

Drago Jančar
AND LOVE ITSELF

Chapter One

The girl in the photograph

1

The photograph, taken by an unknown photographer, shows two slender girls: the first in a check skirt, a thin cardigan and dark stockings, the other in an elegant black coat and with nicely woven plaits falling down her back. She is without stockings, so this is probably the remnants of a warm summer, the last breaths, probably early September. A picture of town residents going about their morning business, a woman with a briefcase, some standing around aimlessly. Here is a man on a bike chatting with someone, probably about the weather, someone else dragging on a cigarette and exhaling into the still morning air. A careful eye can discern that something has happened to the inscription on the large building: HOTEL OREL has become the Germanic HOTEL ADLER – a small correction, the practical owner has had only two new letters made, A and D – whilst the Slovene word RESTAVRACIJA has become RESTAURANT. In the lower right corner is a man in uniform walking away from the photographer. He is wearing high black boots, a grey military jacket and a holster. The idyllic image of a peaceful early autumnal morning on a Maribor street is transformed in a moment by unseen tension: where is he coming from, where is he going, the man in uniform, who is almost certainly a Schutzstaffel or SS officer, entering from the edge of the photograph and heading into its depths? For now he is a stranger, but the next moment the blonde in the check skirt and black stockings looks towards the man in uniform and says to her friend:

“Doesn’t he look just like Ludek?”

The girl with the plaits just manages to catch the profile of the passing German officer.

“Could be,” she says. “He looks a bit more grown up,” she laughs.

But she is soon serious when she sees her friend’s face.

The face of the girl in the check skirt and black stockings shows concern, something is troubling her, perhaps she has just told her friend what is troubling her, when suddenly she realises.

“It’s him,” she says, “I know him.”

For some time they watch him.

“Do you think I should say something?” The girl in the check skirt asks, in an agitated, almost tremulous voice.

“I would in your place,” the girl with the plaits gives an encouraging nod and then shrugs: “It won’t cost you anything.”

The girl in the check skirt is shuffling her feet nervously.

“I’ll ask my father to speak to him, he knows him well.”

And after a few moments she adds:

“If he’s willing to.”

“Sonja!” exclaims her friend, with a slightly teasing smile. “I think it would have more effect if you said something.”

The smile is superfluous, unnecessary: Sonja, who is anxiously kneading her handbag, does not feel like laughing or smiling, although she will soon have to smile – if she wishes to speak to the man, she will have to give him a very friendly smile.

The determined steps of the man in uniform have now taken him deep into the photograph, towards the end of the street now known as Burggasse.

“What will be, will be,” says the blonde in the check skirt suddenly, clutching her bag tighter and running after the officer. Even if she walked as fast as she could, she would not catch him. She runs.

2

I see her running along the pavement, past the window of the Astoria café, after the man in uniform along Slovenska Street – a few years ago it was still Slovenska Street, but before that, when this was Austria, it was Windischstrasse, and now it is Burggasse – she runs after the German officer, she is getting closer and closer to him. For a moment she loses sight of him, he turns onto Tyrševa Street – a few years ago it was Tyrševa Street, now it is Herregasse. The girl in the check skirt, Sonja, stops on the corner, catches her breath and looks after him. It seems as if she has had second thoughts, she can’t do this. But she must, some hope tells her that she has to do this. A moment later she decides and goes up the street. Soon she is walking

almost alongside him, she is trying to breathe steadily, she doesn't want him to see her so out of breath, she wants it to seem as if she was going for a walk, possibly to the park, or going on an errand in the same direction. She is walking almost alongside him, a step behind, perhaps once more she can't decide whether or not to speak to him, possibly she dare not, possibly her heart is beating more quickly. Then she speeds her step, catches him up, turns to him and, as if she has just noticed him, says:

“Why it's you, Ludek.”

The officer turns to her.

“Don't you remember me?” says the girl in the check skirt with a smile, she has to smile.

The man stops, weighs her up, it looks as if he doesn't know her.

