

were positive nurseries of stars out there, a claim which I recently found confirmed in a newspaper report accompanying one of the spectacular photographs sent back to earth from the Hubble telescope on its further journey into space. At any rate, said Austerlitz, Gerald then moved from Cambridge to continue his work at an astrophysics research institute in Geneva, where I visited him several times, and as we walked out of the city together and along the banks of the lake I observed the way his ideas, like the stars themselves, gradually emerged from the whirling nebulae of his astrophysical fantasies. On one of these occasions Gerald also told me about the flights he had made over the gleaming, snow-covered mountains in his Cessna, over the volcanic peaks of the Puy-de-Dôme region, down the beautiful Garonne and on



to Bordeaux. I suppose it was inevitable that he would fail to come home from one of these flights, said Austerlitz. It was a bad day when I heard that he had crashed in the Savoy Alps, and perhaps that was the beginning of my own decline, a withdrawal into myself which became increasingly morbid and intractable with the passage of time.

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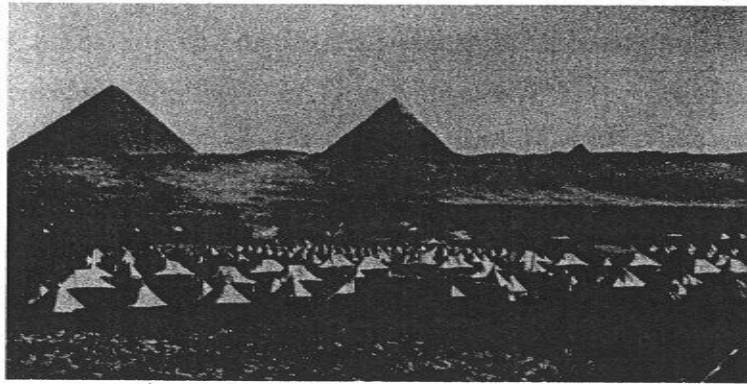
Almost quarter of a year had passed before I next went to London and visited Austerlitz in his house in Alderney Street. On our parting in December we had agreed that I would wait to receive news from him. As the weeks went by I had felt less and less sure whether I would ever hear from him again, fearing at various times that I might have made a thoughtless remark, or offended him in some other way. It also occurred to me that, following his old custom, he might simply have gone away with some unknown purpose in mind and for an indefinite period. Had I realized at the time that for Austerlitz certain moments had no beginning or end, while on the other hand his whole life had sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration, I would probably have waited more

Austerlitz
as recipient
of stars

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Memor

patiently. But at any rate, one day my mail included a picture postcard from the 1920s or 1930s showing a camp of white tents in the Egyptian desert, a picture taken during a campaign now remembered by no one, the message on the back saying merely



Saturday 19 March, Alderney Street, followed by a question mark and a capital A for Austerlitz. Alderney Street is quite a long way out in the East End of London. It is a remarkably quiet street running parallel to the main road not far from the Mile End junction, where there are always traffic jams and, on such Saturdays, market traders set up their stalls of clothes and fabrics on the pavements. Thinking back now, I see again a low block of flats like a fortress standing on the corner of the street; a garish green kiosk with its wares openly laid out,

*McCartney as a picture artist by regard
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though there was never anyone behind the counter; a cast-iron fence round a patch of grass on which you might think no one had ever trodden; and the brick wall on the right, about fifty yards long and as tall as a man. At the end of it I found the house where Austerlitz lived, the first in a row of six or seven. The interior, which appeared to be very spacious, contained only the most essential furniture and no curtains or carpets. The walls were painted a pale shade of matt grey, and the floorboards were also grey, but of a rather darker hue. Apart from what seemed to me a curiously elongated, old-fashioned ottoman, the front room, into which Austerlitz took me first, had nothing in it but a large table, also varnished matt grey, with several dozen photographs lying on it, most of them dating quite a long way back and rather worn at the edges. Some of the pictures were already familiar to me, so to speak: pictures of empty Belgian landscapes, stations and métro viaducts in Paris, the palm house in the Jardin des Plantes, various moths and other night-flying insects, ornate dovecotes, Gerald Fitzpatrick on the airfield near Quy, and a number of heavy doors and gateways. Austerlitz told me that he sometimes sat here for hours, laying out these

*or → London of Austerlitz, full of
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 to new reality is no longer real, but*

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photographs or others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and that then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the grey table top, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman. I often lie here until late in the evening, feeling time roll back, said Austerlitz, as we passed into the sitting-room at the rear, where he lit the little gas fire and invited me to sit down on one of the chairs standing on either side of the hearth. This room too contained hardly any furniture; there were just the grey floorboards and the walls on which the light of the flickering blue flames was now cast in the gathering dusk. I can still hear the faint hiss of the gas, and I remember that while Austerlitz was making tea in the kitchen I sat entranced by the reflection of the little fire, which looked as if it were burning at some distance from the house on the other side of the glazed veranda doors, among the now almost pitch-black bushes in

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the garden. When Austerlitz had brought the tea tray in and was holding slices of white bread on a toasting-fork in front of the blue gas flames, I said something about the incomprehensibility of mirror images, to which he replied that he often sat in this room after nightfall, staring at the apparently motionless spot of light reflected out there in the darkness, and when he did so he inevitably thought of a Rembrandt exhibition he had seen once, many years ago, in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where he had not felt inclined to linger before any of the large-scale masterpieces which have been reproduced over and over again, but instead stood for a long time looking at a small painting measuring at most nine by twelve inches, from the Dublin collection, as far as he remembered, which according to its label showed the Flight into Egypt, although he could make out neither Mary and Joseph, nor the child Jesus, nor the ass, but only a tiny flicker of fire in the middle of the gleaming black varnish of the darkness which, said Austerlitz, he could see in his mind's eye to this day. — But where, he continued, shall I take up my story? When I came back from France I bought this house for what today is the positively ridiculous sum of

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nine hundred and fifty pounds, and then I taught for almost thirty years until I took early retirement in 1991, partly, said Austerlitz, because of the inexorable spread of ignorance even to the universities, and partly because I hoped to set out on paper my investigations into the history of architecture and civilization, as had long been my intention. I might perhaps, Austerlitz said to me, have had some idea since our first conversations in Antwerp of the extent of his interests, the drift of his ideas and the nature of his observations and comments, always made extempore or first recorded in provisional form, but eventually covering thousands of pages. Even in Paris, said Austerlitz, I had thought of collecting my fragmentary studies in a book, although I constantly postponed writing it. The various ideas I entertained at different times of this book I was to write ranged from the concept of a systematically descriptive work in several volumes to a series of essays on such subjects as hygiene and sanitation, the architecture of the penal system, secular temples, hydrotherapy, zoological gardens, departure and arrival, light and shade, steam and gas, and so forth. However, even a first glance at the papers I had brought here from the Institute to

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Alderney Street showed that they consisted largely of sketches which now seemed misguided, distorted, and of little use. I began to assemble and recast anything that still passed muster in order to re-create before my own eyes, as if in the pages of an album, the picture of the landscape, now almost immersed in oblivion, through which my journey had taken me. But the more I laboured on this



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project over several months, the more pitiful did the results seem. I was increasingly overcome by a sense of aversion and distaste, said Austerlitz, at the mere thought of opening the bundles of papers and looking through the endless reams I had written in the course of the years. Yet reading and writing, he added, had always been his favourite occupation.

How happily, said Austerlitz, have I sat over a book in the deepening twilight until I could no longer make out the words and my mind began to wander, and how secure have I felt seated at the desk in my house in the dark night, just watching the tip of my pencil in the lamplight following its shadow, as if of its own accord and with perfect fidelity, while that shadow moved regularly from left to right, line by line, over the ruled paper. But now I found writing such hard going that it often took me a whole day to compose a single sentence, and no sooner had I thought such a sentence out, with the greatest effort, and written it down, than I saw the awkward falsity of my constructions and the inadequacy of all the words I had employed. If at times some kind of self-deception none the less made me feel that I had done a good day's work, then as soon as I glanced at the page next morning I was sure to find the most appalling mistakes, inconsistencies and lapses staring at me from the paper. However much or little I had written, on a subsequent reading it always seemed so fundamentally flawed that I had to destroy it immediately and begin again. Soon I could not even venture on the first step. Like a tightrope walker who has forgotten how to put one

foot in front of the other, all I felt was the swaying of the precarious structure on which I stood, stricken with terror at the realization that the ends of the balancing pole gleaming far out on the edges of my field of vision were no longer my guiding lights, as before, but malignant enticements to me to cast myself into the depths. Now and then a train of thought did succeed in emerging with wonderful clarity inside my head, but I knew even as it formed that I was in no position to record it, for as soon as I so much as picked up my pencil the endless possibilities of language, to which I could once safely abandon myself, became a conglomeration of the most inane phrases. There was not an expression in the sentence but it proved to be a miserable crutch, not a word but it sounded false and hollow. And in this dreadful state of mind I sat for hours, for days on end with my face to the wall, tormenting myself and gradually discovering the horror of finding that even the smallest task or duty, for instance arranging assorted objects in a drawer, can be beyond one's power. It was as if an illness that had been latent in me for a long time were now threatening to erupt, as if some soul-destroying and inexorable force had fastened upon me and would gradually

paralyse my entire system. I already felt in my head the dreadful torpor that heralds disintegration of the personality, I sensed that in truth I had neither memory nor the power of thought, nor even any existence, that all my life had been a constant process of obliteration, a turning away from myself and the world. If someone had come then to lead me away to a place of execution I would have gone meekly, without a word, without so much as opening my eyes, just as people who suffer from violent sea-sickness, if they are crossing the Caspian Sea on a steamer, for instance, will not offer the slightest resistance should someone tell them that they are about to be thrown overboard. Whatever was going on within me, said Austerlitz, the panic I felt on facing the start of any sentence that must be written, not knowing how I could begin it or indeed any other sentence, soon extended to what is in itself the simpler business of reading, until if I attempted to read a whole page I inevitably fell into a state of the greatest confusion. If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, with some quarters dating from far back in time while others have been torn down, cleaned up and rebuilt, and with suburbs

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reaching further and further into the surrounding country, then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl any more, no longer knows what a bus stop is for, or what a back yard is, or a street junction, an avenue or a bridge. The entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog. I could not even understand what I myself had written in the past – perhaps I could understand that least of all. All I could think was that such a sentence only appears to mean something, but in truth is at best a makeshift expedient, a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance, something which we use, in the same way as many sea plants and animals use their tentacles, to grope blindly through the darkness enveloping us. The very thing which may usually convey a sense of purposeful intelligence – the exposition of an idea by means of a certain stylistic facility – now seemed to me nothing but an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise. I could see no connections any more, the sentences resolved themselves into a series of separate words.

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the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs, and those signs into a blue-grey trail gleaming silver here and there, excreted and left behind it by some crawling creature, and the sight of it increasingly filled me with feelings of horror and shame. One evening, said Austerlitz, I gathered up all my papers, bundled or loose, my notepads and exercise books, my files and lecture notes, anything with my writing on it, and carried the entire collection out of the house to the far end of the garden, where I threw it on the compost heap and buried it under layers of rotted leaves and spadefuls of earth. For several weeks afterwards, while I turned out the rooms of my house and repainted the floors and walls, I did think I felt some relief from the burden weighing down on my life, but I soon realized that the shadows were falling over me. Especially in the evening twilight, which had always been my favourite time of day, I was overcome by a sense of anxiety, diffuse at first and then growing ever denser, through which the lovely spectacle of fading colours turned to a malevolent and lightless pallor, my heart felt constricted in my chest to a quarter of its natural size, until at last there remained only one idea in

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my head: I must go to the third-floor landing of a certain building in Great Portland Street, where I had once had a strange turn after visiting a doctor's surgery, and throw myself over the banisters into the dark depths of the stairwell. It was impossible for me then to go and see any of my friends, who were not numerous in any case, or mix with other people in any normal way. The mere idea of listening to anyone brought on a wave of revulsion, while the thought of talking myself, said Austerlitz, was perhaps worse still, and as this state of affairs continued I came to realize how isolated I was and always have been, among the Welsh as much as among the English and French. It never occurred to me to wonder about my true origins, said Austerlitz, nor did I ever feel that I belonged to a certain social class, professional group, or religious confession. I was as ill at ease among artists and intellectuals as in bourgeois life, and it was a very long time since I had felt able to make personal friendships. No sooner did I become acquainted with someone than I feared I had come too close, no sooner did someone turn towards me than I began to retreat. In the end I was linked to other people only by certain forms of courtesy which I

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how = frequency of letters

took to extremes and which I know today, said Austerlitz, I observed not so much for the sake of their recipients as because they allowed me to ignore the fact that my life has always, for as far back as I can remember, been clouded by unrelieved despair. It was then, after my work of destruction in the garden and when I had turned out my house, that I began my nocturnal wanderings through London, to escape the insomnia which increasingly tormented me. For over a year, I think, said Austerlitz, I would leave my house as darkness fell, walking on and on, down the Mile End Road and Bow Road to Stratford, then to Chigwell and Romford, right across Bethnal Green and Canonbury, through Holloway and Kentish Town and thus to Hampstead Heath, or else south over the river to Peckham and Dulwich or westward to Richmond Park. It is a fact that you can traverse this vast city almost from end to end on foot in a single night, said Austerlitz, and once you are used to walking alone and meeting only a few nocturnal spectres on your way, you soon begin to wonder why, apparently because of some agreement concluded long ago, Londoners of all ages lie in their beds in those countless buildings in

Greenwich, Bayswater or Kensington, under a safe roof, as they suppose, while really they are only stretched out with their faces turned to the earth in fear, like travellers of the past resting on their way through the desert. My wanderings took me to the most remote areas of London, into outlying parts of the metropolis which I would never otherwise have seen, and when dawn came I would go back to Whitechapel on the Underground, together with all the other poor souls who flow from the suburbs towards the centre at that time of day. As I passed through the stations, I thought several times that among the passengers coming towards me in the tiled passages, on the escalators plunging steeply into the depths, or behind the grey windows of a train just pulling out, I saw a face known to me from some much earlier part of my life, but I could never say whose it was. These familiar faces always had something different from the rest about them, something I might almost call indistinct, and on occasion they would haunt and disturb me for days on end. In fact at this time, usually when I came home from my nocturnal excursions, I began seeing what might be described as shapes and colours of diminished corporeality

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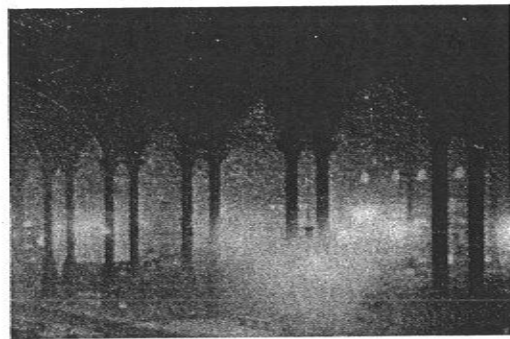
through a drifting veil or cloud of smoke, images from a faded world: a squadron of yachts putting out into the shadows over the sea from the glittering Thames estuary in the evening light, a horse-drawn cab in Spitalfields driven by a man in a top hat, a woman wearing the costume of the 1930s and casting her eyes down as she passed me by. It was at moments of particular weakness, when I thought I could not go on any longer, that my senses played these tricks on me. It sometimes seemed to me as if the noises of the city were dying down around me and the traffic was flowing silently down the street, or as if someone had plucked me by the sleeve. And I would hear people behind my back speaking in a foreign tongue, Lithuanian, Hungarian, or something else with a very alien note to it, or so I thought, said Austerlitz. I had several such experiences in Liverpool Street station, to which I was always irresistibly drawn back on my night journeys. Before work began to rebuild it at the end of the 1980s this station, with its main concourse fifteen to twenty feet below street level, was one of the darkest and most sinister places in London, a kind of entrance to the underworld, as it has often been described. The ballast between the tracks, the

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cracked sleepers, the brick walls with their stone bases, the cornices and panes of the tall windows, the wooden kiosks for the ticket inspectors, and the towering cast-iron columns with their palmate capitals were all covered in a greasy black layer formed, over the course of a century, by coke dust and soot, steam, sulphur and diesel oil. Even on sunny days only a faint greyness, scarcely illuminated at all by the globes of the station lights, came through the glass roof over the main hall, and in

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this eternal dusk, which was full of a muffled babble of voices, a quiet scraping and trampling of feet, innumerable people passed in great tides, disembarking from the trains or boarding them, coming together, moving apart, and being held up at barriers and bottlenecks like water against a weir. Whenever I got out at Liverpool Street station on

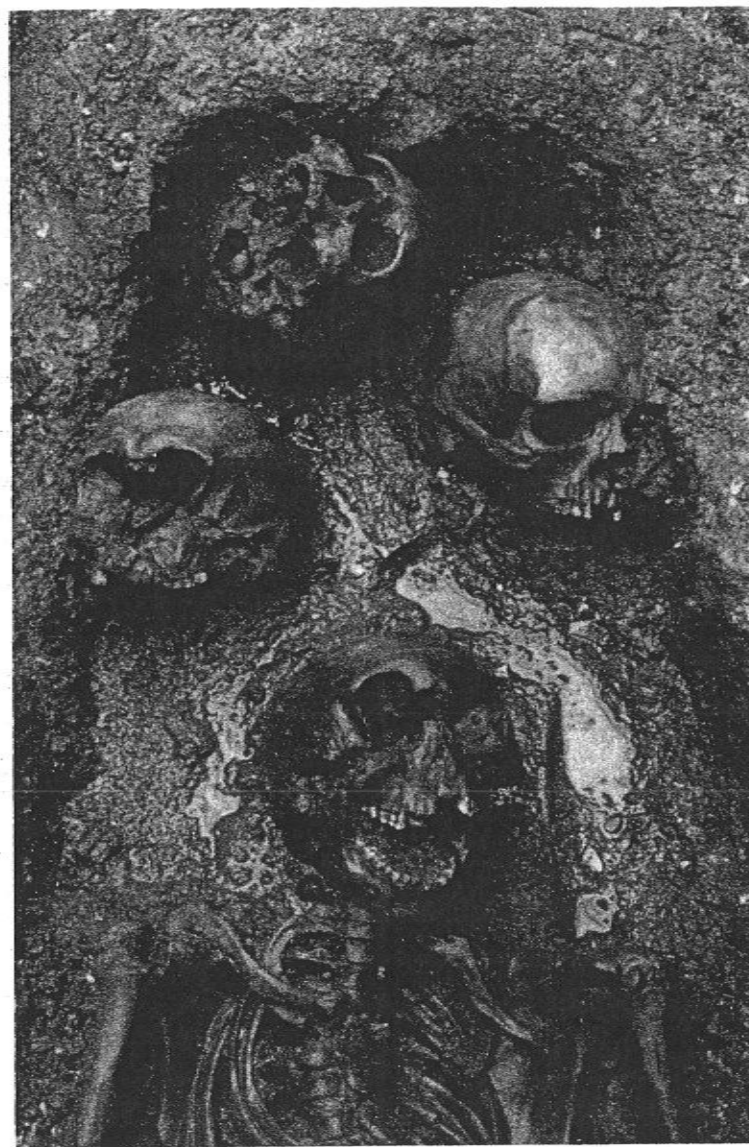
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my way back to the East End, said Austerlitz, I would stay there at least a couple of hours, sitting on a bench with other passengers who were already tired in the early morning, or standing somewhere, leaning on a handrail and feeling that constant wrenching inside me, a kind of heartache which, as I was beginning to sense, was caused by the vortex of past time. I knew that on the site where the station stood marshy meadows had once extended to the city walls, meadows which froze over for months on end in the cold winters of the so-called Little Ice Age, and that Londoners used to strap bone runners under their shoes, skating there as the people of Antwerp skated on the Schelde, sometimes going on until midnight in the flickering light of the bonfires burning here and there on the ice in heavy braziers. Later on, the marshes were progressively drained, elm trees were planted, market gardens, fish ponds and white sandy paths were laid out to make a place where the citizens could walk in their leisure time, and soon pavilions and country houses were being built all the way out to Forest Park and Arden. Until the seventeenth century, Austerlitz continued, the priory of the order of St Mary of Bethlehem stood on the site of the present

main station concourse and the Great Eastern Hotel. It had been founded by a certain Simon FitzMary in gratitude for his miraculous rescue from the hands of the Saracens when he was on a crusade, so that the pious brothers and sisters could pray henceforward for the salvation of the founder's soul and the souls of his ancestors, his descendants and all those related to him. The hospital for the insane and other destitute persons which has gone down in history under the name of Bedlam also belonged to the priory outside Bishopsgate. Whenever I was in the station, said Austerlitz, I kept almost obsessively trying to imagine - through the ever-changing maze of walls - the location in that huge space of the rooms where the asylum inmates were confined, and I often wondered whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away, or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought when I felt a cold breath of air on my forehead, be sensed as we pass through them on our way through the station halls and up and down the flights of steps. Or I imagined the bleachfields stretching westwards from Bedlam, saw the white lengths of linen spread out on the green grass and the diminutive figures of

weavers and washerwomen, and on the far side of the bleachfields the places where the dead were buried once the churchyards of London could hold no more. When space becomes too cramped the dead, like the living, move out into less densely populated districts where they can rest at a decent distance from each other. But more and more keep coming, a never-ending succession of them, and in the end, when the space is entirely occupied, graves are dug through existing graves to accommodate them, until all the bones in the cemetery lie jumbled up together. At Broad Street station, built in 1865 on the site of the former burial grounds and bleachfields, excavations during the demolition work of 1984 brought to light over four hundred skeletons underneath a taxi rank. I went there quite often at the time, said Austerlitz, partly because of my interest in architectural history and partly for other reasons which I could not explain even to myself, and I took photographs of the remains of the dead. I remember falling into conversation with one of the archaeologists, who told me that on average the skeletons of eight people had been found in every cubic metre of earth removed from the trench. In the course of the seventeenth and

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eighteenth centuries the city had grown above these strata of soil mingled with the dust and bones of decayed bodies into a warren of putrid streets and houses for the poorest Londoners, cobbled together out of beams, clods of clay, and any other building material that came to hand. Around 1860 and 1870, before work on the construction of the two north-east terminals began, these poverty-stricken quarters were forcibly cleared and vast quantities of soil, together with the bones buried in them, were dug up and removed, so that the railway lines, which on the engineers' plans looked like muscles and sinews in an anatomical atlas, could be brought to the outskirts of the City. Soon the site in front of Bishopsgate was nothing but a grey-brown morass, a no-man's-land where not a living soul stirred. The little river Wellbrook, the ditches and ponds, the crakes and snipe and herons, the elms and mulberry trees, Paul Pindar's deer park, the inmates of Bedlam and the starving paupers of Angel Alley, Peter Street, Sweet Apple Court and Swan Yard had all gone, and gone now too are the millions and millions of people who passed through Broadgate and Liverpool Street stations



day in, day out, for an entire century. As for me, said Austerlitz, I felt at this time as if the dead were returning from their exile and filling the twilight around me with their strangely slow but incessant to-ing and fro-ing. I remember, for instance, that one quiet Sunday morning I was sitting on a bench on the particularly gloomy platform where the boat trains from Harwich came in, watching a man who wore a snow-white turban with his shabby porter's uniform as he wielded a broom, sweeping up the rubbish scattered on the paving. In doing this job, which in its pointlessness reminded me of the eternal punishments that we are told, said Austerlitz, we must endure after death, the white-turbanned porter, oblivious of all around, performed the same movements over and over again using, instead of a proper dustpan, a cardboard box with one side removed, and nudging it along in front of him with his foot, first up the platform and then down again until he had returned to his point of departure, a low doorway in the builders' fence reaching up to the second storey of the interior façade of the station. He had emerged from this doorway half an hour ago and now disappeared through it again, with an odd jerk, as it seemed to

