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Journey to the Eleventh Reich

ANNA SEGHERS

Translated by Ambika S. Athreya

I. Arrival

¶₁ When, despite all guarantees and guarantors, witnesses and recommendations, ten countries denied us entry, we found ourselves at a loss, and fell into despair. But one day, along the way, we met an old acquaintance whom we had long neglected and nearly forgotten. This acquaintance gave us some advice. “There is still an Eleventh Reich,” he said, “that is said to let people in under certain circumstances.” He gave us the address of the consulate, too. The consulate was on a lane we had traversed many times, on the third floor of an old house, to which one would never have ascribed the foreign affairs of a nontrivial nation. In passing we had already seen the seal of the consulate, so worn, it was hardly distinguishable from any other store sign. All our hopes were now directed towards the sign-plate of the consulate.

¶₂ We knew nothing of the Reich itself. We had also neglected to ask our acquaintance about it. But had we ever before really imagined anything particular about, say, Uruguay?

¶₃ As we queued up for our visa, the official at the consulate told us there wasn’t much sense to standing in line, his country only admitted those without passports. When we let him know that we were not in the mood for jokes, he shrugged his shoulders. When our turn came, we were asked if we had valid passports. Anyone with

¶₄ such a passport would be turned away immediately. Anyone who did not have one was told to depart, they had nothing to fear, if indeed they were without a passport, they would be granted a smooth entrance.

¶₅ Hearing this, a small set of us went away, not because we were satisfied, but because we were exhausted to the point of indifference. Those with the most legally valid of passports, with the recommendations of ministers and professors of foreign universities, they did not leave. Rather, they besieged the consulate in the hopes of a visa, mustering all the tenacity through which they had come into possession of their papers in the first place. They were practically begging on their knees for visas.

¶₆ We all set off together, some dozen of us, and finally arrived one evening at the border of the Eleventh Reich. During the journey, the passportless among us grew anxious, since it had become clear that most of the group had still obtained a visa, or some serviceable equivalent. But then we, and they, took some heart when the following occurred:

¶₇ One of the emigrés was seated with his entire family in a carriage at the front of the train, though his destination, and reasons for emigration, were the same as ours. His guarantees were of such high quality, and his passport so wondrous, that he was earnestly worried about infect-

ing us by his mere presence. No sooner had the train crossed the border, its tail still on the other side, when officials of the Eleventh Reich entered the front carriage and accosted this man with the question: “Do you have a passport?”—in response to which he laid everything out before them. So we bore witness to how our man and his entire family were flung back over the border into the other country, and with them, all their passports and guarantees. A panic ensued in our coupé. A few who had boasted during the journey that they were unfazed by such reports now stuffed their papers in their mouths, chewing and gagging and swallowing them whole. But two were out of luck. The officials saw their bloated faces, dragged them off, and gave them castor oil. So it was that these passport carcasses and seals of the Home Office were regurgitated back to life.

¶⁸ But those of us who answered, No, when asked “do you have a passport?,” were admitted with no fuss.

II. Reception

¶⁹ We were led into a sort of waiting room, where a new pair of officials received us. These officials spoke to us all politely, kindly even. We were truly glad that such interest should be taken in our fates, and told our stories in generous detail. Then we were split into two groups, though we did not yet know why. We were assured that we would all see each other the next evening in the capital city. Our group traveled in normal conditions, in a normal train, together with the local population. In the process we made some curious observations, about which more will be heard later.

¶¹⁰ When, towards evening, we arrived in the capital, we saw the other group behind the barrier being welcomed by a reception committee with flags, flowers and songs. As it turned out, the officials had split us into two groups, based on their assessment of those who were in serious need of

welcome, and those who could be permitted to travel in the usual manner. At all stations along the way, the ones in need of welcome were lavished with offerings and honors. As we saw this group standing there, so cheerfully, spoken to with such warmth, plied with gifts—nobody was speaking to us, even though we deserved the same—the thought darted through our minds that though it was perhaps better to travel as we had, such a reception could still do one good, after so much suffering. Someone in the group went so far as to voice such an observation. No sooner had he said this than one of the reception officials turned to him and sent him back to the border. On the journey back to the capital city, as he later told us, he received a grand welcome, for him alone, at every single station.

