

The Duel. The story of Günter Grass and Marcel Reich-Ranicki

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Two old gentlemen in Lübeck laughing under a low, wooden-beamed ceiling. “What glamorous company in my shed,” the man with the thick hair and the pipe in his hand had said earlier, by way of greeting. It sounded a little ironic, but warm, too; a little distant, but also melancholy and heartfelt. The other man, the one with the glasses and the crown of hair around his bald head, laughed and said: “My dear fellow.”

It is the summer of 2003. They’ve known each other a long time, almost fifty years now. When they first met in 1958, at the grand Hotel Bristol in Warsaw, they had already lived a whole life. But the story of this pair, their fame, the novels, the hatchet jobs, the declarations of love, the tears and the anger, their life as the inseparable couple of German literature – all that still lay ahead of them. The SS man and the Jew. The writer and his critic. The two Germans from Poland, swept up in a life-long love affair with literature.

It’s been nine years now since they last saw each other. The critic’s final attack had proved too much for the writer. But it was no good. “There are marriages that are not made in any register office, nor ended in any divorce court,” the author wrote. “I will not be rid of him, he will not be rid of me.”

That’s the way it is. They both know it. And now they’re standing here, face to face in Lübeck. The writer Günter Grass and the literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki. “And so we stick together and resent each other for our quarrels,” Grass will later write of this meeting. Adding, regretfully: “I should have embraced him.” When Marcel Reich-Ranicki reads this later, he will exclaim: “You know what? Grass is right. We really should have embraced each other.”

But it’s too late for that. This will remain their final meeting.

[...]

The Translator

Marcel Reich. 1939-1943

The euphoria in Warsaw that followed the start of the war didn't last long. On 7 September, when a colonel from the Polish General Staff announced on the radio that the German tanks were approaching the Polish capital, and all men fit for combat were advised to leave the city and head east, blind panic broke out. Another message came shortly afterwards that naturally, the city had to be defended, but it was too late. Scenes of chaos on the streets, shock and fright. But how were people supposed to get out of there now?

Unexpectedly, an opportunity arose for Marcel and his brother to travel east with some relatives in a hired lorry. And they went. It was clear that the Germans would never occupy the whole of Poland; and across the eastern border lay Hitler's arch enemy, Stalin's Soviet Union. They would be safe in the east, then. They left their parents behind. No one would hurt old people – the brothers were certain of that.

On they drove, further and further east. Wherever they went, German planes had been there first. They saw villages in ruins, corpses, burning houses, they passed the deserted city of Siedlce. At last, their journey ended in a bleak stretch of countryside in what is now Belarus: the Pripyat Marshes. They seemed to be safe there, but Marcel Reich discovered to his utter horror that there were villages inside the Polish borders of the time where people had no books. On the hunt for any book at all, he asked around for a bible. No, nobody had one, nor a prayer book, never had. What would they need those for? You could ask the pastor, the villagers told him.

Marcel was lucky that their little troop of refugees included an eighteen-year-old girl with whom he could talk about Theodor Storm and share kisses – until, as he later recalled, he looked up at the sky and saw planes again. They were flying high above them, but it was still strange. And they looked different to the German planes. Were they Russian? What were they doing here? What was going on? Had the Soviet Union entered the war on the Polish side already? Had

Germany been driven back and obliterated? There was no information to be gleaned in the marshes.

The Warsaw troop drove slowly back in their lorry, heading west from village to village. No one knew anything. Until they came upon some Polish soldiers. They told them about the capitulation. No, not by Germany; by Poland. Hitler and Stalin were one heart and one soul, they said. The two men had divided Poland between them.

They arrive back in the city they left just a few days before. Warsaw is in ruins. The brothers hurry past the flattened houses, the smoking rubble, until they reach their street, the apartment building they left in a panic. It is still standing, only partially destroyed, the flat below theirs has been blown to smithereens. They knock on the door, but there's no answer. Finally, the sound of shuffling, and the door is opened anxiously: "Before us stood two very old people, as it seemed to us, who didn't recognise us in the darkness and whom fear had reduced to silence – my mother and father."

Mute parents, their two sons, a ruined city. Things are bad. And from now on, they will get worse with each passing day. The German soldiers run riot in the city; Jews are fair game, and the soldiers are permitted to hit, humiliate and rob them at will. From now on, every Jew over the age of ten has to wear a white armband with a blue star of David on it. It marks you out as a legitimate target.

And they aren't even safe in their homes. It's only October when the Reichs are harassed in their flat by German soldiers for the first time. Guns drawn, they demand money from the dentist and jewellery from his mother. The Reichs hand over what they have, and in three minutes the soldiers are gone again. Helene Reich is indignant, certain this has been a misunderstanding that the dependable German authorities will clear up. And so she sets off for the German command post to complain and ask for her jewellery and her wedding ring back. Her son Marcel goes with her.

They don't get far. A genial guard tells them in no uncertain terms to get lost.

For nineteen-year-old Marcel, however, the new situation in the country also provided an opportunity to do work that was meaningful and, in some ways at least, challenging. The German authorities had

demanded a census of Jews. The Jewish Religious Community, which was soon renamed the “Jewish Council of Elders” and finally the “Jewish Council” was charged with this task, and employed Marcel Reich as a translator. Initially, the job was to last two weeks. But Marcel stayed, and his outstanding German language skills soon saw him become head of the Jewish Council’s “Translation and Correspondence Office”. “For the first time in my life, I was needed,” he recalls.

But the family’s fear grows from one day to the next. In November, there are more German soldiers at the door. They need workers. They take Marcel and his brother; outside, thirty or forty other Jews are already waiting. As they are marched through the city, they’re told to sing. They sing Polish, then Yiddish songs, and finally the soldiers order them to yell: “We are Jewish pigs. We are filthy Jews. We are sub-human.” They then have to clean out an enormous swimming pool in a student hall of residence that is being used as a barracks. Anyone who doesn’t work fast enough is kicked into the pool.

