

Translated excerpt from Constantin Göttert's *Steiners Geschichte* (Steiner's Story), C.H. Beck, 2014, p. 43–55:

I put on a white shirt along with the trousers I'd worn for my school-leaving exams. Although I set off by moped I jumped off as soon as the signs on either side of the road told me I was about to leave the village. I preferred to walk the last few metres. I wanted to prepare myself for this meeting, but didn't have a clue how.

I stopped outside the gate, just as I had done a few days before, but a lot more seemed to be at stake this time. It took a while for my breathing to grow regular. The gate swung open even before I'd removed my finger from the bell, and there stood Ina in a dark-blue dress with a white blouse dazzling below its richly decorated collar. A golden brooch dangled between two breasts confined between lace borders running down to her waist, and once again she'd braided her hair. I found her incredibly beautiful, but these garments, it seemed to me, simply didn't fit the century we lived in.

"They've already seen you," she said.

That was all she said. Eyes lowered, she led me by the hand through a pebbled yard in which a few hens were scraping at parched soil. With her other hand she straightened her hemline. After opening a door she stood aside in order to let me cross the threshold first.

It smelled of wood. That was my first impression. And it was cramped.

A man with a moustache and with a hairline receding high up his forehead was sitting at a big table set with blue-and-white china. His eyes had evidently been glued to the doorway in anticipation of my arrival. As I made my entrance his head jerked forward slightly, but he kept silent. He'd moved back from the table a little in order to make room for a big, pale-blue bird, which he was pressing with both hands against the taut dome of his beshirted stomach. The bird also turned its head to look at me. Don't ask me what kind of bird it was, but it apparently found me less interesting than did the old lady perched on the edge of the bench. She was mustering me with slanting eyes and flaccid skin but features that were all the more severe for it.

I heard the door close behind me, and turned round to look. It's dark in here, I thought.

I smiled in greeting at the people sitting at the kitchen table, but before I could take another step I noticed Ina.

"Here," she said, pointing at a vacant chair at the table. The man and the old lady looked in the same direction, and when our eyes met, I received a nod first from him, then from her. Although I stretched my hand out to the old lady, the man grasped it without getting up – which would not have been possible as long as he clasped the big bird anyway – then released it with a gesture that meant: Sit down.

The room was overheated. The smell of burning wood came from an open stove to which fresh wood must have been added only a few minutes before. The hot air flowed through a stovepipe

just above our heads inside which it kept cracking and hissing. The kitchen was furnished for the most part with large items of plain white furniture, several framed works of embroidery were mounted on top of the floral wallpaper. The scenes depicted were farming tasks like sowing or harvesting, or otherwise biblical in origin. But most striking of all, in fact, was a tattered old leather horse collar nailed to the wall directly above the bench at the kitchen table.

The man I took to be Ina's father waited until I'd sat down on the wooden chair assigned to me. Feeling one knee wedged between table-leg and wall I immediately thought that getting up would no longer be easy. For a moment we sat next to each other in silence, and then he abruptly tossed up in the air the bird he'd been clasping to his breast. The creature spread its wings and flew over the table to land on an old cabinet in the corner. Tilting its head to one side, the bird looked at us.

"Well," said Ina's father.

He moved his head encouragingly. And because I didn't know what was expected from me I responded with a similar movement of the head. The table was set lavishly, on the red-and-white squares of the tablecloth a *guglhupf* cake was giving off a delicious aroma, there was a china plate for each of us, but next to the old lady on one side of the table at which no-one was sitting there was one plate too many. I had misinterpreted the nod of encouragement and picked up a knife, but put it back down immediately when a kick from Ina told me my behaviour was inappropriate.

"I'm Martin," I said.

"We know that," Ina's father said.

Now her grandmother stood up and picked up the knife I'd intended to use. She too was in traditional costume: a white blouse buttoned up to the throat with broad, black wooden buttons, and a black skirt. She cut five slices of cake and distributed them over the five plates, also adding a slice to the plate on the vacant side of the table.

