

KRZYSZTOF KĄKOLEWSKI

How Have You Been, Sir?

Translated from Polish by Krzysztof Rowiński

. . . YOU SAW AUSCHWITZ FROM THE OTHER SIDE

I DID NOT CHOOSE Paraguay or Bolivia, those who escaped and hid in the jungle, or those who were still serving their sentences. I chose the ones who aren't afraid of anything; those who managed to escape punishment forever. I take their freedom, confidence, good fortune, and happiness as a *challenge*. Will they really be granted peace of mind, right up to their final days? No, I decided, something else must happen to them. Thirty years after their deeds, at a time when they finally became convinced that *all that* belongs to history, and that even Poles have forgotten everything, I decided to pay them a visit, in order to remind them of certain events and names. And to ask them certain questions, the first of which will be, "How have you been, sir?"

I will go to meet face-to-face with people you could never approach back then; it would have meant certain death. I'll go to see them before they're gone: the sort of specimens that only one generation in thousands would ever be able to see. Will they agree to talk to me? As I prepared for my journey, many thought my task impossible: "They will cite the court rulings, say that the case has been closed forever, and say nothing else beyond that." I based my whole plan on the same premise: precisely because they'd been acquitted, they'll have to behave as such, and *play* innocents who are able to recollect their past without fear. Refusing to talk to me they would confess their guilt, even if indirectly. And besides—these are solid, proper German citizens, former members of the military, drilled into discipline. If you ask them, they reply. And maybe some of them will want to go back to the old days, to mull things over once again?

"If they don't agree," I was told, "find a place across the street, wait in front of their house for hours on end. Just write about their houses, the model of their cars, the trees, and lawns; list everything you see, take note

of when they leave and when they come home, describe their wives, their children, and grandchildren.” I could also try to get hired by one of them under a false identity, or come by as an anonymous peddler. I received messages that read like arrest warrants: “Look for M., last seen in B. in 1944, he is said to come from Hannover. I will cover your travel expenses.” Or critiques, “Won’t you be giving them the satisfaction of a civilized conversation? Won’t you be not humanizing them by talking to them? I don’t see them as people, but rather as live mixtures of protein and water that need to be destroyed. I wouldn’t be able to keep from tearing their throats out.” I would simply reply, “Where were you in 1945? You didn’t even get to one of them. Typical Polish revenge.” In another letter, I was advised, “Don’t eat or drink anything they serve—you never know.”

I had to choose my protagonists. Working with the Main Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes in Poland, after two months of debate and deliberation, we narrowed it down from one hundred and twenty candidates to twenty, and finally selected eight of them. Almost all were still fairly young, about sixty years of age, and yet all had managed to hold high-ranked positions in the SS or the court system. Their future then looked bright—and it has indeed become so, even if in a slightly different form. All the men selected are currently holding respectable positions in society: they are lawyers or professors, one of them directs an institute, another is a member of the Bundestag. All of them went through the court process, mostly back in the forties, and all were acquitted: there is no possibility of further appeals. Despite the scale of their crimes, none of them is a vulgar murderer, only three of them ever saw their victims, and none ever laid a finger on anyone. Victims appeared to them as strings of numbers to be added and multiplied. In Poland, all of them could potentially face the death penalty. I received eighty-eight photocopies of different documents from the Polish authorities, with special permission to export them and present them to my interlocutors. I started eight different folders, gathering various materials and copies.

One Sunday, I landed in Frankfurt am Main, and I felt as if I was hallucinating: a fashion wave straight from the 1940s was everywhere around me. Young German women, as if ghosts from the past, wore short furs and toques, their faces powdered white and eyes lined with black. A man with no legs gave money to an equally legless beggar. I saw a lone woman with crutches, strolling by the foothills of the Taunus mountains. A lot of people have dogs: in West Germany today, poodles have taken the place

of the German shepherds. An ad for the Institute for Prosthetic Eyes in Mainz read, "We played a great role in a tragic war." At the Frankfurt railway station, I saw Italian workers watch the departure of a Rome-bound train. A Yugoslav chose from a jukebox, for the fifth time in a row, a Serbian folk dance song. I bought a pile of newspapers: "Hitler's Resurrection on the Eve of Easter, 1973," "Hitler's Spring," "The Historical-Psychological Hitler," "Harmless Hitler?" There was a whole group of publications, films, and theater plays about Hitler: "Hitler—Superstar?" and others. I was seized with emotion: my task was to write about the still-alive Hitler, the one who lives in the hearts of my protagonists.

