



Luca Brosch

While the Globe Spins

Untertitel

Original title: Bevor die Welt sich weiterdreht
November 2023
464 pages

An emotional spy drama in Davos

It's 1917 and the First World War is raging on, ripping through Europe, while things in Davos, the classy mountain resort in neutral Switzerland, seem calm. Yet, bubbling beneath the surface is a brutal battle of espionage between world powers, and the young Swiss nurse Johanna Gabathuler unwillingly gets caught in the crossfire. In order to get her illegitimate daughter back, she gets involved in a deadly game with the German secret service – and suddenly the fate of Europe lies in her hands.

- In a man's world, a strong young woman becomes a central player in the First World War
- A story is inspired by real events
- International TV-show in the making



Sebastian Stuertz lives with his family in Hamburg and works as an author, musician and lecturer in motion design. He publishes novels, radio plays and records under various names. ›While the Globe Spins‹ is his first novel as LUCA BROSCH.

Sample Translation
By Leanne Lockwood Cvetan

[pages 5-14]

Taken Away

Graubünden, November 1916

The train emerged at last from the darkness of the tunnel, sending billows of black smoke up into the sky over the Swiss Alps. First class was immersed in the sun: light shone through the windowpanes and refracted off crystal glasses and monocles so that some of the men – who vastly outnumbered the ladies – squinted as they raised their hands to finally toast each other against the snowy backdrop. They were all headed to Davos. Some to escape the endless conflagration in luxury; others to tend to their business dealings, which, for many, were prospering more than ever thanks to the war. While Europe was in flames and the men on the battlefield were falling by the millions, industrialists, the European nobility, artists, and intellectuals – in short, the elites of the opposing parties – were meeting in Davos. The Champagne flowed in back rooms while new ideas for the coming era were discussed over oysters, cigars, cognac, coffee, and Swiss chocolate. For many of them, the end of the monarchies was a given; they believed the age of democracy had truly arrived. Almost all of the ones who had invested their money profitably in the wartime economy feared socialism and communism. Alliances were formed that knew neither national borders nor national pride, strings pulled and courses set, ensuring that bank accounts would be filled so that after the war they would not be left standing empty-handed as the loser – regardless of whoever won the slaughter. In Davos, a tiny mountain resort town, with all its remoteness and claims of neutrality, the future of a continent was laid out. Primarily by men, who did it while twirling their moustaches – but also by women, who perfectly concealed just how mercilessly they would kill for an idea.

The locomotive slowly fought its way up the mountain, the snow-covered slopes reflected the harsh sunlight, and the train seemed endless. Now, the second class caught sight of the bright white world, and just as the locomotive disappeared behind the next mountain, the third-class cars were pulled out of the gorge. In this last section of the train, a cheerful mood also prevailed: everyone had managed to escape the misery, at least for a few weeks. Sitting here, crammed in tightly, were people who would not be falling into a freshly made featherbed that evening, and they'd be smoking cigarettes, not cigars. Most of these people were Swiss border soldiers on leave, though there were also a few German soldiers among the passengers: those who were

injured in the war and had been granted the good fortune to be sent to the mountains to recover. Many of them had lost something at the front, an eye, a leg, a comrade – in any case, hope.

The only woman among them was a young nurse. She too had lost something, though she had gained something from this war as well.

As her compartment emerged from the darkness of the tunnel and the sunlight spread across her beautiful, somber features, nothing stirred. She didn't squint or look excited; it was as though her eyes refused to look at the familiar mountaintops of home. A mere twitch of her mouth gave her away. Johanna Gabathuler wanted to be happy to be home, but it wasn't easy. While she was at the front, her father had been looking for a husband for her – a stipulation she had agreed to. And from what her sister had hinted at the last time they spoke on the telephone, the search had been successful. Though, Mathilde hadn't said who it was. Johanna stared out into the whiteness beyond the pane of glass; her Red Cross uniform was also white – she stared out in the same way she had stared into the blackness of the tunnel.

