

Charles Lewinsky

GERRON. Novel. Nagel & Kimche, 2011.

Shortlisted for the Swiss Book Prize 2011

«I have learned to live without freedom. Without hope. Why then, damn it, do I find it so hard to live without conscience?»

Once he was a star but now he is just a prisoner among a thousand others. And he is determined to prove his talent one last time. As in «Melnitz», Lewinsky reconstructs a slice of contemporary and cultural history by examining the life and chequered career of a vibrant and hopeful man. Although fictitious, the novel's background is true to life and based on in-depth research; it is the story of the actor Kurt Gerron, who starred in Brecht's «The Threepenny Opera» and played alongside Marlene Dietrich in «The Blue Angel». Born and raised in Berlin, he was injured on the front line, but went on to achieve great success in cabaret and as a songwriter and become a star of stage and screen. In 1944 he is commissioned to make a film intended to portray the humiliating lives of the Jews imprisoned in Theresienstadt as 'idyllic' and 'humane'. To refuse would mean risking his own life as well as his wife's. **Gerron** is a spell-binding novel about the might of conscience and the power of love.

In this ingenious, moving and sombre novel, Charles Lewinsky recounts a life story beyond belief, a life caught between success and desperation, between admiration and persecution.

Charles Lewinsky was born in 1946 and lives in France and Zurich. He previously worked as a playwright, director and editor. His most recent publications at Nagel & Kimche are the novels «Melnitz» (2006), «Johannistag» (2007), «Zehndeine Nacht» (2008), «Doppelpass» (2009), and «Der Teufel in der Weihnachtsnacht» (2010).

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The Swiss Arts Council **Pro Helvetia** is prepared to assume the full translation costs (based on local rates) in connection with Charles Lewinsky's «Gerron».

The application must be submitted by the subsequent publisher of the translated version.

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Reviews

“A true literary miracle. Lewinsky’s story is marked by rare linguistic brilliance, the liveliest profusion, and astonishing narrative virtuosity. With Gerron, Lewinsky has outdone himself and his Melnitz.”

Andreas Isenschmid, NZZ am Sonntag

“Stirring and well researched – and where there’s nothing that could be researched, credibly invented.”

Felicitas von Twickel, ZDF Aspekte

“A love story. No question. Masterfully narrated by Charles Lewinsky, as if he were Kurt Gerron in person, that comedian of banality who stands at the brink of the abyss but then rises above himself.”

Ilja Richter, Die Welt

“Lewinsky invents a life story perhaps more as a crafted biography than as a precise narrative in the documentary sense. In addition, Lewinsky is a phenomenal portraitist who can sketch striking likenessness with just a few strokes, thus lending his novel as distinctly special a coloration as do the secondary settings like the Berlin theater scene of the time between the wars.”

Roman Bucheli, Neue Zürcher Zeitung

“Charles Lewinsky has researched meticulously. The rest is his invention, inspired empathy from an appropriate distance, perhaps an artistic kinship of soul. He has made the character Gerron vivid and intensely alive.”

Bettina Kugler, St. Galler Tagblatt

“Lewinsky’s gift for making history come alive on the basis of human fates is impressive. The biography of Jewish actor Kurt Gerron is hard to bear but won’t let you out of its grip.”

Salomé Schmid-Widmer, Schweizer Illustrierte

“A masterpiece. This novel needs to be required reading.”

Gisela Blau, Tachles

Sample Translation

GERRON

by Charles Lewinsky

Translation by Vincent Kling

*For the best reader
an author could ever wish for:
my daughter Tamar*

He was being nice to me, and that scares me. He didn't shout at me, which would have been normal; instead, he was polite. But in a tone of voice as if he were going to turn completely formal on me.

He didn't speak to me formally, though. That wouldn't have entered his mind, but he did know my name. "Well, Gerron," he said to me, not "Well, kike."

It's dangerous when a man like Rahm knows your name.

"So, Gerron," he said, "I have an assignment for you. You're going to make a film for me."

A film.

He wants something personal, I thought at first, a film about himself. Karl Rahm, loving father with his three children. The Obersturmführer, SS company commander, disguised as a man with feelings. Something like that. Something he can send to his family in Klosterneuburg.

Yes, we know how many children he has. We know where he comes from. We know everything about him. Just the way poor sinners know everything about God. Or about the devil.