“Don't you recognise me?” says the girl, clasping her handbag more firmly to her chest. “It's me, Sonja.”

“What do you want?” asks the officer in German, in an unpleasant, clipped voice, piercing her with a look in which there is at least some curiosity, perhaps she does seem familiar.

Sonja can also speak German, it's not difficult for her, she learned it in secondary school, but in any case only German is now spoken in this town, so she is a little embarrassed because she spoke first in Slovene. And that to an officer in a German uniform, an officer that she wants to ask something of. The conversation could have ended even before it began, even though Ludek also knows Slovene, Sonja knows that very well – some fifteen years ago, when she was still a young girl, he spoke Slovene.

“We skied together on the Pohorje,” Sonja suddenly says in German, “you were wearing a blue pullover.” She starts using the formal pronoun, his look is such, his voice is such, that she cannot use the familiar form, or call him Ludek.

“You were wearing a blue pullover,” she continues hurriedly and out of breath, but with a forced smile, “with white stripes across ... you knew my father, his name's Anton, Anton Belak ... you must remember ... once we all went skiing together, you helped me up when I fell into the snow, I was all wet ... wet snow.”

She utters all this in one breath and looks at him expectantly.

It dawns on him, at the name of the girl's father the penny drops, but it appears as if he doesn't want to know, then he really was called Ludek, now he is Ludwig, he was always Ludwig, but they used to use that stupid Slavic distortion.

He is looking at her, suddenly he laughs.

"Yes, we did go skiing up there, you're right."

"And I fell into the snow."

"You fell into the snow?"

"And you helped me up. I was all wet, I lost a stick."

"A stick?"

"A skiing stick, we were looking for it in the snow."

Ludwig looks at his watch.

"And your father?" he asks. "How is your father?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, he is in a hurry, he does work of great responsibility in this town, great responsibility, he can't stand here on this Maribor street chatting endlessly with this girl, who he evidently once pulled out of the snow, wet through, perhaps also her ski stick, he looks at his watch and says that he has to get to work. But he also thinks that the girl is already a woman and that he would with pleasure pull her out of the snow once more.

"What about after work?" says Sonja, feeling her face turn red. "Maybe we could have tea together after work? In a café?"

He looks at her in surprise and a little mistrustfully. He is in the kind of job where such a proposal is immediately met with some mistrust.

"Is there something wrong with your father?" he asks straight out, for he has a feeling that behind this tea there lies a problem the girl would like to discuss.

"Not with father," says Sonja quietly.

"If it's an official matter, come to my office," says Ludwig with a polite nod and then he continues on his way.

Sonja falls silent, her eyes on the ground. She is gripping her handbag so tightly that her knuckles are white. She could go after him, she could say they could go part of the way together. But she can't, she can't do this anymore, she did what she could. She stands there, watching him walk away.

“Just a cup of tea,” she calls out, not knowing where she has found the strength for this humiliation. Begging a German officer on the street for a date. Although it is only Ludek, the skier Ludek from her childhood. She has to put up with the meaningful looks of passers-by, as well as his forgiving smile when he turns and says:

“Okay. I'm free tomorrow afternoon. At five in Theresienhof. And I'm not Ludek. My name is Ludwig.”

Sonja nods and stands in the middle of the street watching his broad back, his black boots, the decisive step of Ludwig Mischkolnig, marching in his boots and SS uniform towards his difficult duties. She knows where Theresienhof is, a few years ago it was the Café Grand, but now only German officers sit there and girls like Sonja don't go there, but she will go, she has to go.

3

“Your German,” says Ludwig Mischkolnig, lighting a cigarette, “your German is impeccable.”

He is wearing a civilian suit, elegantly dark, with a blue pinstripe. He now seems to Sonja more like the Ludek she used to know.

“Why are you using the formal pronoun, there's no need to do that, we've known each other a long time.”

Sonja wishes to speak with him as if they were old acquaintances, which they are, although he probably barely remembers her.

“It's true,” says Ludwig. “When I pulled you out of the snow on the Pohorje you were still a young girl.”

