



JØRN PRECHT

**Das Geheimnis
des Dr. Alzheimer**
Roman

SPANNUNG

GMEINER


Sample translation by Fiona Graham

pp. 9-28

PROLOGUE

An air of menace hung over the lunatic asylum. Darkness had fallen earlier than usual on this foggy autumn evening in the year 1888. To the seven-year-old boy approaching the tall building, its lighted windows were like huge eyes. Nonetheless, with his left hand, the young lad excitedly tugged his adult companion onwards. With his right, he held on to a bag of biscuits just as tightly. The child was in a hurry. Even the sound of terrifying shrieks from within the building made him waver only momentarily. He knew he mustn't give way to fear now, for it was only within the walls towering above him that he'd be able to see her again at long last: the person he'd longed for so desperately these last three seemingly endless weeks.

‘Be patient now, Karl,’ said the lady at his side, ‘your mother can't run away from you in there.’

She was most likely right about that; at any rate, it proved extremely difficult to get into the building in the first place. It was only after lengthy persuasion, via a small hatch, that an old, tired-looking warder opened the doors to the asylum and let them in.

This aged attendant led them mutely to a nurse, an unusually tall woman who was talking to a younger colleague. ‘There's no pleasing this new director,’ she grumbled. ‘Everything's run like clockwork here for years, and now he wants to change it all. Sioli – what kind of a name is that anyway?’

Noticing the two visitors, she eyed them severely. ‘What do you want here?’

‘My name is Auguste Deter,’ said the lady accompanying Karl, speaking confidently. ‘I'm Frau Walz's neighbour. She is this boy's mother.’

The nurse, her demeanour hostile, looked into the face of the woman standing before her. Auguste Deter, who appeared to be in her late thirties, had chestnut-coloured hair which she wore up, and alert eyes.

Little Karl had grown to trust his new neighbour completely over the past few months. The death of his alcoholic father a year ago had left mother and son destitute. Gambling debts, it was said. They had been obliged to leave their apartment at No. 18, Wallstrasse, in Frankfurt-Sachsenhausen, at the beginning of the year – and it was only thanks to the new tenant,

Auguste Deter, that they hadn't ended up homeless. Even before moving in, Auguste had persuaded their landlord, the paint dealer Georg Hagelauer, to rent out a tiny basement room to the mother and son, instead of the first-floor apartment that was now beyond their means. But then Karl's mother had become more and more ill and peculiar. Despite her youth, she had increasingly complained that she couldn't see clearly, that her vision was becoming foggy, and in the end all she did was weep and rage. Finally, two sinister men had come to take the raving young woman away, while her little son had been taken in by the Deters at first. Herr Deter, however, was anything but keen on having the son of a hard-drinking bruiser grow up with their fourteen-year-old daughter, Thekla. So after a week little Karl Walz was placed in an orphanage, and Auguste only fetched him at weekends. The lad survived the terrible days in the orphanage, where he had to fend off blows from the brutal overseer, by looking forward to Sundays at the Deters'. And each time he would beg Auguste to take him to see his mother in the asylum.

Now, at last, that time had come. He looked expectantly at the tall nurse. Then, suddenly, her attention was diverted when a skinny man in a ragged, smeared nightshirt came dashing up a staircase from the basement and yanked hysterically at the handle of the outer door. Two attendants appeared out of the blue and set upon him. Panting with exertion, they attempted to force the raving fellow into a straitjacket. Little Karl was immediately alert and on his guard, just as he always was with the orphanage overseer, and as he'd been whenever his father lost his temper. The boy had learned to remain watchful; his eyes were riveted on the struggling men. He noticed that the two warders were dressed like the men who had hauled his mother off three weeks ago. Finally, the raging inmate was forced into the straitjacket. All he could do was twitch helplessly. The attendants dragged him like a wounded animal, whimpering, down the stairs to the basement.

'This is no place for a child,' the nurse snapped at Auguste. 'Can't you see that for yourself?'

