

SKIING IN TYROL

March 1938

SNOW HAD BEGUN TO fall as the train pulled out from the Wien Sudbahnhof station. It continued steadily through the morning, thickening over the countryside until there was no edge to the land where it met the chalky sky. A series of fast-moving frozen images floated past Toby's window. He caught a glimpse of a farmhouse and an old oak tree. Then open terrain.

Despite the rhythmic vibration, Toby couldn't help fidgeting in his seat. He felt hot in his heavy wool sweater. And his stomach growled. The ham sandwich his mother had packed him was in his rucksack in the overhead bin. To get to it, he'd have to climb over Eli.

He looked over at his childhood friend who was fast asleep. Eli Stoff lived in his apartment building. They'd attended *Volksschule* together since they were six, were both accepted into the *Gymnasium* in their Vienna neighborhood. They were like brothers: Eli taking the role of protector, keeping Toby out of trouble, and pushing him to engage more in school activities.

The long train ride gave Toby plenty of time to consider how he found himself heading to the western province of Tyrol with—other than Eli—eight boys he disliked. He would have rather spent these two days doing almost anything but skiing in the frigid cold. He could still be in bed, reading Kafka's *The Trial* that his father had lent him or, better yet, listening to jazz on his parents' phonograph.

He'd told Eli as much when their teacher, Herr Bohm, first announced the class outing. He reminded Eli he didn't even own a pair of skis. His lack of interest in the national pastime set Toby apart as a contrarian, but he didn't care. "Come on, don't be a spoilsport," Eli had chided him. "I have an old set you can borrow. Other stuff too."

His friend's prodding hadn't really persuaded him. It was what had been brewing at school, an undercurrent of tension that gnawed at Toby all year. It came to a head last December when two students approached him and Eli in the cafeteria.

"Hey there, Stoff. You took my seat. Think you own this space?" The bigger of the two boys, Bruno Maurer, had seemed eager to stir things up. His black eyes narrowed when he spoke; his voice bellowed. Franz Haider, stout with a mop of blond hair, plunked down on the wooden bench and slid his tray across the table hard enough to spill the water glass onto Eli.

Eli took his napkin and sopped up the liquid, his voice controlled, unperturbed. "This table is all yours, fellas. We were just leaving." Eli motioned for Toby to get up, his expression hovering between resignation and puzzlement. As he stepped away, he said, "Enjoy your lunch," without even a faint trace of sarcasm.

Toby remembered his own rage as if it were yesterday. Eli was sturdy and broad-shouldered and could have posed a threat to the roughnecks. When they were out of earshot, he had asked Eli why he didn't stand up to them. It wouldn't work, was all Eli replied. "They'll just keep at it. Up the ante."

While he was thankful not to be the butt of jokes or ploys, as were Eli and the other Jewish kids, he burned with humiliation on his friend's behalf. Eli never let on how he felt. Toby watched Eli calmly deflect every confrontation so it wouldn't escalate. He gave Eli a lot of credit for his self-control. Meanwhile, he bore enough worry and angst for the both of them.

"Approaching Kitzbühel Hahnenkamm." He felt the train slowing as Herr Bohm's booming voice rang through the confined space. "Collect your belongings, boys."

Eli stretched his long legs in the cramped space and stifled a yawn. "How long was I asleep?"

"Two hours. You were really great company." Toby climbed over Eli into the aisle, retrieving his soggy ham sandwich. "At least you didn't snore."

Toby shoved the last bite in his mouth as the whistle announced their arrival. He closed the flap on his bag and grabbed the borrowed ski gear. The rail guard unlatched the door and moved aside while passengers scrambled past him onto the platform. Toby followed Eli down the aisle. When he reached the opening, a thick smoke sprayed up from the train's chimney like a cloud of steam. A hissing noise cut across the crisp ether. Just as Eli was about to step down, Toby felt himself being shoved from behind and he pitched forward against him. Eli lost his footing and fell to his knees, but he sprang back up and brushed the snow off his pants.

"Hey!" Toby spun around and found himself face-to-face with Rudy Kraus. "Take it easy."

"Relax, Wermer." Rudy smirked. "I didn't mean anything."

Toby knew better. "So, you're just naturally clumsy?"

