

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Karl Emil Franzos (1848-1904)

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The Beard of Abraham Weinbeetle

In the South Russian province of Podolia, on the railway line that connects Kiev with the Black Sea, there lies the little town of Vinnytsia. A Jewish man lived there, Abraham Winebeetle by name, a master glazier by trade. He passed his days quietly and peaceably; a good husband and father, a diligent craftsman. He did nothing to draw public attention to himself. Now, he did have an advantage over his fellow citizens, but in Vinnytsia, where the sense of beauty is little cultivated, this gained no recognition: he had the most magnificent beard in the little town, a giant beard, which looked particularly beautiful and awe-inspiring after it had turned grey.

It was in the year 1871, and Abraham was in his mid-fifties at the time, when the Governor-General of Podolia came to Vinnytsia one day. A new school, in the foundation of which he had taken a lively interest, was to be opened, and he did not want to be missing from the ceremony. The

man belonged to the old nobility, he had not only received an aristocratic education but also really learned something; he had a passion for all that was beautiful and he dabbled in the arts; he composed elegant verses and painted devilishly nice watercolours. Yet he was not only a perfect gentleman, but also a truly amiable, benevolent soul, and, as an official, always strove only to do good. The only thing was, he was somewhat absent-minded and exceedingly forgetful, and the most amusing anecdotes were told about this, inter alia, how once, at the Court Table at Petersburg – he belonged to the privileged favourites of Alexander II and the entire Imperial House – he had pushed his plate back, pulled out a pencil and begun, to the horror of those sitting next to him, to draw on the white damask cloth. He was himself conscious of this failing, and to compensate for it he chose an adjutant with an excellent memory.

All the inhabitants of the small town had assembled in festive garb before the new school in honour of the distinguished visitor, and our hero was among them. He looked quite splendid in his kaftan of black silk, decorated with the giant beard, and could not fail to instantly catch a painter's eye. That was why the Governor, when he was walking through the lines after the ceremony had come to an end, followed by his adjutant and the town's Chief of Police, stopped in front of him, surveyed him with a highly satisfied smile, and affably asked for his name and profession. The simple man was so disconcerted by this unexpected honour that he could only stammer out his answer.

“That is excellent,” said the Governor, clapping him condescendingly on the shoulder. “Master glazier – I like to hear that; a

trade in hand finds gold in every land... But tell me, my man," he spoke down to the old man because he was just a Jew, but there was certainly no nasty intent,¹ "how did you come by this beard?"

This question made good Abraham even more disconcerted. How is it that I have come by my beard?" he humbly asked at last. "It just grew on me!..."

"A glorious beard!" His Excellency cried enthusiastically. "And what is the main thing, it goes with your face, your whole appearance. You seem to have no idea, good Abraham, of what a curiosity you are... Would you care to sit for me? I would like to draw you. Only a pencil sketch, one hour will suffice."

"Draw?" cried Abraham, raising an averting hand, "what is there to draw in an old Jew?"

"So, just as modest as handsome!" laughed the Governor. But the Chief of Police understood the meaning of Abraham's whining tone better. "There is a particular reason for that!" he explained to his superior. "The man is not, indeed, one of the strictly Orthodox Jews himself, but he fears their anger. The fact is that these consider it to be sinful if a Jew has his portrait taken... You will do what His Excellency commands," he concluded brusquely, having turned to Abraham.

"Not that tone!" the Governor forbade. "The man is not obliged to sit for me, you know... But if I ask you again," he said to the Jew, "you'll do it, perhaps? As I said, only one hour, say tomorrow morning, as I shall depart

¹ In the original, he uses the informal "du" for "you" instead of the polite "Sie."

at the midday-hour...”

The Jew naturally did not refuse any longer, and on the next morning the “sitting” took place. The Governor conversed with the Jew in the most affable manner and presented him with a valuable amber cigarette-holder on parting. This cigarette-holder and Abraham’s account of his conversation with the Governor occupied the people of Vinnytsia for weeks to come. The master glazier could not praise the condescension of his distinguished patron enough; only, he was quite disparaging in his remarks about the sketch; he himself, although he knew his own face well enough, was not able to make himself out in this criss-cross of pencil strokes. Yet he did a grievous injustice to the Governor’s talent with this judgement, for it was a truly pretty and characteristic sketch.

This opinion was shared several months later by a very grand lady at the Petersburg Court when the Governor showed her the drawing. She was the Duchess of L., related to the Imperial House and distinguished by a fine feeling for art, who had tried her hand, and not without success, as a painter in the historical genre. “Splendid!” she cried, her eyes lighting up. “What a handsome patriarchal head! This would be the ideal model for the Patriarch Abraham in the Biblical scene I have long intended to paint! Again and again, I have delayed the execution, simply because an entirely suitable model could not be found... Pray, leave the sketch with me!”

“With pleasure, Your Highness,” the General assured her. “But I could procure the man himself for you, you know.”

“Oh,” cried the Duchess, “do you believe that to be possible... Why, that would be delightful!”

“Nothing is impossible when Your Highness gives the command!” the cavalier gallantly replied. “Besides, this should not be so very difficult, the man will do it very willingly for money and blandishments. He lives in Vinnytsia; his name has admittedly slipped my mind, but my adjutant is sure still to know it. I will give him the order this very day; he will certainly arrange the matter quickly and adeptly. You shall have your model here in a week’s time at the latest.”

The adjutant really did still know the name, indeed, he remembered all the other particulars, even that Abraham had hesitated for a moment for fear of the fanaticism of his co-religionists. But even if he had not remembered this, requisition through government channels would have seemed to him the only way certain to succeed. At any rate, the Duchess of L. must not be kept waiting. And so he telegraphed to the Provincial Chancellery in Kamenetz-Podolsk that the Jew, Abraham Winebeetle in Vinnytsia was to be taken and transported to St. Petersburg at once, and on arrival there he was to report without delay to the Governor, who would meet the costs of the journey. A reliable man was to be assigned the Jew as a companion.

