

Free Today – Cost You Tomorrow

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(Heute für Geld und morgen umsonst, KiWi Verlag, 2012)



Sample translation by Sarah Timlin for *New Books in German*

Extract from pp. 21-31 and pp. 36-44

I prayed that God would protect Mama and send old Schwerdtfeger to hell. She had been pretty close to it on one occasion. On orders from high above, she had once been sent by my old man to accompany a trainload of deportees. Before departure, she was to vaccinate all the passengers, including the guards, with a louse-repelling serum from the institute and then examine them at their destination to determine its effect. The vaccinations gave a legitimate and official air to the whole business of boarding the train, right there in front of everyone, avoiding the usual theatrical scenes of woman pulling their hair, men throwing themselves to the ground and children screaming. It was my old man's idea.

This disappointed the compassionate audience who always appeared two hours before the show began. But it made it easier for the National Socialist People's Welfare Organisation to hand out sandwiches – and real coffee beans – to the soldiers on leave. Officially reassured, seven hundred vaccinated yids – old and young, big and small – mounted twelve cattle trucks on platform 26. After all, people who offer vaccinations surely cannot have bad intentions.

Behind the engine the guards and their Alsatians travelled in a converted Mitropa carriage. The whistle blew, and eastwards they went. At the front of the train, nothing could be heard from the passengers behind. Soldier songs were sung – *Alte Kameraden auf dem Kriegespfad, Steige hoch, du Brandenburger Adler, An Backbord ist Laboe in Sicht, der Seemann prüft sein Sackgewicht*. At the rear of the train, the airstream carried away the piss, the shit and the screams of the thirsty, together with any hope in God Almighty. By the second day the

children had fallen silent. The smallest were secretly tossed from the train, and thus the chorus of pain of the seven hundred poor souls waned and quickly ended.

This is how old Schwerdtfeger told it, when she came and had lunch with us after her return.

Shortly after crossing the border into the General Government, the guards realised that not a single louse had dared come near them. Usually they would have had to have a shakedown after passing through Breslau. Now, louse-free, they celebrated with Schwerdtfeger, drinking schnapps and boilemaker. Every day, the cook they'd brought along had to throw potato fritters in the frying pan or serve Silesian pork with dried fruit.

Finally, after an exhausting, five-day journey through dull Polack countryside, the train reached Auschwitz. Old Schwerdtfeger got dressed up especially for the arrival. Dressed in a starched white doctor's tunic, stethoscope dangling from her neck, she alighted from the buffet car, her small doctor's case in her hand, constantly adjusting her pinned-up hair and awaited her patients.

"But they kept us waiting, Professor. They didn't even budge when the camp guards and police pulled open the sliding carriage doors. There was just the shout "Raus!" and then they seeped out of the train as if in slow motion."

Schwerdtfeger described all this over lunch in a thorough and reproachful manner.

"Professor, they were falling on top of one another, moaning and whining, they'd soiled themselves and vomited all over each other!"

The guards had shouted themselves hoarse, she explained, while the passengers hadn't even the energy left to complain.

But those capable helped the half-dead onto Auschwitz's soil.

Old Schwerdtfeger didn't believe that this was real, though. She spoke to us of a very elaborate film set. After all, who would throw dead children to the guards' Alsatian dogs?

“Professor, I was wearing my starched white lab coat, my hair done especially, but nobody saw I was a doctor with an important task to undertake. I didn’t take a single sample. That was obviously not part of the script. My patients, stinking of excrement, were swept past me – playing along! Yes, really! An old gentleman in a suit and waistcoat shouted “Excuse me, which way is the garden centre?” And, as if on cue, the guards roared with laughter. One guard, shaking with laughter, shouted “Back there, where the smoke is, Sir!” And I was in two minds. Was this a Nazi film or not!” Where was the leading man, she had asked herself at the time.

The set was so real and well built – the train platform, the filthy, shit-filled train. The miserable figures and the cigarette-smoking officers, signalling to the left or right with their whips. To old Schwerdtfeger, these were extras. They looked like real people. A group of women was even playing gypsy music while she searched for her patients. “Professor Zeitler, this is not the world of God and mankind, I thought. A sea of people, drowning in cold agony in the water, is how I always imagined the sinking of the Titanic. No, that was a film!” But she did, after all, have to take samples, as my old man had instructed her to.