III. The Medals

¶¹¹ What first struck us on our journey was the fact that there was hardly an undecorated person among the entire populace. The most ordinary people, men and women, of all professions, their chests were hung full with medals. Most of them were in fact downright infested with them. Those with a mere five or six were conspicuous. An undecorated person was scarce to be seen, we encountered only one on the journey who had a single medal, and he most certainly caught our attention. There was either a serious abuse of medal-allocation in this Reich, or its people had put some monumental common struggle behind them, that would justify such manner of outward recognition. We asked the functionary who accompanied us. He laughed and explained: “When someone enters a life in our country, as you say, we fasten medals to his breast for all the ways in which, over the course of his life, he must prove himself. He receives medals for valor against the enemy, medals for being a credit to the fatherland, in short, medals for the faithful execution of

duty. Then, once he has proven himself, we tear the medal from his breast, publicly, and to a fanfare, and he need no longer wear it. These medals do not show merit, but rather, unfulfilled obligations. If someone has jubilantly removed a medal for valor, then all of us know he must have been truly courageous, since he is no longer wearing a medal. In this country, the longer one has shown oneself worthy, the fewer medals one wears. One goes about quiet and stripped bare. Others jangle about with their appendages till the end of their days. Despite my best efforts, I, for example, still have five medals. But, I have had countless removed as well.

¶₁₂ That is why women and girls in our country jump at the chance for a stroll with a man who wears no medals. And hence also the idiom that comes to the tongue when meeting a particular type of person: “that man yet has many a medal to shed.”

IV. Change of Profession

¶₁₃ The same functionaries who received us and accompanied us to the capital were there replaced by others, whose duty it was to acclimate us. We confided in them our fears for what awaited us in this foreign land. Our concerns and doubts mingled with grief for all we had done to realize the professions we loved, efforts that now seemed in vain. This aspect of our laments, however, remained incomprehensible to the acclimatization officers.

¶₁₄ “In our country,” they explained, “there is in any case a law that at age forty, everyone must switch professions. They may be spared this change of career in exceptional cases that can be counted on one hand, but these are scarcely invoked. And why? It felt right to us, became a law, and is now heeded as such. Among us, when someone reaches forty, he has the right and the obligation to find himself a new profession. He would have spent enough time in the other one. What

a sudden breath of fresh air for him—the whole Reich, in fact—since, after all, the career change takes place each year for hundreds of thousands of forty-year-olds. That one over there, our friend with the grey moustache, he was a baker, famous across the city. His bakery crammed to the hilt, his cakes at all the parties! Until, slowly, his nuttortes and pretzels and Baumkuchen, came to taste dull, both to him and us. With what passion, you can see for yourself, he became an acclimatization officer. I myself—I beg you to not take offense—I myself am anxiously awaiting my fortieth birthday. At first, this job, the constant interaction with the oddest of people, was ever so fascinating to me. I don’t mean to insult you with this observation, but it shows that my dedication is slackening. Next year, god-willing, I will be apprenticed to a metalsmith.

¶₁₅ “Ah, yes, but,” we said, “what if one suddenly wishes to become a writer in his fortieth year?”

¶₁₆ “Then he becomes one. And the state prints his books.”

¶₁₇ “But,” we said, “how is that possible? That must cost the state tremendous sums of money.”

¶₁₈ “Much, much less,” the officers said, “than if those people had been writing from their youth on.”

¶₁₉ “But then there must be a scrum of people wishing to become writers, painters, actors—”

¶₂₀ “There you are gravely mistaken,” the officers explained to us. “The demand is far thinner than you might imagine. By contrast, it is most commonplace here that someone who, till their fortieth birthday, stood on the stage or painted pictures, heaved a sigh of relief upon returning to their father’s joinery or glove-making business.”

V. Wedding

¶₂₁ We were invited to a big party, a wedding. One is always happy to be treated as a local in a foreign land. The whole street was invited. It seemed to us that this wedding mixed city and peasant cus-

toms. The food and drink were copious. House and street alike were decked out, the best musicians played, and people danced into the night. The bride was very lovely, the groom's infatuation well-justified, even if too demonstrative for our tastes. As the bride and groom withdrew from the cheers of the guests, we said to someone seated next to us, "hopefully they will stay happy."

¶22 "Surely at least till tomorrow morning," was the answer. "They won't have any chance later."