I marked the suspected locations of my interlocutors on the map. Two of them lived in Frankfurt, four in small towns located two hundred to three hundred kilometers to the north, all in a straight line and close to one another: Burgdorf, Vlotho, Salzerhelden, and Bad Harzburg. Only two lived all the way up north. I decided to make Frankfurt my headquarters, staying at the "Palace" hotel, close to the train station. None of the hotel staff knew the purpose of my trip, and no one seemed especially interested in me. I don't think anyone touched my documents during my stay. I knew quite a lot about my Frankfurt interlocutors, but I didn't know their addresses, which bothered me. I reasoned that if they felt innocent and were active in public life, there should be no reason for them to unlist their numbers. I asked for a phone number directory and started looking:

Dr. Hermann Stolting, lawyer, office at 35 Beethovenstrasse, tel. 748428; Prof. Dr. Hans Fleischhacker, home address: 55 Brüder Grimmstr., tel. 443808.

I found one more number: a friend who would introduce me to the leftist circles, where I could find an interpreter and witness to my conversations. I arranged a meeting for the following day at the Voltaire Club, a left-wing nightclub in Frankfurt. Friends worked fast, and I met Adalbert W. He agreed to hear me out over Polish vodka. His French, English, and Polish were impeccable. We talked in Polish, and I presented the case, admitting that I can't provide compensation. We talked well into the night; Adalbert told me his life story: his father, a German citizen, had been in Poland during the war, where he'd met Adalbert's mother and married her. Adalbert was born as the war was drawing to an end, after his father had gone back to Germany. Adalbert saw him for the first time at eighteen, after coming to Germany as part of a campaign to reunite

families. He lived in Germany for ten years, and was an assistant at the university, working on low-temperature physics. He took Polish classes at an evening school, and said he loved Poland. "It's a fascination, a longing," he explained. "I was brought up the Polish way. I will interpret for you. As a German, I think I can really hate war criminals, while you're merely trying to force yourself to hate them."

I met Adalbert again the next evening. "I collected some information about these people," he said. "There is a greater chance for a conversation with Stolting; they say he's egocentric and enjoys attention: he loves to talk about himself. Fleischhacker might be more difficult: the student protests against him at our university, against the hiring of an Auschwitz criminal, must have made him more cautious."

"Should we call and write to get an appointment? Or should we come unannounced? That way we wouldn't give them time to think, and we'd use surprise to our advantage."

"Let's start that way," Adalbert replied. "If we fail, we'll call and write letters."

SO WE WENT on a field trip together, trying to learn the topography of the various places, in order to avoid surprises and write a script for our arrival. The university grounds were empty, with the blue lights of the palm house gleaming in the background. The department building was open, and some work could be heard upstairs in the labs. A class schedule was posted, with its last time slot noted as "Human biology lab. First semester, 1973. Prof. dr. Fleischhacker: Introduction to individual research, all-day, every day. Room 232."

Beethovenstrasse was nearby. On the fence was a brass plaque with the name of Attorney Stolting. An entrance led through a small courtyard, with a small door on the side of the mansion. The bottom buzzer rings at the office. No light visible. We left.

We came back the next day, right after lunch break. We rang the buzzer again. A woman in her fifties, with a quizzical look on her face, opened the ground-floor door. Adalbert said, "This man is a writer. He came from Poland to talk to Attorney Stolting."

Her face tightened. She took my business card with a trembling hand, holding it between two fingers, keeping it at a distance. She kept staring at us, as if we were two dangerous criminals. It was clear she wanted to protect her boss. As her eyes pierced me, she answered Adalbert, "The attorney is not in at the moment. When he's back, I will let him know you came by."

“May we call him?”

“If you want—there might be a message for you.”

