

NICHT GANZ SCHLECHTE MENSCHEN

(Not Such Bad People)

Novel

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*Pray thou thy days be long before thy death,
And full of ease and kingdom; seeing in death
There is no comfort and none aftergrowth,
Nor shall one thence look up and see day's dawn
Nor light upon the land whither I go.
Live thou and take thy fill of days and die
When thy day comes; and make not much of death
Lest ere thy day thou reap an evil thing.*
(Swinburne, from *Atalanta in Calydon*)

TWO BROTHERS

On the first of August 1914, the date of the mobilisation of the German imperial troops, when soon the Kaiser would recognise no more political parties and the celebrations in the streets would recognise no more limits, in Potsdam, in an act motivated primarily by magnificent patriotic surges of emotion (somewhat less elevated motives were also involved), two brothers were conceived who would go on to exit the body of their exhausted mother eleven minutes apart on the 26th of February the following year.

Their progenitor – now promoted to a father of twins – the fifty-year-old District Court Magistrate Theodor Loewe gave his wife Hedwig a very salty kiss on the forehead as soon as the doctor allowed him to do so, as the tears of emotion that overwhelmed him had flowed from the corners of his eyes to those of his mouth, and he determined that he was under no obligation to wipe away in shame such signs of committed sympathy – indeed, not to put too fine a point on it: empathy.

On the third of March 1915 the two members of the next generation of Germans were baptised with the names of Max and Karl in the Church of St Peter and St Paul by a Catholic priest who, after rattling off the usual homilies, expressed his hope that they would grow into that most precious commodity required by the German Empire in its parlous state. Male twins of audibly robust character (he gave a broad smile) were a sign, he said: a good sign, a gift from God that offered the prospect of victory. Theodor Loewe, not an entirely religious man, was surprised at the priest's bellicose, rabble-rousing sermon. Such worldly-mindedness seemed, to his taste, not to be appropriate for what was primarily a spiritual act. While he did not wish to deny his sons the rite of baptism, just to be on the safe side (after all, it couldn't hurt), he was disconcerted – indeed, distressed – by the fact that a representative of the clergy was speculating about future military personnel. Immediately after the ceremony, as the relatives who had travelled from Saxony and Brandenburg were photographed with the infants before the doors of the church, Theodor gave his Hedwig a loving embrace and murmured into her ear that neither Max nor Karl must ever learn which of them had been the first to see the light of the delivery room. They were not to be awarded or branded with a rank of succession; rather, they were to be brought up with scrupulously equal treatment. Hedwig murmured back that that reflected her own views precisely, even if for no other reason than that under the circumstances, she had not paid sufficient attention to be able to say with absolute certainty whether it was Max or Karl that she had pushed out first. Right from the start, the two little blood-smearred creatures were like two peas in a pod.

Hedwig Loewe rarely found it a good idea to lie, but in this case she made an exception. It was definitely Max who had been the first to have the courage to hurl himself headlong into the birth canal. And the nurses assisting the doctor had immediately affixed an insignia of achievement to Max's toe. No room for doubt. Hedwig, a divinely pretty, delicately built and mainly good-natured woman of thirty, sympathised with the refreshingly modern, alarmingly democratic views of her significantly older husband, whom she had married for reasons of common sense, but of whom she had then rapidly become very fond. He was, in his way, an honest and respectable man. Then again, not everyone would have adjudged him that way.

While the struggle among nations came to take an increasingly unfavourable course for Germany, the Loewes lived relatively comfortably in a seven-room apartment near the Nauen Gate, and even during the period of greatest hardship were able to afford two servant girls: a chambermaid and a nanny. Theodor Loewe had his way with both of them, apparently unashamedly taking advantage of their dependency. Hedwig merely went through the motions of being upset with him initially; after

all, she had been let in on the secret. Theodor had told her candidly of his affliction – moderate to severe, he said, with a quiver in his voice: satyriasis. He couldn't help it, no, it had nothing to do with love: it was more a matter of taking care of cloacal needs, sort of a case of sexual diarrhoea with vomiting.

Hedwig was in favour of taking people as they were. Once a man is over forty, as she wrote to her mother, you can no longer change him.

