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THERE'S A WAR ON

The child had been cured early of any notion that he was the centre of the world, and had learned that it is less painful to be inconspicuous. He was not entirely happy with that state of affairs in the endless sequence of "Now you must do this" and "That's not done", and withdrew as often as possible from the verbal world back into a shady or partly shady green one, half visible, half-imagined, where human beings could be heard only from a distance, far away beyond the croaking, chirping, cheeping sounds, lingering there until he was summoned back to the house. Or the houses, because he couldn't really distinguish between them too well yet. A house was big, so big that everything in it must have its proper place if it was to be found again. That was called tidiness, and anyway there was a war on. For the moment both these ideas were foreign to the child, but he learned quickly, for he was trying to avoid the ever-reproachful tone in which the necessity for tidiness was drummed into him, and if he didn't instantly recognize the warning in that tone a spanking usually followed. Spanking hurt the bottom, slapping hurt the face, and the two together were known as a good hiding. There wasn't quite so much of that at Grandmother's, although she lived in an even bigger house. "You must be neat and tidy," the child was always being told, but he neither knew nor understood the fundamental principle of shaping humanity whereby all imagination, desire and dreams must be pruned away, or else tied tightly until they dropped off like lamb's tails, when what was left would pass as a useful member of society. "A jewel must be cut and polished," so they said. Such had always been the case, and anyway there was a war on. The child didn't understand what that meant until he was forbidden to bring a little hedgehog into the house because it had fleas. Which house was it where you couldn't have a hedgehog because there was a war on? Mother's, maybe?

The reason for the similarity between the houses that so confused the child lay in their similar setting and history. Four or five generations ago they had been gentlemen's residences near the banks of rivers, and were destroyed and rebuilt over the centuries, through wars and changes of ownership, until they acquired something like their final form. The land provided a living, and mills and industries stood along the river banks. A hundred years or more before the child's time, railway lines were built beside the rivers too, land was sold to the railway companies in return for a share in the profits, and now an almost obsessive development began: Vienna was bursting at the seams and needed the forests of the great estates to supply more and more timber for construction work. The mills became sawmills. There would be a pulping works too, to exploit the wood waste, and a small paper-making factory. The advantage of all this was that it provided a livelihood for those of the growing throng of labourers' children who could not be employed in forestry. And a great many people arrived from the east of the monarchy, walking barefoot, as their grandchildren were still being told, to find a new home here. Since the economy must expand, timber was soon being bought in from landed proprietors who were not blessed with a river and a railway line on their own estates, and thus – gradually, but

quite rapidly as it affected the local population – the agrarian feudal idyll turned into a timber and wood-working industry with a little castle and a home farm attached. In these houses, so buffeted by progress, everything must have its own place for the sake of peace, and must stay in that place or return to it, for the people of the house hardly knew which time they really belonged to, and were therefore anxious both to preserve the grandeur of the past, inflated as it was by many anecdotes, and to offer profitable defiance to the present.

The child was often – constantly, it seemed to him – taken into a large yellow room where all kinds of people were hung up in effigy as oil paintings, and then he was told who had been what and when, who had married whom and why, how many children they had had and to what purpose. Many of the men wore the stuffing of horsehair mattresses on their heads and had metal items buckled over their bellies, like the things that hung over the stairs but you mustn't play with them. There were few tales to be told about these men, or the women in their stiff dresses, so mercilessly tight-laced that their breasts popped out near the neckline. The closer the pictures came to the present day, with uniforms and dark suits and silk cravats which the child recognized in shrunken form as neck-ties, the more bald heads and the more stories there were. The child listened to the stories as if they were fairy-tales, and he had known that fairy-tales weren't true ever since he chased a rainbow to find the pot of gold at its foot and was spanked for getting dirty. Armed with the scepticism thus induced, he let the family stories wash over him and even learned some of them off by heart. If he recited one successfully he got a pickled gherkin as a reward. He always liked sharp flavours better than sweet.

That must have been in Mother's house, because while Grandmother too had ancestors, indeed even more of them, her relationship with them was not the same. She didn't want to be always under the eye of important forebears who weren't even her own real family, and consequently had banished them to a large, unused room where they hung in triple rows, looking down on the dust that collected on the huge, worn, plush-upholstered furniture. And Grandmother knew stories too, she knew even more stories, because Mother herself had not always paid attention to them. Furthermore, as there was a war on, Grandmother didn't always care so much about what was and what was not fit for childish ears, so the child thought her a better storyteller. There had been Grandmother's father-in-law, whom she herself had not known, since he was so busy in his prime with the industrial conversion and expansion of his inheritance that he died of an apoplexy. His son, who was her husband and grandfather to the child – he discovered only later that these three were one and the same man – his son took that as a warning, spurned industry and sold the paper factories, or what was left of them after the First World War, to an industrialist from the German Reich. "And he became your father. So there we are." It all sounded rather odd, and the child was interested, but only many years later did he find out how it had really been. Father had bought the factories and Mother along with them, and she became his wife, but his grandparents did not approve because Mother had not asked their permission. She had been married once

already, when she was still a lyric soprano, but then her husband had turned his attentions to the dramatic soprano and Mother came home with the child's brother and sister. The brother was at boarding school now, and so was the sister, but the child didn't understand what that meant. All Grandmother did was sigh and say, "Green shutters don't always do what you expect of them."