Otto told me that every year UFA, the big movie studio, makes a film in praise of Joseph Goebbels. Always for his birthday. They send one of their stars, like Rühmann, for example, who does all these cute things with the Goebbels children, which is their way of sucking up to the propaganda minister.

So now Rahm wants something like that too, I was thinking. That would have been no problem. Not in my situation.

But Rahm thinks bigger. The Herr Obersturmführer has other plans.

"Listen, Gerron," he said. "I saw one of your films once. I don't remember the name, but I liked it. You've got talent. That's the nice thing about Theresienstadt: there are quite a number of talented people here. You're all in legitimate theater and things. But what I want now is a film."

Then he told me what kind of film it was meant to be.

I'm agahst. He must have noticed, but he showed no reaction. Because he was expecting my shock. Or because it made no difference to him. I can't read faces like his.

"We already tried something along these lines earlier," he said, "but it wasn't successful. The people who screwed it up aren't here any more."

There's always a next train to Auschwitz.

"So now it's your turn," said Rahm. Still friendly. His voice still friendly the whole time. "If we're both lucky, things will turn out well this time. Don't you agree, Gerron?"

"I'll have to think about it," I said. To Rahm. Eppstein, who as the oldest Jew had also been summoned, gulped back a frightened groan. It's not a Jew's place to contradict. Not when the camp commandant is demanding something. The SS man who'd brought me here was now started hauling off to beat me up. I didn't see his hand, just felt the movement. You don't turn away or stop standing to attention. Not in the camp commandant's office. The blow was on its way, but Rahm waved it aside.

"He's an artist," he said. Still wearing his friendly Uncle-Rahm face the whole time. "He needs inspiration. All right, then, Gerron," he said. "I'll give you three days. To think it over. So that the film will turn out successfully. I don't want to have to be displeased with somebody again. Three days, Gerron."

I took a beating after all anyway. Outside the door of Rahm's office. The SS man punched me in the face, which is what they do most of the time. But not with full force. If you knew how it was going to end, would you ever want to start? Wouldn't you wrap the umbilical cord around your neck so you'd be strangled before you even came out into the air? Wouldn't you find ways of never even going up to the starting gate of a race you've already lost?

They told me about a child – before my time – who came into the world on the train from Amsterdam to Westerbork. They had the best obstetricians come out from the city for that little pipsqueak. A baby nurse who had once changed the diapers for none less than a real live crown princess. On the very day of the child's arrival, however, the mother was sent on her way east. After all, she'd thrown the numbers on the transport documents out of balance by this unbidden, unauthorized birth and so was now being permitted to even things out by completing a different list.

In Westerbork a different kind of madness prevails than here in Theresienstadt. But it has a method, too. In order to be sent to Auschwitz as a whole-number, non-fractional unit of humanity, you have to be six months old.

So this child from the train: would it have wanted to be born if it had known that its cosseted infancy would last exactly six months? Plus three days for the train journey?

Of course not.

There's a legend my grandfather Emil Riese told me, swirling a cloud of cigar smoke around every sentence. I loved my grandfather's fantastic stories as much as my father, an adherent of rationalism, hated them. It went like this: When a human being is created – he didn't explain to me how that comes about, and I wasn't yet at the age where you ask – when a human being begins to be a person, he knows everything there is to know, everything recorded in all those clever books plus things that no one had yet discovered as well. He knows all the events of the past, and he knows everything that's ever going to happen out there in the world and in there in his own life. But shortly before he's born – and the details of how that happens were still also a mystery to me at that time – an angel comes and taps him on the forehead with his index finger. Pling. Then the new human being forgets everything he already knew. And then, when he comes into the world, my grandfather said, the only thing he remembers is how to suck something in at the upper end and push something out at the lower. I would laugh and he would fill in the pause by puffing on his cigar. An effective narrative technique in allowing the teller to set up the punch lines better. Later I would use it on stage myself.

Only Jews, my grandfather continued, are shrewd enough to turn their heads when the angel comes. So then its finger doesn't touch the forehead but the tip of the nose instead. That's why they don't forget everything they already knew, only most of it. And that's why, my grandfather would say, we Jews are more clever than other people, and that's why our noses are hooked. An explanation that not even the Stürmer ever came up with.

Papa wasn't there at the time. He would have interrupted the story before it was over and said: "Don't be telling the boy such things! And besides, all that cigar smoke – that can't be good for the child's health."

The old-fashioned apartment on Händelstrasse was always filled with smoke. "I'm allowed," my grandfather would say. "When you're a widower, you're allowed to do whatever you want."