Secretly Hedwig was even happy – indeed, not to put too fine a point on it: relieved – that she was called upon to perform her so-called marital duties only on holy days of obligation. That sort of thing had rarely given her pleasure, and far more often pain. Taken as a whole, Theodor Loewe had been and remained a good, indeed splendid, match for the ash-blond lass, the daughter of a craftsman, with a pale complexion and freckles. The married couple soon opted for separate bedrooms, not least because Hedwig often had vivid dreams and lashed out in her sleep, while her husband snored constantly, at deafening volume. “He has no other faults,” Hedwig wrote to her mother, “and we delight in one another so during the day that we can safely grant this joy a respite at night-time.”

The maids – Lene, the housemaid, and Albertina, the nursemaid – had even less reason to complain. Both worshipped the profound, often witty lawyer. He had not needed to chase after them; independently of one another, they had virtually forced themselves on him – and were generously rewarded for their services above and beyond the call of duty. The two young single women were able to ride out the grim final years of the war in safety without really having to fear for their survival. And Theodor was well versed in scheduling his extramarital activities so that each of them, Lene and Albertina, thought she was his only mistress. Until one evening when the usual/inevitable happened. Without knocking, Lene entered Theodor's bedroom, wishing to cuddle up to him; the thunder was booming outside and she groped her way towards his body, whereupon a shrill feminine voice created first confusion, then clarity. Theodor attempted in vain to bring the parties around one table – or more precisely, into one bed. He had no option but to dedicate odd-numbered days to Lene and even-numbered ones to Albertina and to ask them both to tolerate the circumstances. He was counting on the maids' being sensible and willing to compromise, in view of the war. And that they were, for a certain period, though they remained – war or no war – women.

Hedwig, who was always kept abreast of the situation (and was grateful to be so), felt a certain sense of amusement at first at how her female domestics grew ever more jealous of one another, each soon wishing the other would make herself scarce, and not until the Loewes' household began to suffer from the conflict did Hedwig ask her husband to take decisive action to clear up the resulting diabolical mess, as she put it. Theodor Loewe asked for some time to think it over. He loved his Hedwig unconditionally – which perhaps might have surprised observers unfamiliar with the scenario – and was himself anything but happy about the resulting situation. It was precisely in that age of great political and social upheaval, as the increasingly helpless old order gave way to chaos, that he was promoted and appointed as a judge to the Supreme Criminal Court of Prussia in Leipzig.

Which meant that he had to uphold death sentences and deny appeals for mercy in the final instance, although such cases really ought to have been presented to the Kaiser for consideration. The Kaiser, meanwhile, had quite enough to do without getting involved in such trifling matters. Theodor Loewe excelled himself. He refused to observe any tacitly agreed rule. After all, rules and regulations *per se* were the quintessence of Prussia, whereas anything that was not regulated in meticulous detail had a future and could be construed however one liked. Loewe did his utmost to keep countless files in circulation; he delayed proceedings, overestimated the discretion granted to him, and with every instance of exceeding his authority he saved the lives of at least five of his fellow human beings accused of relatively minor offences – in an era when examples supposedly had to be set for the greater good. His commitment earned him a dubious reputation among his colleagues as a know-all and a soft touch, a subversive element, and after just three months in his post, in October 1918, in a personal communication from the Kaiser himself – which is to say, via an official notice of dismissal – he was sent back to Potsdam and into retirement.

Max and Karl, who by the way were not identical twins and were quite easy to tell apart, had just turned three and a half years old then and were trying out their first attempts at thinking. As their father could rarely set aside time to spend with them in earnest, the relationship they maintained with their mother was all the closer, but in the end it was Albertina, the nanny, who laid the crucial foundation for the brothers' future development. Even before they were sent to school, she taught them to read, a development that happened to come about as the result of a lack of toys. Albertina would cut the headline out of the daily paper, snip it up into individual letters and have the young