For some time these "green shutters" conveyed nothing to the child, unlike "Swedish curtains". It was easy enough at the time to discover what Swedish curtains were. The child first came across this colloquial expression when the ancient gardener who was always saying bad things about the Führer suddenly disappeared. The child had hardly noticed his departure in the morning. There had been rather more noise than usual in the house below, but since the child knew that noise like that boded no good, he pulled the covers up over his head, pretended to be asleep, and had soon forgotten all about it. After all, the noise was nothing to do with him. That afternoon, however, he missed the gardener, who would always give the child a few raspberries from the canes that he couldn't reach. The child asked two women working in the garden about him, but they acted in an oddly mysterious way. So the child went indoors and asked Grandmother.

"They've taken him away," sighed the old lady. "He's behind Swedish curtains now."

The child had an aunt in Sweden, but he couldn't visit her because there was a war on.

"Has he gone to see Auntie Grete, then?"

The old lady, rather put out, looked at the child. "He's in prison."

Then she explained that Swedish curtains were thick iron bars, much thicker than the gratings over the ground-floor windows, and they were in a building where you got spanked, and you couldn't leave it.

The child had often come upon the expression "green shutters" when people working in the garden or on the farm talked about "them behind the green shutters there", but as they were obviously not referring to him, he didn't mind not understanding. A few days after the incident of the Swedish curtains, however, he did ask Grandmother.

"Are Swedish curtains shutters?"

"No, those are shutters." And she pointed to the window.

"But that's a window!" Knowledge is power.

"And there are shutters on the other side of it."

Aha – and furthermore, they were green. The child was surprised, because he had always lived behind green shutters. His mother's house had them too. Green shutters were sturdy items made of wood and rusting iron, constructed on the Venetian blind principle. They were outside the double windows and consisted of two large wooden frames, one that you opened and another inside it that you could push up. Inside the frames were thinner slats of wood

that could have been adjusted to various positions with yet another mechanism, if rust and many layers of oil-based paint had not clogged them up long ago. Opening the shutters or adjusting them to their “summer position” was impossible not just for the child but for Grandmother too. The maid did it. She also, said Grandmother, opened the shutters up every other year, and then men brought ladders, took them off their hinges and carried them out to the farmyard, where the splintering and now dull wood was given a new coat of green paint. The child heard the painters say that it was called “enamel varnish”, and the stuff that had such a fascinating smell was turpentine.

Because the green shutters didn’t work any more there was always twilight in all the rooms on the first floor, which the child had discovered was called the “peeyanobilay”. You couldn’t see straight out through the gaps between the slats, you had to squint down through them, which could be done only if you fetched a stool, clambered up on it and got on the window sill. Opening them must have been quite an adventurous business too. Once the child heard a frightful scream and a loud crash, and when he managed to peer through the slats of the shutters he saw that the maid had fallen out of the window of the “boodwaah” two rooms away, shutter and all, landing among the runner beans that grew between the flower beds and the wall of the house. She limped for several days, the shutter was smashed to bits, and since there was a war on it couldn’t be either repaired or replaced. Grandfather gave orders for all the shutters in that room to be taken down and stored in the stable. Grandmother complained of the unaccustomed brightness and got green roller blinds – “on account of the blackout too” – but for a long time the house still looked very odd, as if it had opened three eyes by mistake.

Long after the child was no longer a child, he heard it said now and then that someone had “grown up behind green shutters”, an expression meaning that such a person’s behaviour was unusual and rather peculiar. Everything was normal to the child, in so far as anything seems normal to children. It began, once you had learned to sit still, with learning which second-person singular “you” pronoun to use when speaking to whom. The polite *Sie* was to be used in addressing your mother, your father if he happened to turn up, your grandparents and your other granny, all those uncles and aunties, and indeed the world in general with the possible exception of other children. But those were “the servants’ children”, and you could play with them only if Grandmother gave special permission. There was much more to learn too, for instance that, as Grandmother put it, “One is not ‘I’.” She, Grandfather, Mother and the close family, even those related only by marriage, were “one”, while other folk were “them”. It was all right for “them” to say “I”, but such a faux pas on the family’s own part could be avoided by refraining from the pronoun, even when they really did mean “I”, and saying only, “One might ask whether ..”, or, “One would be glad if …” . Then there were a number of nice words that couldn’t be used, because there were other words for the same thing that didn’t sound so good but were apparently the right thing to say. For instance, you didn’t have the trots but diarrhoea, nor did you have the collywobbles, you had stomach-ache instead. As for crapping and puking, that was to be described as diarrhoea with

vomiting, not that anyone would want to have it. Such common words, you were taught, were suitable at most for the servants, although even the child's grandparents could sometimes be caught using them. Now and then Grandfather spoke of "farting" instead of "breaking wind", and come to think of it, was wind breakable anyway? But the child himself must use only the right kind of words, and if he didn't he often got a smack on the head to teach him not to use the wrong ones. So he remembered the others, but he mustn't say them. He was taught quite early to "make a nice bow" and kiss married ladies' hands, placing the kiss in the air just above the right hand, since the left belonged to the lady's husband. And he learned not to enter a room without knocking twice, and then only if he heard a quiet little bell ringing inside. Of course mistakes were sometimes made. Once, for instance, the child was sitting with the old maidservant outside his grandparents' dining-room. The bell inside rang, and the maid went over to the dumb waiter and rang another bell herself. Meanwhile, however, the child entered the room where his grandparents were sitting at table. Grandfather looked at him in surprise. "But I didn't call for you!" Luckily the maid came in with the tray at that moment, and the child managed to make his escape.