After that it went quiet again. Nobody started eating. Steam rose from the still-warm *guglhupf*. I was sure it had been baking in the oven only five or ten minutes before. It was difficult to suppress the urge to bite into the soft, warm dough. I knew the flow of saliva would not make it easy to talk for a long time, but the expression on the faces gathered round the table seemed to suggest we were waiting for somebody else to arrive before we started eating, but since I couldn't imagine who it might be I thought they were waiting for me to introduce myself.

"I'm Martin," I repeated. And although I knew it was inappropriate, I started talking about my studies at the teachers' training college. And because I thought the information might appeal to conservative-minded people, I mentioned that my father ran a business for heating systems and that my mother, before taking early retirement, used to be a teacher, just like I wanted to be. I told them that I liked playing piano and also used to draw, but there was something to be said for having a day job, "young people need a day job," I said, hoping that one day I would be able to forgive myself for having said those words.

I swallowed some saliva and was regaling them with the details of the street I lived in when my ears pricked up because I thought I'd heard a sound. Several pairs of eyes were trained on me. I told them about my attempts at composition and how I was convinced that young people needed a *decent* upbringing.

That noise again.

I looked down at my plate of still untouched cake. The noise wasn't coming from there. I glanced at Ina's plate, her grandmother's plate, her father's plate. The noise wasn't coming from any of them either.

And then I noticed an ownerless hand lying on the table. And the hand – no, somebody to whom the hand belonged – was growling.

I surveyed the faces gathered round the table. Then I bent down and raised the tablecloth slightly.

There was a man stretched out on the bench in front of me. I started: there'd been a man lying there the whole time, and I hadn't even seen him! I had overlooked him, and it was him they had been waiting for before starting to eat. The tablecloth more or less covered him up, he had, I saw, wrapped it round his body, leaving only his face uncovered. He couldn't sit up straight, but was grasping the table from below with one hand, with big heavy fingers with broad nails, the palm as large as the plate it was now propelling downwards.

We heard him eating, we heard him chomping at knee level underneath the table. Then the plate re-surfaced. We saw the man grasping the table. He pulled himself up by his hand. His efforts made the china tremble and the coffee spill into the saucers.

Steiner came to the surface. With eyes small and squinting he peered across the table into my face. And there was nothing but suspicion in his own.

I greeted him but got no response. He rolled his eyes and slowly sank back down on the bench, accompanied by a clinking and trembling of china crockery.

During the next half hour I had to keep reminding myself that Steiner was at the table with us, since he was invisible except for the hand that appeared on the tablecloth every few minutes only to vanish after a few more minutes. I talked about my parents' life and how we came to Austria and where we lived and in what circumstances – without saying anything about my parents' divorce. I kept forgetting about Steiner, and had to remind myself by saying: The old guy's still lying there in front of you, just an arm's length away from your thighs lies Steiner. And I knew he was watching me. He was staring at the lower part of my body.

Nobody asked anything. We just sat round the table. After Steiner had begun eating, we were permitted to dig our fingers into the steaming hot pieces of cake. It was a pleasure to eat them. I praised the consistency of the dough, a masterly accomplishment, as I knew from experience. Ina's grandmother simply nodded at my praise, while at the same time feeding Steiner, who in the course of enjoying the cake had raised himself up five or six times in order to peer at me with one eye across the

table. There was something he wanted to ascertain, and each time he seemed to ascertain it anew and simply shook his head and sank, chewing and growling, back down on the bench.

When I ran out of things to say about myself I asked about the bird, about the feeding of the bird, the habitat of the bird, I asked about the engravings on the rustic cabinets, about the chests standing so elaborately adorned in the corners, about the wood stain applied to the kitchen bench, and in my quest for further questions looked out the window at the dusty, pebbled yard in which a handful of hens penned in behind chicken-wire were picking at scraps from the kitchen.