If my very own angel had missed me with his little tap and I could have known all about my life from the very start, with all its dismal episodes and its even more dismal finale, the way you know a stage play after you've read the text, I would have wanted to play out my role anyway. Because the text alone isn't the production. I would have looked on my knowledge as a first draft, as something you can keep on discussing and revising. And as far as the really unpleasant passages are concerned – cut to the next scene.

No, I wouldn't have held on tight inside my mother's body. I wouldn't have had to be forcibly wrenched out into the world. I would have wanted to give it a try. Propelled by an irrational confidence in my own creative power. In the years when I was famous, I was always having to answer questionnaires for some newspaper or magazine. In every second one there would be this question: What's your greatest defect? I would write whatever

people usually write: impatience or I can't resist sweets. But what really should have been there was: My greatest defect? I believe the world can be arranged like a theater production.

Olga fell into my arms. Like Mama back when I came home from the front on leave. Not everybody who's summoned to Rahm returns.

"Thank God," she said. Olga's not one for praying, neither of us is, but that was more than an empty phrase. "I saved you a piece of bread," she said. I tried to eat it really slowly but then just gobbled it down.

Olga didn't ask any questions. Sat down on my lap and laid her head on my chest. Her hair always smells newly washed. I don't know how she does it here in this ghetto.

I searched for the right words but didn't find them. There are no right words. I told her what they were requiring of me, and now she's aghast too. Not because of the film but because I talked back to Rahm.

"You're crazy," she said.

Maybe I am. Sometimes I do things for which you need courage. Though I'm not a courageous person at all. But even now I still think – even if by now I really should have learned better – but I still go on thinking you can influence things.

Even with Rahm.

"I have three days," I said, "but I already know what answer I have to give him."

"We both know," Olga said. " 'Yes, Herr Obersturmführer': that's your answer. 'But of course, Herr Obersturmführer. At your command, Herr Obersturmführer.' "

"I can't make this film."

"You can do anything. After all, you performed in Ellecom."

It wasn't fair to remind me. That was the most terrible day of my life.

One of the most terrible days.

Then we kept silent for a long time. It does me good to sit in silence with Olga.

Through the open window came a cloud of stench. Or else it had been there all along and I simply hadn't noticed it. You get used to anything.

You can do anything.

"Not this film," I said to Olga. "I would have to live in shame all the rest of my life."

"And how long will the rest of your life be if you refuse?" She doesn't talk around things.

"You'd hold me in contempt."

"There are worse things than contempt."

There are always worse things. The platitude of the century. The world war? A little finger exercise. A state that falls to pieces? Only a shifting of the stage for the truly major scenes. The Nazis and all their laws? They're just a warm-up too. The high point has yet to come. Right at the end. Just as in the movies. Enjoy the surprise.

"How long does it take to finish a film like that?" Olga asked. "Really wrap it up completely?"

"Three months. Minimum. The shooting is the least of it. A book has to be written first and then afterwards comes the editing . . ."

"In three months the war could be over," she said.

"I'm not a man who can do this," I said.

"You have three days." Olga stood up. "You should use them to find out what kind of a man you really are."

Then she left me alone.

Me. Born on May 11, 1897 in Berlin. In the same apartment in which I spent my youth: Klopstockstrasse 19, a few doors away from the Tiergarten train station. In the kitchen, back toward the tracks, you could hear the rattling and whistling of the regional trains. When the west wind was strong – there was always great excitement then – you had to close the windows against the smoke from the locomotives. If you didn't, all the food would have a railroad taste.

I gather it was my grandfather who chose that apartment. He wanted to have his daughter nearby even as a married woman. My mother's name was Toni, Antonia, that is.

Her parents, the Rieses, wanted the next generation to take the definitive step up from the comfortable solid middle class to the affluent upper middle class. That's why there was a piano in our apartment. In short order, however, my parents gave up any attempt to provide me the necessary fundamentals. True, I had a good ear, but two left hands as well. Fortunately it never occurred to them to send me to a singing teacher instead. I could never have made a career through conventional approaches to training.

Mama was one of those gently bred young ladies all her life. After she graduated they sent her for a year to some kind of finishing school, not actually in Switzerland itself – they wouldn't have been able to afford it at the time – but still, in Bad Dürkheim, in the idyllic wine country. She brought back a fixed repertoire of postures and gestures. A would-be actress who'd been trained by strictly provincial leading men. Whenever she laughed, she would hold her hand up to her mouth and turn her head sideways in affected embarrassment; when she applauded, she did so with her fingertips only. They'd drilled it into her that it was unrefined to applaud with the whole flat of the hand.

