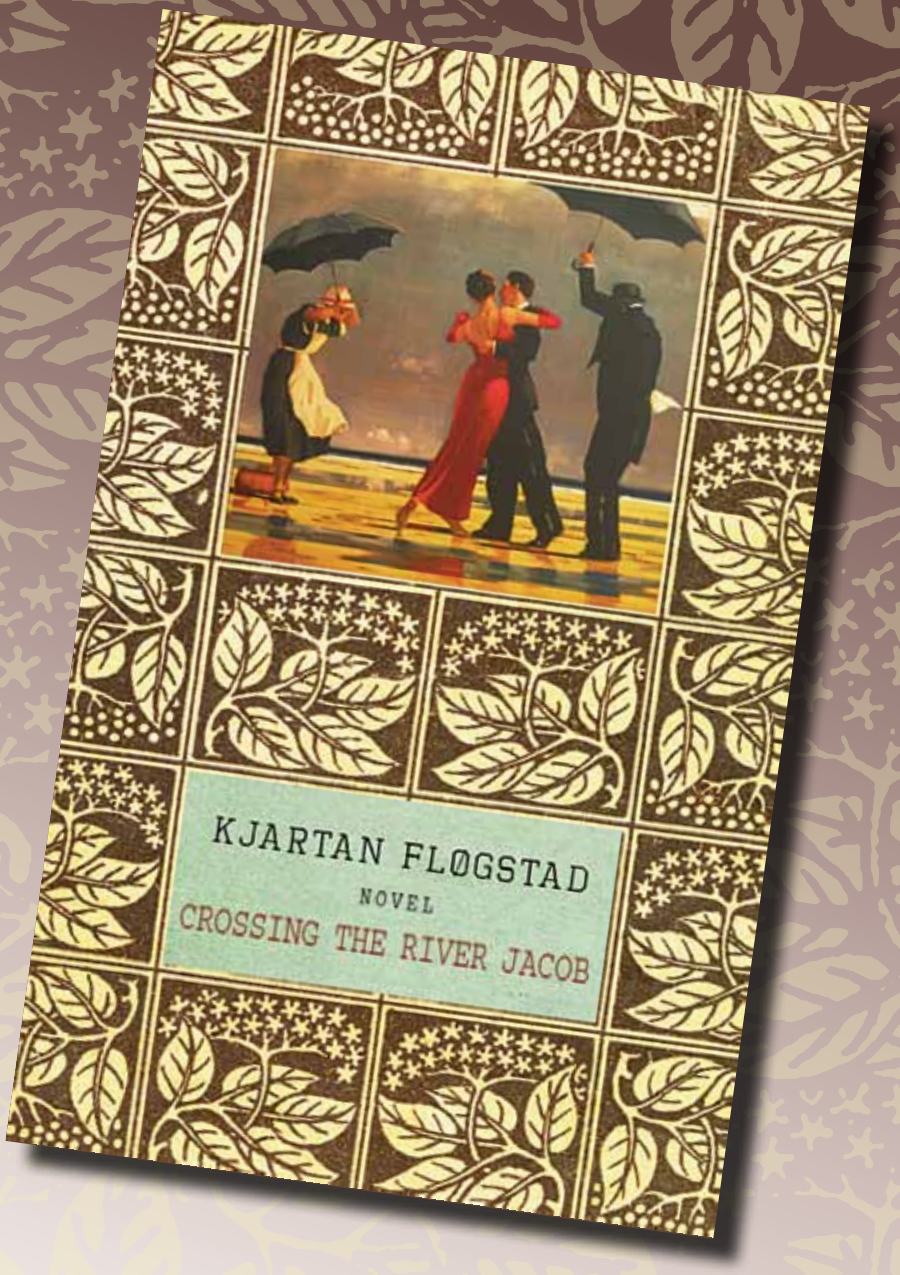
«*Crossing the River Jacob* is shocking and convincing literature.»
Dagbladet



Kjartan Fløgstad's *Crossing the River Jacob*

GYLDENDAL

GYLDENDAL AGENCY – GYLDENDAL NORSK FORLAG

Kjartan Fløgstad (1944)

