

[This chapter originally introduced a chunk of backstory about Dorotea DeVillardi. It was eventually combined with the following chapter and cut almost in half to speed up the story.]

Chapter 33

The *Cottageviertel*—Cottage Quarter—in Döbling northwest of downtown Vienna started out in the 1870s as a stab at recreating the British “garden city” model for the middle-class. But (surprise!) gentrification drove up land costs. By the 1880s, the “cottages” had turned into the bourgeois mansions and proto-McMansions now lining Felix-Mottl-Strasse.

It’s a nice place for a walk.

Julie insisted we ride the streetcars up here so we could see the city. Now we’re strolling past the suburban villas of the *haute bourgeois* under trees still painted with golds, russets, and persimmons. All the usual turn-of-the-century styles are here: Italianate, the revivals, *Jugendstil*, Deco, even a couple examples of International Style. Lots of stone and stucco, Dutch gables (or whatever they call them here), mansard and hip roofs, and bay windows.

It’s cloudy, breezy, and in the mid-forties. Even with Julie cuddling up next to me, I’m glad I wore the hip-length Barbour Bedale jacket I bought at Harrods when Julie was busy ransacking women’s shoes. The waxed cotton swishes when I walk, but it’s warm. Julie’s very cute in a pink knit cap and matching scarf (and cheeks and nose) over her black car coat. We keep each other’s hands warm.

It felt strange waking up next to someone this morning. Good strange. I think the same went for her, too—after we got out of the shower, there was a lot of mutual awkwardness as we tried to remember how to be with a lover when we’re vertical. We’re getting back into the swing of it, though. She’s very touchy-feely and I’ve been starved for physical affection for a long time. There’s been maybe two or three minutes in the past hour when we haven’t

Lance Charnes

been touching.

“That’s it.” She stops and points across the street. “Over there. Number forty-two.”

I can see why she sounds disappointed. It’s a zero-lot-line, four-story gray stucco box with balconies stacked above a pair of prominent ground-floor bay windows. Pairs and triples of vertical windows make for a busy façade. It could be anything from twin townhouses to eight apartments. Whatever it is, it’s completely out of scale and context with the neighbors.

“This is what’s supposed to be there.” Julie shows me a black-and-white photo on her phone. It’s a light-colored, three-story Italianate villa with a projecting central bay and a dark mansard roof. A black 1920s town car sits at the curb. Handsome in its own stodgy kind of way.

She sighs and stuffs her phone into her coat pocket. Her shoulders slump.

I wrap my arms around her waist and kiss the back of her head through the cap. “I’m sorry this isn’t what you wanted.”

She sniffs and leans back against me. “I know it’s just a house.” The air’s gone out of her voice. “I wanted...”

“Something to survive?” She nods. “Maybe, go knock on the door and say, ‘My grandparents used to live here, can I look around?’”

“A girl can dream, can’t she?”

I kiss her cap again. She twists around and I get lips to practice on. Lips taste better than wool.

We stand there for a few moments, then she grabs my hand and leads me to the next corner. She stares toward the apartment building that should be her grandparents’ house. Finally, she sighs again and starts towing me west toward what looks like a park.

She asks, “Want to hear a story?”

“I’m all full up with everybody-dies-at-the-end stories right now.”

“No, it’s a good story. How far through my book are you? Have you met Trudi yet?”

“I have.” Trudi was Gertrude Berrisch, a blond, blue-eyed Jewish girl from Innsbruck who went to Vienna to make her fortune. The Meckelsohns hired her as a nanny for Lea and

STEALING GHOSTS

Lothar, Dorotea's twins. Lea was Julie's mother. "I'm almost to *Anschluss*."

"Okay. Trudi was the kids' real mom. I mean, Oma was around, but Trudi was the one who changed diapers and fixed the scraped knees and read to them at night and held them when they were scared or sad. They loved her." We trot across a four-lane street and turn onto a path that plunges into the mass of trees in front of us. "This is the Türkenschanzpark."

"This is where Trudi brought the kids, right?"