“Well, because of the gnats, mosquitoes, lice and bugs throughout the east, Professor, and to assess the effectiveness of the vaccine.”

She went on to say how she had stammered to a Red Cross nurse that she couldn’t think of anything nicer than to play along, but that she would like to know what her role was.

The nurse, however, accused her of being one of the chosen people, cunningly disguised in a fine garment in an attempt to avoid death. The nurse called an officer over, and he pushed Schwerdtfeger into the row on the right. She still thought that the filming was nearly over and that everyone would soon return to normal. The dead children being nibbled at by the guard-dogs would stand-up, wipe off the make-up and tears and everybody would soon get a Bockwurst in a bun with mustard.

“But, Professor, someone hit me violently in the face. I yelled at everyone that I was a party member and in the Women’s League and worked for the distinguished bacteriologist Professor Armin Zeitler! It was useless! I run away! They grab me and drag me back into line. My hair comes down and I lose my nice doctor’s case!”

Back in the line on the right she found herself between nothing but Hungarians. They smelt even worse than her own patients and, what's more, spoke an impossible language. They held up their children and shook them, and the soldiers yelled at them, "Unfit for work! Straight to the showers!" She then tried to explain what the word 'shower' meant. A young guard helped her. He spoke to the Hungarians, who in actual fact were gypsies, in friendly tones: "Showers, my good people, showers! Water, woda, Wasser! Off you go, take off your clothes and put them in a pile, nice and tidy so you can find everything later, and then into the shower rooms!"

Everything became calmer. Old Schwerdtfeger thought that, without being asked, she had just taken a small part in the film.

"The people felt looked after, Professor. Even the vaccination programme before they departed – trousers down, bums out and needle in – was proof of something good. As long as a doctor, or even a nurse, is involved, people feel that everything is disinfected, nothing else can go wrong. From now on, we will lead a healthy life." Mama had finished her meal quickly and began ironing in the background. The damp ironing cloth hissed and sounded like one of the hot air ovens used for sterilising in Papa's institute.

Old Schwerdtfeger told us of the cold sweat which would evaporate in the showers and how the mothers held up their children once again, so they could see the redeeming barracks where they would soon find the water they so longed for.

They began to tease the children. Some parents started to sing with their dry mouths, their lips sticking together and cracking. Someone played a Puszta tune on the harmonica, accompanying the female band. Even those with the shattered noses and broken collar bones mustered themselves. They played their parts convincingly, these film extras. There was calm on the platform. Everyone was looking forward to the anticipated shower, and we too, listening to old Schwerdtfeger talk of her experiences in Auschwitz, started to enjoy the drastic, but obviously well-meant, film about the crimes of the Communists – or was it the English?

The soldiers only hit the women on the calves, the Alsatians wagged their tails, and old Schwerdtfeger was now very curious about something in particular.

Suddenly, as she proudly told us, she summoned the courage to call for the film director. Leni Riefenstahl came to mind, in fact, did she not make such exotic films? "Frau Riefenstahl! Frau Riefenstahl, aren't you around here somewhere? I am a German citizen and I'm afraid I don't fit into this gypsy film!" she shouted over everyone's heads.

The soldiers all nodded and grinned, and the wounded, still far from the shower rooms, stepped up the pace. No one needed to hurry them along anymore.

In the meantime, the cattle trucks were being cleaned. Detainees from the camp were hosing down the wagons with firemen's hosepipes. Every now and then, well-meaning individuals sent a short cooling spray amongst the rows of people. How good it felt to experience something pleasant!

Old Schwerdtfeger was still searching for Riefenstahl. She had to be there somewhere. When you were making a film like this, you had a responsibility to make sure everything went to plan and not like this!

Old Schwerdtfeger had little understanding of cinema. But wow, these extras were really something.

"They weren't unemployed people like in the Weimar days. They were proper professional extras, and they took their roles very seriously. There were even real gypsies, their straggly hair full of pomade and hideous mouths in their evil faces!" The whole unkemptness was totally genuine. Only someone like Riefenstahl, she continued, could achieve that – to find people prepared to put up with the blows to the calves and the broken collar bones, the thirst and the barking dogs. "By the way, Professor, they were all scratching themselves!" My old man wanted his pudding. She was encouraged to hurry to the end of her story.