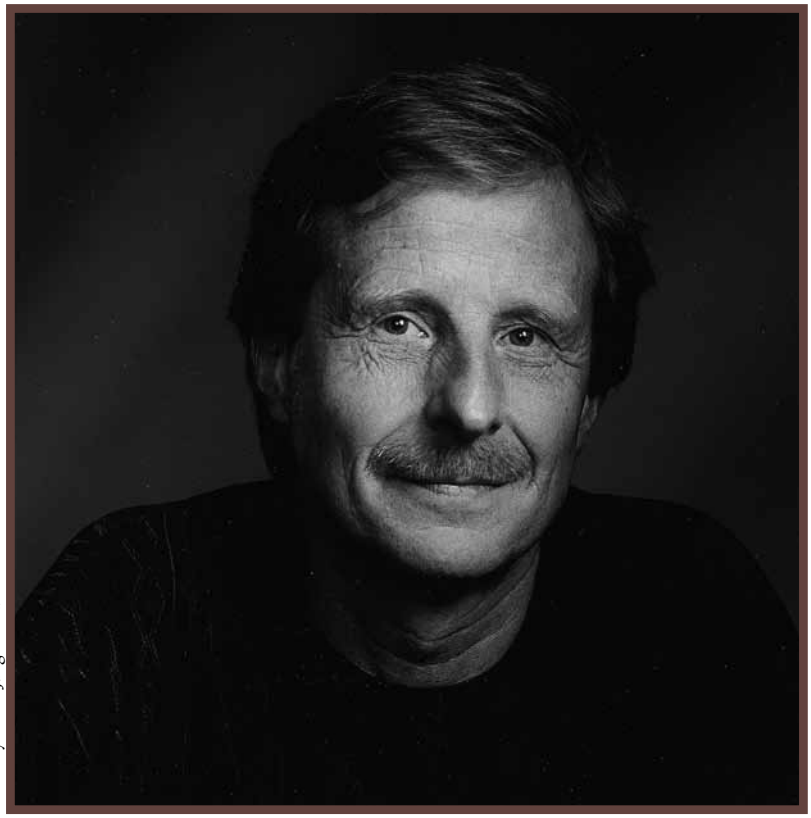


Photo by Hans Jørgen Brun

- One of the most important and influential Norwegian writers of today; a literary icon, a contemporary powerful voice

- Awarded the Nordic Literary Prize in 1975 at 31 as well as numerous other prizes:
  - The Critics' Prize 1980 and 2006
  - The Brage Prize 1998
  - Medalla de Honor Presidencial Internacional Centenario Pablo Neruda 2004

- A prolific writer, since his début in 1977 he has written 11 novels, several collections of poetry, essays, short stories, travelogues, plays and non-fiction

- His novels demonstrate a global awareness and a strong sense of solidarity with the oppressed. He is also exposing the forces that shaped the industrial and post-industrial society, and the belief that a wealth of knowledge can be found in different forms of popular culture, both traditional and modern.

- *Le Monde des Livres* (Nils c. Ahl): «Although he is an excellent essayist, he is first and foremost a great writer, as ambitious as he is talented - as proven by *Grand Manila,* a realistic and poetic polyfonic novel, like nothing else in contemporary literature.»

Crossing the River Jacob

Translated by Walter Gibbs

FLENSBURG

Northern Germany, March 20, 2008

The deceased had wanted no television. No cameras, microphones, coiled cables or lighting rigs were permitted to detract from the august ceremony. Everyone was present anyway, as the newspapers would write. The day of the funeral brought blue skies and cold northerly winds. We, too, came from the north, first by boat to Kiel and onward that same morning by train. The tolling of church bells carried beyond the city to the harbour and the fjord and the surrounding lowlands. Official limousines with darkened windows rolled slowly through the narrow streets of the city centre, depositing formally dressed passengers into the side streets around St.-Marien-Kirche. I should have known the way, but we took a wrong turn leaving the station and arrived at the church at the last minute. Inside, the church was beautifully decorated with flowers and wreaths. The drone of an organ floated above the remarkably commodious wooden pews and the dignitaries occupying them. Generalstaatsanwalt Dr. Dr. Hon. Paul von Damaskus went to the grave in a Protestant ceremony attended by high-ranking state officials and civic leaders. Among his many honours and decorations was the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, which then-Chancellor Willy Brandt had pinned on his chest personally. In the funeral party we saw representatives of the federal government in Berlin (deputy ministers and below, that is) as well as the Schleswig-Holstein state government, Rotary International and of course the Federal Intelligence Service, or BND, in Pullach. Leading press organs like Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Zeit and Der Spiegel had already published extensive obituaries, all emphasizing the deceased's civic engagement and the moral courage he had shown through turbulent decades in German and European history. The most important death notices occupied a quarter-page, fully formatted, in the weightiest national newspapers; others ran in smaller papers across the northwest of the country. Public and private organizations alike were described as benefitting from Dr. Damaskus's wisdom and extraordinary work capacity. Regional auto clubs, health-care institutions and homeowner associations were among those expressing gratitude for his invaluable contributions. Over the decades Dr. Damaskus had held countless positions of trust. Well into his senior years he provided legal counsel to AEG Telefunken, the medical firm Traumapunkt Taunus AG and the business operations of the weekly magazine Der Spiegel.