The telegram reached the hands of the Vice-Governor, and this official might perhaps have been surprised at its contents if he had just had more time. As it was, all he did was to quickly order one of his Court Councillors to bring the Jew to Petersburg by the shortest route and under guard. And the Court Councillor simply did not have any time either and therefore passed the order on to his secretary; only, he introduced the word “arrest.” “What can this master glazier from Vinnytsia have done,” the

young official asked from curiosity, “to have to be sent directly to Petersburg?” “Clearly a political crime!” said the Court Councillor. That made sense to the secretary, and he thought it must have been a serious crime, otherwise such haste would not have been ordered. And so he telegraphed to the Chief of Police in Vinnytsia that the master glazier, Abraham Winebeetle, being accused of a serious political crime, was to be brought to Petersburg forthwith under escort and with all possible expedition.

The Chief of Police read the order with boundless amazement; had he ever sought anything behind the handsome beard, it would assuredly not have been political machinations. The thought also occurred to him that there was a misunderstanding here, but that was of course no use; the order was set down clearly enough and had to be carried out. He had the Jew summonsed, who appeared in a rather agitated state; all his life, the police had taken no notice of him. Paralysed with horror, he listened to the order, and it was long before he could utter a sound. “Mercy!” he pleaded at last, throwing himself at the Chief of Police’s feet. “It cannot be true, what have I to do with ‘Politics’? If you had not explained the word to me just now, I wouldn’t understand it!”

The official was a sufficient judge of character to know that this tone was genuine. Moved to pity for the unfortunate man, he decided to do for him the only thing that lay in his power: He inquired of the government by telegraph if there were not a confusion of names. In the meantime, he absolutely had to detain him as a prisoner. His wife and children were of course allowed to visit him. After the first, terrible shock was overcome,

they began, like him, to hope: The truth of the matter must surely come to light. Furthermore, all the inhabitants of Vinnytsia had the firm conviction that their honest, peaceful fellow citizen, who had never yet worried his head about the dull quarrels in the world, but only about his clear window-panes, could not possibly be a dangerous conspirator.

Only three days had passed when the answer from the Government arrived, signed by that secretary: it contained a reprimand for the Chief of Police because he was delaying the course of justice with superfluous questions; there was no misunderstanding. A western official would perhaps have made precise enquiries beforehand, but it is probable that not every one would have done so, as the wording of the order was so definite. In any case, that secretary did not act maliciously – and that is precisely the deciding factor in this story.

On the next morning, Abraham was taken, heavily chained, to the railway station on a small cart. Opposite him sat two soldiers with loaded muskets; his wife and children wailed as they ran along beside the wagon, and many members of the community followed at the back, from curiosity or from compassion. The unfortunate man did not lose his composure; tears may have streamed incessantly over his pale countenance, but he kept comforting his wife and children. “Trust in the Almighty, as I trust in Him,” he cried to them. “He will not let me, an innocent man, perish. My heart tells me this: I’ll see you again soon and we’ll be happy.”

It took three weeks before Abraham was committed to the fortress-prison in Petersburg, to the division for political prisoners. A brief interrogation was held with him in the Reception Office; he naturally

protested his innocence, and, just as naturally, he was not believed. There may have been only one single document about him – the accompanying report of the Vinnytsia Chief of Police, in which he gave notice that he hereby handed over, in accordance with the order of high government, Abraham Winebeetle, accused of a political crime – but this was sufficient to keep the man in custody. The other documents, thought the gentlemen, were sure to follow soon. The prisoner was clothed in the criminal uniform, and his long beard being against prison regulations, it was shaved off. The glorious, the patriarchal beard! This did not actually cause the unfortunate man woe; he had heavier sorrow. But how those two art-loving souls, the Governor-General and the Duchess, would have lamented, had they learned about this irreplaceable loss for art. The most splendid model for a patriarch to be found in the Empire had been heinously mutilated.

But they did not learn about it. The Duchess did, it is true, when fourteen days had passed by since her conversation with the Governor-General, incidentally ask him what the position was regarding her model, and he at once asked his adjutant, who in his turn inquired of the Provincial Government by telegraph. But the answer: The matter had been delayed by the dilatoriness of the Vinnytsia Chief of Police but all was now in perfect order and the Jew would be in Petersburg in the next few days at any rate – reassured all parties.

Shortly afterwards, the Governor left the capital to go on a holiday trip abroad. He now took leave of his adjutant for good; he had personally recommended this excellent man for a higher post in a northern province. When the Governor returned to his official residence several months later,

no mention was made of the Jew any more. He had completely forgotten him, as had his clerks. All the more ardently did the poor, forsaken wife remember her unfortunate husband. When a year of fruitless waiting had passed by, she resolved to travel to Kamenetz-Podolsk. She wished to implore the Governor for mercy; she took with her the proof of his former favour, the amber cigarette-holder, which she had not alienated, even though Want had gradually moved into the house which had been deprived of its bread-winner. By an unhappy chance, the Governor had just gone to Petersburg at that time. But his deputy received her, and he too was not a man without a conscience; he listened patiently to her complaints and then gave her the answer he was obliged to give: Only the court had authority for political crimes; neither he nor his master could order anything in this matter. But if her husband were truly innocent, he would without doubt return home soon. With this scant consolation, she went home and waited patiently once again. But when a second year had elapsed, she intended to repeat her journey to the Governor, even though she could not produce the amber cigarette-holder any longer. But then people told her that her patron had been transferred several months before; he had been given a high government post in Moscow.

Meanwhile, Abraham was sitting in prison in Petersburg. He had been told that he would soon be brought to trial, but day after day, month after month, a year went by without anybody concerning themselves with him. His pleas for a trial continued to be in vain; they did not even reach the examining magistrate. "You'll be brought forward as soon as it's your turn," the prison warder told him. Finally, at an inspection of the prisoners,

attention was drawn to him. A year's detention without trial – that did strike the Inspector as quite remarkable, and he made inquiries of the examining magistrate. But the latter could plead that the blame did not lie with him – the papers had simply not arrived yet, and the Inspector had to accept this reason.

