

‘For those who wish to find in history a key to our absolutist present.’
—*Il Giornale* (Italy)

‘*Stella* is a book you can hardly put down. You will read it in just a few hours, whatever you might have planned... It has a style which in a certain way echoes Hemingway’s war reporting—you might call it “melancholy heroism.” But it reads very well, you can’t say otherwise.’
—*Die Welt* (Germany)

‘Würger writes in a quiet, authentic style; he writes without mercy but never without empathy, never in a way that is contrived or lurid.’
—*Jüdische Allgemeine* (Germany)

‘*Stella* shows how war and love sometimes bring up the worst in a human being, and how much pain love can cause.’
—*Metro* (Netherlands)

‘Würger avoids any hint of pathos, writing instead in clearly chiseled, artfully sparse sentences... It is the escalating state of emergency that explains everything in this slimmed down, concise novel.’
—*Abendzeitung München* (Germany)

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Stella

Also by Takis Würger

The Club

Stella

TAKIS WÜRGER

Translated from the German by
Liesl Schillinger



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Parts of this story are true. The text in italics contains excerpts from
testimony used in a court trial held in Berlin. The original documents
are located in the Berlin State Archive.

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*For my great-grandfather Willi Waga,
who was gassed in 1941 as part of the
involuntary euthanasia program Aktion T4*



Stella



In 1922, a judge sentenced Adolf Hitler to three months in prison for disturbing the peace, an English archaeologist discovered Tutankhamen's tomb, James Joyce published the novel *Ulysses*, Russia's Communist Party elected Joseph Stalin general secretary, and I was born.

I grew up in a villa on the outskirts of Choulex, near Geneva, with cedars in front. We had thirty acres of land and linen curtains in the windows. In the cellar there was a strip where I learned to fence. In the attic, I learned to identify cadmium red and Naples yellow by their scent and to know what it felt like to be hit with a woven rattan rug beater.

In my part of the world, you answered the question of who you were by giving your parents' names. I could say that Father was the third generation to run a factory that imported velvet from Italy. I could say that Mother was the daughter of a major German landowner who lost his fortune because he drank too much Armagnac. All schnappsed up, Mother would say, which didn't lessen her pride. She liked to talk about how the entire leadership of the Black Reichswehr came to his funeral.

At night, Mother sang lullabies about shooting stars, and when Father was traveling and Mother was drinking to ward off loneliness, she would push the dining room table against the wall, put on a record, and dance Viennese waltzes with me; I had to stretch my arm high to put my hand on her shoulder. She said I would learn how to lead well one day. I knew she was lying.

She said I was the handsomest boy in Germany, though we didn't live in Germany. Sometimes she let me comb her hair with a buffalo horn comb Father had given her; she said her hair should be like silk. She made me promise that when I was a grown man with a wife, I would comb my wife's hair. I observed Mother in the mirror, how she sat before me with her eyes closed, how her hair shimmered. I promised.

When she came to my room to bid me good night, she laid both her hands on my cheeks. When we went for walks, she held my hand. When we went hiking up in the mountains and she drank seven or eight shots up at the peak, I was happy that I could support her on the way back down.

Mother was an artist—she painted. Two of her paintings hung in our hall, oil on canvas. A large still life of tulips and grapes. And a small painting, a rear view of a girl who held her arms crossed at the base of her spine. I looked at that painting a long time. Once I tried to cross my fingers like the girl in the picture. I couldn't make it work. My mother had painted the wrists in an unnatural position that would have broken the bones of any real person.

Mother often spoke about what a great painter I would become and seldom about her own art. Late in the evening, she would talk about how easy painting had been for her in her youth. When she was a girl, she had applied to the painting school of the art academy in Vienna and failed the charcoal drawing test. Maybe another reason she was rejected was that, back then, hardly any women were permitted to study at academies. I knew I wasn't allowed to ask about that.

When I was born, Mother decided that I would attend the art academy in Vienna in her place, or at least the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich.

Definitely, I was to avoid having anything to do with the Feige-Strassburger art school in Berlin or the Röver school in Hamburg, which were thick with Jews, she said.

