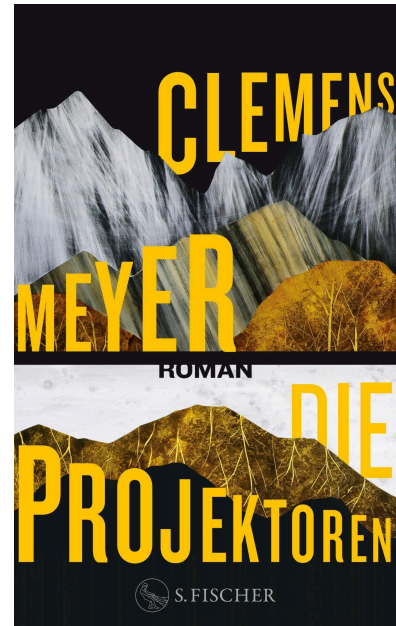


Clemens Meyer

The Projectionists

August 2024 . 1.056 pages

The new novel by Clemens Meyer: an epic tale about Europe's crises and the art of storytelling.



From Leipzig to Belgrade, from the GDR to the People's Republic of Yugoslavia, from silver screen spectacles to adventure novels. Relentless and fast-paced, "The Projectionists" tells the story of our present being crushed by the past – and of incomparable characters: in the Velebit Mountains, a former partisan experiences the adventurous filming of Karl May's Winnetou film adaptations. Decades later, the brutal battles of the Yugoslavian wars take place in these very places – in the midst of it all, a group of young right-wing radicals from Dortmund experience the futility of their ideology. And in Leipzig, the texts of a former patient are discussed at a conference in a psychiatric clinic: How did he manage to disappear without a trace? Was he able to predict the future? And what links him to the world traveller Dr May, who was once also a patient at the clinic?

"A storyteller like no other." Andreas Platthaus, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Clemens Meyer, born in 1977, lives in Leipzig. His debut novel *Als wir träumten* came out in 2006, followed by *Die Nacht, die Lichter. Stories* (2008), *Gewalten. Ein Tagebuch* (2010) and the novel *Im Stein* (2013), which was shortlisted for the German Book Prize and longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2017. Clemens Meyer has received numerous awards for his work, including the Prize of the Leipzig Book Fair, the Bremen Literature Prize and the Premio Salerno Libro d'Europa. He was also a finalist for the Gregor von Rezzori Prize in 2017. A number of his short stories have been adapted for the screen, and the feature film *Als wir träumten*, directed by Andreas Dresen, competed in the Biennale in 2015.

Sample Translation: Katy Derbyshire

Prologue Two

(A Night in the Bioskop)

Beneath the ice of a great river that flowed through a very old city in the south-eastern centre of the world, a young woman drifted. She got caught on the remains of a frozen fishing net and her blonde hair fanned out around her head, and the river's current took her long pale hair and moved it all the way to her hips, and beneath the river's brittle ice, it looked as if she had wings or were swimming in fluid motions against the stream.

The city's name was Novi Sad, and the Germans called it Neusatz.

Various tribes had always occupied the banks of the river, and many hundreds of years before the young woman moved her blue lips in the icy water as though there were a tiny vestige of life left in her, as though she were praying beneath the ice – which extended so thickly from bank to bank that the soldiers shot holes in it and blew it up with canons and explosives – the Ottomans had conquered the city. In the Ottoman administration's old defter, later unearthed in the catacombs of the Petrovaradin fortress by two socialist ethnologists in search of traces of the southern Slavic peoples to interpret or reinterpret for the purposes of *unifying multi-ethnic socialism*, entries were found on the great Serbian families living in and around the city and tolerated by the Ottoman occupiers. 'Don't you agree, dear colleague ...'

'Comrade!'

'... dear colleague comrade, that the Habsburgs in particular represented an early form of imperialist occupation force in Novi Sad, in the sense that the

early – er, *southern* Slavic peoples striving for independence were in a certain way early socialist ...'

'Absolutely, absolutely, comrade!'

And the city was given new names over and over, after the Ottomans left and the Habsburgs ruled (for a while): Neoplanta, Újvidégh, Mlada Loza, Latin, Hungarian, Bulgarian or Romanian ... but in the winter of 1942, in January when the river began slowly freezing over, the blonde woman was still standing at the station looking out for black market traders, at the *Železnička stanica* anticipating the coming dark days and nights growing ever colder in the matte light of its windows and entrance doors, the three pointed roofs above the low building covered in snow, even now a whimpering coming and going in the ticket hall, on the station forecourt, travellers, seekers, escapers, mingled among the people soldiers and uniformed gendarmerie men, and behind the station building the locomotives' steam rose above the tracks and the platforms, the black steam from the coal and the white steam from the water, and far above the *stanica* the locomotives' whistles shrieked into the city and all the way up to the Petrovaradin Fortress on the other side of the river, and the blonde woman stood on the station forecourt and looked out for black market traders, for she was seeking a very particular brand of cigarette ... in winter 1942 the inhabitants, no matter what tribe they belonged to, called their city only by its Serbian name Novi Sad (so the two Yugoslavian ethnologists described it many years later, an act of solidarity among the peoples); it was known by that name all over Europe (and the world) even though the Hungarians, allies of the Germans, held it occupied.

It was a hard winter and snow and ice settled over Vojvodina and Bačka and Novi Sad, and a man standing unmoving below the Petrovaradin Fortress and

gazing at the thin ice-free channel remaining in the middle of the river cocked his head and listened to the locomotives' distant signal whistles, piercing out of the city and across the river to him and reminding him of drawn-out screams, and he knew that this winter would last for years, perhaps.

The man came from warmer climes and wore an old fur coat of grey-black wolf's pelt. He stood very still and apparently lost in thought, and if a soldier had been watching him from the fortress he would have looked, in his long standing and staring at the freezing river, not unlike a bare tree or a tree trunk. As the man crosses the bridge back into the city not much later, the fortress looming dark behind him in the onsetting dusk, recruits are sweeping the snow from the roofs and walls and the snow falls on the bare trees below the fortress, and two soldiers stop him on the bridge to check his papers (the man is not sure at first, are they grey soldiers ahead of him, or is it the blue of the gendarmerie? – even the colours of the uniforms frozen on these cold days), bayonets affixed to their rifles, the soldiers warn him, having scrutinised his papers and then eyed him with curiosity, even clicking their heels briefly as if to salute the man: 'Don't go out there alone, sir!'

'Out there?' the man asks. He speaks Hungarian like the soldiers, but very slowly and with a strong accent.

The younger of the two soldiers, whose thin moustache looks like it's painted on above his chapped lips, gestures with his rifle at the snowy landscapes beyond the river. 'Partisans, communist swine.' The bayonet protrudes like a very long and pointy forefinger into the onsetting night. 'They've sworn to kill every Hungarian, every German ...' The soldier pauses, breathing heavily with steaming breath, '... and to murder all those allied with us. Every one!'

The other soldier, much older, joins in: 'They've distributed leaflets all over the area. They even nailed their leaflets to the dead.'

'Nailed them to the dead?' the man asks. He's still holding his papers, stamps, so many stamps, crosses, symbols, a chessboard, a flame, arrows, above them other stamps again, signatures, unfamiliar symbols ... then he slips them beneath his fur coat.

