PROLOGUE

As a natural sceptic I would not have been inclined to believe the biography of Michel Thomas if I had not been told about him by someone whose own wartime experiences were beyond doubt. My friend spoke of a man who had endured hell in the early years of the war through internment in concentration and deportation camps in France, but who had refused to become a victim. He had escaped to fight with the Résistance, suffered further imprisonment and torture, and then fought with the US Army. Later, in the years directly after the war, he hunted Nazis and war criminals as a special agent with American Counter Intelligence, posing in one elaborate operation as a high-ranking Nazi intelligence officer. It was a life that seemed as fascinating as it was unlikely.

And then there was Michel Thomas' equally improbable post-war reputation as one of the world's great language masters with the ability to teach students in a matter of days. His celebrity clients included people as diverse as Woody Allen, Bob Dylan and Emma Thompson, yet his main interest was reforming the education system itself, and helping disadvantaged children. People spoke of miracles and magic, and his power to hypnotise, read minds and block pain. It was also said, by one of the great secret service cryptographers of the Second World War, that it was impossible to lie to him. 'You should talk to Michel,' my friend said. 'You'll find him interesting.'

Michel Thomas proved to be a quietly spoken, soberly suited gentleman, with the old-fashioned, courtly manners of another age, but even during our first encounter, when the conversation was superficial and general, I became aware that I was in the presence of a highly unusual and unique individual.

He exuded intensity and warmth and I received an impression of

immense self-confidence and inner strength that was almost tangible. In time, I would come to understand that beneath the calm exterior and easy charm, a constant anger burned white hot, and that Michel was as tough as anyone I had ever met, a man of steel. But after that first meeting I left charged with an inexplicable energy and enthusiasm. True to his reputation, he had cast a spell of sorts.

We began to meet often whenever he was in London, and I sought him out in New York and Los Angeles. He seemed perpetually on the move and forever at work. We had long lunches that lasted until evening, and dinners that stretched into the early hours of the morning. I proposed chronicling his life story and Michel agreed. We came to an understanding whereby he would answer questions about all areas of his life, and I would be free to write the book in my own way, interview whomever I wished, and pursue any and every independent avenue of research. Michel would then have access to the final manuscript to correct errors of fact, and the editing process would be one of mutual consent.

The result was hundreds of hours of taped interviews that became the foundation of this book. Few men alive can have witnessed so much raw history, and Michel's memories have been kept alive by a unique form of emotional memory – consciously developed as a child – that relives rather than recalls past events. Memory of such power and immediacy can be a painful gift, and it has endowed Michel with what he describes as, 'A past that does not pass.'

But memory, however powerful, inevitably distorts and telescopes time. Events are subconsciously ordered and re-arranged, and even if the past is held on to and not allowed to pass, it is edited and coloured and becomes blurred. Michel's past is bolstered and verified by a suitcase full of personal papers that is never far from his side. In addition I unearthed a wealth of documents that fixed the principal dates and events of every period of his life. These came from a wide range of sources: French government and court records giving the dates of internment and transportation, family letters, official accreditation cards from the Résistance, ID cards from the US Army and Counter Intelligence, reports written at the time by combat and intelligence colleagues, and numerous interviews with contemporaries from the various periods of Michel's life. There were also finds in the US National Archives and Army records.

The more I learned about Michel, the more interested I became in the connection between the experiences of his life and the revolutionary system of teaching languages that has evolved from it. I interviewed university professors and academics in an attempt to

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understand the technique, and spoke to scores of students – ranging from ambassadors and movie stars, to businessmen, nuns and schoolchildren – to confirm the results.

On publication of the original hardback, I felt I had provided enough documentary evidence and detailed footnotes to convince anyone who had never met Michel Thomas in the truth of his story. Certainly, had I been writing fiction I would not have expected readers to indulge me by believing in a character to whom so much had happened. A single chapter from any one of the war years would have provided more than enough for an entire novel, but terrible times of upheaval bring forward extraordinary men, and they abounded in the Second World War.