His death, while dreaded, came by no means unexpectedly. He fought against it to the last, and the best surgeons did all in their power to save his life. None of the obituaries mentioned that the final transplant operation had actually been an isolated success, of no avail only because the patient's life was beyond saving. Nor did the writers spare a word for the donor, whose fresh organ proved useless to the ancient body into which it was planted. «A short illness has put an end to a long, full life,» was how the Damaskus family put it, in their own paid death announcement. The family then quoted from the Second Epistle of Paul to Timothy: «I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.» The corporate employers on whose behalf Paul von Damaskus had fought so many wage battles emphasized, in their official

statement, the respect and admiration that Dr. Damaskus had always been accorded; they recalled in particular the powerful moral example he had set for allies and adversaries alike in conflict situations and other professional settings.

Similar moral themes found their way into Bishop Tönniessen's high-flown but solemn address from the pulpit. If one thinks back to the Third Reich, he remarked, what may come to mind are crowds of ignorant thugs and bullies. And while that's not entirely inaccurate, we mustn't forget that even as our civilization was collapsing there existed a large, peace-loving establishment with long family traditions. It was hard for Bishop Tönniessen to imagine anyone who more fully embodied the moral heart of this prosperous class than the generous and beloved patriarch of the German north who had so recently passed away. Seized by a longing to flee the noise of the city and the evils of this world, Dr. Dr. Hon. Damaskus had moved some time ago to rural surroundings. It was there, beneath the dramatic and ever-changing sky of northern Germany, that the Generalstaatsanwalt found the peace he needed for contemplation, for deliberating in particular on the fate of friends and associates far less capable of bearing hardship than he himself had been. From a neglected, even godforsaken patch of German earth, Dr. Dr. Hon. Damaskus and his family brought forth a constellation of buildings, landscapes and culture that would not only withstand the abrasions of time, but would grow continuously, a symbol of the noble German spirit. Large words indeed. And Bishop Tönniessen, erect in his pulpit, did not shrink from giving them voice. And why should he? For twelve dark years, the Damaskus estate had served as a gathering place for brave members of the learned classes, meeting to preserve timeless intellectual, moral and aesthetic values in a period of barbarity, a period when the good and the beautiful in man were threatened on all sides, primarily from totalitarian forces in countries not comparable with our own. And those threats, they remain. They loom still. Yes, now more than ever we must be alert to totalitarian temptations. Such a perspective makes it is easier to explain, if not to excuse – no, in no way to excuse, but at least to understand – that in the heat of the battle, yes, in precisely that extremity of effort, one might well have done things and said things that today, in dim hindsight, might seem strange and perhaps even regrettable, at least given the ignorance of history that characterizes our time and the monumental banality now spreading to all corners of society, a society in which degenerative forces appear to have free rein.

Though he was in fact fully retired from the ministry, Bishop Tönniessen spoke at length, indeed perhaps too great a length, about tradition and values, and in particular the value of that essential spirit, so often scorned or discounted, that emerges to resist the powers of darkness – the very spirit, that is, represented by the departed. At this point in the bishop's oration there arose such a din of throat clearing and shoe scraping, accentuated by a heel-iron or two, that it nearly drowned out the quavering voice from the pulpit. I sat wondering if I had switched off my mobile phone when finally the bishop's silver tongue fell silent and a liberating Bach chorale issued from the organ. An attentive family member jumped forward to give the Lord's servant a supporting hand as he descended from the ornate pulpit, which bore the script *Anno 1579*.

The deceased's eldest son spoke for the family. Björn Damaskus had followed his father into the law and now served as Regierungskriminalrat for the Federal Criminal Police. As a result of his work in the appellate courts the younger Damaskus, too, had become widely known, in part for his role in the recent appeal cases of former Red Army Faction members. Standing tall and sure at the front of the rounded chancel, beneath a high mansard ceiling, this seasoned jurist clearly guarded against dazzling his audience with eloquence, and instead spoke calmly but penetratingly about his father

as a family man and a friend, as a role model, as a rock of stability in spirit and intellect, and as a memory that would tower in the minds of all who knew him. A slight contraction of the throat, suppressed by manly effort, betrayed the depth of feeling that welled inside the speaker.

