THE TEACHER OF WARSAW

a novel

MARIO ESCOBAR

HARPER MUSE

The Teacher of Warsaw

English Translation © 2022 Harper Muse

El Maestro

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PROLOGUE

WARSAW

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I have heard that when you say the names of the dead, you bring them back to life again. Reading the Teacher's hidden diary, I wonder if that is an editor's real job. Perhaps our mission is to resurrect the stories that time and misfortune have erased.

There through the window are the ruined buildings of my beloved city, forever sad and sieged by death. I wonder if this is the story that can shake us all free of despair. Summer promises peace, but the shackles still circle the wrists and arms of our people. How short-lived our reprieve! We are cursed with bad luck: occupied for generations by czarists, Austrians, and Teutons, then freed a few decades ago from the Soviet scourge that once again looms mercilessly over us.

Just a few days ago Agnieszka Ignaciuk told me the story of this

diary. Books are born long before the editor delivers them to the printer and the bookstores to their hungry readers. Each story has its own soul that predates the ink-printed paper, the carefully bound spine, and the cover engraved in gold letters. Agnieszka had managed to escape the horror of the ghetto and to hide out for the rest of the war in a house on the outskirts of Cracow. She and her son were some of the few silent witnesses to survive a world that has disappeared completely.

Nearly impenetrable darkness has covered the earth for the past five years, as if several galaxies snuffed out their shining stars to make way for shadow. Then, at the midnight of humanity's terrible winter, that small, lovely woman with wise eagle eyes placed into my hands Janusz Korczak's typed manuscript. She acted like she was passing along a forbidden fruit that would eternally expel me from the semblance of paradise my life had recently become. I had survived the Nazis, sidestepped the shooting squad, and avoided getting massacred during the 1944 uprising. Now I was back at my profession and unwilling to grant that everything had changed irrevocably.

The manuscript was wrapped in rough, corrugated paper pocked by dried splotches of coffee and ashes and bound tightly by esparto twine. I clipped the twine and fingered the battered corners of the yellowed pages inside. Before diving into the reading, I remembered the Teacher. Everyone I know called him the Old Doctor. He was quite popular because of his radio programs, novels, and children's stories, but for me he was just *Teacher*. I met him at a summer camp long before the war, when I was still a dreamer and believed that life was a long climb toward glory.

As my eyes took in the first few lines, a thick lump formed in my throat. The letters disappeared, and I heard his voice that was as strong and secure as it was wise and kind. Everything around me melted

away—the bad omens of that summer, the gutted buildings that were now little more than their once-beautiful facades, the sinkholes from the shells that made the streets nearly impassable, the rag-clad children, the women ravaged by hunger and by Soviet men. It was just he and I in the middle of a ruined world.

HARPER MUSE

PART I

SUMMER'S END

HARPER MUSE

CHAPTER 1

BIRDS OVER WARSAW

My students resisted the end of summer with the ferocity of a shipwreck survivor clinging to his life jacket in the middle of a storm. Existence seemed eternal at their age. Nothing satisfies young minds determined to enjoy things 'til the very last second. They grasp time and squeeze all the juice out of it, like we did with those lovely oranges Stefania brought that afternoon of September 1, 1939.

Children and teachers alike all turned to look at her when she got to the river. Though I always found her pretty, she had surpassed the time when beauty is primarily external. We had met thirty years before, and without her my life would have amounted to nothing. When I saw her that day, her dark hair was streaked with gray, and her face reflected the constant effort of tending to the children.

A year ago she had been staying in Palestine. We were both thinking

about going to live there, though the irony was not lost on us: two Polish Jews accustomed to the freezing northern winds returning to the hot lands of our ancestors. But the children had brought us back together, and now, with summer lazily dissipating and the rumors of war turning into confident declarations, Stefa seemed as peaceful and loving as always.

"Hello, boys and girls. I've brought more of the good ones," she said, lofting the oranges toward the group of older students.

Everyone caught them midair and started peeling them right away. Stefa came up to me and gave me a hand. She hefted me from the rock where I sat and waited for me to steady myself on my weary legs. Then we walked along the river to enjoy the cool breeze.

"Things are getting pretty bad in Warsaw. There are terrible rumors floating around," she said.

