

pp. 40–41 (from Chapter 3 “The Midnight Hour”)

The determining fear was obvious. Everyone was afraid for their own lives to one extent or another. But most important, families wanted to save their sisters and daughters from rape and abduction. Many girls and young women had disappeared throughout the region. Stories had come back that some Hindu and Sikh women jumped into wells, preferring suicide to that fate. Knowing it was very risky for his daughters to stay in their home, Shahji decided one day in September that the girls had to leave immediately, by whatever means possible.

Suri witnessed part of a conversation his father had with some men in the room near the stairs where the family usually played cards. A few Muslim men sat around the card table, discussing the possible purchase of some Sehgal properties. Shahji told them he was willing to sell the house and farm at any price, that he desperately needed cash for his children’s travel. Suri recognized the sense of urgency and was alarmed by the look of desperation he saw on his father’s face. Unfortunately, no deal occurred that day.

Late one evening only days later, Shahji learned from a Muslim friend who worked for the railway that a refugee train was expected to arrive from Rawalpindi early the next morning. It would be stopping only briefly in Lalamusa before heading toward India.

The elder Sehgal decided that four of his children would be on that train. Kedar, now twenty-five, had come home when the trouble reached Lahore. Shahji planned for Kedar to accompany his three sisters—Shakuntla, fifteen; Padma, almost fourteen; and Santosh, eleven—and keep them safe on the train ride to India.

Savitri and the baby would stay, waiting for her husband’s return. The two youngest girls, Parsanta, age seven, and Sanjogta, almost three, would also stay behind with Suri and their parents. The departing children knew nothing about it until the September morning when their train was supposed to arrive.

Shahji and Shila woke the girls early and told them to put together a few things, “not much.” They were told, “The train is coming. Get ready now.”

Suri was awakened by his father and told he was to accompany his brother and three sisters to the train station to help with their baggage. Shahji and Suri would return home after the four were safely on the train.

There was no concrete plan for what would happen once the siblings reached India, nor could there be, under the circumstances. None of the family’s relatives were living in India at that time, except one uncle. Shila’s brother Gurdit Singh, a police inspector, was now working “somewhere near Delhi.” But they had no address for him. Their close family friend, Amar Nath, lived in Palampur. Otherwise, the whole extended family was spread out from Peshawar in the North to Lahore in the South, and none further east than Lahore. The only address they had was Mrs. Punjab Singh’s, the young woman the Sehgals had taken in and helped when the refugee camp was first established several weeks before. Kedar and his sisters had only a few rupees between them and no idea if or how they would find their parents again once they reached India—if they reached India safely.

Suri and his father went to the station with Kedar and the girls. Suri helped carry the suitcases they’d quickly stuffed their belongings into. But when the train arrived, it was already crowded. There was no way for Kedar and his three sisters to fit in one compartment. The baggage they were carrying could not go with them; there was simply no room. They could each only bring along a small bag of clothes. Everyone had to move fast. Shakuntla and Padma managed to squeeze into one compartment, and Kedar ran into another.

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Eleven-year-old Santosh found a spot in a rear train car. But someone needed to accompany her. Suri was enlisted at the last minute as Shahji quickly pushed the boy into the compartment behind his little sister and, without warning, the train started moving.

Shahji hurriedly said good-bye to his children, literally running from one compartment to the other as his dear ones left for an uncertain location and a perilous future.

Suri had, of course, not left the house that morning with any expectation of leaving on a train. He had nothing at all with him when he was tossed like a football onto the train car by his desperate father. Suri had only the clothes he was wearing: a pair of knickers (shorts), a short-sleeved shirt, and flimsy sandals. Instantly accepting his assigned duty, despite his own panic, Suri struggled through the crowded train car to reach his little sister. When Santosh saw her brother, a degree of relief could be seen along with the terror in her eyes.

Suddenly dislocated from the intimate domain he had enjoyed until age thirteen, Suri would now have to rely solely on his own inner sense and the values embedded in him by his family and his childhood in the Punjab.

**pp. 86–87 (from Chapter 7 “Uprooted”)**

The Allied Forces were closing in on Germany in early 1945. Hitler’s reign was collapsing, and the city of Breslau was key to the southern invasion route into Germany. The largest city in the former eastern territories of Germany, Hitler had designated Breslau as a *Festung* (fortress), one of seven cities to be held at all costs, “to be defended to the last drop of German blood.”<sup>19</sup> Alfred was drafted to defend Breslau right after that announcement. Margarete feared for her brother’s safety.