boys reassemble all the cut-up bits into a meaningful sequence. Both of them, Max as well as Karl, displayed an extraordinary talent for this: at the age of four they were already capable of formulating a birthday greeting to their mother by means of cut-out letters. Even though the results resembled an anonymous ransom note, Hedwig reacted to the first written message from her children with undiluted maternal pride: YOU ARE SO DEAR TO US MAMA – though they were less interested in wishing her a happy birthday than in drawing attention to themselves. Lene, the housemaid, had been dismissed, and now the house was looked after by a certain Amalie, who had a potato nose and could not be considered seriously as a target for erotic conquest. In November 1918 the German empire had come to an end, followed by the Kaiser's renunciation of the throne and all public offices, and then in early January 1919 Judge Loewe was unexpectedly reinstated to his former position on the bench. There had been a revolution, Germans had fired shots at Germans, and the revolution (and then the counterrevolution), in the urgency characteristic of both, convicted the vitally necessary numbers according to fairly crude principles. A man who had been labelled inimical to the old order could of course not be an enemy of the new disorder. So went the unrefined thought processes of the revolutionaries, regardless of whether they were Leftists attacking the decadent Right or vice versa. Many who just wanted to kick up a riot kept turning up again and again on whichever side, intent on all sorts of fun and looting, and soon enough their collective rage came to be directed towards Theodor Loewe, apparently a consummate coward who refused to come out in support of any faction, as if he were capable of commenting on the latest unrest only with scorn and inefficiency. Rosa Luxemburg's corpse had not yet even been recovered from the Landwehr Canal when, in April 1919, Loewe was again pensioned off, this time for good – which he was quite happy about as the era was no longer his, and the events of the age had finally got the better of him: they had grown confusing, even in hindsight, and he resolved to pay more attention to his sons in future – something he admitted he should have been doing for some time.

He did still occasionally sleep with Albertina, but it was no longer like it used to be, when he was allowed to enjoy her unalloyed gratitude and admiration – no. In the meantime Albertina had become almost a member of the family, or at least fooled herself into thinking that was the case, with a self-confidence as if she thought she had accrued all sorts of rights through standard practice. On the Loewes' first holiday after the war, to Ahrenshoop on the Baltic coast in summer 1920, she demanded to share a hotel room with Theodor. That did not come to pass – Hedwig justifiably raised an objection, although her natural kindness meant she was prepared to make all sorts of

compromises. She proposed that she would consent to swap places with Albertina secretly after midnight, so long as Albertina played the part of the domestic servant – which, after all, she was – in public during the daytime, with no airs or graces. Thus all of the parties involved could indulge their desires and appetites without losing face in the eagle eyes of the public. And so that is exactly how they handled things. Max and Karl, who slept – or did not sleep, as sometimes happened – in their own room, noticed the nocturnal swapping of places and asked questions in that regard, which in turn led to more questions. The Loewes were not sufficiently ultra-modern to make their *ménage à trois* public; that would have made even Albertina feel uneasy. Theodor pondered at length over a possible solution, and one morning, on the last day before their journey home to Potsdam, he told Hedwig that his drive no longer suffered from the particular urges that a younger man would be helplessly subject to, so he had forced himself to take the decision to dismiss Albertina. He said he intended to pay her a generous settlement – she was still (fairly) young – and, with a bit of luck, she would soon be able to find herself a suitable husband. Hedwig Loewe was touched, yet also frightened, at how cold-heartedly Theodor now intended to shunt off a woman who had meant a great deal to him for several years. She appealed to her husband's conscience to consider it with the greatest care, because she would not, as he might have wagered, be losing a rival, but rather a friend – indeed, a confidante who would not be easily replaced. Theodor Loewe was in no small measure surprised at his Hedwig. Her magnanimity seemed to him to be verging on the grotesque and not of this world. But like so many other fathers who lacked freedom, he made a decision in the end for the benefit of his children, so that they might grow up in orderly, settled surroundings. Albertina was rendered speechless when she was informed of the proposed settlement. She was to live in Berlin, as the owner of a two-room apartment in the miserable district of Moabit, and for the next five years she would receive 50 marks per month. A proposal that could only be called very generous when regarded from an unpartisan perspective. By all rights Albertina should have expected no compensation, nothing at all, full stop. Her employer, had he been a bad man, could have dismissed her and sent her on her way without a bean, so to speak. Then – and only then – would Albertina have had reason to complain, rant and wail. But in the event (and herein lay the cunning brutality of the offer) she had no choice but to accept without objection what was offered. Of course she still complained, ranted and wailed, but her curses and threats, even her urgent pleas, cast no stain on Theodor Loewe's clear conscience. Albertina found a new position forthwith as a cloakroom girl, and she was set up for the future as the owner of a flat. What she no longer possessed, in view of her relentlessly advancing age, was any future to speak of, and certainly not

the sort of future she occasionally permitted herself to imagine and assume for herself as the second wife of a high-ranking official whose child she had come close to bearing, if it had not been for the fact that he was always so very careful. She was never really happy again, succumbed to alcohol, yet lived unprepossessingly for another thirty years, getting by on very little, until January 1950, when she fell victim first to a heart attack and then a pauper's grave.

