Fatherland

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p 96-97

He ploughs through the high-piled snow. Today he's enjoying his self-contempt more than ever. Smoke and flames blot out the sun. The water of the river is syrupy and glints like lead. Frozen snow protrudes above the riverbanks like the serrated edge of a knife. His conversation with the rabbi has cured him of the illusion that anyone will ever understand what he went through. Even if millions of books are written, while millions of tears are shed, no one will ever come any nearer to understanding.

Of one thing he is sure. To history the dead are forever alive and the living are dead. So the same mistakes will be made. No one will learn anything from the events. If there is a hole in the bridge, the Jew falls through it. Already now, the moralisers like his rich uncle and the rabbi are at the ready with their rebukes.

He's still wallowing in his suffering, they say, he keeps looking back, never forwards. What hope is there left if Jews who should know better avert their eyes and close their ears? What can you expect of gentiles then? And what will they think in ten years' time? And in fifty years? Will they shut him up forcibly? Will they declare him insane and lock him up?

He doesn't feel he's the one who should speak; they would think he was showing off, wanting to be in the limelight because he is a camp survivor. It's up to other people to ask him. No one has asked anything, so he says nothing.

He stares at the smoking, burning city and its lazy zinc rivers, but sees only himself. Where does that implacability of his come from? Did he always have it?

He wasn't a particularly well-behaved or pliant child. But aren't all children self-willed? They don't care about anyone but themselves, they tell lies and kick and flail their arms around as soon as they are threatened.

Or did he pick up that hardness in the camps when he was challenged a hundred times a day to let go of life? Faster, pig. Do you want a fist in your gob? Stand up, you bastard. Hats off, hats on. *Häftlinge, stillgestanden*! Get together, whiners. *Korrigieren*! Hats off, hats on. Fancy a smack in the head, idiot? Anyone who failed to obey disappeared noiselessly. A spoon was worth more than a friend, a cigarette more necessary than a father.

You were fortunate, but you fought for it, said his wife when he confessed to her on their wedding night that only a thoroughly bad person could have survived the camp.

So many others lost heart, she said, but you persevered. You should be proud of yourself. He didn't believe her; he could see she wanted to comfort him.

He still doesn't believe her.

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p 98-109

His cousin in Belgium has written again. When he tore the envelope open he wondered why Sigmund wanted to write a second letter before he's even had a reply to the first. But his cousin gave him such a pleasant surprise that he read the letter again twice and, afterwards, was unable to conclude otherwise than that he deserved a chance, even if he found it incomprehensible that he raising his son a Catholic. His wife would ask him why it bothered him when he himself didn't want his son to do his bar mitzvah. She was right, as usual. But her being right didn't mean she knew what she was talking about. His feelings weren't yellowed newspapers to be carried down to the cellar and forgotten about.

As the first flakes fall, he walks back to the car.

For the first time since his talk with the rabbi he has the impression that he's not sinking further. Is it the letter? Can a letter have so much power? In any event, it's an unusual feeling, as if he's just discovered the air isn't poisonous and he can breathe without suffocating. Perhaps it means nothing and he'll soon slump back into melancholia. But what if this is the beginning of a change? But a change in what? And will it be to his benefit? Or will he have to decide that what appears to be better isn't better at all?

His wife switches off the television as he enters the kitchen.

'Meat in the freezer compartment, Papa. Fruit and vegetables underneath'.

He puts the bag of shopping on the table and starts unpacking it. His wife always gives him the same advice when he fills the fridge. She thinks men never learn anything new.

As the freezer compartment is full, he puts the meat in the freezer in the garage. The stock satisfies him. His children needn't go hungry. His cousin isn't going short of anything, either; his parents-in-law's company is a wholesaler's in colonial goods. Warehouses filled to the rafters with sugar, sardines, oil, rice and chocolate. I've literally got my bread buttered on both sides, he wrote.

He doesn't know what to think of people with a sense of humour. Are they laughing at other people, or themselves?

He used to laugh about anything and everything. Now, when he hears or sees something funny, he holds his hand in front of his mouth as if he's got rotten teeth he's ashamed of.

His wife has put his cigarettes out for him.

He sits down at the table, but doesn't reach for the pack. His wife doesn't like him smoking in the kitchen.

In my family they always considered smoking a stupid habit, she says when he gets up in the morning coughing and hacking like a dying man. Once he's finished his coughing fit, he tells her she's right. You knew you were marrying an idiot, he says then, it's too late to have second thoughts now.

'How's the war going?'

'Stalemate; no one's willing to give an inch. Luckily they're not fighting any longer. Do you want potatoes or bread with your corned beef?'

'Whichever you want to get rid of'.

