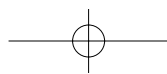
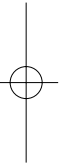
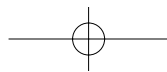
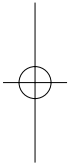
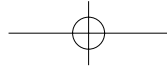

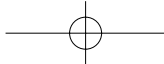


Russia

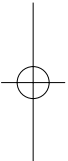

August 1941







A thousand feet above the Russian front, a German scout plane weaved among the clouds, searching for a place to land. The aircraft was a Fiesler 156, whose broad wings and spindly looking wheel struts had earned it the nickname of 'Stork'. The pilot, Hanno Kosch, was a captain in the Luftwaffe. Beside him, nervously clutching a briefcase, sat a lieutenant of the Waffen SS named Karl Hagen.



One hour before, the Stork had taken off from a forward operations base of Army Group North, just outside the town of Luga, bound for a grass strip runway near the village of Vyrista, a short distance by air to the north-east.

Kosch tilted the plane and squinted down at the ground below, searching for some contour of the earth which corresponded to the flight-plan chart clipped to a map board on his knee. 'I don't see it,' he said.

'Maybe we should turn back,' replied Hagen, shouting to make his voice heard over the engine.

'It's too late,' replied the pilot. 'I gave you that chance half an hour ago and you refused. Now we don't have enough fuel to return to Luga. If we can't find the runway at Vyrista, our only chance is to set down in a field and start walking.'

The Stork shuddered as it passed through a pocket of turbulence, causing Hagen to grip the briefcase even more tightly.

‘What’s in there, anyway?’ asked Kosch.

‘Something I have to deliver.’

‘Yes, but what?’

‘If you must know, it’s a painting.’

‘You mean some priceless work of art like a Rembrandt or something?’

‘Priceless yes. Rembrandt no.’

‘Can I see it?’

‘I don’t think I can do that.’

‘Oh, come on!’ Kosch persisted. ‘Just so I can know why I’ve been risking my life for the past hour.’

Hagen considered this for a moment. ‘Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to look.’ He unfastened the brass latch of the briefcase, removed a canvas in a small wooden frame and held it up for Kosch to see.

‘I’ll be damned,’ said Kosch. ‘What is it? A butterfly?’

‘Actually,’ replied Hagen, ‘I believe it’s a moth.’

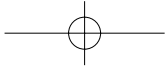
‘It doesn’t look that special.’ Kosch shrugged. ‘But I guess I’m no lover of art.’

‘I don’t like it any more than you do,’ Hagen told him as he slipped the painting back inside the briefcase and re-fastened the latch. ‘All I want is to be rid of this thing and then I hope I never have to get inside an aeroplane again. I’m not like you. I hate flying. I didn’t sign up to be a bird.’

‘You won’t be a bird for much longer,’ Kosch told him, ‘and neither will I, with fuel enough for five more minutes in the air.’

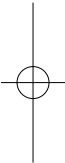
‘How can we possibly have missed the airfield?’ demanded Hagen.

‘In these clouds, we could have missed the whole city of Berlin!’ Kosch growled with frustration. ‘It’s no use, Lieutenant.

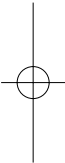


I have to start looking for a place to set us down.’ With those words, he began a gradual descent through the clouds. Raindrops speckled the Perspex canopy. Below them, the thatched roofs of a Russian village slid by, the whitewashed walls of the houses glowing warmly in the summer evening light. Spreading out from the village in all directions lay neatly planted fields of wheat, barley and rye, separated by reddish-brown dirt roads. There was no sign of people. It was the same with the other villages over which they had flown in this past hour. The entire population appeared to have vanished into thin air.

‘What is that?’ Hagen called out. ‘Down there! Look!’

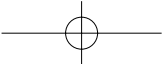


Following Hagen’s gaze, Kosch glimpsed a wide expanse of manicured grass, cut through with ornate pathways. At the head of this park stood a huge building, painted blue and white, with what must have been hundreds of windows, set into gilded frames which gleamed blindingly out of the vivid green below. Another huge building, this one less ornate, stood off to one side. Other, smaller structures lay about the grounds, along with several large ponds. Kosch’s momentary fascination with the beauty of the architecture was followed by the burning of adrenalin in his guts as he realised how far they had strayed from their original course.



‘It’s beautiful,’ admitted Hagen, somewhat reluctantly. ‘I didn’t know such things existed in Russia any more. It almost looks like a palace.’

‘It *is* a palace!’ replied Kosch. ‘It is the old village of Tsarskoye Selo, which the Soviets now call Pushkin. All that down there was once the summer estate of Tsar Nicholas II. There is the Catherine Palace, the Alexander Palace, the Lamskie Pond



and the Chinese Theatre. I learned about them in an architecture class I took at university.'

