There were trains hammering through Sweden night and day; it wasn't exactly a tour of the country like *Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey*, but they did see a lot. Playing cards were slapped down on suitcase lids, toilet floors flooded and stank, they ran out of aquavit, their home-knitted things itched under the uniform cloth. They tried to sleep as the trains shrieked past blacked out towns, silent stretches of water and the black fir forest that was their soul.

The idea was for everybody to change place. At least, it seemed like that. Maybe there was no plan behind it all. The man used to staring at furrows ploughed in rich soil had to learn to negotiate treacherous upland bog country. Many of them saw a lot of things they never knew existed, and they would talk about them for the rest of their lives. They would tell tales of such far-flung places as Fårö Island and Stöllet and Valsjöbyn, how they built roads and rifle ranges and had to pull dead Norwegians, frozen stiff, on sledges across the high fells. They whiled away the empty hours in cafés, they wanked and played cards and wrote home and did deals in cigarettes and aquavit. Nothing was the same.

And there was something else. It was to do with their women. It had been starting here and there even before Europe exploded and the draught blew the Swedish cottage door wide open. It had started at the Ericsson and Luma factories and the Retail Ready-To-Wear Co. Ltd., with make-up, sweets and cigarettes, plus two pairs of silk stockings a week. Then it crept in at SKF Ballbearings and the aircraft watchtowers. You couldn't say anything was the

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same any more. Some of them said the devil had got into their women.

The solid middle-aged and elderly women didn't go clambering up into aircraft watchtowers, of course. They were too unwieldy and they didn't want to learn how to spot different types of plane. They had no shorthand or typing skills, spoke no foreign languages, hadn't a clue about nuts and bolts, most of them. What could they do?

Berta Söderkvist could bake melting moments. Ada Gustafsson had had a little restaurant for eighteen years, and what's more she'd been in charge of the catering when the Belgian giant Ferdinand visited the town with his funfair. Hilda Kjellén was known for her delicious sour cherry jam and Hulda Bergström could make Danish pastries that were lighter and flakier than anybody else's.

They became the WDV mess corps. The ones who cooked the food were known as kitchen volunteers, the ones who stood at the long tables on the station platforms to feed the troops were known as serving volunteers. After all, half of Sweden was on the move and longing for home. They poured out of their trains on black winter mornings, three or four hundred men at a time. It was bitterly cold and ice was forming in their beards by the time they had tramped the platforms for a while. There was a clatter of billycans, they talked and swore in low voices, but when they reached the serving volunteer with her soup ladle they would pull themselves together and make a humorous remark. Sometimes they just told the plain truth: this food's as good as Mother's. Why does there have to be a war?

The volunteers were well wrapped up, with white aprons on top and protective oversleeves. It wasn't easy to see what they really looked like, but the younger the appearance and the prettier the

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face, the more determinedly a man would pull himself together. They hadn't much time to talk though, none at all really. There were thirty-five of them to feed seven hundred and fifty men in seven minutes. Sometimes it was eight hundred men in ten minutes. Officers crunched around in the snow. One of them saluted Hilda Kjellén.

'Your hands must be freezing,' he said, sounding so human. People said some of them were Nazis, but Hilda didn't think this one could be. He asked her if she knew where the train had come from and if it was going to Värmland via Hallsberg. The volunteers worked irregular shifts to stop them getting too familiar with the timetables, but she'd picked up a few things even so. The Hallsberg train had already gone, with eleven hundred men on board. Hilda was plump, good-natured and obliging, and chattered the whole time as she ladled out the soup; she wasn't one to get flustered easily. But then she had to take the safety pins out of her oversleeves and go with the lieutenant to the station hotel. It was a serious matter; he was a security officer and had lured her into a trap.

They didn't take her out and shoot her in the green cold of dawn, but she was reprimanded and the head of the field kitchen, Ada Gustafsson, the one with the little restaurant, was given orders to put Hilda on cooking duty in the engine sheds where she couldn't talk out of turn.

'I knew he wasn't a Nazi,' said Hilda, who had never before been utterly wrong about anybody.

The engine shed was a semicircular building with a black roof on the edge of the railway yard. It was made of brick and of an artistic architectural design, but when they arrived on those winter nights it looked as if it had been hurled there from out of chaos; it was a mass of brick and solid weight over there in the dark, and they

always found the echoing, soot-encrusted roofs above them oppressive to begin with, in spite of all the rush. During that worst time there were eight to ten long trains arriving at the station every night, which could mean eight thousand men to feed. They worked in groups, relieving each other at intervals. They were told the evening before when they would be on duty, always at different times so they wouldn't get to know the timetables of the secret trains thundering along the tracks.