¶23 As we inquired to the meaning of this utterance, we were told: "in our country, when a couple comes to the reciprocal assessment that it is worth spending a life, raising children together, in short, as you call it, entering matrimony, then they do so quietly, and one notices, after some time, that two people have found each other. But when a pair intends to meet only once, then we throw a grand wedding, the whole street invites both, there is a great to-do, with music and drink and dance.

¶24 Of course, from time to time—after all, we are no angels—it comes to pass that someone errs in this matter. Sometimes a pair will go to great pains to put on a proper wedding, then fail to separate—either reunite, or simply remain together in the first place. One has to shake one's head at such people. We consider them to misapprehend their own emotions, they sow disorder in society, because they cannot adequately take account of the situation. And, if one sees the two together after weeks, then one begins to hear a neighbor or two begin to complain: "That nice wedding, what a waste."

VI. Visit to the Authorities

¶25 In order to put forward a petition, of which will be spoken later, we sought a minor functionary, who had been recommended to us for these purposes. Though he was just a lowly clerk, there were some dozen antechambers before his office, and in each, we had to wait for days on end, till we were permitted to fill out a survey that was a condition

for entry into the subsequent room. Each antechamber had its secretary, a kind of sentinel, and we subjected ourselves to jammed rooms, innumerable questions and telephone calls, till finally we stood before the very man who was, as we said, only a minor functionary! He recommended us to a mid-level functionary. There were not so many ante-chambers leading up to this mid-level functionary, the crowd was thinner, the telephone calls and surveys somewhat fewer in number. And the secretaries did not seem quite so sentinel-like. He received us after a shorter time than we had feared, though we had already waited for quite awhile. He recommended a high-level functionary to us. We could not mask our astonishment when we saw that this high-level functionary had only one antechamber, and one secretary, and that he let us in after a single phone call.

¶26 "Please go ahead," this high-level functionary told us, "across the second corridor on the left, and knock on Nr. 23." We did so. In a little administrative office there sat behind the table—we nearly fell over it, as it was right after the door, with no antechamber before it—a man in a plain jacket, with no medals. "I am the president of the state," he said. "What is it you wish?"

¶27 He laughed at our horror and our surprise. "How, Mr. President, is it possible," we asked, "that one need simply knock on your door, that you are not assailed day and night? What protects you from the hordes of people?"—"The fact that it doesn't occur to anyone to come," he said.

VII. Petition

¶28 The reason for the petition—which is why we sought an audience with the president of the state—was the following:

¶29 We had been charged, based on notices circulating against us, with having removed medals without authorization. From their point of view, and not entirely without reason, the locals were

outraged by the fact that we had simply come along, unadorned and undecorated, when that remained out of reach for most of them, despite their best efforts. The authorities now wished to bring us to justice. We consulted among ourselves and together drafted a petition. In it, we requested that our punishment be waived, and that we have the opportunity to rectify our error. Because, as we wrote in our petition, one must first possess medals in order to get rid of them.

¶₃₀ Since the president of the state himself took up our petition favorably, we were all invited one day to the great celebration hall. We were given a speech as to how we were now entering the life of this land, and that we had selected ourselves for this refuge. Officers went about our ranks with large velvet cushions on which lay medals, ribbons, stars and other symbols. Those who at first stifled their laughter now became anxious. We were admonished to quickly bridge the distance that separated us from the locals, accustomed, from an early age, to the norms and laws of the land. We would have to compensate with our experience and the maturity borne of tribulation. No doubt one of us would soon celebrate the first stripping of a medal.

¶₃₁ One might not think it possible, but a few of us felt quite cheerful. Some faces were wet, cheeks down which we had once seen tears roll on occasions so profoundly unlike this one. Indeed, we had to laugh, as we inspected each other before dispersing. All of us, men and women, spangled from top to bottom, not a single button hole, nor fleck of cloth free, our jackets glittering and studded with color. Our laughter petered out on the way home, as we were accosted by malicious shouts and mocking glances. We would have liked to stuff a ribbon or two into the oblivion of our pockets, had we not felt that people were watching us keenly. We would surely have been dealt with as thieves and swindlers.

