

Chapter 1

The sun was rising from behind the mountain, sending rays of warm light over the little town which sat around and along the river valley. Traisen was bigger than a mountain village, yet not quite a town. It was an ancient place not far away from Vienna, where people found plenty of resources for farming on the high green hills, which were heaven for cattle and sheep. Over decades the trade of home-made goods and farmers' products had made Traisen a self-sufficient community. The factory at the edge of the town was relatively new, and employed a large number of the town's younger generation, who were eager to learn and earn money. The land was blessed with natural resources, bright summers, and white winters, and everybody was minding their own business, living in harmony and good faith.

This was the town in which Heidi grew up and went to school. Her family was not rich, but not poor either. Her father was well-known in the community and well respected. He was a shoe master, and while repairing the shoes of almost everybody in town was kept well informed of everything that was happening at any given time. Heidi was his second daughter, and the one that, over the years, began to take after him more and more. He loved all four of his children dearly. He often thought how different they were, and about how each one had something special that made his life worthwhile.

Life Under the Dark Sky

Teresa, the oldest, was born in 1920, and had been blessed with the gift of cooking. She could turn any meal into a treat. She was now a young lady, and had already learnt a lot from her employment as chef assistant, and at times even chef herself, in the lavish castles of the wealthy inhabitants. While doing this, she had also learned to be organized, and picked up a little bit of book-keeping too. She worked for two years at Rosenberg Castle for Grof Hoiu, a very well established man, whose family had inherited old money and properties.

Johan, his only son, born in 1927, was a happy boy who was often spoiled by his older sisters and his mom. There was no doubt that, as long as the world did not plummet into the turmoil of war, he would grow up to be a fine man. Sometimes his father wondered what the future would bring to all of them. He was a veteran of the First World War himself, and knew only too well what it is like to be a young man living through those uncertain times when all hell breaks loose.

Louisa, the youngest, was still in elementary school, and had no worries. The nest of her family and a couple of friends of the same age were enough to make her happy.

And there was Heidi, born on October 11th, 1924, who was now seventeen. Heidi was a free spirit, always ready to discover something new, always willing to see more than Traisen had to offer, to travel, to meet people, and determined to pursue her way in following her dreams. But what dreams can a seventeen year old have when her country was about to be torn apart, caught in the middle of a world war? She knew that life is precious, is meant to be lived one day at a time, and is meant to be made the most of. She had the personality of a leader: she was a quick decision maker, insightful thinker, and possessed a great deal of courage and honesty. Even at that young age she had life experience that prepared her for always being on her feet.

She had just come back from Vienna. Ah, Vienna! The city that mesmerized her! Capital of an empire for more than a century, capital of waltz and music! Living in Vienna for almost a year was a dream come true for Heidi. She could not believe her luck when she had found work there the previous summer. Through one of her mother's acquaintances, she had discovered that a respected family, Mrs. and Mr. Wolfgang,

needed a nanny for their two year old daughter, Klara. Knowing that Heidi was a brave girl who could be trusted, who was yet sweet and amenable with young children, she received a good recommendation for the job, and then off she went to the city of glamorous parties, glorious history, and majestic music.

On a morning like this Heidi could not help thinking back on her time spent in Vienna. Thus far it had been the best time of her life. She still regretted that she could not stay for longer. Having to return home proved to her that one cannot hang on to good times forever, and that only change is constant. Even so, she would treasure that chapter of her life as long as she lived. Happy memories were meant to help her along the way, and give her strength during tough times.

Four years before, in early 1938, Hitler had consolidated his power in Germany and was ready to begin his planned expansion. He had personal ties with Austria, having been born there, and tried to gain popular approval for the unification of Austria with Germany through diplomatic channels. First, he reinstated full party freedom, released imprisoned members of the Nazi party and let them participate in government. The political scene changed drastically for Austria, and in a short time the German troops crossed the Austrian border. Nazi flags and Nazi supporters greeted Hitler on his journey to Vienna. It all looked like an enthusiastic welcome, and he arrived in the capital city on April 2nd, 1938. By then Austria had become the province of Ostmark and part of Germany and the Third Reich. The Anschluss was ratified by a plebiscite that won the support of an overwhelming majority. People were scared and confused, and the vote was not anonymous. The Austrian nation was losing control over its own legitimate identity. Hitler, through his SS officers, arrested prominent representatives of the First Republic Party, Social Democrats, the Communist Party, and other potential political dissenters, as well as Jews. They were either imprisoned or sent to concentration camps. The Austrian population was reduced to obeisance on the threat of similar treatment. Even in a small town like Traisen the German political pressure was present, and nobody could be trusted anymore. People were talking out of fear, and the Nazis had already infiltrated every part of the country with spies.

Life Under the Dark Sky

Heidi's father, Frantz Souisa, advised his family to keep a low profile and not make any kind of comments in public or express any opinion regarding the day-to-day deterioration of life or political concerns. He knew that this was the only way to survive and keep his family safe. He was thinking of his kids, and, from what he heard, it sounded as though Germany was planning to expand into Czechoslovakia and Poland. Nobody could stop the war, or the power of the Third Reich.

Chapter 2

In the summer of 1938 Heidi finished school and wanted to begin learning a profession. The apprenticeship program she was interested in was not available at that time. She wanted to become a hairdresser. She herself had beautiful shoulder-length locks, the color of copper. At that moment, though, there were no places available for training in that field. She put her name on a waiting list, but, with war and its attendant chaos looming, the chances of her being enrolled were slim.

