

Chapter 32

Ruislip, London

March 2001

Simon did not know an enormous amount about Ruislip, except that you passed through the town on your way to Uxbridge, on the Metropolitan Line. The town had substantially expanded by the 1960s, as much due to the extension of this railway line, and had been part of what had been dubbed '*Metro-land*'.

Its claim to fame, if that could be said, was in 1961 when the Portland Spy Ring of Peter and Helen Kroger, both Americans whose real names were Morris and Lona Cohen, were found to be involved with the Soviet spy Konon Molody, better known as Gordon Lonsdale. When arrested, the pair were found to be in possession of a microdot reader and film of the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment at Portland Harbour, hence the name of the ring. Their radio transmitter was not found until sixteen years later, buried in the garden. Having received substantial prison terms, eight years later, they were both exchanged for a businessman called Gerald Brooke, who had been convicted in Russia for allegedly smuggling anti-Soviet leaflets.

A week after Simon had been given the card details by the archivist, he had visited the British Library and studied the historical Electoral Rolls for the London constituency of Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner. It became immediately obvious what Eccles had been alluding to; he had warned of the mammoth task ahead if the Electoral Rolls were used to trace Sutkis. Each book was huge. There were over 70,000 residents just in the town of Ruislip by 1961. Looking at later versions, the numbers grew horrendously.

It had not taken Simon long to realise the futility in taking this course to find Sutkis. However, he also recognised that he might be able to use them to keep a tab on the whereabouts of the Webers, who might lead him to where Sutkis was living. As it

transpired, it was a more profitable decision than he had at first thought.

It had been easy to find a telephone number for the Webers and he had made an appointment to see them. As he had pulled his car up onto the driveway of 116 Westcote Road, he first noticed there was no sign of a car belonging to the householders. The obvious reason might well be their age and a lack of need to own one. They lived on a busy thoroughfare, connecting Ruislip with Uxbridge and South Harefield, which seemed well provided with public transport.

The building he needed, sat behind a waist-high box hedge, was a late thirty's style semi-detached, painted white with bay windows, both ground floor and first. Outwardly, it looked neat and tidy. As Simon walked up to the front door, it opened. He was greeted by an elderly lady, who told him that she was Edith Weber.

"It's not often we get visitors now, dear," she explained, her accent suggesting that she was London born and bred, as she showed him in and then closed the door. "But then we're getting on a bit, and many of our friends don't get around so well these days," she continued as she showed Simon into the living room.

Sat in a high-backed chair was an elderly man, who Simon immediately recognised as an older version of the Altman Weber he had seen in his ID photograph.

"Come in, please," said the old man, waving a hand towards another chair. "Hope you won't mind if I don't get up. My knees sometimes give me some pain," he explained, there was still a hint of a German accent in his voice.

"Please don't," replied Simon, walking over to the old man and took his hand. "As I explained on the telephone, my name is Simon Callan, and I am most grateful for your time."

"That's one thing we have a lot of," said the German, with a wry smile. "Both Edith and I have a lot of time to spare now, and it's good to use it to help if we can. Please sit," he commanded and looked over at his wife. "Edith, my dear, would you mind getting our guest some tea?" He shot a look over to Simon. "I

presume you would like a cup?"

"That would be most kind but don't go to any bother".

"As Altman said, we don't get many visitors, and it's time anyway for a cuppa," his wife said before disappearing out of the room. Once the sound of the kettle being filled could be heard from the kitchen, Weber leaned towards Simon.

"So, you want to know about my time as a POW?" he asked, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

"No, no," replied Simon, trying to put the man at his ease. He had worked out an approach that might work; he needed them to be willing to tell him what he wanted to know. If they thought there was a problem, they might not be so forthcoming, so Simon had decided to concentrate his line on the German rather than Sutkis.

"No, not at all. I am doing some research, for a book, into a number of post-war labour schemes that were devised by the government. My research has brought me to the part where one of these schemes involved recruiting ex-POWs. Whilst trawling through the records at the National Archives, I came across several references to POWs who had become European Volunteer Workers and," he paused as he reached down to the folder he had brought in with him, extracted a piece of paper and handed it to the German. "And I found this."