The remaining boys piled out, some jumping two-footed onto the icy ground. A few jabbed playfully at their nearest classmates. Excited voices glazed the cold air with a frosty mist.

Herr Bohm instructed them to line up along the platform to take the roll. “Christoph Eisler, Stefan Frece, Rolland Gerg . . .”

Slapped by a gust of wind, Toby pulled down the earflaps on his cap and waited for his name to be called, last as always. Everything about this trip bothered him. Labeled “optional” since students were responsible for the train fare and overnight fee at the youth hostel, it discouraged participation from working-class families. And the trip was scheduled at the time Jewish classmates observed their Sabbath, instead of during the week of winter break.

“ . . . Franz Haider, Rudolf Kraus, Karl Langer, Bruno Maurer . . .”

Toby glared at the pair of ruffians who’d taunted Eli months back—Bruno the instigator, Franz his lackey. Along with Rudy, they injected threat and intolerance into a school culture where Jews were in the minority. In the class of twenty, there were only two—Eli, and Freidel Shamansky. Freidel had passed on the trip. Eli’s family was more secular, and Eli insisted on going, perhaps the rebel in him striking back against the bad guys. Eli’s mother at first cautioned both boys about taking the trip because of the steep slopes and possible icy conditions. But at last night’s dinner, she urged them to stay watchful given the “mood” of the times.

“ . . . Dietrich Rauch, Eli Stoff, Tobias Wermer.”

“Look where we are!” Eli whispered the words to Toby, his face shining.

He pointed beyond the train station, which bisected the village of Kitzbühel. Toby took in the mountain flanks surrounding them. They stood deep in the valley of this medieval town with its buttressed walls, as if on the floor of a giant amphitheater chiseled out of the earth.

Following Herr Bohm’s even pace, the boys marched down the narrow, cobbled main road, the snow squeaking under their feet. They passed hostelries, cafés, and taverns with hand-drawn signs, until they reached their lodgings. Toby stared up at the

frescoes of double-headed eagles on the lobby ceiling as his teacher assigned roommates, predictably placing Toby and Eli together. Bohm told them to unpack their things, change clothes, and meet back downstairs in half an hour.

The room was large and comfortable with big windows, through which the sun's reflection off the snow streamed into the chamber. Squinting, Toby plopped on the bed, its surface overlaid with a feather coverlet. "Can you believe this? We're almost on our own!"

"You sound like you're finally happy to be on this trip." Eli's broad smile softened the deep cleft in his chin. "Ready to hit the Alps?"

Toby held his tongue rather than express his true preference—to stay in the hostel and warm himself by the fireplace in the lounge. Eli was already pulling out their ski trousers, boots, mittens, and caps. Toby tightened his suspenders to keep the trousers taut as Eli had instructed. Even though Eli's hand-me-downs were from years earlier, they looked baggy on Toby's short, thin frame. He tucked the pant legs into the tops of his boots—ankle-high and uncomfortable.



THE SNOWFALL HAD FINALLY LET UP. Under the cobalt sky, the boys faced an endless series of mountain peaks still warm from the sun, the snow deep and powdery in spots. They headed for the slopes, carrying their wooden skis in one hand, the bamboo poles in the other. Herr Bohm had divided the students into two groups. The teacher took six and assigned Eli, the best skier in the class, the responsibility for the remaining three: Toby, Franz Haider, and Karl Langer. Toby was pleased. Separating Franz from Bruno and including Karl—the most agreeable of their classmates—might help the four to get along.

After they clamped on their skis, the boys began the slow work of traversing up the mountain trails. Toby stabbed his pole in the ground, sliding his opposite leg forward as he propelled himself upward. His heart pounding, he sucked in deep breaths until his throat became raw and dry. Eli slowed his pace, letting the small group catch up to him. Grateful for the brief respite, Toby regarded his three classmates. Only their cheeks were exposed, reddened from the frigid air and revealing traces of downy new facial hair.

“Let’s hike toward the Streif to get a better view.” The frozen moisture on Eli’s lips cracked. His teeth chattered as he spoke. “Then we’ll head for slopes we can ski.”