From then on, the tyranny and humiliations, and the unexpected and seldom-granted possibility of friendliness from the Germans, became part of everyday life for the Jews of Warsaw. The following year, the authorities started moving the Jews into a designated area of the city. To protect them from abuse and violent assaults, they said at first; then it was to protect the Germans from outbreaks of infection and illnesses. A three-metre-high wall was built around that part of the city, and on 16 November 1940, all entrances to the district were closed and SS soldiers positioned on the gates. The Warsaw Ghetto. A whole district had become a prison.

The Reichs, too, were forced to move. Life was cruel, but in comparison to others they weren’t badly off. Dentists were needed – and Marcel, too, had a job that gave him a steady income. As head of the translation office, he was also one of the first to be informed of all new regulations and developments. And to be told about the horrors of day-to-day life in the ghetto. Witness statements and reports of assaults, and particularly brutal and indiscriminate actions by the SS, often ended up on the desk of the translator Marcel Reich.

He knew better than the vast majority of the ghetto’s Jewish residents that something even more monstrous could happen at any time. His eagerness for news – which in later life led him to begin every conversation with the insistent question: “What’s new?” – had its

roots in those ghetto days, he writes. Back then, it was a question of survival.

Another new thing entered the young Marcel Reich's life that year, in 1940. A good new thing on another terrible day. On 21 January, a woman and her daughter popped out to run some errands. The husband – the girl's father – was alone in the house while they were out. Lately he had virtually stopped talking about killing himself. He must have grown used to the new situation. He had co-owned a flourishing textile factory in Łódź, until the war broke out. After that, the running of the business was suddenly taken over by a custodian who refused him entry to his own factory. A day later, he was hit in the face by a German soldier on the main street of Łódź. Why? Just because.

When he got home that day, he said he had no choice but to kill himself. He didn't do it, though. The family fled to Warsaw. The daughter, who had just taken her university entrance exams, was supposed to be going to Paris to study art history. Nothing would come of that now.

When the mother and daughter come back from their grocery shopping, they find Pawel Langnas, the husband and father. He has hanged himself with his belt.

Helene Reich sees agitated neighbours in the yard. She calls Marcel over, asks him what's going on down there. Someone is already ringing their doorbell. The doctor, they need a doctor, Herr Langnas has hanged himself. In desperation, people have pinned their hopes on the dentist Alexander Reich. But he isn't at home.

No, there's no doctor in the flat. Just Alexander's little brother. His mother thinks quickly: "Go over there at once, Langnas has a daughter, she will need taking care of now." And she adds: "Look after the girl!"

Marcel looks after her. Her name is Teofila, but everyone calls her Tosia. She has a funny, naturally smiley face, with a gap in her teeth and inquisitive dark eyes. Now here she is, standing in the flat where she has just tried and failed to cut her father loose from the belt. Tears are welling from her eyes; Marcel, beside her – helpless,

overwhelmed, his mother's instructions in his head – strokes her hair, kisses her tears.

Pawel Langnas is buried the following day. It is a time when Jews are still being buried. Marcel Reich goes to the funeral with Tosia, and they stand beside the open grave together. “We already felt it natural that on this dismal, wet day in January 1940, we were together. And we stayed together.”

In the summer of the following year, Tosia made him a present for his 21st birthday. “I've never been given anything that someone has put more effort into – or more love.” It was Erich Kästner's *The Lyrical Medicine Chest*: Tosia had written out the poems, painted watercolours to go with them, and bound the whole thing into a book. Poems by Erich Kästner, who little Marcel had so loved in Berlin. Copies: one. Just for him. They read them together. The mournful “Matter-of-Fact Romance”:

*Eight years it was they'd been together
(weathering all kinds of weather)
When one day they mislaid their love
Like some folk lose a cane or glove.*

Or “Apropos of loneliness”:

*When you're alone, it does no good at all
Just to turn your collar up and stop
Outside the window of a friendly shop
And say: that hat is nice, but rather small...*

...

*You feel what it would be like: to be small.
As small as little brand-new babies are!
You close both eyes, the world turns black as tar.
You are...alone*

“The land where canons bloom”:

*Freedom never ripens in this land.
You build a house – and there a barracks stands.
Do you know the land where canons bloom?
You don't? Well, you will come to know it soon.*

“The lullaby”:

*Forget the moon, my child, and sleep!
The stars are in the sky.
Forget the wind that creeps and leaps!
Forget me too, and go to sleep!
There is no need to cry...*

They read and read. She tried to interest him in Polish poetry; he tried to interest her in German literature. Once, they read Stefan Zweig’s *Decisive Moments in History*, including the melodramatic, poetic “Heroic Moment”, which tells the story of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s death sentence and subsequent reprieve:

*His voice rings out and jars
The still, expectant air
The Tsar
Is merciful and has declared
The judgement void; now, with his assent,
You shall face milder punishment.*

But their great shared passion was music. “Our greed for music”, Marcel Reich-Ranicki later called it. Beethoven, Mozart – there were some fantastic concerts in the ghetto, under the leadership of Simon Pullmann. Born in Warsaw in 1890, he had studied the violin at the conservatoire in St Petersburg. He’d played mostly in Vienna before the war, had visited his family in Warsaw in the summer of 1939, and hadn’t got out in time. “It is hard to imagine the dedication with which players rehearsed, and the delight they took in making music in those days.” Beethoven’s string quartet Opus 59, no.3 in C major was played particularly often and particularly well. Many, many years later, in another world, in another age, when Marcel Reich-Ranicki was asked what music he would like for his “Literary Quartet” television programme, he chose the opening bars of the *allegro molto* from this piece – and he later wrote: “Whenever I hear those bars of Beethoven on *Literary Quartet*, I think of the musicians who played it in the ghetto. They were gassed, all of them.”

It was also in the Warsaw Ghetto that the boy who was greedy for music wrote his first pieces of criticism: regular concert reviews for the twice-weekly Polish language *Gazeta Żydowska*. When they asked him if he would start there as a critic, he hesitated: “for I had never written a review in my life. I was afraid.” But he wrote all the same. His criticism was enthusiastic and – ghetto or no – also rigorous. His pseudonym was Wiktor Hart.

“But the very fact that I was passing judgement in public on experienced and quite often long-respected artists,” he wrote later, “even if it was with pangs of conscience – that in itself was something of a liberty, or rather: it was impertinent. I knew it, but I did it anyway. Today, I look at my articles from that time and I am ashamed.”

