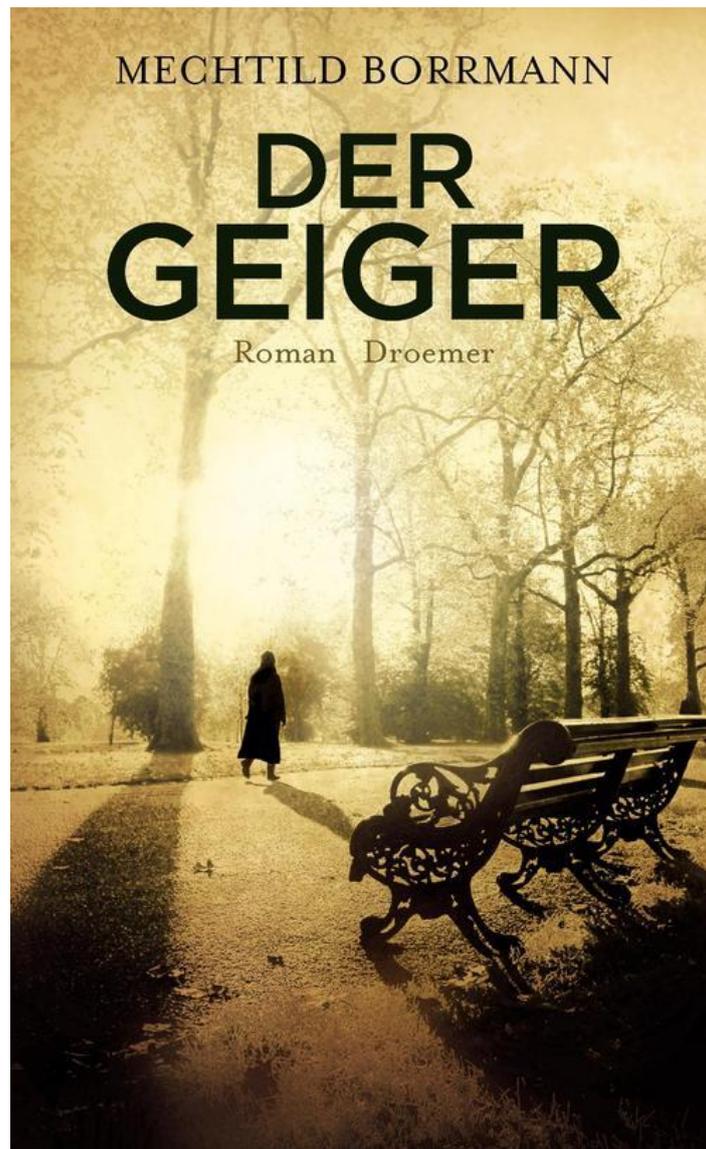


DER GEIGER
(The Violinist)
Novel
By Mechtild Borrmann
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Sample translated by Alison Chandler for *New Books in German*
Chapters 1 & 2

‘Never have I owned a violin with such a sound. It is as though my soul follows its tones into the darkest shadows and the brightest light.’

Running towards the guns
My deepest heart is death
If the killers knew this
they would weary of it

Christa Reinig

Chapter 1

Moscow, May 1948

The final chord of Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto in D major drifted over the heads in the stalls and on up to the balcony, reaching out to those in the gods to finally dissolve into nothing in the great cupola above the concert hall. For a moment there was silence; then the audience erupted into tumultuous applause. Ilya lowered his violin and, together with the conductor, bowed deeply to the euphoric crowd. The orchestra too rose from their seats and acknowledged the applause.

For six weeks now Ilya Vasilievich Grenko had been playing the concert halls of Europe. He had been fêted there too. But here, in the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, where he had been a student, where his teachers were sitting in the front row applauding him, the audience’s approval filled him with particular pride. With his final bow, he took the handkerchief from his pocket one last time and passed it across his forehead. Then he left the concert hall.

His violin case was waiting just by the entrance to the stage. He never carried his instrument unprotected through the corridors and hallways. His colleagues smiled at his caution; for them it was a sign of eccentricity. But Ilya Grenko loved his violin, and danger lurked everywhere – in the thoughtless movement of a colleague, a careless stagehand. For him, his success was inextricably bound up with this Stradivarius, passed down through the Grenko family for four generations. It had been given to his great-grandfather, the violinist

Stanislav Sergeyeovich Grenko, by Tsar Alexander II in 1862. Until the revolution the story of this gift had been retold with pride. Stanislav Sergeyeovich was the Tsar's favourite violinist, and a friendship had developed between the two men. The Tsar even invited Grenko's family to take a holiday at his summer residence.

