

“A stunning elegy to a vanished time”

CAROLINE HELLER

READING CLAUDIUS

A DUAL MEMOIR

“...this fine book contains moments of emotion so pure
that in the end, we too fall in love with the writer’s past.”

NEW YORK TIMES



“Heller plunges us lovingly and convincingly into that lost world, conjuring the youthful longings of her mother and her father, as well as her uncle’s magnetism”

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Leah Hager Cohen, author of *No Book but the World and The Grief of Others*

“A deeply felt and deeply thought memoir, it manages to unearth a whole lost world with aching tenderness and regret.”

Phillip Lopate, author of *Portrait Inside My Head*



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LONDON AND NEW YORK

READING CLAUDIUS

A Memoir in Two Parts



Caroline Heller

Leapfrog Press and TSB
New York and London

Reading Claudius: A Memoir in Two Parts

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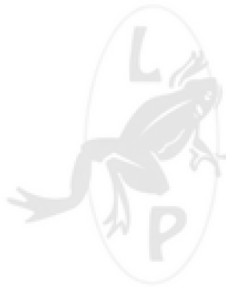
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For Thomas Heller



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FOREWORD

Shortly after the death of my father in 2001, I felt compelled to craft my family's story into words on the page. Initially, I tried writing the chapters out of chronological sequence. These would be the "easier" chapters, I thought. As fallible as memory is, at least I was *there*, a witnessing narrator, already part of the story. From the very beginning of embarking on the research that led to *Reading Claudius*, I agonized over how I would write about events that took place before I was born. Despite immersing myself in archives, interviews, letters, and books, when I turned to writing the chapters that focus on my parents' and uncle's early lives, I became paralyzed. Rich with information from research, I still had no way of knowing how the light looked through a window, what someone wore, the inflection of someone's voice—what the philosopher Michel de Certeau refers to as the "immense remainder" that makes lives real and a story about those lives larger than a compilation of "facts."

I experimented with different possibilities. I tried to enter the narrative at certain junctures, dispersing phrases like: "I

think they told me . . . ,” “I don’t know with certainty, but . . . ,” “There is a good chance that . . .” But the insertions created a nervous glancing-over-the-shoulder feeling in the text, an awkwardness that seemed to diminish the possibility of immersion in my parents’ and uncle’s early world—both for me and, I thought, for my audience.

That strategy failing, I turned to other writers. “There isn’t a self-evident way of going about it,” says W. G. Sebald in an interview about his efforts to narrate history. “You gather things up like a person who leaves a burning house . . . You adulterate the truth as you try to write it.” Alice Munro seemed to agree, describing the process of writing her own family’s story, *The View from Castle Rock*, as one of “sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging on to threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life.” And because he brought such sly sad humor to the question of narrating a family’s past, I felt particularly close to Delmore Schwartz. In my favorite of his stories, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” the protagonist goes to a movie theater and inexplicably finds himself watching a film about his parents’ lives before he was born, rather than the movie he came to see. He starts to talk back to the screen, trying to insert himself into the narrative so that he can fashion the story into the one he wants it to be. “What are *you* doing?!” a theater usher shouts, running down the aisle toward where the man sits. “Don’t you know you can’t do whatever you want to do?” he scolds as he grabs the man’s arm and ejects him from the theater. “You can’t carry on like this!”

But how does any writer avoid “carrying on like this” as she summons the presumption and temerity to cross the border be-

tween present and past, living and dead? If she inserts herself into the story, as I tried to do, the reader will rightly ask, “What are *you* doing here?” But if she aims to be an omniscient narrator, her reader will just as rightly ask, “Where are *you*?”

I eventually made the decision to allow myself to imagine some of the historical details—the expressions and clothing, the dialogue and gestures, thoughts, and emotions, as they may have occurred in the holes left empty by those letters, interviews, and archives, and to provide detailed source notes that describe the research that contributed to the rendering of each chapter.

In *The Human Condition*, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, a dear friend of my uncle Erich who frequently visited my parents’ home when I was a child, wrote that “compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life . . . lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized . . . into a shape to fit them for public appearance.” She calls such stories “the subjective in-between.”

Though the contours of each historical chapter comprising Part I are fundamentally factual, in the everyday details I evoke, I called on my parents and uncle to subtly deputize me to be their chronicler, allowing myself to enter the subjective in-between. I did so not because I believe a writer accomplishes higher artistry or truth when she lets her imagination enter in, but because doing so seemed necessary to capture as closely as possible the spirit of what Claire Messud calls “life being lived.” “At the heart of things,” Messud writes, “whatever the ideas and ideologies, the violations and violence, the peculiarities of culture—always at the heart are ordinary peo-

ple, and there is just life being lived: tables and bread and toilets and scissors and cigarettes and kisses.” Unable to know my parents’ and uncle’s early world in its fullness, I tried in this way to approximate a representation of its wholeness. Doing so was my way of fulfilling a lifelong yearning to literally make my parents’ world whole again, to bring back that dense mingling of the intellectual, the artistic, the social, and the political that defined their early lives—their lost Atlantis of prewar Central Europe.

