

# VILNA

BY

JEFFREY A LEE

Penstone  
Pear Ash Lane  
Pen Selwood  
Wincanton  
Somerset  
BA9 8LX

This play is dedicated to all who suffered in the Nazi Holocaust.

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## VILNA

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## THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey A. Lee attended the Central School of Speech and Drama. He has worked for many years as a teacher of drama and as an actor and director on the amateur stage.

In 1991 his dramatic meditation on the Passion "The Tree of Life", was short listed for The George Bell Award. "The Tree of Life" has been presented in many churches in Norfolk, Kent, and East Sussex, most recently by Group 81 in the Canterbury area. In 1992, Jeffrey A. Lee directed "The Tree of Life" for a much acclaimed performance in Truro Cathedral.

More recently, and with the help of a number gifted Cornish actors, Jeffrey A. Lee has established a touring company known as Pen Theatre. In 1994 Pen Theatre presented "Gold on My Barley" by Jeffrey A. Lee, and another play by Jeffrey A. Lee entitled "Lady Tregarten's Dilemma".

Jeffrey A. Lee's publications include a novel entitled "A Chosen Madness", and a book about Yorkshire entitled "Around Historic Yorkshire". He has also published a number of other plays and a large number of poems.

In 2001 Jeffrey A. Lee won the Somerset Fellowship of Drama Award for his full-length play 'Lorenzo's Dream'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is greatly indebted to Martin Gilbert and to his monumental work entitled "The Holocaust" and to Jean-Francois Steiner's work entitled "Treblinka", both of which contributed much of the background material for the play.

The song at the end of the play, "Never say that you have reached the end" is by Hirsh Glik who lived in Vilna and probably perished in Vayvari, the Estonian Concentration Camp. It has been adapted in English by the author to suit the play, and appeared in a slightly different version in English in Martin Gilbert's "Holocaust".

## SET

The play is to be performed on an open or thrust stage with a downstage area for chorus movement, and various upstage enclosed areas for localized settings such as Doctor Dvorjetsky's house.

Such back drops and stage dressings as the Director may consider necessary for the Production should be contrived to suggest that the people inside the ghetto are, in fact, prisoners.

All the localized settings should be drab and should suggest the degree of poverty to which the whole of the Jewish community of Vilna has been subjected, first by Russian occupation and, more recently, by the Nazis.

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The only setting that should contrast with this is that of the German Kommandant, Colonel Schweinberger, which, though sparsely furnished, should be lit in such a way as to suggest a kind of brutal and pitiless efficiency.

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The events of the play, though condensed for the purposes of the drama, take place between September 1941 and January 1943. Under the onslaught of German military power, the Russians were forced to withdraw from the city in the spring of 1941. Many of the Jews of Vilna had suffered great hardship under the Russians and some expected that they would be treated better by the Germans.

However, the Germans were already evolving their plans for the so-called final solution of the "Jewish Problem" and Vilna was to provide them with a laboratory. After a brief period of terrorism, all the Jews of Vilna were herded into a ghetto which consisted of seventeen streets and five hundred houses. With a population of 60,000 souls this made life almost unbearably difficult for the Jews.

However, this was only the beginning. Vilna had been "The Jerusalem of Lithuania" to the Jews and many scholars from all over Europe and America had converged on it as a centre of Jewish learning and spirituality. In 1941 the Nazis were about to embark on a programme in which all the Jews of Vilna would be exterminated, and the city would be blotted out as a centre of Jewish culture for ever.

### VILNA: SYNOPSIS

#### ACT 1

##### SCENE 1

A single voice sings the "Kol Neidre". There is a mime in which the Jews are divided by a Nazi officer, some going to the left and others to the right. This is repeated, the numbers becoming less each time. At the end a single Jewish girl is left in a spotlight. She looks round and exits swiftly.

##### SCENE TWO

Dr Dvorjetsky is treating Itzak Wittenberg. Wittenberg tells the Dvorjetskys about the Nazis' intention to liquidate the ghetto. They do not believe it and Wittenberg leaves. Major Gens of the Jewish police enters and manages to reassure them. After he has left, Pessia, a victim of the massacre at the Forest of Ponar, arrives disguised as a Lithuanian peasant. Her wounds convince the Dvorjetskys that Jews are being massacred.

##### SCENE THREE

The Jewish resistance fighters meet at No 2 Strakum Street. They decide to remain in the ghetto instead of joining the partisans in the forest. They vote against killing Gens. Wittenberg reports that the Silber sisters, two Jewesses of Aryan appearance, are on their way to Warsaw to convince the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto that the Nazis mean to

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exterminate the Jews. He also hints that he has a mole at German Army H.Q. After the resistance fighters have dispersed, Lydia stays with Wittenberg. She is the mole and they are obviously lovers. Lydia persuades Wittenberg to give her a cyanide capsule in case she is betrayed.

### ACT TWO

#### SCENE ONE

At German Army H.Q. Colonel Schweinberger speaks to Lydia about his family. While they are talking, the Colonel receives news on the telephone that the Silber sisters have been apprehended, after which Gens enters. Schweinberger presents Gens with a goose and gives news of his promotion to Colonel. He then orders him to arrest Wittenberg and hand him over to the German authorities immediately. Gens agrees and leaves. Schweinberger reveals to Lydia that she has been betrayed, and, as she is about to be arrested, she takes the cyanide capsule.

#### SCENE TWO

At Gens' H.Q. as preparations are going ahead to celebrate his promotion, Dvorjetsky arrives to warn Gens of the danger he faces in attempting to arrest Wittenberg. As he leaves, Wittenberg arrives to confront Gens. When Gens attempts to arrest him, he realizes his own men have been disarmed and that Wittenberg has the apparent backing of the whole of the ghetto. Wittenberg leaves in triumph.