Her hands were covered by a pair of matching white gloves, her left resting on her thigh while the other shielded her stomach. Papa would sort it out. He had always been able to sort things out. And her sister had been so kind on the telephone when Johanna told her everything. *It'll be all right, she had said. Don't cry, come home.*

Johanna Gabathuler stood up and looked at the luggage net above her head. How she hated having to ask for help. But in her condition, she really was better off not lifting the heavy suitcase down on her own. When she attempted to do it anyway, she unwittingly brushed the cheek of a sleeping soldier with the curve of her stomach. He awoke, looking around, confused. Once he grasped the situation, he jumped to his feet and gently pushed Johanna aside. His left hand was bandaged.

“I'll do that,” he said.

Over the past months, she had encountered many soldiers who had been sent from all corners of the German Reich to the Western Front, speaking in their barely understandable dialects, telling her of their hometowns, their sweethearts, their children, and, those who were still children themselves, of their mothers. This soldier was Swiss; he only knew war from a distance.

“Getting off here?” he asked.

She answered affirmingly, and with a nod, he signaled that he would carry her suitcase to the door.

Johanna went on ahead, struggling through the narrow gangway, stepping over boots, and past the hungry looks on the soldiers' faces.

“Where are you coming from?” he asked, coming to a stop as they reached the end of the compartment.

Johanna looked at him.

“Verdun.”

He smiled, as did two other comrades who'd been following their exchange.

“No, seriously. Where were you? Also at the border?”

“Infantry regiment 81. First in Andechy and then at Verdun.”

“You were...in the meat grinder?” the soldier asked, stumbling as the train slowed with a screech. He needed to brace himself against the partition wall so as not to fall into Johanna, and instead fell against his bandaged left hand. A grimace of pain contorted his face. He still wanted to believe that she was joking with her answer, but something about her look told him she was telling the truth.

Johanna looked out the window, watched the small buildings pass by, and nodded almost imperceptibly. Her hand lay protectively atop her stomach.

As the platform cleared and the train continued on in the direction of Davos, Johanna’s eyes scanned the mountain peaks as though she had only just noticed them – and she was immediately aware of the minuteness of her existence. She knew this feeling from her childhood, though she had never before associated it with the sense of helplessness that now took hold of her. At one time, the sight of the great majestic mountains used to evoke a sense of reverence, even affection in her. Now, she felt small and lost on the vacant, unfamiliar train platform. Mathilde had instructed her on the telephone to disembark the train two stations before Davos. But why?

“Johanna! Finally!”

The familiar voice plucked her from her thoughts. Mathilde.

Her sister, who was four years older, emanated her usual severity of an old woman. Which was not surprising considering she had more or less skipped her childhood – their mother had died while giving birth to Johanna. Their father had always proclaimed, completely unapologetically, even proudly in fact, that Mathilde had become an adult already at the age of four. Now, as she ran exuberantly toward Johanna, her otherwise so gravely serious face was covered with a childish grin, and Johanna felt the memories of their days together and, with them, the joy of being home welling up inside her at last. The sisters fell into each other’s arms, breathed in the familiar warmth and smells and, because of the large belly between them, they both had to laugh.

They let go of one another. Johanna tilted her head to one side and wiped her face with her upper arm. Mathilde dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief; her ribcage rose once and fell again. But her worries wouldn’t be forgotten as quickly as that.

“Every day I have prayed that you will come back to me safe and sound. You...two.” As she said this last word, she placed her hand on Johanna’s stomach, cautiously. Mathilde shook her head, ever so slightly, dumbfounded and somewhat amused at the same time. Then the grown-up, older sister took charge: the seriousness returned to her face, chasing away her smile as though it were an intruder. Mathilde squared her shoulders and threw a gray wool cloak around Johanna’s arms. She looked at her sister lovingly.

“Thank you for helping me. But...why did you want to meet me here? Why not at home?” Johanna asked and pulled the cloak tighter.

“We’ve organized a private room with the Diakonia Sisterhood. Along with a very experienced midwife.”

Mathilde bent over to the suitcase. When Johanna had first left, the leather was still in perfect

condition, the latches shined. Now, the suitcase was scratched, dented, tattered, like almost everything else that returned home from the front.

Mathilde picked up Johanna’s suitcase and started to walk, but Johanna hesitated. Her sister nodded at her, encouragingly. “Come. It’ll be alright.”

