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Der Jude mit dem Hakenkreuz

The Jew with the Swastika

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The Return

That the war had ended long ago could be smelled in the air in Sonnenberg. The wonderful, satisfying scent of coffee wafted around, masking the mild autumn air on a sunny day in October and drifting through every street until the whole village smelled of it. Fritz Beckhardt was back. The first thing my grandfather did was warm up the vast coffee roaster that since 1926 had filled the right-hand window of his shop. There he stood in a white coat, concentrating on the round inspection window of the gas-flamed drum in which the coffee beans were ceaselessly stirred. He monitored the gradual discolouration of the beans and harvested small, hot samples at ever-shortening intervals near the end of the roasting, so as not to miss the moment the beans would be the right brown and the coffee would have the desired aroma. He was the only one able to roast coffee in the village and it had always been one of his great passions, one which had given him an edge over his competitors.

Brazil Santos was the variety of coffee Fritz most commonly used. It was the backbone of his blends: the mild, the piquant, the easily digestible, the inexpensive everyday blend. The green coffee was stored in large sacks at the customs office in Biebrich, a Wiesbaden suburb directly on the Rhine. It was from here that Kurt, my father, had picked up just a few kilograms the previous day; coffee was a luxury item in 1950, with a high duty placed on it on top of import tax, and so was affordable to only very few customers.

Up until 1933, blending and roasting coffee had been a profitable business for Fritz. He sold coffee not only in his own shop, but also supplied numerous restaurants and bars in the area. Sixteen years later, however, the villagers of Sonnenberg only bought this luxury brown powder fifty grams at a time, if at all.

On that autumn day in 1950, Fritz stood in his shop window roasting coffee and waiting for customers. But nobody came. It was the day the shop had reopened after a devastating local boycott in 1934 had forced him to close it. The previous day he had spent hours making flyers with Kurt, using an old-fashioned duplication apparatus. They had scratched the prices of their wares into a wax mould by hand and laid the mould in a rectangular box with a cloth clamped to its hinged lid. A piece of paper was then laid between the mould and the cloth and the cloth was coated with black dye and pressed down. This was how they printed each individual flyer, and afterwards Kurt distributed them around the village until darkness fell. More advertising was out of the question, there wasn't enough money. When Fritz opened up the shop the next morning he was still in good spirits, and Kurt spent his first day as junior manager of what had once been a successful business – which he knew from hearsay – pacing nervously back and forth behind the counter.

The shop's interior hadn't changed since Karl Pfeiffer took over the shop. The Nazi hadn't invested a single penny in new equipment, as if he had suspected that the Jew would survive and come back. The coffee roaster, which Pfeiffer hadn't known how to use, was left to gather dust in the window. The glass door with its brown wooden frame dated back to 1898. The other window, to the left of the door, displayed fabric and textiles, the business having existed for more than a hundred years as a shop for general wares. On the walls, shelves from floor to ceiling were filled with textiles and rolls of cloth stacked up on top of one another. At the front of the shop were cabinets with drawers for food. White labels revealed whether they contained wheat or rye flour, sugar, coffee, tea, rice, pasta or pulses. A zinc container with a glass spout filled with cooking oil calibrated for a whole, half or quarter litre hung on the wall. Around the edge of the room was a heavy oak counter where customers would typically wait to be served. The air in the room was dry, and if Fritz wasn't roasting coffee it smelled of dust and mothballs. A couple of light bulbs burned constantly to make up for the scarce daylight that made it through the cluttered window.

Fritz looked out onto the street. When it became clear that he would have to give the house and the shop back, Pfeiffer had rented a shed on the opposite side of the street and moved his

goods over to it. It was a walk-in shed about three by six metres with outer walls made half of brick and half of wood.

In the evenings a dim gas light illuminated the street, the small window with its meagre display, and the rickety door. In front of the shed there was a vegetable garden fenced in with green slats, behind which the Rambach flowed down from the Taunus towards Wiesbaden.

With the exception of the gas lantern, which had by then been replaced by an electric lamp, this was my view of the street when I looked out of the window during my childhood.