Alexander II had brought the Stradivarius back to Russia from a trip to Italy as a gift for his friend. It is said that Stanislav Sergeyeovich later wrote a letter to the Tsar saying, 'Never have I owned a violin with such a sound. It is as though my soul follows its tones into the darkest shadows and the brightest light.'

After Stanislav Sergeyeovich's death, his heirs took the utmost care of the gift and its story was lovingly retold. That changed with the advent of the 1917 revolution. The circumstances that had led to the violin coming into the Grenkos' possession became a family secret that was only talked of in confidence with the closest of friends. There were fears that the country's new rulers would confiscate it or even destroy it as a symbol of the rule of the Tsar.

None of Stanislav Sergeyeovich's descendants had become great musicians; none were able to play the violin with the same skill that had allowed Stanislav to coax out its rich tones. Ilya was the first for four generations to succeed in playing the violin with the same light touch that had been the trademark of his great-grandfather. Now as he entered his dressing room, violin case in hand and dripping with perspiration, he found two men in cheap suits waiting for him. One was sitting in front of the dressing table, lounging in the old swivel chair, his left foot resting on his right knee. On the narrow divan against the back wall sat a second man, leaning forward, his elbows planted on his thighs. He rose, moving heavily, took Ilya's summer coat from the hook beside the divan and said brusquely, 'Ilya Vasilievich Grenko, you must come with us.'

Ilya stood motionless, his mind racing.

'There must be some misunderstanding,' he managed to croak.

Only now did he notice that the dressing table drawers were open. And the man who had been sitting in front of its mirror and was now standing right in front of him, was holding the case with the music scores under his arm.

'If there's been a misunderstanding', he said in a bored tone, 'then you'll be back soon enough.' He pushed Ilya Grenko out into the narrow hallway and on towards the rear exit.

Ilya broke into a sweat.

'My wife', he stammered as they hurried him down the corridor, 'my wife was in the audience. Please! Can I just let her know what's happened?'

The men carried on pushing him forward. ‘Don’t make it difficult for yourself, Grenko. Just come with us.’

As Ilya passed the locked doors of the other dressing rooms, he wondered why, today of all days, the corridor was so deserted. One of the stagehands was coming towards him. Without thinking, Ilya called out to him, ‘Please let my wife know I’ve been arrested.’

He was immediately given a violent shove forward. The worker paused for a moment, looking with astonishment first at him and then the two men. Then he lowered his head and hurried on.

At the end of the corridor, just before the stage door, was the porter’s lodge. Vasily Ivanovich Yarosh, sitting in his shabby porter’s uniform in the glass box, looked up with a start from his newspaper.

‘They’ve arrested me, Vasily Ivanovich. Please let my wife know,’ Ilya called out as they passed the lodge. One of the men opened the door onto a side street and pushed him out. Ilya turned back to see Vasily getting to his feet, his gaze following them.

He was bundled roughly into the back of a black car. Only now did he realise that he was still carrying his violin case.

‘My violin.’ Fear had left his voice weak and cracked. ‘Please, can I leave my violin with the porter?’

The man who had taken the seat next to him in the back of the car turned towards him.

‘What’s the matter with you, Ilya Vasilievich?’ he smiled. ‘If this is all a misunderstanding, then you’ll be back home with your violin case in a couple of hours.’ He leant towards Ilya, who was struck by the sour smell of his breath. ‘Or do you have any reason to doubt that?’

Ilya turned away and stared out of the window. The lights of Moscow rushed by; people were out on the street enjoying the warm evening. He would have seen the same picture on his way home with his wife, but somehow it would have been different. He would have been looking with different eyes; he would have been part of the picture. He would probably not even have taken it in consciously. Not the lightness of their steps, nor the embrace of a pair of lovers beneath a street lamp.

He knew that this journey would take him to the Lubyanka.