“Not all that young, I was about twelve. But I remember it all very clearly. You grown-ups were drinking mulled wine, we kids were eating the biscuits that my mum had brought.”

“Mulled wine, yes.”

He blows a round cloud of cigarette smoke into the air, which changes above his head into a trembling smoke ring. He watches his bluish, smoky product with satisfaction, Sonja also watches it, she would laugh if this wasn't such a serious matter; perhaps it would be good if she did laugh, and so she gives a slightly forced giggle.

“How do you do that?” she asks with an astonished look. Ah, she is only pretending to be impressed by his smoke rings, she is not at all interested; she tries to look into his eyes with admiration, but she cannot, they have a cold, greenish shade.

“Would you like to try?”

“I don't smoke,” say Sonja.

Which is not true. She has smoked sometimes with her boyfriend. More as a joke, it's fun to lie in bed blowing smoke into the air.

“It's not hard,” says Ludwig with a laugh. “Like this.”

Once again, he blows a bluish ring into the air and watches it disappear. As if he's in no hurry and has plenty of time. A great deal of time. Something strange flashes through her mind and she has to withdraw her gaze from this leisurely performance. Of course: he blows smoke rings into the air when he is interrogating someone in his office. He asks something, blows a smoke ring, watches it and waits for an answer.

“Your German,” says Ludwig, leaning slightly across the table towards her, “is so... how would you say, supple. And clear, you articulate every word absolutely clearly.”

“I studied medicine in Graz. Karl-Franzens University.”

“Oh!”

Mischkolnig says oh, he looks surprised. A friendly smile creeps across his face, his oh is like the clouds, the smoke rings he released into the air of the Café Grand, that is to say Theriesenhof.

“Reichs University,” he says, “that’s what it’s called now, we’ve abandoned those funny Austrian names.”

She quickly nods: abandoned. Her father thought that Karl and Franz were distinguished names, old and eminent names.

“But I stopped,” she said.

“Why was that?”

She does not want to speak about why she ended her studies.

“The war.”

Mischkolnig laughs.

“Why shouldn’t people study during wartime, the universities are working, the factories are working, everything is working, life goes on.”

Only now when he is leaning towards her does he see that she has tiny freckles beneath her eyes, on her cheeks, also on her neck – if he looks carefully, also on her neck. A smooth neck, supple German, a supple girl.

“Our German teacher,” she says quickly, so that she does not have to give an answer about her studies and why she stopped, “our German teacher at school studied in Frankfurt.”

“It’s not about where your teacher studied.”

He smiles and makes clear what it is about.

“It’s about those who have learned the language understanding better its strength and beauty. How can I put it ... your pronunciation is precise and fresh. You won’t believe it: when I went to Graz, it must have been soon after that skiing, I attended a course in pure German. The German of Goethe, the German of Schiller. Before I went there I was working in a printing house, every day I was dealing with language, with the printed word, so I know what language is and I know what culture is. If I wanted to get rid of my repulsive Maribor dialect, I had to do something.”

He laughs. It is funny that he, Ludwig Mischkolnig, whose family has been based here at this southern outpost of the Germanic world since time immemorial, should learn to pronounce words and sentences as Schiller and Goethe undoubtedly pronounced them.

“Our teacher explained,” Sonja blurts out unwisely, “that Maribor German is a remnant of some Bavarian dialect. Your forebears evidently came from Bavaria.”

Ludwig stops laughing. That was not funny, nor wise, it was stupid, completely stupid. Remnant? Your forebears? Where did Sonja’s forebears come from, in grubby furs from the Russian swamps, they crawled here from there.

“Your teacher was a fool,” he says calmly. “Even if he studied a hundred times in Goethe’s birthplace. Is he still teaching at the secondary school?”

Sonja shakes her head. This conversation over tea and beneath the floating smoke rings is not going well, you silly goose, you didn’t come here to provoke this man.

“I think he was sent into exile. Somewhere in Serbia, evidently.”

