

URSULA KRECHEL

State Justice

extended extract of the novel
translated by Arabella Spencer

JUNG
UND
JUNG

Above the Lake

He had arrived. Arrived, but where. The station was a terminus, the platforms were unspectacular, a dozen tracks, but then he entered the station hall. It was magnificent, cathedralesque, with a panelled, vaulted ceiling and bright light flooding through the windows, a light as if new-born after the long journey. The towering walls clad in dark marble were a colour which, before his exile, he would have described with irony as 'Reichskanzlei-dark'; now he just found it imposing and elegant, even intimidating. Yet the marble did not simply cover the walls. Set in inlaid panels between vertical columns, it created a sense of harmony. The floor spotless, behind the counters neatly uniformed men peering through little round windows, queues of people in front, relatively well dressed. (Considering that these people had lost the war, had been defeated, he thought, they held their heads remarkably high.) He saw French guards in the recesses of the hall politely observing the bustle of the station. The men were wearing olive-green uniforms and carrying guns. As he took in the elegant hall with a sweeping glance he could not imagine there being any cause for intervention, and that was how it remained. A silent, admonitory, reassuring presence.

He sensed the soothing air of civilisation, the timelessness of this station hall, saw the towering swing doors, at least three metres high and clad fully in brass. The word 'push' had been engraved in delicate lettering into the surface of the brass at about chest-height. Cathedral doors, doors that robbed the traveller of any sense of worth; it was the station that was important and significant, and the individual traveller would arrive at their destination safely and on time. Kornitzer's destination had

been uncertain for such a long time, he had not even vaguely imagined a place where he yearned to be, and that made this contradiction all the more painful. The transitoriness of his existence had become an inevitability for him. Everything was sublime and uplifting in this hall; he looked around, he could not see his wife, although he had told her when he would be arriving. (Or could it be that he failed to recognise her after ten years?) No, Claire was not there. But to his surprise he could see lots of day-trippers shouldering skis, having arrived from nearby winter sport resorts, jaunty and cheerful, with tanned faces.

He pushed open one of the high doors and was blinded. Before him lay the lake, the great blue mirror - it was only a few steps to the quay - soft water lapping, no rippling of the surface. Of course his arrival had been delayed, by a good two hours, but he experienced this delay as a protraction of time, the joy of arriving and seeing his wife again had been banished indefinitely. In front of him the lighthouse loomed out of the water, the Bavarian lion guarded the harbour with a serene gesture of command; and there were the mountains, at once distant and near, a backdrop of white and grey and alpine-pink, their boulders, their archaic might, steadfast, incredibly beautiful. Then he heard someone calling his name.

The reunion of a man and a woman who had not seen each other for so long that they must have thought themselves lost to one another. Breathless, speechless, eyes searching for the other's gaze, latching on to the other's gaze, eyes opening wide, drinking in, lowering, and then turning away as if relieved, weary from the effort of recognition; yes, it is you, you are still you. An entire face burying itself into the collar of a coat, but then hastily craning, a shivering excitement, unable to withstand the gaze of eyes that have been missed for ten years. The

light, watery eyes of the man behind the metal-rimmed glasses, and the green eyes of the woman with dark-rimmed pupils. It is the eyes that enact the reunion, but the people who have to bear it, to withstand it, are changed, have aged, almost the same height, their eyes meet at the same level. They smile, they smile at each other, the skin around their eyes creasing, not a twitch of the eyelashes, nothing, nothing, just a gaze, a long, sustained gaze, pupils frozen. Then a hand breaks free, is it the man's hand or the woman's? Whoever it belongs to, it is a brave hand; or rather it is the tip of a right middle finger that demonstrates courage as well as instinct and caresses the high cheekbones of the partner believed lost. A familiar finger, an animation of the nerves still carefully divorced from a stirring of emotions. Instead, it is the sensitive taut skin covering the cheekbones that reacts, that sends an alarm signal through the whole body. A reunion of nerve cells, not of man and wife; this takes longer, much much longer, it is a sensation that vibrates through the whole of the nervous system, a 'you, it really is you.' The instinctive rediscovery of the lovers, of the familiar skin, is a miracle, a miracle that the Kornitzers often spoke about later; later, later, with each other - they could not tell their children about it. It was not the 'caressed' body part (man's or woman's) that alerted the whole body, it was the active 'caressing', and after half a second it was no longer possible to discern who had touched and who had been touched. The hand, still solitary, that had been denied the partner for almost ten years, stirred, twitched, stroked, clasped and did not want to let go again. This was the arrival. The signal emanating from the nerve cells, which opened up a path for the entire human being. A path from the railway station on Lake Constance to the guesthouse at the harbour, which Kornitzer barely saw, sitting across the table from his wife and eating a bowl of soup, luggage heaped

