

MISCHPOKE!

a novel by
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Sample translation
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Marcia Zuckermann, »Mischpoke!«
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Kaddish for a Crown Prince

Around noon on March 10, 1902, nobody suspected that the decline of the Kohanim family was about to be set in motion.

No quiet click, no hairline crack, no icy whiff.

Neither sudden silence nor a swarm of crows taking flight nor a clock that has stopped at twelve on the dot; no black cat crossing one's path; no picture plunging to the floor, no broken glass.

Not even a curse muttered aloud.

Or a meaningful, precise black line, drawn with a ruler like in the novel on the Buddenbrooks family.

Nothing that conjured up forebodings.

The sky held nothing but a consumptive sun struggling to make the icicles weep.

That was it!

This March 10 seemed to simply be one of the family's typical black days, as unavoidable as they were numerous in the life of a well-heeled Jewish family in nineteenth-century West Prussia.

The only unusual aspect to this day of unhappiness was the Yiddish lullaby now echoing through the house:

*Amol is gewen a Majese,
Die Majse is gor nit frejlach,
die Majse hebt sich on mit a jiddischen Mejislach,
Ljulinke mejn Vejele, Ljulinke, mein Kind!
Ich hob verlorn a sa Liebe, wej is mir und wünd.
Der Bojm hot gehobt a Zweijg,
der Zweijg hat gehobt a Nestele,
dos Nestele hot gehobt a Vejele,
Lulinke, mein Veijgele, Ljulinke, mein Kind!*

*Der Meijslach is gestorbn,
die Malke is gworden vadorbn,
de Bojm is obgebrochen,
das Vejgele is awag geflogn,
Ljulinke, mein Veigele,
Ljulinke, mein Kind.
Er hot verlorn a sa Leben, wej is mir und wünd.*

The lullaby would have sounded disconcerting to non-Jewish ears. In this melancholy song, a mouse mother was singing mournfully about the fact that all of her children have died, one after the other, followed by the demise of the tree, the nest, and the birds.

Death, death, death, everywhere death!

Is this a way to lull a child to sleep?

The grief that would have disturbed Christian ears sounded completely normal to Jewish ones.

After all, in earlier times, people were not so squeamish.

People were practical.

Since misery could not be held at bay with song and prayer, Jewish elders deemed it wise to prepare infants still in the cradle for the lives full of deprivation that lay ahead them.

The earlier, the better! Even if you were wealthy, or perhaps especially in that case.

As an admonition that fate could be fickle, and anyone might be faced - any time, any place - with the vicissitudes of life and be forced to start over again from scratch.

However, it had been many years since the family had faced such existential fears. For generations, the Kohanim had been quite prosperous and almost messianically obsessed with their faith in Progress.

In the community, as well as in the county of Schwetz, my great-grandfather Samuel Kohanim was renowned as a liberal oddball. He was a modernist who always wanted to be the first one to introduce the latest machines and methods. His passion was the rejection of anything inherited, backward, or traditional. My great-grandmother dubbed this the "Kohanim Flitz." My great grand father regularly studied some twelve technical and scientific journals. Furthermore, he was the only liberal Republican and freethinker for miles around, surrounded as he was by a sea of monarchists and loyal imperial subjects.

In terms of the family disposition, these modernist tendencies translated into rigorous scorn for practically all medieval Jewish traditions. Yiddish was so embarrassing to the Kohanim that they acted as if they could not understand it.

Whenever someone spoke Yiddish, it was a family tradition to furl one's eyebrows unwillingly and to gesture theatrically a lack of understanding.

Thus, this Yiddish song was *unheard* in the double sense of the word.

The seven Kohanim daughters - that is, my six great-aunts and my adolescent grandmother - had quickly wearied of this unexpected, gloomy, singsong melody with its multiple verses. The lyrics did not make even the slightest sense to them.

Except for *wej, wej, wej* (*woe, woe, woe*) which did not require translation.

They were waiting impatiently for a transition to familiar things.

To songs in which stars and lambs were the focus.

Even "Frère Jacques" would have been preferable.

Only one thing was certain for all seven sisters: The stars can twinkle for their brother where Beelzebub catches flies!

Besides sisterly resentment, the only other things floating in the air were camphor and sorrow. And an ample dose of boredom.

This frowned-upon melody no longer touched the hearts of these Jewish girls, which is why the homeless middle and treble As, Ds, and Bs floated helplessly in the middle layer of ether in the overheated room.

Only the fringe on the lamp trembled.

Oozing gloom, the notes sank slowly to the floor and trickled between the floorboards, like the singer's tears.

Mindel's youngest child, for whom the unpopular lullaby was intended, was the only one who did not hear it.

The child was deeply buried in his white chasm of pillows, covered in billows of lace like spider webs across the attic.

The child alternated between struggling with life and struggling against death.

Whenever little Benjamin breathed a sigh, Life was again victorious.

Whenever he panted or wheezed, Death seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

It had been like this for the past three days and three nights.

In between these moments, the cradle of carved walnut rocked back and forth like a barge on heavy seas.

Dangerously close to the cradle towered a colossal, green tile stove. This bulwark against the Siberian chill was crowned with castle-like green tile crenellations that reached up to a hand's breadth beneath the ceiling.

The rocking of the cradle made a sandy, grinding sound on the scrubbed white boards.

In combination with the stolid ticking of the grandfather clock, a duet of transience emerged, assuming one was sensitive to matters of a higher order. The big sisters of the ailing crown prince were not, however, predisposed to such things.

The seven Kohanim daughters stood there, wrapped in their own thoughts and ossified by boredom in the overheated bedroom. They fought doggedly against yawning, wishing they knew how to sleep standing upright.

The liveried servants in the ducal palace supposedly knew how to sleep on their feet without toppling over.

The boudoir - as my great-grandparents' bedroom was called - was stuffed with dark, expansive furnishings, which were besieged by an array of rugs that were kept meticulously clean to a point of exhaustion.

Fearful of lethal drafts, my great-grandmother had ordered a servant to nail shut the slim double window. The overly long batten nails stuck out wildly from the white-painted window frame. Almost accusingly. The only attraction was provided by the glowing red stove door in the green tile mountain.

The girls occasionally let their eyes wander over to the dancing fringe on the lampshade. However, they were glancing back into the cradle, as sympathetically as if an insect lay there.

“He won't make it much longer!”

In their opinion, “*das Mensch*” - what the girls among themselves called the dwarf-like, yellow old man in the cradle - had dominated the central spot in their family for far too long.

Sturdy Elli - the middle sister - and Franziska - the next youngest - peered intently into the cradle.

They both agreed they had had enough.

Sometimes you had to give Fate a bit of a nudge!

This was why the sentence “*Corrigez la fortune!*” was their favorite line from *Minna von Barnhelm*.

They exchanged surreptitious winks, and then crossed their two index fingers behind their backs, all the while smiling as gently as angels. In his cradle, little Benjamin turned blue.

“Mama!” shrieked Martha.

“Elli and Fränze made the sign of *the cross!* I saw them do it!”

The cross, the sign of heresy! The sign of death!

“That's not true! She's lying through her teeth,” Franziska bleated back in horror.

“As always,” Ellie seconded impudently.

As Mindel continued to gaze tearfully into the cradle, Ellie seized the moment. As swift as a cat, she yanked Martha's mane of red hair as she elbowed her sister in the stomach. From the other side, Franziska kicked her in the shin.

"You witch! Take that, you little tattletale!"

Martha howled like a ship siren.

Normally, heresy *and* scuffling would have resulted in a minimum of one day of grounding with dry bread and wrinkled potatoes.