Other normal behaviour was worse. If you came in from out of doors you had to wash your hands. If you had touched something you had to wash your hands. If you had been playing you were washed, and there wasn't any hot water except at mid-day. And when you had your "best clothes" on, it was necessary to keep perfectly still, because the tiniest little dirty mark on them meant trouble. Once the child was wearing his best knitted trousers with the shoulder straps and his white shirt because an auntie was coming to visit. But the auntie didn't turn up and, feeling bored, the child slipped out into the little garden where he had seen a bird's nest in a tree a few days ago. As he looked up, something splashed down on his hair and his shirt, and then he heard a car coming and ran back to the house with his bunch of flowers. Mother was already standing on the steps outside the door. She was horrified: "What on earth have you been doing now?" He never saw the auntie, because he was locked in his room for going into the garden in his best clothes, and they didn't let him out until she had gone away again.

He hadn't even seen the car, which would have been interesting. Cars were a rarity, having been "requisitioned" because there was a war on. But his grandparents had their big Maybach, and Mother had her 1930s Steyrer, and all the uncles and aunties had cars too, the only ones who didn't were "the common people", who said bad things about "them behind the shutters there" as a result.

The common people were a problem anyway. Leaving aside the uncles and aunties, they were everyone else but also, on occasion, they were individuals. The child had to learn their names, as well as the fact that some were people who lived in and around the house, but there were others whose names he was free to forget at once. And the closer the common people were, the more

carefully a proper distance had to be preserved. They were addressed not directly but in the third person, and with a shift in the sequence of tenses too. The child didn't understand, but was impressed, when Grandmother announced that "Anna is bringing in the washing." Whereupon Anna ran out to the drying ground, took the washing off the line, damped it down in the ironing room – the child watched with interest – let it "rest" for three hours – the child waited for the washing to show some sign of life – then ironed and stacked it and finally, in the evening, took it in to Grandmother in the present tense. He was also impressed when Grandfather went to the window after telling off a drunken manservant and stated: "He's gone." The swaying figure turned, perhaps to make some rejoinder, but then he did go, and the child never saw him again.

Herr Wittmann had some difficulty in teaching the child the sequence of tenses, which worked differently in real life, saying many times a day what a trial he found "it", and there was another "it" that was a trial too. One of these "its" was the child, whom Grandfather also called "it" when he was angry. The child understood about the other "it" that gave grounds for complaint only when he was no longer a child: Herr Wittmann and his wife Ellen had married over forty years ago, to come and be tutor and governess to the little girl who grew up to be Mother, and although they were now well past retiring age, here they were again with demands being made on their educational skills, just because of the child, and they feared for their pension. The child was delivered up to them, and they to him, for four hours a day. He and they cordially hated each other. The child was supposed to be learning the violin. It was fun at first, but the horrible fiddle kept slipping out of his hand when he put the bow near it, and then Frau Wittmann scolded him until he cried. This went on for weeks, and one day Mother came in. "That child's holding the violin the wrong way," she said after a brief glance. Frau Wittmann raised her claw-like hands, which were crippled with arthritis, to Mother's face and said severely, "You expect me to teach him with these?" And when even the child could see that this had taken effect on his mother, she added: "I can't play the piano any more, either." Mother was silent for some time and then said: "Very well, carry on."

The child had already discovered, in Mother's house, how horrible it is to be a child, and in case he forgot what he was suffering the point was driven home for years by adults who were really kindly disposed to him. These adults were the size of giants and were mean with their time, themselves and anything asked of them, granting at most only a fraction of it and asking a horrendous price in return. Such bargains were humiliating, for the adults involved in these transactions were unaware that the value of the payment asked was quite different for the child, though it might look

the same as their own idea of it. A nice little kiss, or a *Bussi* as they put it in the Lower Danube region, was the tiniest of coins, yet the child often found it hard to bear. He frequently thought those whose cheeks he had to kiss repulsive, sometimes even when they were people with whom he usually had no problems – but being obliged to give a kiss is no fun. When the child had made a good tower with his building-bricks, he would kiss the top brick as a matter of routine or to express his pleasure, and he did it so skilfully that the brick seldom fell off, but that was of his own free will. And even a kiss was small change compared to having to sit still, stand up straight or eat his dinner, especially when he wasn't hungry.

Being made to eat was always terrible. No sooner had the child learned how to reject nasty flavours by spluttering, and how to anticipate uncomfortably hot or cold food by watching whatever adult was present take a trial spoonful, than the magic trapdoor gave way again, and once he had seen through every terror another stood behind it, so like the first in the way it worked that it became ever more real, more puzzling, and thus a permanent fixture.