### ACT THREE

#### SCENE ONE

The ghetto is under siege. We hear the noise of tanks, heavy vehicles, and loud hailers. Searchlights sweep across the back of the stage. Golda Vronshka and Dan Ariel watch from an attic room as a crowd of frightened Jews meet in the square below waiting for the Judenrat (The Jewish Council) and Gens to come out onto a balcony and address them. We learn that Wittenberg has gone into hiding to avoid arrest and we gather that the frightened Jews have turned against him. When Gens appears, he stirs up feeling against Wittenberg because he realizes that this is the only way of preventing a bloodbath. Wittenberg appears in the attic room and decides to give himself up in the general interest rather than making his escape into the forest. Dvorjetsky agrees to accompany Wittenberg so that he will not be shot by Gens before he is handed over to the Germans.

As Wittenberg and Dvorjetsky leave, a voice tells the story of the final liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto and Golda Vronshka sings the words of Hirsch Glik's poem. The play ends on a note of triumph despite the fact that the Ghetto is doomed.

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## ACT ONE

### SCENE ONE

The stage is in darkness. We hear a single Jewish voice singing the Kol Neidra, "The Song of the Dead". As the song continues, other sounds intrude. We hear tanks rumbling through the streets, distant gunfire, and the Horst Wessel Song. As the noises of confusion blot out the single human voice, the lights fade in and we see a group of Lithuanian Jews (THE WOMEN OF VILNA) standing motionless, their faces towards the audience, listening in terror.

As the sounds of confusion become more and more dominant, THE WOMEN OF VILNA begin to move about the stage as though trying to escape from the ghetto. Suddenly the noises of confusion cease abruptly and the lights come up on a rostrum upon which stands the tall and imposing figure of a Nazi officer. THE WOMEN OF VILNA turn towards him slowly as though mesmerised.

The Nazi officer raises his baton and slowly begins to conduct, and, as he does so, THE WOMEN OF VILNA move in a series of slow rhythmic movements like puppets.

A drum begins to beat and THE WOMEN OF VILNA make two lines facing the Nazi officer. He gives a signal and the two lines move past him, one line exiting stage right and the other exiting stage left.

The drums make the sound of gunfire.

More Jews come onto the stage and line up; thus the process is repeated several times, and each time, the line on the left becomes smaller until, finally, there is one Jewish woman left. She kneels on the stage in a foetal position.

The lights fade slowly on the Nazi officer. The girl is left in a pale spot which slowly fades and then comes up again. A Lithuanian peasant woman enters. She places a peasant cloak on the girl's back, and a peasant's hat on her head. She then hands her a bunch of flowers. The peasant woman exits leaving the Jewish girl on her own. The Jewish girl looks round warily, and exits quickly.

### SCENE TWO

The lights come up on the sordid attic occupied by Doctor Dvorjetsky and his wife Hannah. Because Dvorjetsky is a doctor, he and Hannah have been allotted more space than most Jewish families but their attic is still cramped and the corner devoted to his surgery is little more than a cupboard. As the

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lights go up, we discover Dvorjetsky treating Itzak Wittenberg for an arm infection while Hannah holds up a candle.

Dvorjetsky: There. I think you'll find that a little easier and with God's blessing you will heal well.

Wittenberg: It feels better already, but I think I must thank you rather than God.

Dvorjetsky: Show me your hands.

Wittenberg: What for?

Dvorjetsky: Let me see them.

(Wittenberg shrugs his shoulders and holds out his hands. Hannah moves the light.)

Dvorjetsky: What have you been doing with those hands? How swollen and cracked your fingers are, as though you've been scratching in the earth like a mole.

Wittenberg (laughing): Not far off the mark, Doctor.

Dvorjetsky: Where have you been?

Wittenberg (still laughing): Killing Germans, Doctor.

Dvorjetsky (glancing uneasily at his wife): You shouldn't joke about these things. Such talk can be dangerous, my friend.

Wittenberg: Danger's my second name, Doctor.

Dvorjetsky (looking at Wittenberg curiously): I know you, don't I?

Wittenberg: Probably. But I don't think we've met before.

Dvorjetsky: Aren't you Itzak Wittenberg?

Wittenberg: Why don't you call me the Atheist, or the Communist? Everyone else does.

Dvorjetsky: I've heard what they say about you.

Wittenberg: Nothing complimentary I'm sure.

Dvorjetsky: That you have ways of getting out of the ghetto. That you go out whenever you like through the sewers or by other means.

(Wittenberg puts a mocking finger to his lips).

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Wittenberg: You must learn to be discreet, Doctor. As you implied just now, walls have ears. The Germans have lickspittles even here in the ghetto.

(Wittenberg raises his head and listens).

If you listen, you can hear them whispering and the creak of their bones as they edge up to the wall to listen more closely. And these are our own people, doctor.

(He points to the roof).

That old goose Jacob Gens is probably has his ear pressed to the roof.

Dvorjetsky: Hannah, would you mind making our friend some tea?

(Hannah Dvorjetsky bows and goes into a cupboard to make tea. Dvorjetsky draws close to Wittenberg and begins to speak less formally.)

Dvorjetsky: Hannah is very nervous at the moment. I don't want her frightened any more than she needs to be.

(Wittenberg nods smiling).

Wittenberg: I understand you, Doctor, but I'm afraid your concern is misplaced. We Jews need to be frightened.

Dvorjetsky: Why did you mention Gens just now?

Wittenberg: Because he's the most dangerous man in the ghetto.

Dvorjetsky: But surely, he's just a policeman. He's only carrying out orders.

Wittenberg: Precisely. German orders. The best Jewish policeman the Germans ever had.

Dvorjetsky: But his job's to maintain harmony. He's providing stability. Don't you see that?

Wittenberg: Precisely. The stability the Germans need to carry out their plan.

Dvorjetsky: Their plan? What do you mean?

(Hannah returns carrying a mug of tea which she places before Wittenberg. She and Wittenberg exchange glances.)



