PROLOGUE

ALEXANDER. Howard Harvey, lovingly known as Hanns, passed away quickly and peacefully on Friday, 23rd December. Cremation on Thursday, 28th December, 2.30 p.m. at Hoop Lane, Golders Green Crematorium, West Chapel. No flowers please. Donations, if desired, to North London Hospice.

Daily Telegraph, 28 December 2006

Hanns Alexander's funeral was held on a cold and rainy afternoon three days after Christmas. Considering the weather, and the timing, the turnout was impressive. More than three hundred people packed into the chapel. The congregation arrived early, and in full force, grabbing all the seats. Fifteen people from Hanns' old bank, Warburg's, were in attendance, including the former and current CEO. His close friends were there, as was the extended family. Hanns' wife of sixty years, Ann, sat in the front row, along with the couple's two daughters, Jackie and Annette.

The synagogue's cantor recited Kaddish, the traditional Jewish

prayer for the dead. He then paused. Looking down upon Ann and her two daughters, he delivered a short sermon, saying how sorry he was for their loss and how Hanns would be missed by the entire community. When he had finished, two of Hanns' nephews stood to give a joint eulogy.

Much was familiar: Hanns growing up in Berlin. The Alexanders fleeing the Nazis and moving to England. Hanns fighting with the British Army. His career as a low-level banker. His commitment to the family and his half-century of schlepping for the synagogue.

But there was one detail that caught nearly everyone off guard: that at the war's end Hanns had tracked down the Kommandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss.

This piqued my interest. For Hanns Alexander was my grandmother's brother, my great-uncle. Growing up we had been cautioned not to ask questions about the war. Now I learned that Hanns may have been a Nazi hunter.

The idea that this nice but unremarkable man had been a Second World War hero seemed unlikely. Presumably, this was just another of Hanns' tales. For he was a bit of a rogue and a prankster, much respected for sure, but also a man who liked to play tricks on his elders and tell dirty jokes to us youngsters, and who, if truth be told, was prone to exaggeration. After all, if he had really been a Nazi hunter, wouldn't it have been mentioned in his obituary?

I decided to find out if it was true.

We live in an age when the waters are closing over the history of the Second World War, when we are about to lose the last remaining witnesses, when all that is left are accounts retold so many times that they have lost their original veracity. And so we are left with caricatures: Hitler and Himmler as monsters, Churchill and Roosevelt as conquering warriors, and millions of Jews as victims.

Yet Hanns Alexander and Rudolf Höss were men with many sides

to their characters. As such, this story challenges the traditional portrayal of the hero and the villain. Both men were adored by their families and respected by their colleagues. Both grew up in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century and, in their way, loved their country. At times, Rudolf Höss, the brutal Kommandant, displayed a capacity for compassion. And the behaviour of his pursuer, Hanns Alexander, was not always above suspicion. This book is therefore a reminder of a more complex world, told through the lives of two men who grew up in parallel and yet opposing German cultures.

It is also an attempt to follow the courses of the two men's lives, and to understand how they came to meet. And the attempt raises difficult questions. How does a man become a mass murderer? Why does a person choose to confront his persecutors? What happens to the families of such men? Is revenge ever justified?

Even more, this story is an argument that when the worlds of these two men collided, modern history was changed. The testimony that emerged proved particularly significant in the war crimes trials at the end of the Second World War: Höss was the first senior Nazi to admit to executing Himmler's and Hitler's Final Solution. And he did so in great and shocking detail. This testimony, unprecedented in its description of human evil, drove the world to swear that such unspeakable atrocities would never again be repeated. From this point forward, those suffering from extreme injustice could dare to hope for intervention.

It is also the story of surprise. In my comfortable north London upbringing, Jews – and I am one – were cast as the victims of the Holocaust, not its avengers. I had never really questioned that stereotype until I fell into this story. Or, to be more accurate, it fell to me.

This is a Jew-fighting-back story. And while there are some well-known examples of resistance – uprisings in the ghettos, revolts in the camps, attacks from the woods – such examples are few. Each should be celebrated, as an inspiration to others. Even when faced

with profound brutality, hope for survival – and perhaps revenge – is still possible.

This is a story pieced together from histories, biographies, archives, family letters, old tape recordings and interviews with survivors. And it is a story that was, for reasons that I think will become clear, never fully told by the men at its heart: Hanns and Rudolf.

