

Winter Bees

by Norbert Scheuer

Translation Sample

by Stephen Brown

Page 98

Thursday, 2nd March 1944

I'm on my own with Sanny in the pub and telling her about Charlotte, when she says to me that Charlotte is the wife of the Nazi District Leader, surely nowadays there are enough women for me in Kall. 'Why of all people the wife of a golden pheasant¹ – or do you just want her for her hair curlers?' she says with a laugh and tells me I should be more careful with my philandering. 'You have a lot of enemies among the women here. They don't understand how their husbands and sons are sacrificing their lives for the fatherland in the war, while you romp about and live in safety with nothing to fear.' 'Unfortunately, Sanny,' I reply, 'the recklessness is exactly what's sweet about it.'

In the middle of the night, I wake up soaked with sweat. I feel like I can't get any air into my lungs. I close my eyes and try to calm myself. Eventually I get up and take my pills. If Alfons doesn't send me any more, they won't last to the end of the war. The pharmacist demands more money every time for the new anti-convulsive (Luminal), the one that does such a good job controlling my epileptic seizures. I have this fear that without the drugs people will start to notice my illness again and they'll get rid of me like before. I'd never have been allowed to come back here without them. I'm afraid of losing my mind.

Pages 124-6

Thursday, 23rd March 1944

It's two in the morning and I cannot sleep. I have the feeling that a warm breeze is blowing through my head, which used to be a sure sign of a seizure to come, but which – thank God! – leads to nothing. I get up and stand at the window. I'm thinking of Charlotte, and I ask myself why she fascinates me so much. I can't stop thinking about her, even when I'm with Maria or some other woman. I saw her husband, the District Leader, on a Nazi parade a few weeks ago. He's a fat golden pheasant and a few years older than her by the look of him. He was

¹ *Translator's Note:* In the Third Reich, 'golden pheasant' was a popular expression for senior Nazi party functionaries, on account of their gaudy uniforms and insignia.

wearing a monocle, which he dropped with a shrug of his face, and which then swung back and forth across his belly on its fine chain. They live in the villa of the Jewish cigarette manufacturer, in large grounds, which reach to the shore of the reservoir. I lie myself back down on my bed and dream of the golden pheasants. They have pale faces. A wreath of bare skin encircles their egg-yolk-yellow eyes. They wear long-feathered, shimmering crests, which fall on to their clean-shaven necks, and uniform jackets, and breeches with broad leather belts, which barely manage to tame their paunches. They deck themselves out with party insignia and medals. Emit shrill, guttural cries. The underside of their plumage has a brownish tinge. Their glittering, metallic secondaries taper to a point. They have persuaded themselves that they can fly and rule the world for a thousand years. Their scrawny legs are scaly and horn-coloured. Their long, hooked talons are tucked into leather boots, buffed to a high shine. Such a man has a wife like Charlotte.

Friday, 24th March 1944

The winter bees will die soon. They look piteous. They have spent their life force in the long, frosty months. Ground down by their labours for the colony, their tiny bodies have grown completely bald, their wings are frayed and creased. Tossed from the hive by their sisters, they are devoured by blackbirds and jays. The summer bees that are taking their place are somewhat fatter and have gleaming brown fur, but then, in contrast to their sisters, they will grow old in just four weeks.

Vincentini's home leave is over; on Sunday he went back to the front. He spent his last evenings in the pub, retelling his stories about his experiences in the war. This was provoking for the Military Police, but they didn't dare pick a quarrel with a highly decorated frontline soldier. I think he was having an affair with Sanny and that she's had a fancy for him all along. She hasn't heard any news from Vallentin for a long time now. She's afraid he may have been killed.

In the evening at Sanny's someone says that a German soldier was found dead yesterday. It looks like it's one of the military police who were searching for the airman from the crashed Mitchell months ago. Because this soldier disappeared from his unit without a trace, it was assumed that he'd deserted; but now it turns out that he was killed. The soldier, who was on guard duty, had been stabbed several times in the shoulder blade and then his skull smashed in with a stone. He was already putrid and eaten away by foxes, lying in a hollow right next to the patch of woodland where the Mitchell crashed. The military police are straightaway back on high alert since the discovery. They are on the move everywhere, searching for the American with tracker dogs, submachine guns at the ready. I think someone must be keeping him hidden, otherwise he'd have been found long ago.

Still no news at the library. Perhaps the organisation simply doesn't exist anymore. Perhaps it's fallen apart, or it was exposed long ago.

