



## **Im Engsten Familien-Kreis**

*With Just My Immediate Family*



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## Prologue

Treading through the thick mud that had enveloped the concentration camp, Kurt stopped and looked at the lines of Jews being driven toward the sterilisation room. He trembled as he clenched his gun, fearing the inevitable and wondering whether his family was among the masses herded together before him.

He remembered how peaceful life had once been in Czechoslovakia, carefree as he and his brother had skied down the mountains. His sister, Elsa, would have been seven by now, he thought, although he couldn't be sure because he had only known her for a month before he had been forced to leave them.

A young Jewish girl fell to her knees in despair and begged for her life. Her hair was like straw and her face bony, though clearly she had once been beautiful. Kurt felt the anguish increase as he knew the outcome of leaving the lines. A bullet pierced her head and she fell at Kurt's feet. He turned to face the Sergeant who had shot her.

"Schnell!" the Sergeant shouted at the Jews. The soldiers shoved the Jewish women into the room for their regular shower. The Jews stripped down to their bare skin and shivered shamefully into the room they had seen so many times. And waited for the water that never came...

The room filled with gas. They screamed and hit the doors with their fists as it stung their throats, they coughed continuously and violently. People began to fall, as others pushed past them in a panic to get to the sealed door. There was no oxygen. All that they could breathe was toxic gas. Kurt watched wanting to turn away but the

temptation of observing through the window in the door was too great. He recognised a couple of the individuals, as they struggled to stay standing and fight for their lives.

## Chapter One- Gisela in Dietenheim

14/ 11/ 1943

*Dear Winnie,*

*It seems as though it was just yesterday we were running in the woods around Dietenheim. Mother talks of you often. You, her long lost niece. Why were you, of all people, forced to leave our town?*

*I can't complain too much, though, as we were the lucky ones who stayed. Uncle Anton was conscripted as a cook on the Russian front a week ago. It was so sad to see him go, but apparently the war there is not going too well. Our town is piece by piece being stripped from us.*

*The curfew is now 7pm. After that we're liable to be arrested. We can't take much more bombing. Night after night we are screaming, running to shelters while the British planes fly overhead. The sirens blare, but too late for many. The planes swoop down and machine guns fire at our people fleeing for the forest.*

*Our family has been taking shelter in the hotel cellar across the street from our house. The doors are bolted shut, but still shake from the impact of the bombs. Scared out of my mind, I always try to hold them closed myself, even after they're bolted, as though anything I did could protect us from the chaos outside! Everyone just laughs at me.*

*Say hello to uncle and aunty for me. Please write soon and let me know if you're well and coping with living in Ulm.*

*Love always  
Gisela  
xxxx*

Gisela wondered what life would have been like had her father been forced to leave

Dietenheim to aid the war effort. Her father was one of three boot makers that had a business in the town. Through the harsh conditions of war only one man of any profession was allowed to stay. The rest were sent to help the army or assist towns in need of their skills. No one was given a choice: the army chose for you. Winnie's father was a boot maker too, one of the ones sent to Ulm.

Ulm was a precarious place filled with factories that were regularly targeted by the enemy planes. When Dietenheim was bombed it was because it had been mistaken for Ulm and therefore the need for lights out curfew. Gisela's family, the Switzers, always had their lights out by seven, but improvised with candles.

"Gisela, dinner's ready," her mother Eva shouted.

"Where's father, isn't he joining us for dinner?" Gisela asked coming down the stairs.

"You know father's got to work back to get enough food on the table," Eva responded.

Wolfgang, Gisela's father, had a deal with the French farmers just beyond the borders of Dietenheim. Wolfgang provided the farmers with much needed boots and in return received good quantities of food. The French farmers often traded their boots for their needs even prior to the war.

"What have you been doing upstairs all this time?" Eva said.

"Writing to Winnie. I miss her so much."

"Give it to me once we've finished dinner and I'll post it tomorrow," Eva always went out of her way to please Gisela.

Gisela ate her dinner quickly, rushed upstairs two at a time and came back down with the letter.

"Can you do me a favour?" Eva pleaded. It was the same question every time at this

time of night. "Can you go upstairs and watch out for the nazi spies?"

Gisela dashed upstairs again and peered out the window as Eva turned on the radio.

She heard a heavy American accent say, "Rise up with us, join us and together we can defeat Hitler."

Just then the front door opened. Gisela's blood froze with fear. Had a nazi been eavesdropping and heard the propaganda Eva was listening to? Hitler had banned these broadcasts and condemned those who continued to listen. Eva had been listening to them for the duration of the war and hadn't been caught so far. Gisela hadn't seen the soldiers enter the street, let alone arrive at their doorstep. Her mother was going to jail...

But it was just her father coming home. Wolfgang usually knocked and waited for Eva or Gisela to answer the door. Tonight Wolfgang had taken them by surprise.

Gisela's mother might almost have preferred a nazi to have burst through the front door and drag her out of the house and into a prison rather than listen to another lecture from her husband.

Upstairs, Gisela listened to their conversation. Her father was a quiet man and her mother was outspoken and despised Hitler. Gisela's father wanted no part of Hitler's ambitions, and knew that Hitler's tyranny would soon be over.

"You know it's forbidden to listen to rebel radio stations, Eva," Wolfgang said. Eva started, jumped and turned off the radio. "The war is not over. You still have to follow Hitler's rules."