The apron spirit was the first terror. It emerged from the darkness beside the table when the child didn't want to eat any more, coming between mother and child. It assumed different colours but always looked the same: a round, faceless head crowned by a flame that was always the same colour and bobbed back and forth. The spirit gradually merged into Mother's apron, but the child seldom dared look that far, for it moved in a strange, swaying way and told the child to eat up nicely now, in a deep voice that only very slightly resembled Mother's. But the thought of eating was impossible, for the talking knot terrified the child so much that he sometimes began to scream in panic. It was the talking that was so horrible, and it didn't help when, before her child's distrustful eyes, Mother slowly knotted a corner of her apron, ostentatiously pushed her forefinger through the knot, and waggled the folds of the apron with her thumb and her middle finger – as soon as the knot began to talk, even in Mother's unmistakable voice, his horror was such that he couldn't see Mother herself any more. The apron spirit hung about for a long time, even when it stopped manifesting itself. Once Mother put her apron on, the child knew he would soon have to eat a meal, and he protested ahead of time as a precaution.

Only slightly less terrible was the crocodile. On its first appearance its function was the same as the apron spirit's, but since it only snapped its long jaws it lacked the ultimate power and you were free to hate it. It was a pest. It would often appear unexpectedly on the child's horizon on the far side of the table, snatching away the toy that had just come to life. Then it was usually time for a meal again, but the child didn't want to eat. It was when the crocodile ate Purzel, the child's beloved dog whose ears and little tail were now nothing but stout bits of bent wire, that it became an enemy of the first magnitude – a phrase with which the child had been much struck when he heard it on the radio. Loud as the child yelled Purzel, rigid with shock, was swept right across the table and down into the depths, and the child was

inconsolable. It was no comfort to find Purzel back in his bed that evening, in reasonably good condition – war was now declared on the crocodile, and must be fought until the final victory was won.

Over the next few days Mother and the servants were surprised by the apparently aimless way the child wandered around, and the fact that he seemed to have lost interest in his toys. Of course he took care not to mention his mission, but one sunny afternoon, when there was no one in the kitchen, he found his enemy there. The crocodile had hidden in a drawer that was almost out of reach, and the child was able to get it open only because the maid had left a stool in front of it. There lay the crocodile among the cooking spoons, forks and other kitchen implements, pretending to be asleep. But the child was not deceived. He cautiously seized the enemy, who offered no resistance now, and carried it upstairs to the drawing room and his cave under the grand piano, known as "the instrument".

The instrument had been the child's favourite place as soon as he could stand almost upright underneath it. He liked sitting under the black, curving roof it made, pale below and divided into little caves, particularly when Mother sat at the keyboard moving her feet about, whereupon beautiful music came raining down from above. The child didn't know when he had discovered that the music was Beethoven, but under the influence of those mighty sounds he sat quite still, enchanted and safe, watching Mother's feet move and knowing that this joy would last for ever. So this was the child's favourite cave, even when all was quiet inside it, and it was in silence that he finished off the crocodile. Its jaws shattered with a short, sharp snap, and the rest was hard work; he hurt one of his fingers badly. Exhausted but happy, he left the field victorious and was a very good boy for the rest of the afternoon, nor was his sense of triumph diminished that evening when he got a good hiding for ruining the gherkin tongs.

Luckily the child also had friends among the many things that sometimes woke to strange life. Not that he could rely unconditionally on all of them. For instance, the teddy bear who couldn't growl any more, and just had a hard thing left in his tummy to remind you that he once could, was kindly and always there when the child needed him, but left it at that, so he gradually vanished from the child's closest circle of friends. Purzel was different, although he too was of only limited value as a comrade in arms. Purzel was grey, and didn't mind having his ears or tail pulled, unlike Foxl, who was black and white and brown but always nipped, giving a sharp little yap. Also unlike Foxl, Purzel never barked and gave the child away, but hissed gently for his sake, just like Huschi, who was a grey tiger and sometimes brought the child dead mice in bed. But you couldn't play with the mice or you would get your fingers slapped, and your hands had to be well washed afterwards too.

Purzel followed the child like a real dog, and was a wonderful duck-hunting companion. The ducks suddenly appeared at Easter, all little and yellow, and mustn't be touched. Then they turned white, and there were lots of them, and they and the chickens pecked about in the meadow outside the garden, from which it was divided by a small stream with a fence on the other side. The stream was also the cause of the child's feud with the ducks. He liked to crumble his

afternoon bread roll into it when no one was looking, and was glad to see bits of the bread float away. But the ducks begrudged him that pleasure, and not only ate the floating crumbs but turned aggressive, snatched the bread from his hand and pecked his fingers. The child was cross, even though they weren't as nasty as the geese, who fortunately grazed outside the child's domain most of the time, appearing in procession beyond the trees only when evening came. Then one day the little door to the garden was left open, as the ducks instantly saw, and the child enjoyed watching the gardener chase them out of paradise with curses and clods of earth. The child was pleased to see them waddling indignantly off, quacking and flapping their wings. After that Purzel came down to the stream with him, and when the ducks approached he shot into the middle of them, causing them to scatter in agitation. The child was proud of himself and of Purzel, and played this game in front of the servants too, until one day he got a good hiding from his mother for chasing the ducks.