One day for each offense was a given.

However, nothing on a day like this was normal, which is why the regular punishment fell by the wayside.

Weary of the spat between her contentious daughters, my great-grandmother ordered nothing except lame God-Protect-Us prayers for everyone.

A mother who had already buried eleven of her children, including each of her sons, probably mourns routinely by this point.

It was not unusual for half of all children to die, but the death of all her boys was highly troubling my great-grandmother.

She brooded over the possible divine reasons why the male seed of the Kohanim line failed to thrive.

What was causing this?

Whose fault was it?

Samuel, my great-grandfather, scoured the writings and sought answers from the Rabbi.

"Was this an unfathomable decree from the Almighty?"

"Nothing of the sort!" Mindel Kohanim's thoughts worked their way down her branch of the family, searching for a similar phenomenon. And of course, she came to the satisfying determination: *Nothing like this had ever happened in my family!*

It was very clear. The fault rested with the in-law Kohanim!

And in her opinion, the explanation was crystal clear.

The clan was just too old!

After a good four or five thousand years since Moses, this branch of the priestly line of Kohanim, Kahanes and Cohns was simply not strong enough to bring strapping sons into the world.

At least, that's the way it seemed!

All you needed to do was look at nature. "Nature doesn't read the Torah, but reacts according to its own laws."

Mindel Kohanim kept this revelation to herself.

She prided herself on being a well-bred Jewess from the Grand Duchy of Warsaw.

After all, she was descended from the Katzenellenbogen family. The name was derived from “Kazim elim Bochen,” which means “sole military general,” and not from the elbow bone of a house cat, as the garbled German name might have indicated. On her mother’s side, Mindel was even an actual descendent of the legendary Jewish One-Day King, Saul Wahl, who ruled Poland for the span of a single day, August 15, 1587.

A Jewess with such a fabled, half-aristocratic heritage as Mindel simply knew when to speak. But above all, she knew when to hold her tongue.

Mindel was gruff and reticent by nature.

Besides that, she seemed to always be wrapped in a cocoon of rumination.

She also cultivated a boundless contempt for the world. In other words: Mindel Kohanim, nee Beinesch, the descendent of Poland’s One-Day King was excessively wry, predominantly absent-minded, and good in a sinister way.

To ensure that she be left in peace as much as possible, she presented to everyone an arrogantly hard, unapproachable face. She ruled house and home almost exclusively with her cold, pebble-gray gaze.

As life and death grappled fiercely with each other inside the Kohanim home, winter and spring were waging an equally bitter battle outside.

With a chirr, the last spark of life left my great-uncle-to-be that afternoon.

Mindel wiped her eyes.

Moaning, she draped all the mirrors with black cloth.

According to Jewish tradition, she tore the girls’ right skirt hems and collars, while as the mother, she ripped hers on the left side. She disheveled her own and the children’s hair, and lit candles to the right and left of the cradle for the duration of the sitting of the shiva, the Jewish mourning ceremony.

Last but not least, she solemnly stopped the pendulum in the grandfather clock.

Time was supposed to stand still for a few days, or almost...

(...)

Translated by Rachel Hildebrandt Reynolds

The Catastrophe on Demand

Max came to a halt on the fourth floor-landing. This was where Franziska supposedly lived. The name on the door meant nothing to him, and he prepared himself for the fact that this had to be a case of mistaken identity on the part of his over-zealous, greedy snoop.

He rang the doorbell with an appropriate hesitation.

My esteemed Mister Kohanim!

As per your instructions, I went looking for your darling daughter and have been able to determine her whereabouts. I have just now been to visit and speak with her. First of all, you should know that Franziska is well and resides at the place in question of her own free will, although her situation there is rather precarious.

It would appear that the young lady somewhat recklessly embarked on an adventurous mesalliance with a certain individual by the name of Wilhelm Rubin of Oberhausen. This alliance, if I may put it this way, has not been without consequences. As she doesn't want to bring dishonour to her parents, she daren't come home. I am familiar with the consequences your darling daughter must now face for her thoughtless actions, but it speaks for your daughter that the man who put her in this delicate situation is, at least, a Jew!

For this reason, casting her out, as it was with Cousin Else is, perhaps, too harsh a response. While I have no right to an opinion, much less to give counsel in this delicate matter, I do think I know how you feel about Franziska. Your darling daughter's swift marriage could perhaps be the best solution for all parties.

Should this Rubin be so dishonourable as to refuse to wed your darling daughter, then I entreat you, my generous benefactor: I am at your disposal!

I have long admired Franziska, and even in these trying times I stand by her and your family, to whom I owe everything. Thus, I humbly ask for your daughter's hand in marriage, as a substitute.

I hope you can forgive my boldness and appreciate it as the expression of my unbreakable loyalty to the house of Kohanim.

With the highest regards,

Maxim Gulkowitsch

In his letter Max tactfully neglected to mention that the 'business' Willy had always spoken of turned out to be a shabby outfit in the Eisenbahnstrasse in Kreuzberg. Essentially, it consisted of himself, two or three pipe wrenches, and a lot of optimism.

Willy Rubin called it 'buildings installation', but because of its purportedly higher efficiency, he spent most of his working days at the bookies or at one of the Berlin race tracks

betting on ‘order’, ‘place’, and ‘winner’. Allegedly he was waiting on money orders from his father’s business in Königsberg.

If he made it home at all, it wasn’t until late at night, usually with neither money nor any food, though not infrequently bearing an expensive bottle of wine or prosecco. Franziska had to look out for herself. She had never learned to work. Apart from French and piano she had no skills, and even these were basic at best.

When she first moved to Berlin Franziska marched straight up to the French embassy; armed with presumption – for she had hitherto known neither fear nor guilt – she was seeking employment as an office clerk or a switchboard operator based on her French language skills.

Sadly, upon encountering her first real Frenchman it transpired that whatever Madame Bertha had taught the girls may have sounded like French but was quite incomprehensible to a Frenchman. The only exception was the ‘Mot de Cambronne’ which was the posh French way of saying ‘Merde!’ Supposedly it had been let slip by Napoleon’s General Cambronne at Waterloo and thus adopted by all educated Frenchmen.

The rest of the ‘French’ was no such thing! Not even “Languedoc”, supposedly the language spoken in Quebec, as the late Madame Bertha had once claimed. It was nothing more than gibberish peppered with French.

The idea that Madame Bertha had spent years teaching a completely invented language, which she alone understood, was a joke to Fränze’s liking. “And so the old bag got her own back in the end! She deserves a monument for her ingenuity to completely invent a language including its own grammar,” she laughed.

She had certainly made a fool of herself at the embassy, as she admitted to Max. By rights, she should have been run out of the place in disgrace. “And they had only let me in on account of my fashionable clothes and appearance,” Fränze remarked with amusement. “I wanted to curl up and die even though it was only the just dessert for all the trouble I had caused Madame Bertha, God rest her soul! The third secretary didn’t throw me out, though, but invited me to coffee and cake. Or so I thought. But my hunger was greater than any sense of shame so instead of ordering a cream pastry I went for a bockwurst with plenty of potato salad and loads of bread. You see, I hadn’t eaten anything decent in two days. And only the stars knew when the next meal would find its way to me. I ate till I nearly exploded!”

Fränze laughed so hard she slammed her hands on the table. And these beautiful hands that Max had always so admired were no longer angelic and immaculately manicured, but red and cracked and calloused with fingernails torn. He wanted only to take these ruined hands and hold them until they healed.