Mother showed me how to hold a paintbrush and how to mix oil paints. I took pains to do it right because I wanted to make her happy, and I studied further when I was alone. We drove to Paris, looked at Cézanne's pictures in the Musée de l'Orangerie, and Mother said that when anyone painted an apple, it should look like one of Cézanne's. I was allowed to prime Mother's canvases, went hand in hand with her through museums, and tried to take note of everything when she praised the depth of color in one painting and criticized the perspective of another. I never saw her paint.

In the year 1929, the stock market in New York collapsed, the Nazi Party won five of ninety-six seats in the state elections in

Saxony, and, shortly before Christmas, a horse-drawn sleigh drove into my hometown.

It slid on runners across the snow. A stranger sat in the driver's seat in a floor-length dark green loden coat. Father would never be able to find him later, despite all the assistance the police offered. It remained unclear why the man was transporting an anvil horn with him up on the driver's seat.

About a dozen of us boys were in the church square, throwing snowballs at the metal weather vane on top of the tower. I don't know who was the first to throw one at the coachman. The snowballs crossed in flight and splattered on the wood walls of the sleigh. One snowball hit the man on the temple; I thought it was mine. I hoped the other boys would like me for it. The man didn't flinch.

He reined in his pony. He took his time about it, stepped down from his perch, whispered in the animal's ear, and went up to us. As he stood before us, snowmelt dripped into his collar.

We were young; we didn't run away. Fear was something I had yet to learn. The coachman carried something short, forged, and dark in his hand.

He spoke Urner German, I think, a dialect you rarely heard in my area.

"Who threw that?" he asked softly, looking at us. I heard the snow crunch under the soles of my shoes; it was frozen over and glittered. The air smelled of wet wool.

Father had told me that telling the truth was a sign of love. Truth was a gift. Back then I was sure that was right.

I was a child. I liked gifts. What love was, I didn't know. I stepped forward.

“Me.”

The point of the anvil horn entered my right cheek, cut through to the jaw, and split my face open to the corner of my mouth. I lost two back teeth and half an incisor. I have no memory of this. My memory returns at the moment when I looked into Mother's gray eyes. She was sitting beside my hospital bed and drinking tea with corn liquor in it, which she poured from a flask. Father was traveling.

“I'm so glad that nothing happened to your painting hand,” Mother said. She stroked my fingers.

My cheek was held together with stitches soaked in carbolic acid. The wound was inflamed. In the coming weeks, I lived off chicken broth that our cook prepared each day. At first, the broth oozed through the sutures.

The medicine made me groggy. The first time I looked into a mirror, I realized that, because of the coachman's blow, I had lost the ability to see colors.

Many people can't tell the difference between red and green, but I had lost all the colors. Crimson, emerald, violet, purple, azure, blond . . . all of them were nothing for me but names for different shades of gray. The doctors would speak

of cerebral achromatopsia, of a color sense disruption that sometimes occurs to old people after a stroke.

You'll grow out of it, they said.

Mother put a sketchpad on my lap and brought me a box of paints. She had gotten them from Zurich so we could begin instruction in the hospital.

"The colors are gone," I said. I knew how important painting was to her.

Mother crooked her head, as if she hadn't heard me.

"Mama, forgive me."

She called for a doctor. I had to look at a couple of pictures and have liquid poured into my eyes.

The doctor explained to Mother that this happens sometimes, it wasn't such a terrible thing; after all, when you went to the cinema the films were always in black and white.

"Forgive me, Mama," I said, "please forgive me. Mama?"

The doctor said it was a miracle that my facial nerves had remained intact. If they had been damaged, my speech would have been impaired, and saliva would have dripped from my mouth. The doctor said something about what a lucky boy I was. Mother just sat there, taking big swigs of her drink.

Mother sent a telegram to Father in Genoa. He drove all night.

"It's my fault," I said.

"There's no blame here," he said.

He stayed in the hospital and slept on a metal cot beside me.

Mother said, "What will people think?"

Father said, "Why should we worry about that?"