Mother was always responsible for giving him the hiding because, as she said, Father wasn't there and she wanted the child to "amount to something" in life. The child avoided her as best he could, but she seemed to be everywhere, and even knew things she couldn't possibly have seen. Gradually the child realized that he was surrounded by spies in the form of the servants. Whenever he had discovered some pleasure, it would always be reported to Mother, and only too often the result was a good hiding. Most malicious of all was the fat, grey, toothless kitchenmaid, who kept grinning even when he got a beating. Hostilities between them had begun with the rabbit who suddenly appeared one afternoon and was a wonderful toy. At lunch next day the cook showed him a platter of roast meat. "There's your bunny." The child refused to have any, finally protesting, with tears in his eyes, "I don't eat people I know." He soon learned to distrust the children who lived in the cottages belonging to the house too, even the gardener's daughter who had shown him that girls can do a wee as well as boys, if not so thoroughly. They were even more likely to tell tales and more malicious than the adults, although they often got a good hiding themselves, but not as often as he did because they were only the servants' children. The child had this class distinction smacked into his bottom at an early age, and he soon realized that when they played games together, for instance with the little trucks that were so easily de-railed in the timber yard beyond the garden, he was the only one to get a hiding.

So apart from Purzel he had only one real friend, his oldest friend the white camel. The camel had been there ever since he could remember, looking at him from the right above his cot. And the camel was not alone. Between the bars of the cot sat a half-veiled woman, and outside the familiar circle of faces there were Arabs, Negroes, even an elephant and a lion lying there like the poodle belonging to one of the aunties, not that she was a real auntie, and one of the lion's eyes was left all smudged after the child patted him, but the camel was special, it was much more than an

ordinary white camel. Whatever the child told it – and he told it a great deal every evening, in a very quiet voice – the camel always understood. You could see that from its face, which always looked different but always wore the right expression, and when the child was scared for any reason he saw that the shadowy outline of his friend was watching over him, and felt better.

The camel was his worst loss when he heard, one day, that they were to leave here and go and join Father. The word Father certainly sounded tempting, although the child didn't really know what to understand by it, but the fact that the camel couldn't come too hurt. "It stays here," he was told curtly, and there was no chance to explain that the camel was his very best friend. Nor was it much help that Purzel was comfortably settled inside the child's travelling bag. Saying goodbye to the camel was very difficult, and he remembered it in his evening prayers for a long time to come.

Places where you do not live for long leave only sharp splinters of memory behind, splinters that are smoothed out later by the stream of time and cannot be fitted together to make a pattern, even with the putty of other people's stories. They remain somewhere in the world, with their pleasant and less pleasant aspects, but never become quite real. It was like that with Hamburg, where Father was an anti-aircraft artillery commander. They had gone to Hamburg to join him, but for some time the child doubted whether their apparently endless train journey had been worth it. Father was almost a stranger in his uniform. He picked the child up in the air and pressed him to his chest, which was prickly, being covered with jagged things called orders, and his face was scratchy too, since he needed to shave twice a day and hadn't got round to it that morning because of the train's arrival. They were living in Frau Meyen's basement in Blumenstrasse. Frau Meyen bore a vague resemblance to the camel but was not so understanding; however, there was a pretty little garden behind the house, and the child was allowed to go into it. Unfortunately there were no animals, only a few birds and a huge, smooth-coated, black dog behind the fence of the next-door garden on the left – how cramped everything was here! – a dog that was always slobbering at the mouth, and growled ferociously when the child came within ten paces of it.

But the absence of animals didn't matter too much, because the anti-aircraft artillery post was in Hagenbeck's Zoo where, as there was a war on, it had requisitioned a restaurant building. Here, soon after his arrival, the child met Uncle Heinrich Hagenbeck, obviously the man who ran the whole show, although he wore no uniform and had to be very polite to Father. Uncle Heinrich liked the child, introduced him to his animals and their keepers, and from then on the child was allowed go to the zoo almost daily.

There was no white camel in the zoo, but there were elephants, lots and lots of them, and their keeper was August, who didn't have to be called Uncle. The child liked him at once because he smelled like the old gardener and

kept a flat bottle in his breast pocket, taking a sip from it now and then to freshen up the smell. The child thought it a pleasant aroma, and he found out that elephant dung had a pleasant aroma too; August carted off such huge quantities of it in a wheelbarrow every day that he was covered with filth. He was a wonderful old man – the child could never be with August too often or too long – and as the canteen staff usually gave him a bag of stale brown bread the elephants made friends with him as well, especially a huge old elephant lady called Roma, evidently August's assistant, for according to August she bossed all the others. One day August told the child not to be frightened, and then he said something to Roma, and the child felt something wind very gently around him, saw Roma's trunk wrapped round his waist, and was lifted right up into the air, a long way up, until he was sitting on Roma's back. It was marvellous, but Roma didn't let go of the child, she raised him in the air again and put him carefully down on the sand. The child couldn't get enough of this, but only August knew the magic word, and he said once a week was enough. Every morning he raked the sand in the elephants' enclosure, and then you could play wonderful games there under Roma's watchful eye. Roma knew a lot of tricks. She would often raise her front leg carefully above the child's head until it looked as if he were under a roof, and that was lovely, but as soon as he caught hold of Roma's foot she withdrew it. One day the child was playing in the elephants' sand as usual when he heard a terrible lot of noise on the other side of the steep wall of the moat. A great many people were standing there, shouting like mad. The child ignored them, for August had said he was going to take a little nap on the fresh hay inside the elephant house, and then Uncle Heinrich's assistant came running up. The child knew him, but he took no notice of the child and ran straight away again. And the people went on shouting. Then Uncle Heinrich's assistant came back with Uncle Heinrich behind him, walking at his usual leisurely pace, and the shouting calmed down and then died away entirely. The child loved Uncle Heinrich, the only one of all those uncles and aunties who weren't really his relations who wanted the child to address him by the familiar *du* pronoun. "I insist," Uncle Heinrich had said. It wasn't easy to say *du* to such a tall old gentleman, which made Uncle Heinrich laugh and then, sighing, say something about rigid Austrian formality, but he promised the child a pony when he was bigger. Now he went over to the elephant house, and the child felt curious. He was just in time to see August wake up all of a sudden and stand to attention in front of Uncle Heinrich, who was telling him not to scare the visitors. "Will he get a good hiding now?" asked the child. Uncle Heinrich laughed, and then explained gravely that he had twice his usual number of elephants, because the animals from his brother's circus were here too on account of the war, and elephants don't usually behave any better than human beings. At this August, still standing to attention, said something, and Uncle Heinrich laughed. "Oh, well, if Roma's keeping an eye on him …". But the child wanted to go with Uncle Heinrich and see his future pony.