'But he just wants to see his mother again,' Karl's neighbour objected. 'Is she so very ill?'

'She's in the place where my colleagues are taking that man. And nobody can visit her there,' replied the nurse, to Karl's utter horror. 'Now leave!'

Auguste explained to the nurse that the boy had baked biscuits for his mother, and asked if she could at least make sure she got them. But Karl had heard enough. After the nurse had stared at the bag of biscuits Auguste was offering her as if it were a pile of refuse,

then scribbled something on a slip of paper, the boy discreetly grabbed his biscuits from the table and slipped away. The last thing he heard was the nurse's instruction to Auguste – 'Sign here!' – by which time he was already half-way down the same stairs the attendants had disappeared down with the raving madman.

The sight that met little Karl on reaching the bottom of the stairs was a dark, musty passageway lined with heavy iron doors. He jumped when a hand suddenly clawed at his trouser leg. On the floor, a young man crouched in the corner, his dishevelled hair sticking out in all directions. He had smeared paper under his arm. With a lunatic giggle, he showed Karl an open bag. In the gloom, the boy couldn't make out what was inside, but it exuded a feral stench. At the end of the passage, a door stood ajar, letting in some light. Suspecting that the attendants were in that room, Karl hurried towards it. On his way he had to pass an emaciated, naked man who was lying on a torn palliase, keening to himself; cursing, the fellow spat after him. People called this uncanny place 'Affenstein', the 'Monkey Rock'. Now the boy was beginning to understand why. Karl passed the doors, hearing more moaning and shrieking behind each one. The closer he got to the light at the end of the passage, the more clearly he could see that the floor was smeared with left-over food – and worse.

The boy reached the open iron door and peeped in. It reeked like a byre; there was straw on the floor – and the straitjacket. Karl watched as the two warders attempted to chain the raving madman to the wall, a fate that had already befallen several other inmates of this stinking dungeon. And finally he spotted a young woman in rags, her bedraggled hair hanging over her face. A groan burst from the boy – his mother! Unable to believe his eyes, he made his way slowly towards her. But once the young woman had swept her hair from her deranged face and noticed the boy, she made to attack him, screeching all the while. Terrified, he dropped his biscuits in the dirty straw. At the last moment, the delirious woman was held back by her chains.

'Mother!' cried Karl, in the depths of despair.

The nurse and Auguste rushed into the room, crushing the biscuits underfoot. Taking in the scene, a horrified Auguste scooped up the boy and held him in her arms.

'Take that child out of here at once!' hissed the nurse.

The inmates responded with the pandemonium of a monkey-house. Shrieking, wailing, bawling. Roughly, the nurse hustled Auguste and her young neighbour out of the cell. Karl felt as if he was in a nightmare. Tears coursing down his cheeks, he sobbed in

despair, looking over one shoulder to catch a last glimpse of his mother. Her face remained empty of all recognition. The heavy iron door fell shut.

Rattle-clack! Noisily, the attendants turned the key in the lock. The sound of doors being locked was only too familiar to Karl. He'd been used to hearing it when his father locked him in so he could beat Karl's mother. And he'd heard it when his father's body had finally been brought home a year ago, after his fatal accident when drunk at the building site. They'd wanted to spare Karl the sight, so they'd locked him in. *Rattle-clack!* Later, his mother, too, would lock him out whenever she let in all those strange men with their heavy breathing who so often reduced her to tears – yet left her cash after their visits. But Karl had learned to peep through keyholes, and what he'd seen that way had often been disturbingly unforgettable.