In the autumn of 1920, at the age of five and a half, the Loewe's sons were sent to school. They surprised their first teacher, the thin-lipped Fräulein Koch, with their fluent reading skills and mastery of their times tables. The latter had been taught to them by their father. To entertain him, the boys would often get up half an hour early and pitch numbers to each other, which the other one then had to multiply together. Whoever made the first mistake had to forfeit the right to be carried on piggy-back by their father to the front door, and they hated it when their father spoiled their fun by putting first one and then the other, who didn't even deserve it, up on his shoulders. Max and Karl, while they were inseparable and always there for one another, treated their growing-up as a fraternal yet quite serious competition right from the start. They had taken to heart their father's advice to make sure they always stayed a few steps ahead of their fellow pupils in order to have an easier time of it later in life. That was not to say they had been incited by an ambitious parental figure to use any means necessary, not at all. The desire to get ahead of other people was something they both possessed equally. If one had fallen noticeably behind for a significant period, the other might perhaps have reined in his ambition, out of empathy, out of shame – who knows. But the need never arose; in most cases they proved to be evenly matched. Theodor Loewe could refer to his sons as a credit to the new German nation with no need to brook any objection. Thanks to the skills they had acquired at home, they were permitted to skip the second and fourth years of primary school, for which they were rewarded by their grateful father at Christmas with the complete set of Karl May's Wild West novels, along with a bicycle each. Hedwig Loewe, the only one in the family to urge restraint (without success), fell ill with cancer in 1923. Because she repeatedly postponed the removal of her left breast, her death came quickly and painfully. Max and Karl wept at her funeral, and even while grieving for their dead mother, asked whether Albertina could come back. Theodor Loewe, in his utter devastation, gave his sons no reply. He had reached an age by which people have forgotten their own immature years so completely that childish pragmatism must seem strange and gauche. Max and Karl, for their part, could not understand why their father would prefer to go on living without a woman by his side. They missed the solicitous tenderness they had

experienced from their mother as well as from Albertina. They hardly seemed like twins any more. This came about because Karl developed a much larger appetite than Max, who was often sickly. They were also noticeably different in their choice of hairstyle. Max's hair was straight and brittle and seemed to grow much less quickly than his brother's lush, slightly greasy mop of curls. A genetic curiosity – and not the only one. Both boys' favourite subject, which distanced them significantly more from their father, was neither German nor mathematics, but religion, of all things. They realised early on that this was something that did not deal with the clearly tangible, finding themselves confronted with numerous claims that lent themselves marvellously to play and speculation. Why was Jesus always depicted with long hair, they asked their teacher, Herr Vogel, when the Apostle Paul expressly criticised such hairstyles? And why didn't all men in Christian countries seek to emulate Jesus instead of going to the barber's every three weeks? They also asked how people could be certain Jesus was God's only son. They knew from reading the Greek myths about gods and heroes that the now-deposed Zeus had sired many offspring with mortal women while assuming a variety of guises. The Christian God (now this they found quite odd) had let himself get carried away and violate a marriage just the once? Perhaps the other times had gone undetected? They got a great deal of grief with these sorts of questions/statements, and Theodor Loewe was urgently requested to attend a conference with the teacher. There the obligatory complaints were aired about the impertinent brothers, but in amongst all the displeasure it was possible to discern the respect that God only knows eight-year-old children prone to blaspheming deserve. Theodor Loewe had to laugh when examples were put to him of how his sons had become subversive characters, and in the end the headmaster joined in the laughter, which counted against Vogel the schoolmaster, who in his senile obstinacy was simply not willing to accept what sort of exceptional talents were being heatedly discussed here. Max and Karl, said the headmaster, after he had drunk a few glasses of Riesling in the Kaiserkeller with Loewe senior, ought to go to a better school that would be more suited to their aptitudes, which he had to say were remarkable, if not entirely astonishing. He suggested the recently established Jesuit college as the strictest disciplinary facility imaginable that could either bring the two young idealists under control or spur them on to new glorious deeds. Loewe, slightly tipsy, agreed to this, and Vogel, the religion master, a banal man and a lazy thinker, was simply glad to be rid of the children who were too much for him. Thus all parties seemed to be satisfied.