*

Now the contractions were only minutes apart. Then, all at once, they banded together into a single, unending stretch of pain. Johanna, wet with sweat, felt as though she were being ripped apart. She screamed like she had never before screamed in her entire life. Mathilde stood there, helpless and dejected, beside the midwife, a woman who had already helped so many children into the world in this room. This room, which was cold and bare, save for a simple wooden cross on the wall. The gray roots of her hairline peeked out from under her cap, which had slipped out of place, and as Johanna roared out her pain and pushed and pushed until her head, her abdomen, till the entire world threatened to burst, this old nun remained stone-faced, quietly gave her orders, intervened, and, with the last contraction, Johanna pushed the little being out into the cold world. The pain did not rob her of her senses, it heightened them even more. And thus, she perceived everything in exact detail and with much more clarity, her body, the rush of hormones, joy, the smell of iron from her blood, the amniotic fluid. She exhaled a torrent of stale breath and allowed her pent-up energy to escape. And once she had breathed everything out, had screamed, had pushed, she heard the thin little voice – the being that had grown into a little person inside her. It was alive, it was here, with her.

“Everything’s where it belongs,” the midwife said softly and cut through the umbilical cord. “A girl.” She dipped a cloth into a bowl of warm water and cleaned the baby, lifting both arms and legs, gently wiping the child’s face and stomach and patting it dry.

Wholly drained of strength, Johanna closed her eyes for a moment, but not for too long. Warmth spread through her like a current. She opened her eyes again and looked at her child. There it lay, she lay, her daughter, tiny and...perfect. Her little arms making their first movements, the tiny fingers grabbing the air – everything about her child was magical on a scale she’d never known before. *A miracle.* Johanna couldn’t think of anything else, didn’t want to think anything else, she just wanted to finally hold and kiss and breathe in her child.

“Elli,” she said faintly and reached out her hand. It had been Erich’s last wish to christen her so. “Her name is Elli,” Johanna reaffirmed and looked to her sister, who had tears in her eyes. Then Mathilde lowered her gaze and wiped her cheeks in a strangely rough manner, as though wanting to take back, or un-cry her tears.

The midwife had wrapped the child in a blanket and had now picked up the still screaming little bundle. Johanna, impatiently, almost greedily, reached out both arms to take her child. She felt her breasts tingle as her milk came in – but the nun turned away. Johanna looked disconcertedly at her sister, who took a step closer and held her hand. The midwife headed toward the door with Elli.

“Where...where are you going?” Johanna wanted to say, but the words got stuck in her throat. Was something wrong with Elli? Did she need medical attention, was she struggling? The midwife stopped as the door opened abruptly and a nun came in, followed by – her father. Finally! He’d made it just in time. But Johanna’s smile was not reciprocated. There was no warmth in his eyes. Instead, Peter Gabathuler entered the room as though it were nothing more than the kitchen at his spa hotel. Underneath his mustache, which broadly extended into sideburns, his lips were pursed and his clean-shaven chin protruded stubbornly. His eyes, too, were narrowed to slits, and despite his burly stature, he seemed altogether deflated. Not looking around nor ever even dignifying his granddaughter with so much as a glance, he casually nodded to the midwife in passing as though she were one of his employees bringing soiled tablecloths through to the laundry room. Without a word, she left the room with a screaming Elli.

What was happening here?

Johanna looked desperately at the closing door, then her father. The crying in the hallway subsided, becoming quieter and quieter until, finally, it couldn’t be heard at all.

“Papa...?”

Gabathuler stood at the door and said nothing, his eyes set on the crucifix on the wall. Johanna looked to Mathilde: her sister would surely be able to explain everything.

“What...Elli...ELLI!” Johanna screamed. Her father lowered his eyes. Mathilde closed hers and, with a strained voice, said: “It...it’s better this way...for everyone.” Then she turned around and ran out of the room. And only now, while Johanna was alone with her father, with him still lingering at the door and putting on his most somber face, hat in hand, wrapped in a warm coat, only now was Johanna struck by the absolute certainty, like an avalanche, or a rockfall: *They had made a plan. Mathilde and Papa had arranged everything.* Her eyes and her mouth opened wide as she realized that Mathilde had known all along. Even at the train station. What was worse: Mathilde would have had to have organized everything.