I had already eaten three pieces of that indeed exceptionally fine *guglhupf*, and Ina's grandmother had twice wordlessly re-filled my coffee cup with her bony grey hand, when I noticed that she, whose monosyllabic responses suggested that politeness alone obliged her to excuse the simplicity of my questions, now turned to Ina. It was the first time in half an hour that somebody else seemed prepared to speak. She was smirking. Something was amusing her and I was about to ask, what, when she beckoned Ina, who was sitting next to her, to come a little closer. What I read on her face was: I've got something to tell you about your husband-to-be. A little secret, from woman to woman. Ina put her fork down and her ear up to the grandmotherly old lips. But the room was so quiet I could hear every word they said. The old dear looked at me and whispered into Ina's ear, "Take your time with the whole business."

"What business?"

"Take your time," her grandmother repeated with a smirk. "Once you're pregnant, the men hit you in the face."

Yet, instead of avoiding my gaze she stared straight at me with her slanting eyes, a repulsively affectionate look on her face. And now she was even pointing a thin grey index finger at Ina's tummy, as if she knew all about a baby inside it. Yes, once there's a baby in your belly he'll smack you. She shrugged, still smiling. Nothing to be done – a law of nature! And before I could even have replied, she had picked her fork back up and turned away from us, as if she hadn't spoken at all. She dug a finger into the dough, then licked it off. At the same time she winked at me in a very unsettling way, as if she'd just been joking before. Only then, with a laugh that was soundless but not unkind, she pointed at Ina's stomach again, nodding at me as if we had jointly hatched a plot against her granddaughter, and I suddenly thought of what Ina said when I asked about her mother, and I thought, where is her mother? I looked about the room and saw the huge bird and the father, I saw Steiner and the grandmother, but no mother. The absence of the mother agitated me to a degree by which I was surprised. The whole time Ina sat quietly by my side saying nothing at all, she would just take my hand only to drop it the next minute then take hold of it again.

That same afternoon, I now remembered in the children's bedroom, I had seen the word *Limbach* on a flag nailed to the wall behind Steiner and his bench, a linden and a stream were depicted on the fabric. The leather of the horse collar was branded with the same word, which was also embroidered along the seam of a moth-eaten, floor-length traditional fur garment.

And in spite of everything I had finally asked about this name that so evidently possessed some significance for the residents of this house but was unknown to me.

“What’s with that name?” I asked. And I read the name aloud, and now, in the children’s bedroom, I again spoke it aloud through the window into the nocturnal silence of the maternal garden. “Limbach,” I said, and thought of the slanting eyes of the grandmother to whom I’d said the name, and thought that on that evening I’d still know so little about Ina that I’d been able to articulate the name so casually, so simply: “Limbach,” I said, “where is Limbach, exactly?” And I asked questions about Limbach, whether Limbach was a town or a village, and I ended up, I remembered, talking about Slovakia after their response was confined to the words *the Small Carpathians*. I immediately felt that it was wrong to be talking about it, but talk about it I did and I talked myself into a stream of telling that showed no consideration to anything else and from which I was unable to escape, it caused every pair of eyes in the room to fasten on my face, I was interested to see how they looked at me: anxiously, angrily, reproachfully and menacingly. I could sense that I was being impudent by telling my Slovak tales, all the time shifting my gaze from one face to the other, yet only Ina’s grandmother was able to stare me out. Whenever I talked, her face underwent a change. I said the word *Trnava*, where in a church I had jotted down the opening strains of a hymn from a leatherbound hymnal, and her facial muscles twitched again, I talked about *Košice*, where the local clergyman locked me inside a tower by mistake for half an hour – and her face twitched again. I watched her puckering her lips as if waiting for an opportunity to spit out at me something she was holding back only from politeness, and the furrows of her eyebrows became deeper and deeper. But it was not just anger I saw in her face. It took me a while to understand that she was sad, that I was making her sad. Not that I knew what I had done to make her feel that way.