Her older sister, Teresa, was attending a specialized program in cooking and restaurants. Her placement at Grof Hoiu's castle was giving her experience and knowledge.

There were not many places to get a job. Young men were being sent to the army, and the only work to be found for girls was as a house-helper for the soldiers' wives. That wasn't what Heidi wanted, and certainly not in Traisen. She wanted to go to a big city to see new places, meet new people, and discover the world. It was two years later that she received the offer to go to Vienna and take care of little Klara and help her mother, Elisabeth Wolfgang, around the house. Elisabeth was a young mother only eight years older than Heidi, and she and her husband had been married for three years. They had a nice spacious apartment close to St. Stephan's Cathedral in the centre of Vienna. Despite the German occupation, the city still looked glamorous to Heidi.

Elisabeth was happy to meet Heidi. She needed help in the house and with little Klara. Her husband Karol, who was an officer, had been called up. He had not been sent to the front yet, but was teaching a regiment of infantry at a cazarm outside the city. He stayed there during the week and only came home on weekends. Elisabeth had a maid who

came to the home three times a week. Heidi was employed to be Klara's nanny and her mother's companion. The uncertain times, due to the political climate and threat of war, made Elisabeth nervous, and she feared for the safety of her family, and, even more, for their future. Having Heidi around helped relieve some of her anxiety.

Heidi was full of life, happy to move to the big city, willing to help and fascinated by her new life, so different from the one she had had in her small town. Little Klara was an adorable toddler with curly blond hair and big blue eyes. The first time she saw her, Heidi thought that if she were ever to have a child she would like him or her to look like Klara. The girl was happy, cute and friendly. Within a week Heidi and Klara had already developed a special bond, playing, taking short walks, and having breakfast, lunch and dinner together, all the while having fun. Elisabeth was pleased to see how helpful, resourceful and loving Heidi was with her child. Elisabeth trusted her, and Klara loved her. Soon Heidi became part of their family, and seemed almost like the younger sister Elisabeth had never had. Along with taking care of Klara, Heidi grew closer to her mom.

The maid, Sylvia, was in her twenties, a decent young woman who was dedicated to her work, diligent and friendly. Heidi liked her from the beginning. Their employer was a good woman and Heidi and Sylvia appreciated their good luck.

The Wolfgang residence was a nest of harmony in which one could easily forget about the chaos that existed outside its walls. Even though people in Vienna tried to remain calm, and stores, banks, schools, and cultural establishments stayed open, the fear of the war was present everywhere. Most of the men suitable for service were already enrolled in the army, and those left at home were older or too young. Rich, ordinary, and poor men were all equally affected by the war. It seemed as if society had brought down its class barriers and become one mass of people trying to survive and stay sane. For the moment, Vienna was calm, the Danube was blue, and the bells of St. Stephan's Cathedral rang out every hour, measuring time. The golden leaves trembled in the wind and fell on the sidewalks, making a nice warm rug underneath people's feet. Elisabeth gazed out the window, thinking of her husband. Sooner or later he would be sent to the front, and who knew what the future would bring for them. She heard the laughter of her daughter coming from the other room where she played with Heidi, and instantly felt stronger, knowing that, no matter what, she'd have her little girl to keep her going.

There was also her cousin Thomas who visited her regularly, and since he was a student at The Medical Institute of Vienna, he would not have to go to the army. If worst came to worst, she and Klara would not be alone.

Thomas was an easy-going young man. At twenty two, he had good life experience, a few good friends among his school mates, and a powerful determination to become a doctor. His family lived in St. Polten. Elisabeth was like a sister to him, and the only family he had in Vienna. He lived in the student residence, but very much enjoyed visiting his cousin. On occasions he took Elisabeth out for lunch or dinner to cheer her up and help her forget her worries. Since Heidi had come to look after his adorable niece Klara, the place had become livelier and he really looked forward to paying them visits. Thomas had a good sense of humor, and knew a lot of gossip from the university. He always tried to share a funny story, or make some entertaining plans when he was coming over. He knew what was going on in his country and around Austria. The war was already part of life, but he did not talk about it much and minded his own business. In such times, everybody tried to cope with the situation in their own way. Thomas chose to take care of his family and focus on his studies rather than fill his life with worries about the world coming to an end. He was, by nature, an optimistic and strong person. The three young ladies, even Klara, always looked forwards to his visits. Occasionally he brought candy or cookies from the corner coffee shop. With Thomas around, Heidi got a taste of social life in the big city. On Thursday nights short silent movies played at the nearby Cinema, and the entrance fee was very cheap. While Elisabeth had seen most of the shows the year before with her husband, she encouraged Thomas to take Heidi out and enjoy the movies. Heidi loved it, and laughed with all her heart watching Charlie Chaplin's meaningful play. At other times there would be soirees taking place that Thomas knew about, usually at one of the remaining open restaurants, where student live bands put together singing concerts for the benefit of the Red Cross organization. He always attended these in the company of his cousin or Heidi, and it was then that Heidi learned the tango and even the waltz. Thomas was a good dancer and great company. For a few shillings' donation, and the cost of a slice of apple pie with a glass of water, they could spend more than three hours enjoying the music and swirling on the dance floor. Walking home afterwards on dark streets was a powerful reminder of the ugly reality, but, for Heidi, the excitement of

such evenings overcame the fear of the war, and by the time she got home and went to bed felt as if the world, at least, was good. Usually, the next morning over a thin breakfast she would give Elisabeth a detailed update about the previous evening, with much enthusiasm. Sometimes there were even funny stories to tell, and they would have a good laugh. Those moments, however, were soon replaced by the anguish that Elisabeth felt listening to radio news from the front, while Heidi went about her day with Karla. One day passed after another, and without so much as a notice the season changed from colorful autumn to gray and white winter.