“Johanna. There is no baby,” her father asserted.

As their eyes met for the first time, Johanna’s temples began to pound, her breath faltered, and the world wavered and threatened to break away entirely. She was empty, so empty. She had just given birth to a child – Elli, who they now wanted to take away from her. How could they take Elli away, she was the only thing that connected her to Erich, the only thing she had. Was that really her father? Who had always allowed her everything? Even her wish to prove herself as a nurse on the Belgian front? Had he really just said: “*There is no baby*”?

You’re wrong, I have a child, your granddaughter Elli, my daughter. Did you not see how beautiful she is?

Johanna was too weak, as though paralyzed by the shock. Her mouth wouldn’t move.

Her father glared at her. If there was any struggle behind this scowl, Johanna couldn’t see it.

“If anyone finds out that you brought a bastard into this world, you’ll end up in jail! So, no word to anyone – do we understand one another?!”

Never had he sounded so threatening, especially not toward her. Johanna’s mouth, still wide open, silently began to tremble, and as her father turned away and left the room again along with

Sample Translation „While the Globe Spins” (Luca Brosch)

the nun, a scream rose up from within her. A scream, that even to her, sounded as though it came from someone else. It got louder; louder than during Elli’s birth – for this was now anger and desperation breaking through.

Johanna was alone. Alone in this empty room with only the walls to bear the brunt of her screaming out her daughter’s name. But the walls around her remained silent and indifferent.

[Pages 270-278]

How easy it can be to disappear

Johanna had to spend the day with Professor Rühmkorf in Chur. That way, if there were an investigation, there'd be witnesses to confirm her presence at the clinic that day. Then she made her way to the arranged meeting point at the train station. She was able to leave on her nurse's uniform since now she was the personal nurse to Ilse von Hausner, whom she was accompanying on her trip to Germany.

The countess was waiting behind the train station, leaning against an ambulance car in the sun and smoking. When she spotted Johanna, she looked at the clock.

“So, let's get started.”

Johanna drove while her supposed patient pulled out a map to show her the way and explain the plan for getting across the border. One way or another, they had to get her out of the country without the agents asking to check her papers. Here in northern Switzerland, the names of Grand Council Thanner and his fiancée would certainly not be as well-known as around Davos – but it was best not to take any chances. They stopped just before the border. The countess got into the back of the ambulance and laid down on the stretcher, where she had a small jar of cherry jam and a spoon waiting. Johanna put on a protective face mask. Once they reached the checkpoint, she rolled the window only halfway down, greeted the guards, along with a warning.

“I have a German patient with open tuberculosis in the back. She's highly contagious.”

“What is the reason for your leaving the country?”

“Her days are numbered. It was her last wish to die in her home country.”

The border guards walked around the vehicle, peering through the rear window. After a brief discussion, one guard opened the door. The countess instantly began to cough violently. She lay bent sideways on the stretcher, too weak to use the handkerchief in her hand. Red sputum ran down her chin, landing on her hand and the white sheet. The soldiers quickly closed the door and allowed the ambulance to pass.

Johanna steered the vehicle through small villages of only a few houses each. The mountains in the rearview mirror looked like gray shadows on the horizon as they disappeared in the cloudy winter sky. The landscape became flatter; the many evergreen trees were replaced by mixed forests, and soon reduced to only the occasional tree along the side of the road. The wind had blown away the thin layer of snow in certain places so that the broad surface was interspersed with a number of dirty brown patches. Now and again, an undernourished cow or a sad horse stood on the other side of a fence.

Johanna still didn't know where their trip was headed to. Why was the countess keeping her guessing?

The longer Johanna drove the ambulance through the sparse countryside, the more skeptical

she became. What about the photo for her passport? Being photographed by the countess had put Johanna in such high spirits – a passport was no longer an empty promise; soon she’d soon be holding it in her hands, or so she thought. But had the countess only tried to lull Johanna into a false sense of security? Or had she really had a passport made? Was the purpose of this journey to get rid of her as quietly as possible and give her dead body, should it be found, another identity?