'I wonder how long Israel will last out without the British and the French. It wouldn't be the first time they let us down. Potato salad or fried potatoes?'

'Whichever's easier. Where are the kids?'

'Upstairs; they've got a lot of homework'.

'And Helena? Did you go down to her school?'

'Didn't have time. But her teacher called. She doesn't think she'll have to retake anything. I saw the meat was more expensive than usual; I'll have to make smaller meatballs'.

'I got veal mince. We're Jews, no more pork for us'.

'Veal mince is expensive'.

'Would it bother you to start cooking kosher again?'

'Why don't you go and smoke a cigarette out on the porch? I don't want you breathing down my neck while I'm busy'.

'It's snowing'.

'Go on, please. You're getting on my nerves'.

He watches the snow, falling in thick, slow flakes.

If it goes on like this all night it will take him hours to clear away the snow in the morning. He doesn't feel like a cigarette; he just wants to watch the snow. Now and then a flake detaches itself from the others and falls at his feet. He watches until it melts. It is quiet out in the street. Not a single passing vehicle, no pedestrians venturing out of doors. Behind the curtain of snow, the pale halo of rays from a lantern glows like a sick moon.

Normally he avoids any discussion with a snap or an impatient grumble. It's understandable that his wife is irritated. He's never been so talkative or shown so much interest in issues that concern her, too.

In any event, now she understands that there are changes afoot.

If she hears that it's because of the letter from his cousin, she won't blink an eyelid. She knows he never listens to her advice, but always to other people's.

Still, she never gives up. A hamster running round and round in a wheel gets further than a woman barraging her husband with good advice.

Why can't his wife understand that? She's so much smarter in everything. Is it so difficult to understand that he needs distance? Married couples live in each other's pockets; they are under the illusion that they know one another. Their opinion is therefore either clouded or malicious. His cousin has nothing to gain or lose. His view is reliable, his opinion is above any possible suspicion. What's more, he showed evidence of self-knowledge. In comparison with you I've experienced nothing, he wrote, even though he was arrested in his new homeland and transported to a camp in Canada. After his release, he returned to England and joined the British army. Didn't experience anything. It was no false humility. Only a survivor of the camps has the right to speak, he wrote. *There are events so overwhelming that they are beyond our comprehension, but it is precisely these events that make us what we are.* He'll never forget that phrase. His cousin worded it in the most modest way, which others are unable to do in overblown speeches.

He was particularly grateful to his cousin for not trying to imagine, like the others, what a survivor had been through. I do sympathise with you. I can imagine how it must have been. It must have been awful for you. Every time he hears such platitudes, he cringes. His cousin didn't use any clichés. He readily admitted he should either keep his counsel or bow and listen to him.

And if a survivor doesn't want to speak? Well, that's just the way it is, he wrote. No one has the right to judge you.

But if you do speak, I'll learn from you.

'Father?'

As his father looks round, his left arm makes a defensive gesture, as if to protect his face from a rifle butt.

'You know you shouldn't make me jump like that, Rudolf'.

His son casts down his eyes, feeling awkward.

'Want to come and sit next to me?'

The boy's eye's light up. He eagerly wriggles himself onto the chair next to his father.

'Does your mother know you've come outside?'

'I've finished my homework and showed it to Mother. Shall we make a snowman in a minute?'

‘Where are your sisters?’

‘Playing with their dolls’.

‘You should have put a thicker sweater on’.

They watch the snow covering the front garden with a fluffy, warm blanket. Although there won’t be time for a snowman after dinner he doesn’t want to disappoint his son.

He’ll leave that to his wife, who will make it plain to the children that it’s off to bed if they want to go to school with a clear head in the morning. Maybe they’ll be lucky and it will keep on snowing so the schools will be closed.

‘Can I start a stamp collection, Father? I’ve already got eighteen American stamps and four Belgian ones’.

‘An expensive hobby, son’.

‘I could ask the neighbours if I can clear their snow away. Mr and Mrs Steiner are real old; they’ll give me two dollars for sure if I sweep their stoop. And I’m sure Mrs Albertini will be pleased; she always waves to me when I come home from school’.

‘Leave the neighbours alone, Rudolf! You wouldn’t like it if they started sticking their noses in our business, would you?’

He feels his son stiffen and, although it’s snowing incessantly and they both continue watching the snow build up on roofs and fences and in the grooves of tree trunks and on the twigs and leaves of bushes, it’s as if his stern voice has sucked the warmth out of the air and they are staring at a frozen world instead.

How can he explain to him that he means well? We don’t know the Steiners or the Albertinis, boy. Who knows what they got up to in the war? Maybe they’ve got terrible crimes on their consciences. Many a friendly face masks a murderer.

