

Barbara Zoeke  
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Translation by Katy Derbyshire

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lone with the voices in my head, since last Friday. I hear your voice, occasionally Püppi's chatter, and in the evenings after lights out I hear the voice of Gustaf Clampe. I know you didn't particularly like Clampe, not even when he bowed down over your hand and called you Signora Felicitas, his eyes radiant. You'd grumble when I invited him to dinner. Every room is instantly too small the moment Clampe crosses the threshold. Apart from which, he steals. He steals the lives of his assistants. (He had money, and that explains a great deal.) Yet when I held the address in his memory on 5 January, the frescoes of Pompeii gleaming on the screen, lavish red and gold, I did feel very close to the late Gustaf Clampe. Yes, he stole a great deal of my time. But he gave me things too, gifts one otherwise has to attain for oneself.

I held the speech in his memory and then I fell. Tripped over one or two steps I hadn't seen in the semi-darkness of the auditorium. I fell and heard my bones

cracking, after that a slight mist before my eyes, later the scent of freshly starched white coats. The ambulance men strapped me onto a stretcher; a swaying exit along the corridors of Berlin University.

We're taking you to the Charité, Professor, said the emergency doctor. They have the best craftsmen there. If Sauerbruch operates on you, there'll be fewer complications.

A few weeks later, Sauerbruch sat alone at my bedside. Until then, I had only seen him with his retinue: large spectacles with thin frames, receding hairline, neatly buttoned white coat. Now, he was wearing a dress suit and patent leather shoes.

I'm on my way to the opera, he answered my surprized look. *Tristan und Isolde*. You can come along again soon. He laughed and turned serious.

We'll get your leg and hip back in shape, more or less, he said. But the twitching hands, the slurred speech – it could be a nervous disorder. There's a specialist in Münster. The name's Kehrer, Professor Ferdinand Kehrer. Perhaps a little too far away from your institute in Leipzig and the family?

I nodded.

I'd suggest Wittenau, then. Ambitious young psychiatrists walk the wards out in Wittenau; they'll do everything possible. And visiting time is every Sunday afternoon. The grounds are beautiful: trees, fields, a patch of woods. Clean air, decent food. An old country estate bought up by the city forty years ago. I wouldn't recommend the clinic in Buch or our colleague Doctor Hallervorden; the good man might well be interested in your brain before its time.

Thank you, I said. And think of me when Isolde sings her love aria. *Mild und leise wie er lächelt*, he hummed. He raised his hand to take his leave. The scent of French cologne remained in the room.

When the light went out, Gustaf Clampe raised his voice.

Koenig, Koenig, he whispered. Don't be so trusting. Sauerbruch was on board when 900 German professors signed the *Call to the Academics of the World*. And he even held a speech in the crowded Alberthalle in Leipzig on 11 November 1933. After Fischer and Heidegger and Pinder and all the others.

*The individual is only a link in the chain of honour that ties our nation to its leaders... Yet a tremendous avowal by the entire nation to the will of our Führer and his great tasks must show the world that Germany has awoken... And do you know how he reacted when all Jewish doctors were expelled from the faculty on 1 April 1933? Did he protest? Or did he simply support his favourites a little? And rumour had it all over Berlin and Munich that Sauerbruch knows *him* personally, that he patched up his left shoulder in 1923, after the march on the Feldherrenhalle. Back then in Uffing am Staffelsee, out at the Hanfstaengls' place. A borderline case between genius and insanity, Sauerbruch is supposed to have said. Perhaps even the world's most dangerous criminal.*

In September 1934, Clampe announced his emigration. *Koenig*, he wrote to me, *Koenig, I'm going to pack my bags. I've watched them murder nearly a hundred of their old companions and their old adversaries in the space of three days. And I've seen them all leaving, the Jewish scholars. The physicists, the chemists, the doctors, the psychologists. Even my friend Rudolf Arnheim left months ago. One of the best minds at the Weltbühne. You met him over breakfast at the Adlon. For German art historians to relinquish a man of his standing! In any case: there is nothing more to keep me in Berlin and at this university. I have heart problems; I shall visit a sanatorium in Switzerland and then step down. Vice Chancellor Fischer will be pleased. He can bring in a prestigious anti-Semite like Pinder for my chair; Pinder, who wants to rewrite art history to make it truly Germanic.*

In late October, Clampe knocked at the door of my office in Leipzig. He was clutching a bouquet of dahlias for Felicitas and a growling teddy bear for Püppi.