After losing battles against England and having been weakened on the Western front, Germany shifted its military focus toward the East. The invasion of the southern Soviet Union got off to a good start, and German armies surrounded more than half a million Red Army troops east of Smolensk. The German armies began the drive toward Moscow, and certain German politicians made glowing predictions of the end of the war. But soon thereafter, while the temperatures fell on the Moscow front and heavy snow followed, the German tanks were immobilized. In the southern Soviet Union, the Germans were more successful, and gained territory in Crimea and Ukraine. By late 1941, major cities in Germany began to suffer nightly bombings, while at the same time the Allies also registered heavy losses.

In mid-December, while civilians in Vienna were trying to think about the coming Christmas, Hitler and Mussolini declared war on the United States, which reciprocated in turn and declared war on Germany and Italy. Soon after, Hungary declared war on the United States and the United Kingdom. Romania and Bulgaria followed Germany and entered the war against the United States and England. The battles were fought on ground, sea, and air. Austrian soldiers were part of the German Army. There were daily reports of lives lost or soldiers missing in action. Elisabeth's husband was due to leave Vienna soon after Christmas for service on the front. Germany needed more and more troops on every active region of the map. The normality of life had been shattered by the war, and the joy of Christmas was a dim memory for most Austrians.

A decorated branch of a pine tree on a coffee table in Elisabeth's living room was the only sign of the holidays. Klara was happy to see the colorful so-called Christmas tree, and, on Christmas morning, to discover a knitted doll underneath it. Heidi and Elisabeth had made the doll in secret over the course of a few late nights. The child was happy, and

everybody tried to see the holidays though Klara's joyful eyes. They celebrated Christmas around the dining table with some traditional meals that weren't easy to prepare, given the lack of food supply in the grocery stores. But at least they were all together for the day, Elisabeth, Karol, Klara, Heidi, Thomas and Sylvia. The carols sung in St. Stephan's Cathedral gave the end of the year a festive atmosphere. People gathered at church to pray and listen to religious music, passing the time and hoping that God would stop the insanity of the world.

The New Year of 1942 came without glory, putting an end to the brief holidays that some privileged officers from the army had spent with their families. Elisabeth's husband had to leave Vienna on January 2nd and join his detachment to leave for eastern Germany. Elisabeth was devastated, not knowing if she would ever see Karol again. She sobbed all day long for days at a time, hardly able to even keep up a brave face for Klara's sake. Heidi spent lots of time with the toddler in order to afford Elisabeth some privacy. Sylvia, whose brother had had to go to the front at the same time as Karol, was a mess herself, and together with Elisabeth intently followed the radio news about the front. The house became a war news center, touched by the war in many ways, and nothing seemed to be the same. Even the little girl was affected by the adult's anguish: she began to cry in her sleep, and woke Heidi up more than once every night.

Thomas's visits lost their sparkle. Where before they had made plans to go out and live life, at the beginning of the year all they could talk about was the news from the front and Hitler's plans for an offensive. The young man always knew something more than was allowed to be said on the radio and the three women now waited for his visits for completely different reasons than they had before. Thomas was torn between the ugly truth he had to deliver from his campus sources and the protective care that he felt toward his cousin and his little niece. He also assumed the role of male figure in Elisabeth's family after Karol had to leave. He wanted to help and be there for the Wolfgang household. One day after another went by and finally, at the end of January, Elisabeth received a letter from her husband and begun to relax a little. She was happy that Karol was safe and sound, and full of gratitude to the dear Lord for having mercy on him. That evening Thomas took Elisabeth to a nearby theatre to see a play and forget her worries.

As the old saying goes, human nature adapts to any conditions after a while. Elisabeth started to accept her life lived on a knife blade,

torn between fear and hope. Heidi, who knew that her family and loved ones were safe in Traisen, and not having anybody close to her heart enrolled in the German army, was in a better position to lift Elisabeth's spirits than Sylvia was. At seventeen, Heidi was wiser than other girls her age. She knew from her dear father, who was a veteran of WWI, that there were many hidden aspects to the conflict that Hitler had started three years before. While most Austrians, at the beginning, had seen Hitler as a liberator who would give Austria prosperity, the Souisa family had the feeling that nothing good could possibly result. But life is lived one day at the time, and, thus far, Heidi's family had remained much better off than many Austrian families, the Wolfangs included. Heidi's optimism gave Elisabeth strength, and Thomas was grateful for that. For this reason, in return for her helping his cousin cope with this difficult time, Thomas really wanted to make Heidi happy.

