

Gabriele Tergit, *First Train to Berlin*

Translated by Sophie Duvernoy

Chapter 4 (pp. 35-46)

Since my German was quite good, I was eager to speak with some Germans. To get to the other carriages, I had to go down a corridor. Once I found the Germans, I immediately felt overdressed. It was obvious that, like most Europeans, they held the old-fashioned opinion that thrift was virtue. At home, our little ones don't even know what it means to save anymore. I opened the conversation with a question which I will never again ask a German. I said, "Are you happy to be rid of Hitler?"

A young man in a tattered uniform said, "Hitler's time was the only time in which the German people was happy. 1934 to 1940 was a great, glorious time, it felt as though we were on equal footing again, we'd gotten over the embarrassment of Versailles, Hitler had begun to free us from the Jews, and there were great things ahead."

"That's right," said a second man. "Without people like you, we would have created the United States of Europe, crushed the Bolsheviks, eradicated the Jewish plague, and brought about ever-lasting peace. And what about the annexation of our territories in the east and along the Rhine, would you defend that?"

I said, "Hitler plunged the entire world into war. He destroyed entire villages in Italy, Greece, Russia, and Poland, and the Germans went along with it."

The young man in the tattered uniform turned beet-red and said, "Those are lies they've spread about us. The Russians killed their own people in droves. And our people were shot at from houses in Italy and Poland and everywhere else. They were all partisans. Civilians who get mixed up in a war with soldiers should pay with their lives. After all,

martial law still applies in the world. Our people suffered and bled twice over, and we gave all we had to save the fatherland. My wife and two kids were killed by bombs in Munich, and I lost what little I had. In 1938, the party gave me a small business from a Jew to reward me for my loyal service. I had it for two years and then it was bombed by the Jews. I've got nothing, nothing in the world anymore. And now I'm supposed to feel sorry? God, isn't there any justice on earth? Our dear Hitler in heaven wouldn't have allowed the Germans to be treated like this..."

"How do you know you were bombed by Jews?" I asked.

"We were all bombed by Jews. The pilots of the Royal Air Force were the pathetic victims of world Jewry, those who pull the strings, Morgenthau and Blum and Rosenfeld and the white Jews in London."

"White Jews?"

"A white Jew is a Jew who isn't a Jew."

"And what about the concentration camps?"

"All of that happened in the line of duty and by command. We all felt as though we were members of a great army under Hitler, and everyone had an important part to play. No one was mistreated in Germany outside the line of duty."

"Now, now, come on," said an old man. "That's not what everyone thinks. We know Hitler brought us to ruin."

A young girl jumped up. "How dare you say that! It's a disgrace!"

"Hey, calm down. You're so young, you've got no clue. We knew they were all crooks, they were all lining their own pockets, but at first we thought they'd make Germany a force to be reckoned with."

The young girl said, "We are all standing behind our dead Führer. There will come a time when Germany is feared once again."

“Oh, spare me the politics,” said a nice-looking woman. “A people can’t rule itself. Every time my mother told me about the Kaiser, it sounded like a fairy tale. Sometimes I think the worst thing that happened was that they abolished the aristocracy in 1918. What would have become of England without a king? I’d like to be English or American. But they have no sense of responsibility. They leave us to ourselves. In Russia, there’s order, at least. The chimneys of Upper Silesia are smoking and they’re working at full steam.”

As I returned to our carriage, a Polish man was saying, “Dear Merton, do you have any idea what the Poles went through? My entire family was murdered, and none of the children in my village can read Polish. The youth has been corrupted with smoking, drugs, and venereal disease. A peaceful country was ransacked.”

“You have my deepest sympathies, and I truly despise the Germans who did this. But Poslavski, what do we want? Revenge? A new war? Or a great, long-lasting peace? After all, what did you do when Czechoslovakia was defeated? You tried to get the choice bits.”

“And do you know why?” replied Poslavski. “Because in this grotesque agreement that was known as the Treaty of Versailles, the Czechs received a piece of land that under no circumstances belonged to them.”