"I don't care. The Fuhrer isn't taking away my freedom of choice," she retaliated.

"Fine, but don't ask for my assistance if the nazis break down the front door," he shrugged. "The trade went well!" he threw his bag onto the kitchen bench with a bang. "Three pairs of boots for all this food. Lucky these French are so close and

associate with the enemy.”

“They know you’re not enemy, dear, they have traded with you for many years. I just worry every time you leave that you won’t make it back home. Your trading is just as much a crime as my listening to the American broadcasts,” Eva said.

“I know. But food isn’t optional and there is no way Gisela can live on our rations. Anyway, where is Gisela?” Wolfgang said.

“Upstairs looking out for nazi spies, of course,” said Eva.

Wolfgang walked over to sit in his single seater chair. It was positioned in the corner of the lounge room and sagged from over use. He fell onto it and moved around until he found a comfortable position. Wolfgang had vivid memories of the First World War which also had ended tragically for Germany. The war placed Germany into a long depression that he had long feared would reoccur as a result of Hitler’s ambitions. The war had taken a dramatic turn over the past months supporting Wolfgang’s fear that Germany would once again find itself in financial strife.

Wolfgang’s father had been encouraged to enlist in the army by his own father, “It will be for the glory of Germany,” Wolfgang remembered him say. Wolfgang’s grandfather was a frail old man who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Nevertheless his father went to war and never returned, probably killed by the gas warfare that had been perfected during World War One. His home town was bombed and his mother killed by the debris from a building that had been hit. Wolfgang was placed in an orphanage till he was taken in by a good family. They gave him great opportunities in life but were disappointed when he decided to be a boot maker. The family had higher aspirations for him.

Wolfgang now feared that Gisela might end up in an orphanage too. He continually told himself he wouldn’t let that happen, but in a time of war a person has no firm



control of their fate.

“Gisela, come downstairs and spend some time with your father,” Eva shouted.

Gisela came dashing down the stairs to her father’s open arms. He got up from his chair and gently wrapped his arms around her waist. Lifting her up into the air he spun her around and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, blue eyes and light coloured hair. And Gisela adored him.

“How is my little girl?” he asked gripping her tightly.

“Well, father, I was worried about you, though. Why don’t you come home in the daylight? I don’t want anything to happen to you,” Gisela said. She had witnessed many deaths that would be hard to comprehend for any eleven year old.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me. What gave you such an idea?” scoffed Wolfgang.

“Girls at school were saying that we are going to lose the war and the Americans are going to kill all the German men,” Gisela’s eyes filled with tears.

“ShhhhShhhh. Nothing is going to happen to me. I think you’re a bit tired. Do you want me to take you off to bed?” Wolfgang said. The only answer was a mute nod.

Wolfgang put her down as Gisela gave a playful yelp and ran up the stairs with him trying to catch her. He came to a complete stop at her bedroom door before entering her room. He tucked her into bed, gave her another kiss and began to leave.

“I love you, father,” Gisela whispered. “Please don’t go, not until I’m asleep.”

“All right, dear. If only you knew how much I missed you today,” he said. He lay next to her with one arm around her and the other stroking Gisela’s head. “I love you, dear. Everything will be all right, you just need some rest.”

Eva was at the door. It was a scene she had witnessed so many times since the war began. It had brought the pair so close together. Slowly Eva closed the door, said, “Pleasant dreams,” and turned to blow out the last candle.

## Chapter Two- Kurt at Neuengamme

Three men sat speaking in a dark desolate room. The room was damp and the beds small and hard. Kurt felt an obligation to tell his uncle and cousin of his experiences that allowed him to be one of the enemy... a nazi.

“The Czech army opened fire on the nazis. I woke to the sound of screams and relentless automatic fire. The nazis had surrounded the town with a well equipped battalion. I ran to my parents’ bedroom, screaming with fright. My parents led me and carried Fritz and Liesel to the town hall where the villagers could be safe. People I had grown up with were gunned down in front of me as they were trapped in the crossfire.

I had a good view from the town hall where I could see the trucks, a tank and the nazi battalion advance. My father tried to cover my eyes with one hand and pushed me away from the window onto the floor with his other hand. I peered through a bullet hole in the woodwork of the town hall. The nazis stormed the town, slaughtering any Czech who was armed. The remaining Czech soldiers had retreated and barricaded themselves in a ditch only metres from the town hall. Their base was poorly fortified with wooden planks and sand bags.

The nazis hid behind the town hall knowing that the Czechs wouldn’t have shot their own people that were sheltered within it. At the same time the nazis defended the hall with knowledge of Germans inside it. The nazis took shelter behind some of the houses that encircled the Czech base.

The Czechs had begun screaming to one another, “I need more ammunition”. The nazis knew this was their chance to exploit the Czech weakness of having a shortage of ammunition. They threw a volley of grenades in behind the Czech

barricades and charged, firing with their bayonets pointed. The Czech soldiers were in disarray. They quickly scavenged around the dead bodies for ammunition. The nazis stormed the base stabbing anyone who was still alive. Blood shot up into the air. A nazi officer's arm had been sliced off. The bayonets were covered in blood and the confrontation raged on because neither side was willing to surrender.

Wounded Czechs lay on the ground spitting at the Germans who plunged their bayonets into them for the last time. A red hand emerged from behind a sand bag and after it a soldier trying to hoist himself out of the death pit. He was staring straight at me when the blade was plunged into his back and blood poured from his mouth.”

