Mirana Likar

*The Storyteller*

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

22.

*At some point in the spring, when I had already greatly recovered, she took me from the camp to a town… well, to a slightly larger village close by. On the way we met soldiers hustling along old men at gunpoint, with the women and children following behind them. Nobody spoke. I didn’t ask her anything. I didn’t even look at her. There was no need. I knew where I was.*

She led him to a small church. Everything that could be removed had already been carried away. The icons will wait, hidden in dark corners, for different times when they will once more be brought out into the open. It is dark. It has been a while since any candle has been lit here and all that is left on the walls are the frescoes. Some of them had been shot at but the bullets bounced back off the walls, scaring the perpetrators into abandoning their party game with the saints. It won’t be long, Nikolai thought to himself, before these colours will vanish into the limewash or deteriorate in some other way. Outside poverty, the military and greyness, in here bearded saints, books and raised index fingers, Alpha and Omega, in long circular rows from the lesser saints up to the Virgin Mary. And on the left wall a yellow arch. Beneath it Saint George on a blue background. In a splendid cloak. A white, well-decked out horse. The saint’s long spear has just pierced the neck of a scaly dragon. The beast writhes greenly in deathly anguish. On its back, red, bat-like wings. A dead serpentine tail and clawed feet. Head thrown backwards. The dying creature stares straight at Nikolai… And George, triumphant, does also.

*Of course I didn’t know why she had brought me or what I was supposed to do there. I stayed silent and waited to see what she would say. Whence all this colour, in the middle of nowhere, I wondered. Would I know how, she asked, to set up a foundry here? Of course I would. A foundry, created with my own hands, now that would surely be… A new move …*

He could, before their eyes, create something really important and gain their trust. They had abolished the God who was of no use to anyone and whom nobody could count on. He would create a foundry that could appear useful to everyone. It would be a handy excuse for the force with which they opposed one idea and tried to assert another. In the foundry new people who no longer had anywhere to plead for mercy, would place a new icon, a new holy image. A moustached ‘Asiatic’ in an army shirt. Nikolai did not yet know that under his rule, which cared not for justice, just as God didn’t, there was not, is not, and would not be any mercy for the two of them, him and his commissar. All that was important to him was the sense that he was not just marking time.

*If you stop, that’s it. The end. Obviously, I knew how to do it, and I wanted to prove myself. Not for steel, I told her, you need immense temperatures for steel, impossible to achieve here, but it would be achievable for non-ferrous metals... I used to be a professional metalworker.*

This is where we would put the casting pit, over there we could smelt the pieces of aluminium, the furnace will have to be small but still large enough. Perhaps we would need a tilting pot as well, to make it easier to…

He did not hear the gunshots.

When they stepped out of the church, the old men were dead, lying on the green grass, the women and children crying without tears. The soldiers had left. And once again he remained silent, the commissar also didn’t say anything. He couldn’t decide whether she had known that, once the two of them would go inside the church, these people would be shot. Was this why she had brought him here at that very moment? Could he trust her? Were those shot the outcome of fallacies, of terror? The truth that should always win? A danger to those in power? With their beards and wrinkles? Had they perhaps merely given milk instead of water to some thirsty man who was not ‘ours’ enough, though he could have been, because he looked like their son? Or just water? Had the foreign forces randomly slept over in one of their houses? Has someone merely said the wrong thing? Thought the wrong thoughts? Summarily spread out the wrong map on their table? And where had the sons of those killed disappeared to?

He was not stupid. She walked so close to him they almost touched and it seemed as if they would become closer. The button on her chest barely held the fabric of her army blouse together, looking as if it might fly off at any moment. No, he wasn’t stupid. Asking too many questions, he might give too much away. Then, all too soon, he could be all alone again. High up in the mountains he would hang over precipices that devour you in no time and you turn into nothingness.

As you turn into nothingness, you cannot be alone, you need to feel some closeness, hear a voice, touch another human being.

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Instead, he preferred to indulge in storytelling. She listened to him with interest. He acquired wings that carried him to unimaginable heights with a taste of bitterness and hope.

So, this is where the casting pit will be, over there we will melt down pieces… of old aluminium, for example, there is no need for a chimney… The matter was becoming big. For both of them. They went to the church often.

Occasionally they would meet someone who would not look at them, would not smile. Whenever they could, everyone avoided them, stared at the floor… into no man’s land between the system that the two of them represented and the enemies of the people who were everywhere.

