

Semester ends

At six it began to snow lightly and by six-thirty my coat became white. I went to Ludwigstrasse looking for Anna and Jens. Ludwigstrasse was deserted, the gas-lights covered with snow, the road, the branches of the trees as well as the red roofs of the houses had become white. The large garbage container in front of Professor Lyura's house as well as the parked car were also covered with snow. The wind was blowing in blasts, swirling the snow around the slender lampposts. I realized that the cold was seeping in through the soles of my shoes. The soles of my feet had become quite numb. Stopping at the dark entrance I heard the sound of bus number one melting into the distance. I thought, I could have taken it, and I pressed the bell.

Wearing a dressing-gown, Herr Langbein (literally, Longlegs) let me in.

'Good evening!'

'Good evening! I am sorry for bothering you at this hour. I am looking for the Darvashes.'

'That's OK. It's no bother. Apartment Number 17.'

'Yes, I know. Thank you.'

'Of course you know that. You come quite often.'

Not just come often. It was I who had arranged these two rooms for Anna and Jens. They are both Hungarian refugees. When they fled from Hungary and arrived in Germany about a year ago, all their possessions had filled just two suitcases. After that Jens got support from the Hungarian Fund of the university. Anna also did odd jobs in between her studies. Slowly their condition improved. Jens is a student of Natural Science. Anna studied Linguistics. Sometimes Anna asks me about English grammar (I taught English at a local school), and I anticipate calamity. Smoking some brand of poisonous cigarette absent-mindedly, Jens lectured (to me, to Anna and to everyone else in the city) about the Hungarian mathematician in Princeton named Johann von Neumann, student barricades on the streets of Budapest and foreign tanks, and how the magnetic properties of elements changed with fall in temperature. It is clear that science is a part of his life and already there is a rumour in the Second Physics Institute that from the next semester Professor Weizsäcker is thinking of taking 'den Ungarn' (meaning the Hungarian) as his assistant. They could not get married all this while since they did not have a home, till three months ago. Fortunately, I had some contact with Herr Langbein, the caretaker of this student boarding house. (Herr Langbein was a student of Law and secretary of the Chess Club. That is how I came to know him.) He said, 'A flat? There are many homeless couples roaming about in this city. Find a place for a newly-wed couple here? Impossible... What did you say? Hungarian refugees? Oh, that is a completely different matter! Because they are Hungarian refugees we Germans have a special responsibility. We have a lot of bad reputation from the past...yes, it is different for Hungarian students. Bring them to me one day; let me see what can be done...'

However, I have not told Jens about this 'helpful' attitude of Herr Langbein; there would be an unnecessary fight if I did so—the Hungarians are not very cool in their heads.

Herr Langbein told me that he had not gone out that evening; he had a slight influenza, and about 38 degrees temperature. He told me that possibly Jens Darvash is not at home, he had seen him going out, but Frau Darvash had a headache; she was probably in the room. Jens was not supposed to be at home, I knew that because today evening was Manfred's birthday party, in the restaurant at the basement of the Rathaus (that is, in the Ratskeller). I didn't make it.

I proceeded along the dark hallway. Most of the doors were closed. There was no light emerging from below most of the doors. I remembered that today is Saturday and on Saturdays there is a dance in the Mensa (the students' canteen). I crossed Dr Haidu's closed door. Dr Haidu is a Hungarian refugee, skeletal body, spectacles, an intellectual-type grizzly beard, very short-tempered. Dr Haidu was fed up with the entire German race. His sister Anita stayed with him. Fraulein Anita Haidu, however, was quite plump, when one saw her it was hard to believe that she played the violin (and that too, not Hungarian gypsy music, but Mozart and Brahms). His wife was in a different city, so they could not come away together (she was supposed to come with another group of refugees, but that group was apprehended and had to go back to Budapest). Dr Haidu had somehow found a job in the Hungarian Seminar, had also got Anita enrolled as a student. In his free time, with the help of a few fellow countrymen, he produced a cyclostyled Hungarian newsletter, and kept wondering how he could free Hungary again (and how he could get his wife to get out of Hungary fooling the authorities). Where had Dr Haidu and Anita gone in this weather? Maybe they have gone nowhere? Maybe all the Hungarians have got together in Jens's room and were chatting, or cooking goulash together, the room was filled with strange and weird aromas. In the middle of this chaos, nothing is impossible—maybe someone romantically inclined was reciting loudly the German translation of some Alexander (Sándor) Petőfi poem:

