight of a passing vehicle, its upraised guns reminiscent of the snake-haired head of Medusa. Scowling, livid Medusa, a murderess with the menacing mouth of a drunken slut. One look at her and you die. You turn to stone or they shoot you. She hates them, but that is all she can do. Just hate. And keep this to herself, if she wants to survive. Humbly she walks on beside her guide and keeps quiet. The night is sinking into a grey dawn and she is pulled along in the quiet, tired procession. The footfalls, the swoosh of overcoats and words spoken in low voices punctuate the cries of the guards and the wails of the injured. From time to time a gunshot rings out; Gerta has lost count of how many times now.

When did this horror actually begin?

At the moment the flowers struck the bottom of Mother's grave, everyone felt it, everyone knew it. Father, too, was uneasy, even though he still blindly believed.

When Gerta stole a look at him, she saw how he was fighting to hold himself together, how tense all the muscles of his face were, how he widened his eyes before disguising them with a variety of blinks, how he was trying not to weep. But he should, thought Gerta, he should cry, he should pour soil from Mother's grave on the bald crown of his skull with

its remnants of fair hair, he should rub it into this cheeks, let it mix with his tears, and — most important of all — he should call out for forgiveness. He should do that. Not just stand there straight and dignified in his uniform with his chest puffed out, watching Mother's coffin disappear into the earth. Don't put her in there, stop this! Gerta wanted to cry out, but Friedrich held her back. He clasped her arms so firmly that he made her afraid. Friedrich wasn't weeping either? How could he be, this faithful copy of the father? Again Gerta looked down into the deep hole, in which the gleam of the dark-grey coffin was by now barely visible. The funeral was a modest one. But the whole thing had hardly begun for them. The funeral was a mere link in the chain of catastrophes that were to come in each month of each year. Right through the war.

The life they she'd led before was so wonderful. And not only her life — Friedrich's, Mother and Father's, Jana's, Karl's; all lives had a sense and an order, and they unfolded together, as a unit, advancing towards a future whose contours Gerta knew well. But in winter forty-two, when Mother disappeared under the Schnirch headstone, this picture of the future was shattered. The last of her certainties was suffocated in 1945 by the throng and the Body of Christ. But a whole series of things happened before this.