

The Voice of Mourning – extract – At Joyful Berta's

An avalanche of impressions overwhelmed him on that April day of the Birthday Parade. But there was one overriding image. It was more powerful than the military splendour, the rank upon rank of men arrayed in uniforms grey, black, brown, navy, pale blue; than the horses, trumpet-corps, kettle-drums; the weaponry, sabres, tanks, armoured cars, machine guns, heavy artillery grumbling down the Unter den Linden past the parade stand set in front of the University; the deafening, roaring crowd of spectators, worshippers shouting wave upon wave 'Heil! 'Heil!' It was the figure of Adolf Hitler himself. Flanked by glittering admirals and generals he seemed to stand alone, as though made of stone, in his silver-trimmed uniform and cap. The pudgy moon-face, the eyes watery blue yet somehow also dark and baleful, glared over his adoring troops as they marched past, sabres drawn and heads turned in salutation. The man possessed all the distinction of a head waiter, Beris thought. And yet the aura of evil was unmistakable, sickening.

And the cavalymen, intricate human beings with whom he had spent hours of companionable labour as well as leisure: now, on parade before their leader, their humanity was extinguished. Faces normally mobile, animated, ready to quicken with emotion, were drained of expression in the presence of the Supreme Commander. A mass of robots marched before their mechanical monarch, ready to do his bidding.

Open up a chasm beneath the horses' hooves and, summoned by the will of a complex-ridden tyrant, these automata would ride unseeing on, toppling row by row into the abyss, careless of their own fate and that of their mounts, to add their own to the heap of corpses at the bottom. Beris shuddered at his nearness to such abandonment of self.

Wrenching his eyes away from the genius of Germany as he acknowledged the worship, and leaving Maxim in control, Beris thought again of Krause and his lonely signals of resistance to the violence inflicted by the regime. Ashamed of his own cowardice, he resolved at the very least to warn the man of the danger he faced, even if he did not join him in his stand.

'What a privilege to be part of our great, all-powerful army, with Adolf Hitler at its head! We're invincible. It's true. Just let anyone try and get in our way now.'

As the men fed and watered the horses back at the barracks designated as the regiment's Berlin billet, even Dietrich, normally more restrained, exalted in reliving the splendour of the day.

'Didn't I tell you how marvellous he is?' Huebsch demanded, afire with self-importance at his own prior experience of the Führer's enchantment.

After settling the animals down a small group made their way to the Potsdamer Platz to sit in a bar watching the ceaseless movement of the traffic and the crowds that crossed the brightly-lit intersection.

Berliners of all ages filled the bar. They gave indulgent and admiring glances at the carousing group of cavalymen; already quite drunk, they were still revisiting the hours of the parade, recalling the details with alcohol-fuelled euphoria.

'He would give his life for us. For Germany. Think of his bravery during the World War! And I . . . I would not hesitate to sacrifice mine for him and the Fatherland.' Dietrich pulled himself erect in his seat and took another greedy swig of beer.

'We are truly the children of the Gods,' mumbled the normally phlegmatic Hans Meier, a conscript from a petty-bourgeois background in Kiel. 'And if we have to die, to spill

our German blood, there will surely be a heroes' welcome in Valhalla.' He gave a self-conscious giggle at the obvious exaggeration.

Beris watched Krause out of the corner of his eye. His jaw was rigid and his eyes flinty with irritation. Beris scoured his brain for some distraction, some way to prevent him speaking his mind.

'Do you seriously believe all that pagan rubbish?' Krause said suddenly, glaring at Meier with angry contempt. 'You ought to know better. It's just mythology, fairy stories, fine to be revived by Wagner, to inspire some great music, but not to be taken seriously. You're talking as though it's a real religion.'

Meier slammed his mug onto the zinc table with a clang that drew eyes from all over the bustling bar. 'Listen to the mealy-mouthed liberal! It's better than eating the flesh of a dirty Jew as part of your religion,' he snarled.

Advancing from a position beside the food hoist at the back of the room, the tall waiter with lavishly oiled black hair who was responsible for serving their table edged closer, just within earshot.

Krause paled at the wounding jibe. He leaned forward in his seat, slapping both palms on the arm-rests, about to stand up. The two or three members of the group who had held back from the argument looked at each other in exasperation.

'Come on boys,' Beris said with feigned joviality. 'We've had a wonderful time. Please don't spoil it by fighting. Let's get another round of drinks.'

He clicked his fingers at the waiter who slid immediately to his side. Beris laid his hand on Krause's sleeve.

'Calm down old chap. Let's not take this too far. It's not going to get any of us anywhere, you know. Simmer down. Please.' The final word with vehemence.