*Never, never, should she know
How she, ah, how she broke my heart,*

And someone else is protesting—broken, *zerrissen*? No, *zerrissen* means to tear apart, to break into pieces... I know that Jens is not at home, still in my mind floated the picture of Anna's record player playing, the long, passionate notes of Benny Goodman's clarinet, Jens is keeping beat with his feet (completely unmoved, Anna was writing the cost of milk and sausages (as if she was deaf), somebody mentioned von Neumann's name, in a moment Jens switched off the record-player agitatedly. I could imagine how Dr Haidu was sitting completely casually in the middle of all these boys and girls, wearing just his pyjamas and vest (the sight of which would make the Germans faint), peeling potatoes or removing peas from their pods, sometimes stroking Anita's hair like petting a cat, and said that one of the main reasons why the Germans were so dull (*borbor*) was because they did not know how to eat in a mouth-watering style...

I crossed Fraulein von Dietsche's room (she is a student of German literature). Her bicycle was just outside the door, leaning against the wall. Perhaps she had wanted to go out somewhere before it started to snow (she would be able to tell, I thought, in what different ways the word *zerrissen* can be used in a poem. Petőfi is a young Hungarian poet who died at the age of 24 in the Hungarian war of independence—maybe she would like Petőfi's poetry)...After that, on the doors were names of many Germans who I didn't know, an Indian research student doing mathematics, after that Leo Kuhn who studied Sociology. He was also a Hungarian refugee. He was also not in his room. Suddenly, since a few days, he had started to roam about with a German fellow student. The affair is only just heating up. They have certainly not gone to the big student crowd at the Mensa, perhaps they are

sitting at some lonely Kneipe (pub) in the outskirts of the city, or in the hot darkness of a cinema hall.

There was light in Günther Gierlach's room (he was an indigent German student) and from inside came the sound of a typewriter being used; the semester is about to end, it is time for him to submit his dissertation, perhaps he was typing just that, a heavy-serious name: "German Democracy in Relation to the Post-war Baltic Powers". I laughed. I remembered Dr Haidu saying, with a smirk, 'You won't believe it, in these last ten years after the war the Germans have learnt a new word, and like a little child who has just found a new toy and cannot have enough of it, they are making a big deal of it: "democracy"...'

I crossed István's room—another Hungarian—but there was light in his room (the weather was bad but what was his connection with bad weather?). I felt like knocking at his door, then I remembered that I had taught him English, for which he had not paid me till now. If I go to his room now who knows what he will think. I moved forward. I put my hand in my pocket. Yes, the thing was still there. A ring of a coffee-machine. One of the steel rings of Anna's Italian espresso coffee machine was broken; it was not possible to find it in this little university town, so our drinking espresso had also come to an end. They gave me the broken ring to take along with me when I went to Hamburg. I have brought a new ring with me today from Hamburg, a good excuse to visit Ludwigstrasse 27 amid this snow and wind. I knocked on door No. 17. From inside, Anna said, 'Come in.' I opened the door. Wearing blue jeans Anna was lying on the couch reading short stories of Heinrich von Kleist. Her face was pale. On the small table next to the couch was half-a-glass of water and a few analgesic tablets. The table-lamp made out of a Chianti bottle was burning, in the typewriter a half-written page from Jens's dissertation was still rolled in. Jens had very minute and terrible handwriting, my head started to ache when I read even a paragraph, possibly Anna had been typing that till late in the night. It was no surprise that she had a headache.

Anna got up. Her face is like her mother's face in the photograph (of course in the photograph there was a piece of cloth tied on the mother's head), but at this moment, it looked exceedingly pale. (She showed the photograph to everyone saying, 'Since I am nothing to look at, let me boast showing my mother's face around.' I believe the mother also possibly said the same thing showing a photograph of her daughter around.) She had some wooden pins on her hair; perhaps she was doing her hair. She looked like an actress getting ready in the green room.

'Oh, it's you.' Anna's face lit up, but then it fell again. 'Oh, your coat is completely white; also your head.'

I smiled.

'When did you get back from Hamburg? Please take off your coat.'

'This afternoon,' I said, and took off my coat and shook it once in the corridor, outside the door. Anna hung it on a hook on the hall. I ran my fingers through my hair and shook some snow off, it fell on the uncarpeted floor of the hall and began to melt away.