'They attack us out of nowhere,' the older soldier says. 'Just the other day those Serbian dogs attacked a bunker on Army Street, over at number ...' He halts. Cocks his head to listen, looks at the man, who has turned up the collars of his fur coat for which the old soldier envies him so, to touch his frost-red cheeks; it's as if the river freezing beneath the bridge were reminding the soldier with every creak and crack of the ice, with its last frosty breath, to be on his guard, not to give numbers and dates away so easily, even though the man in the wolf pelt's papers told him he was one of them, and the thin channel grows ever thinner, first nothing but a stream and then a rivulet between firm and brittle ice floes, which grow ever thicker.

'Like out of nowhere,' the old soldier repeats, tugging his field cap lower over his ears – they're not to light the wood in the cast-iron fire baskets behind them until dusk sets in, and the small shelter on the edge of the bridge offers scant protection – 'they come, strike, disappear ...'

'And *where* did they nail the leaflets to the dead?' the man asks. He takes a pack of cigarettes out of his coat's fur. His hands tremble and he has trouble holding his head still as the cold reaches under his coat and into his limbs, making his teeth chatter.

'They even nail their pamphlets to the wounded,' exclaims the younger of the two soldiers, and the bayonet on his rifle, gripped by its shaft, moves to and

fro, silvery metallic, beside his moustachioed face, 'they're like animals, those communists, lying in wait for us for days!'

'They raided one of our bunkers,' says the old soldier, taking no notice of the young one's exclamation, 'right near here, with hand grenades, and our officers told us they ...'

'It was recruits in the bunker, mainly recruits, as green as the meadows in spring, and still they ...' The young soldier gestures dismissal, himself almost a recruit still and as green as the meadows in ... Very slowly, almost tenderly, he reaches for the pack of cigarettes that the man with the fur coat and the impressive papers is still holding up.

'Wait a minute, comrade,' says the old soldier, and he lays his hand, shimmering almost blue in the evening's cold, on the young soldier's arm, 'wait a bit, comrade,' and beneath the bridge, beneath the ice of the river now completely frozen over, drift ... NO. No one is drifting there yet, except for the fish.

And the fish squeeze against the mud of the banks, and the fish sink ever deeper to the bottom of the great river that flows through the old city in the south-eastern centre of the world, the pike and the carp bed down into the mud on the bottom of the river where the water is warmest, the cold of the earth's atmosphere cannot reach that far, the water gets warmer the deeper it flows beneath the ice, the sensitive greyling squeeze against the mud of the banks, having bumped their heads against the ice, briefly sucked at the ice with their fishy mouths before they understood ... large barbel swim in groups, then submerge again in search of the spots where the current's not strong, not classic predators despite their size, not like the pike that eat anything, even their own kind, and that now rule the ground, their beak-like mouths

sticking out long and pointy into the dull water, frightening the fearful greyling into the mud of the banks. There will be plenty to eat for them all, not long from now.

'Help yourself,' says the man in the fur coat, holding his flat red cigarette pack out to the two soldiers, again speaking the words in very slow Hungarian. The old soldier goes first, pushing his young comrade's hand aside, takes two cigarettes out of the flat pack, inserts one between his lips and the other behind his ear, taking his field cap off briefly to do so, while the young soldier takes only one, cautious.

'What make is this?' the old soldier asks, taking a large metal lighter out of his uniform jacket. 'Are they English?'

'English.' The man in the fur coat nods and takes one for himself. 'Dunhill.'

'Never heard of it.' The old soldier gives them a light; it takes him a while to get his big lighter going, the flame keeps guttering out, they huddle together on the wide bridge to protect the flame, inhaling in silence and dragging greedily on the cigarettes, beside them the railway lines but no train rumbling along the tracks, across the river, and now the evening swiftly turns to night and the three glowing dots would be easy to spot for partisan snipers, but they don't come this close to the city and the fortress, although the opposite will be claimed only a few days later, almost hours later, the city will be searched, rumours will transform into hysteria, everything will transform like in a bad, bad dream.

'They're good, sir, your cigarettes are,' says the young soldier, holding the half-smoked example up to his face between forefinger and thumb to examine it. 'Where did you get such good stuff?'

'Spoils of war,' says the man in the fur coat, and he throws his smoked cigarette over the bridge into the river, or rather onto the ice that covers it. Why are they holding guard here, he thinks, when anyone can come along the river? But then the searchlights up on the fortress flare and illuminate the banks and move across the snow, wander over the bare trees' branches. 'Spoils of war?' The old soldier throws his butt away too, only the young one still smoking now. 'Were you over in Dunkirk, or are the English here already?' A brief laugh. 'In Hungary, under our imperial regent Horthy.' The searchlights sweep across the bridge.

'The *Führer* will defeat them, with our help! He's about to defeat them any day now!' Holding the filterless cigarette between forefinger and thumb, barely any left, the young soldier with the moustache takes a few hasty drags before the heat burns his fingertips and he drops it on the snow.

'What nonsense are you talking!' The old soldier slaps the back of his head, the back of the field cap, and the young soldier jumps but doesn't protest. 'We stand by our duty but we're fighting for our sacred *Magyar Királyság*, not for the *Führer*!' The searchlights sweep across the bridge.

'The *Führer* hates smoking,' the man in the fur coat says, suddenly, and passes the flat pack to the soldiers again. 'He calls tobacco, and smoking as well, *the red man's revenge*.'

'Red Indians?' asks the young soldier, rubbing his head, 'what's the *Führer* got to do with Red Indians? He's not one to smoke the peace pipe.' He smiles, seems to be remembering something, probably a game, a ritual from his just-ended childhood and youth. Cowboys and Indians.

'And what's tobacco got to do with the Indians?' The old soldier removes the cigarette from behind his ear, but then he thinks again and takes one out of

the pack, still held out by the man in the fur coat. 'They smoke herbs. Proper tobacco comes from the Middle East, doesn't it? The *Führer's* wrong about that!' The old soldier lights his cigarette with the big metal lighter and exhales the smoke. On the other bank, the centre of Novi Sad shimmers weakly yellow into the evening, into the night's cupola. The whistles of the locomotives.

'Probably,' the man in the fur coat nods. 'They had *Klospülung*,' he uses the German word for flushing toilets, 'in the Middle East, back when we were ...'

'No, no,' the young soldier protests from beneath his fake-looking moustache, 'the *Führer's* right actually, tobacco comes from South and North America!'

'How do you know that for sure?' the old soldier grumbles, dragging on his cigarette, 'it says Oriental tobacco on some packs.'

'I learned it at school in Győr,' the young soldier says, quietly now as if he's ashamed of his education. 'Our teacher at grammar school loved tobacco, he'd smoke his pipe in class ...' (Not much later – days, or was it just hours? – the man in the fur coat would see the young soldier standing by one of the holes in the ice along with other soldiers, shadows on the water, in the water, the whistles of the locomotives pouring out of wide-open mouths.)

The fire baskets on the bridge are lit now, the man in the fur coat sees more soldiers, hears a bell tolling in the city, other bells joining in, he sees the church spires between and behind the bridge's barred iron arches, no, he and the soldiers (the soldiers and he!) are standing on the boards of the provisional bridge; the big iron bridge once named after Kaiser Franz Joseph and then given the royal Serbian name *Karadžorđević* has been submerged in the river since last April, 1941, when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia braced itself desperately against the *Führer*, its wreckage now fused with the ice; he stares over the wooden balustrade – where exactly did the old bridge span the

river? – the pillars ought to be visible still, the trains would cross the barred cast-iron arches at walking pace, high bell tones, lower from the suburbs and villages, blurred by the wind, but the bell he heard first remains with him, still close, and he counts. Five in the evening and dark, dark night.