Pages 143-57

Tuesday, 11th April 1944

Another air raid warning mid-afternoon; everyone seeks shelter in the newly prepared bunker tunnels, which people say are completely safe. After they've gone, it's as if our little town has died out. I stay with my bees. I feel safe in my shed, which stands right behind the sandstone cliffs and will soon be masked by the leaf canopy of the ash trees, completely invisible to aircraft. I can work there in peace on my hiding place for transporting the fugitives and have no need to fear that someone might walk by. I've constructed four specially designed stackable boxes, dimensioned slightly larger in width and height than the normal hives with their bee colonies. I set the normal hives up on a base so that the difference between the dummy hives and the real ones doesn't draw the eye. A full-grown man can squeeze himself into one of these fake hives with no trouble. While they're travelling on the back of the cart, the fugitives will be able to open the flap in the upper part of the hive, so that they can gulp down some air, have a look outside, even leave their hiding place and crawl under the tarpaulin. When anyone approaches the wagon, the dog begins to bark – that's the signal for the fugitives to get themselves back into their hiding place quickly.

Wednesday, 12th April 1944

I go to the library every day now to check for a new message. I need to know exactly when the fugitives will be at the hand-over point at the Malakoff Tower. This disused head frame stands in the middle of the area of mining subsidence next to the crater of the open cast lead mine. There's only one passable road to it, which terminates in a dead end at the crater. The miners excavated this vast hole, five kilometres in diameter, over decades. The mine reaches a hundred metres down into the earth in terraces. Thousands of workers shovelled lead-ore-rich earth from one level to the next to the rhythm of a drum. Now the crater and the heaps of lead sand and slag are covered by vast fields of heather. In late summer it is as if the blue of the sky has fallen onto the Earth. The honey from heather has a pleasing, slightly bitter taste; I have customers who like this honey especially. If the bees swarm and fly out over the area of mining subsidence to mass together there, I mostly have to give them up for lost, because the danger of falling through into one of the old tunnels is too great, even for me. If that happens, the bees will look for a nesting place in a hole in a tree or a niche in the rock and become wild bees again.

Thursday, 13th April 1944

In the evening I walked drunk to the reservoir, sat myself down on the landing stage and eventually fell asleep to the gentle lapping of the waves. When I woke up the moonlight was shimmering on the water.

In the afternoon I found another message at the library. It informed me that the fugitives were to be collected from the Malakoff Tower as soon as the day after

tomorrow, Saturday afternoon, at five o'clock. On no account was I to be at the Tower earlier, so that the escape agents could depart without being seen. For reasons of security, I am only ever allowed to see the fugitives, never their helpers.

I walked past the villa on my way back from the reservoir. I stood in the clearing and gazed at the brightly lit windows. As a little boy I had stood in the entrance hall with my father. A lady came down the staircase and instructed me to take our honey to the servants in the kitchen. When I returned, the two of them were speaking in a language unknown to me. I stood next to them, bewildered, and in that moment my father was wholly alien to me and I began to hate him. Although I did not back then understand a word of French, I sensed that the two of them were intimate with each other. When I asked about it, my father answered only that he had learned the language while a prisoner during the war. Today I understand him, understand that no lover cares how they ought to behave.

A car drove into the entrance. I thought I recognised Charlotte in one of the lit windows.

Saturday, 15th April 1944

Today, at the appointed moment at the Tower, I took custody of a woman around fifty years old and a girl; they were full of fear, in wet, tattered clothes, crouching under a tarpaulin against the rain. I lead them along the narrow, spiral path down into the steep funnel of the lead mine. The girl is wearing wellington boots, which are much too big for her. The legs have been cut off them and she keeps on losing them. The woman looks sick. Her face is ashen, and I can barely make out her quiet voice. Her broken nose has healed badly. She has to stop to rest several times during our descent to the bottom of the mine, where six of my colonies live. From there our route takes us through wide expanses of heather to the Elephant's Head, underneath which is the entrance to my hiding place. Alfons gave the tall rock that name because it looks so much like the head of an elephant. I instruct both of them to walk close behind me and not to stray from the path, because if you did you could fall through into one of the old tunnels. The girl stands there exhausted. She's lost one of her boots again. She is crying and will go no further. I take off her other boot and lift the kid onto my back. Though she must be ten years old, she is as light as a feather. Eventually we arrive at the entranceway under the Elephant's Head, which leads to the underground lake. On the shore of the lake, we climb onto a raft, which we ride as far as the mineshaft, where my rudimentary den is located. I've already arranged provisions; in an emergency it would be possible to hide away in this spot for a couple of weeks. It may be that they will have to endure a long time here, until I finally get the message telling me when the fugitives are expected at the border.