'This way...'

Rubbing my shoes a couple of times on the doormat outside the door, I came in. I smiled again, and sitting on the couch next to the oil stove, I took off my gloves and started to warm my hands. When the couch was opened up, it became a bed for the night. Meanwhile I realized that my fingers had become numb with cold. The oil-stove was old; it produced more smoke than heat, but perhaps it had been burning for a long time in the closed room,

it had become quite cosy. Both parts of the room had become cosy. There is no line drawn through the middle of the room, but everyone knew that the room had two parts: the right belonging to Anna, the left to Jens. On the wall on Jens's side was a Kandinsky geometric design (Anna did not understand Kandinsky). On the wall on Anna's side was Picasso's 'Harlequin family' (Jens did not understand Picasso). There were tulips in Anna's vase. Jens's vase had been transformed into an ashtray.

'You have a headache?'

'I am better now. I took quite a few pills. What brings you here in the middle of this snowstorm?'

'I had nothing to do,' I said, lighting a cigarette, and smiled. Anna also smiled. Anna certainly knew that I had long ago finished seeing the four films playing in the four cinema halls of this little university town, and although it is true that red coals were burning in the chimneys behind the closed doors of the pubs, they were filled with familiar faces; everyone was taking shelter there from the calamity on the roads.

'Why didn't you take the bus?'

I smiled. Anna smiled too. Too many people on the bus.

'Let that be. It's good that you have come. We can chat.'

Which means Anna would talk and I would listen.

'I have nothing to offer you today. Herr Specht had brought a bottle of Mosel wine yesterday, very tasty. But between Jens and Dr Haidu...'

Anna pointed at the empty bottle of Mosel wine on the window sill and laughed.

'Will you have tea?'

'Yes, but there is no hurry.'

'So what did you do in Hamburg?'

I laughed and told her that I had roamed about a lot. Big city, busy city, I said, very different from this small university town of ours. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was playing at the theatre at the Gänzemarkt, the boats on the Elbe, Reeperbahn,... I laughed again. That means I did not say anything. Who I met, who I didn't. I did not even mention whether I would get the job at Hamburg. Anna also laughed.

'Why didn't you go to Manfred's party?'

'I forgot. Actually, I didn't really forget, but just after getting back from Hamburg, I didn't feel like going to that loud get-together. Assume, assume...'

'Assume that I have forgotten,' Anna said and laughed. Anna showed me the book of Heinrich von Kleist, told me about Kleist's influence on German stories, read out one page from the book, and looked at me.

'I got your thing,' I told her, and took out the ring for the coffee-machine.

Anna was expecting just this, all this time. Her face lit up and then darkened again.

'Ah, you shouldn't have come just to give us this, in the middle of such terrible weather...'
I laughed and stopping her, said, 'I couldn't wait till tomorrow. Today is the weather for espresso coffee. You know how the insides of *kneipes* look like in weather like this. So disregarding the weather, I came to the place where one gets the best espresso coffee in the city: Ludwigstrasse 27, Room No. 17.'

'Thanks. But I'm not sure whether this ring will fit. Come with me, let us see.'

We pushed the door in the middle and went into the kitchen, and tried to fit the ring. We couldn't. We laughed. Anna laughed a laugh of consolation and said, 'Forget it, there is a different trick to do it—only Jens knows how to do it. I can never do it myself. Dr Haidu also doesn't know the trick.'

'So there is no hope of any espresso?' I asked in a sad voice.

'So there is no hope of any espresso,' Anna repeated in the same sad voice. 'Till Jens and the others get back. Tea?'

'Tea,' I said hopelessly.

The kettle began to boil on the gas ring. I came back and sat down on the couch.

'Are you feeling warmer now?'

'Yes, it is quite warm now.' I said. 'But you should also try to get warm.' I pushed the stove a little towards Anna. Something got dislodged somewhere and it began to smoke even more.

'Will you listen to a record? I have a new Mozart...'

I looked at the record player and at the records. Most of them were Mozart, Beethoven and Dvořák, a few of Hungarian folk music, and another pile, kept separately—they were Jens's—Benny Goodman's clarinet and Dixieland's Jazz records (definitely Jens's: whenever these were played, Anna found work to do in the kitchen). I laughed. Anna understood.

