

John Bentley Mays /

UNDER THE WATERFALL

Some years ago, in order to amuse and distract myself while confined to a psychiatric ward, I invented a book by Martin Holzgruber entitled *Folktales of Bavaria*. This book, published in Berlin in 1873 and translated by Emily Klein in 1922, represents the life's work of the famous antiquarian and philologist and contains many stories of unparalleled charm and interest.

One of these tales concerns a lovely wight who had fallen in love with a troll-prince. The prince, who had become very rich by charging exorbitant tolls at his bridge, was impervious to the wight's every plea for him to leave his business and join her beneath the waterfall which was her home. Join me, then! said the troll — but the unfortunate wight could not bring herself to leave the deep forest silences and become the busy wife of a rising entrepreneur. At last, in the desperation of her impossible love, the wight bribed a sorcerer to dry up the stream which flowed beneath the troll-prince's bridge in the hope that, once men found another route across the dry river-bed, the troll would be plunged into poverty and then be more easily persuaded to share with her the subtler riches of solitude and beauty.

Little did the wight know, however, that the flood which ran beneath the bridge was fed by a spring high in the mountains — the same spring alas! that fed the stream which fell like a silver curtain over the entrance of the wight's cavern. In vain she cried out for the sorcerer to reverse his enchantment as the waterfall shrank to a trickle and disappeared, in vain she wailed as she, too, evaporated into the dry mountain air. In the end she perished, the victim of passion, whereas the troll-prince found work and a jolly troll-wife under a bridge not far away and eventually came into wealth greater than ever.

Mutatis mutandis, the wight reappeared in 1934 on the cover of a National Socialist tract called *Bolshevism from Moses to Lenin*. Clothed in a diaphanous gown embroidered with hammers and sickles, her face a grotesque Jewish caricature, the wight squats beneath her waterfall. She slobbers Hebrew characters and obscenities in German against the People's Will and Party. In the text, Holzgruber's story is retold as part of an hysterical diatribe against the "bourgeois intellectual Jewish swine" whose "sole aim" is the disruption of "the German renaissance of national pride and industry." On the last page of the booklet, the wight appears once more, being strangled by a brown-shirted troll-*führer* who shouts in red *Fraktur*: DEATH TO ALL BOLSHEVIKS AND JEWS!

I found this little book while ransacking the room of an elderly gentleman who had arrived in the hospital after smashing all the windows in the show-room of his highly successful Volkswagen dealership.

We are not all without histories! In my search for money, I discovered beneath a stack of the old man's shirts a worn leather box. A Pandora's box of history! These are things contained in the box: a copy of *Bolshevism from Moses to Lenin*, water-stained and dog-eared; a Nazi Party pin and an Iron Cross; a letter from Obersturmbannführer SS Werner Heyde commending the future Volkswagen-dealer for his part in the round-up of some dangerous Jewish snipers in Warsaw; a photograph of the old man, much younger, dressed in a handsome SS uniform; a pen-knife with an ivory handle, wrapped in a scrap of paper on which was written in a boy's sure hand: "Für meine liebe Rebekka. Vergiss nicht dein Bruder ISAAK!"

There were several other photos in the box. One of these depicted six naked girls, hands crossed over their crotches, ringed by smiling SS officers with machine-guns. One was a snapshot of a railway platform littered with baggage and boxes, and Jews of every age and station. Another, which looked as though it had been taken for the benefit of the Red Cross, showed a barracks lined with cots on each of which sat a thin little girl. Another snapshot, tilted and blurred as though it had been taken furtively, showed a row of nude corpses laid in the prison-yard as neatly as a row of cots. Each corpse was that of a little girl.

I quickly went back through all the photographs and discovered that one person — a girl — appeared in each. Could that child have been Rebekka? Could Rebekka have been one of the children in each brown snapshot?

The questions seemed to tear my brain loose from its moorings and send it careening down the sides of history into the theatre where the newsreels eternally grind through projectors in the dark hearts of things, and I saw the brown van moving slowly up the street between the canyon wall of tenements. I saw the van stop and disgorge a platoon of police armed with machine-guns and truncheons.

The future Volkswagen dealer awakens the *Portier* of the designated building and gives him his instructions and the warning that the Reich can take no responsibility for violence if he and the tenants do not strictly comply with orders.