I had no need to wrestle with a narrative style for the Prologue or for Part II of *Reading Claudius*. My challenge here was of a different nature: overcoming my resistance to adding my own story to that of my parents and uncle. Like many heirs of the Holocaust, I carry a sense that the drama and losses of the past eclipse what seem like (and often are) the more prosaic dramas of our more immediate present. Thus, I originally intended *Reading Claudius* to be solely about my parents’ and uncle’s lives, not about my own. But a price is paid for survival, and indeed keeps getting paid generationally, though not in the exact same coin. Writing the Prologue and Part II necessitated varieties of self-scrutiny that I hadn’t anticipated having to undertake, transforming *Reading Claudius* into a more urgently personal undertaking, closer to my own bone. My parents’ history has multiple implications for how I’ve been formed. But while I was shaped by my parents’ darkness and carry its meanings, the darkness itself is only a part of me. It isn’t synonymous with my fuller essence, which belongs to me as a creature of my own place and time. In gaining access to the past’s secrets, I gained access to my own. It is from this full, complicated panorama that I wrote *Reading Claudius*.

READING CLAUDIUS



How can it be that all that is in us dies with us? How can it be that those memories . . . simply ceased to be? . . . This seems to me the greatest weakness of any supposed divine plan, the primary reason to doubt.

Claire Messud, "The Road to Damascus,"
Granta, Winter 2012



PROLOGUE

0-0

And That New Thing Is Life

In the summer of 1954, when I was four years old, my family moved from Omaha, Nebraska, where my father had completed his medical residency, to the west side of Chicago, near his new job as staff hematologist at the VA hospital. The Third Unitarian Church was a block from our apartment, and my parents joined it. On Sunday mornings, I'd sit enfolded in my mother's lap for the adult service, led by the gentle, grandfatherly minister, E. T. Buehrer, while my brother, Tom, who was six, attended Sunday school. On our way home, Tom performed new songs he'd learned—*this little liberal light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.*

Occasionally, after services, my father declared a holiday from his medical research, which he rarely abandoned, even on weekends. We'd pick up rolls and cold cuts from Steve's Grocery, near our apartment, and drive to a nature preserve on the outskirts of Chicago. It had meandering trails bordered by wetlands and prairie grasses and, in spring and summer, bursts of wildflowers of every imaginable color. The long paths, visited by chipmunks and rabbits, which we fed

with the fluffy insides of our sandwich rolls, were connected by arched wooden footbridges over small streams. Each bridge had a glass-enclosed display case fastened to its railing that contained drawings and photographs of the native wildlife and plants as well as short descriptions and, at the bottom, a line or two from a nature poem by Robert Frost, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson.

Carrying our picnic, we'd set out along the trails, where my father, an assortment of Zim's Golden Nature Guides in his back pockets, had the habit of stopping at each display case and, in his serious, schoolmasterly way, reading every bit of information out loud, then looking down at Tom and me with an expression that implied a quiz might follow.

But by the time we got to the third or fourth wooden bridge, the muscles of my father's mouth and cheeks would relax. The dark mood that pressed heavily on our family life fell away like a mask, and a softness came over my father as his voice transitioned from the lines of the American nature poems to recitations of German poems he'd memorized long ago.

My parents had always peppered their English with fragments of German. In later years, when my uncle Erich, my father's older brother, moved to the United States and came to visit us on weekends, they often spoke German together. But here, on the nature trails, the German words flowed out in streams of joy. Our sad, stern father, our "Bau" (when my brother was a toddler, his efforts to say "Paul" produced only "Bau," and we referred to him as that all our lives), transformed into someone impish and lighthearted. He even did a little dance. I didn't want this Bau ever to leave.

The finale to the afternoon was poems by Goethe, which

Bau sang—*Is not the world still left? . . . Doth not the wondrous arch of heaven still rise, / Now rich in shape, now shapeless to the eyes?* Hearing my father speak Goethe’s name with such warmth and happiness, I imagined someone who smelled like a grandfather might smell, a combination of Reverend Buehler and Jingles from the Saturday-morning television show *Wild Bill Hickok*. Bau swept the air with his make-believe conductor’s baton and stretched his arms out toward my mother, who stood on the sidelines of the stream of his activity. Though he’d tease himself—“Only people who have a talent for singing ought to sing”—Bau’s voice sounded as if it were meant for just these words, as though in them he’d finally found a ration of the world’s store of happiness, which on other days eluded him.

While my father sang Goethe, my mother pulled my brother and me close in front of her and wrapped her arms around us, facing Bau. It was hard to stay still for as long as she held us, but I felt that she needed us to. It was as though she were displaying us to the world, a little sanctuary of us.

In 1958, a few weeks before Christmas vacation—by then we’d moved to a suburb called Riverside, and I was in third grade—ninety-two children and three teachers died in a fire at Our Lady of Angels, a Catholic elementary school on Chicago’s northwest side. In the days that followed, the victims’ photographs filled the front pages of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which arrived at my parents’ doorstep every morning. Each evening I cut out the photos, laid them on my bedspread, and stared at the children’s faces, scrutinizing their expressions for

signs of their impending doom like a lookout sentry alert for shadows or noises in the night. I recall the photograph of one little girl in particular. She looked about my age, eight years old, had dark hair, a slightly protruding upper lip that gave her a mischievous look, deep-set, watchful eyes, and a knowing, eager expression, as if she wanted to talk to me.

I made myself look at the photos of the children each night before I went to bed, especially the face of this little girl, whose features, I realized much later, reminded me of a photograph of my mother as a child, one of the few she'd managed to take out of Germany. I was convinced that another terrible tragedy would ensue if I didn't hold the image of the girl with me as I drifted off to sleep, so I thought of her with such concentration that sometimes in dreams I watched her fall from the sky in a light brown dress, somersaulting as she fell, all the while looking at me, talking to me, trying to tell me something.

