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PROLOGUE

Lublin, Poland, April 1942

I'd never been so thirsty, my mouth so dry.

My lips were cracked and sore, my tongue swollen and sticking to the roof of my mouth whenever I tried to swallow—which I'd given up on several hours ago. No saliva. So all that now passed through the sandpaper tunnel of my mouth was my own shallow, labored breathing.

Not that I was the only one.

Almost seventy people were now crammed in the cattle truck with me. Though I'd given up counting after fifty, when they'd started to get hemmed in so close it was impossible to view those at the far end of the truck, let alone attempt a head count.

The same dry, cracked lips and distended tongues all around me. And a bleary, lost look in their eyes, as if suffused beneath a faint mist. *Do my own eyes look like that now?*

Pulling out of Neisse station, when I'd had enough saliva

in my mouth to talk, I'd struck up a conversation with a gray-haired, stiff-backed man named Ernst, who a year ago ran a shoe shop on Vienna's Kärntnerstrasse.

I nodded enthusiastically. "Ah, Kärntnerstrasse. I know it well. I used to meet up with a couple of friends regularly at the Café Mozart, just around the corner from there. And of course the main police station is at the end on Kärntnertorpassage. I knew a police inspector there very well, Josef..." I broke off as Ernst's eyes fixed on me keenly.

"Police inspector?" He raised a brow. "Not some sort of informer, are you?"

"No, *no*," I said hastily, my gaze falling to his Star of David armband. A reminder that informers had been behind many, including myself, ending up in this cattle truck. "In any case, he was just with the Vienna police force, not the Gestapo."

"I see." But it was accompanied with a shrug, as if Ernst hardly discerned any difference.

"I used to see him just to get information," I added.

"Information on *what*?" Ernst's eyes were still heavy with suspicion.

"Nothing specific or important." I shrugged. "Just general details about criminals. I was a writer, you see."

"Like a reporter or journalist?"

"In my early days, yes. But later I stuck mainly to writing books."

Ernst nodded slowly, looked around at the dismal cattle carriage, then back at me, his eyes in turn falling to my lack of star armband. "Obviously, you wrote about something you shouldn't have, eh?"

"Yes. Something like that."

That would have been the far simpler explanation. Because explaining to this man consigned to hell simply for being Jewish that in fact I was originally Jewish, but had for the past three

years buried my Jewish identity in order to try and survive would have just raised a sly sneer, *Didn't do much good, did it?*

Running that gauntlet had worked for a while, but in the end being sent to a camp had come suddenly, without warning. The only preparation a last-minute, emotional meeting with my agent, Julian Reisner: I'd be transported as a Catholic dissident rather than a Jew. *And don't admit you're Jewish in there. It'll be tough... But ask for Dieter Meisel as soon as you get to the camp, make sure he gets the letter I've given you. He's the vice-commandant there.*

It'll be tough. That became clear from the outset as I was led away by two soldiers and shoved at rifle point into a cattle truck with twenty others. Then the steady descent into hell as the train trundled slowly east...

Ludenburg... Neisse... Oppeln... Kielce... Warsaw... Lublin... Chelm...

The journey seemed never-ending, the truck getting hotter, more cramped and fetid with each stop. Bodies jammed up tight against each other, hardly room to move or breathe. And with no choice but to relieve ourselves where we stood—the stench of two days' urine and feces now had an ammonia bite to it, robbing what little fresh air remained.

Shallow, labored breathing and some heavier, tortured gasps punctuated by occasional groans and wails—which might draw a few stares. Not so much of pity or concern, but surprise that anyone had the strength left to cry out.

The largest groups had been loaded on at Oppeln and Warsaw, and I'd become separated from Ernst by those fresh surges of people. Probably best. My mouth was too dry to continue talking, even if I'd had the strength or will to do so.

And some had already succumbed.

I could see four bodies lying prone on the ground, and no doubt there were others at the far end out of sight. From one body there'd been some movement and barely audible groans

for a while, but for the past few hours now any movement had stopped and there'd been silence.

Some eyes lingered on the bodies longer than they should. Somber reminder of the fate awaiting if the train journey continued much longer.

It was cold early morning and at night, and the first people on had shuffled around to keep warm. Now nobody had any room left to move, and the stifling press of fetid bodies had risen the temperature tenfold. An unbearable heat which had also sucked the moisture out of our mouths.

That afternoon some raindrops from a heavy, slanting rain outside sneaked through a chink where the compartment's wood boarding had broken away. Three mouths close by opened up, seeking those few precious drops like newborn chicks for their first feed. One of them then started licking the dampened wood at the hole's edge.

I could hardly move by that stage with the press of bodies around. All I could do was look on with bewildered envy.

As I felt someone brush hard against me, I clutched tight at my woollen coat—the automatic response to pickpockets—before reminding myself I had little worth stealing. *Currency has no value where you're going*, Julian had advised. *The only thing that can be traded is tobacco*. So sewn into the lining of my coat were several pouches of tobacco and a few personal family photos. *All my life had now boiled down to*. My heart clenched with the reminder of the family I'd left in Vienna, my eyes stinging. But there were no tears; not sufficient moisture left in my body even for those.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, that same press of bodies holding me virtually upright—because next thing I recalled was jostling movement and the shouting of German soldiers.