*To melt aluminium, you need a furnace that will reach six, if not seven hundred degrees. I couldn’t get real, quality coke there, even though the Russians had plenty, so I built a fuel oil burner, there was oil in the warehouse. I took a barrel about a metre across, lined it with firebricks I had taken from the ovens, what did you think, you take what’s available and where it’s available. Just clay, which you can find plenty of everywhere in nature, is not good enough for a furnace. I also lined the fire pit to reduce heat loss. Instead of a chimney, I just opened the door and the window.*

They started bringing war waste to Nikolai: cables, parts of engines, pots and pans, once they even haul in remnants of an airplane. In his simple furnace he heats them into a melt and with his smelting ladle that he had also made himself, pours it like soup into the moulds, pressed into quartz sand mixed with clay, collected along the river.

*I taught all the boys in the village, still children in fact, to collect the right kind of sand. A foundry needs lots of it. For a hundred kilos of products you need a hundred kilos of sand. They also learned how to make the form, the female and male parts of the casting mould. You use a wooden model in the sand. It represents the positive of what you want to cast. You take it out of the sand to achieve a hole which you cover with the male part of the cast and pour the melted metal into the space left in the sand. It is known as gravity casting and the process is thousands of years old. For simple things, I knew how to make the wooden models myself. A lid, for example. A pot. A door handle. We mostly made pots that the army needed, eight, ten-gallon pots. We had already made a lot of these when I thought that we could also cast beautiful decorative plates. I just had to think of something to prove that I could also create things of beauty, not just essential items. But for this I needed a proper woodcarver with visual artistic perception. There were people of many different professions at the camp. I asked around for anyone who might fit the bill. I found a Dutch fellow who said he could do it. At the time he hadn’t told me that he was a diamond cutter. He just said that he would know how to make what I needed. I was proud of those plates. Everyone wanted to have them. The Dutch fellow and I got along well. We played chess and dreamed of what life would be like when we got out of there. I need to introduce you to my sister, he said, I’m sure she will like you. But we never met again after the war. What happened to him? I don’t know. What kind of a question is that? If we didn’t meet again, we didn’t meet. Just remember, what I tell you, I tell you myself. What I’ve forgotten, I’ve forgotten.*

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The boys from the village couldn’t go anywhere and seemed to have lost hope. Nikolai wanted to teach them a trade but their gazes were blank and their hands clumsy. They scowled continuously and he could not get them into a better mood. Despite the smelting furnace, the church was ice cold and only felt slightly warmer when he handed out the pieces of army bread that he would bring along with him in a bag.

*They never smiled. One of them was particularly gloomy. I later found out that they had killed both his parents. His elder brother had reported on them. Children reported on parents and were praised as heroes. No man could endure there. That was clear. When terror rules, it is just as bad everywhere.*

Terror respects nothing and knows only threats, distrust, and fear.

He lived on the margins of wars and also at the heart of intimidation, unheard of until then. Without a trace of freedom.

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He could cast objects and create new from old, but what did this actually mean to him? What use were they to him and how would aluminium plates with patterns and scenes, and all the rest that he cast and was loaded onto trucks and driven off into the unknown, actually help him? Had Saint George on the wall opposite the furnace, choking in fuel oil vapours, really killed the dragon?

Every evening he went to the commissar’s office to report on what he had done at the foundry. And during this reporting things became serious. Something. Well. Perhaps. The air was charged like the times he used to take Marietta to the cinema. He had no assurance that what he was sensing was real. Sometimes she was so close that he could feel her breath on his cheek and things began stirring down below. But it was impossible to know what might happen if he touched the untouchable person in uniform. He considered and combined the possible consequences, wondering what would happen, checking his position every time he felt he was being drawn towards her. A continuous exhausting adjustment of the rudder: maybe she likes me, maybe she doesn’t, she might be deceiving me, she might be tempting me, I don’t know where this is going, what is its purpose… He felt that the commissar could save him, ruin him, humiliate him, elevate him… the power emanating from her was terrifying and tempting...

As once before in the past, he was now again wondering whether he could kiss the woman next to him, or whether a kiss would also bring with it all the rest. Today? Tomorrow? Once? When is once? What would become of him then?