and scattered all around him. The picture he now had of his wife was more like a silhouette; she had become bony, shoulders raised against the freezing cold, he saw her generous mouth which she now opened as she spooned in the soup, he saw her teeth, the gold fleck patching up one of her canines which she had once fallen on, he saw her hands that had become more chafed and coarse since their farewell in Berlin. He hid his own hands in his lap. He had gulped down the soup hastily and with determination. He looked at his wife; layer by layer he tried to reconcile the present image, the image of the woman sitting opposite him, with the image that he had formed in his imagination over all the intervening years. He did not succeed. The photo that he kept in his wallet and had stared at so often, until he believed he knew it from memory - if it was at all possible to memorise a picture - was of no use to him either. Claire was now someone eating soup, clearly not afraid of sitting opposite somebody who was practically a stranger. For a moment he thought: What has she learned to be afraid of that makes her fearless now? He refrained from asking: Claire, how has it been for you? The question assumed a greater familiarity, it demanded the time for a long, novel-length response, and above all time to listen, quiet, relaxed: So tell me. And nor did she ask: Richard, how have you been? He would have had to shrug his shoulders, a sudden insight, a fast forward and a slow rewind and where to begin? Then his wife finally scraped the bottom of her soup bowl, the spoon landing with a clatter on the china (perhaps she was trembling?) and she asked: How many days did it take you to get here? To which it was possible to give a quick response: Fourteen on the ship and three days from Hamburg to Lake Constance. This did not seem too long a time to her, she did not give the impression that she felt sorry for him. She took him with her into her vil-

lage, which had not really been the plan. The relief organisation that had paid for his journey and had brought him to Lake Constance had given him an information sheet stating that immediately upon arrival he was to report to the relevant authority in his future place of residence. Kornitzer told Claire, but she wouldn't hear anything about it. The relief organisation won't run away, you can go there tomorrow. Kornitzer's luggage was to follow in a cart. Claire had made an arrangement with somebody at the station, a farmhand, perhaps, he was to collect them from the guesthouse in an hour or so. Kornitzer and his wife helped him load up the pieces of luggage. Together they bent down and reached up, lifted and pushed; the first joint actions that established a form of intimacy. A curtain that was drawn in front of the couple when they retired to Claire's flowery little room in house number six of a hamlet called Bettwang, in which the only salvaged valuables were a record player and a typewriter. He thought he recognised the typewriter from Berlin, it was called 'Erika' and its mechanism had survived the entire war and evacuation. Hats off to 'Erika', and one of the first triumphant remarks that Claire made to her husband, now returned, was: I have stashed away a whole load of ribbons, apparently ribbons were not important for the war, or they forgot to declare them as of military importance. And they take up very little space in an evacuee's luggage. So we can write applications and letters in style. He could not think of anything to say to this, he just nodded, he could see with what foresight she had acted. He had also thought about what he should bring with him from his long journey. Coffee? Tobacco? Sweets? Tropical fruits? Documents attesting to his occupation? But the regulations changed almost every day, what was permitted one day was prohibited for political or hygienic reasons (or for practical ones which masked ideological or com-

pletely inexplicable reasons, maybe seizure by customs) the next. Nobody knew why. What could be said against a small bag of salt? What could be said against the amount of perfume or tobacco that had been permitted only a month ago? You stood there like an idiot, and perhaps that was the very purpose of the wildly inconsistent measures that were taken.

Here's the washstand, Claire said, I don't have any running water. He saw the cupboard himself, the bed, narrow, almost virginal, the wobbly chairs. He saw shame written in Claire's face, hurt. And he also saw the slightly nonchalant gesture of her hand, in which he recognised her former self-confidence: There you have it, that's the way it is, this is the way things turned out. He saw the light of the small bedside table and the pathetically thin cord with which you could turn it on and off. And the couple, who first needed to learn to be a couple again, turned it off. Then it was dark, and the darkness was a searching, a blind-school for the senses, an elementary school, yes really just a touching and breathing.

