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9EB

Historical writing competition

## Strange Meeting

Sun beating down, the heat is relentless; nowhere to shelter, nowhere to hide. The parched grass of southern Bulgaria waves in the wind, the only relief to the oppressive heat. In the grass, a child runs. He is chasing robbers through narrow, winding alleyways of Sofia, the stillness is complete, broken only by a child's laughter.

A woman is calling, she struggles to be heard, shouting over the wind. "Come Aleixo, come in."

"But mama, I don't want to."

"Aleixo, I'm not joking come inside."

The silence is shattered. As the shockwave ripples through the air, clods of soil and smoke rise up, knocked back, Aleixo's mother looks up. Only one thought is her head. "Aleixo, Aleixo." her voice is smothered by the crack of gunfire. In the background a man staggers towards them, "Gaea, go. Remember what I said: Adela, Tsaritsyn, leave now." He disappears, swallowed by the smoke. Separated forever.

Crying, tears streaked down her face; Gaea collapses through the door, sagging ominously the wooden roof strains as she gathers the sobbing infant up. As she darts through into the open the house gives way in as a shell slams into the wall.

### Munich 1927

"Papa."

"Yes Aleixo."

"Where's mama?"

Kyros closed his book and looked up. "A few years ago when you were two, we lived in Petrich with your sister and your mother. The Greek army attacked Petrich at we had to leave." Eyes closed he steadied himself. "Your mother and I both had a plan, if in trouble we would leave, I would take you to Munich and your mother would take Adela, your sister, to Russia."

"Why hasn't mama sent a letter?"

"I don't know Aleixo, I don't know, but we cannot worry. Our future is here in Munich with each other." The clock chimed, 8 o'clock, "Now Aleixo, time for bed."

Crack, crack; harsh and aggressive the knocks rang on the door. Starting, Kyros turned from Aleixo's bed and shot down the stairs, "open up filthy communist, open up" the guttural tones spawned recognition in his mind and with a heavy heart he opened the door. He caught a brief glance at his callers before the first blow fell, and he lost consciousness.

### Munich 1939

Green and calm, the Englischgarten calmed Aleixo, he came here every day. It was a haven. He didn't have to worry about his father's death, or the people at school; he could let all of that go in the bird song and the breeze. Up the path the crunching of gravel under feet alerted Aleixo, he looked up. "Good morning" Aleixo stiffened;

"Good morning sir."

The soldier eyed him up, "16."

"Yes sir."

"School."

Aleixo decided to tell the truth.

"Boarding School, NPEA."

The recruitment officer sensed a lead and pressed on; "your father told you to enlist yet."

"No sir, my father's dead sir."

"I'm sorry son." he paused for a "respectful" silence. "You should enlist today, come with me and serve your fatherland, I'll let you on to a trick, if you volunteer now you save yourself a load of trouble later." Reeling Aleixo weighed his options, from age 4 he had been told: the führer was the saviour, he would rise up and take the world for the fatherland; but his mother, his sister. If he joined the army his hidden, nurtured hope of reconciliation would surely be wiped out.

"Come, join the army, join the fight to save the fatherland."

Still wrestling with his decision Aleixo sat down, he knew that this would be his future decided. "Yes sir, I will."

"Excellent son, come with me, we'll have you in jackboots in no time."

### Stalingrad 1940

Parched by the blazing heat of summer the steppe surrounded Stalingrad, an oasis in the grasslands. Sweltering under the heat of summer: pavements buckled and cracked; watermelon men cried out; the rich made their way to the opera while the poor trudged to work. From Mamaev hill Adela could see the city of Stalingrad in all its glory, she turned from the bustling downtown Stalingrad, with its Univermag department store and other symbols of progress to her life, the worker's settlement next to the Lazur plant. She could see her small, white painted, proudly kept house that she and her mother called home. Something was wrong, the windows were shut, to her that meant her mother wasn't home and if she wasn't home... then they must have got her. The NKVD Stalin's much feared police, the tales of the gulags and worse had terrified her as a child, but at 15 she knew. You didn't return if the NKVD got you, it was a one-way trip. Her mother was gone, gone for the simple crime of opinions, gone forever.

#### Train station Munich 1942

"Cold, it was so cold, we lived like rats. Crawling our way through, one day a time; and that's without the Russians in the picture." Looking up at the grizzled face of one of Germany's war "heroes" Aleixo felt, for the first time, an all-consuming fear about the journey he was about to undertake. "You'll be lucky if you survive the week," he finished, before stumping off on one ruined leg. Aleixo tried and failed to put the brutal advice away as he got on the train, that would take him to the east, to the site of the Germany empire's destruction.