At some point in the spring of 1942, the public concerts were banned. After that, Marcel Reich started organising private concerts in the main Jewish Council building. Young people also met regularly for record concerts and sat around the gramophone together. “It feels to me like music never played such a role in our lives as in that dismal time.”

During those weeks, people in the ghetto also started hearing a rumour that somewhere in Poland, the Germans were funnelling car exhausts into small rooms to murder Jews. Yes, it was a wholly unbelievable, absurd rumour. But with every day that the ghetto endured, incredible stories became more credible. On the night of 17 April, 53 Jews whose names were on a list were taken from their apartments and shot dead nearby. They had been singled out as potential leaders of an uprising. “The ghetto froze in shock.”

Then came the summer. 22 July. The weather is glorious. The ghetto’s residents have been growing more fearful over the preceding two days. An unusually large number of Jews have been shot dead in the street; members of the Jewish Council, which functions as a kind of government, a body representing Jewish interests, and an intermediary with those in power, have been taken hostage. Something seems to be on the horizon. Something even worse than the routine horrors of everyday life.

A few cars and two lorries pull up outside the headquarters of the Jewish Council, and soldiers get out. The building is surrounded. 15 or so SS men climb out of the cars. They enter the building, and go into

the office of Adam Czerniaków, the chair of the Jewish Council. The whole building suddenly falls silent.

Czerniaków calls the head of his translation department in. Marcel Reich thinks he's about to be arrested and taken hostage now, as well. But to be on the safe side, he takes a notepad and two pencils with him, as he always does when the boss calls him in to take dictation. There are heavily armed guards in the corridors. Czerniaków's office door is open, and he himself is standing behind his desk, surrounded by SS officers. When he sees his translator, he turns to a corpulent, bald-headed SS man who is standing beside him and says: "This is my best correspondent, my best translator." The man to whom the young Marcel Reich is introduced in such glowing terms is Hermann Höfle. Head of the main Operation Reinhard department, he works for the SS and police leader. The department is generally known by a catchier name: the extermination commando.

Can he do stenography, Höfle asks the translator. No, he can't, Reich replies. Well then, can he type fast enough to transcribe the meeting that is about to take place? "Yes."

They then sit down at a long table, facing one another. The SS on one side, the Jews on the other. Höfle dictates. And Marcel Reich writes down what he says.

Later, long after he came to be known as Marcel Reich-Ranicki, he still recalled this sunny afternoon in great detail. The open window with the sun streaming in, and the SS men waiting outside, killing time; they clearly had a gramophone in the car and were listening to waltzes by Johann Strauss.

The dictation he now takes is his own death sentence. It is a death sentence for his parents, his brother, Tosia's mother, Tosia, it is the death sentence passed by the SS on the Jews of Warsaw. Hurriedly typed out by Marcel Reich.

Although, that isn't entirely correct. He also writes that some groups are to be exempted. All the Jews capable of work, all Jews employed by the German authorities or on the staff of the Jewish Council – and their wives and children. They are spared that sentence, but no one can be in any doubt that it will be passed on them, too, at some later point. They are excluded from the ranks of the condemned "for the time being" at best.

Nor is there any mention of death in the transcript. It is only for those individuals who rebel against the measures that "...will be shot" is added, a refrain that gains a stoic power with each repetition. And if the Jewish Council doesn't ensure that the order is implemented without a hitch – Höfle points out of the window at a children's playground in front of the building – "you will all be strung up, over there."

He opened this meeting with the words: "Today is the day the resettlement of the Warsaw Jews begins. As you well know, there are too many Jews here." And as the transcript goes on, the talk is all of "resettlement" and the "east". It says that the "resettlers" are permitted to take only fifteen kilos of luggage with them, though they should bring "all valuables, money, jewellery, gold etc." The resettlement must begin immediately. That very day, 22 July 1942, the Jewish Council has to get 6000 Jews to a public square near the train tracks, the *Umschlagplatz* or "collection point". From there, they will be taken off to this "east". 6000 Jews, every day.

Eventually the dictation is over. The SS leave the building and the Jews remain behind.

The silence erupts into noise and turmoil. Panic, dismay, shouting – and Marcel Reich, at his desk, is tasked with translating the order into Polish, in sections that can be put up on posters all over the ghetto that same day.

He now dictates the Polish text to an attractive, confident woman who also works at the Jewish Council. She lives alone with her two sons. Her name is Gustawa Jarecka, she's a Polish author whose socially-critical novels were published before the war to some acclaim – and she is much more grown-up and self-assured than Tosia. Later, Marcel wrote of her: "Unconsciously, I found in her the support that my mother could no longer offer me – and Tosia could not offer me yet." Once, he laid a hand on her shoulder, at which Gustawa said, gently and resolutely, "Stop that." Quickly adding: "*We* need to stop that." He had Tosia, after all, and that was how things should stay.

Now, as he's dictating, there comes a point where she interrupts the translator and, without looking up from the typewriter, says: "You need to marry Tosia, today." It's the passage stipulating that the wives of Jewish Council employees are also exempt from the "resettlement" programme for the time being.

As soon as he has finished the dictation, Marcel Reich sends a message to Tosia, asking her to come straight away and bring her birth certificate with her. Meanwhile, he goes down to the ground floor, where he knows there's a theologian who is licensed to perform the duties of a rabbi. The theologian is ready at once. Tosia arrives, rather perturbed by the panic on the streets, and Marcel tells her of his plan. She is only moderately surprised, and the spur-of-the-moment wedding happens very prosaically and at top speed. In later years, Marcel Reich couldn't remember whether he kissed his bride. But he never forgot the feeling that overwhelmed them both as they were getting married: fear.

Adam Czerniaków, whom the SS had decided to appoint as the executioner of Warsaw's Jews, took his own life the following day. In his suicide note, he wrote: "I have decided to make my exit. Do not regard this as an act of cowardice or an escape. I am powerless, my heart breaks with sadness and pity, I cannot bear it any longer."