A second year elapsed. The old man declined more and more; he could now have sat as a model for Job at the most. His trust in God had long sustained him; at last, the rage of despair overtook him. He began to rave in his cell, and so brought severe disciplinary action down upon himself. But this event had at least the good effect of reminding the authorities of his existence. The Examining Court requisitioned the documents from the Provincial Government. The answer did not arrive until several months later; it was, of course, that nothing was known about this matter there; the arrest had been effected on the orders of the former Governor-General who now lived in Moscow. The Court now directed an enquiry to him. From his deputy came the answer: His Excellency was at a spa, the matter would be laid before him following his return.

And another year passed by, and a new Inspector came. He was shaken by the sight of the old man, but even more by his story. He decided to get to the bottom of the matter and began to do so quite by rule. First of all, he interpellated the Vinnytsia Chief of Police. "Government order," was the answer, but the worthy man was not satisfied with that; he repeated his supposition that there was a misunderstanding here. If that were so, then it had already had terrible consequences: The prisoner's wife had died of grief, and his children were left in the greatest misery. The Inspector now

turned to the Provincial Government. It referred him to its answer of the previous year. Now the inquiry was finally directed to the former Governor again, and this time, the answer came at once: He had never had a political prisoner taken directly to Petersburg. Indeed, the distinguished gentleman could give this answer with the utmost certainty, notwithstanding that his memory was usually so unreliable; for he had always left political investigations to the courts.

The Inspector now found the matter altogether unsettling. He applied for the prisoner to be released, for a criminal might be there, but there was no crime. However, the court demanded complete clarification first, and made fresh enquiries. Yet light was shed on the case even before these came to a conclusion. The Governor came to Petersburg, whither his former adjutant had been transferred in the meantime. The latter looked him up and asked for his intercession to obtain a high post. The Governor promised this readily; with the help of the very influential Duchess of L., it would surely be easily managed. He betook himself to the grand lady and recommended his protégé to her. She promised her good offices in the most amiable manner, but because her memory was as excellent as the Governor's was weak, she asked with a slightly malicious smile, "Is this not the same gentleman who procured my model for me so punctually?"

"The same!" eagerly cried the Governor. "I had quite forgotten about that. Did you paint the Jew? A splendid head, is it not?"

"Doubtless – but I have never seen it!"

Filled with dismay, the Governor communicated this to his protégé. The latter initiated vigorous enquiries; he wished to convince the grand

patroness that he had done his bit. On the very next day, he was able to give the Governor a horrified account of where the poor model was. Both gentlemen betook themselves to the prison at once. No doubt – there was his name on the list. The gaoler was fetched. “Have Abraham Winebeetle brought here immediately!” he was ordered. The official stood there, looking embarrassed. “Beg pardon, Excellency... the man died two months ago. It’s a real miracle that he held out for so long. But he kept hoping...”

The two gentlemen have provided for the orphaned children. Even they could not bring the dead man back to life.

That is the story of the beard of Abraham Winebeetle, and I cannot find any words to add to it.

Jancu the Judge

The following is related strictly after the facts. This assurance will seem almost superfluous to whoever reads it. For this story bears the stamp of its author – of Fate. Only this most merciless and most careless of poets dares such hideous and yet such simple effects. To imitate these through art would perhaps be a rewarding task for a writer of novellas, but it would surely be a sad one. The portrayer of foreign customs, however, takes a different point of view. For him, Truth must be the highest goddess.

Farmer Jancu is sitting on the Accused’s Stool in front of a *Romanian* jury. His brown serdak² is torn, and through it, as through the

² A short overcoat.

splits in his shirt, his glistening bronze-coloured skin can be seen. His hair falls in long, tangled, discoloured strands over his wan countenance, his head is sunk on his breast, his dull eyes are vacantly directed at the floor. No look meets the public, the jury, the judge.

The clerk of the court calls out the case and the bill of indictment is read out. Farmer Jancu, owner of a large farm, Greek Orthodox, 29 years of age, previously of irreproachable character and judge in his village, has confessed to the murder of his wife, Xenia, 21 years of age, his farmhand Alexa, 43 years of age, and the gypsy woman Mariula, of unknown age, at any rate far older than 50, in one and the same night, from Shrove Sunday through to Monday. The charge describes the three crimes according to the statement of the accused; there are no eye-witnesses. Yet Jancu's confession, which of itself occasioned his arrest immediately after the deed, is very comprehensive and confirmed by the results of the post-mortem. Jancu killed his wife with a bullet to the heart, the farmhand with a load of three buckshot to the head, and he strangled the gypsy woman with his hands. He refuses to divulge any information, notes the charge, concerning his reasons; the deed is also inexplicable to the witnesses.

The examination begins. "Jancu," asks the President, "do you confess your guilt today also?"

The accused rises to his feet, but his countenance remains unmoved, and his eyes are fixed on the floor. "Yes," he replies in a flat voice, "it's all true." And he instantly falls back onto his seat.

"You must remain standing, Jancu," the President informs him. "You must now tell us everything that you did and thought on that Sunday and

the night thereof.”

Jancu shakes his head and lets it fall even lower on his breast. Then he rises to his feet nevertheless, reluctant, hesitant. But his voice sounds flat and emotionless, as before: “No, good Sir, I won’t do that. For what I did, you know already, and it’s unnecessary for me to say it once more. And why I did it, I won’t tell you or any man.”

“But the law will have it so,” states the President. “The jury must hear your confession from your own lips. And when you confess to the deed so remorsefully, why not to the reasons as well? For it can only be to your advantage, Jancu! All the people in your village say that you were the best and most upright of men. That is why you became judge in your village at so young an age. Also, Prince St., whom you formerly served for three years, personally came to the Examining Magistrate and said he considered himself bound by his conscience to testify on your behalf that you, Jancu, were the most honest, most sensible, most loyal man he ever had around his person. So when a man like you suddenly commits such an atrocious crime, then he is either mad, and you are not, or he has been thrown into the most terrible agitation by some occurrence. Now what was this occurrence? Confess it, I pray you! It will lighten your conscience and perhaps soften your sentence!”