“But when the fellow pawed at my knee under the table, I was so startled I stabbed the back of his hand with my fork – I am a lady, after all! Ah well, never mind! French perdu! I had more luck with the piano, thanks to my great teacher, Max Gulkowitsch!”

She bowed boisterously, as far as her pregnant belly would permit. With sadness, Max now realised that Franziska’s former supple elegance could now only barely be guessed at. “In the evenings I play at a number of cinemas that have recently opened in the area and that require musical accompaniment of the cinematography.

It keeps you on your toes.

When the hero's left foot emerges at the bottom of the screen, it's time for Strauss's Sphinx Waltz. Immediately afterwards his love interest bats her eyelashes and I have to swiftly play a shred of barcarola. Right after that something from Wallace or a well-worn bit from the middle of *Carmen*. The job isn't without its risks, though, let me tell you!

Recently, the cinema pianist Istvan Nagy went mad after he'd had to butcher Schubert's Symphony in B minor for the fiftieth time.

It's always played when the highly drama transitions into the gentle air of exhilarating anguish.

Thank god I'm not as sensitive! But then I'm no artist! Praise be to Hashem! Ha ha ha!"

Franziska paused so that she could revel in Max's musical horror. She smiled softly to herself with false modesty. "In any case: I haven't starved, but of course, none of this is properly sating either. At the moment I just have no idea how I'm supposed to pay the midwife let alone a doctor for the delivery! Well, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it!" "Right, and what about your ... em," Max could barely say the name out loud, "what about this *Willy*?" Max asked cautiously and stared at Franziska's mangled hands. She's not even wearing a fake wedding band, he noted with surprise. "Ha!" the question about Willy amused Fränze as though it were a good joke. A simple "Oh him!" uttered with scornful disdain, explained everything. "So you don't love him anymore?" he asked hopefully. "What, me love him? Are you out of your mind?" she exclaimed aghast. "That's the last thing I need!" Fränze seemed sincerely outraged at the thought. Absentmindedly, she stroked her heavily pregnant belly across which was stretched a less than clean dark blue chequered apron.

"I only wanted to get one over on Martha at the time. Steal her beau. But only for a laugh! And to begin with it was good fun. I just hadn't expected the fun to turn serious quite so quickly. I didn't even really like Willy. Not emotionally or rationally ... Only then my body had a different idea, and I couldn't get enough of the guy! Well, I was a naïve, silly goose and all this serves me right!"

(...)

To each his own

'I don't normally talk to strangers, you know.

My mother has forbidden it. I'm only ten years old, after all. Of course, a girl of ten can also talk to strangers, but only of such things as train timetables, where to get bread rolls, whether it's going to rain today, and what film is showing at the cinema – so, harmless stuff. Otherwise, my mother says I should play dumb and not say anything. I'm not even allowed to keep a diary anymore now. I could write something that might be bad for us if it fell into the

wrong hands. Now that I don't have a dog anymore who I can tell everything, I really would like a diary to write things down. Today it would say: Good Friday 1933 is the worst day of my life. I don't know whether there are more still to come. And: Thank you, sir, that you comforted me when I boarded earlier, crying my eyes out.

But just because you were friendly to me, bought me a drink and three sandwiches, and lent me your handkerchief, I'm not going to blindly trust you. Still, I simply have to speak to somebody now! Earlier, when the police and the two SA-men passed through the train, you turned all pale. You seem to be as scared as I am. They're looking for you, right? Stupid question. Apologies! Sometimes I am just a child, after all. My name is Hella, by the way.

But I can tell somebody like you why I'm sitting alone on this train now and crying. You see, I don't know where to go. My mother was arrested at lunchtime today! I had just finished the Easter cleaning and put a cake in the oven. My mother had to finish sewing the last of the coats before going out for deliveries on Saturday. You see, my mother sews coats at home. Piecework, if you know what that is. Then suddenly, old Minna comes running. She's not quite right in the head. 'War, war, the soldiers are coming!' she shouted, running back and forth in front of our fence. We knew right away what was happening: raids and arrests! Mother quickly tipped out my school bag, put the party flag, the membership file, and papers at the very bottom, and my books, the sewing kit, and the pencil case back on top. Then she sent me off, wearing the rucksack. 'If anybody asks, you attend the Hindenburg School in Rosenthal, you're in Miss Schubert's class, 4a! You left a book with your teacher and have to go collect it.' I didn't think this was particularly convincing, but I couldn't think of anything better, either. She didn't have time to tell me where I should really go. The police were already closing off one of the exits and I had to quickly run in the opposite direction and act harmless und unsuspecting – I'm good at acting, you know. My mother says it's necessary when you're an illegal. But now I was in a pickle: Where could I possibly go with the flag and the membership file in the bag? Definitely not to a party member or a close relative of ours. Who was politically unsuspecting? Who would be the last person to be connected to my mother? I even thought of her best friend, Aunt Martha. But she is Jewish and has her own worries now that her husband, the judge, isn't able to work anymore. And then it came to me: my father!

You see, my parents are divorced. And my father set our house on fire in a rage because my mother had left him. When he was released from prison three years later, he tried to make contact with my brother and me. He begged us to *please, please* forgive him. My brother Peter, though, is unbending and sent him packing. And I'm not so easily taken in either. Grown-ups always think kids are stupid and can be led down the garden path. But I still secretly kept the piece of paper he left behind with his address and hid it in my pencil case. Thank goodness! He could barely keep it together when I suddenly turned up on his doorstep, so happy was he to see me. I immediately told him that this was his chance to make up for his mistake with deeds rather than words. So he bricked all the things from my bag into the wall of his bakery. Afterwards, I went straight home. My father wanted to come with me to the tram, but of course that wasn't possible. I told him it would be better not to be seen

together, for his sake and for Mother's. He understood and suddenly seemed all proud of me. When I arrived home, my mother had disappeared. Arrested!

Nobody knew where she'd been taken. Our shed had been ransacked – my cake had been trodden into the kitchen floor; flour, sugar, salt, rice, milk had all been spilled; all the soft furnishings, all the mattresses, pillows, duvets had been slit open - feathers were floating everywhere. A huge mess! They even trashed my school books and toys.

What kind of person does such a thing?

But worst of all, the finished coats, the ones my mother had wanted to take out for delivery on Saturday, were all destroyed. That's going to be deducted from her wages. Distraught, I wandered from room to room without a clue what to do. But then I thought, if I know my mother at all, she will have kept a clear head and left a message for me somewhere.

And so she had! In the toilet, in the margin of the newspaper we use as toilet paper, she had hastily written in pencil that I was to go to her brother, Uncle Rudolf, in the Harz. I could borrow the money for the ticket from our neighbour, Mrs Kuth. Mrs Kuth took me to the train station and sent an urgent cable to Uncle Rudi: Oda arrested +++ daughter Hella arriving Seesen 1 pm! +++ When I arrived in Seesen just after one o'clock, Uncle Rudolf was standing on the platform with Aunt Bertha, dressed in an SA-uniform. Even though there wasn't a single person there they kept glancing about, not wanting to be seen with me. Ten minutes later they put me back on the train going in the opposite direction, back to Berlin. And so here I am! ... But why are you crying? This didn't happen to you, it happened to me ... You're going to Prague. Away from Germany. My mother could maybe go to Russia. She was born in Moscow, after all, and speaks perfect Russian. But there's a snag there too. Precisely because she speaks Russian and on top of that used to be an aristocrat, it's been made clear to her that the Soviet Union may not be so good for her either.

Some time ago she wanted to visit the Soviet Union with a party delegation as a comrade of outstanding merit. Obviously, that fell flat!

Everyone was given a visa, except for my mother. Perhaps because of rightist activities - that means cooperation with SPD people and others ... that's what we figured...