#### Stalingrad 1942

The Barrikady gun plant, the symbol of Stalingrad's industrial revolution, now it was a vital cog in the Soviet war machine, now under renewed attack. Hitler's mighty armies were halted in the in 1941 by the winter and General Zhukov's fierce resistance to operation Typhoon, Hitler's attack on Moscow. Now the German armies were primed to attack again this time the objective would be to strangle the Soviets by cutting of their oil fields in the Caucasus. Stalingrad was the target of the mighty 6th army, undefeated in combat and veterans of the war in the east. However, at Voronezh the German's became embroiled in a bitter street fighting, an omen for the future.

In the Barrikady gun plant Adela was hard at work, with the Soviet position in such peril there was no place for rest and the workers were treated as nothing more than cogs, all slotting into place providing their function. No more no less. The alarm sounded, "Attack, I repeat attack, this is not a drill." Adela followed the other workers out; the men formed into their battalions while the rest dispersed. Bewildered Adela looked around her, all her co-workers had gone and she felt alone, more alone than she had since that first day after her mother's disappearance. In fear of being drafted to the battalion she ran to the only place she could, home.

The next day Adela woke up to the sounds of artillery, the crump of incoming shells brought back a flood of memories, mama was bright and clear, but the other two: Papa and Aleixo faint memories, the smell of papa's jacket, Aleixo's smile when he picked her up. Yanking herself back to the present she remembered the advice. Hide wherever you can, just not in the house. So Adela gathered what food she had and set of for the shed in the meagre garden. This shed would become her refuge for weeks to come.

#### Train to Stalingrad 1942

Flat and bleak the landscape of Poland rolled out before Aleixo, mile after mile of cold unforgiving land. "Hey Aleixo, why are you so worried?" Turning round Aleixo saw Max, smiling and irrepressible (as usual). "We're the 336<sup>th</sup> pioneers, we're the best there are. We have spent 2 years training to be the best in the world and we are."

"Bullets have no respect for training Max."

"Oh quit fretting Al," he fell silent. The train drew in to a station, everyone looked out and before them was a sight that quashed all sound. Emaciated, starved faces peered through the window. It was a doorway, a doorway into another world; a world where the food didn't come with a beating, and every action didn't prompt fear of violence. Aleixo, Max and all the others remained transfixed in horror until the train moved on, leaving behind the next batch of workers for Hitler's 1000-year empire.

#### Stalingrad November 1942

Pacing up and down Major Josef Linden looked up at the terrain his units would have to conquer, never before had he seen such a godforsaken scene. Twisted and wrecked broken factory equipment scattered the landscape, also scarred with shells holes and the other ubiquitous product of warfare, corpses. The objectives were simple: two Russian hideouts, the Chemists shop and the Commissar's house, the toughest in his unit's history. The first fell easily to the highly trained pioneers, but when they reached the second objective all hell broke loose. Aleixo and his men began their assault, the silence was deafening. "Should it be this quiet" asked Max as they advanced, suddenly the short sharp staccato bursts of the PPSH. Max fell holes blossoming on his front, spurting blood. Aleixo hit the ground desperate for shelter, he could not find it. The accurate sniper fire hit him, the agony was acute, Aleixo lay there bleeding from the leg. Severely wounded.

## Stalingrad November 1942

Life was hard. The food ran out after a month. The scrounging began, week after week of scraping by. Always hungry never happy, but with repetition comes familiarity, and now the daily trip to gather food had become routine, but never easy. As she darted round the streets, searching bins upending wrecks she was halted, in the distance she heard moans. Human misery was a fact but something stopped her. A human instinct to help. She ran towards the sound, regardless of danger she forged forward, propelled by what, she did not know. She reached the scene. On the street she saw corpses twisted and bent, evidence of human destruction. Only one was alive, a boy in a pool of blood.

Fading in and out, Aliexo floated through dreams to reality in a fluid cycle. Bricks, rubble, corpses; then shells, screams and blood. Which was which, he did not know. Staggering forwards, Adela knew she could not stop dragging this man, this beast of the rampant German army. This solitary act of mercy felt out of place amid the hellish tragedy that was Stalingrad; a few miles away General Chuikov's men lived like rats, fought like rats; the German troops exerting every effort to dislodge their tenacious hold on the banks of the Volga.