When finally I started talking about *Bratislava* and the huge post office on the Square of the Slovak National Uprising in which together with my friend I had been kept waiting for half an hour at the foreign exchange counter, she banged her fists down on the table on either side of her plate, and jumped up from her seat. She cut off the rest of my sentence by violently clearing her throat. Abruptly, I was speechless. Dough residue stuck to her bottom lip. She gulped, then looked at her little hands, clenched into fists, then looked me in the face again, wiping her lips.

“I beg you,” the grandmother said in a stern voice, “not to say that in our presence, at least.”

I stared at her. For a long time I just stared at her, before I started staring at Ina’s father too, and Ina as well. Nothing but unvoiced reproaches, although I had yet to find out what I’d done wrong. Ina’s father now emitted a loud sigh, raised his eyes to the heavens, glared accusingly first at me, then at Ina, and somebody groaned – that was Steiner on the bench. Words cannot express the relief I felt to feel Ina’s hand seeking out my own underneath the table.

In that instant it became clear to me that I had, in fact, been on trial. And had been pronounced guilty. I now knew I would never be accepted here, and the next minute I also knew what I’d done wrong.

“They took our houses,” said Ina’s grandmother, “but they couldn’t take our identity, couldn’t take *Pressburg*. And now she bent down to Steiner and placed his hand on the table in front of her. As a result it sometimes seemed while she talked that she was speaking to the hand that opened and closed lifelessly between her fingers, for she kept talking down to this hand and she kept stroking this hand, like she wanted to calm it down. At the same time she did something that – as Ina later told me – she had not done in a long time. She spoke about Limbach and the days back then, about which, as she immediately revealed, nothing but nonsense was talked today. She no longer bothered to sit down but kept turning – one fist planted on the tabletop – to look at the flag on the wall behind her, and kept stroking the hand like, I thought, one might stroke an ailing pet one had taken to the vet’s surgery. All of a sudden everything came flooding over me at this kitchen-table – at that time, I must admit, I scarcely knew a thing about the history of Slovakia, and less still about the Carpathian Germans who lived there once. As she continued to give her account and to make me feel all the more uneasy, I observed Steiner’s opening and closing hand. It immediately struck me as being an admonitory opening and closing; if the hand had begun by warning against my stories, it was now warning all the more clearly about the grandmother’s stories. Her tales were more dangerous than mine had been. But Ina’s grandmother had been plunged – possibly like I had done previously – into that stream of relentless and unexpected storytelling. Enveloping the trembling hand of Steiner in both of her own as if she wanted to hold it down, she took down from the hook on the wall the flag with the tree and the stream, passed it across the table to me in order to show me the embroideries, saying she had done them with her own hands as a young girl. “So, you want to know!” she cried in a voice that mixed anger and fear in a way wholly new to me at the time, “you want to know? Well then, I’ll show you!” Any unvoiced objections were silenced with her expression as she pushed down the Steiner hand with the ball of her thumb, crying “Quiet now!” to counter any unvoiced pleas, “quiet now!” But it was scarcely possible to keep that hand quiet any more. And you could now also hear Steiner growling on his bench, moaning, tossing and turning on his bench. I felt like raising the tablecloth to have a peek at him squirming. Images like that of a grave being hastily dug and filled in now hung in my head alongside that of an apricot tree that was burnt to a cinder down one side and resplendent with white blossoms down the other. “Don’t interrupt me!” she warned. I heard Ina’s father clear his throat on several occasions, Ina too was shifting about uncomfortably. Everyone seemed determined to stop the grandmother talking, a catastrophe was looming, I realized, Steiner’s fist banged the table several times over. “He wants to know!” the grandmother said in justification, pointing at me, “he did ask!” The picture of a house, a vineyard, the smell of cut grass, the clattering of kitchen utensils on simple peasant carts, stories of starving German children, of nights spent freezing in the camps – but all the stories only hinted at without being told, I thought. And suddenly I heard her sentence, the *treacherous Italians* and *treacherous Hungarians* and *treacherous Romanians* had now been joined by the *treacherous Slovaks*. “We were betrayed!” she cried, “you must have learnt that in school,” and finally the word “theft” was out in the open and lying in front of us and in front of that hand, and I could see