She had her own thoughts on the matter anyway and said that perhaps the Tsarina wasn't the only one for whom Potemkin villages were built. She later explained to me what a "Potemkin village" is. But ever since then she listens carefully to what the Russian emigrants say. You know, they're by no means all reactionaries and bad people. In any case, she ingrained in me the idea that faith is the enemy of humanity! Only reason and doubt lead to progress. Apart from the Catholic churchy lady I don't know anybody in our allotments who believes in God.

If you believe in your God and are leaving Germany because of it, then that's also fine. But he should at least protect you because you're a good person! We aren't getting out of here in any case, that's what my mother said. We have to stay in Germany and righteously defend ourselves, whether we want to or not.

She says, that's what all poor people have to do now.

Look, the sun is already rising!

Oh my, look! There! I'll be damned, look up there, up there on the chimney! I can't believe it, it's really a red flag waving! A red flag on Berlin's highest chimney! Isn't that something! Well, the Nazis will be furious!

Today of all days, May 1 when they've banned the unions!

Hahaha! Isn't this great?

Red Berlin lives!

I am home!

Thank you for everything and good luck to you in Prague!

(...)

Save yourselves!

That when Walter arrived on the Ettersberg day in August 1937 was muggy and holding out for a cathartic thunderstorm. Against the backdrop of gloomy thunder clouds, the remains of Goethe's famous oak tree greeted him in the distance. Under this tree Goethe had once liked to rest, and under it he wrote to Frau von Stein in 1776:

Thou that from heavens art,
Every pain and sorrow stillest,
And the doubly wretched heart
Doubly with refreshment fillest,
I am weary with contending!
Why this pain and desire?
Peace descending
Come ah, come into my breast!¹

In this moment, Walter wished he were here wandering in Goethe's footsteps, perhaps even settled under Goethe's beech tree with a view of Weimar he would even let his mind trail the spirit of the landscape and German Classicism, ideally at twilight and to the tune of 'The Wanderer's Nightsong' while down below in Weimar the lanterns were lit ... During this thought a truncheon hit him hard in the small of the back and reminded him that he had not been brought to this most German of places on a culture trip organised by the Marxist evening school. Nor had the hundreds of people who were being herded up the so-called Caracho-Path alongside him, amid beating and shouting. So this is called the Buchenwald! Instinctively he began to jog so that the thugs would have trouble keeping up, adjusting his breathing for an uphill endurance test and making sure to keep to the protective centre of the

¹ Translation from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

marching column, not running too eagerly towards the front, which was overwhelmed by pure panic and where you could smell the men's fear. Tactically, the best spot was always in the middle of the third row from the front – just like at the start of a cycle race. Here, you could control the front of the field. You could always sally to the right or to the left, skip ahead or tactically fall back as required. At the sight of his comrades' eyes, widened with terror, Walter Rubin-Kohanim once more cursed his arch enemy, Erich Honecker the trusty man. He had that 'comrade' from the jail in Brandenburg where he'd served time to thank for this. Honecker had made sure that his name was put on the Buchenwald list. That scheming slave-driver was constantly out to get him, comrade or no comrade. Well, you couldn't pick your comrades. He'd take that Saarland roofer to task once this Nazi business was over. It couldn't last forever! At the fresh age of twenty-one Walter was an incorrigible optimist. He had no way of knowing, back then, just how vital this attitude, alongside his unspent youth and his health, steeled by cycle racing and ice swimming, would be under the circumstances. Nor could he know that his experiences in the children's home had prepared him well to deal with hierarchies. He had, after all, been well acquainted from earliest childhood with coercive discipline and the secret rules of the pack. His quarrels with the handyman Erich Honecker in the Brandenburg prison aside, he had been living off his secret knowledge since the first day of his incarceration. Unlike other prisoners, Walter did not fall into a dark well of depression, despair, and helplessness following the humiliation of losing his liberty and with the indignity of powerlessness. He adjusted to the new situation without much ado. This was a long, hard test that had to be passed. He felt up to the challenge. He had the same sense of alertness and confidence as ahead of a sporting competition. Then they were standing on the central court. Because he hadn't paid attention during the assembly, he found himself standing in the dangerous outer row, although luckily further back. A haggard, emaciated prisoner pushed a wheelbarrow filled with cobblestones past him and wrenched him out of his thoughts hissing through his teeth: "King Kong, ya hear! When they ask you for your profession, you're a mason! A mason!"

The man, who obviously did not have the right stature for the heavily laden wheelbarrow, wore a red triangle which meant he had to be a comrade. The fact that he knew Walter's nickname suggested that he was either from Berlin or knew something about cycle racing.

Less than half an hour later, Walter, prisoner number 3468, was a registered mason with Construction Unit I. After he had stepped into his striped prison uniform with the red and yellow triangles, and into the wooden clogs with the unfamiliar foot rags, he glanced around for the barracks.

The sky looked heavy with an impending storm. There was already sheet lightning above Weimar in the valley. Thunder rolled in the distance and the wind swept a few noxious gusts uphill. One prisoner, roughly in his mid-forties, of stocky build and with a clever face, the red triangle on his chest and back, approached Walter, who was still standing by the orderly's office door waiting for further instructions. "Comrade, can you tell me where the barracks or the housing is?" Walter asked. "Ha! You're a joker, aren't you?" The man with the

clever face and the red triangle gave a surly laugh. “In planning, lad, in planning! And you’re warmly invited to build your own prison. By the way, there aren’t any umbrellas, either.” Walter stared at him in confusion. “My name’s Seifert, head of Construction Unit I. Everyone follows my orders here and I only say things once. That includes you, King Kong! Apart from that, we need a few reliable, strong blokes to break the hegemony of the criminals. Do I have to say more?”

Walter swallowed and shook his head. He understood. He would be Seifert’s tool, or he would not be at all.

At that moment, raindrops the size of farthings began to fall from the sky and a tropical storm broke over the Ettersberg. Those who, unlike Walter, were not privileged enough to receive an invitation from Comrade Seifert to the temporary shelter for the bags of cement were immediately soaked to the bone. And they would remain that way, since the camp consisted, for the time being, of nothing more than a vast rain-sodden compound with several thousand people on it, ten bogs, and a few torn tents. An electric fence surrounded the site.

Those who didn’t make it into a shelter or one of the few dilapidated tents slept in the mire, or, soaking, in a squat, arms tightly wrapped around knees, head placed protectively between the knees, waiting for the fever to mercifully warm him.

Walter slowly gleaned how lucky he was that he, of all people, stood under Seifert’s protection, and that Seifert represented the party here. And the party meant life here.

At that moment, Walter gave thanks to his Lord, on whom he had never before wasted a single thought. Not that he had ever doubted, but from this point on he knew that his stocks had risen by considerably more than 50 per cent.

(...)

Secrets

Hella celebrated her seventeenth birthday at Siemens.

It was her first day as an errand girl. She had been conscripted there.

What was there to celebrate? Hella donned the new dress that her mother Oda, as always, had sewn for her birthday, and spent the whole day at the Siemens factory in the equipment manufacturing department. She was introduced to about a hundred people, who she would now be working for. The odd office clerk remarked in passing that it was her birthday – her seventeenth! – ‘That has to be celebrated!’

But nobody did. It suited Hella.

She had always hated socialising. Because she could grasp things quickly, as well as for her reliability, the Siemens equipment manufacturing department gradually entrusted Hella with more and more demanding tasks over the next few months.