With the son in silent grief before the casket, I noticed a bulky young man in a dark double-breasted suit, walking up the centre aisle. Scanning left and right as he went, he reached the second row of pews before recognizing the person he was looking for. From behind, I could see that it was an older man with dark, oiled hair arranged elaborately across a shiny dome. The newcomer leaned over and whispered some words into his ear. For a second, the older man sat motionless, then stood resolutely and strode out of the church, the messenger on his heels. Irritated, even irate stares followed the two men as they exited. It was then I recognized him.

«Who was that?» Henny murmured.

I watched as Björn Damaskus returned to his seat in the first row, and I said, «An Italian.»

But I did remember it. I remembered it very well, I just didn't say it. I didn't say, «Gian Luca Ferlosio». The name would have meant nothing to Henny, so it was just as well that the swelling organ – and some new agitation in the pews around us – arrested both my voice and the act of recollection.

What's more, a mourner in the front row stood up exactly then and made his way, all but tottering, to the chancel. Stopping at the flower-decked casket, he banged his heels together and performed a Nazi salute – den Deutschen Gruss. It all happened so fast. I think I heard several shouts of astonishment or disbelief, and Henny pulled at my arm – or was I pinching it myself? *He is dead.* Henny was whispering to me. I said, «What?» *But he won't lie down.* I was nonplussed. And I caught barely a glimpse of the man, from behind, before he sat down again. Who it was I couldn't tell before the assembly composed itself anew.

Other eulogies were delivered by the finance minister of Schleswig-Holstein and by the chairman of the regional judges' association. The only conspicuous mourners I could identify from Dr. Damaskus's own generation were Dr. Sievert Christiansen, the elderly editor of Flensburger Merkur; Dr. August Glahn, the deceased's personal physician; and, most notably, Dr. Otto Nebelung. As Christiansen would write the following day in his paper, it was both poignant and riveting for those in attendance to see the revered Dr. Nebelung, aged well over 90, standing with bowed head over the flowered bier, taking leave of his old friend and staunch ally in the struggle against Neo-Nazism and other totalitarian currents of the age. It was one of those rare, pregnant moments when a great assembly falls quiet, deafeningly quiet, in apprehension that something historic is about to occur. And indeed, in the extension of that moment, it felt as if a titanic train bearing the casualties of a hundred years of extremism rolled soundlessly through the old sanctuary.

The world at large was present as well, including high-ranking officers from Rotary and a variety of public agencies abroad. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to recognize officials of the intelligence service in Pullach as well as NATO headquarters in Brussels and the British SAS. Representing Gladio and Propaganda Due of Italy I saw no one more prominent, oddly enough, than Gian Luca Ferlosio. I assume there were some in the pews, too, who remarked on the presence of us from the High North. Not that anyone would attach much importance to it. The local newspaper mentioned for what it was worth that the newly retired district judge from Drammen, outside Oslo, and his wife Henny, attended on Norway's behalf. Which I suppose was true enough. But I was now out of public service, no longer lived in Drammen, and had received a flat-

tering offer to join the board of Fritt Ord, the Freedom of Expression Foundation in Oslo. As for Henny, I was happy she had forgiven Damaskus and was willing to show it by taking part in the funeral. I myself intended to combine this representational duty at Flensburg with research for a book series – a collection of literary landscapes called *Scandinavian Pen Strokes*, which I had been planning for years and now saw fit to expand southward under the title *Pen Strokes of Southern Jutland and Northern Germany.* I also carried a letter of introduction that identified me as a trusted contributor to the crucial new edition of Scandinavia's twilight-hours almanac.

For the deceased, though not only for him, the funeral marked the end of a long and dramatic story, the telling of which begins quite naturally right here as well: on Germany's northern frontier, where continental Europe meets the Nordic region, near the strip of land where the ferries from Oslo have always docked.

As the six pallbearers left St.-Marien-Kirche with their burden, the cold winds off the fjord picked up speed, threatening a storm, gusting mostly from the north, dishevelling wide silk ties and thin wisps of hair. Children in stiff attire immediately broke away from the procession, only to be reclaimed with a firm hand farther along the difficult route to the gravesite. Then the organ hymns faded, the church bells subsided, and the shifting winds off the Øresund and Kattegat rose to gale force. Whitecaps cut across the blackened water of the fjord. Even the distinct odour of hogs and hog farming came to us from the countryside in wafts tossed this way and that before they mixed with the fresh sea air.

I waited until the service was over and the crowd outside the church began to dispel. When Otto Nebelung was being helped into a black Mercedes Maybach, I recognized the opening I needed. I steeled myself and asked Henny to wait a minute. Through the open car door I could see that Nebelung recognized me immediately, despite his great age and poor eyesight. The barrel chest and bull neck were as I remembered, but the ears had sprouted tufts of hair. His throat was poorly shaven, his gaze distant. From beneath a woolly brow, he seemed to descry a land far beyond this vale. The past year had aged him greatly. He had clearly grown weaker. Still and all, he recognized me.