Their previous activities had consisted of community parades, Festivals of Light in the church, sales of straw handicrafts and raffles of peppermint rock and hand knitting. Then came the National March for Health, air raid training days, Christmas present collections for the troops and field kitchen courses.

And then one night they found themselves there with 144 kilos of peas, 350 kilos of potatoes and 150 kilos of pork to be turned into meals for eleven hundred men. But the pork was in the form of long pigs lying cold and dead on an open cart. Berta Söderkvist who baked such lovely melting moments set to and ran the soaking water while Ada Gustafsson measured out scoops of salt. They had a fatigue-duty conscript to help them, and they gave him instructions on how to tackle the pale pigs. But they soon grew impatient and took the axe and saw into their own hands. The fatigue-duty helper was quite pathetic those first couple of years, when anything truly male was supposed to be bearing arms.

The helper had dungarees and an imitation fur cap and his fingers were swollen like sausages in the cold. The helper shuffled, he peeled thick, clumsy, soil-clogged chunks off the potatoes, sniffed up snot and glowered through pale blue eyes. It seemed improper and above all surprising to see him standing hunched over a snowdrift, peeing, because fatigue-duty conscripts weren't supposed to have anything between their legs, or at least not much.

But the very worst time passed, and it all became part of everyday life: hearing the hammering trains, being worn out and sick of strutting officers and brisk, hearty ones. Soon enough, all the troops had a shuffle just like the helper's. By then the volunteers had long since made friends with him. A friend in need is a friend indeed, they joked, and found him such a dab hand with the low-pressure boiler. And anyway, said Ada Gustafsson, there wouldn't be any wars if everyone was a reject like him. She brought the helper into the warm and made a fuss of him with coffee and cardamom buns.

Jenny Otter was in the group led by Gerda Franzon and there were ten of them in the group, ladies she found quite intimidating to begin with. She didn't know any women that well except those in her own family, and she'd been suspicious of them. Women can't keep quiet, Fredrik said. When they were working together round the Osby boiler, they were very informal about names, didn't call each other Mrs. Initially this intimacy had made her uncomfortable.

She and Fredrik had been married twelve years when the war broke out. There hadn't been any children. The shame and pain of the first childless years had silted over with time and tedium. She didn't put as much time and effort into cleaning as she used to at first, when she wanted to show everybody there was absolutely nothing wrong with her except that she hadn't produced any children. Then she began to forget what she was supposed to be doing, more and more often; she even forgot to get the potatoes on for when Fredrik came home. He made no reproaches. Nor did he need to. She thought it was eccentric behaviour herself.

For as long as the WDV's activities consisted of tombolas and communal peace parades, she didn't take them very seriously. She often forgot to go to meetings. She forgot to wash her collar, cuffs

and armbands on the day of the Festival of Light in the church and had to iron them dry in a mad rush just before it was time to go.

The first time ten WDV's had to feed a thousand men in a fifteen-minute stop on the station platform, she was afraid she wouldn't be up to her part of the job. She was going to be in the engine sheds with Gerda Franzon's group, cooking pork and root vegetable mash. They arrived in unnecessarily good time one dark December evening, just as the delivery of vegetables and pork was coming in on a cart. Jenny looked at the mountain of swedes and the frozen pigs, then she looked at Gerda Franzon who had a maid at home and Hilda Kjellén who was known for her delicious Danish pastries. They were all talking in loud, shrill voices and were all just as nervous as she was. A few moments later they were hard at work, without her knowing quite how it had happened.

Then she discovered that, contrary to what she had thought, she was possessed of strong arms, stamina and punctuality. She discovered that fat little Hilda Kjellén was the most cold-blooded of them all; that Berta Söderkvist was quick-witted and what was more could get them to laugh in the midst of all the ghastly rush; and that Gerda Franzon knew how to organise and practically never allowed herself to feel tired. Jenny didn't care that no one else knew. As she came down to the engine sheds at night and heard their clear voices above the din she was happy.

The war was no longer so alarming as it had been at first. It hammered away like an old train. Jenny rarely read the war reports in the paper. She was sick of the very word.

One night they were on the platform gathering up the pots and pans after the latest contingent of troops when a long, darkened train pulled in. No one got out. Finally a few officers and men loomed out of the darkness and began patrolling in front of the carriages. But not once did the carriage doors open as the station

employees busied themselves up at the front by the locomotive.

One officer grew irritated with the WDV's for taking so long to go. They carried on doing what they had to do at a steady pace, took away the now cold and empty canteens, dismantled the trestle tables and gathered up forgotten cutlery.

Then they saw the faces at the compartment windows. The platform lights illuminated them. They saw that one whole carriage was full of women and that their hair was very short, almost shaved. They stared out through the dirty glass but made no move to wave or give a sign.

A few minutes later, the train pulled away into the darkness. Frightened by what they had seen, they tried to think of explanations.