He throws his cigarette onto the ice, raises his hand to salute the two soldiers who checked his papers, with whom he's been chatting and smoking since dusk, and stomps through the snow towards the city. The two soldiers stare after him for a while, the tang of his Dunhill cigarettes still on their lips.

'Strange man.'

'Strange times.'

'Where do you think he got those cigarettes, I've never ...'

'He told you.'

'But *spoils of war*, what did he mean by that?'

'What do we care?'

'But you were the one who didn't trust him, just now.'

'It's our job not to trust people. His papers were in order.'

'I've never seen documents like that.'

'You don't see them that often.'

'Wonder why he was so interested in the dead.'

'The dead?'

'He wanted to know where we found the dead, the ones with the leaflets ...'

'We didn't find them, we just heard about them.'

'About the dead, yes. Do you think it's true?'

'What?'

'You know, that the communists, the partisans, nailed their slogans to their live bodies.'

'Then they wouldn't be dead.'

'Alright then, injured. Where would they have got the nails from? And you try nailing a dead body ... or an injured man in this freezing cold ...'

'You don't believe it then, lad.'

'It must be true.'

'Never question what the officers tell you.'

'It must be true. And they shot our recruits, those communist swine.'

'There's worse to come, lad.'

'Those murderers, they'll have to pay.'

'Someone will end up paying, lad, you can count on that. Maybe everyone, in the end.'

'How do you mean?'

'Forget it.'

'Why did he keep asking about the dead though ...'

And the man who asked about the dead walks slowly through the old town centre, towards the station. He takes a few detours, hasn't been to the city for a while, the buildings are dark, the whole city seems dark, faces behind the windows, silhouettes in the night, patrols on the streets, in the alleys – have the streets got narrower and the buildings crouched down? – fear floats above the city of Novi Sad, pressing down from above and in from the sides, border guards, military police, sailors from the Hungarian Danube fleet, Hungarian army, bicycle brigades pushing their cycles through the snow, black Ustaše uniforms, German liaison officers, swastikas, dark paper shapes in the night, patrols on the streets, the man in the fur coat counts mutely to himself as a brightly lit *konditorei* appears out of nowhere and he inspects the gateaux and cakes on display, almost like Vienna, he thinks, those old

sweet-toothed Habsburgs; he's never been to Vienna. He crosses the market square, no snow beneath his feet, the street sweepers have been sweeping all day long on the orders of the knight Ferenc Bajor, the old city's Hungarian mayor who sees himself in the tradition of the old Hungarian chivalric orders, while the rest of the city sinks into snow. Soldiers in front of the town hall façade, some wearing steel helmets, others tall black fur hats, some kind of special unit of traditional Magyars, bayonets affixed, and the man in the coat of wolf's pelt wonders whether Lieutenant General Feketehalmy-Czneyder resides here or has hidden away like the other generals in the Petrovaradin Fortress, as some of the locals suspect, for fear of partisan attacks.

'Hold on, my friends, all due respect to rakia, but didn't you just say this and that and it was this way and that way, and now all of a sudden everything's different?' Oh, yes, the Serbs had good backing on the other side of the river, so they say, and rumour has it the partisans have bedded down in the catacombs, but the man in the fur coat knows that's not true, not yet, the occupiers are still strong, Hungarians, Germans, Ustaše, the web of generals large and small is still working, the web of city commandants and military administrators, civilian administrators and knights old and new, Danube fleet captains and liaison officers; the Germans are masters of administration and the Hungarians have brought along a little chaos.

And the man who asked about the dead throws back his head and laughs, and a few passers-by stop and look at him – what's there to laugh about in Novi Sad in January 1942? – and a few of the soldiers eye him too, though he's still standing far away, but he can't stop laughing because the thought has come to him, no, he sees it right in front of him, of the soldiers under the pillared façade of the magistracy swapping their headwear once an hour,

comrades in winter, it must be hellishly cold under one of those steel helmets, and he imagines them starting to bicker over it, the soldiers of the army and the traditional unit, loud voices on Novi Sad's market square: 'You'll be instantly *kaputt* in your ridiculous hats if they start shooting!'

'As if your helmets could stop a bullet!'

'But shrapnel, comrades!'

'As if the damn partisans had canons!'

'But they might throw hand grenades, right here on the market square!'

'Here? No. They're more likely to attack the military administration!'

'The palace? Let them blow it up, that ugly ...'

'Mind what you say, comrade, against our sacred Hungary!'

'What's the palace got to do with us Hungarians, it was the Yugos ... the Serbs that built it!'

'Everything the sacred *Magyar Királyság* conquers is part of the sacred *Magyar Királyság*!'

'Anyway, I'm nice and warm under my hat!'

'But we said we'd swap!'

'Alright, alright, but it'll cost you a shot of rakia!'

And the man in the wolf's pelt who asked about the dead and counted silently inside himself on his tours of the city, still laughing, watches the swapping of hats and helmets, which don't quite go with the opposite uniforms, watches the squabbles of this thrown-together guard detail (and didn't the Hungarian soldiers cycle in search of fame and glory, sent out by Regent Horthy, with the German troops or rather behind the German troops for Moscow, the famous velocipede brigade?), watches all this like in a silent movie, the soldiers' voices captured on title cards.

And he reads the harsh and yet still funny words of the quarrel on the title cards, watches the soldiers swapping hats and reaching for the helmets, one helmet falls with a clatter (silent!) to the ground, flickering black and white, he watches himself entering a movie theatre, a *bioskop*, here in Novi Sad, a counter, a pay booth, from which an old woman gives him a small cardboard ticket that reminds him of a railway ticket, a long corridor that he walks and walks towards the cinema, and he was gazing into the light of the projectors, incredulous, almost twenty years ago.

He had relatives in the city; they wanted to set him up with a bride. Some baker's daughter. 'Come and see us in golden Vojvodina, the bakers here bake until the end of days, you won't regret it!'

He was twenty-seven when he first came to Novi Sad and he'd never set foot in a cinema. What were they showing there? He can't remember exactly, images and voices of the past, silent movies, talkies, the clatter of the projector.

He stood outside the Novi Sad bioskop wearing the good suit his father had bought long ago in one of Zagreb's big gentlemen's outfitters, now a bit too tight – how would he fit into it if he married a baker's daughter? – and nervously crushing a small bouquet he'd bought for the baker's daughter against his jacket. He had a good hour to go until he was to meet the unknown woman, of whom he'd received only a blurred photo in a letter (she looked rather thin for a baker's daughter, but it could be the photo), in his relatives' house, and they lived just around the corner so there was time for a film. And he stroked his lapels smooth, entered the bioskop, went to the ticket counter, walked a long corridor, film posters on the walls.

What was it he'd seen back then? He tries to remember, still watching the soldiers. Chaplin, who looks so like the *Fuhrer*? No. The man with the white face? No. The man dangling from the hands of a clock, high on a tall tower? King Kong? The young John Wayne? No. They only came later. Johnny and the ape? That German, Harry Piel? No, he'd seen them in the early thirties, in another bioskop. But here in Novi Sad? *The Phantom Carriage*?