Wednesday, 19th April 1944

The colonies, weakened by overwintering, are only developing slowly. The foragers aren't ready yet to take on the honey supers, but instead are laying

down quantities of pollen and nectar around the brood nest. The room for depositing eggs is limited. My hope that I may yet harvest some of the lighter spring honey rests now on the black locust and dogwood, which will flower later.

The fugitives have been in my hiding place for three days now. I try to visit them as often as I can, in the morning mostly. I bring them food by the quick route from the garden. It's not much; it's becoming ever more difficult to get hold of provisions, the rationing has got so strict. Although I can provide for most of what I need from my garden, there's just not enough of everything there now.

I crawl through the drainage hole behind the shed into the tunnel; it's the same route I'll bring the fugitives out by later, to take them to the cart in the barn. The journey takes me no more than ten minutes. The two of them are crouched in the darkness, because I asked them to make sparing use of the light. I notice how the girl asks endless questions about her parents. The woman implores me to take them over the border at long last. She is terrified and says over and over that she would rather die than fall into the hands of the Nazis again.

Thursday, 20th April 1944

It's raining again; I sit in Café Blasius and watch the marketplace, where they're parading for Jupp's fifty-fifth birthday. The shelves in the bakery are empty because there's no flour to bake bread; but at least it still smells a little of sourdough, milled wheat and rye flour. The shopgirl hands me a watery ersatz chicory coffee, which tastes only of water and the bitter compounds of common chicory. I get a small piece of cake on the quiet. It has been made with turnip flour, sweetened with my honey. No other customers come in, because today there is nothing for sale. The houses around the small market square and on Station Street are decked with flags; naturally, outside the pharmacist's house a party flag is hanging as well. Every time I go to him in his shop, he brazenly claims that the prices for the medicines have gone up again, not to mention the fact that he's not allowed to give me any medicine at all, that's for certain; people like me have no right to any help. I must work out for myself how to survive all this. The pharmacist has a very hard time procuring the expensive anti-convulsives, he assures me sanctimoniously; phenobarbitol and phenytoin are only produced in small quantities, so he says, because there's hardly anyone with my disease left in the Reich. He's a scrawny man with a head shaped like a bean, cold eyes looking out through his metal-rimmed glasses. I hate the way he braces his hands with their chewed fingernails on the counter. I'm sure he has stocked up on supplies, because he knows I have to take the medication regularly.

Monday, 24th April 1944

The fugitives are now in their second week in the hiding place. I visit them as often as possible. For days the girl has been lying listlessly in her aunt's arms. I'm scared that the woman might abandon the hiding place to see daylight again at long last and then crash through into one of the tunnels or be captured and betray me. She has no hard cash, only jewellery, which I'm not so keen to take, as there's little I can do with it. The pharmacist hasn't given me medicine in return

for jewellery for a long time now. I can sell a portion of the valuables to Sanny. I get less than they're worth, but I'm desperate for money.

The woman begs me to procure her cigarettes. I brought one of the young cats for the girl a few days ago, but it was already too old to trust people anymore. As soon as the girl let it go, it ran away, vanished into the darkness, and only comes back when it's hungry.

In the afternoon I go to the library, hoping I'll find instructions at last, so I'll know when to set out for the border. I study Charlotte as she sits at her desk. What is it that so binds me to her?

The work on the secret transport is almost complete. Alongside the two dummy hives, which will house the fugitives, I will be taking with me three more well developed colonies of 120,000 bees in all, truly a grand army of guardians; who could lay a finger on us with that, I say to the girl, smiling, trying to quell her fear a little. The woman meanwhile is giving me a headache.

Tuesday, 25th April 1944

It's foggy and cold; from time to time there's snow again. At the moment, my bees need their honey stores primarily as fuel, as energy source, in order to generate the warmth necessary in the hive; they are like small furnaces, which must be kept permanently lit. Given the poor state of development of the colonies and that we're expecting more chilly weather over the next few days, I postpone making up the nucleus colonies by a week and am adding in sugar water, because, as Cornelius Gallus said, what nature withholds, nurture may provide.

On my way home I watch dogfights in the sky over the pastures; the agile, single-engine fighters swoop down on the enemy planes at great speed, almost vertically, the sirens fixed to their landing gear emitting a terrifying scream.