“You’ve been through a lot, Kurt,” Ishmael interrupted. He was Kurt’s cousin who lived in a neighbouring village. “We were lucky. Our town surrendered without a fight. How did you pass as a gentile and enlist in the nazi army?”

“After the massacre the nazis ushered us out of the town hall. The mayor, Mr Heinburg, had to point out every Jew that lived in his town. He was a long standing friend of my father and kept our true identity secret. The Jews were rounded up and transported into Germany somewhere, probably to a concentration camp like this. The people of German descent remained in Sudetenland which was returned to Germany’s boundaries.”

Sudetenland was inhabited by both Jews and Germans. The nazis attacked Sudetenland in order to return it to Germany’s borders. It was here too that the nazis acquired Jews to fill concentration camps and young Germans to be trained for war.

“To keep my family’s identity unknown I was placed in the Hitler Youth, along with other teenagers in my village. We were taught to hate all Jews and how to identify one. I became really close to a boy of pure German blood. He wasn’t influenced by what we were taught and said it was all lies. He got caught ridiculing the concept that

all Jews had big noses and the backs of their heads were flat.”

Ishmael and his father, Isaac, looked at each other in disbelief at the fictitious teachings.

“None of us is like that,” Isaac interrupted.

“I know... Pieter, the boy I was talking about began ridiculing Mr Weimer, our teacher, and turned around to see him peering at him contemptuously. Red faced and filled with anger Mr Weimer dragged him by the ear to the head master who had him placed in isolation and God knows what else. Pieter never spoke of what had happened, but it must have been horrific as he never again stepped an inch out of line. I don't know what Weimer did to Pieter and probably never will. One morning he and I were the only ones showering and he burst into my cubical and I could see he was astonished at the sight of a clipped penis. He didn't shout, run or tell anybody. I told him my experiences feeling that my closest friend had the right to know that I was in fact a Jew. Pieter helped me keep my Jewish side a secret. He was like a big brother to me as he was a year older and much more mature. He would stand outside my shower on guard to make sure no one else would see what he had seen. We finished our training and were sent to different fronts.

“I would like to meet Pieter one day,” Ishmael said. “He sounds wise and has the nerves to ridicule the Germans. What happened to your parents?”

“I haven't seen my parents for many years and I heard of Germany's loss of Sudetenland and the families there were relocated all across Germany.”

“You mean to say that you don't know where your family is?” Uncle Isaac questioned.

“That's right. I was lucky to find you. I have been stationed here for a while and I was in charge of the list of Jews in this section of the camp.”

“Have you located Yeta or Reba?” Isaac said. “I miss Mother and sister so much. At least I could get some sympathy at the end of each long day in the clay mine.”

“You mean...”

The door swung open and a lieutenant stood at attention at the sight of Kurt, “Heil Hitler!” He saluted.

“Heil Hitler,” Kurt responded.

“What are you doing in this room with vermin?” the lieutenant shouted.

“I was told there were valuables in these sleeping quarters, but they appear empty.”

Kurt answered quickly.

“Where are the rest of the occupants?”

“Showering, Lieutenant.”

“Take these swine to the showers immediately!” Then the Lieutenant left the room.

Kurt took them towards the showers which was all too familiar for Isaac and Ishmael.

Kurt treated his uncle and cousin roughly so that he wouldn’t attract any suspicion.

The path was muddy and secluded. The sign “Sterilisation Room” stood out high above the entry doors.

“Get in there,” Kurt muttered.

### Chapter Three- The French Invasion of Dietenheim

“What’s happening mother?” Gisela asked

“Hurry up and get your things. We are leaving,” Eva said in a panic.

They exited their home and were mocked and scorned by the French soldiers who had taken over their house for their own accommodation. Barbed wire surrounded an enclosure the French had placed around the nazi soldiers. The nazi soldiers were praying, hoping they wouldn’t be harmed. Gisela and her mother hurried into Liesel’s house, a long time friend of Eva. There were already three families housed in this three-bedroom cottage. Liesel gladly made room for Eva and Gisela. Anita, Liesel’s daughter, showed Gisela to the kitchen and offered her some food which she declined.

“I’m going to check on Wolfgang. Can you watch Gisela for me?” Eva asked.

“I don’t think you should be wandering the streets alone,” Liesel and the other mothers in the house objected.

“I’ve *got* to check on him!” Eva said.

“We are all worried about our husbands,” Mrs Browne said. She was married to Manfred, the Mayor of Dietenhiem.

“How do you think I feel?” added Mrs Schneider. She had to move to Dietenhiem when her husband, Helmholtz, a soldier in the nazi army, was sent to administer the town. “Now he is locked away like he’s an animal or a Jew.”

“Go if you have to. I’ll look after Gisela,” Liesel said.

Eva nodded, kissed Gisela and left the room. Gisela began to cry when she heard the front door slam shut. The war was too much for a child that had now become a twelve year old. It was her birthday two days ago and she couldn’t play with the doll her parents gave Gisela for her birthday as it was left in their house in the rush.

“Anita, can you prepare a sandwich for Gisela?” Liesel called hugging Gisela. “I

think you're exhausted and need something to eat and a sleep.

Gisela nodded and took a bit out of the sandwich Anita had given her. "It's a great sandwich Anita," Gisela said wiping her tears away. "Thank you, Anita."

There was a knock at the front door.