But again Jancu shakes his head, and again the words fall slowly, calmly, tonelessly from his lips. “Good Sir, I thank you and the good Prince and my neighbours, but I don’t want any of that! My confession was not remorseful; I just said everything that the judge needed to know so I can be punished, and I told nothing but the truth, for I’ve never lied before and I

didn't want to lie in this last matter either. But I didn't do it out of remorse, for I don't regret my deed. And if I were still now what I used to be, a happy, peaceful man, and if I now learned what I learned at that time, I would kill those three people in the next hour, as I did on that night. And so I don't need to lighten my conscience, for it's light. And as concerns the more lenient sentence, what use is leniency to me? What I'd like most is for these gentlemen" – he points to the jury – "to say: He should hang! But sadly that can't happen, for we've stopped hanging, and I'll just be placed in the salt-mines at Okna for the rest of my life. Should I wish to come out from there – what for? No, that's not for me! I'll stay there, and the work, the dog's fare, and the blows will kill me after a few years. And that's for the best. For I'll be happy to die, Sir, I'll be very happy to die!"

These words do not perhaps make any particularly deep impression on the reader. For the listener, however, they will be unforgettable. One could sense that there was in fact a burden weighing on this man's soul which made death appear to him as a relief; not remorse, not the awareness of guilt, but an overpowering something under whose influence he had acted, which pressed him to the ground to this day.

The examination of the witnesses began. The first witness was the hoary-headed farmer Thodika, who had been the village judge before Jancu and now occupied the office again, "until another, younger house-father comes along who'll be as honest as Jancu there." The small, garrulous old man, with the wan face, in which his nose shines out red as a ruby, swore the oath and then related the following:

"Well, so it was Shrove Sunday. That's an especially holy day, I went

to church early, then ate in the tavern, and in the evening I walked home. But because I've sworn an oath, I'll tell the truth: namely, I didn't walk, but my wife and my sons carried me, because I was very drunk. Alright, they put me to bed, and I have a sound sleep. Around the third hour of the morning a terrible gale gets up, I don't hear any of it, but my wife says to my daughter Anitza, who was in the house with us because her husband was going to beat her to death – but they're reconciled now – she says this: 'Anitza,' she said, 'someone has hanged themselves, or a serious crime has happened, the wind's blowing really too strong.' And then there's a violent knocking at the door. The women are scared. 'It's me, Jancu the Judge, open up!' But when they light the pine torches and he steps in, they're even more frightened: it's Jancu and yet it isn't, the man has suddenly aged twenty years. 'What do you want?' my wife stammers. But he walks up to me and shakes me awake. 'Thodika, you must get up!' In the beginning, I don't hear anything, for I really had drunk a bit too much, but then I give a start. 'Hey, Jancu, what is it?' But as I look at him, I'm very soon half-sober from terror, and I become completely sober when he says to me: 'You were the judge before me and are the eldest in the Committee. I lay my office in your hands. And so arrest me, as it is your duty to now, and take me to the town at once. For I'm a murderer, I've killed my wife, my farmhand and the old witch. Then I leap up: 'Jancu, you're crazy!' And then I recall that he had lost his only child the day before, a dear little girl, Aniula, quite suddenly from cramps. So I think to myself: he loved the child so uncommonly much, her dying will have fried his brain, and I say sympathetically: 'Jancu, you've had a terrible dream. Perhaps because of

your poor girl. Take comfort, it was God's will.' 'No,' he cries wildly, 'it was *not* God's will, but no matter, it's avenged! I've dealt justice in God's name, now people may do with me as they please; take me to the town!' And then I realised that it was true, and my heart stood still. It was enough to drive you to madness, but it really was the case: our judge, Jancu, was a murderer. Well, I took him into town in the morning."

"And did he not tell you," asks the President, "why he committed the crime?"

Thodika looks down at the ground and then, in embarrassment, over at Jancu. A peculiar change comes over the latter; he lifts up his head, his features come to life, and his blazing eyes are fixed, half-threateningly, half-imploringly, on the witness's countenance.

"Gentlemen," he stammered, disconcerted, "a word about that slipped his lips, against his will, when we were driving to the town. But I swore a sacred oath to him not to tell it to anyone. And now I've sworn the oath here to speak the whole truth. I'm at a complete loss what to do! Jancu, if you'll allow me..."

"You'll be silent," the other starts up, livid.

"Jancu," the President says sternly, "another word, and I'll have you taken out."

"My oath," says Thodika in a whiny voice, "my dear Jancu, I can't help you. So..."

"Be silent!" the accused cries furiously, peremptorily. The President makes a sign to the policeman. But Jancu continues: "If all my shame is to become known among men, then at least nobody shall speak it but I

myself. Have that garrulous old woman step back. I'll say how everything came about myself..."

All is now as silent as the grave in the broad hall. And Jancu tells his story, not in a flat and dull voice as earlier, but wildly, passionately, almost through sobs. No heart remains unmoved, no eye dry, when the poor, unhappy man relates:

"I'll tell it myself, however hard it is for me to do. But I couldn't bear to hear someone else telling it. I didn't think that I'd end this way, and nobody thought it. For I was once a happy man and a good man; I may say that now, for you see, I'm not talking about myself, but about a dead man. Initially, I didn't fare well in life, I was the second son, my elder brother was to inherit everything; I had to serve as a farm-labourer. In my father's house, admittedly, but it's often harder to be a servant with your own folks than with strangers, take my word for it. After my father's death, I went to the town as a servant; I was diligent and devoted, everyone will testify to this. I also learned to read and write, and because I saw how brandy makes men into beasts, I've never touched a drop of it. Then I came to be with the Prince and was with him in Germany and in France. That's another country; even the peasant is a human being there. Well, the Prince was satisfied with me, as you know, he personally remembered me in my great need. I thought to myself at that time: now you'll stay in the town a while longer and save up your wages, and then you'll go to your village and buy yourself some fields. But things turned out differently. When I come home from our travels, my elder brother is dead, and all the big farmstead falls to me. So I buckle down to it and begin to manage the

farm. But people say that I'm still missing something, and I feel this myself. So I began to look out for a wife, and I took Xenia. Not only because she was very beautiful and pleased me greatly, but also, around half out of pity. She was very poor and had to serve as a maid at her elder sister's, and that reminded me of my younger days. I won't say, by the way, that I married her out of magnanimity; I was also very much in love with her. Xenia was a quiet girl, whom nobody in the village could say anything against, and beautiful – admittedly, in a different way from how our girls usually are. She was delicate, blonde, and had still blue eyes. Perhaps it was precisely that which I liked. In short, we were man and wife within four weeks.