The man stared straight into his eyes. Beris read despondency and resignation in the look. But Krause sank back into the chair and fell silent.

'Hey, boys! I've got a wonderful idea,' Dietrich said. He seized his fifth heavy tankard of frothing beer and gulped a long draught.

'We're not far from Joyful Berta's. Maybe you've heard of her. What an excellent place! I happen to know it well. We could all do with a little of what she has on offer there. Something that most of us are in need of. What do you reckon?'

The proposal drew grins and a babble of assent. Hoary old Speck wriggled his hips suggestively. Krause said nothing and Beris also remained silent. Of course he knew what was meant and was trying to decide whether he would lose greater face by leaving now or waiting until the last minute.

He decided to hang on with the crowd, moved by curiosity: what would a proletarian whorehouse be like?

Rapidly galvanised, the men drained their drinks, paid up and left the bar. They had to wait outside for Speck, who dashed back, saying he needed the lavatory. Beris saw him stop to talk to the waiter on his way to the stairs.

They headed not west towards the twinkling mecca of the Kurfürstendamm but southeast down Saarlandstrasse, loping past the Potsdamer and Anhalter Stations, further down yet and towards the Landwehr Kanal. At some point Beris turned to look back up the street to find that Krause was no longer trailing behind the group.

Soon they left the traffic and the tramlines behind, plunging into narrow streets amid tall tenements built for Berlin's workers in the nineteenth century and not yet fully sanitised by the wholesomeness imposed by National Socialism. The shameless decadence

of the Republic had given way to the hole-in-the-corner depravity of Hitler's Reich. This was what they sought in the old streets of Kreuzberg south of the city centre.

Dietrich led them along the bank of the canal, and then down a tiny cobbled lane with no pavement. He slowed down, examining the doorways along the left hand side one by one in the near-darkness. The other cavalymen stood in a self-conscious group in the centre of the lane, watching him peer at doorposts and windows, most of them unlit.

Speck wandered a few yards back down the lane and Beris heard the splash of his urine against the bricks of a nearby tenement block.

'Here it is,' Dietrich shouted. He thumped at a door that looked just like all the others in the street. Almost immediately a rectangular peephole snapped open, releasing a shaft of ghostly blue light.

Dietrich jiggled his head to bring his face into view from inside. He must have been a reassuring sight as the door was thrown open to reveal an enormous, grinning man whose bulk filled the narrow frame. He was wearing a very tight black tail-coat and trousers that failed to restrain a belly that billowed out in a series of mountainous rolls. His hair was arranged in a row of flat curls across his brow in the style of a Roman emperor on a commemorative plaque.

'Enter, gentlemen. At your service. Every service, I'm sure,' he said with a leer that barely dimpled the solid fat of his cheeks. He threw a greedy look at the troopers standing behind Dietrich in the street.

Bathed in azure light the handful of enervated girls slumped on sofas and chairs around the room looked far more unhealthy than they could have been in reality. One or two raised their heads with a feeble return of energy to inspect the soldiers trooping into the room. A record revolving on a gramophone in the middle of the floor emitted slow jazz music.

With a throaty cry of welcome a fleshy, ageing blonde appeared from behind a beaded curtain across a doorway at the back of the room. She raised her arms in a broad arc as though to embrace all the visitors, tugging heavy breasts improbably high inside her glittering lime green dress.

'Darlings, darlings, come in. Come in! Join the party,' she ordered. The men huddled together near the door, which the fat man shut behind them.

'Joyful Berta,' Dietrich announced.

'Theodore. Champagne for our guests. The best.' She motioned to the doorman, who scuttled past the clients more nimbly than seemed possible given his size.

As if in response to an unspoken command the girls rearranged themselves puppet-like over the furniture in poses intended to inflame; some flung their legs over the backs of sofas to reveal the curve of a thigh and much of what lay above, others leaned forward in their chairs, elbows on spread knees; one or two let their breasts slip out of cunningly draped negligées.

The men stared at them hard. One or two shuffled their feet uncertainly.

One girl patted a spot on the sofa beside her, raised her eyebrows and smiled at Speck. Her hair, probably a striking red in daylight, was transmuted by the sepulchral blue light into an odd purple. Speck looked round at his companions, laughed and wriggled into the indicated space, following up with a sideways lunge at the woman, eager hands grasping at her breasts.

'Wait, boy, wait,' she crooned, catching his head in her hands and pushing him away with some force. 'Let's have a drink first.' The other men settled down, shown to seats by Berta herself.

Fascinated but reluctant, Beris sat a little apart on a bentwood chair with a table beside it. He shook his head at the girl who came to sit on the other side. Dark-haired and delicately pretty, hardly older than sixteen, she gave a wan smile.