Hella thought this big company, producing such important things for all over the world, was very exciting. Only rarely now did she think back to her aborted apprenticeship dressmaking with the Segals. One day, Fanny Segal, Hella's apprentice mistress and Oda's employer, had informed her that as Jews, they were no longer permitted to employ or train Aryans.

The Segals were forced to hand over their business to an Aryan. Hella's mother Oda, however, was allowed to continue working there. With her political background it would have been difficult for her to find similar employment. Oda was still the company's best seamstress, but since her Gestapo imprisonment she was no longer quite as sharp. Oda's hair had greyed practically overnight and her head trembled slightly, even though she had been spared the usual tortures thanks to Kalle. Instead, she'd had to treat the torture victims after their abuse: burns of all degrees, broken bones, knocked-out teeth, half-scalped skulls, torn-out finger and toe nails, lesions from electric shocks, dislocated limbs. She also laid eyes on corpses tortured to death, usually drowned in tubs or troughs or tormented mortally with electric shocks. That was why, even long before the bombs fell on Berlin, Oda would wake up screaming in the night. Then she had quickly to take her heart drops. Hella often thought that witnessing the pain of others and treating the wounds of the victims had been the worst form of torture for her mother. She thought back to her final school days in 1936 even less than she did to the aborted apprenticeship with the Segals. It seemed like an eternity since she, as the school's best gymnast, had been allowed to participate in the mass gymnastics that were part of the Olympic opening ceremony at the Olympic Stadium. If Hella thought back to her schooldays at all, it was only with a wistfulness that she hadn't been allowed to attend 'higher school', the Gymnasium. She had had such good grades that the fees would even have been waived. Oda had talked her daughter out of it. Oda reckoned that she would have eventually been expelled from the school or excluded from the Abitur anyway, if she hadn't joined the "Bund Deutscher Mädchen". Hella took her point. But she thought of her old form teacher, Herr Pätzold, with warmth. He had always managed to arrange an errand for her when they were called to flag ceremony in the schoolyard, fetching maps for geography lessons or preparing an experiment in the lab. And so she had never had to salute the swastika flag!

Gradually the war made itself felt in the Siemens factory. One man after another disappeared from the production line. The men had to be replaced. So the reliable and intelligent Hella rose through the ranks, until she more or less single-handedly ran the shipping of equipment and appliances – a position of trust that meant she was privy to official Wehrmacht secrets. But she, a mere seventeen-year-old errand girl, had not been politically vetted at the time of conscription. Like all other employees at the start of their employment she had only had to present her Aryan certificate alongside her work papers. That was all that was known about Hella at Siemens. Later, once Hella had risen through the ranks unnoticed

and her presence become familiar and taken for granted, as though she'd always been there, they simply forgot to put her through the 'political screening' process. By that time, the personnel department at Siemens had other worries. Hella never let herself be caught when she dropped bread in the wastepaper basket for one or the other forced labourer or prisoner of war, or when she purposefully left a warm jacket hanging somewhere. She went quietly about her work and was even happy for overtime, which earned her the title of 'Exemplary National Comrade' as well as the label of 'reliable' and 'intelligent'. During overtime the offices were completely empty. Hella made good use of this opportunity: without leaving a trail, she manipulated shipping orders that had already been signed off, jumbling addresses so that equipment and appliances for armament ended up arriving late, in insufficient number or with parts missing, sent to the wrong place. Sometimes, the shipping boxes were completely empty. In this way, Hella threw an occasional spanner into the workings of the military machine without being noticed. When the 'Tirpitz', the 'Scharnhorst', and the 'Bismarck' were being fitted, Hella was often the only one who knew when exactly which of the ships was docked in which port and until when, so that the shipments kept missing the ships by only a few hours and floated around the ports. The completion of the warships was delayed by days, weeks, months. Not a single sailor suspected that he owed his marginally prolonged life to a half-grown saboteur in Berlin-Siemensstadt.

But this was only half of Hella Hanke's day-to-day. The other half involved cycling nearly 60 kilometres from Berlin to Frankfurt on Oder at the weekend, with two suitcases on the handlebars, one on the rack, and a rucksack on her back. Reinhold's former mate from his days as an apprentice, an ex-Social Democrat, had his own bakery there, where he could put aside loaves of bread. Early in the evening Hella would slip into the bakery and pack forty loaves as agreed, spending the night on the camp bed right next to the oven, for baking was prohibited at weekends. After she had doused her face with cold water, the baker would fill a thermos with hot barley coffee and she would ride back to Berlin early on the Sunday.

Having arrived there, she would take the suitcases to a prearranged location, usually train stations in the North and East of Berlin where people with cheap luggage didn't attract any attention. Nine times out of ten there was already somebody waiting for her to greet her with a watchword: "Aunt Lucie is already waiting with the food!" And they would take one of the suitcases of bread.

If the contact with the folded newspaper scratched his nose, the coast was not clear. Then she would simply continue on her way and lug the suitcases back with her. Often, nobody came. In that case, Hella turned around after a little time had passed and rode to her father's place in Oderberger Strasse, rucksack, suitcases and all.

At least eight to ten illegals were always waiting in Reinhold Hanke's flat for food or to be smuggled onwards. Ever since the day when she had smuggled the stitched flag and the incriminating documents through the raids and the searches in her school bag and entrusted them to her father, the two of them had become close.

Remorse and attempted murder be damned!

Precisely because nobody took the drunken cretin Reinhold Hanke seriously, and because a connection to his divorced wife seemed entirely impossible following the attempted murder of her and his children, her father was the best person for Hella to count on. Nobody knew, least of all her mother Oda.

As is often the case with drunkards, heroism and wretchedness kept close company in the alcoholic Reinhold Hanke. He was so weak of character that he simply couldn't say no if somebody asked him for help. Especially if that someone asked to be taken in while offering money or a spirit.

Thus, Hella encountered a panopticon of illegals, refugees and people in hiding. Reinhold Hanke sat perched in the middle of a throng of all shouting at him. Nobody knew what to do. Reinhold blubbered snottily. "But what should I do? Where should I send them?"

"Well, why did you take the people in in the first place?" "I felt so sorry for them!" moaned Reinhold, ashamed in the face of his stern daughter. If Hella wanted to protect her father she would have to ferry these people onwards.

Later, Hella felt the same pity for the Segals, who were told to stand by for resettlement in Poland. Supposedly they were to go to Riga. Everyone knew what that meant! Hella put out feelers. She undertook to arrange illegal passage to Sweden for six people. Her brother Peter had brought her into the underground group, and she procured food and worked as a courier for them. In response to her anxious question about the trustworthiness and background of their co-conspirators all he could say was that they were not all comrades but also 'untrustworthy elements': Social Democrats, independent liberals, unsuspected humanists, devout Christians who supplied information and warnings from positions of influence, as well as people who had once sympathised with the Nazis but now, disillusioned and desperate, wanted to do something against the rising violence and lawlessness.

Now, since their insight and commitment had come too late, they wanted to do something for their own salvation and self-respect at least, and somehow help people under threat. That was why some of them suddenly risked their lives. Hella could calculate from the bread rations that the group was currently charged with about twenty-three people. That evening a reliable source – the whores from the establishment 'Kitty', the bordello in Giesebrechtstrasse frequented by Nazis and the Gestapo – passed on information that the planned 'resettlements' from Sophienstrasse and Oranienburger Strasse were going to be brought forward by three days.

Somebody had to warn the Segals!

Since Hella was known there as the former apprentice, her brother would go.