Toby didn’t care much about this legendary ski run, although he wasn’t clueless about all the Olympic champions who had competed here. He tried to follow Karl’s measured strides while eyeing the rolling moguls obstructing his view. Once he got his bearings, he had to admit the trek was invigorating. Beads of perspiration trickled down his back. He pulled off his hat and, realizing his typically unkempt hair was matted up with sweat, shoved it back on his head. He may not have been in the best condition to battle the climb, but at least he wasn’t overweight like Franz, who was struggling to keep up.

“Wait up!” A voice rang out behind them. It was Rudy.

Toby locked eyes with Eli and mouthed, *Trouble*. Eli shrugged and shortened his steps to allow Rudy to catch up.

“Heading to the Streif?” Rudy was breathless, each word pushing frost into the space between the boys.

Eli nodded. “Just close enough to see it. Then we’ll find tows for some easy runs. Bohm okay with you leaving his group?”

Rudy gave a thumbs-up, and the five continued their steady march in near silence but for Franz’s grunting when the incline grew steeper. They built a meditative rhythm that kept them equidistant from one another, picking up speed as the terrain

flattened. Their path narrowed between two rows of trees, the snow a fresh powder barely packed down by the skis of others. Puffs of cloud drifted in the indigo sky as they trudged toward Hahnenkamm, the mountain enormous before them.

Toby felt almost lightheaded and wasn't sure if it was the altitude, the physical strain of the climb, or the awesome sight in front of him. Wide-open slopes blanketed in white were flecked with evergreens that blurred into a maze of ridges. Rays of sun fell through the tall trees like cathedral light.

Arriving at a midpoint where the summit came into clear view, the four classmates encircled Eli and stopped, fixing their poles into the snow, stretching their necks to take in the mammoth pinnacle in all its splendor. As they continued to stare at the panorama, their silence felt peaceful to Toby as if, for that moment, the boys were of like minds.

He wasn't sure how long they stood there spellbound before Eli summoned them to move on. A biting wind sent a shiver through Toby's body.



IT WAS MIDAFTERNOON BY the time they reached gentler slopes. Toby clutched the old-fashioned rope tow but could barely hang on to it at first. The line was stiff and icy. It took all five skiers to steady and balance it. On his second try, he was jerked off his feet when he grasped the cord too quickly. When he fell, he nearly dragged all of them down into the snow.

"Look, guys, I'm a clod. You'd do better if I headed back to the hostel."

"We're in this together, Wermer, even if you do ski like my little sister." Karl used his mitten to wipe his runny nose.

"I'd say Ida skis better than Toby," Franz added as he nudged Rudy, and the boys began laughing.

Toby felt the camaraderie despite being the butt of their fun.

“I’ve got an idea. Follow me,” Eli announced. He led the way and before long they found newer lifts—contraptions with continuously circulating overhead wire ropes that could carry the skier.

“I gotta say, you know these slopes, Stoff.” Karl grabbed a horizontal bar coming around the drum wheel, and it immediately pulled him forward as it lifted him upward. “Wow, this is easy.”

Toby seized the next bar in line, not wanting to look like a sissy. In no time, they were pulled to the summit. Eli was the first to shove off, followed by Rudy, wild-eyed as he sped down the slope. Franz and Karl took off side by side. The four returned to the top of the run while Toby was still trying to find his nerve to take the plunge.

“Go into a deep tuck,” Eli said, standing close to Toby. He softened his voice. “Don’t worry, the worst that can happen is you’ll fall. And you’ll stop at the bottom.” He shot Toby a wink as the others chuckled.

Toby pushed off with his poles and tried to remember all of Eli’s instructions—keep his knees flexed, separate his skis for greater stability, edge the skis in an icy traverse, weight-shift to stay balanced, stem-turn to slow his descent. The initial stretch was the steepest, so he instinctively edged both knees into a snowplow position and didn’t look down. His heartbeat felt like a drum pattern in triple time when he slid through an ice skid and fought to stay upright. Getting through the near mishap boosted his confidence, and he picked up speed from there until he skidded, unsteadily, to a stop.

The boys attempted a couple of runs on a new slope though the daylight was fading. Dark clouds had formed overhead, the late afternoon sky taking on the color of a bruise. As they headed back, Eli stopped in his tracks. “Look! An alpine chamois!”