When the wound throbbed, he told me stories he had heard on his journeys to the silk dealers of Peshawar. Father gave me an old metal box from Haifa, etched with a rose pattern, which he said would make your wishes come true if you stroked the top of the casing three times counterclockwise. The lid stuck. Mother said if the box didn't disappear, she was leaving.

Mother hardly touched me at all. When I reached for her hand while we walked, she flinched. When she wished me good night, she stood in the doorway and looked out the window, though it was dark outside. Soon Father left again for his travels.

After I was hurt, Mother would drink so much that she would lie down on the dining room floor, and the cook and I would have to carry her to her bedroom.

Some nights Mother climbed alone into the Alpine meadows. Sometimes she would spend two days in a row shut up with her canvases. I was eight years old and didn't know if it was because of me.

My favorite place was the lake behind the Minorite monastery. On one side it was bordered by a mossy wall, on the other by a rock face.

At the lake I'd lie down among the reeds and smoke tobacco cigarettes, which I'd made from my father's cigars.

The cook showed me how to catch trout with the help of a stick, string, and bent nail. Later the cook would gut the fish and stuff it with chopped garlic and parsley, and then we would grill it over a fire on the riverbank and eat it while it was piping hot.

The cook showed me how to suck nectar from lilac blossoms.

I helped her braid the challah and carried milk cans from the dairy to our house. Sometimes we skimmed off the cream and shared it.

At a time when other boys were making friends and bringing them home, I couldn't, because Mother was there. Perhaps I got used to loneliness because I could not miss what I did not know.

Mother drank arak, which clouded when she infused it with ice water. I would pretend she was drinking milk. There was a jetty on the lake that creaked in the summer heat. Once I stood there in the fall, on the far edge, at dawn, and skimmed flat stones across the water. When the cook and Father had no time for me, and Mother drank away her days, I felt invisible.

I looked at the rock wall that edged the lake and asked myself why I had never seen anyone jump from it.

I grabbed the tall grass and the rock outcroppings and clambered up. From the top I could look at the lake bed and see how the algae swayed. I ran to the end of the rock and farther, into the air. The impact was hard on the leather soles of my shoes, and the cold water roared in my ears. When I came to

the surface, it was hard to breathe, but I had enough air left to let out a cry. I saw the waves that my impact on the water had left behind.

With dripping pant legs, I stepped onto the kitchen tiles. The cook was kneading dough and asked whose idea it had been. I didn't know what to say. Falling is something you can only do alone, I thought. I leaned against the warm oven. The cook rapped her hand, dusty with flour, on the tiles. She gave me a washcloth.

Father had them call for me that night. When he was home, he mostly sat in his library. He liked to read for hours on end: Russian novels, Eastern philosophy, haikus. I knew that Father and Mother did not love each other.

Between my fingers I twirled a flowering reed I had plucked from the riverbank.

"The priests say you jumped," said Father.

I nodded.

"Why?" he asked.

I kept silent.

"Do you know that silence is sometimes worse than lies?" he asked.

He sat me on the armrest of his reading chair.

We listened to the ticking of the clock.

"It felt good, Papa. Why does it feel so good to fall, Papa?"

He thought about it for a long time. Softly he began to hum a melody. After a couple minutes he came to a conclusion. "Because we are stupid creatures," he said.

We both were silent together. He shook his head. His hands were heavy on my shoulders, and he smelled of his books.

“What’s wrong, boy? I recognize that look.”

“Is Mother all right?”

He took a deep breath. “She . . .” he said. He grimaced. “Your mother . . . everything is fine, be kind to her.”

I understood what he meant and that it would be easier to keep silent. Keeping silent was my way of crying.

“We can handle it,” Father said, laying a hand on my neck.

I nodded. He looked at me. I knew I would jump again if I had the chance.

When I think of home, I remember the sunflowers that grew behind the house all the way to the woods beyond the hill.

Our cook didn’t like sunflowers, because they had no scent, she said. The sunflower tempts bees with its beauty, she said, but has no drops of nectar at its heart, only nasty seeds.

I walked into the fields to find the scent of the flowers, and among the flower heads I felt sure that the cook was wrong. On hot summer days, when the heat burned into the pollen, the sunflowers gave out a fragrance; it was subtle, but I could smell them. And once I had recognized their scent, I smelled it again when I left the window open when I went to sleep.