Ever since she'd had to hand over her dog Bobby because Jews were no longer allowed to keep them, Hedwig, Fanny Segal's blind daughter, didn't like to leave the house anymore. And where would she go, anyway? To the theatre, the cinema, the swimming pool? They weren't even allowed on the tram as Jews, or in the park. During the day her parents and siblings were busy tending to things, and she was still too young for the blind people's workshop. So Hedwig sat by the window, day in and day out, even though she couldn't see anything. But she could hear all the more. A removal van, it seemed, was pulling up across the

road. She wondered why a removal van should be needed in the evening. After all, it had to be dark outside. The gas lanterns were already hissing. She heard harsh commands being shouted, flustered, intimidated people from the block of flats opposite theirs gathering in the street. There was the scraping of shoes on cobbles and careful, tentative steps up a wooden stair or a ramp into the removal van.

Why were more people in the van than the movers?

Her practised ears caught the sound of shuffling feet on a wooden board, gruff orders, quiet sighs of despair, here and there a child or a woman sobbing, the soothing murmur of a man who was then struck across the back so that his voice broke and failed him. A crying baby in the corridor. When she told her mother about these odd events, everyone became extremely agitated.

“Deportation!” A decision on what to do could not be made. Father still hadn’t returned. “Where can he be? He should have been back by now.” “We’ll go out to meet him,” Fanny decided, even though the clock showed that it was already past eight. Jews were not allowed to be outside at this time of day. Panic-stricken they walked along the empty, rain-soaked streets that Father should have been taking. Nothing! The streets were deserted. The houses seemed to be hunkering down. A lone drunkard stumbled down the street making a racket. Hastily, they crossed to the other side of the road. “Let’s go back home!” Fanny called to her sons, who were walking ahead with mounting haste. “Maybe he came from the other direction?” Hedwig’s shoelace had torn. Fanny kneeled on the pavement in front of her, murmuring curses, and quickly knotted the torn shoelaces. Meanwhile, the Segal boys had disappeared around the next corner. Fanny and Hedwig hurried after them. Just as they were about to turn the corner, they saw a removal van outside their building. Gerson Segal and his sons, who had not been able to save themselves by turning back in their direction, were being herded into the van.

Fanny wanted to shout something.

Shocked, her mouth stayed shut.

She squeezed herself and Hedwig into an alcove between the columns of a grandiose entryway. At that instant a man close behind her whispered, “Hella sent me!” He yanked them into the entryway; oddly enough, the door wasn’t locked. He must have been waiting there for them. “I have to go to my family,” Fanny protested weakly. “You still can, if you want!” “But I have to...” Fanny had no idea what she had to do anymore. “My mother, my sister and I want to help you. Have you ever wondered where and why Jews are being deported? Have you ever received any good news from anyone who’s been deported?” “They’ll hardly kill us!” Fanny retorted stubbornly and made towards the door with Hedwig. “But that is precisely what they’re doing in Poland! This isn’t a rumour, there are witnesses!” “My God! I have to warn my husband and sons!” “We’ll take care of that. Right now we have to get out of here as quickly as possible. Come, quick!” Peter Hanke was the first to step out of the doorway. He pretended to scan the sky for rain clouds and turned up his collar. Once he saw that the street had quietened down again, he came for Fanny and Hedwig. “Link arms with me! We have to look like a family on our way home now. If the police or the other brown-shirted vermin

approach us, we have to chat light-heartedly. Whatever happens, don't go all silent or cry. Laugh a little, ideally. Do you understand?" Fanny swallowed her sorrow. "Where are we going?" "Hella is waiting for you at the train station and will take you to a safe place." Peter Hanke left Fanny and Hedwig Segal in front of Friedrichstrasse train station and hopped onto the last tram to Rosenthal. "All the best!" Hella was standing on the platform above. "Where are the others?"

Fanny's head fell and she began to cry. "Good grief, don't cry under any circumstances! Otherwise we'll attract attention!" Hella could have recited in a moment an entire catalogue of things and actions that involuntarily attracted attention. She had become a specialist at inconspicuousness. She always behaved in such a way that it was difficult for anyone to remember when she had been where, when she arrived and when she left - unless she wanted to be remembered... Hella had made a high art of this performance of averageness which created the precise degree of disinterest and boredom that rendered her invisible. Hella's habitat was the carefully calculated background. Her ideal was the grey mouse that nobody noticed. The same was true of her interactions with young men, because attention from suitors entailed too much that could not be calculated. She usually ruled out any contact with the opposite sex as too risky. Nonetheless, Hella had been thinking of a certain young man for quite some time now. By her calculation he only represented a risk for her heart, not for her safety. At the thought her gaze became dreamy, but she pulled herself together immediately. "Here is your new ID card, in case of checks. You're now Erika Kampmüller from Lankwitz, born August 14th, 1895 in Teltow. Memorise your birthdate immediately! If you present the ID together with this fallen soldier's obituary, the bloodhounds usually leave you be."

The photograph on the ID card bore little resemblance to her former employer Fanny Segal. Hella ardently hoped that there would be no more checks on the trains this late at night. "One more thing: When we board the train in a minute, we'll stay standing by the opposite door and Hedwig will look out of the window so that nobody can see that she's blind. Less attention is paid to people who stand by the doors on public transport, oddly, than those who sit in compartments."

At the Greifswalder Strasse S-Bahn station an ambulance was waiting for them. Hella knocked the code, the door immediately opened, and they climbed in. A nun from the Order of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary sat at the wheel. "Praise be to Jesus Christ!" Hella completed the greeting: "For ever and ever, amen, venerable Mother!" The nun ordered Fanny and Hedwig to lie down on the stretchers. She handed Hella a nurse's cornet. The journey ended at the Catholic St. Joseph's Hospital in Gartenstrasse in Berlin-Weissensee. A burly Alexian brother greeted them: "Praise be to Jesus Christ!" "The Holy Mother, the Holy Spirit, and God's Blessing be with you! Quarantine Ward!" replied the nun. The brother with the stature of a wrestler and the face of a child and raised the barrier and let the van pass.

(...)

D-Day

“Do you believe in God?” somebody murmured behind him.

Robert turned around, aghast.

“You’re asking me if *I* believe in God!? If *I* believe in God? It doesn’t matter if *I* believe in God! What matters is that God believes in me, amidst all this shit! I don’t even believe in myself any more!”

“Then let us pray!”

In the latrine next to Robert stood the rabbi from Baden from Barrack 23. With a makeshift prayer shawl that he had fashioned from a piece of striped horsecloth he began to sway in prayer amidst the flood of brown faeces.

For the first time since his childhood Robert Fischer joined in with the prayer. So did all the men who were stuck in the latrines. They were more than a proper minyan, hence their prayers would be answered:

Barukh atah Adonaj, Magen Awraham!

O King, Helper and Saviour and Shield!
Praise be to you, the Eternal, Shield of Abraham!
You are mighty for ever, O L-rd,
You raise the dead, you are strong to help.
You sustain the living with grace,
Raise the dead in great mercy,
Support the fallen, heal the sick,
Liberate those who are bound and
Remain loyal to those who sleep in the dust.
Who is like unto you, L-rd Almighty,
and who compares with you, O King,
You who slays and revives, lets salvation bloom?
Who is like unto you, Merciful Father,
You who thinks of the life of your creation with mercy?
Praise be to you, the Eternal, who raises the dead.
Amen!”

Then it suddenly went very quiet.

As a 'fighter' in the resistance group in Buchenwald, Walter - Number 6982 - was a member of the 'camp aristocracy'. On the basis of his previous merit, he was able to maintain his status even during his second internment, this time as a Jew and for being 'asocial'.

As promised, he was immediately taken into Rudi Seifert's block of 'Aryan' politicals when the Jewish blocks were disbanded. He swiftly swapped his jacket for that of a non-Jewish dead man from the Construction Unit.