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They began assembling detainees at the camp, people of all possible nationalities, most with bits of them missing. Their overall weakness made them all look entirely innocent. We will detain the Germans, said the commissar, and then redistribute them again. Some will indeed travel off towards Germany, others won’t. There were other kinds of camps to the east. He could only imagine what they were like. They sucked onto human lives with hundreds of tentacles, hunger, illness, exhaustion, human beasts, cold, despair. Trains home were due to start running… In all this chaos, we don’t know when. The Romanians and the Dutch will be the first to get a place on them, then the Italians and the Finns, then… *We’ll see*.

The diamond cutter will leave and, free once again, he will forget all about Nikolai, still stuck in confinement. The only thing left behind will be his casting moulds for plates with grapes and vines, and boats out at sea, and shells… sad memories… of places that probably still exist somewhere, even if for no other reason than to give hope, but that Nikolai was not allowed to think about. Were he to compare, other people’s happiness would become his misery, driving him crazy, his days would lose their brightness. Even now, when talking about this, he can feel that terrible pang in his chest, the train, to the train, the train that would take him home, was all he could think about. But he no longer dared mention the train, his home, or his mother Maria Theresa, because, whenever he did, the commissar looked away, towards that wretched no man’s land, even though the foundry was working. He did everything right but despite this felt that his mentions of the train and home and Maria Theresa seemed like a betrayal. And she no longer said to him, you too will go home. Why not? He had completed his task, cast all that she had asked him to, even door handles that will open new entrances, and pots that would be used in homes for cooking, and ladles with which they will be able to share the warm soup, gathered around the table… She could at least have mentioned something, given him new, stronger hope. But she said nothing! But who was it who would decide when he will get onto that train? Perhaps this depends on someone more important, someone above her, holding the reins over her? No, it must be quite simple, the train would take him home, things there would be as they were when he last walked down the familiar streets. It cannot be any other way.

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At the time he still had no sense of the transience of life, did not yet know the bitter taste of the words *too soon*. Now, surrounded with *too soon*, he waits: just one more spring, please, one more March twenty-first. One more birthday. And then, if he’s lucky, one more summer with the eternal smell of the sea and pine trees. She will take him to… She will take him and be with him. She’s an honest woman.

…

24.

The commandant was a rather content man and this revitalised everyone in the camp, for an upbeat person seemed at least slightly less dangerous. He was waiting for the birth of his son! It can’t be any other way, surely it would be a son! But even a girl, a doll, would be fine, as long as she’s healthy. He was lucky with his post. The camp he was put in charge of was for now, at least by comparison with others, a peaceful place. The hospital, warehouses, prisoners from all over the place who hope that they will soon, without further detours, be able to go home. They make souvenirs out of things they find on the way, wooden boxes into which they stick their photo and write Russland 1944/1945, for example, and shoes that look more like socks, sewing as many patches they can find onto the toe and heel parts, tying them around their ankles with string, hoping that they will use them to go far, reach their destination, if they are lucky. They trade in secret, even though it seems that there is nothing to trade with, but no worries, trade is as old as humanity itself, always flows, even along seemingly dry riverbeds. They seem peaceful enough, hoping that this way they will be saved sooner.

When Nikolai entered, the commandant stretched like a huge cat who didn’t know what to do with itself or the mouse, and kindly nodded for him to come closer and sit down. He produced a bottle and two glasses, you’re one of us, the foundry is quite something, they clinked their glasses in a toast and emptied them in one. Nikolai belonged.

*These Russians, with them everything is down in one. Everything.*

You will become my assistant, your special task is to sort out the warehouses, he told him. We need you, we see you are thorough and efficient. Please, sign that you are from now onwards a soldier of the Soviet Army, and that you are aware that you will finish your task. This is good for you and for us. You know that yourself. Then you will go home, if things don’t change. We will discuss all that. Perhaps you will want to stay with us, our country is a beautiful country. It is joyful, with an ear for people like you. We will also need you for translating, with such a knowledge of languages, you are very welcome.

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The commandant’s assistant! For a moment, Nikolai was almost cheerful. He forgot about everything. It was hard to imagine that the state with one of the best constitutions in the world would lie and cheat. Laws and rules were made to suit the honest, little people, and in this bright moment, Nikolai was, without doubt, an honest, little person. They might have cheated him when he surrendered and the leaflet promised something very different from what he actually got, but then he was a German soldier on the run and a prisoner of war, now things have changed. The man praising and toasting with him, is surely being honest. Nikolai signed. Committed himself. And no longer thought about the signature and his commitment.

