Sample translation from

The Singer

by

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Lukas Hartmann, *The Singer*

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As September drew to a close, the evenings in the south were still pleasantly warm, even at eight hundred and fifty metres above sea level. And so the group had talked in the garden until nightfall, eating a little goat's cheese and bread that was left over from the previous day, topping up each other's glasses with local wine. A few bottles had already been emptied. The scent of pomace drifted over from a nearby cellar, the air held the fragrance of the season's last roses, something rustled in the autumn foliage. A lizard, thought the singer. He had barely uttered a word while the escape routes were deliberated at the table – his sense of geography was minimal – and had merely cleared his throat from time to time; he knew how hoarse his voice had become, and was embarrassed by it. In Clermont-Ferrand there would be helpers waiting for them, and elsewhere too, the résistance network was by now tried and tested. He waved away the mosquitoes that were buzzing around his ears; a sound he couldn't bear. The night also brought a cooler breeze to the skin.

"You'll sing us something as a goodbye, won't you, Jossele?" said Lucie, the hostess. She ushered her

guests inside the house, into the salon, where the piano stood.

Schmidt could feel how exhausted he was, but complied with Lucie's wish and laboriously made his way up the three stone steps, refusing offers of assistance. Inside, Lucie, together with Selma, who would be accompanying him on the escape, had lit a few candles. The guests were gathered in a semi-circle to listen to him one last time. Lucie with her dark curls, Selma the Gentle and Fair, yet they could easily have been sisters. He wound the stool down so that his feet could reach the pedals. Whether his voice would obey him, he didn't know, but he wanted to try, and for a long while now he had known that his last performance in Villa Phoebus, his refuge for these past few weeks, would be Massenet's *Elegy*. There was nothing more fitting for this moment. Without looking at the group, he played the introduction. The piano was slightly out of tune, the top G too high, but he couldn't let that bother him now. The first chords, the descent into semitones, rang out. Strictly speaking they should be played on a cello, but the notes beneath his fingers sounded soft, just as they were supposed to. Then he came in with his tenor voice, and was surprised by how good it sounded

despite all his afflictions, how sorrow seemed to flicker through it. He sang the French version, as he had at his last concert in Avignon a mere six months before; he had been forbidden from singing in German.

Rêve d'un bonheur effacé, /mon coeur lassé/ T'appelle en vain dans le nuit.

He had had many lovers, and had always left them, just as he would now also leave this place. Not to keep faith with one woman, his mother, who stubbornly insisted on remaining in Chernivtsi, but this time to evade deportation and save his life. The Germans were on the move in Pétain's Vichy-France, searching for hidden Jews, and they would come to La Bourboule too.

La paix du soir vient adoucir nos douleurs, /Tout nous trahit, tout nous fuit sans retour, he sang. *Tout nous trahit sans retour*. 'No return', these were the last words, and he let them drift away, let the piano chords fade. For a long while it remained silent in the salon. Outside a few birds made themselves heard, as though they were continuing the concert in their own way. He remained seated, stirred by the music and yet, like almost always, comforted too, then Mary Solnik said: "How true, how sad!" She was the third of the beauties, alongside Lucie and

Selma. He liked – no, loved – each of them in their own way; he had never stopped loving and courting beauty.

Stifled sounds, someone was crying into a handkerchief, perhaps even a second person. How often he had moved his audience to tears, and how often he had relished his ability to captivate so many people with his voice. He was convinced that not even Caruso had sung Massenet's *Elegy* better than he, Joseph Schmidt, but Caruso, who had been dead for two decades, wasn't a Jew, and – like Beniamino Gigli, who admired Mussolini – he was still revered in Nazi Germany. He, by contrast, the singer Joseph Schmidt, who had been hailed as the German Caruso, had vanished from the papers and radio programmes, had been cut out of films, and his records had disappeared from the shops. From 1933 onwards, one ban after the next had restricted Jewish participation in German musical life, and eventually rendered it impossible; anyone who was able to had fled. Yet many were still regarding the disturbing stories about the camps as mere rumours. Not Schmidt. He knew what was happening: the extermination of Judaism in Europe. He could no longer feign ignorance; he had heard too much over the last few months. The hope

that he could help his mother in the Chernivtsi ghetto from afar had also faded.