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me. To this day I cannot explain what made me follow him, said Austerlitz. We take almost all the decisive steps in our lives as a result of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely conscious. But in any case, that Sunday morning I suddenly found myself on the other side of the tall fence, facing the entrance to the Ladies' Waiting-Room, the existence of which, in this remote part of the station, had been quite unknown to me. The man in the turban was nowhere to be seen, and there was no one on the scaffolding either. I hesitated to approach the swing doors, but as soon as I had taken hold of the brass handle I stepped past a heavy curtain hung on the inside to keep out draughts, and entered the large room, which had obviously been disused for years. I felt, said Austerlitz, like an actor who, upon making his entrance, has completely and irrevocably forgotten not only the lines he knew by heart but the very part he has so often played. Minutes or even hours may have passed while I stood in that empty space beneath a ceiling which seemed to float at a vertiginous height, unable to move from the spot, with my face raised to the icy grey light, like moonshine, which came through the windows in a

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gallery beneath the vaulted roof, and hung above me like a tight-meshed net or a piece of thin, fraying fabric. Although this light, a profusion of dusty glitter, one might almost say, was very bright near the ceiling, as it sank lower it looked as if it were being absorbed by the walls and the deeper reaches of the room, as if it merely added to the gloom and were running down in black streaks, rather like rainwater running down the smooth trunks of beech trees or over the cast-concrete façade of a building. When the blanket of cloud above the city parted for a moment or two, occasional rays of light fell into the waiting-room, but they were generally extinguished again halfway down. Other beams of light followed curious trajectories which violated the laws of physics, departing from the rectilinear and twisting in spirals and eddies before being swallowed up by the wavering shadows. From time to time, and just for a split second, I saw huge halls open up, with rows of pillars and colonnades leading far into the distance, with vaults and brickwork arches bearing on them many-storeyed structures, with flights of stone steps, wooden stairways and ladders, all leading the eye on and on. I saw viaducts and footbridges

crossing deep chasms thronged with tiny figures who looked to me, said Austerlitz, like prisoners in search of some way of escape from their dungeon, and the longer I stared upwards with my head wrenched painfully back, the more I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding, going on for ever and ever in an improbably foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe. Once I thought that very far away I saw a dome of open-work masonry, with a parapet around it on which grew ferns, young willows and various other shrubs where herons had built their large, untidy nests, and I saw the birds spread their great wings and fly away through the blue air. I remember, said Austerlitz, that in the middle of this vision of imprisonment and liberation I could not stop wondering whether it was a ruin or a building in the process of construction that I had entered. Both ideas were right in a way at the time, since the new station was literally rising from the ruins of the old Liverpool Street; in any case, the crucial point was hardly this speculation in itself, which was really only a distraction, but the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the

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outlying regions of my mind: images, for instance, like the recollection of a late November afternoon in 1968 when I stood with Marie de Verneuil — whom I had met in Paris, and of whom I shall have more to say — when we stood in the nave of the wonderful church of Salle in Norfolk, which towers in isolation above the wide fields, and I could not bring out the words I should have spoken then. White mist had risen from the meadows outside, and we watched in silence as it crept slowly into the church porch, a rippling vapour rolling forward at ground level and gradually spreading over the entire stone floor, becoming denser and denser and rising visibly higher, until we ourselves emerged from it only above the waist and it seemed about to stifle us. Memories like this came back to me in the disused Ladies' Waiting-Room of Liverpool Street station, memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie, all interlocking like the labyrinthine vaults I saw in the dusty grey light, and which seemed to go on and on for ever. In fact I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting-room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears

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and wishes I had ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern of the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the endgame would be played, and it covered the entire plane of time. Perhaps that is why, in the gloomy light of the waiting-room, I also saw two middle-aged people dressed in the style of the thirties, a woman in a light gabardine coat with a hat at an angle on her head, and a thin man beside her wearing a dark suit and a dog-collar. And I not only saw the minister and his wife, said Austerlitz, I also saw the boy they had come to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee-length socks, did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don't think I would have known him, said Austerlitz. As it was, I recognized him by that rucksack of his, and for the first time in as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child, at the moment when I realized that it must have been to this same waiting-room I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago. As so often, said Austerlitz, I cannot give any precise description of the state of mind this realization induced; I felt something rending within me, and a

also for a forgotten part of Austerlitz's plan
 of the past and the future of their own selves

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sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it, just as I had no words all those years ago when the two strangers came over to me speaking a language I did not understand. All I do know is that when I saw the boy sitting on the bench I became aware, through my dull bemusement, of the destructive effect on me of my desolation through all those past years, and a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death. I can only guess what reasons may have induced the minister Elias and his wan wife to take me to live with them in the summer of 1939, said Austerlitz. Childless as they were, perhaps they hoped to reverse the petrification of their emotions, which must have been becoming more unbearable to them every day, by devoting themselves together to bringing up a boy then aged four and a half, or perhaps they thought they owed it to a higher authority to perform some good work beyond the level of ordinary charity, a work entailing personal devotion and sacrifice. Or perhaps they thought they ought to save my soul, innocent as it was of the Christian

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faith. I myself cannot say what my first few days in Bala with the Eliases really felt like. I do remember new clothes which made me very unhappy, and the inexplicable disappearance of my little green rucksack, and recently I have even thought that I could still apprehend the dying away of my native tongue, the faltering and fading sounds which I think lingered on in me at least for a while, like something shut up and scratching or knocking, something which, out of fear, stops its noise and falls silent whenever one tries to listen to it. And certainly the words I had forgotten in a short space of time, and all that went with them, would have remained buried in the depths of my mind had I not, through a series of coincidences, entered the old waiting-room in Liverpool Street station that Sunday morning, a few weeks at the most before it vanished for ever in the rebuilding. I have no idea how long I stood in the waiting-room, said Austerlitz, nor how I got out again and which way I walked back, through Bethnal Green or Stepney, reaching home at last as dark began to fall. Exhausted as I was, I lay down in my drenched clothes and fell into a deep, uneasy sleep from which, as I discovered afterwards by making the

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(10/11/1939)

Kurt - Austerlitz?

calculation several times, I did not wake until the middle of the night after the next day. In that sleep, when my body feigned death while feverish thoughts whirled through my head, I was at the innermost heart of a star-shaped fortress, a dungeon entirely cut off from the outside world, and I had to try finding my way into the open, passing down long, low passages which led me through all the buildings I had ever visited and described. It was a nightmarish, never-ending dream, with its main plot interrupted several times by other episodes. One of them gave me a bird's-eye view of a lightless landscape through which a very small railway train was hurrying, twelve earth-coloured miniature carriages and a coal-black locomotive under a plume of smoke wafting horizontally backwards, with the far end of the plume constantly blown this way and that, like the tip of a large ostrich feather, by the speed of the journey. In another episode, looking out of the window of my train compartment, I saw dark forests of firs, a deeply carved river valley, mountain ranges of cloud on the horizon, and windmills towering above the roofs of the houses clustered around them, with their broad sails cutting rhythmically

through the faint light of dawn. In the middle of these dreams, said Austerlitz, somewhere behind his eyes, he had felt these overwhelmingly immediate images forcing their way out of him, but once he had woken he could recall scarcely any of them even in outline. I realized then, he said, how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past. Inconceivable as it seems to me today, I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up, and nothing about the persecution I had escaped, or at least, what I did know was not much more than a salesgirl in a shop, for instance, knows about the plague or cholera. As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go no further than that, although in fact the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time. I did not read newspapers because, as I now know, I feared unwelcome revelations, I turned on the radio only

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at certain hours of the day, I was always refining my defensive reactions, creating a kind of quarantine or immune system which, as I maintained my existence in a smaller and smaller space, protected me from anything that could be connected in any way, however distant, with my own early history. Moreover, I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory. And if some dangerous piece of information came my way despite all my precautions, as it inevitably did, I was clearly capable of closing my eyes and ears to it, of simply forgetting it like any other unpleasantness. Yet this self-censorship of my mind, the constant suppression of the memories surfacing in me, Austerlitz continued, demanded ever greater efforts and finally, and unavoidably, led to the almost total paralysis of my linguistic faculties, the destruction of all my notes and sketches, my endless nocturnal peregrinations through London, and the hallucinations which plagued me with increasing frequency up to the point of my nervous breakdown in the summer of 1992. I cannot say exactly how I spent the rest of that year, said Austerlitz; all I know is

that next spring, when there was some improvement in my state of health, on one of my first ventures into the city I visited an antiquarian bookshop near the British Museum where I regularly went in search of architectural engravings. Absent-mindedly, I leafed through the various boxes and drawers, staring sometimes for minutes on end at a star-shaped vault or diamond frieze, a hermitage, a monopteros or a mausoleum, without knowing what I was looking at or why. The owner of the bookshop, Penelope Peacefull, a very beautiful woman whom I had admired for many years, was sitting where she always sat in the mornings, slightly to one side of her desk with its load of books and papers, solving the crossword puzzle on the back of the *Telegraph* with her left hand. She smiled at me from time to time and then looked out at the street again, deep in thought. It was quiet in the shop except for soft voices coming from the little radio which stood beside Penelope, as usual, and these voices, which at first I could hardly make out but which soon became almost too distinct, cast such a spell over me that I entirely forgot the engravings lying before me, and stood there as still as if on no account must I let a single

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syllable emerging from the rather scratchy radio set escape me. I was listening to two women talking to each other about the summer of 1939, when they were children and had been sent to England on a special transport. They mentioned a number of cities - Vienna, Munich, Danzig, Bratislava, Berlin - but only when one of the couple said that her own transport, after two days travelling through the German Reich and the Netherlands, where she could see the great sails of the windmills from the train, had finally left the Hook of Holland on the ferry *Prague* to cross the North Sea to Harwich, only then did I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of memory were part of my own life as well. I was too alarmed by this sudden revelation to be able to write down the addresses and phone numbers given at the end of the programme. I merely saw myself waiting on a quay in a long crocodile of children lined up two by two, most of them carrying rucksacks or small leather cases. I saw the great slabs of paving at my feet again, the mica in the stone, the grey-brown water in the harbour basin, the ropes and anchor chains slanting upwards, the bows of the ship, higher than a house, the seagulls fluttering over our heads and

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screeching wildly, the sun breaking through the clouds, and the red-haired girl in the tartan cape and velvet beret who had looked after the smaller children in our compartment during the train journey through the dark countryside. Years later, as I now recalled again, I still had recurrent dreams of this girl playing me a cheerful tune on a kind of bandoneon, in a place lit by a bluish nightlight. Are you all right? I heard a voice say suddenly, as if from very far away, and it took me some time to remember where I was and realize that Penelope might have felt concerned by my sudden seizure. I remember telling her that it was nothing, that my thoughts were elsewhere, in the Hook of Holland as a matter of fact, whereupon Penelope raised her face slightly with an understanding smile, as if she herself had often been obliged to wait in that cheerless harbour. One way to live cheaply and without tears? she then immediately asked, tapping the tip of her ballpoint pen on the crossword in her folded newspaper, but just as I was about to confess that I had never been able to solve even the simplest clues in these tortuous English puzzles she said, Oh, it's *rent free!* and scribbled the eight letters swiftly down in the last empty spaces

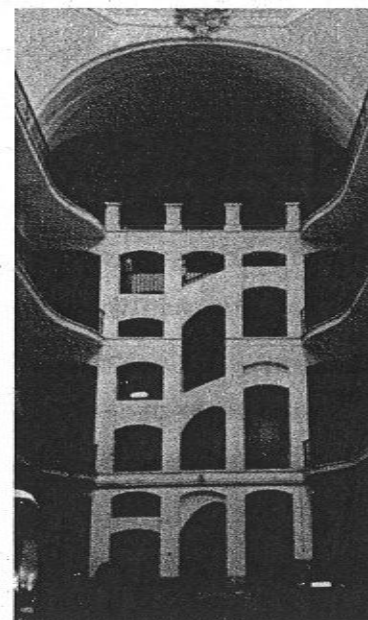
Penelope was smiling why?

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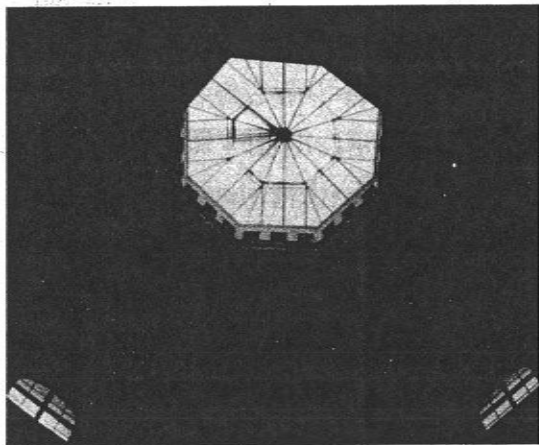
evan → forget it a letter
but a capital of the word passed over
by Joyce

on the grid. When we had parted I sat for an hour on a bench in Russell Square under the tall plane trees, which were still leafless. It was a sunny day. A number of starlings were marching up and down on the grass, pecking desultorily at the crocuses. I watched them, noticing how the green-gold hues in their dark plumage gleamed, depending which way they turned to catch the light, and came to the conclusion that although I did not know whether I had come to England on the *Prague* or on some other ferry, the mere mention of the city's name in the present context was enough to convince me that I would have to go there. I thought of the difficulties Hilary had encountered when, during my last months at Stower Grange, he began taking steps to have me naturalized, and how he had never been able to find out anything from any of the social-services offices in Wales, or the Foreign Office, or the Aid Committee under whose auspices the transports of refugee children had come to England and who had lost a number of files during their several moves and evacuations, carried out during the bombing of London in very difficult circumstances and almost entirely without trained staff. I got the addresses of authorities who

might be consulted in a case like mine from the embassy of the Czech Republic, and then, immediately after arriving at Ruzyňe airport on a day which was much too bright, almost over-exposed, a day, said Austerlitz, when people looked as ill and grey as if they were all chronic smokers not far from death, I took a taxi to the Karmelitská in the Lesser Quarter, where the state archives are housed in a very peculiar building going far back in time if not even, like so much in the city of Prague, standing outside time altogether. You go in through a narrow doorway let into the main



portal, and find yourself first in a dim barrel-vaulted entrance through which coaches and carriages used to drive into the inner courtyard. This courtyard measures some twenty by fifty metres, is roofed by a glazed dome, and on three storeys has galleries running round it, giving access to

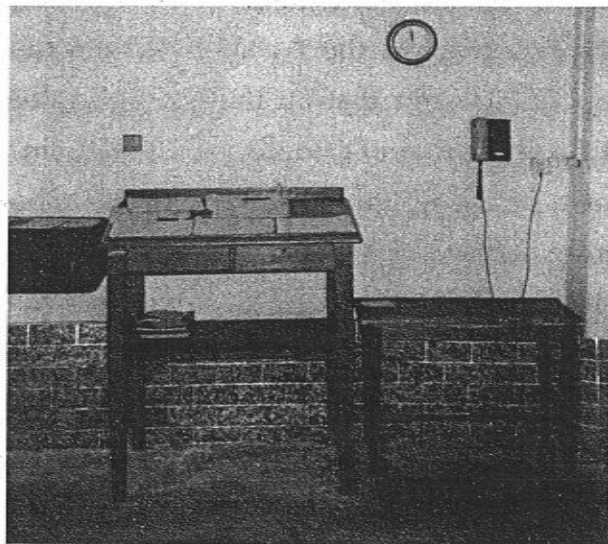


the rooms containing the archives, where the windows look out on the street. The entire building, from the outside more like a mansion house than anything else, therefore consists of four wings, each not much more than three metres deep, set around the courtyard in an almost Illusionist manner and without any corridors or passages in them. It is a style resembling the prison architecture of the bourgeois epoch, when it was

decided that the most useful design for the penal system was to build wings of cells around a rectangular or circular courtyard, with catwalks running along the interior. And it was not just of a prison that the archives building in the Karmelitská reminded me, said Austerlitz; it also suggested a monastery, a riding school, an opera house and a lunatic asylum, and all these ideas mingled in my mind as I looked at the twilight coming in from above, and thought that on the rows of galleries I saw a dense crowd of people, some of them waving hats or handkerchiefs, as passengers on board a steamer used to do when it put out to sea. At any rate, it was a little while before I managed to bring myself back to the present, and turned to the lodge near the entrance, from which the porter had been keeping an eye on me ever since I had crossed the threshold and, attracted by the light of the interior courtyard, had passed by him without noticing his presence. If you wanted to speak to this porter you had to lean a long way down to his window, which was so low that he appeared to be kneeling on the floor of his lodge. Although I had soon adopted the right position, said Austerlitz, I could not make myself understood, with the result that after

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launching into a long verbal torrent in which I could make out nothing but the words *anglický* and *Angličan*, repeated several times with special emphasis, the porter eventually phoned to request assistance from one of the archive's officials, who did indeed, at practically the next moment, while I was still filling in a visitor's form at the desk opposite the



lodge, materialize beside me as if she had, as they say, sprung out of the ground. Tereza Ambrosová – so she introduced herself to me, immediately asking in her slightly hesitant but otherwise very correct English what I wanted to know – Tereza Ambrosová was a pale woman of almost transparent appearance,

and about forty years old. As we went up to the third floor in the cramped lift, which scraped against one side of the shaft, in silence and with a sense of awkwardness because of the unnatural physical proximity into which one is forced in such a box, I saw a gentle pulsation in the curve of a blue vein beneath the skin of her right temple, almost as fast as the throbbing in a lizard's throat when it lies motionless on a rock in the sun. We reached Mrs Ambrosová's office by walking down one of the galleries encircling the courtyard. I hardly dared glance over the balustrade to the depths below where two or three cars were parked, looking curiously elongated from above, or at least much longer than they would appear in the street. The office which we entered straight from this gallery was full of stacks of papers tied up with string, not a few of them discoloured by sunlight and brittle at the edges, crammed into roll-front cupboards, deposited on shelves that sagged under their weight, piled high on a rickety little trolley which seemed to be specially intended for the transport of files, on an old-fashioned wing chair pushed against the wall, and on the two desks facing each other in the room. There were a good dozen houseplants among these

mountains of paper, in plain clay flowerpots or brightly coloured majolica jardinières: mimosas and myrtles, thick-leaved aloes, gardenias, and a large hoyá twining its way around a trelliswork frame. Mrs Ambrosová, who had very courteously pulled out a chair for me beside her desk, listened attentively with her head tilted slightly to one side as, for the first time in my life, I began explaining to someone else that because of certain circumstances my origins had been unknown to me, and for other reasons I had never inquired into them, but now felt compelled, because of a series of coincidental events, to conclude or at least to conjecture that I had left Prague at the age of four and a half, in the months just before the war broke out, on one of the so-called children's transports departing from the city at the time, and I had therefore come to consult the archives in the hope that people of my surname living here between 1934 and 1939, who could not have been very numerous, might be found in the registers, with details of their addresses. I fell into such a panic as I offered these explanations, which suddenly struck me as not just far too cursory but positively absurd, that I began to stammer and could hardly bring out a word. All at once I felt the

heat from the stout radiator, which was encrusted with several layers of lumpy oil paint and stood under the wide-open window; I heard nothing but the noise rising from the Karmelitská, the heavy rumble of the trams, the wailing sirens of police cars and ambulances somewhere in the distance, and I calmed down only when Tereza Ambrosová, whose deep-set violet eyes had been gazing at me with some concern, gave me a glass of water. As I took a few sips from this glass, which I had to hold in both hands, she said that the registers of those living in Prague at the time in question had been preserved complete, that Austerlitz was indeed one of the more unusual surnames, so she thought there could be no particular difficulty in finding me the entries I wanted by tomorrow afternoon. She would see to it personally, she told me. I cannot remember, said Austerlitz, with what words I said goodbye to Mrs Ambrosová, how I got out of the archives building or where I went after that; all I know is that I took a room in a small hotel on Kampa Island not far from the Karmelitská and sat there by the window until darkness fell, looking out at the heavy, leaden grey waters of the Vltava, and over the river to the city, which I now feared was entirely alien to me, a place

with which I had no connection at all. These thoughts went through my head with grinding slowness, each more confused and harder to grasp than the one that went before. I spent the whole night either lying awake or tormented by fearful dreams in which I had to climb up and down flights of steps ringing hundreds of doorbells in vain, until, in the outermost suburbs, I came upon a darkly looming building, from the dungeon-like basement of which there emerged a caretaker called Bartoloměj Smečka, a veteran, it seemed, of long-lost campaigns, clad in a crumpled redingote and a flowered fancy waistcoat with a gold watch-chain draped over it, who having studied the note I handed him shrugged his shoulders, saying that unfortunately the tribe of the Aztecs had died out years ago, and that at best an ancient perroquet which still remembered a few words of their language might survive here and there. Next day, Austerlitz continued, I went back to the state archives building in the Karmelitská, where, in order to compose myself a little, I first took some photographs of the great inner court and the stairway leading up to the galleries, which in its asymmetrical construction reminded me of the follies built by so many English noblemen in their

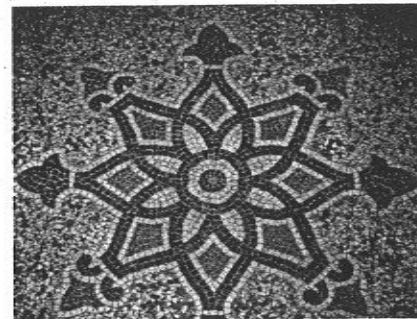
parks and gardens. In the end I went up this stairway, pausing on each landing for a while to look through one of the irregular openings in the wall and down at the empty yard, which I saw traversed only once by one of the archive's grey-coated porters, whose right leg flexed slightly inward as he walked. When I entered Tereza Ambrosová's office she was just watering her geranium cuttings, which stood in an assortment of flowerpots on the sill between the inner and outer windows. They do better in this overheated atmosphere than in the cold springtime air at home, said Mrs Ambrosová. We haven't been able to regulate the steam heating for a long time, so it's often like a hothouse in here, particularly at this time of year. That may be why you felt unwell yesterday, she said, adding, I've already made a note of the addresses of all those named Austerlitz in the register. As I suspected, they didn't come to more than half a dozen. Mrs Ambrosová put her green watering-can down and gave me a sheet of paper from her desk. Austerlitz Leopold, Austerlitz Viktor, Austerlitz Tomáš, Austerlitz Jeroným, Austerlitz Edward and Austerlitz František were listed one beneath another, and at the end there was an Austerlitzová Agáta, evidently a single woman.