“*Sich beeilen*. Come on...get moving. Out...out!!”

I shuffled along with the surge toward the opening: eight huddled bodies on the floor now, though I could see one faintly stirring.

“This way...keep moving. Keep in line.”

Eyes stung by the sudden light—even though the sun was cloud-shrouded and weak—my gaze fixed on an SS guard to one side. In particular on his holstered water flask.

“Please...” I implored, holding a hand out. “Some of your water.”

The guard frowned, looked at me as if I was dirt.

“I... I’m not Jewish,” I pleaded, recalling Julian’s advice. “I’m Christian...like you.”

The guard glanced at my lack of star armband and raised an eyebrow. “You obviously upset *someone*,” he commented.

“Yes, I... I suppose I did.” I cast my eyes down. It was clear that I wasn’t going to get anywhere. Then I recalled the letter and the name Julian had given me. I fished the letter out of my inside coat pocket and passed it across. “I was told to ask for Dieter Meisel when I arrived, make sure he got this letter.”

“Dieter Meisel is the vice-commandant here at Sobibór.” His brow furrowed. “Who gave you his name?”

“A friend of mine in Vienna. I believe he knows him.” I didn’t want to go into the detail of saying it was my literary agent; that seemed irrelevant.

From his insignia, I noticed then that he was a mid-ranked SS-Scharführer. He held a black cane in one hand, almost matching his dark hair slicked back either side beneath his cap.

“I see.” The guard looked at the letter thoughtfully, his stern expression easing after a second. He waggled the letter briefly. “I’ll make sure he gets it.” Then he reached out and patted me on one shoulder. “And look. You’re obviously a good fellow—not like the *rest* here.” He scowled at the passing throng. “But unless or until there’s a direct instruction from the likes of Vice-Commandant Meisel, it would be more than my life’s worth if I was seen giving you water. Besides, I’d probably be ripped apart by the rest of this mob for what was left.”

“I see...yes.”

“But a quick tip to help you out...”

The SS guard’s eyes gleamed, as if he was about to share a precious secret. I leaned in closer.

“The first thing they do when you get inside is put you in the showers. Get rid of the dirt and grime of the journey.” His eyes shifted again to the passing mob. “And the *louse* from this lot.”

I nodded.

“The water’s cold, so brace yourself.” He grimaced tautly. “But it’s also fresh and good for drinking. So lift your mouth to the spray and drink your fill!”

“Thank you...” I nodded eagerly as I started to shuffle away, joining the throng. “*Thank you.*”

All I could think of from that moment on was that ice-cold water hitting my parched mouth.

I thought about it as I shed my clothes in a large dormitory with two hundred others.

I thought about it as I stood waiting to go into one of the shower cubicles—the wait seemed interminable.

An increasing trembling in my legs too, to remind me I had little strength left—sudden fear that I might pass out before I reached the showers.

And then finally we were inside—eighty or ninety to each large cubicle. The door clunked shut behind us.

I had to nudge an elderly man aside to get directly under one of the shower nozzles. Then, as I heard a faint rattling surge in the pipes, I tilted my head and opened my mouth for the nirvana of the first water to touch my lips in three days.

1

Poets are masters of us ordinary men, in knowledge of the mind, because they drink at streams which we have not yet made accessible to science.

—*Sigmund Freud*

Mathias

Vienna, Austria, March 1938

I, Mathias Kraemer, recall vividly the first real warning I took notice of. It was the moment an SS officer walked into the Café Mozart and asked if there were any Jews present, and which Jews they knew of who regularly frequented the café.

I was sitting with Johannes at a table about eight yards from the serving counter where the SS officer was making his inquiry with two waiters. Thankfully, there were two tables between us and the SS officer, otherwise his eyes might have automatically rested on us.

We should have paid more heed to Sigmund Freud at that last “Circle” meeting; he’d warned that with the advent of Anschluss, things might close in fast.

Among Vienna’s many splendid cafés, we preferred the Mozart because it was not too pretentious. Arguably, the Sperl or Landtmann were more opulent and had finer decor, but for us the Mozart’s overriding feature was its brightness and openness. From practically any seat in the Mozart, you were bathed in light and could watch the passing street activity. We’d in fact viewed the SS officer outside through its grand front windows in the final paces of his approach. But now as he spoke to the waiters, we might have preferred somewhere with more secluded corners.

We met at practically the same time every week, 6 p.m. every Tuesday. Office and shop staff at the end of their day, along with the first of the pre-opera, concert and theater crowd. And on many occasions our literary agent, Julian Reisner, would also join us and we’d talk about the progress with our latest books or the state of the book market and the world in general.

At forty-seven years old and with Johannes only celebrating his thirty-second birthday weeks ago, there was a reasonable age gap between us, but we felt as close as brothers rather than just cousins; that extra bond perhaps because of our shared profession. I’d been writing crime thrillers for sixteen years now and Johannes was in his fifth year of the same. I’d in fact initially introduced Johannes to Julian. It hadn’t been just a familial favor; after some initial guidance, I’d felt Johannes’s writing was strong. Julian had agreed. At forty-one, Julian not only bridged that age gap between us, but acted as mentor and guide to both of us.