When they locked the door of the asylum behind him and his neighbour Auguste Deter, the boy had the feeling that he would never see his mother again. *Rattle-clack!*

PART 1: THE MYSTERIOUS DR ALZHEIMER

CHAPTER 1: THE ACCIDENT

What I do here is important – never forget, it's important! He was mopping the hall floor in the group practice with a long-handled scrubbing brush – and doing it as rigorously as if every scrap of dirt, every invisible germ, posed a threat to the lives of the young patients who frequented the polyclinic. In a clinic, even the corridors had to be cleaned; it was important. This was something that Karl, now an athletic young man with a long scar on his right cheek, had to din into himself each day. Three years ago, in February, his neighbour Auguste Deter had finally taken him out of the hated orphanage on his sixteenth birthday. She had arranged for him to move back into the Wallstrasse basement room; she and her family were now living in a rather more upmarket rented house just a kilometre away, in Mörfelder Landstrasse. She had also found him a position as assistant caretaker here in the Nordend quarter of Frankfurt with Dr Leopold Laquer, the well-known child psychiatrist. At the time, Karl had been overjoyed at this first step towards the hitherto unattainable profession of his dreams – medicine. But the months had passed without any significant developments. Last December they'd celebrated the turn of the century, and Karl had gradually abandoned the hope of ever being able to do anything more than secretly watch Dr Laquer at his work and research, and secretly read medical textbooks. He would probably continue to feel like a life-

guard who knows how to swim, understands how to save lives, but who, for reasons of social rank, is not permitted to become a lifesaver himself. So what remained were his cleaning duties. In every corner. Thorough. Conscientious. It's important, it's important!

'Karl?' Rottenmeier, a gaunt man in his late forties, wearing an attendant's uniform, hurried down the corridor towards him. Initially, Karl didn't react; it was only when Rottenmeier touched his shoulder that he whipped round in fright and struck the attendant's hand away from him with startling force.

Rottenmeier was put out. 'Oh, so Herr Assistant Caretaker wishes to receive a written request to do his job, does he?'

Karl looked contrite, even furious with himself. Damn that temper of his! When would his subconscious also grasp that his father, the orphanage overseer and the other orphaned boys could no longer attack him now? Meekly, he asked Rottenmeier to excuse his behaviour.

'Request refused,' Rottenmeier replied. 'Go into Laquer's room and wipe up that brat's ink. I'd have tanned his backside for him if I was allowed to. - And it wouldn't do you any harm, either,' Rottenmeier called after him as Karl obediently went off towards the room where his employer, Dr Laquer, worked. But Karl knew Rottenmeier was only joking. The attendant would have bitten his tongue off sooner than admit it, but he thought a great deal of young Karl Walz.

Karl was pushing his trolley of cleaning materials along the corridor when Laquer's other attendant, a colossus of a man, came towards him. He was 'leading' a ten-year-old boy down the hallway with such an iron grip on his ear that the lad was whimpering in pain. Karl could hardly bear the sight. 'Do you really have to? The boy...' he started to say, but the giant instantly interrupted him roughly: 'You keep your nose out of this, Walz!'

Karl fought down the anger that flamed up in him, refrained from any further comment, and entered Laquer's consulting room.

The signs of the set-to between the doctor and the tantrum-prone child were clear for all to see; the wall and the portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm behind Dr Laquer's desk were bespattered with ink. Karl set the chair and the framed photograph of Laquer's family upright again. Then he started to tidy away the inkwell, which had tipped over on the desk.

While he was doing this, his gaze lingered on the open pages of a book, which had also caught a few small ink spatters. Karl glanced at the title page. It was Sigmund Freud's latest work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Karl couldn't help himself; whenever a medical

publication fell into his hands, his curiosity was piqued. From the ink-spattered open pages, he read: 'These are the ineradicable memories of the punishments we suffered as children...'

Indeed, recollections of the senseless and arbitrary beatings administered by his often drunk father were ineradicably seared into Karl's memory. Sometimes his mother had been the target, sometimes him, sometimes both of them. How often he'd cowered, whimpering, in a corner, while his furious father had thrashed him with a belt or other objects.

'Excuse me?' The sound of a woman's voice behind him dragged Karl back from his dark memories. Startled, he swivelled round; the book slipped from his hands and fell to the floor.