“Humans have been at the same game for thousands of years,” said Merton. “I’m the last person who’d claim that a few hundred square miles matter. But as long as that’s the standard for honor, as long as all our national passions are fixated on a few square miles of land, one must be very careful before making any territorial changes. The next generation must always die for it. We all live on one earth, after all.”

“But why begin 1945 like this? Poland has been divided time and again. If there were any justice in this world, Poland would stretch from Kiev to Wroclaw. Wroclaw was founded by Poles.”

“Just like London was founded by Romans.”

“Right.”

“And the Ukrainians aren’t Poles,” said Merton.

“The Germans shoved people of all nations into cattle trucks, stuffed them into cattle trucks with no air or food and left them to suffocate and starve. And we’re not even to receive two provinces for that?”

“How many dead are required for one province in reparations, and how many for two?” said Hawks.

“You think there should be no reparations?” said Poslavski.

“Of course, there must be reparations. Reparations for individuals, which make sense to individuals. Collective punishment is always barbaric. We’re trying to bring the law to the people, form a kind of police, and then collective punishment will fall away. I wouldn’t accept any Nazi in human society. I would even boycott Planck, the quantum physicist, who’s one of the great intellectuals of Europe, because he spoke in support of Hitler on the German radio. I’d boycott several German generals who prepared and participated in the war, and jail various members of the SS, including Prince August Wilhelm of Prussia and the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, down to the very last worker who claims he was hoodwinked. I would clap air raid wardens in jail for a few years, since they were all good Nazis and were used to spy on their fellow citizens. But anything understood today as ‘evacuation,’ that is, evicting people from their homes or because of their nationality or race or for any reason whatsoever, is a regression to slavery.”

“Why are you so lenient as an American? Because you want to stop the working classes from rising; you want to preserve monopoly capitalism,” said Herr Bergmann.

“Are you a party member? You’re saying such terribly old-fashioned things,” an unknown man said to him quietly. “I thought we’d long stopped hating the Germans. The

time of Ehrenburg's hate speech is long past. The Germans were misled by the Nazis and we, unlike all the other nations, will greet them with love. Or are you a Trotskyite?"

Bromwich, who had paid no attention to the unknown man who had been talking quietly, gloated over Bergmann's attack on Merton.

"Fantastic!" he cried and slapped his thigh. "We should elect you President, Merton, it's our only hope. We will be all government officials and nobody will be allowed more than 5 rooms and to make use of his brain. And while interest is only at 1% in England, practically nil, and 2% for us, the privileged Soviet upper class and the Red Army aristocracy will rise in Russia. And even when all the catchwords have been discredited, our Messrs. Merton will still be preaching for the Russian workers' paradise."

"But Mr. Bromwich, I'm really no communist."

"It's all the same!" crowed Bromwich.

Uncle Phipps came into the carriage and said, "The 1918 armistice rests on the correct assumption that it is impossible for people who are not exactly the same to live together in harmony. And what other reparations can there be for human life but money? It's a healthy principle of actionable damage. Three billion and 500,000 rail cars equal a million fallen men. Of course, a piece of land is an even higher prize, and 500,000 new inhabitants are better than 50,000. It's always been that way. And these new-fangled ideas from Brighton Beeches or Clepton Timber are stillborn. I believe, and always have believed, that it's nonsense to claim that we are holding in trust something that doesn't belong to us. Germany should be permanently divided. The eastern territories stretching to the Elbe should be given to Russia, since they belong, racially, to the Slavs, the north, which is Germanic, should be given to the British, and the Roman west and south to France and Italy."

"Because the division of Poland was such a success story," said Merton.

Our train crept along awfully slowly, and so we discussed the train problem. The group was divided on whether to repair the German rail system or not. Bromwich and Gauntlett argued that all the rails should be removed from Germany, firstly to pay reparations to other countries, and secondly, to eliminate a competitor. Merton and Lord Dolgelly claimed that the more order there was in Germany, the better.