As they reached a small forest where no one would see the mysterious patient getting out, the countess tapped on the small window that connected the cab with the rear of the car. On the right-hand side, a small lake became visible.

“Stop here. I’ll get in front again,” the countess called to her.

“Will you finally tell me where we’re going?”

“That’s exactly what I was going to do. Let’s take a quick break.”

Johanna turned off and followed the narrow road until she found an opportunity to park, then stopped. Between the ambulance and the lake lay a stretch of land covered by a thin layer of snow. At the opposite end, it rose up slightly and was then enclosed by tall, leafy trees. The forest was interrupted by a formation of large rocks. In the rearview mirror, Johanna watched as the countess now opened both of the rear doors and got out, then turned back around and bent over back of the vehicle. It seemed she had opened her suitcase. Was she pulling out a gun? Johanna hoped that she was mistaken. But she also didn’t want to come face-to-face with the countess unarmed, here in the middle of nowhere. She grabbed the blanket from the passenger seat, folded it together, pulled out her weapon, and laid the blanket over her arm. Then she got out and slowly walked to the rear.

A hawk screeched.

Johanna’s view of the countess was obstructed by the open door, and she could only see her head through the window. The countess began to cough.

“Such long journeys are terrible for your health, Countess,” Johanna said.

The two women stared at one another for a moment through the window. Johanna smiled slightly. Underneath the blanket, her weapon was ready to fire.

The countess took half a step around the door, then leaned against it, her shoulder on the inside, her arm hidden. She looked out at the forest.

“We’ve come a long way – you and I. I –” She stopped speaking. Then she looked directly at Johanna.

Their eyes met, lingered a while, and Johanna realized: she didn’t want to lose this woman. That moment on the evening of the ball, standing in front of the mirror in their beautiful gowns, that wasn’t simulated; they had both enjoyed it, Johanna was sure of it. But how could she get to the woman’s true self, break through the spy’s hard outer shell? Without the fear that at any moment she could be eliminated by her? Why did there have to be this stupid war? Why couldn’t everything just be over with and she and the countess be real friends?

“Madame Meunier suffered a hemorrhage the day before yesterday,” Johanna said wistfully.

“Her family hadn’t been to visit for weeks. She had caused trouble with every one of them. She died alone at Cronwald. Do you want to end up like Madame Meunier?”

The countess didn’t answer.

Johanna continued: “I like you, Countess, you know that. The question is: Do you like me? I mean, *really* like me? Without all this fabricated confusion? Do you even know what’s real anymore and what’s not? Who are you, Countess?”

The woman showed no reaction. She swallowed and briefly closed her eyes – and that was a mistake. Johanna kicked the door partially concealing the countess. It swung closed, clipping her arm and causing her to spin around. She let out a cry of pain as something fell to the ground – a pistol. Johanna’s instinct hadn’t deceived her. The countess stumbled and steadied herself on the chassis. Johanna took a step toward the gun and kicked it out of reach. Then she stepped back and aimed her own pistol directly at the countess, who, with a pained expression, leaned against the vehicle, holding her shoulder.

“What do you want to do? Kill me?” she asked with her usual derisive sneer.

“Do I have a choice?”

The countess was overcome by another coughing fit. She leaned against the ambulance, doubled over, sputtering and coughing and unable to stop. *Maybe she’ll just die on her own*, Johanna thought and immediately felt ashamed. Nevertheless, the outcome was clear: she would emerge from the situation either as a murderer – or dead herself. Or as a nurse whose patient had passed on. The last option, objectively, being the best solution.

