

Cappelen Damm Agency *Autumn 2025*

TORGRIM EGGEN BLODET



Blood

What makes two teenage brothers from a small village in Norway, enlist in Waffen-SS?

Oddmund and Sigurd grow up in a small Norwegian village in the 1930s, surrounded by competing ideologies and political tensions. Dark clouds loom over the valley. Europe is on the brink of war, and soon everyone must choose a side. The brothers align themselves with the Germans in the fateful struggle against Stalin.

At just seventeen years old, they both become soldiers in Waffen-SS. While Oddmund fights at Leningrad, Sigurd is sent to Finland. They survive the war, but when they return to a liberated Norway, they must face the consequences of their choices. How will their lives unfold? And what marks do they leave on their descendants and family?

In the novel's final part, the author himself steps forward—as their nephew and descendant—in an attempt to understand the legacy of Sigurd and Oddmund. The result is a novel of moral gravity, linguistic precision, and emotional force.

Blood is a story about heroes and traitors, the dream of honour and the nightmares that follow, and it portrays a time that bears an unsettling resemblance to our own.

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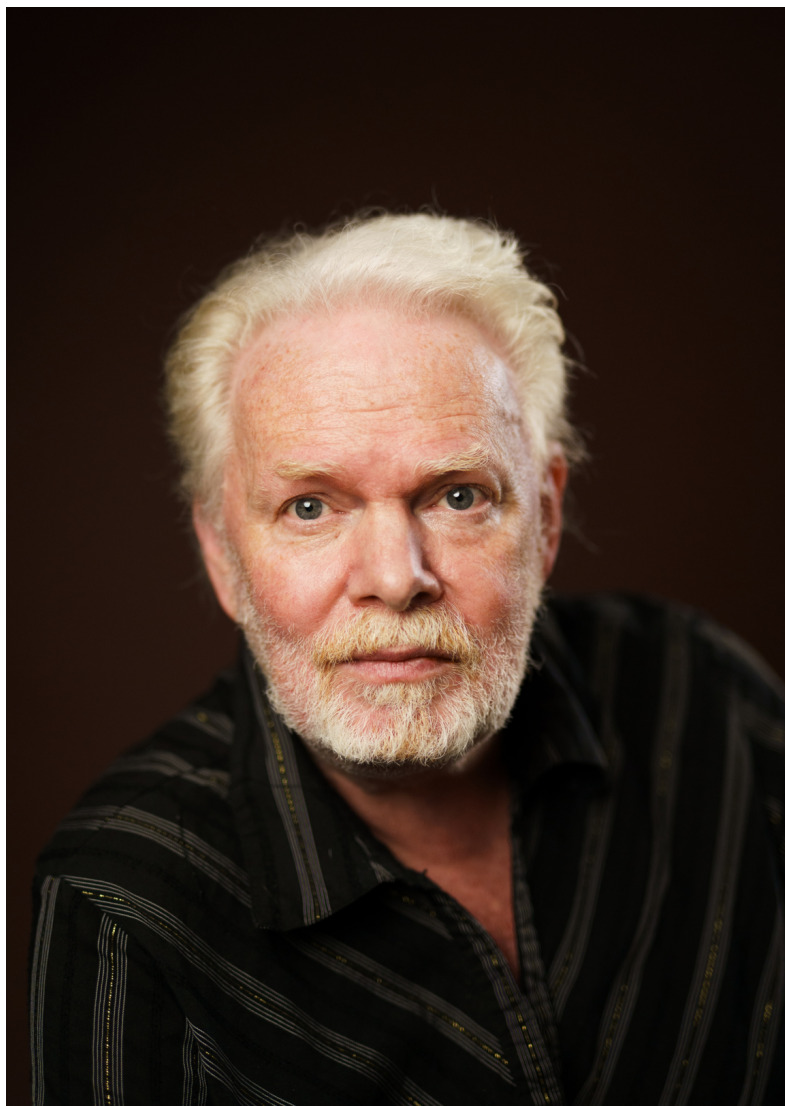
CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

Blood
Torgrim Eggen

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b. 1958

Torgrim Eggen is a journalist, musician and author. His debut novel *Debt* was published in 1992. In 2019, he received the Brage Prize in non-fiction for *Axel*. He has since written trendsetting and critically acclaimed contemporary novels, and been awarded the prestigious Gullpennen award. Eggen also writes regularly for the major newspapers *Klassekampen* and *Dagens Næringsliv*.



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Synopsis – *Blood* by Torgrim Eggen

Blood is a momentous novel about two brothers from Gudbrandsdalen, Norway, growing up in the 1930s, a time characterised by political upheaval, clashing ideologies and darkness spreading across Europe.

Sigurd and Oddmund come from a family passionate about languages, sagas and fierce debates about current ideas. The boys play-fight with wooden swords, imagining Bolsheviks to be horned trolls. Around them, however, the world turns ever more sinister. Vidkun Quisling starts to make a name for himself, Finland is attacked and the shadow of Nazism falls heavily across the country and the Continent.

The boys are teenagers when Norway is invaded. Both volunteer for the Waffen-SS, one driven by ideological conviction, the other mostly by a wish to impress a girl. They lose contact with each other as they are engulfed by the brutality of war, they experience the horrors of the front and return home to be branded traitors.

The novel is also a portrait of the author's own family. Sigurd and Oddmund were Torgrim Eggen's uncles. In the final part of the book the author enters the narrative: he attends a reunion of old Nazis, confronts an alcoholic Sigurd and is forced to take a closer look at his own history.

