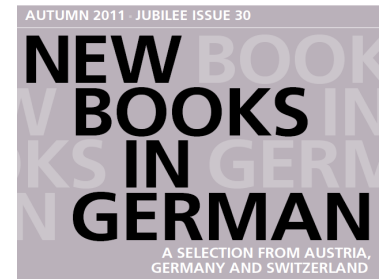
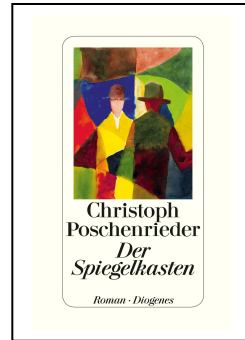


The Mirror Box

Christoph Poschenrieder

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Sample translation by Donna Ochs for *New Books in German*

Extract from pp.70 – 73; pp.80 – 96

That is beyond my power, Manneberg, said the regiment commander, even the King is powerless in that respect.

He knows that, of course. He is terribly nervous. It has been almost four years since he joined the First Royal Bavarian Infantry Regiment, *König*. Today is the twenty-fifth of June 1910 and Officer Cadet Ismar Manneberg, who received his leaving certificate from the military academy a few days ago, is pacing up and down in front of the mess hall of the Marsfeld barracks like a corporal on punishment drill.

But the leaving certificate isn't worth the paper it's written on, even though it is the best ever awarded to a cadet in the regiment. He can recite them all – the regulations, the peacetime and wartime orders of battle, the army corps and their garrisons, the uniforms, the veterans' pension arrangements, knowledge of weaponry – everything. He had taken part in all the exercises in Lagerlechfeld, completed all the training, endured wretched bouts of drinking and endless talk about horses, women, hunting and dogs. He had even postponed his doctoral studies in law for the sake of his military career. He had never let himself go, to call his conduct impeccable would be pure understatement; all of this is testified in the requisite references and reports, as are his patriotism and pride of rank, his political reliability and his orderly and well-heeled background (his father was a cloth merchant).

But all of that and even the leaving certificate is worthless right now because all it takes is for Major Schmidlein's loan to be cancelled by his Jewish moneylender so that he goes to the commissioning meeting in a blind fury; because all it takes is a single black ball in the old trophy cup, a single "no" vote. And if it's not Schmidlein, it will be someone else. Someone who thinks Manneberg is a democrat or someone who believes that it is against nature for

a Jewish soldier to command a Christian soldier. He doesn't have to say as much, all it takes is the black ball.

It is a moment (and not the first) when Manneberg doubts whether it was worth it all – but yes, of course it was! No client will fail to be impressed by the officer's patent, proudly framed on his office wall, and no commission will be able to ignore it if he chooses to pursue a career in public service. It just has to happen.

The regiment commander appears in front of the mess hall. Manneberg can barely keep still. What will he say? His first two words will make the difference between four years well spent and four years wasted.

The commander greets him with *Herr Kamerad* – Manneberg has made it.

No one was back home by Christmas. In some ways everything had gone wrong, but nobody talked about it. The war was in restless hibernation. There was the odd round of gunfire as if to say "we're still here!" Miners began digging tunnels underneath the enemy lines that were going to be blasted as soon as the ground had thawed. "Any roofer has a more dangerous job than we do," said Rechenmacher, not elaborating on whether he thought it a good or a bad thing. Another one of his favourite sayings was "the only killer here is boredom".

It was bearable. Manneberg moved between a dug-out near the front line and the headquarters in Bailleul-Sir-Berthoult. In the officers' mess he ate from white china plates and in the field he ate from a tin cup like the other men. The Bavarian crown prince visited the troops and distributed awards. There were training courses and exercises. Manneberg got himself a horse, explored the area and started taking photographs again. Once, the observer invited him to go up in a moored balloon. A few miles ahead, the criss-cross of the front line spread out before him like a child's scribbles on a slate, but he soon found the altitude threatening and was glad to return to the trenches, to the frozen womb of the earth.

Manneberg had not been back to the field hospital or seen the doctor again. The memory of the *maison blanche* rarely haunted him now, never during the day and only occasionally at night. The black panther had laid down to rest. But Manneberg keenly sensed that it would re-awaken with the war, sometime in the spring.

[...]

p.80

The Ernemann *Liliput* had not been damaged by the fall into the cellar. Manneberg had bought the handy folding camera at a station kiosk while he was being moved to the North.

Photography was a highly fashionable pastime; every self-respecting officer owned a camera.

Even privates took snapshots and sent the pictures home, which they found easier than crafting long letters.

