



**Wolf Biermann DON'T WAIT FOR BETTER TIMES, sample translation**

PART I

My very first performance as a singer was in winter 1940–41. I was four years old. Hitler's Blitzkrieg had long been raging on all fronts. The Battle of Britain was in full swing. The 'Goebbels' Gob' – the popular term for the standard wireless set in German households – spat out reports of victories, vomited speeches by the Führer and screeched martial music. After three years of solitary confinement my father had submitted an application to be housed with other prisoners. Instead Dagobert was given more frequent work details at Teufelsmoor labour camp, where political and criminal prisoners were lumped together. The work was hard; the prisoners were made to cut peat for eleven hours a day.

Three times a year prisoners were permitted to receive a half-hour visit. It was an exciting rail journey from Hamburg to Bremen. This was the one time my mother took me with her. A cold winter's day. Holding my mother's hand, I traipsed for kilometres in the snow across the fairy-tale moorland. Past birches dusted with snow, pyramids of peat sods piled up to dry. At last we were standing by the gate. Barbed wire, watchtower, barracks, roll-call ground. The guard wasn't going to let me in; children were forbidden inside the camp. I don't know how my mother managed to sweet-talk, affect, slobber on or bribe the guard. I've no idea if he asked his superior for a special authorisation. But in the end I was allowed inside.

We entered the guards' recreation room. The sweat of footcloths. Cold cigarette smoke. Two chairs separated by a long table. A uniformed guard at the desk on the left. I sat in the security of my mother's lap. My father was brought in. I



didn't know him. I wasn't shy because he was as close to me as my mama. Every evening and every morning before going to work she told me a goodnight or good morning story about him. And every morning when I opened the door to our apartment my little cart would be standing in the dark stairwell, carrying a lump of sugar, a marble, a feather, a spinning top or a token of affection. And I believed my mother when she said Papa had sent me these via a moonbeam.

Now sitting opposite us was this stranger I was intimately acquainted with. He smiled. He was a strong man. He smelled. He had a gold tooth. His head was shaven. My father gave me a bag of sweets. It wasn't till later, when I was older, that I wondered how a prisoner in this camp could get hold of sweets. In fact my mother had slipped them to the guard to pass on to my father so that he could give his son a treat. These bastards were human beings too. So my father handed me the bag across the table. I took out a sweet and gave it to him. I bet he thought it tasted good. I put another sweet in my mother's mouth. Then I fished out a third sweet. My hand drifted towards the uniformed guard watching us. I eyed him suspiciously and pulled my hand back. I was unsure. My father laughed and said, 'Go on, you can give him one.' So I waved the sweet at the guard, but then recoiled and swiftly shoved it in my own mouth. My father laughed again.

Emma told him that all the people at the rear of our tenement called me the little singer. Because when, just after five o'clock in the morning, she took the tram to work in the Dependorf cleaning firm, I was in bed on my own in the apartment for another two hours. I'd sing and sing until Auntie Lotte, who lived in the apartment opposite, called me over. 'Go on, sing something nice for your papa!' Emma said. At once, I belted out, '*Can you hear the engines roar? Attack the enemy! Can you hear*



*the engines roar? Attack the enemy! Bombs! Bombs! Bombs on England, boom!  
Boom!'*

My first performance was not a success; it was a catastrophe. Of all the songs in the world, the prisoner had to listen to me perform this one. Behind the barbed wire, his own flesh and blood was singing him the war song of his mortal enemies!

Later as a family we would argue again and again about this one meeting I can recall. 'It must have really hurt him to hear his own child squawk out a Nazi song,' I told my mother. 'Rubbish,' she said. 'Your father was grinning. He knew you'd got it from the Goebbels' Gob. He was pleased to have such an attentive child. He knew that I'd teach you the right songs – our ones!'

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Emma paid regular visits to her parents-in-law on the Grossneumarkt in Hamburg. As a Jew, old Herr Biermann wasn't able to get any more work. Grandma Louise trudged from one poultry shop to another, begging for the offcuts of feet and necks from chickens and ducks. Every time we had chicken soup my mother would say, 'Your grandmother makes a better soup from scraps than I could from a whole chicken.'

I sometimes played in the street with my cousin Peter, the son of Dagobert's sister Rosi. He was half a year older than me and wore a pretty yellow star on his jacket. Me, a half-Jew, a half-breed of first degree, didn't wear a star. We'd dash out of the apartment on the ground floor to play. Peter had a colourful paper streamer, which he swirled around delightfully. Eventually he handed it over and I was able to have a go at flapping it about. I was so happy.



In November 1941 my grandparents John and Louise Biermann, my father's brother Karl, his wife Hanna and their daughter Ruth, as well as Rosi and her husband Hubert Weiss and cousin Peter, were suddenly notified that they had twenty-four hours to get ready for transfer to Poland. The 'evacuation order of the Hamburg secret police'. My mother was terrified, the family in a total state.

I have a fading recollection of us setting off one gloomy morning. My mother wanted to bring the Biermanns socks, jumpers and woollen underwear that she'd knitted – all night long, in desperate haste – on her small knitting machine. She knitted with such fury because we'd heard the rumour that Jews were being sent off to hard labour in the cold east.

We went to the Moorweide, a park with mighty trees right beside the main university building at Dammtor station. This is where the Jews were assembling. My grandparents were in their early sixties. Stubbornly, insanely, Grandma Louise had brought along her little birdcage rather than a suitcase. In it was a budgie that over the years she'd taught to say, 'Butsche Biermann! Butsche Biermann! Schlachterstrasse! Schlachterstrasse!' Did she have an inkling that she wouldn't need a suitcase where they were going?