Blood is not a simplistic account but an attempt to understand how young men could have ended up on the wrong side. Eggen reminds us of how inexperienced they were when they made their choices and how easy it is to be swallowed up by movements bigger than you. The result is a novel which depicts ideological seduction and human vulnerability in a rare combination of epic drive and psychological insight.

At the same time *Blood* is a novel that reaches beyond historical events. Eggen evokes childhood play and its thirst for adventure, the relentless brutality of war and the guilt of post-war times with equal assurance. He shows how the past never releases its hold completely, but continues to affect families, society and political trends for generations. At a time when Europe is once more in the grip of war, extremism and ideological polarisation, this is a novel that feels eerily relevant.

Blood is a story about war and betrayal, but also brotherhood, nature and nurture. Eggen's language is precise and vibrant and he has written a novel which is both personal and universal, anchored in history while simultaneously being intensely contemporary. *Blood* is a novel that sheds light on the past, but also speaks strongly to our own time.

BLOOD

(Blodet)

by

Torgrim Eggen

Pages 97 to 112 and 309 to 322

translated from the Norwegian by Charlotte Barslund

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It is a bitterly cold April morning, there is still snow far down the south-facing slopes towards the River Laugen and rumours already abound. When the students turn up for their first lesson, head teacher Ola Kvartilshov is waiting in the corridor to tell them there will be no teaching today. He summons all students and teachers to an important meeting in the hall. His two sons are there. The boys are standing next to the girl's class, straining to appear as tall as they can, especially Oddmund. He often finds it embarrassing to have a father in a position of authority at the school, but today it feels solemn, good almost.

'You'll have heard the news,' Ola Kvartilshov says. 'Norway is at war. Last night and early this morning enemy troops landed along the coast. Possibly up to fifty thousand soldiers. We don't know very much yet, but it would appear that the King and the government have fled Oslo. There is now mobilisation across the country.'

All the students notice Ola Kvartilshov's unusually long pauses and the coughing fits in between. This is more than the usual chest infection associated with spring. His family and colleagues can all hear that his asthma is worsening. In the sharp spring light he looks grey and sallow as if the war has already ravaged him for quite a while.

The boys' father apologises and continues: 'In view of these events we have to shut the school. The wisest thing we can do now is for everyone to make their way home as quickly as you can and help your family. Safe travels, all of you. It has been a pleasure to have you here. God save our country.'

The students continue to stand there, gawping at one another. Is school over just like that? And just before their exams?

He didn't say God save the King, someone remarks. The boys are huddled together, whispering. Everyone is interpreting what they heard in line with their own views and understanding.

Oddmund is standing next to a female student. He hears a strange noise from her, turns and sees that she is sobbing. As are many others. Several of the older boys curse the Germans and vow to enlist immediately and fight for Norway. On the stairs a scuffle breaks out between two boys because one feels his classmate is too English-friendly.

The school does not close immediately. First they gather for morning prayer and then one of the language students, a tall and gangly boy from Åndalsnes, improvises a thank you speech on behalf of all the students. It is very emotional. Did they really enjoy school that much? Afterwards the students disperse, their voices subdued and tense as they pack for their trip home, making quick arrangements about who will get a lift with whom.

Oddmund goes to the dining hall, also known as “bessa”, to make himself a packed lunch. He is not the only one, bread and cold cuts have been set out on the long table by the wall and many seize the opportunity to stock up before the journey home. Oddmund, however, helps himself to extra many slices which he sandwiches with sour blueberry jam plus a couple with eggs and roe. It is a substantial packed lunch, enough food for twenty-four hours or more. Some of the students glance at him with a frown. Because Oddmund is not going anywhere, is he? He lives on site. But nobody asks any questions.

On the radio the pause signal is playing on a loop. *Hey – hu, hei – hu, hei halling, høy-rer du?* Eivind Groven’s folk music on repeat until it feels like water torture. Finally some proper news is broadcast: The King and the government have relocated to Hamar. Orders to mobilise have been issued across the country. Then back to the pause signal which goes on forever before the same information is repeated. Is it good or bad news? And why do they keep saying the same thing over and over?

Back at head teacher’s residence, Oddmund finds a rucksack into which he puts his packed lunch and some toiletries. There has been no sign of their mother all morning and that is a stroke of luck. It means he can sneak away from home without being seen and start his walk down to the main road a kilometre away.

Oddmund waves to a farmer's wife who is out and about, apart from that there are few witnesses to his heroic act. It is a clear and cold day. He drinks up the valley with his eyes and thinks it is so beautiful it makes his chest ache. Is it the last time he will see the landscape of his childhood, is that why? At the bottom of the valley the Laugen is still lethargic, grey and flecked with ice, but just you wait! Soon it will flow fast, there is more snow in the mountains than there has been for years and perhaps the good Lord will use a considerable amount of it this spring to wash the enemy straight into Lake Mjøsa.

No one will ever call Oddmund slow or simple again. He is going to Jørstadmoen military base to join up and defend Norway, Gudbrandsdalen, Ringeby, Gunvor, his younger sister and the family honour. But especially Gunvor, now she will get to see what he is really made of.

Pretty much all the traffic is heading northbound, not surprisingly. First he gets a lift with a farmer who is going to Tretten with empty milk churns on the flatbed. The farmer asks what Oddmund is doing heading south on this strange day and when Oddmund tells him, he gets no reply in return, just a look of surprise and a nod.