Some readers remained unconvinced, as if I had described a type no longer recognised in the modern world. Human extremes of endurance, courage and spirit seemed to strain credulity, while the claim to be able to teach anyone a language easily and quickly invited particular disbelief. It was perhaps as much a failure of imagination as genuine scepticism on the part of these stubborn doubters, or simply an aversion to footnotes, for Michel's life is better supported by documentary proof than most.

One newspaper chose to publish an article that was an attack through innuendo. The Los Angeles Times assigned a reporter to write a long and hostile feature article, which adopted a mocking tone, and raised questions about specific incidents in Michel's life. Refused the right of reply, he was forced to sue for libel, fully aware that defamation cases in the United States are notoriously difficult to win because of the protections afforded the press under the First Amendment in regard to free speech. In preparation for the court case, a small army of top-notch researchers, archivists, photo and handwriting experts, professors of linguistics and journalism, were employed to examine existing documentation, and discover new evidence. This was now required to meet a legal standard of proof, withstand hostile cross-examination in a court of law, and convince a jury. The results after many months, great expense, and thousands of hours of archival research by men and women at the top of their fields were conclusive. Every question raised in the article was successfully answered without exception.

However, the California courts refused to hear the case on legal grounds, and Michel was denied the opportunity of a hearing before a jury. It was an egregious example of the First Amendment protecting the power of the press over the rights of an individual to protect his good name and reputation. A detailed account of the controversy is recorded in an Afterword to the book.

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It is perhaps worth stating, as the author of a biography of a man whose identity is rooted in his Jewishness, that I am not a Jew. I mention this to explain that there is no special pleading in this account of his life, and also to underline the integrity of Michel's universal vision in that he should permit his story to be told by an Englishman brought up as a Christian. 'I never thought about it,' Michel answered, when I brought this to his attention. 'It is not an issue.' (Many Polish Jews with the name Robinowski, who emigrated to America, adopted the name Robbins. My own tribe is less exotic. Mud-rooted in Wessex, it took several hundred years to get from Milton Abbas to Bristol, via Weymouth. However, in the words of the Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtuskhenko, 'In the presence of anti-Semites, I am a Jew'.)

For me, the experience of researching and writing this book has been both an education and a remarkable journey. To follow the life of Michel Thomas is to be handed a human route map to some of the most disturbing history of the twentieth century, and to be guided along its treacherous roads by an eyewitness with a truly original mind. 'It seems from what I know that I am the only living survivor of many of these events. I have never pushed memory away. I have nurtured, not buried it. If I am the only survivor I owe it to those who have died to remind people of the facts. I am a witness.'

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I

On a rainy night in Manhattan, more than fifty years after the end of the Second World War, Michel Thomas pulled a packet of letters from the safe in his apartment and placed them on a writing desk. It was late, and he was alone. The study was dimly lit so he switched on a lamp beside his chair, sat down and drew the letters towards him. He spread them out in a fan, a dozen dog-eared airmail envelopes faded with age. There were two sets of handwriting, both distinctly feminine versions of an old-fashioned continental copperplate, and a single envelope that had been inexpertly typed on an antiquated machine.

The letters dated from just after the outbreak of war in Europe and were among Michel's most prized possessions. He had lost count of the number of times he had taken them from their battered, black cardboard file and set them down in front of him. It was a ritual: he picked up the letters and held them, turned them over again and again, laid them back down and stared at them. He had removed the fragile airmail sheets from their envelopes and carefully unfolded and smoothed them a thousand times. But in fifty years he had never read a single word.

The fear of their impact had haunted him since the war. Now, with the century almost spent, he felt the time was right. He was an accomplished and successful man with an international reputation as a master language teacher, and the story of his life was such a potent mix of adventure and tragedy, dream and nightmare, that it had the power of myth. But until now not even the accumulated wisdom of a long and extraordinary life had enabled him to face the small packet of letters lying on the table.