"Dear Stefa, you don't need to worry. Think about the past forty years. We've lived through a horrifying war, formed a free nation, and chased the Soviets out of Warsaw. We've survived all of it. The Polish people are quite accustomed to suffering. Each generation repeats the cycle in its own way. You and I happen to be at the end of one, and soon others will take our place for the next."

Stefa frowned. My tranquility was unsettling to her. She believed I thought too much about things and analyzed them to a fault, as if the human heart could be predicted. She glanced up. The sky was so shining and bright that it seemed nothing could ruin that calm.

I kept talking. "Each generation is like one of nature's seasons, repeating itself in endless cycles. It's an eternal rebirth starting with spring, when everything seems solid and unmovable and people think things will always be like that. Then with summer a new generation awakens and turns everything on its head. Their provocative creativity questions

all established notions, and then their heyday gives way to autumn. The next generation rediscovers individualism and the human capacity to achieve personal goals, but they neglect the social fabric until the most dangerous and destructive generation shows up. The winter generation exists in a seemingly unprecedented social crisis; it's marked by mass confusion and the complete destruction of all that seemed solid. There's no point in resisting the inevitable."

Her pace slowed, and Stefa's eyes glanced from one silvery gleam to the next on the calm, constantly moving waters. "So what you're saying," she said with a sigh, "is that whatever's going to happen is going to happen, and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

The reflection of the water glinted off my glasses. I leaned over and studied my image in the river as my hand stroked my stubbly chin. I looked older than I recalled. Time had mercilessly plowed up my dry face and washed out the rosy cheeks of my youth.

"I've lived for six decades now. That's six times the lifespan of a child, and who knows if I'll reach a seventh. Sooner or later, we're all going to disappear, Stefa; it's just a matter of time. Memory is always cloudy and presages the decrepit coming of death. Think about the great men of our time. The emperors, the businessmen, the great revolutionary heroes—they all overcame hundreds of obstacles to reach the pinnacle, and what good did it do them? Maybe they had a decade of glory, perhaps two or three decades in the best of cases, and at the end all that was left was a deep fatigue. Old age means being tired: going to bed worn out and waking up out of breath."

At that, Stefa burst out with the laughter she reserved for my philosophical moods. She knew it would unsettle me and shake me out of restrictive reverie. "All conversation always ends up about you. I've never known anybody else who loved and hated himself as much as you do,

Janusz. You and I may be old, but what about them?" She cocked her head toward the children. "What are you going to tell them if the Nazis take over Poland? That it's just a generational cycle? That you fought in the Great War so now it's their turn to suffer?"

I tsked. "We should be getting back to them anyhow. Let the Nazis do what they've got to do. War seems inevitable, but the enthusiasm isn't there like it was in 1914—much less 1920. I don't foresee this lasting long, and I sure hope they get what's coming to them."

We walked slowly back toward the students. The older ones were debating politics while the younger ones were splashing and throwing themselves with carefree abandon into the water. It was contagious, and I wanted to do the same. Growing up has always meant worrying about all that might happen and everything wrong with the world, as if we were powerless to change it. The oranges had disappeared, and the peels were now being tossed around in a newly minted game.

Balbina came up with her husband, Feliks. They had only been with us a short while but had quickly adapted to the routines at Dom Sierot, the orphanage that had cost us so much to build and upkeep and that some conservative media called the palace of the poor.

"Dr. Korczak," she said, "have you heard the rumors? Before we left the city early this morning, on the radio they were saying—"

"Balbina, we've been hearing rumors for months now. Adolf Hitler seems hell-bent on retaking Danzig, but what he really wants is to take Poland, then all of Europe if Chamberlain lets him. It's best to just let things take their course. It will be as God wills."

A scuffle broke out among the children, as if my words sent their Polish blood boiling. Though there were several Communists among them who wanted the country to become a Soviet republic, and just as many Zionists who clamored for all Jews to return to the promised land,

they were universally united in their disdain for the those of the National Socialist variety.

"All right, all right!" I called with my hands raised. "This is exactly what the Fascists want on a beautiful day like today. It's Friday, the start of a wonderful weekend, and here we are talking about their dreams of wars and takeovers. We've been holding our breath for three years now. Whatever's got to happen will happen."

But my words only stoked their thirst for debate. I rolled my eyes, removed my glasses, and sat back down on my rock.