'Now that we know where we are,' said Hagen, 'how close are we to where we ought to be?'

Kosch glanced down at his chart. 'According to this map, we're almost thirty kilometres behind the Russian lines.'

'Thirty kilometres!' Hagen exploded. 'You don't understand, Captain, this painting—'

Kosch didn't let him finish. 'If we come around on a north-by-north-west heading, we might be able to reach our own lines before we run out of fuel.' Banking sharply, Kosch turned the little scout plane towards the west, on a course which took him directly over the vast rooftop of the Catherine Palace.

'It looks deserted,' said Hagen, his forehead pressed against the heavy Perspex of the side window. 'Where did they all go?'

Suddenly the plane lurched as if it had flown into an invisible wall. This jolt was accompanied by a sound which reminded Hagen of the pebbles he used to throw by the handful at a corrugated-iron shed at the bottom of his grandfather's garden. 'What happened?' he shouted. 'What's going on?'

Kosch did not reply. He was too busy struggling to keep the plane steady.

Bright yellow tracers, like a shower of meteors, flickered past the wings. Bullets clattered through the fuselage. In the next instant, a white stream of vaporising coolant poured from the cowling.

The firing died away as they cleared the palace grounds.

'We must be out of range,' Hagen said hopefully.

'It's too late,' Kosch told him. 'The damage has already been done.'

‘What do you mean? We’re still flying, aren’t we?’

‘We have to land now,’ replied Kosch, ‘before the engine catches fire. Look for a field, or a road not bordered by telegraph wires.’

‘We’re behind the lines!’

‘On the ground, we stand a chance. If we stay up here any longer, we have none.’

Seconds passed. The Stork’s engine began to sputter as the temperature gauge climbed into the red.

‘What about that?’ asked Hagen, pointing just beyond the starboard wing. ‘Is that a runway?’

Kosch peered through the blur of the glycol-smearred windscreen. ‘I think it is! It’s pretty crude, but I think I can get us down all right.’

‘Thank God,’ murmured Hagen.

Kosch laughed. ‘I thought you SS types didn’t believe in God.’

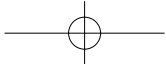
‘I’ll believe in anything that puts me safely on the ground.’

The Stork circled the airfield. At the far end of the runway stood a hangar, its roof painted dull olive green and overlaid with black amoeba-like shapes to camouflage it from above.

Kosch levelled the plane for a final approach, lowered the flaps to drop air speed, throttled back and came in for a landing.

The plane bounced once on its stilt-like legs, then settled on the ground. Silver threads of water sprayed up between the grass and tyres.

The pilot cut the engine and the Fiesler rolled to a stop with little room to spare on the short runway. As the blurred disc of the propeller stuttered to a halt. Kosch pressed his hand against



the silver metal disc on his chest which connected the four seat straps, turned it to the left and then released the clips.

Hagen was still struggling with his straps, one of which had become tangled underneath the leather holster of the SS officer's P38 pistol.

Kosch reached across and unfastened Hagen's seat belt.

Folding back the canopy, Kosch climbed out of the plane and jumped down to the ground, followed closely by Hagen.

The two men began to look around them. The doors of the hangar were closed, but fresh vehicle tracks showed that the place had been visited recently. The rain was still falling softly.

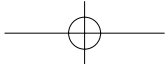
'If we move quickly,' said Kosch, 'we should run into our own lines within a few hours. The Russians must have seen us go down but, with luck, they'll be so busy retreating that they won't have time to worry about us.'

A sound of creaking metal made them jump. Both men turned to see the doors of the hangar sliding open. A face appeared from the darkness and then a man stepped into the light. He was a Red Army officer. There was no mistaking the rotten-apple green of his *gymnastiorka* tunic, the enamelled red star on his cap and the Tokarev automatic he clutched in his right hand. Strapped across his waist was a thick brown leather belt, which carried the holster for his gun.

Now two other men appeared from the darkness. They wore helmets and carried Mosin-Nagant rifles, on which long, cruciform bayonets glinted in the brassy evening sun.

Hagen dropped the briefcase and drew the P38 from its holster.

'Are you mad?' hissed Kosch, raising his hands in the air.



‘There are three of them, and probably more inside that hangar. We can’t get back now. We have no choice but to surrender.’

Seeing that one of the Germans had drawn his weapon, the Russian officer came to a sudden stop. He raised his gun and barked out a command. The two men behind him took aim with their rifles.

‘You were right,’ whispered Hagen.

Kosch turned to him, his eyes wide with fear. ‘About what?’

‘I don’t believe in God.’ With those words, Hagen set the gun against the side of Kosch’s head and pulled the trigger.

Kosch went down so fast it was as if the ground had swallowed him up.

Then, as the Russians looked on in amazement, Hagen placed the barrel of the P38 against his front teeth, closed his eyes and fired.