Bloom

The names were followed by the professions of their bearers – dealer in textiles *en gros*, rabbi, bandages manufacturer, principal clerk, silversmith, printing works proprietor, and finally opera singer – together with the number of the city district and the street: VII U vozovky, II Betlemská, and so on. Mrs Ambrosová suggested that before crossing the river I might begin my inquiries in the Lesser Quarter, which wasn't ten minutes' walk away from here, she said. I could try the Šporkova, a small street a few paces uphill from the Schönborn Palace, where the register of inhabitants for 1938 said that Agáta Austerlitzová had been living at Number Twelve in that year. And so, said Austerlitz, no sooner had I arrived in Prague than I found myself back among the scenes of my early childhood, every trace of which had been expunged from my memory for as long as I could recollect. As I walked through the labyrinth of alleyways, thoroughfares and courtyards between the Vlašská and Nerudova, and still more so when I felt the uneven paving of the Šporkova underfoot as step by step I climbed uphill, it was as if I had already been this way before and memories were revealing themselves to me not by means of any mental effort but through my senses, so long numbed and now

coming back to life. It was true that I could recognize nothing for certain, yet I had to keep stopping now and then because my glance was caught by a finely wrought window grating, the iron handle of a bell-pull, or the branches of an almond tree growing over a garden wall. Once I stood for a considerable time outside the vaulted entrance to a building, said Austerlitz, looking up at a half-relief set in the smooth plaster above the keystone of the arch. The cast was no more than a square foot in size, and showed, set against a spangled sea-green background, a blue dog carrying a small branch in its mouth, which I could tell, by the prickling of my scalp, it had brought back out of my past. Then there was the cool air as I entered the front hall of Number Twelve Šporkova, the metal box for the electrics built into the wall beside the entrance with its lightning symbol, the octofoil mosaic flower in shades of

Spatial
inclusion
prague
indonesia
space



dove grey and snow white set in the flecked artificial-stone floor of the hall, the smell of damp limewash, the gently rising flight of stairs, with



hazelnut-shaped iron knobs placed at intervals in the handrail of the banisters – all of them signs and characters from the type-case of forgotten things, I

thought, and was overcome by such a state of blissful yet anxious confusion that more than once I had to sit down on the steps in the quiet stairwell and lean my head against the wall. It may have been as much as an hour before I finally rang the bell of the right-hand flat on the top floor, and then half an eternity seemed to pass before I heard movement inside, the door was opened, and I found myself facing Věra Ryšanová, who – as she was soon to tell me – had been my mother Agáta's neighbour and my nurserymaid in the thirties when she, Věra, had been studying Romance languages at Prague University. I think that the reason why I did not immediately recognize her, said Austerlitz, although despite her fragility she seemed quite unchanged, was my agitated condition, in which I could hardly believe my eyes. So I merely stammered out the sentence I had laboriously learnt by heart the day before: *Promiňte, prosím, že Vás obtěžuji. Hledám paní Agátu Austerlitzovou, která zde možná v roce devatenáct set třicet osm bydlela.* I am looking for a Mrs Agáta Austerlitzová who may have been living here in 1938. With a gesture of alarm, Věra covered her face with both hands, hands which, it flashed through my mind, were endlessly familiar to me, stared at

Bobby
Mey

me over her spread fingertips, and very quietly but with what to me was a quite singular clarity spoke these words in French: *Jacquot*, she said, *dis, est-ce que c'est vraiment toi?* We embraced, we held each other's hands, we embraced again, I don't know how often, before Věra led me through the dark hall into a room where everything was just as it had been almost sixty years ago. The furniture she had inherited in May 1933 together with her great-aunt's flat, the display cabinet with a masked Meissen china Pulcinello on the left and his beloved Columbine on the right, the glass-fronted bookcase with the fifty-five small volumes of the *Comédie humaine* bound in carmine red, the writing desk, the long ottoman, the camel-hair rug lying folded at one end of it, the blue-tinged aquatint of the Bohemian mountains – throughout my entire life, which was now unravelling headlong before me, all this had stayed in the same place because as Věra told me, said Austerlitz, once she had lost me and my mother, who was almost a sister to her, she could not bear to alter anything. I don't remember in what order Věra and I told each other our stories that late March afternoon and evening, said Austerlitz, but I think that after I had given her a brief

account of myself, leaving out all that had weighed on me so heavily over the years, we spoke first about my lost parents, Agáta and Maximilian. Maximilian Aychenwald, who had come to Prague from St Petersburg where his father traded in spices until the year of the revolution, soon established himself as one of the most prominent officials of the Czech Social Democratic Party, said Věra. He had met my mother, fifteen years younger than he was and then appearing in various provincial towns as she embarked on her stage career, in Nikolsburg on one of the many journeys he made to speak at public gatherings and shop-floor meetings. In May 1933, when I had only just settled in here, said Věra, they came back from a visit to Paris which, as they never tired of repeating, had been full of the most wonderful events and encounters, and perhaps that was why they decided, directly upon their return, to move into a flat in this house together, though they always remained unmarried. Agáta and Maximilian, said Věra, both had a special fondness for all things French. Maximilian was a life-long republican, and had dreamt of making Czechoslovakia an island of freedom in the midst of the tide of Fascism then inexorably spreading

a large
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parallel

throughout Europe, a kind of second Switzerland, while Agáta's rather more colourful notion of the ideal world was inspired by the works of Jacques Offenbach, whom she admired enormously, which incidentally, said Věra, was the reason for my first name, not a usual one among Czechs. It was through an interest in every aspect of French civilization, she added, something which as an enthusiastic student of Romance culture I shared with both Agáta and Maximilian, that a friendship began to develop between us immediately after our first conversation on the day when they moved in, a friendship which led as if quite naturally, so Věra told me, said Austerlitz, to her offering, since unlike Agáta and Maximilian she had her time largely at her own disposal, to assume the duties of nanny for the few years until I started nursery school. It was an offer she had never once regretted later, said Věra, for even before I could talk it had always seemed to her as if no one understood her better than this small boy who, by the age of not quite three, entertained her in the most delightful way with his conversational gifts. By agreement with Agáta, when we walked over the meadow slopes of the Seminar Garden among the pear and cherry trees,

or on hot days through the shadier grounds of the park of Schönborn Palace, we spoke French, and only when we came home late in the afternoon and Věra was making our supper did we revert to Czech, for the discussion of more domestic and childish matters, as it were. In the middle of her account Věra herself, quite involuntarily, had changed from one language to the other, and I, who had not for a moment thought that Czech could mean anything to me, not at the airport or in the state archives, or even while learning by heart the question which would have been of scant use to me addressed to the wrong quarters, now understood almost everything Věra said, like a deaf man whose hearing has been miraculously restored, so that all I wanted to do was close my eyes and listen for ever to her polysyllabic flood of words. In the warm season of the year in particular, said Věra, she had always had to move the geraniums on the sill aside as soon as we came back from our daily walk, so that I could take my favourite place on the window-seat and look down on the garden with its lilac trees and the low building opposite where the hunchbacked tailor Moravec had his workshop, and while she, so Věra said, cut bread and boiled the

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marches

kettle, I used to give her a running commentary on whatever Moravec happened to be doing: mending the worn hem of a jacket, rummaging in his button box, or sewing a quilted lining into an overcoat. But I was particularly anxious, Věra told me, said Austerlitz, not to miss the moment when Moravec put down his needle and thread, his big scissors and the other tools of his trade, cleared the baize-covered table, spread a double sheet of newspaper on it, and laid out on this sheet blackened with print the supper he must have been looking forward to for some time, a supper which varied according to the season and might be curd cheese with chives, a long radish, a few tomatoes with onions, a smoked herring or boiled potatoes. He's putting the sleeve dummy in the wardrobe, he's going out into the kitchen, now he's bringing in his beer, now he's sharpening his knife, he's cutting a slice of sausage, taking a long drink from his glass, wiping the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand – it was in this or some similar fashion, always the same yet always slightly different, that I used to describe the tailor's supper to her almost every evening, said Věra, and I often had to be reminded not to forget my own bread-and-butter soldiers. As she told me

about my curious love of such observations, Věra had risen and opened both the inner and the outer windows to let me look down into the garden next door, where the lilac happened to be in flower, its blossoms so thick and white that in the gathering dusk it looked as if there had been a snow-storm in the middle of spring. And the sweet fragrance wafting up from the walled garden, the waxing moon already in the sky above the rooftops, the sound of church bells ringing down in the city, and the yellow façade of the tailor's house with its green balcony where Moravec, who as Věra told me had died long ago, frequently used to be seen in his time, swinging his heavy iron filled with red-hot coals through the air, these and other images, said Austerlitz, ranged themselves side by side, so that deeply buried and locked away within me as they had been, they now came luminously back to my mind as I looked out of the window. It was the same when Věra, without a word, opened the door to the room where the little couch on which I always slept when my parents were away still stood in its place, at the foot of the four-poster bed with its barley-sugar uprights and pillows piled high which, together with the rest of the furniture, she

had inherited from her great-aunt. The crescent moon shone into the dark room, and there was a white blouse hanging from the catch of the half-open window just as it had always hung there in the past, I now remembered, said Austerlitz. I saw Věra as she had been then, sitting beside me on the divan telling me stories from the Riesengebirge and the Bohemian Forest, I saw her uncommonly beautiful eyes misting over in the twilight, so to speak, when after reaching the end of the story she took off her glasses and bent down to me. Later, I now remembered, while she sat in the next room over her books, I liked to lie awake for a while, safe as I knew myself to be in the care of my solicitous guardian and the pale glow of the circle of light where she sat reading. With only the slightest effort of will I could conjure it all up; the hunchbacked tailor, who would now be in his own bedchamber, the moon travelling round the building, the patterns of the carpet and wallpaper, even the course traced by the hairline cracks in the tiles of the tall stove. But when I got tired of this game and wanted to go to sleep I had only to wait to hear Věra lift the next leaf of her book in the other room, and I can still feel, said Austerlitz, or perhaps it is only now

that I feel again, the sense of my consciousness dissolving among the poppies and leafy tendrils etched into the opaque glass of the door before I caught the slight rustle of the page turning. On our walks, Věra continued when we were sitting in the living-room again, and she had given me a cup of peppermint tea with her two now unsteady hands, on our walks we hardly ever went further than the Seminar Garden, the Khotek Gardens and the other green spaces in the Lesser Quarter. Only occasionally, in summer, did we make rather longer expeditions with my little pushchair, which as I might perhaps remember had a small coloured whirligig fastened to it, going as far as Sofia Island, the swimming school on the banks of the Vltava, or the observation platform on Petřín Hill, from which we may have spent an hour or more looking at the city spread out below us with its many towers, all of which I had known by heart, as well as the names of the seven bridges spanning the glittering river. Since I have been unable to go out of doors, so that I now see almost nothing new, said Věra, the pictures we enjoyed so much at the time come back to me with increasing clarity, like pure fantasies. I often feel, said Věra, as if I were gazing at a diorama

as I once did when I was a child in Reichenberg, seeing the figures inside a case filled with some strangely translucent aura poised motionless in mid-movement, owing their lifelike appearance, oddly enough, to their extremely diminutive size. In later life I never set eyes on anything more magical than the yellow Syrian desert in the Reichenberg diorama, the peaks of the Zillertal Alps rising white and radiant above the dark pine forests, and that moment frozen in time when the young poet Goethe, wearing a short, light-brown coat fluttering in the wind, is about to climb into a post chaise to which his travelling bags are already strapped. These days, Věra continued, the pictures of our excursions together from the Šporkova through the Lesser Quarter tend to go hand in hand with such reminiscences of my own childhood. When memories come back to you, you sometimes feel as if you were looking at the past through a glass mountain, and now, as I tell you this, if I close my eyes I see the two of us as it were disembodied, or, more precisely, reduced to the unnaturally enlarged pupils of our eyes, looking down from the observation platform on the Petřín Hill at the green slopes below, with the funicular railway making its way

upwards like a fat caterpillar, while further out, on the other side of the city, the railway train you always waited so eagerly to see is making its way past the row of houses at the foot of the Vyšehrad and slowly crossing the bridge over the river, trailing a white cloud of vapour. When the weather was bad, said Věra, we often visited my aunt Otýlie in the glove shop on the Šeriková which she had been running since before the Great War and in which, as in some consecrated shrine or temple, a muted atmosphere banishing all profane ideas reigned. Aunt Otýlie was a spinster lady of alarmingly fragile appearance. She always wore an outer garment of pleated black silk with a detachable white lace collar, and moved about in a little cloud of lily-of-the-valley perfume. If she was not busy serving one of the women she described as her honoured lady clients, she was constantly occupied in maintaining order among her stock of hundreds, if not thousands, of different pairs of gloves of all kinds, ranging from cotton for everyday wear to the most elegant velvet or kid creations from Paris and Milan, arranged in a hierarchy of her own devising which she had preserved for decades through all the vicissitudes of time, and which only she really

understood. But when we went to see her, said Věra, she gave you her entire attention, showed you this and that, let you look at the shallow drawers which glided out with extraordinary ease, and allowed you not just to pick up glove after glove but even to try them on, explaining the niceties of every model to you patiently, just as if she saw you as heir presumptive to her business. And I remember, Věra told me, said Austerlitz, that it was Aunt Otýlie who taught you to count at the age of three and a half, using a row of small, shiny black malachite buttons sewn to an elbow-length velvet glove which you particularly liked – *jedna, dva, tři*, counted Věra, and I, said Austerlitz, went on counting – *čtyři, pět, šest, sedm* – feeling like someone taking uncertain steps out on to the ice. Deeply moved as I was on my first visit to the Šporkova, I do not remember all Věra's stories in precise detail today, said Austerlitz, but I think that by some turn or other in our conversation we went on from Aunt Otýlie's glove shop to the Estates Theatre, where Agáta made her *début* in Prague in the autumn of 1938 in the role of Olympia, a part she had dreamed of since the beginning of her career. In mid-October, said Věra, on the evening before the

first night, we went to the dress rehearsal of the operetta together, and as soon as we entered the theatre by the stage door, she said, I fell into a reverent silence, although I had been chattering nineteen to the dozen on our way through the city. I had also been unusually quiet and lost in thought during the performance of the somewhat haphazard arrangement of scenes, and on our way home by tram as well. It was because of this more or less casual remark of Věra's, said Austerlitz, that I went to see the Estates Theatre next morning, and sat alone for a long time in the stalls directly under the top of the dome, having obtained permission from the porter, in exchange for a not inconsiderable tip, to take some photographs in the recently refurbished auditorium. Around me the tiers of seats with their gilded adornments shining through the dim light rose to the roof; before me the proscenium arch of the stage on which Agáta had once stood was like a blind eye. And the harder I tried to conjure up at least some faint recollection of her appearance, the more the theatre seemed to be shrinking, as if I myself had shrunk to the stature of a little Tom Thumb enclosed in a sort of velvet-lined casket. Only after a while, when someone or

other walked quickly over the stage behind the drawn curtain, sending a ripple through the heavy folds of fabric with his rapid pace, only then, said Austerlitz, did the shadows begin to move, and I saw the conductor of the orchestra down in the pit like a beetle in his black tail-coat, and other black-clad figures busy with all kinds of instruments, I heard their music mingling with the voices, and all of a sudden I thought that in between one of the musicians' heads and the neck of a double bass, in the bright strip of light between the wooden floorboards and the hem of the curtain, I caught sight of a sky-blue shoe embroidered with silver sequins. On the evening of that day, when I visited Věra for the second time in her flat in the Šporkova and she confirmed, in answer to my question, that Agáta had indeed worn sequined sky-blue shoes with her costume as Olympia, I felt as if something were shattering inside my brain. Věra said that I had been deeply affected by the dress rehearsal in the Estates Theatre, first and foremost, she suspected, because I was afraid Agáta had genuinely changed into someone who, though she might now be a magical figure, was also a complete stranger to me, and I myself, Austerlitz continued, suddenly remem-

bered that I had been filled by a grief previously unknown to me when, long past my usual bedtime, I lay with my eyes wide open in the dark on the divan in Věra's room, listening to the church clocks strike the quarter-hours and waiting for Agáta to come home, waiting to hear the car bringing her back from that other world stop outside the gate, waiting for her to come into the room at last and sit down beside me, enveloped by a strange theatrical odour in which dust and drifts of perfume mingled. I see her wearing an ashen-grey silk bodice laced up in front, but I cannot make out her face, only an iridescent veil of pale, cloudy milkiness wafting close to her skin, and then, said Austerlitz, I see the scarf slip from her right shoulder as she lays her hand on my forehead. On my third day in Prague, so Austerlitz continued his story, when he had recovered some degree of composure, I went up to the Seminar Garden early in the morning. The cherry and pear trees of Věra's story had now been grubbed up and replaced by young saplings, with thin branches which would not bear fruit for some time yet to come. The path wound uphill, describing wide curves through the grass, which was wet with dew. Halfway up I met an old lady with an

overfed, reddish-brown dachshund which was not very good on its legs and stopped now and then, staring with its brow furrowed at the ground ahead of it. The sight of it reminded me that on my walks with Věra I often used to see old ladies of this kind with bad-tempered little dogs, almost always wearing wire muzzles, which may have been the reason for their mute ill-will. Then I sat on a bench in the sun until nearly midday, looking out over the buildings of the Lesser Quarter and the River Vltava at the panorama of the city, which seemed to be veined with the curving cracks and rifts of past time, like the varnish on a painting. A little later, said Austerlitz, I discovered another such pattern created by no discernible law in the



entwined roots of a chestnut tree clinging to a steep slope, through which Věra had told me, said Austerlitz, I liked to climb as a child. And the dark-green yews growing under the taller trees were familiar to me too, as familiar as the cool air which enveloped me at the bottom of the ravine and the countless windflowers covering the woodland floor, faded now in April, and I understood why, on one of my visits to a Gloucestershire country house with Hilary years ago, my voice failed me when, in the park which was laid out very much like the Schönborn gardens, we unexpectedly came upon a north-facing slope covered by the finely cut leaves and snow-white blooms of the March-flowering *Anemone nemorosa*.



— It was with the botanical name of these shade-loving anemones that Austerlitz concluded another section of his story on that evening in the late winter of 1997, when we sat in the Alderney Street house amidst what seemed to me a silence of unfathomable profundity. Quarter or half an hour may have gone by in the light of the blue, evenly flickering flames of the little gas fire, before Austerlitz rose and said it would probably be best if I spent the night under his roof. So saying, he went upstairs ahead of me, and led me into a room which, like those on the ground floor, was quite unfurnished except for a kind of camp bed standing unfolded against one wall, with handles at both ends so that it resembled a stretcher. Beside the bed there was a wine crate with a blackened coat of arms burnt into it which had once contained Château Gruaud-Larose, and on the crate, in the gentle light of a shaded lamp, stood a glass, a carafe of water, and an old-fashioned radio in a dark-brown Bakelite case. Austerlitz wished me good night and latched the door carefully behind him. I went over to the window, looked down at the empty street below, turned back to the room, sat down on the bed, undid my shoelaces, thought about Austerlitz, whom I could now hear moving about the room

next door, and then, when I looked up again, saw in the faint light a small collection of seven variously shaped Bakelite jars on the mantelpiece. None of these containers was more than two or three inches high, and when I opened them one by one and held them in the light of the lamp, each proved to contain the mortal remains of one of the moths which — as Austerlitz had told me — had met its end here in this house. I tipped one of them, a weightless, ivory-coloured creature with folded wings that might have been woven of some immaterial fabric, out of its Bakelite box on to the palm of my right hand. Its legs, which it had drawn up under its silver-scaled body as if just clearing some final obstacle, were so delicate that I could scarcely make them out, while the antennae curving high above the whole body also trembled on the edge of visibility. However, the staring black eye projecting somewhat from the head was distinct enough. Spellbound by this nocturnal apparition, which although it might have died years ago bore no sign of decay, I studied it intently before replacing it in its narrow tomb. As I lay down I turned on the radio set standing on the wine crate beside the bed. The names of cities and radio stations with which I used to link the most exotic ideas in my

childhood appeared on its round, illuminated dial — Monte Ceneri, Rome, Ljubljana, Stockholm, Bero-münster, Hilversum, Prague, and others besides. I turned the volume down very low and listened to a language I did not understand drifting in the air from a great distance: a female voice, which was sometimes lost in the ether, but then emerged again and mingled with the performance of two careful hands moving, in some place unknown to me, over the keyboard of a Bösendorfer or Pleyel and playing certain musical passages, I think from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which accompanied me far into the realms of slumber. When I woke in the morning only a faint crackle and hiss was coming from the narrow brass mesh over the loudspeaker. Soon afterwards, when I mentioned the mysterious radio at breakfast, Austerlitz told me he had always imagined that the voices moving through the air after the onset of darkness, only a few of which we could catch, had a life of their own, like bats, and shunned the light of day. In the long, sleepless nights of recent years, he said, when I was listening to the women announcers in Budapest, Helsinki or La Coruña, I often saw them weaving their erratic way far out in the air, and wished I were already in their company.

But to come back to my story . . . It was when I had returned from the Schönborn Garden, as we were sitting in Věra's flat again, that she first told me about my parents at greater length: their origins so far as she knew of them, the course of their lives, and the annihilation, within the space of only a few years, of their entire existence. Despite her dark and rather melancholy appearance, so I think Věra began, said Austerlitz, your mother Agáta was a very genial, on occasion even light-hearted woman. In this she was just like her father, old Austerlitz, who owned a fez and slipper-making factory in Sternberg which he had founded while the country was still under Austrian rule, and who had the ability of simply ignoring any unpleasantness. Once, when he was visiting this house, I heard him speak of the considerable boom in his business since Mussolini's men had taken to wearing that semi-Oriental item of headgear the fez, saying that he could hardly manufacture and export enough of them to Italy. At the time, Agáta herself, secure as she felt in the recognition she had won much faster than she dared to hope in her career as an opera and operetta singer, thought that everything would turn out all right in the end, whereas Maximilian, in spite of the cheerful

disposition which he shared with Agáta, had been convinced ever since I knew him, said Věra, so Austerlitz told me, that the parvenus who had come to power in Germany and the corporate bodies and other human swarms endlessly proliferating under the new regime, a spectacle which inspired him, as he often said, with a sense of positive horror, had abandoned themselves from the first to a blind lust for conquest and destruction, taking its cue from the magic word thousand which the Reichskanzler, as we could all hear on the wireless, repeated constantly in his speeches. A thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand, thirty-seven thousand, two hundred and forty thousand, a thousand times a thousand, thousands upon thousands: such was the refrain he barked out in his hoarse voice, drumming into the Germans the notion that the promise of their own greatness was about to be fulfilled. None the less, said Věra, Austerlitz continued, Maximilian did not in any way believe that the German people had been driven into their misfortune; rather, in his view, they had entirely re-created themselves in this perverse form, engendered by every individual's wishful thinking and bound up with false family sentiment, and had then brought forth, as symbolic

exponents of their innermost desires, so to speak, the Nazi grandees, whom Maximilian regarded without exception as muddle-headed and indolent. From time to time, so Věra recollected, said Austerlitz, Maximilian would tell the tale of how once, after a trade-union meeting in Teplitz in the early summer of 1933, he had gone a little way up into the Erzgebirge, where he came upon some day-trippers in a beer garden who had been buying all manner of things in a village on the German side of the border, including a new kind of boiled sweet which had, embedded in its sugary mass, a raspberry-coloured swastika that literally melted in the mouth. At the sight of these Nazi treats, Maximilian had said, he suddenly realized that the Germans had wholly reorganized their production lines, from heavy industry down to the manufacturing of items such as these vulgar sweets, not because they had been ordered to do so but each of his own accord, out of enthusiasm for the national resurgence. Věra went on, said Austerlitz, to tell me that Maximilian visited Austria and Germany several times in the 1930s, to gain a more accurate idea of general developments, and that she remembered precisely how, immediately after returning from

Nuremberg, he had described the Führer's prodigious reception at the Party rally. Hours before his arrival, the entire population of Nuremberg and indeed people from much further afield, crowds flocking in not just from Franconia and Bavaria but from the most remote parts of the country, Holstein and Pomerania, Silesia and the Black Forest, stood shoulder to shoulder all agog with excitement along the predetermined route, until at last, heralded by roars of acclamation, the motorcade of heavy Mercedes limousines came gliding at walking pace down the narrow alley which parted the sea of radiant uplifted faces and the arms outstretched in yearning. Maximilian had told her, said Věra, that in the middle of this crowd, which had merged into a single living organism racked by strange, convulsive contractions, he had felt like a foreign body about to be crushed and then excreted. From where he stood in the square outside the Lorenzkirche, he said, he saw the motorcade making its slow way through the swaying masses down to the Old Town, where the houses with their pointed and crooked gables, their occupants hanging out of the windows like bunches of grapes, resembled a hopelessly overcrowded ghetto into which, so Maximilian had

said, the long-awaited saviour was now making his entry. It was in just the same vein, said Věra, that Maximilian later repeatedly described the spectacular film of the Party rally which he had seen in a Munich cinema, and which confirmed his suspicions that, out of the humiliation from which the Germans had never recovered, they were now developing an image of themselves as a people chosen to evangelize the world. Not only did the overawed spectators witness the Führer's aeroplane descending slowly to earth through towering mountain ranges of cloud; not only was the tragic history they all shared invoked in the ceremony honouring the war dead during which, as Maximilian described it to us, Hitler and Höss and Himmler strode down the broad avenue lined, in straight serried ranks, with columns and companies created by the power of the new state out of a host of immovable German bodies, to the accompaniment of a funeral march which stirred the innermost soul of the entire nation; not only might one see warriors pledging themselves to die for the Fatherland, and the huge forests of flags mysteriously swaying as they moved away by torchlight into the dark — no, said Věra, Maximilian told us that a bird's-eye view showed a city of white tents