The *Liliput* was a primitive thing. To take a picture, he first had to roughly capture the image in the viewfinder, then he tilted and turned the camera to align the pointer to the centre of the frame. And when he pressed the shutter lever the little box snatched a split second's worth of light, swallowed the framed rectangle of reality and regurgitated it on the film plate. He kept a record of every single exposure in a notebook.

65. Direct mine hit in advanced line, section A.

Manneberg found quiet consolation in unfolding the *Liliput* and gently manoeuvring the pointer into the diagonal cross of the viewfinder, in handling this fiddly piece of equipment, looking through the rectangle of the viewfinder, hearing the soft click of the shutter and sending away the images committed to film. But his greatest consolation was having the freedom to point the viewfinder so as not to have to write:

65. Direct mine hit in advanced line, section A.

Lacerated body of Infantryman Fraunhofer, 3rd Platoon, 9th Company

And all it took was the slightest turn of the wrist.

Manneberg had never seen any of his photographs. They were probably out of focus, low in contrast and off centre. He sent the films to a studio in Munich to be developed. They also kept the negatives until he would eventually select the ones he wanted to print and put into albums.

One foggy March night, obstacles had sprung up in front of the trenches. A wild entanglement of barbed wire, barbs and tripwires had been stretched between thousands of crooked posts. On the other side, there was astonishment, but next to no reaction. Building the barricade only cost the regiment six dead and two dozen wounded.

“Now we’re the ones defending,” said Rechenmacher, “now the French will have to attack and get stuck into us.”

A month later, Manneberg looked through the periscope and saw flags waving above the trenches. The French artillery was starting to fire. A black flag meant that a shot was too long, white meant too short, green was for a hit. Battery upon battery of guns sought their targets. German snipers chased the French artillery observers into their forward holes. But there was no stopping it – all they could do was wait, and whoever wanted to hoped or prayed that they would be relieved in time. At the beginning of May, the initial firing turned into systematic destruction fire.

During the daytime, the lines were shot to pieces until their contours disappeared completely. At night they were rebuilt. On the ninth of May, after thirty-five minutes of barrage, the French began their assault at ten o'clock, their time. Three seconds later, Manneberg dashed out of his dug-out as if he were being chased by the black panther.

As soon as he was able to catch his breath, it looked as though the worst was over, at least for the time being. Manneberg took just one photograph. He raised the *Liliput* cautiously over the end of the trench, near the front in his section C1. It was an image that he usually avoided, but now, after nearly forty-eight hours of constantly intensifying artillery fire, after the rattle of guns, the swell of cries, one big attack and a second smaller one at five in the afternoon, during which the assailants no longer knew where to tread for the mass of men and discarded material lying around among the mine craters, which had burst into towering jets of flame – after all of that Manneberg wanted to see whether the *Liliput* could capture what he himself was unable to comprehend, and whether the gentle click of the shutter could restore his inner peace or whether the sound would at least help somewhat. When he recorded this frame in his notebook,

91. After the repelled French attack on 9.5.15. Fallen French soldiers on the road from maison blanche to Roclincourt

his handwriting was unusually spidery, the nib of the pencil humming on the paper like a tattoo needle, causing Manneberg to look disconcertedly at his fingers.

The 9th Company was withdrawn from the line that evening; it was down to little more than half-strength. Manneberg marched at the rear of the convoy, which was actually more like a battered worm writhing away. He heard the shell approach and his well trained reflexes twitched his muscles, but there was no real contraction. He only had the strength to sway slightly to one side as it exploded, just enough for a sliver to slit the sleeve of his jacket from the right elbow to the shoulder and burn a hole there. Otherwise the shell barely did any damage. Only one man started to wail, like an animal, but not like any Manneberg knew; he sounded almost like a beaten dog howling in pain and subjection. The two soldiers helping him were hardly able to support him as he contorted himself. Further ahead one man began to whistle the tune to a children's song and then started to sing in a crowing voice:

You put your right hand in

Your right hand out

In out, in out

and shake it all about —

“Shut up!” Manneberg called to the front, as frightened as if the song had been sung just for him.

He met the regiment commander at the dressing station behind the third line. He took Manneberg aside and urged him to go to the military hospital at Fresnes-lès-Montauban with the next transport. In fact, the wound could have been treated there and then (and Manneberg would have preferred it, out of consideration for his infantrymen and his standing with them), but he was finding it increasingly hard to keep his hands still. To be precise, he no longer had any control over them whatsoever. Even while he was talking to the commander he'd tucked his right hand into his jacket; it looked like he was resting his arm in a Napoleonic pose. Perhaps he'd had tremors too, Manneberg thought. Iodine was dabbed on the gash which, on second thought, maybe did need stitches after all. The pain was bearable, but he was annoyed that he had tossed the sliver away. Most wounded soldiers liked to keep pieces of shells or bullets if they could: the one bit of metal they had nothing to fear from in this war.