At last, he felt he was ready. The letters were from his mother, aunt and uncle to a brother in New York, written at the time of their greatest peril. He picked up the solitary, typewritten envelope. It was from his uncle and Michel thought this might be the easiest to read for the man had been a businessman who wrote a businesslike letter. It had been written in Poland after he had been arrested and

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expelled from Breslau, a city then in Germany. He and his wife were among fifteen thousand German Jews who had been stripped of all their possessions and forced out of the country.[1] The letter had been hand-delivered to New York by a family friend who had crossed the Atlantic by liner.

Michel removed a single typed sheet of paper from the envelope. The sight of the familiar stationery bearing the letterhead WOLF GROSS – the family wholesale wine and liquor business – already stirred powerful memories.[2]

He passed quickly over the banal opening paragraphs to reach the nub at the bottom of the first page: 'Our emigration to the United States looks very bad. A letter from the American consul-general in Berlin states we will have to wait ten to fifteen years for a quota number. What shall we do? And what will happen? Our situation is well known to you. I ask you urgently to do everything possible. To address yourself energetically to the responsible immigration officials and to intervene on our behalf to send us a visa as quickly as possible. We wish you success and wait to hear from you. With all best wishes and heartfelt greetings – we hope for good news. Your brother-in-law.'

As Michel read these words something terrible and unexpected happened to him. For the first time in his life he was gripped by homicidal fury. The feelings aroused were primitive and brutal and thrust him into an extreme and alien psychological state. He had suffered internment and torture in the war, but had never experienced such corrosive hatred. Even his involvement in the arrest and interrogation of war criminals – whip-carrying SS officers and concentration camp executioners – had never triggered wrath like this. He had felt disgust and contempt for these men but now the emotions he experienced were utterly different. The act of a consul who sacrificed human lives on the altar of an American quota system ignited a rage of such violence he could have killed without pity or compunction.[3]

Michel turned over the typewritten sheet and was slammed by another almost unbearable emotional blow as he caught sight of the handwriting of his beloved aunt. She had written a single, despairing paragraph: 'Forgive me for writing so little but I'm completely down. I am so low I cannot write myself. Everything seems hopeless. What are we to do?'

The plea for help to a brother living in the haven of the United States – not yet at war – was an unadorned, final testament from the doomed.[4] All the papers needed for entry into America had long

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been in order, with sworn affidavits from family members guaranteeing financial support, but everything depended on obtaining an American quota number. The hopeless tone of his uncle's letter conveyed the unwritten acknowledgement that nothing could be done – and the man who wrote it would not live to discover that the quota that could have saved him was never filled.[5]

As the rage passed, Michel was left weak and nauseous. He sat motionless for hours with the letters scattered on the desk before him. Half a lifetime of preparation for this moment found him pitifully ill-equipped to cope. He was forced to admit that even after so many years the time was not yet right to read the letters.

He was a man who thought he knew himself but suddenly he was confronted by a violent stranger. He attempted to make sense of the terrible knowledge he had come upon and the alarming emotions it had uncovered. He tried to understand his murderous rage and the fact that it was directed not against the brutes that had tortured and enslaved him but at a bureaucrat who had worked in the American Embassy in Berlin. A man who had chosen to follow the rulebook, and by declining to wield his rubber stamp had condemned the people Michel loved most in the world to death.

As dawn broke outside the study window, he folded his uncle's letter and replaced the single sheet in its envelope. He pulled the other letters towards him, slipped them back into their folder, and returned them to the safe unread.

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II

The memories of Michel Thomas stretch back to the crib: a huge but benign black dog the size of a bear viewed through the wooden bars of a playpen; the sensation of being pushed in a pram in the open air; the texture of a cloth pulled from the drawer of a sewing machine and its oily smell; the glittering silver shapes of the machine's metal frets used for different stitches, and their pleasing feel and cold metallic taste when placed in the mouth. His first erotic memory, vivid and thrilling, dates from the age of three. Crawling on the floor, he looked up at the towering figure of his young nanny and glimpsed under her skirt. The girl wore no underwear. Stretching heroically, the toddler reached up and touched bare flesh. 'The naked female behind! I liked it – I still see it!'