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extending to the horizon, from which as day broke the Germans emerged singly, in couples or in small groups, forming a silent procession and pressing ever closer together as they all went in the same direction, following, so it seemed, some higher bidding, on their way to the Promised Land at last after long years in the wilderness. It was only a few months after this experience of Maximilian's in the Munich cinema that the Austrians were to be heard over the wireless, hundreds of thousands of them pouring into the Heldenplatz in Vienna, their shouts breaking over us like a flood tide for hours on end, said Věra. In Maximilian's opinion, she told me, this collective paroxysm on the part of the Viennese crowds marked the watershed. It was still a sinister echo in our ears when, with summer hardly over, the first refugees arrived here in Prague, expelled from the now so-called Ostmark region after being robbed by their former fellow citizens of everything but a few schillings. In what they probably knew was the false hope of keeping their heads above water in a foreign country, they went from door to door as itinerant pedlars, offering for sale hairpins and slides, pencils and writing paper, ties and other items of haberdashery, just as their ancestors had

once walked the countryside of Galicia, Hungary and the Tyrol with packs on their backs. I remember, said Věra, Austerlitz added, one such hawker, a man called Saly Bleyberg, who had built up his own garage-business in the Leopoldstadt district of Vienna not far from the Praterstern during the difficult inter-war years, and who when Agáta invited him in for a cup of coffee told us the most appalling tales of the despicable conduct of the Viennese: the methods used to force him to make over his business to a certain Herr Haselberger, the manner in which he was then cheated of the sale price, which was ridiculously low anyway, how he was robbed of his bank deposits and securities, how all his furniture and his Steyr car were appropriated, and how at last he, Saly Bleyberg and his family, sitting on their suitcases in the hall of the building where they lived, had been obliged to hear the drunken caretaker negotiating with the young couple, obviously just married, who had come to look at the now vacant flat. Although the story we heard from poor Bleyberg, who kept crumpling the handkerchief in his hand with helpless rage, was far worse than anything we had imagined, and although after the Munich Agreement the situation held out no hope at all, said

Věra, Maximilian stayed in Prague throughout the winter, whether because of his work for the Party, which was now a matter of particular urgency, or because he refused, for as long as was humanly possible, to give up his belief that the law would protect a man. For her part, Agáta was not prepared to go to France ahead of Maximilian, although he had repeatedly advised her to leave, and so it was that your father, Věra told me, said Austerlitz, then in the utmost danger, did not leave until it was almost too late, on the afternoon of the fourteenth of March, by plane from Ruzyně to Paris. I still remember, said Věra, that when he said goodbye he was wearing a wonderful plum-coloured double-breasted suit, and a black felt hat with a green band and a broad brim. Next morning, at first light, the Germans did indeed march into Prague in the middle of a heavy snow-storm which seemed to make them appear out of nowhere. When they crossed the bridge and their armoured cars were rolling up the Národní a profound silence fell over the whole city. People turned away, and from that moment they walked more slowly, like somnambulists, as if they no longer knew where they were going. What particularly upset us, so Věra remarked, said Austerlitz, was the instant

change to driving on the right. It often made my heart miss a beat, she said, when I saw a car racing down the road on the wrong side, since it inevitably made me think that from now on we must live in a world turned upside down. Of course, Věra continued, it was much harder for Agáta than for me to manage under the new regime. Since the Germans had issued their decrees on the Jewish population, she could go shopping only at certain times; she must not take a taxi, she could sit only in the last carriage of the tram, she could not visit a coffee-house or cinema, or attend a concert or any other event. Nor could she herself appear on stage any more, and access to the banks of the Vltava and the parks and gardens she had loved so much was barred to her. All my green places are lost to me, she once said, adding that only now did she truly understand how wonderful it is to stand by the rail of a river steamer without a care in the world. The ever-extended list of bans — before long it was forbidden for Jews to walk on the pavement on the side of the road next to the park, to go into a laundry or dry cleaner's, or to make a call from a public telephone — all of this, I still hear Věra telling me, said Austerlitz, soon brought Agáta to the brink of despair. I can see her now pacing up and

down this room, said Věra, I can see her striking her forehead with the flat of her hand, and crying out, chanting the syllables one by one: I do not un der stand it! I do not un der stand it! I shall ne ver un der stand it!! None the less, she went into the city as often as she could, applying to I don't know how many or what authorities, she stood for hours in the sole post office which the forty thousand Jews in Prague were allowed to use, waiting to send a telegram; she made inquiries, pulled strings, left financial deposits, produced affidavits and guarantees, and when she came home she would sit up racking her brains until late into the night. But the more trouble she took, and the longer she went on trying, the further did any hope of her getting an emigration permit recede, so in the summer, when there was already talk of the forthcoming war and the likelihood of even harsher restrictions when it broke out, she finally decided, Věra told me, said Austerlitz, that she would send me at least to England, having succeeded through the good offices of one of her theatrical friends in getting my name put down for one of the few children's transports leaving Prague for London during those months. Věra remembered, said Austerlitz, that the happy excitement

Agáta felt at this first successful outcome of her efforts was overshadowed by her grief and anxiety as she imagined how I would feel, a boy not yet five years old who had always led a sheltered life, on my long railway journey and then among strangers in a foreign country. On the other hand, said Věra, Agáta hoped that now the first step had been taken, some way for her to leave too would surely be found quite quickly, and then you could all be together in Paris. So she was torn between wishful thinking and her fear that she was doing something irresponsible and unforgivable, and who knows, Věra said to me, whether she might not have kept you with her after all had there been just a few more days left before you were to set off from Prague. I have only an indistinct, rather blurred picture of the moment of farewell at the Wilsonova station, said Věra, adding, after a few moments' reflection, that I had my things with me in a little leather suitcase, and food for the journey in a rucksack – *un petit sac à dos avec quelques viatiques*, said Austerlitz, those had been Věra's exact words, summing up, as he now thought, the whole of his later life. Věra also remembered the twelve-year-old girl with the bandoneon to whose care they had entrusted me, a Charlie Chaplin comic bought at

the last minute, the fluttering of white handkerchiefs like a flock of doves taking off into the air as the parents who were staying behind waved to their children, and her curious impression that the train, after moving off very slowly, had not really left at all, but in a kind of feint had rolled a little way out of the glazed hall before sinking into the ground. But from that day on Agáta was a changed woman, Věra continued, said Austerlitz. What she had preserved of her cheerfulness and confidence, in defiance of all difficulties, was now overcast by a depression which she was clearly unable to dispel. I think she did make one more attempt to buy her freedom, said Věra, but after that she almost never left the building, she shrank from opening the windows, she would sit motionless for hours in the blue-velvet armchair in the darkest corner of the drawing-room, or lie on the sofa with her hands over her face. She was simply waiting to see what happened next, and above all she was waiting for post from England and Paris. She had several addresses for Maximilian — a hotel in the rue de l'Odéon, a small rented flat near the Glacière Métro station, and a third place, said Věra, in a district I no longer remember — and she tormented herself by wondering whether at some

crucial moment she had mixed up these addresses, so that it was her own fault if her correspondence had gone astray, while at the same time she feared that Maximilian's letters to her had been detained by the security services on their arrival in Prague. And indeed the letterbox was always empty up to the winter of 1941, when Agáta was still living in the Šporkova, so that as she said to me once, oddly, it was as if those messages in which we placed our last hopes were misdirected or swallowed up by the evil spirits abroad in the air all around us. It was only later, said Věra, that I realized how well this remark of Agáta's conveyed the invisible terrors beneath which the city of Prague lay cowering at the time, only when I learned of the true extent of the perversion of the law under the Germans, the acts of violence they committed daily in the basement of the Petschek palace, in the Pankrác prison, and at the killing grounds out in Kobylisy. After ninety seconds in which to defend yourself to a judge you could be condemned to death for a trifle, some offence barely worth mentioning, the merest contravention of the regulations in force, and then you would be hanged immediately in the execution room next to the law-court, where there was an iron rail running

along the ceiling down which the lifeless bodies were pushed a little further as required. The bill for these cursory proceedings was sent to the relations of the hanged or guillotined victim, with the information that it could be settled in monthly instalments. Although little hint of it made its way out at the time, fear of the Germans spread through the whole city like a creeping miasma. Agáta said it even drifted in through the closed doors and windows, taking one's breath away. When I look back at the two years following the outbreak of the war, said Věra, it is as if at that time everything was caught in a vortex whirling downwards at ever-increasing speed. Bulletins came thick and fast over the wireless, read by the announcers in a curiously high-pitched tone of voice, as if forced out of the larynx: news of the never-ending exploits of the Wehrmacht, which had soon occupied the entire European continent, while its successive campaigns, with apparently conclusive logic, held out to the Germans the prospect of a vast world empire in which, thanks to the fact that they belonged to the chosen people, they would all be able to embark on the most glittering careers. I believe, Věra told me, said Austerlitz, that even the last remaining German sceptics were overcome by a

kind of euphoria, such as one feels at high altitude, in these years when victory followed upon victory, while we, the oppressed, lived below sea level, as it were, and had to watch as the SS pervaded the economy of the entire country, and one business firm after another was handed over to German trustees. They had even aryanized the fez and slipper factory in Sternberg. The means Agáta still had at her disposal were barely enough for the necessities. Her bank accounts had been frozen ever since she was obliged to send in an eight-page statement of her assets, under dozens of headings. She was also strictly forbidden to dispose of any valuables such as pictures or antiques, and I remember, said Věra, how she once showed me a passage in one of those proclamations issued by the occupying power stating that in the case of any contravention of this regulation, both the Jew concerned in the transaction and the person acquiring the property must expect the most severe of measures to be taken by the State Police. The Jew concerned in the transaction! Agáta had cried, adding: Really, the way these people write! It's enough to make your head swim. I think it was in the late autumn of 1941, said Věra, that Agáta had to take her wireless, her gramophone and the

records she loved so much, her binoculars and opera glasses, musical instruments, jewellery, furs and the clothes Maximilian had left behind to the so-called Compulsory Collection Centre. Because of some mistake she had made in complying with this order, she was sent to shovel snow on Ruzyně airfield on a freezing day – winter came very early that year, said Věra – and at three o'clock next morning, in the deepest part of the night, the two envoys of the Israelite religious community whom she had been expecting for some time arrived with the news that Agáta must prepare to be taken away within six days. These messengers, as Věra described them to me, said Austerlitz, who were strikingly alike and had faces that seemed somehow indistinct, with flickering outlines, wore jackets furnished with assorted pleats, pockets, button facings and a belt, garments which looked especially versatile although it was not clear what purpose they served. The pair spoke quietly to Agáta for some time, and gave her a sheaf of printed forms and instructions setting out everything down to the very smallest detail: where and when the person summoned must present herself, what items of clothing were to be brought – coat, raincoat, warm headgear, ear muffs,

mitten, nightdress, underclothes, and so on – what articles of personal use it was advisable to bring, for instance sewing things, leather grease, a spirit stove and candles; the weight of the main item of luggage, which was not to exceed fifty kilos; what else could be brought in the way of hand baggage and provisions; how the luggage was to be labelled, with name, destination, and the number allotted to her; the proviso that all the attached forms were to be filled in and signed, that it was not permitted to bring cushions or other articles of furnishing, or to make rucksacks and travelling bags out of Persian rugs, winter coats, or other valuable remnants of fabric; and furthermore that matches, lighters and smoking were prohibited at the embarkation point and thereafter in general, and all orders issued by the official authorities were to be followed to the letter in every contingency. Agáta was unable, as I could see for myself, said Věra, to follow these nauseatingly phrased directives; instead, she simply flung a few wholly impractical items into a bag at random, like someone going away for the weekend, so that finally, difficult as it was for me and guilty as it made me feel, I did her packing while she simply stood at the window, turning away from me to look out at

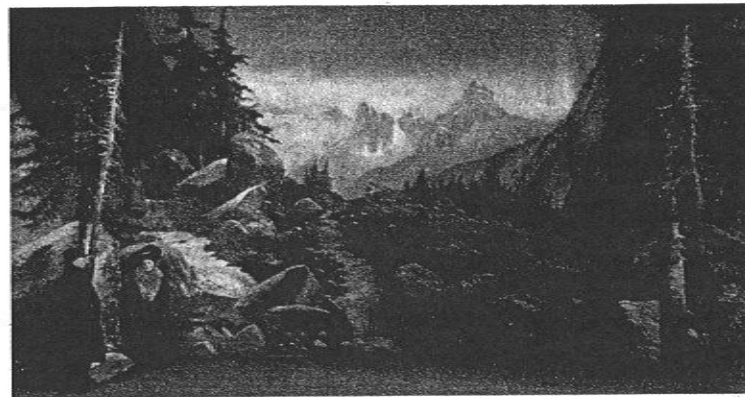
the empty street. Early in the morning of the appointed day we set off while it was still dark, with her luggage strapped to a toboggan, and without a word we made the long journey through the snow spinning down around us, along the left bank of the Vltava, past the Baumgarten, and further out still to the Trade Fair Palace at Holešovice. The closer we came to it, the more often did small groups of people carrying and dragging their heavy burdens emerge from the darkness, moving laboriously towards the same place through the snow, which was falling more thickly now, so that gradually a caravan strung out over a long distance formed, and it was with this caravan that we reached the Trade Fair entrance, faintly illuminated by a single electric light bulb, towards seven in the morning. We waited there in the crowd of those who had been summoned, a silent assembly stirred only, now and then, by an apprehensive murmur running through it. There were men and there were women, families with young children and solitary figures, there were the elderly and the infirm, ordinary folk and those who had been well to do, all of them, in accordance with the instructions they had received, with their transport numbers round their necks on pieces of string.

Agáta soon asked me to leave her. When we parted she embraced me and said: Stromovka Park is over there, would you walk there for me sometimes? I have loved that beautiful place so much. If you look into the dark water of the pools, perhaps one of these days you will see my face. Well, said Věra, so then I went home. It took me over two hours to walk back to the Šporkova. I tried to think where Agáta might be now, whether she was still waiting at the entrance or was already inside the Trade Fair precinct. I learned only years later, from one who had survived the ordeal, what it was like there. The people being taken away were herded into an unheated exhibition hall, a great barn-like building which was freezing in the middle of winter. It was a bleak place where, under faint, glaucous lamp-light, the utmost confusion reigned. Many of those who had just arrived had to have their baggage searched, and were obliged to hand over money, watches and other valuables to a Hauptscharführer called Fiedler who was feared for his brutality. A great mound of silver cutlery lay on a table, along with fox furs and Persian lamb capes. Personal details were taken down, questionnaires handed out, and identity papers stamped EVACUATED or

GHETTOIZED. The German officials and their Czech and Jewish assistants walked busily to and fro, and there was much shouting and cursing, and blows as well. Those who were to leave had to stay in the places allotted to them. Most of them were silent, some wept quietly, but outbursts of despair, loud shouting and fits of frenzied rage were not uncommon. They stayed in this cold Trade Fair building for several days, until finally, early one morning when scarcely anyone was out and about, they were marched under guard to nearby Holešovice railway station, where it took almost another three hours to load them on the trucks. Later, said Věra, I often walked out to Holešovice, to Stromovka Park and the Trade Fair precinct. On these occasions I usually visited the lapidarium installed there in the sixties and spent hours looking at the mineral samples in the glass cases — pyrite crystals, deep green Siberian malachites, specimens of Bohemian mica, granite, quartz, and limestone of an isabelline yellow hue — wondering at the nature of the foundations on which our world is built. On the very day when Agáta had been forced to leave her flat, Věra told me, said Austerlitz, a man from the Trusteeship Centre for Requisitioned Goods came to the Šporkova and put a

paper seal on the doors. Then, between Christmas and the New Year, a troop of very shady characters arrived to clear away everything that had been left behind, the furniture, the lamps and candelabra, the carpets and curtains, the books and musical scores, the clothes from the wardrobes and drawers, the bedlinen, pillows, eiderdowns, blankets, china and kitchen utensils, the pot plants and umbrellas, even the bottled pears and cherries which had been standing forgotten in the cellar for years, and the remaining potatoes. They took everything, down to the very last spoon, off to one of the over fifty depots, where these abandoned objects were itemized separately with that thoroughness peculiar to the Germans, were valued, then washed, cleaned or mended as necessary, and finally stored, row upon row, on specially made shelves. Last of all, said Věra, a pest-control officer turned up in the Šporkova. He struck me as a particularly sinister figure, with an unpleasant look in his eye which went right through me. To this day he sometimes haunts my dreams, in which I see him surrounded by clouds of poisonous white smoke as he goes about fumigating the rooms. — When Věra had come to the end of her story, so Austerlitz continued that morning in Alderney

Street, she handed me, after a long pause in which the silence in the Šporkova flat seemed to grow deeper with every breath we drew, two small photographs measuring about three by four inches from the little occasional table beside her chair. She had found them by chance the previous evening inside one of the fifty-five carmine-red volumes of Balzac which she had happened to pick up, she did not know why. Věra said she could not remember unfastening the glass doors and taking the book off the shelf where it stood with its companions, she merely saw herself sitting here in this armchair and – for the first time since her late twenties, a point on which she laid special emphasis – turning the pages which tell the story of the great injustice suffered by Colonel Chabert. How the two pictures had slipped between the leaves was a mystery to her, said Věra. Perhaps Agáta had borrowed the small volume while she was still living here in the Šporkova, in the last weeks before the Germans marched in. In any case, one of the photographs showed the stage of a provincial theatre, perhaps in Reichenau or Olmütz or one of the other towns where Agáta sometimes performed before she was engaged to appear in Prague. At first glance, said Austerlitz, Věra said she



had thought the two figures in the bottom left-hand corner were Agáta and Maximilian – they were so tiny that it was impossible to make them out well – but then of course she noticed that they were other people, perhaps the impresario, or a conjuror and his woman assistant. She had wondered, said Věra, what kind of play or opera had been staged in front of this alarming backdrop, and because of the high mountain range and the wild forest background she thought it might have been *Wilhelm Tell*, or *La Sonnambula*, or Ibsen's last play. The Swiss boy with the apple on his head appeared in my mind's eye, Věra continued; I sensed in me the moment of terror in which the narrow bridge gives way under the sleepwalker's foot, and imagined that, high in the rocks above, an avalanche was already breaking

loose, about to sweep the poor folk who had lost their way (for what else would have brought them to these desolate surroundings?) down into the depths next moment. Minutes went by, said Austerlitz, in which I too thought I saw the cloud of snow crashing into the valley, before I heard Věra again, speaking of the mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion. One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissements de désespoir* was her expression, said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives. Yes, and the small boy in



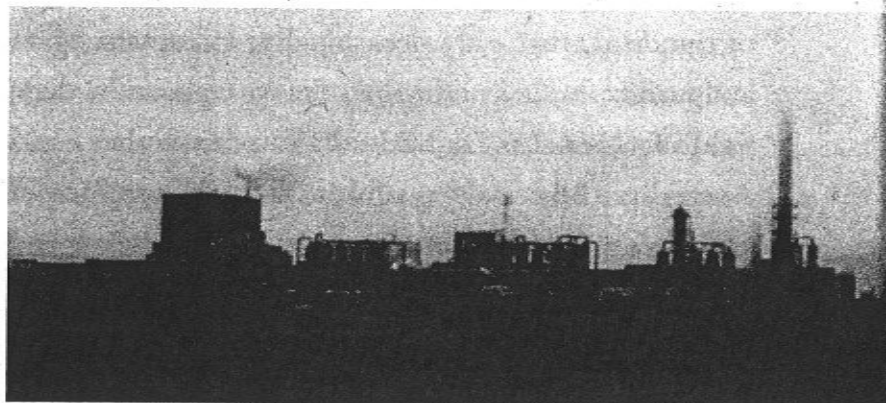
the other photograph, said Věra after a while, this is you, Jacquot, in February 1939, about six months before you left Prague. You were to accompany Agáta to a masked ball at the house of one of her influential admirers, and she had the snow-white costume made for you especially for the occasion. On the back it says *Jacquot Austerlitz, páže růžové královny*, in your grandfather's handwriting, for he happened to be visiting at the time. The picture lay before me, said Austerlitz, but I dared not touch it. The words *páže růžové královny, páže růžové královny* went round and round in my head, until their meaning came to me from far away, and once again I saw the live tableau with the Rose Queen and the little boy carrying her train at her side. Yet hard as I tried both that evening and later, I could not recollect myself in the part. I did recognize the unusual hair-line running at a slant over the forehead, but otherwise all memory was extinguished in me by an overwhelming sense of the long years that had passed. I have studied the photograph many times since, the bare, level field where I am standing, although I cannot think where it was; the blurred, dark area above the horizon, the boy's curly hair, spectrally light around the outline of his head, the

cape over his arm which appears to be held at an angle or, as I once thought, said Austerlitz, might have been broken or in a splint, the six large mother-of-pearl buttons, the extravagant hat with the heron's feather in it, even the folds of the stockings. I examined every detail under a magnifying glass without once finding the slightest clue. And in doing so I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the grey light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him. That evening in the Šporkova, when Věra put the picture of the child cavalier in front of me, I was not, as you might suppose, moved or distressed, said Austerlitz, only speechless and uncomprehending, incapable of any lucid thought. Even later nothing but blind panic filled me when I thought of the five-year-old page. Once I dreamed of returning to the flat in Prague after a long absence. All the furniture is in its proper place. I know that my parents will soon be back from their holiday, and there is something important which I must give them. I am not aware that they have been dead for years. I simply think they must be very old, around ninety or a hundred, as indeed they

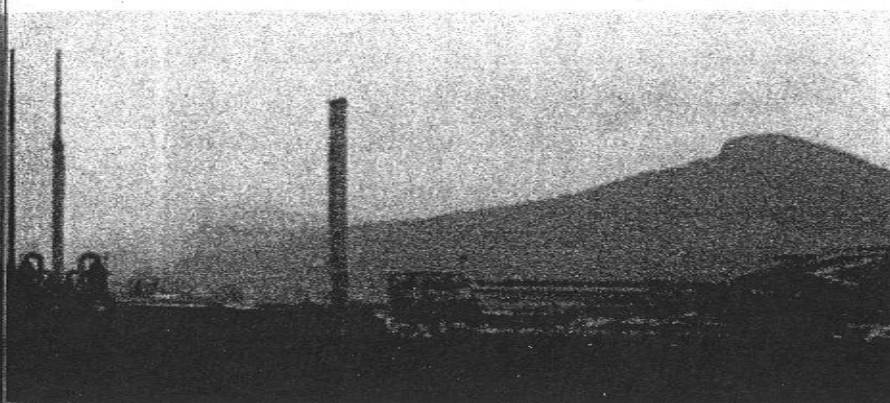
would be if they were still alive. But when at last they come through the door they are in their mid-thirties at the most. They enter the flat, walk round the rooms picking up this and that, sit in the drawing-room for a while and talk to each other in the mysterious language of deaf mutes. They take no notice of me. I suspect that they are about to set off again for the place somewhere in the mountains where they now live. It does not seem to me, Austerlitz added, that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision. As far back as I can remember, said Austerlitz, I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, and I never had this impression more strongly than on that evening in the Šporkova when the eyes of the Rose Queen's page looked through me. Even next day, on my way

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to Terezín, I could not imagine who or what I was. I remember that I stood in a kind of trance on the platform of the bleak station at Holešovice, that the railway lines ran away into infinity on both sides, that I perceived everything indistinctly, and then that I leaned against a window in the corridor of the train, looking out at the northern suburbs as they passed by, at the water meadows of the Vltava and the villas and summer houses on the opposite bank. Once I saw a huge and now disused stone quarry on the other side of the river, then a number of cherry trees in blossom, a few villages far remote from one another, nothing else but the empty Bohemian countryside. When I got out of the train in Lovošice after about an hour, I felt as if I had been travelling for weeks, going further and further east and further