Has Oddmund heard about *The Blücher*, the farmer asks him. Oddmund has not so the farmer updates him on last night's events in Drøbaksundet. Practically before it has commenced, the war gets its first Norwegian hero, a Colonel Eriksen, who gives orders to fire at the German battleship which sinks with all men on board. The farmer does not have any further details, but he heard it from someone who heard it from someone who had come from Oslo, the way things work when the radio falls silent.

Oddmund has never seen a battleship or indeed Drøbaksundet for that matter so his mind struggles with images and dimensions. But it is good news! Finally! The Norsemen are baring their teeth.

'I'm sorry, but how old are you?' the farmer asks him when he drops Oddmund at the Tretten junction.

'Sixteen. I'm not very tall for my age,' Oddmund says. Which is the truth, bar one month. But surely no one will make a fuss over one month?

From Tretten to Fåberg he gets a lift first with a lorry and then at the back of a motorcycle with another hothead who wants to enlist for frontline service. A twenty-year-old from Øyer who tells him he went to Jørstadmoen last year for army training. He wears a leather helmet, he is small and when he takes off his motorcycle goggles, turns out to have a bad squint.

‘So have you been called up already?’ Oddmund wants to know.

‘No, but I’m guessing it’s in the post. That’s how they do it. Where we live we get post twice a week and by then the war will be over,’ says the motorcyclist whose name is Storsveen. As they ride up the broad gravel road to the army base, Oddmund thinks it looks suspiciously quiet. Shouldn’t it be teeming with activity by now?

Jørstadmoen is a collection of two-storey, rectangular barracks around a drill ground. The rusty brown main building is three-storeys high and a group of twenty to thirty young men and four or five somewhat older ones are standing, sitting or hanging around the front of it. Cigarettes are passed around. No one is wearing a uniform. It is three thirty in the afternoon. Some of the men have been here for a long time and are starting to get impatient.

‘Why is nothing happening here?’ Oddmund’s new friend asks.

‘We’re waiting for Captain Røgersen who is on the telephone to HQ,’ someone says, an older man whose accent suggests he is from Lillehammer. Then he sizes up Oddmund and asks, ‘Jesus, is this a children’s crusade?’

Oddmund pretends to ignore him.

Captain Røgersen appears on the steps. At least he is wearing a uniform.

He starts speaking in a loud and commanding voice and there would appear to be many problems. It is “irregular” that people have turned up without having written orders to mobilise to show. He does not like that at all. It just makes everything messy. However, the problem can be resolved if the boys are willing to be patient then those who have been mobilised and those who wish to volunteer can be signed up.

Uniforms and kit are locked away, someone has gone to look for the keys and finds them eventually, but nothing will be available until the evening. Captain Røgersen does, however, have access to the armoury, but the cupboard where the bolts are kept can only be opened by a Lieutenant Colonel and he has gone down south to lead the defence of Gjøvik or Hamar. Without bolts the guns are useless, even Oddmund knows that.

The volunteers groan loudly. A few privately wonder who exactly is responsible for the so-called “mess”.

‘Most likely it will be two days, possibly three,’ Captain Røgersen explains. ‘Which means that you should go home and listen to the radio. Anyone without a radio should visit a neighbour who has one. But we would like you all to register before you leave so we have a list of who we can count on when things get serious. It is my duty to make it clear to you that anyone who signs up now, but fails to turn up later will be regarded as a deserter.’

These are hard terms. Yet no one leaves.

‘Wouldn’t it be better if we spent those two days doing drills?’ someone dares to ask.

Yes, Captain Røgersen agrees with him. However, they do not have working weapons for everyone and furthermore they are short of food. Supplies will not arrive until tomorrow at the earliest. It is chaos everywhere. There is a small supply of war rations, but it is unwise to raid the store cupboard before battle has even commenced.

Captain Røgersen goes back inside to set up the enrolment process and a fairly orderly queue forms outside. They spend a long time registering each man.

The men begin to get cold. Some of the older men who clearly have a better understanding of what mobilisation entails dive into their sacks and produce bottles. These are passed around which soon improves the mood. People start talking about shooting Germans as if this is something they do on a regular basis, every spring and every autumn. No one checks that Oddmund gets a swig. He attacks his packed lunch instead and munches away while he listens to the others boast. Oddmund remembers the movie

newsreels from Poland last autumn and thinks that might be easier said than done. The Germans are not Bolsheviks staggering drunkenly through the forest with their guns, who spend more time fighting each other than the enemy. The Germans are numerous, they are disciplined, they have new and good weapons, aeroplanes, artillery and tanks. They won't be stopped that easily. He wonders how many tanks the Norwegian forces have. Oddmund has heard it is just the one. And ammunition for three days, he believes.

Finally it is Oddmund's turn. He enters the personnel office where Captain Røgersen and an ensign are sitting, smoking their pipes. It is warm and cosy inside.

Oddmund stands as tall as he can manage and says: 'Kvitilshov, Oddmund, from Ringebu.'

'Hang on a moment...' the captain says. He glances at his adjutant and Ensign Nicolaysen actually smirks.

'How old are you, boy?'

'I'm sixteen years old and I'm volunteering to defend my country.'

'Do your parents know you're here?'

Oddmund hesitates. What is the right answer to that question?

'No...' he says eventually. He mulls it over and then he adds: 'I've been trained to handle weapons.'

Oddmund is not sure if the hours spent lying in the heather with the NSUF group shouting "bang!" whenever he saw another boy's fringe counts as weapons practice, but surely it is tactical experience. He has also handled dynamite, once. Or he *was present* when dynamite was handled, but he ran off before the fuse was lit and thus escaped the ugly consequences the others suffered afterwards. It was the time they blew up Gråberg's outhouse in Vekkom, Gråberg was not at war with anyone and did, not surprisingly, get quite cross.