It was – with what is about to come, the words don't want to pass my tongue, but I have to say them, for they are the truth – it was a truly happy marriage. My wife rarely laughed and was never particularly affectionate, but I thought to myself: 'That's just her way.' She was a good housewife and faithfully stood by my side in my arduous work. For I had put all my efforts into running a model farm and imitating all the good I had seen elsewhere. That was difficult with our labourers, who are three-quarters pig and only one-quarter man, but I did all that was humanly possible, and I succeeded in many things, I may say. My property grew, and, because I was helpful wherever I could be, my popularity grew as well. I lacked only one thing to make my happiness complete: I had no children. Then, two years ago, my wife gave birth to a child, a lovely girl, blonde and blue-eyed, such a beautiful, dear child! O my Aniula! ...”

The man's voice fails him. He stares into space and shakes his

head. Then he continues:

“Everything had worked out well for me; I had become judge so young in years! If someone had asked me at midday Saturday, before that terrible day: ‘Judge Jancu, who is the happiest man in the world?’, it’s highly possible that I would have said: ‘It almost seems to me that I am.’ And a little more than a day later, I was the unhappiest; never before has anyone been so wretched, never! I’ll briefly relate how this came about. For when I think of it, my head reels and my strength forsakes me. So it was midday Saturday. I come home from the pond, where I’ve been having ice dug out for the alehouse-keepers in Bucharest, and sit down to eat. My wife serves me meat and then a sweet rice pudding. But I don’t want to eat any of that, whereas Aniula, who’s sitting on my lap, hungrily reaches for it. I leave the child at the dish and quickly ride back out to the workers. I’ve been there about two hours when a maid comes running up as white as a sheet – the child is dying. I ride like the wind, but when I come home my little daughter is dead. Mariula, the old gypsy woman, is standing beside her and says, “It was cramps, like children often have!” My heart is almost breaking, but I pull myself together, as a man should. I arrange everything pertaining to the laying out and go to the priest. Then I come home, I send my wife to bed, but I myself sit down beside the dead body and stay there throughout the night. There is no sound save the crackling of the candles, and every now and then I hear my wife give a sigh; so passes the night. In the morning, I put everything in order at the farm, then I hold the juridical day in the village hall, as is my duty, and after that I come home. My wife is squatting on the floor and staring at the dead body with dry eyes; there’s

something like madness in this. I want to raise and console her, but she wildly screams, 'Don't touch me!' and dashes out. I look after her in amazement, but then I think to myself: 'She's always been so peculiar and quiet, grief shows itself in her in a peculiar way.' Then I sit down again, and my grief finds release, and I weep a long time... Tears are a great relief; since then, I haven't been able to weep any more..."

Again the man stares into space. Then he heaves a deep sigh and continues: "In twilight, I set out and go to the priest, to discuss the final arrangements for the burial the next day. But I take the side-path over the fields. And I hear a whimpering behind the hedge. 'Who's there?' I cry. 'It's me, Mariula,' the witch replies. 'You've been brought here by God, Jancu, or the Devil. But no matter, even I have to go to the gallows, he and she shall go with me. Here I lie, he beat me half to death, that Alexa, because I demanded my honestly earned money from him, the money for the poison I gave Xenia. Is it my fault that the child died and not you? My poison was good!' 'Witch,' I yell out, 'What's this you're saying?' 'O wise one!' she scoffs, 'Don't you suspect anything? Don't you know that your wife hates you, that she only took you because of your farm? She prefers everyone else to you, she's now having an affair with ugly old Alexa; they wanted to poison you, I supplied them with the poison.' My hair stands on end. 'You're lying!' I shout at last. She laughs scornfully. 'Pray convince yourself! Go home and tell your wife that you have to go to the town on official duty and won't come back until tomorrow. But then come back in three hours, and I'll bet that you'll find the two together.' No words can express how I felt. I go home, load my pistols, have the second farmhand hitch up the

horse, and tell my wife, 'I won't be back before the burial.' But I call a halt at the nearest country inn and then go home through the stormy night. The bedroom window is dimly lit, I walk up, it's only the gleam of light which falls through the open door from the catafalque. And," the narrator breaks off, before yelling out in a horribly hoarse voice, "the two of them had been together five paces from the dead body!... Seeing this, I press the cock, aim and shoot, first her then him, fast as lightning. They both rattled their lives out in their blood. Then I go in and drag his corpse away, so nobody will discover the monstrous sin these two committed. And then I stand for a long, long time, staring at the bodies. There is a giggling beside me. 'Splendid, Jancu, splendid!' Mariula had crept in. And I strangled her, for she was guilty too. Then I went to see Thodika... And now I ask, could it not be possible for me to be given the death penalty out of mercy?"

It was not possible. Jancu was sentenced to hard labour for life. After deliberating for nine hours, the jury had pronounced him guilty by eight votes to four. He was therefore only one vote short of being acquitted.

The Latinist Artilleryman

Many, many years have passed since that time, but if I were an artist, I could draw every detail, so exceedingly clear does it appear before my eyes. I can even remember the small grey coat worn by my neighbour on the left, Moses Salzman, and Theodor Bohusiewicz's breeches. But unfortunately, I became a draughtsman only in words and must therefore make the attempt with them. So picture to yourselves a dismal, rainy

February day and, in its light, a dismal, rainy little town, and in one of the mire-filled streets a sinister grey house, and in this house a sinister grey room. Admittedly, while I write this down, the bright golden sunshine of remembrance flickers on the days of my youth. For I see myself among the many fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys who are there, sitting together on low school-benches. Anxiously and with pounding hearts, we sit there, blinking timidly at the teacher's desk from time to time, as if a tiger or a ghost or even the headmaster were standing there. But nothing of the like stands there, rather, on the contrary, a handsome young man who is smiling as he unties the knot of a string which holds a pile of exercise books together. It is the Latin Professor, Herr Wilhelm Lang, and these exercise books are our homework. He smiles, woe to us, we know that smile. All those who have done the task negligently turn pale, and those who have actually copied it from others fold up like a pocket-knife. But a quiet trembling passes through even the ranks of the "Star Pupils." For who is able to boast: "I can stand in the sight of Professor Lang," and who can say of themselves, "I am righteous in his eyes"?

