Search for a Haven

Martin Hoffman*
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Abstract

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HELMUT pushed closer to a white haired lady nervously fidgeting with her wrist watch. This was an old train, and in Europe old trains do not hold the tracks well. Anyway, Helmut thought, this old thing is a cattle-train, yet all forty of us are glad to be on it. In reality, both he and his father Gerhart Schaffer, thought the cattle cars were pretty comfortable. In thirty kilometers or about two hours they would be on the frontier. Helmut adjusted his maroon colored cap, to show off to all who recognized it, that he wore the badge of the tertain class, then he nudged his father.

“Daddy, daddy, do all the Poles smell like garlic like those . . .”

“Shhhh, shhhh, garlic is a vegetable, all vegetables are healthy. Now you look out of the window. Look at those wheat fields. Never thought you’d see so much wheat, did you?”

“Daddy, do you think we’ll have enough bread in Poland?”

“Of course, Helmut. The bread will be fine and black with rye seeds on it. Then you’ll put beef tongue on it, and I’ll drink beer, while we find milk for you . . . Just wait.”

“But daddy . . .”

The train made so much noise going over the viaduct that Helmut’s words were drowned. He sat on his small suitcase, leaned against the heavy-set blond woman by his side and closed his eyes. The gently rocking train did the rest, and soon he was asleep.

Mr. Schaffer, Helmut’s father, lit his pipe and carefully took a folded newspaper from his pocket. He read that in Berlin another three ‘commies’ had been executed. One Nazi was killed in a streetfight in Charlottenburg and . . . he folded the
paper carefully and deliberately hurled it out of the train. "I am through with all this. It is the past and better forgotten." Thoughts crowded his overworked brain; he remembered the time he had been representing the Continental Sugar Co. of West Poland. What did that man in Milan tell him? Sugar from a Pole? No sir—we buy our sugar from Germany. Do you think I'd trade with a Pole?

He had slowly and deliberately told the Milanean that all sugar in West Poland was owned by a German firm in Westphalia in any case... Sure, he would make his sale, three hundred thousand tons of Polish sugar at the new low price to the Stalin fascists. Then he'd quit his job. Then they'd told him to get out of Germany, take his son and get out. They'd told all the Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Danes, and Englishmen; they'd told them all to leave the country. Schaffer thought of the death of his wife two years ago. Hadn't helped Helmut any... in another twenty-five miles they'd be in Poland.

The blonde woman moved and Helmut woke up. He gazed around frightened, then looked up at his father.

"Are we there yet?"
"Not quite, son."
"Will I go to school in the morning?"
"Son, please don't ask silly questions. How can I know what we are going to do? We have to travel another ninety kilometers once we get to the border. We don't even have a house in Bielsko."

"Daddy, will everyone speak Polish?"
"Yes, mostly."
"Will they all understand me when I speak German?"
"Perhaps. If not, I'll tell them what you said."
"Daddy?"
"Yes?"

"Daddy, do you like garlic? Will you smell of garlic if you eat any? Will I smell like that farmer there?"

"Helmut, please let daddy think. We'll be coming to the border soon, and I want to get my papers ready."

Ten kilometers before the border, customs guards started checking papers and baggage. They were uncouth young Germans, and heckled the foreigners. "This your son?" one of them said, pointing his baton at Helmut's head.

"Yes," said Mr. Schaffer.
"Yes SIR! Who the hell do you think you're talking to? Why isn't he mentioned on your passport?"
"He was listed in my wife's..."
"Well, where is she... Oh, Mrs. Schaffer, where are you hiding?"
"My wife is dead."
"Well, see that you get your son listed on your own passport and report to me again before we cross the border." Then turning to his assistant, he commanded: "Lenny, correct this fellow's papers. Charge him twenty marks. If he doesn't have it, take his watch or something. Now who's next?"

In New Beuten, on the border, no one left the train. All the passengers were afraid something might happen. A minor panic had spread throughout the car. The train moved forward slowly, and each car passed under a low wire scraping its roof for any stowaways. They caught a fugitive on top of the back car, and shot him as he tried to crawl over the wire. A few hundred women shrieked as his body hit the pavement with a thud. One must not get out of Germany illegally; one can't stay in Germany if he is not wanted; the Germans are very methodical. There is both method in their madness, and madness in their method.

The locomotives on the train were changed, and slowly the new, Polish train drew on into "no-man's land." Here Polish customs officials again search the papers. Helmut could not understand a word they spoke. He laughed at their picturesque three-cornered caps, and at the long, black cigarettes they smoked. They were a little more polite and did not carry any sticks. They were not so methodical and took longer over their work. They transferred a good many people over to westward trains, back to Germany.

Mr. Schaffer shook hands with the official, and in his cupped hand he held a five-hundred zloty note. "Mr. Schaffer, yes sir, returning to Poland for good, and little Helmut..." that's as far as Helmut's father would translate, but they continued eastward, then changed at Katowice, for a Bielsko-bound train. It was good to get off of the manure and garlic-smelling cattle wagons. Now they had real wooden benches to sit on. They had started at dawn from Berlin, and now, 350 miles eastwards, it was already dusk. They would get home soon. With eager questions in his mind, Helmut fell asleep.
Gerhart Schaffer relit his pipe. He had no thoughts of sleep. He feared the future. He could no longer adjust to life, make a new start. He could send Helmut to school—and then what would happen when war broke out? A feeling of uncertainty and fear hovered over Europe, and Mr. Schaffer was acutely conscious of his plight. He scowled and walked down the aisle to pick up a newspaper. Then he settled down, a tall man, with sparse gray hair and a kind smile. He was too young to need glasses, but he found the one dim low-powered light suspended from the roof insufficient for reading, and he nodded off to a troubled sleep.

—Martin Hoffman, Ag. So.

Sound Off

O’Rooney, Goldfarb, Scott and Kohl—
Names of America, names of men
Pursuing happiness guaranteed by
Washington, Hancock, Jefferson, Henry.

(The Bill of Rights is plain to read—
All their liberties guaranteed.)
Men would speak, but never a Scott—
Black dreams quarreling with what we’ve got.
Men may work, but Goldfarb no—
Stamped with his own intaglio.
Men would assemble, Kohl can’t—
Red words peal a disturbing chant.
Men may worship, O’Rooney’s wrong—
His liturgy hateful, growing strong.

(The Bill of Rights is plain to read—
All their liberties guaranteed.)
Men to bear arms? . . . Call the roll:
O’Rooney, Goldfarb, Scott and Kohl.

—Merritt Bailey, TJ1, Jr.