"Who could that be?" Liesel frowned. "Anita, tell them that the house is full and that we couldn't possibly fit anyone else in."

Anita was very disciplined. She never argued, did exactly as she was told and went to open the door.

"Mother!" Anita yelled.

Liesel ran to the door to see Anita being pushed out of the way by two French soldiers who were followed by another, entering the house as though they owned it. The soldiers hurried the children from the house and kept the three women inside.

"Mother!" Anita shouted. She didn't know what to do.

"Just do as you are told and leave," Liesel said as a soldier lifted the hem of her dress.

The door was slammed shut behind them. The children wandered about the streets going different directions. Anita and Gisela stayed together unsure about what to do.

They tried not to speak of what was happening, which wasn't difficult because they didn't really know what was going on.

"Hello, girls," shouted a nazi soldier peering through the barbed wire.

They tried to ignore him and kept on walking as though they had heard nothing.

"Girls, we just want to talk," another soldier whispered.

Anita dragged Gisela back as she walked towards the enclosure.

"Sorry, if we scared you girls. We just wanted someone to talk to."

"That's all right. We were just evicted from our house," said Gisela. "Sorry we're not really in the mood for talking."

“Move away,” shouted a French soldier.

Anita dragged Gisela back from the wire and towards her house where they sat on the steps outside for an hour.

When the French soldiers emerged from the house they were grinning. “Your mothers are whores,” the first soldier said.

“They moaned and cried like whores,” said the second soldier. The third had his head bowed down in disgrace for what he had done. He was the only one with any remorse. The girls had jumped to attention to get out of their way and then went back into the house to see Liesel on the kitchen floor crying, “Go upstairs girls.”

The girls could hear Mrs Browne and Mrs Schneider crying with their heads submerged beneath their pillows to hide the humiliation. Anita wept herself to sleep while Gisela decided to write another letter to Winnie when things had finally become silent.

22/3/1944

*Dear Winnie,*

*I'm beginning to get very worried about you. I've received no response from you. Is everything all right? Have you received any of my letters? I know there have been mail problems during this time of despair, but I haven't received letters from you for at least six months.*

*Dietenheim is in turmoil at the moment. Our soldiers haven't received orders for months on end. There are rumours circulating that believe Hitler is dead. That's what mother and father have been saying lately. Our town was taken over by the French today and they occupy our home. I'm living at Anita's house. You remember her don't you? She went to school with us.*

*The war I hope will be over soon and we can see each other everyday again for the*



*rest of our lives. If you receive this letter please write back soon. I'm so very worried about you, just let me know if your are safe.*

*Love always  
Gisela  
xxxx*

Wolfgang entered the house with Eva as the sun set. They had both heard what had happened to Liesel through the gossip of the town's people. They entered the kitchen whilst Gisela crept down the stairs.

"I'm so sorry. I should have been here for you," Eva sadly added.

Liesel said nothing. She just sat on the kitchen stool mourning, as Eva wrapped her arms around her.

"There was nothing you could have done," Liesel added. "You would have been raped as well." They cried. "I'm sorry you had to see me like this Wolfgang. Gisela's upstairs if you want to see her."

"Raped?" Gisela thought. What's rape? Is that what had happened to Liesel, Mrs Browne and Mrs Schneider? Was this a bad thing? The whole concept of war was becoming more of a blur for Gisela. Her thoughts of war had changed dramatically now that it had moved closer to home as opposed to distant fronts.

"Thank you Liesel. You are a great person for taking us in like this... and I'm sorry about the incident," Wolfgang said in his deep voice.

Wolfgang left the kitchen and saw a pair of feet scamper up the stairs. Wolfgang paced himself up the stairs closing the gap on her. Gisela dived into their bed and covered herself in the blankets. Wolfgang lit a candle wick allowing light to flow through the room.

"Good evening," he said. "A little late to be playing chasings isn't it?"

"Sorry father I wanted to see you before I went to bed," Gisela answered.

“I’m glad you waited up. I’ve got you a present,” Wolfgang proudly announced. Gisela’s eyes glowed as Wolfgang handed Gisela her favourite doll, the one she had received for her birthday. In the other hand he held some chocolate for Gisela and Anita. Wolfgang had traded boots for the doll and chocolate. Gisela rose from the blankets and hugged her father.

Eva entered the room. “Are you ready for bed yet?” Eva saw the doll and smiled at her husband. “You spoil Gisela with chocolate far too often!”

“Just a reward for being such a good girl,” Wolfgang said smiling.

“Mother can you post that letter to Winnie tomorrow,” Gisela asked with hopeful eyes.

“Sure I will,” Eva answered. “Anything for you precious.” Eva too had realised that Winnie hadn’t replied to Gisela’s letters for a while. Eva thought the worst, but was satisfied with the mail being delayed.

Eva blew out the candle that Wolfgang had just lit and got into the bed with Gisela and Wolfgang. Wolfgang didn’t dismiss the idea of his brother, Karl, Winnie’s father, having been killed during the war. Ulm was a perilous place and that could explain Gisela’s letters lacking a response.

“It’s a cold night tonight! We best sleep close for body warmth,” Wolfgang suggested as he peered down to see Gisela fast asleep on his chest.

The Switzer family remained close even in these harsh conditions as they all snuggled in just one bed whilst the French soldiers shot a few rounds of bullets in the distance.

It seemed that the effects of war had only drawn this family closer together and appeared as though nothing could tear them part.