Hesitant applause began, which he silenced by briefly raising his hand. Everything was still, apart from a few isolated birdcalls. Then, the sound of clumsy footfall coming down the stairs: Guy, Lucie's three-year-old son, for whom the steps were still a little high.

"Mama," he said, "I want to listen to the music too."

"It's over," said Lucie, "but you heard it from upstairs, didn't you?"

The child was lifted into his mother's lap, enfolded in her arms, and some of the guests began to talk with one another in hushed tones. In the last few days Joseph had often joked around with Guy, singing with him, including Yiddish songs, even though Lucie didn't approve of that and her husband – the textile business owner with the pillowy face – even less so. The guest had danced ring-a-ring-o' roses with Guy, swinging him around by his arms in time with the rhythm. He liked this boy with the curly hair and irrepressible laugh, he reminded him a little of his younger brother, who had stayed behind in Bukovina. But he couldn't bring himself to say goodbye to Guy now.

Tomorrow, the little boy would be sure to ask where Joschi was, and Lucie would shake her curls and lie, saying that Uncle Joseph had left and would visit again soon.

Schmidt stood up. Physically, he felt better than earlier, but so much unknown lay before them, the would-be escapees, that he grew more anxious minute by minute.

"We have to head off," he said to Lucie's husband, whom he had met long ago in Berlin. The latter nodded, a little too emphatically. The *passeur*, who would help them escape, had now arrived and was stood in the shadows by the door; a young man from the surrounding area, a member of the résistance, dressed in dark clothing and wearing a broad-rimmed hat. He would accompany them on foot to the vicinity of Clermont-Ferrand; leaving the small spa town by car at this hour would be too conspicuous. Schmidt didn't know exactly who had prepared their route, and he didn't want to. If the Germans were to catch him and torture him in the notorious Lyon prison, they wouldn't be able to force a name out of him; an invented one at most. He knew that he had waited too long, but he hadn't wanted to abandon his mother, who was staying put in Chernivtsi. Who could have imagined, just a few months before, that Switzerland would soon be

the only possible exile in Europe for Jews and Nazi opponents? His original plan had actually been different. In Nice, in the unoccupied zone, he had managed with considerable effort to get a visa for Cuba. Then, on the day before his intended departure, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbour. Cuba had declared war on the Axis powers together with the USA, and maritime traffic from French ports had been brought to a halt. There was no longer any way of getting out, the restrictions from Vichy-France were intensifying, and refugees had to report to the authorities every other day. Schmidt was assigned temporary lodgings in the spa resort of La Bourboule, in Auvergne. Lucie and Ernst, who had bought a property there before the war, granted him the right to hospitality, sparing him the internment camp. It had taken ten hours to get there from Nice, on four different trains. Schmidt's despair grew on this journey, he could no longer cover it up with little jokes or by singing; even music, which he considered to be his true home, was increasingly unable to keep reality at bay.

So now Switzerland, meaning fifty kilometres to Clermont-Ferrand, then almost three hundred to Geneva. Crossing the border, he had been told, wouldn't be easy.

