

Irene Diwiak

Tell Alex Not to Wait for Me

[Sag Alex, er soll nicht auf mich warten]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

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True friendship in the midst of the Second World War

Munich, 1941. Students Hans and Alex don't seem to have much in common – until, one day, they both duck out of military training to discuss art and literature instead of practice standing to attention. From that day on, they are close friends, and Hans is a welcome guest at Alex's "discussion parties". But war is their constant companion, and the urge to speak out against it grows ever stronger within both of them. Their plans are risky, especially when Hans's younger sister, who mustn't at any cost find out about their intentions – moves to Munich...

Diwiak tells the true story of a unique friendship, a story of the White Rose resistance group that for once doesn't deal with its end, but with its fascinating beginning – moving, intelligent and accessible.

Irene Diwiak, born in Graz, Austria, in 1991, has won several awards for her literary works and plays, and her 2017 debut "*Liebwies*" was shortlisted for the Austrian Book Prize (First Novel Award). Her second novel, "*Malvita*", appeared in 2020.

Sample Translation

By Jo Heinrich

18th February 1943

They've just arrested two people, a girl and a young man, we don't know any more than that. Well, not actually arrested; it's only the caretaker who's got them by their sleeves, that pipsqueak's acting all high and mighty, but even the girl's towering over him – can you call that an arrest? It's something to do with papers. Not with her papers, you idiot, it's the papers in the atrium downstairs. It could just be paper to wrap your sandwiches in, who knows, paper's paper, after all, and a caretaker has to make a stand, or what's the point of him? Did you pick one up? Me neither, it's more than my life's worth. It has to be more than just sandwich paper. But it's bad, that's for sure, and especially now with Stalingrad still on our minds, we could do with some uplifting instead of upset. Chin up, everybody! Nothing's been proven yet. That fellow looks suspicious to me; there's something shifty about him, but not that little lamb with her hazel eyes. Did you read it? Me neither, but women don't write things like that, do they? Has he got her firmly by the sleeve though, does she look like she wants to run away? Even caretakers can get it wrong sometimes, superhuman though they may be. And if it was her throwing those papers into the atrium, it could have just been a mistake. Or if she meant to do it, she can't have read them. Did you read one? No, me neither. Could have been sandwich paper. Only it's not just sandwich paper. Have the police got here at last? That's good, it needs to be cleared up, actions speak louder than words, us Germans have got enough problems already, haven't we? Hey, you, hold your tongue or you'll be off to the station and in the slammer as well. I still think it'll be cleared up. I know that lad by sight, he's a medic, and he's in the Wehrmacht too. They're all in the Wehrmacht, but some of them sabotage things and rebel, they're the worst. And what's that supposed to mean, he's a medic? What's the Hippocratic oath got to do with the oath to the Führer? Nothing whatsoever, I'd say. And I'd say it's all a childish prank, the folly of youth, pure stupidity. There'll be an explanation for it. Oh well, we won't see the two of them again. They'll be expelled from their courses, at the very least. They've got nothing to do with it, that's for sure, look how calm they are, they're not letting them drag them away, they're

marching off with them, not exactly goose-stepping, but marching sure-footedly –would someone guilty walk like that? Maybe they're not guilty, but we still won't see them again. Oh well. They almost look happy, really, but relieved too, somehow. Quick march, and a few men in uniform are gathering up the corpi delicti in the meantime. Corpora, corpora! The plural's -ora: it's a neuter with a consonant, pal! I don't care, just forget about that sandwich paper, and carry on as we were. Go on, off to the next lecture, nothing to see here, soon we'll be off to the front, that'll be a shock to your system! Off you go, quick march!

But suddenly the young man stops. They've gone halfway across the hall; the girl's watching, her eyes wide open. Resisting state authority now?

He shouts over his shoulder, to someone, or maybe to all of us, 'Tell Alex not to wait for me!'

Then he gets a rough shove: go on, quick march! And the rest of us are left here – students, at a loss.

