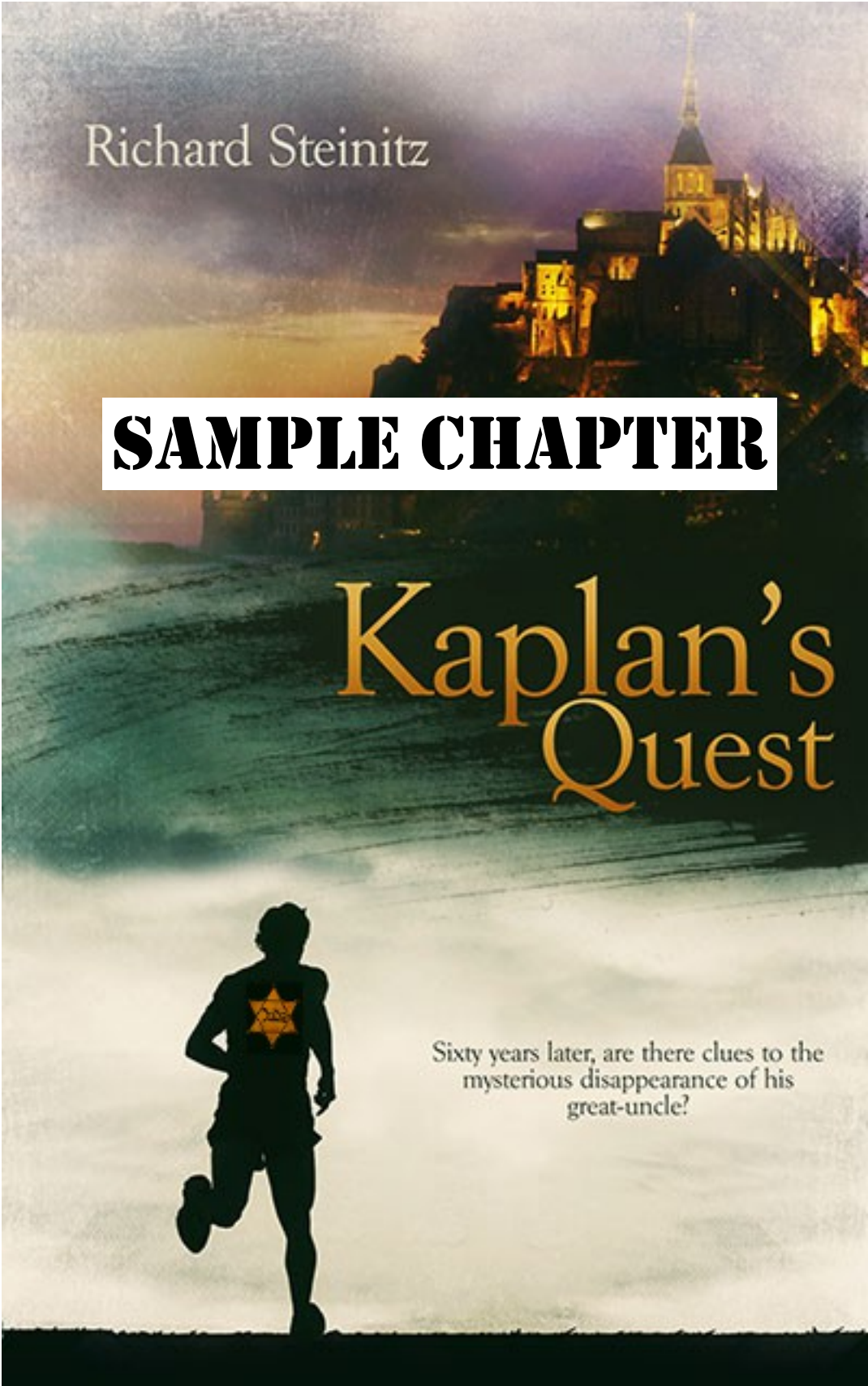




Richard Steinitz

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Kaplan's Quest

Sixty years later, are there clues to the
mysterious disappearance of his
great-uncle?