Hermann Höfle organised and oversaw the deportation of Warsaw's Jews to the gas chambers of Treblinka from 22 July until September 1942. He had been born in Salzburg in 1911, and before the war he'd driven a taxi and had a job at the Salzburg waterworks. When the war ended, he was captured by British troops in Carinthia and, after two years in an internment camp, handed over to the Austrian courts in August 1947. But on 30 October that year he was released and went back to work, taking a job as a car mechanic in Salzburg. In 1948, Poland applied for his extradition, and he fled to Italy, where he lived under a false name until 1951. He then returned to Austria and moved to Germany soon after, where for a short while he was an informant for the US Army's Counterintelligence Corps. Ten years later, in 1961, he was arrested again in Salzburg. On 2 January 1962, the Hamburg district court asked Marcel Reich-Ranicki to act as a witness in Hermann Höfle's trial. The trial never took place; Höfle hanged himself in his prison cell in Vienna on 21 August 1962.

In the year 2000, the British secret service released some previously classified documents. They included a radio transmission sent by Höfle to Adolf Eichmann, and intercepted by the British on 11 January 1943. At the time, the British had been puzzled by it. The transmission yielded little information: it was just a list of numbers that added up to 1,274,166. It was only after the transmission was

declassified that people grasped its significance. The sum was the number of Jews killed in the General Government's death camps up to 31 December 1942.

A number in a radio transmission. 1,274,166. For the inhabitants of the ghetto, there was only one question: how could they avoid adding themselves to this number? Avoid increasing the sum total of people "resettled" by one? It was slowly becoming clear to everyone what this "resettlement" involved. The people from the Jewish Council who saw the trains leave the collection point soon reported that each train was returning after five hours at most. Empty. The trains went to Treblinka station. The prisoners had to change there, and board a train at another platform that took them a further five kilometres into the forest. Their destination was not a work camp; it wasn't a camp at all, just a building that housed three gas chambers.

Of course, nobody in the ghetto was safe, just because they worked for the Jewish Council or because they were married to a Jewish Council employee. There was no safety. Soon, on-the-spot selections started to take place in the Jewish Council building, too. The employees had to gather in the courtyard. A jaded SS man with a riding crop had the Jews march past him, while he decided whether to send each of them left or right. One side meant death; the other, life. He seemed to send the poorly-dressed, badly-shaved people to the death side. The rule appeared to be that smart, respectable-looking, well-groomed men went to the side of life. Later, Marcel Reich-Ranicki often said that at that time, he got into the habit of shaving twice a day – a habit he kept up for the rest of his life. But of course, having a shave wasn't guaranteed to save your life, either. The SS man with the whip would often act on a whim and send a group of smart young people to their deaths just because he felt like it.

Tosia's mother had been sent to the collection point in August. When Helene Reich heard that Tosia was now all alone, she said: "You'll stay with us now."

But this "us" didn't last long. On 5 September a new decree was issued, telling all the ghetto's Jews to gather near the collection point. For "registration", it said. They should bring enough food for two days and leave their apartments unlocked. No one was in any doubt as to what that meant. At the place where they were told to gather, 35,000 Jews were given "life numbers". That was just ten per cent of the Jews who had been living in the ghetto on 22 July, at the start of

the resettlement programme. Marcel and Tosia were each given a number. The other two members of that “us” were not: “My parents had no chance of getting a ‘life number’ because of their age – my mother was 58, my father 62 – and they didn’t have the strength or the desire to hide. I told them where to queue. My father gave me a bewildered look, my mother was surprisingly calm. She was carefully dressed, wearing a light raincoat she had brought with her from Berlin. I knew I was seeing her for the last time. And that’s how I see them still: my father, helpless, and my mother in that handsome trench coat from a department store near the Berlin Gedächtniskirche. The last words Tosia heard from my mother were: ‘Take care of Marcel’.”

Then, without Marcel’s parents, they walked back towards their flat. They never reached it. During the “great selection”, the SS had redrawn the boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto. Their old flat now lay outside the Jewish area. In the distance, they could see the lorries of the SS “collection of valuables” detail. That was why when the Jews had been summoned, they were instructed not to lock their doors. It made it easier for the SS to clear out the vacated living quarters.

Marcel and Tosia were taken to Mila Street, the road near the collection point that would later become the centre of the ghetto uprising. The young couple were allocated a small flat there. One room, a kitchen, a tiny washroom. The beds were unmade and the kitchen table hadn’t been cleared, two half-full glasses of tea, a piece of bread with a bite taken out of it, the light in the washroom left on. “The clothes, the furniture, the two sofa cushions and the rug – it all still seemed to be breathing.”

Marcel Reich-Ranicki later recalls that they had no scruples, no inner resistance to overcome. That was how it was. They were indifferent. They’d been spared in the short term. But their own death wouldn’t be long in coming. It was all just a matter of time.

Of course, they had heard of Jews who had somehow escaped from the ghetto. But nobody had ever heard of one who’d survived. Anyone outside, beyond the ghetto walls, who saw a Jew, or knew about a Jew and didn’t turn them in immediately, would face the death penalty. There was no hope of long-term survival. Not in here. Not out there.

Marcel Reich still had his work. Normally, Tosia went to work with him – he’d set her up in his office, and she did little graphic design jobs, producing signs and labels.

“Then it happened” – this is how the episode begins in Reich-Ranicki’s memoirs. “Then it happened” that one day, her husband went to work without her. She would be along later. But she didn’t come. And finally someone brought Marcel Reich a message. She was at the collection point, from where the trains were still departing.

He rushed to the square and happened upon a Jewish militia officer he knew, a man who’d given Marcel’s parents a loaf of bread for the journey. That day, Marcel Reich-Ranicki says, there were no SS men in the square. He managed to convince the officer to let Tosia go. But how she had got there, and what she had experienced at the collection point, was something she couldn’t or wouldn’t tell him. “I never found out,” says Reich-Ranicki. But he knew that, “Anyone who is condemned to death, and has seen the train to the gas chambers at close quarters, is marked for the rest of their lives.”

Very soon, that happened to both of them. 18 January 1943. They were woken just after six in the morning by a commotion out on the street. Hundreds or even thousands of Jews had gathered, and they could hear loud commands: anyone who doesn’t come out here immediately will be shot. The people gathered there were being guarded by numerous gendarmes, a soldier every ten or fifteen metres with a rifle cocked and ready to fire. It wasn’t long before the Jews were marched off. And everyone knew where they were going. The collection point. Mila Street wasn’t far from there. And today – this much was clear – there would be no escape.