I

RUDOLF
BADEN-BADEN, GERMANY
1901

Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Höss was born on 25 November 1901. His mother, Paulina Speck, was twenty-two years old, and his father, Franz Xaver, was twenty-six. Rudolf was their first child. They lived at 10 Gunzenbachstrasse, a small white-washed house with a red-tiled roof, situated in a wooded valley on the outskirts of Baden-Baden.

In the early 1900s, the medieval town of Baden-Baden was rushing to catch up with the twentieth century. Located in south-west Germany, Baden-Baden sat along the banks of the gently meandering Oos River, at the bottom of a lush green valley full of well-tended vineyards. Five hills overlooked the town, and beyond them, the Black Forest stretched to the horizon.

For centuries Baden-Baden's natural springs and glamorous nightlife had drawn Europe's glitterati. Dostoevsky had researched his novel *The Gambler* at the casino there, and Queen Victoria, Napoleon III and Johannes Brahms all spent time in the city which, for a while, had been known as Europe's summer capital. With these tourists came great wealth, and during the first few years of the early 1900s major modernisation efforts were under way. New tunnels had been carved out of the limestone seam supporting the town's Roman foundations to increase

the capacity of the public baths; an electric funicular railway had been built up to Mount Merkur, offering magnificent views of the surrounding valley from its summit; and the wrought-iron gas street lights around the main square had recently been switched over to electricity.

Höss family house (centre), Baden-Baden

Yet in the Höss family's small house on the edge of town, life remained much as it always had. Franz Xaver had served as an officer with the German Army in Africa, until his career was ended by a poison arrow wound to the chest. He had returned to Germany to become a teacher at the military school in Metz, before retiring as a merchant to Baden-Baden. But for the hint of romanticism attached to his African exploits, he was in all respects unexceptional: a patriotic German and devout Catholic on the edge of middle-class respectability; a family indistinguishable from its neighbours. Three years after Rudolf's birth a daughter, Maria, was born; another daughter, Margarete, followed in 1906.

Rudolf spent most of his early childhood playing by himself. In his rural community the local children were mostly older and his sisters too young to be of interest. His mother was busy with the chores of children and house. Almost of necessity, Rudolf's favourite pastime was to wander away from the house into town towards the

water tower that stood above the neighbourhood. Here he would sit, ear pressed against the walls, listening to the water rushing and gurgling. At other times, he ventured into the dark recesses of the Black Forest, whose edges fell only a short distance from his home.

Rudolf passed endless hours in the woods. But it was not as idyllic a location as it seemed. When he was five, he was kidnapped from the forest's fringes by a band of Gypsies. They carried him to their caravan, perhaps planning to sell him to another family or to put him to work in one of the local coal mines. Luckily for Rudolf a local farmer recognised him just as the Gypsies were leaving and came to his rescue.

After the kidnapping, Rudolf was not allowed to walk far. He was, however, permitted to visit the neighbours' farms, where he mucked out the stables and brushed the horses. It was during this time that Rudolf discovered he had an instinctive feel for these animals. He was small enough to creep under the horses' legs, but he was never kicked or bitten. While he was also fond of bulls and dogs, he truly fell in love with horses, a passion that would remain with him for the rest of his life.

When Rudolf turned six, the family took an important step towards solidifying its claim to respectability, moving to a larger house in the suburbs of Mannheim. Located sixty miles north of Rudolf's first home, and fifty miles south of Frankfurt, Mannheim was a much larger city than Baden-Baden, with a population of over 300,000 and an industrial base that served the entire region. While Rudolf missed the animals and the expansive beauty of the Black Forest, there was a silver lining to the move: on his next birthday he was given a coal-black pony, which he named Hans. He went for frequent rides in the nearby Haardt Forest and groomed the pony for hours when he returned home from school. He loved the animal so much that he would smuggle it into his bedroom when his parents were away. Any spare time that he had was spent with Hans, a pony so faithful that it followed Rudolf like a dog. They became inseparable.

★

Rudolf was captivated by his father's stories of his military career. He was particularly keen to hear about the Africa campaigns, his battles with the local populations, their strange religions, their exotic practices. But despite the fact that both Rudolf's father and grandfather had served in the military, Rudolf was more attracted to becoming a missionary than a soldier fighting in some foreign land.

It was from his father that Rudolf learned about the traditions and principles of the Catholic Church. Franz Xaver took his son on pilgrimages to holy sites in Switzerland and to Lourdes in France. Rudolf became a fervent believer; he later recalled that he 'prayed with a child's earnest gravity, and was ready and willing to act as an altar boy', and he took his 'religious duties very seriously'.