By February, winter was in full cry, covering Vienna with a thick blanket of snow. In times of peace it would have been welcomed, but given the poverty that the war had brought for the last three years, the population was hit hard by the cold and snow storms. Heating homes was a huge challenge as the supply of fire logs and gasoline were not enough for a long heavy winter. Also, warm clothing had been worn out, and no new ones were available. The factories were sending produce to the army first, with only the remnants left over for the civilian population. The fear of catching diseases kept people indoors for the most part. Heidi liked the snow. It reminded her of her childhood, the winter sports that she enjoyed in Traisen, skiing on the mountain's slopes or skating on the frozen Traisen River. She liked to take Klara to the neighborhood park and make snowmen, or pull her on the slide around the plaza. Thomas joined them on occasions. At other times, he borrowed skates from his school mates, and took Heidi or Elisabeth to an improvised ice rink for a few hours of fun on ice. Both young women were good skaters, and the physical exercise did them good. Once again, Heidi enjoyed life, despite the war and the dangerous times. With her optimistic nature, she was able to bring the smiles back to Klara, Elisabeth, and Silvia's faces.

The crisp cold wind caused roses to bloom on the young women's cheeks, while sliding across the ice gave them a feeling of freedom. The news from the Eastern Europe front was that the Axis powers, the German Army and its allies, were doing better now that spring approached. Days followed on one another, and Vienna was about

to change to another season. The snow gave up, the black earth was revealed again in the park, and the streets were washed by the melting snow and ice.

At the end of March, disturbing news was heard. Hitler began another cruel war against the Jews. Those living in Berlin had to clearly identify their houses and obey The Third Reich. From then on, concentration camps were ready to receive their tenants on Death Row. But this detail was kept secret at that time, and few people could even begin to imagine the genocide that was shortly to follow.

As always, the future was unknown and the present liable to change in a split second. Europe, North Africa and Asia became a battle field, and nobody could tell for how long or at what price. It seemed like Hitler's desire for power had no limits, and was constrained not only to land but included also the extermination of selected population and societies. There was no precedent for the madness of this kind of self-proclaimed leader. All the bad news filled the Wolfgang residence with fear and sadness, and the lack of nutritious food and vitamins weakened the resistance to infections, flu and colds.

At the beginning of April, Heidi begun to suffer from a toothache, which cut into her vivacious attitude. The few medicines that Elisabeth had in the house did little to help. Day by day Heidi was losing the battle with an infection of her front teeth. This was the last thing that she needed, and plain bad luck. In a week, in addition to the pain, her face started to swell and complications occurred. A short, painful visit to a dentist advised her to seek treatment in her home town and take time to heal and recover. If she did not do so, she was likely to lose her front teeth and contract septicemia, which would lead to worse consequences. Elisabeth understood that Heidi had to go home and take care of herself. She felt sorry about losing Heidi, and did not know how she and Klara would cope with this unexpected situation. Sylvia could take over Heidi's duties in the house and with the child, but she could not replace the ray of optimism that Heidi's personality always brought to Elisabeth's home. She was irreplaceable, and everybody knew that her departure was not a good sign. Heidi was also sad to leave Vienna and the friends she had made behind. There was the desire to, and possibility of, return after she recovered, but given the uncertainty of everything during the war, that hope was very slim. Klara, Elisabeth, and Sylvia said a tearful good bye, and Thomas took her to the rail station. Together, they took the train to St. Polten. The young man wanted to make sure that she got home safely,

and used this opportunity to pay his parents a visit. For the first time in a year he felt like seeing his family and getting close to his parents. It was almost as if an urge to hold and protect them were animating him. For the first time, he felt the fear of facing the future, and going home was meant to give him strength. Once arrived in St. Polten, he put Heidi on an old bus to Traisen, but not before hugging her and wishing her well.

Heidi knew that she might not see him and his cousin again, which made her very sad. In the time she spent in Vienna she had learnt a lot and grown up faster than she would have had she stayed home. Most importantly, she discovered her strength and the positive influence she had on people, the fact that she could touch other people lives and be empowered by helping others. Thinking this, the toothache seemed to fade a bit. In the wake of the many losses that families started to suffer due to the war, she was happy to see her family again. Waving good-bye to Thomas through the bus window, she was going home to her loved ones.

Chapter 3

Heidi's mother, Josephina Souisa, was hanging washing on the line in the backyard. The sun would dry them in no time. So far, the summer had been sunny and her small vegetable garden had suffered. Weeds were growing faster than the crop, and Josephina would have to attend to it next. Perhaps she would have to water in the evening. That was a hard task, since the water had to be carried in a bucket from the river. The house they lived in was built on a hill's slope. From the front view, it had three stories, but the backyard was at the same level as the third floor. The Souisa family lived on the third floor, with the entrance from the backyard directly into the two bedroom apartment. The twenty three steps that led along the side of the house to their main door became quite tiring for Heidi's parents.

Before the war, Frantz Souisa had begun working from home in his improvised little repair shop in a storage room. He still spent a lot of time in his working room, but he now had fewer and fewer clients. People had no money to pay for his services, and most of his fees were paid in the form of bread or oil tickets, or by rendering services in return. It was a time of war and people did not need money. They needed food and shelter to survive.

The home was cozy. The furniture was old but solid, and had a nice turn of the century touch. The armoire in the great room held a few interesting things that marked the history of the family: faded photos, old coins, and a few pieces of jewelry that the Souisa girls treasured.

Heidi and Johan were now old enough to help their parents, who were grateful for that. Now that Heidi was back home and almost recovered from her tooth infection, she was eager to take on the tasks that were too hard for her parents.