The *Gauleiter* (the regional Nazi leader) for Lower Silesia, an SS man named Karl Hanke, did not permit or even reveal the possibility of evacuation from Silesia until the Russian army was closing in on Breslau by way of Festenberg in mid-January. He gave the order that women, children, and old men must leave Lower Silesia. They had twenty-four hours to leave for German-occupied Czechoslovakia.

The weather was particularly severe that winter; the temperature was often  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-4^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). Max sprang into action and managed to get a wagon with horses. Margarete grabbed her fur coat and what few necessities she could carry: some photographs, bars of soap, and a little potty for Edda. Abandoning their home, Max loaded up Ida, Erna, Margarete, three-year-old Edda, and a few neighbors, and they set off together in the cold, joining the rest of the fleeing German population from Silesia.<sup>20</sup>

The family felt particularly upset leaving their animals—goats, chickens, rabbits, a gaggle of geese, and a flock of ducks. Who would feed them? They tried to imagine that someone staying behind might care for the animals. In retrospect, though, they realized their animals were probably butchered by the hungry Red Army that was immediately bearing down on the town.

When the family reached the railway station, people staying behind took the horses. Though the trains were jammed, Edda’s family was able to stay together in the same car of the first of many trains they boarded in the coming days, weeks, and months. The train cars had no windows and no heat. Margarete was very glad she brought the potty for Edda. People were so tightly crammed onto the train that some of them could not get to the train toilets. They wet their pants, which would then freeze. A few individuals died of burst bladders in the bitter cold. Many were too weak to withstand the extremes in temperature and the continuing discomfort. Thousands leaving Silesia that winter died from hypothermia in transit.

The trek by train wound through Czechoslovakia, with many stops along the way. The refugees were required to walk long distances back and forth from the train stations and wherever they were told to stay at night. Hundreds marched together for miles in the cold to stay overnight or longer in schools. They slept on straw that was strewn wall to wall on gymnasium floors. Ida suffered with pain in her joints. She had difficulty walking and struggled to climb on and off the trains.

Refugees focused only on basic survival, food in particular. A distribution system was set up for people to receive a small allotment of various food items. Ration cards were issued and used to obtain meager supplies, some bread or potatoes, at stops along the way in the seemingly endless journey. People waited for hours in long lines for their allowances. Everyone was cold, miserable, and hungry.

19. *After the Reich, The Brutal History of the Allied Occupation* by Giles MacDonogh, Basic Books, 2009.

20. Refugees fleeing from further north headed to East Berlin and northern Germany.

**pp. 141–143 (from Chapter 11 “Land of Wood and Water”**

In January 1965 Henry A. Wallace, his wife Ilo, and Bill Brown visited Suri’s operation in Jamaica for a few days. The Wallaces had just been visiting corn-breeding stations in the Dominican Republic and Guatemala. They stayed at the Mona Hotel, and Brown stayed with Suri and Edda.

Meeting such a renowned figure as Henry Wallace was a great honor for Suri. He felt humbled to learn that Wallace already knew who he was when Brown inquired about hiring Suri for the Jamaica station. While at Harvard, Suri had been impressed by reading the “Century of the Common Man” speech Wallace made in 1942 that so passionately espoused freedom for all people around the world.<sup>34</sup> He thought Wallace was right on target with his revolutionary quote, “We hear a great deal about atomic energy. Yet I am convinced that historians will rank the harnessing of hybrid power as equally significant.”<sup>35</sup>

Wallace and Brown spent most of a day with Suri in the nursery and walking the fields together, though Wallace was limping. Both men were enthusiastic and very pleased to see what Suri had done in the nursery, and the crosses he had made. The Wallaces came to Suri and Edda’s home in the afternoon. Edda made a delicious apple strudel, which Wallace particularly appreciated as they enjoyed spirited conversation together.

Wallace gave Suri a lot of practical advice involving his operation, but he also wanted to accomplish several other things during his few days in Jamaica. Since he was breeding strawberries and gladioli at his farm in Westchester County, New York, he wanted to meet people who were working on those crops in Jamaica. Though no one in Jamaica was working on gladioli, Suri arranged a meeting with a scientist growing strawberries in the Blue Mountains. At Wallace’s request, Suri also set up a meeting with the agricultural attaché at the American embassy and went along on the informative visit. The lively conversation focused on the application of genetics to improve crop plants. They then visited with the American ambassador, who briefed Wallace on the economic and political situation in Jamaica.