From the earliest age, Rudolf was given numerous tasks to perform as a member of the household, which he was expected to complete without complaint. For every misdemeanour Rudolf was severely punished. Even a small unkindness to one of his sisters – a harsh word or teasing remark – resulted in kneeling for long periods of time on the cold hard floor, seeking God's forgiveness.

Upon the birth of his first daughter, Franz Xaver swore an oath that his three-year-old son would become a priest: he would go to a seminary, he would be celibate, and he would pledge himself to prayer, learning and community. Rudolf's education was planned with the sole purpose of preparing him for a religious life. He later remembered:

> Great emphasis was always laid on my duty to obey and immediately comply with all the wishes and orders of my parents, my teachers, priests, indeed all adults, even including the servants, and to let nothing divert me from that duty. What adults said was always right. Those educational principles became second nature to me.

Living in the suburbs meant Rudolf was surrounded by children of his age, and he enjoyed roughhousing with the other boys. His consideration of future missionary work in no way blunted his enthusiasm for these contests, and he proved no less ruthless when it came to exacting revenge. If another boy hurt him in any way he was relentless until he had paid him back. Thus Rudolf was feared by his playmates.

However, when Rudolf was eleven years old, one fight went too far. He and his friends had been involved in a light-hearted skirmish, during which one of the boys had fallen down a flight of stairs and broken his ankle. Horrified, Rudolf went straight to church and confessed to the priest, who was also a friend of the family. The priest promptly told Franz Xaver, who in turn punished Rudolf. This betrayal of the confessional code deeply upset Rudolf, destroying his belief in the trustworthiness of the profession.

> For a long, long time I went over all the details of what had happened again and again, because such a thing seemed to me so monstrous. At the time – and even today – I was and still am firmly convinced that my father confessor had broken the seal of the confessional. My faith in the sanctity of the priesthood was gone, and I began to have religious doubts. After what had happened I could no longer think the priest trustworthy.

Rudolf painted a dismal picture of his childhood: a father who was a fanatic and a bigot, and whom he therefore feared and despised, and a distant mother, who was either taking care of his two small sisters or was in bed recuperating from some sickness. Indeed, Rudolf recalled not being close to anyone in his family. He might shake somebody's hand or say a few words of thanks, but he was not a child who enjoyed physical touch. As a result, Rudolf did not share his problems with those around him: 'I dealt with all these difficulties by myself.'

On 3 May 1914, a year after the incident with the priest, Rudolf's

forty-year-old father died at home. The cause of death was not recorded.

> I do not remember whether I was particularly affected by that loss. But I was still too young to see all its far-reaching consequences. And yet my father's death was to set my life on a course very different from the one he had wanted it to follow.

However, Franz Xaver's death did have an impact on the rest of the family. Rudolf's father had been the sole income earner and, with three children to feed, it was difficult for Rudolf's mother to make ends meet. But the death freed the son from his father's shadow; the young Rudolf would forge his own path sooner than he might otherwise have been allowed.

On 28 June 1914, the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in Sarajevo, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire reacted by invading Serbia. This aggression triggered retaliation by the other European powers – Russia, Britain, Germany, France and the Ottoman Empire – and within weeks they were embroiled in the First World War. The hostilities were initially focused in the Western European countries of Germany, France and Belgium, but the conflict soon spread east and south, through Europe and then to the colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The fighting was particularly fierce in the Middle East, which became a strategic battleground, partly because of its supply of oil, and partly for the symbolic value of its holy sites.

When war broke out Rudolf was twelve years old and the Höss family was still living on the outskirts of Mannheim. The city was only a two-hour train ride away from eastern France, and Rudolf was thrilled to be living so close to the conflict. He stood on the local train platform to witness the first groups of boys being sent off

to the front line, excited about the war, but also desperate to be among them.

A year later, and after much pleading with his mother, Rudolf joined the Red Cross as an auxiliary. After school he spent as much time as he could working in the Red Cross hospital, distributing tobacco, food and drink to the injured. Horrified by the terrible traumas of modern warfare, Rudolf was nonetheless impressed by the wounded soldiers' bravery and resolute in his wish to fight for his country.

So it was that, in the summer of 1916, Rudolf left home, telling his mother that he intended to visit his grandparents. As soon as he was outside the town limits, he contacted a local captain, an old friend of his father's, and, lying about his age, enlisted. He was just fourteen years old.