The goat-antelope was several ski lengths ahead of them. It looked fully grown, probably fifty kilograms and about seventy centimeters tall. The animal's horns were short and straight, hooked backward near the tip. Toby had never seen a chamois this close.

"It's a male," Eli added.

"How would you know, Stoff?" Rudy glowered at Eli. "Or maybe you're an expert since your people sacrificed goats, right?"

Toby stabbed his poles into the frozen earth, considering a riposte to Rudy's affront. Before he could think of a comeback, Karl elbowed Franz.

"Maybe he checked out the size of his balls, lamebrain." The two boys snorted in laughter.

"I saw a herd of chamois once before. Read about them afterward." Eli continued to watch the animal, ignoring the mockery. "The horn of the male is thicker. That's how you tell them apart."

Rudy narrowed his eyes and observed Eli, like he was sizing him up. Toby wondered if Eli's calm and detachment provoked Rudy further. Or if it would shut him down. The goat's hooves made a crunching sound as it took a few steps in the snow. Toby noticed black markings below the animal's eyes and imagined it a fearless opponent.

"Let's get closer. Surround it," Rudy suggested. The rest of them stood still, watching Rudy lurch toward the mountain goat, then stumble. At that instant, the chamois sped away, jumping high moguls with ease.

Toby had the urge to taunt Rudy but restrained himself. He felt a whirl of wind and watched a mass of snow lift in front of them. He pulled his earflaps low, tightened his scarf, and, with the help of his poles, pivoted in the direction of Kitzbühel.



TOBY FELT SLUGGISH AND famished after the day's exertion. Except for Bruno, the other ski group dispersed to their rooms or down the street with Herr Bohm. He couldn't understand why any of them would want to leave the warmth of the fireplace or the tub of hot apple cider the hostel's owner was ladling into mugs. Before long, the boys who'd stayed back were all sitting around the central fireplace, tossing potatoes wrapped in foil into the embers and tasting a variety of hard and soft cheeses brought up from the cellar.

"I faced down a wild mountain creature," Rudy told the group. He took a gulp of cider and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Scared him off."

Toby rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure how wild that goat was. Seemed pretty tame if you ask me."

"Yeah, you were the wild one, Rudy." Franz turned to Bruno. "Anything interesting go down in your group?"

Bruno carefully peeled the foil off his potato and took a bite. He grimaced and spat the chunk on the floor. "*Ach, mein Gott!* This is too hot to eat!" He set the potato down and turned to Franz. "Stefan and Dietrich were showing off. Plowed right in front of Herr Bohm. First time I saw the man so rankled."

"Anyone get hurt?" Toby's legs ached. He stood up to stretch.

"Stefan skipped over a crusty patch and turned his ankle." Bruno popped a huge chunk of cheese in his mouth, his cheeks puffing out, but he kept talking. "Bohm ended up taking him back here to ice it. That's when we started having some fun."

Toby walked closer to the hearth. The heat felt good. He held his hands up to the fire, rubbing them together. The day hadn't been that bad after all. He'd learned how to ski, seen the most awesome mountain in Austria, even gotten close to a mountain goat. There was the insolence of Rudy, but it had been safely contained. He was now ready to put his feet up and enjoy himself.

Voices and a burst of laughter returned his attention to his classmates. Just outside the banter, Eli sat quietly, holding his mug of hot cider with both hands, blowing across its surface before taking a sip.

As Toby turned back toward the fireplace, his eyes locked on a wooden gramophone with a brass horn tucked into the corner beyond the hearth. “Hey, look over here!” He dashed over and opened the cabinet, his eyes widening at the records stacked neatly in vertical slits. He knelt down and looked closer. Benny Goodman. Count Basie. Duke Ellington. “Wow, incredible.”

“Let’s play this one.” Franz grabbed Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing.” “My cousin lives in Hamburg and goes to clubs, where there’s wild dancing to all this up-tempo music.”