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- Wittenberg: Thank you, Mrs Dvorjetsky. Tell me, d'you think your husband's right to protect you?
- Dvorjetsky: Please, Itzak.
- Hannah: I don't understand. Protect me from what?
- Wittenberg: From the facts. From what the Germans are doing and what they intend to do.
- Dvorjetsky (passionately): We don't know anything, except that war is brutal. Of course, they treated us badly when they first marched in. People were killed, yes. But we Jews have always been victimized. The Russians treated us abominably. The Germans are a civilized race. They have Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven. Art, music, philosophy. They know how to organize things. If we keep quiet and make ourselves useful, they won't harm us, I tell you.
- Wittenberg (shaking his head): My God, Doctor, you're wearing blinkers! Soft, like the rest of them! Don't you see our traditional softness, the fact that we always bow our heads when we are attacked, is what the Nazis are depending on. They mean to kill us all.
- (There is a silence. Dvorjetsky and Hannah exchange glances. Wittenberg moves about restlessly.)
- Hannah: Why are you telling us this?
- Wittenberg: To prepare you for the wrath to come. To put the iron into your souls.
- (He pauses).
- Wittenberg: May I remind you, Doctor, that, when the Germans goose-stepped into the City with their white death's head faces under those terrible helmets, they lost no time in bundling the Jews into a ghetto of seventeen streets with an average of six people to a room. Is this how you used to live, Doctor? Is this what you are accustomed to, Mrs Dvorjetsky? I know it isn't, because I remember you in balmier times. I've watched you, Mrs Dvorjetsky sunning yourself under the trees outside your beautiful suburban house. I once saw you with your parasol, warming yourself like a butterfly...a charming sight.
- Hannah: And why not? It wasn't the only thing I did, you know.
- Wittenberg: Of course not. You engaged in good works, Mrs Dvorjetsky. I knew you couldn't be the innocent butterfly you pretended to be.

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- Dvorjetsky: You're insulting, Wittenberg.
- Wittenberg: No, Doctor, not insulting. Realistic. Forgive me if I seem to be rude, Mrs Dvorjetsky. Crawling about in the sewers has a strange effect on the human mind. You were an excellent Jewish wife. Even the Gentiles had learned to respect you. Many of your patients were Gentiles I believe, Doctor?
- Dvorjetsky: Frankly, I don't see where this is leading.
- Wittenberg: Quite right, Doctor. Let's get back to the occupation. When the Germans marched in, you felt relief because you thought the madness of looting, burning, and rape was about to end, didn't you?
- Dvorjetsky: As I said, underneath the Germans are a civilized race.
- Wittenberg (savagely): Underneath. No doubt when they arrived you felt that God had stepped in to protect us?
- Dvorjetsky: I had a sense of Fate. Yes, I admit it.
- Wittenberg: Precisely. How well you express it, Doctor. The feeling most of us experienced. It was almost gratitude. We said to ourselves: "The Germans are arriving. They will be harsh but at least they will impose order. Whatever you say about the Germans, they are a methodical people. Under their protection we shall at least be safe from the Lithuanian scum who have hung us from lampposts for the last hundred years".
- Hannah: I don't understand all this.
- Wittenberg: Your husband understands, Mrs Dvorjetsky, and you will soon enough.
- Dvorjetsky: Why don't you stop frightening her?
- Wittenberg: Because, as I said, it's necessary. They call me "The Communist" and "The Atheist", Doctor, but I am Cassandra and the Angel of Death rolled into one.
- Hannah: I don't understand what he's talking about.
- Dvorjetsky: You must stop frightening my wife and leave.
- Wittenberg: Yes, yes. I'll go in a minute. But I can't help frightening you, Mrs Dvorjetsky. It's necessary for you to be frightened. Otherwise you're lost completely.
- Hannah: What do you mean?

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- Dvorjetsky: Don't ask him, Hannah.
- Wittenberg: There you are. I knew you understood, Doctor. The Angel of Death has already breathed his word into your soul while you slept.
- Dvorjetsky: I think you'd better go. We're very busy here.
- Hannah: My husband will be called out several times during the night. There are so many people sick and dying.
- Wittenberg (shaking his head): You're right. I'm afraid I'm out of my mind. I didn't mean to go on. All that nonsense. It was just the rage inside me bursting out.
- Hannah: I don't believe that.
- Wittenberg: Don't take any notice, Mrs Dvorjetsky. I was raving.
- Hannah: But I want to know what was behind it.
- Dvorjetsky: Hannah's right. If you have something to say you should say it.
- Wittenberg: Very well. I'll tell you quite clearly what I know and what I believe. There are some sixty thousand people in this ghetto. At least there were in June. All over the occupied areas the Germans are creating other similar ghettos: in Warsaw and Lvov, for example. Jews are being herded together in the poorest parts of the city not to live...but to die.
- Dvorjetsky: To die?
- Wittenberg: We are all under sentence of death, Doctor. They mean to kill us all.
- (There is a long silence. Hannah and Doctor Dvorjetsky exchange glances.)
- Dvorjetsky: You really believe they mean to kill us?
- Wittenberg: Yes.
- Hannah: Every one of us?
- Wittenberg: They've started already.
- Dvorjetsky: We know what they've done to some of our people in Germany ... the humiliation they've been subjected to.
- Wittenberg: Do you know what Hitler's written about us?

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- Dvorjetsky: I haven't read it myself. I know that dictators need a scapegoat. It's propaganda.
- Wittenberg: Hasn't it occurred to you that for once the propaganda is true, that for once what is being done is actually worse than what it being said?
- Dvorjetsky: You're speaking of "The Final Solution".
- Wittenberg: So you have heard? Well, let me tell you this: the so-called Final Solution is in operation now. As far as we're concerned, it started last week.
- Hannah: How?
- Wittenberg: The people who were taken away for resettlement, Mrs Dvorjetsky.
- Dvorjetsky: What do you mean?
- Wittenberg: I'm talking about the members of the Judenrat. The Germans set up the Judenrat to give us a sense of security, the feeling that, at least to some extent we control our own affairs. And then last week sixteen members were whisked off to God knows where with a crowd of other unfortunates. Isn't that so?
- (Dvorjetsky and Hannah nod).
- Hannah (to her husband): Pessia went. We've been hoping to hear from her.
- Wittenberg: Who's Pessia?
- Dvorjetsky: A young friend of ours. She went with her husband and her baby daughter.
- Hannah: She promised to write as soon as they are settled.
- Wittenberg: Well, I'm afraid I've got bad news for you.
- Hannah: What's happened to them?
- Wittenberg: I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I've verified it with my own eyes. All those people who were marched off for resettlement last week are now lying with bullets in their heads in the forest of Ponar twelve miles away.
- (There is a long silence).
- Hannah (with her hands to her mouth): I can't believe it.