Chapter I

Israel, 2004 *Onkel* Samuel, as he was known in my immediate family, was an integral part of my childhood even though I never knew him, and he was presumed to have been dead for many years already (he was actually my great-uncle). I was given his name – Shmuel (Shmuel is the Hebrew version of Samuel, *Shmulik* is the diminutive nickname) and from an early age, heard stories of his athletic prowess and saw his picture prominently displayed in our house, dressed in his athletic gear. He had been a champion shot-putter in the *Maccabi HaTzai'r* (Young Maccabis) sports club in Berlin, had even taken part in the Second Maccabi Games in 1935 in Tel Aviv, and for some unfathomable reason had returned to Berlin at the end of the games.

My grandfather Ethan Kaplan, Samuel's (fraternal) twin brother, had accompanied the *Maccabi HaTzai'r* team to Palestine as a journalist, but had chosen to stay and make his home in Jerusalem, where he met my grandmother, who was also from a German-Jewish family. Their elder brother Nathan Kaplan had left Germany already in 1934, having seen the way things were going and having understood earlier than the rest of the family that it was time to get out. He had somehow managed to get an immigrant visa for Canada (though the Canadians were not very helpful about letting Jewish refugees in, to say the least), and went to live in Montreal. My great-grandparents – the parents of the three brothers – had both died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and we had Red Cross certificates to prove it.

The contradictory character of the *Yeckim* (as the German Jews who managed to escape the Holocaust are locally known) was well in evidence in our home. On one hand, no German-made products were ever bought (including cars), no one would ever travel to Germany unless forced to by circumstance (government service was forgivable, business dealings were frowned upon), and no

chance was ever missed at bad-mouthing the German people (dead or alive) or the present German government. On the other hand, the mother tongue in my parents' house was German. Both my father and my mother were children of German immigrants, and the first language they knew and learned was German. It was only natural for them to speak German amongst themselves, especially as a way of communicating so that the children didn't understand what they were saying! We (my sister Naomi and I) learned a basic level of German at an early age, in self-defense. In our family (and I dare say in most other German immigrant households), culture was considered a German monopoly: no one composed classical music of any value except for German composers, Goethe was the greatest writer in history (far better than Shakespeare or Tolstoy) with Schiller coming in a close second, and the German countryside was the earthly reflection of the Garden of Eden.

It was an unspoken assumption in our house that I would become an athlete and so it was. I joined the local *HaPoel* sports club in our neighborhood at the age of eight and after trying various sports, decided on wrestling. Not exactly what *Onkel* Samuel had done, but close enough. My parents and grandparents came to every meet, every competition, and would shout encouragement from the side - *Oma* and *Opa* in German, my parents in Hebrew. This continued for years, through High School and up until the start of my military service. I wasn't, however, good enough to be an "Exceptional Athlete" and spend my three years wrestling for the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) team, so I went along with some of my high school friends and served in the Artillery. My wrestler's arm muscles came in very handy though, when carrying artillery shells that weighed upwards of 45 kgs each.

The army, however, has a way of changing things – for better and for worse – and by the time I had finished my three years in olive green, wrestling was no longer the focus of my life. I had decided to study History and was accepted at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Perhaps because

of my family background, I concentrated on the period between the two World Wars, and long before the time came for me to do a Master's Thesis, I knew exactly what it would be on.

As I said before, I never knew my *Onkel* Samuel. He had returned to Berlin after the Maccabi Games in 1935 and for a few years had corresponded with my grandfather, but with the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, this correspondence came to an end. My grandfather spent the war years working for the British Army Spokesman's Office in Jerusalem, putting his journalistic talents to use in the war effort. After the war he tried to trace his brother, and through the Red Cross, managed to find some of his old neighbors in what remained of Berlin. Their story was that Samuel had been picked up in late 1938, interrogated and released. He managed to live an almost 'normal' life for the next two years or so, but soon after the occupation of France he disappeared. From one day to the next, with no warning or visible visit by the police or Gestapo, he had simply vanished. It was assumed he had been transported to one of the concentration camps, but no trace in any of the Germans' meticulous records was ever found. It was as if he had been snatched by aliens. Through the early fifties my grandfather kept trying to find him, but soon after the Sinai campaign in 1956 he gave up – probably he just wearied of the alternating hope and pain, accepted the fact that his brother was dead and gone, and went on with his life. He never gave up telling me stories of his brother though, how much I looked like him, and how I should be an athlete in his memory. My dark, curly hair and green eyes were apparently a close match to *Onkel* Samuel's, as was my stocky build.