The countess fell to her knees, coughing and sputtering. Either she was truly about to pass out, or... At that moment, she spun around and swung a knife at Johanna, who just managed to turn sideways so that the short, weighty blade only grazed her upper arm. The dagger fell to the ground a few yards behind her, and although Johanna didn’t raise her shooting arm again, the countess was back on her feet and knocked it out of her hand. The entire coughing fit had just been a ploy. The countess pulled Johanna to the ground. They obviously taught martial arts along with acting at spy school, because a moment later, Johanna was lying on her back with the countess sitting on top of her, tying her hands together. Their eyes met. Johanna’s only hope was a stone that she had noticed as she went down. It must be just within reach, near her head... With all her strength, she freed her left hand, felt around in the powdery snow, and gripping the large, angular stone, she swung it at her adversary’s head. The countess dodged and seized Johanna’s arm. The stone slipped from Johanna’s hand and landed on her shoulder. Johanna screamed with pain and reared up, throwing the countess aside. The two rolled back and forth until Johanna finally managed to free herself. The countess immediately jumped to her feet, then bent to pick up the knife that had landed in the snow not far from her. Johanna got hold of a thick tree branch – but it was pinned to the ground by the weeds covering it, and she had to pull hard to free it; the thin roots crackled as they tore. She gripped the thicker end with both hands just in time to come face to face with her German adversary, who lunged at her with the dagger. Johanna swung and hit her in the arm. The countess let out a grunt, gripped the branch with one hand, and kicked away Johanna’s outstretched arm at the same time. Pain shot through her. The

branch fell, and once more the countess pulled Johanna to the ground, quickly sitting on top of her again, with one hand around Johanna’s right wrist and the knife in her other hand. Johanna’s left hand managed to grip the countess’s wrist; she struggled to push it away. But the countess was strong, much stronger than one would expect in her condition. The blade slowly narrowed in on Johanna’s neck.

It was time for a lifeline.

“If you kill me...”

“Just let it happen. Then it’ll be over faster,” said the countess as the blade continued toward Johanna’s neck. Their faces were so close that Johanna could feel the countess’s breath and smell her perfume, powdery and cheap. The countess continued to grip Johanna’s wrist as the blade scratched across her throat. Mustering her last bit of strength, Johanna slammed the countess’s fist, with the dagger, against her chest again and again. And when the countess started coughing again, it was for real. Johanna flung the hand with the dagger aside, rammed both her knees into the countess’s back and threw her off. She needed her pistol. While the countess, coughing, felt around in the snow for the dagger, Johanna ran back to the ambulance, to where her weapon lay, bent down, picked it up, turned around – and saw the countess running away into the forest.

She fired a shot.

The bullet threw sparks as it hit the rocks at the edge of the forest. Johanna fired again, and then again, missing both times. The countess disappeared between the trees.

Johanna followed her, taking a different route than the countess, and circled around the rock formation, which stood twice as tall as she was. Cautiously peering around the edge, she put one foot slowly before the other, keeping her eyes on the ground, and carefully avoiding stepping on any branches. The forest was quiet and dark, all the animals were silent. Warily, she took a step and looked around the rock. Nothing. One more, two more steps. Also up in the trees – no movement. By the time she registered that something moved above her head, it was too late – there was a hissing sound and, a moment later, she felt the pain. The countess jumped down from the rocks and struck her outstretched arm with a thick branch. Her weapon fell to the ground. She cried out. The next blow was the branch against her back, knocking the air out of her. Johanna fell to her knees. The countess grabbed her pistol and twisted her arm behind her back. It hurt, everything hurt: both her wrists, her back, her twisted arm, her heart. As well as the cold muzzle pressed into the side of her head.

It was Johanna’s last chance. “Karl Wilau,” she grunted through the pain, “Zürich!”

The countess pulled her arm even higher and dug the gun deeper into her temple. Johanna groaned. “If you do that, it’ll be the end of you. All of you.”

“That’s what I’d say, too, if I were in your shoes.”

“Adelheit Guggisheim, Bern. Lemke’s list. The names of all the German agents in Switzerland. I photographed them. Don’t you remember?”

The countess remained silent.

“I left two envelopes with the notary. If I don’t come back safe and sound, one list goes to my brother-in-law and the other to the French Consulate...”

The countess remained silent for a moment, then she loosened her grip, let go, and put away the weapon.

“You never cease to surprise me.”

Johanna got up, rubbed her sore arms, and turned to the countess.

“If anything happens to my family, to Elli...those letters are going out.”

The two women looked at each other. Their hair was disheveled, Johanna had streaks of mud across her cheek, the countess’s skirt was torn. She was panting, trying to suppress a cough.

“And now?” She asked.