Schwerdtfeger gathered herself, and Mama put sponge cake and weak coffee on the table.

Yes, the dogs had pissed on the children who were made up to appear dead. Why something like that had to be in the screen-play was a question that had bothered her for a long time, too.

In the row on the left they were enthusing about the prospect of working in the factories of Krupp and Farben.

In the row on the left, as she had already said, they were looking forward to the showers. She was pushed along with them towards the doors, although she kept insisting that she had already showered in the sleeping wagon of the train. Now, slightly frantic, she again called for Leni Riefenstahl, but she was nowhere to be seen.

At this moment a BMW convertible drove between the rows, carefully weaving around the dead children lying on the ground and around a few old men and women. As the shiny vehicle came to a halt, the camp commandant got out holding a telegram in his hand.

Unfortunately she had forgotten his name – something beginning with 'H'.

"A slim, slight man wearing a smart SS uniform called my name! His voice sounded like the actor Heinrich George's. Swinging my doctors' case, he looked around at the whole misery on the film set and repeatedly shouted "Ulla Merethe Schwerdtfeger!" Then he fired a shot into the air with his pistol and everything was as quiet as a graveyard. As I staggered over to him he kissed my hand. "Merethe," he said emotionally, "please forgive us. You've ended up at the wrong performance. This often happens with our German efficiency".

Everyone around was still quiet. Even the voices of the children were not to be heard.

"I will arrange for your seven hundred fellow passengers to be found. If it is too late, you will get new ones". She looked at all of us - Mama looked straight ahead, the iron cracked. Papa had spilled food all down his tie.

"Unfortunately, Professor, there was nothing to be done! I had no more vaccine!"

This elegant man then took her by car to the finest place in the town of Auschwitz, and to make amends, arranged a first class ticket from Auschwitz via Rome to Leipzig, including accommodation.

"Boss," said old Schwerdtfeger assertively, "I will never return to the film town. I wasn't aware that we had built film studios like Babelsberg and Geiseltal in the east. You should have told me!"

I had listened to her attentively and remembered everything. "What a pity the old strumpet didn't disappear in one of the shower rooms!" said Mama, once Schwerdtfeger had left.

And my old man just said, "If it hadn't been for *me!*" Mama stood up and continued to iron.

I lay in my bed. I couldn't get Schwerdtfeger's peculiar Auschwitz film out of my head.

In my film snippets, at least, there weren't any Alsatian dogs tearing to pieces children who were made up to look dead.

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She lay down on the sofa. I grabbed my bike and rode down the lane towards the road. It was a quite a feeling, rolling along the smooth tarmac. I relished it and rode at a leisurely pace.

Where the road curved left into Danziger Straße there was an ice-cream parlour on the right. A sign in red letters read: FREE TODAY – COST YOU TOMORROW – The sweetest Narvik ice-cream for the German youth!

Behind the hatch stood the ice-cream man, his cap perched on his head. He pointed at his three ice cream tubs.

"Vanilla, chocolate or lemon?"

I didn't dare say anything.

"I know you, lad! Well, well, well, you're both still alive, are you, your mother and you?"

He hit himself on the forehead with his ice tongs. It went 'ping'.

"Brought it back home from the Norwegian Campaign and it'll last forever. Pure silver, the plate is," he said in a broad East German accent. He then put a scoop of chocolate ice-cream in a paper cup and held it out to me.

"The Norwegian bullet was coming head-on," he said. "It whipped through the chest of the man in front – right through his heart. But it was too fiery and ambitious to leave it at that, and so it lunged with its remaining strength through my steel helmet, through my temple and into my nut. And there it came to rest, cold and lifeless."

He looked at me and made the 'ping' sound once again.

“Ever since!” is all he said.

The sound of military music could be heard in the distance. We both looked at one another. Then he said, “Your mother was a spirited one! She used to work for the Olympic delegation. Whenever anyone tried it on a crowded tram, she’d clip them round the ear quick smart. After that I lost sight of her, until she turned up here with that famous father of yours!”

He glanced at my feet, and I moved as close as possible to the hatch. He laughed.

“I’ve heard your Papa gets a package for the gifted every month. What’s in that then?”