"The Soviets are the only ones who can stop the Nazis. Stalin will defend us," one of the older students said.

"Like he did with Spain in the civil war? He left them high and dry, and now the poor republic is in exile, and General Franco has the country in his dirty fist. We have to wait for help from the British and the French," another piped up.

While they kept this up, Ágata's son, Lukasz, came up and showed me a frog he had caught down by the water. He carefully transitioned the creature into my hands, and I studied it for some time. "Tell me, will it turn into a handsome prince if I kiss it, Lukasz?" I joked.

"No, Teacher, it's just a frog."

I pursed my lips at him and cocked an eyebrow. There went adulthood encroaching on him before my very eyes. I shook my head. "No, no, dear Lukasz, this right here is a prince. Igor is his name, and if he finds a beautiful princess, he'll get his human form back as well as his kingdom."

The boy studied me gravely, weighing just how terrible the crime of fantasy was and regretting my way of teasing him.

"Oh, come now," I coaxed. "You can't lose your imagination. The world should never be what reason, adults, and society force it to be. We've got to keep looking with their eyes," I said, nodding toward the

youngest of the bunch who were now engrossed in an all-out battle. I jumped up and went over to them. They immediately ceased their warring, turned to smile at me, embraced me, and dragged me into their fray. As a boy, I had rarely played with other children, but I enjoyed them at all times now.

"Teacher, you're on our team," explained young Pawel. He had come to us just a few months before, after his drunken father had been run over by a trolley while crossing the street. As awful as it was to recognize, that tragedy was the best thing that could have happened to the child.

"Of course I'll be on your team."

Kacper tugged at my sleeve. "No, you're on our team! They have more people, and we're younger." Kacper always managed to melt my heart. He looked like a little cherub with his tight blond curls and dark eyes set just a bit too close together. He spoke with a lisp and kept us all busy with his mischief.

"Hmm," I said, taking a step back and looking back and forth between the teams with a serious, investigative air. "It seems the young cherub is correct. I really should help the weaker side." With that, I picked up a stick and charged into the battle. Swordplay ensued with pine cone grenades launched back and forth between bushy hideouts. War is an endlessly delightful pastime for children.

Suddenly something like thunder roared overhead, but the sky remained clear. I scanned the horizon. A formation of large silver birds was flying toward Warsaw.

The children stopped short. The teachers and helpers rose to their feet, and we were all silent. The only sound was the roar of the Junkers planes' diesel motors. My eyes blazed, and I clenched my teeth to stay the anger.

I thought of Nietzsche's false prophet Zarathustra, the madman who

died hating the world. His prophecies of supermen seemed to be coming true, but the Junkers planes were not what belied his prophecies. It was seeing Kacper's face twisted in confusion and terror. He gripped my legs frantically, as if I could do something to stop the oncoming war. At that moment I decided I would indeed defeat those monsters who aimed to conquer my world. I murmured Franciszek Karpiński's morning song: "Man whom you created and saved, showered with your gifts. . . ."

Kacper heard my humming and looked up. Despite the threatening roar of the motors, he smiled once again. There it was. After all these years, now in old age, there was my place in the world. I clenched my weak, thin, knobby fists and felt like the most powerful man in the world. These little chicks made me strong. The star that my grandmother had always seen in my boyhood face would have to shine out now as the sky surrendered its lights to the all-embracing darkness.

HARPER MUSE

CHAPTER 2

BURNING FLAMES

Boredom is the hunger of the soul. The noblest souls—resisting the discouraging slouch of time and destiny—have never been bored. I was awake while everyone else slept. The children breathed in chorus like an ocean melody, inhaling as the waves gathered and exhaling as they broke and returned to sea. There was never complete silence in the orphanage, and I loved that.

In the lovely villa where I grew up, silence reigned nearly all hours of the day. Silence to me had always felt like death. Yet once the bombing raids on Warsaw started, silence felt like life. The raging motors growling through the dark Polish skies were like the screeching flocks of crows that circled cathedrals in the winter. After the motors came the whistling, like question marks slicing down to announce death. Then the explosions shattered glass and eardrums and made our hearts

jump. Fear replaced boredom with a different kind of soul hunger: desperation.