That was Hamburg as the child knew it. Oh, and there was something else too: his first voyage on a ship. The child was very excited the day before, looking forward to seeing Africa, but the big vessel went only as far as a café

called the Alster Pavilion, where you had to sit still and be good. There were palm trees there all right, but no black people and monkeys, and you could have an anchovy open sandwich to eat, but it was covered with sliced egg and the anchovies were only very thin strips on top of the egg, so they were off the ration. Ration coupons were almost more important than money. You had to pay for everything, of course, but if you didn't have a ration card too – people snipped little corners off it for everything you bought – you could hardly get anything except on the black market.

Then one night there was a terribly loud noise, a crashing and a drumming such as the child had never heard before, and even his room vibrated. Mother had put a tiny lamp on the table, one of the kind called Hindenburg lights at the time, and she looked out of the window through a thin crack in the roller blind and muttered disjointed prayers. But the noise didn't stop, and next morning the dairy on the corner of Pölchaukamp and Dorotheenstrasse had disappeared, and so had the butcher's and the baker's and the laundry and the greengrocer's. Instead there was just a huge mound of rubble and dirt spread all over the street, and people were treading out little paths to get across it. They cursed the English, because now they'd have to get their milk from Schinkelstrasse, since there were similar heaps of rubble on the Mühlenkamp too. Mother said: "One has a war on." Frau Meyen said: "Well, that's war for you," but she seemed surprised. The child thought: does one, and is it? And then they heard that Hagenbeck's elephants were coming to clear the rubble away. Mother and child stood on the Mühlenkamp and the elephants really did come in a never-ending procession, trunk to tail, with Roma and August in the lead. The child shouted happily: "Roma! Roma!" August said something to her, and Roma came quite close, picked the child up with her trunk, put him down on her shoulders for a moment, placed him back on the ground again and trotted on. The people watching were surprised.

Soon after that the child heard that they were going home again. It was safer there, said Father, and after all they'd been away for nearly three months, though the child could hardly believe it. Anyway, Father was being posted to Berlin, where they'd soon be able to visit him again. The child did a lovely drawing for Uncle Heinrich, lots of elephants with a pony in the middle of them, and Mother bought a bottle of rum for August. And that really *was* Hamburg.

But at home nothing was the way it had been before, not even the camel. The child had not forgotten his friend, although he had seen so many other houses, uncles, aunties, and even real camels since they parted. But the camel was smaller than he remembered, and didn't recognize its protégé any more. Absently, with the shadow of the cot tracing its way over his body and through the neck of the half-veiled woman, he looked round the room, which now smelled strange and dusty. Noticing the child's distress, his mother told him how, two hundred years ago, a Baroque painter on his travels had painted the four continents on the walls here: Asia beside the bed, Africa behind the bed, Europe between the windows and America by the door. The child was disappointed, because he knew about pictures, but the camel had once been alive, and now it was as dead as his ancestors.

But there was someone else here instead, Auntie Maika the U-boat. She was almost a real auntie, because Uncle Richard, Grandfather's brother-in-law who was once on the Austrian imperial and royal general staff, had had a great many debts, and Auntie Maika's father had a bank. But Auntie Maika had not acted as she should, said Mother, so Uncle Richard had got a divorce and now she was here and was a U-boat. The child had never seen a U-boat except in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, but Auntie Maika wasn't made of steel, she was a rather plump lady with a long nose and an unusual red hairstyle. However, she had a little monkey on a red leash, all silky and tame. It enjoyed sitting on her shoulder, which made her look like the witch in the fairy-tale book. Sometimes the monkey made a mess on her shoulder, but Auntie Maika didn't mind, she just laughed. She was very nice, and you didn't have to sit still and be good in her company. The child loved her at second glance, and Mother was glad, because now she could go and join Father in Berlin. But after the child had spent two wonderful weeks with Auntie Maika, Mother came back to fetch him. He was going to have to go to the Führer's city now.