A pretty woman in her mid-twenties was standing in the doorway. 'Excuse me, my name is Wilhelmine Gehweiler, and I have an appointment to see Dr Laquer.' The young lady was stylishly, though not expensively dressed, and she wore her flaxen hair up in an elegant chignon.

Picking up the book, Karl stammered, 'Karl Walz, pleased to meet you. The doctor ... ought to be back any moment now. There's been a ... a slight incident with a badly-behaved boy.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.' Smiling, the strange woman gestured towards the book. 'Do you remember which page you were on?'

'Yes, at the part about boys who wish death upon their fathers,' replied Karl, now slightly emboldened.

She looked at him with an amused air, and he was struck by the violet blue of her eyes. 'Well, as long as you don't want to have your mother taxidermied because you love her so much, like the child in the book.'

After a perplexed pause, Karl said he hadn't got that far yet. The pretty lady had a ready wit, he thought, impressed. And she knew this new work!

At that point the founder of the clinic, Dr Leopold Laquer, entered the room. A short, slight, dark-bearded man in his mid-forties, he wore a waistcoat that was still damp, from which the ink spatters had not yet been fully removed. He just nodded to his assistant caretaker, but greeted the young lady cordially, as if they were father and daughter. 'My dear Mina! Do sit down.'

So Mina was the pet name of the lovely Wilhelmine, Karl was musing, when Dr Laquer broke in: 'Walz, just clear up the bare minimum, will you. We'll need to redecorate to get the ink off the wall and picture anyhow.'

Karl did as he was told; meanwhile, Mina took a seat.

‘Do excuse this disorder,’ said Laquer, sighing. ‘There’s nothing ghastlier than children who can’t control their tempers.’

Mina smiled broadly. ‘So ghastly, indeed, that you write whole books on the subject.’

Karl had to smile to himself. It was true that his employer, who had also been appointed official doctor to Frankfurt’s schools that year, was working on a number of books about psychologically disturbed children. Karl had often watched him at his work with great curiosity. And Mina clearly knew about it as well. Dr Laquer laughed self-deprecatingly. ‘So, what brings you to me?’

‘It’s about my husband...’ she said.

Karl, who was listening to the conversation discreetly, but attentively, felt vaguely disappointed. But it was only to be expected, with a lady of her calibre, that there would be a husband. And in any case Karl wouldn’t be able to provide even half-way decently for such a lady. Whoever the lucky man at Mina’s side might be, she was certainly better off with him than with assistant caretaker Karl Walz. Yet her husband was worrying her, that was plain to see.

‘What seems to be the matter with him?’ the psychiatrist probed.

‘He’s been terribly forgetful for a while now,’ Mina explained gravely. ‘Often he can’t find the word he’s looking for, and there are more and more mistakes in his jewellery models.’

Laquer frowned. ‘Oh, that’s not like him at all. Hessenberg always insists that your Joseph is the most outstanding model maker in his workshop.’

Now Mina seemed very sombre. ‘Not any longer. The other day he couldn’t even remember Hessenberg’s name any more.’

‘That doesn’t sound good at all,’ observed the Doctor.

Karl was doing a particularly thorough job of cleaning, so as not to miss a word. Since the conversation was now taking a very private turn, however, Laquer turned to him: ‘Walz, you’ve done enough for today. You can go.’

Karl nodded and began to pack away his cleaning tools, a little disappointed – slowly, so that he could at least follow the next exchange of words between the two.

Mina attempted a smile. ‘My mother warned me not to marry anyone more than twenty years older than myself; she said I’d end up with an old man at my side if I did. But can he be forgetting things like an old man at forty-five?’

Dr Laquer asked her to have her husband consult him as soon as possible.

‘That’s the problem,’ she replied. ‘He won’t.’

Laquer nodded gravely. ‘I see. Then we shall have to find another solution.’