It was important to have a good sense of smell. I could smell the alcohol in the hall when I came home.

I asked the beekeeper and the gardeners what sunflowers smelled like, but nobody knew. I thought it meant something, that I could smell them.

In the year 1935, Mother drank a bottle of potato schnapps when the Nuremberg Laws were announced. Mother topped up her glass a lot. I sat beside her and counted. She raised the glass to Adolf Hitler's health, calling him "Adolphe," as if he were a Frenchman.

That night, as Mother slept on the parquet floor of the ballroom, I went into the kitchen. The cook sat crying by the stove, eating freshly whipped buttercream from a wooden spoon to soothe herself. I stroked her cheek, like Father had done to me when I was little.

A few days later I overheard an argument between Mother and Father, in which she demanded that he fire the cook, whose challah she ate happily every morning. Mother called her a Jewish sow. Father said he wasn't going to fire anybody.

Mother spent more and more time with her canvases. When she wasn't painting, the canvases leaned against the wall of the attic, turned backward. Nobody was allowed to look at them.

The night after they argued, Father came to my bedside. I pretended I was asleep. He sat down cross-legged at the

foot of the bed and said, “My boy, one thing . . .” then there was a long pause. I wasn’t sure he would finish the sentence. “The Lord created everything imaginable, do you know that? Blackbirds and elephants . . . According to Luke, God is in every creature. Do you understand, son? We must take good care of them, these creatures.”

The earnestness in his voice made me uncomfortable. I didn’t answer. He pinched my foot and said, “I know you’re awake.”

In the year 1938, the traveling exhibition “Degenerate Art” opened in Berlin, 1,406 synagogues and places of worship burned down in Germany in a single night, and in late summer I went into the sunflower field with the cook’s son. We were already tall enough to see over the flowers. The cook’s son was mentally disabled; he couldn’t count, he couldn’t remember anything, and he constantly chewed on his lower lip.

“Can you smell them?” I asked, reaching up to rest my hand on a crown of petals. The cook’s son shook his head.

There was a thunderstorm that day; a lightning bolt struck an old ash tree in our garden and the rain knocked down the flowers. The gardener was gathering up flower heads to save the sunflower seeds, cursing and calling God a rotten toad.

We went through the field, the first warm drops falling on my forehead. Shortly before our house we came to the fork in the beaten path. One way led home, the other to the dairy.

As I recall, a billy goat was grazing in the dairy yard—the farmwife had tied him to a gate there. In the valley everyone knew that the goat was called Hieronymus.

His coat was white and long; he belonged to the Gletschergeiss breed. The sunshine up at the mountain peaks had blinded him years ago. I would have liked to pet him, but he bit. In the mornings, when I went to get milk, I sometimes threw him leaves from our blackberry bushes.

For the children of the valley, it was a test of courage to tug Hieronymus's horns. Once I saw the dairyman's son kick him in his soft belly.

That day, while we were running in the sunflower field, rain pattered on our faces. We made funnels out of maple leaves and drank the rainwater. I was happy about our house, that it was warm inside, and about Father, who was home in those days. I thought about what he'd said about the presence of God in all creatures and looked through the rain across the meadow up to the dairy yard. The billy goat had been standing at the gate since the morning. The first lightning bolts flashed. The cook's son cried. I took his hand and brought him to the servants' entrance of our house. Without explanation, I turned around and ran into the rain.

"Thunder," called the cook's son. "Thunder."

The climb felt easy to me, though I slipped a couple times.

I had learned to mistrust my eyes, so I wasn't surprised when the lightning bolts in the dairy yard traveled from the

grass up to the sky. Thunder crashed. At the gate, Hieronymus was chewing the dirt. He had laid his muzzle on the grass and closed his eyes, as if he were waiting for death. Or maybe he was just sleeping, because the thunderstorm didn't interest him.

I untied the rope that was knotted firmly to the gate. Hieronymus lunged in my direction. I stood still. Sometimes it hurts when you do the right thing. Hieronymus bit my left hand. His teeth had fallen out years ago. He chomped into the air, then bit my right hand, which I stretched out to him. "Hey, I'm the one who gives you blackberry leaves."