Switzerland had rigorously heightened its defence measures against refugees in recent months; Jews, recognizable mostly by the 'J' stamped in their passports, had been systematically turned away since August. Mary had said that all one could do is hope everything would go well. She and her husband weren't joining the escape group on account of the children; they hoped to escape arrest with counterfeit passports in a village in Haute-Savoie. But Selma Wolkenheim was coming, counting on the help of her wealthy brother, a cigar manufacturer in Zurich, and there were two men, Jakob and Arnold, who Joseph barely knew; Jews like Selma and himself. They had been in La Bourboule for just three days, fearing for their lives and joining in the laughter regardless. They had escaped from an internment camp, were now being hunted, and they too had counterfeit documents. Schmidt had refused them, he was considered stateless, even though he still carried his old Romanian passport. The 'J' was stamped into the new identity papers that had been handed to him in Nice. Against all reason, he was trusting that he would receive preferential treatment in Switzerland, where he had performed as a celebrated singer two years ago. What he feared most were the exertions that lay ahead, not knowing

whether he would be able to endure them, whether his coughing would betray him and the others somewhere along the route. But he had decided to march off tonight regardless, carrying the backpack that he had packed together with Selma. It was heavy, even though far too few of the things from the steamer trunk he had arrived with had found a place in it: a change of underwear, a second jumper, a tightly rolled-up suit, a Thermos flask, three long play records protected by a bundle of shirts, just three of the many with arias and songs which were in circulation. It didn't seem beyond the realm of possibility that they might save his life in a dangerous situation. As a precaution, however, he hadn't packed any records with the synagogue chants that were popular in the Jewish East.

Almost midnight, he hadn't yet given away his watch with the luminous numerals. There was no time to sleep, not even for a quick rest; the *passeur* was insisting they set off. He was a shepherd, he had told them, on the road with his sheep, and he knew the way to town, but they could only put half the distance behind them before sunrise, then they would need to rest at a pre-arranged location. If everything went well, he said, a car would then take them to

Clermont-Ferrand. They would be less conspicuous there, amongst the crowds. After he had explained this in French, rolling his 'r's, he fell silent. The goodbyes with those staying behind in the house were brief, despite the tears that were shed. Mary embraced Joseph the longest, her face glowing in the flickering candlelight like a promise he no longer wanted to believe in. Selma pulled him away.

The men were waiting outside in the faint moonlight. Fortunately, the clouds left gaps here and there. Ernst Mayer, Lucie's husband, had merely intimated an embrace with Schmidt, slipping him an envelope containing the six thousand Francs Joseph had asked him for – with the assurance he would get them back from future honoraria, despite being far from certain whether this would be possible. Just a few years before, he had been earning a great deal of money. His uncle Leo Engel, the impresario, received a third of it, a third went to his mother and siblings in Chernivtsi; the remaining third, which was for him, the singer, had always run through his fingers far too quickly, he had given it away, spent it frivolously, always treating everybody: Jossele, the Bon Vivant, the Generous, the Profligate. Above all he had lavished gifts on women he liked, most of them half a head taller than him.

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They made their way along the back roads, walking in single file. Whenever the moonlight disappeared, their progress was arduous. Then the pale strips of light to his left and right would return, disorienting him. He stumbled again and again, feeling temporarily blind, the straps of his backpack cut into his shoulders despite the linen smock that Lucie had given him. Even as a child, walking had quickly tired him, but singing and dancing never had. And now, an hour in, he felt pain in his thighs, his feet; yes, such exertions were unfamiliar to him, but he had to keep going, had to suppress the urge to cough near any houses, to ignore his sore throat, the pressure on his chest. He knew he could try to get into a kind of trance, to sing inwardly; that's what he was best at, after all, and because the stars could now be seen from time to time, he tried to remember *E lucevan le stelle* from *Tosca*. It wasn't hard; he was renowned for the number of opera roles he knew off by heart. When the *passeur* stopped in his tracks and reprimanded him with a stern whisper, he gave a start; had he hummed out loud, without realizing?

"You have to be quiet, Joseph," whispered Selma, who was walking behind him.

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She was one of the few close friends who didn't call him Jossele or Joschi, and he wasn't sure whether he liked this or not.