We left, doubting our methods. We decided to go visit the university. We took the elevator to the second floor. Room 232, the office. The secretary, very young, wearing an impeccably white apron, went down the corridor, only to come back immediately: “The professor asks you to come in.”

WE WERE AS SURPRISED as he was. When he entered through the door—opened widely, ostentatiously so, we could see it in his face. He wore a white apron. I was struck by his readiness to speak with us: mark one point for Professor Fleischhacker. He didn’t ask us to take our coats off; taking out his cigarettes, he extended his hand. We politely refused, while he lit up.

As he repeated my first question in German, Adalbert couldn’t keep a tremor from his voice: “Professor Fleischhacker, I’ve come here to remind you of one hundred and fifteen people whose names I don’t know—nor do you, because no one will ever know their identities. They died anonymously, as is usually the case with mass experiments on animals. You chose them based on their physical characteristics, perceiving them merely as specimens. They were later killed, dissected, and included in the most inhuman collection in the history of humanity. They became racial exhibits at a museum in Strasbourg. Never before has man acted against his own species in such a gruesome manner.”

“That is not true. I did not know that these men would be killed. I only learned about it at my trial, when I was acquitted.”

I opened my folder, passing him documents with many underlined fragments: “Regarding the skeleton collection. . . . The war in the East presents us with the possibility of acquiring scientific material. . . . The individual tasked with the procurement of the material must take a series of photographs and measurements, with full anthropological data, if possible; he should establish the birthdate, origin, and other personal details. After death has been effected, heads without lesions should be separated from the body, submerged in preservative liquid, and sent in a specially-designed, sealable metal container. . . . One hundred and fifty skeletons are needed. . . . It is highly recommended that Dr. Fleischhacker participate in the studies in Auschwitz. . . . Overall, one hundred fifteen people—Jews, Poles, and Asians—have been selected for the study. Due to the scale of the studies related to skeleton procurement, we ask for additional time, as stripping flesh proves to be complicated. Soft tissue will be sent to be incinerated.”

Fleischhacker leafed through the documents and handed them back to me. I put them back on the table, saying, "I brought these documents for you as a gift—in case you wanted to keep a memoir or refresh your memories."

"No, thank you. I know this, they write a lot about me here. But I never wrote a word indicating that I'd known in advance what would happen to those people. There was not a single witness who would state that I had known this."

"These documents are private correspondence from Reichsführer Himmler's staff. You were so precious that the most important offices in the Reich fought over you. It ended up distracting you from your research."

"Anthropologists were a rare commodity back then," professor Fleischhacker said.

"Anthropology was a matter of the utmost importance," I replied. "Here is a copy of your travel expense account for a six-day trip to Auschwitz: you spent six days there, living in SS quarters. The building exists to this day. Two days after your departure from Auschwitz, two people, selected by you, were sent to another camp to be executed. The account suggests you were present in Strasbourg when their remains were brought in. There is a striking resemblance between your itinerary and that of the people who later became exhibits."

"The court was convinced that I hadn't known anything. I defer to the court ruling; it would be disloyal toward the court to prove once again my innocence in front of anyone. I agree that one could reach the sort of conclusions that had been initially assumed, but they were not true."

"What were the criteria for selection?"

"As the trial has shown, you are using this term improperly. There was work under way on a new survey for anthropological study. Parallel studies were to be carried out in the Caucasus."

"What data were to be taken into account?"

"Head width, for instance," the professor replied, pointing to his own head.

"How were the measurements taken?"

"Individuals who were sick and did not have to work were chosen. There was no choice. They would stand in pairs and be compared. Chance determined who would be taken."

"What were the results for science?" I asked.

"None. The Caucasian studies were abandoned, and I went back to the military."

“Did you know any of the victims’ names?”

“I did not know the name of any subjects for the study.”

“What about their past?”

“I did not know anything about their past, either,” the professor replied.

“Your very appearance could have kindled some hope in their hearts. You are the first person that I have met who has seen Auschwitz from *the other side*. Did you reflect at all on what you were doing? Did you never feel—having seen *that place*—that your experience is unlike any other known to history, so horrid, located at the extreme of all possible human experiences?”