On the way out, Karl and Mina’s eyes met again momentarily. She gave him a warm smile; his, however, was rather timid.

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Karl put away his work tools, hung up his overall in the cupboard and pulled his coat on. As he left the clinic at No. 42 Jahnstrasse, Rottenmeier was sweeping the path down to the street, which was heaped with colourful autumn leaves. Karl waved to him and walked over to his bicycle. It was his pride and joy. Thekla, the daughter of his neighbour Auguste, had given it to him for Christmas last year. ‘I’ve fallen in love,’ she’d said cheerily. ‘I want everyone to be happy.’ He’d been overwhelmed; even second-hand bicycles were expensive. This evening, Karl would have to say goodbye to Thekla, who was like a big sister to him. She was moving to Berlin with her husband, a good-humoured court actuary. Just as Karl was about to mount his bicycle, Wilhelmine Gehweiler came out of the building. Though he was pleased to see her again, the sight of her was like a stab in the abdomen. So attractive – and so unattainable. To his surprise, Mina also walked over to a bicycle. For women, cycling was unusual – and considered quite scandalous.

Suddenly Karl heard a loud whinnying and a rattling over the paving stones. The horses pulling a dray laden with barrels had run wild; the drayman seemed to have lost control over them. The four of them were racing directly towards the clinic’s front garden. Soon the horses were just a few metres away from Karl and Mina. Reacting instinctively, Karl dashed over to Mina, pulled her down and dragged her behind a bust mounted on a stone pediment.

A fraction of a second later, parts of the dray were smashed as it collided with the pediment. There were splinters everywhere; barrels were tossed into the air and rolled rumbling away.

Karl and Mina were unharmed, but a few metres away shrieks could be heard. Pulling themselves together, they immediately had the presence of mind to take in the scale of the accident. The dray had got caught in the forged iron railings and had literally been torn apart. The drayman, who had been thrown from his seat, lay groaning alongside the gravel path. Rottenmeier, covered in blood, was trapped under the dray.

Curious onlookers emerged from the neighbouring houses, while passers-by stood in numbed horror at the scene of the accident. But Karl and Mina worked together like

clockwork in this shocking situation. While Mina raced over to the drayman and raised his legs, Karl rushed to the help of the trapped attendant. He knelt down and spoke to him, feeling for the pulse in his neck. ‘Herr Rottenmeier! Can you hear me?’

Painfully, Rottenmeier squeezed out the message that he couldn’t breathe.

By now his huge workmate had arrived and was staring along with the curious onlookers.

‘We’ve got to get the dray off him right now!’ Karl told him.

But the giant protested indignantly: they shouldn’t pull Rottenmeier out. ‘One false move, and he’ll be paralysed or something. It’s up to the Doctor to decide.’

Leaping to his feet, Karl tugged in vain at the dray. Auguste Deter had advised him three years ago to limit the outbursts of anger to which he was prone to civilised boxing matches – so his wiry physique concealed strong muscles. But the dray was too heavy for one man. Karl was visibly desperate. Soon it would be too late for Rottenmeier. ‘He can’t breathe – he’s going to suffocate if we don’t get him out.’ Karl’s voice rose to a yell. ‘Can’t you see he’s going to die under that thing?’

Mina, having seen to the drayman’s evidently minor injuries, hurried over to him. She and Karl again tried vainly to lift the dray. The young woman shouted into the crowd, asking whether anyone could please help them. ‘He’s right – the man down there will die unless we get him out!’ Yet the only reaction she got was fearful looks on all sides. Then she looked the giant in the eye, so imploringly that he finally plucked up enough courage; all three of them tried to shift the dray. Dr Laquer joined them. His behaviour was uncommonly hesitant for a doctor, Karl couldn’t help noticing. The child psychologist looked almost as shocked and helpless as the onlookers standing around the scene of the accident. ‘My God, Rottenmeier,’ he breathed in a barely audible voice.