Years before I ever started studying history in earnest, I already dreamed of finding out what exactly happened to my *Onkel* Samuel. So when I began thinking of doing my Master's Thesis, I knew immediately what the subject would be – the last years of the Jewish community in Berlin, and specifically - the disappearance and unknown fate of my uncle. The History Department at the

Mt. Scopus campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has a great staff that specializes in that period, with lecturers from all over the world, including Germany, and I got to know most of them personally.

I started work on the research even before I finished my BA in European History, and spent long hours at the National Library and at the library of the *Yad V'Shem* memorial museum for the Six Million Jews that had been murdered by the Nazis, digging up what little information there was. The Pierre Gildesgame Maccabi Museum also had some material, especially on the *Maccabi HaTzai'r* organization and the Maccabi games. On a visit there, I even discovered a photograph of my uncle in the gallery and I probably needed to return to the museum to dig deeper, but it was not a priority and it would have to wait.

By the spring of 2004, I had done just about all I could in Jerusalem. My coursework was finished and I had exhausted the resources for my research that were available to me there. Despite my misgivings and instinctive revulsion at the idea, I knew it was time for me to go to Berlin. No one in the family had ever been to Germany since the war, and it was a matter of family honor never to buy any German products. I knew that my family, and especially my grandparents, would not take kindly to the idea of my traveling to that cursed country, but I knew that only there would I have any chance of finding the answers to the questions I was asking in my thesis and that I had been asking for most of my life. The family accepted my decision with great misgivings, but understood that I needed to live my own life, and do my own thing.

Two weeks before my departure, I had a surprise phone call from Montreal. Back in the early thirties, my grandfather's elder brother Nathan had emigrated to Canada. The families had kept in touch over the years, and each generation in turn had connected-up with the corresponding generation of the other branch. I had a whole bunch of Canadian cousins, of varying ages, sexes and

personalities. Some I liked and some I detested, some had been to Israel on visits and some swore they would never go near it.

My second cousin Jack (Ya'akov for religious purposes) was my Canadian equivalent - more or less my age, a college athlete (fencing, of all things) and an accomplished scholar, having already finished a Master's degree in Archaeology. Our parents had encouraged us to correspond when we were young, before the days of e-mails. He had managed to understand my broken English, and we found we had many common interests, like stamps, flags of the world, and in time, girls. Up to a certain age it had been all slightly geeky, but good fun.

When he was 14, his father Daniel had taken a sabbatical from McGill University in Montreal where he taught engineering, and the whole family had spent a year in Jerusalem. There had been hope that Jack would learn Hebrew and want to come back to live in Israel, but he spent most of that year playing soccer and only on rare occasions would he visit his classroom.

We had met on several occasions after that, he had spent a whole summer in our house at the age of 17, and we got along really well. In addition to being a cousin, he was a good friend, and was the main reason I spoke English with a reasonable degree of competence. His looks, however, came from his mother's side – blond hair and green eyes. The Israeli girls just loved him! He was deep into his PhD studies, three years ahead of where I was, since he hadn't had to do army service like I had.

“Hey Sammy” he called out over the phone. “How are ya’?”

“Pretty good” I replied, “and yourself?”

“Hangin’ in there.” He paused and then continued: “What are you planning to do over the summer?”

“Funny you should ask,” I retorted, “I’m leaving in two weeks for Berlin.”

“Berlin? Why on earth would you want to go there?”