“These were normal, routine studies. Let me find a case report form from that period.”

The professor went inside his office, toward cabinets full of index cards, passing a table with a human skull. As he passed it, he turned back towards us, smiling in a self-justifying manner. I smiled back, trying to let him know that I understood the skull had come from some West German beggar; I knew very well that the destruction of the “skull collection” from the war was among the most important evacuation-related tasks for the SS. The professor called, “Here! This is a blue case-report form from the period.”

“Can I have it?”

“No, only one remains. But if you want, I can give you a contemporary one, like those I currently use. There are no major differences.”

He came back with a form from the cabinet. Double-sided, it had fifty-six fields, including *Name* and *Occupation*. Four fields were printed in bold: *Eye Color*, *Hair Color*, *Skin Color*, and *Nose Description*.

“Speaking of these forms, you just implied, I think, that your current studies are a continuation of the ones you carried out during the war?”

“Generally speaking, yes.”

“What type of humans are you currently studying?”

“I am directing a cross-sectional study of the entire society of San Salvador, trying to establish the extent to which it is Indian or European.”

“Could I have the offprints of your recent papers?”

The professor reached to the cabinet and handed me a file. I flipped through them.

“So you continue to study mixed-blood peoples?”

“Yes. I focus on fingerprints and blood type statistics in mixed-bloods. Computers process the numerical results.”

“How would these mixed-bloods compare to the white race?”

“They are as human as everyone else. Anthropology looks at differences without judgment. Races are not better or worse than others, they’re just different.”

“Other beliefs, however predominated during the war, and your studies formed part of that movement.”

“As I have already told you, it was about establishing a new method. Students ask which breed of dog is better: a St. Bernard, or a dachshund?¹ A St. Bernard won’t help you when you’re hunting for foxes, and a dachshund will be useless in saving human lives. There can be no Negroes in Greenland and no Eskimos in Africa.”

“Have your views about the races and mixed-bloods changed?”

“Everyone is of mixed blood. Since the Stone Age, there has been no tribe, nation, people, or clan that wasn’t of mixed blood. I don’t think that a pure race ever existed. There is a hypothesis that the offspring of very distant races can carry genetic flaws. There is no proof to support this view, which dates back to the eighteenth century, when Negro slaves consorted with white prostitutes. Let us imagine a different mix, however: Spanish officers, the then aristocracy, and Indian princesses. Here, the ideal human was in the making. Every race has more and less valuable people.”

“Who are the less valuable ones?”

“That is not part of my specialization.”

“Would you like to study me as an anthropological subject? I would like your expert view of myself.”

“You cannot study individuals, only tribes, clans, et cetera; groups which are statistically significant. You cannot choose study subjects based on appearance.”

“So the method must have changed since the war?”

“As I told you, the goal then was to establish a method,” the professor said, clearly frustrated.

“But anthropological types exist? Which am I?”

“Your eyes are set wide, and based on your skull type, I wouldn’t guess that you were either Polish or Eastern European. This type is present throughout Europe.”

“When I saw the beautiful surroundings of your laboratory and the palm house, I thought that this is where I would work. If things had gone differently, today I would perhaps be a slave in the university gardens. The anthropology of the time would have classified me as a somewhat Eastern European type.”

“This is nonsensical. You cannot speak of things which haven’t happened. You would’ve been a Polish writer, just as you are now, except perhaps your progress early in your career would have been somewhat delayed. What you are talking about right now is not achievable: history teaches us that it’s nonsense. If Germany had won, the subdued nations would still have slowly regained independence, and the victors would eventually have been inundated, leveled, or even subjugated by their opponents. Think, for instance, of the degeneration of Alexander the Great’s kingdom, or the southern Indians, whom I am studying right now. Conquest is only the first, initial phase.”

“History also teaches us that the annihilation of Indians happened not during conquest, but during settlement,” I replied.

The professor paused for a while, and said, “Yes. I think you are right.”

“So for us, the Slavs, after the war the worst was still to come. Tell me, professor, do you have a hobby, or do you work nonstop?”