“I wish Julian was with us now,” Johannes muttered under his breath. “He’d know just the right thing to say to keep us calm.”

“I think that’s exactly why he’s not with us now. Especially after that last Circle meeting. Anschluss was only three days ago, and he’s got a fair few others like us on his books.” Though my voice was little more than a hissed whisper, I didn’t want

to openly say “Jews” with the SS officer only eight paces away. “Then on top he’s got a number of political writers and potential subversives. When I spoke to him, he said his phone has been busy trying to explain the current situation to a lot of people, not just myself.”

Anschluss, the takeover and annexing of Austria by Germany, had taken place with hardly a single bullet fired.

At the root of that acquiescence had been a shared vision and identity, not just the fact that Hitler was originally Austrian German. Anti-Jewish sentiment had therefore been brewing in Austria for some while; Anschluss, and the appearance of an SS officer in the Café Mozart, was simply the final visible rubber-stamping. It was official now.

The two young waiters looked vague, shrugging, saying they had no idea which of the café’s patrons were Jewish or not.

“Come now,” the SS officer pressed. “It beggars belief that you have no idea. How long have you both been working here?” He was no more than early thirties, but now he adopted a sternness beyond his years, sharp blue eyes scanning them intently. “It could go badly for you if you’re not honest with me.”

One of the waiters looked uncertain, as if he was about to say something, when another voice came from behind.

“My staff are perfectly correct in saying they would have no idea.” Otto Karner, owner of the Café Mozart, boldly approached the SS officer. “Nor do I—and I’ve been running this establishment now for nine years.”

“Isn’t that somewhat remiss of you—not knowing who your patrons are?”

“It’s not our job to delve into our patrons’ background.” Karner smiled tightly. “Merely serve them the best coffee, pastries and cakes in town.”

The SS officer observed Karner with undisguised disdain, as if Karner himself might be Jewish. Karner had dark hair and incongruously a Chaplin- or Hitler-style moustache—they

were very popular right now—but there the resemblance ended. Karner had a snub-nose and was far more portly, built like a butcher or opera singer. His bulk often pressing against silver-gray or white linen suits, as if he was running a café in Morocco or Panama rather than Vienna. A small black or navy blue bow tie was the only contrast in this ensemble.

“The proprietor at the Café Central said he had no problem with identifying his Jewish patrons for us.” The SS officer’s lips curled mordantly at one corner. “Why would you wish to make things more difficult for yourself by not complying?”

“That might be because the Central is Hitler’s favorite Vienna café.” Karner shrugged. “They might have simply been keen to assure that no Jews would be present if and when the Führer deigned to pay them another visit. They could have just been humoring you.”

I had to resist from smiling at Karner’s boldness, masking any trace by taking another sip of my coffee.

“Make no mind.” The rising flush in the officer’s face quickly covered by bluster, he pushed Karner aside with one hand and stood proudly a step beyond, as if he suddenly was in control at Café Mozart rather than Karner. “I have an announcement to make.”

He surveyed the café keenly as he called out, “Pay attention!” He waited a moment for the gentle murmur of conversation and tinkle of cutlery to subside. “My name is Scharführer Heinrich Schnabel of the Austrian SS. All Jews present here now should make themselves known to me—without fail!”

I felt my next swallow of coffee trap in my chest halfway down, fear gripping me as his eyes scoured the café. Could this Schnabel have already seen some Circle photos and so could pick us out?

We’d been members of Freud’s Circle—a unique collection of scientists, philosophers, psychiatrists, mathematicians and writers formed by Sigmund Freud, Moritz Schlick and Edgar Zilsel in

the late 1920s—for five years now. Our entry to the Circle had been twofold: my uncle Samuel Namal, Johannes's father, as a leading statistician and mathematical theorist, had been part of the original Vienna Circle, and Julian Reisner had also acted as literary agent for some of Freud's books. At that last meeting four days ago, Freud talked about his own family's safety and that of other Circle members—whether there would even be the option of any of them being able to leave Austria after Anschluss. But he'd also raised concerns about old Circle photos, worried that the Nazis might use them to identify and track down members.

I glanced across and saw that Johannes was seeking refuge at that moment in staring at the half-eaten chocolate cake on his plate, his fork toying with the next piece to lift up—perhaps afraid to do so in case he similarly had problems swallowing it.

Of the two of us, I looked more typically Jewish, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. Whereas Johannes had light brown hair and hazel-green eyes. He could easily pass for Austrian Catholic or Lutheran. My uncle Samuel, Johannes's father—who'd sadly died just four years ago—had married a blonde Catholic Austrian girl, and those genes had passed to Johannes. Because of that difference in our looks, few looking on in the café would guess that we were related.

The seconds ticked by, feeling like a lifetime.

A gentle murmur of conversation returned after a moment, but more stilted and unsettled now.

“What, nobody?” Schnabel exclaimed in exasperation. The Jewish population in Vienna was 190,000 now—over 10 percent of the population. It seemed inconceivable that in a café with over forty people, not a single Jew would be there. He took a fresh breath. “Perhaps I should remind that right now there's an amnesty. Any Jews who make themselves known to me will be duly noted and nothing more will come of it. Whereas if they hold back and let things slip beyond the amnesty period, it will become more difficult for them.”