And with that, the Jewish prisoner Walter Rubin had been officially 'exterminated'.

Under this new jacket and the number of a deceased Aryan, Walter lived on. With much manoeuvring, he was able to talk the red kapo into giving him more jackets from deceased, unregistered Aryans.

Rescuing 'non-political' Jews was not a priority for the resistance command. The Aryan comrades doled out the life-saving jackets and numbers of the unregistered 'departures' with great reluctance and only because 6982 was a bigwig in the hierarchy and making such a 'fuss'.

Walter crept back to the latrine with five life-saving 'Aryan' jackets. His best tenor and the rabbi from Baden were thus given a second lease of life in the Dutch and Belgian blocks. He handed out the other three jackets at random. The recipients had to sort themselves out. He could do nothing more for them.

"When are the Yanks finally getting here?"

Various 'experts' were constantly trying to figure out where and how far away the US troops were, what their primary destination might be, and which streets they were likely to take during their advance.

"Which way is the wind blowing?"

"How fast does sound travel?"

They calculated. According to their calculations, the Americans could be no more than thirty to thirty-five kilometres away.

"The Yanks must know of Buchenwald. But perhaps they don't quite know the shortest way to get here. The people of Weimar are hardly going to recommend the camp as a key sight to see and lead them straight to us."

Everybody nodded.

"To hell with it! The electricians have to get working on this, at once," the underground command decided. Relations between the Communist underground and the electricians, all of whom were SPD-supporters and union members, were, to put it mildly, not the best. They hoped that it wouldn't matter on a day like today.

"Can you build a transmitter?"

"If we have the material, no problem. Done in a jiffy. But the 'Red Chapel' is already shut, in case you haven't heard", the Social Democrat electricians teased, and fell about laughing. Nobody else laughed at the smug little dig against the Soviet intelligence group. The Communists answered the joke with glowering looks.

“Given the circumstances, why don’t we stick to business?” Seifert sharply reprimanded the electricians.

“According to our calculations, the Yanks ought to be as close as 30 kilometres from us. We have to send them an SOS so that they can find us more quickly, here behind the Ettersberg. If they don’t come quickly enough, the SS will kill us all before they arrive. Where’s the radio operator, by the way?”

The SS, meanwhile, were no longer anywhere to be seen.

The formerly airtight surveillance was already showing great holes.

They ‘organised’ a radio from an orphaned SS barrack, combined it with other material from the workshop, and created a transmitter in short order. On 9 April 1945, it sent an SOS signal into the ether, including the coordinates of the camp.

On the morning of April 10th they received a reply.

The US Army announced its approach.

The much anticipated ‘D-Day’ had finally arrived!

The fighters of the underground received their weapons, and their orders.

Walter Kohanim-Rubin carried an old Mauser of questionable reliability in his belt, and next to it a dagger. For good measure he kept a wire noose underneath his jacket for silent killing. He had already carried out his order a thousand times in his mind: storm and seize the strategically important Watchtower 4. Capture it silently from behind! Capture the guard!

Walter prayed that the gun would go off and that he would hit his target should it come to it. He had only had two opportunities to have the pistol explained to him and to try it out in the quarry during an explosion. Nevertheless, he was glad and above all proud that he, as the only Jew, had been chosen for this tricky operation to liberate the camp ahead of one of the comrades with war experience. The fact that he had proven himself during other difficult operations that had required nerves and skill, that he was known to be ‘torture resistant’, and that as a ‘fighter’ with the resistance group he was in comparably good physical condition due to the extra food rations, all spoke in Walter’s favour. Nobody in the unit was as quick and nimble a climber as him. In addition to physical and temperamental aspects, national considerations also played a part. The battle-hardened Red Army members would have liquidated the SS to a man. After all, they still stood under the command of the Red Army, even as prisoners. It was more than unlikely that the liberation unit would be able to control a group of armed Soviet soldiers.

“Too many unknowns,” Seifert decided, “we have to stay in control. Comrades aside, brothers to the fore!”

Then he became solemn and squared his shoulders:

“Comrades, it is the task of the German resistance on German ground to restore Germany’s civilisation and honour”, he intoned.

“Hence, only German comrades will be considered for the self-liberation operation! The arrested war criminals will all be tried in a court of law! We need them alive! That is an order! Kill only when met with resistance!”

Walter received his orders. Finally, he would be able to restore his own honour, too!

For a long time, Walter couldn't get over the fact that he had been marked as an 'asocial' seven years before, when he had been arrested for the second time after the amnesty. The black triangle sewn above the yellow one for 'Jew'. The black triangle of the 'asocials' hurt his pride. It rankled him. He turned from a confident political fighter with the honourable red triangle into an unworthy subject, into an asocial like tens of thousands of other Jews who had also fallen victim to those particular waves of arrests.

But he, Walter Kohanim-Rubin, was not a victim! At most, he was a defeated fighter! He was proud of that. Nobody could take it away from him. He wanted now to show them all! He had lost the first battle against the Nazis but now he would be one of history's victors! Walter scaled the back of the watchtower, the stolen SS dagger held between his teeth. The guard at the top of the tower had apparently been dozing. When Walter stood behind him and held the Mauser to his temple, the guard obediently threw his gun from the tower.

'I surrender!' he said calmly, slowly lifting his hands.

Walter had imagined the moment of victory to be grander.

He was almost disappointed.

Such a scene on the newsreel at the cinema would have been accompanied by triumphant fanfares, and a great orchestra with many violins and an oboe would start playing in the background.

Time stood still for a moment.

So was he a hero or just some guy who had done what was needed? he asked himself. But in any case, he had little time for heroic posturing. A soft melancholy came upon him.

Even the feeling of triumph and of overwhelming joy failed to materialise.

There were no more heroes!

There was only a great tiredness and sorrow.

Yes, he had made it! Twelve years of incarceration! From 1933 to 1937 in the Brandenburg jail, then a brief release at Christmas 1937, then the second arrest. Eight years in Buchenwald, all in all! Survived! From the age of twenty-one in 1933 to the age of thirty-two now, 1945.

He would be celebrating his thirty-third birthday on May 1st as a free man! He would celebrate big! Naturally!

Today, on the 11th of April 1945, he was born again!

But where were the cheers?

The time of his imprisonment reeled past his inner eye: Ernst Thälmann's execution and the party's clandestine memorial service in the camp; the three men, criminals, he had killed in the camp under orders from the resistance unit and who had haunted his dreams ever since, powerless to fight.

The ordeals of torture had also crept into his sleep for good.

He had to live with these.

By contrast, acting the fool and buffoon to those in power, whether they were SS or called Seifert, was easy. He thought of himself bartering with the forces cook: an exclusive Goebbels impersonation in exchange for three eggs, some sugar and two lemons for a fatally ill Hungarian boy in Jewish block 23 so that he might survive and one day become a cobbler, an accountant, or win a Nobel Prize. He thought of ten thousand prisoners masturbating to Zarah Leander singing from the speaker every night. Above all, he thought about the endless discussions over recipes, arguing passionately whether semolina and rhubarb pudding should be flavoured with cinnamon or with vanilla, the insurmountable differences regarding the hypothetical preparation of roast goose: mugwort or marjoram? The question as to whether the strawberries the size of ping-pong balls in the SS commander's bed grew so large because he fertilised them with ashes and blood from the crematorium.