Raindrops beaded his coat, which was pale and bristly. I took the rope. I laid my hand on Hieronymus's muzzle. He didn't try to bite me again; he stood still. Maybe he'd forgotten how to walk because he had been tied up too long, I thought. I knelt down in front of him in the meadow and draped him over my shoulders. His ribs pressed against my collarbone.

The billy goat was scrawny, but heavier than I'd thought he would be. He reeked of the barn. My thighs trembled.

"I'm sorry I didn't protect you when you got kicked." That day I told the billy goat things I never told anybody. How I missed my mother, even though she was there. How unconfident I felt. That I never wanted to lie, because then life would lose its meaning. On the walk down, I stumbled and scraped my knees.

As I walked down the cedar-lined path in front of our house, my pants were torn and mud was stuck under my fingernails. The billy goat had bitten my shirt collar.

Father ran to meet me on the path.

“Son.”

As he hugged me, Hieronymus snapped at him.

“Didn’t you see the lightning?”

I knelt on the gravel and let the billy goat slide off my shoulders. Father brushed the water off my hair. Tears came to my eyes. I was happy that he couldn’t see them in the rain.

“A lightning bolt can vaporize you,” said Father. Of course he could see that I was crying; he was my father.

“We must take care of all creatures,” I said.

I wanted to explain to him how beautifully the lightning had flashed in the sky, and why I was happy that the coachman had come, and why sometimes I loved Mother more than him. I kept silent. And then I blurted out, so suddenly that I was startled by the sound of my voice, “You broke your word, Papa.”

“What do you mean, son?”

“You said we must speak the truth. But you lie about Mother.”

I saw the pain in his face. I hadn’t meant to hurt him. The rainwater tasted sweet. He took my hand and went with me to the house.

As we stood in the hall, he asked softly, “Have you ever seen a hibiscus flower in bloom?” He crouched down in front of me so that he was smaller than I was. “That’s what the truth is like, boy. Someday you will see it. In Egypt

you will find whole gardens. It's gorgeously beautiful there. Whole gardens, where the hibiscus blooms in a thousand varieties."

Hieronymus spent the night in our greenhouse, where, by morning, he had gobbled up half the year's zucchini harvest. During the night I had gone to see him. He had let me stroke the fur at his throat.

The farmer came to get him the next morning, shook my hand, excused himself over and over again, and said he would make sure that nothing like the zucchini incident would ever happen again. He hit Hieronymus between the horns many times, with the side of his hand.

That was the year when the members of the Swiss Goat Breeders Association decided which bloodlines would be continued, a process that was officially called "breed correction." The association categorized the *Capra Sempione*, to which Hieronymus belonged, as unworthy of support.

Late in the summer, Father told me that shortly after the night of the storm, the farmer led Hieronymus out to the slurry pit and, from a distance of two meters, shot the animal between the horns with a double-barreled shotgun.

That same year, Mother summoned an eye doctor from Munich. He said that my inability to see colors had to do with my head, not my eyes. Mother believed that I just needed to try harder. She went with me to the attic.

"Now everything will be all right again," she said.

Her paintings leaned against the wall. Mother put a paint box on the table and switched around the pots of paint. Then she asked me which pot held which color. When I guessed right, she nodded. When I got it wrong, she said I just needed to concentrate. For these sessions she wore her riding boots, which she called army boots.

One of the first times up in the attic, she said, "Please, red at least, I beg you."

When Mother had been drinking, she would sometimes raise her fist, but she stuck to her resolve not to touch me.

After a few hours of lessons, a braided rattan rug beater appeared among the canvases, leaning in a corner of the attic. She said that it hurt her more than it hurt me. Every now and then the blows made me fall facefirst into the pots.

Mother said, "Wash your face before you go, please. Don't let anybody see that you've been crying."

Once I just stayed that way, with my forehead resting in the paint, and noticed that the paint pots gave off different smells. The paints were made of natural pigments. Indigo blue smelled of the butterfly blossoms in our washhouse; Naples yellow of lead; cadmium red of clayey earth in summer; black of coal; white of chalk.