At a very early age he began consciously to recover and hold on to these memories of what he calls his 'cradlehood'. It was his first act against being overwhelmed by a hostile world.

Michel Thomas was born Moniek Kroskof, in Lodz, Poland, under the shadow of the First World War, into a prosperous Jewish family that owned a large textile manufacturing company.[1] He was the only child of the second marriage of his mother, Freida, a strong, independent woman in her late twenties who was highly unusual for her time. Arranged marriages were then the norm among well-to-do Jewish families and at the age of eighteen Freida had married a man considered to be from a suitable family. The relationship was a failure from the start, but instead of suffering within the marriage she rebelled and demanded a divorce. It was a scandalous decision for a young girl to make, but Freida insisted in the teeth of fierce family opposition.

She later met and married Samuel Kroskof, an engineer who had worked in the oilfields of Iran and Azerbaijan. The couple lived together in Lodz where the joy felt over the birth of a baby boy was tempered by fear of war. At the outbreak of hostilities, Poland became a battleground. As the German Army advanced towards

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Lodz, a part of Russian Poland at that time, the local population panicked. Poland was first partitioned by Russia, Austria and Prussia in 1772, after which the country's history became an endless cycle of insurrection and reprisal. After a nationalistic uprising in 1863, Russia imposed a harsh policy of Russification within its zone, stripping the country of all autonomy and turning it into little more than a province of the empire. Russian was adopted as the official language in schools, and the use of Polish was restricted. Jewish life became particularly difficult.[2] Treatment of the Jews, many of whose families had lived in the city for hundreds of years, became vicious. There were daily executions by hanging of those accused by the Russians of sympathising with the Germans, and the fact that a quarter of a million Jews served in the Russian Army did nothing to mitigate the prejudice against them. Shops and houses were looted, synagogues defiled, and hundreds of thousands of Jews living within the Russian partition were driven from their homes. They took to the road, carrying their possessions on carts and bicycles, struggling with suitcases and bundles, their children in their arms.

Samuel and Freida remained in Lodz with their baby during this terrible time of fear and privation. The city had always been an ugly industrial place of grime, smog and noise. Its factory chimneys belched foul smoke into sooty skies and the sun found it difficult to shine through the polluted air and dingy window panes. The city at war became dismal, its few scattered trees felled for firewood and its unpaved streets churned into liquid mud by troops and horses. Most of the remainder of the already diminished population fled, including the Russian bureaucracy that had been in the city for a century. Lodz became a ghost town.

When Michel was only eight months old, the German Ninth Army surrounded the city. The ensuing battle was waged on a monumental scale, the first great carnage of modern warfare, and for weeks the two armies fought each other to the point of exhaustion until winter paralysed them. Icy winds brought temperatures to below freezing and at dawn each day both armies removed from the trenches the corpses of those frozen to death in the night.[3]

The Germans finally took the city in December, but at a high cost: German losses in the campaign were about thirty-five thousand killed and wounded; Russian losses are unknown, but conservatively estimated to be around ninety thousand in all.[4] Germany went on to take over the whole country, stripping industry of everything valuable and sending the booty back to the homeland. Copper was collected from factories, church steeples, frying pans and even door-

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post amulets. The thick leather transmission belts from the textile mills were sent back to Germany for soldiers' boots, and roofs were stripped of lead. The country's raw materials were also plundered, paid for with vouchers redeemable after the war, which the locals said were not worth a plug *groschen*.[5]

German sentries stood on every corner to prevent looting and riot. Food was scarce, even for the prosperous, and milk was unobtainable. There were ration cards for the terrible bread, made from a mixture of chestnuts and potato peelings and tasting of clay. Stray dogs and cats were rounded up and rendered down for their flesh, which was sent back to Germany as animal feed. Disease raged in epidemic proportions, the worst of which was typhus. Hospitals overloaded with military casualties were obliged to leave the sick to die, and corpses without shrouds were trundled to cemeteries in wheelbarrows.