A few customers approached Pfeiffer's shed, remained standing on the pavement and looked across. "Old comrades," Fritz muttered and shrugged. He then lifted the counter hatch and disappeared into the rear storage room where barrels of vinegar, cooking oil and herring were kept beside boxes of washing powder, bags of peas, lentils and pearl barley. In the courtyard of the neighbouring house, where Fritz's parents-in-law had once lived, was a metal cask with a hand pump filled with paraffin for the gas lamps.

Kurt was now alone and unsupervised in the shop. He began to fiddle with the National cash till and the heavy Toledo weighing scales, unfamiliar with how to use either of them. He had never sold anything in his life and felt exposed in his starched white coat. Around midday my grandmother Rosa Emma came to the shop and called on her son to come and eat. Kurt remembers how his parents sat and chewed in silence opposite him. "It was a shock for my father. He had really counted on his old customers," Kurt explained. "He believed he would be welcome here."

During the first twenty years of my life he didn't exist for me. I only know of a single photo of Fritz that sits in a frame on the oak dresser in Rosa Emma's living room. Next to the picture stands a colourful porcelain parrot and a wooden stork whose colour has mostly rubbed off. The stork has a hollow chest with a silver watch inserted into it. Stork, parrot, watch – these were all that remained of Rosa Emma's parents Emil and Hannchen Neumann. Rosa Emma Beckhardt, née Neumann, is a silent sufferer. This is the only reason she managed to survive being with Fritz; by enduring his unwavering self-confidence, his iron will that brooked no opposition, and his at times torrential anger.

On work days I eat supper with her while my parents are still at the shop. Rosa Emma doesn't

say much, not with the customers when she works at the till, nor with us. We are oblivious as to whether her life with Fritz remains in her thoughts.

I also have no idea that Rosa Emma's dresser, which we sit in front of every evening while we watch television, contains a precious box concealing the highest order of the German Empire, tucked into blue silk. Fifty years after Fritz's death, elderly gentlemen write me euphoric letters. I've shown the medals to a handful of experts from the collectors' circles for orders and decorations. Fritz was one of the 'most highly decorated enlisted personnel in the First World War,' they write. He received the 'highest award for bravery' for corporals, equivalent to the 'Pour le Mérite with Oak Leaves' presented to officers.

What really excites these gentlemen is an iron cross with a laurel wreath, golden swords and a Prussian eagle that carries the inscription: 'From the rock to the sea'. In 1936 a list of the recipients of the cross was published with the names of two Jews missing from it: Edmund Nathanael and Fritz Beckhardt. The Nazis classified it as the 'highest decoration of war' at the time. In addition to an honorarium of twenty marks a month, the recipients would receive 'a rendered salute by each member of the armed forces through the presentation of arms.' I like this image. I imagine Fritz, marching through the concentration camp in the early morning light on his way to break stones, his chest puffed out, his spade over his shoulder. At the edge of the path stand rows of SS guards presenting arms.

Was Fritz a Nazi? I would have had to ask myself this question if I had found his box sooner, since it contained a mysterious medal that I didn't show the men; a silver object with a diameter of barely two centimetres. As I turn it in my fingers decades later, I feel as if I'm holding the key to Fritz's life in my hands.

Fritz had mentioned the medal once when he wrote a report on his experiences during the war for *The Shield* – the magazine of the league of Jewish frontline soldiers – in August 1933. He called it 'this little talisman'. I didn't know about the report for a long time, so it was a while before I knew the secret of the disturbing medal.

Enticed by a window full of books with German titles, I entered the Pollak antiquarian bookseller's on King George Street in Tel Aviv in the 1980s. It is a small shop with overflowing shelves. On the floor and on the tables the piles of books had turned into book mountains and the book mountains had turned into whole mountain ranges. Behind a

collapsing mountain of books sat a little man so small, grey and wrinkled that he reminded me of Rumpelstiltskin. Rumpelstiltskin spoke German without an accent and told me that the books were brought over to Palestine by German Jews in the 1930s and 40s. Their grandchildren, who hadn't mastered the German language, now brought the books to Pollak and turned them into money.

I start chatting with Rumpelstiltskin about Israel and Germany, about our family histories, and I tell him the little I know about Fritz until he interrupts me with a wave of his hand and disappears into the back of the shop through a book-lined gorge. He returns with a book whose cover shows Fritz sitting in a First World War fighter plane. The enigmatic medal is mentioned on page 49. The author calls it 'the swastika of the Jew Beckhardt.'

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