I introduced myself anyway: Mayen, I said. Alf Magnus Mayen.

The woman who sat beside Nebelung in the back seat placed a hand on his arm and said sharply that Herr Nebelung was tired and must rest. Women of a certain type fancy it's their role to care for wronged, embittered men nearing the end of their lives. This seemed to me such a woman. Perhaps she sized me up as an envious rival, or as one of the many who had wronged and embittered her companion. She was incredibly young, and I thought: Damn, that old ladies' man. Nebelung had not lost his touch. And she was pretty. She looked straight at me. What Herr Nebelung needed now was peace and quiet. The farewell ceremony had affected him deeply. He would need several hours to collect himself again. However, they would be pleased to receive Dr. Mayen at the hotel later in the evening.

Oh, Alf. Oh, Alf.

Nebelung peered over the arch in the woman's neck and smiled to me.

I smiled in return.

Oh, Otto. Oh, Otto.

It's been a long time.

Yes, hasn't it though?

But not so long.

Then and there, Nebelung appeared instantly to fall asleep, if not pass away entirely. The woman, by contrast, threw me a coldly alert, almost hostile look. She opened her mouth. But I spoke first.

Der Tod, I said in rusty German, *ist immer ein Meister aus Deutschland. My condolences.*

And the dead master has felled a tree, burned a book and denied a son. And there you have it: your life.

That's not what I said, but I thought something along the lines. In any case Otto Nebelung opened his eyes, and then his mouth.

Und das Leben, he said with a weak smile, *ist noch ein Weltmeister aus Norwegen.*

There was but one thing to add.

Oh, Otto – when I hear the speech that emanates from your house, I must laugh. But he that sees you, go for the knife.

If that's exactly how I phrased it, I'm not sure. But it's what I meant.

The woman pulled the car door closed with a thud. Nebelung did not get to ask, nor I to answer, how our mutual friends and colleagues were doing. I had prepared an answer for him. I knew how they were doing. I was going to say: You don't want to know. Yet the door with its darkened glass came between us. All I saw was my own mirror image against the late-Romanesque church facade. No, I didn't laugh, didn't even smile. And I never carry a knife.

At night comes the dark. And then we see nothing.

They drove off. It was still well before dark. Henny and I ate dinner at a shopping centre café looking out over the harbour. I still wore my dark suit, but without the tie. When I met Dr. Nebelung at the hotel later that evening, he was still formally apparelled – and alone. Yes, we had the evening to ourselves. And he had nothing against my turning on the tape recorder. «It is hard for me to talk about Paul,» he said.

«Really?»

«Yes, because it always brings a smile to my lips, and I don't want to smile when I think about Paul.»

«I can understand that, of course,» I said. «It would be unseemly somehow.»

«Especially after the news from Italy.»

I didn't know what he meant. And my mind was elsewhere.

«Is there something unseemly about that?» I said anyway.

But then he opened his mouth and began to speak. Together we boarded the night train, the main line that leads backward in time.

«At night comes the dark,» I repeated. «And then we see nothing.»

«I want to enter my house justified,» was the first he said, and, I think, the last he thought. But Otto Nebelung never got to read the proofs of this manuscript. All mistakes and omissions must therefore be ascribed to me. Nonetheless, most of what follows are his own words, translated by me to English. Other sources include journals, edited tape transcriptions, public documents, private archives, books, magazine articles and assorted memorabilia, conversations, memos and minutes before, during and after Otto Nebelung's period as adjutant, legal aide and secretary to Dr. Dr. Paul von Damaskus.

MUNICH, BAVARIA

Oct. 29, 1929

Franz Kien, who sat beside Paul Damaskus, was staring down at his desktop. Between the two stood the rector, towering over them both, though he'd turned his back in the direction of Paul and me, giving us a chance to study him in detail from behind

and from the side. It was the first I had seen him up close, rather than high on the dais or behind a lectern. Rector Himmler wore a light grey suit over a white shirt with the high pointed collar we called a Vatermorder. Though stiffly upright in posture, Himmler was a corpulent man – let's just say a fat one – whose round gut strained against the waistband of his trousers. Despite the double chin, his face had a smooth, freshly polished look. The hair was thinning as it faded from grey to colourless to white. Above his oiled moustache, behind round, gold-rimmed glasses, there lurked a pair of sharp blue eyes. Everything about Rector Himmler seemed burnished, bright and shiny. And he was all-knowing. He couldn't help himself. It was simply his lot in life to be omniscient. The knowledge and authority that burned inside him illuminated the whole classroom, making it hard for us pupils to hide our ignorance.