Still, he’s proud that Rudolf wants to work for his pocket money. Clearing snow is no easy task for a ten-year-old boy. Before you’ve even got going you’re out of breath, with blisters on your hands. At home, he cleared snow for the whole street. He used the money to buy sweets and cigarettes. And one time a football. The same ball he kicked onto the street by accident the very first time, where it was run over by a bus.

At least his son won’t waste his money. Collecting stamps is educational.

‘If you promise me not to go knocking on the neighbours’ doors, I’ll buy an album for you. And I’ll ask my cousin if he’ll send you some stamps. He works for a big company. I’m sure he gets letters from all over Europe and probably from the Congo, too, the Belgian colony in Africa’.

‘Thank you Father’.

He’s relieved Rudolf doesn’t throw his arms around his neck.

You shouldn't be too demonstrative when gratitude is shown; only people who expect ingratitude do that, so he refrains from putting his arm around his son's shoulder. Rudolf has to learn that a father gives and takes as he feels fit, not at random, but because he knows what is best for his children.

'What's the photo you got with the letter from Belgium, Father?'

Although he feels the muscles in his arms cramp, he manages to subdue the trembling.

Why can't his wife hold her tongue? Rudolf is too young to see the picture; his father and mother and three sisters are enough for him. The rabbi accuses him of begrudging Rudolf a future. How can the man get it so wrong? Doesn't he understand that his children are so dear to him that he's protecting them from his past? If they see the photograph they'll ask questions. What kind of answers should he give? No answer will satisfy their curiosity. In other words, instead of understanding what really happened, they'll imagine things that aren't there and scare each other silly because they no longer know what they should believe. Like peering through a keyhole into an unlit room.

'Tell your mother we're hungry'.

Rudolf obediently stands up and trots inside.

Getting his cigarettes from his breast pocket, at the same time he pulls out the photograph he put in there with the pack.

He lays the cigarettes aside and looks at the photograph. When he found it in the letter this morning, he immediately noticed that, like him, his brother and father had one eyebrow with a little bunch of hairs sticking out of it like hedgehog spines. He understood this was no coincidence but a trait that the men in his family possessed. Rudolf has an eyebrow like that, too. All the same, his wife thinks he's the spitting image of *her* father. Women have a sharp eye for resemblances. They can tell you down to the smallest detail which of their children looks like who and why and what changes in their features over the years. He's glad she's wrong for once.

Who took the photograph? And where and when was it taken? They were sitting at a table on a terrace, his father with a beer mug, the others with a glass, probably lemonade.

In the background, a hedge, above which a piece of a wall with the corner of a window protruded. It was summer.

His father was wearing a white waistcoat and had his sleeves rolled up; his mother had put on a flowery dress; his brother and he were in short-sleeved shirts.

Even though the sunlight was blinding, everyone was doing their best not to screw their eyes up. Only his brother had a crooked mouth from the effort.

And then there's the look in his father's eye. He doesn't recognise that look; it's the look of a strange man. His real father kept staring at him from the corner of his eye until the tailgate of the truck was slammed shut and the vehicle disappeared from view. The father in the photograph is an apparition, a father from a time that never existed.

His cousin thinks the picture was taken on holiday in the mountains. Impossible. They went to the sea in the summer and the mountains in the winter. A café terrace in town, then?

But where? Next to the landing stage for the pleasure boats? In the zoo? Or on the belvedere alongside the canal in town where they had stopped for refreshments after a walk? Sooner or later the picture would divulge its secrets. He only had to look at it as often as possible.

A gust of wind blows the snow in his face like sparks.

He sticks the photograph in his breast pocket and lights a cigarette. *We Jews*, wrote Sigmund, *only believe in the possibility of salvation when we are waiting, exhausted, in a corner for the death blow.*

And that from a man who's had himself baptised to marry a gentile. His cousin hasn't let the spark of his Jewishness go out. So what right does he have to let his own fire go out?

He takes the photograph from his pocket again. Should I start singing in the synagogue again, Father? My wife heard from the rabbi that he's begging for a new cantor; the old one has lost his voice. And should I accept money from my executioners? My cousin read that they're planning to compensate their victims. Can grief be paid off, Father? Will I miss you less when my bank account is fatter? Of course I know they're only trying to salve their consciences. But the money would come in handy. We're not well off, even though I work like crazy. I'm a truck driver, Father. Tomorrow I'm off again for a week. To a town behind the mountains in the west of the country. The roads are one big skating rink round this time of year. Do my wife and children miss me while I'm away? Will they miss me if I slip and end up in a ravine? You were there, Father, when my mother brought me into the world. Wednesday's child is full of woe. Did you really believe in that saying? I sat on your lap more than on Mother's. A daddy's child.