If the bombs were not terrifying, they would have been beautiful. They reminded me of the fireworks shows I enjoyed in my childhood, when firecrackers would light up the night. The loud pops would get me out of bed and over to the window, where I would stay with my nose glued to the cold, frosty glass that reflected my pupils.

Stefa and I took turns keeping watch during the bombings. In the working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of the city where our orphanage was, few bombs had fallen, but we could see fires in the distance. It was like an interminable night of the St. John's Day bonfires the Catholics would light every year. Yet over the past few days the effects of the war were spreading like ripples from a stone tossed into a lake.

Most figured that Poland would pull off another miracle, like in 1920 when Warsaw's citizens saved the young nation from the Soviet plague. I was not so sure about that, though I did not mention it to anyone. I did not want to become a grumpy, bad-luck prophet. To me, our beloved city was in sweet denial, like Vienna had been a few years before when it still whistled Anzengruber's refrain, *"Es kann Dir nix g'schehn"*: "Nothing can happen to you!" That is the curse of old empires and cities that have faced a thousand misfortunes. They rely on the fact that calm always returns after the storm. But the Nazis were not just a simple storm, not even a winter front that left old Europe wracked and exhausted. Hitler's Germans were an eternal winter that allowed no regrowth anywhere.

The floor seemed to be vibrating, and a hot breeze that smelled like struck matches and dust blew in, carrying leaves from an early autumn. Then I heard the squawk of the bomber planes approach like threatening birds flying south to escape winter's chill. I grabbed my blanket, and, before I could even wake her, Stefa was already running to my office in

her nightgown. Side by side we stared through the round window at the flames that were inching closer. There was no need to talk. We knew what was about to happen.

The planes' murmur grew to an angry, hoarse roar above us before the whistling began. Those whishing sounds meant luck or death to more innocent lives.

The rooftops of nearby buildings were baptized by bomb fire. People ran through the streets. There were no shelters for Warsaw's poor, just the basement of the old church and one warehouse.

"Should we wake the children?" Stefa asked. I smiled at her ludicrous rhetorical question. The whole orphanage was awake except for Pawel. The world could have literally been burning up beside him and the child would have remained sweetly relaxed and resting.

Flashes fell above us like phoenix tail feathers, and we looked up to see fire spreading across our own roof. "Let's get them to the basement!" I said.

Stefa ran to instruct the teachers to take the pajama-clad children down to the basement while I crawled out the window and made my way across the shingles. Fire was spreading on my left. Over and over I tried to smother it with the blanket, but my attempts seemed to have the opposite effect.

A plane flew low over the building, so close I could see the swastikas and smell the diesel. The shingles had been cool from the night's chill, but now they were getting hot. I knelt over and over to put out the flames. Eventually more teachers came and joined the effort, along with Stefa, after she had seen the children to safety.

"It's not going out!" she hollered in desperation.

"We'll get it!" I hollered back, choked up with dread. For twenty-seven years we had been in that building that stood tall and proud in a

Christian neighborhood. We were there on purpose so that Jewish and Christian children could live together. Long ago I had learned that the only way to knock down the walls of prejudice and hatred toward difference was coexisting and building friendships that allowed the children to fight and then be reconciled again.

My joints were starting to complain. The body seems to make itself tyrannically present as we age, as if vocally renouncing its interest in life and documenting its tiredness so that its tenant is fully aware of how little time is left to enjoy physical existence.

I was burning my hands, the fire burned in my face, and the rebellious flames were jumping all around me. Finally, the planes flew off, and the winds died down as the infernal death sound of the motors faded. Then we did manage to put out the flames.

Returning inside exhausted, Feliks sighed. "Another sleepless night."

Balbina headed to the kitchen to fix coffee. We gathered around the table, and no one spoke for a while. We sipped slowly, the mug uncomfortable in my hands that still tingled with the heat from the flames.

"Should we send the children away from the city?" Zalewsky asked. He was our doorman, a Christian.

"The front is moving quickly. There really isn't a safe place to send them," I said with more indifference than I wanted. I knew I should be encouraging my staff and helping them stay hopeful.

"Our army will hold out," one of the younger teachers insisted. His enthusiasm was barely keeping his desperation from turning into sheer panic.

"The most important thing is for us to stay together. The Allies will get busy, and then things will get better." My words sounded believable, and everyone but Stefa nodded. She knew me too well.