*That was the first of three things I signed there. About the warehouses and that I would help run the camp as the commandant’s assistant. If you can’t imagine what I signed after that, then you can’t, never mind. Perhaps I will get to that, but I also need to keep some things to myself. I’ll see what I can still remember.*

With the commandant’s order he set off to the warehouse to pick up his new uniform, a towel, a piece of grey soap. He was given all this by a sleek-looking attendant, polite and, for the camp, unusually friendly. He was even kinder than the commandant and Nikolai was so happy that they forgot all about caution and mistrust, the eyes everywhere, and began chatting. They told each other who they were and where they came from. He was… something like a prop man at a theatre, perhaps a ballet dancer, or even a theatre manager… Nikolai cannot remember for sure, though he must have been one of those things, perhaps not the manager, and via some strange and lucky coincidences, he had been sent to this very camp from Kiev. He didn’t mention that it was because he liked men more than women, but Nikolai suspected as much.

*He was, well, you know, slightly on the other side, that’s what I think, today that is acceptable, but at the time…*

Although the Soviets initially tolerated certain passions, in his subsequent constant search for enemies, Stalin decided that that there was no place for the prop man and people like him in Soviet life. You never know what they will do with love but what is certain is that they are not going to devote it to a tyrant. Stalin initiated the notorious Article 121 of the Soviet criminal code, a five-year jail sentence. From then on the thespian was considered a fascist, which was absurd because Hitler, the chief fascist, would instantly attach a pink triangle to him and shove him in a concentration camp that only differed from the Soviet camp in the fact that people there were not killed in unorganised, chaotic circumstances, some through starvation, others by the cold, others through illness, yet others by human monsters, instead the Nazis changed chaos into a planned and technologically refined system, into a factory of death that operated according to explicitly specified methods and processes. Though Nikolai was not convinced that the unorganised chaotic conditions with the Soviets were not also an explicitly specified method and process.

At the time, the prop man and Nikolai cared little about the differences between camps, methods and processes because, being too close to the events and lacking information, they could not see the entire forest, and inklings were not enough to go by. Officially the prop man had not even been punished because of his desires and yearnings but for something far more dangerous: counter-revolution. Only by chance had he avoided more drastic punishment and found himself in Nikolai’s story, used to his secretive life conducted in special places, theatres and public toilets, because he was unable to take himself anywhere else. Previously he had, like Nikolai, lived with his mother. He knew how to operate in a stealthy way and the man who had come to pick up his new uniform was tall and handsome. He liked the way he looked. His manners appeared cultivated. The attendant made an effort to give him the best he had. The new uniform fitted Nikolai well and was clean.

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Warm water and soap are a true relief for rough and dried skin. It smells of lavender, my favourite soap, Sandra says, they make it in Tuscany and now they sell it here as well, in every cosmetics store. Nikolai sits on a white chair under the shower. He never lifts up his arms and Sandra does not know what the inside of his forearms look like, so tightly does he hold them against his body, as if surrounded by everlasting cold. Sandra helps him into a new dressing gown and makes another tick, another day is over, another hurdle climbed, she can watch this naked old man, touch him and register it into her tour of duty and into the prospect of a happier life. She also helps him into bed and then goes to tidy the bathroom. She watches the water swirl into the drain, carrying away time.

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Once again he belonged to the triumphant and living human species, once again he found himself on the right bank while the river of German uniforms poured with renewed intensity into the camp. Exhausted groups of diverse nationalities and professions, drained and with a single thought, a swiftest possible end to their detention. German accountants and Hitler youth, Alsatian toolmakers, Romanian singers and Serbian cooks, Dutch sailors and Italian violinists, Hungarian farmers and French bakers… Perhaps he was in a marginally better situation, or marginally worse, depending on how he looked at things. He had her, the commissar, they had only painful yearning eroding away their sleep. And if they did manage to sleep, even in their dreams they longed for the commission, once it was their turn to stand before it, to identify them as capable of travelling off to lands they considered their own. That imagined margin of advantage was probably only a delusion that kept him within a zone of apparent satisfaction, he had an improvised room at the warehouse entrance and in it, for the first time in a long time, a little privacy. What they actually intended to do with him, he did not know.