“I don’t have a lot of time. I often work eighteen hours a day. My hobby is my work. I like to travel: during my field trips, I drive my Volkswagen to the farthest, wildest corners of the Andes. Actually, recently I switched over to an Audi.”

“Do you hunt?”

“Only with a camera.”

“Do you live in a mansion or a town house?”

“I live in a regular apartment. I don’t like the city, but in the countryside I’d be isolated from the library and from my students.”

“Students have called for your expulsion from the Goethe University, because of the skull collection.”

“It was a small group. The rest want to study and work in peace. And I have to say I agree with them partially: they have a point about the ossification of the university. When it comes to my case, however,” the professor said, clearly directing his words at me, “if the court acquitted me, no one else has the right to punish me.” He added, “I have an international reputation. I have had lively exchanges at international congresses with other scientists, including professors from Poland. I could mention several names, among them Prof. W.”

“Let me return to the fact that for the first time I am talking to someone who saw Auschwitz from the other side. *That place* must have left an impression on you. What was it? Did you have any thoughts, did you share them with anyone? Did you talk about it to camp authorities?”

“I’ve answered your many questions openly and at length, without

any concern for why you ask them or how biased your publication will turn out to be. I don't have anything else to tell you. All this was discussed during the trial, so please look through the court documents. I would like to stop here."

The professor extended his hand. I hadn't thought about this: the hardest part. I shook it.

WE LEFT. Fleischhacker's office had been very hot: my fur coat was covered in sweat and roughed-up, like an animal in distress. We found a note on the windshield saying, "Please do not park in spots reserved for professors." We went to the hotel and washed our hands for a long time, like surgeons do.

"You have to confess to having shook his hand," Adalbert said. "It will be up to your readers to decide whether to read you or not."

We tried to reach conclusions about a strategy for our next interlocutors.

"Your greatest success is that he refused to answer your most significant question. It was because you kept throwing him off-kilter. But that also means you lost a lot—given that he told you that he hadn't known about his crimes, it also means that he was likely to go further and say that he'd sent these people to the gas chambers out of kindness, to give them relief. One thing is clear: wherever they receive us, they will be preemptively well-mannered. *All that* is in the past, the laws of war are over. Let's talk like gentlemen who can reach an agreement. Manners, charm—and leave *all that* in the past. In contrast, your questions will seem crude, barbaric and ill-mannered. Every manifestation of emotion, irritation, or anger will be counted against you, as evidence of your inferiority, or even a reason to call the police. As your interpreter, I also have to tell you what 'Fleischhacker' means: it's someone who hacks apart meat."

We went to the prosecutor's office and requested access to the files of Hans Fleischhacker. The prosecutor was very sympathetic: "Of course, but only with Mr. Fleischhacker's consent." And thus the circle was closed.

So we called Stolting's office again. The secretary replied mechanically, "Please come in ten days, on Monday, at four p.m."

THE GENERAL WHO FOUGHT AGAINST CHILDREN

WHO VISITS SYLT ISLAND in the winter? The only way leading there is an eleven-kilometer-long causeway with train tracks, built over shallows.

Cars have to be loaded onto special double-decker train carriages, and passengers can go to regular compartments or stay with their vehicles, admiring this train ride over the sea. The trains, which run infrequently in the winter, are often accompanied by seagulls. We arrived at Westerland on the island early on a Saturday, a day when the residents of a deserted inn had gone out to watch the sea. They were strolling along the coast with their dogs, some dressed in plastic fisherman's raincoats and rubber boots, others in gray chesterfield coats, holding their hats against the wind. The smell of fried fish, french fries, and coffee was in the air; it was almost dinnertime. At least some of these people had voted for the former policeman and SS general Heinz Reinefarth. After all, in the past the majority of the population of Westerland, the capital of northern Europe's most exclusive island, had voted him into office. As we stood on Strandstrasse, which ran perpendicular to the seaboard, we saw a polished brass plate engraved with that very well known name: "H. Reinefarth, Esq." We checked our watches: it was three in the afternoon. We saw a shadow pass behind the glass door: the former SS general, Heinz Reinefarth himself. This unimposing, bespectacled, gray-haired man with a sharp gaze led us inside his office.