After the fire, every evening before my mother came into my room to say good night, I lined up my stuffed animals two by two, arms around each other, paws touching. Each was with a best friend in case something terrifying happened while I slept. "I won't die during the night. Tommy won't die during the night. You won't die during the night. Bau won't die during the night." Night after night, I needed my mother to sit with me at bedtime and repeat these words as if they could cancel the imagined ones the little girl might be trying to tell me. The ritual begun after the fire went on for several years, interrupted only when Uncle Erich, who didn't approve of babying children, visited. Still I dreamed of the little girl, who sometimes transformed into the image of my mother in the

photo of her as a child. Then she'd be the little girl again, coming so close to my face I could feel her breath.

That Christmas season, while the lights of Riverside glowed outside, Bau read aloud to Tom and me from the English translation of *Doctor Zhivago*, which had just come out in the United States. After dinner, Bau, his head thrust a little forward from his body, as was his habit, hurried to the shelf to retrieve the book, which he kept next to his weathered copy of *War and Peace*. As I listened to the sounds of my mother cleaning up in the kitchen and through the windows watched the snow diffuse the beams of the cars and the lights of the houses on Herrick Road, my father turned the pages with a moistened index finger, looking for the exact passage where the previous reading had left off. He pulled out the silver mechanical pencil always clipped to the pocket of his jacket or shirt and carefully bracketed a section or drew a double line in the margin of the book. "Zis is something to remember," he murmured, as Tom and I ate the Scottie dog- and star-shaped Christmas cookies we'd helped my mother bake. Riverside had its Christmas pageants, and we had *Doctor Zhivago*.

The book, with its pencil marks, is in front of me now. I've opened to an early scene in which Yurii Zhivago explains his beliefs about consciousness, religion, and the meaning of memory and eternity to a dying and frightened Anna Ivanovna Gromeko, the woman who raised him. Bracketed in faded pencil is this passage: *And now listen carefully. You in others—this is your soul. This is what you are, what your con-*

sciousness has breathed and lived on and enjoyed throughout your life, your soul, your immortality in others.

Bau's purpose in reading to us from *Doctor Zhivago* may have had nothing to do with trying to relieve my agony over the deaths of the children, but sitting next to him, I felt as though, in a feat of uncommon empathy, he was addressing the words directly to me. I identified the children's faces, their eyes, mouths, noses, hair, with these words from the book and with my father's voice, which, though more serious, expressed something similar to what it conveyed when he stood on the footbridges of the nature preserve singing Goethe—that these words and what could be found in them, certainly what *he* found in them, might connect me to something even more real than the world that surrounded me.

So, what will happen to your consciousness? Your consciousness, yours, not anyone else's? Yurii Zhivago asks Anna Ivanovna in another passage bracketed by Bau's pencil strokes. What are you conscious of in yourself? Your kidneys? Your liver? Your blood vessels? No. However far back you go in your memory, it is always in some external, active manifestations of yourself that you come across your identity—in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people . . . There will be no death because the past is over. It is already done with. What we need is something new, and that new thing is life, Bau read in his deep, heavily accented voice, the book cradled in his lap, Tom and I seated on either side of him, our hands clasped around our knees.

And that new thing is life, my father repeated, tapping his knee, then each of ours, with his soft fist, and nodding as if renewing a bargain he'd made with himself long ago.

On a brilliant, sunny afternoon, fall 1966, I sat at my desk in my American history class, staring longingly out the tall windows, opened just a crack, that overlooked the athletic field. In the heat of early afternoon, the room smelled of formaldehyde from the biology class down the hall and grease from the cafeteria below. Grunts from boys in gym class outside pushed through the windows. I was sixteen years old, a junior at Riverside Brookfield High School. My teacher, Mr. Dombrowski, a slender, sweaty man with regal posture, pursed lips, and perfectly parted brown hair tamed with scented pomade, had a high-pitched voice that became nasal and tinny when he lectured. Even on warm days he wore a dark suit, dress shirt, and bow tie, and when he moved around our classroom, he smelled of menthol and body odor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve established that the colonists wanted their freedom from King George. What else? What else brought the colonies to war?” Mr. Dombrowski hoisted himself out of the chair behind his desk and grabbed a piece of chalk to begin one of his famous lists. *NUMBER 1*, he wrote, as always, in big well-formed letters and numerals, as if the very fact of the list were more important than its content. “In-dee-pen-dence!” he said as he wrote it out, adding in a vertical column underneath #2, #3, #4, #5. In Mr. Dombrowski’s view, all historical events should have at least five clear causes. “Number two? Anyone?”

“To keep another country from taking your land away,” said David Doemland, sitting to my left. Different from the robust, crew-cut boys who presided over the halls of RB, David was slight, with wispy blond curls, serious pale blue

eyes, and a kind of melancholy and intelligence that inspired my fondness and loyalty. We were in several classes together.

“Ah, Mr. Doemland, you take the viewpoint of England!” Mr. Dombrowski said. “How diplomatic of you. Yes, England didn’t want to lose its fine piece of property across the Atlantic. Correct, Mr. Doemland. Good!” He added David’s contribution to the list. #2: *LAND OWNERSHIP*.

“Like Syria blowing up the Jews,” David went on. I remember him leaning back in his seat and stretching his slender legs in the aisle. “The Jews took Syria’s land. War is justified to get it back, to hold the Jews back.” He crossed his arms with self-satisfaction.

“Okay, Mr. Doemland. You offer an example from current events to make a point,” Mr. Dombrowski said, alluding to Syria’s recent attacks on Israeli border towns that had filled the news that fall. “But since you’re making a comparison,” he went on, “let’s define what we’re talking about. For one thing, who *are* ‘the Jews’?”