The officers exchange looks as if they are silently negotiating who will say it first. It falls on Captain Røgersen.

'I'm afraid we can't accept you.'

'I'm good at taking orders,' Oddmund makes another attempt.

‘Right,’ Captain Røgersen says. ‘Then this is my first and last order to you: Go home.’

Oddmund stays where he is.

‘Now listen to me,’ the Captain says. ‘We have strict rules against recruiting minors. When do you turn sixteen, did you say?’

I didn’t, Oddmund is about to pipe up, but he stops himself. ‘May second.’

‘Might be a problem if you want us to send you to the front,’ the ensign adds in a harsh tone of voice.

‘I very much appreciate your willingness to serve,’ Captain Røgersen says. ‘Your country appreciates it. I want you to know that.’

Oddmund realises the battle has been lost. Well, sod them. *What burst so loudly?* he quotes to himself. *Norway in your hand, my liege!*

It will be humiliating to tell Gunvor Granmo this. His plan had been that tonight once he had got his uniform and his rifle, a hot meal inside him and a place in a bunk bed in the warm barracks, then he would write to Gunvor and tell her about his great sacrifice for the country. And if he were to fall in battle ... he wanted her to know that his love is stronger than death. Does that even make sense? Yes, or mostly.

But now there will be no barracks and no letter writing. As the darkness creeps up and Oddmund is busy begging for a lift home, a window is suddenly opened on the ground floor of the main building, they hear arguments and commotion and then a radio is placed on the windowsill. ‘Lads, you need to hear this!’ a voice calls out from inside. Then a uniformed man appears and he turns up the volume. ‘Silence! Listen to this!’

Oddmund recognises the voice on the radio. It belongs to a man who sounds offended. While Oddmund listens, it feels as if his fingers are closing around an egg in his jacket pocket just like they did that summer at Dombås almost five years ago.

... the government itself has fled after gambling so recklessly with the fate of the country and its inhabitants. As a result it is the right and duty of the National Unity movement to take over the power of government to guard and protect the vital interests of the Norwegian people and the security and independence of Norway. Our movement's national goal means we are the only ones who can do this in these circumstances and save the country from the desperate situation into which party politics have led our people.

‘Is this a radio play?’ someone asks. Another person bursts out laughing and a third person hushes him. A car engine starts with deep tuberculosis coughs.

Nygaardsvold's government has resigned. National Unity has assumed power with Vidkun Quisling as the Head of Government and Foreign Minister, and with the following other members...

‘What's this? Who's talking?’ Confusion spreads across the drill ground.

‘It's Major Quisling,’ Oddmund says softly, almost to himself. ‘Come again?’ someone calls out.

‘It's Quisling!’ Oddmund shouts as loudly as he dares. ‘He was at Dombås.’

‘Good God,’ someone says.

When Quisling has finished reading out the list of National Unity members – names that mean nothing to anyone there, but which suggest that these men come from Bergen – the man who now calls himself the Head of the Government continues:

All Norwegians are asked to display calm and composure in this, for our country, so difficult time. Through mutual efforts and everyone's goodwill we will ensure that Norway emerges free and safe from this challenging crisis. Given how the situation has developed, I would like to add

that any kind of ongoing resistance is not only useless, but will be treated as equivalent to criminal damage of life and property.

‘What the hell...’ Storsveen with the motorcycle curses. ‘Who the devil is Quisling, what kind of authority does he have and what does he think he’s playing at?’

Oddmund is shocked. What is the man on the radio saying? That they should not resist? What about the national instinct to defend the country?

He remembers the egging and the expression on the face of Quisling at Dombås the summer when Sigurd and he were little. It is five years ago and here we are. The world is crumbling.

‘It’s a coup d’état,’ an older man says. ‘It’s a coup d’état and high treason. You get shot for that. *The National Unity movement*, who the hell do they think they are?’

Oddmund recognises the man, a railway official who lives in Otta. He thinks back to the Dombås meeting again. Major Quisling is a weak and easily offended type. You could hear it in his voice then and you can hear it now. And he is supposed to be leading the government? Through a war?

‘So if this man is an army major,’ someone from Gausdal asks. ‘Why hasn’t he turned up to be mobilised today?’

‘This is a German trick,’ the railway official opines. ‘They’re bluffing and they have got this lowlife Quisling helping them.’

The men start to argue. Nobody present defends the speech, not even a man from Vinstra whom Oddmund is sure is a National Unity member. Most people believe, as people usually do, that the current travails are the government’s fault. Why did the government flee? Isn’t that leaving the population in the lurch? This is the thanks we get for the Crisis Deal that put Nygaardsvold, a Marxist, in government. Surely Nygaardsvold and Halvdan Koht have known this would happen for weeks? The country only has itself to blame.

They are varied, the voices forced to talk politics with each other that April evening. Many vote for Bondepartiet, the agrarian party, and almost as many for Arbeiderpartiet, the workers' party, there are supporters for left and right. There is some party political disagreement, but overall the differences evaporate as everyone unites around a common cause. However, none of them is Communist. People remark on this, of course, that the Communists believe this war has nothing to do with them.

A man from Lillehammer who arrived by train from Oslo this morning, asks people to think carefully. The sky over Oslo was black with planes. Some of them were dropping bombs. He had never seen the like. The Norwegian defence can do nothing about what the Germans are unleashing on us. This is Ragnarok. Truth be told, it is brave and wise for the King and the government to flee, the man from Lillehammer says. England will come to the country's rescue. The only thing we can do is fight to buy ourselves time.