In front of Paul Damaskus sat Andersch and then Schröter, with Greiff off to the side in the second row of desks. That's how Andersch has depicted it, anyway. Already then, Andersch was a social climber – that I can certify. He was a coward, too. About that Sebald is quite right, though he goes far. I do think Andersch remembers the desk layout correctly. During this particular Greek lesson, Rector Himmler – Gebhard Himmler in the flesh – had taken over the instruction, sidelining our classroom teacher and grilling pupils one at a time. The first person he examined, then cross-examined, and eventually interrogated to the bone, was Schröter. Moving stealthily, he then passed Kien, Damaskus and me before he stopped suddenly and turned, at Greiff's desk.

«Konrad Grieff? Sorry, Konrad *von* Grieff!»

The sarcasm was cutting. But in contrast to Schröter, Konrad did not yield to it. We'd seen him lash out before. Konrad von Grieff was not one to let a provocation stand, or to worry about punishment or expulsion. He sat up straight in his chair and looked the rector in the eye.

«To me,» he said, «you are no Jupiter, Herr Rector. Not to me! I am a Freiherr, the Baron von Grieff. A Freiherr! To me, sir, you are nothing but a very ordinary Herr Himmler! Nothing else. Nothing!»

Just like that – a declaration of war, put forth with nary a tremor.

«My father always acts with modesty,» Konrad added, sounding cold and detached, like a front-line officer reporting on some battle to the general staff in the rear. Morally superior. «But that makes him greater still. We know what we are worth. We have two castles, Herr Himmler, three hundred hectares of tilled land and over three hundred decares untouched.»

Rector Himmler, by the look of him, barely held his temper. But in a controlled tone with each syllable exquisitely articulated he said:

«In these days – in these days, no one bows to that nobility claptrap. And for that we can be glad. In any case we Himmlers are much older. For generations, we've had our Stadtpatriziat in the Upper Rhine. There is a Himmler house in Basel and a family manor in Mainz. The year 1297 is carved over the entrance to the house in Basel. My dear wife comes from a respected and quite well-to-do merchant family in Regensburg. It is because of our civility and a certain cultural polish that we have stood the Bavarian royal family so near. I have personally seen to the education not only of my own children, but also of Prince Heinrich of Wittelsbach. In return, he has honoured us by serving as godfather to our second-oldest son, Heinrich.»

«Congratulations.» This time the sarcasm was Konrad von Grieff's, and it throbbed in the air the way a thrown bayonet does after hitting the wall.

«You are a lout, young sir,» Herr Himmler replied. «I'll be writing to your father to ask him to remove you from my school. Your type has no place here. And if I

know your father, that's not a message he'll appreciate receiving.»

Rector Himmler turned on his heel. Paul Damaskus stole a glance over his shoulder at Andersch, who was sitting as if on hot coals, eyes forward. But for now the danger had passed – at least for those two.

Instead it was the turn of the unfortunate Franz Kien. It was Kien who had told several of us, including Paul and me, that old Himmler was no longer on speaking terms with his second-eldest son. Heinrich was by all accounts a Hitler supporter, if not a fanatic one. He had been a regular at Café Heck, where on certain nights the party's hard core rallied for the Führer. It was well known that young Himmler went out of his way to mix with the Ludendorff clique and groups like Reichskriegsflagge. Or so said Franz Kien. He also seemed to know that our rector was a strict Catholic who supported the Bavarian People's Party and wasn't even an anti-Semite. He had nothing against the Jews! The mild-mannered Levi Bar-On, seated only a few steps away, near the teacher's dais, was no more subject to Rector Himmler's wrath than were the rest of us. And so it was that father and son had fallen out – broken all contact, in fact. Heinrich Himmler would never be caught at table with Jews, Jesuits, Freemasons or communists.

The rector's examination of Kien began on a wretched note, and only got worse.

«At the request of his fine, hard-working father,» Herr Himmler proclaimed to the class, «young Kien here has got out of paying his tuition fee.»

So, not even that was out of bounds to the rector. We had of course heard that he could be strict and heartless when things did not go as he wished. But this! Kien recoiled as if receiving a slap on the face and expecting another one.

The rector said: «Yes, he was let off the hook, though free positions are supposed to be kept for the really bright pupils. Obviously Kien does not qualify on that score. Not even close. He should count himself lucky his father put his life on the line as an officer on the Western Front, decorated for bravery and devotion. But sometimes the apple falls far from the tree. Inexplicably far.»