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- Wittenberg: I'm afraid it's true. So, you see, Doctor, our only choice now is to die or to fight. And I prefer to fight.
- (He moves to the door. Dvorjetsky and Hannah stare at him in silence).
- Wittenberg: Thank you for treating me, Doctor. Think over what I have said. I'll be in touch. Goodnight, Mrs Dvorjetsky.
- (Wittenberg exits).
- (Doctor Dvorjetsky and Hannah sit at the table. They avoid one another's eyes. Hannah sobs. Dvorjetsky rises quickly and goes to comfort her.)
- Dvorjetsky: Hannah, you mustn't listen to such things. That man has become obsessed, demented.
- Hannah: Do you really believe that, Meir?
- Dvorjetsky: He's quite mad.
- Hannah: But what he said...Is it true?
- Dvorjetsky: It's part of his obsession. He thinks it's true.
- Hannah: But all those people. They've gone to a resettlement camp, haven't they?
- Dvorjetsky: Of course. Somewhere in the country. Perhaps they're on their way to the Holy Land. You see the Germans don't want us to panic. They've probably struck a deal with the Americans and the British. You'll know when Pessia writes.
- Hannah: Then perhaps we shall go to the Holy Land?
- Dvorjetsky: Of course, my darling. We must try.
- Hannah: The sunshine there must be beautiful. I've always loved the sun. I think we should go if they give us the chance.
- Dvorjetsky: We will. Now try to forget about Wittenberg. Let him go to his partisans in the forest.
- Hannah: It seemed so convincing, but he's a dangerous man. Meir.
- Dvorjetsky: Yes, he is.
- (There is a peremptory knock at the door. They start and look at one another in fear.)
- Hannah: He's come back!

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Dvorjetsky: I don't think so.  
(He moves to the door).

Hannah: Please don't let him in, Meir.

Dvorjetsky (at the door): Who's there?

Gens: It's me, Major Gens. I think you know me, Doctor.

Dvorjetsky: Gens!

Hannah: Tell him we're going to bed.

Dvorjetsky: I think it might be better to let him in, dear.  
(He opens the door).

Dvorjetsky: Please come in, Major.  
  
(Gens enters. He is somewhat stout and looks well groomed. He has an almost Prussian bearing with a military moustache and wears a smart green uniform, not dissimilar in cut to a Nazi uniform.)

Gens: Good evening, Doctor Dvorjetsky.

Dvorjetsky: Good evening.

Gens: Mrs Dvorjetsky, at your service.  
(He bows fastidiously).

Gens: I was just passing and noticed a chink of light. I thought to myself: this is where the Dvorjetskys live. It would be a pleasure to talk to them for a few minutes.

Dvorjetsky: You're welcome, Major.

Gens: It's always nice to have someone congenial to talk to, isn't it? Especially when you're in my position. Tell me, Mrs Dvorjetsky, is there some tea, by any chance?

Hannah: I'm sure we could squeeze you out a drop.

Gens: Good...good as I was saying, it's wonderful to be able to chat to folk like yourselves. I want to get to know as many influential people as possible. I feel it's an important part of my job, you know. I'm sure you understand that, Doctor, especially in your trade, eh? The mind. (Taps forehead) Far more important than the body, don't you think? In fact I'm sure you agree, many illnesses have

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their origin in the mind. What do you make of that theory, Doctor?

Dvorjetsky: I'm sure it has a good to deal to recommend it.

Gens: My job is far from easy, you know.

Dvorjetsky: Almost impossible, I should think.

Gens (laughing): Quite right. You've hit the nail on the head. It's quite impossible. There aren't many people who would envy me. Sometimes I feel like a tightrope walker in a gale, swaying to and fro, only just keeping my balance.

(Hannah hands him his tea).

Gens: Thank you, dear lady. What a splendid samova. A treasure salvaged from your old house, no doubt.

Hannah: It's precious to us, Major. It reminds me of home and what it will be like when we go back.

Gens: That's the spirit, Mrs Dvorjetsky. A very healthy, positive outlook. You can't imagine how difficult it is trying to keep up people's spirits. They don't understand. They want to bite the hand that feeds them, so to speak. I suppose you've heard the names some people call me?

Dvorjetsky: The young hotheads?

Gens: Not only the young, Doctor. Some older people are equally ungrateful. "The False Messiah", that's what some say. I can't tell you how cruel that seems, especially when I do my best to hold the community together in such difficult times.

Hannah: We know how hard you work, Major, but do the Germans listen to you?

Gens: Ah, Mrs Dvorjetsky, the Germans are a strange people. One has to understand their mentality. I can assure you I've made quite a study of it. I flatter myself I sometimes know what Colonel Schweinberger is thinking before he knows himself. But you mustn't believe all you hear. It's true they are a hard and determined people, and I must admit that official German policy is definitely anti-Jewish. And I know a lot of atrocities have been committed. But, you see, the Germans are not unreasonable. Taken individually, they're sometimes almost human. The Colonel jokes, you know just as you and I joke. After all, they're human. It's all a question of building up good relations, of convincing them that we are reasonable, and that we're willing to work hard.

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- Hannah: You speak with Schweinberger often?
- Gens: Nearly every day, Mrs Dvorjetsky. After all, he is my superior officer. A hard man but a man of good sense. He's a grandfather and has photos of his grandchildren on his desk. So you see he has every reason to understand our position, and I'm sure he's doing his best ... Which brings me to the matter I had in mind, Mrs Dvorjetsky. I'm sure you've seen "News of the Ghetto", the little newspaper I'm editing?
- Hannah: Oh, yes. We have a copy.  
  