And so they went with all the others. Gustawa Jarecka and her two sons were right beside them. “Think of the Dostoevsky anecdote,” Marcel whispered into his wife’s ear. *Decisive Moments in History* by Stefan Zweig. The Russian writer’s last-minute salvation, the reprieve arriving at the very second his death sentence was to be carried out – Marcel Reich hoped this piece of literature (which Stefan Zweig, incidentally, had partly invented) would give his wife strength and comfort in this entirely comfortless situation. He hoped that, should they get separated, the Zweig anecdote would lend her the strength not to give up. To keep hoping and looking for some way out, right to the end.

Clearly, neither of them had made a plan for the situation they were now in, although they’d expected it every day. There was nothing to

plan. And they now saw that the soldiers were shooting at anyone who tried to run, the instant they stepped out of line. But it was the last moment, the last chance to escape a certain death. The two of them were resolved; Marcel gave Gustawa a sign that they were going to flee and that she should follow them. “She nodded.”

When is the right moment? He is on the point of fleeing, then hesitates again. Tosia makes the decision, and pulls him out of the line. They run into the entrance hall of a ruined building. From there, they jump down into a cellar, which is connected to other cellars. Finally they reach the end cellar, a long way from Mila Street. It’s completely silent there. Gustawa Jarecka and her sons haven’t followed them.

In the evening, Marcel writes, he and Tosia leave their cellar and hide in one of the Jewish Council’s unused buildings, together with a few friends. There is only one entrance, which they barricade with old books that are being stored there, the property of Warsaw’s Jewish Community. “The books saved our lives.”

Further transportation of Jews was halted at short notice in the next few days, when something momentous happened. A few Jews, members of the newly-founded Jewish Combat Organisation, offered armed resistance. This created a new state of affairs to which the SS had to adjust. Marcel and Tosia Reich weren’t members of the organisation, but they were still involved in one initiative.

One evening, they were sitting in a Mila Street cellar with two friends, lamenting their hopeless situation, and Marcel called it a scandal that the Jewish Council was still making regular payments to the Germans. He added, not quite seriously, that they would just have to raid the coffers. One of the friends was a member of the combat organisation and pricked up his ears. Raid – how? And they came up with a plan.

Marcel Reich provided a model of the safe and information on access to the treasury room and the door locks. He spoke to the teller and found out when the next payment was due to be given to the Germans. He purloined some Jewish Council headed paper, and Tosia forged the chairman’s signature.

On the night of 30 January some members of the Combat Organisation, dressed in Jewish militia uniforms, woke the teller. They handed him a letter that appeared to be from the chairman, ordering him to come at once and bring the key to the safe. The Germans, the letter said, were demanding a larger sum than usual.

They got their hands on 100,000 Złoty that night. The Combat Organisation planned to use the majority of the sum to buy weapons. Marcel and Tosia Reich received 5000 Złoty each in recognition and thanks for their idea and their help.

With this money, the pair decided to risk escaping from the ghetto. It was madness. They knew that outside, you only stood a chance if you weren't instantly recognisable as a Jew. And that wasn't the case for Marcel Reich, as he was well aware. He looked like the typical Jewish intellectual of the time – or rather, most people's idea of one. Secondly, you needed friends on the outside. Neither of them had any. And thirdly: money. Fine, they had a little money now. Reich-Ranicki later presented their choice as a simple calculation: inside the ghetto, the likelihood of dying was 100%, and outside it was 99%. It was an easy decision to make.

They negotiated a fee with a Jewish militia man who would organise their escape and bribe the Polish and German perimeter guards. The plan was to leave between five and six in the afternoon, when the Jewish labourers who worked outside the ghetto returned and were rigorously checked on their way in. The guards they had bribed wouldn't stop them.

The perimeter of the ghetto was brightly floodlit and the Jewish militia man evidently hadn't passed the money on to the guards – but when the latter had their backs to Marcel and Tosia, he called out to the pair of them: “Go straight ahead now, quickly!” And they went.

In barely twenty paces, they were outside. Out of the ghetto. It was 3 February 1943.

The double S

Günter Grass. 1943-1945

When would it finally get serious? Serious for him, for his friends, for his city? How much longer would he have to watch reports of heroes in the newsreels, without getting to be a hero himself? The whole thing was going to be over before then, passing him by without any chance for him to distinguish himself. For even in those parades of heroes, if you listened closely it was clear that things weren't going that well for his country now. Fronts were being "revised" or "straightened out", and the German troops had to take up new positions, and the great victory somehow wasn't on its way.

Along with other boys from his school year, Günter Grass had been a member of the auxiliary Luftwaffe staff at the Kaiserhafen Battery since autumn 1943. For all practical purposes, that meant the end of school for the fifteen-year-old. To begin with, the teachers still came out along the sandy path from the town to the battery where the lads were being drilled, but lessons were frequently interrupted by combat exercises, and they soon stopped coming. He was finally away from home, if only a few kilometres; finally, an end to school; finally, he was being taken seriously in these serious times.

But auxiliary Luftwaffe man Günter Grass wasn't satisfied with his role in the war for long. Their "eight point eight rifles" were used too seldom – just two or three times on a night when enemy bombers were sighted in the distance. "It looked celebratory, beautiful," he wrote in his 2006 autobiography, describing the attacks. But here, they didn't come in for any major raids like the ones on Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg.

The peaceful city of Danzig. Günter Grass was out of place there. Once, two houses on Fuchswall Street near the Schichau boatyard were hit. Grass noted: "not many deaths". Günter Grass and his friends were proud when a four-engine Lancaster bomber was shot down, though unfortunately the success wasn't his; it belonged to the Zigankenberg battery on the city's southern edge. Vexing. But: "The bodies of the plane's crew, which people said were rather charred, were supposedly Canadians."

Eventually, Günter Grass gets on a train in his auxiliary Luftwaffe uniform (which he thinks of as smart) and heads for Gotenhafen, where naval recruits are being trained to crew submarines. War beneath the waves. That is his image of himself as a war hero.