Merton said, "The greatest misfortune in this world occurred because in the thirties, the belief reigned that a moral vacuum in the center of Europe could be tolerated. One cannot tolerate a vacuum of any kind in the middle of Europe. The Russians, on principle, chose not to bomb German factories because they considered the steady supply of goods to be more important than scarcity, and because they had included all the eastern territories in their economic system. Upper Silesia and the entire region around Mährisch-Ostrau is an even larger center of industrial production than the Ruhr, and naturally the railway network has been reestablished with central hubs in Moscow and Kharkiv. The black market for cheap German coal has boomed in every country, and while the trade unions are busy fighting against underbidding with German coal, manufacturers have declared they can only compete with America because of the cheap coal. Rockegie and Lord Coalside have been waging a battle for months over possession of the German coal mines."

Merton and Dolgelly went out into the corridor.

Thankfully, the discussion turned away from politics, and Bromwich began telling one funny story after another. Shortly before Berlin, Ethel Fielding and Raymond Warren, two Americans, came into our carriage with tremendous hellos. Ethel said to Uncle Phipps that she hoped the food was good in Berlin.

Uncle Phipps said, "I have two crates of potted meat with me. One shouldn't leave anything concerning food up to chance." Ethel had brought along twenty kilograms of

chocolate. Bromwich outdid them all by declaring that he had attached an entire wagon of provisions to the train, including many delicacies.

Uncle Phipps said, “You should host dinners!”

“Of course,” said Bromwich. “I hope that the beautiful Ethel and Maud will attend.”

“I’ve got nothing against it,” I said, “if a few nice boys show up.”

“Why nice boys?” said Bromwich, and his gaze made me realize that a grown-up man was different from a boy, and how flattering, a successful businessman like Bromwich, and I felt as though one of most powerful men in America had fallen in love with me, and that he’d divorce his wife and marry me. He’s twenty years older than me and he’ll use the trip that Raymond Warren and his wife took to make sure I receive the jewels, even though it’s silly, since jewels won’t be worth very much once it’s fashionable to spend even more. But I’ll be featured in *Vogue* every week and Aunt Ketta will stop putting on airs.

Chapter 5

Our hotel, which lay in a forest in splendid isolation and was designated only for the commission, was delightful, and my bathroom was as elegant as any in New York.

Ethel and Bromwich came up to my room, and after a while Raymond joined us. We were very gay. Bromwich brought a bar shaker and some delightful liquor. We sat down on the rim of the bathtub, since we only had one glass for gargling and one more, so we kept having to wash them out, but the bathroom was just as big as the room itself and indescribably elegant.

We got a bit tipsy, and Bromwich gave me a kiss and Raymond gave one to Ethel. Ethel was over the moon and said she’d never dreamed being in Germany would be so lovely. While we were sitting there and laughing and drinking, there was a knock at the door. We had

a terrible fright. We thought it might be one of the Brits, perhaps Miss Battle-Abbey, whom we had disturbed. We had been warned that the Brits considered ‘noisy people’ equal to thieves and burglars, and we didn’t want to disgrace ourselves on our very first evening. But luckily it was only Shirikov, a Russian. Bromwich later told me he was the head of Russian propaganda in Germany. Shirikov was charming and told me he was a tradesman. Later another Russian came, Bestmann, who said he was a journalist, but he was actually with the trade delegation. I later learned that when a Russian says he is an actor, he is usually a G.P.U. agent, and when he says he’s a high functionary, he’s really an engineman. That’s part of the Bolshevik system. But in private, the Russians are more truth-loving than almost any other people. Shirikov, who wore a splendid uniform—white jacket, dark green knickerbockers, and high black patent leather boots—said he had heard us laughing and speaking English and had thought, “Yes, our allies have arrived,” and had taken the liberty of coming to greet us, and wanted to bring us some good, real vodka and his friend Bestmann. Then he reappeared with his friend, who was clad in light blue from head to toe, and a whole lot of glasses and a huge bottle, and a middle-aged lady who sat down next to me and immediately asked me, “Are you happy?” And when I said “Yes,” she said, “Are you in love with someone? The young man over there?”

“No,” I said.

“Oh, I see,” she said, and pointed at Bromwich. “His face is a bad sign. You have many disappointments in store. He lacks warmth.”