Heidi was looking out the window along the street. Across the street was the railway, and across the railway the Traisen River flowed down from the mountains. It was already August. Since she had come back from Vienna in April, she had focused on her health and tried to recover. It was a slow process, as a result of which she lost weight and felt weaker, but that did not stop her from taking on some temporary jobs and earning goods and food as pay. She found out that every time she stayed home for more than two weeks, the officials from City Hall found out about it and sent her messages to come in for a report. Spies were everywhere, and informants from within the community worked for the SS and German Army, who controlled everything, including the lives of civilians. A couple of times she had to go to Town Hall and explain what she had been doing and who she worked for. The fact that she was only seventeen did not stop the authorities from questioning her.

The German Army started to look into enrolling unmarried or childless women for the performance of tasks behind the front in order to release men from those duties, so that they could be sent into battle. The losses of the Axis armies had to be replaced by new soldiers.

'Oh, my! Is that Teresa?' Heidi could not believe what she was seeing. Teresa was coming down the street toward the house. She had no idea that her sister was coming home. Teresa had been working at Grof Hoiu's castle for two years now. Every time she came home for a visit she announced her arrival ahead of time and was expected, but today she had not sent any message, and yet here she was, almost arriving at the building. This made Heidi wonder if everything was alright with her sister. She turned to the door and headed out to meet Teresa, shouting the unexpected news to her mom in the backyard.

'Good Lord, Teresa, what a surprise! Let me hug you sis. Mom and dad will be in shock seeing you here all of a sudden!' Heidi said, jumping the stairs two at a time to meet her sister.

'Heidi, I'm so happy to see you! But not so happy to be home. I'll explain later. Where are the others?'

'Mom and dad are at home. Johan is helping the farmer up on the hill to make hay for the winter. Louisa must be downstairs at the neighbor's place playing with their daughter. Let's get inside, and I'm all ears.'

'Teresa!' her mother exclaimed 'What on Earth are you doing at home? Are you all right? What happened? Frantz, Frantz, your daughter came home, can you believe it?' Josephina Souisa hugged her older child, her heart pounding in her chest.

Frantz came out of his shop to greet his daughter. He was happy to see Teresa, and at the thought that, once more, the whole family was together. Many families were facing the hardship of seeing their older children leaving home, having to join the army. Traisen had begun to lose its younger generation, not knowing how many of the departed would have the chance to return. In many houses parents were sad and lonely, and, knowing this, Frantz felt lucky that once again they were all under the same roof.

'It is good to see you. I feel better already,' Theresa said.

'What do you mean you feel better? Are you sick?' Heidi asked.

'Let's sit, shall we? Give the girl some space and something to eat, Josie. Heidi, please go and ask Louisa to come home. She has to welcome Theresa,' Frantz said, and Heidi disappeared through the door in a hurry, eager not to miss any of the details of her sister's unexpected return home.

Over a frugal snack consisting of a cup of yogurt and a piece of bread, her family gathered around the kitchen table, Teresa begun to talk about the events that had brought her home.

Her employment at the castle was good and she learnt a lot. She was doing what she liked most, and she became a chef assistant. Her skills were recognized by the Hoiu family. She was diligent, and dedicated to her profession. Work was tiring, but rewarding. Furthermore, in the last six months she fell in love. Hans Ellis, the young man in charge of Grof Hoiu's stables, had had an eye for her from the first day of his job. When he came into the marble floored kitchen to get a glass of water and saw Teresa, he spilled the water all over himself. Teresa smiled, trying hard not to laugh at him, and gave him a napkin. He was a tough man, and being sloppy was out of his character. It must have been love at first sight, and it was mutual. Teresa and Hans became an item, and spent all their free time together. Hans was twenty two, one year older than she was. He had not been called to army duty yet as, having an ill mother, three younger siblings, and no father at home, he was the only bread winner in the family. He was from Krems, on the other side of the Danube. From February to June Teresa had a good time, wrapped up in her romance and content with her work. She was not overly worried about the war, since she knew that her family was safe, and nobody close to her was in immediate danger.

Then she felt the pain in her legs, followed by the swelling. At first she did not pay much attention and tried to ignore the signals which her body was sending. Two weeks later the pain intensified, and Grof Hoiu's doctor sent her to the hospital in St. Polten. They investigated her condition and diagnosed her with chronic venous insufficiency. The recommendation was to go to a

sanatorium to recover, and not to stand for more than a few minutes at a time. The truth was that standing for ten hours a day on the cold marble floor in the kitchen had brought upon the illness in the first place. She was told to get another job that would not require as much standing on her feet. The three weeks spent in the sanatorium did her good physically, but tore into her soul. Quitting Hoiu Castle meant quitting a career that she loved, and also leaving Hans, the man she loved. The Hoiu family was sad that Teresa had to be let go: they were fond of her and wished her the best, but, for her own well-being, she had to go. Hans, on the other hand, could not accept seeing her leave so easily. He was concerned about her health, and wanted her to get well, but her having to go home made him very sad. It looked like he was going to lose her, and all his dreams for a future together with her broke into a million pieces. Teresa was as upset about the situation as he was. Finally, a week before she had to leave, Hans proposed to her. It was a beautiful moment, in which they promised one another undying love and decided that when the war ended they would find each other and get married. All they could do for now was to have faith that they, and their love, would survive. It was more like an agreement than an engagement, but that was all they could do to soften the separation. Of course, Teresa was concerned about the fact that he might have to go to the army after all if Hitler needed more troops. She hoped that one day he would come and find her in Traisen, and that they would then be together until death. The day she left the castle was bitter-sweet for both of them.