"Every day it wasn't raining or snowing. She'd grown up outdoors and she thought regular exercise would make them stronger."

We stop at a break in the trees. There's a small lake off to our left with a geyser in the middle, pushing a feathery stream of water as high as the treetops. A young woman is sitting by the water's edge with a baby in a Snuggly. "Did you ever meet Trudi?"

"Oh, I wish. She was gone before I knew she existed. It's funny—after all those years, Mom would still tear up when she talked about Trudi, but not Oma. Come on." She leads me further down the path. The trees are so thick, they screen out most of what little light is coming through the heavy cloud cover. "If you've made it to 1937, then you know the Thirties weren't so great for the Meckelsohns. Viktor's business was kind of limping along. They still had money, but not as much. Then *Anschluss* happened in March 1938. You know what that is, right?"

"Germany's not-so-hostile takeover of Austria."

"Right." We're climbing a small hill through the forest. I can just see the slate-gray roof of a tower peeking above the trees. "Things started going very, very badly for the family. How much detail would you like?"

However she slices it, it's going to get seriously grim. "Let's leave it at the Nazis doing some fucked-up, evil things to your grandparents and stick with the happy story."

She chuckles. "Okay. You know, it's weird. The Nazis did such awful things, but they always had to make it look legal. You wouldn't believe how much of Oma's story involves lawyers and tax auditors. You said you're an architect, right? I thought you might like this."

Lance Charnes

We're in a clearing with a cylindrical brick tower about sixty feet tall. The top twenty feet or so are an octagonal wood post-and-beam observation platform and a zinc standing-seam peaked roof. It looks like something Shrek would try to climb. "This is cool. What is it?"

"It's called the Paulinenwarte. It's supposed to have a wonderful view of Vienna. It's also a water tank." She pulls me past the tower toward a small bridge with wrought-iron railings. "Where was I?"

"Lawyers and tax auditors."

"Oh. So, things got pretty thin by summer. All the men had been arrested. Oma had to lay off the last of the help in August. It was just her, Esther, Trudi and the kids in that big house." Esther was Viktor's wife, Herschel's mom.

"Oma couldn't pay Trudi anymore, but she stayed anyway. She didn't have anyplace else to go, and the kids loved her and needed her. She brought them here every day she could. Let's stop here for a minute, okay?"

We've come to a small meadow. A life-sized bronze Cossack is sitting on a rock, smoking his long-stemmed pipe, while his bronze horse grazes a few yards away. It's got not one ounce of the bombast we've seen in the other monuments; it's immediately my favorite. We settle on the rock by the Cossack's feet.

"What did your mom think of all this?" I ask after a few moments.

"She didn't understand it." Julie's starting to sound down. I can't blame her. Slogging through this muck for what must be the thousandth time would get to anybody. "Oma told her some bad people were blaming them for all the bad things happening in the world, but... well, Mom was only eight. How do you explain all this to an eight-year-old? Mom could barely understand it as a grown-up. I still don't."

Julie closes her eyes and rests her head on my shoulder. I stroke her back through her coat and let my attention wander around the trees and the Cossack and the random well-bundled walkers passing by. It's a comfortable quiet, an intimate one. It's like we have the park all to ourselves except for the fat squirrels hopping around the trees.

STEALING GHOSTS

She finally stands, stretches, then pulls me up into a kiss. “Come on. I want to finish.”

Once we’re on our way, she says, “Okay, October 1938. There were anti-Jewish riots and pogroms all over Austria. Then the Nazis cancelled all the Jews’ passports. The Jews were supposed to get them stamped with a ‘J.’ The Swiss put them up to that, by the way.”

“Figures.”

“Oma convinced Esther and Trudi to not get their passports stamped. It was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid—if they got caught, they’d have gone to a camp like *that*.” She snaps her fingers. “*Kristallnacht* happened a month later. It was... a horror show. You’ve heard the stories, right?”

“Yeah.” Read a lot of them too, when I was in PEN and researching why Ida Rothenberg did what she’d done.