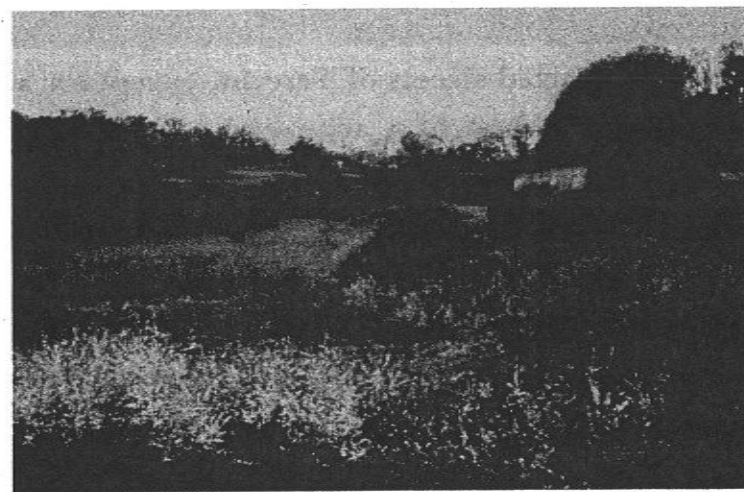
and further back in time. The square in front of the station was empty except for a peasant woman wearing several layers of coats, and waiting behind a makeshift stall for someone to think about buying one of the cabbages she had piled up into a mighty bulwark in front of her. There was no taxi in sight, so I set off on foot from Lovosice in the direction of Terezín. As one leaves the town, the appearance of which I can no longer remember, said Austerlitz, a wide panorama opens up to the north: a field, poison-green in colour, in the foreground, behind it a petrochemicals plant half eaten away by rust, with clouds of smoke rising from its cooling towers and chimneys, as they must have done without cease for many long years. Further away I saw the conical Bohemian mountains surrounding the Bohuševice



basin in a semicircle, their highest summits disappearing into the low sky this cold, grey morning. I walked on down the straight road, always looking ahead to see if the silhouette of the fortifications, which could not be more than an hour and a half's walk away, was in sight yet. The idea I had formed in my mind was of a mighty complex rising high above the level country, but in fact Terezín lies so far down in the damp lowlands around the confluence of the Eger and the Elbe that, as I read later, there is nothing to be seen of the town, even from the hills around Leitmeritz or indeed from its immediate vicinity, except the chimney of the brewery and the church tower. The brick walls built in the eighteenth century to a star-shaped ground plan, undoubtedly by serf labour, rise from a broad moat and stand not much higher than the outlying fields. In the course of time, moreover, all kinds of shrubs and bushes have covered the former glacis and the grass-grown ramparts, giving the impression that Terezín is not so much a fortified town as one half-hidden and sunk into the marshy ground of the flood plain. At any rate, as I made my way that morning to Terezín along the main road from Lovosice, I



did not know until the last minute how close I already was to my journey's end. Several sycamores and chestnuts, their bark blackened by



rain, still obstructed my view when I found myself standing among the façades of the old garrison buildings, and a few more steps brought me out on the central square, which was surrounded by a double avenue of trees. From the first, I felt that the most striking aspect of the place was its emptiness, said Austerlitz, something which to this day I still find incomprehensible. I knew from Věra that for many years now Terezín had been an ordinary town again. Despite this, it was almost a quarter of an hour before I saw the first human being on the other side of the square, a bent figure toiling very slowly forward and leaning on a stick, yet when I took my eye off it for a moment the figure had suddenly gone. Otherwise I met no one all morning in the straight, deserted streets of Terezín, except for a mentally disturbed man who crossed my path among the lime trees of the park with the fountain, telling I have no idea what tale in a kind of broken German while frantically waving his arms, before he too, still clutching the hundred-crown note I had given him, seemed to be swallowed up by the earth, as they say, even as he was running off. Although the sense of abandonment in this

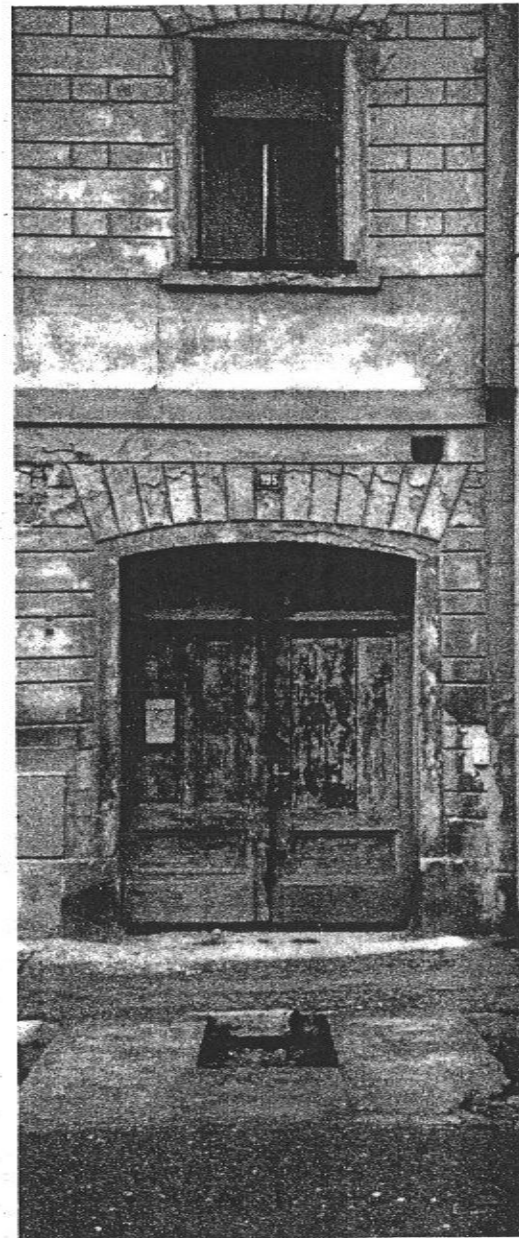
fortified town, laid out like Campanella's ideal sun state to a strictly geometrical grid, was extraordinarily oppressive, yet more so was the forbidding aspect of the silent façades. Not a single curtain moved behind their blank windows, however often I glanced up at them. I could not

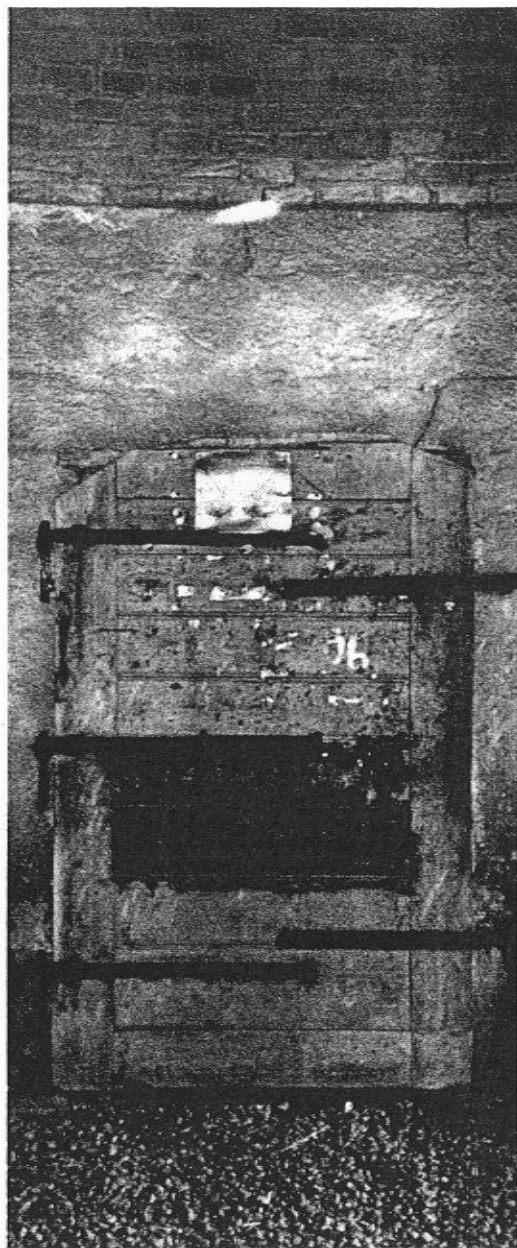
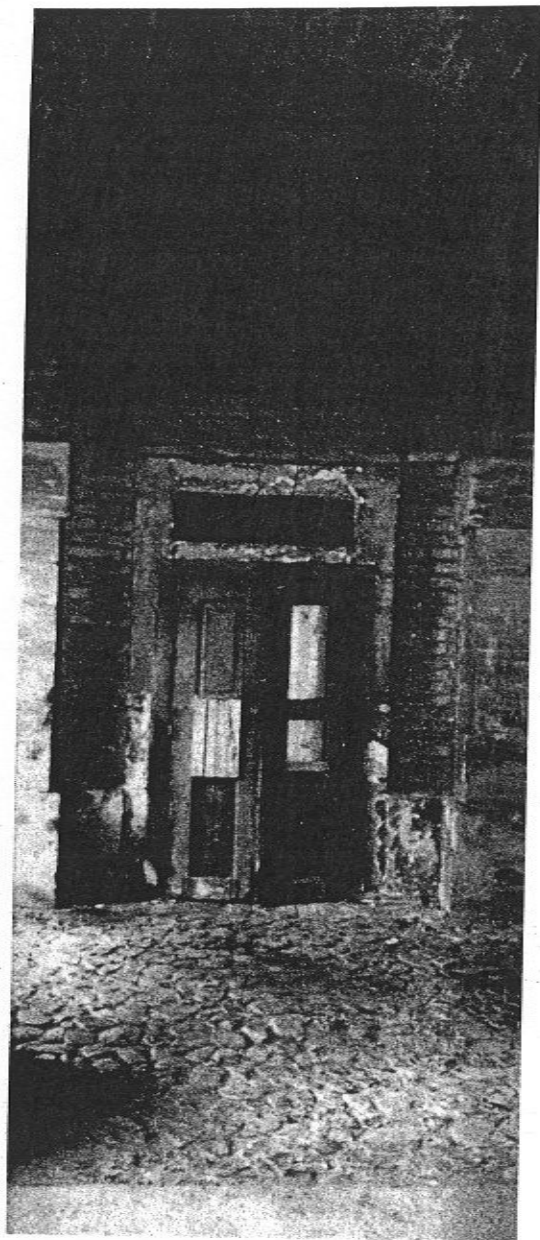


imagine, said Austerlitz, who might inhabit these desolate buildings, or if anyone lived there at all, although on the other hand I had noticed that long rows of dustbins with large numbers on them in red paint were ranged against the walls of the back yards. What I found most uncanny of all, however, were the gates and doorways of Terezín, all of them, as I thought I sensed,

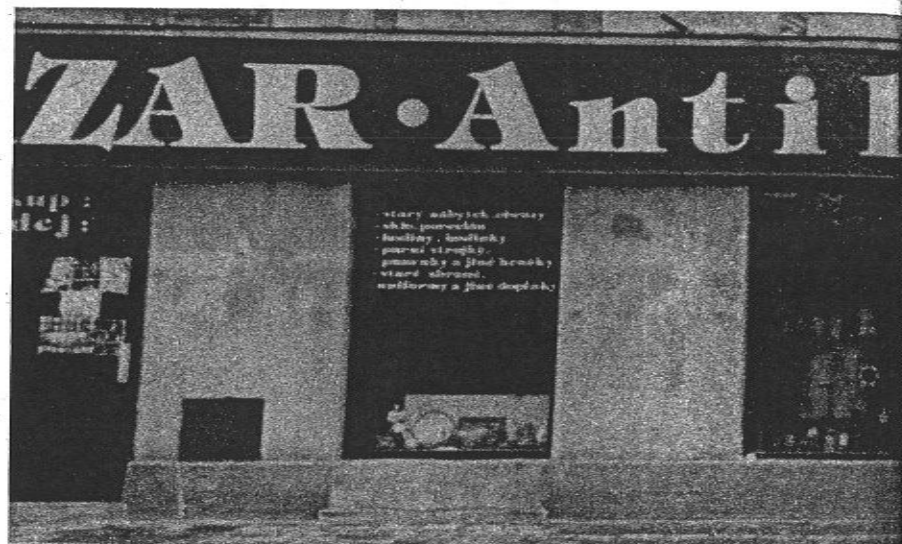


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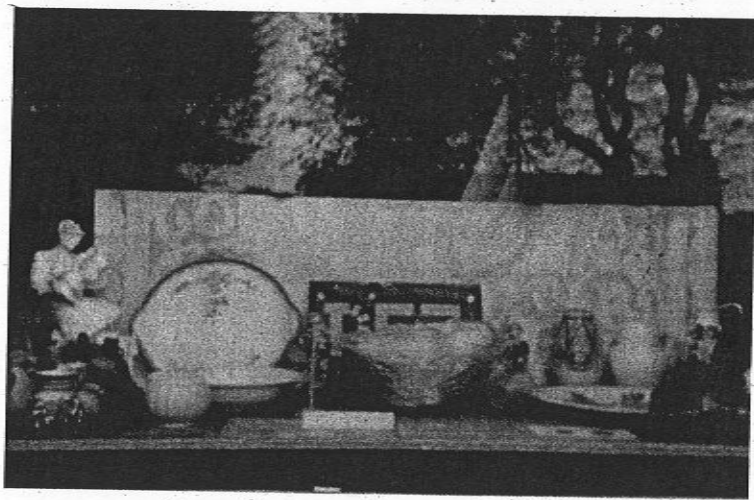
Austerlitz, there was no more movement at all apart from the whitewash peeling off the walls and the spiders spinning their threads, scuttling on crooked legs across the floorboards, or hanging expectantly in their webs. Not long ago, on the verge of waking from sleep, I found myself looking into the interior of one of these Terezín barracks. It was filled from floor to ceiling with layer upon layer of the cobwebs woven by those ingenious creatures. I still remember how, in my half-conscious state, I tried to hold fast to my powdery grey dream image, which sometimes quivered in a slight breath of air, and to discover



what it concealed, but it only dissolved all the more and was overlaid by the memory, surfacing in my mind at the same time, of the shining glass in the display windows of the ANTIKOS BAZAR on the west side of the town square, where I had stood for a long time around midday in what proved to be the vain hope that someone might arrive and open this curious emporium. As far as I could see, said Austerlitz, the ANTIKOS BAZAR is the only shop of any kind in Terezín apart from a tiny grocery store. It occupies the entire façade of one of the largest buildings, and I think its vaults reach back a long way as well. Of



course I could see nothing but the items on display in the windows, which can have amounted to only a small part of the junk heaped up inside the shop. But even these four still lifes obviously composed entirely at random, which appeared to have grown quite naturally into the black branches of the lime trees standing around the square and reflected in the glass of the windows, exerted such a power of attraction on me that it was a long time before I could tear myself away from staring at the hundreds of different objects, my forehead pressed against the cold window, as if one of them or their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the



many questions I found it impossible to ask in my mind. What was the meaning of the festive white lace tablecloth hanging over the back of the ottoman, and the armchair with its worn brocade cover? What secret lay behind the three brass mortars of different sizes, which had about them the suggestion of an oracular utterance, or the cut-glass bowls, ceramic vases and earthenware jugs, the tin advertising sign bearing the words *Theresienstädter Wasser*, the little box of seashells, the miniature barrel organ, the globe-shaped paperweights with wonderful marine flowers swaying inside their glassy spheres, the model ship (some kind of corvette under full sail), the oak-leaf-embroidered jacket of light, pale, summery linen, the stag-horn buttons, the outsize Russian officer's cap and the olive-green uniform tunic with gilt epaulettes that went with it, the fishing rod, the hunter's bag, the Japanese fan, the endless landscape painted round a lampshade in fine brush-strokes, showing a river running quietly through perhaps Bohemia or perhaps Brazil? And then there was the stuffed squirrel, already moth-eaten here and there, perched on the stump of a branch in a showcase the size of a shoebox, which

had its beady button eye implacably fixed on me, and whose Czech name — *veverka* — I now recalled like the name of a long-lost friend. What, I asked myself, said Austerlitz, might be the significance of the river never rising from any source, never flowing out into any sea but always back into itself, what was the meaning of *veverka*, the squirrel forever perched in the same position, or of the ivory-coloured porcelain group of a hero on horseback turning to look back, as his steed



rears up on its hindquarters, in order to raise up with his outstretched left arm an innocent girl already bereft of her last hope, and to save her from a cruel fate not revealed to the observer? They were all as timeless as that moment of

rescue, perpetuated but for ever just occurring, these ornaments, utensils and mementoes stranded in the Terezín bazaar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them. As I waited outside the bazaar, Austerlitz resumed after a little while, a light rain had begun to fall, and since neither the proprietor of the shop, whose name was given as Augustýn Němeček, nor anyone else was in evidence, I finally walked on, going up and down a few streets until suddenly, on the north-east corner of the town square, I found myself outside the so-called Ghetto Museum, which I had overlooked before. I climbed the steps and entered the lobby, where a lady of uncertain age in a lilac blouse, her hair waved in an old-fashioned style, sat behind a kind of cash-desk. She put down the crochet work she was doing and leaned slightly forward to give me a ticket. When I asked if I was the only visitor today she said that the museum had only recently opened and not many people from outside the town came to see it, particularly at this time of

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year and in such weather. And the people of Terezín didn't come anyway, she added, picking up the white handkerchief she was edging with loops like flower petals. So I went round the exhibition by myself, said Austerlitz, through the rooms on the mezzanine floor and the floor above, stood in front of the display panels, sometimes skimming over the captions, sometimes reading them letter by letter, stared at the photographic reproductions, could not believe my eyes, and several times had to turn away and look out of a window into the garden behind the building, having for the first time acquired some idea of the history of the persecution which my avoidance system had kept from me for so long, and which now, in this place, surrounded me on all sides. I studied the maps of the Greater German Reich and its protectorates, which had never before been more than blank spaces in my otherwise well-developed sense of topography, I traced the railway lines running through them, felt blinded by the documentation recording the population policy of the National Socialists, by the evidence of their mania for order and purity, which was put into practice on a vast scale through measures partly improvised, partly devised with obsessive organizational zeal. I

was confronted with incontrovertible proof of the setting up of a forced labour system throughout Central Europe, and learned of the deliberate wastage and discarding of the work-slaves themselves, of the origins and places of death of the victims, the routes by which they were taken to what destinations, what names they had borne in life and what they and their guards looked like. I understood it all now, yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me as I went through the museum from room to room and back again, ignorant as I feared I had been through my own fault, far exceeded my comprehension. I saw pieces of luggage brought to Terezín by the internees from Prague and Pilsen, Würzburg and Vienna, Kufstein and Karlsbad and countless other places; the items such as handbags, belt buckles, clothes brushes and combs which they had made in the various workshops; meticulously worked out projects and production plans for the agricultural exploitation of the open areas behind the ramparts and on the glacis, where oats and hemp, hops and pumpkins and maize were to be grown on plots of land meticulously parcelled out. I saw balance sheets, registers of the dead, lists of every imaginable kind, and endless

rows of numbers and figures, which must have served to reassure the administrators that nothing ever escaped their notice. And whenever I think of the museum in Terezín now, said Austerlitz, I see the framed ground-plan of the star-shaped fortifications, colour-washed in soft tones of grey-brown for Maria Theresa, her Imperial Highness in Vienna who had commissioned it, and fitting neatly into the folds of the surrounding terrain, the model of a world made by reason and regulated in all conceivable respects. This impregnable fortress has never been besieged, not even by the Prussians in 1866, but throughout the nineteenth century — if one disregards the fact that a considerable number of political prisoners of the Habsburg empire pined away in the casemates of one of its out-works — remained a quiet garrison for two or three regiments and some two thousand civilians throughout the nineteenth century, somewhat out of the way, a town with yellow-painted walls, galleried courtyards, well-clipped trees, bakeries, beer-houses, casinos, soldiers' quarters, armouries, band-stand concerts, occasional forays for the purpose of military manoeuvres, officers' wives who were bored to death, and service regulations which, it was

believed, would never change for all eternity. When, towards the end of the day, the museum guardian came up to me and indicated that she would soon have to close, said Austerlitz, I had just been reading, several times over, a note on one of the display panels, to the effect that in the middle of December 1942, and thus at the very time when Agáta came to Terezín, some sixty thousand people were shut up together in the ghetto, a built-up area of one square kilometre at the most, and a little later, when I was out in the deserted town square again, it suddenly seemed to me, with the greatest clarity, that they had never been taken away after all, but were still living crammed into those buildings and basements and attics, as if they were incessantly going up and down the stairs, looking out of the windows, moving in vast numbers through the streets and alleys, and even, a silent assembly, filling the entire space occupied by the air, hatched with grey as it was by the fine rain. With this picture before my eyes I boarded the old-fashioned bus which had appeared out of nowhere, and stopped by the pavement directly in front of me a few paces from the entrance to the museum. It was one of those buses which travel from the country into the

capital. The driver gave me change for a hundred-crown note without a word, and I remember that I held it clutched firmly in my hand all the way to Prague. Outside, the darkening Bohemian fields passed by, hop poles, deep-brown fields, flat, empty country all around. The bus was very overheated. I felt drops of perspiration break out on my forehead and a constriction in my chest. Once, when I looked over my shoulder, I saw that the other passengers, without exception, had fallen asleep, leaning and sprawling at awkward angles in their seats. Some had their heads dropped forward, others sideways or tipped back. Several were snoring quietly. Only the driver looked straight ahead at the ribbon of road gleaming in the rain. As so often when one is travelling south, I had the impression of going steadily downhill, particularly when we reached the suburbs of Prague and it seemed as if we were descending a kind of ramp into a labyrinth through which we moved very slowly, now this way and now that, until I had lost all sense of direction. When we reached the Prague bus station, an overcrowded traffic junction at this early hour of the evening, I therefore set out the wrong way through the great throng of people waiting there or getting in and out

of buses. There were so many of them streaming towards me out in the street, said Austerlitz, most of them carrying large bags and with pale, sad faces, that I thought they could only be coming away from the city centre. Only later did I see from the map that I had reached the centre not in a more or less straight line, as I thought at first, but by way of a wide detour taking me almost to the Vyšehrad, and then through the New Town and along the banks of the Vltava back to my hotel on Kampa Island. It was already late by the time I lay down, exhausted from the day's walking, and tried to fall asleep by listening to the water rushing over the weir outside my window. But whether I kept my eyes wide open or closed, all through the night I saw pictures from Terezín and the Ghetto Museum, the bricks of the fortification walls, the display window of the Bazaar, the endless lists of names, a leather suitcase bearing a double sticker from the Hotels Bristol in Salzburg and Vienna, the closed gates I had photographed, the grass growing between the cobblestones, a pile of briquettes outside a cellar entrance, the squirrel's glass eye and the two forlorn figures of Agáta and Věra pulling the laden toboggan through the driving snow to the Trade Fair building at Holešovice. Only

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towards morning did I sleep briefly, but even then, in the deepest unconsciousness, the flow of pictures did not cease but instead condensed into a nightmare in which, from where I do not know, said Austerlitz, the north Bohemian town of Dux appeared to me situated in the middle of a devastated plain, a place of which all I had previously known was that Casanova spent the last years of his life there in Count Waldstein's castle writing his memoirs, a number of mathematical and esoteric tracts, and his five-volume futuristic novel *Icosameron*. In my dream I saw the old roué shrunk to the size of a boy, surrounded by the gold-stamped rows of books in Count Waldstein's library of more than forty thousand volumes, bending over his writing desk alone on a bleak November afternoon. He had taken off his powdered wig, and his own sparse hair was wafting above his head in a little white cloud, like a sign of the dissolution of his corporeal being. He wrote on and on, his left shoulder slightly raised. There was nothing to be heard but the scratching of his pen, which stopped only when the writer looked up for a couple of seconds and his watery eyes, already half blind for long-distance vision, sought what little brightness was still left in the sky above the park of