As the war ground on, one terrible year after another, the desperate conditions took their toll on the health of mother and child. It also did nothing to help a failing marriage. Freida seemed unprepared, or unwilling, to give up the degree of independence that marriage demanded and broke up with Samuel. One divorce was a scandal, a second social disaster, but Freida seemed unperturbed by the opinions of others. She remained on friendly terms with her ex-husband and later took Michel to see him regularly. The child resented the visits as a duty and an imposition, and during his formative years became emotionally distant from his father.

Michel was brought up in a world of doting women. He lived together with his mother, his aunt Idessa – two years younger than his mother and a beauty – and his grandmother. With the collapse of Tsarist Russia in the revolution of 1917, and the final defeat of Germany the following year, Poland once again became a nation. The factories of the family textile business, which had floundered and closed during the war, gradually picked up production. Michel grew into something of a wild child, independent and wilful, even as a toddler. The women in his life indulged him shamelessly. 'I felt I had two mothers. I was surrounded by love. It was like air. Love was so much part of my life it was like breathing. The security of love was very strong. I am sure that is where I have drawn my strength over the years – that absolute bedrock of mother love.'

By the age of four Michel had developed an advanced case of rickets, news of which had been kept from his mother who had been taken into hospital with typhus. He was cared for by his grandmother and aunt – his second mother. By the time Freida

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returned home after an extended stay in hospital the child's legs were so bowed he could hardly walk. 'I still see my mother as she came into the living room and her reaction as she saw me – my horribly curved legs.'

Rickets was common at this time and often left children permanently crippled, and his mother's initial joy at seeing her son turned to anguish. 'Oh my God,' she blurted, 'he cannot walk!'

'Yes I can,' Michel cried out, delighted to see his mother at home again and eager to please her. In a display of superhuman will and effort, he dragged himself around the dining-room table. He held on to the backs of the chairs and hauled himself from one to another. 'See, I can walk!'

Freida wrote to all the experts in the field, and consulted family friends in the medical profession in a desperate search for a cure. She developed a remedy that was an early form of health cure and radical for the time. Michel was put on a diet of fresh vegetables, fruit juices and hot honey drinks with egg yolk – and less palatable doses of cod liver oil. He was soon walking again and eventually recovered to the point that he began to excel at sport.

'When I went out with my mother, her friends would always talk down to me. Idiotic baby talk in a strained voice – endless stupid questions that were meaningless. It irritated me. So I gave them strange, unexpected answers. They would become confused and embarrassed, and always they would say, "How precocious!"' It puzzled him that adults talked to children in such a manner. 'I wondered why they talked like that. I came to the conclusion that although they had all been children they had somehow forgotten their childhood.' It was an alarming insight. 'A little while later I thought, If *they* have forgotten their childhood, when I grow up *I* will forget mine. And that horrified me! It was a terrible shock. To forget everything! To forget *me* as I am now! Every day was filled with growth and change and events – and it would all be forgotten! And I would be forgotten – cease to exist, wiped from the world! I could not let that happen.'

He carefully began to develop a system to help him remember childhood. Unable to read or write, he adopted a mental process in which he forced himself to think as far back as he could and reclaim feelings and reactions. He flagged these with a child's mental markers of colour, smell, touch and taste. In this way he could recapture and fix a moment in his memory, logging the significant events of his life into his system. It was a large task for a six-year-old but he conscientiously stuck to his method until, at the age of twelve, he

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spent weeks painstakingly writing the history of his childhood into a lined notebook, the Memory Book – a document sadly lost to posterity. 'I owe a lot to that child. He made a vow not to forget. He influenced my development as a man and laid out the pattern of a lifetime.'[6]

It was also at the age of six that he experienced an incident so powerful and disturbing that it forever changed his life. The family lived in a spacious apartment that had a balcony filled with oleander plants overlooking a large courtyard. In one corner was a well used as an emergency water supply on the occasions when the city's mains failed. One sunny spring afternoon his mother went out on to the balcony looking down into the quadrant where the children played. Suddenly, she became rigid. A boy and his teenage sister ran to the well, leaned over its side and began calling down into it. The urgency of the children's voices echoed through the courtyard: 'Moniek, Moniek – come back up, your mother is calling. Moniek, come up!'