Shortly after passing through Bailleul-Sir-Berthoult he felt his right hand tremble hard, so hard that he had to push it under his leg to suppress the tremors with the weight of his body; he soon had to do the same with his left hand, too. The shaking travelled upwards over his elbows, which banged against his ribs, but the ambulance driver did not notice. How could he, with his incessant attempts at humorous chit-chat that only stopped when the car finally pulled up? “This train terminates at the sawmill! Anyone who can should alight here.”

The military hospital at Fresnes-lès-Montauban was housed in a pretty castle that was still completely intact. As in better times, deliveries were made to a wing of the castle. Orderlies wrenched the stretchers of the wounded from the bed of the truck as if they were crates of vegetables – or pig carcasses, Manneberg thought. He turned a corner and saw a raised terrace to one side. Three figures were leaning against the balustrade, smoking cigars and holding tall glasses like the last guests at a garden party. There were flashes of lightning on the horizon, from below, from the ground. Manneberg hunted around for the right word and, as he entered the castle, he mumbled “wrong, it's all wrong here.”

A doctor appeared and cast a glance at his wound. “We can spare the anaesthetic. It's needed more urgently elsewhere.” Manneberg said nothing. The trembling had eased slightly, but to be on the safe side, he kept his hands between his thighs and the seat. The smell of disinfectant made him nervous; the tidiness, cleanliness, silence and the sight of the Red Cross nurses irritated him. They bore the red cross as the symbol of sanctity on the front of their coats, but they were young, rosy, lively and smiled all the time as if to say “it's not as bad as all that!”

He could not find the way out immediately and had to cross a long hall. He walked through a row of beds, eighteen on either side. He didn't know the men, they must have come from different units. Some moaned quietly, their pale faces looking dark against the bright white sheets. Some would never regain their legs, even if they still had them; and many did not, as he could tell from the flat sheets below their bodies. At last he pushed open the door at the other end, glad to have escaped those looks, those feebly raised eyelids, the heads slowly lurching from one side to the other and the eyes gradually closing again.

The next door he tried was locked, another opened into a room full of empty beds. He then took a flight of stairs in the hope of reaching the wing through which he had entered the castle – he did not want to turn around and cross the ward again. He had just started climbing them when he heard voices from above.

"I'm in pain again," a man said, "and I can't open my fist."

"Are you?" another man said. "The pain will go in a minute."

"But it can't," the first man said. He sounded wondering rather than wounded – not suffering, Manneberg thought, and asked himself whether the two words were not related, after all they both described a form of injury: one to the body, the other, more minor, to the mind and the way it functions.

"Oh yes it will," the other man said. He sounded cool and collected. Manneberg knew the voice.

"But it's not there any more," the wounded man said. The second man replied, "that's something your brain decides without asking you."

"I could put my finger on it."

"Which one?" Manneberg heard the other man say, in a new tone of voice, laughing, but with a hint of warmth.

He backed down five steps and climbed up again, treading heavily, turned into a corridor, saw a half-open door, knocked and greeted formally when he saw the doctor's badge of rank. A man in a vest and dropped braces sat at a table. His right arm was missing from the shoulder downwards, on his left hand he had lost all of his fingers apart from the thumb.

"Ah, is that you, Lieutenant?" the doctor said after he had glanced up. He seemed to be fixing something inside a wooden box, possibly tightening a screw. He then pushed the box across the table to the man sitting on the other side.

"Please excuse my interrupting, Colonel, I'm looking for the way out." He recognized the doctor with his finely drawn features, the eyebrows and thin moustache like charcoal lines, on a reddish-bronze face. His doctor. And he didn't even know his name.

"We're all looking for the way out," the doctor said. He seemed to be concentrating intently and not particularly keen to accommodate the unexpected guest.

"Excuse me?" Manneberg said. He turned his attention to the box. He could hardly stare at the colonel any longer without seeming rude. The one-armed man edged closer and pressed his chest and shoulders against the top of the narrow side of the box, made from old ammunition crates; Manneberg spotted a faded calibre marking: 7.62 x57. Something inside the box cast a reflection from the light bulb back onto the ceiling. What was that odd box for? Down below, surgeons were sawing off countless arms and legs and up here this doctor, who was different to the rest, was conducting experiments with amputees. Manneberg was curious but didn't dare to ask.