## Chapter Four- The Deaths at Neuengamme

Kurt sat in absolute silence. He peered down the long tables critically analysing the soldiers as they shovelled food into their mouths. The food did not appeal. Kurt had lost his appetite seeing bony Jews dying everyday dying of starvation and malnutrition. Most of the Jews were healthy when they had first arrived. Now horror stricken and helpless they scavenge around looking for thrown away food. The Jews constantly beg the nazis for some food before the guard on duty aims his automatic gun and fires. The guards at the concentration camps had not participated on the battlefield and shooting the odd Jew they thought was their contribution to the war. Kurt peered down to see a blood stain on his jacket that belonged to a starving Jew who had begged for food. Kurt's heart sank as he realised that Jew was now dead. "Kurt, you hear about those Jewish whores today?" asked Reinhold, one of the Lieutenants in the SS guard.

"No, what happened?" Kurt responded.

"The word from Hitler was to exterminate all the Jews," Reinhold said, eager to tell his story. "We took about a thousand of the swine into the blistering cold and the thick mud for kilometres and kilometres. The weaker Jews began fall to the ground dead as others broke the lines and attacked our soldiers. We had to shoot half of them before they ceased to charge. Then we shot the rest because they would have slowed our journey back. And we were following Hitler's orders."

Carl laughed in hysterics, "One of them even bit my arm," raising his arm to show the mark. "Worthless animals, those Jews. I'll gladly kill a few more before the war is finished."

"We're evacuating tomorrow," added Reinhold. "Don't worry you'll get to shoot some Jews tomorrow before we go. We are all going to have to divide ourselves

amongst villages in northern Germany so that our enemies don't capture us."

Kurt felt a huge sting in his chest and Reinhold noticed Kurt grip his chest. "Are you alright Kurt?" he asked sympathetically.

"Just need some rest," Kurt answered rising from his chair to leave the eating quarters. Kurt's sleeping quarters were to the right, but he went to the left. It was feeding time... that meant most of the Nazis were eating. This made it simple for Kurt to tell a couple of guards a short story in order to have a bit of time with his immediate family.

Kurt entered the room and the Jewish inhabitant's of this cabin all looked dead. They hardly moved from their beds- planks of wood. Kurt looked at the faces, trying to find Isaac. One of the bodies was clearly dead. His face skinny and looking somewhat squashed.

"He died some weeks ago," said Uncle Isaac, revealing himself from a darkened corner. "Ishmael is over here but he's in a bad state. We haven't eaten in a week and have been forced to work in the clay mines."

Kurt pulled a bread roll from his warm jacket and handed it to Ishmael. Ishmael tried to thank Kurt but didn't have the energy. Ishmael barely had the strength to bite the roll let alone chew it. This brought tears to Kurt's eyes to see his family members like this. Kurt had a closer look at Ishmael's face and mouth. Ishmael's chin was covered in dry blood.

"The nazis brutally beat him yesterday for not working fast enough," said Isaac sniffing and a tear running down his face. "They knocked out most of his front teeth. They laughed about it. A few Jews tried to help him but it was useless... they were gunned down before us."

It made Kurt wonder if his parents were here or in a place like this. Kurt couldn't have been sure that they weren't amongst the ninety thousand Jews incarcerated in Neuengamme. Then it happened... his feelings commanded him as he broke out into a hurtful cry. Isaac hugged him trying to comfort him. This was the first time Kurt had cried through all his experiences throughout the war. Kurt had to stay strong during his time in the Hitler Youth to keep his family safe. He had kept it all inside to show the nazis he had no sympathy for the worthless Jews. It was not until this night where he could let out his true feelings with Isaac like a father figure.

"There's nothing I can do Isaac, I'm but one man," Kurt said still crying. "There is so much hate in the world and we are hated most. They are going to kill us all."

"When," Isaac asked.

"Tomorrow. A thousand women were killed today. The chances of it being Yeta and Reba are quite slim, but they may be executed when the nazis evacuate the camp tomorrow. If you and Ishmael hide under a bed you may escape death."

Isaac realising his destiny said, "I'm a Jew who still has his dignity. I was once a doctor. Look at me now. My son is a very intelligent young man, my daughter a beautiful girl and my wife... if only I could hold her again."

"There's still hope," Kurt added as another tear fell.

Isaac mopped up Kurt's tears with his index finger and said, "You brought us hope everyday. You've brought us food. You've shown us how family can prevail in even the worst of situations. I'm a proud uncle to have seen you grow up into such a brave and honourable man."

"I'm going to have to go," Kurt said tragically. "The guards at the gate will become suspicious if I don't. I will treasure this moment forever."

"Tell no one of your knowledge of us being here," Isaac said looking at his Ishmael's

worn face. "I don't want your father to know we died under these horrendous and humiliating conditions."

"They too may be in these conditions," Kurt added sadly.

"They are far from this place, they are safe and warm... I know they are," said Isaac.

Kurt thought that he must have been hallucinating from lack of food and water.

Kurt kissed Isaac on the forehead and gave Isaac a huge hug that he wished never ended. Ishmael by this stage had fallen asleep exhausted.

Kurt hoisted the dead Jew's body he had found on his way into the cabin over his shoulder and carried him out of the cabin. The guard from the gate approached Kurt.

"Drop that filth," the guard stated. "That is a Jew's job."

"They're all beyond work in that cabin," Kurt said.