It was not that rare for such a young person to join the army. Officially, the minimum age of enlistment in Germany during the First World War was seventeen. This limit had been in place since the creation of the German Constitution of 16 April 1871, which stated that every male was liable for military service, from his seventeenth until his forty-fifth birthday. Yet, since the declaration of war in 1914, boy soldiers had flooded the German Army. While the number of adult recruits dropped considerably in 1915 and 1916, as the vast majority of eligible men had by this time enlisted, most young lads – if healthy enough to pass a medical exam and willing enough to carry a rifle – were eagerly accepted, even if looks betrayed their age. As a consequence, hundreds of thousands of boy soldiers fought for the Germans during the Great War.

On 1 August 1916, with the help of his father's friend, Rudolf joined the 21st Baden Regiment of Dragoons, the same cavalry regiment in which both his father and grandfather had once served. He underwent a cursory medical inspection, and was given the standard uniform for a private in the German cavalry: knee-length black leather boots; grey

woollen trousers; a wide black belt with an eagle-embossed buckle, the symbol of his home state; a pocketless grey jacket with brass buttons; and a *Feldmütze*, a grey flat woollen hat that sloped to one side and had a small silver rosette sewn onto the front. Best of all, he was now the proud owner of a brass-handled cavalry sword and a black scabbard which, when resting on the ground, reached as high as his hip. With only two weeks of training, Rudolf and his regiment set off on their long trek towards the Middle East. Their mission was to provide reinforcements to the Turkish troops who were battling the British for control of the south-eastern part of the Ottoman Empire.

On his way south, Rudolf sent his mother a letter telling her that he had gone to war. She had earlier 'with endless, truly touching patience and kindness, tried to make me change my mind', recalled Rudolf, wanting him to finish school and then to join the priesthood. But now that his 'father's strong, guiding hand' was missing, Rudolf felt able to defy her orders.

The Dragoons travelled by train from Mannheim through Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and on to Turkey. After a short rest period in Istanbul, the regiment rode south on horseback for over fifteen hundred miles, towards the Mesopotamian front line, to what is today known as Iraq. Rudolf, who had never before been outside Germany, spent the next month camping rough and surviving on meagre military rations. 'The secret training, together with my constant fear of being found out and taken home, as well as the long journey through many countries to Turkey, all left a great impression'; the exotic landscape and peoples were both new and profoundly shocking.

When Rudolf and his comrades finally arrived at the front line they found themselves in the middle of a year-long struggle for control of the oil fields between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. At the centre of this impasse was Al-Kut, a dusty town situated a hundred miles south-east of Baghdad, where for months the Turks had been laying siege to British forces. The Allies had attempted to break out of Al-Kut but

were repeatedly repelled; each side had suffered high numbers of casualties. In April 1916, the Allies surrendered control of the town and more than 13,000 Allied troops were taken prisoner and pressed into hard labour. The British high command viewed the incident as a humiliating defeat and, concluding that the Mesopotamian Campaign should be a higher priority within their overall global war strategy, they replaced the Indian regional commander with an Englishman, reinforced the railway lines and sent in an additional 150,000 troops. The Central Powers responded to the Allies' changes by replacing the Turkish officer in command with a German general and bringing in fresh troops from Germany, including Rudolf's Dragoons from Baden-Baden.

At the end of 1916 Rudolf's unit joined the Turkish 6th Army on the outskirts of Al-Kut. Just as his cavalry unit was receiving its initial orders, a brigade of Indian soldiers attacked. Rudolf jumped off his horse and dived onto the rocky ground among some ancient ruins, his carefully starched cavalry uniform immediately caked in fine yellow desert dust. There was no battle plan and no complete orders had been given.

As the intensity of the shooting increased, the Turkish soldiers ran away, leaving the Germans to fend for themselves. Rudolf began to panic. The explosions from the enemy's grenades grew louder; all around him German soldiers were being hit. To his left, a man fell wounded and the soldier on his right didn't respond when Rudolf called his name.

> When I turned to look at him, I saw that he was bleeding from a large head wound and was already dead. I was overcome by horror worse than I ever knew in my life, and by a dreadful fear of suffering the same fate. If I had been alone I would certainly have run away like the Turks.

As Rudolf debated joining the Turkish retreat he saw his captain crouching behind a large boulder, firing steadily at the Indians in a

disciplined and orderly fashion. A change came over him. Now calm and focused, he saw a tall Indian man with a black beard come racing forward, his British Lee–Enfield .303-inch rifle pointed straight ahead. Taking a deep breath, Rudolf raised his gun, set his sights and fired. It was his first kill.