“Where he belongs,” he says, “on the dung heap of Europe.”

Sonja looks straight ahead, she takes a few sips of tea. Mischkolnig watches her closely for some moments. When she spoke to him on the street she blushed, now her eyes are wandering, she cannot look into his face, her brown eyes drift across the large windows, across the River Drava, to the green bank on the other side. What is she up to? Mischkolnig knows people’s looks only too well, looks that lie, looks that conceal, looks that wander lost around the room, looks desperately seeking a sign of the rescue that will never come. In these eyes above the freckled cheeks there is nothing like that, these are the eyes of young innocence, her intention is only to intervene on someone’s behalf, to ask for help, he’ll soon see what she’s up to.

Then he smiles again, he put that well, about the Serbian dung heap, he should say it to someone at the office. Or even better, to be a bit more vulgar: the bowels of Europe, for if you look at the map, this Serbia, that destroyed Austria, could be called the bowels.

She is silent. She liked her German teacher, whose admiration for the German language and culture were no help to him. This Ludwig and his people put him on a train, like almost all the teachers and priests, and many others from the town. To Serbia, she has nothing against

Serbia. And this person she is talking to is not the Ludek of fifteen years ago, he is not a person she can expect anything from. She has made a mistake, she would rather get up and leave. But the lecture on language is not over, Mischkolnig seems to think he needs to explain something else.

“So that you understand: German dialect is still German. The language is in our blood, do you see? It’s in the organism, it flows in the blood, ten generations before me they spoke German, and then the language becomes old, superficial. The odd foreign word gets mixed in. So I had to cleanse it. Do you see?”

Sonja nods, she understands.

“We are an old nation, an old culture. You are a young nation, you learn quickly. You will bring freshness, new blood, in a generation you will be better Germans than we are.”

Sonja has no intention of becoming a better German, nor has her father. Nevertheless, she says: “An interesting idea.”

She says that for the sake of peace, she did not come here to listen to him ruminating about language and fresh blood, nor to admire the bluish rings of cigarette smoke snaking from his mouth. Nor to nod. Nor to politely acknowledge the officers who walk past the table and respectfully greet the chivalrous Ludwig, as one elderly gentleman in jodhpurs and boots refers to him: the chivalrous Mischkolnig has beautiful company today, my compliments. She did not come here to be in the company of a chivalrous officer in civvies, acknowledging the greetings of the passing officers in uniform, of which the café was full.

“Oh, I completely forgot,” she exclaims, “my father sends his regards.”

She thought that up, a last feeble attempt to turn this person away from his monologue about language and culture. And dung heaps. If her father knew she was sitting in the Grand Café among the German officers, he would not be happy. That Ludek, he would say, he was alright as long as he worked in printing. Then he went astray, first into the Kulturbund, then he ran off to Austria. How can it be, he would say, he had often said this, that these people became such pigs? Perhaps he would be sad if he knew she was sitting with Ludek, admiring the clouds of smoke that he knows how to transform, oh so skilfully, just using his mouth, into smoke rings.

“Oh,” exclaims Ludwig with satisfaction, “I’m glad. Does he still work at the hospital?”

“Yes,” says Sonja with a nod, “on the surgical ward.”

“Then he has plenty of work,” he says, giving her a meaningful look.

“Quite a lot.”

Ludwig is silent for some time, as if unsure whether this conversation with a young lady who evidently admires him is worth continuing, or whether he should abandon the over-sweet tea and move on to cognac. He decides on the cognac and waves to the waiter, who hurries over with a white napkin over his arm.

They are silent for a while, as if they have nothing further to say to each other. When the cognac is on the table Ludwig, with a soft, practised gesture picks up the glass, swirls the yellow liquid around, sniffs it, has a taste.

To Sonja he seems to do this as well as he blows bluish smoke rings, perhaps even better.

“It’s good,” he says suddenly in Slovene. “Why are you surprised,” he says, “did you think I’d forgotten how?”