He thought of how, just a few hours earlier, his teacher Professor Meshenov had come to his home for lunch. Meshenov, a mentor and father figure during Ilya’s student days at the conservatory, had rung him that morning and more or less invited himself. The conversation over the meal had seemed strangely superficial; each time Ilya had tried to tell Meshenov

something of his travels or his meetings with other musicians of international renown, Meshenov had cut him off. Later the old man had pressed him to show him the garden. ‘Ilyusha, I’m delighted about your success but these constant trips abroad ... you’re not doing yourself any favours, do you understand?’ Ilya had answered him with a smile. ‘My dear Meshenov, you know how little interest I take in politics. My life is devoted to music and my little family.’

The old man stroked his grey sideburns, avoiding Ilya’s gaze. ‘Promise me you’ll stay here for the next few months. Cancel your trips,’ he whispered urgently, his small brown eyes restlessly scanning the windows of the house. ‘Alexei Rybalchenko is in Zürich. They’re saying he stayed abroad because he was afraid of being arrested on his return. There are rumours that musicians who spend a lot of time abroad are being accused of contact with the enemy and anti-Soviet activities.’

He spoke softly, almost beseechingly. Ilya was taken aback. Of course, in Paris and London he too had been asked about the rumours of waves of arrests in his country. He had put an immediate stop to any conversations heading that way. It was enemy propaganda, everyone knew that.

He had been careful about how he put this to Meshenov. He ran through some of the foreign colleagues who had raised the subject with him and said everyone knew that none of it was true. Meshenov was quiet for some time. Then he said, ‘But you were in Europe. Where are they playing? In Paris? In London? In Amsterdam? You must have heard something about them, about their concerts, their triumphs. Have you been in touch with them?’

The old man looked straight at him, his eyebrows raised questioningly. Ilya started in surprise. Was Meshenov really asking him if he was in touch with traitors? Or was he trying to tell him something?

In fact, he had neither come across any of these Russian colleagues nor had he heard or read anything about them. He pushed these thoughts from his mind and turned instead to his invitation to Vienna and his application to take his family with him on this trip. Galina, his wife, knew nothing of this. It would be a surprise for her when the travel authorisation came through.

He had not answered Meshenov’s question. As they were on their way back to the house, Meshenov pressed him once more, ‘Ilyusha, please, I want you to cancel the Vienna trip.’

Shortly afterwards Meshenov took his leave and Ilya went back into the living room. Galina was sitting in an armchair with one-year-old Ossip in her arms; their three-year-old

son Pavel was absorbed in playing with his bricks on the carpet. Ilya stroked Pavel's blond mop of hair and made up his mind to make some discreet enquiries in Vienna about the exiled musicians.

They drove around the deserted square in front of the Lubyanka. Nobody was strolling around. Nobody lingered here. The 'Forecourt to Hell' was what people called it behind closed doors. The ochre-coloured building was heavy and monumental. By contrast, the main entrance was really rather small and insignificant. There were lights on in a number of the windows, even though it was already nearly midnight. He took a deep breath. It would all be cleared up. Whatever they accused him of, he would sort it out and then go home.

The car drove up to the west side of the building. A barrier rose. A few yards further on, they went through a gate and then came to a halt in a courtyard. For a moment Ilya felt completely alone; he could hardly believe that he was still in the centre of Moscow. He clasped his violin case tightly, hugging it to him protectively, as if it were a child.

They pulled him out of the car. He was taken down some steps and on through a dimly lit corridor. A man in uniform rose from behind a sort of counter. He placed a cardboard box on the counter and asked Ilya to hand over his violin case, coat, bow tie, belt and shoelaces. Behind the official, wooden shelves crammed with identical boxes loomed up into the darkness.

'But...', Ilya struggled for breath. 'This is all a mistake. Before you do anything else, take me to someone who can tell me what I'm accused of. You can't just ... not without giving me a hearing first.' His voice was raised in indignation.

One of the men who had brought him grabbed the violin case with one hand and then tore the bow tie from Ilya's neck with the other. 'Coat, belt, watch and shoelaces,' he barked. Ilya was barely able to control the trembling in his hands, as he took off his belt and pulled the laces out of his shoes.

Last of all they checked his trouser pockets and added his handkerchief to the items on the counter. Now he was obliged to hold on to his trousers to stop them from slipping down over his hips. The two men grabbed him by each arm and steered him through a heavy iron door. He stumbled down three steps and another door was opened. He was struck by the animal smell coming from the damp walls that mingled together with the biting stench of urine and sour sweat. He gasped for air. He could hear groans and whimpering. His heart was racing, and for a moment he thought he would suffocate. To his left, he heard the metallic

grating of a bolt being drawn back; a door made of rough wooden planks swung open. Ilya felt hands on his back; he stumbled forwards and fell. Again he heard the metallic grating.