Yes, but as in Finland? Oddmund wonders to himself, but he is too scared to say it out loud.

Oddmund feels he becomes someone else that evening. Everything that happens, everything that is said, is big and exciting to him. But he is dismissed and ridiculed and really ought to start making his way home. It is dark now and the day which is unlike any other day is drawing to a close. More men continue to turn up at Jørstadmoen. They ask for weapons and uniforms and they need updating about what is happening.

Oddmund is in luck and gets a lift all the way to Fåvang with a garage owner who knows his family well. During the drive they talk about the war, about what might happen and what people should do. Oddmund tells him he is scared of what they might say to him at home.

'Your parents should be proud of you,' says the man whose name is Burås. He pulls over, stops the car, rolls a cigarette and passes it to Oddmund as a trophy or consolation prize. 'We'll just have to hope that things don't get so bad that we need fifteen-year-olds on the front line.'

Back on the road they are alone, Oddmund smokes and splutters. Apart from the steady hum of the Ford engine there is not a sound to be heard. Lights have come on in farms and residential houses across

the valley where families are undoubtedly having meetings and conversations not unlike the one in the car. Some have already sourced blackout curtains and they see brief glimpses of light before these are drawn.

‘I don’t mind giving you a lift all the way home,’ Burås the garage owner says after a period of silence in the car. ‘They’ll probably be worried about you by now.’

‘I guess so,’ Oddmund says. Then he imagines what his mother will say and a knot of fear forms in his stomach.

Staying out all day and evening is not unheard of, he has done that before without worse consequences than the usual telling off from his mother. But even he can appreciate that this is an extraordinary day. Oddmund has a few sandwiches left, but does not think he has enough to share with his benefactor and decides to leave his packed lunch even though he is starving hungry by now.

‘Do you have a telephone at home?’

‘Yes,’ Oddmund replies, rather proud of this.

‘If I can borrow it to call home that’ll give us more time.’

When the car finally pulls up outside Trosthaugen, Burås insists on coming inside with him. His offer is terribly embarrassing yet also a huge relief. Oddmund’s parents, Sigurd and Astrid are having dinner in the head teacher’s residence, the only house where the lights are on. The school lies dark and abandoned.

‘Thank God, there you are,’ his mother says. No one screams at him, no one threatens him with a beating. There is no need for Oddmund to say very much. Burås explains where they have come from, what the situation is like down at Jørstadmoen, and that Oddmund has proved his willingness to fight for his country and shown great personal courage, but that they sent him home because he was too young. He himself? The garage owner will be going back down to Jørstadmoen tomorrow evening. Ola Kvitilshov thanks him on behalf of the family, quite solemnly, and drops a few hints about his asthma so that Burås will not assume the worst. A fire has been lit in the fireplace. His mother serves the good coffee which has

become so difficult to get, and tuile biscuits from the big tin which is kept on the top shelf which, at least in theory, Astrid can't reach.

His mother says little apart from what is required for their guest to feel comfortable. Oddmund has to read her eyes. Often she says an awful lot with just her gaze which can sting worse than a slap when she is angry. This is not quite the case now. She is cross with him, but also astonished. Even a little proud, Oddmund thinks optimistically, although it is a fleeting emotion.

Burås and his father talk about how things are in Lillehammer, what people there are doing and how they are preparing. His father drinks his coffee from the saucer, blows on it and slurps it through a lump of sugar between his teeth. Burås, who might be ten years younger, adds milk to his and drinks it straight from the cup. His father is turning into an old man. Oddmund realises that his father is not capable of beating him anymore. He cannot decide if this information makes him feel more safe or less.

Once Burås has said his goodbyes and driven off, the silence is profound. But it is not a bad silence, it is mostly relief that everyone is there, that the family is intact although the world outside no longer is. This is how they feel that evening, on the ninth of April. Things are happening elsewhere which it is important to know about. Their grandparents are on their way, Oddmund learns. They will be arriving by train tomorrow. Oslo is no longer a safe place to be. Grandfather Leonhard is seriously ill with cancer and everyone is told be kind. He may not have much time left.

Pages 309 to 322

One spring day Sigurd's best friend, Harry from Gjøvik, turns up out of breath to tell him that a stranger has arrived at Menkin, a civilian. The stranger has asked to see Sigurd.

They head to the main building. Sigurd takes off his cap before he rings the bell and a waiter shows him to the estate owner's massive office. The mahogany desk is the size of a Reichsgau and on the walls are oil paintings of the Menkin estate in autumn splendour. Sigurd suddenly hears a familiar voice causing fear to ripple through him. Ola Kvitilshov is here, he is wearing a grey suit, a white but yellowing shirt and a striped blue tie, he has a light grey duster coat draped over his knees and is drinking coffee with Friedmann, their tormentor. His father speaks good German and their conversation appears to be amicable.

Sigurd is lost for words. What is going on?

'There you are,' his father says. 'I have come to bring you home, Sigurd.'

His son has to admit he is impressed. His father must have visited several offices to find out where Sigurd is, then most likely caught the ferry to Copenhagen, a voyage not without its dangers these days, travelled onwards by train and boat and bus replacements for trains to Dietfurt and then found someone to drive him to Menkin. Ultimately he is made of strong stuff, the old man. His father has travelled through Germany before, long before Sigurd was born. There is just one really big problem with this trip: Sigurd doesn't want to come home.

'I don't know if you have heard from Oddmund?' his father says. 'He's in hospital in Riga, he is going to be all right, but as far as I can gather he was very lucky. His legs are riddled with shrapnel. He may never walk properly again. Your brother is trying his hardest to be discharged and sent home, and I want you to do the same. The family has given enough blood for this madness now.'