Now here she was, at home with her family, and she could not even be happy about it. Her heart was where Hans Ellis was, and was hurting.

Teresa told everyone about her illness, but left out her love story with Hans. Her mother had tears in her eyes, her father tried to encourage her, Louisa did not understand much, and Heidi thought that it was ill-fate that both of them had gotten sick and had to come home when they would have rather had stayed and kept their jobs.

Later in the evening Johan came home and was surprised to see his older sister. He was happy about it, but he was too tired to notice that everybody was sad.

When they went to bed and the lights went off, Heidi, whose intuition made her think that Teresa had kept something secret, asked her sister if there was more to the story that she had already told her parents. It was then that her sister started to cry quietly and tell her all about Hans. Heidi embraced her sister, held her tightly until the tears dried on her face, and both fell asleep wishing for better dreams.

The next few weeks flew by. On the Eastern front, the German Army approached Stalingrad and the fighting intensified. The news became more and more frightening. What they gained in distance, they lost in numbers. The casualties were never revealed, but, from the letters that sporadically came from the eastern front, people knew that a lot of soldiers had perished or been taken hostage. In Western Europe the Allied Army won and lost by turns, and it looked like victory was still far from their grasp. The war spread to North Africa, too: the British Army was involved in some battles in Morocco, while the battle of Malta claimed a lot of lives.

Heidi and Teresa found out that they had to report to the Unemployment Office on September 1st. The sisters smelled trouble and could not decide whether to be afraid or angry about the appointment.

‘Teresa, what do you think is going to happen when we go there?’ Heidi asked her sister. ‘It is strange that we both have to go at the same time. I have been able to avoid all these appointments for the last two months. I think that some spy must have turned us in once you showed up at home. People are so submissive to the German occupation these days. It makes me sick just thinking of it.’

‘I can tell you that we should be prepared for the worst when we go to that office. I heard that near St. Polten they started to enroll young women into the army. It sounds like Hitler also has

a plan to take boys as young as fourteen or fifteen and train them for the army,' Teresa said while she combed her hair.

'Good Lord sis, don't tell me that Johan is in possible danger too! Mom and dad would be devastated if he has to go to the army. Besides, they need him here for help,' Heidi added with horror.

'It's quite possible, unfortunately. But let's not become paranoid just yet. Tomorrow we will go there and keep our cool and see what happens. I am as scared as you are, but we cannot change our destiny. Ever since I left Grof Hoiu's castle I feel like my life has no meaning anymore. I had to give up on all that mattered to me, and this stupid war is going to kill us.' Tears filled Teresa's eyes, and she turned away and left the room. Heidi knew that her sister was very depressed, and was suffering because she missed Hans so much. She saw that Teresa slept with Hans's picture under the pillow. Sometimes, at night, she heard her crying silently. Love must be full of trouble, Heidi thought, judging by the look of Teresa. Her sister was twenty one years old, and this was her first love. When Teresa showed her Hans's picture, Heidi admitted that he was handsome, and that he had a very profound look on his face. But that was all she noticed, and her heart did not skip a beat, nor was she jealous of her sister. If love makes you feel so miserable, she was not in a hurry to find it. If anything, she felt sorry for Teresa and her unhappiness.

'Tomorrow, when you go to Town Hall, be careful what you say, and you better not express any opinion about the war. Try not to argue with people over there,' Frantz Souisa advised Heidi. 'Your sister is so angry about everything and I'm afraid her big mouth will get her in trouble. I tried to explain this to her, but all she does is turn around and run out of the room in a storm to avoid any conversation. I really do not think that her illness could have made her so sour. Whatever it is, tell her that there is no point in making the matter worse than it already is, and she should control herself and behave. Heidi, I trust you. You always have been more like myself, and I know that your judgment is solid, so please take care of your sister, even though it should be the other way around.'

'Yes Dad, I will. Please don't worry too much about tomorrow. It must be a visit like I had in the past. Nothing out of the ordinary. Do you want something from the garden, or I should go and pick up some apples from the apple tree and bring to you?' Heidi offered, trying to sound casual, to assure her father that everything was going to be all right. At that moment her mother came in, dragging Louisa by her hand and arguing with her about not helping around the house and spending all her time at the neighbors'. That ended the conversation between Heidi and her father, and Louisa's high pitch voice protesting against her mother's argument, filled the house. Frantz turned and went to his working room, feeling outnumbered by the women in his family. It seemed certain that the oldest and the youngest daughters were going through a crisis. God help them all.

The next morning it was raining. The sky was gray; a crisp wind was blowing through the valley. It looked like autumn would be coming sooner than expected. Heidi and Teresa were getting ready for the appointment. The breakfast that Josephine put on the table for all of them did not appeal much to the older girls. Johan and Louisa, having a good appetite, devoured the leftovers. There was tension in the air, but nobody dared to say anything about it. The weather did not help the mood, but rather mirrored it.