He found himself on the concrete floor of a cell. The room was small and windowless, the floor and walls stained. Above him, a naked light bulb hung behind a metal grille. There was a bucket in one corner that had been only perfunctorily cleaned and stank of excrement. Next to it lay a matted grey blanket. No bed, no chair. Did they expect him to spend the whole night here?

Without thinking, he looked at his bare left wrist. He thought of the way they had put his things in the box but had not given him a receipt. What time was it? Midnight? Maybe half past. No receipt for his violin. He took the blanket and, not daring to unfold it, put it down on the floor against the back wall and sat on it. He tried to breathe calmly through his mouth, fighting the nausea. When that failed and the stench penetrated his nose, he felt the urge to retch.

He kept repeating the same two words to himself, like a mantra: a mistake. In a couple of hours this nightmare will be over. But other more threatening thoughts lurked too and pushed themselves to the fore. He could hear Meshenov saying, 'Where are they playing? In Paris? In Amsterdam? Surely you must have heard something about them.'

His stomach contracted. He swallowed hard, wanting, at all costs, to avoid using the stinking bucket. In the end he edged forward on his knees, and taking care not to touch the bucket leant his hands against the wall above it and vomited. For several minutes his body shook as he heaved time and time again, until the acid from his stomach burned his throat and there was nothing left. He crawled back to the blanket and leant against the wall. No, no - this could not be happening. Tears were running down his face.

Slowly he calmed down and put his thoughts in order.

Surely the stagehand or the porter would have let Galina know? She must be searching for him by now. There had been plans for a small celebration at the conservatory after the concert. In any event, by now people would have missed him; telephone calls were probably already being made. Any moment now the door would open. He would be showered with apologies, his belongings would be returned and he would be driven home.

He rubbed the cement dust from the knees and elbows of his evening dress. He would have to take the suit to the cleaners in the morning. As soon as this misunderstanding was cleared up and he had received an official apology.

Chapter 2

Monday, 7 July 2008

Sasha Grenko stood at the window of his spacious eighth-storey office.

It was early evening. Beneath him lines of cars were edging their way out of the city and home to their families, while others were coming over the Deutz bridge and thronging into the old town with its restaurants and cafes, where they could sit outside and enjoy the warm evening. Up here it was quiet. He liked to watch the pulsating city as if it were a silent film, but today he paid little attention to the scene below.

He had been working for Reger's security company for three years now. The company specialised in personal protection and the acquisition of commercial information. Its clients were companies, law firms and individuals who could afford Reger's high prices. Sometimes there were enquiries from the odd lawyer in the state prosecution service too. Mind you, these were never official and always arrived by the back door.

Reger had taken Sasha off the streets, or to be more precise out of the basement flat where he had been camping between his computers, keyboards, screens and a weights bench. In those days he had eked out a living using his computer skills to do little bits of research for journalists who appreciated his talent for accessing information that wasn't in the public domain.

One day Reger had appeared in the doorway and just said, 'Come with me, I need you.' They had driven over to this smart office block with its view of the Rhine, and Reger had offered him a permanent job. But that had not been the most important thing for Sasha. His heart had skipped a beat at the sight of all the technical equipment. 'If there's anything else you need, just buy it,' said Reger and that had decided the matter.

Now he lived in a spacious two-bedroom flat with a rooftop terrace in the heart of Cologne's old town. He still wore jeans and T-shirts but he didn't buy them off the peg these days. His leather jacket was made of the finest distressed buffalo leather and his company car was a BMW. A new life, miles away from his past.

The slip of paper in Sasha's left hand was already creased. He smoothed it out. On it were the words 'Viktoria Freimann, Laiber House, Hubertusgasse, Munich.'

She had rung him well over four hours ago. 'This is Viktoria Freimann,' she said, 'Am I speaking to Sasha Grenko?' He knew immediately who she was and even had the feeling that he had recognised her voice.

He sat down at his desk, switched off the two enormous flatscreens and his laptop and pushed the two keyboards out of the way.