Freida was filled with dread that her mischievous son had fallen into the shaft. Fearing the worst, she ran down the stairs and out into the courtyard. She peered into the well and began to call for her son. There was no reply. The surface of the water was black and still with no sign of life. She became hysterical and began to wail, ripping at her garments and hair. A large crowd gathered to watch the display of grief in silence, as if at a theatre performance.

Just then Michel ran into the courtyard. The sight of his distraught and inconsolable mother shook him to his soul. He had been climbing trees in an adjoining garden to the apartment building and had not been near the well. An adult had called him down from a tree and led him back to the courtyard that had filled with people.

Michel was led through the crowd to his mother and she fell on him in relief, hugging and kissing him. The drowning had been a cruel, brutish joke hatched by a child and fed by adults. 'These men and women who were our neighbours, non-Jewish Poles, enjoyed the spectacle of the despair of a Jewish mother. No one said anything, or tried to explain it was a joke gone too far, or that they did not mean it. *Nothing!* They were enjoying it.

'This viciousness and hatefulness traumatised me. My belief system as a child was totally shaken. It changed me. Changed the child. After that I was no longer wild but clung to my mother's side. I became a mother's boy. It took a physical toll on me and I became a sleepwalker. I would pick up a pillow from my bed, put it under my arm, and try to walk out of the house. My mother actually put a

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bell around my neck. I suffered nightmares – terrible nightmares! Not of the incident itself, but of horrible monsters coming through the window to get me. I was scared of the dark and the things I imagined it held. I developed chronic asthma. That trauma was so deep, so strong, I quite literally could not breathe Polish air.'

His mother grew alarmed at the severity of his condition and took him from one specialist to another without success. 'I just couldn't live in Poland, I felt the atmosphere that strongly. It was such a betrayal. At the age of six I had been made aware of the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew. I wanted out – to get away from Lodz.'

In later life, Michel analysed the virulent nature of Polish anti-Semitism. 'It was worse even than Ukrainian or Russian anti-Semitism – far worse than in Germany. It was a direct result of the teaching of contempt for Jews by the Catholic Church to a largely ignorant and illiterate peasant population. These people emerged from their churches after a Sunday sermon hating the Jews whom they had been told had murdered Christ their God.'

Freida, who was a shrewd businesswoman and held an important position in the family company, travelled all over Poland and now began to take Michel along with her. Since the trauma he had become a difficult and demanding child, and his physical and psychological states were alarming. He was touchy and sensitive and resented doing what was expected of him even when it was agreeable. He grew increasingly stubborn and disobedient. 'I had my own ways and got away with it.'

As they visited the towns of Poznan and Danzig, and other areas that had been part of the German partition of Poland, Freida noticed her son's spirits lift. 'Travelling on a train I can remember looking out at the countryside and everything seemed so beautiful . . . the cows, the horses, the landscape. Still I can see it – I can feel it, I can smell it. Through my childish eyes it was a different country because I was out of the Polish-speaking region.'

On one of these journeys, just before Michel's seventh birthday when he was at his most difficult, his mother engaged him in a long and serious conversation. They walked through the streets of Poznan together and she explained the trouble he was causing, and the problems this posed for her. 'Can you imagine if you had a son, a boy like you are? How would you handle him?'

Michel pondered the question. After some thought he recommended a regime of strict rules and harsh discipline, accompanied by draconian punishment for the least infringement. He elaborated on

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the rules, which were ruthless in their severity, and on the punishments that were equally extreme.