¶₃₂ Our mood recovered only as we came back to our neighborhood and sat together at a long public table like a band of marshalls after a parade. We would surely have started laughing again, when suddenly one of us suffered the sort of awful fit common in the life of the emigrant—a spasm of blistering memory, and equally blistering unfamiliarity, seemed, to our surprise, to have felled an otherwise sedate man in our circle, a former high-level functionary in our home country. Upon arrival, and still in the coupé, he had rushed to burn the letter of a former colleague, a man in service of a very powerful entity, with his cigarette. We lost sight of him soon thereafter, since he was assigned to the group in need of reception. Later, he was always very quiet. But what tempest of emotion hid beneath his composure! He wept loudly that he now had to wear these stupid rags, when the whole time he carried about in his suitcase the most prestigious medals of our homeland, conferred upon him for his devoted service.

¶₃₃ The next morning our man made his way to the authorities, and asked for permission to pin his own two medals on his jacket. The functionary listened, bewildered. He said, “it is true, we don’t have any law that would prohibit you from wearing these extra medals. But no law can foresee such an unprecedented case as this. I would counsel you, dear friend, to truly take into account how difficult it is to have a medal removed. And these medals—no one will ever strip you of them. As an elderly gentleman of dignified aspect, you will have to go about our streets bedecked like this. That will be embarrassing for you. We warn you, in your interest, against tormenting yourself with such irrevocable medals.”

VIII. Enrollment

¶₃₄ Now it was time to think about enrolling our children in school. The school director had them take

an entrance exam, as is the norm anywhere else. We later received the most peculiar descriptions about this exam from our children, which left us adults as befuddled as ever. They had each been given a red pencil, and a pile of papers to correct, they told us. The teachers seemed able to make more sense of our children than we, the parents, and assigned them correspondingly to their respective classes. But after the first day, the children told us such strange things that we went to the director and asked him what system of teaching was being implemented here. The director said: "All schools in the Reich follow a unified curriculum that teaches them to find errors. We do not give the children white paper, empty notebooks, lead, ink— we have come to understand how damaging such exercises are. We give our children only red pencils. In every class, each teacher in each subject distributes notebooks among the children so that they can correct them. The the highest marks go to the one who is able to find the most mistakes in the teacher's notebook. How any good young boy yearns to strike as much as he can in his teacher's notebook! How moving the sight of the youngest class! There they sit, our tiny abecedarians, fidgeting in their school benches and wondering if two plus two really can be five. And then it occurs to them to count on their fingers, or they happen upon other methods for detecting errors, and oh, the joy, when, for the first time in their young lives, they set their red pencils to work. And then onto the marvelous multiplication tables. It demands tremendous acuity of such a little person to conclude that 12×12 cannot be 146. Nothing is more shameful for our children than when their red pencil marks are rubbed out with the class eraser.

¶³⁵ See this notebook. Of a pupil in the third. The topper! See those bold red marks in the margins of his mathematics notebook! During yesterday's class he corrected all axioms without so much as

a blink of hesitation. He was the only one who, in his teacher's notebook, struck the "never" from the statement "Parallel lines never intersect at infinity." In a year he will gallop his way to correcting the clever proofs of the ancients that the earth is flat and that the sun orbits it. Such a talented young fellow begins at ten already to doubt the Ptolemaic worldview. On the other hand, that little one down there in the yard, with the freckles and buttered bread, he has been held back twice, will ultimately leave school and take up a simple manual job. He will become a father and still feel no aversion to the pre-Keplerian conception of the earth's motion. To him, the earth's orbit is probably always a circle, not an ellipse! But this boy in the third! I look upon him with a certain paternal joy when he comes to class, eager as he is to correct even the living. To the eternal glory of our schools!"

IX. Reunion

¶³⁶ Imagine who we just saw! Remember that strange little foreigner, with the impossible name that he would mumble to himself....the one who turned up out of thin air in our Berlin café and vanished just as suddenly? His short holiday—that gave us quite a cause for laughter back back then already—had just come to an end. Do you remember? How he would perplex and delight us with his curious leaps of thought, and his declarations, all the funnier because of his manner, so dry and so sure. He would proclaim, as if self-evident, things like "Children should learn to spot errors from their first year of school," or "Only if a couple has spent just one night together should it wed." Now we know where he managed to acquire such notions. Once he was gone, we racked our brains to make out where in the world he was from. Some would call him a blatherer, others, a philosopher or an artist; for some he was a conniver. Now we know what he is: the manager of a shoe shop.

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