He finds the recruitment office and waits patiently. A sergeant and a petty officer await him behind a desk. They don't want him. "Too young," says one. "Boys born in 1927 aren't being drafted yet," says the other. He'll get his turn soon enough, no need to worry. There's no reason to be over-hasty.

Günter Grass insists. Can't they make an exception? He has to, he wants to. The officers tell him that they aren't taking voluntary submarine recruits at the moment anyway, no matter how old they are. But underwater isn't the only place to fight. They make a note of his name. As soon as the 27 cohort is drafted, they say, there will be opportunities for this over-eager boy in the newly created tank divisions. "Just have some patience, kid, they'll come for you soon enough..."

Clearly, Günter Grass guesses in his late memoirs, he must have refused to give up. Yes, okay, tanks would be fine too, what machine should he gear himself up for, would it be a Tiger? And then he spent so long showing off his knowledge of weapons that the sergeant and the petty officer eventually told him they would commend his application to the right place at the right time. But he would still have to do fatigue duty beforehand. Even volunteers weren't spared that. The officers eventually bid him farewell with a mixture of scorn and sympathy.

It was early summer. May 1944. At last, the next step towards a hero's life. Fatigue duty, as advertised. Near Leipzig.

It began with a huge blow. The smart auxiliary Luftwaffe uniform had to be exchanged for the clod-brown kit of the fatigue service, which was topped with a battered felt hat known as "an arse with a handle". This was not what heroes looked like.

Doubt – this might be the word that Günter Grass uses most often in his memoir when he thinks back to this time. "I missed the opportunity to learn doubt as a first lesson." So many moments when, looking back, he marvels that it never occurred to him to doubt. Doubt

was lacking. Doubt was not envisaged. And *Zweifel* – doubt – is the name he would one day give to a character in a novel based on a man who, earlier that year, left the Warsaw ghetto to try and survive somewhere out in the world.

The young man who never doubts is soon assigned a particularly un-military task for his fatigue duty. This task allows him to pursue his second greatest passion, which has faded into the background: art. He is to paint the walls of the canteen for staff and recruits with images from nature. And so Günter Grass takes himself off into the woods with a box of watercolours, a water bottle and a Pelikan pad to paint from life. Clouds, ponds, birch trees, oaks, boulders. Grass is out in the countryside. “Not free from fear,” as he writes. The young man who is adamant he wants to go to war, on the submarines or elsewhere, is frightened in the peaceful woods outside Leipzig, worried that there might be an armed partisan lurking “behind the ball of a juniper bush”.

After three months, fatigues were over. And there was still no war for Grass. It was back to the two-room hole, to the father he despised, who was still exempted from military service as an “essential” worker. To his mother, who grew ever more taciturn and no longer played the piano at all. His sister Waltraut had been evacuated to the countryside with all the other schoolchildren. With her there, at least a little joy would have remained in the Langfuhr dwarf purgatory. Now there was just one thing to do: wait for the postman. Wait for salvation.

Then finally, in September 1944, the letter. It is lying on the dining room table. His mother refuses to take him to the station. His father Willy has to do that. They have bought the boy a cardboard suitcase for the journey to Berlin, for the longed-for journey into war. His father is carrying it now. They take the tram in silence. On the station platform, there are tears in his father’s eyes. Do they embrace? Do they shake hands? From the train window, the boy sees his father waving, sees his city, the gables, the towers, old and still intact.

He travels third class to Berlin. The capital is ablaze. “People at the station seemed oblivious to the fires. It was business as usual: shoving crowds, curses, sudden salvos of laughter; soldiers on leave hurrying back to the front, soldiers on leave hurrying home; representatives from the female arm of the Hitler Youth, the League of German Girls, passing out hot drinks and giggling when the soldiers pawed them.”

In the ticket hall, the young recruit is given his marching orders. He has to go on to Dresden. But then: the war. An air raid siren. Everyone down to the station's vaulted cellar, which is being used as an air raid shelter. A group of variety artists, Lilliputians, is already down there, carrying on with their performance, a little old man dressed as a clown, a dainty mini lady contortionist. "An image that stayed with me," he will later write.

Then, the next morning, he leaves the fires of Berlin for Dresden. In *Peeling the Onion*, Günter Grass called the chapter of his life that is about to begin "How I learned fear". It is the chapter in which he describes what he remained silent about for a lifetime. How he – what is one to call it? – ended up in the SS. How he became a member of the Waffen SS at seventeen years old.

We are still in September 1944. Dresden is intact, just as Danzig was when Günter Grass left it. He goes up to the Weißer Hirsch district, where all the old villas are. On the upper floor of a smart villa, he is to learn which troop he will join.

"My next marching order made it clear where the recruit with my name was to be trained as a tank gunner on a Waffen SS training ground: somewhere far off in the Bohemian woods."

The passive construction, the shifting of the action into the third person. Even in this book, which was to reveal the long-suppressed truth, the simple, clear sentence: "I was a member of the Waffen SS" does not appear.

"The question is: Was I frightened by what was obvious then in the recruitment office as I am terrified now by the double S, even as I write this more than sixty years later?"

The answer is: no.

"I did not find the double rune on the uniform collar repellent. The boy who saw himself as a man will have regarded the weapons division as important above all." And: "There was a kind of Europeanness about the Waffen SS." And finally: "Enough excuses, then. For decades, I refused to acknowledge to myself the word and the double letters."

Even in this final, confessional book, he wasn't able to admit it to himself and to us clearly and unambiguously. "True, during the training as a tank gunner that numbed me all through that autumn and

winter, nothing was to be heard of those war crimes that later came to light, but that claim of ignorance could not obscure the insight that I had been part of a system which had planned, organised and executed the extermination of millions of people.”

It is the war – as Günter Grass described it to us, his readers, many years later in his memoirs. His fear, his boredom, his weariness. He himself is our source for his life. We have no other.

Once, the boy who until recently had such a desperate longing for war and heroism, drinks hot oil from a sardine tin to feign jaundice and get himself signed off sick. Then an outbreak of boils sends him to the haven of the overcrowded infirmary. But he is soon back to the drills, and the bullying designed to break the recruits.