In moments there are faces looking down at the dingy foyer from every landing of the winding stair. The officer-in-charge, whose possessions I handled that day in the hospital, reads the deportation order in Polish and in Yiddish. The tenants are told what they may and may not take with them, are told that it is the will of the Reich that this removal be executed with as little discomfort as possible, are lectured in the consequences should any attempt to resist the orderly execution of the decree. When he has finished and the last syllable has echoed up the coil of darkness, the faces disappear one by one from the stairwell, like lights winking off in windows at midnight.

In order to make certain that everything is going properly, the SS officer and some of his men ascend the stair and walk from door to door inspecting the progress of each family. Though slightly nauseated by the stale odors of boiled chicken and renderings, the leader smiles politely at old women folding shawls into suitcases and men whispering to their sons.

One door, he finds closed. He knocks, but there is no answer. He knocks again, sharply this time, but still there is no sound within. He pushes the door open with his boot and steps over the threshold.

The room's walls are invisible behind shelf after sagging shelf of books and papers. A desk, over which hangs a bare electric bulb (the room's only illumination), is likewise piled high with dusty volumes and sheets of paper covered with lines of tiny Hebrew characters. In the centre of the room sits an old rabbi with a violin resting on his lap. A little girl, with long russet pigtails, is seated on the floor; her head rests on the rabbi's knee. The yellow stars stitched on their sleeves glow like fragments of sunset in the dull electric light.

The old man looks up.

"Do not take Rebekka," he says in Yiddish. "I have no-one now but Rebekka."

The SS officer replies in fluent Yiddish that he and the girl will not be separated if they comply fully with regulations.

Without speaking, the girl rises, takes the violin from the rabbi and puts it into its case. She then goes to the bureau and begins laying the old man's suits on the bed.

"Rebekka is a good girl, and very strong. My wife is dead ten years now. Rebekka has been with me since last winter. She is a very good girl and a fine cook."

The girl turns to him and motions for him to be silent. He slowly pulls himself from the chair.

"Be sure to pack bread and eggs and milk. My wife would never allow me to go on a journey without a basket of food."

"Can she speak?" asked the SS officer.

"No. Never a word from her. But she can read and understand, and she is a strong girl. She will make a good wife. Will there be Jews in the place we are going? I want her to marry a fine young man and have many sons."

Despite the old man's words, the girl seems to hear and understand nothing. She quickly packs the bags, neglecting to include any food, then leads the old man into the hallway. The officer and the girl pause on the landing while the old man fumbles in his overcoat for a huge key, locks the door, and hands the key to Rebekka.

"You must give this to the *Portier*. He will see that my books are sent ahead. Ah! I am too old for long journeys. Do as I say."

The trio descend the winding stair, and the girl and the old man join the tenants huddled on the sidewalk. The officer-in-charge gives orders for the loading of the van.

We notice here the disobediences of the Jewish child; we notice here her respect for history: a little girl silences a rabbi; she packs no food; she slips the old man's key into a sack full of tumbled hosiery and keepsakes and not into the hand of the *Portier*.

But it is not before the moment that she climbs into the van without so much as a glance at the tenement or the old man — without so much as a gesture of compassion for the old rabbi trying to manage his books and suitcases — that the SS officer falls in love with her. No, it is *now* that the thought burns into his mind: how perfectly she obeys her history — as perfectly, indeed, as he himself. He sees in her yielding to the long descent into nothing a mirror of his own, and is raptured.

Throughout the months that follow, he watches her descent, marking each inch with a photograph. He orders pictures and documents — anything that has to do with her — sent to him on the flimsiest of pretexts. He orders her confiscated possessions sent to his office, where they will remain fetishes of veneration until Allied bombs destroy everything except a pen-knife he always carries on his person. He makes sure he is present on the day the SS nurses give green and red balloons to each child. He waits for a miracle of song to break out among the balloons, he waits for one word of protest to shatter the unity of his love for her — but no, the camp-guards seize her from behind, the nurse injects phenol into her heart, and in an instant she passes from the silence as deep as his own into the nothingness toward which he yearns with all his soul.

Frailty! Frailty and self-regard in a knight of the Master Race! Frailty, I screamed over the leather box of memories.

Without warning the door opened and the maniac car-salesman stepped over the threshold.

"You are in my room," he said softly.

Frailty! I screamed the word for days and days, and nothing my keepers could do or inject into me was able to quench my amazement at having discovered this flaw in the century's pure and violent consistency.