"General Reinefarth, you are among the most hated people in Poland. Do you know that?"

"I do."

"Do you know about your nickname—'the executioner of Warsaw'?"

"I am aware of that as well. And do you know that my trial lasted twenty years, and then ended with an acquittal?"

"Yes, general. I came here because you were acquitted."

"Do they not understand the reasons in Poland?"

"No, they don't," I replied. "Aren't you afraid that I might have come here to shoot you?"

"No. You are only the second Pole I've seen in the last twenty-nine years. I did meet Poles back then, yes. Do you want to know the circumstances? And besides, shooting an old man? Someone who has already had a heart attack?"

"Times were tough for us," he continued. "Warsaw was no easy stroll—if hell exists, it's street fighting. It's always easier to fight in an open field, rather than in the middle of burning, collapsing buildings. I have always said, including back then, that the Polish freedom fighters fought wonderfully and with great courage."

"Your troops killed fewer combatants than civilians. It was the innocent people who suffered the greatest losses."

“They were impossible to distinguish. Not everyone wore an armband.”

“The ones who did not fight did not wear them.”

“No, no, they did. Some of them even wore SS uniforms.”

“. . . and armbands.”

“No, no. . .,” Reinefarth repeated.

“They would have been shot by their own friends,” I said. “What about the women and children who were fired upon and executed?”

“Women fought as well. One of them, a sniper, single-handedly defended a bank—I think it was the Polish Bank. . .”

“. . . let me go back to the children.”

“Children fought too. There are many Polish books, many photo albums too, showing children armed with grenades, or even submachine guns. This is not to say that some unarmed children might also have been shot, under the mistaken assumption that they were armed.”

“So you confirm—unarmed children were fired upon?”

“The soldiers told me, ‘Children shoot at us, so we shoot back.’”

“What then about the executions?”

“I’ve always condemned those executions, and I did so then as well. When I received reports about the executions, I stopped them—but only when I received the reports.”

“General Reinefarth, your name will always be a symbol of an atrocity, and no acquittal from any court will help that. How do you take that?”

“It has been documented that I was not aware of many things which happened on August 5 and 6, 1944; the units responsible arrived there before me. Yes, it has been documented: war crimes were committed, but I know that only from the trial. The people responsible were under Dirlwanger and Kaminski, who both thought that the time for revenge had come. But Bach had Kaminski executed, and called on Himmler to withdraw the civilian execution orders.”

“We both know that Kaminski was not executed for what happened on August 5 and 6. And, speaking of von dem Bach’s report to Himmler, what strikes me most is its motivation: Bach wrote that such executions could end up increasing the resistance and solidarity of the people, as well as lower the morale of the German army. He also wrote that you did not have enough ammunition to kill a million people. His motives were technical, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t write the letter, von dem Bach did. He did prioritize the technicalities rather than the human reasons, because Himmler would not have been convinced otherwise.”

“Are you saying Himmler wouldn’t have understood it otherwise?”

“I don’t know. In any case, this is not to say that I’ve ever received an order from Himmler requesting the execution of noncombatants.”

“Does the name Lurie mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“Do you not remember the name from your files?”

“My files are seventy thousand pages long.”

“Ms. Lurie was pregnant. Your soldiers herded her and her three small children into the courtyard of a factory in the Wola district, along with thousands of others. The four of them approached the wall, holding hands. Her children died from the first round of shots. She managed to crawl out, wounded, and then gave birth to a child, which in her womb had managed to survive the death of its siblings.”

“There is a difference between Polish and German law. German law assigns guilt to someone who issues criminal orders, or to someone who does nothing when aware of crimes. Under Polish law, a commander is responsible for everything happening in his unit, even if he is unaware of the crimes.”

“Are you familiar with Polish law?”

“No. The investigating magistrate handling my case explained it to me.”

“You mentioned Himmler. You were his subordinate.”

“Yes, but I got to know him closer only in late 1944 and early 1945.”

“Under what circumstances?”

“He was my commander in the Upper Rhine.”

“How do you remember him?”