“Good. Most of the worst of it here was in central Vienna, in those places we went to yesterday. Oma and the rest hid upstairs in the house with the lights off. Some friends of the family, the Gutmeiers, showed up at their back door around midnight. They’d been downtown and got caught in it. A mob killed the father and tore off most of the mother’s clothes. Their two kids told Mom and Uncle Leo what they saw. Mom couldn’t sleep after that.”

We arrive at a modern playground with fancy slides and turntables and climbable things. A dozen littles are tearing around, chattering like magpies. Eight or nine adults sit on the iron-framed wooden benches around the edge, watching for blood. We take over an empty bench near the swing set.

Julie squeezes my thigh. “Don’t worry, I’m almost done. *Kristallnacht* was when Oma decided they all had to leave. She wouldn’t let the Gutmeiers go home. They probably didn’t have a home by then anyway. Oma said she’d sell a few more things and then they’d take the train to Bratislava and work their way down to Venice, where they could stay with her parents.”

She watches the kids play for a while. By now I’m pretty sure I know where this is going, but I want her to get to the end so I know how she came to be.

“The police came to the house that afternoon. They arrested Oma for not turning in her passport. They also took Esther and the

Lance Charnes

Gutmeiers. Trudi had brought the kids here to the park as usual. They were on their way back to the house when Trudi saw the black cars and the police truck. She knew right away what was happening. Remember when I stopped on that corner and looked back?” I nod. “That was where Mom saw Oma for the very last time. Trudi rushed the kids back here.” She stops to hug herself. “I keep wondering what would’ve happened if they’d gone back ten minutes earlier. I wouldn’t have been born. Just ten minutes.”

She lurches off the bench and drifts to the edge of the tanbark to look at the kids. A couple of the nearby mothers start watching her instead of their little darlings. After a minute or so, I lead her down the path far enough to keep the mob from driving her off with their selfie sticks and flaming bottles of hand sanitizer.

“Sorry,” she says. “A couple of the kids back there were about Mom’s age when all this was happening. I’d always wondered why Mom was the way she was—the obsessive secrecy, not being able to show emotions like other moms. It wasn’t until I started digging into this that I understood. I’m just glad I didn’t end up that way, too.”

“So am I.”

She smiles a little and bumps my arm with her shoulder.

“How’d they get out? Trudi and the kids.”

“This is where it turns into a spy thriller. Trudi sneaked into the house after dark—”

“No guards?”

“No. She packed a suitcase for all three of them and got the money she’d hidden under her nightstand. She also took the household money, what they used to buy food. I guess she knew that Oma wasn’t coming back. Then she took the kids straight to the Westbahnhof. She told them to call her ‘mama’ and tell people their dad’s name was Max and he was in the army and they were going to visit their grandparents in the mountains.

“They managed to get almost to the platform before a policeman stopped them. She told him her husband was up on the frontier with Czechoslovakia and she was taking the kids to her parents’ house in Innsbruck to get away from all the violence in Vienna. The policeman asked the kids about their father. Mom was too scared to say anything, but Uncle Leo came up with the story

STEALING GHOSTS

Trudi gave him and added some from his imagination. The man let them through. They were in Switzerland two weeks later. They had to walk over the border through the mountains, like in *The Sound of Music*, except there was snow.”

What would all that do to a kid? Probably either make her fearless, or cripple her forever. “Trudi was quite a woman.”

“I know, right? She’s the big hero in all this.” Julie finally unwraps herself and takes my arm. “But Oma deserves respect, too. After the Nazis took over, she went out into the city over and over again and dealt with some really sketchy people to keep the family fed and warm. Some of her letters to her mom are just hair-raising. She could’ve been like Esther—Mom said she mostly cried a lot, and it was Oma who kept things going. She may not have been much of a mom, but she was a good dad when the men went away.”

She pulls me to a stop and holds both my hands in hers. “Now you know why I had to come here. This place is why I’m alive. I had to see it. Sorry if I’ve talked your ears off...”

“I’m glad you asked me along. Now I know why we need to rescue Dorotea.” I pull her close and kiss her forehead. “I know more about you, too. And I like what I’ve heard.”