He smiles, oh, his smile grows wider and wider. And now he holds one of the exercise-books up high. "Can you guess," he asks, "who did the best work on this task?" Deepest silence. Only a few sighs become audible. "So, nobody. Well, the best work is that of our wise Aristides, Aristides Lewczuk."

That is a joke. And so there is dutiful laughter in the front benches, where the good pupils sit, and a less obligatory giggling in the middle benches, where the less good pupils sit. But in the back benches, where

the defiant ones and the lazy ones squat, the unappreciated geniuses and that species who are always “on the receiving end,” there is no laughter when the Professor cracks a joke. There, all stays as quiet as the grave...

But why is that remark about wise Aristides a joke? And who is Aristides Lewczuk?

A second-year in the grammar school at Czernowitz.³ But much more than that. Just take a look at him, the large, ungainly, twenty-six-year-old man – there, close to the wall, on the backmost bench. He has the nickname “the sloth” and anyone who sees him sprawling on his bench, where he reigns supreme, his yellow, puffy countenance with its goggling black little eyes resting on both arms, will not find the designation so very inappropriate. He has just been roused from a gentle daze by a bump on the nose from the boy in front of him, and he now looks around in a not particularly intelligent way. Being intelligent is not his thing at all. Poor boy! Up until his fourteenth year, he lived contentedly in Mamornitza, the dirty little Romanian village on the border where his father is the local judge, and no thirst for higher things tormented him. But that was, unfortunately, the case with his father: Aristides had to study and become a priest. And so the poor, stupid boy came to the town, into school, oh, only God has kept count of the tears and blows! After that, Aristides explained to his father that, it seemed to him, he had “no head for Latin.” But the local judge was of a different opinion, and so Aristides bowed to his fate, to become a shining light in Greek non-uniatic Christianity. Admittedly, he

³ Now Chernivtsi in Ukraine.

seemed at the same time to form the conviction that said Christianity was not in such a hurry. For he avoided haste and used exactly eight years for Lower Grammar School. And now he sits in the Second Year, on the back bench, the poor, foolish, much-teased “ultimus ultimorum” ...

“Lewczuk!” says the Professor; Aristides hesitantly gets up and scratches behind his ear. “Someone else has written this task, that is clear. For it is not only flawless but written in elegant Latin. And for that reason, I shall not content myself with entering a ‘Third’ for you followed by the note, ‘Attempted to cheat,’” Aristides scratches more strongly, “but I shall also ask you: Who is the author? It is not a grammar-school pupil!” Aristides is silent. “Well – quickly now!”

“I cannot say who is,” Aristides tearfully stammered at last in his ponderous German.

“Why not?”

“Because he’ll get twenty-five for it pretty quick!”

We burst out into gales of laughter; even the Professor smiles.

Only Aristides remains deadly serious. “The Captain is sure to let him have,” he adds.

“Come here, Lewczuk,” Lang cries impatiently. Aristides advances slowly until he finally stands before the teacher’s desk. “Has your little bit of mind grown rebellious? Who did the task?”

“The Latinist Artilleryman has done. I don’t know what’s called. Other soldiers always say, ‘Latinist.’ The Captain also cries, ‘Latinist.’ So I say ‘Latinist’ too.”

“And where did you make this curious acquaintance?”

“At our home, in the yard, at Frau Terlecka’s. The Captain lives there too with horses. ‘Latinist’ is orderly of Captain, serves horses.”

The class writhes in convulsive laughter. “And this groom did the task?” cries the Professor. “Who is this man?” “Very good man!” affirms Aristides. “Honest soul. But is always sad, always sad, sick, at the chest. He comes to me the other day, says: ‘You are a student?’ I say, ‘Yes.’ He says, ‘Please lend me books.’ I say, ‘I have only schoolbooks.’ He says, ‘Lend me schoolbooks.’ I give Mathematics. He asks, “Perhaps Classics?’ I ask, ‘Do you know Latin, Greek?’ He says, ‘Yes!’ I give him Ovid, he reads Ovid. I give him Xenophon, he reads Xenophon. I give him Homer, he reads Homer. Without dictionary, knows very well. I ask: ‘Why are you common soldier?’ He says, ‘For fifteen years now,’ tells me, because of packet, because of informers, because of bad people...”

“What?” the Professor interrupts him in astonishment.

“Because of packet,” Aristides repeats imperturbably, “because of informers, because of bad people. You know, Prague Revolution.⁴ I listen. My heart is sore, I say: ‘Is sad!’ I ask, “But can you perhaps do this task?’ He says, ‘Yes!’ I say, ‘Then do it!’ He does. I copy.”

The Professor had grown grave. “Does any one of you live near Lewczuk?” he then asked. I put my hand up. “Please let Lewczuk take you there. Speak with the man and then report to me. Perhaps there is something that can be done for him.” –

The three forenoon school-lessons were over. I went with Lewczuk

⁴ The Prague Uprising of June 12-17, 1848.

through the filthy streets, which lay in thick fog, to his remote dwelling in Russian Street. My fellow pupil was as flustered as someone with so happy a natural disposition could be. "Damn, if comes out," he said. "Captain gets wind, gets angry, has twenty-five given, man is sick, will die, who is to blame? I!" But then: "What, I? Not I! He himself! I say to him straight: 'I am *not* top of class, I am no star pupil, I am bad schoolboy. So make some *mistakes*; four mistakes: SATISFACTORY, or five: ADEQUATE, or six: PASSABLE AT A PINCH. But he promises, then does without mistakes, of course! Lang smells a rat!" I took the liberty of asking why my colleague did not endeavour to make only six mistakes in a task through his own efforts. "No point," he said with fatalistic resignation, "am in Quinta first year, must repeat anyway. No head, too stupid. But does no harm! Do I want to become a doctor? No! Or lawyer? No! Or professor? No! So, only priest, village, peasants, head good enough!" He made this confession to me at the gate to his dwelling. We waded through the mire of the courtyard. "Stables there," said Aristides, pointing to a small, dilapidated building, "will find there. I go have sleep, until noon. Cheerio!"