But the most important rule for living they'd instilled into her was this one: "Men don't like bright women." So Mama concealed her intelligence. Just the way she would have made a pimple on her forehead vanish by a cleverly curled lock. Acted naïve. Gave no sign that she never took Papa's forcefully declaimed pronunciamentos quite seriously. Both had a very happy marriage.

Papa, who grew up in a New Markish mill village called Kriescht, had come to Berlin at sixteen. An exodus he knew how to depict as dramatically as if he'd had to swim through shark-infested waters and conquer mountains deep in snow. He found a job in my grandfather's dress factory on Leipziger Strasse 72 and later married his only daughter.

Out of Emil Riese, Manufactory of Novelty Items in Women's and Children's Lines, Service Wear, Blouses, Petticoats, Handkerchiefs and Aprons – the company's first advertisement hung framed in our hallway and I learned it by heart, the way I learned everything in writing by heart – soon evolved Riese & Gerson and at some later point, when my grandfather grew old, Max Gerson & Co. Though in reality no "Co." existed. But it lent the firm's name plate an impressive touch.

The firm. In our home that was a magical concept. Whenever Papa would punish one of my childish transgressions with undue severity and I would run complaining to my mother in tears, all she needed to say was, "He's having some trouble in the firm," and while I wasn't comforted right away, I at least found the world restored to order. And sometimes it would happen – in some mysterious way this also had something to do with the firm – that Papa would bring home a piece of layer cake in the middle of the week. Then it had to be eaten – with whipped cream – right on the spot. Mama could object as strongly as she wanted about how the boy's appetite was being spoiled. She didn't stand a chance against the firm.

The nicest thing of all was when I was allowed to go with Papa to the offices on Leipziger Strasse. The actual task of cutting was contracted out as piece work to various craftsmen and completed by a faceless army of seamstresses working from home in Berlin Norden, but one floor higher was the storeroom with the fabrics and the finished merchandise. A labyrinth of shelves in which you could play a wonderful game of hide and seek.

Maybe the business is still there today. It's so easy to forget that life goes on. But if the firm does still exist, it's certainly no longer called Max Gerson & Co.

I'm sitting on my rocking horse. I'm little and my feet can touch the floor only when I stretch my legs. I rock and rock. My horse slides forward a little each time until it hits the wall. I can't go any farther and stare at the obstruction. On the wallpaper, dwarves are marching in formation. Instead of weapons, they're shouldering flowers. They frighten me. I start to cry.

That's my very earliest memory.

Mama comes by at some point – but this isn't a memory now; they told me this part – and wants to turn me around with me sitting on my wooden horse. So that I can keep on riding across my room. I cry louder and strike out. She's not allowed to turn my horse around; no one else is, either. She's only allowed to pull it backwards to the other end of the room. Then I start rocking again, in the same direction as before. Until the next time I'm at the wall. And start crying.

"You did that twenty times a day." Whenever Mama told that story, she would tap me on the forehead with her index finger every time and say, "You've always had a thick skull."

When we left Berlin, the rocking horse stayed behind in the attic on Klopstockstrasse. It's probably still there. A veteran party member snagged the apartment for himself, and he has no children. Heitzendorff, our caretaker. The fellow who sets such great store by the double f at the end of his name that the whole world calls him "Effeuff." His wife would sometimes help Mama with housecleaning, and it's easy to imagine how she now dusts the same furniture even more carefully, now that it's hers. Papa's suits, left hanging in the wardrobe, will be too tight for stout Effeuff, though.

The rocking horse was old and looked as if it had never been new. The white faded to a yellowish color. "But that's the thing you can be proudest of," Papa would comfort me. "That's an especially noble breed. A dappled Isabella." So then I really was proud, because Papa – I still believed at the time – knew everything and never made a mistake.

I can no longer remember how it was that we got back to the subject years later; I must have been well into high school by then. Probably Mama had been telling that old story about the rocking horse again.