"Keep going and you'll find the way out. Make sure you don't stop anywhere."

"Excuse me, should I go left or right?" Manneberg asked and leant towards the corridor and back, adjusting his stance by the half-step he needed to glimpse more of the box. While he was shifting he had taken the *Liliput* out of his jacket pocket and unfolded it. But the doctor was not taking any notice of him. He said:

"If you're interested in my, shall we say, novel methods, Lieutenant, come and visit me sometime."

Manneberg saluted briskly, clicking his heels together, and turned as though he were at the parade ground.

"Well," the staff surgeon said, "let's begin. Please move your right arm."

Manneberg heard this last sentence as he lowered the *Liliput* to his hip and, aiming blindly while frozen for a split second between two steps, he pressed the shutter, hoping that he had managed to keep his hand steady for that one moment.

Resting at Bailleul-Sir-Berthoult. A shell had torn off the roof and ripped a hole in the ceiling. Stars shone above his pillow. Manneberg could not sleep, nor could he stay awake. As soon as he closed his eyes a projector started whirring. The small device was located somewhere at the back of his head, shining onto the inside of his eyelids. That's how he imagined it. The problem was, the projectionist could not be made to change the roll of film. He could no longer bear to see the images of the attack, with soldiers streaming out of the ground and falling, falling, falling, screaming, screaming, screaming. If the panther had appeared and batted his paw mercifully across his eyes, it would have been welcome. Manneberg kept his eyes open and listened inside himself in the hope of detecting something other than the screaming and the noise. He thought about the doctor – who had restored him, whom he had never thanked – about his calm and circumspect manner, that strange box and the man who clenched a fist

with a hand he no longer had. Trembling fingers could not pose much of a problem to a doctor who tried to cure such ailments; Manneberg believed he could do anything. And then he remembered the odd thing he had heard while he was leaving the room:

Did the doctor say “right arm” or “left arm”?

2

That morning, the morning that changed everything, a small yellow note was stuck to my monitor.

To all media analysts,

The newspaper subscriptions have been cancelled to save costs. Please use the newspapers' online pages from now. All other policies and procedures remain unchanged.

It was as cruel as snatching a toy away from a child. I must have spent half an hour swinging back and forth on my office chair, to the left and to the right, like a captive animal. I may have even been dribbling from the corner of my mouth. Anyone who saw me would have thought that I was retarded and senile. Then indignation stirred. The organisation had broken the rules. I had not been hired to do computer work. I felt betrayed. I should have handed in my notice on the spot. I was a professional newspaper reader and proud of it – but I was clearly the only one. The other people in the office who I saw at the coffee machine pretended to be indifferent or pleased never to get their fingers black again. Apart from me, nobody regretted the demise of the newspapers. I got worked up, rambled on about professional ethics, accused them of wanting an easy life of copying and pasting.

“And what’s wrong with that?” they said. “Why should we work our socks off for ignoramuses? Or do your reports actually get read?”

I spent the rest of the day saving bookmarks in the browser for each of the newspapers and sections I normally analysed. I was still expected to deliver reports by 5.30 every day. Maybe this was just a temporary cost-cutting measure? My pathetic hopes stopped me from resigning immediately.

I was viewing most of the websites for the first time. It was sheer torture – inane advertising flashed, blinked and blared at the top, bottom, sides, everywhere. I briefly entertained the thought of popping out to the nearest newsagents, but changed my mind – I would only get a few of the national newspapers there.

Of course I knew how it all worked. Even though I didn't grow up with the internet like the proud digital natives – no, with me it's the other way round. The internet grew up with me. Before the huge, all-embracing network existed there were countless little networks, mailbox systems open to one or two users at the same time, where you saw the words appear letter by letter, transmitted over the telephone wires, in fluorescent green on a black cathode ray tube screen.

As far as I was concerned, the worldwide web was no more than a tool, but a useful one at that. But that was to change. However, I had no inkling of that on the day the newspapers disappeared.

I wasn't a member of any of those online asylums. I didn't "follow" anybody and had no "followers" of my own. It would have made me feel like Hansel (albeit without a Gretel) scattering digital breadcrumbs. Entering my common name into the search engine churned up hundreds of thousands of hits which threw a smokescreen over the single entry which may have referred to me. My friends became virtual a long time ago, even before I moved to Munich. I'd lost most of their numbers when my mobile phone slipped out of my shirt pocket, their e-mail addresses had evaporated when my hard disk crashed. Who actually makes back-ups anyway? Digital natives, maybe.