The American cigarettes I procure from Sanny are presumably from planes that have been shot down. The packet cost me two jars of honey. The news in the pub is that another American soldier has been taken prisoner and immediately killed. At the moment it's still warmer in the interior of my hideaway than it is outside, but it is very damp; the woman has swollen fingers and can scarcely move them, so she can't light the cigarettes I give her on her own. She asks me what the weather's like outside. She takes my hand, squeezes it, and guides it to her cheek, thanks me over and over and does not want to let me go. I want to get away, she sobs.

Wednesday, 26th April 1944

It's still raining. The bees stay in the hive; their development is sluggish. They are toiling away to maintain the hive at a constant warmth and to feed the brood as best they can. They are hardly bothered with producing honey. It doesn't look as if there'll be much spring honey to collect this year.

A spot check reveals no hint of nosema; only a few bees whose spiracles might possibly be affected by the tiny, yellowish mites, scarcely visible to the naked eye. The mites fix themselves with their claws in the air-pipes of the bees; the bees lose the power of flight, scuttle around desperately in front of the hive, wretchedly jerking their hindquarters. The female deposits her eggs and then abandons her host. In a long-lived winter bee, you might find as many as a hundred mites. Perhaps the late start to breeding this year has retarded the development of the parasites as well.

Around midday I made a brief visit to the hideaway. The woman was just at that moment washing herself in the lake. I guess she must have seen the glow of my lamp, because she got quickly out of the water and covered her body with her dress held in front of her. She was talking about strange, greenish apparitions on the vaulted ceiling, which were reflected in the water like little flashes of lightning. She asked me whether dangerous fish lived in the lake. She begged me to stay with her; her tightly closed lips trembled. I had brought swedes with me and a little lard and bread. I didn't need to bring them anything to drink: the water in the lake is safe.

In the afternoon I spent two hours teaching Latin class in the reading room of the library. Afterwards I was chatting with Charlotte when I noticed some of my secret books on her desk. I could see works by Alfred Döblin, Sigmund Freud, Maxim Gorky and Rosa Luxemburg. I was startled and I had the feeling that Charlotte had noticed it. She calmed me by remarking that she had found the books by chance, they had no shelf marks, and she was surprised that Miss Elizabeth hadn't noticed them. I changed the subject and told her about my translation work. Charlotte looked interested in my studies, so I explained to her that our local species of bee probably originates from an area of the Italian Alps and was already established in our part of the country by the sixteenth century, told her that this was connected to the apiculture in the monasteries nearby, and that I suspected the local species might be resistant to the nosema pest.

Friday, 28th April 1944

The sun rises at six each morning now and its rays catch the bee house soon after. A gentle, murmuring wind caresses the grass, the dew-wet webs shiver between twigs, birds tweet, midges dance in the sunlight. Now the bees are collecting pollen and nectar untiringly from morning to evening. The pollen dust they harvest prompts the queen to ramp up her egg laying still further. In certain colonies I have already begun to extract the first of the capped drone brood from the frames. Too many drones are bad for the hive. Their only use is for reproduction. Otherwise they lie about and help themselves to honey, fouling the structure with their droppings, so that the worker bees, as well as having to look after the larvae, must spend more and more time cleaning the hive of contaminants.

The cat has come out from the hiding place; it is sitting now by the hive under one of the entrance holes, swiping its paw at the returning bees hovering in front of the hive. The guard bees gather, take a run up, then hurl themselves at the cat

at terrific speed and torment it with stings on its nose and eye. If the weather stays like this, soon all the comb will be full of brood and food; then the worker bees will begin to construct the queen cells. Within two weeks new queens will grow up inside them. Shortly before the first ones hatch, the old queen will abandon the hive with a portion of the colony, in order to establish a new colony.

After breakfast and my work with the bees I walk down to the library.

Still no instructions have arrived for the hand-over of the fugitives. Without instructions a trip to the border is unthinkable. It is cold and damp in the cave and there's no question the two of them are suffering, enduring days and nights of such loneliness. Every time I make to leave the woman grabs hold of me, weeps and absolutely refuses to release her grip.

In the evening I visit Maria; her children are away in one of the Höhendörfer at their grandparents for the Easter holidays and we can enjoy ourselves in her house. From Maria's bedroom you can hear the trains rattling past, endlessly carrying matériel to the western front; tanks and artillery roll off the freight trains onto the platform. Forced labourers unload guns and ammunition cases all night. Early in the morning the sirens wail, but I stay with Maria in bed, because I can tell from the sounds of the planes that the formations are flying away over us.