(Hannah picks up the newspaper).
- Gens: It's only a modest little rag, of course, but tell me...what do you think of it?
- Hannah: Well, it's quite interesting, Major Gens, but perhaps a little too political for me.
- Gens: Ah-ha. I agree it could be a little lighter in tone, but we have to go some way to meet the requirements of our masters. And that's where you could help, Mrs Dvorjetsky.
- Hannah: Me? How?
- Gens: I know you've had experience of magazine work.
- Hannah: How did you know that?
- Gens: Well, that's the nature of policing. One has to be well informed. And that's the point. I want to lighten the tone. A woman's page, even perhaps two pages. Homely items. How to maintain our strict dietary laws in the face of shortages. How to look after the children and keep them entertained during curfew or when there's a raid on. That sort of thing. Do you think you could do something in that line?
- Hannah: I might give it some thought.
- Gens: Splendid! You know, it's the little human touches that make life bearable in times like these. Don't you agree? Well, then, let me have your answer as soon as possible, won't you?
- Hannah: I'll certainly think about it.
- Gens: Good. Then I must be off. Thank you and God's blessing upon you both.



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(He goes to the door and turns).

Gens: By the way, there was one other thing, Doctor Dvorjetsky.

Dvorjetsky: Yes.

Gens: Just before I dropped in, I saw someone lurking down below. I could have pulled him in for questioning but I decided to turn a blind eye.

Dvorjetsky: People have to break the curfew otherwise they wouldn't get treatment.

Gens: I understand that and my men turn the other way as much as they can. All the same, you should take care about who you see. This man probably thought I didn't recognize him. A very undesirable character called Wittenberg.

Hannah: Oh!

Gens: An obsessive troublemaker, Doctor, and unfortunately quite mad. His head's full of the most incredible nonsense. If he happens to sneak in at any time on some trumped up cause, don't listen to a word he says.

Dvorjetsky: My patients all talk, Major. I'm used to it.

Gens: Well, you know, it's sometimes wise to listen. One can pick up useful information, you know. Of course, we treat everything in confidence.

Dvorjetsky: I'll bear that in mind, Major.

Gens: Good. Very good.

(They shake hands).

Gens: Goodbye, Mrs Dvorjetsky. It's been so nice talking to you. I'll look forward to hearing from you in about a week.

(Hannah nods uncertainly as Gens bows and exits).

Dvorjetsky (having seen him out): Well, what do you think of that?

Hannah: He's a strange man. I don't know what to make of him.

Dvorjetsky: One thing's certain. All that stuff about happening to see Wittenberg lurking in the street was nonsense. He's got him under surveillance.

Hannah: He doesn't think we're in with Wittenberg, does he?

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- Dvorjetsky: I don't think so. It was probably intended as a warning.
- Hannah: Does he mean us any harm, Meir?
- Dvorjetsky: I think he's genuinely looking for support. He probably believes what he says about Colonel Schweinberger...or wants to.
- Hannah: He knows the Germans pretty well. After all he works very closely with them.
- Dvorjetsky: He's like a tightrope walker. He's afraid of losing his balance.
- Hannah: Oh, Meir, if only we could get away from here.
- Dvorjetsky: Yes...but how?
- Hannah: Wittenberg gets out, doesn't he?
- Dvorjetsky: He's a fanatic, a madman. Your health wouldn't stand up to it.
- Hannah: It would be an opportunity, wouldn't it?
- Dvorjetsky: For how long, darling?
- Hannah: At least we could - What was that?
- Dvorjetsky: What?
- Hannah: I heard something at the door. Listen.
- (As they listen, there's a scratching sound from the door).
- Hannah: You hear it?
- Dvorjetsky: Another patient, I guess.
- Hannah: Don't answer it, Meir. Remember the curfew. Pretend we haven't heard.
- (The scratching continues).
- Dvorjetsky: What a curious sound, like an animal at the door.
- Hannah: Don't open it, Meir. It might be a trick. Wittenberg might have come back.
- Dvorjetsky (moving to the door): Probably some poor soul in need.
- Hannah: Look through the crack, Meir.

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(She holds onto the table, shaking with fear. Dvorjetsky peers through the crack0.

Dvorjetsky: It's a woman...a Lithuanian peasant woman, carrying a bunch of flowers. What's she doing in the ghetto at this time of night?

(He opens the door and we see Pessia dressed in a peasant woman's hat and shawl and holding a bunch of withered flowers. As Hannah and Dvorjetsky stare at her, she sways and almost falls.)

Pessia (in a strange unearthly voice): Let me in! For God's sake let me in!

(Dvorjetsky helps Pessia into the room)

Hannah: Who are you?

Pessia: It's me, Pessia Aranovich!

Hannah: Pessia?

Pessia: Don't you recognize me? I've escaped from Ponar!

Dvorjetsky (failing to recognize her): What is this? Some sort of joke? We have no money for flowers.

(Pessia sways and almost falls. Hannah and Dvorjetsky support her).

Dvorjetsky: You're ill.

Hannah: Did Pessia send you?

Pessia: I am Pessia. Look.

(She takes off her hat).

Dvorjetsky (staring at her intently): My God, Hannah, it is Pessia.

Hannah: Is it really you, Pessia?

(Pessia sits down at the table and immediately her head sinks from exhaustion. She raises her head again).

Pessia: Hannah, surely you recognize my voice? Look at me. I've aged twenty years in a week, but I'm still Pessia.

Dvorjetsky: Why are you dressed as a peasant? and carrying flowers?

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Pessia (holding up the flowers): Without these, doctor, I should be dead like the rest of them.

Hannah: What are you talking about, Pessia?

Pessia: When I returned from the grave I met a peasant woman in the forest and she gave me food and these clothes so that nobody would see I was a Jew.

Hannah: What do you mean, returned from the grave?

Dvorjetsky: She's delirious. She must rest.

Pessia: Yes, I must sleep. I can hardly stand. Help me.  
(They help her to lie down. She falls asleep immediately).

Hannah: What a terrible story. D'you think it's true?

Dvorjetsky (examining the sleeping woman): She has a wound, look.