how the hand shuddered at the sound of the name that followed the word, and how it tried to strike out at something, and how everybody groaned at the mention of this name. “Beneš,” said the grandmother, and the hand jerked and refused to be held down any longer. The grandmother hastily returned the flag to its hook on the wall and when she turned back to the table I saw that she had been trying to conceal from me her welling tears. “Beneš, that criminal, stole everything from us.”

She spoke about the German culture in the towns of *Bösing* and *Tyrnau*, “our *Bösing*, our *Tyrnau*”, it was people like them who’d first brought culture to the region, “the Germans brought culture to a land with no culture,” she mentioned the mines and the architecture, crop rotation and the three-field system and the sewage systems, how the wine produced there had been the best, no comparison with the plonk made there subsequently, and still today, back then the Limbach Traminer was sold as far afield as England, even the Kaiser drank it, and finally she went so far as to claim that the Germans had introduced any culture the country possessed. “The Germans civilized the country,” she said, “what did they have there before?” She promptly answered her own question with “nothing!” followed by “nothing!” three more times, getting to her feet and staring with a lobster-red face, breathing like panic, out at the chicken run as if the cultural achievements were lying about there. All there were were a few chickens whose curiosity was roused by her shouting, and one hen had come flapping up to the windowsill and was pecking at the pane of glass when Ina’s grandmother kept expelling the word “cultural achievement” as if to ward off the chicken at the window: “civilization”, “achievement”, “culture”, and “civilization”.

And then she said, “Until they drove us out we Germans were responsible for the greatest cultural achievements in eastern Europe” – and only later did I understand just how abominable her words had been.

A chilly silence befell the room after that. I remember feeling the pounding in my throat, on which I intuitively placed my hand. And then Ina, who up to that point had said nothing at all, whom I had almost forgotten was there due to the horrible pictures of her grandmother, burst out laughing.

Standing at the window now, I clearly remembered the sound of that laughter, which – unprecedented and uncanny enough – erupted from the ghastly silence. It was a hysterical laugh, a gasping for air. Ina’s grandmother stood up without another word. She pushed her chair back up to the table with both hands. She checked that her blouse was smooth, passed a hand over her eyes and walked out the door to the yard with the hens. Ina’s father got up as well, visibly relieved to be able to leave the table. He too slid his chair back up to the table. He was going to check on the rabbits, he said, speaking in Ina’s direction. He sounded like he was dealing with a bedridden invalid.

Only Steiner stayed with us in the kitchen. We looked at his face, which was grey and flaccid – I recall that the phrase “deathly tired” entered my mind. We could hear and see him murmuring softly to himself. Ina bent down to him and kissed his cheek, and when she straightened I saw that the old man had been weeping quietly as well.

We both wanted to get out of there, too. We went out into the draughty old hallway, but instead of, say, going out onto the road, we negotiated a narrow old spiral staircase up to Ina's room. She pulled the door shut and locked it, throwing the key onto the bed. Due to the sloping roof the room was cramped, and the only source of light was one narrow window.

“How can she do that to him?” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“Steiner,” she said. “How can she do that to him?”

I could see the pulse hammering in her temples. And I knew there was something more she wanted to say about her grandmother's statement.

“There's a photo of my grandmother. She's standing in the middle of a bunch of girls, all dressed in the dark skirts and white blouses of the BDM, the Nazi youth organization for girls. And if you ask her, even today, she'll tell you those were the best years of her life.”

(Translation: Tom Morrison, Berlin)