Once again he leans across the table and says quietly, confidentially:

“In my work, Slovene comes in very handy.”

Sonja feels a shudder run down her spine. In his *work*. At the same time, she feels she can no longer deal with smoke rings, language and cognac. She is here because of a deadly serious matter. And even though it is deadly serious, she has to smile.

“When we met on the street,” she says calmly and with a slight smile, “I mentioned that it was not about my father.”

4

Ludwig stops talking and looks at her coldly. He had forgotten what they said on the street, when he had really thought that the girl wished to intervene on someone's behalf, he knows how these things work, he seems to remember she really did say something like that, but he had forgotten. Last night he kept thinking about her fluid walk in her check skirt, her friendly voice, now he thinks how supple and fresh her German is, almost like the girl herself. And now

this, always the same thing: in this cursed time in this cursed town, however much it is his town, can he never enjoy a moment's peace, does he have to be on guard every minute?

“Then who is it about?” says Ludwig Mischkolnig coldly, he is no longer Ludek, he is just a police officer, a police officer of an exceptionally important kind. It is only because he is a police officer that Sonja is talking to him, and that is why she ran after him on the street. Then he was in uniform, now he is in civilian dress. Sonja does not know that Mischkolnig is not an ordinary police officer, he is with the SS. Currently he is working for the security force, the SD, which has very important responsibilities in the town. That’s something else she doesn’t know yet, but soon will, that the police also go around in civilian clothes. When they’re at work they are in uniform, the grey uniforms of the various branches of the SS, for everyone who is in the security police is a member of the SS. But Sonja knows none of this yet, she is looking with great hope at Ludek , at the young man who once helped her out of the wet snow.

“My friend has been arrested by mistake.” She suddenly comes out with what she has been holding back ever since she ran after him on the street.

“By mistake?”

“Maybe they mistook him for someone else.”

“Of course, by mistake, it’s always by mistake. He’s not also some kind of teacher?”

“No, he was a teaching assistant at Ljubljana University, a geodesist.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“Friend,” says Sonja hesitantly.

“I see, he’s your boyfriend.”

Sonja looks at the cold tea on the table, there’s a lot left, she suddenly drinks it down, emptying the cup – oh, how she wishes that this conversation could be over as soon as possible.

“That’s the only reason you stopped me on the street, to plead for your boyfriend. What’s his name?”

“Valentin. Valentin Gorjan.”

Ludwig pulls a notebook from his pocket and writes the name down. From out the corner of her eye Sonja sees that those at the other tables are watching them, someone half laughs out loud. Their colleague is not only chivalrous, but he also does work in the café. His job is such that he has to work in the late afternoon in the café and in beautiful company. He writes down his phone number, tears off the page and pushes it across the table.

“Now the matter is official,” he says.

He looks at her without moving, her bowed head, he is seeking her eyes, which are drifting across the large windows through which the warm evening sunshine is glowing.

“I must say you’ve surprised me a little,” says Mischkolnig. “There is no room for anything personal here, only what is legal, nothing else.”

He, too, would like to end this conversation. It’s his own fault for getting embroiled in this, even on the street, but now it is what it is. He owes nothing to anyone, least of all this young miss, who thinks she is going to get him into some kind of stupid trouble, what does she expect, that he’ll rescue her lover from prison?

“Call me in a couple of days,” he says nevertheless, “I’ll see what I can find out.”

When they stand up and he helps her on with her cardigan, he feels that her shoulders are trembling slightly.

“But just so we’re clear,” he quietly, almost in a whisper, breathes into her ear. “You must call me. If you don’t, we’ll come looking for you.”

He gives a brief laugh, so that girl understands: he will look for her, he wants to see her again. She could understand this as a threat: they will come looking for her because she is close to someone they have under arrest. But she doesn’t, she actually understands nothing other than that this man has power over her Tine, he could help him. Although now he also has some kind of power over her, she has put herself in that position.

Sonja raises her eyes and gives him an entreating look.

“You won’t do anything bad to him,” she whispers.