After a few moments, he raised his gun again and started shooting, rapidly, round after round, 'as if the spell was broken'. Rudolf had discovered within himself a new skill: he could kill, efficiently and quickly, in the heat of battle.

Rudolf's captain had been watching, and now called out his name with encouragement. After a short time the Indian soldiers realised they were faced with stiff resistance, halted the attack and were driven back across the desert. By the end of that day, the German unit was in control of the ancient ruins. Rudolf and his comrades dug in to prepare for what was to become the daily task of defending this small piece of territory.

Rudolf recalled feeling mixed emotions during his first battle. He had found it 'exciting', but when he later walked across the field he had 'hesitantly and timidly' looked at the Indian soldier that he had killed and felt a 'little queasy'. When he told his captain that he had been scared, the man simply laughed and said that he should not worry. Over the coming months, Rudolf grew to love and trust this man, who came to be 'like a father' to Rudolf, and an authority figure he revered. Rudolf felt that the captain treated him as if he were a son, showing pride when Rudolf was promoted and ensuring that he wasn't assigned the most dangerous missions. For the first time in his life, he realised that somebody was looking out for him. As he confessed: 'it was a far closer relationship than I had had with my real father'.

In early 1917, Rudolf and his regiment were deployed to Palestine. Their first task was to defend the critical Hejaz railway line, which ran between Damascus, in Syria, and Medina, in Saudi Arabia. Later

that year, the Dragoons found themselves at the front lines of Jerusalem. While the Mesopotamian Campaign had focused on the strategic supply of oil, the battles around Palestine were partly about destabilising British control of the Suez Canal and partly about capturing the venerated biblical cities.

It was during this battle for Jerusalem that Rudolf received a painful shot to the knee, and was taken to a German field hospital near Jaffa. There he became delirious with malaria, a relapse from an infection caught earlier in the campaign, and experienced bouts of fever so violent that he had to be watched closely by the medical staff.

While convalescing in the hospital, Rudolf was cared for by a young German nurse. She was gentle with him, propping him up carefully in bed and ensuring that he didn't hurt himself during one of his malarial episodes. At first he found her caresses confusing, but soon, 'spellbound by the magic of love, I saw her with new eyes'. In later weeks, once Rudolf could walk again, they found a quiet spot, away from the busy wards. 'She initiated me into every stage of love-making, leading to full sexual intercourse,' he remembered. 'I would never have summoned up the courage of my own accord. This first experience of love, with all its sweet affection, became a guideline for me all my life.' This was not only the fifteen-year-old boy's first sexual encounter, but the first time that he had experienced any type of physical intimacy: 'This tenderness was a wonderful experience such as I had never known before.' Rudolf swore to himself, somewhat naively, that he would have sex only if it involved true warmth and he would never, as his fellow soldiers did, visit prostitutes or conduct affairs with other men's girlfriends or wives.

Once he had recovered from his injuries, Rudolf was told to return to his unit. It must have been hard to say goodbye, but he had received his orders. He would never see the nurse again.

★

Over the course of the next few months Rudolf was wounded twice more: on 17 November 1917, a few days before his sixteenth birthday, with a bullet embedded in his thigh; and on 28 February 1918, with wounds to his hands and knees. None of these injuries prevented his participation in continued action.

For his wartime service Rudolf was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class by the German government, and the Iron Half Moon and the Baden Service Medal by the state of Baden-Baden for his efforts in Iraq and Palestine. The war had transformed him from a frightened and innocent young schoolboy into a toughened soldier. In Rudolf's eyes, the war 'had matured me, both outwardly and inwardly, far beyond my years'.

He was by now fully grown. At five feet six inches he was not tall, nor was he bulky like some of the other men in his unit. Instead he was thin, battle-hardened, with piercing brown eyes and a head of short-cropped fair hair. His was a soldier's body. For Rudolf had become accustomed to the pain and hardships of war, possessing the emotional wherewithal – a numbness, perhaps – to withstand injuries, and then to return to the fight. Even more, he had learned what he saw as leadership skills: displaying knowledge rather than rank, showing 'icy, imperturbable calm' in the face of adversity, and endeavouring to 'set an example all the time and never lose face, whatever one's real feelings'.

However, the spring of 1918 brought him sorrow that even he found difficult to hide. The captain that he had so looked up to over the previous year was killed during the Battle of Jordan. His death proved a heavy blow: 'I felt it painfully, and grieved for him.'

Once more Rudolf was alone.