The carriage driver is condemned to drive the souls of the dead and the last dead man on the last day of the year becomes the new carriage driver – he who dies last, must drive! – restlessly wandering the earth for a year, collecting up souls, a ghost and his horse, a carriage in a world between worlds, men drinking in a cemetery and laughing at the legend, an unhappy woman waiting elsewhere for one of the men, deadly sick due to him, New Year's Eve, a man screams aloud, calls into the music that fills the cinema, calls into the images, the carriage driver comes through the fog in his carriage, drives into the Novi Sad bioskop ... Yes. Perhaps. A long time ago. And the films and images and actors start overlapping, Chaplin, cowboys, great dramas, cars and carriages, comedies, for he spent days in the Novi Sad bioskop after that first movie. He sat on the hard wood of the folding chair, which creaked at his every movement, in the midst of several other creaking bioskop-goers, and when the film began, with an old man sitting at a small organ beside the screen and playing strange melodies, sometimes matching the silent images and sometimes not, he knew he would never again see or feel anything as overwhelming, and reality disappeared and reality appeared. His relatives standing outside the cinema-café window, where he sat between the films, the baker's daughter behind them, a blurred

pale and unhappy line, his relatives banging on the café window. Was that shots he heard? 'Your papers, please, sir!'

He looks for the cinema, the bioskop, on his routes around the old city centre. Takes a tram for a bit, only a few passengers standing with him in the small carriage, their faces veiled by scarves, disembarking, vanishing in the streets, the man stands alone directly behind the driver's cab – where is the driver? – then he jumps off, almost slipping on the icy rail, watching as the tram pulls away with electricity crackling and sparking in the overhead cables and then shuts down, its lights extinguished, carriages dark and empty at the stops, on the streets. He looks for the cinema, the bioskop on his routes around the old city centre. There is nothing more to see at the Novi Sad magistracy, helmets and hats have been swapped, guard details relieved. But he can't find the bioskop. He sees the dark trams, faces behind the panes. People must have noticed him walking his routes over and over around the cold dark city. He meant to go to the station, the *stanica*.

He stops by the synagogue. Why are there no soldiers here? No uniformed gendarmes either. The large dome, the small tower at the side.

Which allegedly sent out light signals, to the partisans on the plain, to the Petrovaradin Fortress where the partisans lay in wait in the catacombs. He's been listening to the rumours for days. In the city, outside the city. Noting them down inside.

He steps closer to the large building. Takes a cigarette out of the flat packet and lights it. It takes him five matches until the tobacco will burn.

The street is absolutely quiet. How cold must it have been? At least twenty degrees below zero, probably colder or the river wouldn't have frozen over.

The quiet outside the synagogue frightens him. Didn't he hear shots, before?

He's walked the night city, over and over. Voices and noises from all sides, now loud, now low, but mostly dampened, he felt like he could listen into the buildings, he shook his head, felt like his every motion was slowing down in this incredible cold, voices and noises that stretched out, reaching his ear as if from a slowed record – 'Stop it, Father, take your finger off the record. We want to hear the story again, properly!' – what was that? – laughter and voices and music he'd heard as he passed one of the mansions at the edge of the city, where the distinguished families of Novi Sad lived, but what did that mean these days? And what was there to laugh about in January 1942? – you have to pass the time before it goes darker than dark.

Shots? No, not yet. Voices and images and people, and he'd been noting it all down inside himself, numbers, people, 'Someone will end up paying, maybe everyone in the end,' and as he passes the Banovina Palace in the onsetting night, the cold of the river still beneath his clothes, troops here too, soldiers, steel helmets and fur hats, the blue of the gendarmerie, the greys and greens of the army, glowing cigarette tips, it seems to him the concrete walls are casting the melodies and songs and marches and the clatter of the horses' hooves and the clomp of the soldiers' heels – *wozu ist die Straße da, zum Marschieren, zum Marschieren um die weite Welt* – at him, in an undertone, for it was months ago now, and the past dampened the sounds, yet all this still clearly audible, a never-ending echo of the victors' parade more than half a year back now, songs and marches and voices and clattering hooves between the walls, it looked cold, the Banovina Palace, the concrete walls as if coated in frost though it had been summer, 1941, endless columns passing the concrete palace, flags, people beneath flags, thousands of bayonets affixed to rifle barrels, and the horses steamed as if they could feel the coming cold,

and the man stood without his fur coat on the edge of the parade. After that he'd left the city, and now it seems to him as though the entire past six months between the victors' parade and January 1942 had marched back into the city in a huge semi-circle, through villages, past small rivers, bright forests turning bare, small ponds, towards the winter.

A bridge on the river. A village nearby in which the children were also killed, still January and January again, 'Fifty dead?' 'No.' 'Seventy?' 'No.' 'How many?' 'I'll have to listen inside myself.' Children, why should they live when their parents are gone? – voices, dead bodies coming over the river into the city, into the NOW.

He stands outside the synagogue door, looks up at the circular window under the portal triangle, the large dome far above him in the night. Stars. He tips his head back. Where is the moon? He hasn't seen a moon for days now. He wandered along the banks of the great river. Smaller tributaries flowed into the river. Tributaries that previously branched, flowed through villages whose names the man had never heard before and noted down deep inside himself on the still-fresh paper of his memories that was already beginning to grow mottled, but proper notes were suspicious, might be found, and so he moved his lips as he passed through the snow-covered plain, early January 1942, spoke in a whisper the names of the villages that sounded so unfamiliar to him, over and over, until they leapt easily off his tongue and he still moved his lips in his sleep at night, the names leading him closer to Novi Sad as the tributaries approached the great river, and then away from the city after all, now called Új-Vidégh again, and to every name belonged a number, the largest yet to come, numbers that were unfamiliar to him, people in rivers, only rarely did he find their names, and in this way he noted everything down

inside himself, he'd played plenty of chess in his youth and his memory was still good although he was over forty now, and he was convinced if he'd been younger in these cold days and months and years, had run screaming through snow-covered Vojvodina, he'd have emptied his memory along the way, back to his city that lay in warmer climes, or to his brother, who lived in a mountain range above which the sun almost always shone, but in this way he counted and noted, names and names and the numbers of the dead – when had the killings begun? when did he see the first people in one of the rivers? – names of villages, names of rivers and streams, numbers – 'What did you see, old man?' – but the old man, wearing only a farmer's smock, held his tongue and gazed at the houses on the riverbank, their doors standing open, and the cold invaded the empty rooms, and when he turned around again on his way back to Novi Sad the old man had disappeared, only the toppled tree he'd been sitting on visible long and dark in the snow. He had to be careful, the partisans weren't only active in the dark, up close to the little village of ... he moved his lips ... they had raided a Hungarian army bunker, there had been killings, and now the reprisals were beginning. The snow crunched beneath his feet and he moved his lips, moved his lips uninterrupted as if he were murmuring, speaking quietly, but there was nothing to hear, just the crunch of his footsteps in the snow.

The silence around the synagogue makes him wonder, and he leans his brow briefly on the wood of the door. He jumps back. Strange, the door is warm, the wood almost hot, or was that his brow?

It seems to him there are voices inside, in the building, he hears a low buzz of constant voices, a constant buzz of low voices behind the hot wood of the

door, behind his hot brow, whispers – *not too loud, you people!* – why has he not seen the moon for days now?

‘Ustaše swine!’ He turns around. The street is empty. Only a few of the gaslights are burning. He touches his back with his fingertips, reaches over his shoulder as if to embrace himself, takes off his gloves. It feels as if that hissing voice – ‘Ustaše swine!’ – had pierced his back, but no one is behind him. He lowers his head and looks at the lapels of his fur coat. No, he hadn’t attached his insignia. Though one of the guards at the Banovina Palace who checked his papers had recommended it. The braid with the flaming jug embossed with the red-and-black chessboard pattern. Golden threads on the sides of the braid – what did the German tailors here in Novi Sad call these uniform trimmings? *Posamenten*? And didn’t the most famous and best of this passementerie come from a small German town in a small German mountain range? *Annaberg-Buchholz*. Harsh German words. And yet beautiful. The *Anna* and the *Buch*. The uniform tailors and the passementiers were doing good business these days. But he didn’t wear a uniform. And the braid was still in his coat pocket. ‘Your papers, sir!’