Emma handed over the woollen things, which were hastily stuffed into the cases.

We said our goodbyes and swore that we'd hear from each other soon. Peter was holding onto his streamer. We hugged, we said nothing, we smiled, we waved helplessly. Then they hauled their cases over to the magnificent masonic lodge.

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In summer 1943 in the Hamburg district of Hammerbrook I found myself at the heart of Purgatory, beneath the carpet bombing the Allies had rolled out across the city in 'Operation Gomorrah'. My mother was pleased about the British bombs. It was just very impractical that they were falling on our heads.

Every night we slept in our beds fully dressed. A siren woke us up. My mother gave me a pan of Mirabelle compote. We rushed into the air-raid shelter. The bombs were falling already. As the house above us burned down, the air-raid warden used a pickaxe to knock through the thin wall to the neighbouring cellar.

The memory I have is of complete trust. Pressing my face into my mother's soft coat, I was able to breathe. Safety in the midst of Armageddon. Mama. The two of us sitting alone. Nobody else there. The cellar steps burning. Eventually we must have groped our way behind the others, through the hole in the wall to the cellar of the neighbouring house, and back up from there. Then eyes closed through the wall of fire at the entrance. We leaped into the street. Fresh air! Damp cloths in front of our noses!

When entire streets burn down it produces a powerful air suction. The hot air shoots upwards and fresh air floods into the centre from all sides. Streets in the path of the air suction act like massive nozzles. The bellows effect means that everything burns like tinder. A piece of asphalt turned molten, a woman became stuck in her shoes in the black morass and sank to the ground.

We made it to the factory yard on the corner of Nagelsweg. My mother dragged me into a huge warehouse, a low-ceilinged building full of barrels. Narrow corridors but fresh air. A Dane from the neighbourhood with his wife. The two of them. The two of us. We search the place for fresh water for our cloths. Nothing.



Then an explosion. The room is filled with black smoke, no way out, no air. This is death.

The Danish man has found the little iron door to the yard. He screams. He ignites his lighter and the flame flickers. Head for the tiny light! We stagger to the exit. Through another wall of fire! And my hand is torn away. Mama, Mama! People pushing and shoving and trampling. Mama!

I'm alone. People are yelling. This is death. I stand calmly at the edge of the turmoil. There is no longer any danger; this is just the end. The human creature lying on his back with every limb outstretched. It's all over. No Mama. This is death.

Out of the blue my Auntie Lotte. In the crush she bumps into me. She screams. She grabs me. Screams for her sister. Mama! Reunited. Move on. Away from here! Away! The little porter's lodge in the yard. In! People. Heat. Smoke. This is death. How green the white washing burns on the line in the neighbouring room. We're the last ones again. Our cloths dried out. The smoke bites my lungs. Emma climbs onto a loo. Some water in the cistern. She dunks our cloths. Now out! Along the wall out of the wind. To the bridge! To the river bank! Down into the water! You first! No ground beneath my feet. This is death. I sank. That was death.

Grabbing me by the hair, my mother yanks me back up above the water. So we *will* cross the wide road through the worst of all storms to the other side. This could be death, but it isn't. The soldier sees us from below. He comes up, wants to help us across. A lump of stone from the elevated railway bridge strikes the man before our very eyes. Half a metre from us. This is death.

We stood beneath the underground railway bridge in the shallow water of the canal, huddling around the pillars. The deeper water. The old woman – her



cardboard case below the water – the open bag still partly swimming. A suitcase drifted off. The woman went under. This is death. Mama.

The next lot came piling down the embankment into the water. They stood on the sunken old woman. We've got to get away from here! Now! The factory. The flames. The sheaf of fire. The exploding barrels. Columns of fire in the night. Wonderful! Colourful fountains shooting into the sky from the factory. Every few seconds. That's the barrels in the cellar.

And the waters didn't part. No forwards, no backwards. My mother gave me a piggy-back. I clasped on tight. The water carried me. And like this we proceeded beneath the skeleton-like railway bridge to the other side. Away from the fire! A few people with minor burns lying on the grass on the embankment. How beautiful the large blob of yellow in the red! That is death. The crackling of smouldering freight trains on the tracks. One wagon close by is burning out. How I love that sizzling! We're away. That is life.

In my small fist I clutched onto the covered aluminium pan throughout that bright night in the huge fiery oven all the way to the murky morning. Now my mother flipped up the tight lid and gave me a taste. The sour sweetness of the Mirabelles! Would you like some too? Ten mouths, twelve mouthfuls and the pan was empty.

Above the southern canal we crossed a partially destroyed railway bridge. Even at daybreak the sky was still black. The sun shimmered palely in the sky thick with smoke. The charred bodies. Contracted, so small. A suffocated man by the railway embankment. Bloated. His face pink and deep blue. This isn't death. It's the dead.

We go a long way. That's Lombard Bridge. Across to the Moorweide by Dammtor station. The green meadow – finally! These good old trees.



ullsteinbuchverlage

There's a photo of the burned-out case of a watch in Hiroshima. At the time of the explosion the hands melted onto the watch face. Ever since I saw this photo I've known that the tiny life clock inside my ribcage was welded too. It stopped in the firestorm of that single night. I've become a grey-haired child who still stares in wonder. I was six and a half at the time. And I've stayed that age for the rest of my life.

Now we were camped with other survivors on the Moorweide, the same place where almost two years earlier the Jews had been ordered to assemble for deportation to Minsk. The yellow stars in the fog. Little Peter. His paper streamer. The birdcage with the budgie. 'Butsche Biermann, Butsche Biermann, Schlachterstrasse, Schlachterstrasse.'