But once the dray could be moved sufficiently to give some hope of saving the injured man, several onlookers finally came to their aid. Laquer tried to encourage other passers-by to join in. ‘Do come and help us, please!’

His white coat seemed to convince people more than his hesitant voice. Together, they managed to lift the heavy wagon for an instant. Karl and Mina swiftly pulled Rottenmeier out before it thudded to the ground once more.

Rottenmeier’s eyes were closed. Karl knelt down next to him and raised his chin. Breathe, breathe! Come on! At last, Rottenmeier drew an audible breath. Karl heaved a sigh of relief. Then he sprang to his feet and turned to Dr Laquer. ‘We’ve got to get him indoors – you need

to operate on the open leg fracture. He'll bleed to death otherwise.'

Shocked, Laquer took a step backwards. Out of the question! He didn't have any of the necessary instruments in his surgery, he explained hastily. 'I've already sent to the hospital for assistance. They should be here any moment now.'

Karl looked helplessly at Rottenmeier, lying there in his own blood. He and Mina exchanged worried looks. By the time they arrived it would be far too late, surely...

CHAPTER 2: THE STRANGE DR ALZHEIMER

Barely an hour later, Karl and Mina sat dazed in Dr Laquer's surgery. The doctor's voice was triumphant. 'There you are, Walz, it all worked out after all. They'll get Rottenmeier back on his feet at the hospital. Thanks to *your* excellent first aid.'

He now scrutinised Karl, curious as to how he had acquired his medical knowledge.

Karl tried to divert his attention. 'I think Frau Wilhelmine did an excellent job. Without her ...'

But his employer interrupted him. Frau Wilhelmine was a trained nurse. 'You, on the other hand, are a caretaker's assistant. So ...?'

Karl replied as hesitantly as if he had a shameful confession to make. 'I've read a book or two. Books about medicine ... methods of treatment and that kind of thing.'

Dr Laquer seemed astonished. 'You've read medical textbooks? Of your own accord?'

Mina laughed, and even Karl had to smile. She gave him a searching look, which made him slightly nervous. 'You do seem to have a great interest in medicine.'

Karl quite forgot that his employer was in the room. Something about Wilhelmine Gehweiler aroused a deep trust in him. 'My mother suffered from ... an incurable disease. As a child, I thought medicine was like magic – and that it could save her. Ever since then, I've wanted to know all about it.'

Dr Laquer, noticing that the two young people were clearly at risk of forgetting his presence, cleared his throat. 'Well, every action has consequences, my boy.'

Karl looked at him, slightly worried. What did Laquer mean?

The doctor went over to a small wall cupboard and, taking out a bottle of liqueur and three small glasses, continued: 'Unfortunately, our friend Rottenmeier is likely to be indisposed for the foreseeable future. How would it be if I were to take *you* on as his

replacement for a trial period, Herr Walz? We'll find a new assistant caretaker easily enough.'

Karl was momentarily speechless.

'What do you think, Mina?' asked the doctor, turning to the former nurse.

She smiled encouragingly in Karl's direction. 'With such a strong interest in medicine, I think this could be the start of a splendid career.'

Laquer gave him a questioning look. 'So, Walz, do you agree with the lady?'

Looking dumbstruck, Karl gave a barely perceptible nod of assent.

The doctor had already filled the glasses with liqueur. He raised his glass.

'Congratulations, Herr Walz – nursing attendant,' said Mina, raising hers.

Karl beamed.

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A nursing attendant! On this mild October evening, Karl cycled at breakneck speed through Frankfurt. Past the city's main guard-house, then down the Kaiserstrasse. Out of the way, here comes Karl Walz, the famous nursing attendant! At last he'd be using medicine to help people. The wind blew in his face and he yelled out his elation, stretching his arms above him. The bicycle skidded and he narrowly escaped a fall while crossing the Untermain Bridge, the surface of which was slippery with autumn leaves. But his elation prevailed. Here comes *Doctor* Karl Walz, hurrah!