After what seemed like a lifetime Adela brought Aliexo home, staggering from the exertion she collapsed on the floor. This was as safe as she could get in Stalingrad, a shed, a shelter in the bottom of the garden; this is her home. Slowly Kyros awoke, he took in the scene around him. Two threadbare rugs for blankets; wooden slats threatening to collapse and the strangest sight of all: his saviour, this person who risked her life for a soldier from an army that had been tearing at her country like a starved wolf. He started as she woke, human contact and compassion was so alien to him that it scared him.

"Who are you." Adela fought to keep calm, her decision came back to her, he could leave and order her death any time he liked. She still felt that sense like there was something connecting them, something transcending the conflict. "Aleixo is my name," he felt she deserved that knowledge, at least, for what she had done.

"Adela." she responded still wary. He thought to himself of the Greek sunshine and that field where his family were together mama, papa and his sister Adela. Adela must be about the same age as the Adela I look at now, his thoughts mirrored those in Adela's head.

"I go now." Adela had a rudimentary grasp of German enough to converse in and far better than Aleixo's Russian. She turned and scurried out the door, she tried to mimic the rats that were so good at scavenging, far better than her. Hunting desperately, for she knew they both needed nourishment, Adela rummaged through bins and other waste, and when she turned for home, she had rich rewards. A burnt loaf of bread and half eaten carrots. Preserved by the bitter cold maybe, just maybe these small miracles could save them, with the light of triumph in her eyes she turned for home.

Lying on the floor Aleixo peeled off the bandages, the sight that met him was enough to make anyone gag. Maggots. The seething grey, glistening mass feeding off his leg turned his stomach; to distract himself he thought of family, of the house in Petrich with fields, space and warmth, the garden of Eden to Stalingrad's hell. Mulling over last night's conversation with Adela, her comments about the Nazi's disquieted him because they rang true with the train; the camp and all the other insidious horrors he had seen while a soldier of the third Reich. Against it ran the noble truth, the Aryan race was destined to dominate, the end justifies the means. His mind split in two he settled, falling back into that fitful waypoint between sleep and wake.

"Take the roof, I'll take the lower floor. Check everywhere, these Russians are like rats." The harsh tones of German soldiers jolted Aleixo back into reality, his first instinct was to run but he caught himself, this was his army. These were his people. Torn between the choices, they were taken out of his hands as a sergeant burst in: "get up, move."

"Stop I'm German, 336<sup>th</sup> pioneers."

Visibly shocked the sergeant ran over, "you wounded?"

"Yes, leg with maggots."

"Stretcher, stretcher." The sergeant was fighting to keep the disgust, at the scene of human deprivation in front of him, at bay, as the medics lifted the listless Aleixo away.

Adela crept back, being careful to watch for soldiers as she scampered through the streets of Stalingrad. The fruits of her labour wrapped in her overcoat she darted through street after street of war-torn houses. Death and destruction, the constant companions of life, shrouded Stalingrad in their shadows. Nothing, however was comparable to the shock when she saw the marks of jackboots in the snow. Throwing caution to the wind she ran through the wreck of the house, the sight that greeted her hit her like a hammer blow. Aleixo was gone, the lifeline of human contact gone. She was alone, alone again.

When the convoy reached the German base, Aleixo was promptly whipped off to the dressing station. Stressed and short staffed the surgeon took one look at the wound, barked out rapid fire orders and began the amputation for on the next wounded man to suffer for his leaders' war.

Woozy and weak, Aleixo woke to the insistent prods of a Gestapo officer. "You are Private Aleixo." the sharp, clipped tone stung Aleixo into life. "I am."

"You have anything to report."

Now Aleixo hesitates, the choice he had been avoiding for days was back. In his head he knew that he must not be complicit in the acts of his masters. His heart was a different matter, if he renounced the only way of life he had ever known, what could he do. He would be naked in the storm, raw and unfinished.

"Anything to report private."

"Yes... the house you found me in, it's a hideout."

"For?"

"Russians."

The day dawned bright and cold. The German artillery crews prepared their first round of the day, they fell into their practiced routine: Load, aim... fire. Racing across the horizon the shells gave a moment's notice before smacking right on target; another day, another kill.

Rent in half, incomplete, Aleixo felt like Tantalus, a prize so close, only to be snatched away. Only he didn't know what the prize was, all he knew was that insidious regret. All he could do was what he had been trained to do: put it away and carry on fighting, for what he did not know. He did not care.

Speckled with red, the snow covered the smoking embers. The shell had hit before she could register it, before she knew she was blasted into shreds. There was no one to notice, she was merely one among thousands.