

PROLOGUE —
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Early one slate-grey, late-winter morning, three rusting, single-decker buses left Warsaw. Relics of the Soviet era, they trailed black smoke and stinking diesel fumes behind them as they headed east. A distinguished British High Court Judge, two eminent QCs and their junior counsel led the convoy, along with court stenographers and several officials of London's Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, better known as the Old Bailey. The next vehicle held the jury – eight men and four women – with six court officials and two Metropolitan Police Jury Protection Unit officers, there to ensure the jurors were kept well clear of the British press pack in the third bus. They were travelling to a country none of them knew but they were also journeying into the past, visiting the scenes of crimes that had been committed 57 years before. The alleged perpetrator, who for over 50 years had lived in Britain, unsuspected and unrecognised, had been left behind in London, with his trial put on hold for this unprecedented visit by a British jury to a foreign land.

The snow-covered landscape through which they passed was flat and marshy, broken only by birch woods and small, impoverished villages. The 100-mile journey took four hours, often slowed to a crawl by sudden snowstorms whipped up by the bitter east wind. As they approached the frontier with Belarus,

where sullen border guards routinely took hours or even days just to check visitors' documents, they found a queue snaking back several kilometres. An enterprising vendor had set up a roadside stall selling hot soup to the delayed drivers and a few equally enterprising prostitutes, wearing mini-skirts and low-cut tops despite the bitter cold, could be seen climbing into the cabs of some of the trucks. They were said to have bribed the border guards to keep the delays long enough to make the drivers more receptive to their approaches.

However, with the local police chief acting as a 'fixer', the convoy of buses swept past the queue and cut in right at its head. He distributed packs of Western cigarettes to the guards and customs officials, but increasingly dog-eared forms still had to be inspected and stamped at every stage of the process. By the time they cleared the final hurdle, the forms carried a dozen stamps, but after a mere 65-minute delay, the buses were waved through. Even so, as one of the reporters cynically remarked, it had taken them longer to cross the frontier than the German Army in 1941.

The previous night the British party had stayed in the relative luxury of a four-star hotel in Warsaw, but on their first night in Belarus they had to settle for the rather less salubrious Intourist Hotel in Brest-Litovsk, 'a hostelry,' said *The Times*, 'exuding all the charm of a tax office'. It was rumoured to have undergone an urgent refurbishment before their arrival, but there was little sign of it in the drab, spartan and frigid interior. Some of the bedroom windows were broken, there were no plugs in the sinks or the bathroom down the hall, and if guests ran out of toilet paper, they had to take the empty cardboard tube to the reception desk before being issued with another roll.

Detectives from Scotland Yard's War Crimes Unit had already made several trips to Belarus to interview potential witnesses, and had learned to take food, heaters and even gaffer tape with them to cover the cracks in the windows, but the