Wallace was passionate about plants and full of ideas. Suri found him to be a deep thinker and a genuine visionary who cared about making a difference in the world. Suri recalled something he’d been told by Simon (Si) Casady, a Pioneer associate back in Johnston who had been with the company from the beginning, serving as its first treasurer. In Pioneer’s early years, Wallace had said, “Si, the guys running Pioneer think their job is to make profit. I suppose they are partly right. But that isn’t our real

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job. Our real job is to learn how nature operates and to use that knowledge to make more food for the world.”

Wallace’s whirlwind visit kept Suri totally occupied. He confided to Suri at one point that he didn’t have much time left, due to ALS, and there were so many things he still wanted to get done. Before leaving Jamaica, Wallace suggested that Suri expand his plant trials to the Dominican Republic, that it was an important agricultural country. He gave Suri the name of a Peace Corps volunteer there and encouraged Suri to contact him.

Suri took Wallace’s suggestion. He found two pieces of land in the Dominican Republic, one near La Vega and another at the agricultural school in Santiago. First he went to plant the trials on five acres; then he returned a few times to check on the crop. For the late April harvest, Edda accompanied him to help Suri record grain moisture and take field notes.

Suri and Edda were busy harvesting the trials alongside other workers in the field near La Vega one afternoon when, suddenly, all the workers stopped what they were doing and crowded around a transistor radio.

Suri asked what they were hearing, and the answer was, “*Revolución en la capital!*”

Violence had erupted in Santo Domingo, a rebellion triggered by supporters of the ousted former president. The workers left the fields but Suri wasn’t too concerned. The capital was about a hundred miles away and he wanted to finish harvesting the trials.

When Suri and Edda returned to the hotel in the evening, it was pretty much empty. A few employees stood around the TV in the hotel dining room. They advised Suri and Edda to leave, saying that almost every guest had already checked out. But not knowing where else to go at that hour, they decided to stay the night, with their door securely locked.

In the morning, when they found the hotel restaurant locked and the reception area empty, they felt a greater sense of urgency. Suri and Edda vacated their room in a hurry. But the battery was dead in their rental car. Luckily, the car was parked on a hill, so Suri was able to roll forward to start the engine.

They drove straight to the home of their Peace Corps contact, who accompanied them to the home of another associate, Raul Medina, the director of the tobacco research station in La Vega. Raul invited Suri and Edda to stay with his family. Friends visiting from Puerto Rico were guests there as well, and they were just as keen to get out of the country.

Each evening at the Medinas’, everyone in the household listened to the *Voice of America* on the radio to follow the progress of what was now a bloody civil war. After three days, President Lyndon Johnson, fearing the Dominican Republic could become another Cuba in the Caribbean, sent in the Marines. All foreigners who wished to leave the country were told to travel to a corridor of safety around the Embajador Hotel in Santo Domingo for evacuation.

Suri and Edda decided to risk the drive to the capital. The Puerto Rican couple rode in the front car, and Suri and Edda followed. Both cars were stopped again and again by rebels pointing guns at them. The cars were allowed to proceed once the Puerto Rican couple explained in Spanish that they were all foreigners, and not affiliated with any political party.

Edda said, “The only thing they wanted from us was water.”

Reaching the Embajador safely in the afternoon and showing their passports, Edda and Suri were directed through a barbed-wire barricade to the lobby, where US Marines registered everyone coming in. Within minutes, Suri and Edda were led to an open area within the hotel grounds to board a helicopter that flew them to the aircraft carrier nearby, the USS *Boxer*.

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On the deck of the ship, Suri and Edda were impressed by the well-organized operation. They watched as helicopters kept bringing aboard more people, while fighter planes took off and landed, one after the other. The Marines were well-stocked with food enough for all the evacuees, and the soldiers gave up their bunk beds to civilians, an admirable gesture that was much appreciated.

After a few days, Suri and Edda and their friends were transferred to smaller boats for an all-night ride to Puerto Rico. Space on the boats was so tight that only the women were provided with bunk beds. Men had to sleep wherever they could find a spot. Suri was miserable and seasick the entire time.

Landing in San Juan in the morning, the evacuees were met immediately by the Red Cross, who attended to anyone needing help. The Puerto Rican couple kindly invited Suri and Edda to stay overnight in their home. Dr. Brown was immensely relieved to receive the phone call that Suri and Edda were flown safely back to Jamaica the next day.