Dux. On the other side of the enclosed land, in deep darkness, lay the whole region extending from Teplice to Most and Chomutov. Over to the north, from end to end of the horizon, stood the black wall of the Grenzmark mountains, and in front of them, along their foothills, the torn and ravaged land, with slopes and terraces which dropped far below what had formerly been the surface of the earth. Where roads had once passed over firm ground, where human beings had lived, foxes had run across country and birds of many kinds had flown from bush to bush, now there was nothing but empty space, and at the bottom of it stones and gravel and stagnant water, untouched even by the natural movement of the air. The shadowy forms of power stations with their glowing furnaces drifted like ships in the sombre air: chalk-coloured buildings like blocks, cooling towers with jagged rims, tall chimneys above which motionless plumes of smoke stood white against the sickly colours streaking the western sky. A few stars showed only on the pallid, nocturnal side of the firmament, sooty, smoking lights extinguished one by one, leaving scab-like traces in the orbits through which they have always moved. To the south, in a broad semicircle, rose the cones of the

extinct Bohemian volcanoes, which I wished in my nightmare would erupt and cover everything around with black dust. — Not until around half-past two next day, when I had to some degree pulled myself together again, did I go from Kampa Island to the Šporkova to pay what would be my last visit there for the time being, Austerlitz continued. I had already told Věra that I must retrace my journey from Prague to London by train, all the way across Germany, a country unknown to me, but that then I would soon come back and perhaps take a flat somewhere near her for a few months. It was one of those radiant spring days when the weather is clear as glass. Věra was complaining of a dull pain behind her eyes which had been troubling her since early that morning, and she asked me to pull the curtains over the windows on the sunny side of the room. Leaning back in her red velvet armchair in the gloom, with her tired eyelids closed, she listened as I told her what I had seen in Terezín. I also asked Věra about the Czech word for a squirrel, and after a while, with a smile spreading slowly over her beautiful face, she said it was *veverka*. And then, said Austerlitz, Věra told me how in autumn we would often stand by the upper enclosure wall of the Schönborn Garden to

watch the squirrels burying their treasures. Whenever we came home afterwards, I had to read aloud from your favourite book about the changing seasons, said Věra, even though you knew it by heart from the first line to the last, and she added that I never tired of the winter pictures in particular, scenes showing hares, deer and partridges transfixed with astonishment as they stared at the ground covered with newly fallen snow, and Věra said that every time we reached the page which described the snow falling through the branches of the trees, soon to shroud the entire forest floor, I would look up at her and ask: But if it's all white, how do the squirrels know where they've buried their hoard? *Ale když všechno zakryje snih, jak veverky najdou to místo, kde si schovaly zásoby?* Those were your very words, the question which constantly troubled you. How indeed do the squirrels know, what do we know ourselves, how do we remember, and what is it we find in the end? It was six years after their farewell outside the gates of the Trade Fair in Holešovice, so Věra continued, that she learned how Agáta was sent east in September 1944 with one and a half thousand others who had been interned in Terezín. For a long time after that, said Věra, she herself had been almost

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incapable of thinking of Agáta, of what must have become of her, and of her own life continuing into a pointless future. For weeks she was hardly in her right mind, she had felt a kind of dragging outside her body, she had tried to pick up broken threads and could not believe that everything had really happened as it did. None of her endless attempts later to find out my whereabouts in England or my father's in France had produced any results. Whatever she tried, it was as if all traces were lost in the sand, for at the time, with an army of censors causing havoc in the postal services, it often took months to get an answer from abroad. Perhaps, Věra surmised, said Austerlitz, it would have been different if she could have turned in person to the appropriate authorities, but she lacked both the opportunity and the means to do so. And in this way the years had raced by, seeming in retrospect like a single leaden day. She had indeed gone into the teaching profession and did what was necessary to maintain herself, but almost all her feelings had been extinguished, and she had not truly breathed since that time. Only in the books written in earlier times did she sometimes think she found some faint idea of what it might be like to be alive. Such remarks of Věra's were often followed

by a long silence, said Austerlitz, as if neither of us knew what to say, and the hours passed by almost imperceptibly in the darkened flat in the Šporkova. Towards evening, when I said goodbye to Věra, holding her weightless hands in mine, she suddenly remembered how, on the day of my departure from the Wilsonova station, Agáta had turned to her when the train had disappeared from view, and said: We left from here for Marienbad only last summer. And now — where will we be going now? This reminiscence, which I did not fully take in at first, was soon occupying my mind so much that I made a call to Věra from the hotel on the island that evening, although in the normal way I never use the telephone. Yes, she said, in a voice very faint with weariness, yes, in the summer of 1938 we all went to Marienbad together, Agáta, Maximilian, Věra herself and me. We had spent three wonderful, almost blissful weeks there. The overweight or underweight spa guests, moving at a curiously slow pace through the grounds with their drinking glasses, radiated an extraordinary peacefulness, as Agáta once remarked in passing. We stayed at the Osborne-Balmoral boarding house behind the Palace Hotel. In the morning we generally went to the

baths, and we took long walks in the country around Marienbad in the afternoons. I had retained no memory at all of that summer holiday when I was just four years old, said Austerlitz, and perhaps that was why when I was in that very place later, in Marienbad at the end of August 1972, I felt nothing but blind terror in the face of the better turn my life should have taken at that time. Marie de Verneuil, with whom I had been in correspondence since the time I spent in Paris, had invited me to accompany her on a visit to Bohemia, where she had to carry out some research for her studies on the architectural history of the spas of Europe, and I think I may now say, added Austerlitz, that she also hoped to try to liberate me from my self-inflicted isolation. She had arranged everything to perfection. Her cousin Frédéric Félix, attaché to the French embassy in Prague, had sent an enormous Tatra limousine to meet us at the airport and take us straight to Marienbad. We sat in the deeply upholstered back of the car for two or three hours as it drove west through the empty countryside, on a road which ran perfectly straight for long stretches of our journey, sometimes dipping down into valleys, then climbing again to extended plateaux over which one could

see into the far distance, to the point, said Marie, where the wastes of Bohemia approach the Baltic. Sometimes we drove past low ranges of hills covered with blue forest, standing out sharp as a saw-blade against the uniformly grey sky. There were almost no other vehicles. Only occasionally did a small car of some kind come towards us, and now and then we overtook a truck crawling up the long gradients and trailing behind it great clouds of exhaust fumes. But ever since leaving Prague airport we had been followed by two uniformed motorcyclists who always preserved the same distance. They wore leather crash helmets and black goggles with their tunics and breeches, and their carbines were slung at an angle over their right shoulders. These two escorts made me very uneasy, said Austerlitz, particularly when we went over the top of one of the low hills and down again and they vanished from sight for a while, only to reappear outlined even more menacingly against the light. Marie, who was not so easily intimidated, merely laughed and said that the two shadowy riders were obviously the guard of honour specially provided by the ČSSR for visitors from France. As we approached Marienbad along a road running further and further downhill between

wooded slopes, darkness had fallen, and I remember, said Austerlitz, that a slight sense of disquiet brushed me as we emerged from the firs growing all the way down to the outlying houses and slid into the town, which was sparsely illuminated by a few street lamps. The car stopped outside the Palace Hotel. Marie exchanged a few words with the chauffeur as he took out our luggage, and then we were in the foyer, which was made to look double its size, so to speak, by a row of tall mirrors along the walls. The place was so deathly still and deserted that you might have thought the time long after midnight. It was some while before the reception clerk at his desk in a cramped booth looked up from what he was reading and turned to his late-come guests with a barely audible murmur of *Dobry večer*. This remarkably thin man — the first thing you noticed about him was that although he could not have been much over forty his forehead was wrinkled in fan-like folds above the root of his nose — went through the necessary formalities without another word, very slowly, almost as if he were moving in a denser atmosphere than ours, asked to see our visas, looked at our passports and his register, made an entry of some length on the squared paper of a school exercise book in laborious

handwriting, gave us a questionnaire to fill in, looked in a drawer for our key and finally, ringing a bell, summoned as it seemed from nowhere a porter with a bent back, who was wearing a mouse-grey nylon coat that came down to his knees and, like the clerk at the reception desk, appeared to be afflicted by a chronic lethargy which incapacitated his limbs. When he preceded us up to the third floor with our two lightweight suitcases — the paternoster lift, Marie had pointed out to me as soon as we entered the foyer; had obviously been out of order for a very long time — he found it increasingly hard to climb the stairs and, like a mountaineer negotiating the last difficult ridge before attaining the summit, he had to stop several times for a rest, whereupon we too waited for a while a couple of steps below him. On the way up we met not a living soul except for another member of the hotel staff who, dressed in the same grey coat as his colleague and perhaps worn, I thought to myself, said Austerlitz, by all the employees of the state-owned spa hotels, was sitting asleep in a chair on the top landing with his head sunk forward, and a tin tray of broken glass on the floor beside him. The room unlocked for us was Number Thirty-Eight — a large room resembling a salon. The

walls were covered with burgundy-red brocade wallpaper, very faded in places. The portières dated from a past time as well, and so did the bed standing in an alcove with its white pillows stacked at a curiously steep angle. Marie immediately began settling in, opened all the wardrobes, went into the bathroom, turned on the taps and the huge old-fashioned shower to make sure they were working, and inspected the whole place very closely. It was odd, she said at last, but she had the impression that although everything else was in perfect order the writing-desk had not been dusted for years. What can be the explanation, she asked me, said Austerlitz, of this remarkable phenomenon? Do ghosts haunt the desk, I wonder? I don't remember what I replied, said Austerlitz, but I do recall that as we sat together by the window for a couple of hours that evening Marie told me a great deal about the history of the spa, of the forests which still covered the valley floor at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the building of the first neo-classical houses and hotels set haphazard on the slopes, and the subsequent rapid rise in the fortunes of the resort. Architects, masons, decorators, tin- and locksmiths and stucco workers came from Prague and Vienna

and from all the corners of the empire, many of them from as far afield as the Veneto. One of Prince Lobkowitz's court gardeners began turning what had once been woodland into a landscaped park in the English style, planted rare and native trees, laid out lawns surrounded by bushes and shrubs, avenues, arbour'd walks, and pavilions from which to admire the view. More and prouder hotels constantly rose from the ground, and so did assembly rooms, baths, reading-rooms, a concert hall and a theatre where all manner of eminent artistes were soon appearing. In 1873 the great cast-iron colonnade was built, and by now Marienbad was one of the most fashionable of European resorts. Marie claimed — and here, said Austerlitz, she launched, with her strong sense of the comical, into a positive verbal coloratura of medical and diagnostic terms — Marie claimed that the mineral waters and particularly the so-called Auschowitz Springs had gained a great reputation for curing the obesity then so common among the middle classes, as well as digestive disturbances, sluggishness of the intestinal canal and other stoppages of the lower abdomen, irregular menstruation, cirrhosis of the liver, disorders of bile secretion, gout, hypochondriacal spleen, diseases of the kidneys, the bladder

and the urinary system, glandular swellings and scrofulous deformities, not to mention weakness of the nervous and muscular systems, fatigue, trembling of the limbs, paralysis, mucous and bloody fluxes, unsightly eruptions on the skin, and practically every other medical disorder known to the human race. I can just see them in my mind's eye, said Marie, a set of very corpulent men disregarding their doctors' advice and giving themselves up to the pleasures of the table, which even at a spa were lavish at the time, in order to suppress, by dint of their increasing girth, the anxiety for the security of their social position constantly stirring within them, and I see other patients, most of them ladies and rather pale and sallow already, deep in their own thoughts as they walk along the winding paths from one of the little temples which house fountains to the next, or else in elegiac mood, watching the play of the clouds moving over the narrow valley from the viewing points of the Amalienhöhe or Schloss Miramont. The rare sense of happiness that I felt as I listened to my companion talking, said Austerlitz, paradoxically enough gave me the idea that I myself, like the guests staying in Marienbad a hundred years ago, had contracted an insidious illness, and together

with that idea came the hope that I was now beginning to be cured. Indeed, I had never in my life passed over the threshold into sleep more securely than on that first night I spent with Marie. I listened to her regular breathing, and saw her beautiful face next to me every so often for a split second in the summer lightning that flashed across the sky. Then the rain fell steadily outside, the white curtains blew into the room, and as my mind became gradually submerged I felt, like a slight easing behind my forehead, the belief rise within me that I had found release at last. But nothing came of it. I woke before dawn with such an abysmal sense of distress that without even being able to look at Marie I sat up and, like a man seasick, had to perch on the edge of the bed. I had dreamed that one of the hotel servants brought us a drink of a virulent green colour for breakfast on a tin tray, with a French newspaper bearing an article on the front page which held forth on the necessity of reforming the spas, speaking several times of the sad lot of the hotel employees *qui portent*, so my dream newspaper put it, said Austerlitz, *ces longues blouses grises comme en portent les quincailliers*. The rest of the newspaper consisted almost entirely of death announcements the size of

postage stamps, in tiny print which I could decipher only with great difficulty. The announcements were not just in French but also in German, Polish and Dutch. I still remember, said Austerlitz, Frederieke van Wincklmann, whose death notice said that she had *kalm en rustig van ons heengegaan*, I remember the strange word *rouwkamer* and the information that *De bloemen worden na de crematieplechtigheid neergelegd aan de voet van het Indisch Monument te Den Haag*. I had gone over to the window, where I looked down the main street, still wet with rain, and saw the grand hotels ranged in a semi-circle rising to the heights, the Pacifik, the Atlantic, the Metropole, the Polonia and Bohemia with their rows of balconies, their corner turrets and roof ridges emerging from the morning mist like ocean-going steamers from a dark sea. At some time in the past, I thought, I must have made a mistake, and now I am living the wrong life. Later, on a walk through the deserted town and up to the fountain colonnade, I kept feeling as if someone else were walking beside me, or as if something had brushed against me. Every new view that opened out before us as we turned a corner, every façade, every flight of steps looked to me both familiar and utterly alien. I felt that the decrepit state of

these once magnificent buildings, with their broken gutters, walls blackened by rainwater, crumbling plaster revealing the coarse masonry beneath it, windows boarded up or clad with corrugated iron, precisely reflected my own state of mind, which I could not explain either to myself or to Marie, not on this first walk we took through the deserted park nor in the late afternoon, when we sat in the dimly lit *kavárna* of the Město Moskva under a picture of pink water-lilies measuring at least four square yards. I remember, said Austerlitz, that we ordered an ice cream, or rather, as it turned out, a confection resembling an ice cream, a plaster-like substance tasting of potato starch and notable chiefly for the fact that even after more than an hour it did not melt. Apart from us the only customers in the Město Moskva were two old gentlemen playing chess at one of the tables at the back. The waiter who was standing by the net curtains, which were discoloured with smoke, his hands behind his back and looking out, lost in thought, at the rubbish dump overgrown with giant hogweed on the other side of the road, was himself advanced in age. His white hair and moustache were carefully trimmed, and although he too wore one of those mouse-grey nylon coats it was

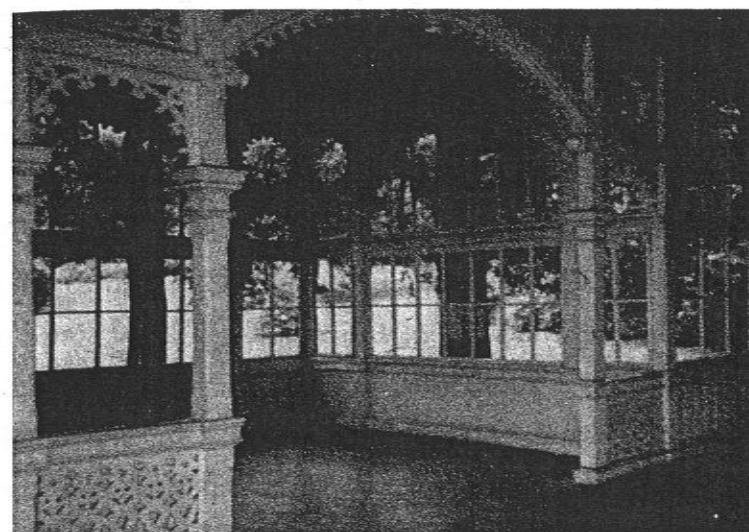
easy to imagine him in deep-black, well-cut tails, with a velvet bow-tie above a starched shirt-front radiant with supernatural cleanliness, wearing shiny patent-leather shoes which reflected the lamplight of a grand hotel lobby. When he brought Marie a flat pack of forty Cuban cigarettes displaying a pretty palm-frond motif, and then gave her a light with an elegantly executed gesture, I could see that she greatly admired him. The Cuban tobacco smoke hung in blue drifts in the air between us, and some time went by before Marie asked what was in my mind, why I was so abstracted, so lost in thought; how could I have lapsed so suddenly from the happy mood which she had sensed in me yesterday? And all I could say was that I didn't know. I think, said Austerlitz, I tried to explain that something or other unknown wrenched at my heart here in Marienbad, something very obvious like an ordinary name or a term which one cannot remember for the sake of anyone or anything in the world. I do not now recall in detail how we spent those few days in Marienbad, said Austerlitz. I know that I often lay for hours in the bubbling mineral baths and the rest rooms, which did me good in one way but in another may have weakened the resistance I had put up for so

many years against the emergence of memory. Once we went to a concert at the Gogol Theatre, where a Russian pianist called Bloch played the *Papillons* and *Kinderszenen* to an audience of half a dozen. On the way back to the hotel Marie spoke, almost as a warning, so it seemed to me, said Austerlitz, of the clouding of Schumann's mind as his madness came on and how at last, in the middle of carnival crowds in Düsseldorf, he took a leap over the parapet of the bridge into the icy waters of the Rhine, from which he was pulled out by two fishermen. He lived for a number of years after that, said Marie, in a private asylum for the mentally deranged near Bonn or Bad Godesberg, where he was visited by Clara and the young Brahms at intervals, and since it was impossible to converse with him any more, withdrawn from the world as he was and humming tunelessly to himself, they generally contented themselves with looking into his room for a while through a small trap in the door. As I listened to Marie and tried to imagine poor Schumann in his Bad Godesberg cell I had another picture constantly before my eyes, that of the pigeon loft we had passed on an excursion to Königswart. Like the country estate to which it belonged, this dovecote, which

may have dated from the Metternich period, was in an advanced state of decay. The floor inside the brick walls was covered with pigeon droppings compressed under their own weight, yet already over two feet high, a hard, desiccated mass on which lay the bodies of some of the birds who had fallen from their niches, mortally sick, while their companions, surviving in a kind of senile dementia, cooed at one another in tones of quiet complaint in the darkness under the roof, and a few downy feathers, spinning round in a little whirlwind, slowly sank through the air. The torment inherent in both these images that came into my mind in Marienbad, the mad Schumann and the pigeons immured in that place of horror, made it impossible for me to attain even the lowest step on the way to self-knowledge. On the final day of our visit, Austerlitz continued at last, in the evening and as if to say goodbye, we walked through the park and down to the Auschowitz Springs. There is a prettily built and fully glazed pump-room there, all painted white inside. In this pump-room, illuminated by the rays of the setting sun, where, apart from the regular splashing of the water, silence reigned entirely, Marie moved closer to me and asked whether I had remembered that

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tomorrow was my birthday. When we wake up tomorrow, she said, I shall wish you every happiness, and it will be like telling a machine working by some unknown mechanism that I hope it will run well. Can't you tell me the reason, she asked, said Austerlitz, why you remain so unapproachable? Why, she said, have you been like a pool of frozen water ever since we came here? Why do I see your lips opening as if you were about to say something, maybe even cry out loud, and then I hear not the slightest sound? Why did you never unpack when we arrived, always preferring to live out of a rucksack, as it were? We stood there a couple of paces apart, like two actors on stage. The colour of

Marie's eyes changed as the light dimmed. And once again I tried to explain to her and to myself what incomprehensible feelings had been weighing on me over the last few days; how I kept thinking, like a madman, that there were mysterious signs and portents all around me here; how it even seemed to me as if the silent façades of the buildings knew something ominous about me, how I had always believed I must be alone, and in spite of my longing for her I now felt it more than ever before. But it isn't true, said Marie, it isn't true that we need absence and loneliness. It isn't true. It's only in your mind. You are afraid of I don't know what. You have always been rather remote, of course, I could tell that, but now it's as if you stood on a threshold and you dared not step over it. That evening in Marienbad, said Austerlitz, I could not admit to myself how right everything Marie said was, but today I know why I felt obliged to turn away when anyone came too close to me, I know that I thought this turning away made me safe, and that at the same time I saw myself transformed into a frightful and hideous creature, a man beyond the pale. Dusk was gathering as we walked back through the park. Dark trees and bushes lined both sides of the white sandy path curving

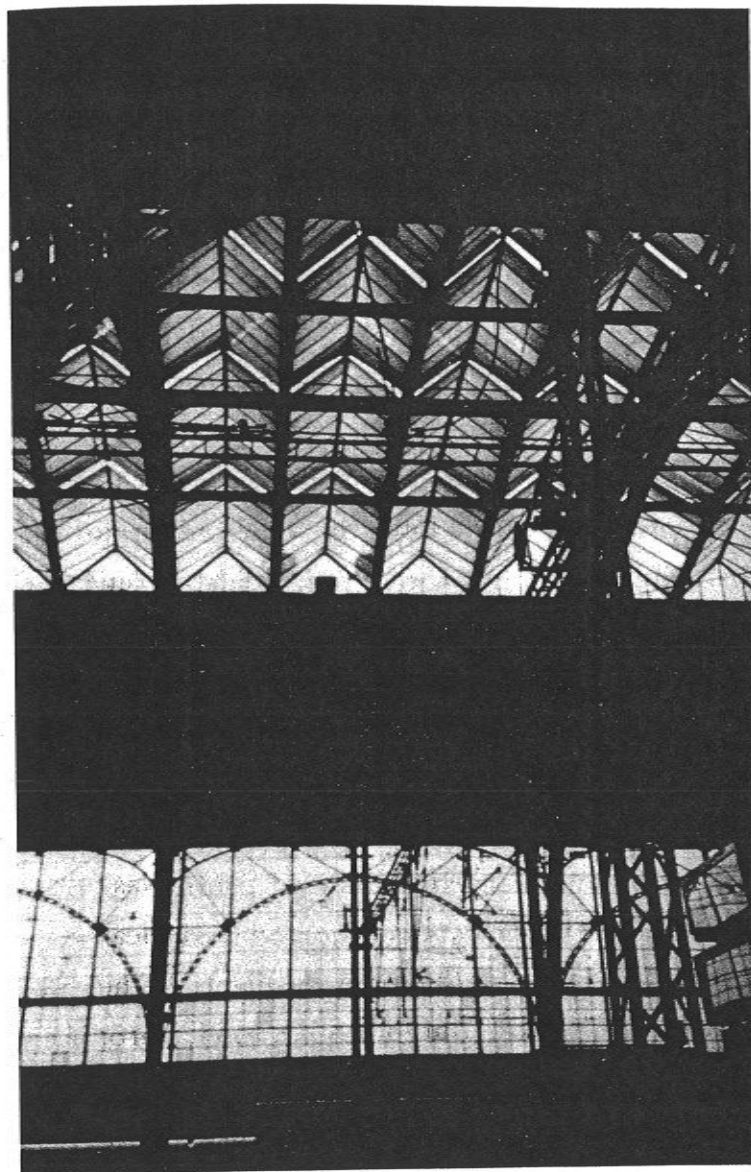
ahead of us, and Marie, whom I lost entirely soon afterwards, by my own fault, was murmuring something quietly to herself. All I remember of it now is a phrase about the poor lovers *qui se promenaient dans les allées désertes du parc*. We were almost back in the town, said Austerlitz, when a little company of some ten or a dozen small people emerged from the dark as if out of nowhere, at a place where white mist was already rising from the ground, and crossed our path. They were the sort of visitors sent to the spa because of their failing health by some Czech enterprise or other, or perhaps they came from one of the neighbouring Socialist countries. They were strikingly short, almost dwarfish figures, slightly bent, moving along in single file, and each of them held one of those pitiful plastic mugs from which the water of the springs was drunk in Mariánské Lázně at the time. I also remember, added Austerlitz, that without exception they wore raincoats of thin blue-grey Perlon, the kind of thing that had been fashionable in the West in the late 1950s. To this day I can sometimes hear the dry rustling with which, as suddenly as they had appeared on one side of the path, they vanished again on the other. — I dwelt on my memories of Marienbad all night after my last