Low voices in the synagogue, no voices in the synagogue. He turns and heads back for the market square, then for the *stanica*, then he changes direction again, walks down to the Danube, the curfew soon set to begin. He reaches for the braid in his coat pocket. Sees the brightly lit display window of a *konditorei*. No, a pub, a bar, on the riverbank street, right on the river. When will the holes be hacked and exploded and shot in the great river’s ice? On the first of these three days in January 1942?

Heaps of clothing on the ice. A coat. Clothes scudding across the rigid waters. Freezing in place; it is snowing. Heaps of snow on the ice. The sun stands low,

dazzling the city. No, it is night and will always be night, and if the moon has disappeared, then how can the sun ...? He gazes into the lights of the *kavarna* on the riverbank, no one is on the ice, just a moment's rest, he leans against the outside of a building. And then he sees the bioskop. He must have walked past it a few times, this low structure with narrow columns beside its large door and a strangely curved upper floor, its three square windows dark and the sign in Cyrillic letters above the entrance barely recognisable. He had suspected the cinema in an entirely different part of the city. Or is it a new bioskop, a second one? A good twenty years ago a cinema was still something special, but now they're living in an age of images. And suddenly, as if the cinema could feel him staring at it, the middle of the three small square windows lights up. A light in the bioskop.

And the man in the fur coat remembers how he once watched film after film *here* (and what does it matter whether it's the same bioskop, it's a bioskop!) when he first set foot in a cinema, in the early twenties, lost himself in the whirr of the projector, three days and three nights he spent in the Novi Sad bioskop ('Mr Projectionist, I'll give you all my money and much more than that, just keep them running!' 'But the projectors have to cool down, young man!').

While outside his relatives waited with the unhappy baker's daughter.

And as he stares at the hilly ribbon of ice vanishing into the darkness between the fortress and the city he remembers the name of the German who played the ape man, the one he'd discovered as a man of the bioskop back in the early thirties, in some bioskop in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia: Weissmüller, first name Johnny because he'd gone to America. And Johnny came from right nearby, born in Banat, in Romania, one of the Danube Swabians, still part of the Habsburg empire back then ... Johnny Weissmüller, the famous

sportsman, the great Olympic swimmer, all Banat had been proud of him, be they German or Romanian or Serbian, good old János from Szabadfalu, from Freidorf, who conquered the great river even as a child, our Olympic winner! Our world record-holder! Who then heeded the call of the projectionists: We need a muscular man, a man of a man! We need a Tarzan to conquer great rivers and virgin forests, we need a star to become a star! *Johnny, oh Johnny ... You never conquered the great river, for your parents took you to the New World when you were a tiny child, knowing nothing of rivers and virgin forests and all the animals soon to crouch at your feet, and only a trickle of mother's milk was left to you of the homeland and the Old World; and did the many stars of the United States dazzle you when you fetched gold for them, Johnny, oh Johnny, swimming all the way to Hollywood ...?*

Had he seen him in one of the cinemas in Zagreb? – where he'd worked for a while, or was it back here, in Novi Sad, in Új-Vidégh, as they were all to call the city once again since 1941, since the Hungarians with German help had ...

After his faux pas with the baker's daughter he'd rarely dared come to Novi Sad, but his relatives had left the city for Beograd, the baker's daughter had four children with a pub landlord, and he was sitting in the bioskop watching Tarzan the Ape Man, raised by apes in the jungle, swinging from tree to tree, clutching vines and uttering his famous call ...

The whistles of the locomotives. He follows them through the darkness. The streets grow narrower and the buildings duck down on either side. When he gets to the *stanica* he's amazed by the sudden silence. (Even the whistles of the locomotives have stopped, as if something had changed with his arrival.)

The forecourt is almost deserted but inside the station the crowd is in motion, surging back and forth, soldiers, gendarmes, first paperwork checks,

something's underway, he can feel it, has heard the rumours on his routes around the city, something's underway, slowly preparing, has not yet begun, the trains standing dark on the tracks beyond the station. Only a constant murmur as he enters the concourse, whispers, footsteps, coughs.

And later too, in the bioskop, in the same bioskop where he might have first seen the ape man, where he saw his first film in the early twenties, *The Phantom Carriage*, here too that silence prevails, just a whisper at times, a busted nose exhaling with a whistle, all of them staring at the screen, sitting still beneath the fanned rays of the projector, while outside ... 'Ustaše swine!' ... while outside.

Then another whistle after all, the night train from Budapest arriving. Women and men carrying luggage stream into the overcrowded concourse, get held up, disperse into the crowd, suitcases standing alone, suitcases tipping over, children standing by suitcases, children no taller than the luggage, a boy in a tiny coat, farmers' wives boarded at the stations along the way gripping baskets of eggs and bread and other necessities (*rakia*) to sell in the market hall come morning, some come with their husbands, others without, they usually sit on the benches here in the *stanica* until morning comes, dozing and dreaming, smoking and chatting and silent, they thought long and hard about whether to come to ... Új-Vidék, in this freezing cold, thermometers bursting and rivers freezing over, but people have to eat, and people have to trade, and to drink (*rakia*). And people have to smoke.

And now the young blonde woman is standing in the station concourse, in the midst of the crowd although she meant to be back home hours ago, she's abandoned her efforts to buy a certain kind of cigarettes from the black marketeers, still holding the bank notes rolled up in her hand, and later this

night she might as well throw the money away, so soaked in sweat that it's dissolving and disintegrating, her palms dyed brown and green. She got pushed back inside the station just as she wanted to leave, a chain of soldiers and gendarmes shoving the people waiting on the forecourt inside the station.

Did she hear shots? A very long and very thin invisible silver thread made its way out of her ear, made its way into her ear, she cocked her head towards the door leading to the station forecourt, into the city, shots? The crowd stopped surging, quietened down and listened.

What kind of sounds are they in the silver thread? ... footsteps, the clatter of hooves, the rush of the great river rearing up at its banks before it freezes over, the chatter of teeth, screams, PLEASE, PLEASE, shots ... like along the strings of children's telephones, all that makes its way to her, thin threads of twine stretched between two empty tin cans ... in childhoods in Novi Sad, Beograd, Kragujevac, Budapest, Berlin and elsewhere.

Later, no one can say any longer when a train arrived again that night, or is it the next night already? Cold days flowing into one another like an amalgam. The toilets in the station are blocked and faeces freeze on the platforms, on the low walls. A man crouches there, dead. A train departs in the dawn, shots – definitely now! – a little way away. The gendarmes stop the train. Panes shatter in the shrill whistle of the locomotives. Travellers without papers lying on the railway embankment. Mottled snow. A man hiding under the seat in a compartment. They grab him by the feet. 'We'll take you to your Serbian friends, don't you worry.'

In the station, the first groups are transported away. 'But I've got papers!' Invalid. A stoker protests – soot-smearred and sweating, coal shovel still in

hand, the sweat frozen on the back of his neck, on the tips of his hair, which glitters like ice in among the soot – against the treatment of passengers and railway staff, he too led away, other railwaymen protesting against his arrest – but we need our stoker!

‘Camel,’ the young woman asks over and over in the waves of the crowd, ‘Do you have any Camel cigarettes to sell, perhaps, sir? The ones with the camel and the pyramids. We’ll pay good money.’ By we she means the Serbian family for whom she works as a maid.