I felt my spirits sinking, almost wishing that my body would sink too through the floor and I'd become invisible. Would this Scharführer Schnabel perhaps later recognize me and hold it against me that I'd been obstructive?

"Nobody?" Schnabel's penetrating gaze scoured the café, doubting, disbelieving.

And as the seconds ticked by, I wondered whether to offer myself up, a sort of sacrificial lamb to save the rest of the café from this unbearable tension. After all, he'd said that everything would be okay, *Nothing more will come of it...* But then the moment went.

"Okay. You have all had your chance." Schnabel turned and strode away, turning back briefly as he was by the door. "If any of you have a change of heart, you should present yourselves at Karmelitermarkt before midnight tonight—that is when the amnesty runs out. After that, it will be too late."

A moment after Schnabel had left, Otto Karner ambled over to our table. He grimaced. "I fear he'll return."

I nodded somberly. "I fear so too. Given that, do you think this amnesty he mentions might be a good idea?"

"No, I don't. You can check it out if you want, but I think it's most likely a trick. Look at what happened with Hitler. Only a couple of years ago he makes a speech announcing that Germany has no intentions of interfering with Austria's internal affairs, let alone annexing it. And now this!" Otto held a hand out helplessly.

Johannes commented, "With the likelihood of him returning, are you saying that it might become more awkward for us, and for you? That perhaps we shouldn't return?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all." Otto appeared irked by the suggestion. "You know that if he returns, I'll say the same thing, keep protecting you." He smiled crookedly. "So you're far better off here than how he paints things at the Café Central, where they'll give you up like a shot to keep the Führer happy. So un-

less it's your intention never to go out for coffee or cake again, you're safer with me than..." Otto's voice trailed off as he became aware of a waiter close by nodding at him.

Otto Karner followed the waiter's gaze and turned to see Scharführer Schnabel, having talked briefly with a couple at a table outside, looking back through the front window toward us.

2

Jews and Gypsies are no longer considered German Reich citizens and do not have the right to vote in either Reichstag elections or the Anschluss.

Johannes

I checked my watch as I ate the last of the dinner Hannah had prepared.

“Is it alright?” she asked.

I suddenly realized that I’d been gulping it down without really concentrating on what I was eating. I paid more attention, savoring the current mouthful: lamb goulash with sweet paprika and potatoes. “Very nice—as it always is.” Hannah was a good cook, but her repertoire extended to no more than eight or nine dishes, which she’d regularly rotate.

“Good, Momma,” our youngest, Elena, just four years old, agreed with a big smile. Hannah had spent a few minutes dic-

ing her lamb into smaller pieces as we'd sat down while Elena protested, "I'm not a baby anymore—you don't need to."

Our eldest, Stefan, now nine, simply smiled and nodded, not wanting anything to interrupt his racehorse eating—though his was more through enjoyment than eagerness to be somewhere else.

My mind was already half on the plans I'd discussed earlier with Mathias.

It was decided that one of us should check out the "amnesty" that this SS officer, Schnabel, had mentioned. It was decided it should be me because I looked the least Jewish; in fact, strictly speaking, I wasn't Jewish at all. My father had been Jewish, but my mother Catholic, and in Judaism the religion runs through the mother. But the problem was my father had been a very prominent figure in Austria, one of its leading statisticians and also a proud and outspoken member of the Social Democratic Party, the main opposition to the Nazis. So, in many ways my father's son, I'd be seen as a "token" Jew and agitator.

I'd asked my father one day whether marrying outside of his religion had anything to do with his equally outspoken atheism—my father never did anything by half measures—but he'd just gently smiled. "No, your mother just happened to be the prettiest girl I met at college. It was as simple as that."

Well, if I was my father's son in any way, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree and all that, I'd followed exactly the same path when I first met Hannah. So beautiful, hair the color of sun-bleached wheat, eyes a limpid green, I could hardly resist her.

But I wondered if subconsciously there was something else going on—the question I hadn't been brazen enough to ask my father at the time: that his partly burying his lineage to his children was to shake off the Jewish stigma seen increasingly in Austria since the 1920s. And I was doing the same in marrying Hannah, to further shake off that stigma, make my family safer.

I looked across the table at my perfect Austrian family: Elena

with her hair almost as blonde as her mother's, Stefan with his light brown hair and hazel eyes taking more after me. It seemed only yesterday that my father was nestling them on his lap or holding them up proudly and gently kissing their foreheads—though it was in fact over four years ago when, at the age of sixty-four, he'd finally succumbed to the cancer eating him away.

This now was the only possible silver lining I could see to his death. This madness with Anschluss and rampant Nazism—it would have killed him to see it. I smiled inwardly at the oxymoron.

We'd even had one of those classic family portraits taken in sepia a year ago to permanently enshrine it in time, which now had pride of place on our sideboard: the perfect Austrian family. Even the staunchest Aryan Nazi viewing it would no doubt remark, "Ah, what a lovely family!"

Halfway through Hannah settling the children down in bed, the phone rang. Mathias.

"You haven't left yet?"

"No. I'm heading out in a moment. I wanted it to be dark, but not too late. Why?"

Slow exhalation from Mathias on the other end. "I wondered whether you should go. Otto might be right—it's all a trick."