34. Wallace gave his speech first in Spanish, then in English, at the Free World Association in New York City.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBWula5GyAc>. [http://www.shaftr.org/classroom\\_documents/Wallace,CommonMan.pdf](http://www.shaftr.org/classroom_documents/Wallace,CommonMan.pdf).

35. *New Yorker*, Volume 60, Issues 16-24, 1955, 80.

**p. 158 (from Chapter 12 “All Is Forgiven”**

Suri, Edda, and the boys flew back to Germany where her parents now lived in a new, spacious house. Edda and the kids stayed there for a few more weeks, while Suri flew back to Des Moines to find a place to live.

That first journey to India, and the two-and-a-half months spent there, left a deep imprint on Edda. She had been a little anxious at first, but Suri’s family turned out to be so wonderful to her. She experienced a kind of total love, warmth, and acceptance from them that she’d never felt or seen anywhere in the West.

Margarete noticed a change in Edda and asked, “What’s the matter? You are so different.”

But Edda could not answer her mother. She was lost in her own thoughts after her experiences in India.

Edda could not explain the way she felt having been so warmly received in India by Suri’s family, and the circumstances that were so different from anything in her past. In Europe, Edda had been keenly aware of restrictions, obstacles, and judgments. In India, all the little details, rules, and expectations that seemed very important in the West didn’t seem to matter. Anything in life could change in the blink of an eye. Yet despite any hardship or inconvenience, the people Edda met in India lived with joy and acceptance, without criticism or complaint—even Shila as she was suffering focused only on her love for her family. Edda’s life with Suri in America had a sense of freedom that Edda appreciated now more than ever.

Her third child was not due until October, so staying in Germany for the birth was not even considered this time. Edda flew home to Iowa in the beginning of July. Word soon came that Shila had succumbed to the cancer, and Edda shared Suri’s sorrow at the loss of his sweet mother.

**pp. 169–170 (from Chapter 13 “Going International”**

Throughout these years, while Suri was spreading hybrid seeds throughout the world, Edda not only kept the home fires burning and the children safe and healthy, she served as hostess extraordinaire when



Suri brought home his international business associates for drinks, hors d'oeuvres, or meals. She took care of the cooking and preparations herself. The kids were often asleep by the time guests arrived for a splendid dinner and lively conversation. But on some occasions, the kids were part of the visit and Edda noticed that the foreign visitors enjoyed spending time with a family.

Visitors from Russia always came with lots of delicious salamis and bottles of vodka in their luggage. At the house, Edda supplied the rye bread and pickles and everyone feasted as they talked and laughed together and toasts were raised “To your grandmother!” and “To your mother!” and so on, one after the other. Edda enjoyed the instant friendships made with these highly emotional Russians who always greeted them coming and going with kisses on both cheeks and warm bear hugs.

That Suri and Edda each had accents from the countries where they were born turned out to be a distinct and unexpected advantage in Suri’s international business relationships. He and Edda were told more than once by their guests, from countries all around the world, that people could more easily enjoy and understand interactions with them. Americans usually spoke so fast that foreign guests caught only about half of what was said in any verbal exchange. Those not fluent in English had to first take a second to translate what they were hearing, then guess what they missed before continuing the conversation. Partnerships, friendships, and camaraderie were enhanced by the fact that, to international visitors, these particular Americans were “just like us.”

Suri set a strong example at Pioneer, just as Edda did in their home, by treating people with tremendous courtesy and respect. International visitors felt that; this consistent behavior nurtured lasting friendships. As it was in the Punjab, every visitor was an honored guest. As a result, strong bonds were formed, and people were often willing to bend over backward to help Suri when needed. This was especially important in Soviet Bloc countries. Suri said, “You must have a person in every country who becomes your champion. We had lots of them.”

**pp. 204–205 (from Chapter 16 “Sweet Poison”**

From day one, the *Des Moines Register* ran the story about the legal case between Pioneer Hi-Bred International and Suri Sehgal.

Suri was very busy gathering his forces to defend his professional business reputation and protect his family’s future. With little savings and suddenly deprived of all income, he was poignantly aware that Pioneer had deep pockets and plenty of institutional clout in the state.