The nazi soldier pulled the body from his shoulders and entered the cabin. Isaac was still standing upright as the guard called to him.

"Carry that body over to the pit," the guard shouted.

Isaac lifted the body and staggered towards the huge pit of dead bodies. The guard escorted Isaac and said goodnight to Kurt. Kurt watched from a distance as Isaac fell to his knees with the weight of the body. Isaac stood once more after being kicked and abused by the guard. Approaching the pit Kurt turned and paced towards his sleeping quarters. There was a single gunshot and then silence.

## Chapter Five- The Americans Advance

The ground began to shake and the Germans looked at one another confused as the French left the town. The Americans were advancing and heading north.

Eva wrapped her arms around Gisela, “Don’t worry darling, everything will be alright.”

The tanks came one after another and heavily armed. Gisela intensely watched as the steel tracks rotated, with the wheels leaving huge indents in the dirt. They continued through the town and exited on the other side of Dietenheim. Infantry followed them in countless numbers, but a small pack broke off and made themselves at home in the village.

“Move back inside,” an American shouted in German. Without a quarrel the Germans went back into their houses mildly frightened...

Gisela went on a stroll the next morning to see if any mail had arrived. This was not common practise for Gisela as she usually went with Eva. Her mother was fast asleep and Gisela didn’t want to wake her.

“Good morning again, young girl,” said the nazi prisoner whom had Gisela met a few weeks ago. “We were wondering whether or not you would come back. Erwin didn’t think you would, but I kept faith in your return.”

“What is your name?” Gisela inquired.

“Marc,” he answered.

“How are they treating you?” Gisela said, sounding very perturbed.

“Fine. We are all fine. The Americans are treating us better than those worthless French,” Marc stated bitterly. “I didn’t even want to be part of this wretched war. I was forced to enlist by my school and family. Look how I’ve wound up. Behind wire,

for Hitler's cause." Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a chocolate. "Here, eat this," Marc offered.

"I must decline. It wouldn't be right," Gisela retorted.

"Take it," Marc insisted. "I don't eat chocolate. You take it."

"Thank you," Gisela said taking the chocolate. "I best be off..."

"Move away," shouted a Negro soldier. Gisela hadn't seen a Negro before. She stared momentarily wondering what he was.

"Get out of here," the Negro said again, pulling out his baton. At this Gisela ran off.

Gisela approached the mail office and, to her surprise the Americans had made it their home. She now realised why the mail had taken so long... the mail bags were in countless numbers. The French must have been storing them as well, Gisela thought. One of the doors had "closed" written on it and the other was wide open. Gisela went to the window down the side of the post office and could hear voices.

"Thomas, you learnt German at school, didn't you?" one of the American soldiers said.

"Yeah. Why Nick?" Thomas wondered.

"Read this letter for me," Nick requested.

"Righto," Thomas agreed. "Dear Gisela, I am sorry I have to inform you" he said in German as he translated it and repeated the English version.

Gisela, hearing her name, instantly knew the letter was for her. In her rage she picked up a rock and threw it through a window of the local bakery across the street. The soldiers jumped to their feet and went to see what the commotion was about. Gisela climbed through the side window of the post office and grabbed the letter from the



table and exited through the back door. She found a tree to sit under and began to read the letter.

7/5/1944

*Dear Gisela,*

*I'm sorry to inform you that Winnie is no longer with us. She and my wife were at the house while I was out getting our rations. Our house along with many others was bombed a few months back.*

*I have been mourning them for this time. I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, but I have found it so hard to cope without my loved ones and my immediate family.*

*It has made me think how wrong Hitler was to wage war. He obviously would have thought the war would have been fought on the fronts far away from civilians. Instead it has been fought in our home towns and has left so many innocent dead. We have all lost so much and the grief is more than I can bare.*

*The war has divided our family across Germany. Some of our family will never see our home town Dietenheim again. The Russian front has fallen and I fear that Anton will not return to us.*

*Americans have just taken our town so the war is almost over on all the fronts. The tanks rolled through and moved further north in search of Hitler. American soldiers occupy our town and are treating us well.*

*I will soon be back with you all in Dietenheim. This very thought brings some light to my long days. Let your father read this letter for me.*

*Love Uncle Karl*  
xxxx

The sirens began. The Germans were rushed to the centre of town and addressed by a corporal and translated by Thomas, the German-speaking American.

“Someone has broken a window of the local bakery,” Thomas interpreted.

“This kind of behaviour will not be tolerated. If the culprit comes forward no one shall be harmed.”

Gisela was scared out of her mind whispering to Wolfgang, “It was me, father.”

“You did this?” Wolfgang asked quite angrily.

“They were reading my letter from Karl and this was a distraction so that I could retrieve the letter,” Gisela argued.

“Karl? Why did Karl write to you?” said Wolfgang puzzled. “This is the first time he has written a letter during the war.”

“Winnie died in a bomb raid,” Gisela added sadly. “He thought I’d better know.”

Moved by the courage of young Gisela he brought her close to him and hugged her.

A Lieutenant entered in a vehicle.

“What’s going on here, Corporal?” the Lieutenant asked.

“Attending to the disorder, Sir,” the Corporal answered in a sly manner.

“Report to my office at once,” the Lieutenant stated in a rage.

“Yes sir,” the Corporal saluted and marched off.

“Thomas apologise to these people on my behalf,” the Lieutenant said sternly. “Let them know that we are not here to terrorise them but rather need a place to sleep. Tell them we will only be here for a short-time and that there will be no unnecessary discipline enforced.”