It wasn't long before I was annoyed by the sugary sweet scent of the monitor. Soon everything else irritated me more than ever – my boss who would put her head around my door and ask if everything was all right without waiting for my response, my indifferent colleagues who could not be expected to unite in rebellion. I got a headache. My neck started to hurt. I had cramps in my right forearm. By the end of the first day I was pushing around a concrete mouse and hammering the keys with my fist. I was also experiencing withdrawal symptoms – I was missing the rustling of pages, the smell, the panorama of an open broadsheet, being able to find my way intuitively and quickly between top left and bottom right of page, the front and back of a newspaper. I left on time (something I'd never done before), or rather, I fled.

At home I wrapped a cool, damp towel around my tingling mouse arm (I was barely able to move my fingers), laboriously assembled an online pizza (with my left hand) and switched off the computer. I'd had enough of it for the time being. I got up, looked around my room and took the photo albums from the box. If my uncle were still alive today would he put his pictures online and share them with the rest of the world?

Share this! Tell a friend!

You have lost twenty-one friends today.

Do you want to add new friends instead?

How interesting, the imperative was still in common use on the internet.

Write a comment!

Rate this picture!

Recommend this picture to a friend!

The pizza delivery man rang. If the object that slid out of the box was supposed to be a Pizza Genesis, then it was a failed creation. As always, I ate with my fingers and turned the pages with the other hand. Old media, I know, but after such a disastrous day I tenderly caressed the embossed leaves of the album with its raised ink writing that I could feel but not yet read. At least I was able to decipher the numbers.

He had stuck a photograph in landscape format diagonally across a whole page of the album. On the right it showed an avenue of bare trees, shrinking towards the low horizon which slanted from left to right; at the bottom of the picture there was something, probably a heap of earth, slightly blurred. In the foreground there was what looked like the remains of a wire entanglement, on the field outside it there were pale piles of clothes scattered around, on the slope up to the avenue there were even more. I dropped the pizza box. They were dead people. Lots of them. The caption read:

91. After the repelled French attack on 9.5.15.

Fallen French soldiers on the road from maison blanche to Roclincourt.

With a bit of guesswork and some context I was able to decipher the handwriting. I wasn't sure about the last place name though, names are names. I only knew that it had to be somewhere in Northern France. I'd just have to switch on the computer and look up a map of the area or go to the bookshelf and take out grandmother's Stieler atlas from 1907, which even contained the right borders. But I was too lazy to do either. Instead I found a magnifying glass and looked at the photo more closely.

A man is lying face down two metres in front of the wire. A few metres to the left another man is lying on his back, his knees bent. Behind him there are legs in boots, draped over the edge of a hole in the ground. They are lying packed together along the avenue, many on top of each other. All over the ground. I counted at least fifty. Strange, the photograph only showed what you can see in history books, but I somehow felt a connection with these dead men; maybe because someone I knew had taken a photo of them.

The prints varied in quality. Some were on firm card, but many were only on thin paper with crooked black edges, cut with scissors. Some bore an eery greeting – clear or smudged fingerprints from fishing the print from the developing or fixing baths. I found these photos with a stamp of authenticity particularly fascinating. I had no idea whether they were my uncle's

fingerprints, I assumed they were. Developing pictures is no great art, and there were enough dark dug-outs.

The captions were always brief – time, place, names of people. Some pictures had obviously been taken from low down, from a trench perspective – were there bullets flying when he pressed the shutter? The same faces and names, time and time again. My uncle only appeared on a few photographs.

246. *In the Obermayer trench* – Hands in pockets, binoculars around his neck, smiling and leaning nonchalantly against the wall of the trench.

439. *With Rechenmacher in front of the castle in Fresnes.* – He and another officer who was laughing confidently into the camera, while my uncle smiled bashfully, eyes cast down. Sitting together arm in arm, in a familiar pose. Were they friends, or is that simply a soldierly gesture? I did not put the albums back again that evening. I emptied and flattened the wine-stained cardboard box. I would find out who, where, what and when. I would research the places, the names, the regiments, the battles and the cemeteries. Seeing as I had to suffer reality as a garishly flickering, fleeting projection on a monitor by day, I might as well delve deep into the black, white and grey world of an officer during World War I in the evening.

Before I went to bed I took another look at the photograph of the mirror box. All of the other images – trench life, ruins, people – were so unambiguous, so carefully chosen and clearly labelled. But this one wasn't. I couldn't help but feel that it had a strange story attached to it, a story that deserved to be told.

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