*Auf Wiedersehen*, Max, he said. Then we shook hands in silence. The silence continued until, a shadow on his face, he said a strange thing: Max, don't wait too long; they'll do the inconceivable.

Laws are nothing but printed paper, I said with a bristliness I hardly recognized in myself. I had rarely contradicted him.

Not for them. They'll do what they've announced. They enjoy murdering without fear of punishment, and we watched them do it this last summer. They invented a putsch to kill Röhm and his vulgar SA pals. Lawlessly. No killers, no judges. And the German judiciary, the entire German educated classes, have made themselves his lapdogs and wag their tails eagerly behind him. Even Gerhart Hauptmann finds the man's speeches *staggeringly great* and hoists the swastika flag at his house on Hiddensee.

Then he left, his gigantic figure bent slightly forward as ever. Five years later, he was dead. And I – I had waited at least a year too long.

(pp. 9 – 13)



They propped up my stretcher in a small room. A nurse approached the foot end with brisk strides. Strong glasses balanced on her thin nose, but her laugh was a promise of joy, warmth, community.

I'll send you someone to help unpack, a young girl I presume you'll like, she said. And then I'll come and we'll arrange what has to be arranged, Professor Koenig. I'm the ward nurse, Nurse Rosemarie.

And thus I met not only Nurse Rosemarie, I also met Miss Elfi. She had tied a large white apron over her pale grey institutional dress. Behind that stiffly starched apron was concealed a child who had shot up too quickly, with finely built limbs and dark curls, a child who liked to hide her hands behind her back.

How did you end up in Wittenau? I asked, hoping to begin a conversation with this magical creature.

Sometimes I speak dream German, she answered. That's what my teachers at the conservatoire said. And I tremble. She removed her hands from behind her back, hands with astoundingly long, strong fingers. And not only her fingers, her whole hands trembled as she held out both of them towards me with a questioning look, like a young wastrel who knows very well he must have his fingernails inspected before the school day begins.

Instead of an answer, I smiled at her large eyes. Her dark hair was cropped short. Yet it was not quite possible to tame; hair curled around her brow and ears, and at the back of her neck a strokable peach fuzz grew down to the top of her collar. A line that men's fingers would dearly like to trace.

Shall we unpack? I asked. And how can I help you?

She smiled her elfin smile and put her right forefinger to her lips, as though obliging me to silence. Then she lifted my suitcase with surprising strength from the bench that was part of my room's furnishings. The first thing she found in the tangle of shirts and trousers was my silver retractable pencil. I had given it up for lost. She could have no idea how important it was to me.

She held up the pencil before my eyes and said: Beautiful. Isn't it beautiful? A silver pencil. I can use it to write down your stories. Your dream notes. Nurse Rosemarie will be pleased. From that moment on, our pact held: I tell stories. She writes.

Then came Nurse Rosemarie. Her glasses sparkled on her long thin nose, her clothes rustled. She looked at us, sent Elfi out with a wave of her hand and leaned over me.

I can tell Elfi will *divinolyze* you, as she likes to put it. And you're equally charmed by her. That's very good. I've studied your medical file, not without gain. Just so there are no misunderstandings: we've been at war since last September. And it didn't take them four weeks to beat the Polish army. No one can guarantee you'll survive this war, but it's in our hands whether that elfin child comes out of it unharmed, in my hands, in yours. And that was the second pact I made that morning: a pact between Nurse Rosemarie and myself.