Heidi was wearing a dark blue dress that had seen better days, and was thinking about putting her rain coat on. A pair of brown shoes completed her modest outfit. Teresa had on a black skirt paired with a white knitted blouse, and looked very stylish. She had gotten some good quality clothes from Mrs. Hoiu when she left the castle. The lady had liked her and admired her skills, and wanted to give her a gift expressing her gratitude when she had to leave. Teresa's shoes were worn out, but her father polished them the night before and she looked pretty from head to toe. Teresa's appearance was a complete contrast with the way she felt inside. Heidi, on the other hand, was in an optimistic mood, not letting the nervousness take over her.

When they left the house, rushing under the rain, Frantz watched from the window and said a silent prayer. Who knows what will come their way? He thought.

The Unemployment Office at the Town Hall had a waiting room painted in a dark shade of gray, and five old chairs, each a different style. The floor was wet from the imprints of the shoes of people coming in from the rain. There were only a couple of middle age women waiting to get in. The Souisa sisters entered the building, shaking the water off their raincoats. After greeting the two women, they sat down on two of the remaining three squeaky chairs. It was a bit early. Good. They had time to catch their breaths, thought Heidi. But then, all of a sudden, the office door opened and their names were called out. Taken by surprise, both girls jumped up from their chairs, looked at each other and then slowly walked toward the open door.

Inside the office where before there had been only two civil servants, they were now joined by an additional army officer. Not a good sign, Heidi thought.

‘Good Morning,’ Heidi said, entering followed by Teresa.

‘Are you Teresa and Heidi Souisa?’ one of the workers asked without greeting them.

Not knowing which of them should answer first, both started to speak at the same time, and suddenly stopped to give one another the turn to respond.

‘Since when have you been out of work? Do you know that our society cannot support lazy people hanging around doing nothing? What is the reason you are out of work?’ the other man asked in an authoritarian voice.

Heidi looked at him asking herself who was supposed to answer first, and which question. Teresa was panting, shocked by the implicit accusations of laziness and irresponsibility. She looked at the German officer and saw that he was taking notes.

The silence started to feel uncomfortable, and the tension in the room could be cut with a knife.

Finally, Heidi regained her composure and spoke for both.

‘I am Heidi Souisa and this is my older sister Teresa Souisa.’ Saying their last name, her father’s image came into her mind and gave her strength. The sense of belonging felt good.

‘Both of us are currently out of work due to illness. Both of us were employed before and worked for well respected households, I in Vienna and my sister near Krems, at Rosenberg Castle. I had a bad tooth abscess that took a long time to heal, and my sister was treated for chronic venous insufficiency in a sanatorium in St. Polten. She was advised not to work in any job that requires standing for long periods of time. Her legs were badly swollen at that time. She came home a few weeks ago. In the mean time we have been helping around the house and assisting one of the farmers up on the hill. Neither of us is lazy. We are good citizens.’ Heidi went on with pride.

Teresa looked at Heidi, realizing that her sister was talking for both of them while she was not able to say a word, shaken by the rudeness of the man. She felt like screaming and running out of the office, but her feet would not move.

The officer then looked at them for the first time since they had walked in the office and asked the sisters their ages. ‘I’m seventeen, and . . .’ Heidi started to answer.

‘I’m twenty one.’ Teresa continued, speaking for the first time in the meeting.

The officer took some notes again, and exchanged a glance with the other two men. Then, one of the civil workers said:

‘You will receive a letter from our office within a few days with our decision regarding your eligibility to unemployment benefits. You may both go now.’ Then he looked down at his papers, and waited for the girls to exit the room.

Heidi was surprised by this conclusion, and for a moment did not know if she should say thank you, good-bye or just leave the room without a word.

She heard Teresa saying ‘We will be waiting for your letter. Good-bye now.’ and turned toward her, took her by hand and headed to the door. Heidi followed without a word, nodding to her sister.

Back in the waiting room, when the door closed behind them, they paused for a moment and looked at each in silence. What was that all about? The meeting was brief, confusing and intimidating. It was not good news at all.

On the way home neither of them spoke, and neither noticed that it had stopped raining. They were both deeply immersed in their own thoughts.

Once they arrived home the anger erupted like fireworks. How dared they call them lazy, and treat them with such disrespect? And the German officer, what was he writing down? Heidi’s intuition told her that the letter they had mentioned would bring bad news, and by that she did not mean only that the unemployment benefit would be cut off. It may be more than that to it.

Frantz and his wife listened to the girls’ complaints without saying a word, trying to make sense of the heated conversation between them. Something had certainly gone wrong, and the consequences would follow. Their father slowly left the room, keeping his opinions to himself. Their mother busied herself with fixing lunch, while Louisa slammed the door on her way to the neighbors’ place. Johan, who stayed home on that rainy day, wanted to find out more, asking questions over the high-pitched voices of his sisters.

‘What do you think their decision will be? Did they tell you how soon the letter will come?’ the boy asked with interest.

‘Can’t you understand that we were not told more than you and I already know? I wish I knew the answers, but I don’t. All I know is that they tried to intimidate us and look down on us.’ Heidi said, knowing that waiting for that damn letter would drive everybody in the family over the edge.

‘Now, I’m going to change my dress, and help dad clean his shop. I’m not going to waste any more time talking about something I have no control over. Teresa, you should help mom in the kitchen and try to relax. Look, the sun is peeking through the clouds. Maybe in the afternoon we can go up to the farmer and help him feed the chickens. That way we can bring home some fresh eggs and a bottle of milk. What do you think, Johan?’

