

At The End of the War

National Socialism originated here, this was the source.

ANISE POSTEL-VINAY

LUCIENNE ON THE TRAIN

Between the trunks of the trees, the lake comes into view. After what seemed like an eternity, the train has finally started moving. Lucienne has a seat by the window, with an elderly Danish woman perched half on her lap, and half on the thighs of the Dutch woman next to her. Between the bench seats, two girls from Belgium, not yet twenty, are camped out, and in the aisles stand a few slightly older women, Scandinavian by the sound of it, leaning against the seats and each other.

Three years ago, Lucienne arrived in a cattle car, and now she is leaving on a passenger train.

That's progress.

KARL IN THE HEADQUARTERS' BALLROOM

'Karl?'

After a sleepless night, he heard his wife's voice early this morning, muffled by the door of his bedroom. For the hundredth time, he mentally played through the sonata as the score lay open on his bedside table. With an annoyed grimace, Karl got out of bed and walked to the landing. There she stood, in a pink dressing gown he didn't recognise. Definitely new, or never properly looked at before, anyway. He asked what was the matter. She started talking about the continuous rumbling in the distance. Oh, that.

Thankfully, he can't hear Christine's rumbling here, in the hustle and bustle of the headquarters' hall, which is being converted into a ballroom.

The Bechstein sounds less out of tune than expected, but he's still glad the tuner has been called because tonight's concert needs to be perfect. The Jew stands before him, cap in hand, clutching a tuba with his other arm. Waving his own hand, Karl dismisses the young SS officer who brought the tuner in.

'Name?'

'Menachem Farkas, Obersturmführer.'

Karl knows, of course, that this is the man's name; he didn't summon him for nothing. Earlier this week, Oberscharführer Ranken – seated on a horse! – told him that this Jew used to play in the Vienna Philharmonic. Karl pointed out to his subordinate that you can only take these kinds of men at their word. Their stories are impossible to verify, so they can basically tell you anything.

Now the wretch stands in the hall in front of Karl, holding tightly onto his tuba as if he believes the dull piece of tin would fetch considerably more than its scrap value.

'So you call yourself a piano tuner. Where were you trained?'

The Jew claims that his father worked as an amanuensis at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and, among other things, maintained the many keyboard instruments they had there, including grand pianos and upright pianos. 'They even had a harpsichord with two manuals, Herr Obersturmführer. I learned from my father, then later I went to the ...'

Karl nods, and the Jew shuts his mouth.

‘Get rid of that pathetic thing and get to work.’

He watches the Jew bend down laboriously to set his instrument on the ground and mutters to himself, ‘If this tone-deaf cockroach played with the Vienna Philharmonic, my name is Walter Giesecking.’

HANNS IN THE HEADQUARTERS’ BALLROOM

As soon as Hanns comes down the stairs and enters the ballroom, he is saluted from all sides. Soldiers stand to attention; prisoners take off their caps and bow their heads. He gestures for them to stand at ease. A stage has been built on which they have placed the grand piano that normally stands in the canteen to accompany drinking songs. Karl Zehlendorf, his deputy, stands next to it, leaning importantly on his cane, while a prisoner sits on a broken chair, apparently there to tune the piano. As if there were nothing more important to do.

CHRISTINE AT THE HAIRDRESSER’S IN TOWN

Christine closes her eyes, mainly so she doesn’t have to keep seeing the officious hairdresser in the mirror. A cripple. When she closes her eyes, it’s as if she’s at home, where a similar thudding noise accompanies her husband’s movements.

This morning at the breakfast table, she asked him if it would be wise to keep the boys at home because of the rumbling that seemed to have been growing louder since sunrise.

‘Why?’ he asked with his mouth full, not even looking up from the report he was leafing through. He took a sip of tea and washed down the bread he was chewing.

‘Because of the Russians.’ It was the second time she had broached the subject. Early this morning, all she had wanted was to shelter with her husband, but now ... now, she expected answers and action.

‘You and your Russians,’ he said softly. ‘I told you, they—’

‘I’m not crazy. My heart tells me that when my boys come home from school it’s best they stay inside. And that we need to leave here.’

Her husband put his cup on the table. ‘The boys will go outside this afternoon. A healthy mind needs a healthy body. And we’re staying here. I can’t ... as captain, I can’t abandon ship.’

At most, he was second mate, but Christine didn’t say that, she just sighed deeply.

‘Maybe they should take off those necklaces,’ he said a little later, as he got up from the table. ‘They don’t even enter the camp anymore.’

‘No, please let them keep the necklaces on.’

‘Whatever you want.’ He turned away from her, towards the piano, which he had been practising on in the middle of the night, much to her despair. ‘I have too much on my mind for this kind of tiresome conversation. Tonight, I have to play ... Fine, they can keep the necklaces on, but when they come home from school, they will go outside to play. They know very well where the boundary of their playground is, and you will see to it that they get home in time so you can be there tonight.’

Thud-step, thud-step, there comes the hairdresser again, carrying a round mirror in a wooden frame. Just as he holds it up so Christine can see her new hairstyle from behind, the man cries out ‘My leg!’ and grabs his wooden limb.