“Of course not,” Ludwig Mischkolnig says gallantly, a little ironically. “Not if a young lady who I once pulled from the snow so demands.”

And he thinks that he hasn't heard anything quite so stupid for a long time. Her statement has even put him in a good mood, he feels a little like laughing, he would really like to say: who would we do anything bad to?

But Sonja surprises him once more. It's as if she has read his thoughts.

"I'm not demanding anything," she whispers fervently to his face, close to his lips smelling of cigarettes, of snaking bluish smoke rings, "how could I demand anything, who am I to make demands?"

She speaks to him fervently, half out loud in front of all these officers, many of whom are now looking at them.

"I'm not demanding anything," she says almost out loud. "I'm appealing to you. Appealing."

5

Obersturmbannführer Ludwig Mischkolnig crossed Adolf-Hitler-Platz and went up Herrengasse towards his apartment. The freshness of the early autumnal evening breeze cooled his face, slightly heated from the warmth of the many bodies and cigarette smoke in the café, and a little from Sonja's breath that he felt not long ago on his face, from her naïve look, in fact innocent – someone who looks like that can't be concealing anything, the eyes are the mirror of the soul – from her: I'm appealing to you. This kind of appeal from a supple young lady is nevertheless slightly exciting, you can't help feeling good in a way. He felt good, this was his town and now it was slowly and reliably becoming what he had long wanted, firmly closed ranks, *mit ruhig festem Schritt*, he muttered, almost sang, that's what they sang in the SS-Junkerschule: *mit ruhig festem Schritt*, with a quiet, steady step, dreaming of a new Europe that would be German and invincible. It still was, although some things were no longer going as they should, and his town was part of this new Europe. If he thought about this, he could feel okay in spite of all the difficulties that needed to be overcome. Even Sonja's impeccable German made him feel good. These people were alright, they were mostly alright in all the countries, in Austria, Yugoslavia and in the Reich they were alright, they did their work as necessary, her father was a doctor, they needed doctors. What was lacking was what was now happening, they were becoming part of the great German culture. He knew her father, as soon

as she said the name he remembered him clearly, Doctor Belak, a doctor and, a year earlier, a patriot – what a stupid word, especially if you added the word Slovene to it, a Slovene patriot, people who not long ago sang patriotic songs at their patriotic celebrations, celebrating Serbian and Russian Slavic dung and showing disdain for their German fellow citizens, making fun of their Slovene, and now look what kind of German their children were speaking, Schiller would be delighted. And their patriotism had also evaporated, they had suddenly become loyal German citizens. Everything had been going well, almost excellently. It was true that over the last year, since the bombs had started to fall on the town, it was somewhat worse, quite a bit worse. The initial enthusiasm had faded slightly. But the main things were in place, at least in this town. The meeting with Sonja had filled him with satisfaction, he would look into what was happening with this... what was his name, Gorjanc or Gorjup. He did not want her to clarify anything, for he knew what she would say, he knew that old song: by mistake, by sheer coincidence he had a pistol in his pocket, someone had stuffed some communist propaganda into his bag, he was drunk when he said at the bar that the Reich could go to the devil, he knew that old song, they were all innocent and all arrested by mistake. With a quiet, steady step, yes, but also with an iron fist, as our Gauleiter said when he came to Marburg an der Drau, as Maribor was properly called, and took over the civil administration, he told them very clearly: with an iron fist, if necessary.

But he would still look into the matter; as far as he remembered, among the suspects he was responsible for, that is to say dealing with, there was no Gorjup, or whatever he was. Probably Hochbauer had his hands on him. He knew his own, not only their names but also their relations, up to five times removed, as well as their sweethearts. Well, so now he also knew the sweetheart of this Gorjanc, Sonja was her name and when she was still a girl he had seemingly pulled her from the wet snow on the Pohorje Mountains, and he would do so again now. To tell the truth: with great pleasure.

6

At the edge of the park he stopped. On the second floor the light was still on in his mother's room. She was waiting for him.