I looked him up and down and took a step backwards, now more self-assured.

“The package my father receives is for those blessed with a divine gift. One every month, from the Führer himself, with booty in.”

He was shocked, and I felt like Herr Franz from the shipping family in my favourite book, who shot a green crocodile in its yellow eye, thereby saving the life of a brown slave.

He stammered, “They’ve built a swing ride at the military hospital and there are free sausages - the Führer has treated every child in the German Empire to a Wiener to celebrate his birthday. Don’t you want to go?” I shook my head.

“Come on, a redhead like you, nobody’ll be suspicious!”

I said, “I am blond!”

Then the railway gates started to jingle, and I forgot about everything around me. I jumped onto my bike and rode one-handed down to the barrier, the rushing air tore the half-empty ice-cream cup out of my other hand, and the rushing air from the train hurtling past almost knocked me over. The guard looked down from his hut. “Since the hedgehopper planes have been around here, the trains travel at full-speed!” he called to me. I then tried to draw his attention to the fact that he should raise the barriers, but he held up his hand and said, “There’s another one coming from the other direction!”

I looked at the shiny tracks. What adventurous, faraway places they might lead to! The signal clattered to give the all-clear. The wires on the signals left and right shifted up and down.

The tracks led between two railway embankments and out into the wide world. I rode along one of the embankments, parallel to the tracks. Allotments to my side, and below me, all trains destined for Rome. That's what old Rand had told me. Years ago, he had seen Mussolini on his way home to Italy after visiting the Führer. He had travelled very slowly past him, he told me. "Him down in the buffet car, a half-full plate of pasta in front of him and loads of wicker bottles of wine, me on my bike up on the path. We looked at each other for a good few seconds, then he laughed as he slurped down a long piece of pasta."

That was Rand's encounter with Mussolini.

I wanted Mussolini for my birthday.

Maybe he had come to the Führer's party.

In the allotments on my right old men and women were celebrating with bottles of beer. They sang, "In the Reitzenhainerstraße hangs the sausage man from a tree. Why might that be? 'Cos he gave sausages away for free."

Little paper flags with swastikas on were hanging out of the summerhouse windows. I braked and wanted to climb down at a good spot, but my tracksuit bottoms got caught in the chain.

I was trapped.

An old woman came up to her garden fence.

"Hang on, sonny, I'll help you!"

She came out to the path and teased my trousers out of the chain with her old fingers.

"Where are you going, lad?" she asked. I pointed down at the tracks.

The grass on the railway embankment was high and I was short. It went down quite steeply and the bank on the other side wasn't nearly as high, and it had locust trees and elderberry bushes growing on it.

The signal mast below still gave the all-clear. "Don't hurt yourself, lad!" the old woman called after me.

"Is Mussolini coming now?" I shouted back.

She became animated. He had come past here before the war and she had seen him, she said. He had been lying on a luxury bed in the sleeping car. But then she had seen another Mussolini in the buffet car, eating a mouthful of pasta in tomato sauce. He had belched so loudly you could even hear it up here. He must have been the lookalike. They all have lookalikes – Stalin, Rosenfeld, and our Adolf too, surely. "Anyway, the one in the sleeping car looked more noble and that was him. A person just like you and me!"

I looked at the signal, which was still tilted upwards. But no train was to be heard.

I ventured onto the track, got on my knees and put my ear to the steel rail.

Nothing. Up above they were still singing, probably thinking that the Führer himself would hear them if they sang loud enough.

"Mussolini doesn't come any more, not now it's all over for him. He looked so thin on the newsreel the other day!" the old women called to me.

In the ditch below the signal wires, lizards scurried about. Old Herr Rand had told me about grass snakes. I could have done with him now, he would definitely have told me everything about Mussolini.

He once brought me a postcard from the Vatican. "That's St Peter's Cathedral," he said to me quietly, so Mama couldn't hear. "That's where the most supreme Catholic sits on his holy throne. And right behind his office is Radio Vatican. Can you see the radio mast? From there, his voice is broadcast to all the Catholics all across the world. There he bemoans the poverty and misery of the negroes and the Indians, and demands money from the poor, for the poor!" He didn't say a word about Mussolini.

“That’s politics, my lad, and nothing to do with faith.”

A whistle blew in the distance.