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According to his instructions, they took everything off the shelves, cleaned out every corner, he ordered them to count and make an inventory of every item in the warehouse, and then stacked it all back on the shelves. He was there at every stage and nothing escaped his attention. The mess in the warehouse was not an obstacle but an opportunity. He would go onto the train a winner. His files were a precise reflection of the situation. Maria Theresa’s consistency had found its purpose, German military thoroughness had become his most useful virtue. He kept an eye over the living and the lifeless, materials and detainees – his warehouse staff. Attentive, focused, efficient. He knew everything, how much of each thing came into the camps, how much they handed out, how much they used. He calculated what was needed for his foundry, to which he occasionally still paid a visit. He knew how much scrap metal they needed to acquire and how many items they could make out of it. It was now run by the Dutch diamond cutter who even had the idea of casting decorations for triumphant Soviet tanks, and talked about this with great enthusiasm. They could hand paint them if they were able to get the right paints. On the tanks his emblems with stars, most certainly each one would have to have a five-pointed star, would go far, far…

*He was an incredible man. He understood the situation and liked beautiful things. He liked talking about diamonds and knew all there was to know about them, but I’ve forgotten all that now.*

Nikolai was regarded as unbribable but it is easy to be unbribable when you are not drawn into temptation and when all you think about is when the first transportations might begin and when, therefore, would be the last one, on which he had been promised a place. Surely they would not hold him longer than the last one, they had given him their word. They will keep it, he believed because he wanted to believe. He thought of Maria Theresa and what he could bring her upon his return. Aluminium plates with grapes and vines would be a nice gift. Three, perhaps. Or six, six is a set. Or even more. They could give some to others. Tank decorations – no! Perhaps the Dutchman could cast something beautiful… She no longer spoke to him in his dreams even though he thought a lot about her, even now that he had the commissar. Or did the commissar have him. But probably because of this, he no longer called out for his mother with quite the same yearning as before. He would have liked to know what she would have advised him about this woman, though no advice of hers could change his behaviour, driven by passion, his current circumstances, and the hope of the gains that might come out of their position. Despite the fact that he was now the commandant’s assistant, apart from the commissar, the Dutch diamond cutter and the theatre prop man, nobody really talked to him. They didn’t trust him. He didn’t trust them either. He stayed silent and did not impose himself on anyone, merely observed.

Nobody had any personal belongings. The commandant, the officers, the commissars, the doctors had no apparent possessions. He found no beautiful things apart from those plates and the wall paintings in the church converted into the foundry, nothing for the eye to rest upon. His warehouse was half empty and he was no longer indifferent about this. What if something runs out and he will not know where the thing they lack had gone? The emptiness of the shelves was disheartening. Oil, belts, fat, blankets, flour, flasks, mess tins, sugar, cornmeal, wheat, uniforms, rags that used to once be trousers, underwear and socks, almost disintegrating, weapons with their special inaccessible protocol, footwear, all counted and noted in the books in Nikolai’s small room where he spends his days stocktaking and checking the books, and his nights trying to sleep. And sometimes… she comes…

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Fortunately he was alone when a heavy hand shook him. He leaped up, ready to run, escape, protest, anything… Still asleep, his legs were shaking… When he recognised the commandant’s face, he calmed down. But not for long.

A s*takan, he held up a faceted drinking glass at me, I brought it with me. My wife has given birth and I have nothing at home with which she could regain some of her lost strength. I’ve come here, to ask you, Kolya, to give me a little sugar, I know you won’t refuse me, I know you’re a good man.*

*Everyone is bribable, remember that. It is just the bribes that differ. For some it is money, for others it is life, theirs or of those close to them, for yet others something else. It is not always easy to know where bribing ends and blackmail begins. That always depends on the circumstances and someone who has not experienced it cannot know what they would decide, when they would give in.*