So, on this first day they had got no further than the first feeling 'Is it you, is it really you?' and the confirmation, 'Yes, it is you'. Perhaps this was already a little too much. It was not foreseeable how and when the family would ever come together again. For the moment they were just two displaced human beings, who hardly knew anything of their own children.

The next day he made his way into town, along the winding road, past meadows and isolated farms, the range of mountains always in view, the folds of the massif, bands of clouds that were bound together. After he had walked for a good half hour cumulus clouds began to gather, snow-white masses of cloud merged, a pliant, haptic jostling of clouds with a wholly unpredictable outcome. Carts overtook him and the post van passed by, but he wanted to walk, wanted to walk until the road turned

a bend and the lake appeared ahead of him. The grey of the air that spread out like a gentle veil above the water's surface. He walked downhill for six kilometres, felt the hollows of his knees giving way, a sensation to which his body was completely unaccustomed, but he liked it, there was something of the travelling journeyman about the feeling. And he was, after all, a man in his mid-forties who had experienced a lot. Experienced too much.

The heart of the town - he had barely noted this on his arrival - was an island that was connected via a long bridge to the mainland, to the farmland. On the bank, villas, gardens, an affluent area. He also noticed straight away that many of the villas had been requisitioned by French officers and their administrations, guards stood out in front. Then on either side of the bridge, wooden shingled houses, the upper floors with overhanging roofs and dove-tailed dormer windows. The town of Lindau behaved as if it were something outside of space and time. This thought pleased him, but he was unable to embellish on it or draw any conclusions from it. Something made him feel calm, and something (what was it?) excited him. He gazed at oriels, the stone arched walkways, the peaceful gabled roofs and steep steps that led to the wine taverns, in which presumably nothing had been changed for the last sixty years, solid, old German cosiness. Only the waitresses who stood on the road in front of the wine taverns, arms crossed, chatting, had grown younger, and Kornitzer looked at them with pleasure. And he saw something else too but couldn't make sense of it. He had read about the devastation of the cities in Germany, deserts of destruction, of fire storms. In this city he saw not a single house that was destroyed, not even a roof tile appeared to have fallen from a roof. He would have to ask Claire, when he was back in Bettwang.

He found his way easily to UNRRA, the United Nations relief organisation that was responsible for him. The office was on the first floor of a broad house with an alcove on Zwanzingerstraße, on the side of the island that faced the mainland. A few young men were sitting on chairs in a corridor, or, rather, they were lounging around in the corridor, Kornitzer thought to himself. They were conversing in a soft melodic language and briefly looked up when he sat down beside them, as if they wanted to say: What's he doing here? They appeared to be Poles or Ukrainians, forced labourers, or people liberated from the concentration and labour camps, who were stranded here in this beautiful town. They either had to or wanted to be sent somewhere, to survivors, who were waiting for them, like Claire had waited for him, or to a completely unknown new life, for which they had opted in the absence of another that had been destroyed, just as he had wanted to be sent here, deprived of his former life in Berlin, which had been reduced to rubble. (That is what Claire had implied.) The door opened and a young woman with a heavy accent that he could not place whispered, quite defensively: Next, please. Two of the men rose. Just one, the woman said and raised her right thumb in the air in order to make herself better understood. Friend's German bad, explained one of the uprooted men and pushed his way into the room, too. The woman left the door open, it looked as if she didn't want to be in a closed room with two strangers in need of help. It took quite some time until the two men left the room with a form. The door also stayed open for the next two hopefuls. Then there was a long interval in which the door remained closed for quite some time. In the end Kornitzer found himself sitting with a young man who was missing an upper incisor and drilling his tongue nervously in the gap between his teeth. He said - or rather hissed through the hole in

his teeth - that he had just been taken, taken away from his parents, his village had been surrounded, the church-goers had been arrested, all the young, he gestured violently over his shoulder, a contemptuous gesture, all gone to Germany. It had been terribly hard for his parents. Without a son, without help on the farm. And then he fell into a gloomy silence, which Kornitzer did not want to invade by asking an inappropriate question.