Then comes his seventeenth birthday, and a parcel from home containing woollen socks and squashed cake. Then – oh – the boredom again, the drills, the hopes for the V1 and V2 miracle weapons, rumours of the Dresden firestorm. Finally, the nocturnal oath-taking ceremony: full moon, freezing cold, and the song of the Waffen SS: “If others prove untrue, yet we shall steadfast be...”

Now comes the time to prove this loyalty. He is put on a goods train via Tetschen-Bodenbach to Dresden. He smells fires, sees the burned-out facades of buildings. On they go towards Lower Silesia, where the front is reputed to be. Finally, here it is: his war. The reality of the newsreels. “We reached Weißwasser,” he writes.

Somewhere there, he hears the rumour that his hometown has been destroyed. He sees the first bodies. Dead soldiers in Wehrmacht uniforms hanging from the trees. “Army-subverting coward” say the signs round their necks, a guard of honour made of corpses. Then, in mid-April 1945, the Soviet army breaks through the German lines between Forst and Muskau. The Stalin organ flies over the Frundsberg Division, the division of SS man Grass. And there he is in a patch of woodland, crawling under a tank, pissing himself, rockets landing, the organ, the screams of injured men. He creeps through the undergrowth. Body parts, shredded corpses, survivors crawling away, then quiet. A superior officer, teeth chattering, Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross under his chin, appears beside Günter Grass. He yells: “Go, go! Ready for counter-attack...” Grass looks across the shredded bodies and sees him chivvying, shouting, a tragic, ridiculous figure.

The Frundsberg Division no longer exists. In the confusion of the retreat, Günter Grass tries to find someone to attach himself to. But where are his marching orders? Where is his troop? He cannot let himself be found now, alone, without marching orders. He'd be strung up in the nearest tree for certain.

As he makes his way west, he comes across a thrown-together group of German soldiers and joins them. They are near Spremberg in Lusatia.

Eventually they find themselves in the Russian-occupied part of a front-line village. They entrench themselves in the cellar of a house. It seems to have belonged to a bicycle salesman; in any case, the cellar is full of bikes. The sergeant, attempting to strengthen his own resolve, calls out quietly to his comrades: "Now or never." Adding, in a whisper: "Come on, everyone grab a bike. And then let's go, hell for leather..."

Unfortunately, one of this sad troop of would-be bicycle soldiers has never learned to ride. The sergeant decides to leave SS man Grass behind. He is to provide cover fire. They will come back and get him later.

Günter Grass watches the mass German bicycle-charge from the cellar window. And he sees: "they were mown down by machine-gun fire in the middle of the village street..." He suspects they are all dead. Grass is alone in the cellar. Quietly and cautiously, he leaves the bicycle salesman's house through the back garden.

On he goes through Lusatia, trying to catch up with the elusive front-line. Again he joins a column of German infantrymen. Their mission: to stabilise the front, form new fighting troops, close the circle around the Reich's capital. The Führer, they say, is standing his ground. Now they have to protect him and his city.

This group of twelve to fifteen men is supposed to advance and try to engage the enemy. SS man Grass is still making eager efforts to fulfil this mission. A pine forest, night, everyone is on his own. Grass sees a light coming towards him down a forest path, and reports: "Motorised vehicle, probably armoured personnel carrier, straight ahead!" Schooled by countless newsreels, he tries to halt the approaching tank

with a hand signal. But the tank ploughs ahead far too fearlessly. It must be the enemy. His first living Soviet soldier.

In a panic, the infantrymen flee into the pines. Every man for himself, deeper and deeper into the forest. Alone. Eventually Grass hears footsteps, another man creeping through the dark and the trees. A Russian? Probably. Or not? How can he tell in the forest, at night? He starts to sing softly, repeating the same line from a children's song over and over: "*Hänschen klein, ging allein...*" until finally the other man responds, "*...in die weite Welt hinein*".

Ah, a German singer. Not a threat. The two men walk towards each other. His new comrade is a weedy-looking man, older and shorter than Günter Grass, without a steel helmet, wearing a crumpled forage cap on his head. Speaks in a Berlin drawl. He is a lance corporal, and thus the more senior of the two. He has fought in Poland, France, Greece and the Crimea. Now he is here, wandering around Lusatia on his own.

The pair walk until they reach an unoccupied village. An Austrian cavalry captain is in command there. He is carrying a little dog with a pearl-studded collar, and asks the two newcomers for their marching orders. They don't have any. Fine. For the time being, they'll be locked up in the cellar of a farmhouse. They'll be dealt with later. Court martial. You know the drill.

The cellar they are taken to is a kind of undiscovered wartime paradise. Shelves of bottled preserves: asparagus, gherkins, goose giblets, potted meat, everything tidily labelled in Sütterlin script. There is apple juice and elderberry juice as well. They stuff their faces, drink, stuff themselves again. The lance corporal smokes and blows languorous smoke rings into the air. SS man Grass empties his gas-mask case and fills it with strawberry and cherry jam.

Time passes. Where is the court martial? Where is the Austrian with his little pearly dog? Should they call out? Go and see? The door isn't locked. No one is guarding them. The village has now been abandoned. Have they been forgotten? Is it a joke? Have the others fled in panic?

From the kitchen upstairs, they can see an anti-tank barrier, and behind it, in staggered squad columns, Russian soldiers. They are coming closer, one step at a time. "Their baby faces. You could count them from left to right. Each a target."

But the two forgotten German soldiers don't aim at those targets. They make themselves scarce without a sound. As they walk, the lance corporal urges the SS man to get rid of his jacket with the SS runes on it. "If the Ivans do get us after all, you'll be for it, boyo, with those spangles on your collar. They shoot people like you, no questions asked. A gun to the back of the head, and that's it..."

From somewhere – probably a dead body – he finds himself a Wehrmacht jacket without the double S. And, as far as appearances go, the career of Günter Grass as a member of the Waffen SS ends there, somewhere in Lusatia. Now, he's just a normal German soldier.