I liked the coal scent best. Mother didn't give me any more instruction beyond the hours in the attic. The museum visits stopped.

Now when I had to identify colors for mother, I leaned near the tray of paints. Sometimes I took the paint pot in

my hand so I could smell it better. Mother hit me less often. Once I guessed three colors right in a row. Mother stroked my index finger.

Every Saturday after the Jewish Sabbath, when it got dark, the cook held a compress of Saint-John's-wort against the scar on my face, even years after the injury. She said it would help me look elegant again. Sometimes the cook hugged me before I went to bed on those nights. I waited for it.

The cook was the fattest woman I knew. Every day she baked cakes, with blueberries in summer, apples in the fall, almonds in winter. She said her cooking was too precious for the staff, and because of that, there was always too much cake lying around. So at night she sat by the oven, playing solitaire and eating.

Once, after applying my compresses, she sat down next to me on a milking stool, gave me a plate with two pieces of honey cake, which she spread with butter, and looked at me.

"People in the house say that you always tell the truth," said the cook.

I kept silent.

"Is that true?"

"Nearly always," I said.

"Then please tell me the truth about myself."

The cook laid her hand on my head.

"Tell me, am I fat?"

Out of nervousness, I forked up a big piece of cake and shoved it in my mouth. I choked, and when the cook gave me a glass of milk, I coughed, and milk ran out my nose.

“I know that I’m a little plump, but I mean, am I fat?”

I nodded as unobtrusively as I could. It hurt her, I could see, and I didn’t want that.

“Do you think that’s why I can’t find a new husband?” she asked.

I looked at the floor. I was sixteen years old and understood very little about men and women and why they liked each other. I shrugged my shoulders. The cook gripped me with her soft hand.

“Please tell the truth, Friedrich.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you think I’m alone because I like to eat too much?”

“You aren’t alone.”

“But I am fat?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled. “Thank you.”

“But I hurt you.”

The oven was warm; we could hear wood crackling in the embers.

“Silence is worse.”

We sat awhile longer on the milking stools and looked into the flames of the oven, in which a bundt cake was baking for the next day, slowly browning, until the crust began

to steam. I brought down the wooden oven peel from the wall, took the cake out and put it on the kitchen countertop.

“Thank you, my golden boy, it was about to go all wrong,” said the cook.

She hugged me. I pretended I didn’t see her tears.

Early in 1941, as German tanks rolled through Libya as part of Operation Sunflower, Mother put up a flag with a swastika on it on the tower of our house. It was the first time in my life that I heard Father raise his voice. Father calmly told one of the stable boys to please remove the flag from the pole, then he went into the greenhouse, shut the frosted-glass door, and let out the shout that announced the end of his marriage.

From the beginning of the war, Mother wore her riding boots more and more often and drank until she lost the power of speech. One morning she lay on the floor inside the door of the house and didn’t move. I called out to her, trying to wake her. She opened her eyes and looked at me; I wasn’t sure she recognized me.

“Do you still love me?” she asked.

Then she wrapped both arms around my head and held me so tightly to her throat that it was hard for me to breathe.

“I am so . . .” she said. “For everything here, for everything, I am so . . .”

It was so beautiful that I got lost on my way to school.

Sometimes I wished that during the day I could forget that Mother was at home sitting on the terrace and drinking arak.

But I knew that would mean that nobody was paying attention to her and that this was my responsibility. Secretly, I sometimes laid my head against her chest when she was lying on the floor, immobile. I was checking to see if she was still breathing.

Because of the new trade embargo, Father had problems with his velvet exports. He said he would go to Istanbul and ride out the war there, but he would keep the villa in Choulex. Mother wanted to move to Munich and live off Father's money. I wanted to travel and see a little of the world. Father suggested Tehran, because there the war was far away.

During the summer I had heard stories from the stable boys about secret nightclubs in Berlin, about hustlers, cocaine, an ivory fountain in a grand hotel, and a singing Negress who rode in a coach drawn by an ostrich.