How long had they been walking now? Two hours, three? He willed his feet to obey him, resisted the urge to sink down onto the damp grass. There were ponds to avoid, the croak of frogs here and there, ducks quacking. Or were those human voices? Fear rose within him like something hard, sharp-edged, he was afraid he would suddenly start coughing blood again, like the day before yesterday. He hadn't told anyone, otherwise they would have talked him out of the escape, all of them at once, in one concerted voice, and now he couldn't help but smile for the duration of a few paces. Any reason to smile was a distraction. But his dazzling tenor could no longer rise above the chorus of concern like it once had, singing *Sch'ma Israel* in the large synagogue in Berlin. Those days would never return. Only one or two sparks of hope remained: that he would be able to stay in a free country, find renewed confidence and a little warmth, because despite the unrelenting movement, he was freezing, a cold from deep inside.

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They reached an untarred road marked with wheel tracks, and came to a few farmsteads, barely visible in the dim light. A dog began to bark. At the edge of the settlement was a barn, annexed to a farmhouse, and the nameless *passeur* instructed them to wait in front of it. He knocked on a door, someone opened, the dog fell silent, and a man whose face they couldn't clearly see showed them into the barn, then brought them a large pitcher of water. They camped down in the front half, on a layer of straw. It was pleasantly warm inside. Schmidt drank a few sips of water and passed the pitcher to Selma, who had instructed him to lean against her as he sat. Behind them, judging by the smell and the noises, were a few cows, presumably at a trough. One, who evidently felt disturbed, mooed indignantly. But it was still too early for her to be milked. A bell tinkled, so softly it was almost inaudible; presumably there were one or two goats in here too. How long was it since he had last been in a barn? Yet everything he smelt and heard here was deeply familiar to him. In

Davideny, before the move to Chernivtsi, his father, a devout man, had worked a small, leased farm consisting of three cows, some arable land and pastures. But prayer and studying the Torah had been more important to him than the harvest. His wife and daughters had to take care of most of the daily work. Sounds had exerted a magical pull on Jossele from a young age, including the noises animals made, which he soon tried to imitate, just as he joined in singing the prayers in the temple at three, four years of age, often to the chagrin of the cantor. Nobody could stop him from singing, and he often preferred to sing than speak. When music could be heard somewhere in the village, from a gypsy band or a gramophone, he was drawn there. Moving close to the first violinist, he stared spellbound at the to and fro of the bow, and longed to creep inside the big horn. He struggled vehemently whenever his sisters, who were sent to look for him, pulled him away from the music. With a great deal of effort, they dragged him home, where he was reproached by his mother and punished by his father, the blows less painful than the order to stay away from music. Yes, sounds everywhere, delicate and mighty sounds, and his mind wandering between them. When he wanted to be alone in the barn, there was the

babble of brooks and streams, there was the tonal cascade from the small waterfalls along the river, there was the undulating surge of the bells from the Christ Church on a Sunday morning. In summer there was stormy thunder, which was also a kind of music, a fear-inducing one. But the most beautiful of all was the sound of a choir singing; these tones wrapped themselves around the child and held him safe, almost as beautifully as his mother's arms encircling him. Yes, there was all of this, and he could try to imitate it with his voice, to create an entire world from sounds, and sometimes it was no longer clear whether his singing went to the other tones or whether they came to him and merged with his. 'The boy sings and hums the entire time instead of repeating the verse after me,'' the rabbi in the school had complained, but he was also the cantor in the temple, and he swiftly placed Jossele, with his clear as a bell soprano, in the front row as a soloist, and was proud of him. His father, however, demanded humility and piety from his son, and said that fame would only lead to arrogance. His mother disagreed, for the singing in the temple was intended to praise God. They argued because of him, which the little boy didn't like; he wanted to please them both, but that wasn't possible.