'I can't just leave. I have a contract,' Sigurd counters. That is not true, or rather it is partly true. He has applied to continue at an academy where he would commit to train for a certain number of months, but his papers have yet to be processed.

'I don't give a damn about your contract, Sigurd. You're a minor and you'll do as I say.'

His father has come to fetch him as if he were a naughty schoolboy. He can almost feel his father pinching his earlobe. Sigurd is furious and casts around for arguments.

‘Not here I’m not! According to German legislation, I’m free to sign up if that is what I want.’

‘Oh, you’ll get to the front all right. You’ll be at the front before you know it. Do you think you’ll be just as lucky as Oddmund or perhaps more? What’s happening over there now is pure slaughter. You’ve heard about Stalingrad, I take it?’

‘Don’t you dare talk to me about the heroes of Stalingrad!’ Sigurd barks.

Gutsherr Friedmann who is a mute and baffled witness to this conversation in Norwegian, picks up on the place names and adds in German: ‘People are spreading lies about that. They’re just Communist lies.’

‘Yes, what do you really know about the war all the way up there in Ringeby?’ Sigurd snaps.

‘Your mother asked me to come here. She cries herself to sleep every night, Sigurd.’

‘I don’t believe that.’

‘You can believe what you want. So, are you willing to come with me?’

‘No. Are you considering any kind of force? Good luck with that!’

‘I can’t force you in any way, I can only rely on common sense,’ his father says. ‘And perhaps my common sense might rub off on you, that is my hope. This isn’t our war, Sigurd. The madness they’re cooking up in Berlin has nothing to do with us.’

Sigurd is very calm now. The coffee cups are empty. He smiles at his father. They are back at Trosthaugen before the war, Sigurd is being difficult and point blank refuses to touch what is on the dinner table. His father had to back down then and he loses again this time.

‘Well, then you have said your piece and I have said mine. Will you stay for dinner, then we can talk a little more?’

‘You have always been headstrong. No, I’m going straight home. I may be given permission to visit Riga, then I shall give Oddmund the return ticket which you should have had. I wish you good luck, of course, because you’ll need it. Things may very well get much worse.’

‘Thank you. I’ll see you at home,’ Sigurd says. ‘Sooner than you know it.’

He shuffles back to his quarters. The scene was humiliating. Of course everyone is gossiping about it now, about the big baby whose daddy had come to pick him up. He turns and sees the grey, lean man with the light-coloured hat wander down the avenue towards the gate at Menkin, a stately home and teaching facility on sacred German soil.

He will show his father. He will show him medals and ribbons.

Three weeks later Sigurd is standing with Harry, his friend from Gjøvik, in front of the gate to an enormous hunting estate with towers and spires. They have nothing like this in Oppland.

‘I think we must have come to the wrong place,’ Sigurd says. ‘Check the map again, would you.’

The bus driver dropped them off exactly where they asked, at the junction with the endless gravel road. Harry gestures as two teenagers wearing Hitler Youth uniforms approach them. They wave. Over here! And one of them calls out as soldiers always do, ‘Got any cigarettes?’

Sigurd feels transported to the Middle Ages as they make their way to the imposing building and no wonder. The Adolf Hitler School in Gross-Gurek is what is known as an “Ordensburg”, a leadership academy for Hitler Youth, a place where they prepare the most arrogant of them for the SS. Now, in 1943, it has become somewhat less selective due to full mobilisation, reflected also in the castle being noticeably run down. The rusty hinges squeal, the rooms are draughty and quite possibly infested with rats.

The Norwegians are allocated bunk beds with four people sharing a room and new clothes. Soon Sigurd can march around in a proper Hitler Youth uniform, the only thing that distinguishes him from the others is the sun cross armband. The sun cross indicates that he is from “das Reichskommissariat” i.e. Norwegian, which the German mindset regards as a “Gau”. This is something that has come about rather

swiftly – and the Germanisation of Sigurd Kvartilshov cannot be said to be progressing at a snail's pace, either. He wears his Hitler Youth uniform with pride. They celebrate Hitler's fifty-fourth birthday with sponge cake, plum liqueur and singing.

There is an academy for girls or a girls' camp a few kilometres from the estate. Just before the end of their training, the boys learn that a troop of young female Fascists have arrived from Italy. It becomes a matter of priority to inspect these delights, but at the entrance they are met by the camp leader, a large and authoritarian Führerin from the League of German Girls, who informs them that absolutely no fraternisation will be taking place. Not even here? Mussolini favours racial purity, too, it would appear. All they can do is slink home, tail between their legs, Hitler Youth uniform or not.

The training at the Adolf Hitler School is rather more military than what he has experienced so far. Everything is preparation for life as a soldier. They study history and theory. Sigurd learns how to read military maps, something he enjoys and finds exciting. They have lessons in a subject called "Rassenkunde". On the blackboard today's assignment has been written in authoritarian chalk letters:

Ein Volk ist —

Ein Reich ist —

Eine Nation ist —

Eine Rasse ist —

Ein Staat ist —

This is child's play for Sigurd, obviously. But his fellow students whose Hitler Youth service is compulsory and who include some of the most molecularly dense fatheads on God's green earth, often struggle.