“Yeah, I heard about those swing clubs. Makes the girls go crazy.” Bruno shuffled through several albums while Toby slid the Duke Ellington out of its jacket, delicately placing the needle onto the groove. A fiddle, then piano backed by a full orchestra, blasted into the lounge. *It don’t mean a thing if you ain’t got that swing. It don’t mean a thing, all you gotta do is swing.*

Toby couldn’t make out all the words, but it didn’t matter because of the steady pulse. Franz moved his head up and down to the beat, his hair falling into his face. *It makes no difference if it’s sweet or hot. Just give that rhythm everything you’ve got.*

“This stuff’s good, actually.” Rudy started tapping his feet. All the boys surrounded the phonograph. “My dad calls it Negro noise. Boy, would he whack me up and down for listening to this.”

Toby had heard the Kraus family was pretty reactionary, that Herr Kraus could be cruel in disciplining his son. Maybe that explained Rudy’s brash and malicious behavior. “Let me see some of these.”

Toby took the records from Bruno, excited by the gems at his fingertips. A Django Reinhardt. Count Basie’s “One O’Clock Jump.” Some slower Ellington tunes—“Mood Indigo,” “In a

Sentimental Mood”—along with “Sophisticated Lady” and “Caravan.”

“Let’s put on Benny Goodman,” Eli said as he looked over Toby’s shoulder. “You have this one at home, Toby.” He pointed to “Sing, Sing, Sing.”

“I love the clarinet in that piece.” Toby rested the needle on the record. “Listen to the drums, the trumpets. There’s nothing like this sound.”

The boys settled back in their chairs, bouncing along with the drum solos. Toby pretended he had sticks in his hand, flicking his wrists with the beat. He looked over at Eli, whose eyes were closed, his shoulders swaying from side to side. Rudy, Bruno, Franz—all of them were caught up in the pulsating tempo. Toby held back an amused grin. They were listening to a Jewish bandleader, something only Eli would know. He certainly wasn’t about to clue in the others.



“I’LL ADMIT WE ALL had some good moments together. But Rudy—I just can’t trust that guy.” Toby’s words filled the darkness of their room that night.

A long silence followed, and Toby thought Eli had fallen asleep until he answered. “He’s just a bully. That’s all he is. But Franz, Karl, and the others keep him in check.”

Toby sat up in disbelief. “Only a bully? You heard what he said about the music. ‘Negro noise.’ And how he insulted you as a Jew earlier. It’s how he’s been brought up, don’t you see? It’s what he believes.” His eyes began adjusting to the dark. “People like that scare me, and they should scare you.”

“Come on. Lighten up. You’re blowing all this out of proportion.” Eli pulled the covers tightly under his chin and rolled away from Toby. “Stop being a worrywart.”

With that, Eli dozed off and didn't so much as stir again. Despite his exhaustion, Toby felt like he tossed and turned all night. He woke up still fatigued, enough that he begged off joining the others for an early morning trek. After packing, he waited in the hostel lobby until the last of his classmates trounced down the steps lugging their bags and skis.

Standing on the station platform, he could feel the day's heat penetrate his face despite the frigid temperature. The sun stood high in the cerulean sky, like a large ball of crystal with shimmering spikes. As he took a final rapt look at his surroundings, a whistle in the distance startled him, the sound stirring a foreboding he couldn't explain. The train's outline came into view. Picking up his bag, he followed Franz, Bruno, and Karl toward the nearest car, where the conductor waved them inside.

"All the way in the back!" The rail man pointed toward the exit door.

"I'm right behind you." Eli patted Toby's shoulder.

Toby stepped on board and grabbed two empty seats while Eli hoisted their bags onto the overhead rack. As the door slammed shut, Toby settled in, staring out the window's thick glass. The train began rolling down the track, slowly at first, then gathering speed.

"This is how fast I flew down those mountains this morning," Bruno barked out from behind, where he sat with Franz.

"Or maybe like that mountain goat as he bolted from Rudy's clutches." Franz hit the back of Toby's seat, laughing.

"Well, at least I tried to do something, Haider." Sitting on the aisle seat across from Bruno, Rudy leaned over toward Franz. "But you just stood there while Stoff analyzed the goat's sex. Oh, excuse me, Stoff. The 'chamois.'"

"Cut it out, Kraus. Let's just have a peaceful ride, okay?" Toby said. He'd wanted to sound more commanding, but his words came out pleading.