## Chapter Six- The Final Extermination

The officers poured out of their meeting. "Round up all the Jews in the their male and female groups. They are having their showers early this morning," one of them shouted. "Start with the women and we'll take the men on the death march."

The nazi soldiers walked over to the women's section of the camp, not knowing what was going on so early in the morning. Some officers had already began rounding up some of the women and were directing them toward us.

"Keep moving," an officer said.

Kurt's small hunched body hovered along the outskirts of the Jewish lines. His once warm heart had been turned cold by the war. Kurt's face prematurely etched with lines of anguish for a man of only twenty. He thought back over the deaths of Isaac and Ishmael. Their fate had been sealed by Hitler from the very beginning.

A little Jewish girl ran up to Kurt and pleaded for her life before being gunned down by one of the heartless sergeants. "She will be giving us no more trouble," laughed the officer. "Bloody mud. It's shin deep."

They were almost at the showering complex when the officers shouted, "Alright, this is your last shower," in German so that none of the Jews could understand.

The Jews were driven in by the hundreds. Lines stretching from the sub-camps to the showers.

"Kurt, I have never seen this many Jews taken to a shower at one time," Joseph stated.

"We are exterminating them in huge amounts," said Reinhold. "Shoot who ever you like Kurt... it's the last time we can shoot these Jews.

Kurt gave no reply. Still distressed about the death of Isaac he was oblivious to what was happening around him.

“Can you smell that?” Joseph said blocking his nose.

“That’s putrid,” Kurt agreed looking towards the showering chimney where a gas was escaping.

Gun shots went off in the background startling everyone. “What is that?” Kurt asked.

“Probably just someone trying to escape,” Joseph answered.

Planes began to fly overhead. “They aren’t ours, Sergeant,” Joseph acknowledged

“It’s the British,” the Sergeant informed Joseph.

A Jew lunged at Joseph’s weapon and he opened fire. Jews were falling from everywhere. The six nearby soldiers joined the shooting.

“This is your last chance, Kurt,” Reinhold shouted. “Shoot a couple!”

“No. Cease fire,” Kurt shouted, trying to be heard above the sound of the guns. “No,”

Kurt shouted as he saw the stream of blood that was flowing before him.

The Jews were fleeing the area trying to take cover from the out-of-control weapons.

Kurt turned around to see a row of Jews dangling in the air having been hanged, their legs still wriggling.

Kurt dashed to the cabin to find Ishmael. He saw that some of the Germans were fleeing already. Entering the room he could tell everyone had been shot. Trying not to look Kurt delicately stepped over the bodies laying on the floor surrounded in blood.

He walked over to the bed in which Ishmael had lay.

The sheets bloodstained where the bullets had pierced him and taken away his dear life. Kurt sat on the edge of the bed and hoisted Ishmael into his arms and hugged the very slender body that remained. He placed Ishmael back on his pillow and folded his arms across his body and closed his eyes. The bread still remained at his side. Kurt could see that Ishmael’s mouth was partially opened. He opened it further and could see a chunk of bread caught in the back of his mouth. Kurt rose from the bed and left

the room, trying hard not to look back and to forget what he'd just seen.

Kurt walked back to the showering facility and Reinhold shouted, "Come with me."

Kurt followed as he was led to the last group being led to the gas chamber.

"Kurt," shouted a female voice. Reinhold dragged Kurt by the sleeve as they pushed the remaining Jews inside. Reinhold bolted the door, "Let's get out of here, Kurt, before the British get here."

Reinhold fled as Kurt searched for a key to the chamber. The door was being hit from the inside. The hitting became more and more faint as the Jews became too breathless to hit any longer. Kurt peered through the glass to see that it was Reba on the other side.

"Stand back," Kurt shouted pointing his gun at the glass and taking a shot. Reba's face emerged from the hole where the glass once was.

Reba sucked in some fresh air before the intoxicating gas began to leak out of the chamber through the broken glass.

"I presumed you were dead, Reba," said Kurt emotionally, with the gas stinging his eyes. "I'm so sorry Reba."

She stumbled and fell backwards into the chamber from where she had come. Kurt, as if mimicking her, fell onto the hard ground, grasping at his throat. Wishing he could have taken her place, he wept uncontrollably.

The British entered the camp later that day...

## Epilogue

Fifty six thousand Jews lay naked in piles inside the concentration camp of Neuengamme. Their skin was lifeless, their bodies bony from lack of food and their bodies scarred from beatings. Blood had ceased to run from the bodies of those who had been shot dead. The ropes had stopped swinging for those who had been hanged.

A soft wind blew over the dead and carried away their now-free souls. The British soldiers entered the camp and dragged Kurt with no resistance from the shower room to one of their vehicles. They held their noses to block out the putrid overpowering smell of decaying bodies. They ushered any survivors away from the camp along with the memories that would never leave them.

Until the war was over Kurt sat patiently in the depths of a British war prison. He was released after six months, and struggled to locate his family. Ironically they were living with Gisela's aunty in another town near Ulm in Germany's south. After a year of searching records to find them he established a career as a dental mechanic.

Kurt reunited with his family as a changed person. The war had shaped him into a silent man who had lost all sense of emotion. He never shed another tear, after sharing his grief with Reba in the concentration camp.