But the black marketeers are pushing towards the exit. Dropping their wares, blue-uniformed gendarmes trampling cigarettes and grabbing at black marketeers and cigarette packs and bank notes.

And two of the three children in the blonde woman’s family – ‘I just work for them, but it’s still my ...’ – two girls – ‘Our Serbian name was entered in the old Ottomans’ defter!’ – stretched thin threads between the two nursery rooms, tied matches onto the ends of the threads, drilled holes in empty tin cans and connected the lines of their conversations. ‘Children, what are you doing?’

‘We’re talking on the telephone, because Father’s said nothing for days!’

She clenches the bank notes in her fist, grips the small bundle of paper given to her by the children’s father. No. The children had emptied their piggy bank, given her only the notes that rustled inside the big white porcelain sheep; later, one of the soldiers will pick the change out from among the shards. ‘Buy Papa a packet of Camels, he loves them so. Then we’ll all be fine again.’

And while the young blonde woman, the family’s housemaid since 1938, is trying to get hold of cigarettes for their father, the children’s voices vibrate along the threads of their telephone stretched across the rooms. While in the

silver thread of the young blonde woman, still thinking she'll get a pack of Camel cigarettes, only the river rushes quietly beneath the ice.

'Telegraph Office Paris to Station Beograd!'

'Don't shout, dummy, or I'll hear you through the walls!'

'I can only hear you in our thread!'

'But you're so loud the partisans can hear you over by the river, you dummy!'

'You're the dummy – I'm not by the river, I'm in Paris! And the partisans would only help us. Put me through to the exchange, please!'

'There you are, now you're quieter!'

'It's tickling my ear!'

'Can you hear that?'

'No. Yes.'

'Someone's knocking on the front door.'

And while the young blonde woman tries first outside and then inside the *stanica* to get hold of a pack of Camel cigarettes for the father of the two children talking on the telephone between rooms – 'You're too early, officers, it's not starting until the next night!' 'Come with me, sir, your neighbour's already laid out in the courtyard. That's what happens to spies. And his wife ...' 'Quiet please, in front of the children,' – ONE TWO THREE, the whistles of the locomotives growing ever louder as if the engine drivers want to inform Vojvodina and the world with the shrill shrieks of their locomotives ... and in the surging crowd in the *stanica*, pierced by the whistles of the locomotives and trying in vain to press their way outside (a stoker hoists his spade, shovels coal and more and more coal into the glowing-red round opening so that the whistling can go on), suddenly a man is standing next to the blonde woman,

and he's wearing a fur coat and its lapels scratch her face, that's how close he's standing to her.

The gendarmes and the soldiers, blue uniforms, field-green uniforms, divide the crowd – 'Papers, papers!' – a man with a bleeding head wound wanders between the soldiers, trying to find the officer in charge as the blood runs down his face, his shirt dark, almost black, and the blood on his chest has hardened to make the fabric stand stiff as a board; later, they say the man had risen from the dead only to be killed again, a patrol of soldiers had broken into his house, shot his wife dead, stabbed his daughter to death with their bayonets while he lay dead on the floor, a bullet deep inside his head, and through the dark glass of his eyes he saw EVERYTHING and rose to his feet and walked into the cold city.

'Do you like movies?'

The man has a strange accent; his Serbian sounds southern like the language of the Croatians, which is almost the same language but the woman can still clearly hear the Slavic undertone of the Serbian.

'Movies?' The blonde woman stares at the man, his shoulders looking very broad beneath the fur of his coat. 'Who's got time for movies now?'

'Time ...' The man laughs and looks her directly in the eyes (brown), and the blonde woman sees his face, which had seemed very old to her, slack and wrinkled, suddenly tauten, growing bright and young, the wrinkles vanishing and turning into laughter lines, and his eyes glint blue as if something very blue were reflected in them, *sky, water, Adria-azure, shirts, pale blue Chesterfields*, glinting as if there were tears in their blue. Then the laughter vanishes and his face grows hard again.

'Either way, you ought to stop informing the *stanica* of your urgent wish for Kamel cigarettes.'

'Camel,' the blonde woman corrects him. 'It's English.'

'I've heard of that language,' the man says, and he extracts a flat red packet from his inside pocket, flips the lid open and takes a cigarette. The blonde woman makes out the curves of the word *Dunhill*. She's never seen the make, even though the man of the family she's been working for since 1938 loves smoking English and American makes and keeps the packs in a cigar humidor made of tropical wood so the tobacco in the cigarettes won't dry out; sometimes he stands by the open humidor, a small slim chest that the children love for the grain of its wood, tracing it with their fingers, and he sniffs at certain cigarettes – 'Virginia Blend, the best tobacco in the world!' – Camel with the pyramid, Woodbine with the little brown tobacco leaf, the strong Chesterfields with the crown above the C, the red circle of Lucky Strike ...

'Help yourself, girl!' The man in the fur coat holds the still open pack out to her.

'Almost as English as your Kamel cigarettes.'

Now she smiles, for the first time that evening and the last time for a long while. And in her smile, a hint of a dimple on her chin.

'Camels are from America though!' She takes one of the cigarettes. And as she's holding the cigarette between thumb and forefinger, undecided, the station falls mute around them, no more voices, no more steam whistles, no soldiers' shouts, all motions slowed down – 'Do you like movies?' – the man with the bleeding head wound is lead outside by two soldiers through one of the doors, his arm suddenly stabbing at the air; he lurches between the two soldiers holding him on either side, his arm stiff and strangely bent like a branch, the forefinger splayed and long and pointy like a ... the man moves

his lips as his blood flows over them, and over and over he seems to call something, words the blonde woman watching him through the smoke of her Dunhill cigarette doesn't understand, incessant movements of his lips, but perhaps he's just whispering, for the *stanica* has fallen mute and is steaming silently into the night's cold.

'I don't actually smoke.'

'Perhaps the time's come to start, then.' Only their voices to be heard in the *stanica*. Her cigarette has gone out and the man gives her another light, and she coughs as she smokes. She's dizzy. And she sees the *stanica* widening, sees the walls curving, the ceiling bulging, and everything grows wide and tall, a cathedral, silent and empty despite all the people inside it, wide and tall before the walls and ceiling constrict again, and the crowd, waiting and being divided into people with papers and people without papers, is shoved together inside the shrinking space, and outside on the station forecourt the waiting trucks emit combustion gases, this process silent too, the engines have to run or else the cylinders freeze, the engines' warmth spills pleasantly into the drivers' cabs, their cargo areas still empty, frost flowers on the side windows of the drivers' cabs, the stoker is brought and thrown onto the back of one of them ... frost flowers on the eyes' dark glass.

'So, do you like movies, then?'

'I don't know ...'

'You don't know?'

'I haven't seen many movies in ... in my ... so far.'

'Then we ought to go and look for them, the movies, tonight.'

'What do you mean?'

'That we have to get out of here.'

'To watch movies? I have to get back to my family.'

'What's your family's name?'

'I work for them. I have to get back to them.'

'Even without cigarettes, girl?'

And she opens the hand still holding the bank notes and sees that the cash is a brightly patterned lump of paper from her fist's tight grip, cold sweat, and when she opens her hand again later there's a small piece of card in it, a ticket. She's sitting in the semi-darkness of the Novi Sad bioskop and she turns around and looks into the fanned rays of light, a man standing next to the flickering, leaning against the whitewashed wall on which his shadow is moving, he's wearing a coat with lapels to which he's affixed some kind of badge, and it takes her a while to realise it's the Ustaše insignia, the symbol of the Croatian fascists.