The boy nodded, and then added, mostly to himself:

‘Hopefully the weather will allow us to climb the hill. You know the road to the farm must be muddy after the rain, and you can hardly walk without slipping down the slope. We need our rubber boots.’

For the next three days Heidi and Teresa busied themselves with any task around the house in order to distract themselves from the awful uncertainty of waiting. On September 5th, the mailman knocked on the door to deliver two letters. Both bore the stamp of the Third Reich. One had Teresa’s name on it, and the other Heidi’s. Frantz took them, thanked the postman and looked at the envelopes for a long time, before turning to find his daughters staring at him.

‘Here you go, you have mail!’ Frantz said, giving each of them a letter and then pulling up a chair and sitting down.

Teresa took a deep breath and opened the envelope. Unfolding the paper, she looked at her father and started to read loudly.

“To: Teresa Souisa,

This is to inform you that on October 1st, 1942 at 10am you shall report to the General Department of the Third Reich in Vienna to enroll into the glorious German Army. At that time you will be informed about your duty and the detachment you are to join. Until that date you must notify us of any changes that may occur in your health and location.

This is an order from the Third Reich, and disobedience will be prosecuted.

Colonel Rudolf Weise.”

When she finished reading, she looked around the room. Her mother had tears in her eyes and her hand pressed to her chest. Her father was looking down at the floor, and Heidi was staring at her in disbelief. None of them spoke for a while. It was as if the room was a scene cut out of a silent movie with a broken sound track.

‘Now, Heidi, it’s your turn to read your letter,’ Frantz said at last.

Heidi started to tear off the envelope, took out the letter and unfolded it. She quickly scanned the content and said:

‘It says exactly the same thing, only it’s addressed to me.’

‘October 1st is only three weeks and three days away. Dear Lord, this is terrible news!’ Josephina managed to say in horror, tears streaming down her face.

Frantz Souisa pushed the chair and got up. This was much worse than he had anticipated. He had a feeling there was a good chance that Teresa would be sent to the army, but, good Lord, now they called Heidi too? She was only seventeen years old. What was Hitler doing, taking children out of their family’s nest and throwing them into war? This was outrageous. The whole thing saddened Frantz to no end. The First World War had been bad enough but this one was complete insanity. He was getting old and his health was not too good, and he needed help around the house, now when two of his children were due to enroll in the Army. He had to do something about it, but what?

The next few days went by quickly. The neighbors found out about the Souisa girls’ call up, and so did the farmer on the hill. Everybody who knew them was concerned about their safety and their future. People come together during challenging times, and many tried to give the girls advice or to comfort the parents.

One morning, Frantz Souisa asked Heidi to give him the letter she had received, an envelope and a blank sheet of paper. When she had done so, he sat down at the kitchen table and started to write. Heidi looked at her father, and without a word sat down at the table too.

‘I’m writing back to the S.S. Office in St. Polten. If you have to join the army, the least I can ask them is to keep you with your sister. Teresa is older, and can look after you with her good judgment, and you can look after her too. Together you have a better chance of handling whatever comes your way. If they will do me this small favor, it will serve as some relief in this awful situation that we have to accept,’ Frantz said to Heidi, and then continued to write. When he had finished he sent Heidi to the post office to mail it.

Heidi took the letter and, on the way out, almost collided with Teresa, who had spent the whole morning in the bedroom. Heidi was surprised to see her ready to go out instead of helping their mother around the house. The two sisters headed down the stairs toward the street. Once outside the iron gate, Heidi said:

‘Where are you going? You almost locked yourself in the bedroom all morning. We will be gone in no time and mom and dad are so upset, and it seems like you are living on another planet. They are so concerned about our departure. You should be more sensitive and try to be there for our parents, and Johan, and Louisa.’

Teresa looked at Heidi, and tears flickered in her eyes.

‘I know I should concentrate more on our family, but I wish you could understand how hard it is to have to go into the army for me. I spent the morning writing a letter to Hans so that he will know what is happening with me, and find a way to keep in touch. I’m going to the post office now to mail it.’

‘Teresa, I wish I understood you better, but it looks to me that all you think about is Hans instead of focusing on our future and the uncertain times that lie ahead for us. I’m going to the post office too, but the letter I have to mail is written by dad, and addressed to the SS Office.’

‘What? Are you serious?’ Teresa asked in disbelief.

‘Yes, sis. He is asking them to keep you and me together wherever they will send us. He is very concerned about our well-being and all the dangers that await us. He wants to make sure that we will be able to look after one another and that at the end of this stupid war we both come home safe and sound. Please make an effort and be gentle with our parents. Help support the family in the short time that we have left before October 1st.’

Ashamed, Teresa put an arm around Heidi’s narrow shoulders and squeezed her gently. She would mail the letter to Hans, but she was determined from then on to treasure her family and their time together. She would take care of her sister and assume the protective role of an oldest sibling. Her family deserved it, and she was part of her family. Yes, she would prove her loving and caring attitude, because she loved her family very much. Yes, Hans would have to take second place in her heart, where he belongs.

On the way home from the post office, Teresa was preoccupied by what had to be done before their departure, full of constructive ideas about how to handle their enrolment and what would be the best approach for military life.

Heidi was glad to notice that, for the first time since coming home from Rosenberg Castle, her sister was behaving normally and responsibly. She finally had her sister back. It was a bitter-sweet revelation, but if they stuck together, and the Good Lord helped them, maybe there was a chance for all of them to make it through.