The train came steaming towards me around a long bend. The engine, with its many carriages, was destined for Rome, even if it was without Mussolini.

I trembled down by the tracks. I had only ever heard a train sound its horn before, mostly in bed at night, or seen one on a film snippet, soundless and black-and-white.

The closer it came, the more I trembled. Suddenly the brakes screeched. I was afraid that it was because of me and retreated another two metres from the track. I could hear the train creep past me, my eyes tightly shut. Then the train became quieter. Just a soft squeak and it stood still. I opened my eyes and was looking straight into one of the windows.

I saw a blood-stained head bandage, and underneath, the pale, unshaven face of a man. I heard groaning. The train groaned from end to end.

There were screams, too. Nurses ran along the aisles with bottles of soda water.

There were cries of “Mama!” and “Water!”

Plaster casts everywhere. Arms, legs, heads, eyes – everything was bandaged or in plaster.

They were soldiers. They lay above and below one another on stretchers, camp-beds and seats – on three levels. I walked along the train a bit.

In every carriage limbs dangled in all directions, splayed out and hoisted up, limp and trembling.

One person was lying strapped up high below the roof, the corners of his mouth twitching, helplessly wanting to say something but unable to, his mouth was so dry and chapped.

One held his folded hands menacingly in my direction, moving his mouth, and I responded, “I’m not to blame, if that’s what you mean!” And he spat at the window and meant me.

I retorted angrily, “It’s not my fault, asshole! Go on, get lost!”

And the train heard me and began to move. Mama would have said at this point, "That's what they're like, these Nazis, when they have had their appetite spoilt."

Carriage upon carriage, window upon window slid past me. Behind each one, the same misery was to be seen. They looked at me in anger; to them, I was an angel, offering no help.

All of a sudden, I had a thought: maybe this was a train like the one old Schwerdtfeger had spoken about, carrying actors and people all made-up to Auschwitz for the second part of the film by this Riefenstahl person.

I began to nod to them in a friendly way, saluting, waving and blowing kisses.

I called loudly, "Have a good journey! Say hello from me to the barracks of Auschwitz and to the greenhouses! Have a good journey, soldiers!"

At this, some started to give me a friendly laugh and waved back with their plastered hands. I did a little negro dance for them as I ran along, and sang, "Negro uprising in Cuba, shots are fired throughout the night – all that said, you'll find the dead with a knife in the head, humbahumbaassa, humbahumbaassa, humbahooohooohooo..."

In the last two carriages, they were lying on tables under bright lamps. Men dressed in white were cutting away at them. One of them threw a bloody hand into a bowl.

At this moment I knew it: this was a film like the one Schwerdtfeger had talked about.

I was climbing up to my bike when it flew over; almost silently, it circled to follow the train, and low between the two embankments it started to fire. The low-flying aircraft was a Lightning, the Cadillac of the skies, according to old Rand. A silver, twin-fuselage aircraft. The pilot sat up front between two engines. He waved at me. After all, we were, briefly, at eye level.

He shot at the train and continued to fire as he flew over it, turning to the left in the direction of the military hospital and climbing quickly. I sat down half-way up the embankment, startled by this Yank. "This pilot sits amid unparalleled technical luxury. He doesn't even have to get up to take a leak, he pisses into something a bit like a bicycle inner

tube," old Rand had said. The noise roared over me, although the airplane was no longer to be seen. As the noise faded away, I heard screaming from the gardens.

I climbed up and saw the old woman lying in front of her garden gate – decapitated. With one hand, she clutched my bike.

It was undamaged, but I had to yank it out of her hand. Even louder screams came from the neighbouring garden.

Where was the old woman's head? I looked but couldn't find it. Perhaps I was too flustered. Just a moment ago she'd been telling me about Mussolini. And in the distance the train whistled. Mama came to mind. She had heard the plane. She would look for me, and she wouldn't find me. She was bound to think of the military hospital and the celebration for the Führer. What a shitty outing this was! What if Mama went over to the military hospital? I had to get home. I picked up my bike and, on tiptoes, wheeled it away. I had had enough of the whole death thing. As I sneaked past the garden fence belonging to the old men and women, I saw, on my honour, a beer glass full of blood with pink foam on top.

Then I jumped onto my bike.

This sample translation was commissioned by *New Books in German*.

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