The Führer was a great man and had been around for ever. He was in the kitchen, not far from the crucifix and next to the radio, a colourful sight in his red, black and white frame. He was in Grandmother's kitchen too, only rather smaller, although hers was a much bigger kitchen. And he was in Father's study, where the chairs and sofa waited under white linen cloths and the room was dusted once every two months. In the study he was a brownish photo standing on the desk, a very valuable photo, because *he* himself had written on it. So he was everywhere, and kept watch on the child too, even from heaven on high, because the nursemaid enlivened boring bedtime prayers one day by adding an extra line, so now the child's prayers ran:

Here a little child I pray:
Jesus, guide me on my way.
As I lay me down to sleep
I hope that God my soul will keep,
And you, dear Führer, too.

The child thought this a very nice prayer, and rehearsed it industriously. And Mother, when these lines were carefully served up to her soon afterwards, looked so surprised that the child was delighted. So the Führer retained his place in the inmost chamber of the child's five-year-old heart, next to the crib. However, he stood with the shepherds near the ox and the ass, for by now the child had learned about God through one of those natural misunderstandings that so easily happened at his grandparents' house. The simple reason was that Grandfather had no name of his own but was simply referred to in the house, the garden and the village as *der Herr*, "the master" – the word that was also used for God, "the Lord". In summer, when the child was at his grandmother's because it was her birthday, there had been so little rain that everyone was complaining of the drought, and even the priest standing before the congregation in church – the child once spoke of him as being "on stage" there, and was teased for it long afterwards – said during Mass: "And

now let us all pray to the Lord to give us rain." The child was proud of his grandfather and of being so closely related to him. But Grandfather had not been in church, so at lunch the child asked him to make it rain. Grandfather was at a loss, but Grandmother asked a few questions and then explained to the child that the Lord in church and Grandfather as master of the estate were two different people and did not get on well together. As a result the Führer, like God and Grandfather, remained a human being in the child's eyes, if a very, very great and enormously important human being.

Then Christmas came, and they went to Grandfather and Grandmother's again. All the radios were broadcasting news of the heroic fighting at Stalingrad, but the child's bedtime prayer had become terribly boring, Führer and all, and was replaced by some verses from an evening hymn by Claudius. The child gave them their première on Christmas Eve. The nursemaid sat beside him, holding the book, and in front of him, in a kindly semi-circle, were his grandparents, his mother, and the old tutor and governess. The child had learned the lines by heart very nicely, but then he stumbled after all, making a mistake through the wrong association of ideas:

… from punishment, dear Lord, pray cease
and let us sleep tonight in peace
and our dear Führer too.

At which the grown-ups stared again with a helplessly wry expression which secretly pleased the child a good deal. At last Grandmother growled into the silence: "Well, at least he's not our sick neighbour." And Grandfather heaved a melancholy sigh with such irony that Mother sat up very straight and said sternly: "Thank God." Then they were all silent again in the way that the child knew meant he mustn't move a muscle. But the nursemaid heard a few days later that her services were no longer needed, since the child was big enough to dispense with them.

And now the child was almost a year older and in the Führer's city, although the Führer himself wasn't there but very far away in his headquarters, waging war. The child did not think of this as a loss because he was constantly being bombarded with new uncles and aunties. Father was living in much grander style than in Hamburg, in an army apartment not far from the Reich Ministry of Aviation, and he had a new uniform too with many more orders and stars than before and extra gold lace, but he looked positively plain beside his superior officer Uncle Hermann, who was very fat and glittered even more than the embroidered garments on the skeletons of saints in the pilgrimage church the child had seen when visiting his grandparents. Uncle Hermann grinned all over his face, of which there was a great deal, and kissed Mother's hand in a very elaborate way – Mother said later he had learned how from his wife, who was an actress. Then he approached the child, took his chin, pinched it firmly and pushed his lips up so far that the child could only say: "Ow!" He shouldn't have done that, because he realized it would mean a spanking, but Uncle Hermann left the child alone – and he never saw him again – and afterwards, a few metres beyond the court of honour where stone soldiers with stone banners marched along the wall, all he got was a scolding.

All the Berlin uncles, as it happened, had this unpleasant urge to attack the child's cheeks and chin, and when one of them set eyes on him he instinctively took a step back. There was Uncle Albert, still quite young, who wore an impressive leather coat, there was the rather smaller Uncle Josef with his fascinatingly non-matching shoes, and Uncle Baldi who was almost a real uncle, being married to Mother's best friend, in his imposing naval uniform, and Uncle Ernst from Linz with all those scars on his face. They were supposed to date from his student days but were really the result of a car accident. Berlin was horrible, and its zoo wasn't a patch on the zoo in Hamburg, but Mother liked having her hand kissed by all those uncles, the way no one would ever have kissed it in the Lower Danube region, and she enjoyed being asked to tea parties by lots and lots of aunties. The child hated tea parties because you had to sit still and be good, wear uncomfortable clothes and say only what was proper, or not even that, because there was often a scolding or a spanking afterwards. "I want to be proud of you," Mother always said.

Once the child and his mother went to tea at Auntie Magda's, and Uncle Josef's chauffeur came to fetch them. Auntie Magda was wearing a flowered brown dress with large lace flounces and had three daughters standing around. They looked very spiteful at first, but once in the playroom the children were soon getting on well together, and suddenly there was Auntie Magda shouting her head off, with the lace flounces flapping around her raised arms. Then Mother came in too and apologized profusely, but it was one of the girls who had started the doctors-and-nurses game. The child knew there was going to be a terrible hiding, but Mother couldn't get round to it yet because first they were driven home by Uncle Josef's chauffeur. All she said on the way was, "You're never coming out to tea with me again," and when the child innocently thanked her she was so confused that later on she forgot all about the good hiding. But she stuck to her word, and the child didn't have to go out to tea with her any more. Instead Granny came from Dresden – Father's mother whom the child had never liked, calling her "Granny go away!" – but still that was better than tea parties.