Summer 1941

Strange, Hans thinks, not so long ago a day like this would have seemed perfect. Getting up early in the barracks, everyone in it together, washing side by side from metal bowls: it's just another kind of vagabond life. Putting on your uniform and hoping for a better one at some point, for rank and name. Praying in silence over breakfast, bad coffee and dry bread, it's just another kind of fasting. Thanking the Lord for everything and asking for little, then it's off to the university to spend the morning deep in intellectual activity. Hans has taken more subjects than anyone he knows. A human being isn't just made up of skin, bones and blood; learning medicine alone won't be enough to comprehend mankind as a whole. Hans prefers to sit in the lecture hall with the philosophers. The Führer doesn't care whether you learn something or not, just as long as you show up on time for military training: healthy body, healthy mind, and all that. Physical exercise in the fresh air just like with the boys in Ulm in the old days. Then in the evening, you write to a girl, any girl. Sing patriotic songs. No time for moping around.

How a person can change, and yet only a few years have passed. Hans starts pedalling. It takes him a little more effort every time: his bike is old, and he'll have to buy a new one soon. If he didn't hand over every Reichsmark he can lay his hands on to the bookshop, he'd easily have the money together by now. But the philosophy books, especially, are so unbelievably expensive and so interesting that he'll have to keep his old boneshaker a little longer. If only there was more time to read, and the state wasn't constantly breathing down your neck.

Hans can hear church bells in the distance, a single sharp chime, marking the end of lunch hour. He's pedalling harder and harder, but the bike seems indifferent: it won't go any faster. He wonders if it's technically possible for his own reluctance to transfer to the wheels beneath him, slowing him down. Maybe not technically, but it's still a possibility. A couple of girls wave and call out to him at the top of their voices from the pavement opposite, and Hans turns to look at them. No, he doesn't know them; he wobbles a little and almost hits a newspaper stand. Why are they waving? Oh yes, he's wearing his uniform. Silly cows, they almost made him fall off. But they're still very young and of the mindset that every soldier must be a hero or at least a big shot. Silly cows and stupid newsstand that drummed it into their heads in the first place, with its big headlines and its handsome chaps on the front pages. 'Our glorious Wehrmacht in the East', 'Our glorious Wehrmacht in the West', 'Our

glorious Wehrmacht here, there and everywhere'. And just now a tiny part of this Wehrmacht almost crashed into the newsstand himself. The girls over there aren't even giggling, they've just moved on. Not such a big shot after all. The stall owner is ranting: Hans swept a stack of papers off the counter when he swerved. The *Völkischer Beobachter*, that Nazi paper, ironically. Leave the papers in the dirt, Hans is in a hurry anyway. Turning up late for military sports practice is utterly un-German behaviour and will be severely punished. The newspaper man's still waving his fist in the air briefly, more comically than threateningly, like a cuckolded husband in a farce, but he doesn't go to the bother of following the rickety bike. The *Völkischer Beobachter* isn't worth the effort - maybe he doesn't think that differently to Hans.

Hans could have made it easier for himself, of course. The other members of his company are just finishing off their cigarettes in the barrack yard, which used to be a schoolyard before the war, and then casually making their way over to the sports field. Hans, however, didn't go back to the barracks in the Westend for lunch like everyone else. He still rents his student room, despite the decree to stay in the barracks. Your books have to be kept somewhere, and occasionally you can't help holing up there too, if it all gets too much. At least he has peace and quiet in his room, and he can look out of the window onto the neighbour's flower garden. Not much is in bloom now, but it's still wonderfully green, and besides, Hans relishes every moment that isn't dictated to him from above. And as punishment for this, he's now working up a good sweat. Incredibly good weather really, for times like these. As if the sun condoned everything that happens on this earth. At any rate, it can't do anything about it.