How did she get here? She sees other people, the rows of seats in the small cinema sparsely occupied, a man sitting two rows in front of her beside an old woman is wearing a stained turban, white at the top and red at the bottom. And they're all staring at the screen as a desert appears, an endless expanse of sand and rocks. Two men are riding through the desert. The man with the bloody turban laughs. Perhaps because his head covering, which is more of a bandage, resembles that of the two men on the screen.

How hot it must be there. The sand reflecting the sun dazzles them all. The old woman shields her eyes with her hand. Large dark birds circle above a rock formation; the two men spot a corpse. The bloody turban two rows in front of her laughs. She turns around. The man in the coat has gone, only his shadow left on the wall. Who killed the ... dead man? How did she get here?

She closes her eyes. Sees and feels the movement of the light through her closed eyelids. They stumbled over bodies. At irregular intervals that felt regular to her, they ran into bodies, long and dark and thin in the snow – where was the moon? – streets, alleys, Novi Sad. ‘Sad, really sad, isn’t it?’ She turned to him, was he laughing as they stumbled along? Hadn’t he spoken of *Kamel* cigarettes earlier instead of *Camel*, and now he suddenly spoke Oxford English like that big fat Churchill with the big fat head who she’d seen in the newspaper.

Two youths whispering beside her. They’re in their underwear, as if someone had forced them to undress. For a moment she thinks they might have stripped off here in the bioskop because of the desert’s heat, endless sand, dunes, fields of stone, black-and-white sand, but then she spots coin-sized marks, like holes, on one of the boys’ arms. They’re both staring at the screen. Shots. Inside. Outside. The two riders get caught up in an ambush. They are lured into the great salt marshes. To Chott el Djerid.

‘The Sea of Silence. I’ve been there.’

‘What?’ She almost jumped up. Into the light of the projector. And the eight or nine people, for it was no more than that sitting in the Novi Sad bioskop, would have shouted because the blonde woman’s shadow would have been cast over the screen, over the desert, over the salt marshes, over the blazing sun at which they’re staring with streaming eyes, with dreaming eyes.

The man in the fur coat is sitting next to her. The Ustaše braid on his lapel has disappeared. ‘I’ve been there,’ he says again.

‘To the salt marshes? To the Sea of Silence?’ She shakes her head, not understanding.

‘What sea? What are you talking about, girl?’

'I ... I don't know. Where were you?' She grabs his arm, and the sound of her own voice – *'Where were you?'* – is suddenly unfamiliar to her, echoes strangely over and over in her ears, still hurting from the silver threads she ripped out, *unfamiliar* was perhaps the wrong word, for it seems briefly to her as if she'd known the man in the fur coat, with or without the fascist braid, for a long time, as if they'd been stumbling for weeks, months, years through this never-ending night and ending up together here in the bioskop every time.

'I went to your family, girl.'

'I'm not a girl.'

'I went to the street you ...'

'What did you see there, fascist?'

The man nods, strokes the lapels of his fur coat, looks over at the half-naked boys sitting next to them and eyeing him briefly, pressing against each other, *dark marks on their naked skin*, before they turn back to face the screen, on which the two men who seem never to part company are swimming along a subterranean canal. Later, they're on a ship together, the African coasts of the Mediterranean, someone falls in the water.

'The fascist found the apartment empty,' says the man. He speaks quietly, not wanting to disturb the people in the bioskop. Only now does she see the gun in his hand.

It's a short-barrelled pistol, resting on his thigh. The man is breathing heavily. She sees that his eyes are closed. And his lips are moving, and she leans her head towards him – 'Fascist!' – but nothing but a wordless whisper exits like restless breath from his mouth, which keeps opening and closing. The man looks very tired, and for a moment she thinks he's fallen asleep.

'Where are they, where did they take them?' she asks by his ear, and she sees his hand moving with the gun.

'They should have gone to the cinema.' He nods and then repeats, after a few seconds of nodding: 'To the bioskop.'

She looks at him, trying to spot something in his eyes, a hint concealed in a blink of where the family has been taken, but the man stares at the screen, gripping his gun with both hands while before them, in black and white like everything outside is black and white in the light of the vanished moon, a watering hole in the desert is destroyed, a well, so that the two heroes will surely die of thirst in the never-ending heat. And the man doesn't know whether he's seen already the soldiers blowing holes in the great river's ice or whether he's yet to see it, since similar things happened in one of the villages he passed through – 'Stuffed under the ice,' 'Stuffed?' 'I can't think of a better word,' – I can't think of a better word. The bloodied turban laughs.

She's still looking at the man in the wolf's pelt, not understanding what's going on in the city while they're watching this German desert movie, for most of the words and lines spoken on screen are German, the two heroes speak German, only the Arabs, the Bedouins speak Arabic, though that sounds more familiar and friendly to her than the heroes' harsh calls, despite her understanding German quite well like most inhabitants of NEUSATZ, and the two heroes are crawling through the desert dunes, one of them, she could tell now, as not German at all, looking as un-Aryan as could be (the father of the Serbian family she worked for was always making Hitler jokes, 'Hitler visits a madhouse and inspects the lined-up patients. Every patient yells: "Heil Hitler!" except for one, all quiet at the end of the row. Hitler says: "Why aren't you saluting?" And the man says: "I'm the guard, I'm not crazy."'") – short, almost

stunted, pointed beard and stubble, he's a Bedouin and the German's servant, he calls him 'Sihdi', they're half-dead of thirst already – 'I don't want to drown!' 'We'll be ice long before we touch the ground,' – and while the few moviegoers in the Novi Sad bioskop fear for the heroes and forget their own fear, the man in the fur coat suddenly says, not turning to the blonde woman beside him: 'Someone was still there.'

'In the apartment?' She folds her arms, puts her hands on her shoulders, grips her shoulders. 'How did you ... why didn't the soldiers ...?'

'It's the night of the fascists.' Now he looks at her, and she has to turn away because she can't look him in the eye, can't look there, later he will blindfold her ...

'Someone?' she asks quietly.

'Someone,' he says. And after a while – the two heroes are rescued, a woman leads a group of Bedouins on camels to them, the bloodied turban laughs – the man in the fur coat very slowly raises his gun, still resting on his thigh.

'For a moment,' he says, and once again he closes his eyes and his head sinks onto his chest, 'I thought I could ... no, I *had to* shoot, the way you drown a kitten, the way you put someone out of their ...'

'A kitten?' she asks, and her voice sounds very high and almost shrill as she asks again, 'A kitten,' for now she can guess what he found there. She grabs his hand with the gun, pulls it to her face and sniffs at the barrel. 'You didn't shoot ...'

'How could I.'

'Where is the child?'

'Up there.' He gestures behind him with the gun, at the small window in the wall from where the light reaches the screen, first thin and then ever wider,

fan-shaped. The two boys sitting a few seats away see the gun in the light and get a shock and cling to one another, and the gun's shadow looms large on the screen, superimposed on the desert, on the Bedouin village where the heroes are being welcomed, veiled women dancing for them as tradition has it, riders displaying their skills, galloping in ever-decreasing circles around the heroes' divan, and the gun vanishes again, a shadow hand laid over it. And they look from 'up there' through the window, watch in the projector's light as the cinema below them returns to calm. The gun is forgotten, the movie goes on, the heroes ride on, new adventures, the winter once again far from the desert.