Hannah: Where?

Dvorjetsky: Here, just below the shoulder. The bullet has passed right through the muscle. Bring me water and a clean cloth. We must disinfect it immediately.  
(He begins to work on the wound).

Hannah: So she was shot. How much more of it is true, I wonder.

Dvorjetsky (staring intently at the wound): Just a moment. Look. Look at this.  
(He draws something away from the wound and shows her).

Hannah: What is it?

Dvorjetsky: It's one of those brown ants that live in the forest.

Hannah: That must mean...

Dvorjetsky: It means what she said is true. She was shot in the forest of Ponar with the others.

Hannah: What about her husband and her little girl, and the rest of them?

Dvorjetsky: All dead. Hannah, my darling, we've got to be brave. Wittenberg isn't so mad after all. He was telling the truth. Pessia is probably the only survivor.

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(Hannah puts her hands to her mouth and we hear her sob as the lights fade).

SCENE THREE

The scene is a dilapidated room at No 2 Strakum Street in the Ghetto. The room is full of people, mostly young men but with a sprinkling of young women and one or two older people. Behind a makeshift table sit Doctor Dvorjetsky, Dan Ariel (a Jewish leader), and Itzak Wittenberg. Dan Ariel is about to address the meeting.

- Dan Ariel: Brothers and sisters, we have heard Doctor Dvorjetsky's account of what happened to Pessia Aranovich in the Forest of Ponar. This supports Itzak Wittenberg's report about the wholesale murder of our people in the forest. Now we have to decide what action to take.
- Golda Vroshka: Just a moment, Dan. I'd like to say something.
- Dan Ariel: Of course. Everyone is free to ask a question or to express an opinion.
- Golda Vroshka (standing): As you know, comrades, I work in the dress factory.
- Dan Ariel: Please give your name.
- Golda Vroshka: Golda Vroshka.
- Dan Ariel: Okay, Golda, carry on.
- Golda Vroshka: This business of the alleged murders. It occurred several weeks ago. Why haven't we been told before?
- Dan Ariel: Well, as you know, this meeting has been difficult to organize. It isn't easy to make people listen. Doctor Dvorjetsky perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell us what happened after Pessia came to you.
- Dvorjetsky: Certainly...As soon as Pessia was well enough to leave, I decided everybody had a right to know what was happening. I wanted people to be quite clear about the future.
- Dan Ariel: Yes. What happened then?
- Dvorjetsky: I went to see an old friend of mine, a man for whom I have always had great respect. I told Pessia's story,

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including her final words after she had slept: "Ponar is not a work camp. Neither is it a transit camp. Nobody leaves Ponar alive".

Dan Ariel: What did he say?

Dvorjetsky: He didn't even raise an eyebrow. It was as though he had become completely deaf. I repeated Pessia's words. After I'd told him three times, he smiled at me and said: "Meir, this girl...her sufferings have made her hysterical. You mustn't believe all this nonsense." So I went to another friend, a lawyer, much younger, a man who prides himself on having his ear to the ground. He took me by the hand and said: "Meir, do you want to create panic in the Ghetto? Our responsibility is to encourage the people. Do you want an insurrection because of a madwoman's nightmare? I asked him to interview Pessia's, but he refused. And he's a responsible person.

(The people hiss).

That's all very well. He's right in one way: we must have order in the community. But he refused to listen.

Golda Vroshka: D'you know where Pessia is now?

Dvorjetsky: No. She left my house and I haven't seen her since.

Golda Vroshka: I'll tell you something interesting, Doctor. Pessia is working with me in the dress-making factory. We sit side by side at our machines. Of course, I knew this story, so I asked her to tell me the truth. You know what she did? She picked up a piece of calico and said: "Isn't this a pretty pattern, Golda? Don't you think it would suit me?" D'you think she would behave like that if she had been through such a harrowing experience?

Dvorjetsky: Denial. It's not an unusual phenomenon. She's obviously decided to wipe it out of her mind.

Wittenberg (leaping up suddenly): Of course it happened! Is there anybody here who doubts it?

(There is a brooding silence).

Wittenberg: Most of us here are young. We value our lives, but we must also be strong enough to face the truth. We mustn't listen to those old people who think that the horror will go away if we stop talking about it, or that God, perhaps will swoop down from his palace in the sky and stop the Germans from liquidating us.

Dan Ariel: Liquidating!

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- Wittenberg: Yes, liquidating, Dan! Why don't you take your blinkers off and face the truth. Pessia has blotted the horror out of her mind because she can't come to terms with the fact that she had to crawl out from under the bodies of her child and her husband. Her mind won't let her remember. She's trying to protect herself! It's natural!
- Dan Ariel: Calm down, Itzak!
- Wittenberg: But I tell you, I saw the bodies heaped up in the forest for myself. I heard the air being squeezed out of their dead lungs. I know Pessia is telling the truth.
- (He struggles with emotion).
- Wittenberg: But you're right. This meeting's too important for fits of temper. I have something to tell you. And you must listen carefully because there may not be many more chances.
- Dan Ariel: Okay. But before you go on, Itzak, there's something I must say. You are all bound to secrecy. Whatever happens between these four walls must remain absolutely secret, Is that understood?
- (There are murmurs of "yes" and "of course", etc).
- Dan Ariel: Very well. Place your hands on your hearts and repeat this after me.
- Golda Vroshka: Is this necessary?
- Dan Ariel: Place your hands on your hearts and repeat this after me: "In the name of Our Father, the God of our fathers, we declare that everything said at this meeting shall be locked in the secret of our hearts for ever more."
- (This is repeated).
- Dan Ariel: Very well. Now, Itzak, please go on.
- Wittenberg: Since the establishment of this Ghetto in which we crawl like cockroaches, I have been out many times. Don't ask me how because I'm not going to tell you. But there are ways. Not only that; I have contacts outside in the forest, men and women of tremendous courage who move about under cover of darkness. Their lives are unspeakably hard. At any moment they know they might be betrayed. But that's not important. They're out there for one reason only – to destroy the Nazis. Nothing but death will stop them.
- A Voice: Why don't you stay in the forest with them?