Since his father died, she has waited for him every evening, as she waited for her husband. I've made you pancakes, my boy. He didn't like this sentence when he came home in the

evening after a hard day's work, he didn't like her calling him my boy, as she did when he was little. He would prefer to tiptoe past her room, lie down, listen to a record, read. But that was impossible: yesterday evening, when he came home from the office, he took his boots off on the stairs, opened the door quietly, didn't switch on the light in the hall and then went in stocking feet towards his room. But in spite of her age his mother had excellent hearing; she opened the door, turned on the light and looked at him in surprise.

"What's wrong with you?" she said. "Surely you haven't been drinking."

He shook his head and said he hadn't wanted to disturb her. But he wasn't disturbing her, she could barely wait to see him each evening, he was never home.

"You know I have a lot of work, mum."

"I know," said his mother, "but I so look forward to seeing you. We could listen sometime to *Veronika, der Lenz ist da* again."

"I don't like that song," he said grumpily.

"You used to like listening to it, we all did."

He put down his boots and unfastened his holster. His mother watched him.

"What is it?" he said, somewhat nervously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You know why," she hissed, putting her hands on her hips.

"What?!"

"You were with a woman," she said. "Why don't you trust your mother? I've nothing against it, but you could introduce us."

"Mum," he said as calmly as he could. "I've not been with a woman, so stop talking nonsense. I was at work, I took my boots off because I thought you were asleep, I didn't want to wake you."

"You know very well that I'm never asleep, I always wait for you," she said.

He went into his room, slamming the door behind him. He stood there for some time, waiting for her to go. But she did not, he could hear the rustle of her dressing gown on the other side of the door.

Then she sang quietly:

*Veronika, der Lenz ist da,
die Mädchen singen Trallala.*

Veronika, the spring is here, the girls are singing tralala.

“Mother, go to bed,” he said.

There was no reply. After a while she spoke, with a broken voice, almost a sob, she said quietly:

“The pancakes are on the stove, the jam is in the cupboard.”

He opened the door. There she stood, barely holding back her tears. He thought how alone she was since his father died, so alone. He hugged her. He went into the kitchen and started to stuff himself with pancakes, even though he wasn't the slightest bit hungry. His mother sat on her chair, her hands in her lap, watching him with satisfaction.

That was last night. This evening he really did not want pancakes with jam. He decided to walk around a bit, perhaps his mother would fall asleep, she did sleep sometimes. In the morning he would apologise because he had not eaten them, but they are also good for breakfast, he'd have them for breakfast. This evening he would like some more fresh autumn air, a walk through the liberated town that was joined to the German fatherland. He thought he might return to the café and some friendly company, there was never a shortage there, and share his cheerful thoughts. Hans Hochbauer sometimes sat there drinking and making stupid jokes: Did your mum let you go out? Hans is always asking him why he still lives with his mother, he could find his own apartment. And get married. Ludwig Mischkolnig laughs and says: I'm married to the fatherland. Although he does not feel like laughing, he outranks Hans and yet Hans is always making such jokes. He is fat, he eats too much, in this job there should be no room for those who eat and drink so much.

But now he could join his comrades in Theresienhof, Hans is in Vienna, dealing with some complicated matter about the links between Austrian and Yugoslav communists. He wouldn't have to listen to his stupid taunts. He could talk to the other officers about events on the battlefields, some had been in Africa, in Scandinavia, in Poland. Brave men. Sometimes he wished that he could also go to the front, among the explosions and victories. But the fatherland

wants him here, in his home town – there is also a battle here, for German culture and the new Europe.

He didn't go to the café. The park was nearer, the presentiment of dark greenery drew him among the old trees. He headed for the Three Ponds, for some time he wandered here and there, and had no idea how he ended up outside his office, his feet had found their own way there. The guard at the entrance saluted him, one of the duty typists was chatting to the doorman. He said something about a beautiful evening and took the key to his office, in fact not only his, but also Hans's. He would take a look at Gorjan's file.

excerpt from the novel translated by David Limon