When Sigurd falls ill, he regards it as a stroke of luck. However, it turns out to be more serious than he had first thought. Epidemic hepatitis or jaundice. His skin turns yellow, he develops a temperature and loses all energy and strength because he never gets enough salt or sugar. After some days in isolation,

Sigurd sneaks down to the kitchen where a Polish woman is working and manages to beg his way to macaroni with a lot of salt and sugar. His zest for life returns quite quickly, but now he has “not passed” Rassenkunde and a few other things, and that is bad news for someone who is hoping to join the Waffen-SS.

Recruiting officers also stop by the Adolf Hitler School. They seek out teenagers from the Reichskommissariat, treat them to a drink and a casual chat. One day in May a Norwegian turns up who has met Sigurd’s brother! The Eastern Front is long, but not *that* long, clearly.

His name is Knut Pedersen and he is a Scharführer in the Waffen-SS, formerly of The Norwegian Legion. When the legion was dissolved in March, he was in the third company which served at Pulkovo and Gongozi.

‘What was it like? Hell itself, but you didn’t hear that from me. Especially during the winter, during the Russian offensive.’

‘Oddmund was injured there, what happened?’

‘Given that it all went to shit, he was lucky. Shelling right outside the staff bunker in Gongozi. Three bits of shrapnel in his legs, I think. I last saw him in Mitau and he was still on crutches. The last thing I heard was that Oddmund was transferred to a staff battalion in Graz. Exempted from front-line service.’

Sigurd nods. ‘Why didn’t he go home?’

‘Problem with his contract. That’s been a recurring issue with those of us who were in the Legion. Including me. They’re so in love with us legionnaires that they’ll never let us go, ha-ha. I could be on Hvaler right now, roasting freshly caught mackerel over a fire, and here I am, doing the rounds of deepest Silesia.’

A few drinks later the Scharführer and Sigurd have bonded to the extent that Pedersen starts telling him stories about what it was really like.

‘Ever tried drinking your own piss? Some of the lads claim it develops a particularly fine bouquet the third time it’s been through your bladder.’

Sigurd laughs.

‘What I heard about Oddmund was that he was drunk most of the winter until he got injured. And he wasn’t the only one, let me tell you. But it seemed to really get on top of him out there and you can’t blame the boys who drink to keep it at bay. Someone said they had to drag him into the trench one night because he was holding onto a Russian and he refused to let go.’

‘What do you mean, holding onto?’

‘Well, Oddmund had grabbed his bayonet and was using it to turn the Russian into mincemeat. He went totally berserk and wouldn’t to stop. I think he was reprimanded because of it. People do a lot of strange things when they’re scared, you know.’

Sigurd nodded. ‘Yes, I guess so.’

Does that sound like Oddmund, he wonders. Yes. He thinks about the times his brother was violent when he was younger. The time he hit him over the head with the chamber pot. Yes, Oddmund is more than capable of taking his rage out on younger children, dead objects or dead people.

‘He can get quite aggressive, my brother,’ Sigurd says.

‘Right, now you know where to find me. All I need are four more men on my list and then I’ll have earned three weeks’ leave. But I don’t suppose you give a toss about that, do you? Ha-ha.’

On his way back to Norway, Sigurd stops by Menkin once more. He has a couple of days’ leave in Dietfurt and can’t think of anything better to do than visit the old place with Harry. He makes discreet enquiries about Stasja, but no one knows where she has gone. And that despite Menkin having become a girls’ camp. The Polish village is suddenly teeming with young, Aryan women, it would seem. One evening in Menkin, Sigurd meets Ruth from Norway who tells him that he has “such deep eyes”. He lives on that for a long time.

In June Sigurd travels back to Oslo to organise the next contingent going to Reichsgau Wartheland and be turned into settlers. He has been abroad for one year by then. The troop is stationed at Jessheim where Sigurd is tasked with “breaking in” the new arrivals, as they call it. It is all about drill, drill and more drill. He is an expert at this now. *Shoulder arms, pitchfork hold! Present... Skipping rope!* If they sing badly, then it is on the ground and give me twenty push-ups. Boys or girls, it makes no difference or that several of the trainees are a head or more taller than Sigurd. Given how many push-ups the German armed forces order from 1940 to 1943, you wonder why the earth doesn’t start to shake.

The recruits still sing the same battle song as last summer, “Heil and hearty” as Sigurd calls it. He orders those new to the land service to skip the fourth verse, the one with the lyrics “crooked noses, low brows” and so on. The words are cheap and base, childish. Unworthy and un-Germanic. They have no place in his project. Sigurd has been to Dietfurt and seen the “devil Jews” close up – poor, frightened and wretched people. They are defeated, they represent a threat to absolutely no one.

When their training is complete and Sigurd is to accompany the recruits to Poland, they run into problems. The Swedes will no longer guarantee free passage so the recruits never leave. Sigurd ends up drifting around Oslo, the home for frontline fighters and Café Clou. He is “ordered to serve” as adjutant to Youth Leader Axel Stang in Hieronymus Heyerdahls gate.

Sigurd is fed up being just a guide for the Youth Hirten. He is very impatient and restless now. One day he decides to risk it, helps himself to a thick, shiny adjutant ribbon and turns up at Stortingsgata 3 at SS-Ergänzungsstelle Nord where he is introduced to Sturmbannführer Leib and his adjutant.

Sigurd answers every question quickly, accurately and willingly. He speaks excellent German. The Germans push him hard, but finally the Sturmbannführer exclaims: ‘Na ja! Wenn der Junge zur Front will, dann lassen wir ihn halt fahren!’