We dispersed, still holding our mugs. We would have to wake the children in a few minutes, though most had only slept a few hours. But we had to keep to our schedules and rhythms or else everything would come crashing down. The only way to hold on to normalcy was to pretend it existed until we all believed it did.

"You know very well the Allies won't get here in time," Stefa said. But it was without reproach, just a warning. She wanted me to know I could trust her. I was a father to many children and to quite a number of adults, but not to her.

I hung my head. "Nope, they won't."

"So what will we do when the Nazis invade?"

I had been asking myself that for quite some time but still had no answer.

"The same thing we've always done. We're here to take care of the children and keep them safe. They must be protected until they can take care of themselves."

She raised an eyebrow, unconvinced but understanding. That was the day I started to write my diary. It was not an autobiography—there was nothing about me worth documenting—but the hands were circling the clock with increasing speed, and the sphinx was glaring at me in challenge. There was not much time left.

CHAPTER 3

THE POWER OF WORDS

I had not been outside the orphanage in a few days. I wanted to remember Warsaw the way it was before war, under the calm light of midday—the radiant city that had begun to shine in the few short years its independence lasted. It is always much easier to live in memories than to be truly submerged in a toxic, strangling reality. Nonetheless, I grabbed my hat from the hook and my cane and was halfway out the door when Stefa's sweet voice called out. She wanted me to walk with her in the garden a bit before heading downtown. We did so, at first in silence and enjoying the crunching of autumn leaves underfoot. Then we sat on a chilly bench and looked at the cloudy sky. It was going to rain.

"Maybe we should leave," she hazarded.

"That ship has sailed, my friend. The British didn't grant me a visa. You should've stayed in Palestine. It won't be long before the Germans enter the city, and we all know what they do to Jews. We've heard from many friends what's been going on in Germany, but it's even worse in Czechoslovakia and Austria."

"Maybe they're exaggerating," she said, but her face denied her words. She knew as well as I did how the Nazis were humiliating the Jews and taking everything they had. It was nothing new. For centuries we Hebrews had been persecuted in Europe for all sorts of things: killing Christ, starting plagues, ruining harvests. The main difference between all previous waves of persecution and now was that most twentieth-century Hebrews had no idea why we were being persecuted.

Jews from the past lived and died proudly because they believed they were chosen, and suffering seemed insignificant to that truth. The law pulsed vividly in their famished bones, and they did not care if their bodies were thrown to the flames or their country was stolen: their souls were longing for a better country, their long-lost Jerusalem. But we were despised for obeying the laws and faith of our ancestors even though most modern Jews no longer believed we were a chosen people, and most did not even worship the God of Abraham and Jacob.

"Ah, you know very well they're not exaggerating. Friends have written me about the abuses of the Germans and the Austrians themselves against our brothers in Vienna. Last year on March 13, a frenzied mob set out on a witch hunt. They were cruelest with the most respected Jews. They dragged the rabbis by their beards into the synagogues and forced them to scream 'Heil Hitler!' at the Torah. Some of the wisest men in Vienna were forced to get on their knees and scrub the streets and the bathrooms of the SA's barracks. What did the rest of the world do then? Nothing. And they won't do anything now. Once the Nazis are

in Warsaw, many who smile and greet us in the streets every day will be the first to join the mobs in publicly shaming us."

"So you agree with me. We need to get out of here. There's still a way out by sea. We can take a boat to England, and from there to Palestine, where they'll let us in as refugees."

I looked at the orphanage. It was a bit charred from the fires but still intact. My whole life was there. Plus, inside there were about two hundred reasons to stay. "We can't just leave the children."

"We'll get them out little by little," Stefa went on. "Surely the Nazis won't go that far—they're just harmless kids—but you're a public personage, and they love to humiliate and ruin anyone who might question them."

"Do you remember three years ago? The Polish authorities kept my children's program from going on air. They accused me of being a Zionist and of hiding my Jewish identity under my Polish name, Janusz Korczak. In our country there are already plenty of people who hate us, without even knowing who we are. But today they've asked me to return on air, not to do a program like last year on Pasteur but simply to raise morale in the city."

I stood, not wanting to be late. Stefa stood, too, and her face was clouded with sadness. I would have gone with her to the end of the world, but getting out and leaving the children behind was asking too much. I nodded, put on my hat, and walked down the gravel path toward the gate. I did not look back at my friend. Her sadness weighed heavily on me, but I needed to shake it off before going on the radio.