Pages of love & memory

visit to the Šporkova, continued Austerlitz. As soon as it began to grow light outside I packed, left the hotel on Kampa Island, and crossed the Charles Bridge, which was wrapped in early mist, walked through the streets of the Old Town and over the still deserted Wenceslaus Square, making my way to the main station on Wilsonova which, as it turned out, did not correspond in the least to the idea I had formed of it from Věra's narrative. Its Jugendstil architecture, once famous far beyond Prague, had been surrounded, obviously in the 1960s, by ugly glass façades and concrete blocks, and it took me some time to find a way into this forbidding complex over a taxi ramp leading down to the basement storey. The low-ceilinged hall I now entered was crowded with throngs of people who had spent the night there among piles of luggage, huddled together in groups of various sizes, most of them still asleep. A sickening red-hued light immersed the entire apparently boundless encampment in a positively infernal glare as it shone from a slightly raised platform measuring at least ten by twenty metres, on which about a hundred games machines were arranged in several batteries, idling to no purpose and chanting inanely to themselves. I stepped over

some of the motionless bodies on the floor, went upstairs and downstairs but failed to find my way through this labyrinthine station, which seemed to consist of nothing but sales booths and stands of all kinds. Eventually I asked a uniformed man who came towards me: *Hlavní nádraží? Wilsonovo nádraží?* whereupon he took me carefully by the sleeve, like a lost child, guided me to a dark recess in a remote corner, and there showed me a memorial plaque saying that the station had been named in 1919 after the freedom-loving American President Wilson. When I had deciphered the memorial and nodded my thanks to the railway official, who had patiently stayed beside me, he led me round a few more corners and up several steps to a kind of mezzanine floor, from which I could look up at the mighty dome of the former Wilsonova station, or more accurately at half the dome, since the other half had been sliced away, so to speak, by the new construction towering up into it. Along the semi-circular lower rim of the dome ran a gallery with small café tables on it. When I had bought myself a ticket for the Hook of Holland I sat there for half an hour, until it was time for my train to leave, trying to think my way back through the decades, to remember what it

had been like when, carried in Agáta's arms — as Věra had told me, said Austerlitz — I craned my neck, unable to take my eyes off the vault reaching such a vast height above us. But neither Agáta nor Věra nor I myself emerged from the past. Sometimes it seemed as if the veil would part; I thought, for one fleeting instant, that I could feel the touch of Agáta's shoulder or see the picture on the front of the Charlie Chaplin comic which Věra had bought me for the journey, but as soon as I tried to hold one of these fragments fast, or get it into better focus, as it were, it disappeared into the emptiness revolving over my head. It was all the more surprising and indeed alarming a little later, said Austerlitz, when I looked out of the corridor window of my carriage just before the train left at seven-thirteen, to find it dawning upon me with perfect certainty that I had seen the pattern of the glass and steel roof above the platforms before, made up as it was of triangles, round arches, horizontal and vertical lines and diagonals, and in the same half-light. As the train rolled very slowly out of the station, through a passage between the backs of blocks of flats and into the dark tunnel running under the New Town, and then crossed the Vltava with a regular beat, it really



seemed to me, said Austerlitz, as if time had stood still since the day when I first left Prague. It was a dark, oppressive morning. A small lamp with a pink pleated shade, the kind of thing one used to see in the windows of Belgian brothels, stood on the white cloth covering the little table in the Czech State Railways dining car, where I was sitting in order to get a better view. The chef, his toque at an angle on his head, leaned in the entrance to his galley smoking and talking to the waiter, a curly-haired, slight little man in a check waistcoat and yellow bow-tie. Outside, under the lowering sky, meadows and fields passed by, fishponds, woods, the curve of a bend in a river, a stand of alders, hills and valleys, and at Beroun, if I remember correctly, a lime-works extending over a square mile or more, with chimneys and towering silos disappearing into the low clouds above, huge square buildings of crumbling concrete roofed with rusty corrugated iron, conveyor belts moving up and down, mills to grind the stone, conical mounds of gravel, huts and freight trucks, all of it uniformly covered with pale-grey sinter and dust. Then the wide countryside opened out again, and all the time I was looking out I never

saw a vehicle on the roads, or a single human being except for the station masters who, whether from boredom or habit or because of some regulation which they had to observe, had come out on the platform at even the smallest stations such as Holoubkov, Chrást or Rokycany in their red uniform caps, most of them, it seemed to me, sporting blond moustaches, and determined not to miss the Prague express as it thundered by on this pallid April morning. All I remember of Pilsen, where we stopped for some time, said Austerlitz, is that I went out on the platform to photograph the capital of a cast-iron column which had touched some chord of recognition in me. What made me uneasy at the sight of it, however, was not the question of whether the complex form of the capital, now covered with a puce-tinged encrustation, had really impressed itself on my mind when I passed through Pilsen with the children's transport in the summer of 1939, but the idea, ridiculous in itself, that this cast-iron column, which with its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being, might remember me and was, if I may so put it, said Austerlitz, a witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself. Beyond Pilsen the

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line ran towards the mountains dividing Bohemia from Bavaria. Soon the gradient was delaying the tempo of the train, and dark forests were almost encroaching on the railway embankment. Swathes of mist or low, drifting cloud hung among the dripping pines, until after about an hour the line went downhill again, the valley gradually broadened, and we came out into pleasant countryside. I don't know what I had expected of Germany, said Austerlitz, but wherever I looked I saw trim towns and villages, neat yards around factories and industrial buildings, lovingly tended gardens, piles of firewood tidily stacked under cover, level asphalted cart tracks running through the meadows, roads with brightly coloured cars purring along them at great speed, well-managed woodland, regulated watercourses and new railway buildings where the station masters obviously felt under no obligation to come out. Parts of the sky had cleared, cheerful patches of sunlight lit up the country here and there, and the train, which had often seemed to be having difficulty in making any progress on the Czech side of the border, was now suddenly racing along with almost improbable ease. Around midday we

reached Nuremberg, and when I saw the name on a signal box in its German spelling of Nürnberg, which was unfamiliar to me, I remembered what Věra had said about my father's account of the National Socialist Party rally of 1936 and the roars of acclamation rising from the people who had gathered here at the time. Although I had really meant to do no more than ask about my next connections, said Austerlitz, that recollection may have been why I walked out of Nuremberg station without pausing to think and on into that unknown city. I had never before set foot on German soil, I had always avoided learning anything at all about German topography, German history or modern German life, and so, said Austerlitz, Germany was probably more unfamiliar to me than any other country in the world, more foreign even than Afghanistan or Paraguay. As soon as I had emerged from the underpass in front of the station I was swept along by a huge crowd of people who were streaming down the entire breadth of the street, rather like water in a river bed, going in not just one but both directions, as if flowing simultaneously up- and downstream. I think it was a Saturday, the day when people go to shop in town,

inundating these pedestrian zones which apparently, as I was told later, said Austerlitz, exist in more or less the same form in all German cities. The first thing that caught my eye on this excursion was the great number of grey, brown and green loden coats and hats, and how well and sensibly everyone was dressed in general, how remarkably solid were the shoes of the pedestrians of Nuremberg. I avoided looking closely at the faces coming towards me, and thought it odd that few of these people raised their voices as they moved quietly through the city. Looking up at the façades on both sides of the street, even those of the older buildings which, judging by their style, must date from the sixteenth or fifteenth century, I was troubled to realize that I could not see a crooked line anywhere, not at the corners of the houses or on the gables, the window frames or the sills, nor was there any other trace of past history. I remember, said Austerlitz, that the paving under my feet sloped slightly downhill, that once, looking over the parapet of a bridge, I caught sight of two snow-white swans swimming on black water, and then, high above the rooftops, of the castle, somehow miniaturized and in postage-stamp format, so to

speak. I could not bring myself to go into a café or buy anything from one of the many stalls and booths. When I turned to go back to the station after about an hour, I felt increasingly as if I had to struggle against a current growing ever stronger, perhaps because I was now going uphill, or maybe there were in fact more people moving one way than the other. In any case, said Austerlitz, I felt more panic-stricken with every passing minute, so that at last, although I was not at all far from the station, I had to stop under the red sandstone arch of a window displaying the pages of the local Nuremberg newspaper, where I waited until the crowds of shoppers had to some extent thinned out. I cannot now say for certain how long I stood there, my senses dazed, on the outer edge of this flood of Germans moving endlessly past me, said Austerlitz, but I think it was four or five o'clock by the time an elderly woman wearing a kind of Tyrolean hat with a cockerel's feather in it stopped beside me, probably taking me for one of the homeless because of my old rucksack, fetched a one-mark coin out of her purse with arthritic fingers, and carefully handed it to me as alms. I was still holding this coin, minted in 1956 with the

head of Chancellor Adenauer on it, when I was finally in the train again late that afternoon, traveling towards Cologne, said Austerlitz. I stood in the corridor looking out of the window almost throughout this part of the journey. I think it was between Würzburg and Frankfurt that the line ran through a densely forested region with leafless stands of oak and beech trees, and mile upon mile of conifers. As I gazed out a distant memory came to me of a dream I often had both in the manse at Bala and later, a dream of a nameless land without borders and entirely overgrown by dark forests, which I had to cross without any idea where I was going, and it dawned upon me, said Austerlitz, that what I now saw going past outside the train was the original of the images that had haunted me for so many years. Then I recollected another idea which had obsessed me over a long period: the image of a twin brother who had been with me on that long journey, sitting motionless by the window of the compartment, staring out into the dark. I knew nothing about him, not even his name, and I had never exchanged so much as a word with him, but whenever I thought of him I was tormented by the notion that towards the end

of the journey he had died of consumption and was stowed in the baggage net with the rest of our belongings. And then, Austerlitz continued, somewhere beyond Frankfurt, when I entered the Rhine valley for the second time in my life, the sight of the Mäuseturm in the part of the river known as the Binger Loch revealed, with absolute



certainty, why the tower in Lake Vyrnwy had always seemed to me so uncanny. I could not take my eyes off the great river Rhine flowing sluggishly along in the dusk, the apparently motionless barges lying low in the water, which almost lapped over their decks, the trees and bushes on the other bank, the fine cross-hatching of the vineyards, the stronger transverse lines of the walls supporting

the terraces, the slate-grey rocks and ravines leading off sideways into what seemed to me a pre-historic and unexplored realm. While I was still under the spell of this landscape, to me a truly mythological one, said Austerlitz, the setting sun broke through the clouds, filled the entire valley with its radiance, and illuminated the heights on the other side where three gigantic chimneys towered into the sky at the place we were just passing, making the steep slopes on the eastern mountains look like hollow shells, mere camouflage for an underground industrial site covering many square miles. Passing through the valley of the Rhine, said Austerlitz, you can scarcely tell what century it is. As you look out of the train window it is difficult to say even of the castles standing high above the river, bearing such strange and somehow preposterous names as Reichenstein, Ehrenfels and Stahleck, whether they are medieval or were built by the industrial barons of the nineteenth century. Some of them, for instance Burg Katz and Burg Maus, seem to be rooted in legend, and even the ruins resemble a romantic stage set. At least, I no longer knew in what period of my life I was living as I journeyed down the Rhine valley. Through the

evening sunlight I saw the glow of a fiery dawn rising from my past above the other bank, pervading the whole sky. Even today, Austerlitz continued, when I think of my Rhine journeys, the second of them hardly less terrifying than the first, everything becomes confused in my head: my experiences of that time, what I have read, memories surfacing and then sinking out of sight again, consecutive images and distressing blank spots where nothing at all is left. I see that German landscape, said Austerlitz, as it was described by earlier travellers, the great river not yet regulated in any way, flooding its banks in places, salmon leaping in the water, crayfish crawling over the fine sand; I see Victor Hugo's sombre pen-and-ink drawings of the Rhine castles, and Joseph Mallord Turner sitting on a folding stool not far from the murderous town of Bacharach, swiftly painting his water-colours; I see the deep waters of Lake Vyrnwy and the people of Llanwddyn submerged in them; and I see, said Austerlitz, the great army of mice, a grey horde said to have plagued the German countryside, plunging into the river and swimming desperately, their little throats raised only just above the water, to reach the safety of the island.

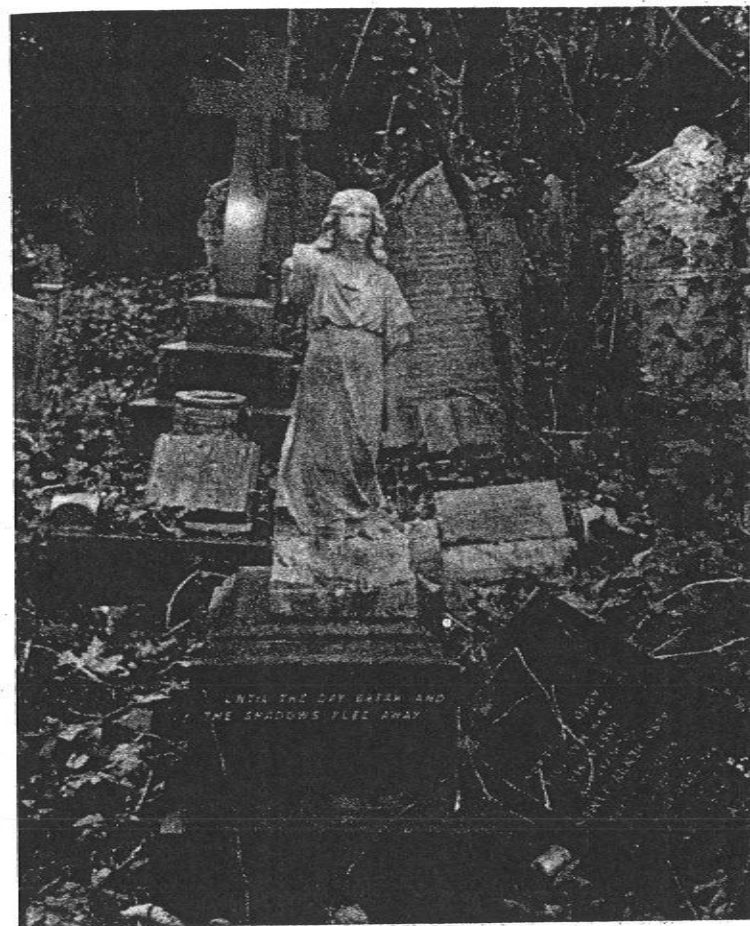
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— Imperceptibly, the day had begun drawing to a close as Austerlitz talked, and the light was already fading when we left the house in Alderney Street together to walk a little way out of town, along the Mile End Road to the large Tower Hamlets cemetery, which is surrounded by a tall, dark brick wall and, like the adjoining complex of St Clement's Hospital, according to a remark made by Austerlitz in passing, was one of the scenes of this phase of his story. In the twilight slowly falling over London we walked along the paths of the cemetery, past monuments



erected by the Victorians to commemorate their dead, past mausoleums, marble crosses, stelae and obelisks, bulbous urns and statues of angels, many of them wingless or otherwise mutilated, turned to stone, so it seemed to me, at the very moment when they were about to take off



from the earth. Most of these memorials had long ago been tilted to one side or thrown over entirely by the roots of the sycamores which were shooting up everywhere. The sarcophagi covered with pale-green, grey, ochre and orange lichens were broken, some of the graves themselves had

risen above the ground or sunk into it, so that you might think an earthquake had shaken this abode of the departed, or else that, summoned to the Last Judgment, they had upset, as they rose from their resting places, the neat and tidy order we impose on them. In the first few weeks after his return from Bohemia, Austerlitz continued his tale as we walked on, he had learnt by heart the names and dates of birth and death of those buried here, he had taken home pebbles and ivy leaves and on one occasion a stone rose, and the stone hand broken off one of the angels, but however much my walks in Tower Hamlets might soothe me during the day, said Austerlitz, at night I was plagued by the most frightful anxiety attacks which sometimes lasted for hours on end. It was obviously of little use that I had discovered the sources of my distress and, looking back over all the past years, could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar surroundings: reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation which I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement. Soon I would be overcome by this terrible anxiety in the midst of the simplest actions: tying my shoelaces,

washing up teacups, waiting for the kettle to boil. All of a sudden my tongue and palate would be as dry as if I had been lying in the desert for days, I had to fight harder and harder for breath, my heart began to flutter and palpitate in my throat, cold sweat broke out all over my body, even on the back of my trembling hand, and everything I looked at was veiled by a black mist. I felt like screaming but could not utter a sound, I wanted to walk out into the street but was unable to move from the spot; once, after a long and painful contraction, I actually visualized myself being broken up from within, so that parts of my body were scattered over a dark and distant terrain. I cannot say now, said Austerlitz, how many such attacks I suffered at the time, but one day, when I collapsed on my way to the kiosk at the end of Alderney Street, striking my head against the edge of the pavement, I was taken to St Clement's as the last in a series of various casualty departments and hospitals, and there found myself in one of the men's wards when at last I returned to my senses, after what I was told later had been nearly three weeks of mental absence which, though it did not impair the bodily functions, paralysed all thought processes and emotions.

I walked around in this place, said Austerlitz, his left hand pointing to the tall brick façade of the hospital building towering behind the wall, in the curiously remote state of mind induced by the drugs I was being given; both desolate and weirdly contented I wandered, all through that winter, up and down the long corridors, staring out for hours through one of the dirty windows at the cemetery below, where



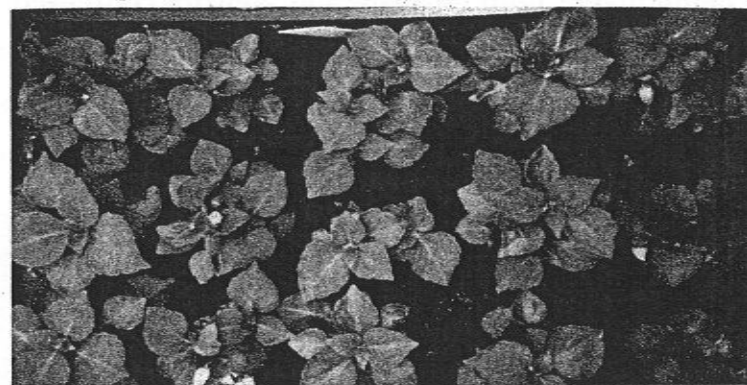
we are standing now, feeling nothing inside my head but the four burnt-out walls of my brain. Later, when there had been some improvement in my condition, I looked through a telescope given to me by one of the nurses and watched the foxes running wild in the cemetery in the grey dawn. I would see squirrels dodging back and forth, or sitting quite still, arrested, as it were, in mid-motion. I studied

the faces of those solitary people who visited the graveyard now and then, or I observed the slow wingbeats of an owl in its curving flight over the tombstones at nightfall. Occasionally I talked to one of the other hospital patients, a roofer, for instance, who said he could recollect with perfect clarity the moment when, just as he was about to fix a slate in place, something that had been stretched too taut inside him snapped at a particular spot behind his forehead; and for the first time he heard, coming over the crackling transistor wedged into the batten in front of him, the voices of those bearers of bad tidings which had haunted him ever since. While I was there I also thought quite often of Elias the minister lapsing into madness, and of the stone-built asylum in Denbigh where he died. But I found it impossible to think of myself, my own history, or my present state of mind. I was not discharged until the beginning of April, a year after returning from Prague. The last doctor whom I saw at the hospital advised me to look for some kind of light physical occupation, perhaps in horticulture, she suggested, and so for the next two years, at the time of day when office staff are pouring into the City, I went out the other way to Romford and my new place of

work, a council-run nursery garden on the outskirts of a large park which employed, as well as the trained gardeners, a certain number of assistants who suffered from disabilities or required to have their minds set at rest by some quiet pursuit. I cannot say, said Austerlitz, why I began to recover in some degree out at Romford in the course of those months, whether it was because of the people in whose company I found myself, who though they all bore the scars of their mental sufferings often seemed carefree and very cheerful, or the constant warm, humid atmosphere in the greenhouses, the mossy, forest-ground fragrance filling the air, the rectilinear patterns presented to the eye, or simply the even tenor of the work itself, the careful prick-

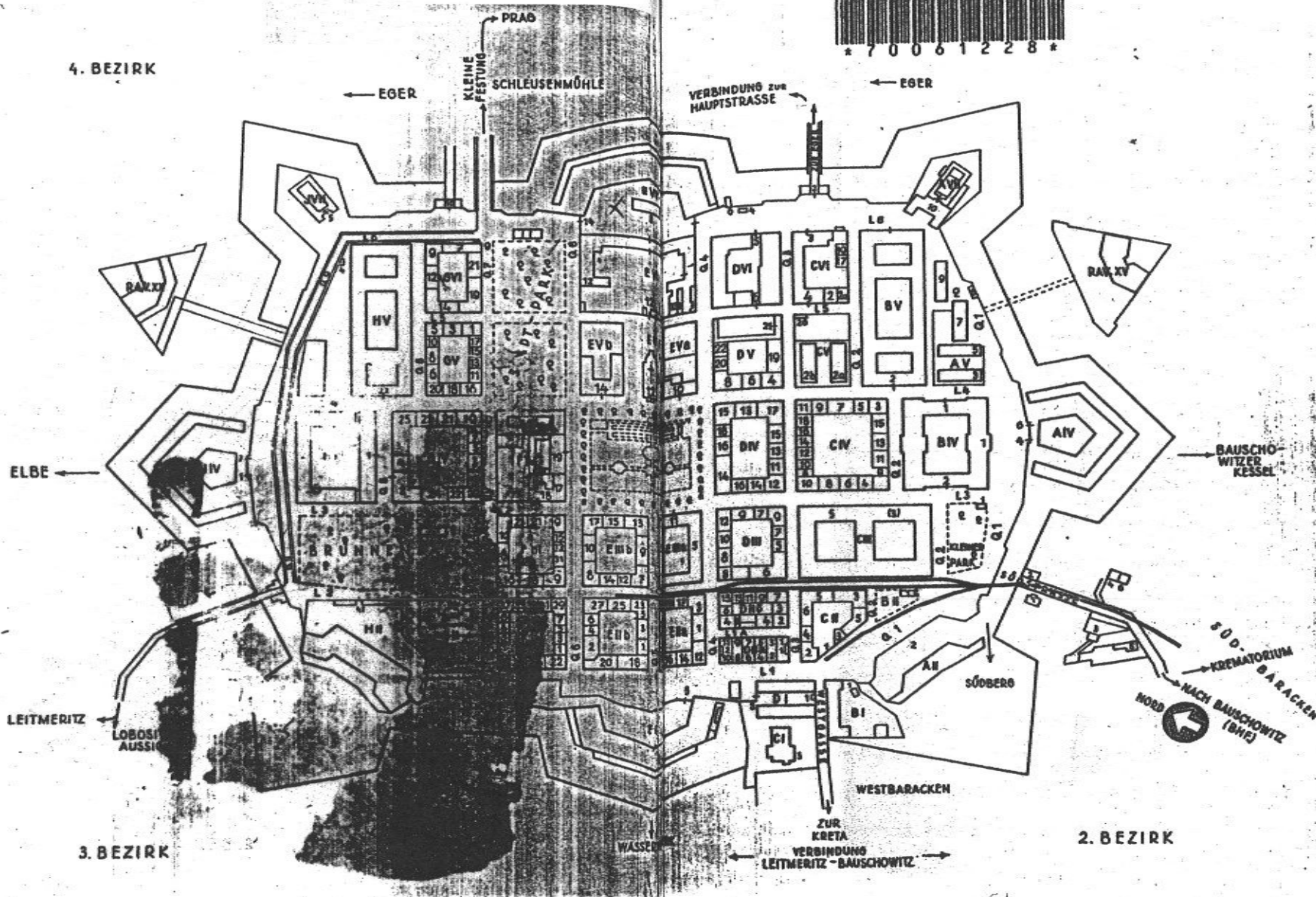


ing out and potting up of seedlings, transplanting them when they had grown larger, looking after the cold frames and watering the trays with a fine hose, which I liked perhaps best of all. At the time when I



was working as an assistant gardener in Romford, said Austerlitz, I began to spend my evenings and weekends poring over the heavy tome, running to almost eight hundred close-printed pages, which H. G. Adler, a name previously unknown to me, had written between 1945 and 1947 in the most difficult of circumstances, partly in Prague and partly in London, on the subject of the setting up, development and internal organization of the Theresienstadt ghetto, and which he had revised several times before it was brought out by a German publishing house in 1955. Reading this book, which

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line by line gave me an insight into matters I could never have imagined when I myself visited the fortified town, almost entirely ignorant as I was at that time, was a painstaking business because of my poor knowledge of German, and indeed, said Austerlitz, I might well say it was almost as difficult for me as deciphering an Egyptian or Babylonian text in hieroglyphic or cuneiform script. The long compounds, not listed in my dictionary, which were obviously being spawned the whole time by the pseudo-technical jargon governing everything in Theresienstadt had to be unravelled syllable by syllable. When I had finally discovered the meaning of such terms and concepts as *Barackenbestandteillager*, *Zusatzkostenberechnungsschein*, *Bagatellreparaturwerkstätte*, *Menagetransportkolonnen*, *Küchenbeschwerdeorgane*, *Reinlichkeitsreihenuntersuchung*, and *Entwesungsübersiedlung* — to my surprise, Austerlitz articulated these heterogeneous German compounds unhesitatingly and without the slightest trace of an accent — when I had worked out what they meant, he continued, I had to make just as much of an effort to fit the presumptive sense of my reconstructions into the sentences and the wider context, which kept threatening to elude me, first because it

quite often took me until midnight to master a single page, and a good deal was lost in this lengthy process, and second because in its almost futuristic deformation of social life the ghetto system had something incomprehensible and unreal about it, even though Adler describes it down to the last detail in its objective actuality. It seems unpardonable to me today that I had blocked off the investigation of my most distant past for so many years, not on principle, to be sure, but still of my own accord, and that now it is too late for me to seek out Adler, who had lived in London until his death in the summer of 1988, and talk to him about that extra-territorial place where at the time, as I think I have mentioned before, said Austerlitz, some sixty thousand people were crammed together in an area little more than a square kilometre in size — industrialists and manufacturers, lawyers and doctors, rabbis and university professors, singers and composers, bank managers, businessmen, shorthand typists, housewives, farmers, labourers and millionaires, people from Prague and the rest of the Protectorate, from Slovakia, from Denmark and Holland, from Vienna and Munich, Cologne and Berlin, from the Palatinate, from Lower Franconia and Westphalia — each of

Verzeichnis der als Sonderweisungen bezeichneten Arbeiten.