'Very well, let it be. Today the weather is also like that—somewhat constraining, dull and gloomy. You don't feel like doing anything, don't feel like listening to anything.'

Anna pushed the window-curtains to look out and said, 'Oh, it is snowing very heavily outside. Snow has gathered and become ice even on the window panes. What a mess.

Schließlich!

'*Scheußlich*, horrible!' I corrected her.

Anna laughed and said, '*Scheußlich*. How will you go back tonight? The last bus is at 9:30, is it not?'

'Let Jens come,' I replied quite indifferently, 'something will be arranged. For the moment I am happy here.' I stretched my legs and sat more comfortably.

Anna wanted to laugh, but suddenly became serious. 'Have you noticed something? How quiet the house is today even though it is a weekend? Absolutely still, like a deserted house...'

'Yes, everyone has probably gone to the Mensa.'

'No, many students are inside. Of course, most of the Hungarians have gone out, but the German students are mostly in their rooms—the semester is about to end, the exams are also approaching, in a day or two. That a house filled with young boys and girls can be so lifeless, that I have seen only in Germany. If this boarding house were in Hungary, it would be humming with noise and activity. How is it in your country?'

'Even in our country, our boys make a lot of noise,' I said. I wanted to say that Manfred was a German boy and István (in whose room the light was on) was a Hungarian. But I did not say anything.

'The Germans are so earnest, so serious,' Anna said, making a face, 'it is not nice.' After that she laughed. Outside in the hall, the telephone began to ring. "It could be Jens."
'I'll take it...'

'There is no light in the hall. Be careful.'

I came out into the dark hallway. One could hear the wind blowing outside from the hall. The uncarpeted hallway had become very cold—cold and still. There was only the sound of the typewriter coming out of Günther Gierlach's room. I knew where the telephone was, and picked it up in the darkness. An indistinct sound of noise and the tinkling of glasses floated in from the other end through the telephone. A jazz-band was playing 'Patricia'. Jens was calling from the Rathaus Keller. He speaks German fluently. We say '*Du*' to each other, that means, the familiar *you*. 'Oh, you are already back from Hamburg?' he said, 'Why didn't you come to the party?' 'Oh, many things, will tell you later,' I said. 'Party...'
'*Dummkopf*, you dumb fool, what "many things" can you have?' 'How's the party going?' 'Fine. Herr Sissak is making a scene of himself. I found out only today that even Germans can be so free and frank.' 'Do convey my birthday greetings to Manfred,' I said. 'OK, I will. How is Anna's headache?' 'She is better now. Should I call her?' 'No, no, don't call her. I don't have the time now,' Jens said hurriedly. 'Since you are there with Anna I don't need to give further instructions. Tell her that our party will end in another half an hour or so. You don't go away. We are trying to arrange a car to go home. That can also drop you home.' 'You are organizing a car? Whose car?' 'Somebody's car. Who cares whose car it is? You don't try to go out. We are coming. So long.' 'Bye,' I said and put down the receiver.

I returned to the warm room. Anna was pouring tea. I lit a cigarette and told her, 'Yes, it was Jens. Even in the middle of the party he was worried about someone who has a headache. His body is in the Ratskeller, but his mind is in Ludwigstrasse.' Anna smiled and said, 'Is it not the same for you? You are here, but your mind is in your own country, somewhere with someone in your own country?'

I smiled. Anna kept looking at me for a few moments, but I smiled, without saying anything. Anna gave up.

'Milk or lemon?'

'Anything is fine for me. But you should have yours with milk.'

Anna squeezed some lemon juice over my tea. She also unearthed a couple of pieces of Hungarian sausages from somewhere, saying, maybe they have become rather dry now but she arranged them so nicely that I had the feeling that I had not missed much by not going to the party at the Ratskeller. Suddenly I had the urge to eat, and the lemon tea and

Hungarian sausages looked very inviting to me (of course it would have been excellent if one could have put some rum into the tea, but there is usually no rum in this house).

Pulling back the curtains once again, Anna looked out and said, 'What miserable weather! Just snow, snow and snow! Can really make one unhappy. In any case, I will be relieved when the semester is over.'

'Have you made plans to go anywhere during the holidays?'

'To Italy, to Florence.'

Of course. I remembered, Anna's sister was married in Florence. While coming from Hungary, they came via Florence.

'Have you been to Italy?'

'No, I would really love to.'