The champagne -- six bottles of cheap *sekt* -- was carried into the room by the gigantic Theodore, who manipulated tray and glasses again with unexpected deftness.

Gradually the men relaxed as the wine took effect and the women drew them out with easy skill. A dance tune was set on the gramophone and two couples got up to quickstep round the room, closely entwined and ungainly. Once or twice they lumbered so close to the machine that the needle jumped, with an ugly rupture in the music. When the record ended Beris lifted the gramophone onto the table.

As each bottle was finished Theodore brought out another, until all the troopers except Beris were very drunk. Watching them blunder around, he wondered if any of them would be capable of performing.

But one by one they staggered away, supported by the women, through the beaded curtain and up the stairs beyond. Beris heard steps cross the floor of the room above his head, followed by a crash as a heavy body fell onto the bed.

'Are you sure you don't want to come with me,' the girl beside him asked quietly. 'It's not expensive. Only fifteen marks. But I need the money.' There was a thread of desperation in her voice.

His compassion was shot through with disapproval. 'Can't you find anything better to do? No other way of earning money? Surely there are jobs available elsewhere?'

'I did have a job. I was a maid in a grand house in Charlottenburg but they threw me out . . . I got pregnant. The son of the house denied it, of course. I know . . . It's an old story. Berta took me in and even found someone to look after the baby. Like this I can earn enough money to pay for her. She's only a year old.' Her smile was fleeting, wistful. Beris caught a glimpse of what she must have looked like as a child herself, not that long ago.

'It's an old story. Yes,' he said, remembering Romantic novels that thrived on such predicament.

'I bet you've never even done it. You don't look old enough. Wet behind the ears,' she said. 'Go on, admit it.'

'That's not quite true,' he replied slowly. 'But it's too complicated and sad to explain.'

'Come on. You're a soldier now and you know what soldiers are. I certainly do,' she added with a laugh, only slightly bitter. 'Why not have a try. It's easy. Come upstairs and I'll teach you.'

He was more sober than his comrades but had drunk enough to shake off some of his inhibition. He had no idea if he was capable physically of sex with a woman. But he had never assumed that love between men in itself excluded the other kind.

'All right. Let's try it,' he said finally, tired of holding out, curious about the physical process, also hoping to avoid becoming the butt of the other men's barrack-room humour. And if they could gain satisfaction, or at least release, why not him?

Gripping his hand hard as if determined to prevent him escaping, she led him up the stairs and along an uncarpeted corridor lit by a single bare bulb. At the top of a second staircase at the back of the house they stopped beside a low door.

'This is my room. It's the smallest because I'm the youngest,' she said.

In the dark Beris heard the sound of a match striking and then the flame of a yellow candle showed him a rumpled bed, a table, a Madonna and Child in a bamboo frame hanging on the wall.

'Would you like me to undress you?' she asked.

Nervous and embarrassed, he replied with a question of his own: 'What's your name?' he asked.

'Hannah,' came the answer. She sat on the bed and removed her own clothes, leaving on only grubby feathered slippers. Then she stood up, and Beris saw the contours of her slim body, the small, vulnerable breasts, the angular protrusions of shoulders and hips and the darker patch of shadow between her thighs.

She stepped towards him, took his hand and placed it on her breast. With her other hand she reached for the buttons at the waist of his breeches and undid those nearest the top. He felt her hand slip down, cool against his warmer flesh, and for the first time since his return to Germany, his penis filled and rose.

Sitting awkwardly on the bed he watched her remove his boots and then pull his breeches away. He stood while she folded back the garish, flower-patterned counterpane and then lay down, quiet, waiting.

Beris bent over and looked at her. And all at once the inviting, lascivious smile on the little whore's lips seemed a revolting parody of desire. Now, irreversibly, he saw her as a victim staked out before him: defenceless, wretched and doomed, trapped in a cycle of exploitation, in a market for human misery.

His lust failed as swiftly as it had flared and he turned away in shame for both of them.

He dressed hurriedly while she lay there dull-eyed and downcast. 'No good, eh?' she said sourly, levering herself onto one elbow.

'It's not your fault,' Beris said.

He took a sheaf of notes from his tunic pocket and counted out 30 marks. 'Try and find something else. Before it's too late,' he said as he laid them on the table beside the bed.

Anxious not to disturb his comrades he crept downstairs and made for the street door. Half a turn of the metal ring handle told him it was locked. At a loss he stepped back into the room. But with a grunt Theodore prised his mass sleepily out of an armchair. Expressionless and without a word he let the client out.