"We won't know unless one of us checks it out. And I'll be fine—I'll just hang back in the shadows observing." I eased into a lighter tone. "Besides, I look more Aryan than...than Hitler."

At the other end, Mathias chuckled. That was all that was left to us now: trying to make light of this new dark and threatening storm. "Take care," he said. "Don't take any risks. Hitler and the Nazis aren't worth it."

As I was putting on my jacket and hat in the hallway, Hannah asked, "Everything alright?"

"Yes, fine. That was just Mathias then." I didn't think Hannah had heard any of our conversation, she'd still been busy with

the kids. Besides, there was no point in worrying her unnecessarily when it was all probably nothing. “He was reminding me of a new writers group I’d promised to check out. I won’t be long—no more than an hour or so.” I smiled reassuringly.

“Okay. See you later.”

But as Hannah smiled back and leaned in to kiss me just before I went out the door, I sensed an uncertainty beneath. I began to wonder whether she had overheard part of my conversation with Mathias.

The Karmeliter area of Vienna was strongly Jewish, with its market very much a centerpiece. An expansive cobblestone courtyard a hundred square yards, it was open to all traders throughout the week, with the Jewish trading days predominantly Wednesdays and Sundays. A profusion of bright vegetables and fruit from surrounding farms with live poultry in small cages and sometimes a whole tethered lamb. The only difference with the Jewish days was there’d be stronger displays of pickled fish, olives and sweet treats such as baklava and halva.

My father used to live on the edge of the district, but now I lived over a kilometer southwest. As if I’d been moving away from my Jewish background not just with marriage choices, but geographically too.

I’d decided to walk. Best I avoided trams or buses where my identity papers might be asked for. While I wasn’t strictly Jewish, Namal was a common Austrian Jewish name, and someone might remember my father, *Ah, the son of Samuel Namal, the outspoken Jewish socialist and anti-Nazi. I have someone who’d like to ask you a few questions. Come with me.*

I became increasingly uneasy as I got closer to the Karmeliter area. At least three shops boarded up so far that I’d passed—which I hadn’t noticed when I’d last been here two weeks ago—another two in the street ahead. Had they been Jewish-owned stores? The name MARX on the farthest shop sign with

two yellow lines through it leading to a Star of David in the same yellow paint gave me my answer. I swallowed. Things were moving far faster than I thought.

As I turned into the next street, two more shops boarded up, then another one twenty yards opposite with part of its boarding ripped away and the window behind smashed.

More noise from the end of the street, a murmur and rumble of voices—the main market square was only fifty yards away. Sounded like a reasonable gathering. A middle-aged couple walked toward me, shoulders hunched. They kept their eyes stolidly ahead, didn't make eye contact. Not far behind them were two men in their early twenties, who did look at me before passing.

I looked back briefly. Were they following the couple perhaps? Sudden scuffling and movement made me jump, my heart in my throat. Two cats who'd been pulling at a rubbish bag scampered off only a foot ahead of me. I closed my eyes for a second as my pounding heart eased back. I shouldn't have come. Maybe I should just head back before it was too late.

But I found the rumble of voices ahead, with a now stronger light visible, drawing me on. Curiosity killed the cat.

On the wall to my side, an anti-fascist and -Nazi slogan had been hastily painted over, but it looked like they'd used the same yellow paint, now watered down—so that traces of the slogan still showed through. Then on top in bolder black paint were the words: *Amnestie Sammeln*—*Amnesty Gathering*...and an arrow pointing toward the square twenty yards away.

As the square opened out before me, I saw the source of the stronger light. Two sets of arc lamps on tripods each end of a long trestle table with the same *Amnestie Sammeln* banner along its side.

As I'd promised Mathias, I shuffled to one side and hung back in the shadows at the back of the square observing. No market stalls or fruit and vegetables today, no olives, baklava, halva or

poultry in cages—just that long well-lit trestle table and some German soldiers one side and a small line of what was probably Jews the other. All looked very orderly.

A couple of German soldiers behind the table appeared to be taking details, nodding at intervals as they made notes, then they would stamp a paper and the next in line would approach. I saw that those who'd had their papers stamped were standing in small huddles at the far end. Some other soldiers were there, but they seemed to be talking amiably with the Jews—no sign of discomfort or the situation being forced, let alone arrest. Maybe Schnabel had been telling the truth after all.

But then I noticed something more disturbing to one side. In a corner of the square a group of people had lit a small bonfire. At first, I thought it was just to keep them warm. But then I spotted a Nazi flag being waved by one of them and saw what they were throwing on the fire: not just firewood, cardboard or papers, but books!

I moved closer to see the books being thrown onto the fire: Bernstein, Freud, Schnitzler, Remarque, Werfel, Zweig... All Jewish or dissident authors!

The closest German soldier shouted toward them, "You shouldn't be doing that here!"

"How else do we let these Jew dogs know they're not welcome in Vienna!" one of the protestors yelled back.

It struck me then what had happened. Word had got around that Jews were being given amnesty in the square, so a Nazi protest group had turned up to intimidate them.

Hauptmann, Einstein... Roth... Salten...