'Why don't you come with us? You will love Italy. It is a country filled with sunshine. The people are also very different, very open, very friendly, very happy. They can laugh their hearts out over small things, joke, sing. They don't sit around with glum faces like the Germans. However, we can't go by train. We could not save much money this semester,' Anna laughed. I understood that Anna was talking about the expenses of setting up their new home. 'If we go, we'll have to hitch-hike all the way.'

'I had roamed about in and around Florence with my sister and brother-in-law. Thinking about it makes me happy, makes me want to go again. Jens is also in need of a break, he had to work very hard this semester. Will you come with us?'

'Let's see,' I said and smiled, and tried to change the subject. 'Where will the Haidus go?' 'Dr Haidu wants to go to Tirol, but Anita doesn't want to. Of course, in the end, they will go wherever the sister wants to.'

'Possibly she would want to go to Hungary,' I said, thinking about Dr Haidu's wife. I didn't ask where Leo Kuhn was going. He was busy with his girl-friend, and it was impossible to figure out his present activities.

'Yes,' Anna said, beginning to smile, but she suddenly became serious, and asked, 'Don't you feel bad when you see the German students packing their bags and going home for the holidays?'

I smiled. Anna looked at my face for a few moments, and then gave up. She smiled, looked at my plate and said, 'Ah, my *liebe* God!'

'Ah, my *lieber* God,' I corrected her.

'Ah, my dear God!' she repeated, and smiled. 'I had forgotten, there was some white bread...'

Anna hurriedly got up and went towards the kitchen, and stopped. She spotted a straw hat on the wall.

'Bought it in Fiesole. How do you like it?'

'Pretty,' I said.

'I told you about Fiesole, didn't I? It is very close to Florence. You will love it there.'

Anna pulled out a postcard from one of Jens's books—a picture postcard. 'This is Fiesole. The market. Wait.'

Anna went to the kitchen. The market in Fiesole. Some stalls made of cloth in the shade of trees, there were benches inside the stalls, on those benches were displayed all sorts of trinkets and jewellery. I did not look too closely. A few Italians were sitting around a table under a tree and were drinking something from very tall glasses, possibly ice-cold beer or Vermouth. Sunlight fell on their faces, on the liquid in their glasses and on the ashtray which had 'Cinzano' written on it. It was a picture postcard like many others...

It felt rather stuffy inside the room. Slowly, the smoke from the oil-lamp had also accumulated. I opened the window. Immediately a blast of cold air came in, and a sheet of snow. I closed the window again quickly. Some snow melted on the window sill, and the picture in my hand was also covered with snow. It seemed as if it was the picture of some Russian village, and as if one of the gentlemen drinking beer had his hair covered with snow and that he was wearing a coat that had become white.

Anna came back with the bread and hot tea. She immediately noticed the water on the window sill. I said, 'The room has been closed for quite a while now. I opened the window.' 'Oh,' Anna said, and looking at my face again, smiled. She took the picture from my hands and removed the snow from it with her slender fingers. Sunshine fell again on the faces of the Italians and on the glasses in their hands. Anna began to pour tea again into my cup.

'Lemon again?'

'Lemon again,' I said and smiled.

'The area around Florence is very attractive,' Anna said, as she finished pouring the tea and began squeezing the lemon. 'Filled with cyprus and olive trees, filled with sunshine. Fiesole is very close to Florence. There is a very beautiful thirteenth century church there. There is a Franciscan monastery on top of the hill; from there one gets a lovely view of the area. There are Roman and Etruscan ruins as well. People go to look at them too. One can go there by tram from Florence. Buses also ply. They leave from the Piazza San Marco. We went cycling. It was market-day in Fiesole that day. The shops had been set up under two rows of chestnut and lime trees, inside cloth-covered stalls. Outside, the shopkeepers were loudly advertising their wares. What a bustle there was! How busy everyone was! So many different faces, the display of so many colours, so much enthusiasm, so much glittering sunshine! There were mounds of cheese, ice-cream, biscuits, sweets being sold, bottles of Chianti, huge baskets full of apples, grapes, pears, figs. Objects made of straw are very famous in Fiesole. A huge variety of straw items were being sold: straw hats in many different colours and designs, bags, baskets. Leather goods produced in Florence were also being sold. And they were also selling a host of other things -- cheap jewellery, shoes, socks, accordions, toys, prayer beads, crosses and pictures of Mary and her son, books, clothes, postcards,...