Himmler continued around the room in this way, not letting up. He even baited our teacher, Dr. Kandlbinder. But Damaskus and I were both spared. The rector didn't seem to notice me. That suited me fine: being passed over. Paul Damaskus, by contrast, sat alert through the rector's harangues. He was a lit bulb; he wanted to be seen. He had the answers and wanted to give them. And because everyone could see it, because Rector Himmler could see it, he was passed over. He wanted to be judged, and therefore wasn't. Instead, the rector placed a damp hand on Levi Bar-On's shoulder and held forth about the importance of strictness, especially in relation to oneself, and of fairness to others, and of discipline and order and decency – all those core secondary virtues of German culture. Yes, he actually called them that: «core secondary virtues».

Paul Damaskus eventually lost hope of being called upon and looked out the window, as if preoccupied with other thoughts, and Rector Himmler moved toward the teaching dais. Having crushed Franz Kien and reduced Dr. Kandlbinder to a wan shadow, he was now pontificating on the word *metafora,* which was Greek and meant transference, first and foremost in the everyday practical sense, as still used by Greeks today when transferring, for example, from one train to another. Worthwhile knowledge, to anyone who bothers to learn.

The rector paused on that note and stared down upon on the remains of Franz Kien. I thought: It's hard to say. In some terrain it's hard to say when you lose your bearings. Or reach a destination.

Rector Himmler had finally reached the dais and sat down at the desk there.

Through his spectacles he squinted out over the classroom. Yes, he felt compelled to say it. He was dissatisfied. We had disappointed him. The examination had been a fiasco. Our knowledge of Greek was much weaker than he could have imagined. As he saw it, our ignorance must have something to do with the general breakdown of cultured society. The decline of civic virtues like order, duty and honour. The decline of the German Spirit. Here Rector Gebhard Himmler returned to the theme of his origins. The ancient family Stadtpatriziat gave him membership in the Munich elite. And while he loved German literature and the German language, he wanted us to know that he was at heart a student of Greece. Antiquity, the Greek classics – these towered above all else. As the rector at Wittelsbacher-Gymnasium he had been entrusted with educating the children of the nobility. For a period before 1914 he had even tutored the children of Bavarian royalty. To him, Wittelsbacher-Gymnasium was more than a collection of rose-coloured buildings at Marsplatz 1. The school represented an educational and cultural ideal, the foremost of its kind. Yet even as he extolled that ideal to us, Gebhard Himmler insisted that he came from a typical, not to say ideal-typical, bourgeois family. Evidently we were to infer, by extension, that the rector's son Heinrich, while something of a black sheep, was in no way a product of the working class or ragged proletariat, but was in fact a scion of Bavaria's old, learned society.

In the course of portioning out these thoughts, Himmler had risen again to pace back and forth before the blackboard. Off to the side, Dr. Kandlbinder continued to shrink before our eyes. Then suddenly Himmler froze and gazed out over the room. Most of us knew he had severed with his son when Heinrich began wearing a swastika in public. Here at school, too, the rector had cracked down on swastikas, but also on red stars and other political symbols.

«Whether it's a symbol or just some identifier,» he said with force, «we take such signs seriously. They are never innocent. If you would now open your grammar to page three, you'll see an important sign. Can anyone tell me what it stands for?»

Paul Damaskus already had his hand in the air.

«Yes, you there.»

«It's called a circumflex, and it means curved or bent.»

«That's right, and since this is the language of Homer and Sophocles, even the tiniest accent mark can make a difference, and elevate a simple sentence to a work of art. Damaskus is your name?»

«Yes.»

«Write this sentence on the board. In Greek, of course. It is one of the simplest examples we have of the use of the infinitive, or to be more exact, the infinitive as adverbial. You know of course what an adverbial is?»

Damaskus nodded eagerly: «Yes, sir.»

«This is elementary. Or alpha and omega, to put it another way.»

Paul Damaskus wrote: *Paroxytonon, proparoxytonon, perispomenon, properipomenon.* Gebhard Himmler, lover of Sophocles, chanted the words as Paul's chalk scratched across the board. Then the great authority on Homeric and Sophoclean literature showered praise on Paul Damaskus. He concluded his Greek lesson to the pupils of Munich's best academic gymnasium by relating the story of Hasdrubal's wife as told by Polybios. It was she who strangled her children and pitched them into the flames, then leapt after them, to erase all trace of her husband's betrayal. The eschatological view of life is based on theories of the final or the ultimate, and it posits happiness in the defeat and extinction of the enemy. To massacre the other and devour it. Worldly grandeur ends where bloodshed begins, Rector Himmler

added curtly, and with that he turned us back to Dr. Kaldlbinder, himself well nigh massacred, and the period was out.