The Jesuit college in Potsdam had a strict disciplinary regime. Beating was both favoured and feared as a punishment. At night a good many pupils would let off steam in the dormitories and make up for what they had been denied during the day. In the competition for dominance, groups – indeed, not to put too fine a point on it: gangs – formed and regarded anyone who did not belong as a potential slave. Max and Karl were confronted early on with facts that ought to have been better left until late puberty. In ways that ranged from discreet to drastic, they were introduced by some precocious schoolmates, as well as a few masters, to desires which their young souls did not know how to handle. Exactly what went on and why was something the brothers, otherwise extremely close, avoided discussing with each other – and would not have dreamt of revealing to an outsider, even their father. They did understand quite well that a certain degree of compliance could gain them some advantages, whereas putting up resistance would be to their immediate detriment in the form of undeservedly poor marks and even more sadistic reprisals. So they grasped a few nettles and made the best of their situation.

Everyone has to start at the bottom and work his way up, as their father was wont to say whenever the brothers complained about their lot. To him, it was enough to know that his sons – after a few initial difficulties – had gained a foothold in the system and were achieving marks at the level expected of them. It pleased him no end to hear that the college had a preponderance of latent atheists who treated theology as more of a theoretical game. He chose to ignore the subtle hints about some of those godless fellows being committed hedonists of the sort found in ancient Greece. After all, what did nine-year-olds know about *hedonism*? A term picked up somewhere that did not suit Prussia.

Karl ate a great deal, as if he suspected that he would be less attractive as a fat boy.

And indeed he continued to be left in peace.

When he was twelve years old, he joined the Steinitz chess club of Potsdam, for which he had to acquire special permission from the school and present a written note of consent from his father. Normally it was unthinkable for under-sixteens to enter the usually smoke-filled environs of a chess club. In recent times there had been a change of policy at the highest – that is to say, ministerial – level so as not to endanger Germany's leading position on the world chess scene any further. The greatest boost in performance could be achieved through intensive instruction when pupils were between the ages of eight and twelve. At that time, chess was held in high regard throughout the empire, thanks to the legacy of the German world champions Steinitz and Lasker and the runners-up

Janowski and Tarrasch, but with a serious blot on the records only recently: in 1924 Emanuel Lasker lost the world championship match to Capablanca, the Cuban. Something had to be done.

After a certain amount of back-and-forth, Karl was permitted to leave the school grounds on Fridays between 3 and 6 o'clock to receive chess instruction in the back room of the Café Hohenlohe. At his first session he duly became the club's youth champion, effortlessly winning against half a dozen older lads. Karl possessed an extraordinary talent for all sorts of board games. With a bit more effort he could have had a career in chess, although, however much pleasure he derived from studying complicated openings and solving tricky problems, the game appeared to him to be a way – albeit a splendid one – to avoid real life, to fritter it away. Older men who had exchanged real life for one spent among bishops, rooks and knights positively appalled him. Thus he refused to take part in tournaments and other championships, and withdrew from life in the club. Only occasionally when he thought he could treat himself to a break from his political/philosophical studies would he bring out the little folding travel board, set up a difficult position and then not rest until he had found the solution. Max, on the other hand, was not one for games. Apart from a bit of rummy and canasta on holiday with their parents, he had never held a hand of cards, even at school where it was the done thing to play skat for a quarter-penny a point during breaks, at night in the dormitory, even sometimes secretly during lessons, under the desk. He hadn't even had any marbles as a child. Nor did he display any ambition in sport. Such was his loathing for gymnastics that he refused outright even to touch the high bar, vault or parallel bars. He sat off to the side and earned himself a D. And several strokes of the rod across his bare backside.

In early February 1928 the Potsdam Jesuit college became embroiled in a scandal. One of the classical languages masters, Jonathan Fink, not even thirty years of age, decided to take his own life by leaping into the icy Havel. Dozens of love letters addressed to Max Loewe but never sent were discovered among his personal effects. No one wished to make a fuss about it, with the exception of Jonathan Fink's longstanding fiancée Anna Tritt, whose existence he had kept secret and who first insisted upon the surrender of his personal belongings and then demanded an explanation of what had been going on with her betrothed. She confronted Max, just turned thirteen, with the letters. She sat him down on a park bench and read out just a couple of passages that were suitable for children – which, as it happened, were essentially the only passages suitable for children in the whole lot. Max feigned astonishment, as if he had no idea what it was all about. No, Herr Fink had

never made inappropriate advances towards him, and what did she mean by ‘advances’, anyway? This was sufficient to ease the mind of the twenty-three-year-old Fräulein Tritt. Jonathan’s weakness for boys had been *affectionate* (as she put it) and platonic, and the sodomitic filth that had been more than just hinted at in the letters had never found its way out of his fantasy into reality, thank God.