Yet my spirits grew darker as I walked the streets of our working-class neighborhood. The faces I passed were pale and thin, but the horror worsened the closer I got to downtown. I had seen the city in 1920 after the Soviet attack; even so, I could hardly believe my eyes now.

The bombing had been going on for several days. Most of the government and military high command, including Commander-in-Chief Edward Rydz-Śmigly, had fled to exile in Romania with the equipment and ammunition needed to defend the city. Our valiant mayor, Stefan Starzyński, had stepped up, distributed weapons to the people, and formed a citizens' defense network. The rumor was that the Germans were coming up from the southwest, near the district of Ochota.

The hour-long walk to the radio station tired me out. Some buildings were still smoking from the previous night's bombings. A dozen bodies were lined up, covered in white, bloodied sheets. My heart skipped a beat at how small some of those bodies were. I trudged up the stairs and pushed the door open without knocking.

"You're late, Doctor!"

I took off my hat and headed to the studio without answering. The images from the street were too present with me. The announcer glanced sideways at me and asked, "You all right?"

I sipped the water they had set out for me and wished it were vodka. "Yes, let's get started."

The announcer signaled with his hand to the technician to put us on air. I cleared my throat and saw the red light flash.

"Here, from Radio Warsaw 2, the Voice of Poland! A few days ago the vile Nazis destroyed our transmitter in Raszyn with their bombs, but we'll continue broadcasting from our humble studio. Today we have with us the famous doctor and director of the children's home, Janusz Korczak. Thank you for being with us in this dark hour, Doctor."

"Thank you. My dear citizens of Poland and beloved Varsovians, in recent years we have enjoyed the phrase, 'Peace for our time.' The workers stopped digging trenches, and construction of bomb shelters ceased. People were convinced that our generation would not have to see

another war. Then Adolf Hitler rose up and demanded more and more territory in exchange for our peace that was so precarious yet so dear to us. In 1935, we cared little for the fate of the inhabitants of Saar. We were unruffled by what happened to Jews and Communists persecuted by the Nazis after the annexation of Austria. Even the Sudeten Germans and then more and more of Czechoslovakia succumbed to the voracious appetites of Hitler and the sons of the Third Reich while Europe looked on unperturbed, sighing in relief over the peace—peace for our time, no matter the cost, no matter who gets sacrificed to sustain it. Then the Nazi leader's greedy eyes turned toward Danzig to take another bite out of Europe. And we, the Poles, were his next sacrificial victims."

I paused for a deep breath. After adjusting the knot of my tie, I went on.

"Then the bitter taste of violence coated our throats. Fate had chosen us, and we could no longer look away. The German war machine started to tread on us, crushing our dreams of liberty. Today as I walked toward the radio studio, I saw my reflection in the broken glass windows of empty stores strewn with debris. In some of them, women waited in interminable lines hoping to find bread to take home. Surely they were thinking of the coming winter. I saw groups of crestfallen soldiers in tattered uniforms falling back. At the very doors of the radio station, lined up in a row, the bodies of the most recent bombing victims are resting peacefully, far removed now from the cares and fears of this life. That's what convinced me to change what I had prepared to say to you.

"I was going to ask you to resist, to hold out for the French and the British, to cling to the burning mast of the desperate. I had thought about reading some of the poets who pushed us to freedom from German, Austrian, and Russian occupation. But I'm not going to do that. Poland is a strong nation that will withstand the invasion of the Germans and

the Third Reich. We will survive the ashes of our cities and raise a new patriotic army. But right now, it's best to lay down our arms. I'm not asking you to give up—don't hear me wrong. The hardest part is yet to come. I'm asking you to resist while loving life; to resist without letting poisonous Nazi ideas seep into our brains and our schools; resist when the oppressors want to turn us into accomplices to their abominations; resist, and you will overcome."

The announcer looked at me with bewilderment, unsure whether to applaud or to kick me out of the studio. There were tears in his eyes, and he was breathing hard. The sound of cold, hard truth after too long without it seemed to be too much for him. I was trembling. I did not want to believe my own words. Peace, as well as the war, had already succumbed to the vitriolic message of the great false prophet, Hitler.

HARPER MUSE