

Fiction

ASSAF INBARI

## Chapter 38, Excerpt from *Home*

—Translated from the Hebrew by Janice Weizman

The Wehrmacht invaded Poland from the west, the Red Army invaded from the East, and Italian planes bombed Tel Aviv and Haifa. Yeruham Reiter and Meir Laks loaded their trucks at the Kelet factory and drove to Haifa. They were killed on arrival.

Lasia Galili expounded on possible outcomes of the war, and when he paused for a sip of water, the whisper of rats scurrying over the dining hall ceiling could be heard. The burning question was whether to cooperate with the British. On the one hand, they were fighting the Germans. On the other, they were denying entry to the ships carrying refugees, and they were torturing Tzvi Brenner, if they hadn't already killed him. Thirdly, the kibbutz made a good living from the British. Even before the war, the British army was in need of thousands of crates a year, and now the demand had tripled, thanks to the deal that Mitia Kritchman had closed in Egypt.

Mitia had heard that forty percent of the petrol cans delivered to British desert bases were damaged when thrown from delivery trucks, so that the petrol went to waste on the sands. He ran to Cairo and presented himself, barefoot in his Russian nightshirt, before the brigadiers of the military supply corps and offered to sell them crates assembled in Afikim: every crate would hold two cans of petrol. He returned with a contract to supply the North African front with crates and no one understood how he pulled it off without knowing a word of English. In any case, even though the national economy was in paralysis, the members of Afikim realized what Lonia Geller had realized at the age of fourteen: that there are those who benefit from war. The income from the Kelet factory surpassed that from agricultural produce, and so, even though the British were

torturing Tzvi, if they hadn't yet hung him, it was decided not to commit economic suicide.

Mitia ran Kelet, his wife Bertha acted as his secretary, and Nira, their ten-year-old daughter, planted two cyclamen bulbs beside the path that lined the factory's inner courtyard, which was used as a smoking area. The courtyard grounds were littered with cigarette butts and drenched in petrol and machine oil. The air was laden with petrol and machine oil vapor, sawdust and cigarette smoke. But Nira tended her bulbs, sprinkled them with manure from the cowshed, just as she had learned from Sonia Gurevitch, watered them, weeded out the cigarette butts, spoke to them, and from the filth sprouted two cyclamen flowers. Nira showed the garden to her parents and they were immensely proud of her. She was overjoyed, but two months later she became ill and died.

When Tzvi Brenner returned home from the Acre prison he could barely stand. The next day Ruth married him as they sat on the floor of their home with a friend who brought them a bottle of wine. The three of them drank the wine and that was the wedding. Tzvi was assigned to assist Yitzhak Levi in the shoe repair shack until he got his health back. The stench of the leather and contact glue had him feeling better within three months, and he was soon slipping away from his duties at the shack in order to dig out a new hiding pit for clandestine weapons with Yasha Helman. The old pit behind the Children's House was too small to hold the guns and ammunition that David Brontman and Zhora Shinansky had smuggled into the kibbutz. Until the new hiding place was ready, David Brontman hid grenades in the stable under the bales of hay, and Zhora jammed his guns into tin pipes and sunk them in the Jordan River. The muddy waters of the Jordan hid them well, perhaps too well, because Zhora could only remember a general sense of their location.

As the Germans conquered the Balkans and the Sahara Desert, approaching from both north and south, the general meetings were devoted to bureaucratic concerns. The Nomination Committee put forward the names of candidates for the other committees, and the members argued over each name. Clara Galili was elected to the Economic Committee, on which until then, no woman had sat, and Rahel Zaharhari was elected to the Farm Committee, which had

also been comprised solely of men. But instead of feeling satisfied with their appointments Clara and Rahel used them as bargaining chips. Clara agreed to serve on condition that the kibbutz enlarge the budget for food products and resolve the sanitation issue in the pantry which, in her opinion, bordered on scandalous, and announced that if her demands were not met she would resign from the pantry that very evening, and also resign from the Economic Committee. Everyone feared her threat, because she was the one who had brought in canned mushrooms and other delicacies, and once a week she would prepare potato dumplings in mushroom sauce—the treat she had loved best as a child, for the night watchmen. Rahel behaved likewise and announced that if she were not provided with two assistants to help in the clothing warehouse, she would resign her job and disqualify herself from sitting on the Farm Committee. The demands of both candidates were met and they agreed to fill their appointments.

The kibbutz accepted a group of young refugees from Transylvania. One of the boys, Peretz Goldstien, arrived with phylacteries, a bible and a prayer book given to him by his parents, and he showed them to Molya Zaharhari, who patted him on the head. In the summer the Germans repelled the British in the Sahara and only Egypt stood in their way to Palestine. Lasia Galili gave a strategic speech in the dining hall, in which he estimated that the Germans were at this point unstoppable, and warned that they had to prepare for the worst. Two hundred kibbutz children, two hundred and fifty members, the cabins, the sheds, the buildings, the horses, the stables, the water tower, the cowshed, Kelet, the shoe repair shack, Leo Roth and Aronchik Giladi's paintings, Lyova Ravitz's orchestra, the holiday of the First Fruits, the kitchen budget, the number of workers in the clothing warehouse, the loves and the opinions, the weddings and the births and the births without weddings—all were about to be annihilated, and this feeling grew stronger on the twenty-second of June, when the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union. Members would ask Lasia: who, in his opinion, would reach them first—the Germans who had repelled the British in Egypt, or the Germans who were about to glide from the Caucasus into the Golan and from there into the valley. And what would happen now, in the Soviet Union,

to their parents and brothers? If they didn't kill them as Jews, they would kill them as Russians and Ukrainians. Letters were no longer arriving from those places. Lonia didn't know if he would ever again see his father, whom he had left seventeen years earlier. Similar fears plagued the newer members who had come from Eastern Europe, Germany, Austria and the Balkans, when *Davar*, the Labor Party newspaper, reported that a million Jews had been murdered in Europe.