Sleep wasn't possible now either; his chest hurt, one of the group was snoring loudly, the animals were too restless and so was he. Mere hopes that the escape would be successful were of little use. The memories of the child in Davideny had also brought the image of Otto out of hiding. Otto, who wasn't even supposed to be his son and yet was, now just seven years of age. He had got Lotte pregnant and not believed it initially, for he was very practiced in being careful. He had met her in Vienna at a society event, a sophisticated admirer, younger than him and married. He had thought it was an affair, then she had come after him, pregnant, wanting money and a legal union. He was too weak to send her away, and the fact that she was having his child had moved him. Yet he couldn't take on the paternal role in earnest, he travelled around too much for that. The child she laid in his arms whenever they met felt like a stranger, his head seemed too big, he never stretched his little arms out towards him, and Schmidt handled him so awkwardly that the boy quickly began to cry every time. He didn't even dare write to his *mamuschka* about it. It wasn't nice, the way he had behaved as a father; it was dishonourable. His bad conscience prompted him to make the marriage pledge

before a rabbi in Nice, where Jews could still move freely, but he hadn't had the vow sealed, and afterwards Lotte had quarrelled with him so ferociously that the next day she had taken Otto and sought refuge with her current lover. And yet she had appeared with Otto at his last concert in the Avignon theatre, right at the front of the audience, and had lifted the unhappy boy up towards him, and for a moment his voice had almost failed him. Lotte hadn't managed to push her way through to him after the concert, his guardians had seen to that. He had waved to her, and then turned away. After all, following the emigration even he had almost run out of money, and it was now dwindling even quicker than usual given that his income had shrunk drastically – the always strict and greedy Leo reminded him of that often enough. It was probably his greatest liability that even in these circumstances he wanted to be one thing, and one thing only, a singer, utterly devoted to music, and even though he wanted things to be different, he was unable to see his own child as anything other than a stranger.

Then he slept for a while after all; Selma had gently eased him off her lap and made a bed for him on the ground. Suddenly he was stood on a stage, and still much

too short, despite heeled shoes, but in the dream he was able to create an almost tangible space around him with his voice. No one could break through the border of sound. As long as he sang, he remained unharmed. That's how it was; music had rescued him again and again.

The noise of an approaching engine woke him from his slumber. In the dark, Selma whispered to him: "Come on, we have to move on," and he knew at once that he wasn't where he had wished he was, in the land of his childhood, in Bukovina, and then the *passeur*, Antoine, who was standing close by, also said: "*Vite maintenant, vite*!" One of the two half-unknown companions, it was Jakob, lit a match, which Antoine immediately and angrily blew out. They groped their way out into the open air, where it was a touch lighter. Schmidt almost forgot his backpack. The car waited on the road, black like a primeval animal, the engine turned off, headlights extinguished. The chauffeur waved them over, he too seemed young. "*Montez, vite!*" he commanded. They climbed in, first Selma, then Schmidt, followed by the two others, Jakob and Arnold, while the *passeur* – a friendlier word for people smuggler, Schmidt thought to himself – sat down next to the driver. As they huddled together on the back

seat, Selma's warmth felt pleasant. She said she probably had a temperature now too; they took it in turns coughing. The engine spluttered at first, but after the driver cursed it under his breath it began to run better. They drove slowly, without lights at first. Admittedly it was gradually getting lighter, but how the driver, presumably a local too, could see the road was a mystery to Schmidt; he felt uneasy, vulnerable, but in truth he was anyway, for a road block could stop them at any moment, then they would be arrested, and he had heard enough stories about stateless Jews being treated mercilessly, herded like cattle and transported east, for days and nights on end, with the danger of dying of thirst or suffocating. To evade deportation, it all came down to the benevolence of the police, to the size of the bribe. Lucie's husband had given him six thousand francs, which wouldn't be enough to buy his freedom everywhere, but two thousand should be enough for the *passeurs*. The poor suspension of the pre-war Renault was making him suffer, and, as so often in difficult situations, he memorized arias from his repertoire. It helped now too, and this time he was disciplined enough to stay silent, but tones and words ran through his head without him summoning them, *O, dark night!*, *Donna non*

vidi mai, Alles ist nun vorbei. None of it fit together, a confusion that he found almost amusing, a cacophony – as his teacher, Felicitas Lerchenfeld, who he had often teased, would have called it in mock horror.