After school Paul Damaskus would generally meet up with Franz Kien for the walk home. After this particular Greek lesson Kien was nowhere to be found. Himmler's prodding must have upset him, and I suppose he was engaged in solitary reflection. When I saw Paul Damaskus walking alone, I sidled up to him. Though we had been in the same class for more than a year, he seemed hardly to have noticed me. I had greatly admired him, without daring to seek contact. Now was my chance. I took it. I introduced myself. I said: «Nebelung, Otto.» He asked where I was headed. I said we were going the same way. It wasn't true. Lying comes hard to me. But if he saw I was lying, he didn't let it show.

From Marsplatz the walk home usually went via Jutastrasse, Alphonsstrasse, Nymphenburgerstrasse and Blutenburgstrasse. Then across Hackerbrücke, toward the walls of the artillery barracks. Later it sometimes happened that we walked the opposite way, past to the railway station to Stachus, or to the Löwenbräukeller, a gigantic beer hall whose exterior looked a lot like Wittelsbacher-Gymnasium, though without the tokens of antiquity like Pallas Athena or Mercury in gold over the entryway. On those days we would naturally treat ourselves to a glass of Barock Dunkel out in the garden under the oak trees. I had a few older friends already studying at the university – chemistry, languages, medicine. That could be one reason Paul started palling with me after school. Sometimes we would bluff our way into Stefanie, the stately Vienna café and intellectual hub at the corner of Theresienstrasse and Amalienstrasse, or we would visit the slightly less fashionable Café Glasl across the street. Once in a while we headed over to the university itself, at Maxvorstadt, to hear protests and right-wing political appeals by student leaders like Wilhelm Tempel and the militant son of Rector Himmler.

During that first walk home we took our usual route through the brewery district. The sound of horseshoes striking pavement echoed among the walls, but otherwise it was a quiet part of town. I said I was sure about one thing. And that was that the rector was actually, or probably, a decent person, and certainly a good teacher as well, though no doubt a bit too ruthless.

Damaskus made no reply to this.

Then I said something I had done a lot of thinking about, and committed to memory for just this occasion.

I said: «I was sitting there looking at the rector when I began to think about Hegel, and how the whole foundation of phenomenology is the human gaze. What's unique about humans is self-awareness. We're aware of ourselves, our humanness, and our value as humans. And people become self-aware when they say the word *I* for the first time. To understand yourself is to know how the word 'I' arose in the language. When we're caught up in the world around us, it's this instinct that leads us back to ourselves.»

I paused here and there in my delivery so I wouldn't seem to be rattling off sentences by rote. But I'd practiced the speech over and over. I hoped it would impress Paul Damaskus. But still he didn't answer.

Silently we walked on, across the open area I think we called Lascherschmied-Wiese (though I might be wrong about that). In any case a gang of street boys, laughing and flying all directions, was playing a game, apparently called cannonball. Hoodlums, the lot of them. I myself used to ride in the area on Sundays. My horse stood quartered out by the old dynamite plant at Dachau, but this was no time to mention Sunday rides.

«Do you agree with that?» I finally said.

«I'm not sure,» Damaskus answered. «To me Hegel was above all the first to conceptualize the world as history more than nature. After Hegel, we can see the world as a process that we're in charge of, not some finished product we've been handed once and for all. That of course is why he's the great liberation philosopher.»

Some sort of volunteer corps of half-uniformed soldiers came toward us from the opposite direction, marching double time. The sound was like hoof-beats. Above the corps there waved a black banner with a skull.

Farther on we came upon a gentleman, neatly turned out in bowler and Vatermorder, walking his dog. He carried a special stick – it may have been a riding crop – which he threw again and again. The dog, a purebred shepherd, launched itself after the stick each time, then ran back to lay the stick in the grass at the owner's foot.

Spare the rod, spoil the dog? Paul Damaskus looked at me, I looked at Damaskus. He said he thought Himmler, Overstudiendirektor Himmler, looked at the two of us – and at Schöter, Andersch, Kien, Bar-On, Grieff and the others – as if we were that dog and he was the master.

In the darkening October light, Paul and I continued across the field. I looked at him from the side. But in another sense I looked up to him. I felt we had sealed a friendship. He said yes to a glass of Barock Dunkel. A thrown stick, a bounding dog. Yes, it's hard to say if you've lost your bearings – or reached some destined terrain.