For the time being, as long as no particularly severe case comes along, you'll be able to stay in this room. She took my file and sat down next to me. What did your parents die of?

They poisoned themselves. I don't know exactly why, I answered truthfully but with some concern.

You were at least an adult in the summer of 1927, almost thirty and already with a

PhD. She had studied the dates in my file with a certain severity, and made a swift calculation.

What did your grandparents die of? she went on.

My paternal grandfather is said to have been rather queer. He died quite young, in his early fifties; I didn't know him. My other grandfather had a stomach perforation at over sixty. He was a good-looking man; my mother took after him.

And your grandmothers?

They both lived to a ripe old age. Old women, years in the dark dresses of widowhood. One with a modest income, the other with a large house in Bad Saarow. But both pampering women with busy hands and friendly eyes. People wept by their open graves.

And your father? She was relentless.

He had a fall, he got forgetful, he had to close his law office. He turned into an emaciated yellow-skinned wreck, who fell from every sofa and slipped out of every armchair.

I see, she said. I hope you know what examination to expect as soon as the psychiatrists arrive. They'll check your reflexes and ask about your family history. And if you don't provide proper information, they'll declassify you immediately. They like to diagnose progressive dementia here.

She removed her glasses and looked over me out of the window for a moment. Without spectacles, her face looked almost naked; only now could I see how incautious her eyes were.

I can only say what I'm going to tell you now a single time. A single time, she repeated, looking into the distance. My older brother is a well-known eugenicist.

He knows them all personally, Eugen Fischer, Fritz Lenz, Erwin Baur, Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer. He knows what war the German doctors are waging. They have their own battleground: these clinics. And Miss Elfi, just turned eighteen—they'll want to sterilize her because her bizarre behaviour arouses suspicion. Schizophrenia, and at such a young age: not a good prognosis. I've taken her under my wing and I let her accompany me on my rounds as my trainee, but Dr Waetzoldt, the head doctor here, loves his applications and evaluations. He works fast and conscientiously, if one can use the word *conscientious* in this context. He's even written a book on the subject; it's in our ward office. I'll bring it to you.

And then she told me Elfi's story. She told me how the letter with the news of the major's death arrived in Halle two weeks after the war began, the letter and his belongings. The photographs of his wife and daughter between the few books he had taken along on the Polish campaign: Luther, Kant, Rilke's poems. The Iron Cross on top. She turned eighteen shortly later. She didn't cry; she trembled. And sometimes she invented words or phrases that caught attention. *I'm very far-faced today*. She said *wrong-way-round* for irony. And a few of her teachers grew scared of her, thinking she could read their thoughts. She had to give up her place at the conservatoire; her fingers slipped off the piano keys. She began writing *dream notes*, she began speaking *dream German*, her own form of poetry with which she tried to heal the rupture. Her mother sent her to Wittenau because her father had been a friend of our head doctor in his youth; they studied medicine together. She had no idea some doctors today wear black uniforms beneath their white coats. And that they are determined to win *their* war, the battle against inferior genes. The healthy body of the nation as a new false idol. In any case: Elfi must get out of this building. Someone from outside must put in a request for her, best of all an SS man in a key position, with a high rank and a large family. An SS-Standartenführer, for example. She couldn't care for small children, but reading to old ladies, chatting to them, taking strolls with them, that she could do.

Truth for truth, I said. What's the name of the disease you will ascribe to me?

Do you have children? she asked in turn.

One, Angelica. We call her Püppi. Ten years old. My wife is from Rome, hence the Italian name.

Nurse Rosemarie tended to make leaps in conversation. She rarely leapt backwards; she jumped forward.

Don't tell them about the child. It's not even in your file. Sauerbruch's people did you a favour.