The mirror falls to the floor and shatters into tiny pieces.

LUCIENNE ON THE TRAIN

Her breath makes a condensation mark on the window she has leant her cheek against. Lucienne suppresses the urge to lick the moisture off the glass.

A cup of milk, a bath, clean clothes, a freshly made bed and something other than gritty soup, rotting turnips and bread hard as a rock – that’s what she longs for.

If only this train would move a little faster than walking pace.

Near a small building on the lake’s shore, two boys cast their fishing rods. A carefree image from long ago, a postcard you send home when you’re on holiday: ‘We’re having a great time here!’

HERBERT IN THE TOWN

Through the shop window of the ladies’ and gentlemen’s hairdresser’s, Herbert sees that, fortunately, Madam is still in her chair. The crippled barber is sweeping up shards of a mirror with a broom. On this bank holiday, he has kept his shop open longer than usual, especially for Madam.

As soon as Madam starts to get up, Herbert hurries back to the dusty staff car.

KARL IN THE HEADQUARTERS’ BALLROOM

The Jew has placed his tuba on the floor and started to work. Karl leafs through the score. The difficult passages – and there are quite a few of them – he has practised at home in the spare hours, to Christine’s noticeable annoyance, three or four times in total. Only yesterday though, when it was past midnight, after a depressing visit to Himmler, did he find the time and peace to play the sonata through once in its entirety. But had he truly found time and peace? He’d forced himself to play, while above his head Christine stomped around her room. To his dismay, that run-through had been far from flawless, and he lay awake all night because of it.

LUCIENNE ON THE TRAIN

The train has almost come to a standstill, and Lucienne fears she will have to get off again. Almost simultaneously, the two boys out fishing pull up their rods with a sharp tug and turn their bodies towards one another. Judging by their gestures, they are cursing at each other.

They must be brothers.

Lucienne’s empty stomach tightens.

The smallest one takes a few steps back and runs forward to headbutt his big brother like a goat, hitting him squarely in the stomach.

JOHANNA IN THE SICK BAY

The professor steps out of his consulting room and asks if Johanna has any plans for tonight – for a moment she thinks he wants to ask her out (where to, for God’s sake?), but then she understands what he means.

‘We are celebrating the joyous occasion in private,’ she says, bowing her head. ‘My father, my mother and ...’ She is startled by what she almost said. ‘... and myself. Obviously.’

‘I wish I could be with my family, but unfortunately ...’ His voice falters, and he coughs, then flashes an apologetic smile.

Is Johanna mistaken or is he blinking too much?

The professor pulls an old-fashioned silver watch out of the pocket of the black uniform he wears under his white coat. ‘Well, as far as I’m concerned, you can go, Miss Löw. I wish you a pleasant evening.’

She has never been given time off and doesn’t know what to say. ‘Time off? It doesn’t feel right.’

Mechanically, she bobs a curtsy that the professor acknowledges kindly, after which he disappears behind the door of his consulting room again.

HANNS ON THE LANDING OF THE HEADQUARTERS

The weather is quite fine now; the sun has finally started to shine. For the first time since early this morning, Hanns goes outside. People are busy everywhere, as if they want to finish things quickly before the party starts tonight. Walking calmly to the main gate of his camp, he takes the time to look around a bit and listen to the rumbling in the distance.

LONE ON THE JETTY ON THE SHORE OF THE LAKE

Lone can’t possibly say how many times they have pushed and pulled the cart through the mud to the lake today. She straightens her back, even though she’s not allowed to dawdle. As soon as she steps foot on the slippery jetty, she must lift a heavy stone from the flat-bottomed boat and bring it to the cart, without delay. A quick glance at another prisoner to confer, stretching your muscles, or closing your eyes for a few seconds: that could be the last thing you do. Take a moment to scratch your head and you’ll spend a week starving in the Bunker, with rats that will nibble on your toes as soon as you dare to fall asleep.

Lone knows this, but she remains standing on the jetty, looking in the direction from which they came.

She wants to know if everyone is still alive.

KARL IN THE HEADQUARTERS’ BALLROOM

Barrels of beer are rolled noisily into the ballroom. There’s already a terrible racket: chairs and tables being moved, hammering and sawing everywhere. That Jew won’t be able to do

his work like this. Leaning on his cane, Karl walks to the edge of the stage and gruffly requests silence, 'until further notice'.

Everyone immediately freezes. A little respect for the highest art form would not be out of place for members of the SS, and certainly not for that rabble from the camp.

Karl walks away from the grand piano and stands in front of the French doors that open onto the garden. Behind it lies the lake, illuminated by the setting sun.

IWONA IN THE SICK BAY

Nurse Löw leans over Iwona's bed. She always does that at the end of her shift. She checks how everyone is doing and whether there are any matters she needs to see to before she goes home. Although she can't be much older than Iwona, there's something motherly in the way the nurse tucks her in and wishes her goodnight. She's a sweet woman who's even learned a little Polish.