“It is difficult to describe him. I have never noticed anything—personally, I mean—that would warrant calling him a bloodhound, although I don’t mean to say he wasn’t. In the Upper Rhine, whenever I opposed him, he would change his order. Granted, that was a military situation, rather than murder. Himmler had a tendency for extremes; he often exaggerated or undermined things, pretending not to see them. In Nuremberg, I was asked the same questions and I replied the same way. Himmler had no sense of humor and any discussion with him was difficult. When he ordered me to ‘end the uprising in Warsaw,’ he had no idea about its extent or power. He gave me one battalion of the Order Police and one of Wehrmacht soldiers, asking me to quell the uprising with these two battalions in forty-eight hours. That shows his perception of the uprising.”

“What did you see upon your arrival in Warsaw?”

“I went to the 9th Army Command, and I was briefed about the situation. They told me that two battalions would not be enough, and that two days were not feasible. The whole thing lasted two months. Let me tell you about that hell. It was a “layer cake”: Germans would attack a five-story building, pushing the insurgents up and taking control of the ground level along with the next two floors. Then Poles would come, attacking the Germans from the ground floor, taking control of it, pushing us up, and taking control of the next floor, too. The Germans, under pressure from the insurgents from below, would take the fourth floor from the other Polish unit. Finally, German reinforcements come and attack the ground floor again. You end up with a layer cake: Poles – Germans – Poles – Germans.”

“What else do you remember and would like to share?”

“I came down with a case of dysentery, and I was lying in my quarters when an officer came in to report that, after a battle that had lasted several days, his unit had taken a church where they found a relic of some sort. He left a leather case in front of my bed. Attached was a small plaque with a name on it. I kept it on top of my armoire. The Archbishop of Warsaw was away from the city, but von dem Bach contacted him and was told that there is no saint by that name. I opened the case and found a glass vessel inside. The name on the case, it turned out, belonged to a factory owner. The inscription on the vessel inside said ‘Chopin.’ I immediately recalled, as I’ve always been passionate about music and play some myself, Chopin’s last will and testament: ‘Body in Paris, heart in Warsaw.’ At heart, Chopin remained a Pole.”

“What do you play? What is your repertoire?”

“Beethoven, Mozart.” He paused. “I had never been in Warsaw before, and I have never seen it not destroyed. Wherever we went, it was in ruins. My investigating magistrate, who has never been to Warsaw, could navigate the city with his eyes closed.”

“... the city that is no more, because you destroyed it. You, Mr. Reinefarth, could not appear in that city, or in Poland.”

“I would have never done it.”

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t want to open old wounds with my presence. I would not be welcome.”

“It wouldn’t be safe for you. Do you know that Warsaw was rebuilt?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve read about it, and seen many photographs.”

“Your work has been spoiled: today Warsaw is beautiful.”

“It has been my destiny in life to see ruins. Ruins and more ruins. That

was my destiny. One night, as we walked the streets, I heard someone playing the piano, and very nicely, too. I went over in that direction. There was a house whose walls were completely in ruins; the only thing left intact was a piano. Behind those ruined walls was a German colonel, playing. I sent my aide-de-camp for my violin, which I took with me everywhere, and we played together.”

“What piece did you play?”

“I can’t remember. We must have known it well, because we played by ear. It was dark.”

“What about the houses that were burning?”

“You wouldn’t be able to read music in their light.”

“Was it a song of triumph?”

“No! . . .” Reinefarth was moved by the question, motioning to me, as if doubting if I understood him. “It was out of pure love for music. Out of a desire to hear something else than gunfire.”

“Have you heard of the Polish poet Norwid and his poem ‘Chopin’s piano?’”

“I haven’t.”

“Let’s leave it, then. The scene you that you have described is pure literature. Is it not horrible to talk of Chopin’s heart in the face of the hundreds of thousands of victims murdered?”

“That is life, such contradictions are common. I saw a horse-drawn wedding carriage in Warsaw, just two kilometers from the Western Front, just three minutes from the front. The groom was dressed all in black; the bride in a white dress, two horses, and everything was calm. . . . I did a double take, at first I didn’t believe what I saw. You can’t make such things up; you have to live them.”

“Weren’t they afraid?”