"I didn't lie to you," Papa said. "It really was a dappled Isabella." And he fetched Meyer's Encyclopedia from the glass-fronted book case. Papa was firmly convinced that you could find the answer to everything in its many volumes. If you only knew how to frame the question correctly. On free evenings he would read through it page by page the way other people read a novel. Now he opened to the article on the Spanish queen Isabella, and I had to read it out loud. Papa was just an ordinary manufacturer of ready-made clothing, but he loved playing the schoolmaster. The queen, I read, had sworn not to change her shift until her spouse had conquered some hostile city or other – I don't remember which one – and when the walls finally fell, her shift was no longer white, but yellow.

Wrong! I would write in red ink in the margin today. A white shift worn too long would turn gray, not yellow. I know what I'm talking about.

Mama attributed my always wanting to ride in the same direction to my innate stubbornness. But that wasn't it. I had something embarrassing to hide. My dappled Isabella made of wood was one-eyed. On either side of its head the two halves of a cat-patch aggie – as we boys used to call marbles flecked with black – had been glued some time in the past. But my rocking horse had lost its left eye. That was the reason why, as a three- or four-year-old, I had screamed and lashed out so the horse always to gallop in the same direction. It was important for me that the blind side had to be concealed from onlookers. Otherwise they might have noticed that it wasn't a real horse.

As a boy I was a tall, gangling, skinny kid. "Only weeds grow that fast," Papa would say.

There exists – no, there existed – a picture taken on my thirteenth birthday, where I'm standing in a photographer's studio in front of an artistically draped curtain. I can still remember its color, dark green. I was wearing a suit, my very first. My new long pants were probably meant to be recorded for all eternity, just like myself.

Underneath, on the right hand side of the photo mount, were embossed in gold letters Alphons Tiedeke, Portrait Studio, Friedrichstrasse 78. But it couldn't have been Herr Tiedeke himself who photographed me. A young man in a white smock kept bustling around me. Made me strike several poses but wasn't satisfied with any of them. Finally he dragged over a chair, the kind you fetch from the property room in a theater when furnishing a nobleman's castle. I was supposed to lean on the arm rest, supposedly because it looked nonchalant in an elegant way. The thing was, though, that even by age thirteen I had grown so tall that my arm, if I held it

straight down, didn't reach the side of the chair. So I'm standing in the picture with my shoulders crooked. Leaning over to the side, as if something had dropped out of my hand and I'm trying to feel for it without attracting attention. The framed picture stood for years on Mama's dressing table.

Later she took it with her to Holland. It was packed inside her suitcase when she was transported further. Starting that day I wanted to become a photographer. Herr Tiedeke's assistant had impressed me not just by his manner of dressing – the duster so nonchalantly folded and protruding from the breast pocket of his painter's smock was, as Papa noted with an expert's eye, genuine Japanese silk – but above all how his job called for him to arrange me like a mannequin. It was the first time I was experiencing something like the work of a theater director.

I built myself a camera. A kitchen chair to the back of which a shoe box painted black was attached. An old ironing-board cover under which I crept to take my pictures. I was Court Photographer Gerson, and my classmate and best friend Kalle was His Majesty the Emperor, who was having me record his likeness. Kalle went along with every game I thought up. As long as he could be somebody distinguished. One time, when we were striking matches – though we were forbidden to – he was Emperor Nero and sang in a hideous voice while I torched Rome.

We preferred games that required us to make up things, and we avoided more physical activities like cops and robbers. My arms and legs had grown much too quickly and got all tangled up when I ran. I would trip over my own self. Kalle had something wrong with his lungs, so he was exempt from gymnastics. He probably would have died of tuberculosis at some time or other. If he'd lived long enough.

We would have liked to sit at the same desk in school. But the seating chart was arranged strictly according to the marks earned. The seat all the way to the right in the first row was reserved for the boy with the highest average, who in our class was a nice kid, not a grind. My desk was somewhere in the middle, and Kalle sat all the way in the back. He wasn't in danger just this one time only of not being promoted to the next class; it was like that for him every year. His getting through each year by the skin of his teeth had more to do with sympathy than with scholastic achievement.

Photography soon lost its appeal. I couldn't think of enough poses in which to position my model. Emperor Kalle bestowed one last medal on me, then we converted our camera into a telescope and discovered many new celestial bodies as inspired by Halley's Comet.

In retrospect it seems unbelievable to me how childish we were. And in 1910 at that, just four years before we were all declared adults overnight and sent to war. In the photograph with my new suit I had no inkling of anything that was awaiting me. I'm just standing there all gawky and skinny. No one could then imagine that I would very soon grow plump.

So now: Kalle.