As soon as the nurse has left, Iwona and the other women are left to their fate until the next morning. Due to a lack of medical staff, Arrestführerinnen in training supervise here in the evenings and at night: girls plucked from school who only appear in the ward to yell that everyone must be quiet. They even bark orders at the dying to rattle a little more quietly as they breathe.

HERBERT IN THE TOWN

In less than an hour, Madam has turned into a film star. Most people leave the hairdresser's with less hair, yet she has done so with more. Illuminated by the forgiving light of the spring sun that is showing itself for the first time today, Madam looks like a sophisticated, wavy-haired Berliner who has got lost in this sleepy town by the lake surrounded by wild forests, overlooking the beautifully situated mud-filled camp on the other side.

In a mist of hairspray, Herbert lets her into the car.

HANNS ON THE ROAD ALONG THE HEADQUARTERS

Hanns stops in the middle of the road and takes in his surroundings. It's not out of the question that this area, where he has been allowed to serve the people as camp commandant for so long, will soon turn into a battlefield. Then everything will have been for nothing. That damned rumbling in the distance.

At the garages, vehicles that have been stationary for weeks are being patched up, even though he hasn't given any orders to do so. Outside, commandos are busy with trucks full of coal and stones, and prisoners emerge from the woods dragging huge tree trunks. Lorries, a train, small boats. It is almost inconceivable that this peaceful setting could turn into a battle scene full of tanks and bloodthirsty fighters from the Red Army.

His women are walking around everywhere: dozens, hundreds of prisoners, all in similar striped clothing that needs washing.

Two boys are wrestling on the shore of the lake – what on earth are they doing here? Or are they Zehlendorf's sons? Astonishing! He will check with his deputy.

KARL IN THE HEADQUARTERS' BALLROOM

The silence in the room and the Jew's patient tinkling on the piano bring Karl back to early this morning.

'Tell me those aren't the Russians,' Christine said on the landing. She was wearing that pink dressing gown, her blonde hair up in a ponytail.

The enemy's position is a state secret, he wanted to lie, but he couldn't, so he nodded and gave her a forced smile. 'Maybe you should go to the hairdresser before night falls.'

'I asked you something.'

'The Bolsheviks are still hundreds of kilometres from here. Dozens at the very least. And we will stop them, we will stop them by any means ... a devastating counter-offensive is in the making ...'

'That's not the point, Karl! Hold me, please.'

He held her, but he felt nothing.

Now, in the soft light of evening, he understands that she knows just as well as he does that their time here, in the comfortable villa in the woods – a house she loathes – will soon be over. He mustn't give up, he must be both a soldier and a musician. But later, when he has received a round of applause and the party is over, he will mostly have to be a soldier.

Everything else, however essential in peacetime, is now secondary to the final victory.

HANNS ON THE ROAD BY THE HEADQUARTERS

Hanns has more important things on his mind than snotty kids who apparently don't realise they are on forbidden territory. A patrol will soon make that clear to them. He has to go to the Schreibstube, then on to the sick bay, and then he needs to drag Zehlendorf away from that piano and put him to work.

KARL IN THE HEADQUARTERS' BALLROOM

Karl has a war to fight. That became clear to him when his wife started talking about the advancing enemy at the breakfast table again. 'Can't you hear that?' she asked.

In the distance, heavy explosions from the Russian artillery sounded. Even a deaf person wouldn't have missed them, as the parquet floor in the dining room vibrated with every impact.

He and Christine had words about it, in the same way that they haven't been able to have a single conversation without raised voices or barely concealed annoyance in recent years. Upon seeing his wife, Karl has sometimes thought over the last months: I wish I were at the front. And now his wish is being granted. The front has found him.

He had stood up and turned to the piano to study the painting hanging above it, a romantic landscape passed down to them by her family. That scene of a lonely figure

dwarfed by the immensity of nature; the rugged trees, the eternal mountains, all bathed in the golden glow of the life-giving sun – that was his ideal, he realised, not the discordant lament of a spoiled and estranged wife.

He no longer hears a piano, just the people in the hall, who have started to chat with each other again. Karl walks back to the grand piano and taps the Jew on the shoulder.

The man makes way for him. It seems he has done his job properly. A stroke of luck.

The International Jewry continues to amaze us, fellow countrymen.

EMANUEL IN FRONT OF THE MAIN GATE

For Emanuel, the war has finally begun. Together with three comrades, he marches in goose step to the main gate. The guard is being changed and as soon as they get the chance, the others light a cigarette, but he declines. Firm refusal seems tougher to him than hesitant acceptance and a coughing fit.

What can he expect? Well, he needs to keep an eye on everything and constantly assess whether there is any danger. He must also determine at a glance whether someone is allowed in or out.

A train has started moving along the track that follows the edge of the lake and then turns inland and runs along the camp's wall – where it leads, he doesn't know. There are so many wagons that he cannot see the locomotive that apparently pushes the whole thing, but the white and black clouds of steam and smoke that rise in the distance above the forest betray its presence.

Closer by, on the shore of the lake, are two boys with fishing rods. Childish nonsense. Today, Emanuel has entered the world of men.