I walked through the stable doors. Two glossily currycombed horses neighed at me, weapons and regimentals hung on the walls. I was just about to withdraw when a violent coughing sounded towards me from the background, where a bed might have been, followed by the question: "Can I help you?"

I looked over but was not able to distinguish anything in the gloomy light of this day. So I touched my hat and spoke into the twilight: "I wish to speak with the Latinist Artilleryman." The man got up and walked towards

me. He was built quite tall, but his posture was limp, his figure emaciated. He had to be very ill. One could see this in his face also: it was bare and sombre, dreadfully sombre. And something more could be read from this face: that riding-breeches and stable-jacket were not the right attire for this man. I do not know how it happened, but I took off my hat. "I am the artilleryman you are seeking." A soft smile played around the corners of his mouth as he spoke. This made me aware that I, a complete stranger, had actually called him by his nickname, which threw me into so embarrassed a state that I told the tale of our Aristides's homework and Lang's instruction only very confusedly. He looked at me gratefully with his sad blue eyes. "I thank the Professor for his kindness and you for this trouble, I thank you with all my heart. I am sorry that poor Lewczuk got into hot water, but I really forgot the 'six mistakes.' I did not like doing it at all, but I did owe him a return for the books he had lent me. And the composition was correct?" "And how! The Professor said straight away: 'No grammar-school pupil wrote that!'"

"Yes," he said, "when you have once devoted your life to something, you don't forget it so easily." He coughed convulsively, and I was horrified to see bloody froth appearing on his lips for a moment. Then the fit eased up and he continued: "It is fifteen years since I had a Latin book in my hand. I had only Homer." He went to his bed and brought me the small, voluminous, well-worn little book. "I put this in my pocket on that night of the ninth to the tenth of May when they tore me out of bed in Prague, and since then, as by a miracle, I have smuggled it through everywhere. I should actually be angry with this book," he continued with an appalling

smile, "it has kept me alive."

"Oh, I know," I cried, "You were in the Prague Revolution!"

He shook his head. "No! I was a diligent student who lived only for his studies. My crime was: I once knew somebody who cared about politics."

"What?" I cried, horrified. "And for that –"

"Yes, for that!" But then he said, changing the subject, "So tell the Professor that I thank him with all my heart. But I can scarcely think what else could be done for me."

"But you are so ill! You cannot stay here any longer, in this damp stable!"

"Soon it will be spring!" he replied with a smile that cut me to the quick. "I always feel better when the days are fair. And if all the signs do not deceive me, my young friend, I shall become perfectly healthy again in this very spring!"

Tears filled my eyes. "Don't speak like that!" I asked. "Everything will be all right. We have Schmerling⁵ now!" I remembered how, three years before, at the end of February 1861, the entire town, and the grammar school in particular, had been illuminated to honour the February Constitution, and how we schoolboys, at the order of our class teacher, had made a banner at that time: 'Liberias et justitia Austriae fundamenta.' And so I continued: "We have a constitution now. Nobody may suffer injustice any longer. Now Austria is built on freedom and justice..." He

⁵ Anton von Schmerling (1805-93), a reforming statesman.

smiled, smiled so strangely, that I broke off. I have often been obliged to remember that smile – on July 30th, 1865 – on February 6th, 1871 ... and often since then, very often...

“We can perhaps,” I concluded, “make your life more bearable in the meantime. You would like books?”

“Oh,” he cried with delight, “that would certainly be splendid! If you would be so kind! You have no idea how great a favour you would be doing me!” He was electrified, his eyes shone. “If the Professor could lend me a solid commentary on Homer! Then perhaps a Horace. You see how insatiable I am already! And then – I would also like to read Schiller’s poems one more time, before I – before it becomes spring!”

“I shall see to everything,” I promised. “I’ll fetch the classics from the Professor this afternoon. But the Schiller I have myself, I’ll bring it right away.”

I ran home and brought him the book. The way in which he reached for it, trembling, and began to read in a low voice, is something I never shall forget.

After that, I went to Lang and told him everything. He was deeply affected and showed the liveliest interest. He would willingly have given me his whole library; laden like a mule, I trotted to Russian Street. At the same time, I brought an invitation from the Professor to pay him a visit soon. The poor artilleryman was moved to tears. He opened every book, read the title and cried out time after time: “Oh, to see this again!” Then we took everything to Lewczuk’s room; here, in the Treasury Stables, the books were not safe from confiscation. Honest Aristides did not, indeed,

truly understand the poor Latinist's joy, but he shared it. "Is glad about books!" he said, astonished, to me. "I'm never glad about books. But if poor, sick man is glad, I'm glad too!" The artilleryman also accepted the invitation with gratitude. "Next Sunday," he said, "when my Captain is hunting in Zuczka."

I took him to the Professor's house on that day and was allowed to stay. It was moving to see how the mortally ill man came to life, as it were, through contact with an educated man who took the liveliest interest in him and, moreover, pursued the same learned studies as he himself had formerly done. And on that day he told us the story of his life, a simple, sober story and yet full of crushing tragedy.

"My name is Franz Bauer and I was born in southern Bohemia, near Budweis. My parents were poor people, and I had to struggle my way up through my own efforts. Even during my schooldays, I supported myself by giving private lessons, and I continued to help myself in the same way at university. I entered Prague University in 1847 and studied Philology. I took no part in the movement of 1848; I had no connection with the Prague June Days. It is not that I was insensitive to the ideals which were championed at that time, they were the ideals of nationality and freedom, and my old folks had preached them to me, albeit in their own way. But I was not the type that is suited to noisy activity, being a quiet, timid person who was actually well versed only in his books. At that time, I began the preliminary work for a treatise: 'On the Genesis of the Homeric Epics.' Winter passed in tireless work, the spring of eighteen-hundred and forty-nine came. Then disaster broke over me.