In little trumpet blasts of contempt, yet in the matter-of-fact tone of someone who saw himself as a spokesperson for accepted truths, David answered: “You know, kinky black hair. Hooked noses.” His chest puffed with vanity. He glanced around the room as though we were all in on this, as though he hadn’t a doubt that we all agreed.

Heat spread down my legs and arms and suffused my face. In high school, I was known for being shy, soft-spoken, and smart. My comments in class were careful, measured. I raised my hand to speak. At first nothing came out. Then I began to speak loudly, emphatically, as if a calling to meet this moment had lived inside me forever. “Israel is a tiny country.” I might

have shouted it. “Jews couldn’t go anywhere else. Jews were being murdered . . .” I lost my way as my voice stuck in my throat.

“Before we proceed with our discussion,” Mr. Dombrowski said in a cool and dispassionate voice, “I should ask if anyone in the class is Jewish.”

His question felt intimate and perilous. David fiddled with his pencil. I didn’t want anyone to look at me. In the room, which suddenly felt motionless and silent, Mr. Dombrowski’s near-suffocating fragrance settled around me. I had the sensation of floating above myself, my body hidden in a shapeless brown dress. I felt my arm go up, propelled by a will of its own, then stop halfway, extended out to my right like that of a crossing guard stopping traffic. I couldn’t raise it farther. I couldn’t put it down.

Into the blank space of my mind—for seconds, minutes, years—nothing entered and yet, as if for the very first time, everything did. What was once confused, formless, and partial now cohered, like a primordial threat. Haughtily blond David Doemland had declared his hatred for Jews, and I knew: He was talking about me.

I don’t believe my parents made a conscious decision to hide our Jewishness from my brother and me as we were growing up. Nor do I believe they made a deliberate decision not to tell us about the losses that formed their lives before we were born. Maybe it was a second’s hesitancy that kept them from telling us. Perhaps more seconds accumulated until the silence became more a surrender to habit than a thought or plan.

They'd filled our house with symbols of intellectual curiosity and openness—shelves crammed with books, including the old tattered ones they'd managed to take out of Europe, heady progressive journals and program notes from concerts, lectures, and plays. But that openness and curiosity had limits. However it had been forged, there was a tacit family agreement not to ask certain questions. Tom and I fell into step with the prohibition, tiptoeing around those questions as if avoiding broken glass. Little by little, without our noticing, tiptoeing became our natural gait.

A truth that had little to do with our daily lives in Riverside, Illinois, hovered over everything but never landed quite long enough for us to touch it. I felt confounded by feelings of incompleteness. We were strangers to our parents' darkness, yet wholly formed from it. Though the losses our parents knew before we were born lay behind them, I sensed that everything else that held meaning and importance was behind them, too—behind all of us. The real narrative had already been lived, and we were its tiny afterlife.

After the war, my parents, like many Holocaust survivors, believed their engagement in the present and their hopes for the future depended in large measure on trying to forget the past. My brother and I were born only a few years after Hitler and those complicit with his goals destroyed the world that would have been our inheritance.

By the late 1970s, when Holocaust testimonies were more welcomed into public discourse in the United States, and even more so, later in our parents' lives, when they became increasingly overwhelmed by memories, they opened up more. Those outpourings, often filled with vivid detail, gave me a great deal

of the material I've used to write this book. Until then the truth of the past announced itself indirectly and incompletely. Mostly it whispered in our ears: Don't ask. Just be good. Be so good that through you, their world will be made whole again.

It has taken me years to trust my understanding of all that I absorbed from my parents, and years more to engage in the research that helped me to write about their lives—travels to Czechoslovakia, Germany, and England to follow in their (and my uncle's) footsteps; interviews with people who knew them before, during, and after the war; immersion in the letters, photographs, books, and other documents that survived.

In what follows, I try to give that past coherence as a story.

They were young people finding their way in life, but when I try to imagine them then, they feel as old as Europe itself.

PART I

The Subjective In-Between



CHAPTER ONE

0-0

Arrival in Prague

Summer 1933

Liese Florsheim was nineteen years old when she first met the Heller brothers on the shores of the Alaunsee, a lake nestled among the wooded hills of the Czechoslovakian countryside. It was late June 1933, just weeks after Liese had arrived in Prague alone. She spoke not a single word of Czech and knew no one in the country, yet her parents believed that Czechoslovakia, known throughout Europe for its benevolence toward refugees, was the best place for her until life in Germany returned to normal.

She entered the city alongside thousands of Jews fleeing Hitler in Germany and moved into the Msec Castle, a fortresslike building being used as temporary housing for refugees. Soon she found a student room in an old stone building in Prague's Staré Mesto (the Old City). Across the hall lived a second-year medical student, Franta Kraus, whose fluent German made him a perfect guide to the city and to nearby Charles University, where she planned to enroll as a medical student that fall. A friend of the Hellers' since childhood, Franta invited Liese to join him and his girlfriend, Eva

Hirsch, for a swimming outing with the Heller boys and other friends.

Liese had changed into her skirted swimming suit and was lying on a towel in the warm sand, immersed in a book, by the time the others arrived at the lake—Franz Gollan and his girlfriend, Edith Abeles, Hans Posner, Paul Schülle, and Tomas Berman. She felt very much the outsider among this close-knit group of Czech students, whose families lived in the sleepy towns surrounding Prague and were part of the young nation's flourishing Jewish community. Most of them were bilingual; some, because of the lingering influence of the Hapsburg monarchy, had grown up more fluent in German than in Czech. Liese was relieved that they didn't ask many questions about the situation in Germany, instead showing their concern with their eyes and warm handshakes.