The Poisel's had forged a close relationship with Gisela's aunty, which led to Kurt meeting Gisela. They eventually married, even though Eva disapproved of the marriage. The Switzer family weren't divided by the war but rather due to a love that couldn't remain separated. Kurt and Gisela moved to Australia to begin a new life on a farm in New South Wales and tried to forget the horrors and the sins of war through

which they had lived.

It is in Sydney's south that my immediate family now reside...

## **The Reflection Statement**

**Student Number: 11089305**

**Centre Number:103**

The aim of my Major Work was to inform people of the struggles suffered by both Germans and Jews alike. The Major Work juxtaposes the two stories by a series of chapters with the stories linked together in the epilogue. I knew from the beginning that it was going to be a difficult task which would involve much research.

I have targeted young adults and adults as the intended audience for the Major Work whilst giving them insight into World War Two. The composition offers a different perspective from the usual British and American perspectives that we are constantly fed.

My father's lack of knowledge of his parents' war experiences was the catalyst for the Major Work. I really wanted to create a work that would allow me to uncover my family background. From the very beginning I was probably too ambitious. I initially wanted to contrast the lives of my grandparents living in Germany and Australia. I came to the realisation this would have been too difficult a task to create in 6-8000 words.

I settled with the fact that I was only going to tell the German story as I was more eager to reveal war experiences. The Major Work illustrates two completely different stories in different places. My main intention was to gain knowledge of their war experiences not only personal satisfaction but also to increase my father's details on his parents' backgrounds.

I knew from the very beginning that the task was going to require an extensive investigation. I first went to the primary source, my paternal grandmother, Gisela. This is where I found out details of her experiences with vivid descriptions of the enemy planes dropping bombs on her home town. Kurt has passed away so I couldn't interview him and Gisela only knew the basics of his experiences. It was difficult for my grandmother to talk about it as she had tried to forget it and hadn't spoken of the war since it finished in 1945.

The interview showed gaps in Kurt's story as he hadn't really discussed his experiences in the war much either. To fill in these gaps I researched the camp he was stationed at, to aid in its re-creation and the living conditions within them. I sifted through information to locate a concentration camp on the western side of Germany that had been taken by the British. There was only one that fitted this description- Neuengamme. The website from which I gathered this information gave me a lot of insight into the figures of Jews incarcerated at this camp and the work they were forced to do. The deaths that occur in the last chapter of the Major Work, where the Jews are being exterminated through a wide range of mediums, is historically correct and this information was also gathered from this one website.

The films "Schindler's List" and "Europa, Europa" also gave insight into the jobs the Jews did, the horrid living conditions and the mentality of the nazis. Both films are very graphic which help re-create war conditions which is what I had to integrate into



my Major Work. The film "Life is Beautiful" creates such a closeness within a family that I hoped to reproduce in my Major Work.

Due to the fact that I am a student of Ancient History, and not of Modern History, I had little knowledge of dates and events. I really wanted the Major Work to be historically correct so I had to research what I didn't already know. For the dates of certain events I used "Chronology of World War II" written by Davidson and Manning. I was indecisive as to when I should set the events that would take place. I continually had to refer to this text for historical purposes and timeframes.

"The Writing Book" by Kate Grenville taught me the basics of writing a Major Work. I felt that my dialogue was lacklustre while the characterisation was almost non-existent. "The Writing Book" was of great importance after I had done several drafts and was ready to refine the work. This text helped revise the work to better the boring sections of text and bring them to life. Without having used this text my work may have had two dimensional characters and unbelievable conversations. This book really did assist in developing my weaknesses and to improve the Major Work.

The extensive research I undertook can clearly be seen by the vast array of sources located in the bibliography. Although I haven't mentioned many of them in the Reflection Statement they aided me by giving broad overviews and background information to get a perspective of the nature of the Second World War.

In the loose leaf folder are the many drafts that I have completed and it is amazing to see the development of the Major Work that only came after I undertook extensive research. The process was very in depth and required not only research but constant refining by teachers, peers and an editor. These refinements created a Major Work to be proud of and gave much personal satisfaction. By completing the Major Work I have learnt many skills that I previously didn't have. Characterisation and dialogue were two areas that I wasn't too confident with initially but I developed these areas with the aid of Kate Grenville's "The Writing Book".

I gained many insights into the hardships of war through the interview with my grandmother. The concept of an eleven year old, in fear for her life during night bombings, seems somewhat distant to us. Capturing a country in a period of turmoil was not an easy task to create, having never personally experiencing it.

The Major Work incorporates a variety of mediums such as flashbacks, dialogue, letters, a prologue and an epilogue. I tried to include several text types to tell the story but also to prevent the composition from being lacklustre.

My process was rather slow as I procrastinated about where to start. I feel that I should have had the Major Work well under way by fourth term last year as opposed to first term this year. I believe this had something to do with not being totally sure that I knew what I was doing, as in which stories I would be telling and in what time period.

Using Anna Maria Dell'osa's concept of there being two types of writers I was a settler. A settler is a writer that is slow as they want their first draft to be perfect. A

pioneer is a writer that does a draft and refines later. I procrastinated as a settler for far too long before I realised that I wasn't getting far quickly enough.

I was rather pleased with the finished product and felt that I could not really have improved it that much more. The process I went through was a very long and at times a frustrating one with the constant need to be historically correct. When I would find out another fact I had to go back and redraft the Major Work. This redrafting is the main reason that I was satisfied with the final product.

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