“At that time I associated now and then with a compatriot and fellow student, who was a member of the student fraternity ‘Marcomannia.’ He was a good, hard-working person, but also fanatical and devoted to the revolutionary ideas. He came to me one day in March and told me that a large secret society had formed against the ‘black and yellow tyranny,’⁶ and he belonged to it: the society consisted of young people of all stations, Germans and Czechs, it had contact with the country folk and also, through some officers in Bohemian regiments, with the military. The purpose of the society was to seize Hradčany⁷ and all fortifications in Prague; on this signal, the whole land would rise up. He invited me to join the society, which I flatly refused to do; I also warned him not to get mixed up in such dangerous affairs. But he said, firstly, it was his duty to liberate the Fatherland, and secondly, the matter could not possibly miscarry, for the Prague Society did not stand alone, it was in contact with a large revolutionary league in Dresden through the Russian agitator Bakunin,⁸ and it maintained relations with Görgey,⁹ who would continue to defeat the Imperial and Royal¹⁰ troops and very soon be in Budapest, and soon be in Vienna also. Moreover, the society was under the leadership of proven and experienced patriots. Of course, I stuck to my refusal nonetheless, and he broke off, disgruntled. We did not speak about the matter subsequently, and I forgot about it. For it had not particularly interested me: it seemed to

⁶ Referring to the colours of the flag of the Habsburg Monarchy.

⁷ The district around Prague Castle.

⁸ Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), Russian anarchist.

⁹ Artúr Görgey (1818-1916), Hungarian General (and chemist).

¹⁰ k.k. = kaiserlich-königlich: Pertaining to the Dual Monarchy of Austria (Emperor) and Hungary (King).

me to just be a case of foolish, boyish fanaticism. But I was to be reminded of it in a terrible way... My friend had visited me several times during April. He usually called for me in the late afternoon, whereupon we would go for a longish walk that lasted into the night. So he came to me at dusk on May the ninth, a large, sealed packet under his arm. "Here I am," he said, "But now you must accompany me to my room, I want to get the packet to safety there. After that, I am at your disposal." But because he lived in a small alley in the Old Town and we had planned a walk in the opposite direction, I said, laughing: "Leave your treasure here until tomorrow! What is inside it?" "All kinds of papers," he replied, and I put it in my table drawer. We went out and spent some really pleasant hours. Around ten o'clock I returned home, read some Greek verses, and then fell asleep. It may have been around three o'clock in the morning when I was woken by a banging at my door. I started up in fright; I heard, outside, the wails of my old landlady, the curt question, 'Where does he sleep?' and the clashing of weapons. 'Soldiers!' I cried, horrified, and leapt to my feet. My first thought was of the fateful packet; I had to get rid of it. But it was too late, the patrol was already in my room. I was arrested, my books hastily rummaged through, my papers, including the packet, which I still held in my hand, bundled together and hauled away. Then they dragged me down the stairs and took me on a little cart through the twilight streets to Hradčany. On the street-corners in the city, which still lay in deep sleep, proclamations had been put up which announced a state of siege. I also saw an escort just stepping out of a house, with a young person, a student, in their midst. He was deathly pale, but he held his head up high and his eyes shone. 'Long

live the holy cause!' he enthusiastically cried to me. I made no answer, I was stunned. High up, the cannons were directed at the town, the Hradčany resembled a military camp... I was thrown into a prison. Here, I gradually became aware of my situation. There could be no doubt – that conspiracy of which my friend had spoken had been discovered, and I was arrested as an accomplice. They had found the papers on me, I did not know how they had got wind of that, but I was a lost man! But then I picked myself back up: I was innocent, and if there was a God in Heaven, He could not suffer me to pay for a crime I had not committed.”

The narrator paused. “And yet I did pay for it,” he cried despairingly, “paid with my whole life.” Then he calmed down again and continued: “Further details hold little interest for you, I am sure. I had been brought to disaster by my friend, but not intentionally. He had been arrested shortly before midnight. He was still awake; he had bolted the door and written a note to me in great haste: ‘Destroy the papers!’ He had entrusted this to his landlord, who had been disturbed from sleep. And this honest man had nothing better to do than hand it over, with my address, to the head of the patrol. It happened very quickly.

“The proceedings against me did not happen so quickly. The trial moved slowly forward, and I discovered from the judge, during the countless examinations, what a dangerous person I was. My innocence did not come to light; the gentlemen of the Court Martial pronounced me guilty. I was sentenced to death and the punishment was then, by way of grace, mitigated to twenty years’ service in the Artillery Train Corps. People call that mitigation and grace! Five years later, my Captain made my

acquaintance. He was the chairman of a military court which, incited by my comrades – I had told them my story – sentenced me to be transferred to a punishment battalion. My fate moved him, he took me on as his orderly and treats me quite humanely, that is to say, when he is sober...” And softly, very softly, he added: “Oh, if only it were spring!”

I shall not describe what we two listeners felt during this narration. The Professor sought to alleviate the man’s lot whenever he could, and I at least carried books to him, as there was really nothing else I could do for him.

His presentiment, his hope, that he would get well in the spring, did not deceive him.

On a fine Sunday in May, I walked down Russian Street with several fellow pupils. We were going to the small wood of Horecza. Then Aristides approached us; he was strolling towards the town. “Hey,” we cried, “come with us, Lewczuk”; he was always welcome as our scapegoat. But Aristides gravely shook his head. “I’m going to funeral,” he said, and turning to me, he continued: “Come with me, ‘Latinist’ is dead, poor, sick man, no hurt any more. Thursday gets haemorrhage, Captain has him dragged to hospital, died Friday morning. Funeral is today four o’clock, I bought schnaps for medical orderly, he told me.” We went to the military hospital. At four o’clock on the dot the sad procession strode out, the funeral procession of a common soldier. Only I and Aristides may have felt any sorrow. The ceremony at the graveyard was very short. The pastor spoke a short prayer, then the coffin was lowered into the grave, and two Czech medical orderlies cheerfully filled it up.

I cannot express what I felt during this. Aristides was very moved also. "Because of packet," he murmured. "Why did God allow?" Why?! I have no answer to that. Nor, I suppose, does the dear Lord or, just as little, the – Austrian government.