Johanna raised her chin. She had the countess in the palm of her hand. Johanna Gabathuler had out-spied the spy.

“I have no interest in killing off any of your spies. I simply want to start a new life somewhere with Elli. A good life.”

“What does that mean?”

“I want my passport.”

“Things are already in motion at the consulate. But it’ll still take a few days, since the papers need to be issued from Germany.”

“And I’ll need more money. I’ll carry on working for you, Ilse, until my passport is finished. But for double the money.”

The countess raised her eyebrows. A grin slowly crept across her face. Not one of scorn but of acknowledgment. “You know what you’re worth.” She observed Johanna silently. Then nodded. “Well then, get to work. You still have a little more to do for your money.”

She returned to the ambulance with Johanna following her. The countess collected her pistol and dagger, then got into the vehicle. Johanna got into the driver’s seat, looked in the rearview mirror, and rubbed the mud from her face with a handkerchief.

“When did I ever say you could use my first name?” Ilse asked.

“You didn’t,” Johanna answered and started the engine.

[Pages 459-461]

The Happiest Day of her Life

In her white wedding dress, Johanna went over to Elli in her cradle. The little girl was also wearing a lovely little dress, happily sucking on her thumb, and looking at her mother – who would officially become her mother today. Immediately following their wedding, the Thanner couple would be signing the adoption papers. Johanna smiled, leaned over, and gave Elli a kiss. And Elli gurgled cheerfully.

When she stood back up, her gaze fell on the dresser. To where Ilse’s farewell letter lay. As well as the medal with the image of St. Barbara she had left her. Johanna went over, put on the necklace, then picked up the letter. She still hadn’t found the courage to read it.

What was she scared of?

Ilse had always been unpredictable. What had she put to paper while faced with death?

Johanna sat down in the chair, reached for the letter opener, and slit open the envelope with a quick swipe. Inside the envelope was a letter, and as she pulled it out, a photograph fell into her lap. Johanna looked at it. Summer 1895. Five servant girls. The one on the right was especially attractive.

The farewell message was written in a shaky hand.

My dearest Johanna!

Times change. People don’t. They’re forced to.

But how did we come to be what we are? A series of small events we hardly notice? Or was it indeed that one great moment in time that changed everything? As long as there is no peace in the world, you and Mangold cannot be together. Never forget: those who want peace must prepare for war.

I am not a mother. And that is a good thing. But I would have given anything to have a daughter like you.

Take care,
Barbara

Johanna let the note fall. Barbara. What a woman.

She went to the mirror and looked at herself. The pendant went very well with her dress. She pressed the tiny clasp at the side to look at the portrait of St. Barbara. With a soft click, the locket opened and something sailed to the floor. Johanna bent over and picked up the small sheet of foil, or rather, film, between her thumb and first finger and held it up to the light. A microfilm.

Those who want peace must prepare for war.

Johanna smiled. Whatever was on it was sure to be of great use to her. There was a knock at the door. She hid the microfilm in a safe place in her dresser, closed the locket, and called out, “come in.”

Mathilde entered the room. She, too, was dressed beautifully.

“Let’s go, let’s go! The pastor’s getting impatient!”

Her sister went to the cradle, picked up Elli, put her lips on her cheek and blew out air. The child laughed. Johanna and Mathilde laughed as well. The two sisters beamed at each other.

“Now come! Bigna is waiting downstairs with Thanner!” Mathilde admonished.

Johanna stepped up to the mirror and looked at herself.

This was her. Johanna Thanner.

Not Elena Adler.

She reached behind her head and pulled the veil over her face.

Epilogue

The unlikely cooperation between the German Kaiser and the Russian revolutionary bore fruit: freed from exile, Lenin traveled in a sealed train car from Switzerland via Germany and Sweden into the Russian heartland. The population is war weary, and the army is showing signs of disintegration; desertion and uprisings make defending the front lines impossible. Ongoing supply problems additionally fan the flames of revolution. With the help of the Kaiser’s millions, Lenin succeeds in starting the October Revolution. Change devours the old order, and the new Bolshevik government keeps its word to the Germans: in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia withdraws from the First World War.

After that, hostilities in the West became more ferocious than ever.