Reinefarth took a black-and-green cigar box and, with the sure hand of a general, he put it on a folder full of documents, as if he were still besieging Warsaw.

“This,” he said, dragging his finger along the outline of the box, “is Warsaw. But all around,” he moved his flat palm over the folder, “it’s completely quiet.”

“You misunderstood me. I wasn’t asking whether the fighting caused them fear—I was referring to the sight of you, wearing an SS uniform.”

Reinefarth returned to his previous way of speaking, and replied, sulkily, “I don’t know about the relations in the General Government. I had never been there before.”

I raised myself up slightly from my seat, in order to note down the name on the box: *Brasil*.

“Are you interested in the brand of cigars?” Reinefarth asked. “Here,” he passed me the box.

“Thank you. I was interested in your gesture: those cigars in your hand represent the city that you attacked, and where I live today. How do you live? What is your life like these days?”

“I am an attorney. I work hard, especially for a seventy-year-old. A man is not old as long as he keeps working. This work is right for me. I consider it to be the finest profession. I was a general for a very short time.”

“People in Poland say you have a beautiful garden.”

“Beautiful? It’s merely a couple of trees and a meadow.”

“What sort of trees?” I asked.

“A couple of lilac bushes, some apple trees, one cherry tree, one pear. That’s it.”

“You look young for seventy, but time flies. In the face of eternity, of the unknown, of all that is beyond us—do you ever think back to your past, to the times of war?”

“Only when I meet people who fought. Here in Germany people don’t talk much about the war—they don’t like to talk about the war.”

“That’s a change. Things used to be different.”

“My God! Was there ever a nation, and I mean people who walk the streets, the people who get shot, who would want to have a war?”

“Is this something you learned as a higher-level commander?”

“How on earth would I know how I know this?”

“Why did you decide to live on Sylt?”

“That’s the only thing left in my family—the house on Sylt.”

“Have you lost anything in the East?”

“We had a house in Cottbus, near Berlin. Sylt was our summer house, and now it’s our home.”

“Do you keep your general’s uniform as a souvenir?”

“No, I had to give it up when I was taken captive. It was exchanged for prisoner’s clothes: an American military uniform, dyed black.”

“What was your pay as a general in the police and the SS?”

“Towards the end of the war, 1,600 marks.”

“That was a lot of money. That is 3,200 over two months, correct?”²

Seeming not to understand, Reinefarth replied, “Yes, it was a lot. You could save it all, but you couldn’t buy anything. As a soldier I had no

expenses, it all went straight to the bank account and accumulated—and then it was all lost.”

“How much did you lose?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t go back home. I looked for work after the war. I worked cutting basalt rocks at the airport, I was a gardener’s assistant, which was difficult, because I didn’t know anything about different kinds of flowers. The only consolation was I wasn’t a soldier anymore.”

“Many people around the world believe that you former SS officers form a clandestine organization.”

“I don’t think so. But if one exists, it must be known to German intelligence. As a result of my twenty-year-long trial, the longest I’ve ever heard of, I had a heart attack. But what caused most harm was not the prolonged investigation, nor the constant uncertainty associated with it, but witnessing how my wife endured it. She didn’t know anything, except for what I told her, and then it hit her: twenty years of not knowing what would happen to me. It had a real psychological burden on her, and the same for the children. And I was affected by their burden.”

“And what about the 35,000 from August 5 and 6, the ones I came to remind you about? Please, tell me who to blame, if not yourself.”

“That has never been documented precisely. We do not know today which units executed people. I don’t believe there were 35,000, it’s technically impossible: we did not have enough soldiers. The fighting was ongoing, and these people were not simply waiting to be killed, they would have had to be caught first.”

We were back at the starting point. We checked our watches; it was five o’clock.

Reinefarth said, “I reserved two hours for you, as we had agreed.”

As we went out through the office, he observed, “My house is a labyrinth, just like Warsaw—I mean for me, as it was back then, of course. On your way back, the weather won’t be good; the sea is turbulent. Goodbye.”

NOTES

¹ Both Polish and German use the same word for breed and race. Cf. ‘*rasa*’ and ‘*die Rasse*.’

² A reference to the two months of the Warsaw Uprising.