Altman smiled as he looked at a copy of his old EVW ID card.

"It also helped that you haven't moved from this house as it didn't take much effort to find you".

At that moment, Edith entered the room with a tea tray. Simon stood up to help.

"No need to, my dear," she said, placing the tray on a low table. "Now, do you take milk and sugar?"

"Just milk, please," Simon replied and watched as the old lady purposefully poured the tea.

"Mr Callan was just telling me, dear," said Altman, "that he's researching ex-POWs who stayed here to work".

Edith stopped pouring and turned towards Simon. "Oh?"

"Yes," Simon said, to calm the interest. "I was just saying that

I'm writing a book. It's about the schemes that were introduced and the people who were recruited. That is why I am here. I would very much like to hear your husband's story".

Edith turned back to finishing pouring the tea. When done, she brought the cup over to his chair.

"Would you like a biscuit?"

"No, thank you. This is fine."

Edith poured another cup for her husband and then for herself. When she had finally sat down at one end of the sofa, Simon retrieved the copy ID from her husband and handed it to her.

"I expect you remember that face," he said jovially.

"Oh, goodness me," Edith said, raising a hand to her mouth. "That was taken years ago".

"Handsome man, I would say," added Simon.

"Oh, he was, dear," replied the old lady. She had moved her hand away from her mouth and was gently stroking the picture of a youthful Altman.

"Oh, he was. I first met him at a dance, you know. We used to have one each week at the Salvation Army Hall." She allowed a laugh to escape as she reminisced memories back to those long-gone days. "The music was very risqué. Some thought we were very wicked, but we didn't care. Chuck Berry, Gene Vincent and of course Elvis Presley. I loved Elvis Presley; he was gorgeous". She laughed.

"Rock and Roll, Jiving. Dressing up to go out. Oh, it was wonderful. It allowed you to forget about some of the hardships we still had to put up with." She looked across at her husband, a look of affection washing over her face.

"It was at one of those dances that I met him. He was so handsome. The other girls all swooned around him. He asked me for a dance. How could I refuse?" She fell silent for a moment. "Oh yes," she said, looking back at the ID card, "I remember this face so well. I don't think he has changed a great deal, do you?"

Simon allowed himself to laugh. He was breaking the ice gently. He turned to her husband.

"Can you tell me anything about your time as an EVW?"

“I’ll tell you how I ended up at the camp in Malton first. I was a wireless operator, part of the Wehrmacht 716th Static Infantry Division in Normandy, France. Our command post was in the town of Ranville, near the Orne River and the Caen Canal, when the Allied invasion began in June 1944. The landings, which we had been told would be impossible, were far more successful. We soon became aware that we could be surrounded because of airborne troop landings in the area. We were ordered to relocate our post back towards Caen. It took us a while to pack all our gear together whilst the admin staff hurried around storing theirs.

“Anyway, there were twenty-four of us when we left in twelve vehicles with all our equipment and volumes of paperwork. We had reached the other side of the village of Hérouvillete when we were attacked by two aircraft. We abandoned our vehicles and fell into the roadside ditches as the aircraft swept over us, firing and dropping bombs. The noise was terrible. When they had gone, I dragged myself up and out of the ditch. There was not one vehicle left of any use. They were all on fire or blown to pieces. All our equipment had gone up in smoke; the admin papers were strewn across the fields in the wind. It was not just the vehicles that had suffered. Thirteen of our group were dead, including our captain. Our lieutenant told us we would have to walk; there was no other way. It was only a short while later that we were surrounded by a group of British soldiers. I found out later that they were paratroopers, the ones we had been warned of. We sat where we were captured for a while and then taken back towards Ranville.

“Eventually, we, along with about a hundred other prisoners, were put aboard a craft on the coast and sailed to England. We arrived at Southampton, put on a train and sent to the camp at Malton, and that is where I stayed for the next two years.” Weber reached for the copy ID cards.