One of the stable boys had worked for a while as a horse dung collector in Berlin and said he had moved away because he couldn't stand the Berlin dialect, the "Ah" instead of "I," the "wut?" instead of "what?" It was obnoxious, he said. Even the hairdressers felt free to tell you what was on their mind.

"Is that true?" I asked.

"Everything's idiotic there, the girls, too. No culture," he said. That night was the first time I heard the rumor. In Berlin, the stable boy said, a moving truck drives into the Scheunenviertel at night and takes away the Jews. "They never come back," he said.

“Is that true?” I asked.

“It’s just a rumor.”

“Where is the Scheunenviertel?”

Germany seemed like a land of conquerors. The Wehrmacht controlled Europe and loomed over Moscow. The British had stopped the air raids on Berlin. Berlin, in spite of everything, was really something. A place where even the hairdressers told you what was on their minds.

I asked Father about his trips to Berlin and he gave me Theodor Fontane to read. I read the novels that were in our library and Fontane’s correspondence, too. In a letter he wrote to the writer Paul Heyse in 1862, I read:

No matter how much we like to mock Berlin, and however gladly I concede that it occasionally deserves this mockery, it cannot be denied that what happens and doesn’t happen here is directly caught up in the great gear of world events. It has become a necessity to me to hear the whirring of that flywheel close by, even at the risk that it might turn into the proverbial grindstone.

At night I lay awake and thought about the word “flywheel” and about the rumor from the Scheunenviertel. In my head, the Germans were what I wanted to be. I had seen pictures of marching soldiers at the movie theater. I did not

want to be a soldier, but maybe a little bit of their strength could pass to me. I asked Father about the furniture truck.

“It’s something I heard,” I said.

“Why are people spreading rumors?” Father’s voice sounded uneasy as he answered. “I don’t know, maybe it’s a gray area. There must also be good Germans. I think that the truth is never more in danger than in wartime.”

He turned and looked at me.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

I looked him directly in the face. He was trying to smile, as if it were nothing serious. I could tell he was afraid.

“Don’t do it,” Father said. “I beg you, not this time.”

A couple of days later, Father and Mother sat together in the library, although they had long since stopped listening to each other.

“I will begin my travels with a short trip to Berlin,” I said.

Mother laughed. “And what do you want to do there?”

“To see it.”

“See what?”

“And take some drawing lessons.”

Mother fell silent.

“You want to take drawing lessons during a war?” Father asked.

“Only for a few days.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Berlin is safe.”

“But there’s a war.”

“In the east. Not in Berlin. No bombs have fallen there for weeks.”

“It’s still too dangerous.”

“I’m going there, Father, I want to see it. This gray area.”

Father nodded and stroked his chin.

Somebody had to be able to distinguish between rumors and reality. Back then I thought I was brave.

“But it’s a city of Jews,” Mother said.

After Christmas, a dark-colored car with German license plates pulled to a stop on the gravel of our drive. A man in uniform stepped out. I hid in the hayloft and watched while he put his hand on Mother’s backside. Later the cook would tell me that Mother had introduced the man as her nephew.

She wanted her piano and clothes to be sent on after.

The cook told me she was supposed to inform me that I should continue the exercises with the paint box. It had broken Mother’s heart that I had not come to see her off.

Two years later, Mother would burn up in a garden shed during an air raid in Nymphenburg. Her nephew would say that Mother had probably drunk so much that she had mistaken the shed for the air-raid shelter.

I booked my train ticket from Geneva. The cook gave me a cap she had knitted and a woven basket that she filled with

honey cakes. She hugged me. I secretly tucked my best fish-hooks into a pocket of her apron.

Father gave me a parting kiss on my forehead. "Be well," he said.

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he kept silent.

Before he drove me to the train station, I went up into the attic and walked up to a canvas that was turned backward, leaning against the wall. For a long time I had wondered what it was that Mother painted. I turned the canvas to face the light. I went to the next one. Without haste, I turned every canvas in the attic. The canvases were bare.

The dried-up paint box was lying on the table. I took it with me. I went alone to the lake, took a rock from the shore, let it break the surface of the ice, which was still thin, and threw the paint box into the water.