## VILNA

- Wittenberg: Yes, I've asked myself that question repeatedly. And I keep coming back because, although many people refer to me as "The Communist" and "The Atheist", above everything else, I'm a Jew. This Ghetto is my Jewish home. I return to it again and again because I can't leave. There is too much to do here, and perhaps I am the only one who can do it. And there's something else I want to tell you, comrades. We're not completely defenceless. We have ears in the German Army Headquarters. We know exactly what Colonel Schweinberger thinks and everything he decides. In the interest of security, I won't say anything more. But what I tell you is true.
- A Voice: And what are these ears telling you?
- Wittenberg: Everything, my friend even to the colour of Schweinberger's blotting paper. Everything that Doctor Dvorjetsky and I have told you is true. The Nazis keep a file. They know exactly how many people died at Ponar and it wasn't an act of brutality carried out on the spur of the moment. It was deliberate. It was another move in a savage game that will end only when every Jew in this ghetto has been liquidated. And not only here. After Vilna they will liquidate Warsaw. After Warsaw, who knows? The further the Nazis reach, the stronger their satanic grasp will become.
- Golda Vroshka: Can you prove this?
- Wittenberg: What proof do you need? Pessia's wounds; the bodies I have seen in the forest; the fact that we are confined here like animals waiting to be slaughtered; the fact that nobody the Nazi's take from here ever returns.
- Gold Vroshka: But some did come back from Pessia's assignment.
- Wittenberg: The only ones who came back were those who chose the left instead of the right. And they move like shadows because, like Pessia, they're too terrified to speak.
- Dan Ariel: Brothers and sisters, it's no accident you're here in this room. In one way or another, you have each proved to be an exception. We are realists. We can face up to the truth. If there is anyone among us who is unwilling to face death, he or she must leave immediately and no one will blame him.
- (There is silence. Nobody leaves).
- Dan Ariel: Then, now we know what the Germans plan, we must decide what to do. It's a matter of tactics. If, as Itzak tells us, they have decided to close down the Ghetto and



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liquidate us all, we shall have some advanced warning. A day, perhaps. If we're lucky, a week. When the time comes, we must be ready to act.

Young Jew: If this is true, and I believe it is, there's one thing we can do. Those of us who are fit and able must join the partisans.

Dan Ariel: You mean leave those in the Ghetto to their fate?

Young Jew: If the Ghetto is doomed anyway, what choice do we have? Our object should be to inflict as much damage on the German forces as possible.

Dan Ariel: A valid point.

Golda Vroshka: What about weapons? How can we fight without guns?

Wittenberg: There will be guns. I can promise that.

Golda Vroshka: D'you mean there are weapons available already?

Wittenberg: A few. And we shall get more. I can promise you that. Not enough to fight the whole German army but enough to inflict a good many casualties.

Dan Ariel: So it is proposed that some of us should disappear and join the partisans?

Golda Vroshka: Won't that make matters worse for those who are left behind?

Dan Ariel: That may be inevitable. What do you think Itzak?

Wittenberg: Before we take a decision, we must accept one fact. That is the inevitability of our own deaths. If anybody is thinking of glory or heroics, forget it. Whether we stay here or go outside, we are already dead. Everyone in this room is dead. Whatever we choose, we choose as dead men and women. You must understand that.

(There is a gloomy silence).

Dan Ariel: What are you proposing Itzak?

Wittenberg: Anybody who wants to go out, can go. I'll make sure you reach the partisans. But I have chosen to stay. That's my personal commitment. It's a matter of going out there to die or staying here to die. I shall stay here and fight and die, not because I hope to win but because these are my people. When the history of this place is written, I want it to be said: "The Jews of Vilna did not

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submit to the slaughter like lambs; they fought!" That's my contribution to history, comrades.

(There is a moment's silence, followed by applause).

- Golda Vroshka: If we stay, if we can get weapons, will you lead us, Itzak?
- Wittenberg: Yes.
- Voices: We'll stay and fight with you, Itzak!
- Wittenberg: Good. Then we must prepare ourselves. There are weapons already and we will get more. Not only for ourselves and Vilna. Already two people of Aryan appearance are on their way to warn the ghetto in Warsaw.
- Golda Vroshka: There's another thing to think about.
- Dan Ariel: Yes?
- Golda Vroshka: We have traitors here. What are we going to do about them?
- Dan Ariel: What have you in mind?
- Golda Vroshka: I'm thinking about Gens.
- Young Jew: If we mean business, he should be killed at once.
- Voices: Yes! Gens should die! He should be killed at once! Get rid of the bastard! Death to the traitor!
- Dan Ariel: What are you saying? Gens is only a laughing-stock. If we kill him, we might as well kill all the Jewish police.
- Golda Vroshka: Why not? They're all traitors, aren't they? We could seize their weapons.
- A Voice: They must be killed. But we should wait until we know for certain that the Germans are about to liquidate the Ghetto. We must kill them first as a punishment for what they have done.
- Dvorjetsky: May I say something?
- A Young Jew: Quiet! Listen to the Doctor!
- Dvorjetsky: It would be a mistake to kill Gens.

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- Golda Vroshka: Why?
- Dvorjetsky: First because, after all, he is a Jew.  
(Cries of disagreement).
- A Voice: He's a traitor!
- Dvorjetsky: Whatever he may have done, he is still one of us. However misguided his actions are, I think he is trying to do his best for the Ghetto. Moreover, I don't think he understands the position.
- A Voice: He's burying his head in the sand!
- Golda Vroshka: He's a fool, but he's dangerous.
- Dvorjetsky: The second reason is that to kill him would be a tactical blunder. If we did, we'd lose the initiative completely and weaken our cause. Many people would be against us. Our own people would call us traitors. And it would give the Germans an excuse to kill us all immediately.
- Dan Ariel: That makes sense. What do you think, Itzak?
- Wittenberg: The doctor's right. We can't afford to kill Gens...certainly not for the moment. He's an irrelevance, but he does have a modest function. He keeps the people calm and gives them a spurious sense of order. This is what the Germans want, of course, but for now it serves our purpose. As you say, Gens is a fathead and a laughing-stock. I don't think we have much to fear from him. Let him go on amusing himself with "News from the Ghetto" if it pleases him. And let the Germans think we're taken in by it, while we prepare ourselves for the day.
- Dan Ariel: Yes. The day. Brothers and sisters, I have something to say. Although we are about to die, we must be joyful. We must even rejoice that we are about to accept our death willingly. Let's join hands and sing the Hatikvah together.  
  