But as the flames of the fire leaped higher around the books, I saw another reason the soldier might not be keen on them having the fire there. Two buses on the far side of the square, previously in shadow and darkness beyond the harsh glare of the arc lamps, were suddenly illuminated. And on one of the buses, an old lady was tapping against the glass and pointing to

something in the square, as if she'd left something behind. But the soldier at its side was vehemently shaking his head. As if to say, *You've been let on the bus, but you can't come off.*

Otto had been right. It had been a trap after all!

I staggered back from the flames—not only the heat, but what it represented! Shifted back into part-shadow again. But as I did so, a couple of books thrown on caught my eye. Even if I hadn't already recognized the covers, the name was emblazoned boldly on them: Mathias Kraemer. His trademark silhouette modern-day–Sherlock Holmes flyleaf photo clearly visible as one of the books flipped open.

None of my own books, thank goodness—but then I wasn't nearly as well-known. Probably one of the few times I'd actually felt grateful not to have wider readership. And as I watched the pages curl and the flames rise from my cousin's book, I must have stayed transfixed a moment longer than I realized. Because when I looked up, I saw someone at the far side of the long trestle table that I recognized: Scharführer Heinrich Schnabel! He seemed to spot me in that moment too, recalling where he'd seen me, because he lifted a hand my way.

I backed swiftly away into the shadows again, but at that moment I felt someone grip tight onto my arm from the side—no doubt a fellow guard that Schnabel had signaled—wrenching me hard away deeper into those shadows.

3

We are living in a specially remarkable period. We find to our astonishment that progress has allied itself with barbarism.

—*Sigmund Freud*

Johannes

I was thrown into the back of a car and seconds later it sped away.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

I was still dazed and in shock, so it took me a moment to orientate and recognize the voice: Josef Weber, the local police inspector that Mathias had introduced me to three years ago and had since become—after numerous bar and restaurant meetings for background research on the police and the city’s lowlifes—something of a friend.

“I was in the Mozart earlier with Mathias, and we heard there was an amnesty for Jews in the square tonight—so I came to

check it out.” I went on to explain about Schnabel’s standing announcement to the café, Otto’s take on it and what I’d finally agreed with Mathias.

Josef appeared suddenly alarmed, his eyes squinting sharper in the rearview mirror. “My God! Don’t tell me Mathias came with you into the square?”

“No. It was agreed that I should come alone—because I look less Jewish.”

“Well, at least you’re not completely stupid.” The trace of a smile curled his mouth as he fleetingly half turned to me. “You should have listened to Otto. If he says it was a trap, an SS officer made the announcement and it looked like a trap—then it’s probably a trap!”

“At first it looked okay,” I tamely defended. “Forms being signed, soldiers looking cordial and helpful. But then I spotted the buses on the far side.”

“You know what those buses are for?” Josef’s eyes again in the mirror, sharp, disturbed. “They’re there to transport everyone to a nearby warehouse to be locked up. They’re told that tea, coffee and a hot meal awaits them for being helpful—but once they go beyond the harsh light of those arc lamps, they’re lost. The soldiers’ attitudes become equally harsh and there’s no turning back.” He shook his head. “Two nights ago they commandeered the disused Northwestbahnhof station, turned it into a makeshift concentration camp. It’s reckoned that already almost twenty thousand Jews and dissidents are being held there.”

The news shocked me, but after Schnabel’s earlier café visit and the horrors of the night, perhaps less than it should have. Already I was starting to become numbed to such news. “So what’s the point in holding a false amnesty like that?”

“It saves the Gestapo and SS the trouble of hunting all the Jews and dissidents out—you’re doing their work for them by turning up.” Josef shrugged. “Same reason this Schnabel didn’t go table to table in the Mozart earlier asking to see everyone’s

identity cards. Too much work, and in the process he risks upsetting the 90 percent upstanding Aryan Viennese citizens. Many of them top-drawer in somewhere like the Mozart.”

Suddenly struck with the thought, I asked, “Why were you there in the square tonight?”

“We heard at the Kärntnerstrasse station that there was going to be a little demonstration. Myself and a few others showed up just in case there was any conflict, things flared up.”

“Is that your attempt at humor, with the book burning?”

“Unintentional...unless it was a Freudian slip.” I couldn’t see Josef’s smile in the mirror, but I could see his eyes crinkle. “It’s not just Jews who might have objected to the book burning, but staunch academics and the literary elite. Freedom of speech and all that.”

“I suppose.” I sighed softly. “But there was nothing, not a word of objection. The people in that line hardly looked toward the Nazi flag-wavers and book-burners, looked afraid to meet their eyes for even a second. It was a people who looked already defeated, Josef. No fight left.”

“Because they’re afraid, Johannes. As I sensed you were in that moment looking at the fire.”

“I saw some of Mathias’s books there.” I said it plainly, matter-of-factly, belying how I’d felt in that moment. As if my insides had been hollowed out.

“Oh, I see.” I noticed Josef’s hands grip tighter at the steering wheel and his eyes dart uncomfortably for a moment; as if in acknowledgment that that made it somehow different, more personal.

Josef’s shifting gray-blue eyes were the first thing I’d noticed about him. As if constantly trying to work out the angles on an investigation. Late thirties with thinning sandy hair, Josef was medium height, about five-nine, but built like a bull. The many stories he’d related of arresting suspects, barging them against

a wall and spinning them sharply around to handcuff, I could easily believe. Not a man to fool with.