Soon Paul Heller arrived at the lake, winding his way toward them through the dense beach grass at the edge of the sand, wet reeds clinging to his legs and the straps of his sandals. He was a sturdy, gentle-faced boy with gray-green eyes and black hair combed straight back, in the style of the times, revealing shiny peaks and valleys of comb marks. He had a scattering of pimples and summer freckles on his sunburned nose, making him look younger than his eighteen years. Liese noticed his hesitation when he shook her hand, the shy tilt of his head as he took off his glasses. Erich would be late, Paul told the group apologetically, as if he assumed it was his brother's arrival that they more eagerly awaited. As usual, Erich had stayed up late the night before, writing, and was still asleep, he said.

"The task of morning sleep requires all Erich Heller's best energies, Liese," Franta explained as he, Eva, and Hans

climbed into one of the shiny green rowboats tied to the nearby dock. “The man goes to bed with the dawn chorus, but it never seems to do him the least bit of harm.”

Liese wondered about this absent fellow who, even before his arrival, seemed to command so much attention.

Paul headed for the water by himself, swimming across the lake and back before placing himself on his towel on the sand near Liese. Out of his rucksack he pulled a tin of bilberries, a thermos, and a volume of Thomas Mann stories, its pages pulling loose from the cardboard binding. Mann was all the rage among young people.

“I have the same edition,” Liese told him, glancing up. “The pages are falling out of mine, too. Such a thin cover. But it’s light and good for travel.”

“*Tonio Kröger* just came out in leather,” Paul said, an excited grin filling his face as he dried off his glasses and replaced them on his nose. “You can buy it with its own oak slipcase. Too beautiful to bring to a picnic, though!”

“Do you have a favorite?” Liese asked, sitting up and wrapping her arms around her knees. She was full-breasted and slim, with dark, wildly curly hair and intent brown eyes that shimmered when something interested her, a quality that gave a sense of something tender in her personality, something inviting.

“Depends on my mood,” Paul said. “But really, I suppose, it’s always been *Tonio Kröger*. Maybe because I read it first. I remember thinking then . . . Well, you come away thinking that you haven’t really *lived* yet. There is all this life to live!” Paul’s neck and face reddened.

“It’s impossible to read *Tonio Kröger* without thinking

Mann wrote it just for you. I mean, *me*,” Liese said, and they both laughed.

When the rowers returned, they spread out an immense picnic—salami, rolls, bottles of wine, chestnuts, strawberries, Paul’s bilberries, chocolate (Liese’s contribution), even bananas, a rarity. Franz Gollan began to whistle a tune from a Hofmannsthal operetta while balancing a chestnut on his nose.

Paul wanted to ask Liese more questions, to talk about other Mann stories, about the Tolstoy she was reading. He wanted to tell her she’d just missed Prague’s spring lilacs, which blossomed into more colors than anywhere else in the world. He wanted to recite to her the poem that had been in his head as he swam. This happened to him often—a nonsense poem would enter his head, a Christian Morgenstern or a Joachim Ringelnatz—and wouldn’t leave until he recited it out loud. This time it was Morgenstern’s “The Picket Fence.”

One time there was a picket fence
With space to gaze from hence to thence.
An architect who saw this sight
Approached it suddenly one night,
Removed the spaces from the fence,
And built of them a residence.
The picket fence stood there dumbfounded
With pickets wholly unsurrounded,
A view so loathsome and obscene,
The Senate had to intervene.
The architect, however, flew
To Afri- or Americoo.

“Hence to thence” was Paul’s newest favorite line with which to tease himself about his incessant need to carefully plan his future. “Hence to thence, Paul! But focus more on hence than thence!”

Erich Heller arrived soon, a tall, slender, startlingly handsome figure in a rumpled shirt and long striped swimming shorts under his open robe. His light brown hair was tousled from sleep. He couldn’t stay long, he announced immediately, glancing at his wristwatch, for he was expected at a party in Prague and had to catch the six o’clock train. He took off his robe and shirt and bounded into the water before joining their feast.

“*Unbedante Weise,*” he said to Liese, shaking her hand. All my very best to you, though I do not yet know you. Liese watched him as he shook the water from his hair and laid his towel in the warm sand beside her and Paul. She listened to his rapid-fire stories and his opinions about literature and history, which she thought showed a remarkable command of whatever subject he touched upon. He had spent much of the night before, he announced, working on an essay about Goethe, the poet he loved above all others. He felt that suddenly, that very night, he’d recognized in Goethe’s work what no one else ever had.

“Oh, Erich Heller, don’t show off! There’s nobody here who will take notice!” said Edith.

“No, I’m entirely serious. Goethe did not comprehend his own history!” Erich said, jumping to his feet, sandwich in one hand and paper cup of wine in the other. “He would not admit to his own despair at the tragedy of Germany. Do you not see? While he foresaw the fragmentation . . .” No, this was not the

word he meant. He paused, staring at the sand. “Breakdown!” He seemed to revel in this retrieval. “Breakdown! The breakdown of German culture. Do you see? Do you not see that Goethe refused to recognize this tragedy? His optimistic heart simply could not accept it. He was accused of aloofness from politics, but his only choice, if he wanted to be a poet, was to identify completely with his own inner order. Does this not sound like a lesson for us?” Erich asked, his gaze fixed dreamily on the steep wooded hills across the lake.

Turning back to his friends, he offered a toast to the lake, then another to Liese. “To our new acquaintance from Frankfurt! To optimism amid tragedy!” After polishing off his wine, he collapsed on his back, stretching his arms out in the sand.