What could he remember of the years in Kazakhstan, of his parents and the journey over to this country? The Federal Republic of Germany. Those words had always been uttered with such faith and reverence in their home. Babushka Galina was still clear in his memory: her tall stooped figure, the long grey hair that she wore in a bun. She would always sit modestly to one side; even in the photos that he would later look at with his parents and his sister Viktoria, it seemed as though she had only been included accidentally. When she broke into her toothless smile, a thousand wrinkles would appear on her weathered face and her large brown eyes would twinkle. In winter she would sit by the oven, her wide grey skirt reaching down to her ankles. She would peel potatoes, chop turnips and knead dough expertly in the rust-stained enamel bowl. In summer his father and uncle would carry her out to the vine-covered porch behind their modest three-roomed house.

‘About ten yards by six for seven people,’ his father would say, when they were looking at the pictures together and he thought his son might already have forgotten how little space they’d had. There weren’t many of these well-thumbed black and white photos, but as soon as they’d arrived in the transit camp in Germany, Maria, Sasha’s mother, had carefully fixed these few pictures onto sheets of card and put them in a folder. Time and again they were brought out as the starting point of all the stories they would tell to try and ease their homesickness.

One of these evenings was particularly clear in Sasha’s memory. In the transit camp they ate all their meals on their bunks. Viktoria, or Vika as she was known to everybody, was lying on the top bunk. Her head dangled over the edge, as she took a bird’s eye view of the pictures, whispering sleepily ‘Babushka’ or ‘Tyotya Alya’, while he sat on the lower bunk between his parents, the album resting on his knees. They spoke quietly together, as the hall, their home for the time being, was shared with eight other families, all waiting to be allocated an apartment.

Father touched the picture showing him with Dyadya Pavel in front of the house. Babushka Galina was sitting on the old wooden chair that had had wicker panels added to each side. The village street was no more than a dirt track full of large puddles. For the first time, he realised that he had only ever seen his grandmother lying on a mattress or sitting on this chair. He recalled the bitter scent of her sweat and the warmth of her body, when her gout-crippled hands drew him and Vika close to her on cold winter nights, like a cat pawing her young towards her to keep them safe.

‘Why couldn’t Babushka walk?’ he asked. His father stroked his head and whispered, ‘I’ll tell you when you’re old enough.’

He took the album and snapped it shut. ‘Time for bed,’ he said and then added, ‘There’s something you should know: the Grenko name was a very important name in Russia for a long time.’

He had been so excited that night in bed, his child’s imagination busy conjuring up the story behind this mysterious remark. He had dreamt of kings and great warriors, of secret buried treasure.

Sasha looked at the blank screens, his thoughts straying even further back into the past. He could remember the day that their exit visa had come.

It was a warm day in May and, when he came home from school, a letter was lying on the kitchen table. Over the years his parents had made several applications for exit visas and when the rejections arrived, the mood around the table would be gloomy for days. ‘This one’s a lot fatter than the others we’ve had,’ said Babushka, leaving him to wait impatiently for his parents to come home from work and open it.

At school they shouted ‘Fascist’ at him, just because his mother was of German stock, a descendant of one of those families that had settled along the Volga river so long ago. Even some of the teachers called him that. He didn’t know exactly what it meant, only that it was an insult, but when they said it, he could hear a touch of envy too. Because hidden within that word was a possibility: the possibility of emigrating. When he first started school, he had explained that he wouldn’t be staying for long, that his family would soon be going to Germany. But by the second year they had stopped believing him.

His father came home first that day. He weighed the heavy envelope in his hand and took it out onto the porch to open it carefully with a knife. After all these years, Sasha could still hear the rasping sound of the knife cutting through the paper; the rustling of all those pages, as his father unfolded them; the clatter of the chair as it fell, when his father jumped up, lifted Sasha into the air and spun him around.

Within an hour, the house and porch had filled up with people. Dyadya Pavel had a car and he had driven off to buy vodka and bread. Mother and Tyotya Alya were opening jars of pickled gherkins, tomatoes and peppers and cutting thick slices of sausage, while he – he ran around between their neighbours and friends with just one thought in his mind: Tomorrow at school! Tomorrow I’ll say, ‘We’re going to Germany. No. We’re flying. We’re flying to Germany.’ Vika was asleep on Babushka’s lap. She was three years old. Auntie Alya stroked her chubby red cheeks and laughed. ‘She just doesn’t know what a lucky little thing she is.’