Hans casually drops his bike in the bushes near the barrack gate. If it's stolen, it's a minor loss compared to the disciplinary proceedings that would almost certainly cost him his next weekend off. It's perfect weather for going up the Jochberg or to Lake Starnberg; you can't just sit around in the gloomy barracks - it's no good for your soul.

When Hans arrives at the sports field, no one's standing to attention, and no barked commands are cutting through the sultry summer air: he's made it, he's on time. It's not an army yet, just a bunch of young people. A schoolyard like in the old days, but with very big children, whose mothers just happened to dress them all in the same clothes. Some people are chatting and laughing, others are kicking a can back and forth, a few over-motivated people are arm-wrestling each other and doing push-ups; only a few are standing apart a little, seemingly as lost in the crowd as he is. Hans can't catch his breath for too long,

however: the roll call's being bellowed out. Straight away the students turn into soldiers and stand to attention. If we've learned nothing else in this world, the one thing we can do is line up in dead straight lines in a matter of seconds. Who knows when you might need it? The commander checks the register from A to Z; it takes a long time to get to S. The things you can waste time on.

'Aberer?' 'Jawohl!'

'Achleitner?' 'Jawohl!'

'Biedermann?' 'Jawohl!'

The things you can waste youth on.

'Scholl?' 'Jawoll!'

What a stupid rhyme! Not once does he manage to stretch out the 'o' in 'Jawohl' properly to skip the same old joke, as he'd intended. Never mind. Keep standing and staring until they get to Z.

When the last name's finally called and the groups are picked for the exercise ahead of them, everyone sets off to their sections as instructed. But the young man next to Hans, who he's barely noticed up to now, steps out of line. Simply walks away. And no one else seems to notice; now they're all on the move, he simply walks towards the woodland, effortlessly crosses the sports field's low fence with his long legs and disappears beyond it with a natural ease, as if the commanding officer himself had ordered him to sneak away. Hans wonders what to do. Should he report him? What for? To serve the system? That would be a joke. Forget it? That would be a possibility, but then curiosity wins him over. A moment ago, he would have willingly sacrificed his bike to avoid potential punishment, but now he risks much worse for no reason at all. He looks around again: everyone seems busy; no one's paying attention, not even the commanding officer. Hans takes another deep breath and marches after him, over the fence into the forest, to freedom.

There he is, the tall chap, sitting in the shade of a tree, his back turned to Hans. He hasn't wandered far, he's already settled down just out of sight of the sports field, on his uniform jacket which is spread out on the forest floor like a picnic blanket. He's sitting there, hunched over in his rowing shirt, Hans can't quite make it out: is he reading? Strange fellow. This isn't what being on your guard looks like. He's probably leafing through one of those dirty magazines they like to pass around in the barracks, a waste of paper if you ask Hans. He's got a lot of nerve, skipping military service for crap like that. And yet Hans steps closer. The dry twigs crack a little under his boots, but the young man doesn't seem to hear him and

carries on flicking through the pages, regardless. Over his shoulder, Hans can finally make out what he's reading. It's not a magazine, it's a book, and what a book it is: a magnificent coffee table book. As he suspected, the people in the photos aren't wearing clothes, but they don't need to: they're made of stone.

'Rodin!' Hans exclaims, amazed.

The chap flinches in fright, and the book falls noisily from his hand. He must think Hans is his superior, or someone who'll get him into trouble because of this. He gets up, trying to put his jacket back on while trying to salute and, at the same time, trying to come up with an apology, all while attempting to keep a certain nonchalance, as if to say, 'Come on mate, don't make a big deal over this triviality.' Hans can't help himself. He laughs. His counterpart realises there won't be a big deal with him.

Battle cries emanate from the sports field: one, two, three, go! The tall chap is laughing as well now, with only one sleeve of his jacket on, and the wrong one at that.

'You've got a lot of nerve, scaring me like that,' he says, 'you're lucky I only dropped my book and not the bottle of good stuff.'

Only now does Hans notice the green wine bottle in the moss.