1. Dienststelle
2. Kameradschaftsheim
3. SS-Garage
4. Kleine Feste
5. Deutsche Dienstpost
6. Reserve-Lazarett
7. Berliner Dienststelle
8. Gendarmerie
9. Reichsappellat
10. Landwirtschaft
11. Torfabrik
12. Schleusenmühle
13. Eisenbahn Ing. Figlovský
14. Eisenbahn eig. Rechnung
15. Feuerlöscheinrichtung E I, H IV
16. Straßenbau Leimeritz
17. Straßenbau f. Rechnung Ing. Figlovský (T 321)
18. Uhrenreparaturwerkstätte
19. Zentralbau f. d. Regelung der Judenfrage in Prag
20. Bau des Wasserwerks (T 423)

a) Ing. Figlovský	b) Artura, Prag
c) Ing. C. Píra, Prag	d) sonstige Posten
21. Silagebau Ing. Figlovský (Hilfsdienst)
22. Kanalisationsarbeiten (T 45)
23. Kanalisationsarbeiten für Rechnung Ing. Figlovský
24. Bau der Silagegrube Ing. Figlovský
25. Steinbruch Kamah
26. Karosseriebau
27. Hilfsarbeiten und Schweißerei Kamah-Leimeritz
28. Kreis-Bäumen und deren Erhaltungskosten
29. Chemische Kontrollarbeiten
30. Gruppe Dr. Weidmann (s. 19. Kap.)
31. Bucherstattungsgruppe (s. 19. Kap.)
32. Schutzbrillenerzeugung
33. Uniformkonfektion
34. Kinderspielzeug
35. Zentralbad (arische Abt.)
36. Glühbirnenfabrik
37. Kaninchenzucht
38. Tonenpulverarbeiten
39. Elektrizitätswerk
40. Kartonagenwerkstätte
41. Lehrspiele
42. Maschinenwarenherstellung (früher Galanterie)
43. Instandhaltung von Uniformen
44. Jutesack-Reparatur
45. Bijouterie
46. Straßenerhaltung und Straßenreinigung
47. Arbeitsgruppe Jungfern-Breschan
48. Projektierte Hydrozentrale
49. NSFK-Flagplatz
50. Schlachthof
51. Schneefräse
52. Holzkohlerzeugung

whom had to make do with about two square metres of space in which to exist and all of them, in so far as they were in any condition to do so or until they were loaded into trucks and sent on east, obliged to

work entirely without remuneration in one of the primitive factories set up, with a view to generating actual profit, by the External Trade Section, assigned to the bandage-weaving workshop, to the handbag and satchel assembly line, the production of horn buttons and other haberdashery items, the manufacturing of wooden soles for footwear and of cowhide galoshes, to the charcoal yard, the making of such board games as Nine Men's Morris and Catch the Hat, the splitting of mica, the shearing of rabbit fur, the bottling of ink dust, the silkworm-breeding station run under the aegis of the SS or, alternatively, employed in one of the operations serving the ghetto's internal economy, in the clothing store, for instance, in one of the precinct mending and darning rooms, the shredding section, the rag depot, the book reception and sorting unit, the kitchen brigade, the potato-peeling platoon, the bone-crushing mill, the glue-boiling plant or the mattress department, as medical and nursing auxiliaries, in the disinfection and rodent-control service, the floor-space-allocation office, the central registration bureau, the self-administration housed in barrack block BV, known as 'The Castle', or in the transport of goods maintained within the walls of the fortress by means

of a medley of carts of every conceivable kind and four dozen ancient hearses brought from the now defunct Jewish communities in the Bohemian countryside to Terezín, where they moved along the crowded streets with two men harnessed between the shafts and four to eight pushing or putting their weight against the spokes of the wheels of these oddly swaying conveyances, which were covered by ulcerations of peeling black varnish and from which, before long, the rickety superstructures, high-built coach-boxes and silver-bronzed canopies resting on turned columns had been roughly sawn away, so that the lower parts, on the sides of which rows of letters and numbers were coarsely painted in lime-wash, scarcely betrayed their former function, a function, said Austerlitz, for which they were still frequently employed even now, since much of the load carted round Theresienstadt every day was made up of the dead, of whom there were always a great many because the high population density and poor diet rendered it impossible for the course of such infectious diseases as scarlet fever, enteritis, diphtheria, jaundice and tuberculosis to be stemmed, and because the average age of those brought from all regions of the German Reich to the ghetto was over

seventy, and these people, who before they were sent away had been led to believe some tale about a pleasant resort in Bohemia called Theresienbad, with beautiful gardens, promenades, boarding houses and villas, and many of whom had been persuaded or forced to sign contracts, so-called *Heimeinkaufsverträge*, said Austerlitz, offering them, against deposits of up to eighty thousand Reichsmarks, the right of residence in what was described



to them as a most salubrious place, these people, Austerlitz continued, had come to Theresienstadt, completely misled by the illusions implanted in their minds, carrying in their luggage all manner of personal items and mementoes which could be of no conceivable use in the life that awaited them in the ghetto, often arriving already ravaged in body and spirit, no longer in their right minds, delirious, frequently unable to remember their own names,

surviving the procedure of being sluiced in, as it was termed, either not at all or only by a few days, in which latter case, on account of the extreme psychopathic personality changes which they had undergone and which generally resulted in a kind of infantilism divorcing them from reality and entailing an almost total loss of the ability to speak and act, they were immediately sectioned in the casemate of the Cavalier Barracks, which served as a psychiatric ward and where they usually perished within a week under the dreadful conditions prevailing there, so that although there was no shortage of doctors and surgeons in Theresienstadt who cared for their fellow prisoners as best they could, and in spite of the steam-disinfection boiler installed in the malting kiln of the former brewery, the hydrogen-cyanide chamber and other hygienic measures introduced by the Kommandantur in an all-out campaign against infestation with lice, the number of the dead – entirely in line, said Austerlitz, with the intentions of the masters of the ghetto – rose to well above twenty thousand in the ten months between August 1942 and May 1943 alone, as a result of which the joiner's workshop in the former riding school could no longer make enough deal coffins, there were

sometimes more than five hundred dead bodies stacked in layers on top of each other in the central morgue in the casemate by the gateway to the Bohuševice road, and the four naphtha-fired incinerators of the crematorium, kept going day and night in cycles of forty minutes at a time, were stretched to the utmost limits of their capacity, said Austerlitz, and this comprehensive system of internment and forced labour which, in Theresienstadt as elsewhere, was ultimately directed, so he continued, solely at the extinction of life and was built on an organizational plan regulating all functions and responsibilities, as Adler's reconstruction shows, with a crazed administrative zeal – from the use of whole troops of workers in building the branch railway line from Bohuševice to the fort, to the one man whose job it was to keep the clock mechanism in the closed Catholic church in order – this system had to be constantly supervised and statistically accounted for, particularly with respect to the total number of inmates of the ghetto, an uncommonly time-consuming business going far beyond civilian requirements when you remember that new transports were arriving all the time, and people were regularly weeded out to be sent elsewhere with their

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T. Austerlitz
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files marked *R.N.E.* for *Rückkehr Nicht Erwünscht*, Return Not Desired, a purpose for which the SS men responsible, who regarded numerical accuracy as one of their highest principles, had a census taken several times, on one occasion, if I remember correctly, said Austerlitz, on 10 November 1943 outside the gates in the open fields of the Bohuševice basin, when the entire population of the ghetto – children, old people and any of the sick at all able to walk not excepted – was marched out after assembling in the barracks yards at dawn to be drawn up in block formation behind numbered wooden boards, and there, throughout the whole of this cold and damp day, as the fog drifted over the fields, they were forced to wait, guarded by armed police and not permitted to step out of line even for a minute, for the SS men to arrive, as they eventually did on their motorbikes at three o'clock, to carry out the count of heads and then repeat it twice before they could feel convinced that the final result, including those few still within the walls, did in fact tally with the expected number of forty thousand one hundred and forty-five, whereupon they rode away again in some haste, entirely forgetting to give any orders for the inmates' return, so that this great crowd of many

thousands stood out in the Bohuševice basin on that grey tenth of November drenched to the skin and increasingly distressed until well after dark, bowed and swaying like reeds in the showers that now swept over the countryside, before finally, driven to it by a wave of panic, they poured back into the town from which most of them had never emerged except for this one time since their transfer to Theresienstadt, where soon after the beginning of the new year, said Austerlitz, what was described as a *Verschönerungsaktion* or general improvement campaign was undertaken, with an eye to the imminent visit in the early summer of 1944 of a Red Cross commission, an event regarded by those authorities of the Reich responsible as a good opportunity to dissimulate the true nature of their deportation policy, and consequently it was decided to organize the ghetto inmates under the command of the SS for the purpose of a vast cleaning-up programme: pathways and a grove with a columbarium were laid out, park benches and signposts were set up, the latter adorned in the German fashion with jolly carvings and floral decoration, over a thousand rose-bushes were planted, a children's nursery and crèche or *Kriechlingskrippe*, as it was termed, said Austerlitz, in

one of those perverse formulations, were adorned with pretty fairy-tale friezes and equipped with sand-pits, paddling pools and merry-go-rounds, whilst the former OREL cinema, which until now had served as a dumping ground for the oldest inmates of the ghetto and where a huge chandelier still hung from the ceiling in the dark space inside, was converted within a few weeks into a concert hall and theatre, and elsewhere shops stocked with goods from the SS storehouses were opened for the sale of food and household utensils, ladies' and gentlemen's clothing, shoes, underwear, travel requisites and suitcases; there were also a convalescent home, a chapel, a lending library, a gymnasium, a post office, a bank where the manager's office was furnished with a sort of field marshal's desk and a suite of easy chairs, not to mention a coffee-house with sun umbrellas and folding chairs outside it to suggest the agreeable atmosphere of a resort inviting all passers-by to linger for a while, and indeed there was no end to the improvements and embellishments, with much sawing, hammering and painting until the time of the visit itself approached and Theresienstadt, after another seven and a half thousand of the less presentable inmates had been sent east amidst all this

busy activity, to thin out the population, so to speak, became a Potemkin village or sham Eldorado which may have dazzled even some of the inhabitants themselves and where, when the appointed day came, the commission of two Danes and one Swiss official, having been guided, in conformity with a precise plan and a timetable drawn up by the Kommandant's office, through the streets and over the spotless pavements, scrubbed with soap early that morning, could see for themselves the friendly, happy folk who had been spared the horrors of war and were looking out of the windows, could see how smartly they were all dressed, how well the few sick people were cared for, how they were given proper meals served on plates, how the bread ration was handed out by people in white drill gloves, how posters advertising sporting events, cabarets, theatrical performances and concerts were being put up on every corner and how, when the day's work was over, the residents of the town flocked out in their thousands on the ramparts and bastions to take the air, almost as if they were passengers enjoying an evening stroll on the deck of an ocean-going steamer, a most reassuring spectacle, all things considered, which the Germans, whether for propaganda purposes or in

order to justify their actions and conduct to themselves, thought fit after the end of the Red Cross visit to record in a film, which Adler tells us, said Austerlitz, was given a soundtrack of Jewish folk music in March 1945, when a considerable number of the people who had appeared in it were no longer alive, and a copy of which, again according to Adler, had apparently turned up in the British-occupied zone after the war, although he, Adler himself, said Austerlitz, never saw it, and thought it was now lost without trace. For months, said Austerlitz, I tried in vain, through the good offices of the Imperial War Museum and other agencies, to find any clue to the present location of that film, since although I had been to Theresienstadt before leaving Prague, and despite Adler's meticulous account, which I had read down to the last footnote with the greatest attention, I found myself unable to cast my mind back to the ghetto and picture my mother Agáta there at the time. I kept thinking that if only the film could be found I might perhaps be able to see or gain some inkling of what it was really like, and then I imagined recognizing Agáta, beyond any possibility of doubt, a young woman as she would be by comparison with me today, perhaps among the guests outside the fake

coffee-house, or a saleswoman in the haberdashery shop, just taking a fine pair of gloves carefully out of one of the drawers, or singing the part of Olympia in the *Tales of Hoffmann* which, so Adler says, was staged in Theresienstadt in the course of the improvements campaign. I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and lightweight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me. It was wishful fantasies such as these which cast me into a state of great excitement when the Imperial War Museum finally succeeded, through the Federal Archives in Berlin, in obtaining a cassette copy of the film of Theresienstadt for which I had been searching. I remember very clearly, said Austerlitz, how I sat in one of the museum's video viewing rooms, placed the cassette in the black opening of the recorder with trembling hands, and then, although unable to take in any of it, watched various tasks being carried out at the anvil and forge of a smithy, in the pottery and wood-carving workshop, in the handbag-making and shoe-manufacturing sections —

a constant, pointless to-do of hammering, metal-beating and welding, cutting, gluing and stitching; I saw an unbroken succession of strangers' faces emerge before me for a few seconds, I saw workers leaving the huts when the siren had sounded and crossing an empty field beneath a sky filled with motionless white clouds, a game of football in the inner court of one of the barrack buildings, with hundreds of cheerful spectators crowding the arcades and the galleries on the first and second floors, I saw men under the showers in the central bathhouse, books being borrowed from the library by gentlemen of soigné appearance, I saw a full-scale orchestral concert and, in the moat surrounding the fortified town, kitchen gardens neatly laid out where several dozen people were raking the vegetable beds, watering beans and tomatoes, searching brassica leaves for Cabbage White caterpillars, whilst at the end of the day others were sitting on benches outside the houses, apparently in perfect contentment, letting the children play a little longer, one man reading a book, a woman talking to her neighbour, many of them just taking their ease at their windows, arms folded, in a way once common at the onset of dusk. At first I could get none of these

images into my head; they merely flickered before my eyes as the source of continual irritation or vexation, which was further reinforced when, to my horror, it turned out that the Berlin cassette inscribed with the original title of *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* had on it only a patchwork of scenes cobbled together and lasting some fourteen minutes, scarcely more than an opening sequence in which, despite the hopes I had entertained, I could not see Agáta anywhere, however often I ran the tape and however hard I strained to make her out among those fleeting faces. In the end the impossibility of seeing anything more closely in those pictures, which seemed to dissolve even as they appeared, said Austerlitz, gave me the idea of having a slow-motion copy of this fragment from Theresienstadt made, one which would last a whole hour, and indeed once the scant document was extended to four times its original length, it did reveal previously hidden objects and people, creating, by default as it were, a different sort of film altogether, which I have since watched over and over again. The men and women employed in the workshops now looked as if they were toiling in their sleep, so long did it take them to draw needle and thread through the air as they

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stitched, so heavily did their eyelids sink, so slowly did their lips move as they looked wearily up at the camera. They seemed to be hovering rather than walking, as if their feet no longer quite touched the ground. The contours of their bodies were blurred and, particularly in the scenes shot out of doors in broad daylight, had dissolved at the edges, resembling, as it occurred to me, said Austerlitz, the frayed outlines of the human hand shown in the fluidal pictures and electrographs taken by Louis Draget in Paris around the turn of the century. The many damaged sections of the tape, which I had hardly noticed before, now melted the image from its centre or from the edges, blotting it out and instead making patterns of bright white sprinkled with black which reminded me of aerial photographs taken in the far north, or a drop of water seen under the microscope. Strangest of all, however, said Austerlitz, was the transformation of sounds in this slow-motion version. In a brief sequence at the very beginning, showing red-hot iron being worked in a smithy to shoe a draught ox, the merry polka by some Austrian operetta composer on the soundtrack of the Berlin copy had become a funeral march dragging along at a grotesquely sluggish pace, and the rest

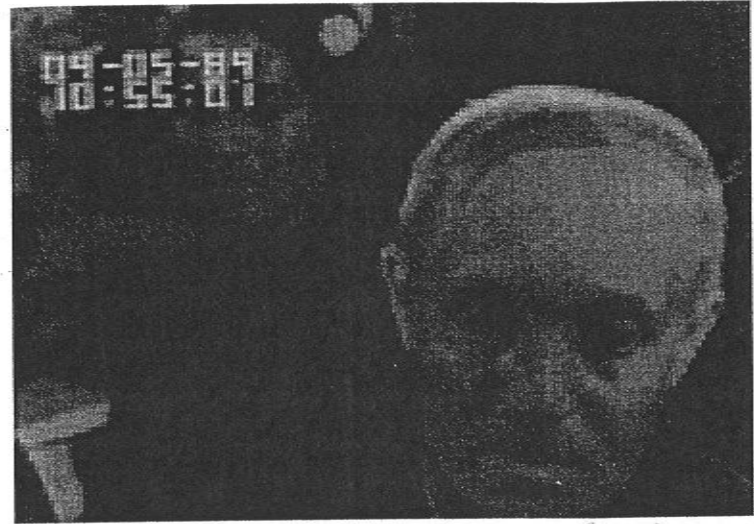
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of the musical pieces accompanying the film, among which I could identify only the can-can from *La Vie Parisienne* and the scherzo from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, also moved in a kind of subterranean world, through the most nightmarish depths, said Austerlitz, to which no human voice has ever descended. None of the words of the commentary could be distinguished any more. At the point where, on the original Berlin copy, a male voice, in high-pitched, strenuous tones forced through the larynx, had spoken of task forces and cohorts of workers deployed, as circumstances required, in various different ways, or if necessary retrained, so that everyone willing to work - *jeder Arbeitswillige!*, so Austerlitz interrupted himself - had an opportunity of fitting seamlessly into the production process, at this point of the tape all that could now be made out, Austerlitz continued, was a menacing growl such as I had heard only once before in my life, on an unseasonably hot May Day many years ago in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris when, after one of the peculiar turns that often came over me in those days, I rested for a while on a park bench beside an aviary not far from the big cats' house, where the lions and tigers, invisible from my vantage point and, as it

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struck me at the time, said Austerlitz, driven out of their minds in captivity, raised their hollow roars of lament hour after hour without ceasing. And then, Austerlitz continued, towards the end of the film there was the comparatively long sequence showing the first performance of a piece of music composed in Theresienstadt, Pavel Haas's study for string orchestra, if I am not mistaken. The series of frames begins with a view into the hall from the back. The windows are wide open, and a large audience is sitting not in rows as usual at a concert, but as if they were in some sort of tavern or hotel dining-room, in groups of four around tables. The chairs, probably made specially for the occasion in the carpentry workshop of the ghetto, are of pseudo-Tyrolean design with heart shapes sawn out of their backs. In the course of the performance the camera lingers in close-up over several members of the audience, including an old gentleman whose cropped grey head fills the right-hand side of the picture, while at the left-hand side, set a little way back and close to the upper edge of the frame, the face of a young woman appears, barely emerging from the black shadows around it, which is why I did not notice it at all at first. Around her neck, said Austerlitz, she is



wearing a three-stringed and delicately draped necklace which scarcely stands out from her dark, high-necked dress, and there is, I think, a white flower in her hair. She looks, so I tell myself as I watch, just as I imagined the singer Agáta from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance that I now have, and I gaze and gaze again at that face, which seems to me both strange and familiar, said Austerlitz, I run the tape back repeatedly, looking at the time indicator in the top left-hand corner of the screen, where the figures covering part of her forehead show the minutes and seconds, from 10:53 to 10:57, while the hundredths of a second flash by so fast that you cannot read and capture them. — At

the beginning of this year, Austerlitz finally continued his narrative, after lapsing, as so often, into deep abstraction in the middle of it, at the beginning of this year, he said, not long after our last meeting, I went to Prague for a second time, resumed my conversations with Věra, set up a kind of pension fund at a bank for her and did what else I could to ease her life in the Šporkova. When it was not too cold out of doors we called a taxi driver, whom I had engaged to be at Věra's disposal should she need him, to take us to some of the places she had mentioned and which she herself had not seen, as she put it, for an eternity. We looked down at the city again from the observation tower on Petřín Hill, watching the cars and trains crawling slowly along the banks of the Vltava and over the bridges. We walked for a little while through the Baumgarten by the river in the pale winter sunlight, we sat for an hour or so in the planetarium on the Holešovice exhibition grounds, repeating the names of those heavenly constellations we could recognize, first in French and then in Czech or vice versa, and once we went out to the game park at Liboc where, surrounded on all sides by lovely meadows, there is a star-shaped house

built as his summer residence by Archduke Ferdinand of the Tyrol, which Věra had told me was a favourite destination of Agáta and Maximilian on their excursions out of the city. I also spent several days searching the records for the years 1938 and 1939 in the Prague theatrical archives in the Celetná, and there, among letters, files on employees, programmes and faded newspaper cuttings, I came upon the photograph of an anonymous actress who seemed to resemble my dim memory of my mother, and in whom Věra, who had already spent some time studying the face of the woman in the concert audience which I had copied from the Theresienstadt film, before shaking her head and putting it aside, immediately and without a shadow of doubt, as she said, recognized



Agáta as she had then been. — During this part of his tale, Austerlitz and I had walked from the cemetery, behind St Clement's Hospital all the way back to Liverpool Street. When we took leave of each other outside the railway station, Austerlitz gave me an envelope which he had with him and which contained the photograph from the theatrical archives in Prague, as a memento, he said, for he told me that he was now about to go to Paris to search for traces of his father's last movements; and to transport himself back to the time when he too had lived there, in one way feeling liberated from the false pretences of his English life, but in another oppressed by the vague sense that he did not belong in this city either, or indeed anywhere else in the world.

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It was in September of the same year that I received a postcard from Austerlitz giving me his new address (6 rue des cinq Diamants, in the thirteenth arrondissement), which I knew was in the nature of an invitation to visit him as soon as it could be arranged. When I arrived at the Gare du Nord, high summer temperatures still prevailed, at the

end of a drought which had been parching large parts of the country for over two months, and they did not begin to drop until October. The thermometer rose to over twenty-five degrees quite early in the morning, and towards midday the city was groaning beneath the heavy haze of lead and petrol fumes weighing down like a bell jar on the entire Ile de France. The blue-grey air was motionless and took one's breath away. The traffic inched along the boulevards, the tall stone façades quivered like mirages in the shimmering light, the leaves of the trees in the Tuileries and the Jardin du Luxembourg were scorched, the passengers in the Métro trains and the endless underpasses through which a hot desert wind blew were exhausted. I met Austerlitz, as agreed, on the day after my arrival, in the Le Havane bistro bar on the boulevard Auguste Blanqui, not far from the Glacière Métro station. As I entered the bar, which was rather dark even in the middle of the day, a television screen measuring at least two square metres and fixed high on the wall was just transmitting pictures of the great palls of smoke which had been stifling the towns and villages of Indonesia for weeks on end, and dusting grey ash over the heads