'Very interesting,' his mother said. 'I have learned a lot. You have taught me how to handle you.'

'Oh no!' The child's response was immediate. 'For me it's too late!'

The system was never introduced, and Michel kept his true feelings over the incident to himself, but he felt tricked. He had been betrayed by his own mother and was deeply hurt. 'The only time I was ever hurt by my mother. I still feel it now.'

It was evident to the child as they travelled together that his mother was both well-known and respected. Michel also came to understand that his upbringing was somehow privileged and more comfortable than that of many of the children around him. Freida took great trouble to imbue him with her own philosophy, explaining that privilege and riches could be stripped from anyone at any time, and that the only true wealth was knowledge. The mind, she insisted, was something that a human being carried with him, a treasure trove that could be endlessly enriched and never taken away. 'What you are and who you are and what you know – these are the only things that count. That has to be strong. Everything else can be destroyed.' Freida was imparting a life lesson that would pay a high dividend in the future.

Michel's condition remained extreme, but his relief when outside the Polish-speaking region was so evident that Freida decided her son's health depended upon him leaving the country. Aunt Idessa had married and gone to live in Breslau, just across the border in Germany, where her husband owned a highly successful wholesale wine and spirits business, complete with its own vineyards. Some six months after the trauma it was decided that Michel should go to live with his adored aunt, something he accepted happily. 'I was not homesick, or in tears – I was happy to be going. I knew I was not being sent away but that I was going to my aunt, who seemed like a part of my mother. I did not feel I was losing my mother – I knew she would always be with me. She was in my heart.'

But travel had been forbidden to Jews under the previous Russian regime, as had college education, and passports in the new Poland were still difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. The child would have to be smuggled out of the country. A German friend from Breslau arrived one sunny afternoon in an open convertible. Michel was excited at the prospect of the journey, which he saw as a grand adventure despite the welter of rules that seemed to govern it. Advice and instructions were piled upon him. Most important of all,

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he was told that during the journey he was not to speak at all in the presence of other people or attract attention in any way.

His mother pretended to be happy and excited about the journey as she saw him off. But as the car sped away and he turned to wave goodbye, he saw Freida collapse to the ground. Michel squirmed in his seat and wanted to turn back, but was assured with a comforting, adult nod from the driver that everything was as it should be.[7]

It was a long journey that took all day. The driver spoke no Polish, and Michel no German, but they drove along comfortably enough in silence. The hood of the car was down and it was a sunny day. The man occasionally turned to the child beside him and smiled kindly. Somewhere near the border he pulled the car over to the side of the road and bought punnets of the first cherries of the season. He handed one to Michel, who ate the delicious fresh fruit greedily.

They crossed the border without incident. The man seemed familiar with the German frontier guards who waved them through after only a perfunctory inspection. The young charge was delivered to his aunt in the old part of the city of Breslau. He was delighted to see Idessa, who could not have been happier to have him. Michel had shed his first identity as a Polish child, and was about to enter his life as a German youth.

And suddenly he could breathe.

As a child, Michel adored Germany. The journey from Poland had been a passage from darkness into light; his arrival rebirth and liberation. True, the financial circumstances of the Weimar Republic were disastrous in the wake of the First World War (in 1914 the mark exchanged at four to the dollar; by November 1923 it was 130 million to one) but this hardly concerned a young boy who felt he had been delivered from hell. The family seemed to have everything and lived comfortably. His health improved dramatically – although he still had to be watched at night – and while he was a rather serious child for his years, he was adventurous and enjoyed life to the full. Slowly, the trauma began to fade.

His mother visited him as often as she was able. Sometimes she would travel on a business passport that strictly limited the number of days the bearer was allowed to stay out of the country. On other occasions she would take great risks to enter Germany illegally. Even if his mother arrived in the dead of night Michel could sense her in the house, and her silent presence at the end of the bed was enough to wake him. 'I would feel just a touch on my foot when I was sleeping and know it was my mother.'