Josef huffed out tiredly, "Next time you plan on going to 'amnesties' or any other meetings arranged by the SS, let me know first." He swung his car, a fairly new Steyr 220, the smell of its seat-leather still heavy, into the curb and stopped. "Meanwhile, I'll see what I can find out on file about Heinrich Schnabel."

"Thanks." I looked out and saw that he'd pulled up in front of my apartment block.

"Take care," Josef said. "And give my regards to Hannah and your two lovely children."

4

Marriages between Jews and citizens of German or related blood are forbidden. As are marriages between Mischlinge of the first degree and Germans; between Jews and Mischlinge of the second degree; and between two Mischlinge of the second degree.

Mathias

I decided to walk my son, Ivor, to school.

Halfway along the street, I saw Mrs. Haider, our neighbor from three doors away, returning from the bakery with a bag. I nodded and smiled at her.

“Good morning!”

A smile and nod in return, but it was curt, more restrained than normal. As if she was already starting to worry that consorting with a Jew might get her into trouble. Or was I just imagining it?

After Johannes’s call late last night, telling me about the am-

nesty trick in Karmelitermarkt—the boarded shops he’d seen in the area, the Nazi flag-waving and book burning, and what he’d heard from Josef Weber, our mutual police contact and friend, as Josef had whisked him away—I was being more watchful for signs of change: only one shop so far I’d seen boarded up.

Not that I’d needed much reminding of that change. I’d had my marriage for that.

Four years now since Emilia had finally walked out, leaving me as a single father to Ivor. Like Johannes, I’d also married a good Austrian girl, also Catholic, although Emilia hadn’t been in the least religious. But, unlike Johannes with Hannah, my marriage to Emilia had ended disastrously.

Later, when I’d had the conversation with Johannes—another area where our lives had followed similar paths, our respective marriages, not just being writers—I’d voiced whether I too had been guilty of trying to sanitize my family, make them appear less Jewish in the face of increasing acrimony, then finally open hostility, toward Jews in Austria. It hadn’t even started as the wish to keep our children safe, because initially there’d been no foreseeable danger. Just acrimony. *“We all want the best for our children,” I’d commented to Johannes. “So it was simply the fact that I didn’t want Ivor seen somehow as a ‘lesser-being.’ To have to put up with those comments, gibes and sometimes just looks of disdain. Why should he suffer because of my background?”*

But as I’d said it, I realized in that moment that I too, like Emilia, had allowed myself to become far too reactive to the anti-Judaic sentiment that had crept into Austrian society year by year.

There had been no escaping my own Jewish heritage. My father, Isaac Kraemer, and mother Lena, Samuel Namal’s eldest sister, had both been Jewish and regularly attended a synagogue—though I’d lapsed somewhat. But despite the ethnic-marriage step away, Ivor had ended up looking more

like me—the same dark brown hair and warm brown eyes—than Emilia.

When I'd first met Emilia, she'd been a struggling actress and dancer with an easy smile, fiery red-tinged hair and a twinkle in her eye. Always glad of a glass of champagne after a performance, whether it had gone well or badly. Maybe a little too "flighty" for some, but to me that had been part of the attraction—I loved her easygoing, carefree spirit and charm. And for Emilia, six years younger than me, perhaps the attraction had been that as a Jewish writer she saw me as different, something of a rebel, unconventional, exciting. Half of her acting friends were Socialist dissidents in any case, so it wasn't such a leap. Always easier to be attracted to rebels when you're young, I thought, before the conventions of society take grip. Emilia and I were married within a year.

Ivor was born four years later. But already those societal conventions, along with the more staid and humdrum rigors of marriage, had started to wear Emilia down. With Hitler's steady rise in Germany in the late 1920s, culminating in him being made chancellor in 1933, the sea change of attitude toward Jews in Austria became more evident day by day. Another factor had been Emilia meanwhile finding more success with her acting career and so moving in more rigid, higher-society circles, drifting away from her old Socialist and rebel-loving dissident friends. As she found the pressures of those two sides harder to mesh in her mind—her society friends and their comments one side, our marriage the other—she tried to bridge that increasing gulf with drink. More champagne and wine after performances, then finally drinking openly at home too.

One day when I commented that perhaps she was drinking too much, she'd glared and snapped back, "And why do you think that is, Mathias? It's not easy being married to a Jew in today's world, you know."

Perhaps another contributory factor had been that my early

writing career hadn't been that successful—my biggest hits hadn't come until Ivor had been six, by which time our marriage was already on the rocks. One night after returning from a champagne-swilled après-performance celebration with her friends, she'd sneered in the middle of an argument, "My friends think your writing is a joke. I mean, it's hardly Goethe or Kafka, is it?" The unspoken and evident truth that literary elitists often looked down on more basic, populist crime and thriller writers. But now that truth hung over my marriage, along with being a second-class Jew.

The final straw came when Emilia met Gerhard, a wealthy German industrialist, who'd taken a shine to her after seeing her performance in *Pygmalion* at Vienna's Ronacher Theater. They had an affair, which Emilia had originally denied, but after six months of Gerhard wining and dining Emilia more openly, she asked for a divorce. I readily agreed. I'd had enough too.