A *stakan* of sugar would not be much. Nobody would notice, nobody could tell that there was less of the stuff if Nikolai went and stole a glass of sugar. She had given birth to his son, the man tried to talk him into it, I’d like to give her something for her effort, pamper her a little, she is very weak and sugar would give her an instant boost in strength, I can’t bring her anything else, and she is so exhausted... But stealing sugar was not just theft, it was a betrayal of Soviet principles, cheating the State, resisting the system, instant court martial. The silent sound of a thin sharp blade split Nikolai’s thoughts into two. Perhaps this important person was a provocateur who came this very night to check whether he really was devoted, honest, trustworthy, and whether all he had said about himself so far was true. On the other hand, perhaps the commandant is not as important as it appeared and really does simply need a glass of sugar to save his wife from postnatal fatigue. Giving him or refusing him the sugar – both could be equally as dangerous. If he has come to check Nikolai’s peerless reputation and it turns out that Nikolai is a counter-revolutionary thief, he could be shot. If the sugar would make him happy and Nikolai refuses to give some to him, he might not die straight away, but things would certainly change over time. The commandant will not allow him onto the train. He would work at the warehouse until the very end and eternal nothingness. Every day he will encounter resentment, not plain ordinary resentment that would not get to him, but resentment from the most important person in the camp, a hundred times more significant than him, Nikolai, the ordinary soldier who was, on top of everything, a foreigner, whose only uncertain defence was the commissar whose purposes he was not at all sure of. He would end up in misty clouds. On a mountain road. Chafed hands and wounds on his feet. Perhaps from the new pneumonia. Or due to dynamite. On a miserable bunk in a dormitory. Inside the shack he had helped to build. It wasn’t important where. He will be alone. Alone. Worth less than nothing. Is a glass of sugar a gift or theft? Betrayal or a confirmation of trust? He could not report on the officer. And anyway, how can you report on a person who has turned to you at a time of distress? The damn glass of sugar! If you fill it, you could die, if you don’t, also.

*Even now I don’t know what that was all about. A single glass of sugar… and it changes your life, and you don’t know whether it has changed for the better or if things are worse that they would have been without it.*

He crossed the line, went into the dark warehouse without switching on the light, felt for the sack, opened it up and pushed the glass inside. The commandant carefully, without spilling a single tiny crystal, put it in his pocket, and went his way, shoulders lowered, sticking tightly to the shadows alongside the wooden stairs. From now on, Nikolai would be bound to these footsteps with invisible threads, even more that he was bound by his signature to the promise of sorting out the warehouses. He spent the rest of the night in restless observation of the black ceiling, deciding that he would not mention the sugar to the commissar, listening out and waiting to hear voices coming to get him. He wondered whether they would grab him and how it will be, what he would say to them, what excuse he would find, what his worst and best chances were…

Nobody came but he is still afraid of those footsteps. Are we locked in? he always asks Sandra before they fall asleep. And he goes to the door and tries the handle, as if now things are different to the time before he started locking it and Gustl could walk in just like that, without knocking.

He thought to himself that something must be seriously wrong if the commandant came to him for a glass of sugar, and something seriously right that he was able to give him one, but could not find any proper way of describing either of these *somethings*.

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It was the Dutch who were most pleased, they were to be the first to go home. Nikolai sat at the doorstep of the warehouse, watching them play football with a ball made of rags. The diamond cutter came to say goodbye. And he said all that is said when you know that someone has helped you but you don’t ever wish to meet them again because all that connects you is best forgotten.

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I know that you’re in a hurry to get home, said the commandant, the person to whom he was now bound with a sugary thread and who one day called him into his office again. I also know that you don’t want to stay with us, despite…, he smiled conspiratorially and drew the shapes of a woman’s curves in the air. But now you’re one of us, we’re happy with you and I personally appreciate you highly, and we can’t just let you go like that. We both know that. We’re friends. You’ve proved yourself. Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia can wait. The first trains towards the Balkans will leave at the end of summer, perhaps in the autumn, perhaps the winter, or next spring… This is a decisive time for us, we rely too much on you, surely you understand that you won’t be able to leave just like that. We need you, the way you are. Capable and clever. Full of initiative, devoted.

The barrage of words made Nikolai doubtful. Look, said the commandant and produced some papers from somewhere, nobody can leave just like that, we would have to officially come to an agreement about your departure and about your next task. You can also refuse it and wait to see what will happen next, I don’t know, nobody knows. I can help you, if you will help me. The task will be difficult, but the foundry and the warehouse, and the occasional translation work and the help you give a few people around here, at this point he laughed, grinning like a shark, are not bad at all. We took care of you because you took care of us. And we will continue to look after you. Kolya, I promise you, you will be put on the first train as soon as that will be possible, just sign and do this… She said you would manage it. We are not unreasonable, we will push you. But there are things that our… instructors know better. We will send you to… You’ll see where. There you will be taught… You will come back from there a different man. And things here will be different also.

*You will really belong to us, he said. And I signed. That was my second signature. Anyone would have signed in my position. After the war, everyone can be clever, everyone is a general, everyone talks about what they would and wouldn’t have done… But when you are there… Have you heard of the Miligram experiment? Most people obey authority that instructs them to perform an act with which they breach their own moral norms. And I could not imagine what would have been, had I not signed. There was no return from that path. What do I mean by that? Well, if I tell you, I tell you. If I don’t, I don’t.*