He recalled the first winter, how he had protected himself from frostbite and pneumonia with thick layers of newspaper underneath the prison uniform to the point that he could barely move. He would always remember the nights spent with his old Jewish family stories, the ones he had to recount again and again to Kurt and the comrades: the story of his ancestress Zippora Orenstein who, following the seventeenth-century Cossack pogroms, was raped by a Cossack and carried off to the Ukrainian steppe where she bore her tormentor two children. And yet still this hellcat of an ancestress managed to escape all the way back to Poland on horseback with the children in saddlebags having made sure he was unconscious on home-brewed liquor. Not least on account of this legendary primordial mother Zippora he had wanted to hold himself together and survive it all. The way his fellow prisoners, who didn't know any Jewish family legends of their own, hung on his every word when he recounted how Zippora, following her successful escape, had to marry the ancient Chaim Orenstein because of the disgrace of her Cossack bastard children. But he had run away with his old friend's money in order to follow the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi from Hamburg to Jerusalem in a salt box. The anecdote explaining why the Kohanim had three horses in their crest: because as horse dealers on route to the horse market they had saved a Polish count from his marauding serfs – the peasants had mistaken the Kohanim horses' clip-clop for the king's cavalry – whereupon the Jewish horse dealer Kohanim was appointed to be the manager of the Polish count's estate in appreciation.

It was only in telling all these family legends that he realised the treasure he possessed: his Jewish inheritance that he had always disdained. Walter smiled at the thought of his Jewish comrades in the camp had always teased him when he, who had grown up in the countryside, plucked dandelion, cress, and sorrel everywhere he went and ate elderberries straight from the tree: "Walter is biting the dust again!" Walter recalled the formation and successes of his camp choir, 'The Zebras', his pride and joy, and the camp's theatre and cabaret group that he had founded and run together with his old pal Friedrich Kahle. He remembered the effort of lifting up comrades who were ready to give in and were on their way to becoming 'Mussulmans', as suicidal prisoners were called in the camp jargon, because they wanted to surrender to their

fate. The fear of human experiments during an illness would haunt him for the rest of his life, the moment he saw a doctor. “You don’t forget something like that!”

The soul suffered no less from the terrible greyness of the camp.

It was the grey of death, as though all the colours of life had been extinguished and only the red of blood had been allowed.

All of this ran through his head like a film in time lapse.

And now it was all over ...

Ah well, heroism ... Is it anything more than antiquated myth?

He tore himself away from the rush of thoughts and forced himself back into the present.

“You will all face court proceedings!” Walter barked at his prisoner.

He wasn’t even thinking of the proverbial guillotine on Alexanderplatz that he and Kurt had fantasised about in the evenings just before falling asleep when they thought about what they would do should they one day be in power and pass judgment over the war criminals. They had quarrelled fiercely about whether Hitler, Himmler and the rest should be imprisoned for life because it would make them suffer more, while death was perhaps too mild a punishment that might also turn them into martyrs.

Having climbed down from the tower, Walter tied the disarmed soldier’s hands on his back. “I have a wife and children,” the man whined at him.

“You better shut your face, man, or I really will shoot you after all, you rat! Because I don’t have a wife and children! And you know why, too, you stupid asshole! Come with me!” He kicked him in the rear for emphasis.

He collected his prisoner’s gun and led him at gunpoint with kicks to the central court.

The other prisoners backed away in timid awe. Wide-eyed and silent they formed an alley. Other guards and SS thugs who had been arrested were now being rounded up behind Walter who herded his captive energetically onwards. Suddenly, as his fellow inmates recovered from the initial astonishment, stones came flying towards him and the new captives. The mob wanted to fall upon the overpowered SS-men and guards. You could feel the lust for a lynching. Walter fired two warning shots into the air with the confiscated rifle.

“From this moment on, the rule of law is reinstated in Germany, assholes! Not mob justice! Not mob justice! Then we’re no better than these pigs!” he yelled at the murderous mob. Cowed, the lynch mob, who had been his comrades only a minute ago, backed off. Morality wasn’t especially impressive to the vengeful crowd as the foundation of a new beginning. But the gun was.

The situation was heating up. The liberation unit had to take the captured SS-men and guards into their midst for protection. The liberationists now pointed weapons at their fellow inmates, who yelled abuse at them. Walter and the others in his unit had formed a circle around the former guardsmen, and now they were attacked with airborne stones and bare hands. Once more they fired warning shots into the air. They wouldn’t be able to hold the angry crowd at bay for very long.

“Where are the Americans?!” Walter anxiously wondered.

The hatred that he saw in these faces was familiar to him only from the fascist mobs.
At that moment the speakers crackled.

“Comrades! We are free!”

Simultaneously, the camp gate burst open and an American jeep with four military police, cocked weapons at the ready, drove in.

The hand of the camp clock stopped at 15:16 hours.

It was the 11th of April 1945.

Zero hour at Buchenwald.

The crowd backed away in disbelief.

Then an unquenchable cheer broke loose.

It was over!

Men who had been furious just a moment ago now sank to their knees crying, threw themselves on the ground, kissed the dirt. Others hugged each other or stood stock still, as though frozen.

The American military police took custody of the captured SS-men and camp guards.

The commander of the resistance, Seifert, and the camp elder clicked their heels in the Prussian fashion and, standing to attention, reported to the MPs. The GIs, meanwhile, with their automatic weapons casually resting on their hips and cigarettes dangling from the corners of their mouths, gazed in disbelief at these briskly formal prisoners delivering their report. Once this grotesque image of the collision of two worlds had burned itself into his memory, Walter let his gaze wander, out of habit, to check for any threats. He came up short at the clothing store.

He couldn't believe what he saw there: in a pinstripe suit that was much too baggy for him, a white shirt, a flawlessly knotted tie, brightly polished shoes, and with a black Homburg on his head, number 92574, the Jewish prisoner with whom Walter had run the theatre group, stepped blinking into the sun that was finally pushing its way through the clouds on this chilly 11th of April. Partly shy and apprehensive, partly curious, it seemed belatedly to want to dignify this great day.

92574 must have felt Walter's glance, somehow, because he suddenly turned towards him. Smiling, he sauntered across to him. Walter shouldered the carbine and tucked the Mauser into his belt.

92574 came towards him with a laugh.

‘I'll see you after the war, at six?!’ Walter asked with a grin.

‘Yes, till after the war at six in the Volkstheater Leipzig, Walter!’

92574 touched two fingers to the brim of his hat in salutation.

Flummoxed, Walter examined his theatre mate from all sides. In front of him stood, somewhat the worse for wear, the actor Friedrich Kahle from Leipzig, a gentleman with a sunken face, a close shave, and a suit that was far too baggy.

‘Brecht would have cast him as Mack the Knife,’ thought Walter momentarily and shook his head, laughing. “You will be never be a proletarian, Fritz!”

“Nor will you, Walter! Don’t even try! And a word of advice: Steer clear of politics! You are too much of a romantic for it!”

They gave each other a quick hug. “Right, don’t forget: You can find me at the Volkstheater Leipzig, Walter!” Then Kahle flicked a non-existent speck of dust from his lapel. “If you have any sense, you will follow me straightaway, once this circus here is over.”

Unimpressed by the tumult of American soldiers, captured SS-men, and the raging lynch mob, Kahle adjusted his hat and the knot in his tie and strolled out of the camp, as though he were merely sauntering from the coffee house to a rehearsal. The sun sent a ray of light after him as though it were a spotlight on stage.

“What an exit,” marvelled Walter. “The heroic, the grotesque, and the banal can be so close to one another!”

With his left hand, Friedrich Kahle softly stroked the inscription above the gate: *To each his own!*

Farewell to the horror.

Then he went on his way.

(...)

Translated by Prof. Dr. Rebecca Pohl, University of Cambridge