We went to the gym together. You hoisted me up to the rings and solemnly impressed on me that I would only be a real German once I could perform gymnastics like an acrobat. I'm not a German any more, Father, I feel like a stranger everywhere. Only when I'm on my way to nowhere do I feel I'll find my way. When or how, I don't know, I'm waiting patiently, there's no other option.

'Dinner's ready, Father'.

When he turns round, his son has already run inside again.

He takes a last draw on his cigarette and grinds it out with his heel. His stomach is grumbling. He's hungry. The corned beef will go down well. After dinner he'll write to his cousin. He deserves it. Should he suggest he comes and visits?

Maybe his wife is right. After all, she's more sensible than he is. Maybe he should introduce his children to his father after all. He doesn't have a grave. His grandchildren will never be able to place a stone on his stone. He kisses the photograph, I'm here, he whispers, I remember.

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p 127-129

The journey there would take two days, the return journey as long. That left him three days to watch the girls on the dance floor from the café terrace of the Liebichshöhe, three days to drink

sweet beer with his father in the Schweidnitzer Keller. He wasn't intending to do anything with his brothers. They had their own plans and wouldn't appreciate his taking up their time. It was probably best to keep out of their way as much as possible. They would only talk about the war anyway. He would buy coffee for his father in Cologne, sausage and butter in Berlin. On his last leave he had managed to get hold of Belgian chocolates for his fiancée in Liège, but now chocolate had become scarcer than lobster and caviar.

In his letters, his father had written that he was eating well and the price of coal hadn't risen by much. The home front was behind the war as one man and no one shirked his duties or doubted the final victory.

His patriotic enthusiasm had not fooled Leo.

He was sure his father was going short at home and he would be cold this winter. Lothar and Ludwig would have caught on, too, and turn up with a knapsack full of provisions. He writes a lot, your father. Every time Madame handed him his letters, she looked at him candidly, as he were her own flesh and blood. Only then could he bear her friendliness. After all, she was not only a woman, but also a mother with two sons at the front.

It had turned out well that he would be home for the Sabbath. Before the war, he wouldn't have thought twice about it; he was first German and then Jewish. Besides, religious rituals caused more harm than good, certainly if a business contract had to be signed or a good customer had to be served on a high day.

But the war had brought changes. Although Leo didn't doubt his patriotism, he knew his friends and acquaintances would take offence if he didn't use his Jewishness in the service of the country.

Failing to do so gave those who didn't know better the impression that you didn't care about the sacrifices being made. Just as Christians prayed to God and Kaiser, showing that both the Hohenzollern and the king of heaven were in absolute agreement with the war waging, Jews, too, professed their love of their country by singing Yahweh's praises. Now He had chosen the side of the Germans, they wanted to thank Him and ask Him to hasten the enemy's surrender. After all, the enemy was fighting for hackneyed ideals.

The train lumbered through a landscape of black hills and sooty villages. Leo was so fed up with the snail's pace that he pulled down the window and stuck his head out to see what was holding them up. The icy draft woke several of his pals.

They yawned and stretched, scratching their scalps. When the train came to a stop with grinding wheels and began to shunt backwards, someone asked whether they were already in Paris.

'Two tickets for the Moulin Rouge for me!' exclaimed his neighbour.

No one laughed.

The area reminded Leo of the rubbly landscape of coalmines and steel factories in the heimat. Nevertheless, this ugliness was of an entirely different character. At home, the smoking chimney stacks and fire-spewing furnaces stood for strength and dynamism; here they were witness to decline.

The train pulled exasperatingly slowly into a station. Leo bit his lip. If they continued at this dog trot he's never reach Breslau.

On the platform, a group of civilians stared at him with dead eyes. Evidently farmers on their way to market; the women were carrying baskets and the men bundles on their backs. A diorama of hollow-cheeked faces and shabby clothes. Leo had no sympathy; Belgians were poor because they were backward. That was the fault of their political leaders, who had let the country degenerate. If the ultimate proof that the enemy was fighting a losing battle was to be found anywhere, then it was here on the platform of this depressive little rural station.

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p 131-132

The train was now going so fast that it shook dangerously backwards and forwards. Leo was content. The rocking and shuddering would send him to sleep. Even though he wasn't tired, sleep was the only thing he wanted now; if he stayed awake too long his thoughts would drive him into the arms of the supercilious major and his order to draw up a list of dead Jews.

Leo couldn't understand it. Why didn't he feel perfectly happy? He was on his way home. He would see his father and brothers again, saunter through his beloved town and dream of kissing all the girls in a ballroom long and passionately on the mouth. Life in all its simplicity, as it was in cheap novels and children's stories.

Instead, he felt as misunderstood and lost as when he strayed from his parents as a small boy while walking in the woods and was convinced he would never find his way home again.