The old man—I know him from my time at the Charité—sometimes shows lucid prudence. Aside from that, I won't make a secret out of the fact that he called me and recommended you as a man one can talk to. By the way: children under twelve are not allowed to pay visits to the clinic. Never. And in your case, Professor Koenig: the black guest has come to you, the incurable hereditary disease that takes almost silent possession of the body. It used to be called *St. Vitus' dance*, but now it bears the name of an American doctor who described it around the turn of the century: *Huntington's disease*. Poor genotype. A torturous death. No one will tell you. They'll write it in your file and then proceed according to the guidelines from the *Führer's chancellery*. New instructions have come pouring in since the war began. The *healthy body of the nation* as a war objective. They're working on it the way Michelangelo worked on his godlike marble statues. Let me tell you again: don't mention your child. Save her soul. Last September in Danzig, *Hitler* mentioned a new weapon, the weapon no one can beat, as he chose to put it. Today's war is determined by specialists, the specialists in destruction; it may take years. Save your child. And help me to save Miss Elfi. If you'd like, I can accidentally leave your medical file in your room for a little while. You can read it and check the registration form that has to be filled out for

you very soon. The *Führer's chancellery* sent out the forms; they've been in the head doctor's office here in Wittenau since 28 October. They're being distributed and processed ward by ward.

I nodded. There was nothing more to say. I could not have spoken. She replaced her glasses and took my hand. Mine ice cold and wet, hers warm and strong.

I have to take care of lunchtime. Elfi assists me in distributing the meals, although she's no real help. And occasionally Carl helps, my second protégé. A grammar school teacher in the outside world, Dr Carl Hohein, Latin and history. Until he began hearing voices and writing an endless litany to the colour black. When he's doing very badly, he speaks of his *mind flashes*. There's a picture of a boy above his bed, who sometimes cries at night and refuses to be consoled. But he doesn't want me to remove the picture. The two of you will get on well. I'll send him to you this evening.



I lay unmoving in my bed after she had left. Grief? Exhaustion? Anger? No, it wasn't anger. I didn't have the strength for that. I closed my eyes and dozed; I kept my eyes shut when a starched apron rustled and someone set down a bowl of soup on my bedside table with a slight clink. To judge by the scent, the apron belonged to Miss Elfi.

It was the kind of sleep that doesn't bring refreshment, because the brain does not find peace. It ticks and tocks away. Why had I not consulted my father's doctor, as my mother advised? Why had I not believed Clampe? Now the name of a disease made my heart race.

By the time I opened my eyes at around five o'clock, dusk was drawing in. I looked out of the window; grey-black clouds scudded across the sky and I began to ask myself what I had omitted in my life, what I hadn't seen.

A, I said. A for Andalusia. The abominations of Franco's troops had revolted me, perhaps also frightened me. I had even turned down an invitation to Granada because a Spanish colleague had told me the Falangists had taken the writer Federico Garcia Lorca from his home on the night of 19 August 1936 and shot him dead. That colleague had brought Fee and me a volume of poetry and attempted a clumsy translation:

*Green how I love you, green...*

*In the eyes silver cold.*

I remember how annoyed I was that Fee flirted with him and he recited the lines of Garcia Lorca literally into her eyes.

Compare that to the poems of your poets' academy, your court poets, Fee had said. Sometimes she enjoyed teasing me for being German. Compare it to Carossas, Vespers, Bindings and their hurried expressions of devotion:

*On the cliff she stands upright*

*Ne'er swaying, divine her firm form...*

*Yet in her breasts, what a storm.*

Pablo laughed along with her, though I doubted he understood every word; then we took our seats at the dining table.

Fee had made Roman roast lamb and crème caramel. We raised our glasses and left *Franco* and *Hitler* aside, although Europe's air was beginning to smell of blood. One of my students was working with Pablo and myself on the influence of

Moorish miniatures on Spanish painting, a never-ending subject. We were young and foolish enough to forget the world's squabbles.