(They join hands and sing, first solemnly, and then with increasing fervour and courage).
- Dan Ariel: May God bless you all!
- Voices: Every blessing on you.
- Wittenberg: We will call another meeting soon to keep you informed.
- Young Jew: Why don't you advertise in "News of the Ghetto"?

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(Laughter. The group disperses, all but Wittenberg and Lydia).

Wittenberg: Lydia, don't go! There's something I want to say to you.

Lydia (moving to him): Yes, Itzak?

Wittenberg: Let me look at you.

(He takes her shawl gently from her head and we see that she is beautiful but blonde).

Lydia: Why do you stare at me, Itzak?

Wittenberg: I'm trying to understand something. How is it with you, Lydia?

(They stand as though hypnotized by one another. Then they come together and embrace. Lydia wriggles out of his grasp).

Lydia: Oh, Itzak this is wrong.

Wittenberg: What can be wrong with it?

Lydia: You mustn't make me weak. Can't you see, we must both be strong.

Wittenberg: You are strong. You have a wonderful strength in your heart, Lydia. It sticks in me like a dagger when I think of you sitting in the same room as Schweinberger, listening to his obscenities, typing his reports on the Jews he has had murdered. Where did you get the strength? Why did I allow you to do this?

Lydia: You know very well I couldn't have done anything else, Itzak. I'm here. Look at me. I'm the only one apart from the Silber sisters who have the right complexion and the right hair for the job. I had to do it.

Wittenberg: That beautiful hair of yours...like spun gold.

(He strokes her hair. She shivers and draws back).

Lydia: Don't, Itzak. I hate my hair! It makes me look like one of those butchers. I'd have cut it off if it wasn't useful.

Wittenberg: And so you're holding up all right?

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Lydia: Don't ask questions like that, as though you think you should see weakness because I'm a woman.

Wittenberg: You want me to think of you as a comrade?

Lydia: Forget I'm a woman, Itzak, as I try to. I may have been a woman once but now I'm a soldier. As you've said yourself so many times, we are already dead. The only life we have is the life of hate that teaches us to resist. I am ready to kill Schweinberger whenever you give the order. There's just one thing...

Wittenberg: What's that?

Lydia: Please give me the cyanide capsule you promised.

Wittenberg: I can't do that, Lydia.

Lydia: But you must. In case I'm caught. You know everyone talks under torture.

(Wittenberg hesitates).

Lydia: Please, Itzak.

Wittenberg (handing her the cyanide phial): If you need it, put it between your teeth and crush it. The end will come in less than a minute.

(Lydia looks at the phial for a moment, shudders and conceals it quickly).

Lydia: Thank you.

Wittenberg: One other thing.

Lydia: Yes?

Wittenberg: We may not...I want to hold you just for a second so that I can imagine what it might have been like if things had been different.

(They embrace).

Lydia: Ah, Itzak. Whoever thought of calling you "The Madman"?

Wittenberg: Someone very wise and far-sighted. I am mad. Mad with the grief that comes of watching one's people going into the fire of extinction.

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(He releases her).

Wittenberg: There. That must be enough to last a lifetime.

(They break away from one another. She turns at the door and then exits. Wittenberg stands in deep thought as the lights fade).

INTERVAL

ACT TWO - SCENE ONE

(The scene is Colonel Schweinberger's Headquarters, a large sanitized office lit brightly by artificial light. One has the impression that the office extends outwards through space in all directions and that Schweinberger's power is immense. (The Director will probably use the whole of the thrust or arena part of the stage for this).

Schweinberger is sitting behind his desk, speaking on the telephone. He smiles a good deal and appears to be genial though business-like. As the lights fade in, he puts down the telephone and studies the photograph of his wife and children before rising and going to the window.

Lydia enters. She dressed in a Nazi uniform. She is carrying a bouquet of flowers. After a second she coughs discreetly to attract Schweinberger's attention).

Schweinberger: Ah, Lydia, good morning. I see you've brought the flowers.

Lydia: Yes, Colonel. Where would you like them?

Schweinberger: Good point. Not on my desk, for sure. Sergeant Schmidt would think I was turning into a poofter. Here, on the shelf will do next to the photo. It's my wedding anniversary. You must have guessed.

Lydia: It did occur to me.

Schweinberger: Of course. Usually I forget but, when one is so far from home, you know. She always remembers. Women are sentimental creatures, aren't they?

Lydia: Sometimes.

Schweinberger: I daresay you're just like the others out of uniform.

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(He takes the photo of his wife and hands it to Lydia).

Schweinberger: There. What do you think of her?

Lydia: She's very pretty, Colonel. Allow me to congratulate you.

(He takes the photograph and studies the picture).

Schweinberger: Yes, she was pretty. She's older now, of course, but once she was beautiful...a bit like you. More robustly built, I must admit. A good strong Aryan girl. The sort the Fuhrer likes.

Lydia (looking at another photograph): And these are your children?

Schweinberger: That's when they were kids. They're almost grown up now. I haven't seen them for ages.

Lydia: Perhaps you will, sir.

Schweinberger: Who knows? There's so much to do. We can't look far ahead. Of course, I know we're going to win the war, but there are so many unpleasant tasks. Not for the squeamish. I sometimes wonder if even the Fuhrer can get us through this dark period.

Lydia: Nobody knows what lies ahead, Colonel. We must just do our best at the time.

Schweinberger: Wise words, Lydia. You have a sad face today. You're looking a bit peaky. I'll have to send you on leave when I can spare you. God knows when that will be. You know you're wrong.