“I don’t need a little creep like you telling me what to do, Wermer.”

Toby let the comment go. His muscles ached. He tried to take in the scenery, but his eyelids drooped as the fast-moving images blurred. The repetitive sounds of the train lulled him into a stupor.

He awoke abruptly to the screeching of metal and the steam whistle’s shrill cry. He looked out the window and realized they were approaching a station. He yawned, stretching his arms above his head, then elbowed Eli. “Where are we?”

“Salzburg, I think.”

Relief washed over Toby. He must have slept for several hours. They were almost home. Maybe he had been overreacting, as Eli had suggested.

Just then, Rudy jumped out of his seat. “Look at all the soldiers!” His outburst rose above the clanging bells as the train eased to a stop.

Eli stretched across Toby, and the two stared out the window. The sound of cheering erupted. Eli’s voice was barely audible but somber. “Now it begins.”

Hundreds of soldiers with Nazi banners and swastikas surrounded the depot and loading platform. Toby turned back and saw Rudy’s eyes widening, saw all of his classmates transfixed on the scene.

“Students! Stay put. We still have another stop at Linz before we arrive in Vienna.” Herr Bohm held onto a metal bar to steady himself, his voice strident over the clamor outside the train.

Rudy stood up, edging into the aisle. “The Germans will save Austria!”

“Are you crazy?” Toby’s words rushed out before he could stop himself.

Rudy stepped toward Toby’s and Eli’s seats. “Some people . . .” He glared down at Eli. “Some people have sucked our country dry. Hitler will change that.”

Toby's entire body tensed up. Until this moment, all of Rudy's taunts of Eli had been like small jabs—those of a thug, but without the power of a political movement behind him. Now Rudy was making a slur on Eli's family, a misguided one at that. The Stoff's were far from wealthy. Eli's mother was an English language tutor; his father owned a small company that made uniforms.

Toby looked over at Eli, whose head was down, his hands folded on his lap. A flood of compassion washed over him, then a wave of anger. He took in a breath to measure his words. He felt protected by their teacher, but speaking out in defense of Jews exposed him to classmates who probably saw the world as Rudy did, or were starting to. Their silence seemed to confirm this. "Austria's problems—like Germany's—have to do with the Great War, not Jewish—"

"What world are you living in? My parents say our Austrian dictatorship has given a pass to Jews like your buddy here."

An undercurrent of whispers swept through the train car.

Toby stood, stretching across Eli as he glared into Rudy's eyes. "Then why don't you run out there and sign up before it's too late?"

Rudy raised a hand as if to hit Toby. Eli jumped out of his seat, pushed past Toby, and grabbed Rudy's arm in midair.

"Get your hands off me, Jew boy!" Rudy tried to swing at Eli with his other arm, but Eli grabbed that one, too, and held fast.

"You don't scare me, Kraus. Are you so weak that you have to attack someone smaller?" Eli scowled at Rudy, not moving and not easing up on his grip. Suddenly Rudy rammed Eli with his body, and for a moment, Eli's hold on him loosened. But before Rudy could strike, Eli threw a punch at his jaw, knocking Rudy backward so he fell onto Bruno's lap. Eli's face was expressionless as he watched Rudy awkwardly pull himself up. Toby stood gaping, horrified.

“Eli, Rudolf! Break it up.” Herr Bohm’s face reddened as he bounded down the aisle and inserted his body between the two. The imposing teacher took hold of Rudy’s shoulders and pressed him into his seat, whispering something in his ear. Then he pivoted toward Eli, addressing him in a low voice that Toby could also hear. “Your friend is making things difficult. His outspoken tongue will get you into deep trouble.”

Bohm turned toward Toby, a black look on his face. “There are battles that can’t be won. Look what your provocation just created for your Jewish friend here.”

Toby stood there clenching his fists. Eli locked eyes with him, motioning his head toward their seats. Toby eased himself down and turned sullenly toward the window just as the train started coasting out of the station. He felt the beat of the train’s wheels, solemn like drums. As he watched the Alps recede in the distance, a flicker of yesterday’s thrill sparkled back in him. He thought of how the grandeur of the mountains had brought a bunch of fifteen-year-olds together. And how they were about to be split apart.