But he still has no marching orders. This threat to his life remains. They reach the road from Senftenberg to Spremberg, which is jammed with horses and carts full of refugees. It's an opencast mining area, conical slag heaps, jagged edges. Diggers. Brown coal. Away from the road, the pair find a mustering point and finally receive a piece of paper with a stamp for their marching orders. Right beside the mustering point is a mobile field kitchen. They eat and eat. It occurs to someone that it's Hitler's birthday. In previous years, there were always extra portions for the troops. Chocolate, cigarettes, brandy. But today – 20 April 1945 – nothing. Their only gift is not having been killed yet.

And then suddenly: Soviet tank grenades rain down. Chaos. Screams. Up top, above the quarry, Soviet tanks emerge from some woodland. "They're T-34s!" shouts the lance corporal.

Then more explosions, the steel helmet is torn off Günter Grass's head, and he loses consciousness. When he comes to, he sees his trousers are soaked in blood. His left arm hangs uselessly from his shoulder. The lance corporal is lying beside him, his legs shredded, "his torso apparently intact. His eyes wide open, amazed, unbelieving..."

They are taken to an ambulance, the lance corporal carried and Grass helped to walk. Then on to the dressing station. In his Berlin drawl, the man with no legs asks his comrade Grass for a cigarette and a light. And then for a favour, as a friend: could he reach into his trousers and see whether everything is still present and correct there, at least. Grass reaches in, feels and confirms: all still there. The lance corporal grins, smokes, slips into unconsciousness.

Later, in his first novel *The Tin Drum*, which will make him world famous, Grass will turn this act of reaching into the other man's trousers into literature. He will have Jan Bronski, Oskar Matzerath's mother's cousin, do the reaching, at the Polish post office, back when this monstrous war began on Heveliusplatz in Danzig.

An eternity ago. When Danzig was still standing, whole and intact. "A clear to partly cloudy September day, the sun coating everything in antique gold, paper-thin, sensitive, yet still hard of hearing. My fifteenth birthday was coming up in a few days. And as I did every year in September, I wanted a tin drum, nothing less than a tin drum." And suddenly, this war: "[It] did not strike Jan Bronski, struck Kobyella instead, a shell had delivered a colossal joke and bricks now laughed themselves to chips, shards to dust, plaster to flour, wood found its ax, the whole droll nursery hopped on one leg... After we'd dragged Kobyella from the nursery and finally got him into the corridor, the janitor found the strength to utter a few words that Jan Bronski managed to make out. 'Is everything still there?' he asked with concern. Jan reached into the man's trousers, between his old man's legs, found a handful, and nodded to Kobyella. We were all happy."

In the reality of the war's final days in Lusatia, no one was happy. But there was something to laugh about at the dressing station, where there was usually nothing to laugh about. They cut off Grass's red-soaked trousers to save his leg, to dress the wound. And they found the gas-mask case shot through and the cherry jam leaking everywhere. The legs and what was between them: all unscathed.

He is put on the field hospital train to Meißen, bedded down on straw between men who are mortally wounded, screaming, praying and dying. In Meißen, the dead and the living are unloaded. A last glimpse of the lance corporal, being taken away in a wheelchair, a trunk with no legs. They will not see each other again.

And in Meißen, the last marching orders for Günter Grass: to Marienbad, a military hospital centre. That is where the war will end for him. There, he hears that his Führer, Adolf Hitler is dead. "Fallen in the battle for the Reich capital," as they say. "He was gone, as if he had never existed."

8 May 1945. Günter Grass becomes an American prisoner of war. His record states: “Troop unit: ‘Frundsberg SS tank division’”. Joined: “Waffen-SS: 10/11/44”.

Later, when the Americans take him and other German soldiers to show them the Dachau concentration camp, there is a trained bricklayer among the Germans, who says afterwards: “Remember the shower rooms? And the shower heads? For gas supposedly. Well, they were freshly plastered, the Amis installed them afterwards...”

And in fact, shortly after the war, the Americans *had* reconstructed Dachau as a death camp, which in truth it never was. So Günter Grass and his comrades are able to sustain their disbelief a while longer. It is only in May 1946, when he hears the Reich youth leader Baldur von Schirach give his testimony to the war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg, that the vision of the world he has managed to protect from all doubt collapses. “It was some time before I came gradually to understand and hesitantly to admit that I had unknowingly – or, more precisely, unwilling to know – taken part in a crime that did not diminish over the years and for which no statute of limitations would ever apply, a crime that grieves me still.”

[...]

When the war is finally, really over – 9 May 1945, a sunny day in Warsaw – Marcel Reich and his wife are urged by their joyful colleagues to go out into the courtyard of their workplace and fire celebratory shots into the air. Everyone shoots into the blue sky, and Marcel Reich, too, takes off the safety catch of his pistol and fires the first and last shot of his life. A triumph? A relief? The starting gun for a new life? “Tosia stood beside me. We looked at each other, saying nothing. We both knew we were feeling the same thing: no, it wasn’t joy, but sadness; not happiness, but anger and rage.”

In the centre of the ruined city stands a splendid hotel, rising proudly into the sky above Warsaw, hardly damaged. It is the Hotel Bristol; for many years, the country’s foremost hotel, ceremonially opened in 1901. This is where the new, independent Poland held its first cabinet meetings in 1919; Artur Rubinstein gave an excessive dinner party there after a concert by the Russian singer Fyodor Chaliapin; the famous painter Wojciech Kossak lived there and paid his rent with pictures, which were hung in the restaurant. It was where the new Poland had celebrated itself, the rich, the rulers, the artists. At the start of the Second World War, a hospital was set up there; later it was occupied by German authorities and officers, and wasn’t destroyed.

Two men will meet in this magnificent building in the summer of 1958: one a writer, the other a critic, both still with hardly any work to their names, not famous yet, but full of hope for a great future. Here in the Hotel Bristol in the resurrected city of Warsaw, one of them will tell the story of a boy who doesn’t want to grow, and the other will regard it as a wholly absurd, silly story, and this odd couple will be bound together with invisible chains that they won’t throw off for the rest of their lives.

The two don’t yet know anything about each other. Or about the lives they will live. The war they both survived on opposite sides of the front lines – one as part of that murderous machine that sought to take the lives of the other and his people – that war is over. They are free. Free to do what? Free to go where? What lives are they to begin amid this rubble?

[END OF SAMPLE]