“To the lake and to Liese!” the others added, raising their cups toward her, coaxing a smile to her face as she sat, transfixed by their sense of celebration.

“What should the lesson from Goethe be?” Edith asked Erich as she replenished everyone’s paper cup, then pulled him up to a sitting position, falling back into the sand herself. “You left that part out. That we should all aspire to his inner order?”

“No one should aspire to anyone else’s inner order!” He tossed a bilberry at his friend and lit a cigarette. “For *him* to create, he couldn’t accept the idea of evil. He could write his poetry, his plays, only because on some level he refused to let himself comprehend real evil. I mean, look at his Mephistopheles in *Faust*. In Goethe’s hands, even the devil himself was nothing but a fool.”

“No one in his right mind comprehends evil,” Hans said. “Goethe’s not alone in that.”

“To the incomprehensibility of evil and to Goethe’s inner order!” Franz said, and they raised their cups again.

“But I only mean we should keep reading him,” Erich said. “Even as Hitler now claims him as *his*. We can’t let Hitler have him! But this is self-evident! What would Tante Ida say, Pauli?” Erich asked, turning to his brother, who’d taken off his shirt and glasses and was heading off for another swim.

“‘Life is a mess!’” Paul called back in a perfect imitation of their late father’s oldest sister, the Heller family matriarch.

“And then she would scold me for wearing *fürs schlechtere* [messy clothing] to the beach when I meet such an elegant stranger,” Erich said, turning to Liese.

“To Tante Ida!” said Franta. “And to finishing off the wine right here and now.”

As they sat on the beach through the afternoon, debating politics, books, the best way to peel a chestnut, Liese felt the first shiver of joy she’d known in months. It surprised her. So this was what it was like to be in Czechoslovakia. A line from a Matthias Claudius poem her mother used to recite to her at bedtime came into her head: *Where the sorrow of the day you shall forget and sleep away*. Here was everything that was still normal, that belonged to everyday life—choosing what book to read, what poet to take hope from, making fun of Hitler without having to be afraid. This feeling began to thaw the frozen places in her mind, as if she were being dug up from the ice.

Lying in the sand next to Erich, Liese felt quiet and beautiful. When her eyes met his, she looked away, at the ashes falling from the end of his cigarette, or at the sand wedged between his toes, or at the soft cotton sash that tied his robe.

The sun set behind the hills, the beach lanterns were lit, a fire was built. Erich decided to skip his party in Prague that night. And so it was that Liese began to build herself a world as an émigré.

She heard from Erich a week later by way of a note Franta Kraus delivered to her room. He would be meeting friends that evening at the Café Continental. Later there would be a get-together at the apartment of his friends the Mayers. Joszi Mayer's father ran one of Prague's major newspapers, *Prager Tagblatt*, and Joszi's husband, Fredy, was the managing editor. Their apartment was the center of life for writers and social democrats. Would she accompany him?

Tall black statues stood along either side of Charles Bridge, which linked the somber Staré Mesto to the lively cafés across the river. At twilight, when the mist formed above the Vltava, the shadowy statues took on a life hidden from daylight, ominous and ghostly in appearance. But that evening, walking on the path along the river to meet Erich, Liese saw them as loving, benevolent gods.

When she got to the entrance of the café, she saw Erich sitting at a corner table, his eyes turned away from the doorway. Very good, she thought. She could find a washroom, tidy up, get her bearings, and look around before he knew she was there. Every table and almost all the seats at the bar in the center of the room were full. The Continental felt to her like a wonderfully festive university library. Most of its inhabitants were young. On the tables, amid fat beer glasses, half-full wine bottles, and wooden bowls filled with salted nuts, were stacks

of newspapers, open books piled on top of each other, and handwritten sheets of paper scattered about. Other newspapers, more than she'd ever seen in one place, hung over rods attached to varnished oak pillars against the wall. On the walls themselves were dark pictures of serious faces, some of whom Liese recognized—the untamed hair and sumptuous mouth of Rainer Maria Rilke, the piercing eyes of a young Kafka.

“Liese, Liese, dear Liese,” Erich called over to her before she could find the washroom. “Congratulations! We must celebrate your first visit to our spiritual sessions at seventeen Na Prikope, where we all practically live!” He pulled out a chair and motioned to her to sit, pouring a beer from the pitcher on the table into a cup and handing it to her. Still standing, she quickly licked the foam running down the outside of her cup, then felt mortified by her unguarded moment.

Seated beside Erich at the table was Hans Posner, whom she'd already met at the Alaunsee. Hans had sandy-colored curls and wore rimless glasses; he was growing a not terribly successful beard. He introduced her to his older brother, a medical student a year ahead of her. Also named Erich but nicknamed EP, he had kind eyes and a fine mustache and was smoking a short English pipe, his hands stretched over a good-sized belly.

“Liese and I are already great friends,” Erich Heller told the group. He lit a cigarette and ground the lighted match into the floor with the sole of his shoe. “By chance, Liese, did you read my piece in the *Prager Tagblatt* on Tuesday? I must give you a copy if you haven't. An essay about Karl Kraus. Have you read Karl Kraus? Have you not? Have you not read Karl Kraus?” All this before Liese sat, before she spoke.

“I haven’t. But of course I will. Tonight, possibly,” Liese said. She was distressed by the sound of her own voice, words coming of their own accord, and they weren’t even the truth. She’d read a good deal of Karl Kraus. She corrected herself. “I actually read parts of *The Last Days of Mankind* last year in school, and I enjoyed it immensely.”