She married Gerhard within six weeks of the decree absolute coming through. During the period Emilia had been at home, between the drink and pursuing her acting career, she hadn't been a particularly good mother to Ivor—perhaps too seeing him as part of the pressure on her, part of me. So she didn't argue for custody, in fact quite the opposite. Knowing that she'd be hopeless at taking care of him constantly, she readily agreed to seeing Ivor just once a week.

The one benefit of Gerhard coming into Emilia's life had been that she'd cut down on her drinking. Perhaps he'd spoken to her or perhaps simply because she felt the pressure of living a double life had gone. Gerhard's business was in automotive components, with a main factory in Stuttgart and a West-Vienna subsidiary plant in Brigittenau. But twenty months after they'd married, he had to be more at the Stuttgart factory, so Emilia moved there with him. Her visits then to see Ivor were at first once a month, then finally every other month.

But with the increasing absences, Emilia would pile it on like

a doting mother like she never had before. Turning up in a new Mercedes and sweeping in with a sable or mink coat redolent with Lenthéric, as beautiful as ever, her arms full of presents for Ivor, showering him with kisses and “Oh, my goodness, I’ve missed you so” hugs.

Then they’d wave goodbye to me as Emilia took Ivor to the park, local fair, circus or cinema, with Ivor beaming when they returned two or three hours later. After one of those visits, while Ivor had been playing with an almost two-foot-long model of the convertible Mercedes Emilia had turned up in, he asked wistfully, “Why can’t I see Mum more?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think it would work out,” I’d answered after a moment’s contemplation. Difficult to explain to Ivor that it was mainly the long absences which made his mother’s visits more special.

“Why not? She’s a good mother now.”

Almost an unwitting admittance that she’d been a bad mother before.

That was even more difficult to explain, so I’d just smiled indulgently and playfully ruffled Ivor’s hair. “We’ll see.”

My answer to so much these days.

When Ivor had asked me whether I’d be walking him back and forth to school every day from now on—normally I’d alternate with my sister, Erica, who was four years younger and also doted on Ivor—“We’ll see.” With Anschluss, I didn’t want Erica possibly being confronted by SS soldiers. Hopefully, I’d be able to answer—or deflect—their questions more adroitly.

Then when I’d picked Ivor up from school yesterday, he’d commented that his class teacher said that from now on a number of the school’s children might have to be registered differently. “Something about Jews and Mischlinge. Is that true?” Another “We’ll see.”

But now as I approached the school gates with Ivor, I could

see the headmaster, Mr. Leitner, looking my way, hoping to get my attention.

I made out I hadn't seen him. Simply gave Ivor a quick parting hug, said, "Have a good day," and turned and walked away.

I had a meeting later with Julian Reisner to go to. Besides, that was the last thing I wanted to discuss with Mr. Leitner right now: whether from now on my son would be a first-, second- or third-class Austrian citizen.

5

What progress we are making. In the Middle Ages they would have burned me. Now they are content with burning my books.

—*Sigmund Freud*

Mathias

Fortunately, I didn't see too many SS or soldiers on the way to and from Ivor's school—at least none that paid me much attention or looked inclined to demand to see my identity card or ask me any questions.

But a block from Julian's office, I saw a group of SS who looked keener and more alert, eyes scouring in each direction. Only a few streets from Heldenplatz, one of Vienna's main squares and parks, it was a busy area, and I'd only seen the soldiers stop one person so far—so I took my chances.

One of the soldiers' eyes drifted my way as I approached on

the opposite side of the street, but they didn't linger on me—then I was lost behind a small group of people heading toward me as I passed the soldiers, and I didn't, daren't, look back. But hardly had my breath eased before I saw another group of soldiers on the next corner ahead. Something was happening!

This group wouldn't be so easy to pass unnoticed, because Julian's office was halfway down that next side street.

I toyed with the idea of crossing over at the last minute, as if I'd forgotten that was the turning I wanted, so was then on the opposite side from them—but that might appear too obvious. And if I crossed over directly toward them, I'd stand out and they'd be more conscious of my approach—so I decided in the end to cross over ten yards short of them, try and merge with some other people walking up that side: a teenage girl with an elderly couple, the man with a cane.

I let fall and stubbed out beneath my shoe the cigarette I'd lit halfway there, my third since dropping off Ivor—already Anschluss appeared to have increased my habit. I paused at the curb to look each way for passing traffic, feeling a twinge grip my left leg—something that returned now and then when I felt tense—timing it so that I was tucked in just a few yards behind them, hopefully partly shielded from the guards ahead. But as we got closer to them, I noticed one guard peer past the couple and the teenage girl, his eyes fixing on me.

And I knew then my luck had probably run out. I'd have to present my identity card and answer some awkward questions. I might be late seeing Julian, if I got to see him at all.

“You look like you've seen a ghost,” Julian said. “Here. Get this down you. This kirsch would wake the dead.”

I nodded numbly and smiled as Julian poured a generous third-tumblerful of Fürfteneck and set it down by the coffee his secretary, Krisztina, had just brought me.

“It's certainly been a rough couple of days,” I said. And as