I outlined my reasons for him, including *Onkel Samuel* and the Master’s thesis I was working on. When I was done, Jack said: “Coincidentally, I’m also going to Europe this summer. There’s a dig I’m going to supervise in northern France, starting in July. Why don’t we meet up somewhere?”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll e-mail you my address and phone number in Berlin as soon as I know them, then we can decide when and where to meet. I’ll probably be in need of a vacation by the time you get to France. A month and a half of digging through German archives sounds more than enough to me, ‘specially since they’re probably all in Gothic script - eh?”

So it was settled, we would meet in July, probably in France as he couldn’t get away from the dig for too long and I would be saturated by then with old German documents. After a few pleasantries and bits of family gossip, I hung up and continued with my packing. I planned to travel light: a few changes of clothes, various jackets for the vagaries of the European climate and my laptop computer, which held everything I had amassed so far for the thesis. Admittedly this wasn’t much yet, but I hoped by the time the summer was over the hard disk would be full. A copy of whatever I had so far was also on my desktop computer at home, and another copy was in my miniature office at the Hebrew University. My Masters’ adviser had helped me make arrangements with the *Freie Universität* of Berlin for e-mail access, so I would be able to send messages home, and even back-up my material that way. I had also arranged with the university in Berlin for a

dormitory room, which would be available to me for the entire summer, until one week before classes there started. As far as I was concerned, I was all set.

Some friends from the university were having a party that Thursday, and I went along, mainly to say goodbye. I wasn't really in a party mood, the whole idea of going to Germany had dampened my spirits in general, but I was determined to go. Many of my fellow MA students from the History Department were there as we tended to be friends with people who understood our studies. There was a nice balance between male and female students in the department, not like in the sciences or computer studies, and we often partied together. We also had a few overseas students, mainly from the US, and I had used them to improve my spoken English, since the occasional meetings with Jack were not really enough to give me a good command of the language. There had also been the odd German student from time to time, and I had offered my linguistic services to them to help them get through their courses.

I had even dated a few of my classmates, but nothing had ever developed – I was probably too involved in my studies to take dating seriously. One of the female overseas students, Yael Berkowitch, had chased me a bit more than the others, we had gone out a few times but our schedules never seemed to synch and in the end, both of us had stopped calling. Shame about that, but what can you do?

The weekend before my departure, I went to see my parents at their home in Beit HaKerem, the green and quiet quarter of Jerusalem where I grew up and they still lived, to have one good meal before I left. My mother was convinced I would starve in Berlin, that the nasty Germans would try to kill me off with bad food, and so she prepared a meal that would provide the necessary caloric intake to keep me alive for the whole summer. If I had eaten everything she put on the table, I would not have been allowed onto the plane, due to overweight.

My father took me aside after dinner and talked to me, man-to-man. He wasn't 100% at peace with the idea of me going to Berlin, but understood the personal quest that was taking me there. He himself had never been to Germany, and had no intentions of ever doing so. Spending even one penny that would somehow add to any German's wealth was, in his eyes, too much. But he didn't preach to me, and he didn't try to stop me from going, and for that I was grateful. He did, however, give me a small parcel. I asked if I could open it already, and he said: "Sure."

So I unwrapped it, and found a small Perspex picture frame, with a new copy of a photograph of the three brothers - *Onkel* Samuel, my grandfather Ethan, and Nathan the oldest brother - that hung in a prominent place in the family living room. It had been taken in 1933, just before Nathan left for Canada. My father said to me: "Keep that near you, remember who you are and where you come from."

He also gave me a slip of paper with an eight-digit number. When I looked at him quizzically, he said: "In the sixties, Germany started to pay reparations to families of Holocaust victims and people who had to flee from Germany. Oma and Opa felt they could not take the money, and neither did I. However, I convinced them to open an account in Berlin, at the Dresdener Bank, and to have their money paid into it. I don't know how much there is, I've never checked, but it should keep you in bread and cheese for a while." I thanked him for everything, he nodded back and we returned to the dinner table.

Forty-eight hours later, after a direct flight from Tel Aviv to Berlin, I was ensconced in my dormitory room close to the *Freie Universität* and ready to begin my research.