“The camp was alright but demoralising, and so most of us were glad when we were told that we would soon be released. I, though, was not so much glad. My home had been in Dresden, and, as you may well know, the city had been almost flattened

by Allied bombing. My father had died just before the war and, two years before I was captured and came to England, I had received a telegram to say that my mother had been killed in an air-raid. As you can see, I had nothing to return to but ruins and broken memories". He paused for a moment, possibly thinking back to his lost family.

"When they asked if anyone would like to stay and work in England, it was easy for me to say yes. There were ten of us who left the camp. We were put on a truck. The journey was long, or it felt as if it was, as we travelled through the countryside and towns. Eventually, in the evening, we stopped, and I was ordered to climb down. In front of me was a large building which, as I was told, was my new home, Mecklefield Hall. Each day, from there, I was taken out to a farm to work." He paused and smiled.

"I will always remember it. It was called Symons farm. It was the beginning of a new life. It was also on that farm where I met my good friend Antonas".

Simon reached into his folder once more and retrieved another sheet of paper. He handed it to Altman.

"Ha!" the old man shouted. "You found his card as well!" he continued, laughing.

"Is that the Antonas you remember?"

"Of course, it is! Who else could it be with such a ferocious scar on his face? This is Antonas! How did you find this?"

"The same way I found yours," replied Simon, thinking carefully how to proceed. "I found your card, which told me where you had been taken, so I looked at who else might have been there. This card showed identical address movements as yours did, all the way to here in Ruislip. I guessed he was a friend. He could also be enormously helpful as well. Whilst I am looking at people like you who were ex-POWs who became EVWs, there were also many people who came to Britain from Germany. They came as part of the so-called '*Westward Ho!*' scheme for Displaced Persons, and Antonas was one of these. I would love to speak with him about his experiences, how he came to be here, what made him come, all that sort of thing, the

same as you have said. I don't suppose you still see him, do you?"

The German shook his head. Simon feared the worst. It seemed that he had lost the trail again. Then Edith spoke.

"We don't see him so much any longer. He comes over about twice or three times a year. We have something to eat, and then he leaves. We used to see him regularly, but that was many years ago before he retired. Like us, he's getting old. Now it's just now and then".

Simon's heart was racing. His quarry still came here. His quarry was still alive.

"I don't suppose you have an address for him, do you?"

"Oh yes," replied the old lady and stood up. She went to a chest of drawers near the door. Opened a drawer and took out a book, an address book.

"Here we are," she said as she found the entry. "He's in Ealing. No 74 Sullivan Terrace, not far from the North Ealing Underground station. A small flat. We only went there once. We don't have a telephone number for him. We did, but we think it must have changed".

Simon frantically found a pen and scribbled the information down. He couldn't believe his luck, though he wondered what had happened with the telephone number.

"He's retired now, you know," said Altman, forgetting that his wife had already told their guest. "He used to work for a cargo handling company, near Heathrow Airport. He became a supervisor there, didn't he Edith? Can't remember what it was called, but it was a big company".

"Roadford Cargo," said his wife. "I remember him telling us all about it. He worked there for, oh, fifteen years or more. He loved it. First, as a van driver, then in the warehouse. He tried to get you to go there as well, didn't he, dear?"

"He did, but I liked my job. I was a builder. Always had been one. Even when I was young and in Germany before the war, I worked in building". He looked down at his hands. They reminded Simon so much of those that Jonas Meris had shown

him. Workman's hands. "I couldn't be stuck in a warehouse all day. I much preferred the fresh air."

"Roadford Cargo?" said Simon almost to himself.

"That's right," said Edith. "Roadford Cargo. I think he said it was in Hayes".

As Simon left, he felt a measure of embarrassment. He hadn't been truthful with them. He had told himself that he couldn't afford to be. They were such a lovely pair, and it was patently obvious that they liked the '*Antonias*' they knew. They wouldn't have believed the '*Antonias*' that he knew.