'Yes, that would've been a shame,' he says, 'but shame about the Rodin too.'

'A book can't break. Anyway, my name's Alexander Schmorell. If you want, we can drink to brotherhood right now, and then you can call me Alex – it's shorter.'

'Hans,' says Hans and stretches out his hand to him, 'it can't get any shorter.'

'And your surname?'

'Scholl.'

'Hans Scholl,' repeats Alex and shakes his head in disbelief, 'it really doesn't get any shorter than that.'

Then he bends down to pick up the bottle and pulls out the cork.

Summer 1941

It's become a ritual. They arrive at the sports field, both of them invariably late; Alex also spends as much time as possible away from the barracks and doesn't give two hoots about the rules, usually even sleeping at home. They throw their bikes into the bushes, run through the barrack gate and make it just in time for roll call. But there are times when Alex is late, and then Hans has to spit out his reluctant 'Jawoll' twice in a row, first at 'Schmorell', then again at 'Scholl'. It's terribly risky, of course, but surprisingly it works every time. In general, Hans is amazed at what they can get away with, how easily the strict German system can be fooled, presumably because no one expects anyone to even attempt something like this. By the time the commanding officer gets to Z, Alex has always made it, and he lines up inconspicuously somewhere at the side, standing to attention with a black briefcase under his arm, half hidden behind his back; he's already had plenty of practice in hiding it. When it's time to form groups for the exercises, two soldiers march unerringly across the yard and cross the fence towards the forest in military synchronicity. If anyone ever saw them doing this, they would assume this deviation from the norm was somehow just as it should be; no one ever reports them.

In the shelter of the trees, they take off their uniform jackets, Alex pulls a fresh bottle of wine out of his briefcase, and the books - you'd be amazed what can fit in a bag like that, even the Rodin doorstop slides in with a little push. Hans wants to contribute cigarettes, but Alex always has a pipe in his mouth, even when he's just run out of tobacco.

'It's nice to keep bringing it to your lips like the old poets and thinkers did,' he says, 'you should give it a try, it's quite a different experience.'

'No, you're fine,' Hans replies, 'I'd rather stick to cigarettes and real smoke. Want one?'

Alex shrugs his shoulders, 'Well, a cigarette can't hurt in between. Even if it is a bit conventional.'

Then they smoke and drink and flick through the pages together; Alex's books are all about art.

'Rodin is the best,' he says, 'and sculpture in general's better than anything else.'

He's trying his hand at art himself; he's taking courses and private lessons at the moment - it's hard to say if he'll ever take it further, but he'd love to. Other than that, he's studying medicine like Hans, only less diligently, and if his attendance at a lecture isn't strictly necessary, he doesn't go at all.

'I've seen Rodin's works in Paris,' Hans says.

'You've been to Paris?'

'Yes. The Western campaign.'

Hans didn't have much to do there: the French didn't exactly put up a fight, skulking around their occupiers instead while the Germans were snapping up the best houses and the valuables; Hans grew thoroughly ashamed of his countrymen. So he went to the capital and visited the museum there. At last, his expensive camera proved its worth: in the military hospital where he was doing his sometimes terrible, sometimes terribly boring service, there was plenty to see, but nothing to photograph. It was bad enough having all that misery around him while he was at work, so in his free time Hans sought out beauty. Where might those photos be now? They must be lying around at home at his parents', they could send them to him when they get a chance, or maybe Alex could go to Ulm with him in the holidays - that would be a good idea.

'The Western campaign,' repeated Alex, 'I was there too, but not in Paris, unfortunately.'

He sighs and takes a big gulp of wine. 'When do you think they'll ship us out again, and where to?'

On an afternoon like this, they can get through a bottle between them, so they have to be careful not to miss the final roll call or give their drinking away. Alex says that as he was born in Russia he can take it, but it's not entirely true: sometimes he staggers across the sports field in a daze.