And the old man operating the two Zeiss Ikon projectors from Dresden, changing the reels, guarding the carbon's electric arc that projects the images so blazing bright from the nitrocellulose reel onto the screen, greets the two of them as if he'd known them for years, pushes up the green visor he wears on his forehead to shade his eyes, fixed to a rubber band, as if it were the most normal thing in the world for an armed Croatian fascist and a young Serbian woman to come into his projection room in January 1942; and the old man, the projectionist, watches the arc, the arc of light that must never grow darker, the carbon, two rods end to end, grows shorter as it burns, a spark between negative and positive becomes light and becomes images, and the old projectionist watches the graphic symbols through the window, which appear on the screen when the time comes to change the reel, TRIANGLES, *white as snow, black as ...*, readies the other projector, the next reel, the film has seven acts, *Across the Desert*, he feels the projectors' heat, smells the nitrocellulose sweat that no one else can smell, listens to the projector's low rattle, the second standing silent alongside it and waiting its turn, and the arc

sparked between the two ends of the carbon rods illuminates the small room above the cinema.

A backpack on the table, an army backpack. The dark green fabric moving.

The woman goes to the backpack. Opens it. 'What's the matter with the boy?'

'He's asleep.' The man in the fur coat lowers his head to the old projectionist's, and together they watch the screen through the window as a man sinks into a swamp, the desert nearby, the Sea of Silence.

'He's sleeping so deeply, you brought him here ... What happened in the apartment?'

'You don't want to know, girl.'

'I'm not a girl!'

'I gave the baby a glass of beer. In his ... bottle. He drank well.'

'Beer? In his bocica? What are you doing?'

'I wanted him to sleep. I had to get him out of the apartment.'

'To the cinema. To the bioskop.' She nods and grows calm and rocks the backpack to and fro. 'Like you brought the others here?' She looks over at the little window, the projector rattling low in front of it.

'The others ...' He dismisses the idea with a wave. Sees that he's still holding the gun, and shoves it in the pocket of his fur coat.

'So you're not a fascist after all?'

'What does it matter ...'

'Anyone who loves movies like he does can't possibly be a fascist,' the old man interjects in a strangely high voice. His face glows greenish under his eyeshade in the flicker of the projector light.

'Oh, stop it,' the man in the fur coat steps closer to the blonde woman, still rocking the backpack, 'even Hitler loves movies, so they say. We ought to go,

we have to get out of here.' He looks into the backpack, which he lined with sheep's wool before he laid the child inside, a baby still, really. He stood with the gun at the cradle, the apartment empty and cupboards and drawers broken open, and aimed at the child sleeping fitfully.

Before that he'd walked through the rooms. A wealthy family; they could afford a maid, at least. But Serbs, not Jews. An engraving behind glass of old Novi Sad, the fortress on one side of the great river, the city on the other, the bridge over the ... the glass was smashed, the picture aslant, he tried to straighten it on the wall and then walked slowly on, shards crunching beneath his boots, he looked in all the rooms, *other rooms, no voices*, found a wooden chest with marble-like grain, tropical wood, on the floor, a few snapped cigarettes left in this humidor (he'd seen similar luxury in the gentlemen's clubs in Zagreb, cigars and rare tobaccos stored in premium wood), Kamel cigarettes, a pale upholstered sofa beside a bureau, so clean and flawless he had to sit down on it for a moment. His head slumped to his chest, his hands stroked the velvet cushions. And when he then, a little later, walked back along the hall through the apartment, he had no time to sit and rest and he had lost his bearings slightly, *where am I*, he looked again into all the rooms, opened doors again and again that he'd already opened, the floor of the hall running very long and dark along the rooms, a corridor, was covered in dirt, melted snow and blood, footprints, a petroleum lamp burning in the kitchen, electricity no longer a certainty in Novi Sad, the lamp swinging back and forth, apparently still in motion from the intrusion ... he found one of the girls in the pantry behind the kitchen. She must have hidden there. Tried, at least. She was squatting, slumped, torn apart, between jars of food, staring at him and

staring past him. An empty tin can, a hole in its base with a thin thread hanging from it.

He covered the girl with a sheet fetched from one of the bedrooms, not knowing what else to do.

He stood by the cradle, clutching the pistol in both hands, aimed and looked at the breathing child. Which was a baby. Would it not be a mercy? No family. Any more. Big fat Churchill. His sister in the pantry. Dunhill cigarettes. The short barrel of the gun. *Like throwing a kitten in the ...*

She can't see the river; he's blindfolded her. She hears screams. Shots. He's holding her by the arm. Carrying the backpack beneath his coat so it looks like he has a hump, and he feels the child moving against his back. They need milk. He knows a farmer, not too far outside the city – he'll still be alive, probably; he's Hungarian. How's a child to survive at 25 degrees below freezing in the midst of this darkness. 'You're hurting me.'

'Be quiet.' He grips her arm even harder; he's spotted a group of soldiers approaching slowly. They've hitched a horse to one of the stopped tram carriages and folded down the current collector on the roof; the horse is struggling to pull the carriage, the tracks barely visible beneath the snow, the soldiers walking ahead of the horse and on either side of the carriage, its windowpanes fogged over from inside; the soldiers call, spurring on the horse, hammering their rifle butts against the metal walls of the tram.

The man's wearing the Ustaše braid on his lapel. He pulls the woman in close. Holds his papers in his free hand. Walks straight towards the tram and the soldiers. 'This spy is a prisoner of the Ustaše, of the great Poglavnik Ante Pavelić, friend to all Hungarians.' She can't see the river. She hears the man murmuring to himself. Is it numbers he's whispering? He's laid several

blankets over her shoulders but she feels as if she were naked and her skin were ice.

'Just a second,' he'd said before they set off. 'I want to see how it ends.'

'How what ends?'

'The movie, girl, what else?' He had stepped up to the little window, had watched the screen from there until the credits began. He read the actors' names attentively. Then he turned around, nodded and smiled at her. 'The two of them made it, vanquished all their enemies.'

The projectionist was wielding large round tins containing film reels. 'I can't run films all night long,' he said, 'or the whole place will burn down.'

'No one in the audience will leave,' said the man in the fur coat, 'no matter if there's a film rolling or not.'

'This one's almost cooled down.' The projectionist stroked one of the two projectors. 'Quality machinery, made in Dresden. And I've got *Baron Münchhausen*, in colour!'

'The *Führer* would love it. First Karl May in the desert, then Hans Albers.'

She can't see the river. She only learns much later what exactly happened on those nights through which they're stumbling. A few times, she wants to push the blindfold aside but he takes her hand. 'No. Don't look.'

Living and dead. Beneath the ice. She can't see the ...

'Where are we going? Why are you helping me? What will happen to the others, in the bioskop?'

The man says nothing. Looks at her. The dimple in her chin when she laughs. Her blonde hair. He moves his hand in front of her, his fingertips only centimetres from her face, but she can't see it. Perhaps I should have left her in the bioskop, he thinks, with the others. But when they leave the cinema,

once the cleansing is over, it'll still be the winter of 42 outside, *and death's carriage driving through the city.*

The man will never go to a cinema again, no more movies in the bioskop. The baby's started crying. She's walking behind the man now, one hand on his shoulder. 'Where are we?' She stroked the man's hump, the baby crying inside it. The shots are barely audible now.

'Where are we?' Their feet crunching on the snow.

'I don't know,' he says, and she feels him taking off the backpack, 'I don't know.' He pulls off her blindfold.

Beneath the ice of a broad river drifted a young woman. Her blonde hair fanned out around her head and the river's current took her long pale hair and moved it all the way to her hips, and beneath the river's brittle ice it looked as if she had wings or were swimming in fluid motions against the stream.