He didn't seem sick to me. I knew from Mama, who was constantly going through tribulations with her overdilicate stomach, what it was supposed to look like when you weren't healthy. You took to your bed and only spoke in a very soft voice. In contrast, Kalle had the loudest laugh I had ever heard. Louder still than Emil Jannings with a load on. I heard it the very first time we met as brand-new sixth graders, when we shyly entered the school yard. Papa had bought my green and white school cap one size too big because my head was still growing. But because I'd been treated to a military-style haircut at the same time, it slid down over my ears. Kalle caught sight of me, stopped short, and almost reached his last gasp from laughing. Which was more than just an expression with him; that's how it really looked. Because he had to pant for air and would start wheezing. Whenever he had one of his attacks of hilarity, you always had the impression he was about to throw up. What it was that so amused him to the point of being unable to breathe was not my hangdog appearance but the fact that he wasn't in any better shape than I was. He too, thanks to exactly the same prudent reflection on his father's part, had been outfitted with a cap too large. And he had likewise been subjected to what was then the standard pedagogical initiation rite of a close-cropped haircut. Because I was an outsize, gangly weed a head taller than he, we must have made a truly ridiculous pair.

From that day on we were friends.

His name was Karl-Heinz. When our names had to be entered into the class register during the first hour, it was important to him that his should not be written as one word. That whole year, our teacher would cry "Hyphen!" when he called on him.

In Amsterdam I once witnessed how a hyphen saved someone's life. At least temporarily. His name was missing one on the list, and because he could prove that the omission was a formal bureaucratic error, someone else was deported in his place.

It never occurred to me that Kalle's illness could be anything serious. So all right, he coughed, and he was exempt from gymnastics – for which I envied him – but we had become acquainted at an age when things as we find them seem to be unvarying, part of nature. Kalle was Kalle, and Kurt was Kurt.

His father was an unaffiliated scholar. I pictured such a person to be a kind of Doctor Faust, spending his nights in a laboratory. When I then met him, he was just a friendly, absent-minded man who still had his robe on at noon and was not to be disturbed when he was reading. I never did find out what branch of learning he was occupied with. It must have had something to do with music. Once he told us something about secret messages that could be found in the scores of Johann Sebastian Bach. No doubt he was simply a harmless dreamer. Who could afford to ride his hobby horse his whole life.

In total contrast to my pedagogically overzealous father, there was only thing he expected from his son: the least possible disturbance. Whenever we wanted to conquer Troy in Kalle's room – I was Achilles, he was King Menelaus – we would supply ourselves in advance with ample troop provisions from the kitchen and could be certain of not being interrupted for hours.

Kalle was the most cheerful person I had ever met. His laughter was so infectious that it was once able to disarm even fat Effeft, who took his caretaking duties in the building with military seriousness. We'd been up to something, I don't remember what, Heitzendorff had caught us and threatened draconically martial consequences. Whereupon Kalle began chuckling. From anybody else, Effeft would have considered that an instance of lèse-majesté demanding even more drastic punishment, but instead his serving-man's moustache began to twitch, and something unheard-of occurred: Heitzendorff, he of stern demeanor, joined in the laughter, and both of us rascals got out of it unscathed.

That's how Kalle was.

Later, he laughed his way all through our graduation ceremony. Found it only too funny that he, whom they'd pushed through all those years out of pure sympathy, had actually passed. He absolutely could not contain himself. The whole auditorium, draped in black, white, and red was laughing along with him. The principal, Doctor Kramm, had to interrupt his patriotic address to say reprovingly: "Someone laughed to death once." The only prophecy he would ever be right about.

If I knew, if I knew with total certainty, that shooting the film would never be finished, or that it would be but no one would see the finished product, because the war would be over before that . . . The Americans, so rumor has it, are said to have landed in France, the Russians already in control of Vitebsk. I rejoiced along with everybody else, rejoiced very cautiously and quietly when they told me, and only afterwards did I realize I don't even know where Vitebsk is.

If I knew with total certainty that the last act has already begun – and a long-standing rule of the theater says it's always the shortest one – if I could see the stagehand assigned to the curtain standing ready, his hand on the rope and only waiting for a sign from the stage manager, if there were somebody, some prophet who could issue me a firm assurance, then there would be no question; I wouldn't need three days to decide; I could go right to Rahm – as if anyone could go to him without being summoned! – and I could say to him: "With great pleasure, Herr Obersturmführer"; I could say: "It will be an honor"; I could say: "Just how would you like your film to be?"

If only I knew.