In all his years of traveling around the world for Pioneer, the satisfaction provided by the continued growth of the business had further fueled Suri’s commitment to his work. Building the company had been his focus. Now his focus turned to the work his lawyers were doing. The lawyers were impressed. Noticing that Suri was working as hard as they were, the firm provided him with an office and a desk.

Suri’s attorney, Jim Gritzner, who later became a federal district court judge in Des Moines, reflected on his initial impressions of Suri and his case, saying, “As a lawyer, when you first meet someone, you’re always a little suspect. We deal with a lot of people who are playing a role. Early on, it was very important for me to figure out if Suri was the good guy or the bad guy in this equation. Very quickly I found out that he was the good guy, and there were some pretty significant bad guys involved.”

Gritzner described Suri as “a combination of tremendous achievement and ability, as well as humility and graciousness. Suri regarded his lawyers as lieutenants, not generals, because he remained very much in charge.”

Edda observed that, during this period, Suri never got angry, impatient, or discouraged. He took control. He worked long hours with the attorneys and in his home office, documenting information. He liked his lawyers and approved of their approach. He felt sure that things would eventually be all right.

**pp. 256–257 (from Chapter 19 “Assuring Sustainability”**

The time had come for celebration on several fronts. The Good Governance Now program was ready for implementation, and the new Sehgal Foundation facility was completed on schedule. A formal inauguration celebration was held in December 2008.

The assembled crowd included the governor of the state of Haryana and other dignitaries, key funding partners (Mosaic, KMG, and the Mewat Development Agency), the staff, friends of the institution, and Sehgal family members. This was Kenny’s first trip to India. Vicki and Ryan, now married, brought their little daughter Sabina, who had taken her first steps during the plane ride to India. Oliver and Ben made the trip, as did Raman and Chander.

The crowd gathered for presentations in the building’s auditorium with its beautiful teak woodwork. Suri and Edda and other family members, plus a few relatives from India, were all in attendance as the program began with a choir of village girls singing the national anthem. For girls to participate in a public function was important in itself. After the welcome from Jay, words from Suri, and the presentations, a gala lunch was served, and people explored the new Platinum LEED-certified building.

Suri and Edda circulated and greeted the guests. As was typical, Suri did not wish to be in the spotlight at formal ceremonies. He instead gravitated toward a group of villagers, speaking with them informally, answering their questions and discussing their ideas and future plans. The celebration lasted all day.

At the foundation’s community center in the village of Ghaghas, in Mewat, workshop tours and demonstrations were held a couple of days later. The shops were well ordered and arrayed with tool boards and equipment. In a telephone repair shop, boys were learning how to repair cellphones, and a computer workshop had teams working in groups.

Experimental agricultural rows in wooden beds, including squash, mustard, tomato, and onion, illustrated crop diversification. Vermicompost was turned over and mixed with soil to improve soil health and significantly increase crop yield. Each crop had water drips for maximum use of the precious supply.

Outside Ghaghas, visitors were shown a check dam with its ridged stone outcrops dug into the earth at many levels up and down the eroded hills, and the newly dug reservoir where runoff water was directed in the rainy season. Guests were surrounded by chattering children. Boys and men from the village surrounded and regarded the group with curiosity, listening to the descriptions of the water program, including collection, storage, groundwater replenishment, recharging of wells, deepening of ponds, and roof-water harvesting.

At Notki village, brightly colored signs explained the foundation programs going on there. Education team leaders made brief presentations, pointing out village participation and the funds they had raised. Villagers received Edda and Suri by placing an elaborate and colorful turban on Suri’s head, designating him a high benefactor. A silk shawl was put around Edda’s shoulders.

Guests were directed across the schoolyard into a classroom where girls wearing headscarves were seated in rows to one side. Suri addressed the children and their teachers in Hindi, asking them to volunteer descriptions of what they were learning, and listening to their animated answers.

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The villagers appeared comfortable in a newly acquired sense of order. Students and workers spoke with enthusiasm and assurance, volunteering descriptions of the projects they were part of. An orchard had been planted as a means of preventing desertification and to create an income for the panchayat (local governing body akin to a town council). Wells had been dug, with new pipes and storage tanks. Guests were shown the modern well head and pump, soak wells, and soak pits. The street was lit with solar lampposts, and the main street was paved with bricks. The health center included birthing rooms with modern equipment and screens for privacy, plus wall diagrams showing medical and preventive health procedures.

There was still plenty of work to be done, as evidenced by the women of the town, who watched everything from behind their houses at a little distance across the street.