“Immensely?” Erich said, smiling. “You enjoyed it immensely? Tell me more, Liese. Might you choose a word, as Kafka would say, where you wouldn’t be misunderstood? What does ‘immensely’ mean to you?”

Liese brushed her hair back with her hand and let herself down into the chair. “I enjoyed him. I liked him immensely.” She was dazed for a moment, surprised that she’d repeated herself. “I don’t know him well, really,” she added, when in fact she’d read his play several times and discussed it at length with her best girlfriends, Lilo and Ille, in Frankfurt.

“Yes, well,” continued Erich, as if speaking for her—and she found herself strangely grateful for this—“if Kafka will one day be known as the greatest writer of Prague, Kraus will be claimed as the greatest of Vienna. His satire is so very Austrian, if there can really be such a thing as ‘*so very Austrian.*’ This is my claim!” He leaned toward Liese. “If I only had the courage, I would travel to Vienna tomorrow to insist that I become his literary biographer. Do you think he’d permit someone twenty-two to write his life story? Shall we travel there together, Liese?” He smiled at her, tilting his chair back and balancing it on two legs.

EP turned to her. “Tell us, would you, Liese, about how it is in Frankfurt. We don’t know how to take some of the news. What’s your impression?” he asked, never removing his pipe from the corner of his mouth.

The word “impression” took her by surprise. What was happening at home couldn’t be explained as an impression. She got angry for a moment, then was overcome with the sense of isolation that had become so familiar to her since she’d come to Prague, where so few seemed to comprehend the seriousness of what was happening in Germany.

“It’s terrible,” she said, looking at Erich Heller, expecting to say more. “It’s perfectly terrible.” Again she was stunned that she’d repeated herself. She was used to being so much more articulate. She spoke directly to Erich Posner now, explaining that Hitler was able to fool so many in Germany, that he was not going away any time soon, that she and all of her friends at home believed things would get worse. She knew this conversation inside out. It was all anyone had talked about in the months before she left.

“Please,” she said haltingly. It seemed to her that she might cry. She glanced behind her, aware of her shadow on the wall across from their table as the lights in the Continental were lowered. How small she looked next to the shadows of the men. How wild her hair looked. She got up to find the washroom, surprising them with her hasty exit.

Through the filmy window set deep into the wall of the tiny washroom, she could see the shape of the gargoyles looking down at her from the roof across the alley. Humiliated by her flustered state, she thought of leaving the café, crossing the main square of the Staré Mesto, and returning to her room. She even thought of boarding the train back to Frankfurt that night. She could be in her own bed, in her own home on Schef-felstrasse, before her parents and older brother awoke the next morning. It was a bad idea, she knew. The thought of the

black-coated SS guards swarming the railroad station made her sick, and to draw any attention would put her family at more risk. But since coming to Prague, she had always carried the railroad timetable with her, and she opened her handbag now to touch it.

She inspected herself in the mirror, her lips so close to the glass that she fogged her own reflection. She ran icy water over her wrists and splashed it on her face. When she returned to the table, she'd tell Erich Heller some of the points she'd made in a paper about Karl Kraus that she'd written for her German class just that past spring. In it she'd imagined Kraus as the editor in chief of all the major newspapers of Europe. Had this been the case, Liese had asserted in her paper, the Nazis would not have gained power. Their propaganda would have failed. Kraus, his judgment governed by his love of clear language, would have seen right through it and convinced the German population that it was empty and false. Her teacher, Frau Eppels, had admired her passion. Yes, she knew the words she'd say when she got back to the table.

But when she returned, Erich was already waiting by the exit, eager to be off to the Mayers' apartment. "Hans, can you imagine my great good fortune! Schocken publishers in Vienna may be interested in my Kraus essay," he was saying as he bought cigarettes from the headwaiter, who counted the pencil marks he'd scratched on their table's cardboard coasters to tally up their bill. Liese was impressed that such a young man was already being considered by a major publisher.

"If only the editor weren't such a complete idiot! His interest in my essay is one of his few good ideas," Erich added, poking Hans in the upper arm and looking delighted when he

noticed Liese's return. He'd taken her sweater from the back of her chair, and handed it to her now as he brushed nut crumbs from its sleeves. But it was Erich Posner who helped her into it as they walked down the winding stairs and out onto Na Prikope Street. It had started to drizzle.

Liese had always doubted her intelligence. Even as a little girl in Frankfurt, she had felt insecure about whether she would ever be smart enough to be taken seriously. Her father, so Old World that he continued to wear a standing collar long after its stylishness had faded with the defeat of Germany in World War I, was wedded to the bourgeois order in which only men were the thinkers. Proud as he was of her high marks in school, he teased her when she expressed an opinion or idea, a reaction that caused her more pain than she admitted.

Once, her father chuckled from behind his after-dinner newspaper as she tried to explain to him her intense reaction to the novel *The Forsyte Saga*—she felt that this book had taught her to understand human psychology in a new way—and she'd run to her room in tears. There, glancing at herself in the mirror, she was haunted by the feeling that she had disappeared altogether.