And then, one November afternoon, the child did see the Führer, who had come back from the war to hold a reception. After Mother had spent ages getting herself up to look elegant, and the child had been made to put on his scratchy knitted trousers, they followed a great many soldiers and other uniformed men into a huge hall, red and grey and all made of marble, with a lot of people standing around making the place echo. There was a long red carpet that mustn't be trodden on down the middle of the hall, and people were arranged along it: mothers with and without children at the front, then uniformed men and civilians with orders, and then, by the wall, uniformed men and civilians without orders. The child was just looking at the glass roof, which resembled his arithmetic exercise book, when a huge double door was flung open on the left, all present raised their right hands, and the Führer came in. The child didn't see him at once because of all the uniforms. The Führer wore the lightest-coloured uniform, but he looked different. However, the most impressive thing was a kind of wind that suddenly blew through the hall, more of a gentle breeze,

but it smelled – and much, much later, when the child was no longer a child, he could recognize the separate aromas of that incomparable wind – it smelled of perfume, fish, leather, sweat, urine and some very feminine odours. A cloud of Chanel drifted from Mother's own afternoon dress. The crowd around the Führer came slowly closer to the child's side, and he ducked into safety behind Mother, because he feared for his chin – if all the other uncles went for him like that, what would *he* do? – but all the same he could see the Führer quite well. He was much smaller than the child had expected and looked, well, different. Then Mother made a curtsey and had her hand kissed by the Führer, who said something very brief, and next moment all the child could see was the uniformed backs of the escort. He saw the Führer again several times as he moved from right to left on the other side of the carpet, a back paler in colour than the others around him, and he saw him in profile too, but he was disappointed. Soon the doors on the left were flung open again, closed after the Führer and his retinue had disappeared through them, and then the doors on the right opened. There were echoing sounds once more, and a crowd of happy people made for the cloakrooms. It was like being in the theatre after Humperdinck's *Hänsel and Gretel*, when the poor witch had such a hard time. Then the child was holding Mother's hand and standing at the top of the stairs down to the long, over-bright stone courtyard, in which people looked like little matchstick men.

"Well, what do you think of the Führer?" asked Mother when they had been walking along Wilhelmstrasse for some time. The child had kept quiet all this time, so he continued to keep quiet, priding himself on his silence. "Wasn't he wonderful?" Mother's voice sounded hesitant, and the child noticed the way his knitted trousers scratched his thighs. "Did you like him, anyway?" The child's silence knew no bounds. That evening Father and Mother sat side by side, staring penetratingly at the child. "So what was it like at the Führer's reception?" asked Father, not in uniform now. The child said nothing, because in view of those stares he was busy examining his conscience. "He's still quite over-awed," said Mother, and the child said truthfully, "No, I'm not." Father immediately inquired again: "So what was it like?" The child froze with horror. He had broken his silence, and now, as his parents' avid glances showed, things could only get worse. After a long time he replied, "I'm not saying." He said this so forcefully that his parents couldn't help laughing, and with that the subject of the Führer was dismissed from the table upon which, miraculously, three oranges had appeared. In the following conversation about the oranges, and where you could get what off the ration or through connections, he found he could still preserve his silence, but it wasn't quite so good any more.

However, the Führer wasn't letting the child go so easily. The neighbour he could see across the light-well from his bedroom window, the man who couldn't fight in the war because he had lung cancer, coughed and coughed the length of a whole evening hymn and longer still before the child could finally get to sleep. In the morning he said: "Our dear Führer was coughing all night." Mother looked at him with a kindly but baffled expression. "It was only a dream. You slept soundly all night." Then the child realized that he had associated the wrong ideas again, and said: "I

mean the dear Führer and our sick neighbour too." This so perplexed his mother that her expression stuck in the child's memory.

But Granny was a trial when she arrived a few days later. "So you shook hands with the Führer?" "No, I didn't." "What – you didn't shake hands with the Führer? Why didn't you shake hands with the Führer?" How could he explain to Granny? But the child had her to thank for a new piece of knowledge acquired during an air-raid practice. He had nothing against air-raid practices, and in this case nothing against Granny's company either, since he could easily get away from her and play with other children in another part of the cellar. Grown-ups were usually very cross at these times, and the children liked that, since it wasn't their fault. "It's all Hitler's fault," said the elderly woman keeping an eye on the children in the cellar. "It's Hitler's fault," crowed the child happily as Granny grumbled her way home. Granny stopped abruptly. "Whose fault?" "Hitler's." "But Hitler is the Führer!" So now the child knew that the Führer's secret name was Hitler. And older boys who played in the yards of apartment blocks a little further told him other names for the Führer, like the Lance-Corporal, the Gröfaz (meaning the Greatest Field Marshal of All Time), or the Man from Braunau, but when Mother heard about this she forbade him to play with those boys any more.

Hans-Georg Behr: Almost a Childhood

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sample translation, translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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