Not only is Sigurd too young, he is also too short. As an SS member and the “flower of the Nordic race” you need to be at least 170 centimetres tall, a height Sigurd will never achieve in this earthly life. At the age of sixteen he measures 153 centimetres in stockinged feet, but afterwards he can read in his papers

that they have listed his height as 155 centimetres. ‘Ivan is going to crap his pants,’ the adjutant snickers as he opens and updates Sigurd’s papers. It is June 1943 and the Waffen-SS has started to ease its requirements considerably.

Sigurd notices something else as he checks his documents: on the typewriter brought from Germany by the SS staff the double lightning, the SS symbol, has its very own key. The alphabet has acquired a new letter.

Then, in a uniform which is far too big, they send him to Holmestrand and then to Sennheim in Elsass where the SS has training grounds and a school for recruits. Yet another place which recently was called something else: it used to be Cernay in Alsace. Sigurd wonders what the Germans call different places in Norway. He has heard Drontheim, the habitat of the dodo. The volunteers with whom Sigurd trains are an odd mix: Walloons from Belgium, Volksdeutsche from Romania, Italian Fascists and a small handful of Norwegians. Harry and Sigurd continue to stick together. The camp is on a plain from where they have a view of a hill in the blue horizon with a fifteen metre tall pole on the top. The pole shows how high the hill was before the previous war where it was ground down by thousands and thousands of artillery shells. Not far from the training area are several prisoner of war camps run by the SS. The region is famous for its picturesque villages and white wine which the recruits manage to sample before the lightning quick training process is over. The situation on the Eastern front is getting critical.

The solemn moment arrives one August day in 1943. Sigurd has his steel helmet under his left arm and his right hand on the standard as he swears his oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler in German, in a loud and in a clear boy’s voice. They sing the SS Treuelied, a medieval hymn now dressed in a modern Germanic language coat.

*Wenn alle untreu werden,
so bleiben wir doch treu,*

dess immer nach auf Erden für euch ein Fähnlein sei

Gefährten unserer Jugend

ihr Bildner bess'rer Zeit

die uns zur Männertugend

und Liebestod geweiht.

Youth plus loyalty becomes manliness and death in beauty to simplify the equation. The person accepting the oath in behalf of the Führer is SS General Sepp Dietrich, one of Hitler's most trusted officers. Dietrich is a heavyset man with a bulldog face, a butcher by trade who became a war hero, who was awarded the Iron Cross twice in 1918 and the Blood Order as early as 1923 when he was among those loyal to Hitler during his attempted coup in Munich. Now he has the Knight's Cross with oak leaves on his chest. Two men are holding the SS standard which is unfurled. Sigurd places three fingers of his right hand on the standard and stands as stiffly as he can while he repeats the magic words of sacrificing his life for Germany's leader in the fight against Bolshevism.

That same week the Battle of Kursk, the biggest panzer battle in history, ends with a German defeat.

Sigurd can now attach the SS-emblem to his collar and he becomes an SS Jäger attached to the SS Ski Jäger Battalion Norway, under the Sixth SS Mountain Division North. After a period of leave and more training, the battalion will be sent to Finland, something Sigurd wishes he could tell his mother. She would have appreciated that particular piece of information, perhaps even cried a tiny bit less? He is realising her dream. They will join the German front in the Continuation War as it has become known, the Germans' and Field Marshal Mannerheim's large-scale revenge for the Winter War. The journey takes them to a region which in Snorre Sturlason was known as Bjarmeland. It is about time the Norse people set foot there again.

On their way to Danzig, the battalion will change trains in Berlin. The carriages in which the men will travel onwards are at Stettiner Bahnhof which Sigurd remembers from his first trip to the city when

he was still stiff and sore after the operation to remove his appendix. Berlin has changed in a year. The railway terminal has been damaged by Allied bombing. Swastika standards are everywhere, but have now been joined by signs showing the way to the nearest air raid shelter.

Around eight o'clock that evening when the Ski Jäger Battalion has started boarding the train, the sirens start to sound. A British attack is underway. They are ordered to seek cover under the train, that is regarded as a safe place. The darkness is rent by glimpses of light that resemble flashbulbs going off. The newly laid railway sleepers where they are lying reek of creosote, a strong and stimulating smell. It reminds him intensely of Dovre and the smell lingers on his uniform.

It is early December. There is bad weather over Berlin, clouds and dense fog. The British bombers are easy to see in the searchlights projected by the defence and Berlin's many thousands of anti-aircraft guns pick them out. The first planes reach the city centre which is protected by four enormous flak batteries. The bombs start to fall.

Sigurd lies under the train listening to the drone of the British bomber squadron, the roar of the anti-aircraft defences in the city and then the deep, gut wrenching hits on German military infrastructure and anything else the Brits can find. How dare Churchill take such liberties with the *Welthauptstadt*? The Luftwaffe will make him pay a high price for this.

Sigurd has survived his first act of war. After a wait in a nearby bar for a few hours, the railway tracks have been repaired and the train with the Ski Jäger Battalion can start its journey to Danzig. None of them was wounded.

The large-scale British bombing raid of Berlin involved two hundred and forty planes. South-west of the city centre a Lancaster bomber was hit by anti-aircraft guns. On board as a passenger and war correspondent was the famous Norwegian poet, Nordahl Grieg. The crew tried to drop their bombs before the eight men parachuted, but then a wing broke off. The plane crashed soon afterwards among shrubs and maples near Dallgow-Döberitz; there were no survivors.

A month or two later Sigurd learns about this coincidence and is taken with the symbolism. The cigarette-craving Communist on the golden train to Otta, the poet with wine leaves in his hair of whom Sigurd caught a glimpse on Venåsen in April 1940, on that December night it is all over for him. For Sigurd, however, this is the night where it all begins.