When, finally, it was Kornitzer's turn, the woman closed the door behind him; it was like a sign of trust. Kornitzer said what he had to say, a litany, accompanied by the rustling of documents that he had brought with him. He informed her that he had arrived the day before as a 'Displaced Person', that he expected help on his return. His fear that she would reprimand him for not having made his way immediately to the office proved unfounded. He had also feared that as a displaced person he would be assigned to mass lodgings immediately. Being taken back by an 'Arian' wife was not accounted for in the forms. Presumably his case was extremely rare. The woman completed a form which had three carbon copies and sent him into a neighbouring room where he received ration coupons in exchange for one of the copies. He was instructed to take the remaining copies back to the first office, take a seat in the corridor, and wait for his final consultation. So he found himself sitting in the corridor again, this time with two young women, who were almost still girls and who winked at him in a strangely comical way, as if their only possible method of establishing contact was an innocent, or seemingly innocent, in reality artful, flirtation of the eyes. It made him feel exposed, and he quickly looked down, which appeared to offend the young women. Back in the first room, the UNRAA employee wanted to send him away politely and at the same time succinctly, but

Kornitzer remained rooted to the spot. I am a lawyer, I am a judge, I want to work in my profession as soon as possible. You are a D.P., the woman said, you have lost your German citizenship. As a D.P. I am responsible for you, but not for your employment. Go to the district office, there is an employment agency connected to it. You will find a good man there. He was sacked in '33 and reinstated in '45 as if nothing had happened. Contact him. They are looking for glaziers, bricklayers and farmhands, I don't know about judges. And then she said goodbye with a brief, well-meant, but nevertheless business-like nod of the head.

Kornitzer wanted to discuss all this with his wife first, just as he had discussed a lot of things with her in the past: business dealings, plans for the future, dreams that were not that far-fetched. So he set off for Bettwang, back up the winding road. The return journey took longer than the way there, the road was very steep, a world of snowdrifts and newly blossoming apple trees spread out between the bank of the lake and the steeply rising slope of the Allgäu, everything slowed and cooled. And during the ascent he kept looking back, to the lake, to the high mountains, to the hallowed landscape of the peaks and to the ruffles of snow in the roadside ditch. Now was a time for experience. Walking cushioned his experience of being a petitioner, distancing it from the experience of being an insecure husband, and the time in which he sat in Claire's room waiting for her return from the dairy in which she had found work was a time out of time. Then Claire arrived with the post bus; she had rosy cheeks, but she was also tired from a day's work in the secretarial office, a kind of work that she was barely familiar with; in Berlin (a long time ago, before they were parted) she had of course had her own secretary. And what he had to tell her about his first encounter with a relief organisation on

German soil was told in an instant, melting like snow in the spring sun. Have a rest after the long journey, said Claire, wait a few days before you go to the employment agency.

Many things had been taken away, had fallen away, but thankfully not his ability to perceive, not his ability to experience joy, an immense joy. And the fact that he felt it, that even his cautious arrival had been a pleasure, he owed entirely to his wife. He hesitated to call her 'his wife' after ten years of separation. But she had overwhelmed him with her resolve: she wanted him back as 'her husband', she had put it on the record, and so he had read it. And she had taken the most sensible measures in order to get him back.

He looked out of the window, saw the onion dome of the church, behind it an almighty sun setting, a blazing fruit, a tropical fruit. The mountains glowed and something glowed within him. To be here, to be with Claire, felt good. He was glowing, it gave him a burning desire to find some work that he was made for. An occupation that he would find satisfying and on which he would be able to survive, along with Claire and the children. The hamlet of Bettwang with its six or seven farms had no guesthouse, the locals sat on benches in front of their houses. Sometimes they were joined by a neighbour. They drank cider and gazed into the blue sky, a blue sky that was alien to Kornitzer. He had no desire to join them. The hamlet had a tiny school, a cobbler, an alpine dairy and a small shop in which you could buy everyday essentials, always zwieback, barrels of sauerkraut, matches and elastic bands, sewing and safety pins, and thread. Most of the fresh food, milk products and fruit came from the surrounding farms and gardens, there was no need to stock these in the shop.

Kornitzer liked to slip into the small church, altars set in gold to the left and the right, a pulpit like a swallow's nest raised high

on the wall. The two golden saints on either side of the main altar, wistful beneath their mitres. At the right-hand altar a Sebastian with a pattern of arrows piercing his beautifully carved and painted skin, sweetly smiling down on the faithful. There was a comfortable harmony to everything, tried and tested for hundreds of years and ingrained. The confidence of a rustic culture that asks no questions and does not wish to be called into question.