Early in 1938, Pablo wrote to me from the south of France. My people are tearing each other apart, he wrote. I managed to save myself at the last minute. Not everyone was granted that fortune. *La vida es un regalo. Life is a gift...* Those were the last words of his I read. Nothing came after that. Now I would never find out what became of him, whether he even received my brief reply. A for Andalusia, P for Pablo from Granada. J for jealousy. I got no further that evening, as Nurse Rosemarie opened the door to my room, pushing a bony man ahead of her.

Dr Carl Hohein, she said. Latin and history. He's been with us for the past six weeks.

Dr Carl Hohein examined me with radiant blue eyes, but then he looked through me; that is, his eyes slipped away from him. Darted here and there as if he lacked all control. After a while, they returned to my face.

I'm Carl, Calle, Callissimo, he said in a clear, quiet voice, nodding his head slightly on every word. I'm a composer; I'm writing a litany to the colour black.

I shook his hand and gestured at the chair by my bed.

Do you find enough time for your compositions? I asked.

He shook his head. From Monday morning to Saturday noon I have to stamp sheet metal for the Wehrmacht. Essential for the war effort. We get more soup and more bread for our work.

Following this short explanation of the institution's exchange rates, we had got the burden of speaking over with and enjoyed the silence. I listened to his careful

breathing; one could tell he had far too few hours on his clock. A king of the night, a rare kind. He left shortly before lights out.

See you in the day, he said.

(pp. 19 – 29)

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## Praise from the press

“Barbara Zoeke has written a historically authentic, instructive and simultaneously exciting and very moving story. This is an impressive achievement.”

*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

“This is a very remarkable book, so it’s good not to focus too much on the material and topic straight off the bat. The language is clear and unadorned. Much is set in dialogue, but there are also brief descriptions of the situation and compressed atmospheric sketches. You find yourself immediately in the middle of the action, and only gradually do the relationships between the characters become apparent. The full force of the contemporary dimension, so important and central to this book, only emerges slowly.”

*Süddeutsche Zeitung*

“Barbara Zoeke’s profound knowledge of her subject and her stunningly multi-faceted writing have combined to produce a book of remarkable empathy and exemplary humanity.”

*neues deutschland*

“The impressive thing about Barbara Zoeke’s novel is that she writes from the perspective of her characters without painting them with the moral judgement of the next generation. Her characters’ awareness doesn’t stretch beyond the time in which they live, act and think. Behaving like a victim or getting drawn into the role of perpetrator have nothing to do with fate, but with the will to act in a particular way in a particular situation.”

*Ö1 – ORF*

“Barbara Zoeke writes about a dark chapter in German history. The hospital beds and nurses’ uniforms probably tipped you off: it’s about ‘racial hygiene’ and euthanasia under the Nazis. [...] Yet Zoeke manages to tell a very good story – though not one that turns out well (how could it?) – through the language and tone that characterise the novel. I’m impressed by her skill. To write a novel on such a topic takes a lot of courage.”

*Buchblog literaturleuchtet*

Barbara Zoeke has been awarded the City of Hanau's Brothers Grimm Prize 2017 for her novel *THE HOUR OF THE SPECIALISTS*. From the Jury's comments:

“Barbara Zoeke's novel *THE HOUR OF THE SPECIALISTS* focuses on one of the Nazis' crimes that is still remarkably untouched in German-language literature: the murder of psychiatric patients and the handicapped, generally referred to by the euphemistic term ‘euthanasia’. Barbara Zoeke, having her own psychiatric practice, is thus the first author to transform the distinctive language of patients into literature, and in this book she has built them a unique memorial.

Virtuosically constructed from the voices of both victims and perpetrators, each with a specific style of speech, this is a claustrophobic work of art in the humanist tradition, provoking inner turmoil in its readers as only outstanding literature can. Moreover, in the masterful language of the novel and its sensitive approach incorporating different voices, the jury sees an affinity to the work of the Brothers Grimm, situated on the border between archive, linguistic research and narrative.”