When they've gone through the thick Rodin and the smaller books on sculpture, Hans thinks it must be his turn. He buys a briefcase like Alex's (the new bike can wait) and puts some of his philosophy books in there: the complete works of Nietzsche. Beaming, he lays the books out in front of Alex.

'There, what do you think?'

'That'll take us a while to get through,' says Alex, making a face.

'Yes,' Hans replies, 'but it's worth a read.'

'I don't know,' says Alex, 'philosophy...'

He shrugs and chews on his pipe a while. 'There is a God, isn't there, and what more do you need?'

Hans finds it hard not to make his indignation too obvious, but he can't help stammering a little:

'But... Nietzsche... what he says about today's culture... form but no content... and about free people and...'

'Maybe,' says Alex, 'you read your Nietzsche, and I'll read something I like.'

That's what they do, but Hans doesn't really want to leave it at that. He's an intelligent man, this Alex, so why is he so resistant to the highest form of thinking?

The next time Hans arrives with his briefcase, there's just a single book in it. Alex stretches out on the forest floor and looks up curiously at Hans.

"So, you're trying with your philosophy again?"

But Hans just smirks a little and pulls out the book. Alex's eyes widen.

The two of them have never talked about politics. Wordlessly they've agreed it's absolutely fine to bunk off from military sports every week, whether it's from sheer laziness or another reason they don't mention to each other.

"On April 1 1924, I entered upon my prison term in the fortress of Landsberg am Lech, as sentenced by the People's Court in Munich on that day."

Hans reads aloud with a steady voice. He skips over the woefully long dedication, and reads on about Hitler's parental home, or more precisely his call to unite German Austria with the Old Reich: "Their sword will become our plow, and from the tears of war the daily bread of future generations will grow."

Alex is still looking at him wide-eyed.

'Well, what's it to be?' Hans suddenly asks and looks up from the book, 'is it a plough or a sword, or is this a metaphor for a metaphor, and since when does bread grow like vegetables from the earth, I beg your pardon, from tears?'

Alex's tense face loosens, his lips widen into a broad grin.

'No wait,' exclaims Hans, 'there's plenty more to laugh at...'

He turns over a few pages: 'Here, for example, "In this little town on the Inn, gilded by the rays of German martyrdom", he was born, who'd have thought it, so German martyrdom colours whole towns? Or I think this bit's particularly good: "By the time the thirteen-year-old grew to be seventeen," well, only our Führer's father could manage to turn seventeen as a thirteen-year-old, or then there's...'

He turns the pages, but Alex has already burst into resounding laughter and is holding out the wine bottle to him, shaking with mirth, 'Here, please, have a drink and stop reading, I can't take any more!'

'I haven't even got to his political arguments yet,' protests Hans, 'first we've got to read how our Führer was simply too talented for every single profession he tried his hand at, and so he just had to become our Führer, like it or not...'

They make a game of it, passing the book to each other, opening it and reading aloud; on every page there's a mangled sentence, an incongruous simile, an off-key metaphor. They read out long, winding sentences with an infinite number of commas and comically awkward constructions to each other: how Schiller would have been fuming, and how Goethe must be turning in his grave! They're agreed on this sorry effort, although they also think Schiller's style of spontaneous combustion and Goethe's use of the subjunctive future tense are a bit far-fetched. All this drivel needs to be washed down with wine, and that's what they do, a sip with each sentence, to stop their brains turning completely to mush.

But there are also sentences they don't read, not aloud anyway; they skim over them in silence. Sentences that leave a nasty taste in their mouths. Hans and Alex don't read out anything about race, eradicating Judaism, worthy lives and worthless ones. They don't want to talk about that yet, not today. Today they just want to have fun and celebrate the fact that they've found each other. They're laughing at the worries and fear that can paralyse you when you can't share them with someone.

Translation of excerpts from *Mein Kampf* taken from the 1943 edition published by Houghton Mifflin Co. and translated by Ralph Manheim.