And she had a great many ideas. She got them from the books she read nearly every evening after school, sometimes a full novel in one sitting and several on weekend trips to her paternal grandparents' farm in Alsfeld, southwest of Frankfurt, where, under her grandmother's tutelage, she cared for their goats and chickens and the small field of cucumbers, cabbage, and potatoes. She also got ideas from Lilo and Ille, with whom she debated and discussed nearly everything. By the time they turned fourteen, they'd read all of Mann's books,

then read them again, until the stories became as dear to them as any living thing. They formed a reading club which, to describe their never-ending connection, they called *Kränzchen*—their little wreath. They met after school and on weekends, dramatizing stories and plays they'd read, talking about their latest crushes and comparing them (usually unfavorably) to favorite characters from books. In these books they found their first sweethearts, sensitive, passionate young men with artistic souls—Mann's Tonio Kröger, Schiller's Prince Don Carlos, Goethe's Young Werther, Galsworthy's Jolyon Forsyte—men who they were sure would long to hear their most private thoughts.

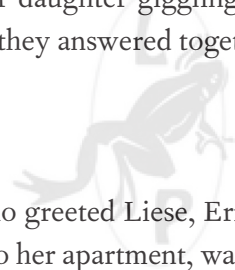
She'd gotten still other ideas from her teachers at the Volksschule in Frankfurt, particularly from Frau Eppels and Herr Hirsch, her German teachers, whom she adored. Frau Eppels had invited Liese, Lilo, and Ille to an after-school reading group where they discussed Goethe's *Faust*. Herr Hirsch seized every opportunity to take his students out of the school building and into the city to observe as much as they could. He sometimes became so impassioned about a story or poem he was teaching them that, while they wrote at their desks, he would turn his head to the window behind his own desk and, hidden from his students—though Liese saw him—softly cry.

He had cried, too, when he came to Liese's family's apartment two months before she left for Prague. With a new mandate in place prohibiting Jews from teaching, Herr Hirsch was removed from his position before the school year ended. He had come to say good-bye before he left with his family for Paris.

Most of all, it was her mother, her "distant angel," as Liese thought of her, who gave her ideas, her mother who spurred

her to think and dream. “What do you think having your eyes open means?” Irma Florsheim had often asked her daughter as Liese followed her from room to room in the apartment. Irma had asked her again as they walked in Römerberg Platz, the center of cultural life in Frankfurt, and in the city parks, as she pointed out the hummingbirds circling maple trees looking for sugar, the gray swans as tall as Liese, floating down the Main River.

“What do you think having your eyes open means, Lieschen? Does it mean just having your eyelids propped up?” she’d asked, her daughter giggling, her voice blending with her mother’s as they answered together. “No, it means watching the world!”



Joszi Mayer, who greeted Liese, Erich, and the Posner brothers at the door to her apartment, was tiny, with a slight hunchback and thick black-rimmed glasses. She was considerably older than Liese, with a pale pretty face that lit up when she spoke. After seeing them in, Joszi walked them past the crowd of damp coats on the rack in the hall to show Liese around. The apartment was brightly lit and immense, occupying the entire top floor of a gabled Czech Renaissance building in the center of Wenceslaus Square. The front half was their living quarters, and tonight it was already filled with people and activity.

Joszi escorted Liese to the back of the apartment, which they’d converted into a work area. On the desks were several typewriters, bulging notebooks, and tablets of paper filled with notes. It was here, Joszi told her, that her husband, Fredy,

worked; here that members of Freie Vereinigung, the Social Democratic student organization, often congregated after their coffeehouse meetings, eager for Fredy's political counsel; here, too, that Kafka's onetime love, Milena Jesenská, who was a close friend of the Mayers, had come to write; and here that Erich Heller sometimes stayed when he needed a quiet place to work during his frequent trips from Komotau to Prague over the summer.

By the time they returned to the living room, more guests had arrived, shaking rain from their hats and umbrellas. Tonight the Prague accent seemed to turn German into another language. The room was a blur of young men—there weren't many women—smelling of wet wool, musky cologne, and sweat, helping themselves to food from the buffet, which was laden with platters of beef hot from the oven, cucumbers and green peppers laid out in neat lines, bread dumplings atop braised cabbage leaves, and honey cookies filled with poppy seed jam. There were rows of beers: Plzen, Prazdroj, Bakalar, and Gambrinus.

Erich was standing across the buffet, several young men surrounding him. Liese wondered which of his features she found most appealing—his commanding voice, his forever amused expression, the pink that flushed his face when he spoke, the way he dressed: never without a tie, properly creased trousers, and well-chosen colors, like the blue-gray shirt he had on tonight. She tried to catch his eye, but he didn't see her.

“Only someone from Prague can really understand Kafka,” she heard him say. “And it doesn't hurt to be an expert in alienation!”

“No one will ever accuse you of being a high-grade optimist,” she heard another say.

Moving to join them, she changed course when she noticed Paul Heller standing near the door, his raincoat over his shoulder, as if either just arriving or about to depart. He was leaning over a newspaper and peeling an apple with a pocketknife. Talking with him would relax her, she thought, embolden her.

“You perform your task like a future surgeon, Paul,” she said, surprising herself by kissing him on the cheek. When he looked up, he put his hands above his eyes as if the light were too bright.

“Well, I make perfect what I can make perfect,” he replied. “And right now there isn’t much that I can make perfect. How good to see you again, Liese.” He offered her a fresh slice of the apple speared on the tip of his knife.

Erich had left his group and was walking toward them, lighting a cigarette hurriedly. “Dear, dear Liese, did you fill your plate yet? Come meet my friends Milan and Kurt; they want terribly to make your acquaintance.” He stood nearly a head taller than his brother and towered over Liese. He tousled Paul’s hair and straightened his brother’s shirt collar. His expression communicated either tenderness or condescension, Liese couldn’t tell which. As Erich steered her toward his group, she saw Paul immediately adjust the collar back to the way it had been, square his shoulders, and, offering Liese an awkward smile, walk out into the rain.

About the Author

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